

This Thing with Sticks

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Evening and the man scans the horizon for rain clouds. It's been a long day—ten rows planted, each a hundred and forty cubits long. His sons, older now, had helped. That made the task go faster, but not easier.

His eyes shift from the cloudless sky to his boys chasing each other with sticks across the far field, the one he has yet to plow.

Beside him, his wife sighs. "Why do they do that?"

"Do what?"

"This crazy thing with sticks."

"I don't know."

Her drooping mouth signals her disappointment in him—he should know why their sons suddenly have begun chasing each other with sticks—just as he should have known what ailed the ox. And why the barley harvest had been so poor.

All these blaming thoughts of hers, he knows, buffer his wife's mind against what she can't admit to herself: that as much as he, she's to blame for their hard circumstances.

She shields her eyes against the sun's low slant. "Remember when they'd fasten locusts' wings onto pomegranates so that they looked like ears on round red rabbits? Or how they used to content themselves with a mud puddle?"

The man remembered. At first light, they'd put the two of them near a mess of mud, and when the sun had reached straight overhead, the pair would still be there, black as overripe berries. But happy. This thing with sticks, he realizes, began when he first taught Cain to hoe.

He draws his woman's weary body close. "They'll be fine. They're fine." He inhales, hoping for the scent of rain. Please, God, spare us a shower from your store. Just one.

The woman relaxes into him. "Funny...I used to wake up in terror that an adder would strike them. Or that one would wander off, especially Abel, and somewhere in the forest, I'd hear a hyena scream, and dread, like the wrath of God, would run through me. Yet somehow they survived. But this...this thing they've started with the sticks, it doesn't seem right."

"Not right how?"

She murmurs into his chest. "Now I'm the one who doesn't know."

The light has almost faded before the rising night, and the man calls his sons to him. They all go into the tent.

The next five evenings are the same: at sundown, the man scans the sky for rain clouds but sees only the mocking, emergent moon while in the far field, his sons chase each other with sticks. Each evening their game intensifies, until, on the sixth, Able strikes Cain's right ear. The older boy howls and clamps his hand to his ear, then snatches up his stick. By the time the man and his wife have reached him, he's pummeling his brother's back and shoulders. The man holds his sons apart: Cain on his left, Abel on his right. He doesn't know who's more deeply wounded or whose blame is greater.

Dear God, I'm so tired. Too tired to answer the question burning in their mother's eyes: "Why? Why, for the love of God, are they doing this crazy thing with sticks?"

That night he holds her sleeping body close, and just before his own lids drop, the man sees the tent's flap lift, then lower, then lift again—the air is stirring! Maybe blessed rain will come.

He gets up and stumbles past his sleeping boys: Cain's bloodied ear wrapped in linen, Abel's bruised shoulders swathed in lamb's wool. He goes to the fluttering flap and draws a deep breath. Yes...rain is in the air!

He leaves the sheltering tent for the gusting night and skirts the planted rows for the field he has yet to plow. Like a rooted promise, a lone fig tree stands at the field's edge. The man sinks down and rests his back against its trunk. He turns his head up and watches the branches sway in the churning air. When he looks back at the planted rows, he can almost sense the seeds deep within quickening toward the coming rain.

He stays beneath the swaying tree until the first drops fall like liquid grace on his upturned face. Then he stands up, walks past his planted rows, and returns to the tent. He lights a lamp. From his soaking hair, rain drips down his face and pockmarks the dirt floor. He looks at his battered boys and suddenly realizes why they are alien to him. He had been begotten a grown man. Never having rolled before he crawled, nor crawled before he toddled, nor toddled before he walked, he knows nothing of the ages his sons will pass through to reach his. Or if this thing they do with sticks is simply what they must do in order to grow. Or if the day will ever come when they'll drop their sticks to take up the plow. Tears mingle with the raindrops coursing down his face.

Dear God, oh dear God, how will ever they live to manhood if they bloody each other so?