Perhaps it was like this—

The drape of her dress on the kneeling board, hands crossed over her breast, in prayer or reading. Maybe asleep. She did not invite him in.

Of course she was terrified. Of course she jumped back and gripped the wall. Threw books at him. Said, “Don’t ask such things of me! To carry a child, unwed. To risk death by stoning.” And he, the difficult child, the unknown one. “No! Get out!”

Perhaps he left. Came back. The Angel Annunciatory.

“Stop bothering me!” she might have said. Thinking, if I even listen to you, I will come undone. His light, his voice. As of another world. A world past sand and crow. Past the laundry drying in the tree.

Why did I think it was an easy thing? A moment of terror and then consent. How could it be? Years, years to do that work. To
look into an unknown world, past lake and market smell, the fish, their hammered heads, the thud, that sound of her father working, her mother grinding almonds between stone, just so, that flick of the water from her fingertips, that bit of oil. The paste. The angel leaving, coming again.

Perhaps he learned to make the sound of knocking, learned to wait until she said, “Come in,” before he let go his celestial light. His nimbus brighter than the sun. Perhaps he learned to stay on the far side of the room, hands at his sides. His wing against the wall. They eyed their differences. All that lay between. So that, in time, she came to mark the distance on the floor between where he always stood and where she sat. Forty inches and three quarters. A new, unchanging, sacred space. In time, coming to know the shadow on the floor, cast from his light, to be her own. Many times into her room. Perhaps seventy times seven.

Years, years, trying to see how she was separate from her friends, the water in the well, the raven, her mother’s hand, the dust on the stony ledge. Until she knew her own outline, how could she let another in? “Go! Get out of here!” And he, vacating through the wall. His trace, his feather, on the cold clay floor. She put it in her basket with the others.

The first ones, when Gabriel was young and confident. Proud of his charge. Proud of his vocation. The cobalt blue, the radiating green of the wing. In those days, when his entrance lit up her room.
Now she barely notices when he is there. His grey wings, travel-worn and weary. The fatigue she sees in his eyes. His clumsiness. A jar knocked over by mistake. His wrinkled, callused feet. His tattered nimbus now a simple crown of fish.

Patient, the patient angel. His weathered wing. His mission not accomplished. His old age, his worry. Shame.


Did she have a violation? A memory? A wound? A cave inside big enough to hold the problem child? What wound could this be? Perhaps only when she remembered it, would there be room.

The day when her work was finished, long, since that first visit when she threw the books, she speaks to him. Knowing to speak louder than before. His diminished hearing, his eyes cloudy, the whites yellowed with age. “I have a ripped-apart place,” she tells him. “I am ready. I have enough room.”

He raises his tired eyes. He spreads his wings, wide, against the wall. His nimbus fills with light.

“Behold,” she instructed him. “See before you the handmaid of the Lord.”
Or, perhaps it was like this—

Mary at the well turned her head in the direction of the voice.

Listening, her feet trembled in her black shoes.

Stay still, she told herself. Someone is putting roses in my hair.
Don't move, not even my fingers.

Always alone, it came when she was most vulnerable.

Until one day when she screamed, “No! You cannot do that to me!”
The Visitation

SHE RAN.

If Joseph did not believe her and refused to marry, the men of Nazareth would bury her up to her neck in the sand and would kill her, slowly, in a hail of stones. They would volunteer to do this, to be the ones.

She ran into the hills, alone. Ran one hundred miles straight into the arms of Elizabeth.

IN THE DAY Mary rested, almost calm, Elizabeth bringing tea, glass cups rattling on a wicker tray. She had marked pages, set it on the night stand, having read the stories herself, trying to find other women who had conceived in old age like she now had, her body heavy and slow, her breasts enlarged and tender like a young woman’s.

Likewise, Mary read to find herself in the stories. But all the women who conceived when it had seemed hopeless were old, not
like herself, only fifteen. And the husbands were, in every case, also the fathers.

"There is no precedent," she told Elizabeth. "I have no sisters. I am alone."

The fears returned. Her dreams were vivid. She was a dead mare with her dead foal, carted about by a senseless minotaur.

