

## Prometheus Martin Kovan

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It's not difficult to leave the room as it is, accessories of life put in order, kitchen things cleaned, power-points off. To put on shoes, sufficient for the purpose, lock the door from inside, opening, stepping out, letting it swing to, closed. To carry whatever is needed, a small bag, some cash, a bankcard at most, but not a passport. The idea is not to cross any international borders; these are closed, in view of the general situation. All the planes are grounded. The street as it is, normally: passers-by, passive, some not so (the yelling woman, ear-grater, fighting unseen foes), waiting in huddles, standing in line to receive takeaway cups. Like people who wait everywhere, the transaction secured; expectation as much a matter of law as of a craving for caffeine.

Multiple spaces, between the people who wait, and those who move along. A hard surface designed for their passage, through a process loosely called life but more narrowly obligation. Obligated to live, and survive, carry on occupations: slightly more difficult, with restrictions in place; a smaller space in which to manoeuvre, fewer options at hand, a reduced range of choice. But the impetus remains, there's even a bustle, not quite so many, moving so fast, a steady flow nonetheless of those carrying out the project, seeing something through.

The entrance to the underground, where city trains come and go. The commercial stalls are there, the man with a lathe, with broken shoes; coffee-makers, again, a shoe-box niche, faces diligent, bent to a task, Asian bodies turning, lithely, workers of the world, unironically, providing goods and services for those providing something else. So many providers, the question returns: to be a producer, or a consumer? A selling-point is needed, an act of self-advertisement. What is the goal, now? An anti-project project, if it had to be given a name. A place of rendezvous, but not an appointment. No clear sense of where to go. To go somewhere not yet visited. On the station walls, large-form recommendations: Look Up—to

pre-empt the great spaces that in tunnels and underground stations do not exist. If eyes are accidentally caught in a mutual gaze, it lasts a moment, or less.

Questions demanding to be answered. How long is a moment? Could a single one have the power to drown everything else in it? Could a moment last as long as a lifetime? Is a lifetime only a moment of many series of other such moments? Perhaps it's for this reason that, so it's said, at the moment before its demise a lifetime passes before the mind's eye, in a flash—lasting only as long as a glancing of light before darkness returns. On the train, it makes some sense not to sit in the direction of travel, but looking back, towards where it has begun. A train full of bandits, masked, and so potentially dangerous. If real criminals were to get on, at the next stop, or a further one, it might be hard to distinguish them. Persona hijacked, no-one asking their permission. They must make do without warning, taking everything as it comes.

Perhaps it will rain; clouds building in some part of the sky—one of the cardinal directions, if direction is still important. It's possible to lose any sense of it, of direction, its meaning or measurement, its function in a life. It's possible that the direction that seemed for so long correct, the only one by which to navigate, proves to be misguided, not reliable all along. It's possible to wake in the morning, put things in order, leave a dwelling, and move in any direction, in which the direction does not matter so much as the moving. All the commuters know this, without having realised it. Everyone in the train moving because they must, it's impossible to stay still, so that where they go is of only secondary importance.

Outside the window the city panorama: a view of two dimensions, flat beneath a depthless field of sky, uniformly grey. Closer to the railway, parallel lines stretching on, the depth of things comes into view: the course of a direction, opening into time. For as long as depth is avoided, it could all be just a moment. In leaving, travelling, in going somewhere new, the moment is expanded, grows unbounded, bursts. Maybe there's an end to the series, a final moment—everyone has said so. Out the window, billboards laid giant against walls; sometimes relying on the surface beneath, sometimes self-standing. Enormous, unnamed beckonings, for people with gigantic needs, consumers with raging appetites. Flawless teeth, shutting by. Vehicles and credit-cards, things indeterminate, virtual goods, a plane arcing through another sky, as flat and perfect as the larger, greyer one behind it.

