

THE DANCING PRESENT

Katrien Vermeire's *Godspeed*

I/

The nature reserve, even just the name, evokes the mood of grandeur. Opened officially in 1934, this protected milieu receives about 9 million visitors a year. Lavish promotional pictures show off a sylvan realm veiled in woodland saturated with autumn colours, awash in smoky mists. The private guide, a former park ranger, recounts how the misty veil is most clearly visible in the early morning, usually after rainfall. The rain itself precipitates as the result of warm, humid air moving from the south then cooled in the heights of the distant mountains.

The guide is used to letting newcomers feel the sheer sense of vastness of the reserve. For the high price of his tour you are being immersed in the inscrutable privacy of *his* forest. With eagerness he allows the intoxicating aromas of the forest, the exuberant green, to act upon you. If there is anyone who could exemplify this place in terms of a living organism, it is he. In just four sentences he almost plays down the presence of the black bear, but with a tenderness he regales upon the variety of salamanders that can be seen. Now and again he gestures upward to the gently rocking crowns of trees in the hope of being able to point out one of his beloved bird species.

It soon becomes apparent that you haven't paid for the admission to the National Park, but for the edifying weight of his words. With his conscientious love of the wood – one spontaneously thinks of the spinning yarns of Emerson, Thoreau's little hut – he doesn't seem American at all. The trees, the woods, the animals: the ranger has only given them a meticulous place in his speech after much reflection and meditation. It is also astonishing how his euphoria and wonder has remained in spite of the conveyance of biological facts, and how humbly he carries himself through the foliage.

About half way through the expedition, the guide calls a halt. The religiousness of the awe that he stages suddenly appears all too real.

"You see, for me all this was created by God."

Now a hush descends – more out of unsurety than desire. Nobody dares acknowledge his words, even with a nod, let alone contradict him. The respect for this thoughtful guide turns into disbelief, even a silent shudder. It materialises that this affable ranger, nature philosopher, appears to be a most fervent, devout Creationist. The chaos of the forest, the visible lack of order about which he spoke with so much vigour, doubles in magnitude.

After a few hours walking, the car park, the starting point of the journey, is reached again. Familiar territory abounds; the memory of a Biblical prehistoric chaos, genesis and such, echoes after. During the entirety of an expedition, his remark has been carried along like an encumbering, lead-heavy attribute. When farewells are exchanged, his ceremonial innocuousness has a crushing effect.

"Godspeed."

The word seems to drift from afar, echoing a sentiment from a bygone age, centuries past, though from the guide's mouth it seems to carry a natural currency; it sounds strangely appropriate to the

age, casual even. *Godspeed* was traditionally a Christian greeting meaning 'all the best', 'go well' or 'safe journey'. Alongside the word 'God', the old English *spede* indicates good luck and prosperity: 'May God precipitate your happiness', or something thereabouts.

In English-speaking Bibles, the term is used upon occasion in the Second Letter of John, addressing an unknown Christian community. 'Whomsoever wishes to further the self without the teachings of Jesus, neglects God. He whom pursues Jesus' teachings has the blessings of the Father and the Son. Whomsoever comes to you and heeds not these teachings, allow them not into your house nor greet them, because to consort with such people condemns you as an accessory to their evil.'

The discord harboured in the above passage is being consciously pursued by some. In certain circles, the address *Godspeed* is being used as a crude code, a hidden curse to place the non-believing outsiders firmly in their place.

'I pity you, ignorant one', or something thus akin.

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How much pity can the 'ignorant' rely upon? How much mercy is the person who does not want to believe being given in life? Just as much, less or more than the one who doesn't want to know of the world of hard, factual science?

For the ranger, the facts do not suffice. A bound has been set to the multitude of life and the overwhelming power of natural beauty. Somewhere this world is being thrown back on itself. Effortlessly he brings in the limitation of it: 'All this is God's creation'.

For the anthropologist, the world opened up with 'all this.' Her own personal epiphany that she experienced in the National Park was not the product of poetic invention but naked truth. In the immediate surroundings of the wooden summerhouse that the family had been renting for over 30 years, she saw lights flicker every holiday. Not just as in a luminous profusion, an excess of little flashes, shuffled together. No. Every summer, she would sit with her family on the wooden terrace, in total darkness and watch 'The Light Show': the gradual emerging of innumerable flickering and flaring little lights, flashing synchronously. Periods of impenetrable darkness alternate with a rhythmically pulsing flickering of lights more or less attuned to one another.

