

Northbound Train

Natalie Anne Raffa

7 04A

Poppies, Poppies. California Poppies. Stop. I'm looking down, I'm getting sick. I have to feel not **think** not do. I look out my window and see my body's reflection looking out, I see the line. Here the ocean ends and the clouds reach down to touch the water with its wide extended bushy arms. Arms that scratch, pull, seep itself into, sucked from the deep blue, springing up to catch the sprinkling air. *I'll write when I'm ready to write.*

The grayish-brown tint of the glass. The ocean looks a mucky brown. The grass takes a dark green tone, it whispers to me. *I am not like this.* Green next to brown, this is the way it is. Send the water, the brush the weeds so tall so overgrown they dance with the ocean winds. Tall weeds never touch, never bother. *It has a purpose. All of this.*

Driving To The Station

I'm not nervous, don't tell me that. I know when I'm being nervous, and I'm not nervous. I'm not disagreeing with you, I just want to add my piece. Dad, you don't have to rush. We have enough time to get there. Why are you rushing? See, it's only 6:30. You know how late the train always is.

No, I checked the right schedule this time. I did. Let's see here.....Monday morning, San Diegan.....7 04A? Uhhh.....*shit I did it again*.....well, I guess it's not the 6:42am train. That's on the weekends. Please, why do you have to get all hot about it? It's hard to read these schedules. Okay, I'll try to read more clearly next time. *If there is a next time.* I'm sorry. So we'll be a little early.

Must we bring that up now? No, no, I'm not telling you not to say it. Did I say you couldn't feel how you want to feel? Why are you putting words into my mouth? Okay, you said it. You're concerned about the baby coming. Now here is my response: This really couldn't be a better time. *Why can't you agree on anything I say?* Here we go again. I heard you, I did, I did!

7 17A

Two wrinkled up ladies walking on the sands, wearing white trouser pants and white sweaters, they wave to us, they look the same. The dog and the man sipping out of his tall white cup. He does not turn around. He is dignified, he is sure.

The sun. I feel the sun shining on my back, shining through from the glass behind me, touching me, letting me see myself sitting here on the seat, alone, shining through. The ocean, the sands, the glass is coming at me, I am close. A lady in her pajamas standing alone, grabbing her side, she must be cramping, cramping real bad.

What will happen when the baby comes? Where will I be?

"Did you hear in the newspapers, they're thinking of stopping at Del Mar station again."

"But I don't want it to stop."

"I do. I won't have to drive so far. I can walk there."

"I'm going to get some more coffee. Want any?"

Sparkling like glitter, like tiny specks of glass shimmering, it opens me. There is the pier. Sticking, jutting out, long and woody and dark. Reaching and touching out, the glitter, the sparkles are gone it is dark. The sea gulls fly above it, following me, following.

Watch me here, do come inside and have a visit. I have no one to talk to. Do understand, I might not have much to say, but I'll listen to you. Hello neighbor, do you see me, do you know me, do you know what I'm writing? About you, perhaps.

*I wish my dad was here so I could have someone to talk to,
so I could say, I'm sorry.*

"See ya later Signor. Thanks for the newspapers."

Packing My Bags

My bag is too heavy. I've been having problems with my back, so I better not. You take it, really, please. I'm telling you, I won't have any room in my small refrigerator for those oranges.

Oh ma, don't make me! They're the last ones from your garden, I want you to enjoy it. The tomatoes will get smashed and spoil by the time I reach my apartment. No, please, I told you no! See, feel how heavy that is. *Can't you see the kind of condition I'm in?* How am I going to take this?

7 48A

Goodbye ocean. Hello grass. A tiny neighborhood. The trees, more grass, short, small grass. Too close of a squeeze, let me breath, let me see you are blocking my view. You are ugly and wide and blunt. The land, the hills, the grass, trees and weeds let them grow. Cut, snip, step, dig. Torn out, cut down, turned around, around, around. The hills look magnificent alone. ALONE. Do Not Disturb. Kill, burn, chop, saw, hammer, die, die. Construction yellow blue and white. Concrete walls, white eyes burning slabs of concrete, plaster, nails and wood. This is new, this is modern, this is change, like it, like to live with it.

What is there to like?

I look back to my neighborhood, growing up. Where did the open fields go, the cows I used to watch on the hill. Why all the houses, why so close.

Chuga chuga chug. Progress progress progress, chuga chuga chug, toot too! Keep on building, chug chug chug, houses, houses, chuga chuga.....

