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Lucas Southworth

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Southworth: Under the World

UNDER THE WORLD

Lucas Southworth

Down here, the walls are traps. Long escalator and elevator rides are the only way up. The smell of electricity thins the air. Musk settles in the corners.

Here, the constant wail of metal grating against metal. The flipping and flipping of schedule boards. The stuttering cement. Sometimes winds burst free from the mouths of tunnels, whipping over the crowd before shivering and dying across the platform.

Here, a cold smoke slithers along the ceiling. Aromas from makeshift food-stands mud and then separate. A traveler waves before stepping aboard a lurching train. An outcast sleeps on a bench, his head drooped back, his mouth gaping in the shape of a zero.



This place has always been fascinating. Its reach, its depth. A worldwide subway system that has begun to function like its own city. A web of satellites, an underground metropolis that connects all others. The system accommodates millions of travelers per day and is home to those who crouch in its shadows, those who hawk food and wares, those who populate the dingy cathouses and hotels. It seems the desperate are doomed to forever migrate downward, and they've descended to this place. Here, they've found ways to subsist. Here, they've adapted to the concrete and bad air.

For travelers, the subway is convenient and affordable. But it can also swallow a person. There are tales of muggings and violence. There will always be someone willing to tell you about the dirty economy, the inevitability of collapse. People on the surface speak of this place as a series of incidents, and together they build those incidents into horrors. Once, a man was tortured so hard he began to grow butterfly wings. Once, a

woman tumbled over an underground palisade and was sucked to the bottom of a bottomless river. Once, a man stumbled upon generations and generations of his relatives, all living together as though they were still alive.



Once, not long ago, I stood in line with enough money to buy a yearly pass. I was thinking of those stories. The ones my mother told me, the ones I'd heard from friends. Stories repeated and repeated. Stories that have become myths, fairy tales. Stories with morals and lessons and explanations. Some people believe the subway has the power to return to you what you've lost. Some believe it has the power to lose you.

And as I waited to purchase my ticket, that's what I wanted. To be swallowed. Ever since, I've been trying to lose myself under the world. I've kept my gaze low to avoid schedules and clocks. I've kept moving. The system has begun to blur. It rotates, it expands, it retracts. Sometimes I feel as though I no longer trudge forward. That I'm turning in all directions. Often, I think that I'm living outside of time. That I'm stepping from a train and into a memory. That I'm touching the dead.



Down here, sparks dance in the throat of a tunnel. On the platform the crowd of bodies is thick. Children brush flyers across knuckles and tug customers in the direction of what they're selling. Odors of food and sweat mingle. A man in a turban scoops stir-fry with his right hand and collects money with his left. Another man crawls moaning from the shadows, clutching his broken face.

Sometimes the stations are grand and beautiful. Sometimes the ceilings are low and suffocating. This one is cavernous and resembles an ancient city. All its surfaces are lacquered in a shiny, white overlay. Stone arches spread out and run down the walls

like liquid. On either side of the platform, two giant mirrors echo each other, reflecting an eternity of vaulted passageways, an eternity of tracks, and an eternity tunnels. In the center, two large stairways adorned with marble leaves curve to meet a story above. Passengers recline upon the steps.



Here, another train forges though another seemingly endless tunnel. A man sidles up and sits in the seat to my left. With a strange expression that resembles something like a smile, he accuses me of following him.

No, I tell him. I'm not. I'm wandering.

When he doesn't believe me, I describe my attempt to disorient myself, my avoidance of schedules and maps and clocks.

It must be a coincidence, I say.

The man adjusts the collar of his shirt and leans back. He sighs. He brushes his elbow against mine.

Sorry, he says. It's strange. I've seen you at four stations now. If your path is random and mine has been meticulously predetermined.

He begins to mutter.

Then he speaks up: There's something scary about it. Something impossible. Something inevitable.

I'm John Markus, he says to me.

I shake his hand.



Here, as I crouch over a Styrofoam container on my lap, the stranger beside me begins to talk. I can smell him, and I can smell my food, just purchased and steaming hot. But he will not let me eat.

From his rambling I start to understand that behind the concrete in the tunnels there are pockets. With his finger the man draws slashes across the air.

I can find them, he tells me. There are marks on the walls. I see them. I read them. Then he smiles, showing teeth too large for his mouth. I will sell to you, he says. You want a home? You want to come see mine?

