

# An Excerpt From *Leap*\*

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## Paradise

The new can bear fruit only when it grows  
from the seeds implanted in tradition.

—Paul Tillich, *The Dogma of the Trinity*

I once lived near the shores of Great Salt Lake with no outlet to the sea.

I once lived in a fault-block basin where mountains made of granite surrounded me. These mountains in time were hollowed to house the genealogy of my people, Mormons. Our names, the dates of our births and deaths, are safe. We have records hidden in stone.

I once lived in a landscape where my ancestors sacrificed everything in the name of belief and they passed their belief on to me, a belief that we can be the creators of our own worlds.

I once lived in the City of Latter-day Saints.

I have moved.

I have moved because of a painting.

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Over the course of seven years, I have been traveling in the landscape of Hieronymus Bosch. A secret I did not tell for fear of seeming mad. Let these pages be my interrogation of faith. My roots have been pleached with the wings of a medieval triptych, my soul intertwined with an artist's vision.

This painting lives in Spain. It resides in the Prado Museum. The Prado Museum is found in the heart of Old Madrid. I will tell you the name of the painting I love. Its name is *El jardín de las delicias*.

The doors to the triptych are closed. Now it opens like a great medieval butterfly flapping its wings through the centuries. Open and close. Open and close. Open. Hieronymus Bosch has painted, as wings, Paradise and Hell. The body is a portrait of Earthly Delights. The wings close again. Open, now slowly, with each viewer's breath the butterfly quivers, Heaven and Hell quiver, the wings are wet and fragile, only the body remains stable. The legs hidden, six. The antennae, two. The eyes, infinite. The artist's brush with life, mysterious. Close the triptych. The outside colors are drab. Black, grey, olive blue. The organism is not dead. Hear its heart beating. After five hundred years, the heart is still beating inside the triptych. The wings open.

I step back.

Red. Blue. Yellow. Green. Black. Pink. Orange. White. Gold.

Paradise.

Hell.

Earthly Delights.

As a child, I grew up with Hieronymus Bosch hanging over my head. My grandmother had thumbtacked the wings of Paradise and Hell to the bulletin board above the bed where I slept. The prints were, in fact, part of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's series of discussions designed for home education. The Garden of Eden to the left with Christ taking Eve's pulse as Adam looks on—opposite—Hell, the bone-white face of a man looking over the shoulder of his eggshell body as the world burns: these were the images that framed the “oughts and

shoulds” and “if you don’ts” of my religious upbringing.

Whenever my siblings and I stayed overnight, we fell asleep in “the grandchildren’s room” beneath Truth and Evil.

Standing before *El jardín de las delicias* in the Prado Museum in Spain, now as a woman, I see the complete triptych for the first time. I am stunned. The center panel. The Garden of Earthly Delights. So little is hidden in the center panel, why was it hidden from me?

The body.

The body of the triptych.

My body.

The bodies of the center panel, this panel of play and discovery, of joyful curiosities cavorting with Eros, is not only a surprise to me, but a great mystery.

I stare at the painting. My eyes do not blink. They focus on the blue pool of bathers standing thigh-high in the middle of the triptych.

Bareback riders circle the black and white women bathing in the water, the black and white women who are balancing black and white birds on top of their heads. Cherries, too. Faster and faster, the bareback riders gallop their horses and goats and griffins; bareback riders, naked men, riding bulls, bears, lions, camels, deer, and pigs, faster and faster, circling the women.

The triptych begins to blur. My eyes begin to blur. I resist. Focus. I rein my eyes in from the pull of the bodies, the body of the triptych, the bodies bare, bareback on animals, circling, circling, circling them, circling me, black and white bodies, my body stands stoically inside the Prado determined to resist the galloping of my blood.

I feel faint. I turn from the painting and see a wooden chair shaped like a crescent leaning against the wall. The wall is white. I sit down, stare at the floor, the granite floor, and get my bearings.

