

THREE RAILS LIVE

Narrative texts by Scott Rettberg

1 LANDSCAPE AND FATE

We are all just tourists here. We all come from somewhere else. None of us actually belong to one particular place or one particular era. We stand where we land. Some people think there's something important about a sense of place, that there's a sense of belonging to a place, as if the mountains around you become part of your bones. I don't think there's much to that.

You belong to the landscape. You belong to your surroundings. You are just an organism like any other. People are no more significant than trees if you think about it. Just animals in an ecosystem. Sure we have our impact on the world around us but it will outlast us, maybe even regret we were ever here.

I don't believe in fate, no. But I really don't think that I'm the master of my own destiny. So many things have happened that I would not have anticipated. I guess I think there's an invisible hand of some kind. A finger that flicks an avalanche or claps an earthquake into being. I don't think it's God really--but some force that is beyond me. I don't feel like I'm the master of my own destiny, that's for sure.

2 TOURISTS

Whenever we go on vacation together we have small arguments: something is missing from the luggage, a toothbrush or something, or some hotel is not what we had imagined, or someone lost the directions, someone wants to go to the art museum when someone else wants to go for walk along the river. We have these petty arguments--I think we all do--but then there are those moments of serenity when you see something together and you stop and think we are here now, together, in this place.

Seems like every place wants to be a special place--every town has its secret corners, some place that only the locals know about, and your job is to discover it and then appreciate it like a local would. But then I think, well, the places that the locals know about, we don't really appreciate them the way that they do, because they probably don't anymore. The places that we think the locals appreciate are the places that they think are for the tourists and they tell all the tourists to go there though maybe they sometimes think wistfully that place used to be great before all the tourists came and ruined it.

We like to watch other people having a good time. We like to watch young lovers laughing, embracing, watching a sunset. We remember maybe when we were young. We do this on vacation together--we look out for young lovers. We do it without wanting. We do it without longing for anything, really. It's just something we do. There's some spark there we appreciate. We do this on vacation. That's what we do.

3 DEATH BY SNAKE

He died about fifteen minutes after he was bitten by the snake. She cried out the very moment he was bitten, as if she knew what would come. That it would be the end of things. Or an end of something. For a moment it was like a scene in the garden, the Garden of Eden. But as she watched him dying on the sand, in that unbearable heat, it was actually just another scene in her desert of the real.

She always knew that he would die in some idiotic way. She expected that it would be some sort of car crash or skiing accident or some type of household incident involving a blender or an electrical fire of some kind maybe a heart attack at a steakhouse after he ordered something medium rare but she never expected he would die of a snake bite. Sort of a dramatic death. Replete with metaphoric associations. She did not think that he would die like that. He didn't know what to think. Is there some kind of anti-venom?

At some point fate will reach out for you. Or coincidence will. Something from an actuarial table. I suppose it's not really fate—it's just circumstance. Fate is just a sort of comforting umbrella for the unexpected. Some sort of unanticipated death will be there for you. Or some sort of anticipated death. I suppose we all anticipate death at some point though we live as if we are immortal. Few of us will actually die at the hands or rather teeth of a small animal. Do you say "died at the teeth of" if you die from a bite, from a small animal, from poison? How would you go about describing that? As he was dying, all of it struck him as absurd—not just the snake bite—the whole ball of wax. He found himself thinking of the phrase "winterize your tires" and he thought "that's funny."

4 INDUSTRIAL SITES

He had an obsession with industrial sites the way that some men have an obsession with bridges or trains or construction sites. He would go out of his way to find them. The massive industrial sites where real work is conducted, work that drives an economy, work that pollutes an environment. Places where the stuff of the world is processed and made otherwise. He would go out of his way to find them. He would drive for hours, and he would watch them, record them, listen to their noises so he could go home and listen to them again. It brought him comfort to see and hear the men and machines at work.

It was when they traveled to the oil refinery, just to see it, just to see what made the whole economy turn, up close with their own eyes. It was that day it first occurred to her. I may divorce this man. I could. I may leave him behind. Like a used mop. Like a tarnished silver spoon. Like a tin can that used to contain soup. I may grow tired of him at any time, or he tired of me. We may die without each other. I may be alone.

I suppose, he said, we could have brought some signs or something to protest this place. Truly ugly, the way it belches smoke into the sky. Sort of monstrous, isn't it? It is like it

is eating itself. He said something like that, in Norwegian. I couldn't tell really whether or not he was joking or serious or half serious. Everyone around here seems to love nature but they also like to go home early from work and enjoy the benefits their natural resources provide. There's an awareness of consequences, a sort of balancing act people play with the ethical parts of themselves. There are problems of translation.

5 TRAINS

He loved trains, associated them with childhood, the model train set circling round the Christmas tree. He remembered a sort of ride you used to see at old-time amusement parks, with train cars a child could propel by cycling with his hands, faster and faster. He loved the music of trains, the shuffling noise they make as they move on the rails, the landscape shifting as he turned pages. Trains represented true progress: the slow progress of the careful reader, and the excited progress of the eager child. He never associated trains with death, never considered that the train might derail.