For a moment I imagine the two of us stumbling through the pitch dark. I remember a story from childhood about people who once lived in the tunnels. Those who slaughtered sheep as a kind of sacrifice, and then began doing the same to humans. The sheep and human bodies had been bled from the neck and deposited on the tracks. At various times, trains would emerge to the lighted stations, pushing a ripped and ragged carcass.

The man next to me is still smiling, hopeful.

I stare down at the food on my lap.



Here, a sign announces the name, Selene. And underneath it is a price. Behind a small table draped in colorful cloths sits a woman, scrutinizing the skin on the backs of her hands.

I place some money in front of her, and she rakes it in with crooked fingers. I extend my palm, but she doesn't take it.

It will be too painful, she warns. I will be searching for hidden doors.

I nod. I've been here for what feels like a long time, I tell her. That's what I need.

Selene is silent. She shuffles close, dragging her chair. Then, when her face is inches from mine, she stares into my eyes.

Don't tell me where I am or where I've been, I say. Only where I'm going.

But it's true, Selene says, there might not be any difference between those things.

And then I can feel her strolling through the corridors of my brain, picking at the walls with her fingernails.



And sometimes I step off a train, and I am not in a station at all, but in the hospital with my mother. The air is so stiff it could have been manufactured by giant machines, and a nurse is shaking her head at us. When she looks away, my mother drags me into a labyrinth of whitewashed hallways. We turn corners at random and take elevators to different levels. I have a slight feeling that I've been here before, that I know where to go. But my mother will not let me lead. We wander for what seems like hours before she stops and slumps in the middle of a hallway. She pushes at her eyes with the heels of her hands and begins to cry. I lean against her, weave my arms around her neck. Doctors and patients continue to flow past. They rush by as though they do not see us, as though we are boulders in the center of a river.



Once, long ago, the critics claimed a worldwide subway system would never be possible. They questioned the science, saying it would be too deep in the ground, it would cost too much, trains could never travel under the ocean. They argued this place was a product of an overblown inferiority complex. It was a way of strangling the world. It was an attempt to prove we could be gods.

Thousands of feet below, contractors and architects couldn't hear these concerns. Drills marched forward. Machines slammed against bedrock. Inventors created the necessary technologies. As construction continued, they assured us the system would be safe. It would not disturb anything above. Trains did not need to travel under oceans if they could tunnel through them. The world would not be strangled, it would be brought closer together.

Then the first train carried passengers from New York to London at 600 miles per hour. Then one from Japan to Los Angeles. Then Russia to Argentina. Each new journey did its part to shrink our idea of distance. These trains were incredibly

fast. They were always on time; they would forever be on time. That might mean we'd brought the world together. That might mean we'd finally controlled it.

Soon after these maiden voyages, people stopped seeing the subway in terms of innovation. The system lost its wonder, its feeling of ingenuity. Its size and technology did not impress. It no longer made us shiver. Stations once studied as architectural marvels received absent glances. The history, the significance, the initial symbolism faded. Now, it is about simplicity, convenience, and comfort. Travelers want to go to places they want to go. They want to believe this system is separate from their world. They want to tell stories about what happens to those who've spent time under a mile of dirt.



Down here, sound overlaps sound. A woman grabs her luggage and disembarks. She crosses the platform and enters the sprawl of people and clutter. Soon she will ascend toward the surface.

Here, trains lurch and then glide. The light from a station recedes to black in the windows. Arteries of silver wires coil outward from an electric, sizzling heart.

Here, a station of headless statues. Hundreds of marble figures frozen in time. The figures commemorate those who were burned when flames shot from one of the tunnels. Skin was seared, muscles eaten, bones turned to ash. Now rats scavenge for food. The place smells of ammonia and burnt cold. The walls are empty, gray, and covered with deep cracks. Different versions of the story about this place put this station under different cities. Each version attributes the flame's origin to something different. As I walk, I hear little else but the echoes of my footsteps. And in the distance, the whirring of machines. The statues are here and stand as tall as people. It is said outcasts wear white and crouch still with their heads burrowed deep between their shoulders. They are like sea anemones, waiting to sting whatever comes close.



On the train, John Markus tells me he's working on a second book. He's a professor of architecture at a college in New York. He's always checking his watch. He's always shaking his head. I was hoping you were either going to kill me or you were a fan of my book, he says.

