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opening extract from

The Oxford Book of Bible Stories

retold from the old testament by

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illustrated by

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Introduction

When I was a child, in a small seaside town, I used to go to the beach and listen to a man telling stories. One was about a baby whose mother hid him from the soldiers in the bulrushes, and whose sister Miriam watched and waited to see what would happen to him. Another was about Jonah, who was swallowed by a whale and was later spat out, still alive! Another was about Daniel, who spent the night in a lions' den, and not a hair of his head was touched. While he was talkng, the man stuck little cut-out felt lions, whales, babies, and suchlike on to a felt board; sometimes they would drop off—the desert camel, which turned up in most stories, had a particular habit of doing that. The children would giggle and whistle, but I used to sit with my heart stopped while the story-teller groped in the sand, desperate for him to carry on with his story.

I loved those stories. I didn't even know that they came from the Bible.

Some years ago, Oxford University Press invited me to retell stories from the Old Testament. Imagine my joy at revisiting these stories from my childhood.

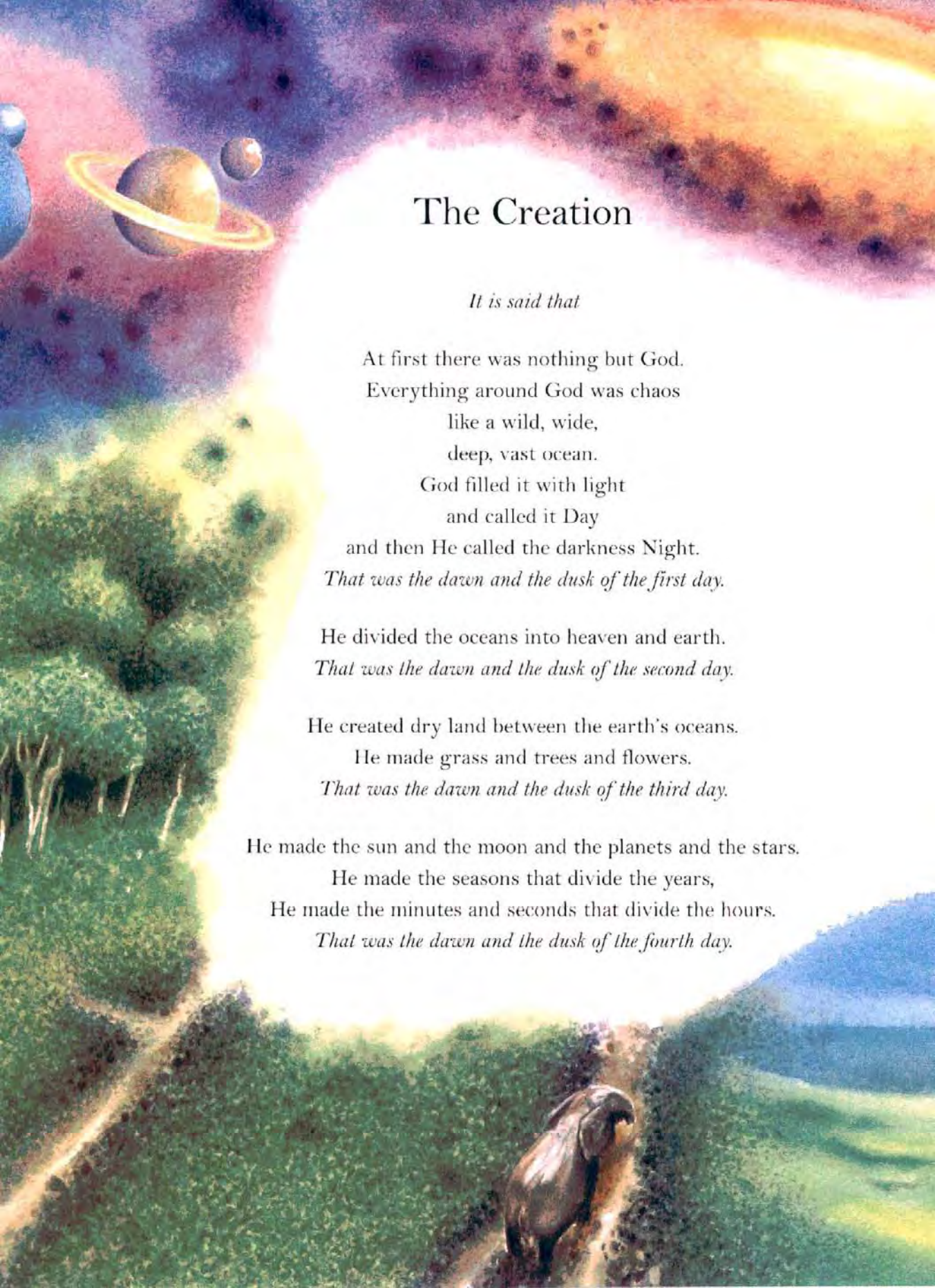


In my research I discovered more that I only half knew, or had never met before, and realized that they are all part of one big, important story, like chapters in a book. These chapter-stories are full of danger and treachery, of heroes and villains, of fierce love and simple devotion, of hopeless despair and glorious triumph. I am haunted by characters such as Ruth, stranded in a strange land; Jephtha's daughter, who knows she will never grow up; Hagar, sheltering her dying son from the desert heat; David, shepherd boy, giant-slayer, King . . . Oh—I can't stop there! But they are all in these pages, for you to discover.

I hope you love reading them as much as I loved listening to the man on the beach. Instead of his felt figures, you have Jason Cockcroft's superb illustrations. I hope the stories will stay with you for the rest of your lives.

Thank you to my editor, Vic Tebbs, for her generous and thorough support, and for making sure that my versions of the stories remained faithful to the original text.





