

# EARTHLY DELIGHTS

Terry Tempest Williams\*

Hieronymus Bosch allows us to play in the Garden. So little is hidden in the Garden. Why was it hidden from me? With Paradise on my left and Hell to my right, I can play in the middle of my life, with the middle of my life I will play. Run. Jump. Leap. I will leap with my eyes wide open and land without knowing anything except my feet are on the Earth, this beautiful Earth where we live and breathe and love and work and play and pray that we might never lose sight of how delicious it is to open our mouths *while of these emblems we partake* of all the bounties of the Earth, a jay drops a berry into a mouth that is open. We can remain open.

To open is not a sin.

To play is not a sin.

To imagine is not a sin.

Do you see the couple making love inside a mussel shell?

There is a traveler who walks beyond El Bosco's blue horizon. The town is Ribadesella, a northern port of Spain where deep caves hold the images of horses. She walks along the beach. It is low tide. Among the rocks, she is aware of a strange hissing. She stops, bends down, and locates the sound. It is the musings of barnacles, creatures who stand on their heads with their feathered feet filtering food as the sea overtakes them. Tiny armored shells protect the flesh inside. She looks more closely. A double door whose sides disappear when opened is tightly

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\* © Terry Tempest Williams, 2000. Terry Tempest Williams is a writer and naturalist working in, and often on behalf of, southern Utah. This piece is an excerpt from her forthcoming book *Leap: A Traveler in the Garden of Earthly Delights*, being published by Pantheon Books this year. This excerpt is reprinted here with the permission of the Author.

sealed. Only their voices whisper life. The traveler rises, looks ahead, and finds mussels, saturated blue, also attached to the rocks. A herring gull has pulled one of the bivalves from its base, breaks it open with its beak and tears the orange body into sinewy strands and eats. Long, thick strands of eel grass grow below, green.

The traveler stops at the Gran Hotel, where seventy-eight lanterns round like the moon illuminate the beach. It has begun to rain. She takes a small room with a balcony and sits on a pink plush chair until the sun sets. She enjoys a shower, slips into a chiffon dress, puts on her pearls, and walks down the spiral staircase noting the carved spindles in the shape of sea horses.

Inside the dining room, she asks for the table in the corner. It is still raining. The tide is rising. She orders paella. The waiter informs the traveler that it will take forty-five minutes to prepare. She says that is what she would expect from such a lavish dish. She relaxes and watches the waves reach, crest, and break in small elegant intervals. The traveler wonders why such harsh, direct lighting is used inside when everything outside is muted. She wishes for the light of candles to comfort the food.

It rains and rains.

While waiting for the paella, the traveler whispers to the waiter after he has filled her glass with wine that if a gentleman should walk into the dining room looking for a table and would like to join her she would be delighted to share the shellfish. The waiter nods. The traveler takes her first sip of wine. Rioja. Red. Black cherries. Plums. She reaches for the baguette, tears off the heel. There is a wedge of cabrales wrapped in leaves on the table. She spreads the cheese on the bread. As she takes it into her mouth the sound of bells through the high Aliva meadows in the Picos returns to her. Harebell, columbine, iris, lilies, ferns, penstemon, gilia, orchids—the transformed hayfields of Asturias are the florid backgrounds of medieval tapestries.

The waiter pardons himself and introduces a dinner companion to the traveler. She extends her hand to the man, who takes it generously and sits down across from her. The waiter pours him a glass of cabernet and refills hers. They both lift their glasses and then avert their eyes.

It rains and rains.

The paella arrives steaming.

The waiter, with two covered hands, carries the cast-iron pan sizzling and carefully places it on the table between the two eaters. As he moves away the traveler motions him forward one more time and whispers something in his ear. She returns her attention to her guest.

The City of Longing appears.

On her plate: mussels, barnacles, clams, squid, crab legs, and crayfish. Saffron rice: yellow-orange. Green olives stuffed with pimentos. Peas. Sliced hard-boiled eggs. Olive oil, some still simmering at the bottom of the pan.

On his plate: mussels, crab legs, clams, crayfish, barnacles, and squid. Saffron rice: orange. Perfectly sliced hard-boiled eggs. Black olives. Peas. White asparagus.

They lift their forks and begin to explore, to taste, to tease, to touch, to play, to romp, to knead, to court, to want, to do, to dare, to ride, to rock, to swim, to float, to fly, to feed, to toy, to try, to say, to hear, to see, to dare, to do, to break, to burn, to eat and be eaten. With saffron-stained fingers they break open the last mussels, blue-orange, and feed each other what is inside moving to the outside.

*Explorar. Probar. Agitar. Palpar. Jugar. Retozar. Amasar. Cortejar. Querer. Hacer. Osar. Montar. Mecer. Nadar. Flotar. Volar. Nutrir. Juguetear. Intehtar. Decir. Oir. Ver. Osar. Hacer. Romper. Incendiar. Comer y ser comida.*

They drink coffee black with no cream. To be curious. To imagine. To question and be questioned. To desire. *Desear.*

The tide is rising to stand on one's head and feed.