"Did you hear about the demonstration in downtown, L.A.? 20,000 people were striking. Construction workers. They got the street blocked."

"Good. I hope it turns into a riot."

7 50A

Turn away. Do I feel thirsty? There is no line. I will leave my seat for just a moment, will you watch my things? I know they sell cranberry juice. There's always cranberry juice. Ocean Spray cranberry on the rocks, please. And a napkin. Oh, it's right there in front of me, but of course, I see it now. And a cup. Oh here it is, thank you.

Bang bang, side to side, watch your step. Oops! I'm sorry. Bang bang, side to side. Here is my seat. Empty, untouched. Ahhh. Nice.

I should have taken the tomatoes.

What possesses me to act like that?

Flower boxes here and there, flower boxes.....I don't see any flowers. Didn't you see them? No. I swear I haven't seen one since we left the ocean.

A row of flower boxes, blooming colors, would be nice here. Yes, it would. I see white trimmed balconies, wood, tile, pink walls, green grass, but no flows boxes. Once in Munich I saw the most beautiful display of flowers adorning the windows. One after another, after another. There must have been a thousand flower boxes in the city.

No more, much more.

Up and up and up there is a cottage, a castle, a ranch house, big and expansive and wide. Room, room roomy. Blue grass. My gosh! The grass is blue! It can't be. It's the tint of the glass here. *Don't ruin my hallucination.*

"Look at the snow on those mountains!"

"Where?"

"Ain't that gorgeous?"

"Yep that sure is gorgeous."

"Where?"

"Look at those snow caps."

Different down below, near us, it is quite different. Don't neglect to say it, it is different. How flat, how clearly now do I see the line. Look at it, look! There it is! Why can't you see it! I do, I do. Is it only me? It's me isn't it?

I'm sick of living this commercial life. I'm sick of not seeing green. I always thought of having my children grow up in a place where grass is abundant everywhere, like in Germany, or..... somewhere else.

Here the rooftops are jutting out, kissing brick side to side touching, hugging each other. So Close. so close. I feel the green turned to brown darkness, I see it near me. I don't like to see chicken coops. Live in them, never.

This is meshy. I try to write and not look down, I try to set it free. I don't want to get sick.

"It hailed last night you know. It was pretty rowdy."

"It hailed hard too."

Oh yes, I had a dream last night. Get it down. The river was dry. A couple of masked boys bombed the bridge and made the river dry. I tried to save it, I tried to help

the others. I did not live there it was not me town. We dug and dug shovel to dirt to shovel to dirt. My father was there.

Only Silence.

8 10A

A long creek I follow with my eyes, and it passes so quickly. Quickly, we're moving fast. Woosh. A wood lined fence going, going, going, open. Yuck. It's dry. No fruit orange trees, so little so few. Gone. Come all yee construction - tall, strong steel beams, crossing, multiplying, subtracting, muddy dirt, a machine's mesh.

Big people with big fat faces.

"There was no place to go but over the tracks. He saw this big yellow thing. He knew it was over the tracks. He told him to run. They waited for the crash."

Nellie Gail Ranch. Hmm. A Road Paseo. A flat bank straight up and then smooth, very smooth. It was once weathered, it became like that on its own.

On My Own.

Pools of water. Lots and lots of pools. It gets hot here in the summer. The people like to own their own pools. I see that. I see that from up here. Up high on this new division. This upper-decker, *this San Diegan Express.*

Another shade of green, a limy green made for golfing. Around it apartments tighten it, keeps it in tact, I guess. NO land, NO room.

Breath in this bag, in this plastic. Take in the particle air if you wish, the smoke the fog, the fumes. This bag suits me fine.

I'll learn to live with it.

Trailer parks, trailer parks. You can't miss those trailer parks. It's like nothing you've seen before. A small community. A temporary place. They all look alike. Modern gypsies. They know how to live, how to breathe. Each space far apart, each mom separate, land not gone, not away, but here here here.

Office buildings. Cooped up rooms, no space no room. Tall, fat, wide shapes, anything you can choose. Tinted or clear glass? Fans or air? Coffee or tea? A doughnut, or are you on a diet? You must go to the gym. Who walks anymore. No times no room, no space. What is left, a bulk supply. *No use, one way.*

Voom! chick chick.....window window window, oooh people. Another train. Waiting. Let it pass. *One track. One way.*

"Oh! I don't want to work anymore."

"You ain't got no day!"

"He has a very logical mind."

Me. I don't want to write about me. Not about anything that concerns me. How about you?

