

## Biblical Silences

### Eve

*And out of the ground Yahweh Elohim made to grow every tree that is desirable in appearance and good for food. (Genesis 2:9)*

*And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it is attractive to the eyes, and a tree that is desirable to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and ate. (Genesis 3:6)*

I linger by the two fig trees, the green leaves seeming a bit brighter now, the odor a little sharper, and the fruit, the fruit voluptuous—I'd reached my thumbs in and slowly torn it open, its green and red innards more creature-like than vegetal, and I look up, seeking your stolid eyes and watch them not meet mine but scurry from the tendrils I feel between my teeth and the luscious fragments on my lips to the wet misshapen handful left in my palm, your eyes wanting not to know what they know, as you try to believe that this fruit is the other fruit from the other tree, while my mind is stuck on my certainty that the fruits of both of these trees, like all the other fruits of the garden, were created, as we were told, to be nourishing, delicious, and a feast for the eyes, and yet

there was the single prohibited one, which had gotten me wondering about *its* nature—what was it that could make it so different?—and my own, having suddenly come to the conviction, even before I plucked the fruit from its branch, that everything must have been created solely to become more revealed, to become wholly and fully itself, and so it must be only the prohibition that makes this one what it is, and, if that is so, what need the iridescence of the fruit, the thick green of the leaf, and the gnarly black of the trunk, what need its yielding and firm texture, its flavor and its loveliness, its sweet savor? —unless I am missing the point entirely, and following the trail of these thoughts is precisely how *I* can't help it

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as I continue to become perfectly and fully myself,  
and not be annihilated,  
and the only thing that matters about this fruit  
is this capacity to awaken me to wonder—

but why then is my heart suddenly beating wildly—  
and why does a terrible loneliness spread out  
before me as I force my eyes upward to meet your eyes  
now gazing directly into mine, and in dread  
to ask myself about you? How are *you*  
to be yourself? Is it in you, is it you  
to cross over to me or is it you  
who lives only to stand there perfect in the unseen gaze  
of your beloved creator?

Are you so besotted with me  
so uxorious, that you will do whatever  
I say and eat whatever I offer you?  
Or has the great mystery of this one tree and its fruit  
been rattling around roughly in your mind as well?

Or do you feel no inclination at all to cross over to me,  
bathing in the attention of the creator who took  
your loneliness so to heart (so to speak) that it not only  
gave you the gift of naming all living creatures—  
a pretext and experiment in the pursuit of a partner—  
but also, in the end, gave me to you as well,  
blood of my blood and flesh of my flesh?

And do you know full well the cost of crossing over  
and are you willing—nobly, tragically?—to surrender  
that intimacy that has meant the most to you  
until now because you have just taken in fully  
the absolute loneliness that I know  
you can read in my terrified eyes,  
whose plea is transparent: What shall I do without you?"

*And she gave it also to her man with her,  
and he ate. (Genesis 3:6)*

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“Cain said to Abel his brother . . .” (Genesis 4:8)  
*for Dave*

Cain:

. . . Mine. The desire always boiling inside me.  
My brother, can I tell you instead of the toll on Mama  
of my birth and yours, too?  
Mine, the first: she had no way of knowing anything:  
continuously off-balance, her body blowing up  
from me inside her, the terrible taste  
in her mouth all day long,  
the eddies and crashes of mood,  
the unspeakable relief when it was over,  
she, the only woman born of man  
(if we believe the old story)  
and how she felt beloved of Papa  
in the making of me, and of me, too,  
in the naming of me.

I had to ask you, I think,  
because there's something I seem to see  
that you don't in you,  
the way you come home  
bloody, often enough, from the beasts' wounds  
and the open gashes that have scarred you everywhere  
and always preternaturally calm  
and you seem not to see what I see:  
a relation between the two,  
the blood and the calm.

