

Trains

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Track I: Turi

Turi, 1979

September 19, 2007

In the dark of
the African night
the far-off whistle, and
the roar of the wheels
brings thoughts of home.

Stories were told of
boys who slipped out in the night,
made it down to the station,
got as far as Nakuru,
even to Kampala, if you
believe that sort of thing.

The measured breathing around me,
a bullfrog singing bass,
and above it all, the approaching diesel.

I could slip out,
past the matron, past the prefects,
past the gates
and hop the train home.

Far away, the whistle,
an ibis cries
"Hadada! Hadada! Hadada!"
The train approaches,
recedes,
and still I lie there
listening to the
sounds of the night,
with 30 other boys
just as far from home,
some so much farther
or who have only known
this place as home.

The rumble of the wheels passes

for another night.

Maybe tomorrow night.

In the woods, the bushbaby cries,
cries, cries

As do I.

The whistle fades
far, far down the track

Track II: Turi

Turi, 1980

September 20, 2007

My ear on the rail,
something I'd read in a book,
I proclaimed sagely that
something was coming.
The thrum in the rail
a cicada buzz
heralding the approaching storm,
a minor earthquake
making the pebbles dance
a jitterbug with the distant diesel.

Or not so distant.

My companions scattered
leaving me lying on the ground,
my face on the fiery steel.

Around the bend
not twenty paces away
bigger than a house
it bears down on me
whistle screaming like a tortured soul.

Leaping for the side of the cutting
gaining the edge
just as the behemoth
roared past,
an angry beast
dragging vacuum in its wake.

Heart a running rabbit
trying to break through my ribs,
forty eight cars, pounding past,
each one no farther away
than the reach of my fingers,
feet scrabbling at the
crumbling red clay.

Ten, twenty, a thousand years
as the KR express
bellowed past, shaking the whole world,
inches from my slipping Batas.

Then

Gone

around the next bend
and gone.

Fly and Douglas
on top of the cutting
laughing uncontrollably at my
weak kneed terror,
the scream I didn't even know
poured from my lips

Then I, too, was laughing,

crying, laughing,
relief, terror, and
joy to be alive,
to be so very alive

Track III: Lexington

Lexington, 2002 - 2005

September 21, 2007

It's never dark here.
The blanket over the window
still lets in the
light of the passing cars --
people with places to go,
with others to go home to --
and of the parking lot light
just outside the window.

And nothing keeps out the sounds.
The cars, yes, but mostly the train.
Just there, across the fence,
the train forever roars past
from nowhere, going nowhere,
every rattle and clank and squeak
the sound of loneliness.

Traveling from empty places
and through other cities
where other lonely people
lay and listen, listen, listen,
but can go nowhere,
are going nowhere.

The whistle, the cry of
a lost animal,
solitary, alone, crying into the night,
but never answered.
A mournful wail that
everyone hears, but no one heeds,
until, over time,
one can pretend it's not there.

And yet, early every morning
at 2, at 3:30, at 5,
the train hurries past,
its cry pouring over the sleeping city,

it's wheels turning endlessly around,
going nowhere.

I lie awake, the light
streaming in,
however much I wish to escape it,
I cannot.
Still everything is
so very, very dark.

Track IV: Tsavo

Tsavo, 1986

September 22, 2007

The usual thing was
we'd leave Nairobi after dark
and arrive in Mombasa at sunup.
Clackety clack all night long
lulling you to sleep
across the dark Tsavo,
only your imagination to tell you
what all those
eyes out there in the dark
had behind them.

Over the rattle of the wheels
you might hear a hyena laugh,
or, if you're lucky, a lion roar,
and you might imagine a leopard cough --
a sound to strike terror,

but at 35 clicks
little more than a slight cold shiver
to run up the spine.

This time, though,
we struck it lucky.
In the wee hours, the train broke down.
Early in the morning I woke
to silence.
No wheels clacking,
no diesel chugging,
just silence.

But there, outside the window,
a thousand thousand faces,
looking at this new thing,
this strange creature
lying across their path.

Black and white striped faces,
side by side,

with , here and there,
the liquid-eyed, vacant stare
of a wildebeest
looking nervously at his
monochrome brethren
for a little direction.

The baobabs and acacias
catch fire for a moment
as the sun leaps up into the sky,
the heat of the day gathering,
ready to pounce,
but waiting a moment
to see what strange things
will happen this day.