Her Light Show can still be seen there. Every month of June, the woods about the little holiday place become filled with hundreds of curious people eager to behold the phenomenon for themselves. A dim, red lantern is pushed into their hands and they are gone - away into the dark to pursue the white and yellow little flashes. Most of them will venture no further than a kilometre or so into the forest, partly out of a fear of the black bear and rattlesnake. Only much further into the forest will the darkness, the flashing tingling reveal itself in all its splendour.

Most important for her was a need to get to the bottom of this miracle. She envisaged the idea as a subject for study, daring to jump from an easy-going, summery youth to a salient domain of eminent science. Indoubtedly, this disconcerting interplay had to be informing us about a different order of manifestation urge, mass, power.

This was the state of affairs ten years ago. Now she has left the more probing questions behind. A new, disturbing phenomenon attracts her attention: the gradual emigration and decline of the phenomena. At present, there isn't enough material to blame this activity on light pollution, but nevertheless. She is not alone in her concern. Colleagues worldwide tell her similar stories. In Ban Lomtuan, Thailand, for example, the Mae Klong River is being shone upon by the fluorescence of the local amenities. The little flashes that one could see in abundance there three years ago have now disappeared.

She is realistic enough not to jump to any hasty conclusions. Firstly, facts need to be collected and correlated, charts plotted, evolutions established and delineated. She admits: scientists must not be ignorant, nor do they need compassion from others. But the scientific research is still too much in its infancy to be able to see into the past. The material that she and her colleagues have gathered can scarcely composite a period before light pollution, but has evolved itself in parallel with it. The increasing store of knowledge conflates in equal proportion with the decline of research material.

Luckily, there is Discovery Channel.

The television channel wants to pay elaborate attention to the little flashes. The anthropologist has exclusively sold her story to the station, so she cannot and does not want to elaborate further for the time being. And how she resembles her namesake from Gertrude Stein's theatre play: 'I know all the words that rhyme with bright with light with might with alright, I know them so that I cannot tell.'

She has no objection to giving practical advice about *where* (Little River Road, Jakes Creek Road or maybe 'the wooded hillside to your left'), *when* (throughout June, peaking around the twelfth) and *how* ('watch for the bears, be careful with your food and what you carry when hiking', or 'go in the daylight and become familiar with the area before you try it in the dark').

Further to this, she adopts a reticent attitude, perhaps even a little discouraging: 'Many have tried to video the overall display and as yet, none have succeeded other than short clips taken at close range. None show the thousands of lights. They are very difficult to film.'

She knows what she is talking about. But also: what she has to keep quiet about. Discovery Channel has provisioned a well-equipped camera team, and will be the first and only TV station to capture on film her Light Show in an accomplished form. Camera and science alike will collaborate; together they will deliver the definitive images of the miracle. Alternative attempts will become superfluous; nobody will be able to surpass them.

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The scientist realises that the little lights, as small as a fingertip, will only allow themselves to be pressed into an image frame with much difficulty. He has an unrivalled knowledge of the unwilling, contrary behaviour of his subject which has withdrawn itself from all human measurement and classification. As if the rhythmic, pulsing light has, in some unseen moment, broken free of our control room. As if it took its leave of us, and since then spurs (sideways, heedless, but yet so visible) on another speed.

The ranger would say: the speed of God.

That is: a haste which isn't ours.

God's speed.

All his life, the specialist is on the trail of its essence. He furnishes more material, maps out shifting patterns. With a loving devotion he admires the waving and pulsing light, writing page after page of gilt-edged words. But the quintessence of it that he desires so much as a scientist still has him feeling in the dark. He has looked into the light so much that he is blinded by it.

Initially, while studying during the 1970s, there were people who spoke with scientific awe about the rhythmic pulsing by which these little lights show themselves to us. Certainly, we are used to seeing a flock of birds flying overhead with their sudden turns and reversals.

We also possess knowledge of shoals of fish capable of making themselves look bigger than they really are. But synchronic flashing light is, if possible, even more enigmatic: it presupposes a coordinated rhythmic action - isochronism combined with a sense of spontaneity.

