

## Eve

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**P**ick an eden, any eden. Behind door number one lies the bedouin's Eden. Water undulates around his ankles, cooling his skin. Dozens of lakes spread out before him. Their cool blues are contained by lanes of emerald green. Crystalline liquid flows from the tops of mountains and the phalluses of bronze statues. Behind door number two is the jungle dweller's Eden. Sands, smooth and pearlescent as a baby's ass, slip and slide to accommodate his weight. No more creeping vines to trip him when he walks, no cinchona canopies to cloud the sky when he looks up. Liberated from the pressures of humidity, he breathes freely.

Behind door number three is the urbanite's Eden. Hills and oaks and maples surround him. Wherever he looks, he sees grass and leaves. His house smells of fresh straw and packed mud. Here he knows the time without resorting to a watch or calendar. Dark is night, light is day; cold is winter, warmth is spring. Door number four opens onto the country boy's Eden. A place where he can tame the tyranny of nature. In this paradise, day becomes night and night becomes day at the flick of a switch. He controls the temperature around him by turning a knob. With a twist of his wrist, he draws water from gold and silver faucets.

And so it goes— Islanders long for land; inlanders dream of oceans. For all their surface differences, each and every Eden starts from the same place. Out of chaos, creation is set in motion by a series of thefts. God blinks and the angels sneak away with a ball of light. God looks away and the ocean burps up a piece of land. God sleeps and vegetation covers the land. His eyes open and close with purpose and determination. With each burglary, He winks and pretends not to see the changes He has willed.

Once upon a time, God let the angels make a universal Eden. Banyan, jacaranda, frangipani, oak and evergreen shot up side by side. Inches away from sultry, sweet sandalwood, the air smelled of clear, cold pine. Swaying casuarina grew next to soaring birch. "To each according to its needs," God declared, and the earth carried out His wishes, raising the heat beneath the banyan and cooling the ground under the evergreen. One heaven, one earth, one river running through them, circling its way to gorse and reeds that wanted water and shying away from the brush and succulents that preferred to go without. "To each according to its desires," God said, and in the beginning, desire and need were the same.

Two of each fish, two of each bird, two of each reptile, two of each mammal. Procreation wasn't conceived because everything was immortal. For a finishing touch, God plucked a few stars from the sky, cut off their hard edges and cooled them with His breath. While the rock and the light were still pliant, He shaped them into arms and legs, torso, neck, and head. Then He slapped His child awake and called him Earth. When He twisted Earth's arm off at the elbow, a woman sprang out of the empty space below the joint. He called her Life. Then He planted the tree of the knowledge of good and evil smack in the middle of the garden. Just for the hell of it.

Earth and Life were naked, but they didn't notice because they were comfortable in their own skins. And although they had sex constantly, they remained virgins. At night, Life planted Earth between her knees and measured him vertebra by vertebra. She ran her smooth fingers through the down on his back and took stock of their blessings.

"The sharp smell of the cedar trees," she whispered.

"The sweet smell of jasmine," Earth answered.

"Sun warming your back."

"Mud cooling the soles of your feet."

"Pine needles scratching your arms."

"Grass tickling your bottom."

"Blackberries, cashews and cherries."

"Pistachios, walnuts and grapes."

Life dribbled cool honey up and down Earth's back and sprinkled almond shavings over the sticky base. She leaned back, framed her work between her thumb and forefinger and saw that it was good.

"I've made a honey tree," she said.

"There's no such thing," Earth replied. "We have one of everything here and there's no honey tree."

"There is now."

"Only God can make a tree."

So Life licked her picture off Earth's back and swallowed it.

"All of this is yours," God told Life and Earth on their first birthday. "The seed bearing plants and fruit bearing trees and all the wild beasts and birds. Enjoy it."

Life ran straight to the tree in the middle of the garden and reached for one of the pretty blue figs that hung from its branches. God slapped her hand away. For days, she wore the purple shadow of His anger across her knuckles.

"Not that one," God explained.