Abel:

But how can you be so certain?  
I don't know what to say, how  
to answer you, not that I've ever  
been able to . . . I mean:  
I was watching you in the distance. I had just gotten in,  
dog tired from the day's work. The sheep restless,  
packed in the narrow pass,

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pressed in on me on all sides and surged  
there and back in a huge mass, and stuck  
for the moment, they were surrounding the two ewes  
heavy with child and the first lamb of the spring,  
as if purposefully, and the soft  
relentless pressure was forcing me sideways  
towards the sharp protruding rocks, I resisting,  
trying to turn, and suddenly, my body twisting,  
corkscrew-like, I am spun in a full circle,  
and I burst out of the pass into the dusk  
and grab a deep breath, the sun low in the sky,  
and the gradually sloping plate of the wide field  
spread out before me and you busy on the opposite rim:  
your silhouette rolling, then heaving  
one large flat boulder onto another,  
which you seemed to be adjusting, one on the other,  
and then you're lifting some stalks and branches—  
maybe wheat and barley or spelt—I'm too far away  
to discern the species, but your gestures are slow  
and painstaking, broken by pauses and readjustments,  
leaning over, looking, adding something, rearranging,  
and then you're standing in my way and then you've stepped  
back and a flame's leapt up, flickering,  
a tiny yellow and red spot in the deepening gloom,  
and then the smoke: low, all around you, thick,  
you seemed to be gasping, shuddering, and vague, and squinting I detected  
sputtering light and then nothing, and I thought  
*I'm catching on* and the newest lamb and her dam  
were right there and I gave the ram a whack  
to get her and the whole herd  
moving towards the lower pasture,  
except the lamb, that is, unsteady still  
on her spindles, and all at once I've picked out a thick squat rock,  
sliced right through to her neck bone and blood is pulsing  
all over me, the ground, and the rock, where I carefully  
lay her down, then lift her and shove in under her  
a bed of all the twigs and sheaves and brush  
I could sweep into my arms in a minute or two.

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I ran over to the stream to wash myself as best I could  
and then, setting my crook aflame in Mama's kiln,  
I hurried back and I thrust the whole blazing end in.  
The fire took so quickly I was knocked backward  
and off my feet by the force of it,  
the sudden intensity of the heat and the light  
and the suddenness too with which it was over:  
everything consumed so quickly and completely  
that if not for the fine trace of gray ash a fresh breeze  
tossed up and erased and the slick fat smear on the rock,  
at once turned stunningly beautiful, illuminated for an instant  
by the last rays of the setting sun in a display  
of every color I've ever seen, a rainbow,  
I would have thought it all a dream

Is that what you wanted to know?  
No, I had nothing on my mind.  
I never do, my brother,  
I'm not you.  
I just stood there, taking  
everything in, still,  
until it was finished.

. . . and when they were in the field Cain set upon his brother Abel and killed him  
(Genesis 4:8)

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### Shimon to Deena (Genesis 34:32)

Deena, sweet sister, daughter of my own  
mother, say something, please, don't stand there,  
slumping and blank, staring or peering or is it  
glaring at me? or is it gazing?—  
your large brown irises, your wide eyes,  
so much white in them now  
it frightens me . . . are they hungry  
for my face? they seem to be . . . searching  
for something there, for anything, a hint,  
a key to what I was thinking, what I was  
feeling for you. I don't feel  
I own you, sister, you're not someone  
to be owned . . . But father didn't say  
a word and Reuben made his usual  
commotion, ineffectual as ever,  
and Judah . . . even he, Judah,  
whom you love so much it breaks this craggy heart,  
this once, he too was silent, and Levi!  
my God! he was ready to take them on  
alone or with me alone. "Picture this,"  
he said, "just the two of us, of their whole city,  
of our whole family, the two of us  
left standing alone in this wide world."

