

Pat Nolan

JACKS OR BETTER

a travel journal

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for Andrei Codrescu

When I boarded the train in Oakland, it was already four hours late. There was a noticeable tension in the nearly full coach. Most of the passengers, I learned later, had started out in Seattle and Portland. After stowing my luggage, I seated myself next to a woman who hugged a bundle of blankets and a pillow. She cursorily acknowledged me and continued to stare out at the platform. I took stock of my situation, looking around to see if there were a more favorable or friendly place to sit but most of the seating had been taken by the already seated and an occasional set of legs from a sleeper stretched across two.

A look of horror
still etched in the reflection
passing train window

Shortly after leaving Portland in the early hours of the morning, The Coast Starlight, as this particular train was named, apparently ran into a blizzard that had caused an avalanche to block the tracks. The passengers were forced to transfer to buses to be ferried in the driving sleet and ice over a winding mountain pass to the next open station down the line. The driver was a mad man and besides he couldn't see more than twenty feet of road ahead in the blinding

snow. He'd nearly gone off the road more than once. By the time they'd reached their destination several hours later, they were ready to lynch the man. She was on her way to visit her sister in San Jose. As much as she hated the thought of flying, she would never take the train again.

East Bay's industrial backside
where the power of the word
shouts out its challenge

Although this is my first trip to New Orleans, I've taken trains across country before and have always found that if you're on a schedule they are the last place to be. But if you're not in a hurry, they enforce a leisurely pace that is fast becoming antique. My final destination is Florida where I will visit with my parents. The first leg will take most of three days. This trip is ostensibly about the anatomy of a friendship and the relationship between generations. I will visit with Andrei Codrescu in New Orleans and lecture to his MA classes at Louisiana State University.

Baton Rouge
"only place in America named
after a dog's dick"

That Andrei would arrange for me to speak before his class and have me paid to do so speaks of his thoughtfulness. Although many years and many miles have separated us, his amicability and sincerity is unchanged. We have always recognized an ease of kinship as if we were brothers under the skin in a strange land. We both immigrated from other countries, possessed green cards even. The joke when we were neighbors in Monte Rio was that we both had "immigrant" consciousness. His great success and my lack of it make that bond even sweeter. One should always wish the best for their friends.

I don't know why
I go where I'm going
I only know that I do

The Coast route is splendid if for nothing else than to glide along the Pacific's shore and catch glimpses of waves rolling in between ice plant decked dunes. In certain areas closer to Los Angeles, the steep inland cliffs, beige and buxom are reminders of the landscapes prevalent in the old Saturday matinee B Westerns, no doubt filmed in these very environs. Our vision of the old black and white West is based on the wind carved sandstone buttes and arroyos of the Ventura coast.

Graffiti abounds
someone "was here" where trains meet
with rumbled exchange

Inside the quaint surprisingly modern Mission style Southern Pacific LA station are rows of vending machines. There will be a layover for the connecting train east through the Southwest. I have brought a book to read, a notebook and pens. The book, an exposition on early Japanese court poetry, doesn't tempt just yet; it would no doubt serve as a sedative and, although it's been a long day, I am still stimulated by the act of travel.

Notebook open pen
idle pedestrian are
my observations

After an explained delay, the train boards and slowly ever so slowly leaves the gravity of this sprawling mass of humanity as if it were a string of particles trying to escape the pull of a black hole. The dark shaped landscape reveals nothing. The ghost of an orange band flickers green and is gone. The observation car is too crowded. In my seat, the book is having its desired effect. I will soon doze off. I figure to catch the first hints of daylight just before El Paso.

Blond poplars
in the arroyo scrub brush sage
mesquite sawtooth mountains

I farted in my sleep and the next morning the whole train was talking about it. "Did you hear those rude noises last night?" someone says to a neighboring passenger in the dining car. Traveling always gives me gas. The perfunctory watery ham and eggs in the dining car will not help. Hard scrabble wiry brush, cactus, a tableland cut away reveals its geological story as illuminated by early light. Dry arroyo crossed by steel bridge. What I can see of New Mexico, barren, dark shadowed mountains where I've imagined my Western novel takes place.

