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First published in June 2023

528 pages

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2 September

Johnny, no longer quite visible, one might say. Nothing’s visible anymore, from your perspective. If you forced yourself to open your eyes again, your field of view would be restricted to this: your own lap; the feet of the woman next to you, still just in sandals; your own feet in those old men’s socks from Coles, still too big for you; and the proximity of the backrest in front. All of this in the dimmed, otherworldly light of half past three AEST. You know that to your right is the aisle, a word you acquired late. ‘An aisle seat, please.’ A window seat would have been absolutely pointless on a long-distance flight, a beginner’s mistake, and it may well be that this too is just the beginning of terror, but first and foremost it is the end of terror and there’s nothing else to be seen. No farewell glance at the night-time lights, glowing like fireflies, of the city that never felt like home to you, thank goodness. And it’s not a farewell. Don’t look back in anger. Don’t look now.

Later, later will be earlier, and although you know the departure and arrival times, beginning and end, you’re not able to calculate the duration of the trip by factoring in the time difference correctly, not able to make the connection between two outermost points and what lies in-between. There is a resistance, a deliberate reluctance to understand, and it’s a long-standing hunch that this refusal may satisfy more effectively than total knowledge, that all short-lived and lasting cults are based on it, that all bad stories are more bearable when you assume that something is fundamentally unfathomable and remains so forever, beyond the forbidding boundaries of our logic, and that, if all sums worked out perfectly there would no longer be any reason to keep going.

Question is: womit. Womit and womit? At twelve kilometres above the earth it turns out there’s no word for this in the language you must have eventually got used to, after all that time feeling ill because you had to spend every day talking as if you had a hot potato in your mouth. Vomit. Wombat springs into your head too, that specimen in the zoo always stretching its hairless or

hairy nose – you can’t remember which – towards the perimeter fence. Womit, a wombat with a permanently empty pouch. Woman. A query turned into a gender. I’ve given up on...

The task is straightforward. Survive twenty-seven hours in the air and airless space of a few airports, then keep the delirium in check until you stagger out of taxi, past a night porter at reception and finally crawl into a bed booked a week ago, which – incredible as this may be – is waiting peacefully and unassumingly on the other side of the world to receive you in the clean coolness of its sheets. That’s to say, it’ll be one sheet and a proper duvet in a cover, not that bewildering arrangement of sheets and blankets which always unravelled, and moreover was folded under the mattress with a skill you could never master; it made you feel as if you were in a bag and could never get warm or fall asleep, and if you laboriously teased it out, the bottom sheet – the real one – would inevitably come loose and everything would appear like an act of destruction, a wanton torpedoing of other people’s sense of order. Even Renata couldn’t be weaned off this unnecessary routine. Oh Johnny. Her indulgent smile as if you were the one who couldn’t be helped. But all of a sudden you fancy you understand: refraining from these hand movements may have left a hole in Renata’s life that couldn’t have been filled with a substitute, because it would have remained beneath the surface of consciousness, but would have merely brought everything else to a standstill. Just as being granted time to prepare is never useful and only gives rise to mild panic.

You think of this bed in the foreign country that is your homeland as an atonement, without feeling obliged at this hour to follow a thought to its end. Atonement for something to someone or something. Again. Woman. Oh begone, thou who art not even a false friend. Welcome womit, wodurch, wobeï, wofern, wovon, worin, woran! Not to mention wogegen!

I’m travelling against time, you formulate clearly in your mother tongue, unsure whether this corresponds with fact in any way. It’s possible. What’s also possible is that two movements are happening at the same time, as a matter of principle, an unwritten scientific law: the relativity of being on the move. Yes, let’s call it this for the time being. Until tomorrow, when the world will look different again. That was always meant as consolation, but it has turned out to be two different things: in childhood the drip, drip of mild terror that it could be like this and what, when, into, although it wasn’t really believable, certainly not the bit about tomorrow, and what gradually emerged was the inkling that you were abruptly, maybe inevitably sleepwalking into the so-called seriousness of life, from which everyone who mentioned it seemed to suffer. And later, later everything came true.