The Creation

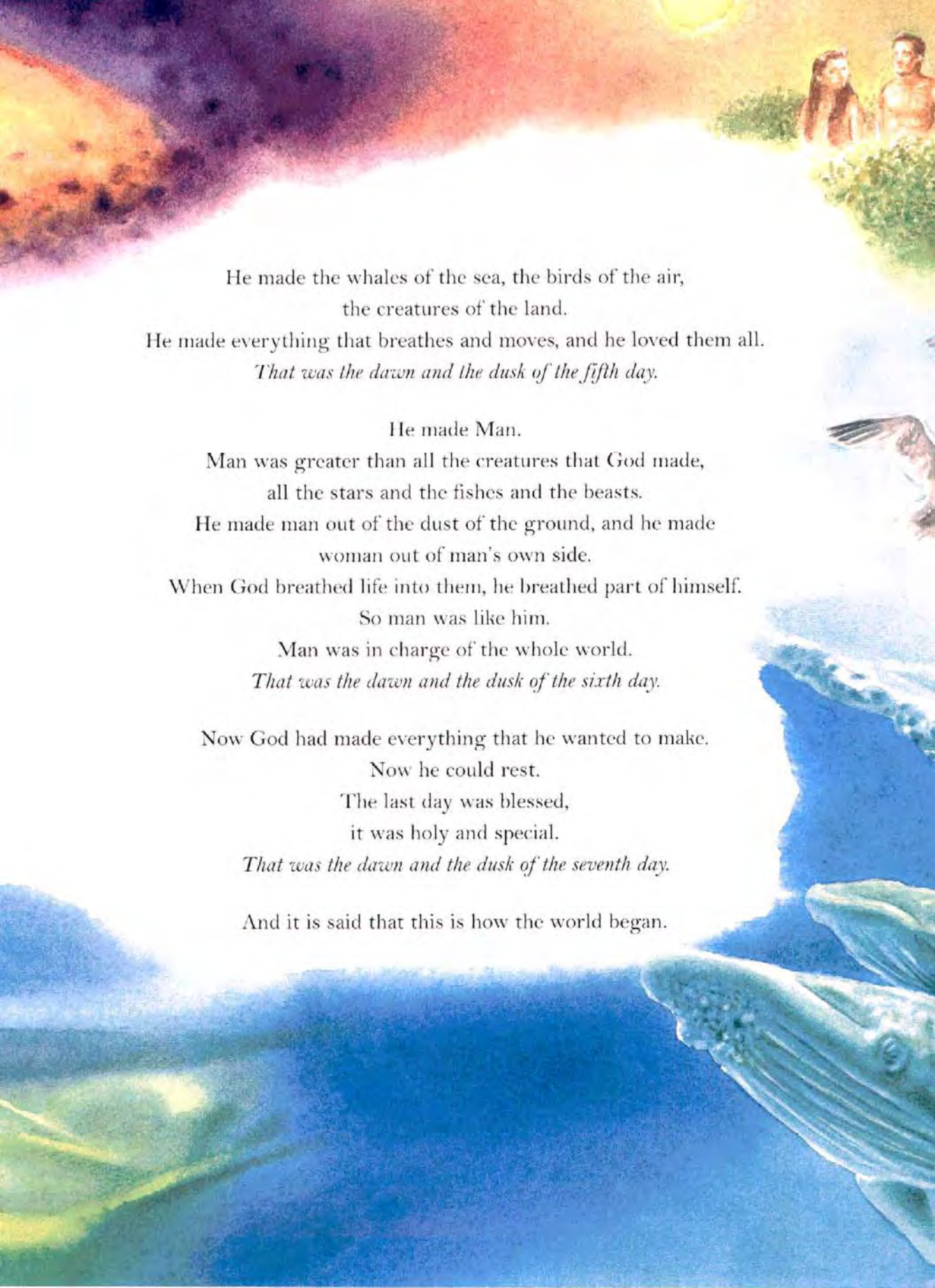
It is said that

At first there was nothing but God.
Everything around God was chaos
like a wild, wide,
deep, vast ocean.
God filled it with light
and called it Day
and then He called the darkness Night.
That was the dawn and the dusk of the first day.

He divided the oceans into heaven and earth.
That was the dawn and the dusk of the second day.

He created dry land between the earth's oceans.
He made grass and trees and flowers.
That was the dawn and the dusk of the third day.

He made the sun and the moon and the planets and the stars.
He made the seasons that divide the years,
He made the minutes and seconds that divide the hours.
That was the dawn and the dusk of the fourth day.



He made the whales of the sea, the birds of the air,
the creatures of the land.
He made everything that breathes and moves, and he loved them all.
That was the dawn and the dusk of the fifth day.

He made Man.
Man was greater than all the creatures that God made,
all the stars and the fishes and the beasts.
He made man out of the dust of the ground, and he made
woman out of man's own side.
When God breathed life into them, he breathed part of himself.
So man was like him.
Man was in charge of the whole world.
That was the dawn and the dusk of the sixth day.

Now God had made everything that he wanted to make.
Now he could rest.
The last day was blessed,
it was holy and special.
That was the dawn and the dusk of the seventh day.

And it is said that this is how the world began.



Eden

There was once a beautiful garden. It was more full of colour and scent and light than anything we can imagine. Animals wandered about freely, and they were at peace with one another. The lion played with the lamb, and finches flew with hawks. A great river flowed through the