

The first word

by [Gary Fincke](#) in the [November 18, 2008](#) issue

(The Amharas of Ethiopia name their babies the first word spoken by the mother after she gives birth.)

Just what should she do, this mother?
Practice Patricia or Rosalie
until there's nothing else upon
Her tongue? Spout Mike until she cannot
Pronounce another word for boy?

Exhausted, she stifles "Blackjack!"
And other exclamations for joy,
Afraid, suddenly, she'll utter
"Icewater" or "gelato," or one
Great profane whoop of "Jesus Christ!"

And we might wonder what father
Is doing, whether he is present,
Staying close to coach from the wings
Of this incredible theater,
Reminding mother what's scripted.

Look, he's forming a name with lips
And tongue, shaping that child for her voice.
Nearby, someone holds the baby
Through the nostalgia of second thoughts.
The room is a quiet of cries.

The future, a brush of air, flies
Up the throat. At once, apprehension.

Then mother hears herself begin,
Pronouncing syllables carefully,
Speaking clearly to be certain.