Suddenly, the trance breaks,
the interrupted migration resumes,
and the tide flows around
the somnolent train,
eddies of zebras and

currents of gnus
wash up against the dining car,
and lap against the sleepers.

An Africa that may not last much longer,
a sight granted only to
the lucky few.

A child in the next car
asks his daddy if
the train has a puncture,
a phrase indelibly carved on our memories,
even as those million faces,
ancient and wise,
will always recur in my dreams.

Without warning,
the train lurches back to life,
the snake revived to
writhe across the savannah
towards the distant white sands,

leaving behind this marvel,
this vision never to be repeated.
The herds hardly seem to notice
and continue their safari
in search of water and grass,
and the satiation of a
deep urge, unknown of source
and unanalyzed of purpose,
but inexorable and irrefutable,
briefly interrupted this day,
for this one unrepeatable moment.

Track V: Mombasa

September 23, 2007

Mombasa, 1988

And then, suddenly,
we're going for the last time.
Slipping out between two weeks
of final exams
to take the old familiar diesel
down to Mombasa
and back again.

Drinking in every moment,
every rattle, every whistle,
knowing I'll never do this again,
never again to ride the rails
across Tsavo
under the ice crisp sky
with the stars
blazing down, impossibly bright,

the endless savannah
washing against the train,
waves of grass crashing against
the sunrise, one last time.

And, one last time,
to walk the white beaches,
the sand as bright as memories,
the salt air
etching this moment on my soul.
Never long enough,
but drawn in deeply enough
to last the rest of my life,
remembered now as though
I just stepped off the beach.

Reluctantly, so reluctantly,
climbing back onto the train,
letting it carry me back home
on this, the first leg
of the long journey away from home.

Wanting to suck the
marrow out of life,
savoring every moment,
I was delighted to find
the unrepeatably repeated,
albeit briefly.
Another break down in Tsavo,
the parting gift from Mother Africa.

Arriving too late to
don the drabs,
I sat, resplendent in beach clothes,
drawing in the
lingering aromas of Mombasa,
while my gray-clad comrades
stared resentfully at me
over their geography final.

Track VI: Gare du Nord

Gare du Nord, July 12, 2007

September 27, 2007

It took two tries,
but we made it at last
out of Gare du Nord
and all the way to Waterloo.

It was a little uncertain there
for a moment,
uncertain if we would make it
to our Waterloo.
Uncertain if we'd even make it
out of the maze of
twisty passages all alike
with missing
and misleading signs.

But in the end,
we made it,
and that's what matters.

Along the way we became
so familiar with Gare du Nord,
more than one would really care to be,
back and forth between there
and La Chapelle
on a quest for our
elusive passports.

But in the end
we were on the train,
and off across the
countryside, très belle.

Churches that Napoleon saw,
fields that young boys
tramped across in search of poppies

and cemeteries where they found them,
rushing past on the way
to the white cliffs
and Waterloo.

Track VII: Waterloo

Waterloo, July 12, 2007

September 27, 2007

We saw Peter in Kensington,
the Duke at Victoria,
and missed Charles at Westminster,
and then it was time
to start back home.

It is a long trek back
from Waterloo
to Montmartre,
and once again,
it took two tries.
Thank God for second chances.

We dashed out onto the platform,
eager to embark,
start home,

home to our
open window and view of
the Paris sky.

But it was the wrong train,
and someone was in our seats.

Next time, instructed the guard,
as he led us back to the lobby
Next time, he said, as he
unlocked the wrong-way door,
and showed us back out to the
waiting room

Next time, seize the opportunity,
jump in with both feet,
grab a seat,
and pretend
you know what you're doing.
'Cause once you're on,
you're on,
and one way or another,

you'll make it there.

Next time, to be sure,
we'll do that.

Next time.

But this time,
we sat and waited,
our own little Purgatory,
waiting for Charon.

He arrived, and told us
of his hardship,
a month-long assignment
in the City of Lights.
We drew back a strong bow,
and listened to his tale of woe.

Then it was, at last
our turn

and we were hurtling back
to Gare du Nord
and notre Montmartre.

This time, we skipped La Chapelle
and called a chariot
to carry us back to Clichy.

Track VIII: Arbatskaya

Arbatskaya, April 29, 2005

Oct 1, 2007

Stepping from the train
with leaders of the new world,
Larry and Jon and Bergie,
into a showcase of the old,
where they called one another comrade,
and spoke of working together
for a better world.

