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The Long Side Of The Tracks

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THE LONG SIDE OF THE TRACKS

James Metzger

In just three short weeks I traveled upwards of 8000 miles of rail, circulating around an

antiquated network of industrial savagery, from Oakland CA to Oakland CA, trading stories and

cigarettes with other wayward travelers while waiting for more important trains of cattle and

produce to take the tracks. Along the way, this intersection of many lives washed through an

experience connected loosely, romantically, to a miss-wound pocket watch chained symbolically

to the conductor clicking tickets. Yet, within the staggered timetable pulling me into Seattle

nineteen hours behind schedule, and then dragging me all over the rest of the country with no

particular decency to punctuality, the ability to flow, to allow opportunities to unfurl, became

quickly embraced and time was eventually erased. The opportunity to fully respect time, if only

by letting it go completely, is available to the passenger on a train once all considerations for

reliability are accepted as lost.

The train is a romantic vision, running deeply through the veins of history, the steam

engine actualized and the world connected into a slightly smaller geography. And yet, with the

advent of planes and automobiles, the necessity of social transport quickly shifted in its tracks.

Today, most passenger trains, particularly those in the West, do not own the rails. They rent time

from industrial interests, and once a passenger train falls behind schedule it moves to the back of

the line. Delayed trains slow even slower, rolling along with the dashing jackrabbits bounding

about the prairies they call home.

In America, we live untimely by the clock. Moments and seconds are quite valuable.

Time is a commodity, quantified as a quality. Availability of self represents respect and interest.

As a species, the American is typically time sensitive, quick to experience and expire even

before the “eventual” has come and gone. However, on the train, Americans travel off the

clock. There can be no dependency to a timetable, or schedule. As a passenger on the train, an

American is powerless to an on-time arrival. For the average citizen of the United States of

America, this offers an opportunity to relax, or it may generate tragedy for the same person.

The loss of time challenges an American traveler and becomes just as much a journey into new

territory. Gazing lazily is allowed, productivity belongs to the engine and the passenger just rolls

along, turning this hometown hero into a stranger to his own time, or within its lack thereof.

Arrival is the only thing that matters simply because departure is so haphazard. As I

finally boarded the 3:00 pm train in Jack London Square, I was already in no hurry. I had just

perished to a round of layoffs at work and was so exhausted by my partner of 2-years that I

secretly hoped to never return home. Finally embarking as the sun set under the earliest touch of

summer, I arrived 3 weeks later at Jack London Square. By the time I approached Portland the

next evening, the train had fallen sixteen hours behind schedule, an early lesson to the consistent

inconsistency of riding Amtrak from Oakland to Oakland... I noticed the gravity first.

In tow was the precedent of my journey, Dharma Bums, the magical little coincidence

that held no personal value until experience and reflection embedded it with worth. As the

train shifted me north on the first leg of my journey, so traveled Kerouac's narrator Ray Smith.

We both left friends behind on Milvia Street in Berkeley and eventually found our ways up to

Washington. At every station stop along the way, we stepped from the train to chain smoke

until "all aboard" sent me back to the book. Rolling through Oregon a day behind schedule,

finally arriving in Seattle, Ray had just found transcendence in the mountains of Washington; the

spiritual foundation of my trip took root. While I did not generate this same level of awakening, I

did spend the next 2 days in thought, crossing every inch of Seattle on foot until my departure for

Oakland, sweeping via Chicago, North Carolina and New Orleans, and then Texas, approaching

Texas into Texas across Texas, a bit more Texas until out of Texas and away from Texas, and

finally up the central valley of California towards home.

It would have been a bad dream had I been asleep. A jaunt with minimal awareness

of location, fleeting images disconnected passing by outside, jarring slowdowns hidden in the

softest of deceleration, rumbling pulses at just above motionless churning like an upset stomach,

trapped little travelers in the madness of the smoking car. Seattle to Chicago proved the liveliest.

