Excerpted from: ***Genesis in Poetry***
By Jeffrey M Cohen

EATING OF THE FORBIDDEN FRUIT
(Genesis 3:1 – 4:26)

On Eve's return from her lengthy tour
She passed the forbidden trees.
By contrast all the rest seemed poor—
By desire she was strongly seized.

A hidden force propelled her
To approach as close as she might.
She struggled to avert her eyes
To shut out the rapturous sight.

But Lilith's wiles,[1] ever strong,
Diverted Eve from right to wrong.
To further her original plan,
That, with guile, she might seize
Eve's man.

A serpent,
Born of Lilith's occult power,
Lurked in the shadow of a fragrant bower,
Close by where Eve stood, quite mute,
Overcome with desire to eat the fruit.

''Eve,'' spoke the serpent, in a voice so soft,
Holding the forbidden fruit aloft,
''Is this not the object of your heart's desire?
Now, have *I* incurred the good Lord's ire?''

''But he commanded *us*,
Not you,'' said Eve,
''Those two trees alone to leave,
Without so much as the slightest touch,[2]
Or even the very barest brush
Against its trunk or branch or root—
Let alone to eat its fruit!
And if his word we deign to defy,
The sentence is that we must die!''

''Oh, Eve,'' said the serpent, ''you foolish child,
How little you fathom the Lord's mind.
He was simply giving you a test,
To see how determined you were to wrest
The choicest blessing from his treasure chest.

''For one of the trees whose fruit you desired
Will impart knowledge that, once acquired,

Will make you wise as the Lord—
And that, be sure, he can ill afford
If he wishes to remain alone adored.''

With that, the wily serpent unfurled
His slithery body and suddenly hurled
Eve roughly against that choice tree,
Gashing her shoulder and grazing her knee.

''See you've touched the taboo tree!''
Said the serpent, exuding glee,
''And if he warned you that you'd die,
Now you see it was a lie.
So, if, in touching, all was well,[3]
To desist from eating he can't compel.''

''Thank you, serpent, for your wise advice''—
She took a bite and found it nice![4]
Rushing to Adam, she bestowed a kiss,
And, at his response of sheer bliss,[5]
When his lips opened wide,
A slice of the fruit Eve slipped inside.

No sooner had Adam ceased to chew,
When a foreboding neither previously knew
Gripped them as they became aware
That their God was also standing there.

Glancing guiltily at each other,
They sensed a powerful need to cover
Parts of their body till then shown,
Whose shame they'd never
Hitherto known.[6]

''*Oh, Adam,*'' boomed God,
''*You foolish sinner!*
You could have been
An eternal winner!
Why have you so
Betrayed my trust?
Why didn't you
Control your lust?''

''It wasn't me,'' Adam whimpered.
''I would never have been so blinkered
As to disobey your sovereign will
Just for the sake of a passing thrill.

''It was the woman you gave me—
She's to blame,

She's the one devoid of shame,
She deceived me into eating,
She desired the pleasures, fleeting.''[7]

''*Eve,*'' said God, ''*that's Adam's defense;*
Should I not now pass sentence?
Did you not exploit his lust? —
Defend yourself if you must!''

''God, I beg you, don't judge me in haste!
It's true, I enjoyed the fruit's luscious taste.
But I was a victim of the serpent's ruse,[8]
When he colluded with Lilith
To seduce.''

''*I hear you*,'' said God.
''*The serpent I'll question.*
No doubt he'll have a cogent suggestion
As to whom I should punish, Adam or you,
And why he's a paragon of virtue!

''*One more thing— without being crude—*
But since you're unhappy in the nude,
I've brought you fig leaves[9] *attached with laces,*
To cover those mysterious places
Whose display, before, was never taboo,
But is now considered so
By you.

''*Among their tasks is to kindle the fire*
Of what will be known as human desire,
Which, in turn, will lead to procreation,
And the birth of earth's founding nation.''

God turned to the serpent:
''*What have you done now,*[10]
Did I not instruct you
To take a solemn vow
To live in peace with the man I'd made,[11]
And do nothing at all
To make him afraid?

''*Now, through your act,*[12]
Eve has sinned,
While you stood by
And inanely grinned.
At your door I must lay the blame —
Your bond with man won't be the same.''

''Lord,'' you know me better than that!

‘‘Would I behave like a boorish brat?
Eve was not misled by me,
It was but Lilith’s trickery.

‘‘She envied Eve the man she’d wed,
For Lilith desired to share his bed.
She created me to bring Eve down,
That she might don her bridal gown.’’

‘‘*Enough!*’’ cried the Lord, ‘‘*I’ve heard it all.*
Now, because it’s truly a close call,
The blame shall be spread among all you three,
For eating the fruit of my precious tree.

‘‘*From this Garden will Adam be sent*
To a world where his strength will be spent
In sowing, planting, and harvesting grain,
In clearing, weeding, pruning — and pain,[13]
As thorns and thistles tear at his skin,[14]
As seasons pass when the yield’s so thin
That he can barely feed the mouths at his table;
Those he’ll name Seth, Cain, and Abel.[15]

‘‘*Eve, for diminishing your Adam’s worth,*
Your pain will be great when you give birth.[16]
He’ll be the one to give the commands,[17]
And you’ll be as putty in his hands!