Sometimes she was a girl with a dove, guiding the minotaur in the night.

A month passed and there was no blood. When the second month came, and, again, there was no blood, certainty fell on Elizabeth and she knelt down before Mary, holding the chair for balance, and cried out with a loud voice, "Blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb!" She laid her palm on Mary's torso, touching what was already there, and for a moment Mary thought, maybe it's true and maybe I am safe. "The child in my womb leaps for joy!" Elizabeth exclaimed, short of breath, "because you, Mary, are the mother of my Lord, and you have come to me."

In that profession of Elizabeth, whom she loved, the rocking boat in which Mary found herself began to settle.

"My soul magnifies the Lord," Mary began, testing how it felt, "and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior. . . ." The more she spoke, the more her own words lifted her up from fear. "Behold, all generations will call me blessed because he who is mighty has
done great things for me, and holy is his name.” She spoke as if almost knowing that the voice she had so often heard was not dangerous but was God’s voice.

When they told Zachariah what they had come to believe, he withdrew to his room and when he emerged, still struck with muteness, he wrote questions for Mary. “Is this true?”

“Yes,” she replied.

He scribbled the words faster. “You have not been with Joseph?”

“I haven’t been with any man.”

A firm silence fell over the room, sober and dark. They were all thinking the same thing. “If Joseph doesn’t believe and marry me, I will be killed,” she said.

Zachariah looked down at the bony white knuckles of his hands and wrote, slowly, with great care, “I will protect you.”

“Go home now and tell Joseph,” Elizabeth said. “Prepare him.”

Through the hills Mary walked slowly this time, to cleave to what Elizabeth and Zachariah had given her. That armor.

By the time she reached home, Elizabeth’s child had been born, and, as foretold, it was a boy. In obedience they named him John and speech returned to Zachariah.

Things beyond nature were everywhere happening. Courage would now be the new demand. In this she felt united with holy women everywhere. She heard a woman singing from the future,
O most steadfast path.
O mail-coat of hope.
O sword-belt of honesty.

She called bravely to the Angel Gabriel who came in haste. “See before you,” she instructed, as one raising her shield, “the hand­maid of the Lord.”
Joseph’s Decision

He’d missed her. Gone three months and no word. He groomed his hair, his fingernails. “She’s coming to me,” he told himself, “the Queen of Galilee.”

But she was pregnant when she returned from the hill country and the only thing he knew for certain was that he was not the father.

It was God’s child? She was talking to angels now? Even the details didn’t make sense. She went without saying good-bye, didn’t tell him or her parents but had just run away.

“Look at my hands, my feet,” he exclaimed. “I’m a practical man! What am I to do?”

It felt new to call himself “a practical man,” new to call himself a man at all. His father had been encouraging him to become more independent, stronger, more reliable, and he had tried to grow into this for his father’s sake. He was engaged, he and Mary would have many children, he would stop drifting and apply himself to his trade. He would build a large family table with many leaves and
Mary would learn to cook, making large pots of lentils, soups and stews. He could picture it. Mary would even teach him to read and teach their children to read, one by one. He would make beautiful, useful objects of wood, writing desks, fine cases, and his business would prosper. Knowing well the various trees and their distinct properties, the work of his life would glorify God and bring honor to his family. But he was not prepared for this.

He unfolded the drawing his father had made for him, of a boy his own age, also sixteen, saying, “He’s just like you.” Joseph held the picture and practiced standing in front of the mirror being that boy, David with Goliath, his hand on his hip, as if he had no fear. He practiced the boy’s cocky pose, the slingshot, the soft boots, the sword, and stood a long time until he could really feel the doubts fall at his feet. His father had drawn the slingshot but also a sword, explaining, “Just in case the stone misses its mark.” Then added, “Courage is required for every other virtue, Joseph. Remember that.”

For many nights he kept to himself and Mary was shaken by it, her life in the balance and the baby’s life, too. But she knew it was his habit to make difficult decisions in sleep and silence, waiting for the authoritative voice that was not his own, the familiar voice that had never done him ill. Living on the film of his dreams.