I begin counting cherries in Bosch’s Garden. I lose track, they are in such abundance. I stop at sixty. Cherries are flying in the air, dangling from poles, being passed from one person to the next, dropped into the mouths of lovers by birds, worn on women’s heads as hats, and bal-

anced on the feet as balls.

In Utah, my home, cherries are a love crop. They are also our state fruit. They grow in well-tended orchards along the Wasatch Front. Cherry picking was a large part of our childhood. Our parents, aunts, and uncles would load up their station wagons with kids and drop us off in one of the orchards alongside Great Salt Lake with empty buckets in hand. Sometimes we were paid by the pail or given bags to take home for our families. Once we were up in the trees, out of view, we could eat as many as we wanted.

One day, my great-uncle was standing on a ladder picking cherries with my cousin and me. We were perched on sturdy branches above him, ten-year-old girls unafraid of heights.

“What principle of the Gospel of Jesus Christ means the most to you?” he asked, filling his bucket.

Mormon children are used to these kinds of questions practiced on them by their elders, who consider this part of their religious training.

“Obedience,” my cousin replied, pulling a cherry off its stem.

“Free agency,” I answered, eating one.

It is early morning on my way to the Prado. Pink camellia petals cover the path inside the Real Jardín Botánico adjacent to the museum. I love coming here first before watching the painting. Flocks of white butterflies appear to have lit on bare branches. Up close, I recognize them as magnolia trees in bloom.

It is difficult not to touch everything. Blue hyacinths line the walks. Daffodils and narcissus tower above them. Red and yellow striated tulips are now cups holding last night’s rain.

The gardener’s hand is evident. There is an overall narrative to be followed, nothing is random. Each hedgerow, each bed now flowering was an idea before it took root in the land. The leaves of each plant express themselves rhythmically. Iambic pentameter. Blank verse. A sonnet. The arrangement of leaves can be read as poetry.

The miniature rock garden stops me. Sage grows next to verbena. I bend down and rub its blue-grey leaves between my fingers and smell the Great Basin of home.

Paradise.

The Tree of Life stands behind Adam. Vines of raspberries wrap around its trunk. Christ, who appears to be staring outside Eden, is dressed in a pink robe. He holds Eve's wrist. Eve kneels. Adam sits. Neither is clothed.

Focus on Eden. Remain in Eden. Today it is Christ's hand on Eve's that holds my attention. Eve's head is bowed. Her eyes are closed. Her knees are tight against each other. Eve's obeisance becomes my own baptism and confirmation.

I am dressed in white and descend into the warm waters of the baptismal font accompanied by my father, also dressed in white. We stand in the center of the pool and face family witnesses. My father raises his right hand to the square, fingers pointing toward heaven. He delivers a prayer, then holds my wrist as I hold my nose and with bended knees, I am leaned back into the holy waters. With one quick swoosh through the process of immersion, I am happily declared a Mormon.

I am eight years old.

The following Sunday, I wished I had not worn the white headband to keep my bangs out of my eyes. Even before the confirmation began, the weight of the men's hands on top of my head was forcing the plastic teeth to bite into my scalp. I opened my eyes seconds before the blessing to see the varied shoes pointing toward me around the circle: wing tips, Hush Puppies, and boots. I recognized the black polished cowboy boots as my father's, the wing tips belonged to the bishop, the slip-ons were his counselor's shoes. I couldn't wrap my eyes around far enough behind my ears to see what shoes my uncle or the remaining priesthood bearers were wearing.

The pressure of the warm hands on my head increased. I quickly closed my eyes. My father began, "Our beloved daughter of Zion, by the authority vested in me . . ."

And the words "Receive the Holy Ghost."

The hands lifted. My eyes opened. I stood up and faced the congregation as the bishop congratulated me on becoming a member of the

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. All the men in the circle shook my hand. My father put his arm around me as we walked back to where my mother and her mother and her mother's mother were sitting.

I sat down on the pew. My grandmother took my hand and patted it.

"I am possessed," I thought. "I am possessed by the Holy Spirit and protected from evil. I am a clean slate. There are no sins on my record before God."