"Do you have any open positions for my niece? Do you object to a mexican inunigrant with a green card? Why are you laughing?"

"We don't object. Here is my card."

8 12A

I'm thinking. Oh, great. Stop. I have to stop. I'm getting hungry. What is there to eat besides hard and salty pretzels. Let me stop. I know. Mustard. There is nothing else but that and mustard. Another cranberry juice, please. Yes, and a bag of those Bavarian or whatever you call them pretzels. Thank you. I'll take the big napkin this time.

Bang bang side to side, bang bang.....

"Well who's going to pay for it? This is the 90's. I never hear anyone saying, who's going to pay for it. Someone has to say it."

This New Me

I'm three months already, maybe more. This is it, I can't turn back. I think ...I could be a mother. I think I'll be happy. Yes, it will be mine. My family, my way.

I'm happy I'll be a mother. Utterly happy. Really. There's no reason to get angry at him. To hate him. So he got scared, *so he's that way*. I can't change him. *How could I have married that*. No, I didn't want that. I can stand alone. I'll be done with school, I'll have time. I'll have to move. I'll need to say goodbye to this life. For a while. *Forever*. This couldn't be the perfect time for it. I mean it this time. Who knows where I would have been a year from now. In another country, probably. *Like I always wanted*.

I see my reflection for the first time in the window. My face looks serious, dry, wrinkled. How old and ugly I have become. What has happened ? I don't want to be me. me. My time is running out .

Oh God, what will I do. *That bastard!* How can I leave this place, this life? My freedom? Sometimes I don't want tomorrow to come, then sometimes I do. I can't seem to make up my mind about living or dying. What will I do after I'm gone from here, after I'm no longer.....

"There was no place to go but over the tracks. The only way to get out was over the tracks.....yeah, he got stuck. The fence was there and this guy was going to back up into the bowl. I said idiot. He didn't say a thing. He took off in an opposite direction. I never saw him again. What a jerk! Yeah! Two weeks later I found out a truck was stolen. And to think I could have prevented it."

I came home and then I left. I'm on the train and I am leaving. I'm coming and leaving my home. I'm going home.

The Throbbing Session

We sat around and they talked. My mother and sister actually talked to each other, not at, over, or in between, but TO.

This is the reason I am here.

We were there together and we had to force it. It couldn't of all happened without Bettie there with us. I had to tell her to ask. Just ask, don't talk about it, don't talk to her in the third person, ask her. Mom is right here. Ask her why she did what you thought she did and then listen to what her reason is. Listen to her and find the truth. the truth. Not how you thought you saw it, but how it really was. Understand how she sees it. She sees it different than you.

I raise my hand up to meet my father's wailing mouth and I say, let them speak. Give them this time to speak.

What's in a name? Everything and nothing, *Bettie tells us.*

If you try and understand me, I will understand you.

You hurt me mother. Did you know that you hurt me? yells sister.

Tell her you want an apology.

Tell her you love her, you respect her. Let her know she exists.

I don't want to hear about the past anymore, says mother.

I'm having a baby. It's turning inside.

You won, mother dear. Are you happy you won! yells father.

No one is listening to her. You people do not listen! It's just like you dad to preach about it and not do it. That was not what mom meant!

You're making it worse! Please stop because you are. You don't see it. *This could be much easier.* Why must we always fight? Be calm, be patient, we can work it out. Dad, you still have anger. True, a moment ago you didn't, but now look at you.

I don't want this family.

I want.....to leave.

8 35A

"What could I have done? Ask him, what are you doing here? Oh, yeah sure, and he would have said, I was trying to steal this truck."

Six years ago I rode these tracks for the first time. How exciting it was, the new faces, the many people, the laughs, conversations, dropping phone numbers, dropping ticket stubs, questions asked - Where are you headed?

It just doesn't seem possible. Six years. Six long years. Every day people ride to work. The same crowd, the same loud voices and dirty jokes, stupid one liners, and lousy drinks, lousy food. Hard, salty pretzels. Mustard. Cranberry juice. Bang bang side to side. It's cold, it's stuffy, it's dark, it's too loud in here. I can't study. I can't think. Stop. Don't think. Don't.

How am I now? More lost than ever.....so misdirected, so confused.

It's empty. The car is now empty but the three of us loners, remain in silence, peering out at what looks like, plants, commercialized plants, full of them. I see the guy way behind me has his head resting back, dosing. There was this other good looking guy on my left, but I think he's now taken off for another seat. It's a bit cold in here. *Why can't they ever control these air conditioner's?* Well, I'm sorry I didn't try and make conversation with you. You must of seen me writing away, busy, busy, much preoccupied.

