

Jean-Marc  
Ligny



**AIRPORT**

Original title:  
*L'aéroport*

© Jean-Marc Ligny, 2020

© JEU DE PAUME, 2020  
for the English version

Cover photograph:  
© Adrien Chevrot

Jean-Marc Ligny

## **AIRPORT**

Translated from French (France)  
by Bernard Wooding

Standing in front of the window of the boarding hall, he surveyed the deserted tarmac. The concrete shimmered in the heat, which was already intense even though it was early morning. The torrid wind kicked up swirls of sand and swept tumbleweed across what used to be lawns, expanses of cracked earth scattered with mildew. They were the only signs of movement that the man could detect on this plain engulfed in sun. But there was another, slower one, invisible to the naked eye: the advancing dunes, which were gradually invading the runways.

Leaning across the chrome guardrail towards the window, he could make out the three planes that had been stranded there for ages: a Boeing 787 and an Airbus A330 in parking areas, and a small Iranian An-140 Faraz in front of a maintenance hangar – now his hangar. Their colours were washed out and the logos of the airlines that used them were disappearing under a thick layer of ochre dust. Seen from afar, they looked as though they needed nothing more than a thorough clean, but he knew, having explored them many times before, that they were simply rusting shells that had been plundered and ransacked, and now served as shelters for snakes, gerbils and scorpions. Their punctured tyres and demolished cockpits pained him, and the wind ululating in their inert pipes sounded like agonising groans. He had flown the Faraz. It was the last plane to land here. It had been just a technical stopover because one of the turboprops was playing up. That was twenty years ago.

As he looked at these depressing vestiges, he wondered whether he was the last pilot still alive. To begin with, he had thought of repairing *his* Faraz, but Antonov, the Ukrainian mother company, no longer supplied spare parts; then they stopped answering the phone. Finally, the phone itself went dead. And anyway, fuel had become too scarce, expensive and poor in quality. And where could he go anyway? Its range of two thousand kilometres was not enough to reach a secure airport – even if one still existed. He had other projects now – or one other project, at least. It was waiting for him down there in the hangar. Indeed, he had to go to it quickly, before the heat became too intense to work outside.

The pilot did not know why he sometimes came back to this terminal. Was he hoping by some miracle to hear a flight being announced? Did he enjoy wallowing in nostalgia for a bygone time? Was he waiting for the desert jinns to appear? Or the ghosts of his last passengers? Only the sound of his own footsteps echoed in the vast halls with their fake marble flooring; the blank screens merely showing his own reflection, that of a dishevelled, emaciated man in shapeless rags; no spectre roamed behind the long rows of counters and the control points. The abandoned airport remained frozen in its absolute stoniness.

Curiously, the ravages of man and time had not greatly disfigured this temple dedicated to the dead gods of Transport, Speed and Technology. Aside from the windows pockmarked by impacts and scratched by abrasive storms, aside from the sand that had accumulated in places that were exposed to draughts, except for the empty shops, empty right down to the last duty-free gadget, the structure had resisted, its decor of stucco, glass and brushed aluminium still flaunting an arrogant modernism; although nothing functioned anymore, nothing had been deliberately destroyed either. It was as if the last surviving humans nearby saw it as a real *temple*, an immobile hymn to the lost glory of people: as long as the airport remains



standing, humanity will too.

He left the large window which the sun had turned into a hotplate. The temperature had been climbing inexorably since sunrise. What possessed him to come and spend time here? In an hour, maybe less, it would already be too late.

He headed slowly for one of the exits, already suffering from the effects. If he had been able to, he would have moved in here, turning it into his domain and becoming the warden, the conservator, the temple officiant. He had tried, but the heat had forced him to abandon the idea. When it was operating, the airport was air-conditioned; no passive or natural defence against the sun's heat had been envisaged. It was as if the air conditioning, plugged into a divine source of energy, was supposed to emit its fresh air for eternity.

In the hangar with its metal roof, things were even worse. The hours that he was able to work there, at dawn and at twilight, were at the very limit of what was bearable. It was a perpetual furnace, but it was the only place where he could protect his work from the terrible sandstorms and the threat of looters – he had already seen some of them, descending on the dead city like a cloud of locusts, killing everything that moved and pillaging the meagre possessions of the few inhabitants who had stayed behind.