No, I say. I haven't read it. What's it about?

Simply? Periods in history when architects were failing to produce anything new. We're mired in one right now. Ever since we finished this place.

And the new book?

Kind of the same thing. This one's on a theory I have about the evolution of architecture over time.

Markus then goes on to explain that he has arranged an itinerary that will take him from station to station, following a tour of what he calls the beginning of architecture to the end.

When these stations were built, Markus says, each city hired local architects. They took pride in what they were going to create.

He pulls a piece of paper from his briefcase. This, he says, is my timeline. This is where I've mapped it. Here, he says pointing, is the first. A station inspired by buildings in Greece, around 600 B.C.

I make sure not to glance at Markus' paper. In many ways, his plan is simple. He will charge through the history of architecture so quickly that when he reaches the end, his momentum will carry him forward into the future. Then, he might glimpse what comes next.



I decide to go with the strange man to see his home behind the tunnel. If he hurts me, if he bleeds me over the tracks, I will slide into the mythology of this place. I will have gotten what I wanted.

Together, we crouch in the dim corner at the end of the platform. The man continues to smile, showing his large teeth. I'm so glad you came, he says. He grabs the sleeve of my coat. He lays his fingers on the concrete in front of him.

After five minutes a train shoots by, and after five more, a second. My legs are burning. My knees are sore from the hard ground. The man still holds my coat as if he thinks I might stand or run away. A third train rushes by, and then we lower ourselves onto the tracks, hurrying into one of the tunnels.

We will move fast, the man says, breathing hard. He leads me through the dark with nothing more than a lighter. Step where I step, he says. Not on the tracks. Don't step on the tracks. If you do...

The man turns, stretches out his arms, grits his teeth. He fakes a seizure. He laughs. The sound of his voice bounces off the walls and clamors down the tunnel in both directions.

After a while, he hands me the lighter. Stretching his arms over his head like a diver, he slides into a tiny hole in the wall. Rocking his torso back and forth, he scoots forward inch by inch. Once I no longer see his feet, I follow.



Selene tramps through my brain for a long time. Each one of her steps is like a needle prick.

Do not think, Selene says. Do not squirm. It will take longer.

When she has sucked herself out through my eyes, she sits back in her chair.

She looks at me. You're going to die, she says.

That's not a fortune, I say. When?

She laughs. Every hall in your mind had an ending, she says. I was almost lost.

She points to my head. Everything is all inside out, she says.

I close my eyes as Selene tells a story. Long ago she had

conceived a baby, carried it, and given birth to it all in one night. She'd always wanted a child and she cried with happiness. As the head crowned, followed by the beautiful feeling of the shoulders sliding through, Selene realized she hadn't experienced even a stab of pain. And after, when she reached between her legs, she touched nothing except cold concrete. There was no baby. Not even a warm drop of blood.

My mother used to tell this same story. And I want to believe Selene has always been the woman in the tale. I also consider asking for my money back.

Selene is staring over my shoulder at the station behind. This is not the world, she says. Some things could only happen down here.



After a long ride, I disembark to the sound of my father's whispered curses. He is trying to build the electric train set he bought me for Christmas. And he sighs with relief as the toy lurches forward. For over three hours, I watch the engine haul its single boxcar around the track. I pull the lever until it slows. I push the lever and it quickens. Then I realize my father has not assembled the station. There is no place for me to stop the train. Stop it anywhere, my father says gruffly. But there is only the suffocating turn of cold metal on the family-room carpet and the plastic locomotive upon it, circling and circling, without end.



I often have a strong urge to abandon what I'm doing, to reorient myself. It sneaks up on me like nervousness or guilt. My heart begins to hammer. I can feel my breath fluttering just inside my chest. It is tempting to glance up, to read a schedule or a clock, to know just where and when I've wandered to. It would be a relief to end this floating.

But if I gave in, I do not know what would happen. It's

possible I could go back to who I was my first few weeks down here. When I frequented the filthy cathouses. When I slumped in the corners for days with drugs I'd bought from men hovering at the edges of the markets. This, I told myself then, was where I belonged. Like the other outcasts, I refused to speak about who I was, where I had come from, what I had left behind. We spoke only of what had been taken from us, and what else could still be taken. We rooted ourselves in our bodies, in the places we sat and slept. But we were not lost. We were fighting against it. We were at the lip, we were in the throat, but we had not been swallowed.