garden, watering the flowers that grew on its banks, sending ripples of golden light up the barks of the great trees. It was called the Garden of Eden, and it was made for the first man and woman, Adam and his wife Eve. One day it would be home for all the people that God created.

That was the plan, but the plan went wrong.

Also in the garden was a serpent. He wasn't a man, and he wasn't a beast. He was an angel when the world was first created, but because he was too proud God had thrown him out of Heaven. Once, before Adam and his wife were made, he was God's favourite. Now he was angry that God had rejected him, and he came to the Garden of Eden to seek his revenge. He had red eyes that gleamed like garnet stones, and white wings that shimmered when the sun or the moon was on them. He had more freedom than anything else in the garden, and he was clever and crafty. He could do anything he wanted to do, and go wherever he chose to go. But he chose to follow Adam and his wife, like a beautiful, colourful, silent shadow. He watched everything they did, and he was jealous because God loved them.

In the dusky evenings, when the sun was going down and filling the garden with amber light, God used to walk in the garden with Adam and

Eve and show them everything he had made for them. The red-eyed serpent followed them, and watched, and listened.

In the middle of the Garden of Eden there were two trees. One was the tree of life itself. Its roots were deeper than the earth, and its branches climbed towards the sky like hands reaching up to heaven. The other tree, the most beautiful tree, was the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Every branch hung with fruits that were round and ripe and bursting with juices. When they came to this one God always stopped and turned to look at Adam and Eve.

