

The Pre-emptive Strike

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## The Pre-emptive Strike

*Erich Fried*

No more doubt: my own brother Cain wants to kill me. I saw him clearly when his face turned into a hate-filled grimace because his sacrifice was not accepted as graciously as mine. And I heard the voice, the voice of him to whom he and I bring sacrifices, each his own, how he interrogated Cain because of his anger and warned him against the sin. That sin couches by his door, waiting, yearning for him. As to what this sin is which Cain carries around within himself the way my sheep carry their unborn lambs, that I know full well.

Long enough do I suffer this fear. I have no hope of being able to defend myself against his insidious attack. I know that Cain is stronger than I. He is not only the older one; I was always weaker. Digging his field strengthens his arms and his whole body far more than the raising and keeping of sheep – my work – does for me. In addition, he has his dangerous tools: the spade and the wooden post with its fire-hardened tip. And anyway, he who attacks the other suddenly without warning always has the advantage.

Just the same: he to whom we bring our sacrifices – I, the firstlings of my herds, he, his ears of corn and fruit and green vegetables – he favours me and not him. The smoke of our sacrifices already shows this. As always, the smoke of my sacrifice rose straight up to heaven while his crawled heavily along the ground – a stinking smell of burning weeds that would not rise. I believe that the Will residing above us cannot desire that this chopper of the earth's crust should also strike me and chop me apart with his dusty, dung-encrusted tools, manure for his plowed field, the soil perhaps already loosened for my grave.

No; this must not happen. I myself must grasp the advantage! Not he but I must surprise the other. And if he can handle spade and post, I still have my stone axe with which I protect my herds from beasts of prey. He who has graciously accepted my sacrifice and has rejected his, he knows: my brother Cain is now no better than the ravaging beast of prey which seeks after the life of my lambs and sheep. No, he is worse. His intentions are not against an animal, but against me, his own brother. But he will find himself deceived!

There he comes. Sure, sure. His greeting cannot deceive me. He only wants to lull me into feeling secure; but those times are past. Let him stay away from my body. There! Another sign: never, in recent times, has he been able to face my look for long. And now, again, he turns his head away and does not look at me, his own brother. Instead, he looks back to his miserable altar, where the smoke snake is still crawling along the ground, dark and heavy. I must be now! Now, while he still sees nothing except the unredeemed smoke . . .

How quickly it all went; as though I had done nothing at all. As though it were not true. But it is true: there he lies in front of me, upon the soil. Finished. He'll not spin any more murder plots against me. He will not lift up the spade behind my back, nor the pointed post. It is *his* blood, not mine which now fills the cavity here in the rock, almost as the water over there, in the pool, along the way where my animals go to be watered. The will of him who has accepted my sacrifice and has rejected his – his will has been done! It was *his* voice which decided for me and against him . . .

Yes. His voice. I hear it. It is speaking loud and audibly. But what does it say? "Cain," it is calling, "Cain, where is your brother Abel?"

Here am I, Lord, here! Have no more fear for me: here I stand, Abel, the one whose sacrifice you graciously accepted. And Cain, whom you rejected, lies there behind me. His own sin has turned against him. I've covered his face with withered leaves, so that his fixed eyes will not insult heaven.

No, Lord: you are mistaken. I am *not* Cain. Abel is not my brother, it is I myself. Why do you ask me: 'Where is your brother Abel?' You are mistaken.

There – I will show him to you, my brother. There he lies. O yes, certainly, that is Cain – who else? Wait: I'll take the leaves off his face, so that you can . . .

But how can that be? Never in life did he look that much like me. Almost as though . . . or do I imagine it? But I know my face. Over there in the pool which reflects everything I see it day after day. And now he is

supposed to look like me? No; that cannot be. It only appears to me like that because he is dead. I am different in appearance from him. I know: I'll go to the pool. I want to see my own face again.

Now I know why he is mistaken and calls me Cain.

(translated by Albert H. Friedlander)

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## Beauty, Justice, and Progress

Keep your head down, don't call attention  
to yourself: so my mother said.  
Don't let them whisper: What can you expect?  
They're Jews.  
I was never sure exactly what she felt –  
even her humour,  
though it could be cruel,  
most often turned upon herself,  
because she knew her maternal duty  
was to teach such crude  
but necessary truths.

During my youth,  
I thought I hadn't been affected  
by that cautiousness, those crippling rules.  
But the older I get,  
further experience proves  
I'm no more immune  
to the sickness than anyone else.

I manifest the same disguises and ruses,  
silences, equivocations meant  
to win approval. I tell  
the children not to be rude or make excuses  
and always do their best  
(what every mother says) except  
I cannot ignore or forget  
the effort is futile. And yet  
how fortunate my life has been, to let  
me still believe in beauty,  
justice, and progress.

*Ruth Fainlight*