As he stood practicing bravery, Joseph began to feel supported as if by a sturdy platform made of wood. The platform lifted him and Mary over this difficult time and into another, where they were a bit older, he maybe twenty and Mary nineteen. Mary was again like a dream to him, his queen, alive and real. All the confusion fell
away. In fact, everything fell away except that he loved her. And she desperately needed to be believed.

And he came out of his room and returned to her. Not twenty and nineteen but sixteen and fifteen. It didn’t matter. They held each other and, girded with gladness, flew out of the familiar into the great unknown.
JOSEPH SAT APART, in a corner. Not because the midwives wanted him out of the way, he’d found them past midnight, frantically knocking on doors, and they’d come quickly, but because doubt had returned and he wasn’t ready for it. The journey had been difficult, then shepherds came saying angels were singing in the sky. Nothing was simple, nothing within the reach of his understanding.

He’d called the day they married Bright Friday. It was his favorite day of the week, then Bright Saturday, Bright Sunday. He reasoned, she sees behind a membrane and I don’t. I see what’s in front of me. She sees the transparent structure of the world and I can’t see it. Maybe that’s why we’re perfect for each other. Besides, we love the same God. That will be enough.

But now the room smelled foul even though he’d washed everything down with buckets of clean water. He’d wanted cleanliness. Then privacy. Now he wanted Mary to look stronger than she did, more able to bring other children into the world. He wished
her hips were wider, her breasts more full. Birth from a virgin is not possible, and he wondered when the true father would show up. It could be one of the shepherds for all he knew. Maybe they mocked him.

If God gives us love, why not the necessary courage to sustain it? If God gives courage, why isn’t it permanent?

He stared at his knees and did not see Mary, who looked away from the baby and across to him. She felt the presence of his doubts and their power. Afraid, she wondered, are we no longer us? In a brief moment of sleep, Joseph walked toward her. He was an old man and as he walked white powder fell from his elbows and knees. She woke with a jolt. The baby was crying. Something is disintegrating, she thought. He is leaving us.
When she held Jesus on her knee and he reached his arm around her neck, Mary felt flooded with melancholy she could not account for, a profound foreknowledge of sorrow for which she had no empirical evidence. She saw that what she'd given her son by giving him her body was suffering. And she grieved not only for herself, her son and husband, but for all of creation, the cat outside, the cucumbers sliced in the bowl, the great fish in the sea, vulture and crow, for every person, for lovers, for every child born and yet to come. Grieved for the entire world in all its soiled history and crippled future because suffering was an inalienable element of the world’s order and because it was incurable.

From that day on, she resolved to pray hourly for all of creation, the reptiles and insects, the flowers and birds, for those she loved and for those she did not love.
IN TIME a startling vision came to her that was unlike anything she'd ever seen with her eyes. Two hands very near each other. Hers and her son's. And she could not reach him.

THE VISION CAME often so she began to pray for those who would hurt her son and for the enemies of truth. Eventually she was able to pray that her son's enemies, sure that he would have them, would also be preserved and be shown mercy.

She prepared herself, and she would also prepare him.

“What is the price of salvation?” she asked Jesus as he grew, until one day he answered, “Death.”

And she said, “Yes.”
She was afraid when she heard the commotion outside, looked through the latch, and waited. Joseph gone, the moon too bright and, opening the door, she saw that there was no moon.

“My husband will be home any minute,” she said. The men looked wise and exotic so she added, “He’s a dreamer,” hoping they would think more highly of him, and then invited them in. They brought fruitcakes, berries, sweet wine in bottles, gold coins, incense, a bracelet for her. The myrrh she refused.

“No, take it to anoint the dead,” one said.

“I know what it’s for,” she snapped, remembering how she’d anointed her mother.

“No,” he insisted, pointing to the boy on the floor surrounded by the new toys, a wooden sword, a ball, a kite. He set it on the table anyway. She would remove it the next day, take it to the riverbank, bury it in the mud.