The possibility of the sleeping compartment. The mysterious stranger. The casual glance over the newspaper at the passenger across. The air of mystery. Secret agents almost always ride in trains. A whiff of perfume, a pillbox hat, a rhythmic landscape. The Freudian suggestion implicit. A martini in the dining car, a chance encounter. We always somehow expected that we would have an affair on the train, though we never properly arranged it before time ran out.

In their final years they settled their longstanding argument, train or plane, in her favor. He always preferred the speed of air travel. To her it always felt ungrounded, and though she bottled it, her fear of flight never actually dissipated. Her knuckles white from coast to coast. Arthritis and a retirement account that could not accommodate business class fares finally convinced him that the more comfortable seats on the train were preferable. And, she felt, it gave them both a new appreciation of time. She liked to knit. He did not complain though in his heart he missed the sensation of descent.

6 FLOOD

The sump pump failed and the basement flooded. Frustrations mount as the waters rise below: where did he leave the flashlight; the impossibility of locating the D batteries. Figuring out which circuit breaker to flip inside the poorly marked box. All the personal failures. The waders he had not used since the trip to the boundary waters. Unreachable plumbers. Odors of dampening photo albums. What to do? What to do? What to do? The water rising steadily. The insurance company? Where did he put the damn policy? What is inside all of these swollen cardboard boxes? Two feet deep now and he is splashing in the dark, futilely shining a beam on the water, watching as the heads of forgotten dolls float towards him in the scattering light.

The little creek out back was a selling point when we bought the house, twenty years ago. My son used to catch tadpoles there and we pretended to fish. Never caught anything but

a cold. We played Huck Finn and made rafts for gnomes from twigs and stems. Was once a trickling thing. Summer Sundays I would sit there in my Adirondack chair with the Times crossword mumbling things like "Babbling brook, babbling brook." Now it is a swollen raging thing and her tulips and perennials are washing away. Improbable storm. The cruelty of calling it perfect. Everything spongy and shifting. World turned mud. The rhododendrons are drowning. A swing set loosed from its foundation falls and floats away.

There is terrible loneliness in the flood, awful desperation in bailing out. You find no consolation in sharing this. There is no one to blame and so you will blame each other. The accumulated years of petty failings come to this, two people carrying buckets of sewage. And you know in your heart it is your own fault, this storm, this dirty water, all of the conspiracies against you. Struggling to remember what is important and what is not. If it was so important why did you put it down there to begin with? Electricity, osmosis, shit, garments, board games, waterborne disease, accumulation, rust, incompetence, meanness, labor, eels, and mortgages come to mind.

7 TOXIC

There are cracks in the foundation and black mold spores are growing in those cracks. See that slick ooze? Yeah its the bad kind, well, one of them. Not the worst kind but one of em. Memmoniella spores won't kill you quickly but they can slowly erode your autoimmune system. Some people it makes drowsy, other people it makes your eyes red, some get a kind of raspy cough like (this), or it makes you itch all over, get little sort of mold sores on your skin. It creeps up on you, over time. It's hard to kill off the mold. If you got kids you ought to get it taken care of. But you know what, I'll be honest with you these cracks here? That's a bigger problem. You could spend twenty thirty grand on the mold and still have this place uninhabitable within two three years. Maybe. I don't know your budget. I can't say. I really can't. I'm not a foundation guy. I am a mold guy.

So it turns out there are some underground tanks nearby, filled with who knows what. There was a big commercial drying-cleaning place operation. Forty fifty years ago before that there was a tannery in the same building. You know they just used to put all that stuff in tanks, right there in the premises? They just kept filling up the tanks, buying new ones once they filled up. Better than dumping it, I guess. Seemed like the best thing to do at the time, put it all underground. Completely legal. Send it downstairs, figure it out later. They eventually went bankrupt, they all do, businesses, most do. Industry is here to die. And those tanks just stay there with their who knows what. People die, forget what all was there. Eventually rust, a crack, a small leak. I don't know, I don't. Maybe that's where her leukaemia came from. Does it matter?

For a while we went on tours of towns that don't exist anymore. Places that have been removed from the map. There are many more ghost towns than you might think. Hundreds of hamlets along the old Midwestern highways killed off by the interstate. Many others evacuated for other reasons, other mistakes. We held vigils in long-abandoned churches, ate ham sandwiches and grapes in the ruins of carpet mills and tile

factories. In Centralia we walked hand in hand through the smouldering acres where the fires still burn underground. The place smells like a Weber gone wrong. Once on our way to Niagra Falls, we broke into an abandoned ranch house in Love Canal and had sex on the sofa. The place looked untouched, time capsule of the Carter era. We took photographs in these places with a Polaroid camera. We kept a garden gnome in the trunk, to help us to frame the exposures.