Chris had just been released from prison. Elizabeth, barely 17, was off to spend the

start of summer with her father. Andy was from Reed College, the most non-religious school

in America. Cheffy was winding her way back to the closet in Indiana. Bryan and his shadow

claimed Keith Haring's NYC studio as home. My dot.com had knocked me out in the third

round of layoffs. Michelle was a total stray that Chris picked up and disappeared with into the

bathroom every hour, like clockwork. Some other young guy made out of hair gel and currents

of baby fat bloated about like an Abercrombie toss-off and another man kept Cheffy on alert

with his dirty agenda for Elizabeth. There wasn't much for us to do but smoke, buy booze, drink

booze, babble on and stumble about within the moving corridors. It wasn't like we were going

anywhere. We were on the train.

On the train the place where you are is not the place that you see. Passing silently
outside
the window blurs the countryside or the darkness. The subtle lurching of churning gears,
moving
along. Take a nap and any frame of reference to the map and your destination is lost. Of
course,
spend an hour suffocating in the smokers' car, lost in banter, and place loses all value,
sucked
into this tunnel of transport where countryside is filtered through a filter of movement.
Images
move lost like the dreams of a lazy afternoon nap, thundering and pulsing forward in a
horizontal
gravity toward the destination. Outside past the tracks, an abandoned house drifts by far
too
briskly to awaken many curiosities or stories of wonder. It is a space simply equated to
time
paused, time passed. The whole vanquish of landscape a backdrop to emptiness, the
façade of
America.

When traveling outside the standard practices of American society, truth becomes
more
available. Towns aren't built to be pretty for the tracks. It is an America without makeup,
or at
least without the intent to misrepresent. In the world of the automobile, freeways,
interstates and
downtown promenades are designed to be beautiful from the vantage point of the car.
However,
because the train existed before the particulars of suburban awareness, this journey
exposes the
backdrop of the country. Architecture is not designed to invite a visit, or compel a stay.
Coming

into a town or city, the passenger has already discovered the “wrong side of the tracks.” Many

of the surrounding neighborhoods seem destitute, vacant industry centers long lost to the service

industrial economy shaping the society of today. Trains no longer fit the model. The station

drops off into the wash of the city and fails to deliver the passenger to any particular address.

Upon arrival, a traveler must navigate elsewhere, essentially naked yet centralized, from this new

starting place onto the next portion of the journey, to wherever their final destination might be.

The journey is never done when you arrive at the station.

And you cannot escape the train. There is no exit. Once settled on the trip, a passenger

has given oneself over to the experience. Time to focus, time to breathe, and time to sleep. There

is progress, for the will to advance has been offered to the train; however, in this process of

losing a schedule, the traveler should not tend toward tension. He is wholly lost to the resolve of

the track.

Far off in the distance lay a destination you can't quite grasp, like a night of terrible drinking trying to remember what you can't seem to forget. Scattering about the landscape of

dreams through a tumultuous journey towards a tumultuous place where the journey only takes

a nightmarish turn before starting again. Of course, you're wide-awake and the rhythm of the

track lulls you to the pulsing sway of the engine's forward motion. The power of the track owns

you, time trails off to the distance, the diminished horizon ever present but intangible still. The

place where you are is not the place that you see. And it works both ways. The train is traveling

through some abandoned prairie within the backdrop of America, a geography you might touch

but leave to distant memory even before the journey begins.

Upon leaving Oakland, Seattle settled in my sights. Upon leaving Seattle, the two days

between Chicago and me were just a vacuum. I was already at my destination. I simply had

to fritter the time to finally arrive. And so the passenger wanders, pretends to rest, gazes out

at somewhere and wonders how to pretend that the place is knowable, but back to a book or

down to a sandwich before back to the observations of made up conclusions. As life moves

forward on the train, gravity comes horizontal, pushing/pulling you into an inevitable fall to your

destination.