As the pilot walked amid the still, silent halls, corridors and escalators, he spotted a few signs of decrepitude here and there: cracks in the walls; floor tiles that were beginning to work loose; panels that were askew in the ceiling, announcing their impending fall; metal ducts buckled by the heat . . . And he could hear cracking, clicking and grinding noises: materials that were expanding and hardening under the remorseless assault of the sun. No, the airport was not eternal. It will succumb to the vagaries of the climate, like every other human construction. In a more or less near future, it would be nothing more than a pile of ruins, then just a few sections of wall

emerging from the dunes; the runways and tarmac will be swallowed up, the wreckage underneath supporting sandstone concretions. In the end, everything will be erased by the unrelenting and combined action of the wind, sun and sand, and the desert will reign as supreme master, the final consequence of the Anthropocene epoch, before a new biotope forms and a new life cycle begins. How many humans will there be left to witness this renaissance? Very few, he feared. Not him at any rate. Unless . . .

On reaching the vast entrance hall, with its huge suspended displays showing nothing other than the vacuity of the human soul, the former pilot could make out an incongruous sound: a flapping noise high up that was different from the cracking of the expanding concrete and metal. He recognised it as the whirr of wings, just before seeing the bird. This one was flying around in all directions, in a panic, returning endlessly to the glazed façade, crashing into it each time. It had forgotten where it had come from and could no longer find the exit, and it was incapable of understanding this translucent surface that separated it from the outside. The man watched it for a moment, fascinated. How long had it been since he had seen any birds?

He held open the entrance's only manual, swing door; the others – electric sliding doors – had expired in a closed position. The desert's torrid, stony breath rushed into the hall. The bird sensed it and quickly spotted an opportune way out, but was frightened by the man's presence next to it. The man wedged the door with concrete debris and moved away. The bird performed a final circle and then escaped through the opening and flew off quickly into the sparkling sky. The pilot followed its flight, squinting, until he lost sight of it. He experienced a fleeting moment of regret: he could have caught it and eaten it. He shook his head. No, this bird was too small, and if it had managed to last for so long in this deadly desert, that meant it was a survivor that deserved to continue living. It should be left in peace, until the

sun, storms, hunger, thirst or a predator finished it off.

Or perhaps it would reach a viable biotope where it could eat and drink all it wanted, and even find a mate and produce offspring. Why not? Why not indeed? This bird had not come out of nowhere. It had come from an environment where it could live, or was on its way to one. The man looked in the direction it had gone, flying strongly and resolutely, as if it knew where to go: north-northeast, according to his points of reference.

Excellent. That would give direction and meaning to his adventure which, it had to be said, had been a little random and desperate to date.

Comforted, he went out into the inferno, closed the door and set off purposefully across the burning tarmac towards his hangar.

\*\*\*

Seeing it like this, slumped on the concrete floor, with its numerous ropes dangling loose, it reminded the pilot of a giant jellyfish washed up on a beach. Giant, opaque and multicoloured, since it had been assembled from hundreds of scraps of sheets, canvas, tarpaulin and fabric.

His hot-air balloon.

It had taken him years to make it, little bit by little bit, with the help of an old manual found in a bookstore slightly less ransacked than the other stores in town – as if human beings who were in survival mode no longer had the time – or desire – to read. He did – he had never lost this pleasure, this tenuous link with the world before and its human dramas that were now a little pathetic. But *How to Make a Hot-Air Balloon* was the spark that lit up the darkness of his future: a project, something achievable, a way of escaping from here, of leaving this dying city that almost everyone had already fled – everyone who had not perished. Up until then, since all hope of repairing his Faraz and reaching a still civilized area had gone, and as a great silence



spread across the deserted, looted, burnt out city, he had lived from one day to the next in a kind of torpor, hunting and marauding for water and food, doing his best to ensure that the minimum needs for life were met, convinced that he remained human because he read books. And while the great silence spread over the whole world, he lived for years like this, in a dull solitude, without tomorrow or prospects, in the depths of a cellar that sheltered him – and continued to shelter him – from the endless heatwave . . . until he came across this little guide, which gave him the impetus required to start living again rather than merely surviving. In other words, to build, to construct, and to have projects and a goal.

