

Hélène Dorion

DAYS OF SAND



A Novel Translated by Jonathan Kaplansky

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*This translation is for my parents,
Leonard and Paula,
and for my sister, Margo,
and the days of sand ...*

JONATHAN KAPLANSKY

EACH MORNING I WALK DOWN the stairs leading to the dock. I come across birds — blue jays, robins, turtledoves — and many squirrels; from the end of the dock, I sometimes see the muskrat, who lives somewhere behind the stones of the peninsula, swimming. Eyes half shut, mouth closing around the algae that trail on each side of his body, he slices through the still-blue of early morning. His tail acting as both engine and rudder, he surges up toward the dock, then twists around to the left and dives, disappearing a few metres from shore.

Writing these words once is enough. More and more, we lock ourselves away, enter into the useless repetition of self, the useless multiplication of days. Yet we know, each morning, what returns this way, apparently different, transfigured, would not take much to keep us in the realm of the known. It is about that: days that burn, burning us along with them.

What are we made of? Dust risen up, immediately settling down, creates the fragile impression. “In the interval, the

open enclosure, perhaps my only homeland,” wrote Philippe Jaccottet. The places of writing are only ever elsewhere. Companions of non-tranquility, words convey the life that passes through us. At the end, only an indistinct line will remain, a passage of shadows and light between here and elsewhere.

The tide comes in, goes out on the sand. Feet sink into it and footsteps are lost there, inside and out, revealing the past that shapes them. I let the hours enter me, followed by the words. Everything that hemmed me in — the shackles, habits, supports that things sometimes become — soon opens: the immense lake, the trees, the street, the light, my body itself; here I am whole; moreover, I am inside, at last, I am here. Writing gives time back its freedom and space its otherness.

IN 1670, SPINOZA ANONYMOUSLY PUBLISHED his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, a work deemed blasphemous, which had him banished from Amsterdam. Afterwards, he lived in seclusion, devoting most of his time to study. To support himself, he polished microscope and telescope lenses.

During the winter of 1750, Johann Sebastian Bach underwent an operation that failed and left him almost blind. After six months he suddenly recovered his sight, but a few hours later was struck down by a fit of apoplexy.

Slight mist on the lake, leaves barely quivering. Seen from afar, seen from close up, the largest emerges from the smallest. The finger shows the moon, there, at the end of the dark sky. We close our eyes, just a few seconds and only words remain to make life move, to follow the rapid curve of the moon, to act as a gaze, a road leading toward meaning.

Through the glass of words, through the shadow and light that meld them, the world appears.

IT IS EVENING, A COOL autumn evening. I am walking in a shopping centre parking lot. My father moves ahead of me, but rather than trying to catch up to him, I walk slowly and look up to the transparent sky of this night. A long passage suddenly opens — it is as if I am being sucked toward top and toward bottom at the same time, caught up in this vertigo of feeling the world surging right to me, *I* of dust, consciousness that lives, that will die as well, and suddenly the world splits up into a multitude of Russian dolls, fragile *galaxy-planet-earth-father-I-dust*, held to the ground by we don't know what miracle, what ultimate order. But so it is, a tunnel of life ending in death. I am five years old; until then, everything to me had seemed infinite.

That same autumn, one day, alone at home with my father, I see him stretched out on the living room couch, feverish. Grimacing in pain, he asks me to go fetch him a blanket. Then the images blur. How to take care of your father when you're five? I imagine how long it seemed before

my mother and sister returned. The doctor came to the house, then the ambulance in turn arrived to carry away my father, barely conscious, suffering — we later discovered — from poisoning that could have taken him away to that beyond of which I could only sense the vague outline.

One day that same autumn, John Kennedy was assassinated. Four o'clock in the afternoon, my sister had just returned from school. On the television screen: a car was moving, smiles glowing on faces, hands raised to greet the crowd. Then the man's head suddenly tilted forward, back — at his side, the woman in white climbed up on the seat, caught something that seemed to have landed on the trunk of the car, now suddenly accelerating, followed by a procession of motorcycles and other cars. Then the scene begins anew: the smiles, the hands, the head, the white silhouette, smiles, hands, head. Then death. The assassination of John F. Kennedy.