Take, for example, this night–day night-flight to a capital city – the reflex of thinking about this city is something you never forget, just like they say about ice-skating, although the strain and wobbliness on the first few metres of ice stiffens your limbs, and now, hard to believe though it is, it’s been quite a few winters, autumn–winters, summer–winters since you last saw a frozen lake, pond or river – so this journey by air, a sort of triple jump via the cities of Dubai and Düsseldorf, both equally unfamiliar, can only for the record be described as a backwards movement. There are a number of different opinions when it comes to assessing such a movement. Retreat, escape, failure, humiliation, and this too, once copied out in a notebook and which at the time you clung to like an ultimate certainty: From every tricky situation you can always find a way out... you just have to carefully go backwards, as a crab retreats into its bolthole. And: if you’re not anything anymore, then you’re still what you were. The only question is when? When were you that, and what? This method of going back, retracing your steps leads – even if you approach it as an experiment rather than seriously – to the edge of its magnetic field, your thoughts spinning wildly, your inner indicators going haywire, unable to decide how they ought to be aligning themselves, for it turns out that each so-called point in your memory, your own history, is not clearly divisible from its immediate surroundings, the neighbouring points, points in inverted commas, that amorphous before and after, to which every honest narrative style will ascribe it – and of course you can’t go any further than that, you can’t go back, behind a narrative. That’s to say, o philosopher, only the river exists. Or it doesn’t exist. Todd River. Sometimes one thing, sometimes another. Everyone knows it and nobody wants it to be this way. Perhaps – but this is an aeroplane idea when you can’t get to sleep, and feel certain that you won’t be able to get to sleep for the rest of this journey (when can you start talking about the rest, when about having a rest? O, the restless rest – no, surely that’s going too far) – perhaps this creature swimming in the river, the vagueness of tranquillity in the riverbed, didn’t constitute the ultimate reason for the invention – or must we talk of discovery? – and triumph of the digital. Either or. And of course there is nothing new in the craft of automatically transforming the narrative of one’s life from an analogue process into digital steps, rather ignorantly cutting up connected sequences of notes into different songs, so that a click is heard in transition. Maybe all that matters is being able to confirm the boundaries and differences between the discrete phases, first and foremost to oneself.

But you’ve always thought of travelling as a bolthole. For some time you’ve suspected yourself of charlatanism whenever you use this word for what – correctly called habit – must sound wrong and coquettish to some: showing off through understatement. Years ago it would have been the truth. Earlier – earlier? still in your other life? – when you checked in your overweight suitcase,

later, when following the horde, you stood in the queue to board, trotted through the airtube, the only emotional truth that materialised was that you were abandoning yourself once more to an old habit after a long abstinence. Get out of here! Away, but not with the pose and mood of someone in flight, no going backwards, no retreating. No, leave with lips puckered for whistling, La Paloma, the dove on the roof, beyond the reach of grabby circumstances, and turning what can no longer be endured into what’s no longer necessary; just leave, wearing this cloak sewn together from flying flags with large stitches and in your second-class seven-league boots. Of course it is strange to no longer inhabit the earth, no longer practise customs you’d barely learned. Slightly chilly from the side-effects of feeling so determined this thought came ritually and favourably.

‘I thought her feet must be boiling!’ You can only infer that the woman is talking to you, despite the use of the third person, as a result of which that Englishwoman, ignorantly, more insensitively than innocently – but can one be guilty of a lack of sensitivity? and did clarity change anything of the question which is a permanent fixture on the indigestible weekly menus? and what does this have to do with the stranger next to you? – immediately lost your sympathy by presuming your feet belonged to someone who wasn’t being addressed. Someone you see yourself as too, a weaker but not yet faded afterimage of the child before the baker’s wife, Hasn’t she got a groschen?, as subject–object, suspect and incapable of responding in a way that might save you, avenge you; you can’t run away. Pretending you haven’t been spoken to either, which is the most humiliating thing about this. Let us consider the situation (here and now and forever): your absent gaze at your neighbour’s hands, her undoing the laces of her sandals, rubbing her bare feet, probably to warm them up, was only too willingly interpreted as sympathy, curiosity even, finally giving rise to that remark, one about feet that weren’t hers but were wearing ugly socks, an address avoiding the use of an address, in other words fraudulently obtaining attention without giving anything in return. Concealing this fraud, this neediness by diminishing the other person to a non-person. Guilty. All of us three times per week. Trivial. Nonsense. She’s admitting, at any rate, that sandals were not a sensible choice for the temperature inside the plane and that her suspicion about ‘her’, Johnny’s (which she wouldn’t suspect), i.e. your feet boiling in those socks is wrong. Is she not, therefore, making an apology unnecessarily and even accusing herself of stupidity, with the friendly intention of leavening the resounding anonymity of being cooped up like this, easing for both of you what is nothing but arduous waiting?

