

she had deliberately withdrawn from places where she might at least have glimpsed the man she loved, in favour of these places which had never seen him. And I watched her, as she came back from some walk on a path along which she knew he would not pass, drawing from her resigned hands long gloves of a useless grace.

Never, in our walk along the Guermantes way, could we go as far as the sources of the Vivonne, of which I had often thought and which had in my mind an existence so abstract, so ideal, that I had been as surprised when I was told they could be found within the *département*, at a certain distance in kilometres from Combray, as I was the day I learned there was another precise spot on the earth where the opening lay, in ancient times, of the entrance to the Underworld. Never, either, could we go all the way to the end-point that I would so much have liked to reach, all the way to Guermantes. I knew this was where the castellans, the Duc and Duchesse de Guermantes, lived, I knew they were real and presently existing figures, but when I thought about them, I pictured them to myself sometimes made of tapestry, like the Comtesse de Guermantes in our church's *Coronation of Esther*, sometimes in changing colours, like Gilbert the Bad in the stained-glass window where he turned from cabbage green to plum blue, depending on whether I was still in front of the holy water or was reaching our seats, sometimes completely impalpable like the image of Geneviève de Brabant, ancestor of the Guermantes family, which our magic lantern walked out over the curtains of my room or up to the ceiling — but always wrapped in the mystery of Merovingian times and bathing as though in a sunset in the orange light emanating from that syllable: 'antes'. But if despite this they were, as duke and duchess, real human beings for me, even if strange ones, on the other hand their ducal person was inordinately distended, became immaterial, in order to contain within itself this Guermantes of which they were duke and duchess, all this sunlit 'Guermantes way', the course of the Vivonne, its water-lilies and its tall trees, and so many lovely afternoons. And I knew that they did not merely bear the title of Duc and Duchesse de Guermantes, but that since the fourteenth century when, after uselessly trying to defeat its former lords, they had formed an alliance with them through marriages, they were also Comtes de Combray, and

thus the foremost citizens of Combray, and yet the only ones who did not live there. Comtes de Combray, possessing Combray in the midst of their name, of their person, and no doubt actually having within them that strange and pious sadness that was special to Combray; proprietors in the town, but not of a private house, probably dwelling outdoors, in the street, between sky and earth, like Gilbert de Guermantes, of whom I could see, in the windows of the apse of Saint-Hilaire, only the reverse side, of black lake, if I raised my head as I went to get salt at Camus's.

And along the Guermantes way I would sometimes pass damp little enclosures over which climbed clusters of dark flowers. I would stop, thinking I was about to acquire some precious idea, because it seemed to me that there before my eyes I possessed a fragment of that fluvial region I had so much wanted to know ever since I had seen it described by one of my favourite writers. And it was with this, with its imaginary ground traversed by currents of seething water, that Guermantes, changing its appearance in my mind, was identified when I heard Doctor Percepied talk to us about the flowers and beautiful spring waters that could be seen in the park of their country house. I dreamed that Mme de Guermantes had summoned me there, smitten with a sudden fancy for me; all day long she would fish for trout with me. And in the evening, holding me by the hand as we walked past the little gardens of her vassals, she would show me the flowers that leaned their violet and red stems along the low walls, and would teach me their names. She would make me tell her the subjects of the poems that I intended to compose. And these dreams warned me that since I wanted to be a writer some day, it was time to find out what I meant to write. But as soon as I asked myself this, trying to find a subject in which I could anchor some infinite philosophical meaning, my mind would stop functioning, I could no longer see anything but empty space before my attentive eyes, I felt that I had no talent or perhaps a disease of the brain kept it from being born. Sometimes I counted on my father to make it all come out right. He was so powerful, in such favour with people in office, that he had succeeded in having us transgress the laws that Françoise had taught me to consider more ineluctable than the laws of life and death, to procure for our house

pound like the heart of a traveller who spies on a lowland a first beached boat being repaired by a caulker and, before catching sight of it, cries out: 'The Sea!'

Then I came back to stand in front of the hawthorns as you do in front of those masterpieces which, you think, you will be able to see more clearly when you have stopped looking at them for a moment, but although I formed a screen for myself with my hands so that I would have only them before my eyes, the feeling they awakened in me remained obscure and vague, seeking in vain to detach itself, to come and adhere to their flowers. They did not help me to clarify it, and I could not ask other flowers to satisfy it. Then, filling me with the joy we feel when we see a work by our favourite painter that is different from the ones we knew, or if someone takes us up to a painting of which we had until then seen only a pencil sketch, if a piece heard only on the piano appears to us later clothed in the colours of the orchestra, my grandfather, calling me and pointing to the Tansonville hedge, said to me: 'You love hawthorns – just look at this pink one. Isn't it lovely!' Indeed it was a hawthorn, but a pink hawthorn, even more beautiful than the white ones. It, too, wore finery for a holiday – for the only true holidays, which are the religious holidays, since they are not assigned by some fortuitous whim, as are the secular holidays, to an ordinary day that is not especially intended for them, that has nothing essentially festal about it – but their finery was even more opulent, for the flowers, attached to the branch one above another, in such a way as to leave no spot that was not decorated, like pompoms garlanding a rococo shepherd's crook, were 'in colour', and consequently of a superior quality according to the aesthetics of Combray, if one judged it by the scale of prices in 'the store' in the Square, or at Camus', where the more expensive biscuits were the pink ones. Even I preferred cream cheese when it was pink, when I had been allowed to crush strawberries in it. And these flowers had chosen precisely the colour of an edible thing, or of a delicate embellishment to an outfit for an important holiday, one of those colours which, because they offer children the reason for their superiority, seem most obviously beautiful to the eyes of children, and for that reason will always seem more vivid and more natural to them than the other tints,

even after the children have learned that they did not promise anything for the appetite and had not been chosen by the dressmaker. And certainly, I had felt at once, as I had felt in front of the white hawthorns but with more wonder, that it was in no artificial manner, by no device of human fabrication that the festive intention of the flowers was expressed, but that nature had spontaneously expressed it with the naivety of a village shop-keeper labouring over her wayside altar, by overloading the shrub with these rosettes which were too delicate in their colour and provincially pompadour in their style. At the tops of the branches, like those little rosebushes, their pots hidden in lace paper, whose thin spindles radiated from the altar on the major feast-days, teemed a thousand little buds of a paler tint which revealed, when they began to open, as though at the bottom of a cup of pink marble, reds of a bloody tinge, and expressed even more than the flowers the particular, irresistible essence of the hawthorn which, wherever it budded, wherever it was about to flower, could do so only in pink. Inserted into the hedge, but as different from it as a young girl in a party dress among people in everyday clothes who are staying at home, the shrub was all ready for Mary's month, and seemed to form a part of it already, shining there, smiling in its fresh pink outfit, catholic and delicious.

Through the hedge we could see within the park a path edged with jasmines, pansies and verbenas between which stocks opened their fresh purses, of a pink as fragrant and faded as an old piece of Cordovan leather, while a long green-painted watering hose, uncoiling its loops over the gravel, sent up at each of the points where it was punctured, over the flowers whose fragrances it imbibed, the prismatic vertical fan of its multicoloured droplets. Suddenly I stopped, I could not move, as happens when something we see does not merely address our eyes, but requires a deeper kind of perception and possesses our entire being. A little girl with reddish blonde hair, who appeared to be coming back from a walk and held a gardening spade in her hand, was looking at us, lifting towards us a face scattered with pink freckles. Her dark eyes shone, and since I did not know then, nor have I learned since, how to reduce a strong impression to its objective elements, since I did not have enough 'power of observation', as they say, to