

*(The three Brothers exit; Barak piles dyed animal skins up in a great heap.)*

Wife:

Either they leave here,  
Leave here forever,  
Leave here forever,  
Or I leave.  
That's how  
I'll take the measure  
Of my worth to you.

Barak: *(still straightening things up)*

Here sit the soup bowls  
From which they are sated.  
Where then should they take shelter  
If not in their father's house?

*(angry silence from the Wife; Barak as before without looking up)*

Children, they were once children,  
And had perfect bright eyes; perfect arms, too,  
And they had perfect posture.  
I watched as each one grew up  
In Father's house.

Wife: *(mocking him)*

For thirteen children,  
Each had a soup bowl  
Steaming with fat  
And plenty more left  
To feed the beggars.

*(Barak fetches a rope to tie up the bundle, stops and looks at her. The Wife holds her hands over her ears.)*

Barak:

Vittles for thirteen,  
If I had to,  
I, too, could provide  
With these two hands!

*(He stands and goes to her.)*

Wife, bear me children to gather round me  
With their soup bowls each evening  
And not a one will wake up hungry.  
And I'll give grateful praise for for their hunger  
And thanks give with my whole heart  
That I was called on,

Called on to satisfy it.  
When will you bear me  
Children to feed?

*(He comes closer and caresses her gently. The Wife draws back when he touches her and she shakes his hand off. Barak, guilelessly and comfortably:)*

But why? It's your husband standing here.  
Is he not allowed to caress you?

Wife: *(without looking at him)*

My husband stands here,  
Oh, right, my husband is here.  
Oh, right, my husband. Yes, I know,  
I know what that bodes....  
I've been bought and paid for just to know it.  
I'm well kept at home,  
I've been fed and been cared for  
Just so I'd know.  
From now on I don't want to know it.  
I swear off the word and off the thing!

Barak: *(calm, almost joyful)*

Aha! Did not the godmothers come here?  
And did they not over your belly  
Pronounce their blessings and their spells?  
And did I not eat seven times from  
The food that they had blessed just for me?  
And when you strangely act  
And are not yourself,  
Your strangeness I celebrate.  
I bow down low, reveling in  
Your transformation.  
O fortunate me,  
How expectant  
And joyful is my heart!

*(he kneels and resumes working)*

Wife: *(not loudly)*

Dull, bleary-eyed women who mutter blessings--  
With my belly, they have  
Nothing to do.  
And what you have eaten in the night  
Can summon no power  
Over me or my soul.

*(softly)*

Thirty months I've been your wife  
And you've not won the fruit of my womb from me.  
Neither have you made me into a mother.  
My longing for that,  
I was forced to stamp out,  
Cut out of my soul.  
Now it's up to you  
To stamp out the longings  
That you hold dear.

Barak: *(with unforced solemnity and heartfelt piety)*

From such a girlish mouth  
Come such hardened words and  
Such defiant speeches.  
But these speeches are blessed  
With the blessing  
That you can take them back.  
I bear you no grudge  
And my heart is happy  
And I bide time  
And await them,  
The exalted ones,  
Who are coming.

*(Barak has tied the heavy bundle together, lifts it onto the hearth and shoulders it, bowing under the weight. The ends of the rope hang down his back. Thus laden, he straightens up.)*

Wife: *(darkly, to herself)*

Not one will there be  
Inside this house.  
I'd sooner see a few of them leave here  
And shake off the dust on their way out.

*(Almost soundlessly)*

And I would rather it be today than tomorrow.

*(Barak nods at her good-naturedly without having listened to what she's just said, as he is struggling under the heavy load and on his way out the door.)*

Barak: *(to himself)*

I'll take the goods to market myself.  
I'll spare the donkey all of his load.

*(He exits. The Wife, alone, has sat herself down on a bundle set Downstage. A hovering, a darkening, a flash in the air. The Nurse, in a black gown with white spots, and the Empress, dressed as a serving maid, are standing in the room without having come through the door.)*

Wife: *(now on her feet)*  
What do you want?  
Where are you from?

Nurse: *(approaches her humbly to kiss her feet)*  
Ah! Beauty without equal!  
A dazzling fire!  
Oh! Oh! Oh, my daughter  
Who is this we see?  
Who is she, this princess?  
And where are her ladies?  
How is it that she's alone in this hovel?

*(rises timidly from the Wife's feet)*  
Will you allow the question, oh my mistress?  
Could that have been one of your many servants?  
Or else perhaps a message bearer,  
That big man who had a pack on his shoulders,  
Young no longer,  
With a wide, stocky build,  
The one who has a harelip and a low forehead?

Wife:  
You flatterer whom I've never seen,  
You who slipped in here from who knows where,  
I see through you. That's right!  
You know full well  
That man is the dyer and my husband  
And that I live here in this hovel.

Nurse: *(jumps to her feet in exaggerated astonishment)*  
Oh, oh, my daughter, look on in wonder!  
Could this be the wife of dyer Barak?  
Approach her, my daughter, for she has allowed it,  
And gaze on her lovely lashes and fair face,  
And gaze as well on her body, so slender  
It's like a young palm tree,  
And cry out "Sorrow!"

Empress:

I want to kiss the shadow that she casts!

Nurse:  
Sorrow!  
It is her lot  
Children to bear him  
And all alone here to languish.  
How unseeing is fate, how pernicious is fortune!

Wife: *(shrinks back from her in fear)*  
Sorrow that you came to me  
Only to taunt me!  
And all of your talk  
And your gawking at me  
Is only to make a fool of me  
Before God and my neighbors.

Nurse: *(with feigned astonishment, as she pulls the Empress away)*  
Sorrow, my child.  
Away with us!  
This one casts us out  
And does not wish us to serve her.  
For she knows our secret  
And wants to insult us.  
Come away!  
*(makes as if to leave)*

Wife: *(rises suddenly)*  
What kind of secret,  
You unspeakable one?  
Upon my soul  
And upon yours,  
What kind of secret?

Nurse: *(bows deeply)*  
It is the secret of price  
And it's the secret of bargains  
And how to buy all that you want.

Wife:  
Upon my soul and  
By the dawning day,  
I know not of a bargain,  
Know not of a price!

Nurse:

Oh, but, my mistress,  
Should I believe you  
Don't regard your shadow,  
That blackened nothing  
At your back,  
In the mire,  
That nameless thing,  
As a product  
For sale?  
Though it would buy  
Everlasting charm  
And power without limit  
Over all menfolk?

Wife: (*turns toward her shadow*)  
What, the stooping shadow  
Of a woman such as me?  
Who for it would pay  
Even the tiniest price?

Nurse:  
Many, many,  
You blessed lady.  
Eager buyers  
Would pay any price, should  
My mistress,  
Should one  
Indescribable,  
Such as you are,  
Cast off her own shade and  
For riches exchange it!  
Think of all the slave girls and slave men  
You'd have, and how before you they'd cower  
And rich brocades and fine silken garments,  
So many, you'd change them once an hour.  
You'd have mules and houses,  
Sparkling fountains and charming gardens  
As many paramours as you could manage  
And youth everlasting, beauty, too,  
Forever would be with you.  
This all would be yours,  
Queen in All But Name,  
Just say your shadow's for sale!

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