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## Eden's Burden

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## Eden's Burden

Casey L. Jones

From the corner of a busy restaurant patio we watch children play in puddles of fresh rain, and from beneath your dark glasses, a tear falls. It trickles down the side of your face, collecting along your delicate jaw line. It dangles there, sparkling in the light, signaling to me with flashing colors. Reaching across the table, I brush aside a loose strand of your hair and wipe the tear from your cheek. Your eyes are fixed on a little girl with pigtails.

She waves, but you turn away. Your eyes sink mournfully to your side where a bird hops about the patio floor in search of crumbs.

"I'm sorry," you say shaking your head.

"Leah, it's ok. I understand, but at some point we have to learn to move on and find happiness with what we have. Don't you agree?"

"John, you don't understand."

"Then, help me to, Leah. Please...what am I not understanding?"

Wrinkles bunch along your brow and your chin begins to quiver. Beside us, a waiter lays out some menus and seats a young couple. You pull the napkin from beneath your glass and slide stealthily to the back of the bistro while concealing your eyes from the chattering tables around you. I run my hands through my hair, puzzled and flustered, staring at the patterns along my empty plate.

Across the promenade, a group of musicians gather on stools amidst open black cases, while tourists and shoppers set down their bags and take seats along the edge of a fountain. The crowd grows silent as the strings begin to play.

I pay the bill and wander out through the patio gate, occasionally glancing back to the restaurant for Leah while I ponder over the doleful cries of two violins

Patience, I tell myself. Just give her time.

We met at a wedding in Santa Barbara, three years ago this June. You were laughing with a friend when our eyes first met. I asked you to dance, and by the end of the night I knew my days as a bachelor were over. We were inseparable that first summer, and by fall we were married.

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We bought a condo, just down from the Santa Monica pier, and spent many late nights talking on our balcony and gazing out onto the sleepy ocean. The lights of distant ships sailed across the black horizon as we charted the course for our new life together. We both wanted children, and given our age, we decided it best not to wait.

Spring came and went, and our dreamy conversations about parenthood grew increasingly tense, as if Aphrodite were eavesdropping from inside our sliding glass door, ready to curse our fertility for presuming too much. We tried everything in the course of that next year, but to no success. You were heartbroken

and shunned my attempts to comfort you. You grew distant and depressed, and slowly retreated into your own silent world. Left in my solitude, I struggled to read between the emotional lines. Perhaps we would never have children of our own, but after all, wasn't it out of our hands? And why would you pull away from me at a time like this?

One morning, you were sulking over a cup of coffee. "I can't teach anymore," you said desperately. "It's too painful to bear." Your eyes were swollen and red. I pulled up a stool next to you and you melted into my arms. Our sadness slowly turned into passion and we made love like newlyweds.

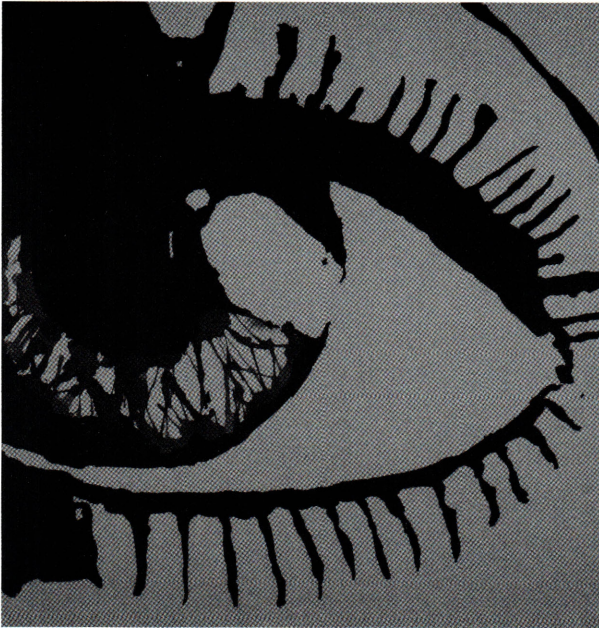
I thought the gloom was beginning to lift, but my hopes vanished quickly. Our evening walks along the beach became sufferable chores; every child we passed seemed to rip the scab off a wound that refused to heal.

Overhead, the sky rolls in a smoky haze, and I watch the cloudy figures take shape as the orchestra plays. I'm startled by the touch of your lips against neck. They tickle along my collar and I turn around to meet them. Your tender kisses give me hope and I savor the moment with my arm around you, as the two violins softly bring the song to an end.