"But it's mine. You told me to enjoy it."

"There's no pleasure without restriction." And with that warning, He rolled onto His side and settled under the shade of the tree of good and evil for a long nap.

A few feet away, Life cleared a small patch of ground the shape and size of Earth's back. Raking the soil with her fingers, she removed every small stone and weed. Then she pounded her plot with the palm of her hand until it was as smooth as skin. Using a torn branch for broad outlines and her long nails for detail, she drew a miniature garden within the garden. Wisteria and moss framed its borders and a cooling stream ran along its length. When she was done, she stepped back and assessed her work.

"What are you doing?" Earth asked.

"Making a garden. Come and look. I need a fresh pair of eyes."

Earth squinted and held his hand over his brow and hemmed and hawed and humphed. "It's not very good," he decided.

"How do you know?"

"Because it doesn't fool anybody. If it was good, flies would be gathering on that bunch of grapes hanging in the right corner, and bees would be buzzing around the hibiscus in the middle."

"It just needs a little color, that's all." Life rolled fistfuls of grass between her palms and squeezed out bright green for the leaves. She chomped on raspberries and tinted the roses with the juice that dribbled from the sides

of her mouth. Juniper berries filled in her lake, and beetle wings lacquered the sun's reflection on the water. Yellow was easy; pollen and crushed marigolds dusted the ground all around them.

"What about the sky?" Earth said.

"What's wrong with it?"

"Too brown. It should be blue."

"Why?" Life asked.

"Look up."

Life sighed and went off in search of sky color. She marched the length and breadth of the garden, looping around fruit trees, craning for a look at the tops of palms and firs, bellying through deep savannah grasses, burrowing through the sands, doubling back when she feared that she had missed something. Her tour confirmed what she had known from the start. Only the sweet smelling figs that hung from the forbidden tree bore the right shade of blue.

"All I have to do is peel one and lay the skin across my sky," she decided.

"He told you to stay away from that tree," Earth said.

"That was just a joke," Life answered. "You don't think He put those figs there just to test us. He can't be that small."

"He can be any size He wants."

A few feet above their heads, the figs dangled back and forth, pushed by a teasing breeze. As the afternoon sun bore down on the fruit, it expanded and ripened. Honey and sugar filled the air. The sweet perfume made Life hungry. She jumped up and down until her legs ached and stretched her fingers until the joints throbbed, but the figs were out of reach. Swatting the air, she caught handfuls of nothing that only fed her frustration. To be closer to her goal, she climbed Earth's back and sat on his shoulders. When she took another futile swipe at the air, she lost her balance and fell, dragging Earth down with her. He landed between her legs. The salty smell of her sex tickled his. His member doubled in size. He raised Life's behind off the ground and settled his hands on her hips to steady her while he rocked back and forth. When his stiff prick grazed the soft skin on her thigh, she sprang back, sat on her haunches and bared her teeth.

"Not now," she growled.

"When?"

“Soon.”

Just above her head, the figs fermented in the afternoon heat.

“What do you think they taste like?”

“How should I know?” Earth grumbled.

“I bet they taste like everything good that there is,” Life said. “Stringy pulp falling apart between your teeth, sugary sap soothing your tongue. If you help me, you can have the fruit all to yourself. I only want the skins to fill in my sky.”

“What should I do?”

“Just be still. This time, I’ll stand on your shoulders.” Feet perched on either side of Earth’s neck, Life managed to take hold of the lowest arm of the tree, but the older limbs, the ones with the best fruit, remained beyond her grasp.

“Get down,” Earth said. “I can’t hold you up anymore.”

“Then I’ll hold myself up,” Life answered. Still clinging to her branch, she lifted her feet off Earth’s shoulders. Her legs dangled back and forth, scissoring the air. Hand over hand, she slowly made her way toward the trunk. Too exhausted to go on, she wrapped her legs around the smooth bark and shimmied down to the ground.

