“NOTES FROM ENCOUNTERED LANDS”

A travel book by Miroslav Kirin

(excerpts)

Translated by Una Dimitrijević

COVER TEXT

Miroslav Kirin's travel accounts blend notes from various periods of his life, yet their cohesion and stylistic elegance unify the work into a seamless whole. The book unfolds like a triptych: beginning with entries from Paris in 2005, followed by a central section focused on stays in China, and concluding with brief notes from travels in Croatia. Throughout the journey, the author's observations span a wide spectrum, from the simple, everyday details that capture his attention to broader cultural reflections on the East. Despite the varied motifs that emerge from these "encountered lands", the traveller's gaze is always characterised by the same unwavering curiosity and intensity. The moments captured often evolve into micro-stories, and among the many sketches of people who pass through his pages and notebooks, some gain depth and emerge as vivid, memorable characters. Poetry weaves through Kirin's "notes" like a thread—serving as the impetus for travel, a subject of contemplation and work, and as a subtle awareness of the poetic qualities inherent in language. Both travel enthusiasts and lovers of fine literature will discover plenty to appreciate in this work.

(Sanja Lovrenčić, ed.)

https://www.mala-zvona.hr/en/product/notes-from-encountered-lands/

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Miroslav Kirin was born in Sisak in 1965. He has published more than ten volumes of poetry, a book of photographic essays, an illustrated children's book in collaboration with Mingsheng Pi (published by Mala zvona), an auto-fictional novel that received an important Croatian prize in 2001, and a volume of short lyrical prose that also won an important national award and was shortlisted for another one. In 2024 he was awarded the highest Croatian recognition for poetry, "Goran's Wreath". He lives in Zagreb and works as a highschool teacher and occasional translator.

IN A STATION OF THE METRO

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.

Ezra Pound

THE UNDERGROUND

Eyes are rarely as restless as in underground trains. First, of course, they must adjust to the change in light: from the brightness outside they slip into the dull half-light of long, winding corridors, cautiously tracking the rhythmic variation of lit and unlit pillars, studying—more superficially than with any great interest—the faces of passengers already waiting for the train, glancing at the opposite wall plastered with large advertising posters, then returning to the faces of people, straining increasingly over time. Upon entering the train, they search for free seats, and once they find one, they take possession of it, draw closer, and then stop, seemingly still, gazing at someone's face, or looking through it, following the lines in a book or newspaper spread open on someone's lap, or perhaps closing for an instant, trying to regain balance and serenity, somewhat unsettled by the descent from the upper to the lower, underground world. For one cannot deny that this entirely ordinary, even automated, almost unconscious descent holds an element of the unreal, the mythical, both liberating and unsettling. What was above has now been replaced by an objectively new world, stripping passengers of their present and everything that it carries with it. In the underground, one enters a timeless realm: whenever we descend into a station everything is the same, trains arrive according to a schedule and passengers resemble one another—or is it perhaps the same mass of people endlessly circling, trapped in a time loop? And the light, that artificial light which has replaced the daylight, intensifies the isolation of an underground world that knows no distinction between day and night, erasing or at least suppressing all the energy we bring from the world outside. A peculiar stillness ensues, a frozen state, where experiences are temporarily lost, or rather postponed, to be resurrected when we re-emerge into the daylight.

POETRY

Poetry exposes itself, wrote Paul Celan, the poet of the end of language, certainly not thinking of its obscene advertising display in the metro. This month, Paris is celebrating Brazilian culture, and thus the verses of Brazilian poets stand on display throughout the metro trains. Yet another cynical gaze turned inward: poetry desperately contriving to be as present as possible, but pasted up like any advertising slogan, it most reliably erases itself, or at best (if different cases existed to be ranked) provokes boredom and a dismissive wave of the hand. Considering the offer, one might think the selected poets were bureaucrats sat in administrative offices in international humanitarian and other such organisations. So when you lift your gaze from your newspaper columns to immerse yourself in the wonder of the poetic world, you turn your face in vain towards these panels—poetry is to be found everywhere but in the spaces where it is so sanctimoniously displayed.