There will always be more trains, more stations. People shouting in an effort to be heard over the howling breaks, the whine of electricity. Here, everything either moves too fast or does not move. Engines power forward, others slow. Doors spread to exchange passengers, doors slide shut. Trains sit. Air pulses and stagnates. People pull in oxygen, stale from the pipes. Lungs inflate, lungs deflate. And used air rises to the ceiling where it rests a while before it is sucked away.

Here, a station where beggars have no fear of hassling the crowd. Men, women, and children grab and nick at pockets and sleeves. I untangle myself from bony fingers. Above the tracks, high in the air, floats a giant sphere. It hovers and glows, pouring off warmth. Its light glints off the metal. Rays quiver through the dust, crisscross, dot the walls. A row of columns casts elongated shadows. At the end of the platform, away from the heat of the globe, I almost stumble over a man. He is crouching over a helpless body. Stop, I say without thinking, and he turns his eyes on me. He has something metal in his hand, and he rubs it against the concrete. The body below him twitches, makes a tiny sound. There is no one to stop this. There are no police.



John Markus wants to know if I'll be getting off at the next stop. I tell him no. He looks disappointed.

You're the only person I've met down here, he says. I'm not ready for this trip to be over. I don't have much confidence in my theory. I've got nothing to go back to.

I nod. I know how he feels, but I don't tell him that.

We shake hands just as the train begins to slow.

I have another theory, Markus says, turning in his seat. He is cleaning up his area, stuffing half-filled bottles of water into a plastic bag.

Tell me what you think, he says. When an architect plans a building, Markus says, he's really designing a kind of museum of himself. Or a home. A replica of his own mind where he could feel comfortable.

What if a building is designed by more than one person? I ask. What if it's designed by many?

I don't know, Markus says. But people who aren't architects must search for a place that suits them. I suppose a collaboration may find more dwellers. But none of them will feel quite right.



The small tunnel is longer than I thought it would be, but finally I pull myself from the darkness and into a lighted cave. There is carpet on the floor, a couple of couches and tables, even a television.

Let me make this for you, the man with big teeth says. He walks about the room touching each piece of furniture. You can have one of these. And this. And this. You can even find a wife, a family. He smiles and ropes an arm around a woman, thin and sallow as a candle.

How did you get electricity? I ask.

Electricity, he says. Electricity is everywhere.

Then he again indicates his hovel: This was not easy, he says. You could not do it. You could not find it or dig it.

How much? I ask.

The man names a price. It will be a new life, he says. You will be anyone you want. You will be a new person with a new home.

He struts around once more. My children, he says, indicating a space that juts off from the main room. I wonder if this man's family has ever seen the sky. Has ever breathed air that isn't lined with dirt.

When I decline his offer, the man threatens to kill me. He demands my money. He has a knife. He will slice through my throat and leave my body to rot in the dark.

I follow his instructions and he counts what I give him. This is not very much, he says. Then he leads me back to the station.



I sit with Selene and she continues to avoid telling my fortune. She tells stories about herself, most of which I've heard before, and many of which can't be true.

Do you tell your own fortune, I ask her.

I do not, she says.

Selene says that telling fortunes is usually easy. Most people already know where they're going and what's going to happen to them. All she has to do is follow a clearly marked path. It's like walking on a road through the woods. And people never try to see what is around the bends. They hide it from themselves.

But you are not like that, she says to me. Everything's scrambled. There are many paths and they all lead inward. Everything goes in to a single point.

What is it? I ask.

In the center, she says. She shrugs. I don't know what it is. Someday you will find you are back there and then you will know it. You will die there. Not here. Somewhere in the world above.



The next time I step from a train, I am in the backyard of my childhood home. I am thirteen and digging holes. I know that my father is dead. I know that my mother is sick and soon to die. I have been digging every day for weeks, moving the dirt from one place to another. Creating something by removing something else. The shovel enters the ground. It tosses the dirt away. Then, one day, I uncover a collection of bones. I pick up a few and take them into the house to show my mother. She is on constant medication and she rarely knows where she is. She says that she used to own chickens. That when they died she buried them one by one in the yard. She tells me she does not know how long ago that was. The past always comes back to the surface, she says, stroking a bone with her fingertip. I don't know if she knows what she's saying.