‘‘*Serpent, I’ll pull you down a peg,*
To crawl on your belly, instead of your leg.
Man will forever be your foe,
He’ll strike your head
You’ll bite his toe![18]

‘‘*I’ll deal with you, Lilith, in my own good time,*
Till then be confined to hot quicklime,
Your mission’s to tempt man as I require,
Not to satisfy your own desire.

‘‘*In case he attempts to return to the Garden,*
I’ll provide it with a cherubic warden,
Wielding a sword constantly turning,[19]
Man’s machinations wisely discerning.

‘‘*Too much freedom I’ve dispensed,*
Now a new era has commenced,
When man shall be judged
Alone by his deeds,
And shall have to provide
For his own needs.’’[20]

CAIN & ABEL
(4:1 – 16)

Sometime later Eve felt sick
And noticed her stomach getting thick.
Too tired to do all the household chores,
No appetite to eat the food in her stores.
Adam feared that Eve would die,
And he suspected the reason why:
'This must be for having eaten the fruit—
God is clearly in hot pursuit!'

''*Adam,*'' called God, in a gentle voice,
''*Don't be afraid — just rejoice,*
For your wife, Eve, shall bear you a son,
Call him Cain and teach him to run,
To till the ground, and hunt for his food—
Keep him ever in a confident mood.''

Cain was born before very long,
Followed by Abel, who wasn't too strong.
So, Abel tended the goats and sheep,
And prayed each night before going to sleep.

Since, in adulthood, they'd need a wife,
God had blessed the mother of life.
For, when Adam and Eve, together, had lain,
Twin sisters were born with Abel and Cain.[21]

Abel married his sister,
For which he offered thanks,
Through songs of praise and sacrifice
By the tranquil banks
Of the River Pishon
Where he offered to his Lord
The fattest lambs of his flock,[22]
All devotedly procured.

A fire came down from heaven
And swiftly devoured his lambs,
So, Abel knew that the Lord
Had received them from his hands.

When Cain saw that his brother
Had obtained divine goodwill,
He assumed that, as firstborn,
He'd get something better still.

So, he took a bath, combed his hair
And selected the best he had to wear,
But the fruit he chose was of inferior kind,
And, with scant devotion in his mind,
He tossed it nonchalantly on the ground,
Not even shaping it into a mound.

The voice he heard from above
Was clearly of one quite riled:
‘‘*Is that your token of love, Cain?*
From now you are exiled!’’[23]
‘‘But, Lord,’’ said Cain, self-righteously,
‘‘Do you really think that’s fair?
The entire earth is yours alone,
So why should you even care
Whether the gift I offer you is
A harvest or one pear?’’

‘‘*Oh, stupid man*,’’ the Lord replied,
‘‘*How could you fail to see*
That it’s the fruit of the heart that I desire,
Not what you offer me?

‘‘*But that is not your only sin,*
From which your exile flows.
It’s for what you did to your brother’s wife,
The sister whom he chose.[24]

‘‘*Not content with the wife you gained—*
Whose love you don’t deserve—
To seize Abel’s, you felt constrained,
Thinking I didn’t observe.

‘‘*A wife is sacred to her man—*
I built that into my original plan—
I created them body and soul,
To occupy the same bed roll.

‘‘*Because Abel’s trust you violated,*
Through the act you perpetrated,
His broken heart I must repair
Through blessings galore –
But you beware:
One wanton glance at his wife,
And you will pay with your life!’’

Cain went away in disgrace,
But God’s last words he couldn’t efface.
They rang in his ears that were still burning
From God’s warning and his own yearning.

‘‘*Pay with your life*! —
Hmm! There’s a thought!
Why should I be distraught?
With Abel gone, the reward will be great;
God’s love for him will evaporate
And I’ll inherit wife and estate!’’

One day the brothers were alone,
When Cain picked up the largest stone
And smashed it over Abel’s head[25] —
And, in an instant, he was dead!

‘‘*Where’s your brother?*’’
Boomed the heavenly voice.
‘‘I know not, Lord? Do I rejoice
In being his keeper wherever he goes?
You know he has so many foes.
Perhaps he was mauled by a lioness—
They are so incomparably heartless,
Especially when protecting a cub,
Or on the receiving end of a snub!’’

‘‘*Cain, go seal your lips with tape!*
What a pathetic attempt to escape
Being condemned for a heinous crime! —
I’ll now bury you alive
In a pit of lime.’’

‘‘Lord,’’ said Cain, ‘‘please hear me out.
I know I’ve been a terrible lout,
But no one’s ever been killed before,
Except for a lion, a bear or boar;
How could I have guessed what now I know
That a man can die from a gentle blow?
So, forgive me Lord before it’s too late—
I acknowledge my sin and accept my fate.’’

Thereupon, God replied:
‘‘*I’ll ignore the fact that you lied.*
If in remorse you’ll be resolute,
Your punishment I’ll now commute.

‘‘*But the ground which absorbed Abel’s blood*
Will no longer yield its crop.[26]
A fugitive and a wanderer be,
Scavenging at every stop.’’

‘‘But what,’’ said Cain, ‘‘of the animals wild,
When they learn of this, my fate?

They'll regard me as an easy prey
For them and their mate.''

''*On that score, you need not fear*,''
God reassured Cain,
''*I'll place a sign between your eyes*:[27]
A reddish-colored stain.

''*The animals will know what that implies,*
And keep you far from harm.
Seven-fold shall their punishment be[28]
If they disturb your calm.

''*Now off you go with your wife.*
Search out the land of Nod.
Be fruitful there and multiply —
And submit yourself to God.''

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