Both, as ever it’s both, you know full well, you always have. How predictable, how unvarying life eventually becomes in its ambivalence. Mark the truth that there are two sides to everything;

true, you always hit the mark. But not necessarily the bullseye, the results of this hard-to-control tendency, to get double, treble meanings out of words, to squeeze a second and third level out of them, allowing nothing to go to waste. And can you now relate this to ambivalence, is it a case of obedience rushing on ahead, as a result of flesh-and-blood ubiquity, or a case of undermining through over-exaggeration? Or is it just verbal rape again? By the way, you wanted to get away from absolutes, didn't you?

Another thing that's true: only now does the droning of the engine bore its way into your consciousness, after being interrupted by the woman's voice, perfectly pleasant as it is. Symbolic of all routine, you think, which only starts becoming an unbearable burden when invaded by happiness, a happiness that will of course disappear again. Does this count as human unhappiness? The point about happiness, you soon find out, is that the opposite, or to put it more gently, the absence of happiness is the normal state of affairs, it's what you live with, what you expect and justifiably believe you ought to expect. Expecting happiness is seen as more naïve and irrational than any superstition (which doesn't stop people from engaging in superstitious behaviour); it's drummed in to you by the tongues of relatives, rehearsed at an age when you bury dried-up ladybirds and bet that when you poke around in the same spot later you won't find them anymore because they've gone to heaven: if you wish for it too badly it won't happen, don't celebrate prematurely, there's many a slip betwixt cup and lip. The entire scale on which even almost dead-certain happiness barely came closer to reality than the most foolish wishful thinking, but rather was viewed with the same suspicion, and soon the thoughts themselves shied away from the unpredictability of potential happiness, they brought themselves back into line and were rewarded by the logic of superstition, which not only harboured the sensible aim of preventing disappointment, but always let its true nature flash from behind its smokescreen, this sweet, enchanting thought: if you avert your eyes from the wish, from the happiness, it won't see you either and it will dare come closer. If you don't think about it, in time it will seek you out. Only now do you notice how your whole body has come out in goosepimples, how tight your skin feels, now when not much can happen and out of curiosity you begin to peel it off with everyday wishes, minor fantasies you're no longer going to deny yourself, and it appears that in spite of this they'll come true anyway. But you're not totally convinced, these are negligible test cases, lily-livered simulations that say barely nothing about the chances of a genuinely longed-for happiness. And you can't see anything, it's out of range chiefly because for weeks you've felt as if you'd forfeited all your ability even to put together such a wish; you can't in your head concoct an idea of how the future that awaits you would best look, and for the

time being you can’t escape this blind spot. Wanting a window seat on a long-distance flight might be an inane thought; on a night flight, however, it’s pointless.

Witless. This word has turned up again, at some point it was there, in the usage of others, then at some point it eluded all of you, and you in particular with a feeling of contamination. Charlie had fewer scruples on this count, but coming from his mouth as a judgment it sounded like someone else’s words, not Charlie’s, witless in its original sense of being pointless, mindless, heartless. You once read in an obituary about Bach that by nature he’d had a slightly stupid face, although all this meant was that he was short-sighted. You still enjoy chewing over these archaic definitions, dropping them into conversation, that’s to say you can’t help it anymore, even though forsooth it is witless, pointless, to try to make these words sound like anything but the current end point of their semantic shift, or even their opposite. But your gaze and sensibility too always begin with the end of the story, making the historic stages and zero-grades appear in a faintly comical light, in line with your nature; the continual shifting and metaphorisation can’t be glossed over. It would also be a shame, you now add, seeing as you think you only think about words.