Rio Grande a thin band
more of an idea than a river
held in by bare banks

Surprised by the fact of such monotony having come from a place of infinite variety. But even here, each day is never the same though undoubtedly the bleakness is unremitting. Bone white chunks of limestone, gray brittle clumps of brush, drab dusty yellow short grass for miles in all directions broken only by the sterile contraptions of environmental exploitation. Hardly another place like it in North America.

This part of Texas
the fabled place where
the sun don't shine

As an example of cultural disconnect, or debunking the myth of national homogeneity, I am in line behind two young pre-adolescent girls at the snack bar. They want to know what choices they have. The weary attendant points to the menu posted in the top half of the Dutch door and reads off a few of the items. When he says the word "bagel" the girls burst into uncontrollable giggles and when he says "yogurt" they make sour faces. Just as the fuel burning dynamos pollute the surrounding landscape so does this germ of foreignness infect. There's no inoculation available or necessary. What doesn't kill you makes you stronger but not necessarily smarter.

Forced to be by myself
I'm not all that good company
bitter cynical denial

In each new mirror I shave a different face. Even after a couple hours behind schedule, Andrei's there to greet me at the station in New Orleans. There are places to see, things to do but first I must drop off my bags at his old ante-bellum style house built after the first war with gas fixtures converted to electric and a thoroughly modern kitchen.

Above the stairs
Alice has painted "Andrei
with poker machine"

Jean Lafitte's lair still preserved where we sip cognac. Down a brick paved alley for gumbo over rice. Then the hotel where Napoleon could have enjoyed exile. "I've seen more people go by on Bourbon St in the last five minutes than I ever did in a whole week in Monte Rio!" Andrei's perception of America is unique. He views it as if he were in a wasteland of wonderment. The rusted hulks of promise, the myth debunked, or better yet, the immense sordidness of every day that tarnishes even the most brilliant of ideas. For myself, as a child in Quebec, I remember believing the streets of America were paved with gold.

Family will stab you in the back
a true friend hands you
a twenty to play video poker

The gap between generations is the agony of misunderstanding. So why am I headed for that tangle of associations murkier than friendship, that elephant bone yard in the land of citrus and alligators? Duty, however indefinable that word is, has me in its preconceived grip. I sink into the fluff of a feather mattress, my first real bed in days, Andrei and I to head to Baton Rouge in the morning.

The guy who made
a film about driving cross-country
still rides the bus

I speak of Apollinaire, Jacob, Reverdy,
Soupault, my heroes of early 20th Century French
poetry. I didn't prepare any notes so I ramble.
On the other hand, I surprise myself by how much
I know I know. Unfortunately there isn't time
for it all. I read a few of my own poems and
talk about how they were influenced by the orig-
inal vanguard of the avantgarde.

What I knew and when
I knew it what I said and
what I couldn't say

Andrei has a speaking engagement that night as
part of the University Faculty Lecture Series.
We kill time in an off campus bar. I play pool
with Laura. Andrei isn't interested. There's an
unoccupied poker machine. We talk about "the
white goddess" and agree that that doesn't mean
the color of her skin, Laura and I. Andrei's not
getting anywhere with Lady Luck, the reason he's
almost half an hour late for his lecture. First
he examines the buffet. It is to his liking,
particularly the salmon canapés. Very well then,
he will say a few things about New Orleans.
Don't mind the accent.

Blue haired faculty wives
livid with impatience melt
after the first few words

I have a train to catch. Andrei has one of his grad students drive me to the station, a young man whose ambition it is to be a hockey player though he's only seen ice once or twice in his whole life. I would have been shocked if the train on through to Florida had been on time. The book on Japanese Court Poetry is actually very interesting. The other choice is boredom and the anticipation of my next stop, my ultimate destination.

Faithful son that anguished
illusion cross the bridge
over the big muddy

Bleak autumn Alabama. When the train is stopped nowhere in particular there's always the question "why?" Good vibrations, bad vibrations, big wheel keep on rollin'. Don't we all live in a state of unhappiness and hope to gravitate toward that opposite condition? Making promises about visiting people has a way of catching up with you, especially when they're your parents. The flat reclaimed swamp that is Florida. The wide featureless horizon, a painful grungy beige just a shade below yellow. I didn't know what to expect but find myself unprepared for the humid squalor.

