

Alice Hoffman's new novel *The Dovekeepers* is told in four parts, in the voices of four women: Yael, Revka, Aziza and Shirah. Here are excerpts from each part of the novel.

"Beautiful, harrowing, a major contribution to twenty-first century literature."—**Toni Morrison, Nobel Laureate in Literature**

"I am still reeling from *THE DOVEKEEPERS*--from the history Alice Hoffman illuminates, from the language she uses to bring these women to life. This novel is a testament to the human spirit and to love rising from the ashes of war. But most of all, this novel is one that will never be forgotten by a reader." —**Jodi Picoult, author of *Sing You Home***

Yael (pp. 12-17)

All the while I was growing up I wondered what it might be like to have a father who wouldn't turn away from the sight of me, one who told me I was beautiful, even though my hair flamed a strange red color and my skin was sprinkled with earth-toned flecks as though I'd been splattered with mud. I'd heard my father say to another man that these marks were specks of my mother's blood. Afterward, I tried to pluck them out with my fingers, drawing blood from my own flesh, but my brother stopped me when he discovered the red-rimmed pockmarks on my arms and legs. He assured me the freckles were bits of ash that had fallen from the stars in the sky. Because of this I would always shine in the darkness. He would always be able to find me, no matter how far he might travel.

When I became a woman, I had no mother to tell me what to do with the blood that came with the moon or escort me to the *mikvah*, the ritual bath that would have cleansed me with a total immersion into purity. The first time I bled I thought I was dying until an old woman who was my neighbor took pity on me and told me the truth about women's monthly cycles. I lowered my eyes as she spoke, shamed to be told such intimate details by a stranger, not quite believing her, wondering why our God would cause me to become unclean. Even now I think I might have been right to tremble in fear on the day that I first bled. Perhaps my becoming a woman was the end for me, for I had been born in blood and deserved to be taken from life in the same way.

I didn't bother to ring my eyes with kohl or rub pomegranate oil onto my wrists. Flirtation was not something I practiced, nor did I think myself attractive. I didn't perfume my hair but instead wound the plaits at the nape of my neck, then covered my head with a woolen shawl of the plainest fabric I could find. My father addressed me only when he summoned me to bring his meal or wash his garments. By then I had begun to realize what it was that he did when he slipped out to meet with his cohorts at night. He often wrapped a pale gray cloak around his shoulders, one that was said to have been woven from the strands of a spider's web. I had touched the hem of the garment once. It was both sinister and beautiful, granting its wearer the ability to conceal himself. When my father went out, he disappeared, for he had the power to vanish while he was still before you.

I'd heard him called an assassin by our neighbors. I frowned and didn't believe this, but the more I studied his comings and goings, the more I knew it to be true. He was part of a secret group, men who carried the curled dagger of the *Sicarii*, Zealots who hid sharp knives in their cloaks which they used to punish those who refused to fight Rome, especially the priests who accepted the legion's sacrifices and their favor at the Temple. The assassins were ruthless, even I

knew that. No one was safe from their wrath; other Zealots disowned them, objecting to their brutal methods. It was said that the *Sicarii* had taken the fight against Jews who bowed to Rome too far, and that *Adonai*, our great God, would never condone murder, especially of brother against brother. But the Jews were a divided brotherhood, already at odds in practice if not in prayer. Those who belonged to the *Sicarii* laughed at the notion that God desired anything other than for all men to be free. The price was of no consequence. Their goal was one ruler alone, no emperors, no kings, only the King of Creation. He alone would rule when they were done with their work on earth.

My father had been an assassin for so long that the men he had killed were like leaves on a willow tree, too many to count. Because he possessed a skill that few men had and claimed the power of invisibility, he could slip into a room as a shadow might, dispatching his enemy before his victim was even aware that a window had been opened or a door had closed.

To my sorrow, my brother followed our father's path as soon as he was old enough to become a disciple of vengeance. Amram was dangerously susceptible to their violent ways, for in his purity he saw the world as either good or evil with no twilight space in between. I often spied them huddled together, my father speaking in my brother's ear, teaching him the rules of murder. One day as I gathered Amram's tunics and cloak to wash at the well I found a dagger, already rippled with a line of crimson. I would have wept had I been able, but I had forsaken tears. I would not drown another as I had drowned my own mother, from the inside out.