You want to know what I hate most? When someone sits down next to me, makes a lot of noise, a lot of rumbling, then looks over to see what I'm reading, asks me what it is, gets my response, then doesn't stop talking. The person actually thinks I'd rather talk to them than continue what I'm busily doing. That's annoying. Bored, out spoken people, with nothing on their minds but talk, is annoying. Buggy. Get me out of here. But they trap you in. They trap you in with their rushed words, and hot breathe. They trap you with guilty thoughts of leaving, of not caring.

Who is this person, anyway.

"Would you mind if I borrowed a piece of paper?" *You have a backpack, how can you possibly not have a stinkin piece of paper.*

"No, of course not. How many, one, two..?" *How much is she willing to get off me?*

"Just one, thank you. I want to write a letter." *Oh yeah, for who? Your boyfriend?*

Husband? Good for you, lady. Go ahead, write.

I'm not angry. I am not like my father.

For six years I've looked out at these windows. Not once have I written about them, talked about them.

There is only silence.

What I saw was inside me, holding on. Six years of my life gone by. Like the flashing light of the passing southbound train I watch from my window - - - I move forward, turn around and there I am. Watching- - - waiting for the speckled waters to give their evening shade.
I am there.

8 48A

We're here. There's the city, the city of Angels, the lights. The peaked roof. The only tall building in the city. The old bridges, the young city. This is the part the train moves very slowly, clickity clack We don't want to miss the barbed wires, the graffiti, the back lots of smashed cars, dirty laundry, week's old trash, factories on top of factories on top of power plants, smoke stacks and long pipes, one color one shade *what kind of life.* We see it all here, there's nothing to hide. Not fanciful, not pretty, the old tracks.

NR
“I was telling my friend all I need here is a six caliber...”

“Yeah, and it’ll be the OK-Corral.”

“And Homer’s hat.”

“Yeah, a hat and some boots.”

“I would think....it’s the old way.”

I’m not sure if I got the last line right. I can’t seem to ever get the last part of anything. Endings always sound mumbled to me, lacking in concreteness, in any sense; it’s almost like the speaker lost track of what they were saying for a second, then stopped. The End. Fine. No more, go home.

I don’t want to go home, I want more.

Last stretch. I have to get up. My tailbone is aching, the remnants of last year’s spinal tap, my Meningitis false alarm. Turns out, instead, it was Chicken Pox. Great, I say. Now I can’t lean to my left side and get up without feeling it. *Feeling I am nine months already.* The needles, the aching pinch, the release. We’re almost there.

I didn’t kiss my father goodbye back there on that platform, back there with the cool, damp air, the stillness, the people crowding. Watching the kissing, the hugging, the lapses of time, the shortness of words, what to do, plans to make. Stepping slowly, carefully, we emerge and then enter. I had a heavy bag to carry.

I should have left the oranges.

I couldn’t easily turn back and hug him, or lean over to pat the cheek like I normally would, like I usually do. This time it was different. I made it that way. I made my way through the crowd and was just about to step on the steel, punched holed steps of the train when I turned my head around to look at his face. He was looking down at the floor, I don’t know what, perhaps some lady’s shoes, or a man’s briefcase. I didn’t feel bad at the time. I thought he might have understood, and he probably did. But, I wonder sometimes, what does he think?

Why can’t he be happy about the baby coming. Why do I feel so alone.

When I was five years old, I remember waiting in our old Chevy with the white vinyl seats, and my mother sitting next to me, waiting for that 6:30 evening train from New York City, the one my dad was riding on, the one he rode every day to work and back, the one that took him one and a half hours to get there, and one and a half hours back. I remember it was dark, and I remember the people, waiting. It was 1976.

This morning, when waiting at the station, when I had my father at my side, I asked him for the first time what he used to do on the train. He told me he would read the New York Times every morning in his seat, silently drinking coffee, and sometimes involved himself in idle conversation. The business world was something new to him, and that was his way of being terribly up-to-date on the latest.

He always had to be informed, prepared.

As a young child, I knew nothing of that world of his and I didn't care. All I wanted was to see his face appear above the crowd so I could run onto the platform, just so I could run into his arms. I wanted to feel his presence next to mine, all the way home, and all through my life.

8 58A

"Welcome to Union Station. The Red Caps are on the platform if you need assistance. This is Union Station."



Tom Moran