Large in two dimensions, as certain dreams are, in which a door is opened, to reveal a threshold's other side. The sound of approaching thunder; or thunder being approached. It could be very far away, or

close by. Perhaps the rain won't matter, it's not likely to kill you. It would be worse to encounter, for example, a bandit with a face mask, or a bushranger, in an iron one. They would be sure to be deceptive, but no chances should be taken. The country will undoubtedly be haunted, but only by benign ghosts; the kind that whisper in a stranger's ear, before moving on again. Even ghosts are in motion, with limbo lives to lead.

No-one betrays concern; umbrellas or indifference at the ready. Millions in every direction, pursuing highwire walks, modes of escape. In the concourse of the station the imperative is evident; perhaps it's the same the world over. The requirement to be somewhere, on which the future depends. But if there is no future? Then departure has no destination. Buying the ticket from a machine, without knowing to where it will sanction travel. It indicates the southern train, located on a certain platform: the long conveyance at rest, wheezing now and then. A person, a woman, approaching: a torn shirt, part of her pale chest exposed. Others briskly pass.

No reason now to hold onto loose notes and coins; they go into her hands. Face-coverings are ubiquitous, but even without them there's no guarantee of getting ill. Survivors are usually those who cared the least: who went into battle both arms raised, who drank willingly from the poisoned well, which turned out to be nothing stronger than water. The body of the crowd swells in its purpose. Being wrenched from the heaving warmth of the common fate. Uncommon in one way, inevitable in another. But just to set out, as all the others return to their known places—that might still make all the difference. If not to them, or to the world, in its heaving, which won't notice that anything has changed.

Taking a seat, again waiting. The train will wind south, and inland, where the spaces are. The decision will make itself. The reasons populate, in jostling disorder, a region that has always lacked a name, lying somewhere off the map. The adversaries are immense, needing no virtual enhancement. They're alive to circumstance, to bend and torture it to their advantage and bring a Gulliver down. Finding himself on his back, tied with a million twines of invisible industry, until there's nowhere to move. To leave, in this way, isn't to escape the binding threads; it's to submit to their intransigence.

A jolt, a buckling noise, the sighing weight ready to move. Only a handful of others in the carriage; a missed feast of conversation. The air is cool, plastic-smelling. Someone will notice an absence, probably. It might take some time, maybe a week, maybe more. How something not there begins slowly to encroach on consciousness. Where is x? X has flown. X is not-present. X is a silence, at the end of an unasked question.

How many others have vanished, disappeared? The answer is obvious: an infinity of them. The idea of the finite falling imperceptibly into infinity must be a perfect idea. So it must be a perfect event. How would someone describe it?

The undying movement of the train, the passing of the rail-lines beyond it: also, somehow perfect. Was all this not noticed before? The way things shift and join, their seamless choreography, like naked bodies in love. How could it have gone ignored? Seeing things on a flat plane of inconsequence. Lovemaking on tranquillisers. So the rushing starts—objects in time, space wrapping up the passage in a shroud of transience. The perception of each moment as it glances by. But there will be a final one—surely. Isn't that how it goes? Many moments (but not an infinity) until a final one—and then none. Falling from a height, a quick descent—then neither of these, because nothing.

Everyone in the carriage wears a face mask. Possibly a tawdry hallucination, a horror film lacking imagination. When will the axeman break through the carriage door? Poisonous yellow gas, let loose from terrorist canisters? What flimsy protection the masks will prove. But nothing happens, not even someone in a uniform making an entry to inspect the tickets. Nothing ever happens, in the analogue world, with all the regulations and tacit agreements. The rules have been devised beforehand. Anyone or anything breaking them, sooner or later to be dealt with. It's against the rules to open the carriage door while the conveyance is in motion—to escape, or closely inspect the moving wheels—so the door is locked against misadventure.

