

Road, River & Rail

The world is full of things to put away for another time

I

It goes straight for quite a ways before it bends. It arcs away out of sight and what it does beyond the bend is irrelevant, except at night, when the desert clarity allows glimpses of occasional lights moving across its flat spaces, out in the distance, out of earshot. The asphalt is in good shape, without potholes or significant cracks, smelling, on glaring sunny days, of tar, as it should. If you were to sprawl across either lane naked, or wrapped in the American flag, or in street clothes eating a slice of juicy fruit, and a car ran over you, it would kill you. If you kept to the soft shoulder, pressing your cheek and ear to the gravel, when a vehicle sped by, the resulting wind would stir your hair and shirt, would possibly blow sand in your eyes, or a wheel might sometimes throw a pebble off the asphalt against your brow and that would hurt. If you stayed considerably off the road, standing, not presenting yourself as a hitchhiker or as someone stranded, sporadic motorists would flash

past and you could imagine what their lives might be like. Or, you could tilt your head, loosen your hands, and slump into your personality.

If, on a moonless night, you were to drive this stretch of road trying to wile away moments after a day of unspent travel, your windows open so that bliss could swell your lungs, your non-steering arm draped outside so that your particular palm on the cold surface of the car could connect you to history, and you felt the urge to flick off your headlights without coming to a stop or applying the brake, even if not one of us has the courage to keep ourselves from not slightly lifting our foot off the accelerator; if you were to do this, the blend of movement and darkness would satisfy your need for absolution. Eventually, just before the automobile left the pavement, you would bring back the beams to guide your way. If the exhilaration or fright had been too much for you, you might pull off onto the shoulder and step out into the incredible hush, sweating, or shaking, or merely savoring a rarity, and if, while catching your breath under a starry sky that could take it away again were you to look up, you were to feel vulnerable and suddenly bored, nobody else would be there to blame you.

II

The same cool clear water that refreshes a throat stricken by a night-long fever or that babbles soothingly in the woods is the stuff of tenement dripping and fabled Chinese torture. What washes away a night of restless sleeping in a morning shower stall is what hoses off a sidewalk splattered by suicide. We are sixty-six percent water and always a cup and a half away from drowning. You might kneel on the riverbank and plunge your whole head into the flow. If you could stand to keep it submerged throughout your ability to hold your breath (unlikely; the water is close to freezing), you might be able to feel things

striking your cheeks and eyelids. Objects relinquished to the current, unknown to you who have your eyes closed, potentially painful but never fatal, might brush by you on their way to the forgiving sea.

If you could dangle under the span of a river bridge, your fingernails clutching to the miniscule gaps between the bolts and the girder, your thoughts more on the traffic rattling above you than on the tonnage of liquid you could watch flowing below your sneakers were you to consider glancing downward, you could suspend your doubts for a stretch of time and accept that living itself is the trajectory of redemption. The vehicles would rumble along above you, unaware of your tenuous grip, and it would be like what things are like, what we are clueless about, what we must miss most of the time. You might need to scratch yourself or piss, and, hopefully, that would strike you as funny and not cynical, typical and not cruel, as going with the territory of a deepening summer evening above moving water.

III

The tracks conjure a vanishing point, a place to go someday, a way of imagining tomorrow. Treeshade cools the rails in spots and the crossties are spaced like buttons. *Clickety-clack, no time to pack. Going nowhere, not coming back.* A penny on the rail gets flattened, a damsel in distress gets rescued, but an ear to the steel, listening for the voice of a country, hears a shaggy animal groan, an infinitesimal splitting, a reverb of appearances.

If it were to cross your mind to walk the tracks barefoot, bare-souled, to cross some land toward some sanctuary, stepping upon every tie, not worrying about splinters or shattered bottles or nails, ignoring stray dogs and nagging cramps and thirst, clenching your fists and concentrating on your consistent stride, you might feel the frontier on your forehead

like the angled sun, or you could gather the failure of the American railroad to have done anything but deliver dominion, or your eyes could glimpse the glory of the coming of the Ford, and if, when you grew weary, you were to stub a toe, falling out of stride and bruising your heel on harsh gravel, sitting uncomfortably on a skinny rail to survey the damage, you might try praying for someone other than yourself, say, me, and if you were to lie on your back, looking celestial, with your nape upon the opposite rail, you could imagine a train coming along and the wheels severing your consciousness from your libido, your head rolling down the embankment, wobbling to a halt at the edge of the brimming riverbank, your hair draped across the water and stretched away from your skin by the subtle current, the hair undulating peaceably like a flag of surrender waved by one willing to put away doubts of outcome; then, if I am not mistaken, I am so often mistaken, gazing at the movement of something distant would not cure your distance, but it would alleviate the shadows beyond your doubts.

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