Still, I went in search of my brother, finding him in the market with his friends. Women alone were not often seen among the men who came to these narrow passageways; those who had no choice but to go out unaccompanied rushed to the Street of the Bakers or to the stalls that offered pottery and jugs made from Jerusalem clay, then, just as quickly, rushed home. I wore a veil and my cloak clasped tightly. There were *zonnoth* in the market, women who sold themselves for men's pleasure and did not cover their arms or their hair. One mocked me as I ran past, her sullen face breaking into a grin when she spied me dashing through the alleyway. *You think you're any different than we are?* she called. *You're only a woman, as we are.*

I pulled my brother away from his friends so that we might stand beneath a flame tree. The red flowers gave off the scent of fire, and I thought this was an omen, that my brother would know fire. I worried over what would happen to him when night came and the *Sicarii* gathered under cedars where they made their plans. I begged him to renounce the violent ways he'd taken up, but my brother, young as he was, burned for justice and a new order where all men were equal.

"I can't reconsider my faith, Yaya."

"Then consider your life" was my answer.

To tease me, Amram clucked like a chicken, strutting, his lean, strong body hunched over as he flapped imaginary wings. "Do you want me to stay home in the henhouse, where you can lock me inside and make sure I'm safe?"

I laughed despite my fears. My brother was brave and beautiful. No wonder my father favored him. His hair was golden, his eyes dark but flecked with light. I saw now that the child I had once mothered had become a man, one who was pure in his intentions. I could do little more than object to the path that he chose. Still I was determined to act on his behalf. When my brother rejoined his friends, I went on through the market, making my way deep within the twisting streets, at last turning in to an alley that was cobbled with dusty, dun-colored bricks. I'd heard it was possible to buy good fortune nearby. There was a mysterious shop spoken about in

whispers by the neighborhood women. They usually stopped their discussion when I came near, but I'd been curious and had overheard that if a person followed the scrawled image of an eye inside a circle she would be led to a place of medicines and spells. I took the path of the eye until I came to the house of *keshaphim*, the breed of magic practiced by women, always pursued in secret.

When I knocked on the door, an old woman came to study me. Annoyed by my presence, she asked why I'd come. As soon as I hesitated, she began to close the door against me, grumbling.

"I don't have time for someone who doesn't know what she wants," she muttered.

"Protection for my brother," I managed to say, too unnerved to reveal any more.

At the Temple there was the magic of the priests, holy men who were anointed by prayer, chosen to give sacrifices and attempt miracles and perform exorcisms, driving out the evil that can often possess men. In the streets there was the magic of the *minim*, who were looked down upon by the priests, called charlatans and impostors by some, yet who were still respected by many. Houses of *keshaphim*, however, were considered to engage in the foulest sort of magic, women's work, evil, vengeful, practiced by those who were denounced as witches. But the *min* who performed curses and spells would have never spoken to a girl such as I if I had no silver to hand over and no father or brother to recommend me. And had I gone to the priests for an amulet, they would have denied me, for I was the daughter of one who opposed them. Even I knew I didn't deserve their favor.

The room behind the old woman was unlit, but I glimpsed herbs and plants draped from the ceiling on lengths of rope. I recognized rue and myrtle and the dried yellow apples of the mandrake, what is called *yavrucha*, an herb that is both aphrodisiac and antidemonic in nature, poisonous and powerful. I thought I heard the sound of a goat, a pet witches are said to have, from inside the dim chamber.

"Before you waste my time, do you have shekels enough for protection?" the old woman asked.

I shook my head. I had no coins, but I'd brought a precious hand mirror with me. It had belonged to my mother and was beautifully crafted, made of bronze and silver and gold, set with a chunk of deep blue lapis. It was the one thing I had of any value. The ancient woman examined it and then, satisfied, took my offering and went inside. After she shut the door, I heard the clatter of a lock. For a moment I wondered if she had disappeared for good, if perhaps I'd never see her or my mirror again, but she came back outside and told me to open my hand.