To leave.

For a more hospitable region, if there was one. Where nature would still be a tiny bit bountiful. Where other humans had begun to rebuild a real life, without hiding away like the handful of cockroaches still vegetating in the city. A handful from which he would soon escape.

And this morning, a new sign had appeared: this bird that had got 'lost' there by some miracle, and which had clearly indicated a direction to him: north-northeast.

It remained to be seen whether he would be able to pilot a hot-air balloon. The manual gave some indications, but it was mainly focused on construction. At least the pilot knew what each rope was used for and how to handle them. After that it was more a question of knowing how to catch the prevailing winds, and since he used to go hang gliding in his youth, this was something he thought he could master quite easily.

He went up to the craft and lifted the plywood gondola – which was already quite heavy with the heating device fitted above it – with two hands. Using his foot, he slid a board on rollers that he had prepared the day before underneath it. Then he started to drag it. The whole thing was incredibly heavy, leaving him drenched in sweat and out of breath. He had to admit

that he was no longer young either, and that his meagre diet didn't give him much strength. As he puffed and panted and sweated profusely, pulling the balloon centimetre by centimetre towards the outside of the hangar, he anxiously wondered if it would be able to take off despite its weight, if he would be able to keep it in the air, if it would collapse after an hour or two in the middle of the desert. He had already inflated it, of course, partially at least, and he knew that his process worked. But he hadn't flown with it yet – he hadn't dared to take this final step. He had been thinking of doing a test flight, a simple trip over the city to familiarize himself with the controls and to see how this makeshift assemblage would behave when entrusted to the winds of sand. But seeing this bird today had given him wings too, and his anxiety was mixed with elation: in fact, if everything was going well, why settle for a trip over the city? Why not head straight north, where the bird had gone? There was nothing to keep him here.

Finally, with difficulty, he managed to get the beast out onto the tarmac, into the sun, not far from the sad wreck of his Faraz. To think that this little gem of modern technology – from thirty years ago – had been reduced to a pile of scrap dusty metal and plastic, entirely incapable of flying, while his makeshift assemblage of bits of string and fabric would (possibly) take him to a new paradise. For the pilot, it represented the vanity of mankind's technological progress, which had ultimately led to his ruin.

And yet a little technology would certainly have helped him with his project. The manual said to allow for about 200 hours of work, but it had taken him almost ten years. Regular strips of nylon or polyester would have been more suitable than this motley patchwork of fabrics, canvas, tarpaulins and various materials gleaned from all over the city. An electric sewing machine would have saved him from damaging his fingers and eyes as he sewed for hours on end in his suffocating hangar. Finally, a heating system as recommended in the manual – one burner and two propane tanks –

would have been easier to install than his current DIY system: a parabolic solar oven that could be turned to concentrate the sun's rays inside the envelope, the interior of which had been entirely blackened by soot smoke – of which there was no shortage in the city – converting the intense light into heat and warming the air inside, which was indispensable for the balloon to rise. Sometimes he proudly told himself that he had invented the first solar-heated hot-air balloon, and that in a time now past he could have perfected and patented this still embryonic invention.

For although, during the day, he would be able – in theory at least – to control the aerostat's altitude by opening and closing the exhaust valve at the top of the balloon, and the inlet opening above the oven, at nightfall he would have no means of heat and would inexorably descend as the air in the balloon cooled, especially since it was far from airtight. He would have much preferred to travel at night, when the temperature became a bit more bearable, but he had a choice to make: he either had to travel during the day in the sun – in the shade of his solar oven – or else fester in this dead city and die there sooner or later. He would take as much water with him as possible.

Speaking of water, he allowed himself three mouthfuls before preparing the balloon for inflation. Dirty and tasting of earth, the water was lukewarm and disgusting. It had been scraped from the bottom of a hole he had dug in his cellar, and which had been drying up over the years: he was only getting three or four litres a day, and sometimes pulled up nothing but mud. When he first started living there, attracted by the relative coolness and the prospect of a water source, he dug the hole and had no difficulty bringing up a full bucket, which was sufficient for his daily needs. Now there was just enough to prevent him from dying of thirst, discounting what was lost when he boiled the water in another solar oven. Trading thirst for dysentery would have been unwise.

