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For centuries paradise was the great lost opportunity of mankind. We knew we had messed up. For a while the world had been perfect. First Man had no unsatisfied longings. There had been no pain, no guilt, no shame, and no regrets. Everything had been natural, nothing was left unsaid. But Satan had led God's Creation into temptation; the snake had seduced Eve into eating the forbidden fruit. The result was a general disenchantment. Adam and Eve were expelled from Eden into a world full of pain and shame. From then on they would suffer from the great curse of consciousness. Nothing spoke for itself, everything was riddled by doubt. What followed was history as we know it, *our* history, a story of pride, treason, murder and destruction. And bloodshed, endless bloodshed.

It was a myth with the power of a strong, direct emotion: Man was to blame for his own estrangement. He was now surrounded by imperfection; his own body was vulnerable and mortal. Paradise was forever out of his reach. The only thing left to him was regret and the hope for a better world after this one: heaven.

For more worldly beings paradise was no longer where they found themselves, but somewhere else. To reach it you had to traverse the globe, you had to suffer a lot of hardship, but there, beyond the horizon of the known world, lay a sun-infused, radiant place, an Eldorado, a Shangri-La. As long as the world had not been mapped out, there were spots on the map of the imagination who promised curious men a paradise on earth. Exotic locations where men and women walked in naked innocence. Everything that was sorely missed in everyday life of failed miserably, could be projected positively on the exotic unknown. Unimaginable riches, hoards of pure gold, spotless love, sex without regrets, unspoiled minds and noble savages – it was somewhere to be found in this world, only not close at home. Sometimes you caught a glimpse of it. Stories were told about it, its wonders were recounted in travellers' tales. But it remained out of reach. You could only dream about it.

From time to time it seemed within one grasp. When the painter Paul Gauguin (1848-1903) left for French-Polynesia at the end of the 19th-century, he told his correspondents about an unspoiled world that differed in everything from the ugly, materialistic society he had left behind him. His paintings show an exotic and innocent world full of untouched natural beauty and luscious women. But that idyll, it has been recently discovered, existed foremost in his own mind. Gauguin, his more sceptical critics discovered, embellished, cheated and fabricated his new found paradise. The society he wanted to be paradisiacal, in reality proved far from that. It was simply an artist's dream. What seemed innocent, proved ramshackle and hopelessly infected by modernity. It could only resemble paradise if you kept your eyes firmly shut.

There was another tempting paradise, for which only mind-travel was required: the paradise of oblivion. The opium of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Thomas de Quincey, the *hasjish* of Baudelaire, and a whole lot of 20th-century disciples, every one of them tried inhabited their "artificial paradise" by using drugs. All these experiments ended badly, most of the time oblivion meant death, but they were mostly viewed with sympathy by

less courageous souls. This because the longing that causes this self-destruction was so recognizable. It resembles the longing for paradise so much: man who is not hampered by self-awareness, who is not plagued by doubt and who is no longer confronted by harsh reality. That in the end it amounted to nothing more than a temporary flight from reality, did not diminish its romantic attraction, on the contrary. The poets and artists who used drugs were seen as real explorers, who dared to take risks for something that in the end perhaps proved an illusion, but it kept the hope for paradise nevertheless intact. Their hope was our hope.

That is, before reality set in. The use of drugs to induce a higher state of consciousness or an overcoming of the self, has been exposed as a dangerous myth. Drug users are no longer seen as romantic. Their trance is seen as a curse.

Even the exotic is no longer seen as paradisiacal. The world has been charted, the process of globalisation has made everything visible and nearby. Everything in this world that in unspoiled is seen as threatened. Our eco-consciousness has turned nature in one big reserve – the moment we touch it, it will be destroyed forever. If it is a paradise, it can only be so without us. We are permanently excluded.

Paradise as a place outside reality, a dreamed-up world beyond the horizon, seems to have disappeared for good. It is even seen with suspicion. Philosophers warn us against our own Messianistic impulses, our dream of human perfectibility. The New Jerusalem, heaven on earth, the communistic worker's paradise, they are all dream images that proved to be a nightmare. Stop it, they say, the world will never be a perfect place, and neither will Man be perfect. Take things as they are. Live in the moment. Accept human fallibility.

That sounds refreshing, certainly so in a time in which neoconservatives have tried to establish democracies at the point of a gun and in which radical *jihadis* think they can reach paradise through violence and destruction. No great visions and dreams for a while, let's keep our head clear. Let's try to live with our own sense of imperfection.

If only it was that simple. Paradise on earth as an idea may have been discarded, it has not stopped us from dreaming about it. The difference is that in our time paradise can no longer be seen as a place that is outside of us – in the future or at the other end of the world. No longer is paradise placed beyond the horizon, it will have to be realized here and now. And time after time this will prove impossible.

In the work of Pia Wergius there is much dreaming and longing going on, tinged with passion and despair. Her men and women dream of escape, of flying away in a clear blue sky, but their dreams without exception end in the painful realisation that man will remain a prisoner of this world, locked up in his own mortal body. He is forced to live in a disenchanted world. But that realization only causes him to dream on even more feverishly about being set free. It is an endless song of longing, quiet and regretful, heartbreaking and accepting – sometimes with a glimpse of paradise.