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MEREDITH LOCKMAN
OUT OF THE GARDEN

OUT OF THE GARDEN

MEREDITH LOCKMAN

2015

SPONSOR

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“...when pain is to be borne, a little courage helps more than much knowledge,
a little human sympathy more than much courage,
and the least tincture of the love of God more than all.”

- C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*.

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PART I: NOVELLA

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PROLOGUE

A deep sleep hung over creation,
like the marble stone that covered David,
like the obfuscating fog that stifles unfound invention.
The deep; the deep; the deep.

Stretching into blackness – right, left, down, up –
deepness so deep that colors dissipated
and heaviness smothered the face of
nothing but the deep, deep, deep.

Devoid – void of life, void of thought, void of speech
void of words with which man's heart is reached;
void of spells of beauty and fits of madness;
only: the deep, that deep, dread deep.

A wind came hurtling o'er the face of the waters,
the waters that stretched through the deep of the deep;
tumultuous waters, refusing calm,
wild and heavy and weird.

Dark in the roiling, deep black and blue,
thick like sludge, but quick to sew
through the deepness like indiscriminate thread –
watery, silky, the deepness fed.

But that wind – that wind that hurtled o'er the deep –
its wildness matched the tumult underneath,
not tame, but blowing with easterly force,
as it pushêd through its winding course.

The whistling screech of its fast advance
would have filled the ears with awe
but also dance
for its wildness creeps into the heart
and creates a song of laughter
with its wild, purposed darts.

As of yet, no one could hear

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its whistling screech in awe-filled ear
for creation lay hid in deepest sleep
as the wind of Wildness whistled o'er the deep.

Then Word spoke
to Lightness bring –
in substance buoyant
o'er deepness to sing
and make of things unseen
well seen.

The Word then spoke again
to cleave
the darkness from the light
and made a wall – ephemeral –
to break the first-born day from night.

Another word, then chaos reigned
for waters surged
with might and main
at Word's command
to separate
and break from waters – twin –
to make
a dome in heaven's blue estate
waters below:
their heaven's mate.

Yet waters could not satiate
the Word's deep thirst to do and make –
so terra cotta earth was formed;
out of the depths, the land was born
to complement the storming seas
and from the rivers freely feed.

The waters lazed through newfound kin,
in earth's embrace made river bends
that watered seeds the Word had placed
in terra cotta earth's embrace.

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So slender trees and gnarled roots
curved from mother earth's moist womb;
up to seek the new-made sky,
to the space where birds would fly.

Tender green, and luscious fruits
popped from carefully crafted limbs,
swelled with juice and curved in shape;
and glories opened when Day grew dim.

Bursts of light in velvet night,
exploding stars soon filled all sight
immobile dust surround'ed their birth
cousins of their kin on earth.

Vassals in a heavenly court,
they waited for the soon report
of Queen Moon's birth,
to glorify
the lady white who made them sigh
with gladness
at her lily white, pale skin.

She came, and heavens leapt
to see the light and feel the touch –
the Queen's –
that with purest glow now kept
the heavens filled with light.

Her husband's warmer glow
soon seeped
into his lady's velvet night;
she turned and smiled at his advance,
and fled to let him chase
and dance.

Ever keen, he took the bait,
and let his warm glow fill the place
that she had, just the mom' before,
occupied;

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this seat he well adored.

This dance they've played with joy each day;
but now, beneath their merry chase,
the Word desir'd
to fashion man
and help their heart to understand
the choice,
the grace,
the pain,
the peace
that comes from being made
to be
in godlike form.

To say, "Create!"
and watch his creatures
rise to make and do
and think each try
on what is
good in holy eyes.

To flourish in the warmth
of deep love's fire;
to learn to check and curb
wayward desires;
to seek after the things of godlike thought,
to ponder more than what they 'ought'
to do;
but revel in the choice
and burden too
of life as creatures
in creators' lives;
to dwell upon the "therefores"
and the "whys";
to seek the wild untamed
in self and world,
but find this in the life
that Word had curled
around the deep's embrace.

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To revel in the love of what is Good,
to reject some things to do that they well could;
to find their freedom in Love's immortal chains,
and from this servitude have life and liberty gained.

The burden giv'n,
their life was spoke,
and from the dusty ground God now awoke
the creatures who would have the choice to make
of serving him or living in the wake
of freedom's pain.

CHAPTER I

“Run!” he yelled.

Eve couldn't respond. Numbly, she kept running.

Adam glanced sideways at his lover's face. An unfamiliar expression glazed it: shock.

Adam grabbed her hand and pulled her with him. His heart, at least, was beating with the speed of the swiftest gazelle. Faster.

Their haste proved treacherous. Running too quickly for the descent, Adam and Eve tripped and tumbled, landing in a sprawled heap at the bottom. Adam was worried that Eve would stop. She didn't. Eve hoisted herself off the earth and kept sprinting.

After a time, Adam grew aware that he could feel no heat behind them. No sound echoed through the air but their own panting and the mournful whisper of a soft wind. Adam slowed. Eve continued to run. He forced himself back into a sprint, grabbed her hand. She looked at him in surprise.

“We can halt.”

Eve stopped. She turned to look behind them.

A fierce glow emanated out of the garden from which they had fled. Gazing on their once-home, Eve became conscious that a trembling ruled her limbs. She did nothing to halt it. Instead, she widened her eyes to take in the glow. Eve remembered fire and smoke and terror and the feeling that, instead of fear, she should have felt joy. The glow came from a fearsome angel of light, who now guarded a most precious entrance, one that had never before been shut: the pathway to the tree of life. Eve and Adam had once tasted of that tree. They sipped its nectar whenever they pleased. And the more often they ate of it, the gladder was God. No longer.

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Eve found that she was weeping. “Why did God take the tree of life...” she whispered, “why would he deprive us...we didn’t know we would die without it...”

Adam moved to hold his lover. She wouldn’t remove her eyes from the entrance to the tree of life.

Adam gritted his teeth. He squeezed Eve’s shoulders in an attempt to comfort her. He couldn’t tell if he succeeded. Would that his love for Eve had caused him to stay her hand! Instead, he had accepted from that beloved hand a piece of golden fruit.

Eve,” Adam said softly, “we should find a place to rest for the night.”

Eve let out a deep sigh. He knew she was steeling herself for their departure.

Still holding Eve, Adam turned and inspected their surroundings. He had never before thought of the world outside their garden. Curiosity attempted to peep through the dull fog that clouded his thoughts. Its half-hearted attempt couldn’t fully succeed. Still, he wondered what kind of a place they would now inhabit.

Examining this new world, Adam knew not whether to feel gratitude or disappointment. The world was rather like the one he had inhabited in the garden, yet its colors and vivacity were less. The sky was less blue, the earth less rich and moist.

Eve’s weeping had grown more intense. Adam returned his focus to his companion. “Eve,” Adam reiterated, “we must leave. To cry and regret has its place, but we must find a place to rest for the night.”

Numbly, Eve turned to face her husband. Eve would have to fight to focus on the present.

“We have a few hours before nightfall. Let’s make what we can of it,” Adam said. Eve barely nodded. With a squeeze of her hand, Adam followed the stream that issued from the garden – the stream that would lead them further away from it.

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Several hours later, tired, feeling the bruises from their earlier tumble, and covered in dust, the two crowning gems of creation collapsed beneath a spacious tree as the light of the sun began to fade.

Adam groaned. He stretched out beneath the tree's branches.

Eve followed suit.

They lay side by side, still.

The wind moaned through the trees and the sun slowly – so slowly – glided into the earth.

When the earth had fully enveloped its cousin, Adam spoke into the silence. "Never do I wish to repeat this day." His voice was low.

Silence greeted his statement. The wind continued to cry softly.

"Yet," Eve finally whispered, "might we not have to live this day over and over again, every day from now until eternity?" She lay flat on her back, still as the earth, staring up at the dark sky through the silhouetted branches of the tree. "I chose to know right and wrong for myself."

"We chose it," interjected Adam. "You were not alone."

Eve bit her lip. "We chose to know right and wrong for ourselves, not to know them solely in relation to God's command and prohibition." Eve swallowed. "I fear we may experience the consequences of that choice each day."

Adam frowned at the pinpricks of light that were forming in the night sky. "Perhaps, Eve, you are right. We may experience the consequences of our choice each day. Has not God revealed to us the first consequences of our choice? The ground will not yield to me its full fruit" – Adam licked his lips anxiously – "and you will feel increased pain in childbirth." Adam reached for Eve's hand and pressed it. "But, Eve," he continued, "I cannot believe that God

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will abandon us. He has not removed us from the earth. God may give us new commands.

Perhaps, although we kept not his first commands, we can keep the later ones.”

Eve laughed softly. “Perhaps, Adam, you are too hopeful.” She let the word hang in the silence. “How will God teach us if we are not walking with him each evening?”

Gesturing at their surroundings, Adam said, “Look at the stars, Eve. The same stars that laughed at our merrymaking in the garden weep bright tears at our expulsion. Did not God make the bright stars? Our bodies are not bare, as they once were; God has clothed them in animal skins. God still lives. He may yet speak.”

“But,” Eve ventured, “has not our disobedience curtailed our fellowship? God has cast us from our home and placed an angel, armed with a sword of fire, as guardian of the entrance to the tree of life. God now denies us the fruit of life, which we once enjoyed, because we took the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil.” Eve tightened her grip on Adam’s hand. “I think God has abandoned us, and,” her face paled, though Adam couldn’t see it, “I don’t blame him for doing so. We must make do with our understanding of good and evil. We cannot build our lives on the hope that God will reinstate our relationship and give us new commands to follow.”

After silence had re-established its reign over the tree under which Adam and Eve lay, Eve reintroduced speech. “Adam,” she whispered quickly, “one thing scares me.”

Adam gave a slight laugh. “Just one?”

“Do you remember what the serpent said that made me thirst for the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil? He told me that if we ate the fruit, we would become wise. We would be like God.” Eve’s breathing grew quicker. “I’m worried, Adam, that the serpent was very wrong. In fact, he must be. Our understanding of morality – of good and evil – has been corrupted. The serpent told the truth and, at the same time, the serpent did the unthinkable – he

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lied. We do know good and evil. We do not need God to tell us what is good and what is evil; we simply know. But I'm afraid that our knowledge has been tainted in its transmission."

Adam frowned. "You just maintained that we must rely on our knowledge of good and evil."

"I did," Eve agreed, "but this frightens me. By doing so, we will rely on corrupted knowledge."

"Why do you think this?" Adam asked.

"In the garden, we were unashamed of our nakedness," Eve said. "It was our glory, our wonder. God favored it, called it good. After we took the fruit, our perception of nakedness changed. Our bodies now seem shameful," – her face contorted in confusion. She willed herself not to survey her breasts and her flesh – "Their beauty seems wrong. Even though I can't understand why God allowed us to take the fruit, I don't doubt that what he calls good is good. Surely we were right in the garden; our bodies were beautiful then and are still now. But we cannot now see that; our bodies seem shameful."

"Do you deny, then," Adam asked, "that we gained the knowledge of good and evil?"

"I do not doubt," Eve replied, "that we have gained knowledge of good and evil; why else would God name the tree from which we took the tree of the knowledge of good and evil? If God called it thus, we gained knowledge. Yet, somehow, our bodies were not meant for this knowledge. Perhaps we corrupted it."

"So," Adam said slowly, "In part, we understand and we know. And yet, we have lost knowledge by severed our greatest knowledge – the knowledge of God."

"Now you know why I am afraid," Eve whispered.

CHAPTER II

“Perhaps we corrupted...” Eve mumbled, her tongue heavy with age and illness. She moved restlessly on the pile of skins where her sons had laid her.

“We’re losing her,” Cain said sharply.

Cain’s younger brother – Abel – had been incessantly clenching and unclenching his fists. Prompted by Cain’s words, he darted impulsively towards his mother and stretched out one hand to touch her brow.

“We must trust...God...” Eve spluttered.

Sitting beside her on the bed, Adam smiled slightly. The movement looked more like a frown.

Abel’s hand paused above his mother’s forehead. His eyes had tightened at his mother’s mutterings and his mouth contracted into a thin, angry line. He looked far older than his 20 years. His hand shook.

Adam turned from Abel and Eve and looked at his eldest son. “You’re right; she is leaving us,” he said.

Cain’s gritted his teeth in frustration. His muscular arms bulged with tension. “What can we do?” he asked roughly.

Cain’s father didn’t reply.

Cain waited, then shouted, “How do we stop this illness?”

At his outburst, Eve twitched on the bed of skins.

Adam closed his eyes and gripped his wife’s clammy hand. “By doing what we have been doing, Cain” he said firmly. “By watching her, giving her water and food and giving her comfort. And by praying to the God who gives her life.”

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Eve's mouth moved almost imperceptibly.

Abel grunted angrily.

"What is it?" Cain asked.

Abel swallowed and gritted out, with effort. "She won't stop speaking of trust."

Adam smiled again. "It wasn't always this way."

Abel didn't respond, so Adam said, "This seems hard to you."

"Of course it seems hard to me," Abel said fiercely. "What has she done to deserve this? Mother loves God, loves him more than any of us do. Yet he chooses *her* to lay low. She cannot walk. She cannot converse coherently for longer than a few minutes. Her mind wanders. She is losing control over her body."

Adam considered Abel's words. Then he said quietly, "You are right."

Abel looked at his father angrily. "Are you so composed, Father? God is torturing the woman you have called *bone of your bones and flesh of your flesh*."

"Do you call this torture, Abel?" Adam asked. He gripped his wife's hand more tightly, then abruptly loosened it in fear that he was hurting her.

"I don't see a reason to call it anything else. What good does God accomplish by this illness? You said that God called all of creation good when he made it."

Adam nodded. "I once heard the sky and the earth speaking of this. They were enraptured by his enjoyment."

"And you no longer hear the sky and earth speaking now, I presume?" Cain interjected sarcastically.

"No," Adam replied, "I do not. Not in that way."

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“Cain, that doesn’t matter,” Abel said harshly. “I want to know whether you think God calls this creation” – he gestured at Eve on the bed – “good.”

Adam considered his son; the shadows of anger began to line his jaw. “Do you gesture at my lover or do you gesture at her illness?”

“Her illness. Not Mother.”

“And do you know that God has made this illness?”

“Father, where else would the evil originate if not with God?” Cain asked sharply.

“Perhaps with us,” Adam said.

Abel laughed harshly. “Are you willing to take all the blame for this disease? Have you afflicted Mother?” He grimaced. “Of course not. You would halt this illness if you could.”

“Perhaps they caused it without meaning to,” Cain suggested. “But if they didn’t realize what they were doing, whose fault was the choice?”

“The fault was God’s,” Abel said steadily.

“The fault was our own,” Adam said.

Abel considered his father with irritation. “Father. If you didn’t understand the choice, you couldn’t have really made it.”

Adam smiled. “Didn’t we make it? If we hadn’t, we wouldn’t be having this conversation.”

“But you were ill-informed,” Abel persisted.

“We were enough informed. Did we know what death was? No. But we knew what life was. More importantly, we knew who God was. His goodness should have convinced us that the things he forbade were forbidden with good reason. We had enough information to make our decision.”

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“But do you really think your decision to eat the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil caused Mother’s suffering?”

“No,” Adam said gingerly, “I’m not sure I think that.”

“Again, then,” Cain pointed out, “we come back to blame. If you and Mother caused not her suffering, who did?”

“Perhaps no one causes it; perhaps it is simply a consequence,” Adam said, “We can no longer eat of the tree of the life; we are no longer sustained.”

“Yet God allows this,” Abel said, “and, presumably, it will one day affect Cain and me. We did not share in your choice. Why should the consequence of your choice – if this is indeed that consequence – burden us? Would God be so unjust?”

CHAPTER III

Abel hoisted his pack onto his back as the sweetness of dawn's pink kiss brushed the horizons. His face was stony, an odd contrast to the golden glow that bathed him and his older brother, who ran after him and sought to stop him.

"Abel!" Cain shouted.

Abel continued walking, his back set against Cain's cries.

"Mother is ill!" Cain bellowed. "This may be the day we meet death."

"I know," Abel called back.

