The Brothers
by B. Davie Napier

Gen. 4:1-2 Now Adam knew his wife, and she conceived and bore him Cain... again: his brother Abel.

I

One was a shepherd, one would till the ground; one occupied the high land, one the low; one practiced circumcision, one abhorred it; one was contemplative, the other bold.

The one was one, the other was the other.

One was dark and one was light
one was brown and one was white
one was west and one was east
one was layman one was priest
one was soldier one was sailor
one robust the other frailer
one was dreamer one a doer
one a caveman one a wooer.

One was one and one the other
each to each a bloody brother
One liked desert one liked rain-
one was Abel... one was Cain.

II

4:3-5 There's Abel over there, the fair-haired Abel, the tight and tidy Abel-able Abel:
the ordered life, a time for everything;
existence neatly-harnessed, firmly-reined.

There's Abel over there, the backward Abel. He stinks, you know, he literally stinks;
sweats too much and bathes too little,
ouls his streets with dung and spittle,
the great unwashed. And arrogant: He thinks
that he is God's and all the world is his.

There's Abel over there, the odd-ball Abel, Abel who differs—that's all right. But God, how much he cherishes the difference not only in himself but in his God.
This Abel has devised an odd-ball God.
Of course I cannot altogether blame him:
no proper God—the only God, that is—would enter into league with such a man.
And what a spectacle my brother makes, the brazen non-conformist, hatching plots I know to seize the fruits of all creation.
I hate his guts, I hate the guts of Abel. I'm sick of Abel, sick to death of Abel. Sick of Brother sick of Fellows Blacks and Whites and Browns and Yellows sick of Negro sick of Jew pressing pressing for his due sick of white men bastard white men arrogant and always right men sick of sick men sick of sickness Protestant- and Catholic-ness sick of every lying bromide Happy Birthday Merry Yuletide freedom truth and brotherhood Reader’s Digest motherhood pledge allegiance to the flag “under God”—now what’s the gag?

Sick of vicious ostentation sick of humor’s constipation sick of sickness human sickness human greed and human thickness

Get my Brother off my back White and Yellow, Brown and Black. Perish Abel perish quick—One of us is awful sick.

III

4:6 Why are you angry, why are you downcast? If you do well, will you not be accepted? If I do well? What do You mean by well? I am the very symbol of respect. You know me, J. B. Cain, the president of Acme Company; presiding deacon of my church. They say I am the church (it isn’t really true—they speak in jest), that no one moves a chair or gives a dime belonging to the church without my knowledge and my consent.

Or let me introduce myself, Professor Cain. What can I say but what is said: noted authority; writer of books and brilliant articles; dynamic lecturer, admired of students, the envy of his colleagues. A modest man, I live for learning and its meager fruits. The adulation I but tolerate. My one profession is the field of knowledge: I spurn, for this career, all lesser goods.

If I do well? What do You mean by well?
I am a student, Sir, one of the best.
Jonathan Cain the Third. I chose this school
(as did my father Jonathan the Second
as did his father Jonathan the First)
and was accepted here because I have
the proper gifts, the proper attributes.
Not only am I here, but I belong
(it is enough to say that I belong).
The contours of success are everywhere
apparent in my person and my station.
I am the son of parents who are right;
I am the product of the proper schools;
I am myself the rightest of the right.
If I do well? What do You mean by well?

Meet Luther Cain, the B. D. candidate.
Thy servant, Sir. I love Thy kingdom, Lord,
the House of Thy abode. I give myself
to Thee and to Thy church. And no mean gift
it is. I am an honor graduate
of Christian University where I
was Student Council President and triple
letter man. (They called me "Triple-threat"
not in the mundane football sense, but as
a triple threat in studies, sports and love.)
I come to Thee and to Thy service, Lord,
equipped in mind and heart—and in physique.
Together we will lead Thy people, Lord.

Why do You say to me, "If you do well"?
I am a doctor, lawyer, parson, teacher.
I am a businessman, Rotarian.
I earn an honest wage, I pay my bills.
I give to feed the poor. I hate what must be
hated. I support the decent causes.
I am a Mason, thirty-third degree,
Knight of Columbus, Synagogue and Temple.
I am a Man, first-born of Adam, son
of God, King of the universe. A Man.
If I do well—my God, what do You want?

IV

4:7 If you do well, will you not be accepted?
Acceptance is it now? You toss that out
as if it were a simple thing: do well
and be accepted. Ganz einfach! Voila!
It does not work that way. To be accepted
or not to be accepted is the question.
And if to be accepted, on what terms,
whose terms, by whom, with whom, and to what end?

I know You, Chief. I know Your ancient problem.
The Word about Your nature gets around.
I know Your universalistic leanings;
I know that You are gracious, merciful,
in anger slow, in steadfast love abounding.
This is, at least reputedly, the Word.
This is Your widely-rumored reputation.

I hope You will not mind a mild rebuff:
deity should be made of sterner stuff.

You offer me acceptance, on Your terms.
You will accept me—if I come with Abel.
And this is what You mean by doing well:
hold my revolting brother by the hand.

Let me propose the terms. If You want me
You cannot have my brother. Damn it, Sir,
You know how rudely Abel comes between
the two of us. He fouls our sweet communion
where two is company and three's a crowd.
It is for You, for Us, I cut him off!
Besides, my way is difficult enough,
my passage rough enough, my risky crossing
fraught enough with hazards of my own.

The choice to be or not to be accepted
is mine to make, and I have made the choice.
Acceptance on Your terms is unacceptable:
so far as I'm concerned, Abel is dead.

V

4:8 Let us go out into the field. Come, Abel,
how shall I kill you? Let me count the ways
since violence is versatile, and knows
not only overt savage acts of murder
but subtler forms as well, aesthetic forms
which spare the sight of blood but just as surely
remove the victim. Fratricide can be grotesque
or beautiful. Community of brothers,
sons of God, can be destroyed in
crude brutality or, if one will,
if one but exercise intelligence,
in fashion cold and clean and rational.
4:8 So Cain rose up against his brother Abel
and killed him. Yahweh said to killer Cain
4:9 Where is your brother Abel? Where is Abel?
I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?

VI

4:10 What have you done? The voice of Abel's blood
is crying to me from the ground. The voice
of Abel's blood, a thousand, thousand voices
crying to me from the bloody ground!
O Cain, my son, my son, who took the life of Abel, son of mine. The voice of Abel, the voice of Abel's blood, is crying to me from the bloody ground, the blood-soaked ground.

O Absalom, my son, my son, who took the life of Amnon, son of mine; the voice of Amnon, Absalom, is crying to me from the ground. O bleeding son of mine, the son your brother (son of mine) despised; my son rejected, smitten and afflicted; my son, my wounded son, my dying son, subjected to the public ways of dying and all the countless private hidden ways—
in battle, execution, inquisition;
in lethal oven or in lethal humor;
in lynching by the hand of brutal brother;
or brutal psychological exclusion (a quiet but effective form of lynching);
and always wholesale murder by neglect.

My son, my son! The voice of Abel's blood is crying to me from the ground. O Christ, O Jesus Christ, my son, my dying son!