"You're sure you don't want this charm for yourself?" she cautioned, insisting there was only one like it in all the world. "You might need protection in this life."

I shook my head, and as I did my plain woolen veil fell. When the old woman saw the scarlet color of my hair, she backed away as though she'd discovered a demon at her door.

"It's good you don't want it," she said. "It wouldn't work for you. You need a token that's far more powerful."

I snapped up the charm, then turned and started away. I was surprised when she called for me to wait.

"You don't ask why?" The market woman was signaling to me, urging me to return, but I refused. "You don't want to know what I see for you, my sister? I can tell you what you will become."

“I know what I am.” I was the child born of a dead woman, the one who couldn’t bear to look at her own face. I was immensely glad to be rid of that mirror. “I don’t need you to tell me,” I called to the witch in the alleyway.

Revka (pp. 164-168)

Before we came here we believed that our village in the Valley of the Cypresses was heaven, or perhaps we imagined it was not unlike the heaven we would someday enter. We should have known it would be taken from us. Nothing in this world is lasting, only our faith lives on. One day soldiers from the legion arrived, six across, walking down roads my own father had helped to build. First the legionnaires came, trained in Rome, decorated with chain mail and helmets; then the fierce auxiliary troops arrived, many of them tribesmen, wearing leather tunics, carrying long broadswords and lances. They wanted any riches they could find. From that morning when they entered our village, our land belonged to them and our lives did, too. They killed a white cockerel on the steps of the synagogue. In our law, that is a sin. They were well aware of this doctrine. The bird’s blood defiled us. This initial act of violence announced what the future would bring, if only the priests had bothered to read the signs left behind by the rooster’s bones. A hundred of our people went to rally against the legion and demand an apology. These were men who paid taxes and had homes and families, reputable, honest men who were certain this day would end with an apology from Rome.

They could not have been more wrong.

We did not see beyond the cypresses that grew with fragrant twisted bark set within a wood that had been there for so long we thought it would last forevermore. Outrage howled from ruined villages nearby for those who could hear, but we turned a deaf ear to their misery. For those who breathed deeply, there was the stink of war, but it was also the season when the oleander’s pink blooms sent out their fragrance and perfumed the air. Our land had been conquered many times, the sweet groves and fields drawing outsiders to us just as surely as the baker called to his customers with the rich scent of his loaves. But that was in the past; we wanted to believe that our lives were settled. My husband paid no attention to what was happening. In that he was indeed single-minded, as well as hardworking. The wise men and rabbis bowed to the legion, accepting taxes so high we could barely survive, but as long as there was wood for his ovens, my husband was happy. He cut the logs himself, and there was a pile as tall as a mountain in our yard. My husband asked only for a blessing from *Adonai* for what he was about to bring forth into this world each day, the mystery of the *challah*. He had white powder in the creases of his skin. Each time he kissed me he left a white mark, a baker’s kiss. He assured me that, if we paid no attention to what was around us and did no harm, we would be safe. People always needed bread.

He left our home determined to bring the first round loaves to the synagogue as an offering, as he always did. He had vowed to avoid trouble, but on this day it found him. Our neighbors had collected in a beleaguered group on their way to plead their case so they would not lose their homes to the Romans. My husband was convinced to go with them. He had his tray of offerings, the loaves covered by a prayer shawl that had been so finely spun gold threads were braided among the purple fringes. He was ready to go to the rabbis, but when his neighbors scolded him and said all men must make a stand, he was compelled to make his mark with the others. The letter *R* fashioned into the crusts of the loaves he baked should have been enough of a mark for him, my name his inspiration and his shield. Instead, he joined those men who wanted more.

I knew something was wrong when I smelled smoke. There were loaves in the oven. I checked them, but they weren't yet burning. Why did he go on this day of all days? Why on this morning was he not single-minded when at all other times he saw nothing but his own bakery? The barley, the salt, the coriander, the cumin, these were the ingredients that made up his world. Until now the only difficulty that had plagued my husband was that rats slunk through the windows; like many bakers, he often had to lay down hemlock to turn them away from the flour bins. Now there was peril in every corner of our world. The demons had flung open the doors to our village. They had declared us to be victims as they stood on a dark ledge and rubbed their hands together gleefully. What you are given, they declared, we now take away.