Already off on the wrong foot
last passenger in the station
phone rings in an empty house

Parents can be like old friends you just can't hang out with anymore. What was once held in common has been boiled down to just blood. They who have drifted off to the isle of nostalgia, the fabled land of the way things used to be, where reality is a barely remembered past. By way of greeting, an admonishment that having to fetch me from the station is bothersome, and next time I visit I should make other arrangements. "If there is a next time," the old man echoes my thoughts, but each for our own and opposite reason. The air, poisoned long before I arrived.

Yea though I enter into
the valley of recrimination
I shall not get annoyed

This ghost town of Spanish moss and alligators, a refuge in an increasingly frightening world, populated by many who, like them, have lost their nerve or their minds, a depot of shabby gentility at the end of the line. This is no way to live. The amygdala has taken over all cognitive functions. "Pea brain" resonates with unintended significance. Is fear a condition of aging? The transformative power of living seems to have lost its meaning.

Ignorance is not bliss
ignorance is ignorance
arrogance is ignorance

I feel I've learned much about life from my children. They live in my future and so have knowledge I can't possibly have. It is something I am proud to relate. I suggest that we cannot only learn from the past, locked into ways that offer no solution. This is met with scorn. I had forgotten about the derision of things not understood and once again encounter a pre-Copernican mentality that is insufferable, self-righteous, over-bearing, pitiable, inflexible, racist, infantile, reactionary, and intolerant. Later, on a walk around the tiny alligator infested lake, my mother reproached me for talking that way around my father. I had to put in my two cents. I should know better.

A sudden gust almost
bowls her over she jokes
the wind is her hairdresser

My parents have been taken over by aliens, I can only conclude. Across the room, I see my somber reflection in the dark window. Actually, I may be the one taken over by aliens from the planet ARF. Pat, the dog faced man (that's just a worried expression!).

Death awaited like
a visitor long overdue the anxiety
created by mortality

Usefulness is turned into uselessness. "I'm fed up" is the mantra of sadness and self-pity weighing down the days and making each interminable. That the body no longer respects itself is the hardest to talk about aging—skin sags, muscles cry out, joints stiffen, stomach cramps. Don Ameche just died, at 85. The news is greeted as if it were a confirmation, an affirmation. "He was only 85" meaning, "I could go any moment, too." Sotto voice: "thank God."

There should be less
finger pointing more
offering of a hand

Fears of the future compounded by anxiety over the present. Add hopelessness and it equals a rejection of any joy. The reverse snobbery of a stunted egotistical patriarchy, a bitter, cynical distortion that denies even the most obvious is like a necklace of millstones, soon to be my inheritance. Discounted or ignored, the agony of childhood revisited. Nurturing goes sour when disappointment curdles the milk of human kindness. It's a hard lesson to swallow. This visit can't be over soon enough. It's easy to say hello or goodbye but what must be said in the interim is the most difficult.

Dropped off at curbside
unceremoniously
suitcase at my feet

The train station is adjacent to the winter headquarters of a traveling circus. A demented clown wanders over from across the tracks and accosts me with questions of no particular relevance. There is something almost predatory in his interrogation, but also incredibly simple-minded, child-like. He wants to know where I'm from, where I am going. Why I am here; a question I have been asking myself ever since I arrived. I am vague with my answers, on my guard, fearful, some of the baggage that I was given to take back with me. An indefinable heaviness weighs me down. At one point, he indicates a row of dark trees in the encroaching twilight. That's where the elephant graveyard is, over there," he states.

As if my mind were
an open book sadness and
confusion writ large

My reflection speeds across the darkened landscape. Train crowded with passengers, no seat empty. The attendants seem brusque, unfriendly. This disquieting, disheartening journey, now it's my turn to stare out the window in quiet horror. I find myself asking again, if it

weren't for the prevalence of unhappiness, would happiness be so eagerly sought after?

The book I am reading offers no relief although eleventh century Japan would certainly seem a better place than where I am now. I am finally impatient with the train delays. I just want it all to be over, my duty done, I can now return home. I search my memory of the past few days for some redeeming moment among the miscommunications and injured feelings, something that would rescue this part of the journey from being a total loss.

