
First Family

Robert Danberg

To the memory of Anne Sklov

Adam Names the Animals in the Garden of Eden

He found me, though I was not hiding,
 Called me “belly-rumble, stuck throat-click, gut-shake.”
 The first time called and I went running
 Into the open in search of this sound
 That turned out to be my name.

And why was I called this?
 Did he draw it from me or from my shape
 Or from the habit I have of singing my prey to sleep
 Or because I sleep under damp leaves in the dark?
 Had my name always been here in me
 Curled between the bones of my back?
 And who else was called the same?

When I found him his hand was out.
 Others were there that I knew.
 I did not lick his open palm,
 The way the others did—
 Those who made sense of the world
 With their tongues.

There we were:
 One great creature before him
 Crouching, hanging, hovering,
 Winged, furred, part plate armor,
 Part feather—a conglomerate of one
 Another, thousand eyed,
 long stepped—

Then he began to speak
 Or perhaps to sing.
 I only know that I recognized sounds
 I'd heard all day through
 The dark dome of leaves
 Covering my head, strange and familiar,
 Like dream talk.
 I heard sounds I knew as the calls of my neighbors,
 And others I never heard before;
 But I knew when he came to the sound that was mine.
 And I answered. We all knew and answered
 When it was our time, and each sound he made was a line
 And each answer twisted the line into a knot
 In the net billowing wider and wider above us.

Before, each in the Garden spoke his own word
 But we all understood. For the first time
 We heard sounds we could not make that made us.
 It seems to me now
 That this was when we left the Garden.
 Before the barren and unyielding soil,
 Before the floods and two by twos,
 Before he bent wood into curved ships
 And cast iron across the waters
 We were yoked to his throat
 The first victims of his benevolence

When They Woke to Work that Morning

A raven whose companion had just died said: I will teach Adam what to do...

SEFER HA-AGGADAH, 24:102

When they woke to work that morning,
 They didn't know they'd find one son's body
 Cold beside a stone or that the other son
 Would not answer when he was called.
 The raven spoke first. His companion had
 Recently passed. "I'll show you what we do."
 He scratched at the earth until a narrow
 Keyhole appeared. With the point of his beak
 He rolled his deceased companion over and in,
 Then kicked dust over her flattened black feathers
 Until the body was completely concealed. They
 Watched carefully and did the same,
 Scratching and pawing, moving stones,
 Until a low trench appeared beneath their hands
 Into which bruised Abel was rolled and covered.
 In all, about two hours. But, since the raven
 Does not visit his dead, they did not mark the grave,
 And could only remember that he was buried beside a raven.
 Soon, it seemed that there were few places Abel might not be.

Calling

For a long time after Abel passed and Cain had disappeared,
 They called for Cain throughout the day
 In case he might be near
 And the sound of his name might bring him home.
 Arms full of rock
 Heads covered in dust,
 His name rose up out of the work.

But, soon another son came and
 It was clear
 Here was the answer
 To their calls:
 The others, gone
 And their new loneliness
 Permanent, human
 Natural as birth.

Relieved, she never
 Called for them again
 Her birth cries were the last
 And the reply, accepted.
 And while she
 Loved this new child
 With the love of two
 He nursed
 A new bitterness
 As a child of this second loss
 And though pride
 Prevented him from calling out
 In the daytime,
 At night, he shouted
 "Cain, Cain"
 Into the private
 Thicket of his dreams.

Just Before Sleep, Beneath God's Silence

Beneath God's silence and a roof of leaves and branches,
 She lay, facing away from his whispering, up, up, up!
 "He took me by the hand, I was barely formed, you know,
 still dreaming at night of spinning lights deep inside

black rock and clay, of my time in the womb of the earth,
a radish in his garden. He reached down and took me,
I-my-self wrapped around him like a child's fist
around his father's thumb and we walked, naming things—
He called them to me, I called them something.
My first word was ball, you know. If he had not
interfered all creatures with any roundness to them
would have been called "ball-this" or "ball with four legs."
But, he is never content with a simple outcome and drew
sounds from me, in my voice, my sounds, sounds
I would never say without him. Mine, but more than my self.
He could not have all things called "Ball" and "Not-Ball."
then—"

She's heard this before. In the beginning, when he was
Shy and more gentle, as he told it he bragged a bit,
Always embarrassed at the implication that he relied on the
Association. Then, later, after their first bad luck,
He reproached her with it and they would argue, endlessly,
Repetitively. But, now, alone again, he only told the story
When he felt weary and bitter, in the voice of a man
Who had forgiven his father for a childhood betrayal
Only to be betrayed by him once more as an adult.

In the darkness beneath the silence of the roof
She turns from his talk to the settling of the earth
And listens for the other voice she hears every night:
Abel's crying out from the earth to his God.