Elsewhere, not so tightly. In the poorer countries, where people board and dis-board while the machine is still in motion, sometimes throwing themselves into the working of the iron wheels, axles rising up and to the side, before coming down again. The passing view takes over, as it's designed to do. Dwelling after dwelling after dwelling, housing innumerable persons. Watching them persisting in mowing lawns, throwing balls, walking dogs, chasing buses. So certain of a purpose: taking the bins in, taking the bins out. Sweeping porches, driveways. Someone with a vacuum-cleaner, on the footpath, sucking the leaves away. A woman with a stroller, making a detour around. Armies of the suburbs, armed with leaf-blowers, the music they perform, a demented chorus. The leaves fall all the same. Is there something to miss? The swimming-pools are closed—the danger of infection. The old cinemas, sepia-toned, closed for decades, converted into depots, offices, stores. The sky still grey above them. No-one emerging, no-one entering. The bunting in the used-car yard fluttering, barely.

Objects persisting. Causes lining up in unseen sequence, before coming on to do a tiny duty. The train urging itself through them. Driven by its own quiet demons, or by a fear of obsolescence. They might cease to exist, as well, at some point. At least in the richer countries, where people prefer to commandeer themselves. The pumps are open, fuel still flowing freely. Only a matter of time before not merely passengers, but the vehicles, commandeer themselves. Everything shunting, in real time, a perfect calibration of programmed choreography. Something remarkable, barely dreamt of. Sequence after sequence unfolding, a Busby Berkely musical, in four dimensions, infinitely.

Is this a reason to leave? Among so many other non-reasons, it might as well be. It might be only an automaticity, as so many things now are: something that happens, irrespective. So that a place of welling space is a necessary corrective: somewhere more or less empty. The landscape in the south confirms or conforms to a memory it opens on indefinitely: bald hills dotted with only a scarce covering of knotted, gnarled eucalypts. Sentinels, guarding balefully the light-filled spaces between them. In the memory (of a film, or a vestigial telling) there are soaring pale skies lying along the lengths of the earth's boundary, like the canvas left white outside a nude body. The bare line of flank, waist, a rocky outcrop, marked by emptiness.

Somewhere in the bareness, a necessary tree, standing out against the horizon. It takes some hours of travel, two or three. Rural towns, swinging by, some burnt beyond recognition, to quote the radio. There's no commentary, just bare spectacle. Charred trees, sunken dwellings, buckled water-tanks, children's playparks. The riverbeds not completely dry. Discarded suitcases, detritus on the weedy bank, brought down in a prior flood. Car bodies lying upside-down. Rusted wheel-axles fingering the sky, as desiccated branches do. A cockatoo, admonishing vacancy, then flying imperiously away. Birds only care what happens on the ground if they can take it in their beaks and eat it, or carry it back to their nests.

In this they resemble most of their human counterpart. The spaces starting again, though they've never stopped. Buildings falling away, with centuries. Apart from trees and hills, and sky, there's nothing there. The conveyance could be invisible. Some way ahead a steep escarpment, rising casually, premonitory. It sees newcomers before they've arrived. Perhaps no-one on the train notices its slowing down. The bare evidence of a station sign, a piece of concrete drily holding to a slope, the bench lacking a shelter, a semi-human residue. The train stops, and there's only the act of disembarking from its mild contentment. No point in staying on it forever, the time of foregoing the re-enchantments arrives, without

a bell or a warning or a summons. The landscape, with the train, moving into a completely different future. An interloper with noises of the city smuggled in its inside, dope or dreams or contraband.

What hasn't happened here? It would be hard to say. Magpies make commentary, garrulous but fantastical, so that no-one could believe it, tales too tall to tell. It opens out on all sides, the hills rounding down to the escarpment, still far in the distance. The walking starts by itself. The bag extraneous, left somewhere near the foot of the slope, not far from the station that is not a station. Someone can find whatever it holds of interest, the rain fall on it, ants crawl inside, a snake seeking shelter. A spectre could consult the contents, but what person would bother where no persons come? There's no-one around. The vault of emptiness soars above. A lone wedge-tailed eagle.

Countless signs of the past passing in imagination—belonging to a collective that is never present. A giant reservoir floating up there: at all times. The group dream of history. The cloud. Some have thought that it might come to an end—the dream, and so history. So many talking about it for so long, it could be true. Moving now towards the highest point of the landscape. A rocky overhang, on the escarpment. It juts out, sufficient unto itself—unto the purpose it serves. Why else is it there, hanging over space? Perhaps less than a kilometre away.