THE GIRL

Let's take the girl sitting across from me. I don't know how long she's been there, sat in her seat. It seems to me that she doesn't know either. The longer I observe her, the more convinced I am of this. She sits there, immersed in the perpetual artificial light of the metro, amid darting eyes that meet or avoid each other, fidgeting from the onset of her distraction. When she left, she was already late. But I'm not convinced you even need to leave to be late. You can be late because you're marooned in your own world, frozen in a realm of images, people and landscapes. I can't get to the place where this girl dwells. Or maybe I can, it's not too late. But there's no rush—one always arrives there on time. Yet she, who is younger than me, arrived early and has long since plunged into her impenetrable inner world. All that reach me are the cold reflections of the shimmers within her. The girl's world becomes accessible only when its internal turmoil and unsettling inner voices quieten down. Right now, she's sitting in her home, before her vanity—what my mother used to call the little table with a mirror at the centre of the room—observing herself. She's not wearing a silk nightgown, nor the black dress she slips on for dinner at some Parisian restaurant with her sweetheart; she's in a worn-out black Adidas tracksuit, her feet clad in cheap sneakers, likely bought in a Chinese store. Huddled up to her slender black thighs streaked with traces of ash is a half-opened purse, dirty and torn at the seams, like a cat at the mercy of its owner. With one hand she takes a comb from the bag, with the other she grasps her black hair and raises it as if into a bun. Then she slowly runs the comb through her hair, from forehead to crown, forcefully and not without meeting resistance from tangled strands. It seems as though she hasn't combed her hair in days and is now impatient to do so as soon as possible. And this combing must be painful—long black strands get caught in the teeth of the comb, and furrows appear on her brow. The comb keeps slipping from her hand onto the seat, her clenched legs or her open purse.

Her dishevelled hair falls over her forehead and eyes, vexing her, and she grabs at it again with childlike rebelliousness, yet with a certain restraint, as if it were a venomous snake escaped from a wicker box. While she combs her hair, it's difficult, almost impossible for her to follow her reflection in the mirror. Her gaze remains downcast, submissive, humbled before the beauty being born. Yet, every now and then, she steals a glance at her reflection in the windowpane. When she notices the changes in her face and hair, that imagined burst of beauty, her lips tremble and the lower one tenses and swells on the verge of a smile.

SHANGYU BICYCLE AND FISH POND

On the main village street, right by the entrance of the Art School where students spend summer preparing for entrance exams in the autumn, in a corner formed by two brick walls, on a pile of tires bound together like a bundle of firewood to serve as a more or less comfortable armchair, you can find an improvised bicycle repair service run by a thin, wiry middle-aged man, his skin tanned from working half-naked in the sun and at an incredible speed—a Shangyu artist once told me he could remove a tire, find the puncture, patch it, fix it back on the bike and inflate it in five minutes flat. This is who I turned to—with Hui Di's help—to repair the rear tire of a Pony bike I found in the apartment of my unexpected host, the poet Jiang Hao, who no longer lives there but stops in occasionally when he tires of life in southern China where he now resides. And indeed, it took exactly five minutes, for which I was charged only four yuan. For the same sum you can buy two kilos of tomatoes at the village market, or half a kilo in Croatia. A couple of days later, I was already cycling along a road that passes two shops, goes straight and then turns right; the village slowly fades away, the houses become more sparse, but the yards expand, suggesting wealthier homes. Alongside the road trickles a small stream, or perhaps a drainage channel—it's hard to say, the water is shallow and bluish, as if flowing from a large laundrette. Further along the road, an artificial dam stops the water, and perhaps a small lake or pond could have formed there if the water weren't so polluted that only hardy algae and aquatic plants feeding on the waste survive. The failed fish pond was perhaps part of a more ambitious plan for a recreational park within a weekend resort—which still exists, judging by the sign on the board in front of the walled-off settlement. The wall obstructs the view, so it's not clear if the miniature resort is thriving or if it's just another failed investment generating empty housing and ruins. I tried to climb the path that runs up along the edge of the resort towards a small pagoda at the top of the hill, but the barking of dogs warned me off. I had stumbled upon the caretaker's house, from which I could draw no reliable conclusions concerning the fate of the resort. It may have come to nothing while the caretaker remains on the estate where he has a comfortable life, or perhaps the resort has indeed flourished, at least on weekends, with the caretaker always on duty. I didn't know where the main road led and had no intention of cycling on endlessly; this was, after all, the first test ride of my Beijing bicycle. Its wheels were small, I needed to pedal fast, I didn't cover much ground, and I tired quickly—fortunately, it wasn't humid, and there were signs it might finally rain.

