

A close-up photograph of a hand holding a peach. The hand is positioned in the lower-left quadrant, with the thumb and index finger gently cradling the fruit. The peach is a warm, golden-orange color with a soft, fuzzy texture. The background is a dark, almost black, surface with a mottled, organic texture, possibly wood or stone, which is illuminated by a warm, low-key light source, creating a dramatic contrast and highlighting the textures of the hand and the peach. The overall mood is intimate and contemplative.

Fragments of the World

WANDERING
SOULS
IN PARADISE
LOST

HÉLÈNE
RIOUX

A NOVEL TRANSLATED
BY JONATHAN KAPLANSKY

Fragments of the World II

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Cormorant Books

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The passages by Marcel Proust in the second part of chapter six are translated
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DEDICATIONS



For Yes.

— *Hélène Rioux*

This translation is for Larry and Paul, such good friends.

— *Jonathan Kaplansky*

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SPRING EQUINOX

PREVIEW

I

WANDERING SOULS AT THE END OF THE WORLD

*... there's a restaurant of a similar name in the area.
A greasy spoon, to tell the truth.
Frequented mainly by taxi drivers.*

FOR SOME IT IS AN earthly garden, an Eden filled with trees and flowers from where, long ago, Adam and Eve were banished after biting into the cursed apple. People speak of the Fall — with a capital. We remember old pen drawings in which our two guilty parties, naked, heads lowered, their private parts camouflaged modestly — for from now on they are modest — behind a vine leaf, exit the gates of the playground from which they are forever banned. Guilty or not, their descendants, sweat on their brows, will be subject to the same exile until the end of time. It is written. It is the curse of the human

race. Non-believers shrug their shoulders: a legend, they dismiss, smiling contemptuously.

In the beginning there was the Big Bang; then things evolved for a few millennia, as everyone knows. Our ancestors were gorillas, more or less, and there weren't any apple trees on earth. At one time — not so long ago if we consider the age of the human race — they burned at the stake those who dared challenge dogmas. “We've gone beyond such black deeds, I hope,” non-believers add smugly. Besides, how to believe that for a simple trifling, a harmless (and if you think about it, healthy) bit of greed, one recommended by doctors, nutritionists, and other inquisitors of our scientific era for a healthy bit of greed, this God whom we qualify as just, would inflict such a punishment. It's incommensurable. And why should an apple be a forbidden fruit? “An allegory, or a symbol,” suggest the less adamant, aware that science alone can't explain everything. Since the dawn of time, humanity has invented myths for the inexplicable: a plumed serpent, Cronus eating his children, a garden of delights. Why not? Deep down, it's poetic. And we'd still rather have Adam and Eve as our ancestors than a band of orangutans.

Researchers, however, claim to have discovered the site of an ancient garden in Persia, in Mesopotamia — they even speak of Cuba or other islands close to the Equator, and of Atlantis sunk to the bottom of the ocean, as other possible sites of Eden.

People — that is, Novalis — thought that after the Fall, the

Earthly Paradise imploded, its fragments scattered throughout the surface of the globe. We will never be able to find or reconstruct it.

But others believe the opposite. The place exists, sacred books describe it, milk and honey flow in its rivers; it's called the Promised Land. Or Arcadia.

PARADISE. FOR SOME, THE WORD calls to mind an unusual flower without petals or scent; for others a bird with shining plumage. Film buffs remember a movie or two. If the y've made inquiries, the y know seats are less expensive in the highest gallery of a theatre, what the French call "Paradis." They see images in black and white — sad Pierrot and Garance, and in *Les Enfants du Paradis* — or the y think of the film *Cinema Paradiso*, set in Italy, in which a wide-eyed child listens to a projectionist philosophize. The literary ones quote Dante, Baudelaire, or Milton. Some like to recall Proust, remembering that his last servant — but she was so much more — was called Céleste and played the role of a guardian angel to the sickly genius. Others, a learned circle of hand-picked eighteenth-century scholars, think of Paradis de Moncrief, an accomplished courtesier, formidable duellist, actor, and librettist from the Age of Enlightenment, to whom we owe the *Histoire des chats* and the libretto of a heroic ballet. The work was entitled *L'Empire de l'amour* — *The Empire of Love* — but who remembers? Booed by audiences, today it is no longer staged. Such is life. The man himself slipped

into oblivion, but well, they can't all be Diderot or Voltaire.

Flipping absent-mindedly through the dictionary, we see paradise is also a place for the departed souls of the righteous awaiting resurrection. Because there is, of course, underlying this idea of waiting, the desire to regain ... what exactly? Innocence, perhaps. More original than sin, lost innocence, a faint light that glimmers at the end of a long tunnel in the memory of the world.

It is a distinctive, special corner of the Earth; for adventure lovers, the savannah with its elephants and big cats, an oasis in the desert, a lake in the heart of a wild forest; for history lovers, a village in the bush, a medieval city in Tuscany or Andalusia, surrounded by walls, filled with relics, the river meandering through it spanned by stone bridges. A castle, an uninhabited Moorish palace, still dominates the landscape. Each season has its scent: jasmine, orange blossom, lavender, or rosemary. And all those islands in shimmering seas, tropical — some would say fiscal — paradise. They form archipelagos in the Mediterranean, the Atlantic or Indian Ocean, and the Caribbean: the past hideouts of pirates, cruel wreckers, and adventurers — Corsica, Nassau, Paradise Island. Five-star resorts now extend their tentacles along the coast. On some of these islands, the Seychelles or Marquesas, painters and poets have followed a fickle muse. Some actually found the muse frolicking on the shore, flowers in her hair. Others, well ... others contracted tropical dysentery and died there, without further glory.