“It was a miracle,” she told Joseph. “They came from so far away!”
He lay down. "What did they want? The neighbors said they were wealthy. Like kings." When he looked at her bracelet, she realized they'd brought nothing for him. "I wish I'd been home," he offered.

She wanted him to decipher the meaning of the visit for her. "Is it a warning?" He shook his head. "I don't know. Did they have wives? Families?"

"They didn't say."

"And they knew you?"

"They were looking for him," she pointed to the young boy.

He has my co-ordination, Joseph thought, seeing how skillfully their son held the ball. It was a small idea but that's why he liked it, a resting place in what had become another conversation he did not understand.

To be an accessory was not a new feeling. He'd felt it when they took Jesus to the temple as a infant. Mary walked ahead holding their baby as if he were hers only, and he followed with nothing but the turtledoves.

From the day the wealthy men came, Joseph oscillated between two interpretations of his life which could not both be true at the same time. And there was no third position. Either the God of Abraham and Isaac had somehow joined himself to the body of his son, his loveable son, or his wife had an imagination that was possibly dangerous. Dangerous for a small boy, putting ridiculous ideas in his head. A woman from whom he should protect his son.

He watched as Mary bathed the boy and dressed him for bed, the cloth tiger, the sword, the puppets, the clutter of it a comfort
and in the clutter of objects he tried to find peace. In the smoothness of Mary’s arms, her thin waist, she seemed, again, too frail and good to abandon. Tonight he would not go away to think. He would stay home, with them.

He and Mary fell asleep in each other’s arms. But Joseph woke shaking. His dream was full of wailing, galloping horses and blood.
Trash cans kicked over, a door slammed, screaming. Then another voice, one she recognized. The woman with twins. Mary lit the candle, opened the door. A third scream from the butcher’s house. Soldiers on horseback. Blood in the street. Lamps coming on all down the block. Screams from the house behind. The slap of leather on flesh. Shadows of horses running across the sides of the houses. And then they were gone. Like horses of the apocalypse, Mary thought.

In daylight all was still. Men and women and children, as if frozen, stared at the street. No blood on the lintels. None on the doors. It wasn’t the angel of death. They were soldiers with blankets under their saddles and shields. No one spoke. No one ate. No one moved into action. For days blood lay unanswered in the street.

In almost every house, a dead child and a living one. And all the dead children were boys. All of them young. Older brothers and sisters sleepwalking, dazed, one boy laughed uncontrollably, holding his pet mouse, stroking it.
A week later she woke in a pool of blood. It was true, then, she had been with child. Glistening and motionless, she held it in the palm of her hand. It would have been a brother.

It was weeks, when a skin of normalcy returned, that the smart girl did the calculations. Only boys were murdered and only those two years old or younger. The age Jesus had been. By rumor and calculation, pieces were assembled. The order had come down from Herod himself.

"It wasn't our fault," Joseph repeated.

"But our son was saved and none of the others his age. We were lucky. You had that dream."

Joseph tried to be patient but she'd spoken this way for months, demanding that he console her, demanding that he say again, "It had nothing to do with us." But it didn't help. She would say, "It's because of us," whenever the temperature dropped and the air felt like that night's air. Or the jasmine smelled outside the window as it had that night. Or the stars aligned in the same way.

The families who lost one son and those who lost two threw rocks at their door. At the well, women locked arms forming a barricade so that she fetched water at noon in the sweltering sun when no one was there.

Their outrage did not fade. "We saw our sons murdered and you miscarried!" the women taunted her. "We've all miscarried plenty!" In this the older women chimed in, even the grandmothers, drawing on memory.
Some days Mary wanted neither marriage nor motherhood. Thought, if this is holiness, I don’t want any part of it. Unable to feel compassion, unable to forgive, she called out to Joseph, “I don’t want to be here anymore!” and Joseph thought, I have nothing left to give you.

“Why didn’t you warn us?” the men boycotted his workshop, no customers came so there was, suddenly, no income, just what was left of the gold.

Shunned in public, forbidden to attend the funerals of the slain, Joseph took his goods to other villages where he was not known, but his business did not grow. He found work making small repairs, a stuck drawer, a weakened table leg, a broken gate.