On the verge of giving up, she caught sight of a large serpent as it slithered past, crimson and purple scales glinting in the sun. Life stepped on its tail with her foot.

“Let go,” the snake hissed.

“All in good time,” she said. “Tell me, serpent, do the stones and vines cut into your belly when you move?”

“My skin is as thick as an elephant’s, only prettier.”

“Still, it must be awful to have to crawl from place to place and eat dust.”

“It beats walking around with your head in the clouds,” the serpent answered.

“Wouldn’t you rather stand?”

“If I feel the need to be vertical, all I have to do is find the nearest tree. Unlike you, I can climb to whatever height I choose and look down on all the other creatures.”

“Can you reach the figs at the top of this tree?”

“Easily.”

"I don't believe you, ssserpent," Life hissed.

"Take your foot off me and I'll show you."

"Only if you promise to knock down some fruit when you get to the highest branch," Life said.

The serpent sprang forward. Slowly, steadily, it wound its way up the tree. When it reached the top, it bit through the thin twigs that held the figs in place. Four perfect, blue globes plopped to the ground. Unable to resist, the serpent wrapped its jaws around the last piece on the branch and swallowed it whole. Pulp and seeds carved out a round space at the base of the serpent's head. Life watched the fig make its way through the boneless body, spasm by spasm. By the time it reached the ground, the serpent had digested enough of the forbidden fruit to know there was a difference between right and wrong. And from that instant onward, snakes moved sideways to avoid making the choice.

Life snatched the largest of the four bruised figs, carefully peeled away its skin and popped the bleeding fruit into her mouth. She held the taste between her cheeks for an instant before swallowing. Hands shaking, she stretched the blue skin across her sky. She stepped back for a clearer view of her work and saw that it was good.

"Beautiful."

As soon as she spoke, the flattened peel cracked and bubbled at the edges. Smoke knifed up from its center as the picture flowered into fire. Blue sky shriveled into black curls. Burnt skin floated in the air.

Earth had already grabbed one of the other figs. He tossed the whole of it into his mouth and chewed through the fruit. A large seed stuck in his throat, cutting off his air. His face turned sky blue. When Life slapped him on the back, the dislodged pit arched through space and landed smack in the middle of God's forehead, waking him from a dream of perfect obedience.

"What have you two have been doing?" He bellowed. The ground trembled. Fronds and vines in the line of His breath dried up. Geckos, mynahs and rabbits burrowed their noses into the dirt. Dark clouds blotted out the sun. Lightning crisscrossed the dark sky. Earth dropped to his knees and vomited the remains of the fig on God's feet.

"She made me," he whined, resting his chin on the ground. The instant he spoke, soft, white hairs erupted over Earth's cheeks and forehead. His ears stretched upward, his snout pulled forward. He pushed his weight to

his back legs and scrambled up from the ground on all fours.

"Baa, baa," he said, extending his right hoof toward Life.

"You were my favorites," God moaned. "The only two of my creatures I endowed with the power to choose. By abusing it, you've forced me to punish you. I wanted to spare you death. Now you will know it."

"We already know death," Life answered, legs spread, hands on hips. "Day after perfect day, everything always the same."

"Then you'll know life, which, I assure you, can be far worse," God said, pointing to the wall at the edge of the garden.

Life gathered the blackened remains of her painting. Head held high, she marched out of Eden. When she saw the desert that was her exile and felt the first hot blast of the sirocco, she buried her charred treasures in the sand to protect them. The sharp shrill whistle of the wind cut through her head. A dull ache spread across her chest. When she opened her mouth to scream, drops of blood stained the silence.

Evening came and morning came: their first day.

"If you squint, you can still see the light of the angels who stand guard over the sacred tree," Life said.

"Baa," Earth answered. With his front hooves, he dug a hole in the sand. When the pit was large enough, he plunged his ears and eyes into the dark.

Evening came and morning came: their second day.

Now Life could only see the seraphim's fiery wings if she closed her eyes altogether. Earth ran circles around her, bucking sand into her face until her cheeks were raw and swollen and her vision blurred by tears.