"Then why do you leave?" Cain shouted angrily. "What good will you do?"

Abel didn't reply. He lengthened his stride and gripped the pack on his back more tightly.

Cain was now near Abel. "You return to the garden," he spat out. "Are you going to speak with God?" he asked sarcastically.

"I can speak to God anywhere." Abel said tonelessly.

"Then why speak with him in the garden?"

"What, Cain," Abel asked sarcastically, "does the garden contain that we don't have?"

Shock struck Cain's face. "The tree of life."

Abel glanced at his brother.

"You seek the tree of life? Abel, are you mad?"

"I hope not," Abel growled.

"Can you defeat an angel, Abel? For that is what guards the entrance to the tree."

"God may make the angel move."

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“And will you make God move? He set the angel thence. Have you so high an opinion of yourself to think you can change the mind of God?” Cain asked incredulously.

“It is an honor to God,” Abel said, his face dark. “I think he may be persuaded by arguments of justice and mercy.”

“So you think him just and merciful?” Cain whispered.

Abel paused. “It seems I don’t know what I think. Let me try, Cain.”

“Listen, Abel,” Cain implored, grabbing his shoulders. Abel attempted to repel Cain, but Cain was stronger. He gripped his younger brother and forced him to look at him. Abel stared at Cain defiantly.

“What has God done but cast Mother out and afflict her?” Cain said softly. “Her love for God is misplaced, the love of a fool. Don’t make the same mistake she has. Don’t believe that he will heed you.”

Abel stared at his brother, then spoke deliberately. “I haven’t made Mother’s choice, Cain. I do not love God as she.”

Cain stared at Abel in frustration.

Abel smiled sourly. “Let me be, brother, unless you would come with me.”

Cain shook his head. “I’d rather anything than that.”

“Then let me go.”

Cain turned away. “May you find what you seek.”

Abel nodded curtly and left his older brother under the heat of the morning sun.

Adam had once told Abel that he and Eve had followed a stream when they left the garden. Abel now retraced that stream.

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When Abel was young, Adam had regaled him with the story of the garden. God had formed Adam from the dust of the earth, he said, and Eve from the bone of Adam's ribs. They slept among lush trees laden with delectable fruit and were the garden's keepers. Work they had in plenty and love – with each other and with God. Adam said they spoke with God as friends. Each night they walked with God as the sky grew dim. Although he had once found the thought marvelous, Abel laughed now; the thought of a relationship so close with the living God astounded him. It bemused him. Could Adam have misunderstood their relationship? What friend would turn out a friend for the sake of one error? Of course, Abel had felt differently about the story when he first heard it. Young and with a vivacious imagination, Abel's curiosity had been piqued and his desire for the garden heightened, regardless of the strangeness of God's relationship with his parents. He hadn't been able to understand why his family failed to visit the garden regularly, why they had left.

The older Abel shook his head. Now he couldn't fathom why his parents had thrown away their wealth for a single piece of fruit. And the closer he got to the garden, the more pressing became his greatest question: if suffering came from Adam and Eve's choice, why had God given his parents the choice to disobey?

Abel kicked a few rocks that lingered beneath the light grass. It almost seemed as if God had set them up for failure. Hadn't God made them? Didn't he know their innermost workings? God must have known that Abel's parents would fail. Why, then, give them the test?

Abel scowled. "Perhaps Cain was wise," he muttered. "Why seek help from a god who lays the snare for us to fail and rejoices that he caught us, but fails to free us from the trap? He has left us, broken and bleeding, in the snare and does not do us the courtesy of ending our misery."

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But Abel remembered the fruit of life and his mother. He didn't turn from the stream.

Strange that a god who made beauty and life could be so cruel. Absent suffering, Abel would have been inclined to call God good. Although Adam claimed that the colors of their world were dimmer than the colors of the garden, Abel reveled in what he saw as the glories of nature. God had made them. Abel enjoyed his work – tending sheep. Although his charges were excessively stupid, he loved them. God had created Abel's sheep. Food from the earth, although difficult to cultivate after Adam's expulsion from the garden, was plentiful enough to feed their family. God hadn't shut the earth to Adam; they were well-fed. And, when they worked properly, his family experienced deep joy in the exercise and challenge of their bodies. Wasn't health also a gift from God?

Suffering smudged this golden image of the world. Health could be removed. Abel's mother was proof: she was slowly losing her sanity and health. Earth could shrivel into itself; it would refuse to produce food if the heavens stopped pouring rain. Cain had told Abel that this season foreboded drought. Their family now feared hunger. As suffering encroached upon the goods of life, Abel had grown more and more bitter. If he could, he knew he would clutch to himself all health, life, and plenty to obstruct that Great Thief: God. Nothing good was permanent; at any moment, the snatching finger of God could remove what goods Abel had. This knowledge hadn't made Abel more grateful for health, food, and work. It had made him fearful. Angry.

Abel shook himself, hard. His breathing had quickened, so he quickened his pace too.

What could possibly explain pain and – what was still to come – death? Why would God punish them so fiercely for seeking knowledge?

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Abel grinned humorlessly. How he had once puzzled over what it meant that the forbidden tree was the tree of the *knowledge of good and evil*. Why would a loving god punish Adam and Eve for wanting to better understand what was good or evil?

Eve had tried to explain her understanding of it to him once. He hadn't believed her when she first told him; Abel knew that his mother had also once questioned God's goodness. Abel didn't know what had changed her interpretation of their choice.

I don't understand, he had said, not angry as he was now, but sincerely perplexed. *Isn't it right that you wanted to know good and evil? Why wouldn't God praise you? I would.*

Abel remembered that Eve had closed her eyes and smiled. *O, my sweet boy*. Abel had grimaced. He had lived through twelve cycles of the seasons – he was no longer a boy. *Of course you would; you care about right and wrong. For you, additional knowledge would be a boon, a blessing. For us, it was our downfall.*

Abel had crossed his arms and frowned. His mother had attempted to smother her smile, but he still saw it. *You make no sense, mother.*

Eve's smile had become sad. *Abel, we already had a sense of right and wrong. God gave us commands; his word created for us what was good and what was evil. We knew that God loved us and that he was good; we could see and feel his love everywhere. God's creation and his character spoke to his trustworthiness. We knew, therefore, that to disobey God's command was wrong. For some time, we were content to do what was right – learning it from God – and to avoid wrong – learning what was wrong from his commands. By taking the fruit, we showed that we wanted to know good and evil for ourselves. We no longer wanted to learn them from God.*

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Abel hadn't been able to stop frowning, *But God only gave you one command. He told you not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Was eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil the only thing you thought was wrong?*

No, we knew other actions that were wrong. Eve had said, The command of which you speak was God's most specific command. But he also told us to till the ground, to care for the garden, to be fruitful and multiply, to fill the earth, and to rule it. She had shaken her head. If we wanted to, we could have disobeyed these injunctions. Therefore, we knew what was right and what was wrong – right was to obey God, wrong was to disobey.

But why did God call the tree the tree of the knowledge of good and evil?

Because that is the tree's proper name, Eve had said simply.

Abel had been exasperated. *Then why wasn't it proper to eat from it? Additional knowledge would benefit you.*

God said it wouldn't. At that time, it wasn't part of God's plan for us, Eve had replied.

Do you think God would have given you the fruit eventually? Abel had asked incredulously.

I don't see why not. The tree was dangerous for us because of our nature. We didn't want to better know God through the knowledge. We wanted it for ourselves. We wanted it because it was prohibited. If we had wanted the fruit in order to better know God, I think he would have been delighted. But because God prohibited it, our desire for it couldn't honor God. We knew what was right and wrong; we didn't need the fruit.

Abel hadn't replied.

Do you remember me telling you what the serpent said that prompted me to take the fruit?

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Abel had shaken his head.

He told me that we would be like gods, knowing good and evil. He told me that God was jealous of our potential for knowledge.

Eve had laughed quietly. *Do you see what a fool I was to believe him? He must have been mistaken himself, although I've often wondered if he did it purposefully.*

God understood what knowledge we needed. We should have trusted him. He knew us better than we knew ourselves. Our downfall, Abel, was that we sought to have the knowledge of good and evil without God. The problem wasn't that we wanted it. I believe that God intended us to learn more about good, although perhaps he didn't intend us to know evil, every passing day. By taking the fruit with the intention of independence, we corrupted knowledge; without God, we cannot bear the burden of the knowledge we've received.

Why do you believe your knowledge has been corrupted, Mother?

Eve had fixed her brown eyes on him and smiled softly. *Do you remember when you started wearing clothes, Abel?*

Abel had laughed. *No.*

You wore them when you began to feel uncomfortable without them, maybe when you had reached eight cycles of the seasons. Before then, you were free and innocent as a bird in your skin. You were as we once were.

Mother, you wore no clothes in the garden? Abel had asked.

Of course! After we took the fruit, our nakedness became shameful to us. I wondered then, although your father didn't agree, whether our knowledge had been corrupted. After your brother was born, I knew for certain. An innocent child behaved as we had behaved in the garden – in delight over his own nakedness. Innocent joy rejoices in all created things; only the

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creature who has become obsessed with herself has the ability to become ashamed of her own innocence.

Abel awoke from his reminiscing with a start. How near his mother had seemed. And how much more willing he was to give credence to her interpretation of the choice she and his father had made. Yet, she had only spoken of their choice. Why had God given them the choice to make? Hadn't his father told Abel that God's command included the words, "in the day you eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you will die"? God foresaw the creation of suffering and death. God was to blame for Mother's suffering. Adam and Eve might have wrongly taken the fruit, but God had created the punishment and did little to alleviate it.

Out in the desert, with no one to see him, Abel threw his hands up to the heavens and screamed.

When his rage and frustration were spent, Abel resumed his journey in quietness.

Abel soon became aware that the day seemed darker; it was not yet two hours past mid-day. Did a storm approach? Abel looked up from the stream, on which his eyes had been focused.

It was not a storm. It was fire. Great billows of smoke curled across the horizon as far as Abel could see. Tongues of flame lapped at the smoke like a tiger playing with its prey. Abel's heartbeat hammered against his chest.

The angel. She who guarded the entrance to the tree of life with a sword of fire. Hers was the fire. Hers was the smoke.

"Courage, Abel," he wanted to whisper, but couldn't find his voice.

Slowly, Abel advanced toward the flames.

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As he approached, his clothes began to burn with heat, but his body remained unscathed. When his garment began to smoke, Abel quickly undressed and flung his clothes and pack behind him, away from the fire. His flesh grew warm, but it was not burned.

As he advanced, the wall of smoke and flame seemed to rise like a mighty bastion before him. Abel had once visited the sea. He had trembled before the mighty waves that heaved and tossed. He had imagined the terror he would feel if he were standing before a great wave as it broke, the rush of fear he would feel before it enveloped him. That fear bit at his heels, clawed at his flesh, burrowed into his heart; the wave he feared was not a wave of water, but a wall of fire.

Suddenly, the wall tumbled down upon Abel, like the breaking wave. Abel screamed, but his voice was swallowed up by the darkness that smothered him. Flames licked him, surrounded him. He could see naught but the orange stripes that flashed across his vision and threatened to blind him; their background was a vast blackness, deeper than the hue of smoke should be.

In the midst of his terror, Abel couldn't know that the flames failed to scorch him. Their power was restrained.

"GOD!" he screamed. "ANGEL! SHOW YOURSELF!"

"I am showing myself," said a voice, "in the only way you can see me."

Skittish, Abel turned. He could see only flames and darkness.

"I see nothing!" he cried.

The fire trembled.

"Is this how you see me? As nothing?" asked the voice.

"I see fire and smoke."

"Then you were mistaken. You do see something."

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“I see no person!”

“I am not a person. Why should you expect me to show myself as one?”

“Then are you fire and smoke?”

“No.”

“Who are you?”

“I am.”

“Enough of these games,” Abel yelled, “If you are God, I will tell you how I see you. I see you as the Great Thief. You snatch away health, food, family, life; you are not satisfied with banishing humanity from the garden. What great wrong have we done you that you continue to punish us? What was so very wrong about seeking knowledge of good and evil?”

“Clearly, you do not know,” said the voice. “You have rejected your mother’s interpretation. Let us, then, discuss choice itself. You cannot imagine a reason to give this choice, you have said. You have called me, in addition to the Great Thief, the Arbitrary Hunter: the one who lays a snare and leaves his prey to rot within the trap. Is that not so?”

Abel began to shake. Over him suddenly washed the impression that he was playing with a tiger; the tiger’s claws were currently retracted, but the claws had not been sawn nor the razor sharp edges of the tiger’s teeth blunted. To his utter horror, he began to weep.

“Abel, there is a reason to allow choice. Choice shows something to both the giver and the recipient. I knew that, if your parents took the fruit, they would reveal how they saw me. They showed that they saw me neither as trustworthy nor loving, at least not wholly. Since, as you’ve already pointed out, I already knew how Adam and Eve would choose, this did not surprise me. It did wound me. The greater knowledge was given to your parents. They learned

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that they hadn't loved me; they had loved my gifts. And this, as your mother would learn, told her something about herself."

"What did it tell her?" Abel asked.

"It told her that she was broken. With every reason to believe in my goodness, she chose to see me as arbitrary and avaricious."

"Aren't you?" Abel whispered.

"No," said God kindly. "I am not. I know what Goodness is and I know that I am Good."

"And are we simply to trust you on this?" Abel whispered. "How can we know that you are Goodness when you do things that do not seem good?"

"Adam and Eve didn't ask me why I prohibited the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil. That was their error. Because they didn't ask me, the methods by which I love seem strange. Will you ask me to show you?"

Abel didn't respond immediately. Consumed by darkness and flame, he considered the power of God; fear welled up inside Abel at the thought of trusting God. Yet God had spoken with Abel and had not harmed him. Perhaps a reason existed for suffering, though the thought seemed an imagination of the greatest proportions.

Finally, Abel said quietly, "Please show me."

As Abel again followed the stream, this time away from the garden, he wept freely. He had been shown, in part, reason to trust in God's goodness. He didn't know if he could speak of them to his family; the story was his own.

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His tears also flowed because God had denied Eve the fruit of life. In response to Abel's request, God had answered, "She cannot have it. The fruit that once brought her life would now make her ill. Although she is closer to tasting its nectar than she has been in some time, the fruit would do her little good in her present state. She has changed herself; I cannot give her what would cause her harm."

"Is no hope left for her?" Abel had wept, "Will you kill her, God?"

"Abel," God had said, "Illness and death are medicines; they are not torture. The patient must decide if she will accept them gladly or reject their bitter taste."

Abel hadn't been able to speak.

"Son of Eve, know this," God had said, in response to Abel's grief, "she will not yet die."

CHAPTER IV

Adam and Cain were perched on either side of Eve. The tent was quiet and still.

“Abel shouldn’t have left,” Cain said presently to his father.

Adam looked at his son from across Eve’s bed. “Why do you believe this?”

“God will not give Abel the fruit of life. Abel wastes his remaining time with Mother.”

Adam reached across Eve’s sleeping frame and laid a hand on Cain. “My son, it is not wrong to hope.”

Cain didn’t reply.

Outside the tent, the sheep began to bay loudly. “Abel has returned,” Cain said. Adam glanced toward the flap of the tent; yes, his younger son was striding to meet them.

When Abel entered the tent, Adam frowned quizzically. His son seemed different. Perhaps it was nothing but his journey. Abel was moving rather slowly.

“Did God give you the fruit of life?” Cain asked immediately.

Abel’s face grew red. “No,” he said softly. He walked quickly towards his mother and took one of her hands in his.

“She is not better,” Cain said.

Abel closed his eyes briefly, then lifted them to his mother’s.

Adam watched his younger son closely. Eventually, Abel returned his father’s inquisitive look. “Cain is right; she sleeps, you see, but she is not better. She thinks herself in the garden of Eden,” Adam informed him.

Abel nodded; Adam could see that he was digesting the news slowly. Abel muttered something beneath his breath.

“What did you say?” Adam asked.

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Abel looked at his father; Adam saw an odd mixture of pain and resignation on his son's face. "I said, 'And yet God is still God.'"

Cain frowned and walked closer to his brother. "What does that mean? What did you see?"

Abel didn't look at Cain.