From the cabinet behind the stove she took some of the gold and traveled to Jerusalem where she bought a costly garment. She put it on and stood in front of the mirror. It changed nothing. She wanted to feel innocent and could not.

There would be no more pregnancies. She and Joseph felt unable to be sexual, unable to risk more unhappiness, unable to find in the body of the other either pleasure or solace. The table he built lay almost empty and more children would not come. Over the years he would take the leaves and chop them to kindling.
The Murder of Zachariah

Word came from the hill country. On the same night that Jesus was spared, soldiers had gone to the house of Elizabeth and Zachariah seeking their child, to slay him. But Zachariah had hidden his wife and son in the wilderness, in a mountain that opened its bosom to them. And when the soldier asked the whereabouts of the child, Zachariah refused to divulge their hiding place and for this was slain along with the infants.
Ive years passed and Jesus was seven. Mary set the table and Joseph planned games. She’d made a cake fashioning animals of almond paste for the top, sheep, camels, rabbits, one for each guest, eighteen in all. She felt that they were help mates again, she and Joseph doing the party together. But no children came. Not the older boys, not any of the girls, except, finally, one, the Gentile girl who came with her cat, but seeing the large cake and none of her friends, set down her present and left.

The plates around the table, the favors and party hats, Joseph, Mary, and Jesus held hands. Looking at his wife to make a point, that she not forget it, Joseph said, “We are a holy family.” She lit the candles and, seeing her husband through them, that he was a person of discernment, a provider of sound judgment, she wondered, is it true? Are we a holy family after all?

As she cut the cake she could almost feel again that surprise when the angel addressed her as an innocent. How at one point he’d looked right into her eyes and she’d looked right into his and
Joseph said those words but did not believe them. I, too, have eaten ashes like bread. He thought of his father's favorite psalm, 137, "They who carried us away required myth of us," and he tried to do this. Then, "If I make my bed in Hell, thou art there." He'd memorized all one hundred and fifty psalms by the time he was his son's age, his father punctuating speech with a psalm day and night, phrases for every mood, happy, dejected, fatigued, energetic.

But he was stretching, to be a holding net, to keep the family together in a claim of innocence that none of them felt. Not Mary, not himself, not their son who'd grown up with the anniversaries, the torchlight processions, the weeping, portraits drawn on the walls in chalk. Families had moved away, many decided they would bring no more children into the world, others divorced, siblings developed strange illnesses. Most no longer observed the Sabbath. "We've sacrificed enough," the boy read on their faces scarred with grief.

Joseph looked at his son and wife and hid his thoughts because, again, he was calculating. The logic came to him often. If he hadn't been a dreamer, if he hadn't obeyed the voice in his dreams, if he hadn't married Mary, she would have been dead seven years now, a thought he despised, as well as their son. But all the other boys would still be alive. Hundreds of them. And Zachariah, too. He said, "We are a holy family," because he said it to himself often,
when the calculating came like a fiendish animal circling the bed¬
post, the front door, his work bench, and he was ashamed.

When he prayed, which was rare, it was to tell God, in case he’d
forgotten, “Send me no more of your dreams.”
Finding Jesus in the Temple

Jesus sat by himself often, trying to understand his family, the murder of his uncle, Zachariah, and the murder of his male peers. He was five, he was eight, he was eleven. He had no answer. Sometimes he wished he’d been murdered, too. At those times he was angry with his father for having dreams and for obeying them. Angry that his father’s dreams had twice saved his life.

When he spoke in the Temple, though he was only twelve, he spoke of unhappiness, destiny and the web into which, though we don’t design it, we are born. He spoke with great conviction and little emotion. That he knew about human suffering was clear to those who heard him.

He didn’t speak of the night visitors who came bringing gifts. That he still had the kite, his mother, the gold. He spoke of what he’d seen, of the limit of riches to bring happiness, that gold did not lift his mother’s despondency when he watched her stand before
the mirror newly clothed in fine garments and wept. The dress that still hung at the back of her closet, unworn. Riches could not prevent the slicing off anymore than righteousness could. Her righteousness, his father’s, his uncle’s, the parents in his neighborhood.