He put the battered, cracked plastic bottle down in the shade, then began the tedious task of unfolding and arranging the envelope, with the mouth wide open, around the frame above the oven, so that it could more easily inflate by itself, in the absence of an inflation fan. Finally, he turned the oven – a dish made of sheets of metal covered with tin foil, a rare material that he had only found when dismantling the wreck of the Boeing – in keeping with the position of the sun, so that its rays were concentrated in the envelope. Here again, a little technology, such as a solar sensor and a small motor, would have allowed his oven to rotate to follow the sun, but never mind, the pilot would have to make do with coming back frequently to correct the orientation of the dish himself.

This meant that he could not leave the airport.

He had anticipated this, and had two bottles of water in addition to this half-full one waiting for him in the coolest – or rather, the least hot – corner of the hangar. He did not know how long it would take for the envelope to inflate enough for him to turn the gondola upright and prepare for lift off. He had already carried out an inflation test, enough to see his patchwork creation round out and conclude that his method was working. But he had had to interrupt the experiment due to the threat of a sandstorm, which had forced him to fold everything up in a hurry. Lately, the weather seemed to be stuck on permanent blue sky/sand winds, so this was a good time to do a real test – although, of course, in these uncertain times, everything could change from one moment to the next.

Squinting, using his hand as a visor, he looked up at the fiery star that devoured the molten sky. The tarmac was already too hot for him to put his hand on, and it was only his tire-reinforced soles that enabled him to put his feet on it, but the tire was melting and sticking to the powdery concrete. The sun began to roast his skin, which had been tanned over time, and he felt as though he was inhaling the breath of a volcano. He was forced to put

a scarf in front of his mouth and nose to avoid filling his lungs with sand, rendering breathing even more difficult.

And to think that it must only have been eight or nine o'clock in the morning, or not much later.

Waiting here was going to be difficult, very difficult.

The hangar would protect him from the direct bite of the sun, of course, but not from the heat. Made of rough concrete, with a metal roof, it was not designed for a permanent heatwave – nor even for the weather conditions that were once normal in this area. He felt as though he was being boiled alive in there, and he knew that he wouldn't be able to last for long.

Could he seek refuge in the depths of the airport? In basement toilets, old cold rooms, or cargo or storage areas away from the sun? Yes, he could try. Every hour or so, he would have to run the few hundred metres across the incandescent tarmac to the balloon, correct the way the oven was facing and then run back, even during the hottest part of the day, but in between he would probably be able to survive the heat.

But he would have to get used to it anyway. Once in the air, he would have only the shadow of his dish for protection.

With sweat running down his eyes, he checked one last time that everything was going well, that the balloon was properly tied down, and that the air inside was already starting to heat up – then he fetched his water bottles, took a deep breath and headed for the terminal.

As he ran across the warm concrete, it felt as if the sun was sticking white-hot needles in his back.

A taste of what was to come.

\*\*\*



The balloon did not inflate very quickly.

Far from it, in fact. He had already been three times to adjust the orientation of the dish – on each occasion it felt like entering a giant oven or a fire without any flames – and he did not have the impression that the envelope was filling in an encouraging way. A slight swelling was visible, and the air inside was suitably hot and was expanding accordingly, but there was no noticeable progress. Was it too hot outside? Was there insufficient difference in pressure? He didn't know, and couldn't do anything about it anyway. All he could do was wait.

It would probably take all day, as he had more or less feared. So he would not be able to take off until tomorrow, and not very early at that, because the balloon would cool down and deflate during the night, even if he closed all the valves. He would have to warm it up again before casting off. He didn't know how long it would take or how much it will have shrunk by. He hoped he wouldn't have to repeat the whole operation: given how slow it was, this worried him a little.

