In the beginning

by Peggy Rosenthal in the January 30, 2002 issue

The first thing that strikes us about Lucille Clifton's poetry is what is missing: capitalization, punctuation, long and plentiful lines. We see a poetry so pared down that its spaces take on substance, become a shaping presence as much as the words themselves.

"adam and eve": without capital letters, our human ancestors look humbled, on the same plane as everything else in the poem's world. It's the world at the start of Genesis, the title indicates. And specifically, we can tell from the opening stanza, we humans are in the second creation account, where God gives Adam the power to name all the animals and birds.

The stanza enacts its own creation process, expanding from a line of only two words to a line of three, then of four—developing step by step into the image of "blooming." I gasp when I reach this metaphor, my own mouth opened in an "Ah!" like Adam's. Here is an image of humanity so in harmony with the rest of creation that our power over it is as a blooming in our mouths: we don't order it around or command it to do our will, but let its essence speak through us.

With no period to block the flow at the end of the sentence, "my mouth" seems to transmute—in the space between the stanzas—into "my body," which "opens" like another blooming. Human reproduction is imaged as a natural opening "into brothers": into the brothers Cain and Abel, yes, but also into the brothers of "my body." The poet has crafted this ambiguity of "brothers" so that they're at once the next generation and also all humankind as a single family, all brothers of Eve.

Or of Adam? For here is another subtly crafted ambiguity: "my body" could be Adam's or Eve's—or both. "My mouth" in stanza one seems to be Adam's, since he does the naming in Genesis. "My body" would seem to be Eve's, the woman's body opening in childbirth. So who is the poem's speaker? The title hints that it is "adam and eve," jointly. That transmutation of "my mouth" into "my body" suggests the same. Without making a fuss, by arranging a few chosen words, the poet dissolves the gender break that has historically distorted so much of human relations. Gender

is irrelevant, she implies. Try looking at the world without it, and look at man and woman as one flesh and one spirit, naming, reproducing, co-creating.

Lucille Clifton is an African-American whose consciousness of her race and gender informs all of her poetry, though she never gets preachy. Instead, she has chosen a minimalist mode that clears out human society's clutter, the mess we've made by identifying ourselves in contending genders, ethnicities, nations. Lightly, as if biting her tongue, with a wise smile, she shows us a radically egalitarian world where no one or no capitalized word lords it over others.

Clifton is a master of poetry's art of saying much with little. Even the poem's brevity gives it an added dimension: a visual shape which we can take in at a glance. "adam and eve" looks like a single deep breath. Stanza one expands as an inhalation, stanza two exhales, so that the whole is a breath of creative life that is the poem's very being, its meaning.

"adam and eve" is the first of a sequence called "some jesus." Each of the 16 spare poems reflects on a key biblical moment. But before we can take a breath into the next poem of the series, "cain," there has been a murder.

The lines of "cain" seem the heaves of sobbing, each a disconnected gasp of anguished sorrow. Having broken natural human bonds by killing, Cain can't share in his parents' life-enhancing breath. There's no blooming for him; the only cultivation he knows is to plant fruitless tears of remorse.

He has been banished, Genesis 4:16 tells us, to the land of Nod, a word which means "wandering." The poet dramatizes Cain's displacement by cutting loose his grammatical moorings. Phrases like "on my head" and "every morning" wander rootlessly: is the desert on my head? or on my head do i plant tears? do i plant tears every morning? or is it that every morning my brother don't rise up? The absence of punctuation—which for "adam and eve" both represents and facilitates their harmonious merging—is in "cain" the mark and message of disorientation.

But the sign of the poet's Cain that is most heartbreaking is that small "i" hanging alone out in the poem's space. "Violent human conflict," said Anglican Bishop Rowan Williams in a sermon during the gulf war (now printed in *A Ray of Darkness*), "is the effect of the steady shrinkage of the world to the dimensions of the ego. It is *my* interests that interpret and process what I see, and yours can increasingly appear only as a rival bid for the territory I have colonized." Clifton hints at something like

this ego-aggrandizement as the cause of Cain’s murderous act, for his punishment is an ego now shrunk to an isolated little “i,” cut off from all bonding with others or the earth.

Rereading “adam and eve” and “cain” together, I see that Clifton has reenvisioned the origin of human sinfulness and suffering. Sin, as she views it, enters the world not with eve and adam, but with violence against “my brother.”