At one spot, road workers were repairing the edge of the road. They had dug up a metre-wide section and were laying large stones from a nearby quarry that I had also passed by and which probably employed villagers from Shayukou. Later, they would cover it with asphalt or concrete. I returned the same way, but at the bend where the road continued into the village, I decided to turn right, knowing that this path led to the other side of the lake where fishermen went. Nearby, several tonnes of stone boulders had been dumped—something had evidently been planned, then abandoned, and now they lay there like a stone forest among living poplars. Through the trees, I glimpsed a run-down company, shabby dwellings, heaps of earth resembling ground asphalt, a stationary yellow digger, and a shirtless man shovelling waste from a pile and carrying it into a dilapidated shed. Although it appeared pointless to me, I didn't question his intent or effort. A dusty path nearby led to one of the agricultural areas, but alongside it was a dell hidden by dense shrubs into which waste was dumped daily. It seemed that this hollow was to be filled up in due course and turned into another agricultural plot. Later, at the market, we would unknowingly buy tomatoes and courgettes grown from the symbiosis of inorganic and organic waste. When I finally reached the lake, I found around ten fishermen planted in their seats, but fortune had yet to smile on them. Golden orioles sang in the grove, red and blue dragonflies flew above the lake, and nothing else happened in these fishermen's lives. The steep, eroded bank of reddish earth also bordered the lake on this side. On the flat land above these slopes were the dilapidated brick houses I had seen from the opposite shore. It was then that I noticed an old man doing something strange with a long stick on the lake's surface. I immediately dismissed the idea that it was an unusual form of fishing, but not the suspicion that what the old man was doing had something to do with fishing. He had enclosed part of the lake with earthen walls, usurped it and evidently turned it into a pond. When I observed him stirring the water with his stick, he was in fact rearranging the grasses he had thrown into his pond for the herbivorous fish to eat. He kept going to the tall dry grass at the lake shore, returning with a new bundle, throwing it into the lake, rearranging it, going for more, returning and repeating this several times. But the mystery remained unsolved. Afterwards, he walked along the shore, digging through the earth with his stick. I waited for him to leave and then went over. The fish pond formed part of an interesting "multicultural" farm patch—along the edge of the lake, this industrious man had planted numerous vegetables: cucumbers, courgettes, aubergines, tomatoes, beans, sunflowers and celery. Drought would clearly never be a concern, his vegetables are always near the water, and the fish are also close by.

EXPLAINING POETRY TRANSLATION TO THE HAIRDRESSER IN SHAYUKOU

Explaining to my Chinese hairdresser how much to trim my hair and how much to leave is akin to translating Chinese—and not just Chinese—poetry: in translating, I explain to the language I'm translating from, Chinese, how comfortable it will feel in its new language, Croatian; how it will resemble itself, the source language, yet still be different,

and how there will be no confusion regarding its identity. I rely on the hairdresser's knowledge and experience, which traditionally excludes any radical measures, mostly adhering to the boundaries of the expected and learned on both sides, so that we roughly reach what I had envisioned, the point at which we accept/confirm our tacit agreement. I trustingly submit to her hands and scissors, of which she is fully aware. She approaches the task with a relaxed demeanour, even an overabundance of calm, which she then channels into a casual and lively conversation with a local who invariably appears in establishments such as this, not as a customer-decor but as a support mechanism. For if the hairdresser were deprived of the power of speech, her entire job would become questionable, perhaps even futile. Scissors become dangerous when they start listening to themselves in silence, hands become half-blind—just as in translation it is dangerous to be seduced by the sonority of the language while forgetting the accuracy of meaning, the whole culture hidden within the language, and the possibility of a stable relationship between the two idioms. The hairdressing salon only opens at the end of the day, when the summer sun stops beating onto the storefront, and the locals, mostly farmers, after washing their sunburned bodies, leave their homes to eagerly partake in the social life of the village. They are given two opportunities to be revived each day: in the morning, after having breakfast at a small eatery offering dumplings, flatbread and soup, when they sit on benches in the shade of young pines planted along the main road, listening to music on the radio, gently swaying and chattering like birds; and in the evening, when from the darkness—since their frugality means streetlights are rarely or never turned on—there emerges only the glow of their eyes and burning cigarette tips. During those evenings, in the hairdressing salon whose recesses reveal a dishevelled bed and a few indistinct human figures who sit on it staring ahead, the middle-aged hairdresser turns on her modest but functional light and welcomes clients for their evening talk therapy. But I am excluded from such therapy; I have no right to participate in the evening chatter. The sentences that fly from the hairdresser to the local are an exclusive part of their evening ritual. The words I have written during the day have no refuge, they can only run into their own solitude, which means I must go with them into the night, and on until morning.