"Do you mean that he is still the same god – callous, oblivious to our pain?" Cain persisted.

Abel still didn't answer. Adam prodded him, frowning slightly, "Speak, my son. Your brother and I are curious."

Abel looked at Adam. "No, I do not mean what Cain has said." He looked at his brother briefly. "I do not mean the exact opposite, but I mean something different."

"And what is that?" Cain asked.

"That he is God and may do what he pleases with his creation."

"He is God!" Cain scoffed. "He may do what he pleases! This lunatic has been bewildered by sunstroke. Is he not a good god?"

"I do not know," said Abel softly. "I think so."

"Then is not God bound by the same laws as we? Do not we all feel that to murder is evil?"

Abel nodded. "I cannot deny that we do and that that feeling is a right one."

"Then is not God bound by the same rules as we?"

Abel frowned. "Why should you think that? Is God mortal? Is God fallible, corruptible" – here he looked at his mother gently – "as are we? Can not God do as God wills?"

"Only if he wishes to be a tyrant and not a god of love," Cain roared.

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Eve's eyelids fluttered open at his outburst.

"Cain..." Adam beseeched him sharply.

"God may do what he pleases, but let him not think that we rejoice at his doings!" Cain ignored his father, whether out of anger or ignorance, Abel could not tell. "The actions he has taken recently were not done out of love." He spat on the ground. "And yet does he not claim to be a God of love?"

"If he is a God of love," Eve croaked suddenly, "surely whatever he does is good?"

The tent hushed. The men stared at Eve, amazed to find her speaking lucid words. Fear gripped Abel that she would soon slide back into lunacy. Cain stared at his mother, fighting against his anger.

"Answer me, Cain," she whispered. "How do you know that what God has allowed me to experience is evil?"

"You are not well, Mother," Cain said sharply. "Do not tire yourself with these questions."

"I will tire myself with thinking them if I do not speak. Let me speak," she said. Her voice was weak; Eve paused after only a few words to regain her breath.

Cain's jaw tightened.

"How do you know that my suffering is evil?"

"From our own experience, Mother. I would never afflict you thus. Neither would Abel nor Father. To harm you in this way would be evil. We all know this."

Eve smiled, but it was a sad smile. "Your words are angry, Cain, but your heart is tender. Yes, if you had caused my illness, you would have done evil. You cannot imagine a benevolent purpose for this pain, can you?"

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Cain closed his eyes. “No. I cannot.”

“But can God?”

“I cannot imagine how.”

“I can,” Eve said. “I’ve learned, through this illness, the limits of my strength and goodness. I am not invincible.” Eve’s face paled and her jaw tightened. “I’m still afraid, Cain. It terrifies me to think that, in the next few moments, I may again forget who I am, where I am. That I may forget who you are” – she looked pleadingly at Adam – “or that I am your mother. I do not accept this illness with the courage with which I should. But I am learning the strength and beauty of gratitude.”

Cain looked at her angrily.

“Have you ever thanked God that you can walk, Cain?”

Cain looked at her with concern.

“I am still sane, Cain. Until you can no longer walk, you won’t appreciate the full beauty of standing, walking, running, jumping on your own two legs. I can experience only the memory of ambulation; you daily experience its joy. Learn from my deprivation, Cain. I want you to appreciate the thousand beautiful things you receive every day because of God’s generosity. Thank God for sight, for being able to lift a bucket of water to wash yourself.” She laughed. “Who would have thought that requires gratitude? But it does. It requires gratitude so very much.”

Abel asked, “Could you not have learned this without pain, Mother?”

Eve grew thoughtful. “I wish I had. I think I could have, but I didn’t. So God – in his loving wisdom – has allowed me to learn it in pain since I failed to learn it in peace and pleasure.”

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“And is that worth it to you, Mother?” Abel asked quietly. “Is knowledge worth more to you than health?”

Eve laughed boisterously. “What a question! To think that I have gained knowledge. I once wanted it more than God. I think, having gained worthwhile knowledge through illness, I do prefer it to health. If I were healthy, I wonder if I would say the same.”

“Are illness and pain only for those who fail to learn a lesson, Mother?” Cain asked.

Eve puzzled on his question. “No, no, I don’t think so. Perhaps God does not intend the pain I feel. It could be some natural consequence of choices I have made.”

Cain sighed in disgust. “But God made the natural world; surely God could stop its consequences or have made the world without them altogether.”

“Perhaps God could have. But he didn’t. I believe that God uses these things that seem evil for good.”

“You rely too much on this belief in God’s goodness,” said Cain. “How came you by it?”

“By trial and error and discovering my own weakness and finitude. It is the wisdom and mystery of God that, in my weakness, I should discover his strength. In my poverty of love, I learned of Love.”

When Abel and Cain didn’t reply, Adam ventured gently, “Perhaps you should rest now.”

Ruefully, Eve acquiesced. She breathed deeply and allowed herself to relax completely into the skins that covered her bed. She quickly drifted into sleep; the confrontation she had forced had taxed her.

Later that evening, Abel addressed his father, “Perhaps she is on the mend.”

Adam seemed loathe to reply.

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“What is it?”

Adam didn't respond immediately. Finally, he said, “She twitches.”

“Oh.”

“The sign of one of her fits,” volunteered Cain.

Adam nodded.

As the night began to fall, Eve finally opened her eyes. Abel looked at her, half-hopeful.

“What is it, Mother?”

“Why would God tell us, ‘Don't’?” she asked dreamily, almost incoherently.

No one replied.

“Why would God tell us not to take from that beautiful tree...just over there?” Eve pointed faintly.

Adam closed his eyes.

“Again,” Abel whispered.

“Perhaps she is learning from this experience, but it's killing us,” Cain said harshly.

Eve tried to sit up in bed. Adam restrained her. “But why?” she asked softly.

CHAPTER V

“I don’t understand,” Eve said, frowning. “God told us not to eat...?”

“God has commanded us not to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil,” Adam affirmed, gesturing at the tree behind him.

Eve frowned at it for moment, then skirted Adam and began to circle the tree.

Its branches drooped languidly towards the earth, but the tree was so tall that the lowest branches reached her shoulder. Each branch was covered with white blossoms and golden fruit. Eve shook her head and touched the bark. It was rough and covered with moss. Beautiful.

“I cannot fathom this, Adam,” she said, her hand still on the tree. “Why would God forbid this fruit? See how lovely it is. Its taste would surely match its appearance.” She turned to face Adam. “From every other tree in the garden – each one as beautiful as this – we are encouraged to take. Why should God forbid us this tree?”

Adam shrugged. “Your guess is as good as mine, love. Perhaps its name gives us a clue?”

She laughed. “That perplexes me still further. God delights to give us knowledge. When we ask why trees grows or how birds fly, we cause God delight and...”

“...and he gives us some knowledge about why trees grow or birds fly until we come back and ask for more,” Adam finished. “I know.”

“So why should God deny us?”

“Presumably for a good reason. Do we need to know it?”

“Perhaps he intends to give us the fruit later,” Eve mused.

Tentatively, Adam said, “I’m not certain God ever intends to give us this fruit.”

He lifted his eyebrows at Eve, who was staring at him in disbelief.

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When she recognized that Adam was serious, Eve scoffed. “Never give us the fruit?” she asked. “Then why make it? God gives us more and more knowledge as we ask for it. Why wouldn’t God eventually give us the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil?”

Adam shrugged his shoulders again. “He may. It wouldn’t be unlike him. Hasn’t God given us all things in their proper time?” He grinned at Eve. “Like you, loveliest of all the lovely things that God has made. Didn’t God make you – my companion, lover, my own bone and flesh?”

Eve smiled back. “I understand. He gives good things. But God didn’t make me immediately. Why shouldn’t he intend us to eat this fruit” – she arched her neck to look at the golden fruit above them – “in good time?”

“He may, I agree. But we cannot expect this. God has only commanded me that we are not to eat of this tree. He didn’t suggest that he would one day remove the prohibition. In the meantime, I suggest we enjoy the good things God has given us to enjoy.” Adam lowered himself to the ground.

Eve frowned and returned to contemplating the fruit.

While she examined the tree, Adam began to fidget, twirling the green grass between his fingers. With trepidation, he added, “In fact, Eve, I haven’t told you all God said.”

“Oh?” Eve replied.

“Yes.” Adam affirmed.

“What haven’t you told me?” she asked. Eve lowered herself to the ground to sit beside Adam.

“Something that I don’t understand,” Adam said. “God told me that, in the day we eat of this fruit, we will die.”

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“Die?” Eve asked, playing with the sounds of the word. “What does it mean to die?”

“I do not know.”

“Did you not ask God what it means to die?”

Adam frowned. “I did not. Was that wrong of me?”

Eve didn’t reply.

“I assumed that death was not a pleasant thing,” Adam said, “since it is connected with disobedience to God’s command.”

“How strange to think of something not being pleasant,” Eve mused. “We know only pleasant things here. What could unpleasantness possibly be like?”

“I do not wish to know,” Adam said. “Eve, we must not eat the fruit.”

Eve nodded assent. “Of course. Not until God allows us.”

“Eve,” Adam said, “I think the tree’s purpose is to test our obedience. Even if God never gives us the fruit, we must obey his command.”

Eve looked at Adam skeptically. “Why would God ask us to obey without giving a reason?”

“Has not God given us everything we need, Eve? He has showered us with bounty. Can we not trust this God? Can we not obey – without any reason other than ‘God gave it’ – his command?”

“This sounds right, I know,” Eve admitted, “But God has given me a mind. Can I not ask questions?”

“Ask as many questions as you like,” Adam said. “In fact, perhaps we should be asking God more questions. I should have asked God what death is. You should ask him why we are forbidden to eat this tree’s fruit. But ultimately, we must obey. Because why wouldn’t we?”

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He picked a handful of grass and gently blew it into Eve's face. "Don't we have everything we need?"



Eve swung her legs back and forth in the cool, deep stream. Enveloped by the soft light of dusk, she sighed and fiddled with her hair. Just beyond that clump of trees was the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Why couldn't they have it?

Perhaps, she reasoned, if she were studying the tree – its leaves, its branches, its fruit – she would see something different about it, something that would justify God's prohibition.

Eve sighed more deeply. Was she wise? How could she know? Were her thoughts neither wise nor foolish? Eve couldn't decide. But her impulses urged her toward the tree. Eve acquiesced and lowered herself into the stream, relaxing into its chilly embrace. Swimming against the current, Eve soon reached the other bank. Carefully, she hoisted herself up.

She hadn't yet asked God why the tree was prohibited. She didn't want to ask him now, not until she had thought more about the tree on her own.

Eve crept through the bushes and trees that separated her from the tree of knowledge quietly. Each tree was beautiful in its own right – each as beautiful as the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Strange.

Finally, she glimpsed it, standing in a clearing by itself. With a gasp, she realized that the tree was placed in the center of the garden. Peculiar that God would give it such a place of prominence.

As she had done when Adam first told her the prohibition, she circled the tree. She took it all in – its strong branches and trunk, its fragrant blossoms and juicy fruit. Eve frowned in exasperation. This tree was no different from any other.

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Utterly perplexed, Eve idled in front of the tree, no longer circling it deliberately. Just looking.

Gradually, she became aware that the serpent – one of the wisest creatures God had made – was surveying her with a mixture of pity and comradery.

She grinned at him in welcome. “Are you laughing at me, serpent?” she asked.

The serpent flicked its tongue in its version of a smile. “No, I assure you. I’m laughing with you at the puzzle you and your lover have been handed.”

Eve raised her eyebrows. “You know our puzzle?”

The serpent bobbed its head gently. “I do.”

“How strange. I suppose, as you’re the cleverest beast in the garden, you’ve discovered our predicament on your own. Well, serpent, how would you advise us?” Eve crossed her arms. “Advise me and my lover. I am utterly perplexed.”

The serpent moved closer. “Perhaps it would be easiest if you first explained what you perceive to be your predicament.”

Eve was surprised, but conceded. “If you wish,” she said. “This is the source of my perplexity. God has forbidden Adam and me to eat from this tree, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil,” –she patted its roots as she spoke, “but the tree is just like any other tree in the garden. It is entirely lovely and its fruit, I fully expect, is delectable. Serpent, why should God forbid us to eat from it?”

The serpent lowered his head in deference, “There is always the possibility, my dear, that God forbids it for your own good.”

Eve frowned. “I understand that. Why do both you and Adam assume I fail to recognize God’s goodness?”

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The serpent tilted his head. "I don't assume that, Eve."

Eve sighed. "So, recognizing God's goodness, what reason might he have for forbidding the fruit? That's what I really want to know, serpent. I'm looking for something strange in the tree, something that will reveal what God's purpose is in prohibiting it."

"And you cannot find a clue in the outer appearance of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil."

Eve shook her head.

The serpent bowed. "I see. Perhaps its other qualities will be helpful. What does the tree offer you, Eve?"

She frowned. "It offers fruit."

The serpent flicked his tongue. "Not quite," he rejoined. "What does the tree of the knowledge of good and evil offer you that no other tree in the garden can?"

"Knowledge of good and evil," Eve began, "but I'm not even sure what that is."

"Leaving aside what it is, the tree does offer you knowledge. Knowledge of good and evil. Yes, it offers you that. But what does it offer you in terms of action?"

Eve looked at the serpent perplexedly. "The chance to disobey?"

"Choice, Eve," the serpent whispered. "It offers you choice."

Eve considered him. "You are considered the wisest creature in the garden, but I cannot understand your answer. How does this differentiate this tree from any other? I can choose to take from any tree. I might have an apple or I might eat a pear."

The serpent shook his head. "Yes, but that choice doesn't cost you anything, not really. The choice to take from this tree costs you something – you mentioned it just a moment before – obedience to God."

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Eve didn't respond.

The serpent looked at Eve searchingly. "When you eat an apple, not a pear, what do you lose?"

"The chance to eat the pear," Eve suggested, "but not really; I can eat the two together or I can eat the pear after the apple."

"Exactly," the serpent nodded, "this tree is different. This fruit is different. You may not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and remain obedient to God."

"I can see that you're right," Eve said softly, a frown etching itself deeper into her forehead. "But," she added falteringly, "why would God give us that choice?"

The serpent listened to the silence of the evening. Then he said, "I suppose the real point is: God gave you the choice, but doesn't want you to take it."

Eve remained quiet, still musing on her question.

"Eve," called a voice on the outskirts of the clearing.

Eve recognized Adam's voice and, attempting to shake herself free of her thoughts, turned to greet him.

Abruptly, the serpent said, "Eve, I think you should know, before you go, that the fruit of this tree will make you wise."

Eve turned back to the serpent – distracted. "What?"

"This fruit will make you like God, knowing the good from the evil. It will give you strength and wisdom."

Eve stared at the serpent. He forked his tongue in a soft smile, then bowed as Adam approached.

"What's this?" Adam asked joyfully. "What are we discussing?"

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“The beauty of this tree,” the serpent replied.

Adam turned to admire the object of their contemplation. The grin on his face faded when he saw the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

“This tree is forbidden,” he said, turning to Eve.

“Perhaps, then,” the serpent said, “we would do best to admire, but not trespass on God’s command.”

Eve looked at the serpent in confusion.

“I hope you enjoy the rest of your evening,” the serpent said. “I enjoyed our conversation.” He smiled again and left the clearing.



“Are you mad?” Adam whispered furiously, tugging at Eve’s arm as they crept through the garden.

“Nothing’s wrong with me,” Eve said. “I’d like to look at the tree again. It’s beautiful to the sight, even you admit it.”

She kept walking, avoiding Adam’s gaze.

“Eve,” Adam said, hurrying in front of her and placing his hands on her shoulders, “I found you there with the serpent yesterday. You return tonight. The fruit is forbidden. Why do you whet your appetite for something you cannot have?”

“God has made beautiful things and freely invites us to partake of them. I may not be able to eat of this fruit, but I can admire its beauty.”

“Eve, you can’t even touch it!”

She paused. “Can’t I?”

“No, you can’t,” Adam reiterated.

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“I thought we were only forbidden to eat the fruit.”

“Neither can we touch it.”

“You’ve added that prohibition; God did not say it.”

“Eve, I’d add anything to keep us from disobeying.”