Say something, my sister, and,  
in the name of God, please forgive me  
if you were coming to love that . . .  
You can't imagine, or perhaps you can,  
what it was like when I got back  
to the homestead: you could barely tell  
anything was up. Everybody was, how shall I put it,  
meandering, yes, meandering  
is the world, I mean the word  
that comes to mind, the goats and sheep,  
the servants, my brothers, three of the mothers,  
Father's eyes . . . On the way home I knew

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that everyone would be armed by the time  
I got there, I knew that Father  
would have some scheme already hatched  
that, once again, would astound us all,  
and I burst into his tent to a tableau:  
His lips are inches away from pale Rachel's  
swollen belly, crooning, "This is your Daddy  
speaking," beside himself in Joy, and Joseph's  
looking on, laughing that contagious  
laugh of his, so irresistible  
I found myself smiling too and I could have  
killed him on the spot,  
and I: "Where's my sister?" And Father: "Don't.  
They'll be here soon. A delegation."  
And I: "Where's my sister?" And he: "I don't know."

So they came and they bargained. How another soul  
is bound up with yours. His soul, mind you,  
as the rape, the act, scraped along my mind  
and I am suffocating and . . . don't look away . . .  
and Levi's jaw is working, his hand leaps  
to his sword, it was all I could do to hold him  
and scream a slashing whisper, my lips  
and tongue and spit nicking his ear,  
"But they have her, you idiot!  
and if we kill them . . ." And we are  
so few, my sister, my darling, and they  
are a city and known and native and Father!  
for once in his life, he isn't saying a word  
and I can't tell if he has something on his mind  
(you know how hard it is to read him),  
and suddenly (I don't know where it came from)  
I'm talking my head off, saying  
they must be circumcised—if not, we'll come and get you,  
thinking all the while that this is a way  
to get you home before we decide what to do—  
I couldn't imagine them agreeing! . . . no, no,  
don't look at me that way, that's not what I meant,

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I, more than anyone, my darling sister . . .  
and the next thing I know they do,  
agree, I mean, God knows why. Because  
he loves you? Because Father's riches have been  
thorns in their hides? Because they think  
they'll absorb us all? I mean, I'm not Father,  
no doubt he would have foreseen it all.  
I'm not Levi either whose hand is at my throat.  
"Who's the idiot now?" he's saying.

And you, whatever else is in your mind, you have to know  
that all I thought about was you. You, raped.  
You, kidnapped. You, a hostage. And then  
I saw the whole thing!  
the only out: we, I mean, we, two,  
Shimon and Levi, the bloody men.  
the dirty work men, the men of the sword,  
we would have to kill them all. We couldn't kill the son  
unless we killed the king. We couldn't kill the king  
unless we killed the men. We are, all of us, only  
a handful, and all I could think of was you  
and Father and Mother, all, the baby  
in Rachel's womb, erased. So we did  
what we had to do, got you from their palace,  
and left, wearily dragging our way home—  
we could barely lift our swords  
by the end, you know; it was hard work,  
killing so many. And I admit it all.  
I admit my sheer pleasure in it. I admit  
my fury at Father. I admit  
my envy of Judah—this time I  
would be the one who saved you, this time you  
would look at me with favor—I simply could  
not bear it: to rape you and then to come  
to buy you like a common whore. I even  
dreamed Father would see it my way too,  
a foolish thought, I must admit. But now it's your turn,  
please. Say anything. Say you hate me,



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that it was monstrous what I did,  
say you love me, just a little, even say  
you fell in love with him, Shechem the rapist,  
but speak. Listen, you don't even have to look at me,  
and, if it will make it easier, I will look away.

Or is it something else  
that you're waiting for,  
a last admission that,  
like a hookworm,  
has been drilling around  
the region of my heart,  
cutting its way  
upward, lacerating,  
from the moment I began  
to speak to you today,  
here, facing your pitiless stillness—  
have I been the last to see  
what you have known all along? Oh . . . . .  
it's true, dear, dear sister, Judah  
is not the only one I envied.  
I envied . . . here it is: I envy Shechem too.  
There. I've said it all. Now it's your turn,  
please, dear Deena. Don't stand there, silent,  
twisting a strand of your sweet hair in terrible  
distraction. For God's sake, speak.