For the more modest, a chaise longue on the beach, a glass of rum under a palm tree suffice — their earthly paradise one week a year.

Others believe the barren, virgin expanses of the North are the last infinite spaces of paradise. Perhaps they've heard tell of the strange legend of the ancient Greeks. Arktikos was bear country, a continent with a mild climate filled with kindness, where unicorns, naiads, and other creatures of mythology lived together. A bear? The North Star. To the ear of these austere dreamers, Siberia sounds better than Tahiti. The whiteness appeals to them, the immobility, the solitude. They ponder for a long while, turning the glossy pages of albums, looking at maps of northern Canada. The water and the air there, so pure, they think, the silence so absolute. In the North, very far north, beyond the Arctic Circle, Nunavut, Baffin Island, Alaska, far beyond Kuujuaq, Iqaluit, and farther still beyond, Radisson, Goose Bay, Carwright City, and Labrador City. Their spirit hovers above unexplored islands; they whisper magic names: Cornwallis, Somerset, Ellesmere, Devon; they are as if in a trance, their entire being reaching toward the far reaches of the world. They think of a highway called the Freedom Road, in extreme eastern Quebec, of a valley called Happy Valley; they think of the polynyas, the areas of open water that remain mysteriously unfrozen despite the intense cold — in 1616, William Baffin discovered them on his ship called, in fact, *Discovery* — they think of the polar night that spreads over this forgotten world from September

to February. They think of the white nights, the midnight sun, the slow drifting of icebergs that melt in the ocean in a ghostly procession.

Others, however, continue their reading. They are amazed to learn that for fifty million years ago, Ellesmere Island was a subtropical paradise. There stumps of dawn redwoods are found, skeletons of tapirs, turtles, and snakes. Another legend? The same? It doesn't matter. Images appear and fill them with wonder. Paradise existed. These spaces still intact, these undiscovered lands and seas are mermaids. Their calls are a trap. Perhaps they read stories of explorers — Hearne, Hubbard, Wallace, George Cartright — and imagined accompanying them on their voyages. Rash in their thoughts, they start out armed with shotguns and worthless compasses. For what good is a compass in a gust of wind, or a shotgun when not a soul lives in the vicinity and even the large white bears have holed up in some cave to hibernate? They become those adventurers — that is, the unlucky ones — alone in the white, empty expanses; they go round in circles as if in a maze, bent over by the brutal wind, blinded by the blizzard. What were they thinking? Their paradise — their quest for the absolute — is truly lost. And yet it was so beautiful when they dreamed. They cling to their dream. They're hungry. If they still have matches, and gas in their portable stove, they melt snow in their mess kit, boil their moccasins and mittens and, trembling, swallow the thin soup. Then they stop being hungry. Sleep and night win out. They've reached the end. A

final image fades beneath their frozen eyelids. Fade to white. Perhaps they've achieved what they were seeking.

But others — whether or not they've already gone — claim that in the North there is absolutely nothing.

YES, PARADISE: IT IS OFTEN dreamt of, and everyone has their own dream. It is the imagined country, the faraway land people long for without knowing it. It is always somewhere else. It is the life beyond this one.

What we never had, we miss. For the poor, it's opulence, and for the unknown, glory. People whose hearts have been wounded will say it's a loving mother, a faithful friend; people whose memories have been wounded will say it's childhood.

It is love. And here are little girls immersed in storybooks, girls in front of the mirror, smiling at their reflection. Musicians are tuning their instruments: the ball may begin. "Where are you?" they whisper. Crystal-clear laughter, trembling sighs. We see them thirty, forty years later. They have married a real estate agent, an electrical appliance salesman; their children will soon leave home, live their lives. What remains of their dreams lies in a heap on the grass, among the dead leaves, ready to be burned. Everything is ruined; everything has come too late. They forget that life is there, still there, or else it's life itself they want to forget. Old tunes of tangos in their wake, pillows wet with tears, a hoarse voice conjugating a verb in all tenses. What verb? To love too much. A rider gallops in the distance, wind sweeps into his

cloak. A hair y guer rilla, covered in scar s, bedec ked with ammunition, shouts out — *¡Libertad o muerte!* Or it's a pale revolutionary, with round, steel-rimmed glasses, carrying the aura of his altruistic mission, a martyr or a messiah — both have the undeniable potential to c harm — the big-hear ted outlaw or his pitiless double. Prince Charming must be a myth invented by men. Any woman will tell y ou: she'd prefer a hundred times to ha ve been Ma ta Har i, La P asionaria, or Carmen the gypsy, red skirt lifting to reveal her tanned legs, peony in her hair , than the pr incess sleeping on a pink bed for a hundred years.

And then there are powerful men with a dubious past, all alike, in lo ve with inaccessible blondes: Adam Worth, for instance, madly in lo ve with the Duc hess of De vonshire. Always the same model. Star ting out with nothing , the climb, ready to defy all la ws, break all taboos, climb the rungs to ward an ideal that slips away — the blonde with the temperamental pout, the pinup in a negligee posing in their calendar — and when they reach it, if perchance they succeed, they never really possess it. The dream slips between their hands, sand or snow.

Paradise is something fleetin . It is a mirage; it is like the horizon receding. We don't reach it.

The Holy Grail.

There where death does not exist.

FOR OTHERS, IT IS CELESTIAL. It's called heaven, or nirvana; it's where the righteous go after they die. Somewhere beyond