BOSCH IN BEIJING

Of course, I couldn't stay in the Palace of Abundance forever; it seemed impossible that I would be able to write a decent poem there, and my stay in China was rapidly coming to an end. I wanted to spend a few last days in the heart of Beijing, wandering around, sampling good food, and meeting up with Hui Di and other friends, so I rented a modest room in the Jade Palace, about fifteen minutes' walk from the Forbidden City. One morning, while reading the *China Daily* before breakfast, I was genuinely astonished to see an article announcing that the Cervantes Institute Gallery in Beijing would be exhibiting nothing less than Hieronymus Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights*! Or *The Pleasure Garden*, as it is sometimes referred to. But the latter is also the title of Alfred Hitchcock's debut film, a silent drama from 1925 about dancers in a nightclub, and while there are some similarities with Bosch's famous triptych, the main resemblance lies in their titles.

An hour later, I was at Dengshikou metro station where I boarded Line 5, transferred to Line 6 at Dongsi, and then, after about half an hour, exited at Dongdaqiao in the trendy Sanlitun neighbourhood of Chaoyang District, where I was to find the Instituto Cervantes and finally see *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. It was already noon when I found myself at an intersection of broad avenues. The sun blazed mercilessly as I stared at a map of Beijing, trying to orient myself. It seemed easy—I had the address, I knew which station I had exited and that the street with the Cervantes Institute should be about two to three hundred metres north, so I headed in that direction. But after walking along a few streets, taking left and right turns, and crossing a pedestrian bridge over a road, I had to admit that I no longer knew where I was or in which direction to go. In my halting Chinese I asked a girl for directions, hoping that I could communicate with a little English as well. She did her best to explain, but her mix of Chinese and English only confused me further. So, a little later, I sat on a low wall in the shade of an ash tree to spread out my map and once again check where I was and where I needed to go. Walking under the summer sun had made me quite thirsty; I also felt a strong desire to rest a bit, even to give up and go back, as I could always go to see the painting in the Prado Museum. Still, I continued on and soon stumbled into a store where I bought a bottle of water to quench my growing thirst. The shelves displayed exotic fruits too, including fresh slices of durian packed in clear plastic boxes alongside those in spiky shells. I had never tried it before—nor would I now, I told myself, I'd save it for a more opportune moment. One article I read described durian as tasting like the finest almond cream but smelling like rotten eggs, public toilets or a pig farm. Since it can cause unpredictable reactions, eating it in public spaces is prohibited. On the other hand, nothing is more tempting than a controversial dish.

I don't remember how it happened, but when I stopped for a moment on Gongti Donglu—foam-like clouds were drifting across an almost clear blue sky—and then turned around, I found myself facing the massive blue-tinted glass building of the Cervantes Institute, in front of which the flags of Spain and China fluttered on tall poles. Maybe I would have seen it sooner had I not been preoccupied with reading signs and inscriptions on and around the street, and if I had felt the need to look up at all. "Here I am", I said out loud. "Here I am", I exclaimed as I entered the building. To the right was a counter where a Chinese official sat, looking as bored as if he were in a bank or a post office. I don't recall if I asked him in Chinese or English but I think he must have understood, because he mumbled something and waved me to the left, towards some doors, before returning with an utterly disinterested expression to whiling away the time. Incredibly, there was no admission to pay, no one checked me at the entrance and I was free to walk into an exhibition of which I could only have dreamed. Perhaps this should have told me something, but in my excitement I ignored these anomalies.

Upon entering the room, I saw the famous triptych but also a woman on her knees, wiping the floor below the painting. This scene was surreal in itself. She was kneeling. With a rag. It seemed that someone had spilled water right in front of Bosch's painting, yet it was unclear how such a thing could have occurred. Surely it wasn't one of those attacks on famous paintings meant to highlight some pressing issue? To get close to *The Garden of Earthly Delights* I had to wait for her to finish her task, but I could go look at the other works on display. Immediately to the left of the Bosch was a nearly mirror-