The Paradise of childhood.

"Bosch is rubbish," I hear a British guide say to her group. She is wearing a brown wool suit just below her knees. "He ate rye bread that was rotten, which most certainly brought on the cruelest of hallucinations."

My view of Paradise is often blocked by other visitors. I have no choice but to watch them interact with the painting.

"What we have here, ladies and gentlemen, is a massive orgy. It is rumored Hieronymus Bosch belonged to a religious sect that believed in purification through gratification."

Some of the visitors cluck their tongues.

"Notice the preponderance of strawberries and other fleshy fruits, symbols of lust. It is true God said, 'Go forth and multiply,' but we are not supposed to enjoy it like we see here. Bosch presents a perversion, ladies and gentlemen. I ask you to note the clear references to bestiality as men and animals prance around the pool in a state of arousal."

The guide points to the naked women cavorting in the pool that the cavalcade circles.

"And here, please witness Chaucer's 'Wife of Bath' who, as you recall, possessed a libido much too strong for her own good. 'A likerous mouth moste han a likerous tayl. In wommen vinolent is no defence, This knownen lecchours by experience.'"

As the matron of arts begins to lose herself in Chaucer's tale, her group are showing their own signs of arousal. Suddenly aware of her own titillating vocabulary, she quickly shifts her analysis to Hell.

"I must say, I find great comfort in Bosch's depiction of Hell. We will pay for our bloody sins if we cannot control our bodily obsessions. Here we see the lovely, dreadful sophistications of the Middle Ages.

Each sin has its appropriate payback. Rightfully so; if you are gluttonous, you will be eaten gluttonously.”

A man who seemed to be preoccupied with one section of Hell in particular raises his hand and points to the panel. “Might these be vats of semen?”

She lifts her arm high over her head. “Follow me please.”

### Earthly Delights

The body of the butterfly is still, the wings are steady. I am lying on the ground in the Garden of Earthly Delights, looking up. Someone is taking my pulse. My neck is being supported on the calf of another man who kneels, arching his back as he waves a blue thistle over my head.

*Why why why joy enjoy joy joy*

El Bosco’s men and women are uttering chants, healing chants, offering me the chance to live after I was almost dead, have you ever felt dead to rise again in joy, enjoy this Garden of Delights? There is a desire in my soul to see, a desire in my heart to be, here, finally, in peace.

My left hand reaches to touch, what can I feel but a blue blackberry. Earthly blue. They say my pulse is returning. I am returning to the place I feared was gone. I can touch and taste my own irrepressible hunger. Rise to eat this lip-luscious fruit, the flesh of these berries: blackberries, raspberries, blueberries, and strawberries. *This triptych was once called "The Strawberry" in medieval days.* Ripe on the vine, heavy on the bough, I pick each one, a delicacy in my hand, a red-violetblue weight on my tongue, on this day, I taste the joy, explode with joy, smear the joy all over my face. Feed me cherries and I will feed you gapes, deep red-purple grapes, one grape at a time. Time. The most luxurious gift in this Garden is time. Time to talk, time to eat, time to love, time to drink, discover, uncover, expose, explore, ponder, dream, create, time to do nothing but sit and stare, look and listen and wonder how it is, why it is, that we have strayed so far from this world of *Naked Truth*.

*What is Naked Truth?*

I am clothed in delight. In naked delight I am clothed. Wearing my own skin of joy and two cherries as a hat, there is no shame in this earthly stance of love. One foot forward, it is easier than I thought. Before my friends and fellow creatures, I say yes, yes to this open, delightful body.

I will take my stand in *El jardín de las delicias* and breathe.

I dreamed this center panel long before I saw it. I was walking through the Hayden Valley of Yellowstone. It was autumn and the grasses along the river had turned to gold. Steam was rising from pink and blue furnaces. The stench of sulphur was strong. Mudpots hidden in the forests were bubbling. There were people everywhere, human beings engaged in Earthplay.