When the anthropologist pointed out to him the presence of little lights in the park, he thought it impossible that his luminous love could also be out there. For her part, she had not realised that thus far, she was the only person that knew of the existence of them. Their respective disbelief moved one another. A vibration, extensive, followed.

Suddenly, the little lights were found on the other side of the ocean, and not just in Asia, as the scientist had first assumed. These little flashes did not amalgamate in trees or bushes as they do over there, but glided nonchalantly, interwoven with one another. Later research would reveal that the synchronic flashing does not arise on account of shortening time intervals, as in the case of the Asian lights, but of the ability of the light pulses to imitate one another.

Having asked the anthropologist for a detailed description, he journeyed to meet the light. He tells the story frequently and with pleasure: how cynical he had been, falling into a jet-lagged sleep on the terrace of the veranda, only to wake hours later, to be greeted by a whole lot of synchronous little flashes. 'It flashed about six times and then the woods were completely dark. And then, it began again. It was one of the wonderful moments of discovery that come every now and then to a scientist.'

Since then, he has designed a research programme with an army of students and volunteers. Many more facts, comments, photos and videos were presented to him for analysis. The specialist peers into the distance, gradually overcome by this flashing insouciance, and accepts the elusiveness. 'If there is a punchline to this story, it is this,' he says, gilded, 'you don't need to be a scientist to make discoveries. All you need to do is be there, out in nature, walking and watching and observing and noting what for you is unusual.'

IV/

To be there.

Walking, observing.

To open oneself to the unusual.

Is this what photographers and scientists have in common? The cliché would have it that photographers open up reality by treading towards it, meeting it with open arms. Just like scientists who will initially adopt an unbiased, open-minded approach, only later with an earnest face presenting the facts, will photographers also dwell in their pit of reality. You could also say it like this. Both are cut of the same, vain cloth: they present themselves as if they respect the reality, but deem themselves - in public, upon occasion, but most often, secretly - superior to it.

Once in a while, there are more subtler forms of affinity to be ascertained. Take a look at the pictures of Katrien Vermeire. Her photography isn't one of those supposed, characterless registrations of how the world appears to us. Nor does she exert herself to sweep clean our eyes with images that give the reality a pathos. Even less is she interested in isolating fragments that jump away from the naked eye.

Her photography doesn't even want to lay much claim. If her congeniality with science rests upon anything at all, let it be this: the sense for experiment, the adventure of trial and error. This is not to imply the incessant calculation of presumptions or the keeping track of expectations. On the contrary, it points to even less. Her pictures have an insight into the inadequacy of our desires by adopting an openly naive attitude. They place a finger to the viewer's lips before he or she can ask themselves which order rules within this chaos. Is it permitted to conceal the already damaged questions about realism, being true to nature, to return to the blessing of pure observation?

All in all, her approach possesses something of a warding-off gesture. Her pictures do not go in search of the essence, the right, let alone a meaning. The truth of a detached moment, after all the general experience that photography presents us with, is not present in her pictures with any great urgency. The images that she makes want to part with all the power over the visible world. They gain no advantage by an aesthetic explanation or even the reduction of this to zero. Rather, they resign themselves, as with the specialist from before, in retrospective, with the slogan: 'All you need to do is be there, out in nature.'

Now look at the butterfly lamp.

She stands there precisely the way she stands: abandoned, as if sheltered by leaves. Nobody, hardly a butterfly can be seen in the periphery. No meaning or intention either. Just this presence of human workmanship (fabric, lamp, box, thread) indicates that something is being tested here. What is the aim of this construction? What is this luminosity striving for, amidst this darkness of green?

Just like the photographer, the butterfly lamp also stands there, in open nature. The expectant attitude they adopt is but partly theirs. Rather it is being enforced upon them from the outside by us, while they themselves do not tire of the standing still, the watching. What is their intention? It is a question that moves us, they least of all.

The butterfly lamp.

An experiment.

The self-portrait.

V/

There is a certain pattern in the way in which Katrien Vermeire registers reality.

Amazement is certainly her theme, but which motives does she utilise?

Look at the path with the yellowish little flashes.