You must never eat the fruit from this tree, he warned them. *If you disobey me, I will punish you.*

They held hands and promised they would never touch the tree. Why would they ever do anything to disobey God? they asked.

I tell you, you must never eat the fruit of this tree, God said. *Or you'll have pain, and fear, and you will die.*

Adam and Eve smiled. What were these words, pain and fear, and what did it mean, to die? God smiled back at them, but it was a sorrowful smile. And the red-eyed serpent smiled too, dark in the shadows.

Adam and Eve passed the tree of knowledge every day when they walked round the garden. They always stopped to admire the fruits that clustered like jewels on its branches; emerald green and amber gold, ruby-red and amethyst-purple, according to their ripeness.

'It's a very beautiful tree,' said Adam, 'but we mustn't touch it.'

'No, we'll never touch it,' Eve agreed. 'We'll just look at it, won't we?'

The red-eyed serpent folded his wings and waited. He curled up under the tree and sipped the juicy fruits as if they were nectar. Then he watched silently until the next time Eve walked on her own.

When she came to the forbidden tree he hummed softly:

'*How sweet* the fruit must be, that dangles from that tree.'

Eve stopped and listened, amazed that a serpent could speak exactly the thoughts that were inside her head. She went up to the tree, close

enough to smell the sweet fruit. She could have put out her hand and touched the tree, she was so close, but she remembered what God had said, and she walked away.

Next time Eve walked near the tree, the serpent spread out his gorgeous wings and flew up onto one of the branches.

'As ripe as the sun is the fruit on this tree,' he sang. 'As ready to eat as it will ever be.'

Eve stopped, surprised again to hear a serpent singing words that she could understand. She went up to the tree and held up her hands like a bowl. If one of the fruits had fallen, it would have dropped right into her hands. But she remembered what God had said, and she went away.

Next time she went by the tree the serpent had twined himself around the trunk. His wings were shimmering like the moon on water, and his eyes were as red as setting suns.

'Eat, Eve, taste and eat,' he whispered.

Eve stopped. The serpent's head lay just by one of the fruits.

'Eat, Eve. Just taste. You won't die. It's quite safe.'

She hesitated. The fruit was brimming with juices, ready to burst.

'Eat, Eve, taste and eat. And you will be as wise as God. You will know everything. See how ripe it is, how sweet.'

Eve tilted back her head and put her lips round the fruit, and the juices trickled down her face, down her arms, down her body. She closed her eyes, and the serpent disappeared.

'Eve, Eve, are you mad? What are you doing?'

Eve opened her eyes and saw Adam running towards her. She stared at the half-eaten fruit and plucked it from the tree. 'I just wanted to taste it. Try it, Adam. Just a little bit. It won't do any harm,' she begged him.

'No,' he said. 'We promised God we wouldn't touch this fruit.' He took her hand and tried to lead her away from the tree, but she held out the fruit to him.



'Just one bite. It's so sweet, you'll love it.'

He shook his head. 'Come away. Drop it, please.'

'Adam, if we eat this fruit we'll know everything that God knows. This is the Tree of Knowledge.' She held out the fruit again. 'Taste, Adam. Taste and eat with me. It's safe. We won't die.'

And Adam took the fruit, and ate it, and the juices trickled down his body like wine.

'Now you know everything,' laughed the serpent, twisting himself out of the shadows and twining round the tree like tendrils of ivy. 'Everything. Pain, fear, and death. Death, and fear, and pain.' His laughter echoed round the Garden of Eden.

'What have we done?' gasped Adam.

'What will God say?' Eve moaned.

It was evening. The birds came home to roost in the branches of the tree. The sun was sinking fast, fast, and they knew that soon God would be coming to walk and talk with them. They looked at each other in despair.

'What shall we do?' they asked each other.

'Fear, and pain, and death,' the serpent sang.

Adam and Eve realized that they were as naked as the animals. Desperate with fear and shame, they ran and tried to hide themselves. They pulled leaves down from fig trees and tried to cover their bodies with them.

But there was no hiding from God. He came straight to them. His shadow fell like night across them where they crouched, their heads in their hands. He stood in silence, looking down at them, and they knew that he had seen them eating the forbidden fruit. He knew everything.

Why have you covered yourselves with leaves? he asked them sadly.