“The Son of Man will bring division,” he said because this was the nature of the puzzle he was trying to solve, the severing he’d already seen and had set in motion. A family of four children had three. A family with two sons had only one. That knife blade. That sickle.

“Who is my mother and brother?” Mary quizzed him.

“Those who hear the word of God and do it,” he answered and spoke the same that day in the Temple.

Those present listened with amazement and some said, “Surely this boy is a prophet.”

After searching for Jesus three days, Joseph and Mary found him in the Temple and Joseph instructed him to come home, but Jesus answered, saying, “Here I am doing my father’s business,” rebuking his father, which offended Joseph. And the Elders, witnessing the exchange, said among themselves, “Is he the boy’s father? This carpenter? The one who can’t read? The one who makes chairs?”

Mary did not hear the insult, so that Joseph bore the full weight of the humiliation without her.

In that moment he saw the degree of his uselessness to both her and their son and felt anger again toward Jesus. He thought of Abraham’s rage against Isaac, a story he knew from childhood, his
father telling it to him with sadness, saying, “I hope we never have that strife between us.”

His wife and son had eyes fixed on something greater that he could not see, something more important than being a family, even a holy one. And Joseph fell away from them, so that there was no repairing it. Once they reached home, he would gather his possessions and move away.

They seemed unconcerned with happiness, which he held as life’s greatest gain, a true measure of the spiritual life. Life was made for joy, after all. And he did not take it for granted much less devalue it as they seemed to do. He looked at them as they walked ahead, feeling how keenly he wanted a simple life, a life without the supernatural in it.

They walked so closely that their steps almost matched, the boy almost as tall as his mother, each occasionally looking away at the landscape, the hills to the left, the wide, flat expanse of sand to the right. By the time they reached home, Joseph wondered if their quest for some higher meaning that he did not feel or feel drawn to was a kind of gluttony or greed.
Women found Elizabeth noble in her widowhood. Some envied her because her son lived, others because her husband had hidden them, still others because he had given his life for them.

Zachariah achieved remarkable stature among them, his face drawn in chalk on the walls, leading the slain children to a safe place, a beyond. It was a myth in the village, and a comfort, and for Zachariah, each anniversary, the tallest white candles were lit.

The story was singular among the families of the slain and told everywhere on the anniversary of that night, so that at times Jesus envied his cousin.

When Elizabeth dreamt of her husband, which was often, he wore ochre, vermilion and gold, rich fabrics befitting a martyr. She existed as if in his presence so that she saw herself in that same way, on her fingers sapphire and ruby rings where there were none, wearing a crinoline head piece and dressed in an ermine-trimmed gown embroidered in gold.

When he was young, she knit John a raven of black yarn and left notes and snacks outside his door, a fig cookie, a paper airplane, “To Elijah from the Raven.” It was their game. John knew and loved the story of the prophet fed by ravens in the wilderness and made her tell it again and again. Often he stood on the kitchen chair, pretending to ride up to Heaven in a chariot of fire. He demanded she admire him. “You, my little Thunder-Bearer!” she said playfully.

He cut out large paper wings and she tied them to his arms, first pricking the paper with her needle then pushing through the string. “Oh, you have the wings of a messenger!” she exclaimed as he opened them wide and jumped from the table, calling out, “I’m the Angel of the Wilderness!” then running around the room.

But sometimes she saw streaks of gold on his paper wings and through the window gold on the trees. She watched his feet grow into the shape of the prophet’s. She’d seen the paintings. It seemed more than a coincidence. And then, the same elongated, spade-shaped face, so extreme on some days that for a moment it looked like the face of a dog.

She thought, these are ascetic features belonging to one with an austere message, a preacher of penitence.
Both fatherless, Jesus and John spent time together, their mothers devoted to each other and to them. Mary made puppets from small pieces of wood, string, scraps of cloth, and they played “Three Kings,” riding the rake and broom like camels.