In the meantime, the pilot took refuge in the basement toilet, which was dark and cramped, but at least the tiles were almost cool, and the air was not full of sand and dust. Trying not to worry too much about the slow inflation of the balloon, he occupied himself with imagining the scenario of a possible meeting with villagers, a tribe, a camp, a community. What would he say to them and who would see him arriving by air? 'Hello, I come in peace. I offer you this invention that I made myself, if you would be kind enough to let me join you. I am very good with my hands, I'm an outstanding survivalist, I can be very useful.' Yes, something like that. But what if they were hostile? Or got scared at the sight of his contraption? What if he came across a camp of looters? Or sub-humans like those who vegetate in the city, too stupefied by the heat and disease to talk, to hold a sensible conversation, to think of something other than satisfying their constant hunger,

like zombies not yet putrefied, but on the way to becoming so. No, he must hope that luck will continue to smile on him, that the bird had shown him the right direction and that he will come across a community of real people dedicated to rebuilding real human life.

Yes, he will say something like: 'Hello, I come in peace, my name is ...'

He tried saying these words out loud, but only a barely articulate croaking emerged from his mouth. My goodness! How many months – years – had he not spoken aloud? Not merely to someone else – he had quickly realised how pointless it was with the few left languishing here – but also to himself. Or to an animal. He had never had any animals – too much responsibility – his family, who were too far away, had perished long ago in a huge fire, and he never talked to himself. His dialogue remained entirely internal.

He needed to practice finding his voice again.

'... lloo. Uh um nnn pppeace ...'

It will come back.

\*\*\*

At the end of the day, the balloon was finally inflated enough for him to pull it upright it. It was even inflated enough to tug on its moorings, the basket barely touching the ground – in short, it was ready to ascend. That was reassuring, comforting – it almost made the pilot want to cast off immediately and fly off into the sunset. But he had to be reasonable, he knew he wouldn't get far, and he had no more water or food. He had to take a bare minimum.

Satisfied at seeing it rise up proudly into the pink dusk sky, he closed the intake manifold, folded up the oven, and checked the tightness of the valves and the firmness of the mooring. He did not want it to be ripped away

by a sudden surge of wind and leave without him. Nor did he want looters to spot it, clearly visible on the tarmac. No. That was not going to happen. Not before tomorrow. Everything was going to be okay.

With butterflies in his stomach even so, he returned to the city in the tawny evening light. A few kilometres on a rough track – formerly a four-lane road – stony, dusty, lined with dried out, burnt-out palm trees, and skeletal signposts and advertising signs long since torn down and recycled. In the distance, the city was nothing but ruins and rubble, buffeted by dusty winds, crushed in a scorching silence.

After walking alone through the deserted streets, strewn with debris and rubble, he reached his cellar, which was located in the suburbs – and immediately saw that the door had been forced open. It was a thick double wooden door with a large padlock. One of the doors was wide open and the bent padlock lay on the ground.

Heart pounding, he rushed inside and discovered with dismay, in the last glimmers of the sunset, that everything of his had been taken: his mattress, what few clothes he had, his meagre food supplies. His solar oven, his utensils, his tools. His candles and his oil lamp. Even his bucket. Everything. It had all been taken from him.

Who had done this? He knew the question was pointless. One of the local daredevils, someone a bit bolder than the others. A passing vagrant. A troop of looters. It didn't matter, he'd never recover anything anyway.

Sitting on the dirt floor in the gathering darkness, head in his hands, he felt once again that this was a sign. It was telling him that he had to leave, that this city was now rejecting him. He no longer belonged here, and would leave nothing behind.

He still had the rags he was wearing, the three empty bottles he had brought back and a piece of string that he always carried with him, in case a seam broke or a tear needed repairing. With the string, he lowered the

bottles one by one into the hole, feeling his way in the dark. It was not easy, as the bottles were light and snagged on the irregular walls. After considerable effort, he managed to pull up three litres of muddy, cloudy water. There was nothing left with which to heat it up. Too bad, he would just have to risk getting dysentery or some other ailment, in the hope that the community that receives him will be able to treat him . . . unless he could manage to rig up a stove to place in the balloon's solar oven. But boiling water during flight seemed risky to him.

He also had almost nothing left to eat. He had eaten his last smoked snake fillets at the airport, with the intention of relying on his stores for at least part of the trip. Tomorrow, he would be starving. And the mud in the water wouldn't provide him with sustenance. Once again, we could only hope that those who welcomed him would have enough to feed him. In any case, there was no point in staying here. The thief might come back and find the place to his liking, and the old man didn't feel like fighting. What was the point? It was better to spend the night near his beloved balloon and at least make sure that it didn't get stolen.