It is obvious that the photographer keeps a respectful distance. Nowhere is this play of light being observed so primarily as in this image. But into which dimension does this well-considered distance, the respect of it, extend itself? The gaze does not simply lie in the lengthening of a lateral observation, it doesn't bear witness to a position that is bordered by some line of demarcation. Have a look. The photographer stands as central as possible on the raked path. This means: no position carries greater privilege than this one. This also means: if disorientation occurs after all, it has nothing to do with the featureless pretences of the field of vision, but with the irregular character of the little lights which have no concern for the neatly kept gravel. They spread themselves out in waves, a metre or so above the sand and green. If the path, where the photographer stands, curving further on, can give us a certain depth at all, it only serves to demolish the caprices of the viewer.

Now look at the little lights around the hut.

The unsteady tangle of lights stands again in opposition of - notice the lath central to the image - the tight frame so beloved of scientists and photographers. But much more however, has been put into view. We also think of the anthropologist, for whom, in a little summer house like this, a new world revealed itself. Even without this thought, infinite nature abrades human security. And the object of the exercise is being laid before us: to navigate our gaze toward two spaces, in bitter realisation that one more time a protective harbour will be denied us. For the gradual dripping, thickening of flashing little lights stands there, facing a deadly darkness. The homeliness of the hut has not so much a human, but inscrutable quality. This black gravity seems - together with our categorical claims - to also disclose the emptiness of our shared intimacy. It knows how to permeate you with the feckless quality of words, no matter how secure they may appear.

Then finally look at the blue trees.

From afar, the little flashes come whirling towards us. No path this time that sends us in the direction, no house that serves as refuge. Yet, here also, the tautology of the watching circles the image. Certainly the trees, remarkably blue, provide vertical lines, and in the distance an horizon line is being suggested. With the bush in the foreground of the picture, in this manner, depth, motion and spatiality are being created. But 'this manner' does not readily disclose itself, and this is what is so surprising. The patterns (tree high, horizon far, bush nearby) are only able to be experienced as such, thanks to the image - if not, we wouldn't have known what to look at. The drawing calls upon our

gaze that wants to see: it lets us see the space as if outside there is no space. The little lights come towards us in waves, because we want it like that. The picture knows less, though: it allows us to see that there are trees, little lights. That they appear to be fluttering towards us is the product of the space in which the viewer stands.

The lateral face from which Katrien Vermeire looks at this reality, this Light Show, is the one from the wooden terrace upon which the anthropologist lived her summering youth. She is not hindered by the weight of science; it is only the luminous wonder that opens the world for her. Moreover, she finds herself in a state of grace on account of the exclusivity of her experience. Nobody can relate to that position, nobody shares her story at the moment itself.

Only by showing the pictures, a world of words unfolds.

And they (the photographer, the anthropologist) are being forced to silence.

How they resemble the hero from Stein's play.

VI/

A=B

According to the little book, it is possible to put an 'equals' sign between the perception of a picture and the identification of the subject. The parallel, elongated little legs of this sign are possibly our preferred hand-hold. Together they form the smoothest transition between world and knowledge. A miniature zebra crossing.

But is a punctuation like this useful to us when looking at these pictures?

The immoderate swarming, the abundance of flashing yellow, seems to suggest another order. What does she coincide with, this luminous blessing? And in however a manner she moves herself - from picture to picture, but also within the picture itself - this mass of light cannot just be redrawn into a recognisable scheme of coordinates on a system of coordinate axes. The shortcut, held before us, to whichever dimensions deductable to fact, is broken up, and the parameters start to shift.

$A \neq B$

Even with most lucid perception, one could imagine that Katrien Vermeire was using photographic tricks and gimmicks through which the partitioning gossamer of the image is also being pierced by the matter itself, and the identification would slip away until mere colours, shapes are left. As if the marsh-dark theatre, including the leafing trees, is just partly hinterland, but sticks to the rear of computer yellow represented as reality. As if, as if.

But it is not like this.

Nothing is as artificial as it seems.

In contemplation reality swarms.

The scientist - usually so cool, reserved - knows well that no stunts were being pulled here. In his efforts to exclaim his astonishment with these pictures, he is no longer at peace with the mathematical sobriety of the 'equals' sign. He who celebrates the simplicity of the essence needs exclamation marks in order to express his amazement. And preferably as many as possible. 'These are the most lovely pictures that I have ever seen!!!! Wow!!!!!!!!!!!! I've just viewed all of these pictures briefly, and they are stunning.' How beautiful spontaneous enthusiasm can be.