They played games they would not play with other children. “Turn the other cheek,” John said, thinking of his father succumbing to the soldier, and Jesus said the same, thinking of the women who barricaded his mother from the well. “When someone strikes you, turn the other cheek,” was their code and they played different versions of it, Father and the Soldier, Mother and the Women at the Well. They practiced fighting with swords, one turning the cheek while being slain. Other times they fought to win, loud and shrieking, pretending to stab each other, to fall dead, to be the victor. And sometimes real anger emerged. John crying out, “If it weren’t for you, I’d still have my father!”
Jesus also wanted Zachariah. He imagined growing up to be like him, to give his life for something. A priest in the Temple, then a martyr. To be heroic. To return to the world something that already seemed like a debt.

"People don’t become martyrs because they want to be heroic," his aunt instructed him. "They become martyrs because they love something or someone to a heroic degree."

By the time Jesus was eighteen, his father had been gone six years without coming home. John knew this, yet he envied Jesus because his father lived in some particular place and spoke real words and ate and drank like other men.

Hearing the longing of her nephew, Mary opened the box in which she’d kept the notes Zachariah wrote to her when he could not speak and gave them to John who loved the small papers because they had touched his father.

As they grew John longed to meet Joseph and begged Jesus to look for him. "Let’s find him," he said, wanting touch, roughness, something more than memory, a hunger for the visible in his fingertips.

So they packed food and rolled their blankets and went searching for Joseph through Nazareth and all of Galilee. It was his voice Jesus heard, loud and boisterous, sitting at a table with other men, his back to the door.
“Weren’t you the one who married that girl?” one man said, laughing, and others joined in. “You look like that man, but older.” The room was dark, the men dejected.

“It wasn’t me,” Joseph said.

“You aren’t the one whose wife ‘saw an angel’?” another man laughed.

“I’m telling you,” Joseph’s voice rose, “it wasn’t me.” He glanced over his shoulder then and through the open door saw the back of his son.

Jesus walked away but John walked in.
“How did you know to go to Egypt?” John asked, pulling up a chair, touching Joseph on his forearm, the first of many questions.

“God used to speak to me in dreams,” Joseph said. “Then I didn’t want his dreams anymore.”

Joseph often sat at the inn. He had papers and John saw that there were more jammed into his pocket. “I want a world like other men,” his uncle said. “That first, before anything fancy’s added on.” He signaled the waiter. “This morning, for instance, I saw a bull being led to the Temple for sacrifice.”

John immediately thought of the wide and detailed fan of the Law. The bull would have been a male without blemish, the sacrifice of a wealthy man, not a mere lamb or goat or turtledove. He would place his hands on the bull’s head to recognize its innocence, that it would be killed in the man’s place, to make atonement for him.

“So I drew the bull,” Joseph said, bringing John back from his reverie. “I draw a lot lately.”
“May I see?”

“I did a series. I’m trying to work something out.” Joseph spread the papers out on the table.

But it was not what John expected. His uncle had not drawn an altar or the sons of Aaron taking the blood and sprinkling it. He hadn’t drawn the priests skinning the bull, cutting it into pieces, laying down the wood, laying the parts onto the wood, the head and the fat in that order. He hadn’t drawn the priest washing the legs of the bull or its entrails. Or the meal offerings of cereals and vegetables sacrificed in addition to the bull, their preparation, the wheat flour baked, fried or cooked in a pan, the dough with oil and salt but no honey or leaven. Joseph hadn’t drawn the incense the wealthy man would bring.

“This was the first one,” Joseph said, tapping it. Instead of the lush elaboration of the Law, John saw that his uncle was going in the opposite direction. Trying to find in the bull what was essential. To remove the rest. To see who he really is, John thought, in each drawing, the bull facing the same way, but more details removed than in the drawing before. Six drawings in all and the last, one simple curved line. And he admired what his uncle was doing and wanted to find a way to do the same thing.