“If God wanted us to leave it alone, he would have made it unpleasant to look at.”

“How can you say that when God has prohibited it? You judge the goodness of God.”

“Perhaps I do...” Eve said softly.

Adam blinked in shock. “I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear that,” he said.

“Either way, it’s irrelevant, Adam,” Eve said. “We’re here.”

They stood in the clearing where the tree of the knowledge of good and evil grew.

Eve sighed softly and approached it. Adam followed her, unfamiliar emotions roiling within him. He felt anger.

“Eve, did you ask God why the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was made? Did you ask him why we aren’t allowed it?”

“No, I did not,” Eve replied.

“Why?” Adam asked.

“Because he has forbidden it. What more do we need to know?”

“Nothing more; but if you have pressing questions, you should ask them. If not, be content with God’s command. Clearly, you are not content,” Adam ended abruptly.

Eve didn’t respond. She lowered her head. Adam was behind her, so the move did nothing to affect his ability to see her face. Yet Adam walked closer toward Eve and placed a hand firmly on her shoulder.

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After a pause, Eve lifted her head slightly so that Adam could see the outline of her face.

“Do you know what the serpent told me?” she asked.

Adam said nothing.

“He said the tree will make us wise. Why would God wish us not to be wise?”

“There are other paths to wisdom,” Adam said. “Disobedience will not make us wise.”

“And if it does?” Eve rejoined. “Why would the serpent say it does?”

“Are you willing to pit the serpent’s word against God’s?” Adam asked in a low voice.

Eve stiffened slightly. “Maybe you misheard him.”

“Who, Eve?” Adam asked.

“God.”

“God?” Adam said incredulously. “Better rather to say that the serpent misunderstood.”

Eve shook her head as if to clear cobwebs. “No, Adam,” she insisted. “If the tree makes us wise, God should invite us to eat it. The beauty of this tree is his invitation.”

“Eve.” Adam’s grip on her shoulder grew tighter.

Eve pulled away. “You seem to think the serpent is mistaken. But our own eyes confirm his account of the tree. Nothing in our experience confirms the command you say God gave.”

Eve turned to face Adam.

Adam’s jaw tightened. “You say I have not spoken truth?”

Eve’s eyes flicked on and off of Adam’s, but never directly met his gaze, which stared at her with the heat of the great sun. “I say you have been mistaken in what you thought you heard.”

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“Eve,” Adam said, his voice rising, “God told me we would die if we ate the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Do you think that’s worth nothing?”

Eve’s eyes finally met Adam’s, but they were dipped in pity.

“Dying?” she asked gently. “And what is death? Do you know?”

“No,” Adam admitted. “And neither do you. But God knows it. Why should we not trust him?”

“But the serpent...” Eve faltered. “Isn’t he the wisest of the creatures God has made? If anything, I should think the serpent were meant to be our counselor, sent from God.”

“The serpent cannot here be our counselor,” Adam said strongly, “because what he says is contrary to what God has said.”

“But,” Eve said thoughtfully, “God didn’t say that the tree wouldn’t make one wise. Perhaps we’ll become wise and die. It’s possible that both could occur.”

“But if God forbade it, I would assume that the unpleasantness of death outweighs the pleasure of wisdom.”

Eve smiled at Adam. “You trust God so much.”

Adam nodded. “Why shouldn’t I trust him? I have every reason to trust God.”

Eve nodded thoughtfully. “Do you know what else the serpent said?”

“I am grown tired of this serpent,” Adam said, gritting his teeth.

Eve ignored him. “He said that, if we ate this fruit, we would become like gods. Perhaps knowledge of good and evil is what makes one equal with God.”

“Perhaps that is precisely the reason God forbids it,” Adam growled.

“So that we never gain some worthy new knowledge? Would God prohibit us from growing?” Eve asked, affronted.

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“God would prevent us,” Adam gritted out, “from growing so high that we fall. Even the flowers, if they grow too tall, begin to droop.”

“Then why give us the choice?” Eve said, her voice getting louder.

“Am I God, to know these things?” Adam rejoined. “Perhaps God gave us the choice so that we would choose to remain his creatures and not seek the role of supreme creators!”

“If this were so, God would be degrading us!” Eve yelled angrily.

“Degrading us?” Adam said furiously. “God has elevated us. What has this choice done to you?”

“If the choice has changed me, the fault is God’s. He gave me choice,” said Eve.

Adam shook his head. “Your own choice has done this to you. You cannot blame God for how you exercise it. Eve, listen to me and come away from this tree.”

Adam turned and began to leave the clearing. Hearing no footsteps behind him, Adam looked over his shoulder.

Eve hadn’t moved.

No.

She had moved.

“Eve!” Adam yelled in fear.

Eve’s beautiful arm was lost within the branches of the tree. The leaves of the tree rustled. Though the pounding of his feet on the forest floor obscured all sound, Adam thought he could hear a soft snap.

Suddenly, a piece of golden fruit was next to Eve’s lips.

Adam tried to scream, but the breath in his lungs seemed frozen. He ran. The clearing

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that had taken him seconds to cross now seemed to stretch across mountains. Finally, he clapped Eve in his arms and flung her piece of fruit to the ground.

“Eve.”

She didn’t reply.

“Did you eat it?” he asked frantically. “Did you eat the fruit?”

Eve stared at him, unseeing. A single tear etched its way down her pale face and rolled into the smile that softened her mouth. Her body was pale, far paler than the body of the Eve who had spent her mornings, afternoons, and evenings under the caress of the sun. Slowly, she nodded.

Adam stared at her in horror.

Gingerly, Eve pried herself from Adam’s arms and bent toward the forest floor. Her hand closed upon the piece of fruit Adam had thrust aside. “Here,” Eve said faintly, rising to offer it to Adam.

“Try some.” Eve proffered the golden fruit before Adam’s face. Within him, a cry of delirium and primal fear was welling.

Eve smiled and whispered, “It’s delicious.”

The faintness of her voice frightened him.

Suddenly, a shadow began to pass over Eve’s face.

Adam’s terror grew. “Eve,” he said.

Eve’s eyes grew wide and she looked wildly about her. When her eyes lit on Adam’s body, her face colored scarlet. In an effort to see anything else, she looked at her own. Eve gave a tiny scream and, hunched, fell to the floor.

“Eve!” Adam pleaded, clutching her to himself. Her body was shaking.

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This was death. Adam felt it. And his love would leave him alone. It was not good for man to be alone. Wildly, Adam forced open Eve's clenched hand and took from her the piece of fruit.

Tears began to pour down his cheeks. Adam kissed Eve roughly once on the head, then followed his lover's footsteps and bit into his choice.

CHAPTER VI

“Where are you going?” Cain asked sullenly. He was leaning against their mother’s tent, a shadow of himself amid the darkness of the early morning.

Abel stopped. “I still have to pasture my sheep,” he replied. “Mother won’t be helped if our sheep starve or if you forget to till the earth.”

Cain grunted in acknowledgment.

“You’ve found some good pasture for your flock?” he asked as Abel turned to go.

Abel turned back. Cain could see his teeth flash in the darkness. “I have.”

“At least you can relocate your flock,” Cain said begrudgingly. “If only crops could walk.”

Abel was silent. “I know. This drought is hard for you.”

Cain didn’t respond. Instead, he said, “Joy for you that you picked shepherding over Father’s line of work. Is that why you picked shepherding? So that you wouldn’t have to deal with drought?”

Abel colored, though Cain couldn’t see it in the darkness. “In part. I picked it out of fear, I think. I was afraid to deal with the curse on the ground.”

Cain lifted his mouth in the imitation of a smile. “You picked the way that was cleared of brambles.”

Abel nodded. “I’m ashamed to say I did. But I’m grateful now. We at least have meat and clothes, even if our crops fail.”

Cain tightened his jaw.

“That’s not a poor reflection on you, Cain. You’re dealing with cursed ground.”

Cain nodded in acknowledgement. “Again, God has cursed us.”

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“True,” Abel said softly. “But here, at least, we are to blame.”

Cain shook his head. “*We* didn’t choose anything, you and I. Our parents choose the fruit.”

“Father once said that the choice to take the fruit is made every day. Each day, we affirm the crux of their choice – we choose ourselves over God.”

“Father can be as mad as Mother.”

Abel paused, then ventured, “Bit by bit, Cain, I’m inclined to agree with Mother.”

“That God is good, despite suffering?” Cain said incredulously.

Abel nodded. “Yes. Mother’s suffering and the curse you experience when you till the earth are somehow instruments for our good. I once heard them called medicines.”

“You sound as irrational as Mother.”

“I know. I realize that myself.”

“Then why say it?” Cain asked.

“Much of my experience begins to confirm it. I asked God to show me that he is good. I think I begin to see it. I once called God the Great Thief. He seems to steal our health, our food, our family. But it was he who gave us the gifts of health, food, and family. Better to call him the Great Giver. Better to have a little good than thirst for goods we have not. Did not mother once sing,

*‘Golden gleams of gloried light
vanquishing the rule of night
seem to eyes of mine – dull, drear –
full of comfort, full of cheer.*

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*Better, far, to have this boon,
than walk upon the shimm'ring moon
as gods upon the heaven's film;
No, would I, rather, as a child,
climb higher on the rocks of earth
than sky.'*

“She began to find joy in the simple things when her illness began; perhaps our suffering makes us more grateful for things we’ve often ignored – like gleams of sunshine.”

“This seems naïve, Abel. God has taken the ability to enjoy most goods from our mother. Can she see clearly? Her eyes are clouded with dreams of the past. How then can she see the sunshine to enjoy it? Can she hear our voices when she’s feverish? When, then, shall she enjoy the pleasure of a conversation? When her sanity returns, her enjoyment of brief conversation is overshadowed by the fear that she will – far too soon – subside into madness. She wastes away, her appetite weak. Where is her enjoyment? Since her ability to enjoy is gone, must we conclude that God is tyrannical and delights in misery? What good does her suffering accomplish?”

“Cain,” Abel said softly, “You should take care to not speak directly for Mother. She would not allow you to say that she is unable to enjoy life. She would say the opposite. Mother would say that her joy in life has tripled through her suffering. Her ability to enjoy has not been hampered; it has, rather, been heightened.”

“This seems to call suffering good.”

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Abel considered his brother. “I don’t think it calls suffering good. But perhaps we are wrong to view suffering as evil.”

Cain’s jaw tightened and his eyes grew hot. “This seems a foolish statement.”

“It may be. But consider it. Why do you think pain is evil?” Abel asked.

Cain stared at his brother. “In case you were unaware, pain hurts, sometimes with the force of a thousand suns.”

“You’ve just told me what pain is: something that hurts. But what is so intrinsically wrong with a thing that hurts you?”

“Abel, can you hear yourself?” Cain asked, dumbfounded.

“Pain can be good, Cain, can’t it? Doesn’t pain often tell us when something is wrong with our bodies? When your throat is sore, you know that you need rest and sleep, as well as nourishing foods. Pain indicates a problem in your body of which you wouldn’t otherwise be aware. Or,” Abel amended, “of which you wouldn’t be aware until it was too late. In the same way, other pain – suffering, extreme illness, and death – may alert us to a serious problem.”

“And, what problem is that?” Cain asked. In the light of the rising sun, irritation clearly marked his face.

“Our reliance on ourselves and failure to enjoy God as we should,” said Abel simply.

Cain frowned. “What failure is that? This all revolves around your belief that God is good. I do not share your belief. How can I understand suffering?”

“Perhaps you can’t,” Abel said softly, “until you ask God to show you.”

“And why would God use this “medicine” on Mother? She loves God, far more than we.

“Perhaps,” Abel said, “although she loves God more than we, she doesn’t love him as she should. Or perhaps this is for us.”

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Cain frowned. "I don't understand you."

"Mother's illness has prompted us to consider God, death, gratitude, suffering. Questions often lead one to new conclusions. Perhaps her illness is for our benefit, to transform us."

Cain fairly snarled, "I don't take well to being instructed through my mother's suffering."

"You know what Mother would say to that."

"Do I?"

"You do. She would reply that God has the right to do with his creation as he pleases. And since he is good, she would add, we should welcome his actions."

Cain shook his head and exhaled in exasperation. "I hate these words."

Abel looked at his brother sadly. "I understand. I feel the pain of suffering too."

When Cain didn't respond, Abel added, "Perhaps way to conceive of it, Cain, is that God allows suffering for our joy."

Cain closed his eyes. "Can you please cease speaking nonsense?"

Abel opened his mouth to continue, but thought better of it. Instead, he said, "Perhaps I should take my sheep to pasture. The sun has fully risen." Abel laid a hand on his brother's shoulder and walked toward his flock.

When Abel had walked ten yards from his brother, Cain called, "Abel."

His brother turned.

"Will you be offering a sacrifice this evening?" Cain asked.

Abel nodded his head gently. "I will."

"Then I will offer one with you."

Abel frowned in confusion. "Why offer a sacrifice to a God you neither trust nor love?"

Cain shrugged. "One never knows. Out of fear. Or out of hope."

CHAPTER VII

Cain gave a deep, deep sigh. His muscles ached. Cain didn't object to this pain. The soreness that permeated his body after being in the sun – tilling the earth – gave him a measure of satisfaction.

Still, the satisfaction was accompanied by a deep aching and deep thirst. Cain wiped his brow, which dripped with sweat. The sun was already beginning to fall. Soon, his sweat would turn against him and fill his body with chills. Cain worked faster to gather the fruits of the field – the first harvest of their crops this season.

Cain tied bundles of each crop together and threw them onto the back of a sled he had fashioned from a sturdy tree. The animal that would pull the sled stared at the horizon languidly; Cain knew it was also tired by the sun's fierce rays.

“Hey, he-up,” Cain directed the beast when he had fully loaded the cart. He tied the crops that wouldn't fit to his own back.

Slowly, Cain and his beast of burden made the trek back to the family's dwelling – back to where Abel would be waiting. Cain grimaced at the thought of the paltry offering he had to give God, then laughed that he should feel this way. Hadn't Abel asked him, just this morning, why Cain would present an offering to a god Cain neither loved nor trusted? Cain had replied optimistically – perhaps he would offer out of hope. But what hope did Cain have in God? Very little. Cain believed that God was omnipotent – hadn't God turned his parents out of the garden and created the world? But Cain couldn't believe God was – as his mother claimed – benevolent.

Cain swallowed, trying to remain hydrated without water. He looked around to distract himself. All around him were good things - the sky, the beast of burden beside him, his family's

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safety, their relative health – Cain admitted the world had bits of good. And when he and Abel had played as children, he had known great fun and happiness. He still saw glimpses of that fun now. But the world was marred with suffering; his mother was living proof.

Cain hated worst her delusions. His skin crawled at the thought. His mother knew not where she was. She thought herself in the garden of Eden, in labor, or starving during a drought. She felt herself in pain, but knew not the pain she was in. Her delusions and illness grew worse each passing week.

Would Cain present God an offering out of hope? Hardly; God would not heal his mother. Cain would offer out of fear. This malicious god might take vengeance on Cain if Cain refused to offer. The thought planted in Cain a seed of fear. Perhaps his mother's illness was punishment for Cain's failure to offer sacrifices in the past. Cain paled. Surely an offering would appease God's wrath; perhaps he would lift the punishment on Cain's mother. But Cain couldn't believe that God would lift the illness out of love.

Yet the drought had made the harvest scarce. Could Cain give God less than a full portion? After all, the crops might not be enough to feed Cain's family... Cain considered the crops in the sled, bouncing as his animal trudged along. Cain grimaced, but felt that nothing less than a full sacrifice would appease a vengeful God or grant Cain the chance of reprieve for his mother. He would offer the full first fruit of his labor. Let him see if God would regard his offering.

As Cain approached his family's tents, he heard the baying of sheep. Abel was waiting.

Cain hailed his brother as he approached. Abel carried a pristine, young lamb – the best of his flock – the one most likely to produce the best offspring. Cain almost retched when he

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saw the contentment on Abel's face. Didn't Abel feel the insanity of giving their best to a god who didn't need it, but took it?

Cain halted his beast. He would store the grain when he and Abel returned. For now, he cut lose his animal and hoisted the bundle of crops that was his best. No contentment marred Cain's face. He nodded at Abel.