As the hours passed, I began to pace back and forth in alarm. The baker had expected to return before the loaves in the slow-burning oven were brown. Does a man go off and disappear like that? He'd told me to remove the loaves when the sun was in the center of the sky if he hadn't yet returned. I didn't. What had he meant by that? Had he had some idea of the trouble to come? Noon came and went. I gazed out in alarm as I saw the shadows lengthening, the smoke drifting over courtyards and roofs.

I thought if I waited to remove the loaves, my husband would smell the bread and know it was burning and run back home. At worst he would be cross with me for not doing as I was instructed. But he still hadn't returned when the sun had begun to drop down in the direction of evening. By now the loaves were charred, the crusts black with soot.

I had one thought, and that was to find my husband. I could be single-minded, too, perhaps that was what had bound us together for so many years. I opened the door, frantic to begin a search for the Baker, ready to dart into the street though it was now teeming with our neighbors, many of them stained with their own blood and with the blood of their fathers. As I was readying myself to leave, I found my son-in-law, Yoav, in my doorway. He wasn't a fighter then, not yet the warrior who would vow to never again cut his hair. Instead, he was a gentle man who longed to run from trouble. He had the panicked look of a scholar who is suddenly faced with the brutalities and the vile concerns of life. Like my husband, he had been dedicated to his work, concerned with his studies and with the will of *Adonai*. I had already wrapped my head scarf close to my skull, possessed with the intention to search for my husband, but my son-in-law stopped me. He warned I must prepare myself for what he had to say.

I raised my chin, ready to push past him, not willing to listen. What could stop me from going to my husband? What excuse could my son-in-law offer that might compel me to give up my search? My son-in-law, who was devout and would never touch a woman other than my daughter, his wife, placed his hand on my arm.

"There is a reason I tell you not to go out there," he murmured.

There could be only one reason. A world that had unraveled so completely that the man I'd spent a lifetime with had been lost. I could see the truth in my son-in-law's eyes when he began to speak. He confessed he had seen the husk that had been my husband in the center of our town, cast upon the plaza with dozens of our neighbors, broken like a branch in the wind. It was too late to retrieve the body. If I tried, I would only lose my life as well.

Despite his report, I tried to push past the place where my son-in-law had planted himself in my doorway. He was stronger than I imagined, or perhaps I was weakened by regret.

"Listen to me," Yoav insisted. He said it in a way that gave me no choice but to hear. "There is no other way for me to say this, and no time to reason with you. Your husband is already in the World-to-Come."

There was no map to lead the living there. I could not reach him. The Romans were already piling up bodies in the street. They had lit the fire which had alerted me to the misery of the day. Now I realized it was not bread I smelled on the waves of smoke pouring through town but the bitter odor of flesh.

Yoav was a young rabbi who was respected and learned; because of his rank he'd had to think twice before taking a baker's daughter as his bride. Most rabbis searched out other rabbis' daughters in marriage, for like congregated with like, as the birds in the sky gathered with their own kind. But of course Yoav had wanted my daughter. Zara was beautiful beyond measure. No wonder he had courted her, ignoring the more suitable girls who chased after him. My daughter's name meant beautiful morning, and she truly was brighter than anything in this world, her skin golden, her hair like wheat, her countenance made even more lovely because her black eyes were a reminder of night before morning broke through, a time when the world was a mystery and shadows were all we had.

I'd often wondered if perhaps Zara had been given to me by an angel. How else could a plain woman such as I be blessed with a daughter who resembled a queen? I took great pride in her, and for good reason.

I never once stopped to consider that what you are given can also be taken away.

Aziza (pp. 296-299)

Even now I am drawn to the ways of my old life. I spend as little time as possible inside the dovecotes. Doves do not interest me, no women's work does. I cannot weave or sew without pricking my fingers. When I cook, I burn the flatbread. My stew is tasteless no matter what ingredients I might add to the pot. There is not enough salt or cumin in the world to make my attempts palatable. I am clumsy at tasks my sister could complete with ease when she was a mere eight years old.