A!!!!!!!!!!!!B

This doesn't make any sense. Or does it?

Notice that in his words a short-cut is being made to recover scientism. Beforehand he is honest enough to sow doubt about his words, as if he must excuse himself already for his non-scientific enthusiasm. 'I wrote what I think the pictures told me. The scientific story? I'm not sure.'

Once detached from his amazement, he tries to define the space. He wonders how high above the ground the camera finds itself. He establishes ribbed lightwaves, particularly in the the little flashes nearest the lens. Questions are being asked about the velocity of the little lights and the compactness of their grouping, but also: the spatial disposition of those smaller sub-groups that venture every once in a while either above or below the great mass. Never before has the Light Show been imaged so accurately, so conscientiously - of this he is convinced. It is now his turn to formulate answers to perceived questions.

Undoubtedly these pictures defy the scientific ability to offer an explanation. The process of petrifying what is in reality a long lasting event, will in itself grant the phenomenon a duration which begs for an explanation. But how much is this explanation worth? Is it not once more the result of the gaze that wants to see? The realisation of this thought undermines the question itself, and further to this: the hope - to once and for all - seize reality by its collar. As if he understands that the bruising power of photography over reality is now also impairing his discourse, the scientist, tired of the enthusiastic rattling on his keyboard, puts his arms in the air when he reaches one of the last pictures. 'Story?????' From which follows: A ?????? B

The question marks are less hopeless than their downward-dripping curves would have us suspect. The scientist is aware that also his specialist area only intimates a shortcut to the essence. Just like the photographer, he has to observe on how the world, time and light escape from his meaning. He admits, at the end of our thoughts, we have no more than our own imagination at hand. 'It was fun to look at these and to try to figure out what is happening.' After which, the mass of little lights again takes to flight. And we are being thrown back upon the naked picture itself.

You see what there is.

Not something else.

A = A

VIII/

Time to shut down.

Shutter-time.

Whoever wants light in a little box, must have patience. A long, scary night is necessary, that the eyes of the photographer and her lens can adjust to the dark. She looks into the dark wood and lets the action of the little trooping lights act upon her. While she waits, she wonders what it is she in fact wants to show. It is the question that blinds each experiment, disorderly by nature. In the end, the words of the scientist remain with her: 'All you need to do is be there, out in nature.'

Now, it also seems to her that the end of this process, this action, is undefined, and that no verifiable boundaries are placed on the taking of her pictures. In the diffuseness of this idea, a compelling insecurity is hidden. Once, she must push in the button, close the eyes on how the reality unfolds itself. Once, the lens must be closed so that we can see.

The time required to capture this glittering within an image, is not ours. A time, if you will, of which only the gods have the measure. God's speed, let us say. The ranger would, silently, agree with it. There is a time which gives one the sensation that everything which surrounds us is worth more than this existence. Alan Watts, another lonely ranger, guide in the thicket of our thoughts - speaks in relation to this about joyful participation in the cosmos. In *The Joyous Cosmology* he presents his cheerful science with Nietzschean euphoria. Read what he writes. Time, as we know and experience it, is extremely subjective. Its entity moulds itself about our interests and boredom, adapting to routine, aim, deadline. The critique on a false, human time may sound obtrusive, Watt's words present us with astonishment, as opposed to any moral. 'Here the present is self-sufficient, but it is not a static present. It is a dancing present - the unfolding of a pattern which has no specific destination in the future but is simply its own point. It leaves and arrives simultaneously, and the seed is as much the goal as the flower.' The dancing present - is that the notion that was being searched for?

Look now at the little lights on the pictures.

Watch them gliding in silence. Watch them move, stock-still.

Katrien Vermeire's camera does not stand disapprovingly in relation to the insouciance of Alan Watts' dancing present. Her pictures bring worlds together which begin to move. The ranger who sees his higher order. The anthropologist who subdues memory to silence. The scientist whose knowing hits boundary walls.

As soon as their stories have become miniatures, they glimmer and shoot dancing through the air.

It happens in no time.

You are not aware of it.

Tom Janssens

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