"Shall we?" his brother asked.

Cain silently assented. The two brothers left their family tents and made for the foundation of stones.

They had learned this practice from their father, who had always burned the first fruits of his crops as an offering to God. Adam felt that the action conveyed deep gratitude to God, as well as the belief that God deserved the best of everything they possessed. Adam often prayed while he offered his crops, in thanks or in a request. God often granted Adam's prayers, which prompted more gratitude in Adam's heart.

Since Eve had taken ill, the task of tending the crops had fallen squarely on Cain's shoulders. Cain doubted his father knew that the offerings had steadily declined and, for a time, ceased. Today they would begin again, though not with the intent with which Adam had offered them.

As a special marker for their offerings, Adam had erected a foundation of stones some ways from the family tents, a foundation upon which to burn grain or beast. Cain avoided looking at it as they approached. As the eldest son, his offering would be burned first. He couldn't anticipate the sacrifice without anger bubbling in his throat.

Cain approached and laid his grain upon the smooth stone. He grasped two sticks and forcefully rubbed them against one another to make flames. When fire erupted, Cain cast the

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flaming stick upon his grain. The crops began to flame. Cain clenched his teeth in anger. *How could God demand this of him while his mother suffered and as a drought stunted their crops?*

Cain fixed his eyes on the ground beside the stone; he wouldn't watch the destruction of his offering. Fire still licked the corners of his vision. Cain shut his eyes tight against the flames. His eyelids pulsed with the fire's orange glow and his nostrils filled with smoke. Cain grit his teeth and clenched his hands so tightly that his fingernails dug into his palms. Yet he had come to this offering stone for a reason. "Remove the illness from my mother, God," Cain bit out. "Heal her. I came to this offering stone to pay debt for the sacrifices I have not offered. Honor this."

Cain bit his tongue while he waited for the remainder of his grain to dissipate in the fire, to become nothing but rubble and charred sticks. Finally, no orange glow remained. Only trailing wisps of smoke spiraled toward the starry heavens. Cain walked away from the offering. Abel tried to meet his eyes, but Cain avoided him. He would not stay to watch the offering of his younger brother.

Abel let Cain go. He approached the stone, breathing deeply as he drew near. His healthiest, most beautiful lamb ambled beside him.

To prepare the stone, Abel laid dry sticks upon the altar. Before laying his lamb atop them, Abel patted her gently and bound together her forearms and back legs. She began to kick. When he didn't untie her, his lamb began to bay loudly. Abel breathed deeply to keep down his tears. With his left arm, Abel held his lamb down upon the altar. With his right, he reached for a knife.

Sensing his anguish, the lamb began to struggle fiercely and cry more intensely. With a tense hand, Abel slashed. Her struggles eased. Finally, she collapsed.

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Abel's vision grew blurry as he hunted for two sticks with which to create fire. The hoarse cry finally broke from his throat. "Help me, God!"

Beneath his feet, Abel heard a crack; he had stumbled upon a patch of sticks. Bending down, Abel collected two of the lot and returned to the altar upon which his lamb lay.

Abel sat down beside her and numbly rubbed the two sticks together. As the fire sparked, he laid the flaming branch upon the carpet of dead sticks beneath his lamb. Stepping back from the flames, he gathered more sticks and created more flames, laying them around his lamb like a garland of flowers. The fire soon consumed her.

His task finished, Abel collapsed before the altar.

"Oh, God!" Abel wept, "here is my precious lamb, the best and most loved of all my flock. I give her to you because I love you and I know that you love me. Only you are worthy of my lamb. You deserve the best of my flock. Here she is and here am I."

The crackling of the fire popped in Abel's ears. He lay beside the altar and didn't lift his gaze to the flames.

"Is this not," Abel whispered, "the very image of our pain? We weep at our deprivation, the destruction of what we love. The pain threatens to undo us, to kill us. But this is the point of suffering's pain: to drive us to you, who ease all pain. The pain I feel now is self-inflicted; you asked it not of me. But I did not inflict the pain of my mother's illness.

To whom can I go to sustain me in the face of her insanity? I cannot go to myself. I feel within me a pain rawer and bloodier than any I have felt, a weakness and an emptiness that threatens to overcome me. I have tried to find within myself strength to face Mother's illness. I have not succeeded. But in you I find strength. In you I find deep goodness, though not a palliative to numb the pain in me. Your goodness does not ease the pain or remove it, but adds

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something better than even the thing for which I grieve: my own mother and her health. I find in you worth and riches of goodness and glory that make – dare I say it? – the pain I feel worth knowing.”

Abel wept more strongly.

“Are we such creatures that only pain will tempt us to you? Can we not learn through gracious life? Can not the smile of the sun and the blueness of the sky and the warmth of familial love drive us to you? Cannot the lesser goods of family and health cause us to seek the greatest good that is you? Alas! If only I belonged to a race greater than my own, a race that sought your face in joy, not only in sorrow. As for me and my house, we think not of you unless we feel some pain.

Are you not justified, my God, in introducing us to pain? Do you not act with wisdom and with love in your doings? As God, you have the right to do what you will, but your will is made glorious by your love. You are not content that we should live as disobedient, feckless beasts, insensitive to your glory and your good. Your love for us demands that you restore us to the relationship we forsook in the garden.

Gracious God! Your love is painful, but it is good. Our tepid imitations allow the beloved to act recklessly, wrongly as long as the beloved is free from pain – as long as the beloved has a happy life. You do us the great, unwanted honor of loving us by demanding we seek Goodness – you.

Blessed be your name, O God! What other god would so love its creatures as to accept the creatures’ surrenders when they had lost everything? What other god would rejoice when the creatures prayed out of desperation, not from delight and worship? Your love is more humble than we can ever understand. Truly, it is right that you are God.”

CHAPTER VIII

As Cain walked away from the stone altar, anger boiled within him against Abel.

How his younger brother managed to feel such ardor for their cruel god he could not fathom. Cain felt no such warmth.

Cain turned his gaze toward the heavens. He had no doubt that God would accept Abel's offering. Did not Abel feel that God deserved his sheep and Cain's grain? Cain felt no such repulsive belief. A god who willingly deprived a family of their mother, who made the ground difficult to till, and then required a praise-offering was not a god worthy of praise. Perhaps the god was worthy of fear. That Cain could well believe.

His offering would not be accepted by God. Abel's would. Cain was living in an unjust world, in whose injustice Abel was now participating.

Tears began to stream down Cain's cheeks. *How could Abel do this? What had happened to the brother with whom Cain had used to play? Had they not jointly wondered at the existence of pain? Had they not both despised pain and poked fun at the God who allowed it? Had they not both been sobered when their mother began to seize and shake like a mad woman, when she couldn't tell the difference between reality and dreams? They both had realized that a god who allowed such pain was not a god worth loving. Abel had been – like their mother – corrupted.*

Cain screamed to the heavens in fury. No one should hear but God. Were not Abel and his parents far enough away that his screams would seem as the scream of a wounded beast? And would they not praise God for his kindness in killing another creature?

Each member of his family was infected with a disease that called the unjust Just and the cruel Merciful. They could not see the evil with which God reigned, nor understand the reasonableness of a position that questioned the benevolence of God.

What did it matter that Adam and Eve had defected, disobeyed, God's command? The command was a wrong one; knowledge of good and evil was to be sought at all costs. Knowledge of good and evil *had* to be understood without reference to God's command. Armed with this knowledge, Cain could discern what his family couldn't – that God was torturing them. His brother and mother could find a purpose in God's torture – moral improvement, the natural way of things, reason for gratitude – but Cain saw the insensibility of their position. If Cain pushed his brother into a stream and his brother began to drown, would Cain be praised for pulling his brother out again? No; his action would merit censure, not praise. Why praise God for torturing them, then rescuing them from the very torture God had made? The thought made Cain sick. Perhaps his family should be given a taste of the medicine they were so willing to accept from God. Could they be made to see the insensibility of their position if a human hurt them for their "good"? Cain's good would be to awaken them to the cruelty of God.

Cain knew he would recoil a bit at the thought in the morning, but for now, he let the anger and anticipation bubble over him.

Cain finally arrived at the family tents. He gazed back toward the stone altar. Abel's shadow was nowhere discernable on the horizon. Not even a flicker of fire or smoke marked his brother's position.

Cain deviated from the path to his tent and approached the small stream that bubbled beside their tents. Bending down, he cupped his hand into the water and raised it to his lips.

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Cain relaxed as the cool liquid swept down his parched throat. He bent again to splash away the soot of the altar.

Suddenly, Cain tensed. Was someone there? He carefully turned to inspect his surroundings. He saw nothing. Still, he felt the cold, prickly sensation on the back of his neck that warned of another's presence.

“Abel?” he called softly.

Abel, if he was there, did not reply.

An animal?

Cain swallowed. Breathing quickly, he crept as stealthily and surely as he could toward his tent. Once inside, he fastened the flap of his tent's entrance and waited quietly.

No footsteps rent the deep silence that filled Cain's ears. Still, Cain felt the inexplicable shiver of another's presence. Cain tossed the skin that served as his blanket around his shoulders and stared at the flap of the tent, waiting.

Cain shook, then berated himself for his fear. Could this be God? Had God come to take revenge on Cain for the anger with which Cain had offered his grain?

Cain licked his lips.

Finally, a voice spoke. It was awesome, but very quiet. Cain doubted if anyone heard it but himself. The voice seemed to reach inside Cain and to come from the very bones of Cain's body. Cain could have screamed in fear, but the breath of his lungs was stolen.

Cain didn't move, couldn't move. “Cain,” said the voice. Cain knew it was God. “Do you not know that sin is making its lair outside your tent?”

Cain swallowed. “What?” he squeaked.

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“A whole host of evil is stretching itself in front of your tent flap. It is preparing its home. Its living will be your dwelling. It yearns for you, Cain. You must master it!”

Cain’s mouth dropped and his body shook.

“Cain,” God said. Cain was dimly aware that God’s voice both warned and pleaded. “You must master the sin that stalks you. Do you not know the way? One word and it will vanish.”

Cain closed his eyes tightly, desperate to shut out the voice.

“Cain!” God said again.

Cain’s body shook uncontrollably and he willed himself to disappear. The night filled again with the sounds of nocturnal creatures. The shiver that had perched itself in Cain’s spine relaxed.

Cain moaned in agony and gladness at being alive. He wept as he had never wept in his life. In his weeping and from his fear, he fell into a restless sleep, in which he cowered and ran from a deep voice that relentlessly pursued him. Finally, when the morning was still dark, he forgot the voice and fell into a deep sleep. Exhausted from fear and weeping, the eldest son of Adam slept.

CHAPTER IX

When Cain awoke, his first thought was of the deep voice and the accompanying fear it had aroused within him. Immediately, therefore, and with adamant determination, Cain scrambled up from his pallet to seek distraction.

Cain strode into his mother's tent. Both his father and brother were turned from him, their faces fixed on Eve.

Cain's heart pounded fiercely. *Had something happened to Mother during the night?*

"Abel?" he whispered.

Abel turned. The worry lines that had often marked his face had relaxed. "She's taken a turn for good," he said, smiling softly. Cain saw the trail of drying tears on Abel's cheeks.

Cain closed his eyes in a flood of relief. "Thank God!" he thought, but halted mid-joy. *How could he thank God for giving back his mother when it was God who had first taken her? He could not.* Cain approached the bed.

"Mother," he said softly, grabbing one of her hands.

Eve's eyes fluttered open and she smiled – oh, how she smiled – at her first-born son.

"My son, rejoice with me," she said softly.

Cain closed his eyes and kissed her mother's hand. "I do, mother. I rejoice with you."

Eve eyed him searchingly. "Do not fear that the illness may return. If it does, God will help us."

Cain couldn't keep his jaw from tensing.

"When did she recover?" Cain asked, turning to his father.

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“During the evening,” his father said. Adam’s voice was tired. Cain knew his father had slept little over the past weeks. Adam’s adrenaline had finally failed; there was no need for it now that his wife had miraculously taken a turn for good.

Cain frowned. “About what time of evening?”

“About the time you were offering your sacrifices,” Adam said. “God heard your prayers.”

“Cain,” Eve said, “you look taken aback. Learn to hope, my son.”

“Cain did hope, mother,” Abel corrected. “He prayed for your healing. Is that not right, Cain?” he asked.

Cain frowned. “I don’t know what I thought. Mother,” he asked, “are you free of pain? Do you feel no ailments?”

“I feel nothing but the exhaustion of many months illness. Much of my pain is gone. I may try to walk presently. My appetite has certainly returned.”

“And her dreams?” Cain asked Adam. “Are they gone too?”

“We cannot know for certain,” Adam replied, “Her dreams have come every few hours for the past several days; since last night, they haven’t come at all. We’ll have to wait and see.”

Cain nodded. “Mother, I’m so glad to hear this. What can I do to help us celebrate?”

Eve smiled. “Might we enjoy some of your crops? I’m tired of eating little. And perhaps,” she said, turning to Abel, “some lamb stew to accompany them?”

Abel squeezed her hand. “I can do that.”

Cain kissed his mother’s forehead and rose. “Shall we?”

Abel nodded.

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Once outside the tent, Cain addressed his brother. “Abel,” he said. “Would you help me cart the crops in from the field? I didn’t finish transporting them yesterday.”

“Of course.” Abel nodded. “You seem fairly tense; are you well?”

“I should be fine. Will you grab the ox? I left the cart in the field.”

“Of course,” Abel responded. Abel was careful to not ask questions when the questions were rebuffed.

“Thank you. I’ll see you in the field.”

When Abel finally arrived, Cain was waiting tensely.

“I don’t see the cart,” Abel said, frowning.

“I carted the crops in yesterday.”

“Ah,” Abel said, “All you desired was to talk.”

Cain nodded. After a thoughtful pause, he asked, “Do you really think God healed mother?”

Abel considered his brother and nodded. “I do. Do you not?”

Cain clenched his jaw. “Perhaps God healed her. But if God healed our mother, should we praise him?”

Surprisingly, Abel didn’t frown or burst out. Instead, he said, “Explain.”

Cain traced his toes through the dust of the field. He was surprised that Abel didn’t immediately reject his question. Cain had given this much thought. He could explain.

“Imagine that you and I were walking beside the river,” he said. Cain drew a river in the dust beneath their feet. “You couldn’t swim and I knew it. I pushed you into the water and you began to drown. As you neared death, I jumped in and pulled you to safety. Would you be better justified in praising me or in throttling me?”

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“In throttling you,” Abel replied.

“What’s the difference between God’s rescue of our mother? Hasn’t he pushed her into the stream? Didn’t God curse her with this sickness? Why should we praise him for rescuing her from her death?”

Abel was silent. Then he said, “Cain, I think your analogy is wrong.”

“Explain,” Cain demanded.

“You assume that God has pushed mother into the water for cruel purposes.”

“I still see no reason to assume otherwise,” Cain replied. “Have we not had this conversation a hundred times?”

“Cain, I understand you, but I disagree with you. I think God’s love can coexist with the existence of pain and suffering. The thing of which I’m unsure is whether God merely allows pain – using it for his purpose, but not creating it – or if he designed and creates the pain we experience.”

“There seems to me a large difference between the two, Abel.”

Abel nodded. “At first, I thought the origin of evil would have to be explained satisfactorily before the goodness of God could be considered. But now I think the goodness of God in using pain may make the distinction inconsequential. Let me explain to you my reasoning.”

Cain waited.

“You remember our last discussion about pain and evil,” Abel said, “We agreed that God greatly values choice. And we wondered *why* God would so esteem in us the ability to choose.

But can we not easily see choice as a boon, Cain? We have the opportunity to choose – really choose – and suffer the consequences. Our choice is real; it is not illusory. There is

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something valuable in authenticity. God does not always correct the consequences of our choices. He allows us to have the godlike quality of making consequential decisions.”

Cain shook his head. “I would rather God corrected the poor outcomes of our choices if our choices lead to suffering. If God were good, he would decry the pain that his creatures experience. He would alleviate our pain. What choice did Mother make whose consequence is grave illness?”