Wedging his three bottles of stagnant water under his arm, he wearily ascended the cellar stairs, walked out into the street leaving the door open and left without even looking back.

\*\*\*

'Hello . . . I come in peace. You see, I have no weapon, I have nothing, nothing but this balloon to offer you ... Hello, I come in peace, my name is . . . Hello, do you accept me? Please don't shoot. Hello, my name is come in peace ...'

The pilot spent a dreadful night lying on the hangar's concrete floor, going over his speech during a mixture of dreams and nightmares in which

he was greeted either as a hero, or with arrows or guns, in which he ended up in the middle of a horde of looters, in an infinite desert, or in the village of his childhood, surrounded by his family. Each time, he was unable to complete his speech, he would stumble on something, he didn't know what, or something happened that interrupted him. 'Hello, what's your name? I . . . I come in peace, I have a gift for you . . .'

He rose well before dawn, drank some of his earthy water – which was disgusting, of course, and tasted rotten, as if some dead creature had been lying at the bottom of the well – and immediately went outside to see his hot-air balloon.

It seemed to have gone down a little, but not by that much in the end. It still looked good under the star-studded sky, illuminated by the low, red moon on the horizon. Outside, the night had cooled down, and the black from the smoke must have kept the air inside the envelope quite warm, which might even have increased the pressure. Perhaps it would be able to take off quite early, as soon as the sun had risen or almost.

The man waited impatiently for the sun to rise and climb sufficiently high in the sky that he could use his oven. In the meantime, he contemplated his masterpiece as it swayed gently in the breeze, tugging on its moorings, its ropes creaking. He rehearsed the take off and steering manoeuvres in his head, although they were actually pretty simple, since it was only a matter of going up or down, of catching the prevailing winds and letting them carry him along.

As the heat rose inexorably and the sun bounced off the dish and heated up the interior, the balloon took on a well-rounded shape and the gondola began to scrape along the ground. 'It's time,' the pilot said to himself, his heart pounding.

One by one, he undid the moorings in keeping with the procedure described in the guide (which he knew by heart), except for the last one,



which was equipped with a noose that he would pull on from the basket.

He climbed on board, checked one last time that he had loaded his water bottles – the only thing that would keep him going for at least a day – took a deep breath, and pulled on the mooring line.

The gondola scraped along the ground a bit more, then suddenly broke contact with it.

The balloon rose.

With a big smile, the pilot grasped the ropes for controlling the valves, checked that the oven was facing the right way, then dared to look over the side.

He saw the roof of the shed moving away below, the wreck of the Faraz shrinking. The airport terminal baking in the sun, still impressive but somewhat tarnished. The cracked, sandy runways. The shapeless heaps of the city in the distance. The infinite desert. The dunes.

Direction north-northeast.

As the balloon ascended until it encountered a fairly constant southerly wind, the pilot finally dared to give out a victory cry:

‘Crrroaaah!’

Well, it would need a little work. But he had plenty of time to practice during his trip, before he encountered this welcoming, constructive community he was certain he would discover.

‘Hello to you my friends, I come in peace, my name is ...’

That was it – that was the point where he got stuck in his dreams last night.

He no longer knew his name.

This story by Jean-Marc Ligny  
is published by the Jeu de Paume  
in the framework of the Espace virtuel  
exhibition "Futurs d'avant",  
an online project with artworks  
by Letícia Ramos and Marguerite Humeau –  
<http://espacevirtuel.jeudepaume.org/>

# FUTURS D'AVANT.



Agnes Pelton, *Idyl*, c. 1952. Collection Jeri L. Waxenberg Wolfson

<  
jeu  
de  
paume  
espace  
virtuel  
>

LETICIA RAMOS  
MARGUERITE HUMEAU

Curators : Livia Benedetti and Marcela Vieira (aarea)

**JEU DE PAUME / ESPACE VIRTUEL**

<http://espacevirtuel.jeudepaume.org>

**October 2020 - February 2021**