Evening came and morning came: their third day.

It was Life's turn to burrow into the earth. Blinded and frightened by her bleating mate, she found kinship with a family of moles. Victims of another bungled burglary, she decided; God must have woken up before the angels had a chance to bestow vision on these poor, furry creatures.

Down in her hollow, Life lost sight of the angels' wings. When she closed her eyes, all that remained was a tiny, flickering spark, stripped of color and form. The flame refused to ignite, no matter how hard she concentrated. Despairing, Life held her breath to smother the last teasing particle of fire. On the verge of blacking out, she remembered the cinders she'd smuggled out of

Eden. Sand crawled under her nail beds as she struggled to dig her way out. Despite her best efforts, she couldn't gain ground. Soil slipped and slid between her fingers. Earth danced in a circle around her, shouting out his panic in a high pitched yelp. She begged him to drag her out, but she wasn't able to get a grip on the shiny surface of his hooves.

On the morning of their fourth day, as the sun began its slow ascent, a pair of soft hands slowly lifted Life to the surface. When she finally reached the top of her hole, she faced an aged face that was one-third the size of the creature's entire body. The plum shadow of Almighty fury was tattooed on his brow.

"A fallen angel?" Life asked.

The creature nodded.

When he turned around, she saw the knobby remains of flight. His skin was scaly and tough where God had clipped his wings. Life read his story with the tips of her fingers, following each gouge and tear. In some places, the wound cut clear to the bone and she warmed her hands on the angel's exposed viscera. His scars made Life's eyes cloud over.

"Tell me," she said.

"When God announced your exile, only the angels knew what you would face outside Eden. An infinity of sand, miles of heat, acres of cold. After He recited the record of your crime, I judged His to be the greater wrong. When He turned away from us to weep, I tried one last burglary. Sweeping down from heaven, I took a fig from the forbidden tree. Tearing into the fruit, I lifted the seeds out one by one with the pointy end of my tongue."

"Weren't you frightened?" Life asked.

"No. I was only doing what I thought He wanted. The angels were almost always the means of making His will manifest."

"I don't understand."

"By having us carry out His handiwork, His slate stayed clean. If there was a mistake, He could blame us. The problem was that He never gave direct orders, so we had to second guess what He wanted. Worse, to maintain the pretense, we could only work when His back was turned. The time pressure resulted in some real horrors—goats with scaly, tridented tails, lions with hands for paws, talking pike and perch. He obliterated them all with a snap of his fingers. Poof!"



"Why didn't He just kill us?" Life asked.

"He never seemed able to decide whether you and Earth were a mistake or not. His signals became harder to read after your creation. Suddenly a cough might actually mean that His throat itched. Then, when things seemed settled, you disobeyed Him. We were sure He would erase you and all of our hard work would come to nothing. When I learned that He'd spared you, I hoped He might approve one last effort on your behalf. I thought I was doing what He wanted until He tore the wings off my back."

Life's eyes ran. Earth clip-clopped to her side and comforted her by licking the saltwater off her face. As he drank her sorrow, his pelt fell off in thick clumps until he was naked, his fur replaced by a soft, dark skin. The clefts in his hooves multiplied five fold. With his new right hand, he pushed his snout back until it was almost level with his cheeks. Vertebra by vertebra, he raised his spine until his weight rested on his back legs.

"I'm cold," he said, fingering the hard nipples on his chest. Life picked his sheared wool off the ground, divided it in two and draped one half each around Earth and herself.

"Where did you learn to do that?" the angel asked.

"I don't know," Life answered.

The angel smiled. "He must still love you. He let you keep some instinct."

"Time to move on," Life said, instinctively. Before leaving, she dug up the buried cinders and tucked them into her makeshift clothing.