Surrounded by the stars,
and the hammers and the sickles,
the emblems of the worker,
the emblems that we
grew up hating and fearing,
while we ourselves carry
all over us
emblazoned on our chests

the emblems that they, too,
grew up hating and fearing,
the emblems of capitalism
and the corrupt West.

The train, a marvel of progress,
decades ahead of its time,
whispers away on the
still-modern tracks,
and the press of the crowd
moves us to the escalator,
stretching forever up into the distance
to carry us back up
to the world
where we are all,
in the final analysis
not so very different
from one another.

Track IX, Christmas

Christmas

October 1, 2007

At about that time every year
the trains came out,
Santa Fe and Rock Island
with their coal cars,
and Smuckers' jam cars,
and the tiny red cabooses
chugging among the
H.O. gauge houses and cows.

Taking up half the living room
and two thirds of our days,
these were as much the
harbingers of Christmas as
trees, or presents, or
the inevitable and pointless
wishes for snow --

a snow that would
never come in the
heat of the East African December,

The smell of ozone,
the whir of the engines,
the flash of the tinsel
as it fell on the tracks,
popping and sparking.

And the
circling, circling, circling
of the engines
as they counted down
the days to Christmas.

And although, without fail,
a cow wedged in the tracks
sent the train
tumbling from the table,
and perhaps a sobbing kid
running from the room,

it wouldn't stay derailed for long
and would soon be, again,
rushing around on its
brisk journey to nowhere.

Across the years
electric trains mean Christmas
and Christmas means electric trains,
even as they sat
collecting dust and rust
in boxes somewhere in an attic darkness,
and I raced my own
circles 'round the sun.

This year, though,
they'll resume their rightful place
as center pieces of the season,
and, once again the
same age as my kids,

I'll watch them
rush around and around
and behind them pull
a full load of memories.

Track X, Le Metro

July 2007, Le Metro, Paris

October 3, 2007

So many years
riding the rails alone
waiting for you.

Perhaps you'd forgotten your passport,
perhaps you'd be
waiting at the next station.

Or perhaps I'd just missed you,
gotten on the wrong train
going in the wrong direction.

But then, there you were,
there, ahead of me in line,
buying your ticket,
boarding the same train.

This, at last, the first

time on a train with you.
All those years going hither
and yon on the tracks,
looking for you,
and finding so many other things.

Some of them good,
worth finding, and life-giving.
Others, not.
But the tracks, they go on
and on, and we ride them
where they will take us.

Sometimes alone
but this time, with you.

And so, as the
tiny paper stubs accumulate,
so do the memories.

Place de Clichy, La Chapelle,

Notre Dame des Champs, Pigalle,
Cité, and all the way to Victoria
we rode together.

To Luxembourg, to be
scolded by the happiness police,
and to Bir-Hakeim
to see France, with her
wings spread and sword outstretched,
and to Kliéber where
France and the United States
grasp hands and mourn together.

So long to wait
to discover that
it's not so much the track
or the train
but the fellow travelers
who make the journey worthwhile.

Even when, late at night,

they tell us that there's
no more trains for the night,
it turns out that
even that is not a dilemma,
and we can still make it home.

Track XI, Victoria

July 12, 2007, Victoria Station, London

October 3, 2007

And then, there we were
at Victoria.

Nothing special to those who
streamed around us as we
stood gazing at the sign.

Lo, it is Victoria.

Track XII, Highbridge

Highbridge Rail-Trail, September 20, 2001

October 3, 2007

SRB

A few days after
the world changed forever,
and a scant year before
mine changed for a while,
we went walking, you and I,
up Highbridge way.

Things were simpler then
and might have remained so.

Might, but didn't.

So many things are just
a question of timing.

We walked the path
that once the train took,
long ago, before
the world changed,
the tracks moved,
and the land reclaimed
what had been wrested from it.

It seems that's what happens --
left to themselves,
things tend to fall back,
be reclaimed, fall apart.

So it goes.

The tracks were here,
the train chugged through here,
before the diesels,
before the wars.

Before

the world changed.

And, but for the will
of a few men,
we might allow many to enjoy
what you and I walked
on that day.

But, though the world changes,
getting men to change
is so much harder.

We see things as they were,
and have so much trouble accepting that
the world has changed,
much as we might wish
that it hadn't.

So we walked,
you and I, and a few friends,

down this path
where once the iron horses ran,
to see how it once was,
and how it might once again be,
but for those who
cling so hard to the
way they see the world.