image triptych titled *The Uninhabited Garden (El jardín deshabitado)* by contemporary Spanish artist José Manuel Ballester, as noted on the label. Ballester's work was a copy of Bosch's painting in which something was wrong. The artist had used digital tools to "clean" Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* of its human and animal forms. The vivid pleasures, the scene with Adam and Eve, and the depiction of hell had vanished as if wiped away. There was nothing left. It was like a storm or deadly epidemic had swept them from the painting—which instantly became an uneventful static landscape—along with all the obscenities of Bosch's bizarre Christian critique, or moral tale, and its unprecedented display of the paradisiacal and infernal facets of life, the consequences of temptation and sin. History itself had disappeared. The remaining "uncleaned", denuded objects, the witnesses of pleasure in motion scattered about Ballester's painting, testified to the eerie solitude of a world deprived of human presence, whatever our opinion of it may be. The contemporary Spanish artist was perhaps also sending a harsh and prophetic message about the environment: this is how grim and helpless the world will look when humanity eventually disappears—an event towards which we are, of course, headed faster and faster and with no help in sight—and through the emptied cosmos of this desolate landscape will float only useless objects, the products of extravagant human imagination that nobody no longer needs.

While I was observing Ballester's "intervention", someone also "swept away" the Chinese lady who had been wiping the floor by Bosch's painting. She had vanished, ethereal as she was, and I was no longer sure she had been there at all. In any case, the space in front of the painting I had longed to see was now clear and I could approach, but I wanted to delay my pleasure a little longer; since I had already waited so much, I could be a little more patient.

On nine black-framed panels resembling window shutters, contemporary Chinese artist Miao Xiaochun presented his *Microcosmos*. It consisted of stills taken from his eponymous video project, which uses 3D technology to create a dynamic image of a possible world by blending the virtual and the real. In this work, reality was depicted through the detritus of civilization: plastic bottles, drinks cans, computer keyboards and discarded rock instruments, surrounded by androids crawling like ants over a carcass. The departure from Bosch's painting was evident in the number of panels, a sort of tripling of *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. Moreover, Miao Xiaochun had "exiled" Adam and Eve from their symbolic capital. His artistic and philosophical perspective, however, was Eastern; Christian iconography and symbolism are foreign to him, though he made an attempt to understand and establish a dialogue with them. The *apple* was still present in his work, albeit in a technological sense, as Miao Xiaochun explained in an interview for *China Real Time*: "We know that the forbidden fruit eaten by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden was an apple. Coincidentally, the logo of one of the biggest tech brands is also an apple. In my work, it represents science and technology. People rely on technology so much that it might ultimately lead us to hell." Today that path is shorter, and hell is closer. It seems that Miao Xiaochun did not intend to offer his own interpretation of Bosch's masterpiece. Above all, he aimed to create a disturbing work in which every figure was identical, a clone of some ideal human devoid of personality and driven solely by its functionality, unable to generate any exciting events or sins and thereby eliminating the moral impact of the painting. Nonetheless, the work contained allusions to Bosch and

his wondrous objects in a landscape teeming with turmoil. My impression was that all this hypertrophied dynamism primarily reflects the exhausted state of a world stripped of emotion and any true desire to move forward. In other words, even if progress is made, it's not necessarily in the right direction.

I finally stand before the Bosch and can't believe it. I think to myself: serves you right, you've always been gullible, naively trusting people, and now you can add being impulsive and superficial to that list—such cursory reading, whether of a newspaper article or novel. That longed-for world-renowned artwork, here in Beijing, in the Cervantes Institute, in front of you, before your astonished eyes, in a clean and quiet space with no one to disturb you, in an ideal setting to view a painting, this masterpiece, you soon realise, is merely a convincing large-format print, not a painting borrowed from the Prado Museum. Just look at how the colours blend and dance up close, how those playful pixels mock you, you credulous fool! You've lost all desire to look at the "painting". How could you have believed that something as priceless as *The Garden of Earthly Delights* would be brought to Beijing? Does that painting ever even leave the Prado? You console yourself with the thought that it must have been the poor English in the *China Daily* that convinced you it was the original painting, for why create a media fuss over an ordinary print of a masterpiece? The two interpretations of Bosch's painting were likely the focus, that perpetually sought-after dialogue between East and West. So don't be disheartened that you didn't see the real Bosch this time. José Manuel Ballester and Miao Xiaochun may have brought you closer to Bosch than you realise. Maybe that was the point.

I return to my modest room in the Jade Palace, shut out the light and lay down to rest, hoping that none of the versions of *The Garden of Earthly Delights* will come to me in my dreams.