My mother and I did attempt some translation from the French. A few prose poems by Max Jacob. She had hesitated because his French, to her, was so unconventional and because he was a Jew. I told her that he had converted to Catholicism, but had died in a concentration camp during the war all the same. This seemed to allay her reluctance some. With my sense of the poetic and her native abilities with the language, we attempted a few, laughing over Jacob's comic sense and word play. Unfortunately, our apparent joviality impinged on the darkness in the other room. "What are you laughing about?" As if it were against the rules. I did manage to find a poem about a priest that she found charming.

REAL MIRACLES

The saintly parish priest! After he left us, we spotted him scuttling across the lake like a field mouse. He was so absorbed in his thoughts that he didn't notice the miracle. That the hem of his cassock was wet baffled him.

translated by Cecile Nolan & Pat Nolan

Love is unconditional. It's the most important lesson I learned from my children. I suppose I should apply what I've learned towards my parents. Their disappointment in me has become my disappointment in them. It's not a road I want to go down. I will suffer my regret in good humor and not descend into bitterness. I must have uttered a deep sigh because the passenger sitting next to me shot me a look of concern.

In the near dark
shadows of a landscape
brush past

I lose myself in observation, retracing the tracks I took to get here. People watching can be a diverting idleness. There's the petite redhead with the well-turned ankle, pale forehead creased in concentration as she does a crossword puzzle. And the man so large that he takes up two seats and snores as loud as the giant in Jack In The Beanstalk. I have to conclude, as I

nod off into uneasy sleep, that proportion, the relation of size to size, is the essence of beauty.

A red tie holds
the blackest of velveteen
hair in a bun

In the dark hours just before dawn, the train once again passes through New Orleans. I have an elevated view of Louisiana graveyards and their mausoleums, tiny, well-appointed cities of the dead. And before long, the train is speeding through the ramshackled Louisiana countryside. An egret's slow studied gait in the shallows along the lake, just another wild bird seeking sanctuary. Sunrise appears like a bright stain behind a cotton horizon.

Cartoon clouds
heron parallels the trestle
across the bayou

Sleep disturbed I find myself dozing through the eventless day, the side to side sway of the train acting as a rocker to lull me beyond my boredom and anxiety that this journey soon be over. I read the words in my book but forget them immediately. I am distracted by my weariness. I wander the narrow aisle between the dining car, the observation car, the lavatories, and back to my seat aimlessly. Days will pass in this fashion, dawn to dark. A burnished twilight

sky, house lights dot the horizon among silhouettes of trees arranged in the foreground as in the grandeur of a Dutch landscape. Sunset in bayou country, riding along even with the tree tops, a very tasty looking orange drops away to an ember under the raised highway bridge next to the oil refinery, reflection of a pale streak across an estuary. What am I thinking?

Twilight mirage
hill like a perfect breast taut
nipple backlit by sunset

Further on the down the road, one evening I watch the scenery go by from a club car crowded with people lined up at the snack bar or enjoying conversation with each other, drinks in hand. I indulge myself again, finding a story in a face or gesture of someone at the next table. They are a motley lot, myself included, and each has a history and a similarity to each other. We're all in this together, particularly on this train headed west, anonymous except for our resemblance to each other and the world of tabloid headlines.

J Edgar Hoover and friend
comfortable in drag
playing double solitaire

At another table old men in polyester, about my father's age, but certainly livelier, play poker. Their loud talk and hearty laughter echoes in the tiny compartment. Everyone within earshot is privy to their banter. Sometimes it's funny, sometimes it's just plain stupid.

Hoping for a bit of wisdom
"play the hand you're dealt—
Jacks or better to open"

Late November 1991

Pat Nolan's *Jacks Or Better* is one in a series of travel journals modelled on Basho's *kikō* (travel diaries) in which the Japanese poet recorded his travels to meet others engaged in the practice of *haikai no renga* (linked verse). In *Jacks Or Better*, Nolan travels by train from the Bay Area to New Orleans to meet up with the poet Andrei Codrescu, and then on to Lakeland, Florida to visit with his parents. Travel journals of this type usually consist of a narrative interspersed with haiku-like poems resembling the prose/poetry form of *haibun*. Nolan's other excursions at the behest of the muse include *The Cloudy Road To The East (Transfer)*, *Exile's Return (Exquisite Corpse)*, *Bolinas And Beyond (Exquisite Corpse*, later published as *Ah Bolinas!* in a limited edition by Not My Hat Press), and *Irony Road (Milk Magazine)*.