“Cain,” Abel said vehemently, “you misunderstand me on this point, as you did the last time we spoke. I don’t suggest that every illness is the outcome of our choice. We may be entirely innocent. I’m merely trying to establish that our choices are real, that they have consequences. Our consequences are not always death and illness. They may be entirely pleasant.

Before we ask why illness exists, we must ask why choice exists. Choice, I think, is one of the keys to understanding suffering.”

“I’m listening, Abel.”

“Could God have made us perfectly happy and good creatures without giving us choice?”

Cain laughed gruffly. “If what you say about the connection between suffering and choice is true, it seems that would be the only way for God to make us perfectly happy and good.”

“But how could we be perfectly good creatures without choosing the good?”

“I don’t understand you.” Cain said.

“Can we truly be good if we choose good because we were made to do so? Say God creates for us wives, as he did for Father. If he makes them so that they have no choice but to love us, will we be pleased? Perhaps we will be. To be loved is a great pleasure. But say he

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gives them choice, so that they may love us, leave us, or make our lives miserable by their lovelessness. We would be touched to the core that, despite being able to despise us, they chose to stay and love us deeply. Wouldn't their choice make their love more precious?"

Cain considered. "I would rather be loved than not," he said slowly, "but if I were to choose between being loved by design and loved by choice, I would choose to be freely loved."

"I think," Abel said, "God feels the same, except he so prefers the free love that he is willing to let us choose things other than himself."

Cain shook his head. "That's a great risk."

"It is," Abel agreed, "and it places a great responsibility on our shoulders to choose well. To choose him."

Cain laughed. "Why should we choose him? What good has he done us? Of course, you may point to the very gift of life and to the beauty of creation, but hasn't God also visited pain upon us? Hasn't he demonstrated that he has in him both good and evil?"

"I think not," Abel objected. "You seem to believe that the only way God can love us is by giving us pleasure or removing pain. I doubt this is so. Enjoyment may not be the only good in life. Or, at least not enjoyment of physical pleasures."

"What other pleasures did you have in mind?"

"The pleasure of goodness. From whence do pleasures come, Cain?"

Cain laughed. "I'm not sure what you mean, Abel. From whence could pleasures come? They simply are."

"Come, Cain," Abel smiled, "if you are willing to ascribe to God the evil of the world, you must also be willing to ascribe to him the good. Pleasure must begin with God."

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“You argue that the things in which we find pleasure originate with God. He created them. Fine; I grant you your point.”

“I mean more than that, Cain. I mean that pleasure, itself, is in God. Undergirding my thought is the claim that God is Goodness. I understand that you disagree, so you may not find my thoughts convincing. But if God is truly Goodness, then the goodness of our everyday pleasures stem from God. If they give us great joy, imagine the joy that must come from receiving the full measure of Goodness – God himself.”

“And in order to receive this full joy, we must be deprived of the weaker joys?” Cain asked skeptically.

“It shouldn’t be so, but – yes – if the only way to give us the greatest joy is to deprive us of weaker joys, to deprive us would be to love us. Earlier, Cain, you gave the analogy of God pushing us into a stream, pulling us out, and demanding praise. May I substitute your analogy with my own?”

“Please,” said Cain.

“Suppose that a great lion is bounding toward you, but you don’t see it. In order to alert you to the great danger in which you stand, I scream at you. You cannot hear me. I throw a rock at you. The rock hurts you; you are in pain, but you examine your surroundings to find the source of your pain. In your examination, you either see me, in which case I can communicate to you that a lion stalks you, or you see the lion. Either way, you are saved. Say that God is throwing rocks at us to alert us to a greater pain. Our experience of pain wouldn’t, then, be diabolical, but benevolent.”

Cain shook his head vehemently. “And the greater pain is not knowing him.”

“Yes. The pain is not knowing him who is Goodness itself, Strength itself, Knowledge itself. Wouldn’t there be pain in not knowing the one who is these things?”

“Perhaps we do not choose to know him. Can God fault us for choosing something other than him if he gave us choice?”

“Could he fault us?” Abel asked. “I think he could. Granting us the ability to choose does not mean God calls each of our choices good. God would be like a foolish parent if he didn’t attempt to show us the wrong of our choice. Do you remember, as a child, wanting to play by the rapids? Because we could swim, we thought the rapids could do us no harm. Mother and Father, although attempting to create within us personal responsibility and cultivate our ability to choose, did everything in their power to convince us that our beliefs about the rapids were wrong. Thank God they stopped us, that we didn’t disobey them and ford the rapids when they weren’t looking. They used explanations and commands. When we ignored their explanations and disobeyed their commands, they sometimes had to punish us. We sought to avoid the punishment. And, when we obeyed – even if we obeyed from the wrong reasons – they were happy because they loved us.”

Cain shook his head. “Can you hear yourself? You’re claiming that God uses pain to show that he is good. God doesn’t rescue us from the lion. God causes the lion to hunt us. The pain of a rock is merely additional damage thrust upon us by an unkind God. You said that it didn’t matter whether God allowed evil or made it. I think it does. Your analogy shows this. If God merely allowed the lion to attack us, his culpability might be less. If God caused the lion to attack us, his culpability is as great as if he had pushed us into the water before pulling us out.”

“Cain,” Abel said urgently, “even if God did cause the lion to hunt us, he may not be culpable.”

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“I don’t see how. You better explain, little brother,” Cain growled.

“When the lion hunts us, we look for rescue. You claim that this rescue is a sham – that God has created the chase and the rescue, so that his rescue is illegitimate and his chase the demonstration of his guilt. But if God caused the lion to chase us so that we would run to God, the action is good. Say that, before the lion appeared, we were walking towards an abyss. Call this abyss life completely devoid of God. I know you don’t believe that God is good, but say that he is. If God is truly good, then anything other than him is not worth our time, at least not at the expense of knowing God. Because God values choice, he gives us the ability to choose between the abyss – life without acknowledging him – and an oasis – knowing and loving him. We, in the disobedience and disregard for our own welfare that our family has shown since the garden, choose the abyss. Would God be truly loving if he did not pursue us, even through the teeth of a lion, to woe us away from the abyss and toward the oasis?”

Cain stared at Abel. His face was pale. Inside his head were echoing the words, “*Do you not know that sin is making its lair outside your tent?*” Cain closed his eyes. “*You must master it!*”

“Cain?” Abel said.

Cain licked his lips. “If God was truly good, yes, he would woo us away from our wrong choices.”

“Even if his wooing seemed to us painful?”

A vein in Cain’s neck twitched.

“Cain?” Abel said again.

Cain didn’t respond.

“Cain, if what we loved was something other than God, wouldn’t we expect *any* change

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from that desire to be painful? We'd have to give up what we had previously loved. At the very least, we'd have to submit our previous love to our love for God. In and of itself, the process would be painful. But if God cannot get us to see his goodness on our own, would he not be justified in taking away the good, lesser things we worship instead of him? If health is worth two sheep and the goodness of God is worth a thousand, isn't God justified in removing our health so that we look to his goodness?"

Cain was shaking. "You're wrong, Abel. You have to be wrong. How could God allow Mother's sickness?"

"Haven't I just given you a possible reason?" Abel asked.

"No," said Cain, "it's not possible."

"It is possible, Cain," Abel reiterated.

"It's not," Cain repeated. "It can't be possible. What a truly wicked God you serve."

His hands shook.

"How is it wicked to point us to true goodness?" Abel asked.

"My mother's illness doesn't come from true goodness," Cain stammered.

"God has given you back your mother," Abel said. "He hasn't taken her completely."

"But he may," Cain said. "He may take her and will, one day."

"Yes, he may," Abel agreed. "But, when he does, it will be for good, not for our harm.

We may feel pain, but God can use that pain to deepen our relationship with him."

"You're wrong, Abel," Cain bit out. His face was pale and angry. "Say," he said, moving closer to Abel, "that I were to cause you pain" – he pushed Abel roughly – "in order to save you from the greater pain of not knowing me."

Abel stumbled. "Cain."

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“Isn’t this the same?” Cain asked sarcastically. “I see no difference between my actions and the actions you ascribe to God.” He pushed Abel’s head, hard.

“Cain!” Abel bit out.

“Aren’t you glad that I’m inflicting you with pain?” Cain asked. “Are you gaining wisdom? Are you overcome with love for me?”

“Cain, stop!” Abel yelled. “You aren’t God. You aren’t Goodness. You don’t have all knowledge, nor do you do this out of a benevolent purpose. You’re doing it out of anger.”

Abel looked angrily at his brother. “Perhaps you do this out of hate.”

“Oh!” Cain said mockingly, “Out of hate? And this is different from God’s impulses toward us? You need to learn, little brother.”

Abel backed away from his brother warily.

“Beware, Abel, a lion stalks you!” Cain yelled.

“There is no lion behind me,” Abel said soberly.

“A great stream stretches behind you,” said Cain, “or it may be an abyss. Come closer to me so that I may save you.”

Abel shook his head. “Cain, you’re not well.”

“Neither is God,” Cain replied.

“I’m not staying for this,” Abel said, “Mother needs her stew. You’d better bring the crops.” He turned to go.

“Don’t you dare turn your back on me!” Cain yelled. “Abel!”

Abel didn’t turn.

With a scream, Cain rushed after his brother. His brother was younger, weaker. Cain pushed him to the earth.

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Finally, Abel's brown eyes filled with fear. "Cain..."

Cain silenced his brother with a blow. Abel heaved. He blinked his eyes in confusion. Cain hit his brother a second time. Two blows didn't satisfy. Screaming in anger, Cain aimed blow after blow at his brother's body.

Abel was limp long before Cain had finished. Blood trickled down the younger brother's head.

Cain fell back from Abel, exhausted. Finally, he really looked at Abel.

Something was very, very wrong. Cain began to shake. His brother wasn't moving. He didn't breathe. Abel's eyes were open, but they didn't see.

Cain finally knew death.

"Oh God," he heaved. "Oh God."

Cain stared around frantically. Pulling at his hair, he screamed to the countryside.

Cain flinched. Surely his parents would hear. Worry about his future overwhelmed the horror of his present. Would they not see and render judgment against him?

Cain fled to his sled and hoisted one of his tools. With it, he carved a hole in the cursed earth. After several hours of intense work, during which he anxiously eyed his family's tents, he managed to dig a sufficiently large pit for Abel's body. Breathing heavily and feeling the urge to vomit, Cain approached his brother's body. He grabbed hold of Abel's arms and flinched. Cain closed his eyes and pulled the body toward the grave. As he pushed Abel's body into the grave, Cain began to weep.

When the last bit of earth had been piled above his brother's body, Cain fell to the earth and screamed.

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Suddenly, the shiver that had stalked his spine the night before returned. “Oh, God,” he whispered. “No.”

Cain stumbled to his feet. Where would he flee?

“Cain.” God’s voice was cold – as beautiful as the frigidity of a starry night, but biting as frost.

Cain fell to the ground in horror. Once again, his voice was smothered in a cloud of fear.

“Where is your brother, Abel?”

“I...I do not know!” Cain cried. “Am I my brother’s keeper?” he hiccupped. Tears began to fall from his face like rain.

“Your brother’s blood is crying to me from the ground beneath your feet!” God said. Cain shivered and closed his eyes. The ground had cursed him; he had never known anything from it but trouble. This time, the curse was truly his own.

“The earth, which has swallowed your brother’s blood, curses you, Cain. You can no longer till the soil.” Cain recoiled from God’s voice, but couldn’t escape it. His bones spoke to him with the voice of God. “When you attempt to reap the fruit of the earth, soil will yield to you nothing but sweat and tears. You will wander the earth as a fugitive; how can it yield to you after you have watered it with your brother’s blood? Hate yields no crops good for eating.”

Cain attempted to scream; he managed only a small, strangled cry.

“Did I not warn you, Cain, that sin was making its lair outside of your tent? You have let it lie with you in bed!”

Cain moaned. Here again, God had dealt him pain, and yet here Cain deserved it! But alas, what pain!

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“My punishment, God, is heavier than my shoulders can bear!” he cried. Spittle was running down his chin now, his eyes were puffy slits. “You have driven me away from the earth. Where can I go? You have hidden me from your sight. What goodness and protection shall I receive as a fugitive, wandering the earth?”

Weeping, he continued, “We have heard that other tribes and peoples have populated the earth – that you, O God, have increased our number. What, then, is to prevent them from killing me? I have nothing to offer them, no one to protect me. My life is forfeit.”

“Yes, your life is forfeit,” God said, “but it is not taken from you yet, nor will it be taken from you by the hand of man.”

Cain lifted his face from the soil as a man lifts his mind from a dream. He hardly dared to hope...

“If any man touches you, he will suffer a vengeance sevenfold greater than the vengeance with which he harmed you.”

“But how...” Cain whispered. He suddenly felt warmth penetrate the side of his face. Its heat reached into his bones and remained there, tingling. Still as in a stupor, Cain slowly reached up a hand to touch his face.

“A mark I have placed upon your face. Any man who sees it will understand the curse he will receive should he attempt to take your life.”

Cain began to shake. His whole body was cold, but a fire burned in his cheek. “God...” he whispered. “My God...”

Weeping, Cain turned from the earth and the blood of his brother. Into exile.

CHAPTER X

When Adam strode to the field to find his sons, he was startled to see neither. A curious mound arose from the earth, which he felt moved to investigate. As he began to dig into its depths, a voice stopped him.

“Adam, my son.”

“My Lord!” Adam stopped and turned about himself in delight, eager to see his God.

“You cannot see me,” said God. “In knowing good and evil by themselves, you have lessened your ability to see that through which you once saw them.”

Adam lowered his head. “My Lord, how I regret that day.”

“Do not dwell on the past, my son. Dwell on the present, where you now speak with me.”

“Then speak, Lord, to me.”

The wind began to howl wildly. Adam trembled to hear the cry of God.

“Tell me, Lord,” he whispered.

“Your first-born son has brought death into the world.”

Adam clutched his hands in fear.

“To whom?” he asked hoarsely.

“To Abel.”

Adam collapsed to the ground and could not scream. His fingers scraped along the mound, though he knew it not.

“Is he dead, then, Lord?” Adam whispered.

“He is dead. His body lies beneath the mound that you now touch.”

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Adam froze. He knew not whether he longed to uncover the body of his son or whether he wished to flee from it.

“Do not wish to see the work of hate, Adam,” God said. “Abel’s body is but a shell of himself. You will not see your son; you will only see death, but you feel its effects already.”

“Oh, cursed be my sin which brought death into the world! My son has slept with it!” Crawling a little ways away from the mound under which Abel lay, Adam curled into a ball on the earth and wept uncontrollably.

God said nothing, but a strong wind hurtled through the field, mourning with Adam.

Adam and God wept as the stars peeped at them through the dusky skirts of their mother, the sky. When the moon had begun to shine, God spoke gently. “Eve will fear for you and for your sons. You must return to her. I will help you.”

Adam rose from the ground, but knew not what he did. In a stupor, hardly seeing the ground or sky, but keenly aware of the numbness inside him, Adam walked dumbly home.

When he entered the tent, Adam told Eve what he had learned from God. Cain and Abel’s mother stared at their father, not understanding, and yet understanding more than she had ever thought to know. Her eyes glazed and unseeing, she fell back on her bed, her eyes fixed on the tent’s ceiling.

Adam got into bed beside her. He held his wife until the morning sun dawned.

EPILOGUE

“Is this our story?” Eve whispered to her husband. It had been many months since her son had died. Eve lay beside her husband on the soft, green grass that had once been Abel’s favorite pasture. They had considered moving their dwelling far away after their youngest son had died – how could Adam continue to till the very ground on which their oldest son had killed their youngest? – but had decided to move only a little ways away, to this pasture. Adam still tilled the field, but avoided the spot where Abel was buried. Eve grew a small garden of flowers over Abel’s body. Their home was now a mixture of grief and happy memory.

“What do you mean, dear one?” Adam asked gently.

Eve sighed deeply, drinking in the honey of the spring air to lessen the heaviness she still felt inside her. “Is our story one where we constantly re-live the choice we made in the garden? Is every day an opportunity to choose God or choose something else?”

Adam grabbed her hand and squeezed it. “It may be. What are you thinking?”