Why are you ashamed of your nakedness now,

when you have always walked freely and unashamed?

Take these furs, and cover yourselves, if you must.

They scrambled into the clothes that he handed them. They stood in front of him like frightened children, afraid of what he might do.

Now tell me. Have you eaten fruit from the forbidden tree?

Adam pointed at Eve and said, 'It was her fault. She gave me the fruit, and I ate it.'

Why?

'The serpent tricked me,' Eve whispered. 'He made me do it.'

You disobeyed me, God said.

I gave you everything, and you disobeyed me.

I loved you, and yet you disobeyed me.

He turned away from them as if he couldn't bear to look at them any longer. The serpent was dangling from the tree, laughing, and God roared at him in anger.

You!

You will never live as you please again.

You will never walk with men

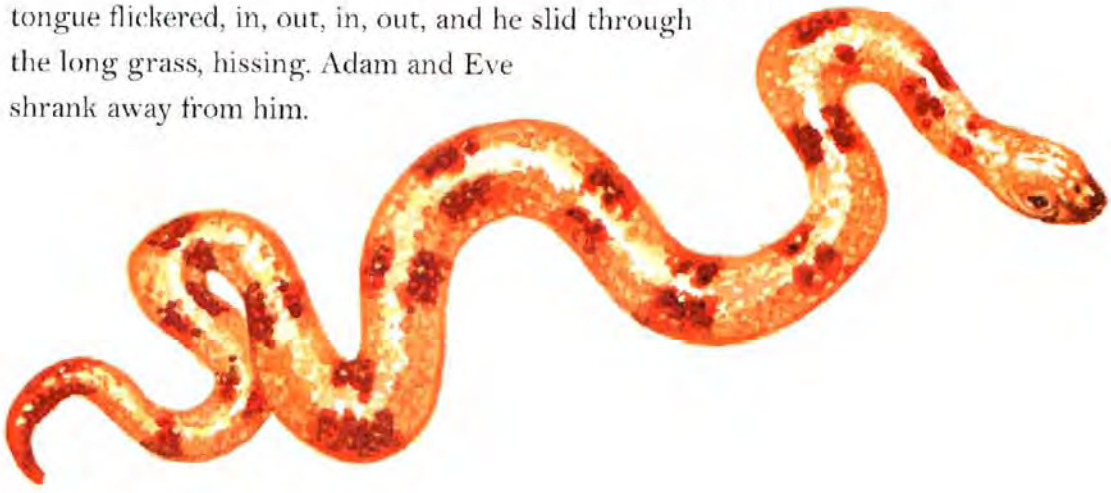
or fly with angels.

You will slide on the ground on your belly,

and you will eat the dust of the earth.

You are a snake, and men will always despise you.

The serpent slithered down from the tree. The feathers dropped from his wings and drifted away like leaves. An oily, papery skin crinkled across his body. The red of his eyes faded like a quenched fire. His forked tongue flickered, in, out, in, out, and he slid through the long grass, hissing. Adam and Eve shrank away from him.



Then God turned back to Adam and Eve. *Go away from me. You are banished from my garden.*

'What shall we do?' Adam asked him, shaking with fear.

Now you are afraid! God said.

Outside this garden you will toil and sweat
from the rising of the sun to the rising of the moon.
Your limbs will ache with toil
your bellies will hurt with hunger,
and still you will work.
Eve will bring children into the world
through pain and blood and labour.
And at the end of it all, you will die.
You came from dust,
you will return to dust.
Fear, and pain, and death.

Now go! he shouted. *Go.*

Adam and Eve ran, clutching their clothes around themselves, crying and stumbling out of the Garden of Eden. The grass turned to thorns and thistles and dragged at their skin, their feet bled on the sharp stones, the sun grew cold and the sky wept down on them. Everywhere around them was bare, stony, gritty soil.

When they turned to look back to where the garden had been they saw an angel with the face of a lion, brandishing a sword of fire. A tongue of flame whipped this way and that: it was impossible to go back into the garden. The heat of the flames drove them further and further away, on and on, until they could run no more.

Then they stopped. The fiery angel had gone; the voice of God had gone. Adam and Eve felt they were alone in a strange, harsh world. They knew that they would never see the beautiful garden again.