I often find myself beside the barracks, pulled there especially on the evenings that mark the new month, *Rosh Chodesh*, when the women gather to celebrate, for it is not with them I belong but here, alongside the warriors. When I find arrowheads, I hold them in the palm of my hand, talismans from my past. The blades fit perfectly in my grasp. Their cold, flat weight is what I yearn for. Metal alone can reach the center of who I am.

I have been in this fortress for so long, but I still dreamed of that other time, though I told no one, not even Amram, to whom I have pledged myself, despite my mother's warnings. Some things are meant to be kept secret, I learned that young, and I have kept our secret well. My mother may be flooded with doubts, but she has no proof that I have disobeyed. She's piled salt outside our threshold, so that I might leave footprints, but I leap over, leaving no trace. She's tied a strand of her hair across the doorway, but I merely crawl beneath it. I can outwit her at some things; all the same, I think of her prophecy every time I meet Amram. I am his, yet I know I have disgraced myself in keeping the truth from my own mother, the one who gave me life not once but three times.

From the start my sister was my accomplice. We had been here for nearly a year, working beside our mother in the dovecotes, when Amram first arrived. We spent days devoted to toil. The three dovecotes were like a family of goats—the father, built as a tower, then came mother and child, square and squat, small and then smaller yet again. They were my world then, as I avoided our neighbors and kept away from other women, afraid they would somehow see through to the differences between us.

When Amram arrived from Jerusalem at the beginning of the summer in the year the Temple fell, he was merely one more young man running from his enemies, convicted by his bloodline as well as by his actions, an assassin who could be seen as a murderer or a hero depending on who you were and where fate had placed you. I happened to be there, crossing the plaza. I was nearly sixteen, but still I kept to myself. I did not take note of any man until I saw Amram climb the serpent's path. He did so easily, as though the rugged cliffs were little more than a field. What was steep and difficult for others was for Amram no different than air to the lark. It was clear he could conquer whatever came before him, man or beast, even the land itself.

Watching him, I was almost ashamed of how handsome I found him. He was the warrior I wished I had become, fluid and lean, sure of himself. I envied him and wanted to possess him and all that he had. I remembered the way the dusk fell on the other side of the Salt Sea in waves of deep blue on the day my mother warned me of the prophecy that I should avoid love at all costs. But I was born to disobey her. I knew this when I found I could not look away from Amram. I tried and failed, though I was iron and stronger than most in such matters. Aziza, the powerful, was somehow undone. Was there some angel or demon who remembered what my name had once been and now called me Rebekah from the reaches of heaven? I stood there like any other woman at the Snake Gate alongside all the rest who gathered there, charmed and seduced by Amram even before he reached us.

Perhaps the moment might have passed and I would have turned away and resumed my duties, if only he hadn't seen me as well, if we hadn't been transformed by a single glance that passed between us. I realized I had been caught from the moment I'd given in to my impulse to stand upon the wall to cheer him on. My intention was otherwise. Merely to view the sort of man I might have been in my second life. Instead, I became a woman in that instant. I gazed through the shimmering heat, watching his fate and mine twine together as he climbed the serpent path.

I was curious, drawn to him. When the rains came, I stood beside the armory, dripping wet, hoping to catch a glimpse of this man at the barracks. I circled the wall, in search of signs marking where he had walked: an arrowhead, a footprint, a strand of hair. When the dust rose I thought of him, when I gazed into the sky I was reminded of him, when I fetched water, ate my dinner, worked among the doves, all of it, no matter how trivial, brought him to mind. I would not have pursued him, but one day he stood in my path as my sister and I hurried to the dovecote. I raised a hand to shield my eyes so I could take him in and so that I might hide the mark beneath my eye. In that instant I was claimed yet again. He grinned, convinced he knew me, and I grinned back, knowing he did not.

Our mother was waiting for us. Had she been beside us, I would have been made to turn away. Perhaps everything that followed would have been different, but as fate would have it, she wasn't there, and for that I was immensely thankful. Nahara threw me a look when I told her to go on, but she did as I asked.