Following a trail of bones and marrow, Life, Earth and the angel headed east of Eden. They walked forever and arrived nowhere. For days, they walked all night. Night after night. The hardscrabble terrain clawed at their feet and ankles. At the beginning of the long journey, Life tried to keep track of the distance from Eden by measuring the amount of time that had passed—one sunset, two, three—but space and time quickly lost all meaning. There was only rain or shine, fog or dust, good ground or bad.

"It's just over there," the angel said when Life and Earth refused to go on.

"What is?" Life asked.

"The land of milk and honey."

Life ran to the top of the next hill. In the distance, white sand bled into russet plains.

"This is the place," the angel said when he caught up with her. He held up a palm full of his stolen seeds and scattered them with a sigh. Pale green shoots of oat and barley sprouted from the humid valley soil. Life watched, transfixed, as the tendrils ripened into stalks, stretching and straining toward the dim sun.

"Now," the angel ordered.

The rough plants tore into Life's palms, but she kept pulling. Sweat blurred her vision, but she couldn't/wouldn't stop. Earth trailed behind her, gathering whatever she missed. From the top of the hill, the fallen angel tapped out a steady rhythm by striking his tiny thighs with his huge fists. Following closely on the beat, God's children didn't notice their shadows lengthening across the field. Their work kept them warm as the sun set.

Relying on what was left of their instincts, the first family plowed, planted and harvested. They collected the husks of their grains and used them to roof their improvised huts. The fallen angel showed them how to make tools out of stone and shelter out of bone, singing to them while they worked:

The soil is cursed,  
but you get your food from it;  
You cut your grain,  
but you're aching and sore from it;  
You'll sweat every day of your life,  
until you're dry as a bone  
and hard as a stone;  
And, one by one, you'll return to the soil,  
so another generation can eat.

The raw barley and oats they lived on expanded in their stomachs and made their bowels churn. They were always bloated and never full. In winter, violent shivering was their only exercise and complaining their only activity.

"Look at us," Earth said. "We grow fat on food that only makes us hungrier. Nothing but seeds and shoots. In Eden, we had coconuts and kiwis and apples and beans and lettuce."

They lived in the past, where God was as natural as breathing and nature as easy as God.

"He was as close as air," Earth moaned, "and we sent him away."

"He sent us away," Life said.

“What difference does it make? The result is the same. All so you could have a blue sky.”

“No,” Life said, “all so we could choose freely.”

“What kind of animal chooses misery over comfort?”

That night, Life realized what she had to do and how to do it. While Earth and the angel slept, she felt her way across the dark and reached into the clay jar where she stored her Edenic embers. She blew on the ashes until sparks singed her palms. Tiny lights flew around the hut and landed in her hair.

“Fire!” the angel yelled.

“Fire to bake our bread

Fire to cook our meals

Fire to melt metal

and bend iron.”

They huddled together and warmed their cold toes under the blue hem of the flames.

The next day, Life’s belly began to expand. Nine months after the first fire, she woke up in the middle of the night blanketed in sweat. The pain came in waves at first. Then it was constant. Just before dawn, as the edges of the sky lightened to gray, her water broke. Salt seas gushed out from every orifice. The tears she’d held back for so long swept her away. She floated past streams and mountains, fields and dunes, until the hard needles of an evergreen tree pegged her and held her still. Spasms twisted her muscles into knots. Blood trickled down her thighs and pain made her head hum. After one final push, her twins emerged, fully formed and dripping wet. Their brown, puckered limbs were covered in an iridescent purple and scarlet veil. Life coated her arms and legs with the afterbirth to regain her strength, and spit shined her babies until their burnished skin glowed. Their quivering, transparent eyelids remained shut. Only their hands and mouths seemed wholly alive, constantly groping and searching for food.

She named the boys Hope and Despair. As her twins grew, Life shrank. They fed on her for hours at a time, impatiently pulling and tugging at her stretched skin and sore nipples. To stimulate her milk, Life concentrated on sweet things to eat. She remembered the sugared water hidden at the center of coconuts and cacti and the lovely sour smack of plums and strawberries.