Everyone, everything was in motion.

Yellow Grizzlies. Blue Bison. Red Ravens. Elk wearing bridles of silver led by Coyotes in pink capes at dawn. Flying Trout. Pelicans levitating above the river. Moose trying to hide behind the all-seeing aspen. Something was said to me. I have forgotten the words. What were the words? I awoke in a sweat. That is all I remembered until I stood before the triptych in the Prado and realized *El Bosco* had painted my dream.

What the heart desires can be dreamed.

I dreamed the panel withheld from me as a child, never knowing this was the landscape between Paradise and Hell, never knowing as children who slept beneath images of Good and Evil, that there was another way of being, another way of seeing in this Garden of Earthly Delights.

Standing before Antoni Gaudí's unfinished cathedral in Barcelona known as El Templo de la Sagrada Familia, I cannot imagine a church more alive to the openness of belief, a church still under construction, a church designed by an earthly genius, an artist, who, far from simply representing his own time, anticipated the following one.

I stand in front of the central façade looking up at the intricate detailing of Christ's birth, the Doors of Hope and Faith. The sun is intense and my hand shields my eyes. The weight of the central columns is borne on the backs of turtles, their mouths wide open. The four ominous bell towers rise organically from the façade, reminiscent of wet sand squeezed from the hands of children at the beach. They are whimsical, seemingly spontaneous with a sense of humor. Upon closer examination, however, they are the meticulous invention of the thirty-one-year-old Gaudí, a Catalan architect known for his originality, who inherited the project in 1883.

The Expiatory Temple of the Sacred Family became the colossal work in which Gaudí saw his destiny fulfilled as architect, builder, believer, and creator. He never planned on finishing the cathedral but trusted and inspired the hands that would follow his. And so, for over forty-two years, Antoni Gaudí dedicated his life to the construction of this church and no longer concerned himself with anything else. Each day for Gaudí became a spiritual revelation as he perfected the structure and oversaw the construction of the Sagrada Familia.

*The Sagrada Familia was conceived as a great mystical poem.*

To find one's way inside the Church-in-Progress is to enter the architecture of bones. It is skeletal. Bone by bone, ligament by ligament,

an idea, now a collective belief in the name of community, is being erected from the ground up.

Gaudì foresaw and created a structure that has come to be called “equilibrated”—a structure designed to stand on its own without internal bracing or external buttressing (“crutches” he called them). He wanted to create a cathedral that “stands as a tree stands.” Observing that there are no straight lines in nature, Gaudì relied on the hyperbolic curve, employing columns that are angled to absorb the necessary loads.

Everywhere there are workers: engineers, contractors, laborers, masons. Cranes are carefully lifting cement forms. Sheets of plastic drape over stone beams like sacred shrouds. The spirit of Gaudì is still alive, ongoing, still directing this Earth-bound vision.

Some say he was a “revivalist,” re-creating through his religious fervor and imaginative genius the same kind of Gothic space possible in the Middle Ages.

Much of Gaudì’s distinctive style can be seen as *mudéjar*, Spain’s convergence of Muslim and Christian design.

But others say Gaudì’s “biological style,” with a freedom of form, voluptuous color, texture, and organic unity, has its precedents only in the Earth itself. He bowed to nature. He wanted to create through his architecture a natural object in communion with nature’s laws.

My eye is drawn to a shell carved on the wall of one of the bell towers. It is a snail’s shell, a moon shell, a shell spiraling slowly around itself. I place my hand on the stone carving and enter the tower.