"You come this way every day," Amram remarked once my sister had gone.

"How would you know?" I spoke to him as I had once spoken to Nouri, as though I were an equal, not one who would bow before him.

"Because I watch you."

I felt the way I had when I was in the mountains, myself once more.

"Not as often as I watch you," I said, my grin widening.

Because I'd grown up among boys, I didn't have the guile of a woman. Amram laughed, surprised by my honesty. I suppose when I first kissed him, holding nothing back, I did so as a man would, unwound by ardor. If he was surprised by that, he was not displeased.

Shirah (pp. 402-407)

AS A GIRL in Alexandria, I often watched my mother leaf through her notebook when I was meant to be asleep on the pallet at the foot of her bed, which was worthy of a queen, raised off the floor and covered by a fine linen cloth, threaded with strands of purple and gold. My mother looked fierce in the half-light, her black hair falling down her back. In the evenings she burned balsam in an earthenware bowl. The smoke that spiraled up toward the ceiling was pale, much like the inner feathers of a dove's wing. The scent was of lands far away, where the fields were always green and acacia trees grew. My mother had been chosen to go to Alexandria and live among a sect of Greeks and Jews because she was so beautiful and so learned. Because of this she wore secret tattoos imprinted on her skin, intricate designs fashioned with sharpened reeds that had been dipped in henna. These proclaimed her status as a *kedeshah*. After her initiation, she often kept herself hidden, for although her status was revered among many in Alexandria, the Temple in Jerusalem outlawed such practices.

The women who joined in this way of life believed that few were closer to Shechinah than the *kedeshah*. They embraced the feminine aspect of God, the Dwelling, the deep place where inspiration abided, for in the written words of God, compassion and knowledge were always female. This is why the lilies grew in my mother's garden and why she was allowed knowledge of Hebrew and Greek and could converse with any man.

When the priests came to visit, I was sent from the house, and I would go into the garden. Among the hedges, there grew the white blooms of the henna flower that turned a mysterious, sacred shade of red when prepared as a dye. I often spent my time beside a small fountain fashioned of blue and white ceramic tiles. I was not pleased to be sent from my mother, but I occupied myself, a skill learned by children who must sometimes act older than their age. The water lilies rested on plump green pads that trailed pale, fleshy tendrils below them in the waters of the fountain. Birds came to drink, offering their songs in return for quenching their thirst. My mother had told me to be silent, and I did as she asked. I practiced until I could sit so still I became invisible to the birds that fluttered down from the pine trees. Often they would alight on my shoulders and on my knees. I could feel their nimble hearts beating as they sang in sheer gratitude for the shade and comfort of our garden.

Once, when I was little more than four, I was sent out for several hours in the burning-hot sun. I was so angry to have been cast out of our chamber into the brutal heat of noon that I threw myself into the fountain. The ceramic tiles were cool and slippery on my feet. In my childish fury, I leapt without thinking of the consequences. The instant I did, the heat of the day disappeared. I held my breath as I went under. With the green water all around me, I immediately felt I had found a home. This was the element I was meant for. The world itself spun upside down, and yet it seemed more mine than any other place. I wanted to close my eyes and drift forever. I saw bubbles formed of my own breath. All at once someone grabbed for me roughly. The priest ripped me out of the water. He shook me and told me that little girls who played with water drowned and that no one would feel sorry for me if this should be my fate.

But I hadn't drowned, and I looked up at him, defiant and dripping with water. I could feel a new power within me, one that gave me the courage to glare at this holy man. I could see my mother's glance focused on me in a strange manner, her gaze lingering on my drenched form from the doorway where she stood. Her hair was loose, and she was wearing only a white shawl

wrapped around her naked body. The henna tattoos swirling across her throat and breasts and arms were drawn in honeyed patterns, as if she were a flower rather than a woman.