As he headed home, John thought again of the laws of slaughter stipulated in Leviticus. He knew exactly how the bull had been treated, the many details to inflict as little pain as possible. That the slaughterer could not be a deaf-mute or a minor and must be of sound mind. That the knife must be perfectly smooth, tested on the flesh of the finger and then on the fingernail. That the flesh of the
bull would not be consumed if pain had been inflicted in any of five ways: by delay or pressure or digging or slipping or tearing. The knife must move in a continuous forward and backward motion without interruption, the cut made gently without force, the knife drawn across the throat only and not inserted into the flesh, the cut made in the prescribed section of the neck so that the windpipe and gullet would not be dislocated.

These elaborations are signs of love, John thought, just as his uncle’s drawings were signs of love and the press for understanding. And John sat on the side of the road and wept in anger at Herod for not giving to his father the courtesy and honor and compassion that was given, that morning, to the bull.
Why don't you go back to the wilderness? Elizabeth offered, seeing the restlessness of her son. "God can be found in anger," she added, reading his heart. "He can be found everywhere." And in the spaciousness of his mother's words, John could feel both the intensity of his anger and his fondness for the mountain that had sheltered him and his mother and for the angel who had led them home.

So John went back to the desert's dryness, its allure, to the ant and the bumblebee and lion, to the snow leopard, the raven and the ram.

He cried out to the wilderness, crying out for his father. And the wilderness answered saying, "I am he."
JESUS WENT TO be baptized, to confess the sin of his being born. The pressure bore down, a past he could neither escape nor repair. “If it weren’t for me,” he told John often, “you’d still have a father.” The wound bright, vivid and sparkling.

The villagers called him the crippled boy who carries his past on his shoulders like a house.

FROM A GREAT distance he heard John calling, “You breed of vipers!” in a voice fierce with certainty.

And Jesus told himself, John is right. I am a viper.
On the River Bank

Tiny birds walked at John’s ankles, held by delicate gold chains, rumor being that the birds bound themselves to him. The bees gave him honey and the camel its coat. “You’ll be like me someday,” the camel had warned him. “They’ll take your voice away. I’m saying this as a warning,” then died. John skinned it with a knife, burned the carcass, wore the camel’s hide and never ate flesh again. Until the locusts came and said, “Let us be the great exception,” dying at his feet in great numbers and in his hair and beard and on his shoulders in swarms. He wrapped them in muslin and carried them in a pouch at his waist, eating the locusts, guaranteeing their distinction that way, as they had hoped. To not be forgotten, along with the honey.

To others John appeared exotic but to Jesus he looked only more himself, coalesced, purposeful, all else fallen away, the city, his mother’s nobility, her fruit tartlets and his paper wings. John looked ancient and Jesus wondered if death brought this about, his father’s early death, or if it was the wilderness.
John sensed his cousin was near and when Jesus stood before him with eyes full of sorrow and penance, John pulled away and refused the exact thing Jesus desired. “No,” he said. “I won’t.”

The sky was quiet and the leaves on the trees shimmered nervously, waiting for a resolution, an eagle circled high above, eavesdropping, the sun sent its light equally onto both men, the waters up to their waist, the bystanders restless, until, at last, each spoke to the other.

“I’ve been waiting for you,” John said. “I’m clearing your path.” A dove landed in the branch overhead, carrying Heaven on its back, and a voice saying, “This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased.”

Jesus saw through the water the long head of his cousin the prophet, he smelled his sour breath, his beard and matted hair, the honey caught at his lips, the flies buzzing near it, all the ways physical beauty was absent, and he shuddered, not because John lacked comeliness but because he saw the large, magnificent head of his cousin resting in a pool of blood.

John shuddered, too, greenish silt in the oiled curls of his cousin and he thought, you will soon be like me, little brother. My life has reached its purpose. And my end will be violent. I feel it in the wind. So will yours, my pretty little brother with your oiled curls and shopkeepers.

Faces inches apart, the sour breath of one mingling with the minted breath of the other, they stood a long while, silence clamping its arms around them, forming a room, a vault, and in that
vault they both saw the jolting arrival of a completely new kind of time.

WHEN THE CROWDS had gone and dusk came, they sat beside each other on the riverbank and John said, “Now we know who we are.”

“Today I am born,” Jesus answered.

“I will perform no miracles,” John told him, “but you, little cousin, will raise the dead.”