The chamber is dark and narrow. Up, I look up. One foot on one step, then another. Up. Up. Up. Each stone step curves around the next. My right hand keeps track of the wall. There is no railing, only the smooth, warm wall. Up. Up. Up. It is a spiral staircase so steep, so tight, I feel a shell is curling around me, growing around me, wrapping itself around my soft fleshy body. Up. Up. This organic ascension is tight and dark and secret. My heart is pumping, my head is throbbing, my mind is reeling, steeling against the fear, the claustrophobic fear, mirror of doubt, nothing else to do, one foot in front of the next, around and around, curling, whorling, swirling thoughts,

spinning thoughts, this is freedom, freedom from form, freedom from mind, freedom in beauty, man-made on Earth, our daily bread, thread, do not panic, there is an invisible thread, pulling me up, up, do not panic, do not waver, one foot in front of the other, up and up and up and up. Wasn't it a chambered nautilus we had given to our parents when we were married in a chamber, another temple dedicated to God, built block by block of granite, hand cut out of the mountains, delivered, I am delivered, this invisible strand, deliver me from evil, I am delivered to a small stone alcove where I stop to look out, out beyond anything I have ever known before now, now, at this particular moment, I am in, inside, in turn, in tune with the bell tower, Gaudi's musical bell tower shuttered for perfect sound, it is perfectly sound to continue up, up, up, do I dare, up and around, my feet automatically keep trusting, turning, rising, up, up, around, rising in this stone shell that is gradually wrapping itself around me in heat, sweet heat, in silence, it is hot, hot, so very hot, I am faint, faint, have faith, up, up, around, up, hundreds of steps, hundreds of feet, above me, below me, circling, rising, ascending, I am in the middle, the middle of my life, the middle of the tower, hundreds of steps below, hundreds of steps above, circling rising, ascending, hundreds of breaths freely given, given freely, I have been given my heart pumping, pulsing, pleading with my blood, my faith, my belief, right now, I can go no further, you can go further, go still further, up, around, ascend, look out, look in, hand on the wall, the smooth wall, I am inside a living organism, I am safe, I am strong, hot, hot, up, up, up, I wipe my brow, it is wet, wet, dry, the wall is dry, but my hands are wet, my body is wet, dripping, my hand on the wall, the wall is turning, burning, learning to trust one step at a time, trusting one step at a time, dizzy, a bridge arches between two towers, I leave the spiral for air, beware, the view I see is the perspective I need to return to whatever is carrying me upward, pulling me upward, the tree of life is ascending upward, the tree of life that has been carved in stone, carved leaves, painted leaves, green, green, the place of green where white alabaster doves are perched and poised in peace, have I ever known peace, flying, circling, ascending white doves, white doves, cooing doves, a feather falls, cradles will rock, what is real,

what is imagined, I return to the spiral staircase, the winding shell that is inspiring me to go up and up and up and around, slowly I climb, my head light, my body light, my eyes bright, the light pouring in and out through the shuttered tower where the bells sing, in and out, up and around I see the cross, the red cross with the god letter X, a white dove on top, the Holy Trinity, across there are four other towers, mosaic-covered pinnacles, that shimmer and sway, they are adorned with words, "Hosanna," "Excelsis," "Hosanna," "Excelsis." These ecstatic words glimmer in Catalanian light.

I stop.

up  
Should I go or  
down?  
I go  
down,  
down,  
down,  
my  
descension  
inside  
Gaudi's  
shell  
is  
my  
acknowledgment  
of limits,  
limitations  
lamentations,  
joy,  
my own  
imagination  
is full,  
down,  
down,  
down,

down,  
around  
my hand  
guiding  
each  
step,  
a song,  
a step,  
another  
step  
down  
around  
hosanna,  
excelsis,  
hosanna,  
I see the white  
carved doves  
circling the tree of  
life carved green,  
each leaf,  
down,  
my feet,  
going  
down,  
my head,  
spiraling  
down,  
around,  
around,  
down,  
down,  
down,  
down,  
down,  
down,  
down,  
down,

down,  
down,  
down,  
around,  
how  
many  
more  
steps  
around  
in beauty  
descending  
in a shell  
of my own  
making by  
making a shell  
Gaudi wraps  
his  
imagination  
around  
every  
human being  
who dares  
to descend  
down,  
down,  
up,  
down,  
up,  
up,  
I look  
either  
way,  
down,  
down,  
it is  
a spiral  
we move