Her mouth watered at the memory of the sweet-tart, juicy figs that hung from the tree of knowledge. The boys ate her thoughts, depleting her reserves.

When her milk ran dry, she gathered berries and flowers and taste tested each petal and stem, tossing aside the bitter ones and feeding the safe ones to the twins. She learned to make stews of bracken and moss, cooking in bark strips held together by pine resin. She gathered leaves and twigs for bedding and dug body shaped spaces in the ground so they could keep warm at night. When they slept, Hope and Despair snuggled against Life's neck and waist and blew clouds of baby's breath on her skin.

As the twins grew, Life began to look at her new world through new eyes, eyes that had no memory of an Eden with which to compare it. For the first time, she was able to find beauty in the landscape around her. She noticed the way the sun dusted every nook and cranny of the hills and ground until even the dirt shone. Then the rains came and made everything glisten. When the boys were old enough to walk, the three of them foraged as a team, calling out to one another when they found a berry or anthill. Gradually, Life began to speak to the twins in a language they invented together.

"Wah," Hope said when he held his hands up to catch the rain.

"Water," Life answered.

"Ma," Despair cooed when he cuddled against her chest.

"Mama," Life said.

"Da, da, da, da," the boys chanted and Life knew it was time to go back to Earth and the angel.

She started the long return with a child suspended from each breast. With every step she took, the boys swung together or apart. When their legs grew long enough, they kicked each other incessantly until Life threatened to unhook both of them if they didn't behave. Between feedings, the twins pushed and punched each other. They fought over food, they fought for their mother's attention. Throughout the journey, Life wavered between Hope and Despair, favoring first the one, then the other. Punishment was a sharp look, a slap, a pinch. When these failed, she calmed them with stories about a beautiful garden where banyan, jacaranda, oleander, and oak grew side by side and reptiles, birds, and mammals peacefully coexisted tooth by claw by beak.

"And at the center of the garden, there was a tall tree whose blue fruit was poisonous, but sweet. So sweet."

"Can we go there?" Hope asked.

"Not anymore."

"Then I'm not taking another step," Despair announced. He folded his arms over his chest and sat cross-legged on the sand.

"But home is just past the next valley," Life pleaded.

"I don't care," Despair answered.

"Then we'll go on without you." The smile on Hope's face brought Despair to his feet.

To keep the boys from fighting, Life walked between them the rest of the way. Stretching her arms across their shoulders, she felt the hard core of the wings that had calcified inside their bodies and never emerged.

"So close," she sighed.

By the time they reached Earth and the angel, mother and children were tired and hungry and covered in dust. They found father and godfather floating in the saltwater sea that Life had left behind when she floated away. When Life asked how they were, Earth and the angel answered in a tongue she didn't understand.

"Have I been away that long?"

The angel shook his head, meaning yes.

Life pried open Earth's mouth with her fingers and examined his throat. Nothing had changed. His tongue still glowed pink and purple; his teeth still clicked when she flicked her nails against them. She walked to the edge of the salt sea and waited until her reflection cleared. Opening her mouth as wide as she could, she saw that her own tongue was twisted. Frightened, she tried to straighten out her speech, but when she released her fingers, the muscle sprang back into a tight coil. Realizing she would have to start from the beginning, she pointed at every object in sight while Earth named them for her.

"Rock," he said when she indicated the sandstone cliffs that surrounded them.

"Rock," Life repeated.

"Rock," Earth said when she pointed to the buttes that had formed in the center of the salt sea.

"Rock," Life echoed.

"Little rocks," Earth said when Life picked up a handful of sand.

Life wondered how all these things could bear the same name, but

she didn't know how to frame the question in terms that Earth would understand. Still hopeful, she directed his attention to a thorny bush at the edge of the water.

"Tree," Earth said.

Life pointed to the spindly, bare branched plant that grew next to the bush.

"Tree."

Was their language always such a poor thing or had Earth grown lazy in her absence? Without waiting for an answer, Life took matters into her own hands. Shaking her head, she held her index finger over her lips.