The billboard inside the station—Look Up. The others will keep up with the task. The straining and striving, building the new, wild and good, venturing into uncharted, etc. The new frontier. A long way to go, threading light-years on the necklace of the goddess. One foot raised off the earth, the other—in space. Interstellar travel sans the technology. Not a soul. Not even a friendly canine, to accompany part of the way, man's best friend—a beautiful idea, as so many have been. They all fly away, like kites, into the ether. If only each life could be the same, serving a beautiful purpose, before flying away, leaving only a beautiful idea.

Characteristic boulders of the region. Scarce scrub or growth. Most of the trees dead, statuesque, in that state. They keep existing after ceasing to live—stuck more or less vertical on the horizon, on the curve of the hill. Little or no shade. A waterhole, distant, biblical—sheep and deer, come to the oasis, come to drink at scarce water. Marsupials, birds of dun hue. Those who were here before the other one arrived—upright, upstanding, bringing ideas. Increasingly left behind. The rising slope to the escarpment almost imperceptible. One step after the other: how progress is made. Everything that is still there—the other end of the rail-line, how will it proceed, one crisis after another? Is this the wager: unending ruptures, into higher levels of organisation? How to evade entropy?

From a higher elevation the land spreads out, willingly, giving itself. No sign of the train, passed into a zone of indistinction. In this one, all the signs coming clear: how defined the lines are, laid between lower country—marsh, trodden paths, low trees—and the higher—sere, dead trees that refuse to die. Moving by foot between them. Somewhere still higher, a tourist orbiting the planet (one departure is for Mars—a later one, on the group schedule). A change of season, to be sure. No point in envying anyone, and so far to go. Here it's a matter of a few hundred metres, only.

The drop is significant, with nothing between it and the ground below—an outflung tree branch, or cantilevered stone. Nothing to stop the fall, once begun. There's been talk of preventative measures, but it's not clear they were ever put in place. For decades, high-level disputations, between competing parties. It doesn't matter now. The closer to the terminus, the more the view catches the breath; it's needful to stop: to look. To look back on what lies behind, before. Uncountable riches, too much to disown. What would the newcomers do with it all, chancing upon the discovery? It hasn't all flowered in someone's imagination; it's taken form, taken life. It must be worth salvaging, for whoever comes, after.

The time to go, there's no further. At this height, nothing seems to stir: the shrubs and dried grasses almost obediently still. Things alert to the breath of their beholder, who enters as an alien. Here it might not even be a question of survival, but of something in-between. Is it right to leave now? Depart for where? Not for Mars, too cold, inhospitable. Not for heaven or hell, or their subsidiaries. The company has filed for bankruptcy. Soon, it will go into liquidation. The new vantage suspends the question. Faint trails of smoke, from some habitation, a spontaneous combustion. Miracles, that can't easily be seen from sea-level. The rocky outcrop presents itself, the obliging overhang, close to the highest point of elevation.

From here the entire past can be seen—falling away now, insignificant. It ends as dreams do. Soon fires will surge through here again, snapping up fuel; the past will mean even less. Many times over, blackened stone and seeded ground expire, trees that are dead die still more times over. There's nowhere to go, now; only space to stop, in the interval, between the moment and its end. Light glancing up from bodies of water, where animals stoop to drink; clouds keeping to the horizontal, which is really curved. The iron emissary, of the cities of the plain. Winged creatures heralding the other burning wings; they'd wonder if the falling one is another bird like them, suddenly grown exhausted in its flight, and can't continue. The wedge-tailed eagle in the near distance. To keep going is not

impossible, though it means stepping off the earth. Nothing is insisting; everything is waiting. The spine of the earth is solid, the future not even weightless. Then it comes, eagle of the air, to dive into the body of the willing one—again and again. Pulling out whole knots of internal parts, organs and viscera, all the glory trailing. Not knowing it must return, perhaps the following day, to repeat the punishment. And the other, on the outcrop, willing, willing it to come.