“I’m remembering Abel...and Cain,” she added softly. Eve placed a hand on her growing belly. Adam smiled. “This new little one makes me think of them often. I remember what Cain used to do in my belly and what Abel did. And I try not to compare this little one with the two my womb has already carried.” She sighed heavily. “It makes me afraid when I compare. If our baby is doing what Cain did in my belly, I wonder if this new child will be as Cain.” Eve bit her lip. “I’m afraid for the choices our baby will one day make.”

Adam rolled over onto his side, facing Eve. “My dear,” he said hesitantly, “we cannot stop our baby from doing what he or she will. We can only encourage our baby to choose God and discipline the child as long as childhood allows.”

“Rather like God does with us,” Eve laughed softly.

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“Yes, but far more gentle and far more painful is God’s discipline,” said Adam.

Eve smiled a soft smile. “I’ve often wished I could go back to the garden, just to ask God about the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. I wish I had trusted him enough to ask why he prohibited it.” She breathed deeply. “But at least we ask him now. The pain of our disobedience has worked some good.”

“As only God can make it work,” Adam added.

“Yes,” Eve whispered.

The two stared at the blue sky above them and felt the whisper of a soft wind across their skin.

“Do you know what amazes me, love?” Adam asked.

“What?” she smiled.

“It amazes me that God accepts our obedience and our dependence so humbly. He doesn’t require that we come to him in perfection, freely choosing him without ever wanting or choosing something else.”

Eve smiled. “It amazes me too. He welcomes us when we come to him with nothing left. After experiencing pain and sickness and death, we finally offer him our lives. But, by then, of what value are our lives? They have been stripped of what makes them valuable – health and life and full moral goodness. God accepts very dirty creatures indeed.”

Adam gripped her hand more tightly. “I’m glad you understand me.”

Eve laughed. “And you me.”

The breeze drifted over their bodies and kissed their faces.

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“Odd that God can use such pain for good,” Adam said at last. “We’re more convinced of his goodness after witnessing the consequences of our choice. We thought ourselves gods, equal with the Almighty One. Our choice has shown us lesser than the dirt from which I came.”

“Yes,” Eve agreed thoughtfully. “And my illness, though no fault of my own, has made me more grateful to God, not bitter. God has the full right to my life and my health. Has he not made me? Yet he demonstrates that he does not exercise this right to the exclusion of his love and kindness. No, his love guides his rightful power.”

Eve closed her eyes and let her skin drink in the warmth of the sun. “In my sickness, he was near. And he showed me more clearly my relationship to him – as creature to creator, as daughter to father. I learned my utter dependence on him. My choice is a gift, but I want to exercise it by choosing him. Our life is best that way. For is he not a strong foundation in grief and tribulation...?” she whispered.

Adam leaned over and laid a gentle kiss on his wife’s forehead.

“He is indeed.”

Eve smiled. In this world of pain and pleasure, they had peace.

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PART II: COMMENTARY

INTRODUCTION

This project was born around my family's breakfast table. As a tradition, my family used to read scriptures from the Old and New Testament over hot biscuits, chocolate pancakes, buttery grits, (or even cold cereal); this tradition dwindled after my brother and I left for college. On the particular morning in question, I revisited the tradition with my parents; we read in Genesis. We puzzled over the command God had given Adam and Eve: how could they understand God's prohibition against the tree of the knowledge of good and evil if they didn't understand death? And if the serpent – just an ordinary creature – suggested disobedience, didn't sin exist before Adam and Eve took the fruit? Where, according to the writer, did evil originate? These questions bothered me, but it wasn't unusual that I would encounter frustrating questions while reading scripture with my family; we often leave the breakfast table with questions rather than answers. But on this day, Dad rummaged more deeply into the story. He used his imagination to get at some of the story's questions. "What if the serpent was jealous of Eve?" he asked. "Before Eve came along, the serpent was top pick for Adam's partner. He was the cleverest creature in the garden. Maybe the serpent told Eve to take the fruit out of spite." My eyes widened. Dad had handed me the seeds for my thesis. Although I didn't incorporate the serpent's rivalry into my final draft, Dad's foray into the Genesis story prompted me to imagine life in the garden. Once imagination took hold, the questions of the text became more urgent and lent themselves easily to a philosophical issue that troubled me.

That philosophical issue, of course, was the problem of evil. I hope to illuminate, in the following pages, a little more clearly my reasons for exploring the problem of evil in the Genesis creation stories. I also discuss the process through which I created this story. By discussing my

rationale for the project and the process through which it was written, I hope to shed a little more light on the inspiration and circumstances that led me to *Out of the Garden*.

SECTION I: “TO DWELL AMONG THE ‘THEREFORE’S AND THE ‘WHY’S”

If I were reading this story, not as an author or an interested reader, but as a critic, I would ask myself three questions. They build on each other. Why explore the problem of evil? Why explore the problem of evil in a story? Why explore the problem of evil in this story – the Genesis creation stories?

WHY EXPLORE THE PROBLEM OF EVIL?

There are two questions within the question, “Why explore the problem of evil?” First, the question asks why the subject matter – the problem of evil – matters. Second, it asks why I – the author – chose it. Although the answer to the second question could reasonably be a repetition of the first, it is not. My first answer applies to all people; my second answer is deeply personal.

The answer to the first question is, I think, reasonably obvious, but must begin with a quick overview of the problem of evil itself. The problem of evil comes in two forms – logical and evidential. J.L. Mackie is most famous for the logical problem. He argued that the statements “God is omnipotent and God is wholly good” and “Evil exists” could not both be true. Mackie claimed that a good god would eliminate all evil it could and an omnipotent being had the power to do all it wanted. Therefore, if a good, omnipotent God wanted to eliminate evil, it could and would. Since evil exists, Mackie argued, God could not be both omnipotent and

good.¹ Of course, if God had some morally justifiable reason for allowing evil, Mackie's argument would fall apart. A good, omnipotent god could allow evil in order to accomplish some great moral good.

The other version of the problem of evil is the evidential one. Instead of relying on the logical inconsistency of the coexistence of a good, omnipotent god with a world of suffering, the evidential problem of evil questions God from particularly gruesome accounts of evil. Daniel Howard-Snyder characterizes William Rowe's argument as the following:

1. "There exist instances of intense suffering that God could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good.
2. God would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering He could, unless He could not do so without thereby losing some greater good.
3. So, God does not exist."²

I deal less with the evidential problem of evil; Rowe gives particularly horrible examples of suffering to which Eve's illness can't compare.³ *Out of the Garden* is more a response – albeit in story form – to the claim that no great moral good can be accomplished through suffering.

Understanding the basic argument from evil, the question still remains: why address it?

The problem of evil is important to consider primarily because it's one of the most formidable arguments against the existence of God and one of the most troubling concerns for

¹ Daniel Howard-Snyder, "Introduction," in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, ed. Daniel

² Daniel Howard-Snyder, "Introduction," in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), xiv

³ Michael Peterson, William Hasker, Bruce Reichenbach, and David Basinger. "The Problem of Evil" in *Reason & Religious Belief: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*. 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 135.

those who believe in him. In this world, we may choose to believe in a good, powerful, all-knowing God or we may choose to believe in something else. The problem of evil often stands between those positions. Presumably, if the world were really made by God, we would want to know it. And, in pursuit of that knowledge, we would need to squarely encounter the problem of evil. I therefore consider the problem of evil essential to two of the most important questions we can ask, “Does God exist?” and “If so, what is God like?” In a sense, our response to the problem of evil helps determine the color and tilt of our lives. It is crucial for those who seek to know whether a good, omnipotent God exists.

It is also fundamental for those who have accepted the existence of an omnipotent, benevolent God. When believers encounter suffering, should they simply “walk by faith” in God’s goodness, even though their circumstances seem to scream that he is ambivalent or cruel? Faith is often the proper response to suffering for the believer, but that faith shouldn’t be blind. Believers should consider whether arguments exist that show the compatibility of suffering and a good, powerful, all-knowing God. To ignore the argument from evil may be to promote a shallow belief or lack thereof in a good, powerful god. The problem matters because it defines our lives.

The second question nestled within the question, “Why explore the problem of evil?” is a personal one. Why did I, the writer, choose to explore the problem of evil? The problem of evil began as a more academic one, but became more personal after I encountered suffering in two ways. Both shaped me as a person and shaped this story. My first experience with suffering relevant to this thesis occurred a few months before I began *Out of the Garden*. The second transpired when I had almost completed the thesis, forcing me to extend work on the project for an additional six months.

My Honor Scholar thesis was originally a policy analysis that connected sex trafficking with legalized prostitution in Geneva, Switzerland. In order to write this thesis, I was, of course, studying in Geneva. While there, I made a good friend who was a BASE jumper (BASE jumping is a more dangerous version of sky-diving). He died on a jump. Brian's death caused grief and shock to roll over me like a wave, which continued pummeling me over the next several months. But the first night after I learned that Brian had died, I felt the peace of God's presence (in the midst of my grief; it didn't remove my grief) in a way I had never before experienced. My experience of suffering didn't cause me to question God's goodness; it assured me of it. I learned much in the next few months, things that aren't as relevant to this thesis. This, at least, is relevant: suffering can be redemptive. Abel tells Cain several times throughout *Out of the Garden* that God is justified in removing our lesser goods of health and family in order to give us the greatest joy of knowing Him.⁴ I don't believe that God took Brian (or allowed Brian to die) out of some vindictive jealousy, as if God were in the business of snatching away happiness. I don't know why Brian died. But I do know that, in Brian's absence, I turned to God wholeheartedly. I needed God. In my need, I found greater help than I had ever expected to find. God – Goodness himself – met me in my suffering.

Almost seven months after Brian died, and with less than two months until my thesis was due, I experienced a different type of suffering. I was hospitalized for iron-deficiency anemia and internal bleeding. I couldn't walk without help and struggled to concentrate, would pass out if I exerted myself, and suffered terrible headaches. After undergoing a plethora of invasive procedures and iron transfusions, I was sent home; within a month, I was re-hospitalized with

⁴ For an example, see p. 75: "...if the only way to give us the greatest joy is to deprive us of weaker joys, to deprive us would be to love us," *Out of the Garden*.

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hemoglobin below the blood transfusion line. There was a risk I would go into a coma. Finally, I was given a blood transfusion, as well as a second transfusion of iron.

Throughout the first hospital visit, I felt God's peace palpably, as I had after Brian died. My faith in God's goodness was strengthened. As we drove to the hospital the second time, I felt none of the peace I had previously experienced. Instead, fear was chilling my veins; death was closer than I had realized. In the absence of the palpable feeling of God's peace, I became convinced of his authority and worth. Several times throughout *Out of the Garden*, Abel expresses what I learned during my second hospitalization: God is God and may do as he pleases. He is as worthy of my worship and obedience in my suffering as he is in my pleasure.⁵ I wasn't worried that God's actions would be other than good. He showed me his love through the nurses, my family, friends, and random things at the hospital; I had no need to question his goodness.

I only began to question God's goodness in the recovery months that followed, particularly when I returned to DePauw. I struggled with fear; would God take my parents in a car crash? Would my brother be safe at school? Were the heart palpitations I experienced indicative of another health problem? I had made it through several storms, but I feared that other, fiercer storms would come. I struggled to know that all God's actions were good. Around this time, I read C.S. Lewis' *A Grief Observed*. With Lewis, I wondered whether – since God could do what he pleased and much of what he did was painful – God could be called the Cosmic

⁵ For examples, see p. 35 and pp. 63-64, *Out of the Garden*.

Sadist.⁶ Abel's decision to call God the Great Thief and Arbitrary Hunter stemmed from this fear.⁷

I chose the problem of evil as the subject of my thesis because I wrestled with it. My experiences with suffering bled into *Out of the Garden*; the characters often speak my words and beliefs. Of course, *Out of the Garden* is not a perfect mirror of my experience; it isn't an analogy for my suffering. It is, however, tinged with my experiences of pain, all of which happened immediately before or during the writing of this text. The problem of evil isn't a purely academic perplexity; it's a fundamental obstacle that those who suffer face.

WHY EXPLORE THE PROBLEM OF EVIL THROUGH STORY?

The second question I imagine an imaginary critic would ask me is, "Why explore the problem of evil through story?" This question suggests an alternative: that I explore the problem of evil through analysis, responding to arguments like those presented by Rowe and Mackie.

I originally hoped that I could present an argument against someone like Mackie or Rowe within a story. I soon realized that analytic philosophy and literature are very different creatures. Analysis requires premises and clarity; a story relies on some sort of mystery. A story may present a point of view (as does mine), but it doesn't do so in the systematic fashion of analytical philosophy. Objections aren't considered one by one in a story; they're considered throughout the text in a different order than they would be in argument.

I experimented with inserting explicit theodicies into the story, but found these passages stilted and, in a sense, boring. They didn't convey the pain Abel and Cain felt; they seemed like

⁶ C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1961), 30.

⁷ See p. 31, *Out of the Garden*.

passages from a textbook dressed in flowery language. I decided to address the human aspect of the problem of evil, which, I think, is its most potent form. To support my decision, I give four reasons for the value of considering philosophical or theological issues (here, the problem of evil) through story.

First, story mimics the messy pain of suffering in real life. The problem of evil may be satisfactorily explained in an argument, but it gains potency through experience. C.S. Lewis' experience with grief helps illustrate this potency.

Lewis argued that the problem of pain, as he called it, could be explained by considering what it means to be loved. Love is not always giving the loved one what the loved one desires, he said. Instead, love does the beloved the great honor of improving her, being the most gentle with the beloved's faults and the most exacting in eliminating them. God – Lewis argued – loves us with this exacting, perfect love. Pain may exist to reform our faults and cause us to embrace the greatest good – God himself – at the expense of lesser goods. By allowing or orchestrating pain's function, God isn't vindictively depriving us of goods; if he were, he would deserve no love. Instead, since God himself is the ultimate joy, the deprivation of our lesser goods and our moral transformation to better love God are beneficial; pain can give us more joy, better joy.⁸ Thus, we have Lewis' famous quote on the subject:

“It would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud

⁸ Of course, our understanding of joy might have to be altered in order for us to realize this.

pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.”⁹

Sometimes, in order to make us aware of the holiday by the sea, our mud pies must be taken from us, a prospect that seems painful when they’re taken. I relied on Lewis’ argument throughout *Out of the Garden*; Abel’s analogy of the lion and abyss are owed to Lewis’ conception of pain. I give this example of Lewis’ argument to illustrate the increase in potency the problem of evil gains when it is experienced. Although Lewis was intellectually convinced of the compatibility of God’s goodness and suffering, he struggled to see God as good when his wife died.¹⁰ Lewis felt for a time that God might be better called the Cosmic Sadist than the God of Love.¹¹ Lewis’ experience of deep suffering caused him to question his arguments. Life can be considered the great story. By mimicking the experience of suffering in life through story, I hope to heighten the potency and urgency of the problem of evil. We often feel the strength of an argument when it’s experienced; in a story, readers can “experience” suffering with the characters, causing them to ponder the problem even after they close the book.

Second, stories can transform us – both the writer and the reader. Stephanie May Wilson wrote, “[Creation] requires us to dig deep within ourselves, to face the things we’d rather ignore, to confront our inner brokenness as well as the beauty stored up within”.¹² Story can force us to ponder how we respond to suffering, as well as how we explain it. Story has the potential to inspire, to elicit tears or ecstasy. As Cain and Abel struggle with suffering, we struggle with

⁹ C.S. Lewis, “The Weight of Glory” in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1949), 26.

¹⁰ C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1961), 5-6.

¹¹ C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1961), 30.

¹² Stephanie May Wilson, “Finding the Divine in Art,” *Darling Magazine*, April 19, 2015.

them. We're transformed by another's experience and led to see our own experiences in a different light, perhaps to approach them with a new inspiration or intent. Often, inspiration to act courageously can do more good than an argument on the importance of courage. Stories offer inspiration and, by inspiring, transform us. David Brooks put it this way:

“Storytelling becomes central to conquering fear. It’s a way of naming and making sense of fear and imagining different routes out. Storytellers expand the consciousness, waken the sleeping self and give their hearers the words and motifs to use for themselves...Stories create new ways of seeing, which lead to new ways of feeling and thinking.”¹³

Third, stories are memorable, which heightens their power to transform. Analytical philosophers understand the memorable nature of stories; they often use analogies to convey their points. When the premises used to support a conclusion grow hazy, remind someone of the story once used to explain the premises; his memory should be jogged. By exploring suffering in a story, I hope to cause the themes, problems, anguish, and redemptive power of suffering to “stick” better – in my mind and in the minds of my readers. In this way, the questions of the story can continue transforming us even after we’ve finished the story’s last page.