"Mouth," Earth said.

"No," the angel answered. "You've misunderstood. She's trying to shush you."

"I've found my mother tongue," Life announced. She took hold of the twins by their shoulders and gently shoved them toward the spindly, bare-branched tree. "Acacia," she announced. "AcaCIA, Acacia, ACACia, Aca-c-i-a, A-cacia." She said the word six or seven times, speeding it up, slowing it down, savoring the consonants, elongating the vowels. With each repetition, she felt lighter and younger.

"Bird," Earth said when Hope pointed to a long beaked, red crowned animal fluttering at the edge of a nearby oasis.

"Kingfisher," Life answered.

"Kingfisher," the twins repeated.

Ibex, hyrax, vulture, partridge, gypsum, marl. Syllables came in a rush. Unable to sleep or eat, Life spent days naming every animal, vegetable, and mineral in sight. Waving her arms in the air and shifting her weight from side to side, she danced to the tune of her new sounds. With each baby word, she left Earth a few more beats behind. The wind surrendered after one or two consonants, the trees could only susurrate, and the birds were unable to wrap their tongues around more than one syllable at a time. After a few days, even the twins no longer followed her. Only the angel kept pace.

"There's nothing left to name here," he said, when she'd exhausted the world around them. "You'll have to stop and let the others catch up."

Life shook her head. "Now!" she commanded as a strong gust lifted her skyward. Everywhere she looked, some new nameless thing appeared to feed her insatiable craving for language. Words were suddenly dearer to her than the

first sip when she was thirsty or the first bite when she was hungry. As she rose higher, Life released a string of new sounds that stretched from her mouth to the dunes below. The language rope was the last thing that tied her to the earth and it slackened with each syllable. Clouds between her knees, Life rode the sky.

“Cumulus,” she shouted.

Cirrocumulus

Stratus

Cumulostratus

Nimbus

Nimbostratus.

Clouds were all of these things. Miles below, the angel stared up at the speck that was Life and tugged at his end of the string.

“Let go,” Life shouted, but he ignored her. He wrapped the rope around his wrists, pulling her closer and closer. She struck back with more words. From her bird’s eye view, she could see and name that much more:

Seals

Walruses

Narwhals

Glaciers

Icebergs

The cold air pinched her lungs and she exhaled clouds, but she wouldn’t stop. Each syllable was like a taste of Paradise. Raisins and almonds rested on her tongue. Flavors that had been dead to her for years came alive. “Naming is being,” Life decided. Every word was a birth; every birth a victory. For the first time since her banishment from Eden, she felt close to God.

Concentrating all his strength on his end of the rope, the angel managed to turn Life east to west, west to east, but he couldn’t force her down. With each twitch on the thread, Life listed in one direction or another, all the while unleashing a flood of names. The angel bobbed and ducked to avoid her words, but they kept coming:

Llamas

Vicunas

Alpacas

Quinoa and

pigweed

as she faced east, and

Kangaroos  
Koalas  
Reefs  
Coral and  
mangosteen  
when she turned west.

Ankle deep in words, the angel yielded to curiosity. He cried out for full descriptions so he could absorb the sounds that Life flung at him.

"A humpless camel that drinks its own saliva and spits out the excess."

"More."

"A huge rat that hops around like a landlocked sunbird."

"More."

"A tiny bear with long claws and a pouch at its bottom to house its babies," she bellowed.

That was enough. Now that he was sure she was lying, the angel resumed his tug of war. It was almost too late. The rope already stretched well beyond the clouds. From Life's end, her old home was nothing more than a small blue ball veined with streaks of white. The angel begged her to come down.

"Remember what happened the last time you tried to rise above your station," he shouted. "The Almighty might not be so charitable this time. Instead of exile, he'll obliterate you and yours once and for all. Real death. No history, no memory. No one to speak your words."

The angel's prophecies were stones on her soul. She crashed with a thud that split the parched ground into hundreds of tiny pieces and made waves in the Dead Sea for the first and last time. Saltwater poured over the fallen angel. When it reached the scars on his back, he screamed.