"I'm sorry, John."

"It's all right," I say, trying to sound as comforting as possible. "Do you want to walk around, catch a little fresh air?"

You nod and look at me as if wanting to explain, but before you can speak the orchestra begins to play, and you settle for a peck on my cheek.



**SEEN1** Abigail Long

We stroll down the promenade with our fingers intertwined, wandering beneath the towering rows of palms and eucalyptus. The smell of jasmine drifts through the air, while people linger from one store to the next. A mime clad in solid white, approaches us with an embellished sad frown. He pulls a rose from behind his back and you blush. Your beauty is captivating. Even the mime can't help but smile.

We turn down a quiet side street towards the beach, trying to escape the crowds, when a lavishly decorated store front grabs our attention. Framed with pink clusters of draping bougainvillea is a small sign reading: "Friends from Eden," and painted below is a mural depicting Adam and Eve, nestled beneath a tree and surrounded by a host of exotic animals. We hear a dog yelp from within, and you tug at my hand, pulling me towards the store.

The doors part for us as we approach, luring us in. Mist rolls out at our feet and the pavement gives way to finely crushed earth. My eyes strain to adjust to the dim lights as I take in the scene.

**T**ree branches stretch above our heads, forming a canopy of leaves and limbs and the walls are lost behind bushes and vines. A magical forest spreads before our eyes, and the soft chirps of birds filter down to us from hidden nests above. Beads glisten down my arm as the humid air condenses and cools against my skin. We hear another yelp and follow it further down a winding dirt path. The bushes rustle with life, and butterflies flutter through the air. Approaching a tall hedge, the path takes a turn and opens to reveal a softly lit meadow, with a tree standing in its midst. Its foliage is speckled with colorful fruit, and beneath it a little red fox stares inquisitively back at us. He looks up at the tree and yelps, the same cry that drew us within, and then scurries away into the tall grass. We walk towards the tree, and gaze at its mystical limbs. Golden pears and ruby red apples dangle like ornaments before our eyes. You look back at me and then reach up towards the tree, pulling down one of the jewels for closer inspection.

The tree rustles and a sudden shriek startles us from above. We freeze, expecting the wrath of some god-like caretaker, when a high raspy voice crackles and begins to sing.

"Braak...One is the loneliest number that you'll ever do, Braak."

Perched on an open branch is a tall, colorful bird with swirling checkered eyes. His scarlet crowned head is ruffled and frayed. He rocks up and down, beating his wings as he squawks. Your face becomes solemn, and your eyes close, like Moses being humbled before the burning bush.

"Braak...Two can be as bad as one...Braak."

The fruit slips from your fingers as you turn and look up. The bird settles and puffs out his faded red chest like a battle worn soldier, gazing proudly back at you from over his crusty beak. You step towards the bird, and he, in turn, lowers

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his broad head and shuffles along the branch to meet you. To my amazement, you hold up your hand and the bird takes a fluttering step down, lacing his claws around your fingers.

“John, there’s something I must tell you.” Your eyes start to swell and your jaw rocks from side to side.

“What is it Leah?”

You hesitate, and the bird climbs to your shoulder, spreading his wings, parading its multicolored feathers underneath.

## **Pregnancy**

Talmeez Burney

Once a dream  
had dinner with us  
and it  
stayed overnight.  
Like goose bumps  
it managed to insert itself  
between us.  
When we were done love making  
panting in each other’s arms,  
it split.  
You got the dream;  
I got the flesh and blood.  
Unequal  
division  
of our first vision.

Your eyes become windows, opening slightly to reveal the hidden torment inside. I see you sitting cross legged in a robe at the end of a narrow hall. The walls are barren. You rock back and forth, biting your nails. The lights flicker and you cover your face, rocking faster and faster. My throat tightens, my stomach churns...

“John...”

You reach for my hand and pull me out of my daze. I follow you as we wade through a field of poppies toward a wall of dark trees. A thick fog swirls along the forest edge masking its depths as we approach. You press ahead, while the bird swivels his head back and forth, watching me carefully from your shoulder.

**T**he periphery begins to fade as we pass through the trees. The chirping birds become muffled and the earth crunches beneath our feet with every step. We follow along the path in complete silence, until the faint sound of laughter begins to resonate within the fog.

“It’s all my fault, John. This whole thing’s my fault,” you say as we continue down the widening trail. I want to empathize with you, but I don’t understand what is happening.