Fourth, should this story ever reach a wider audience, it might make the problem of evil relevant to those who would not otherwise consider the problem. Someone may not pick up Aquinas’ *Summa Theologica*, but he may open a story. By dealing with philosophical questions in story form, I hope to prompt readers who wouldn’t pick up Aquinas to contemplate questions that are as relevant to them as any theologian, even if – before they picked up the story – they didn’t know it themselves.

¹³ David Brooks, “On Conquering Fear,” *New York Times*, April 3, 2015.

WHY EXPLORE THE PROBLEM OF EVIL THROUGH THE GENESIS STORIES?

Having given four reasons for the benefit of exploring the problem of evil through story, I turn to the final question of my imaginary critic: Why explore the problem of evil through the creation stories of Genesis?

I said earlier that the problem of evil helps us ask two fundamental questions: “Is there a God?” and “If so, what is he like?” The Genesis creation accounts present a beautiful response to the second question, having assumed the first. They also answer two additional, fundamental questions: “Who are we?” and “What is our purpose?” Each of these four questions gets at the core of what it means to be alive; to them, Genesis gives complex, vivacious responses. God is generous, powerful, a lover of beauty and a lover of goodness. Humans have a spark of the divine and a high purpose that includes work and love, yet we’ve missed the full realization of our purpose. We’re also meant (perhaps this is our real purpose) to have a full relationship with God. I see these qualities as inherent to the text. The problem of evil only matters because, through it, we question the character and existence of God. In other words, the problem of evil is situated between these four fundamental questions: “Is there a God?”, “What is he like?”, “Who are we?” and “What is our purpose?”. The second Genesis creation story seems tailor-made to prompt consideration of these questions. Genesis therefore sets the stage for redemption of our purpose (at the very least, to begin considering God – the greatest good – over the lesser goods) and also sets the stage for consideration of suffering.¹⁴

¹⁴ Sandra L. Richter, *The Epic of Eden: A Christian Entry into the Old Testament*, (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2008), 49.

SECTION II: PROCESS.

Since mine is a creative thesis, I've been asked to indicate the process through which this story was written. Although there's a sort of "method to the madness", my process was an organic one. I didn't schedule all my research before I began to write. Although I read the Genesis text several times before I put pen to paper, I conducted other research while already composing the first and second drafts. But, to give some sense of the way this project was formed, I've roughly divided the process into seven sections: question fomentation, character interpretation, Genesis and problem of evil research, textual adaptation, drafts: pulverization and transformation, inspiration, and final construction.

1. QUESTION FOMENTATION

I began by taking extensive notes on the two Genesis creation stories, highlighting any questions I had of the text, as well as noting key passages. These questions, in turn, fomented additional questions. In general, I allowed my mind to follow rabbit trails, many of which ended up in the story proper. An example will help to illustrate this process.

I was obviously struck by God's prohibition against the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God warns Adam, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die."¹⁵ In light of the immediate consequence of Adam and Eve's disobedience (they don't die), I wondered what God meant by "death". Was death a state of being – separation from God? By claiming that Adam and Eve died "in the day that [they] [ate] of it", was the writer arguing that all people are already dead – that final death is merely the conclusion of life as a dying people?

¹⁵ Gen 2:16b-17 (NRSV Version)

Also important for *Out of the Garden*, if Adam and Eve didn't understand what was meant by death, how could they make an informed decision to take the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil? Once out of the garden, since they weren't "dead", would they still be unable to understand the punishment for their choice?

I used these questions to create general confusion in the family over what it means to die. Thus, Cain upbraids Abel's decision to seek the fruit of life by saying, "Mother is ill!...This may be the day we meet death."¹⁶ Cain's statement reveals that he has some understanding of death; he understands that illness connects with what it means to die. I gave them this small understanding of death to alert the reader that the family understands at least one thing: death is unpleasant – contrary to God's best for them.¹⁷ Since they understand suffering and illness as contrary to God's best for them (neither existed, after all, in the garden), they tentatively connect death with suffering.¹⁸ Before they learned other unpleasant things, they couldn't understand death in any but the most vague sense, although Adam later tells Abel that they understood enough to choose.¹⁹ Nevertheless, their ignorance allows Adam and Eve to spend time questioning the nature of death as they deliberate on whether to take the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil.²⁰ The characters, therefore, embodied the questions I had of the Genesis text.

¹⁶ See, p. 22, *Out of the Garden*.

¹⁷ Adam and Eve originally discuss death in the garden; they speculate that death must be unpleasant, but they can't imagine what it means to be unpleasant.

¹⁸ Presumably, since Abel tends sheep and sometimes sacrifices them, the family has also experienced the death of animals. They might also infer, from animal death, what it means to die as a human.

¹⁹ See p. 20, *Out of the Garden*.

²⁰ See p. 42, *Out of the Garden*.

2. CHARACTER ADAPTATION

Out of the Garden is an exploration of the problem of evil, but its characters drive the exploration. Eve was my original protagonist. I was intrigued by the idea of telling Eve's side of the story, of making her more human and less the mother of sin. About halfway through actualizing this intent, I realized that I could better deal with the problem of evil if I incorporated the first murder into the story. To do so, I would need to en flesh Abel and Cain.

Cain and Abel began to dominate the story; their perspectives became just as important as the perspectives of their parents. I quickly decided that I wouldn't present Cain and Abel in their cookie-cutter forms: Cain as the evil, vindictive older brother and Abel as the angelic, younger one. Cain and Abel, after all, are humans. Evil acts like murder are not committed solely by the deranged; ordinary people may commit them with more hate than those we expect to kill. The people who are truly good often struggle more than the rest of us with questions and inner demons. Cain and Abel, therefore, were cast as brothers who shared anger and questions about God and suffering. They differed in how they chose to respond to that anger and those questions. Abel honestly confronts God, full of fury; God was able to speak to Abel because Abel chose authenticity over internalization. Cain, on the other hand, increased his resentment by avoiding a confrontation with God. He refuses to hear the "other side of the story". This refusal costs Cain, for it makes him less willing to hear the story from his younger brother, eventually leading him to direct his hate of God at Abel.

In my depiction of Cain, I was influenced by a sketch of Cain Madeleine L'Engle once composed. In the sketch, she presents Cain as a bumbling, self-absorbed, but curious boy; Cain's murder of Abel is unintentional:

“I went to find my brother. He was holding a new born lamb in his arms and he paid more attention to the lamb than he did to me. So I took a stick and hit him with it the way the giants hit the dinosaurs and the dragons.

Still holding the lamb, he fell, and red blood came from his head. I looked at him, and then I told him to get up. But he did not move.”²¹

In L’Engle’s version, Cain doesn’t understand death. I carried this interpretation into *Out of the Garden*, but gave Cain more culpability than did L’Engle. Cain understands the fear of death and can comprehend the abhorrence of hate. His action, therefore, isn’t excusable; like Adam and Eve in the garden, he understands enough to make him culpable.

I felt it crucial that Abel not appear a “goody-two-shoes”. His obedience would have to be hard-won. Thus, Abel angrily seeks God in the garden, ostensibly to earn the fruit of life for his mother. Abel’s anger with God allows him to sympathize with Cain (indeed, Cain remembers fondly the time when he and Abel jointly blamed God) and discuss frankly the problem of suffering.²² His anger also makes his final submission a submission that he understands; Abel chooses to submit out of hope, not out of habit.

Eve, my original protagonist, was given a chance of redemption. In many ways, Eve is the shining light of the story. Although she causes the expulsion from the garden, Eve comes to obey, love, and trust God more deeply than any of the men in the story. Hers’ is a redeeming story.

Adam receives the least spotlight outside of the garden, but, within the garden, I gave Adam a stronger role. Adam’s role is that of a helper; he assents to Eve’s decision to take the

²¹ Madeleine L’Engle, “And it was good” in *The Genesis Trilogy*, (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook Press, 2001), 79-80.

²² See p. 65 for Cain’s recollection of the blame he and Abel used to direct at God.

fruit of the knowledge of good and evil. I believe that Adam and Eve should have mutually kept each other from disobeying. They had been created to love each other; love would have stayed the beloved's hand. Adam, therefore, failed as much as Eve in the garden. Adam at least attempted to fulfill this role of love; he tried to persuade Eve to ignore the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Ultimately, Adam failed, which sets the stage for the beginning of suffering.

3. GENESIS AND PROBLEM OF EVIL RESEARCH

Throughout this process, I conducted some research on the Genesis creation accounts and the problem of evil. I began by exploring commentary on the Genesis creation accounts. Although I had originally hoped to use this research in the text, I concluded that the story didn't require it. My adaptation was an adaptation that depended on a textual analysis, not on the context out of which the stories were written. While information on the different authors who wrote the stories (the "Priestly" author wrote the first story and the "Yahwist" wrote the second) was helpful for understanding the stories' original import, I felt that the information didn't need to be included in the story proper.²³

I reached a similar conclusion about my research on the problem of evil. Originally, I had hoped to dress up the arguments of men like Aquinas, Augustine, and Plantinga through the characters of *Out of the Garden*; this, I expected, would demonstrate mastery of the problem of evil and of story. When attempted, it demonstrated neither. My story suffered and I couldn't research and relate all theories on the problem of evil. I particularly tried to insert the natural

²³ Ronald S. Hendel, "Genesis, Book Of" in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 1, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 933.

law theodicy into the story.²⁴ The scene became stilted, as if it were a textbook dressed up in flowery garb. Therefore, after getting a handle on a few arguments for and against the problem of evil, I decided to let the story flow, addressing only the core of the problem, not all of its complications.

4. TEXTUAL ADAPTATION

After compiling my notes and questions on the Genesis text, I began to add things to my working draft that didn't exist in the original Genesis version. Since I assumed that a perfect being couldn't sin by disobeying God, I reasoned that Adam and Eve must be fallible, even in the garden. In the final version, this interpretation was manifested in the obsession, anger, and petulance that Eve demonstrates before she takes the fruit.²⁵ The fruit doesn't introduce sin and disobedience; the fruit is sin's culmination. In the same way, I gave a reason in the story for the discrepancy between the command God gives Adam and the way Eve sees the command. She tells the serpent that God has prohibited them from even *touching* the fruit; God only commanded them not to eat it.²⁶ I assumed that the author of Genesis inserted that inconsistency purposefully; I therefore interpreted the change in command to reveal that Adam and Eve took measures to ensure they didn't disobey, rather like the Israelites prohibited the use of Yahweh's name in order to ensure they didn't use God's name in vain. In my story, Adam blurts out at Eve

²⁴ The natural law theodicy suggests that, in order for us to make choices, we must understand the properties of the natural world. We must understand, for example, that if we move one foot in front of the other, we will walk; we will not shoot up into air. Sometimes, these good properties clash and – inadvertently – produce evil/suffering. Suffering therefore exists as the by-product of our necessary ability to choose.

²⁵ See, pp. 40-53, *Out of the Garden*.

²⁶ Gen. 3:3 (NRSV Version)

– scared at how she toys with the thought of taking the fruit – “Eve, you can’t even touch [the fruit]!”²⁷

5. DRAFTS: PULVERIZATION & TRANSFORMATION

The additions mentioned above remained in the final version of the story. But, other than key themes and ideas, the rest of my first draft was entirely scrapped when I recovered from my hospitalizations. As mentioned above, I became aware of my frailty and God’s power while in the hospital. I keenly felt that God was perfectly justified in whatever he did; my life or health was his to take. When I revisited the draft I had written prior to being hospitalized, I was horrified by the way I had characterized God. He seemed like a soft, tolerant, weak grandfather, nothing like the fearsome God I had just encountered. I understood, for the first time, why C.S. Lewis always characterized Aslan (the lion who represents God in Lewis’ *Chronicles of Narnia* series) as wild, but good. Abel reflects my new understanding when he says, after he returns from the garden and finds his mother still ill, “...he is God and may do what he pleases with his creation”.²⁸

My first draft also failed to get at the problem of evil; it felt more like an embellished retelling of the second creation account rather than a story in which the characters struggle with suffering and evil. In the second draft, I sought to rectify both failings.

²⁷ See p. 47, *Out of the Garden*.

²⁸ See p. 35, *Out of the Garden*.

6. INSPIRATION

While writing the second draft, I realized that my prose was better when I read good authors who wrote good prose. I also noticed an increase in a magical quality in my writing when I was listening to beautiful music or had just watched a delightful movie. I therefore began to feed my imagination (and, I hope, my writing) by reading faerie stories like *Lilith* by George MacDonald, listening to orchestral music, and watching films like Kenneth Branagh's *Cinderella*.

7. FINAL CONSTRUCTION

When the draft was well finalized, I began to see possibilities for intentional structure and mirroring. Although one might assume that the structure should be created before one begins to write the story, I didn't follow that path. I had a sense of how I wanted the story to begin and end and outlined the scenes accordingly, but I didn't incorporate intentional parallelism until the end of the process. I particularly used parallelism in finishing Abel and Cain's stories.

Both, before encountering God in fire and smoke, conclude that suffering mars the good of the world.²⁹ Abel fears that God will arbitrarily remove what good Abel has; Abel's fear was mine after leaving the hospital. Cain, in a slightly different response, resents God. He doesn't fear the removal of his goods; he expects it. Both, after introspection, meet God in fire and smoke. Abel encounters God directly in the fire at the garden; his conversation with God is raw because of Abel's honesty.³⁰ Cain encounters God indirectly in fire and smoke when he presents his offering to God. Immediately following that "encounter", God forces a confrontation

²⁹ For Abel, see p. 25; for Cain, see pp.59-60, *Out of the Garden*.

³⁰ See pp.30-32, *Out of the Garden*.

through a midnight warning.³¹ Although the brothers began from the same position, one seeks God and the other rebuffs him. I tried to argue, through these parallels, that God honors authenticity and allows us to begin in the same position as Cain and Abel: in anger, fear, and with plenty of questions.

One final note on structure. I've said, throughout this commentary, that *Out of the Garden* is an adaptation of the two Genesis creation accounts. It may seem as though the novella is primarily an adaptation of the second creation story of Genesis – Gen 2:4b-3:24 – with the addition of the first murder, Gen. 4:1-16. This assumption would be correct. *Out of the Garden* was largely an adaptation of the second creation story. The first is explored in the poem that precedes the story proper. Although I realize that different authors wrote the two stories, I follow the lead of the redactor who clapped the two stories together. Something about the beauty and grandeur of the first account makes the second account more personal, more human. I've tried to keep that feeling by using poetry to convey what I hope is an ethereal quality; it emphasizes the glory of creation and the awesome nature of God before the story moves into the personal pain of the Adam, Eve, Cain, and Abel.

CONCLUSION

This thesis began with one simple, imaginative comment from my dad: “What if the serpent was jealous of Eve?” His imagination ushered me into the garden; I took my questions with me. As I've journeyed with Abel, Cain, Eve, and Adam, I've explored the problem of evil. I've suggested, throughout the story, that a good, powerful God can – and, indeed, does – allow suffering for our good. When suffering helps us seek the source of our greatest possible joy –

³¹ See pp.67-68, *Out of the Garden*.

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God – it transforms us. Because of this transformational power and because of the importance of the problem of evil to the human condition, suffering must be considered in story. I’ve done so in the Genesis creation accounts, which help us explore four fundamental questions: “Is there a god?”, “If so, what is he like?”, “Who are we?”, and “What is our purpose?” These questions were here considered in a story that formed organically. My process was informed by personal experience, benefited by research, and improved through the help of authors of truly good stories. In its finished form, I can only hope that *Out of Garden* will transform you as much as, in its writing, it has transformed me. May the story enable us to better consider the nature of our existence and the character of the God who made us, especially as we wrestle with that crucial problem of suffering.

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