"After all these years?" Life asked him.

Instead of an answer, an anchovy popped out of his mouth. Hungry from her exertions, Life picked the fish up from the ground and swallowed it. After she finished eating, she tried to resume her work. She pointed to the dark spaces made by the cracks in the soil and opened her lips to speak, but scales were all that came out.

"Hole," Earth said.

"Crev..." A sharp stab clamped Life's throat shut. When the angel slapped her on the back, fish bones fell to the ground.

"Hole," Earth said.



"Hole," Life repeated whole.

And when, years later, it came time to decide the twins' inheritance, Earth was the one who chose between them. He gave Despair all the nameless things above sea level and Hope all the nameless things below sea level.

"Take it back," Life said.

"It's better this way," Earth said. "Language is safe if it's divided between the two of them. Neither one can fly on half."

"Please take it back," Life begged. "They'll drag each other down."

"No," Earth answered. "This way, they'll hold each other up."

"You're wrong. Neither one will be satisfied. They'll only fight over what the other one has."

Sometimes the boys were silent for days at a time, refusing to speak no matter how emphatically Earth pointed his finger or stamped his foot. Other times they fought to outdo one another, naming and re-naming until words lost all meaning. Hundreds of letters sparred in the air. Earth, Life and the angel strained to make sense of them, but the results were a hopeless jumble. Life asked for a fork and Earth gave her a knife; the angel brushed his hair with a spoon. They slow roasted their meats on a shovel held over a fire because the twins couldn't agree on a word for oven or stove.

When they were tired of objects, the twins focused their differences on time. One night, when their parents' eyes were shut and their breathing slow and steady, the boys went back to the beginning and decided that God never separated dark from light...

"Dawn," Hope insisted, pointing at the black sky.

"Midnight."

"Sunset."

"Sunrise."

As the edges of the sky lightened, Hope picked up a sharp rock/bone/tool/stone, raised it over his brother's head and brought it down in the center of Despair's skull. Before he died, Despair managed to find a sharp branch/limb/weapon/stick and stab his brother in the side. By the time their helpless parents woke up, both twins had bled to death.

Life and Earth made separate pyres for each boy. They laid Hope and Despair on bundles of twigs and set them alight. As the twins burned, Life and Earth added wood to the fire, covering their noses to block the smell of roasting flesh.

"Fire is the substance of memory," the angel whispered to Life, "destined to go up in smoke."

He was right. Everything that Life thought she knew by heart about her children—their monkey hips, speckled blue eyes, thin ribs, pointed chins—was already fading. She desperately clutched at whatever was left. Hope loved to sing and dance, she insisted. Or was that Despair? Soon, the pain of their absence would be all that was left of them.

The next day, mother and father stripped two branches and raked through the ashes that had been their twins. Life removed one bone from each pile and bundled them in a swatch of wool.

"What are you doing?" Earth asked.

"The least that I can." She vowed that whatever happened, she would carry the bones of her children with her so that, in the end, her own remains would be joined with theirs forever.

"We'll have to leave this place," Earth said.

"I can't move," Life answered. And it was true. She was up to her ankles in tears. When she tried to walk, her right foot caught in the mire. The struggle to keep going twisted her body into a spiral that neither Earth nor the angel could straighten. Earth half-carried, half-dragged her away, but for many years, she could only look backward. She couldn't handle the future at all.

Centuries later, long after Earth had returned to dust, Life finally managed to retrace her steps back to the gates of paradise. In the shadow of the seraphims' fiery wings, she cleared a space and set to work. All she had left was language. Alone, she wove story after story to keep her heart warm. With all the words in the world at her disposal, she learned to choose. To leave some out. To put others in. Hundreds of years old, she became the baby she'd never been, sorting through yes and no for the first time. When she was finished, she laid out her choices in neat rows of black and white and constructed a beautiful garden where there was no difference between desire and need and both were satisfied.

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