Not long after my dive into the fountain, my mother took me to the Nile. It was here, on the shore of the mightiest river, that Moses had inscribed God's name upon gold, throwing it into the waters, begging the Almighty to allow the Exodus of our people to begin. It was a long journey to undertake, but my mother insisted we must go. Our servants brought us there in a cart pulled by donkeys. A tent was lifted over our heads to protect our skins from burning as we traveled. We set off in the middle of the night so that the voyage would be cooler. We rested during the heat of the next day, then set off once again. As I dozed I listened to the wheels of our cart and the drone of our servants speaking to each other in Greek, the language we all spoke publicly, whether we were Jews or Egyptians, pagans or Greeks. Our donkeys were white and well brushed, their gait even and quick. We had fruit in a basket to eat whenever we were hungry, along with cakes made of dates and figs. I wondered if I were a princess, and my mother a queen. The air gleamed with heat, but the closer we drew to the river, the cooler the breeze became.

Morning was rising, and people were already busy in the working world around us. The mass of life was noisy on the road to the river, the air scented with cinnamon and cardamom. There were pepper trees and date palms that were taller than any I'd seen before. I felt a shimmer of excitement, and great satisfaction at being alone with my mother. For once I did not have to share her. She allowed me to play with the two golden amulets she wore at her throat, and the serpent key that gleamed in the sunlight.

My mother wore a white tunic and sandals. She had oiled and braided her own hair and mine, as she would have had we been attending a ritual to make an offering. As we drew even nearer to the river, the hour was still early, the sky pink. There was the rich scent of mud and lilies. Women had brought baskets of laundry to wash and then dry on the banks, and men were setting out in narrow, flat-bottomed wooden fishing boats, their oars turning as they called to one another, their woven nets flashing through the air as they tossed them out for their catch.

My mother leaned down to whisper that we had arrived at our destination. She told me that, if water was indeed my element, I must learn to swim with my eyes open. I must control it or it would control me. To take charge of a substance so powerful, one had to give in to it first, become one with it, then triumph. We went through the reeds, though they were sharp as they slapped against us, leaving little crisscross serrations on our legs in a pattern of X's. I saw herons and storks fishing for their breakfasts. Our feet sank in the mud, and as we went deeper our tunics flowed out around us.

The Nile always grew fat after the full moon in summer, its water a great gift in a time of brutal heat. I could feel how refreshing and sweet it was. I had never known the sense of true delight, how intense pleasure coursed through your body slowly, and then, suddenly, in a rush of sensation. All at once you possessed the river, as it possessed you in turn. I had the sense that I belonged to these waters and always had.

"Now we'll discover who you will be," my mother said to me, eager to see what her daughter might become.

I sank under, my eyes open. I would have blinked had my mother not told me to be vigilant. I trusted her and always did as she said. I made certain to keep my eyes wide. Because of this I saw a vision I would carry with me for my entire life. There was a fish as large as a man. He was luminous in the murky dark. He was enormous, a creature who needed neither breath nor earth, as I did, and yet I had no fear of him. Rather, tenderness rose inside me. I felt he was my

beloved. I reached out, and he ventured close enough for me to run my hand over his cold, silvery scales.

I arose from the river with a sense of joy, but also with a melancholy I had not known before. It is not usual for a child to feel such sadness when nothing has changed and the world around is still the same. Yet I had a sense of extreme loss.

When I told my mother about the fish, she said I had seen my destiny. She didn't seem at all surprised.

"Did he bite you?" she asked.

I shook my head. The fish had seemed very kind.

"Well, he will," my mother told me. "Here is the riddle of love: Everything it gives to you, it takes away."

I did not know what this meant, though I knew the world was a dangerous place for a woman. Still, I did not understand how a person whose element was water could stay away from fish.

They say that a woman who practices magic is a witch, and that every witch derives her power from the earth. There was a great seer who advised that, should a man hold a witch in the air, he could then cut off her powers, thereby making her helpless. But such an attempt would have no effect on me. My strength came from water, my talents buoyed by the river. On the day I swam in the Nile and saw my fate in the ink blue depths, my mother told me that I would have powers of my own, as she did. But there was a warning she gave to me as well: If I were ever to journey too far from the water, I would lose my power and my life. I must keep my head and not give in to desire, for desire is what causes women to drown.