

# 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.