For months these words revolved in my body. While my family slept, I got up and went out into the hallway, where I sat down on the floor, fear seeming to come from everywhere. For I knew: not only did death await at the close of each life, but we could, before this ending, be killed. Assassinated. The words and the images they carried revolved, without settling, revolved, and fear revolved with them. Suddenly death settled. Took hold. So in the evening, when my mother put me to bed, I could no longer remain there,

in the darkness of my childhood room, my childhood window, a window overlooking a world where death, at any moment, could appear.

For a long time I believed that these events had been spread out over many years. But they all took place in the fall of 1963. I was five-and-a-half.

Years later, I was plunged again into the dizzying sensation. This time, it came from a book. I asked myself afterwards if deep down the professor suspected the true power of the words. The title of the course, “Existentialism,” had already led us to read Sartre, Husserl, Heidegger. Then it was Camus. *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Sisyphus, condemned to roll his rock up a mountain, an effort incessantly repeated, fails, and watches it hurtle back down the hill. At that moment all of Sisyphus’ tragedy plays out, in the precise interval when he is possessed by the unshakable hope of finally succeeding. Hope, then fervour, and emptiness. He must begin anew, again lifting the rock, again climbing the hill. Down and back up, joy and pain, hope and sorrow. Life, each time different and the same, begun anew a thousand times through thousands of little things that are repeated.

“At that subtle moment when man glances backward over his life, Sisyphus, returning to his rock, contemplates that series of unrelated actions which becomes his fate, created by him, combined under his memory’s eye and soon

sealed by his death. Thus, convinced of the wholly human origin of all that is human, a blind man eager to see who knows that the night has no end, he is still on the go. The rock is still rolling.”

No more answers, in me, no consolation, no reason. My gaze was changed, forever transformed. Since life was nothing, it must be all. I turned over the lens. Seen from afar, seen from close up, the largest emerged from the smallest. Then I saw that sometimes life has to be taken apart so it can be put back together, recreating what is here with other places.

“Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.”

The smallest was found again, and life put back together. Everything I looked at suddenly appeared more clearly.

Then it was the words. What I had sought as a child finally came to pass. The words appeared. Not simply those we trail around from one moment to the next in the middle of our life, but real words, the ones we sense behind things, behind what we name. I held in my hands a book, not many pages in it, and not many words on each page. The words took form, I clearly perceived their shape, felt their texture; at last I touched the very matter from which they were made. Just as in a landscape, I could see colours, multiple shapes meeting

up; I could now manage to perceive the words as matter from which meaning emerged. That day, I experienced this encounter with poetry as a kind of shock. What I had so awaited as a child had come to pass. I finally saw not only the window but the infinite it overlooked.

For a long time I believed for a long time I wanted
for a long time
for a long time not to die no longer to love no longer
and yet I knew moreover from a sure source that
to live to die is the same movement and nothing
else nothing else now every day
in the street I come and go roundabout I keep
...
Now between the future and the past is revealed
an inhabitable present, a genuine truth. Freedom
to be in the world, to live without quality, as
the very first molecule seeking another
identical to it.

It was at the beginning of our age, the planet
earth had neither hips, nor sex, nor hair, but
it knew with inexact science the detours
of desire. Ever since, from marriage to marriage the body
busies itself,
scatters, then comes back together; we no longer count
our souls that unlock anguish, the wall of despair,

to more clarity.

What will tomorrow bring?

Through the glass the landscape unfolds. All is there: body and Earth, soul, and life shaking them up. From one molecule to the next, keen desire casts us into the present, passes from shadow to shadow, then smashes them for more light. We then enter pure presence, which places us in harmony with the world — we hear our heart beat, leaves quiver. We no longer hear anything, and the silence that then resonates against the hours leaves us no longer alone but among things touched, inhabited, named one by one.

The words of Jacques Brault flung wide open the windows of poetry for me. As a teenager, I listened emotionally, passionately, to lyrics sung by Ferré, Brel, Piaf. Thousands of times, the records of Jacques Bertin, Georges Moustaki, and Barbara had been played. But this time the words dug into the void itself — form and matter, they took all the space of meaning. Each word seemed shaped by reality itself so that it managed not only to recreate its essence, but also to extend its boundaries. Life itself breathed more fully there, and what was here opened onto other places.

WINNER OF THE PRIX ANNE-HÉBERT

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