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Peter Weber

Orient

I ordered another coffee and a glass of water from a diminutive wafer in a white uniform. The sun had already begun to set and its rays were silver through the dull glass of the windows, they fanned out and were refracted as they entered the room. The faces of the passers-by blurred as they streamed on, pulled along by strings of light, while those waiting were plunged in half shadows, the great majority of them grouped around the big clock. The escalators disgorged a constant flow of new people into the silvery space, in time to a private, restless rhythm: now following more densely on each other's heels, now arriving separately. (...)

The light was now coming from behind the big clock. The white cube of time rises up above everyone surrounding it, high on its slender columns. We orient ourselves by the clock. There's a face with black indicators and a red second hand turned in each of the four directions. Underneath the cube there hangs a metal ball, barely the size of a head, from which in turn a little blue cube with a white dot and an arrow on each side is suspended from four rods, showing the way to the meeting point. The same is set in stone on the floor below. Beneath the clock there is calm, round about surges the maelstrom. The newcomers huddle in close to the clock. The longer one remains here, the more readily one is driven out to the edges. (...)

The first clock-towers were those the British used to impose world time on their colonies, and they were little copies of Big Ben. Time is money: this motto, emblazoned on every English clock, was taken literally by a certain young West Indian, who filled the case of the clock that stood on the central square of his country's capital with English pounds, thinking that he could thus gain time. Soon shells and floral wreaths began to be heaped up beneath clocks all over the South Sea islands. In order to unify the various temporal habits of His Majesty's peoples, the royal astronomer invented the Time Games, for which representatives of all the continents were invited to London, to a playing field laid out in Greenwich Park just below the observatory. An empty clock case was set upon stilts above the meridian line. This was where the various peoples were to deposit their tributes on the occasion of the opening ceremony. The royal family was also in attendance, taking in the spectacle from an appropriate distance on a raised platform above the park. The astronomer directed his telescope at the heap of tributes and gave a minute account of the treasures he saw magnified there and the amount of time that had thus been gained. He ensured that, with proper balance, a large drop of wax formed beneath the clock case, which he then referred to as the common drop of time. And now the clock was ready for milking.

The tallest of the players kept their sights trained on the growing bulge, awaiting the perfect moment: then they sprang in the air, plucked the ball from the casing, and began to run in their ranks through the park, passing the wax ball back and forth (both hands and feet were allowed). The aim of the whole mass exercise seemed to be to promote the maximum physical interaction of the greatest number of players, and thus to gradually diminish the size of the ball until it was no bigger than a marble, then to be laid back within the case amid solemn applause; and so the games were ended. The rules had been clearly established, and nevertheless they remained utterly mysterious to continental Europeans, for all their valiant attempts to understand them. This cultic process was in turn to give rise to the entire range of ball games.

The time sport is played once a year here in our station hall as well, which is divided into four sections for the occasion: Asia, Africa, America, Australia. The Europeans are both organisers and spectators, and they call the game folkball. Only the male railway employees are permitted to take part, emerging from the kitchens for the event. The restaurants are closed for the duration, and on the sidelines the players' wives sell specialities of their far-flung continents. Various groups take advantage of the warm-up period to make announcements of all kinds, and word has already got around that the most interesting part of the folkball match will take place between eleven and twelve: the scent of lemongrass and red spices wafts up, with a snatch of bass-heavy music, spokesong and glimpses of dancing figures in every corner. On the dot of noon the diminutive waiter climbs up his long ladder and unscrews the glass ball. The indicators on the mother clock stop, as do all the indicators on all the other clocks. Ball upon little ball descend from the casing, to be snatched up by the players and brought into play in a variety of ways: dribbled, sprinted, tossed, traded and blocked, shoes squeaking on the floor. The African and Afro-American players are noticeably dominant, and the youth who gather at the clock after work and at weekends with their cheap balls have long since been infected by their artistry. They dress like them, listen to the same music, move to the same rhythms. There are whole contingents of Asian kids from the inner city for whom the railway station is the only place they really feel at home. They have their own version of the time sport, which they play in their own sector with a multitude of little balls passed nimbly back and forth. The speed with which they serve the Europeans pressing for attention at their stands flows over into all the processes taking place in the hall.

Just in front of us, all the employees are forming a human pyramid. The diminutive waiter is collecting the remaining balls in a basket, climbing over thighs and arms, being lifted higher and higher until he is mounted on the topmost pair of shoulders: and now he is pouring the balls back into the casing. The second hand begins to sweep again, the games are over, the pyramid is dismantled, everyone goes back to work.

At all times, inconspicuous, elderly people stand among the columns, their features alert to the depths. They wear yellow badges bearing the words Railway mission. The mission is staffed by volunteers. Everyone knows that the station is a dark magnet, that the desperate will sooner or later find themselves at the station as they make their wild journey; that they will wind up here, beneath the clock, before they go to ground for good. This is what the ladies of the mission are here to guard against as they watch the zero point. Just recently a yellow garbage bin was erected

on the spot at chest height and topped with an ashtray, and below the clock the general ban on smoking has been lifted. As everyone knows, vanishing souls smoke a final cigarette before they evaporate. It is at this point that they can be addressed, carefully, in a whisper. They haven't spoken to anyone in a long time, or at most with themselves. The lady from the mission forms little islands of sense, attempts to connect with the people in a series of gentle sentences, to ensnare them in her whispers, to touch them with her hand, and she guides them into more protected zones where they are received by assistants. The ladies from the mission are supported and aided by the station staff as they dissolve into their mission. They require daily warm meals and coffee on the hour, brought to them by the assistants, who are themselves volunteers.

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END

Thank you for having taken the time to read. Of course our thanks also go to the authors who with their short stories have dealt with the theme «time passed with the railway».