Imagining unhappiness is no joke, nor is it far-sighted; it’s idiotic, it’s the reverse method. It came from within, you didn’t have to be taught it, it was simply a conclusion that appeared by itself. If you prevent happiness by conceiving of it, couldn’t you focus your mind’s eye on potential unhappiness, force yourself to countenance the cruelty in all its dismal detail, and with this trick thereby banish it? Couldn’t the probability of this unhappiness occurring be seriously reduced by such a preview? After all, as you later found out, vaccinations work in a similar way: a weakened form of the catastrophe, introduced carefully into the body, will quash this very catastrophe in the future. You happily put up with the fleeting pain of the needle and the evening of languor that followed. And you couldn’t understand that others could fear and frown upon this benefit, which you gained from the inoculated instructions for thought and action. Don’t tempt fate, they said. But you weren’t in to all that doom-mongering. For although you might accept that such behaviour could only drive away happiness, the idea that the same thought processes would also attract unhappiness went too far for your sensibilities, and seemed to you like an outrageously unfair punishment, and the question was: a punishment for what, in fact? How could this be the case? Unhappiness arrived of its own accord. And surely it was better and ultimately even more sensible to picture a few of its possible manifestations, to prevent it from catching you totally defenceless and unawares. Or so you thought.

A problem gradually emerged, howbeit, first as the vague anxiety that something was missing from this theory, like that feeling of having forgotten something when setting out on a journey, and you bet you’ve left something with Renata, and for the first time this makes you feel happy rather than indifferent. Later there were concrete situations, which helped isolate the problem, even though this was of no help to anybody. Desired happiness is easily understood, whereas undesired unhappiness is inscrutable; you know roughly and sometimes exactly what you long for, but not what you would hate to see happen under any circumstances. Now that once again you’re facing this image of your version of fatalism, which is still deemed valid, you falter, like a hidden face it suddenly changes the familiar situation – that often you don’t really know what you want, but you have a good idea of what you don’t want – into the very opposite. And in this case, which is everything at once, that’s to say not everything, no ground, no sleep, no view, no prospect, you really start getting on your nerves. Maybe everything is topsy-turvy again. But that’s easy to say when you’re floundering. Nothing, everything, always, again, yes, yes.

But what else can you do? You’ve always got to have the last word, even with yourself, sure in the knowledge that it will never be the last one, but merely the first of a new tangle of thoughts. At any rate it seems that this is far from being everything that has knotted inside you; you merely tugged at an untidy loop and pulled out a thread, thereby twisting the rest into even more fiendish knots. In a distant memory you sat there, elbows raised, hands outstretched, keeping the skein of wool wrapped around them taut, and Oma Meta wound length after length onto an orderly growing ball, at the centre of which sat a rolled-up piece of cardboard that came back into view later as the pullover grew – you wore it at some point, sitting in the same seat. In the same seat you’ll be hanging in the air until Dubai, hands in lap, with the thought which is increasingly being shaped by the thin air at altitude and – admit it – is spurious: that happiness and unhappiness ultimately belong to the same category, namely that of a striking event, not exactly a novel thought. Thin like a layer of cardboard that doesn’t warm under your bottom, for example on 29 February, this striking date. The monthly overview in the calendar, always confusing when looking at February: the month that got a raw deal. And the fact that it’s sometimes granted an extra day doesn’t help efface this anomalous impression, rather it serves to emphasise it, for the month remains too short like a shrunken sleeve, in spite and indeed because of the stitched-on day, which confuses most by the occasional nature of its existence; its appearance is more disconcerting than its usual absence, which one can deal with and the disquiet over your childish question of where it has got to in those years that aren’t called leap years still rumbles on. February has two final days, a normal finish and an unusual finish, just like in the strictest logic of dreams, and you can’t take your pick.

You wonder whether the Englishwoman beside you – she might be Welsh – has ever reflected on this, whether anyone has ever reflected on this, you’re lost in another of your notoriously childish questions that were always a feature of your eccentricity without your ever considering if you were the only person to ask them. Am I the first person to think this? It’s scarcely believable how long it took you to realise that you’re never the only one. In the beginning you also believed, with the belief of a conviction never challenged, that you were the only person with your name, but that too was a mistake.

A landing? The announcement of something unannounced. For you everything is becoming a metaphor, give yourself a break, but you surrender to this automatic process because right now there’s nothing else nearby to surrender to. So, once again it was clear that something was happening, but not what. And on the ticket it says 1 technical stop. Which means Singapore, and if it doesn’t, so what?