Ahead, the path turns to sand and a pier stretches out into the foggy abyss. I look over at you and stop, astonished. The bird towers over you with his claws straddling both of your shoulders. It has doubled in size and its feathers are smooth and vibrant. I reach for your arm and pull you closer. Your face is smooth and tight, a younger face that I had only seen in photos.

“I was pregnant before. Before I met you, John. I never should have done it.” Your innocent young voice takes me by surprise. Your lower lip trembles.

The colossal bird glares down at us, unfurling his wings the length of your body and beating them against the mist.

“Braak. One is the loneliest number.”

**A**s we walk out onto the pier, the echoing laughter grows louder and from the haze appears a ticket booth and carnival. We pass a parade of strange dream-like animation: children with rotten teeth tote pink clouds of candy, a blindfolded man throws knives at a girl tied to a spinning wheel, and a doctor gazes closely into a crystal ball, handing out fortunes to a line of young, impressionable girls. I hear voices calling your name from the Ferris wheel high above, but you continue on your path. As we approach the end of the pier, a strong gust of wind rattles the planks, spraying our faces with salt. The ocean rumbles beneath our feet and waves crash against the wooden piles.

You turn to me, pushing your dark auburn hair from your face. Your eyes are lined in blue, and your lips sealed in pink.

“Leah?”

“I was seventeen and I was alone and scared. I didn’t think things through. I just couldn’t deal with it. I’m so sorry.” Rivers of blue makeup flow down your cheeks.

The bird has now grown to menacing heights, and his fiery breast looms overhead. Newspapers and popcorn swirl about the pier, as the bird flaps his monstrous wings in protest. His deafening cries sail through the fog, like a fleet of tortured souls.

“Braaak. Two can be as bad as one. Braaaak.”

Your arms are jelly-cold, and your narrow shoulders buckle beneath the weight of the bird. “We can work through this, Leah. Nothing can change the way I feel about you.”

“Why should God ever trust me again? I’m sorry John, I’m so sorry.”

**S**harp turquoise feathers thrash from one side of the pier to the other, splashing into the ocean as they extend beyond the rails. The bird’s claws broaden and stretch, wrapping around your delicate frame. I tug and jerk at them, trying to pull you free, but I can’t. The harder I pull the tighter they squeeze, and your face is throbbing red. I lean into you closely.

“We all have made decisions we regret Leah, but we can get through this together, I promise.”

A turbulent wind bears down as the feathery giant begins to lift you away from me. Your pale blue eyes open wide with fear, as if suddenly aware of the bird’s divisive intent. My fingers slide down your slippery arms as you’re

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pulled higher and higher into the air. In a sudden burst of panic, you scream and reach out for me, "John...No!" You struggle and twist, fighting the serpent-like grip with every bit of energy you have. The bird screams as you flail and begin to pry the claws loose. With a desperate last heave, you pull yourself free and fall to the pier below. I cover you with my arms as the bird breaks away and begins spiraling above, leering at us with his giant checkered eyes.

**A** warm gust of air blows in from the ocean and the heavy veil of fog swirls and scatters. Darkness gives way, and the sky ignites into a radiant orange glow. The bird shudders and turns to retreat, screeching in vain as he flees from the miraculous light. He tears through the sky like a comet and is quickly lost in the fiery firmament above.

The winds slow to a gentle breeze and a peaceful calm ensues. The ocean face sprawls out before us like glass, and the division between water and sky is lost in a shimmering horizon.

"It's gone Leah," I whisper. We're alone now on the pier, and your face is buried against my chest. The sun spreads over us like a blanket of warm protection.

"Do you still love me?" you ask, squeezing me tightly. My eyes swell and begin to burn from a sudden rush of emotion; I find it hard to reply without sobbing.

"Of course I do Leah. I love you more than ever."

You turn and look up at me. The familiar signs of age have returned, but the gloomy veil has been lifted. Your crystal blue eyes are as big and bright as the sun and a sparkle of hope dances freely within them, signaling to me with flashing colors.

## **Delivered**

Bonnie Frazier

The International Bible Deliverance  
Center

looked like a truck stop  
off highway 45, between Houston and  
Dallas.

Beneath a hot tin canopy  
you can get delivered in 5 minutes.

5 minutes for \$9.95

10 minutes for \$ 19.95

30 minutes for \$49.95

(includes emotional baggage  
and/or evil spirit removal)

Guaranteed. No refunds.

Tap water always available upon request.

Some days there is warm lemonade.

I saw a sign.