8 FLIGHT

Venice. No particular reason. The canals. I read the book, about death. Mostly I want to ride in one of those boats. With the striped shirt and the pole and the hat and all that. Lost its glamor? Well, I don't know about that. I still love airports, planes. I know most people hate them, or pretend to. But watching the planes take off? When I was a kid I would ride my red Schwinn to the fields near the airport, to stand at the fence and watch them for hours. I'm making a sort of study now, of airports, departures, the like. Not sure if I'll do anything with it. Have you ever been to Kansas City? Thinking of going there next. Security? I agree. Perverts. Any excuse to fondle a thigh. To be honest I don't care much, about security. I don't think it would be a bad way to go, a plane crash, considering all the other things that could happen.

That winter thousands of birds fell from the sky. In Arkansas, the small corpses of 5,000 red wing blackbirds and starlings suddenly rained down on the highways and in the public parks. Joggers stumbled, removing their headphones and staring in shock and awe. An elderly woman walking her dog was struck in the head by a brown headed cowbird as her St. Bernard howled and strained at the leash. In Faenza, Italy, 8,000 turtle doves hailed down on the town like macabre Christmas ornaments. Also strange at sea. In the Chesapeake Bay, millions of silver fish washed ashore from the Chesapeake Bay. Near Kent, 40,000 devil crabs littered the beaches. Some blamed global warming, or God, or coincidence. Explanations were provided but they only functioned to deepen the mystery and our sense of its enormity.

For a month or so after her death he would not leave their home, nor rarely even his bed. Neighbors would see him wander out of the house around noon in his bathrobe to fetch the morning paper, blinking and furtively shielding his eyes from the sun, looking unwashed and undernourished. And then suddenly one day, to the confusion of his children, he began to travel the world, in seemingly erratic and incomprehensible patterns. He would pick a bargain flight out of the newspaper and fly there, with no reservations or plans. He visited Sao Paolo and Peoria, Istanbul, Kiev, and Baton Rouge, Reykjavik, and Bristol. He travelled alone, and he did not make the trip to either of the coasts to visit his grandchildren. He plundered the retirement account, and the children received only occasional postcards with scrawled notes they regarded as cryptic, mostly accounting only for details of geography and architecture. He gave no indication of his emotions or psychological state.

9 STRIPPED

A body wears a body down. In Venice Beach he watches as a young woman endures a fresh tattoo on her upper arm, an exhibit in the body artist's display window. She grips something tightly in her hand. The needle gun a loud buzzing electric rattle. The tattooist spreads her flesh between fingers and thumb as he works. Palpable pain reflects through the window, her eyes rolling back slightly and her head an angle askew, jaw set in a kind of grim mortis, low moans escape from time to time, droplets of blood forming along the lines. He stands close to the window and watches. Her thighs shudder slightly and her feet strain as if she might bolt from the chair at any time, sweat streaming down her brow. He cannot look away though he has stood here staring at the spectacle longer than could possibly be polite. He thinks for a moment that he might turn around, walk past the body builders on the shore, and wade into the ocean, perhaps to swim out beyond, but he cannot move from this place at the window, in communion with her pain and its proximity and what strangely resembles ecstasy.

In the Tallinn bar an Abba song pipes in through tinny loudspeakers as a tall Ukrainian woman in a platinum wig gyrates, removing one article at a time, unzipping a silvery dress, hooking it onto a pointy heel, and flinging it off the stage, unhooking a red sequinned bra before caressing her own oiled breasts, spinning furiously around the pole and then mounting it in a fashion that seems to defy gravity, arching her back, heels in the air, the disco ball reflecting off her taut belly before she cartwheels off the phallic prop. And here he stands at the rail, a sickeningly sweet vodka/grenadine cocktail in hand, an ageing widower among young Russian toughs and middle-aged German salesmen in brown business suits offering five Euro notes to her g-string. She looks past them all to some imperceptible point in the distance beyond the walls of the bar even as she contorts to offer them her well-trimmed revelation, even as she does a sort of snake belly slither across the stage to allow the hooting Cossacks a closeup of her ass crack. He does not know why he is here or what he hopes to find, past any sense of eroticism, beyond feeling much of anything at all.

They carve away the mountain. A mountain is not so much. Nothing eternal. A mountain can be stripped away, layer by layer. There is great pride in the operation, making short work of geological truth. No man is a mountain but men can wear one away. We assert our significance through these acts. These miracles of capital scrape away what thousands of years have made. Our diggers and trucks and men in hard hats, our remakers of nature and things. Geological time is revealed and pliable. We take what is sweet from the earth, we flatten and invert. We load our dump trucks one at a time, buckets and buckets, we carry them away. We revise habitat. We change the geometry of the earth. We make electricity of our violations. We want what we want and we get it when we want.

10 THE THIRD RAIL

Terra cotta men in endless rows before him. He has walked on the Great Wall, purchased a postcard for his daughter, eaten noodles with some kind of meat and spices. A wall

intended to divide the world. An army for the living, an army for the dead. He has spent time at these walls, in China, in Arizona, in Jerusalem, in Scotland, in Berlin. Walking along divisions between worlds. Thousands of clay avatars all staring blankly in the same direction. He has toured camps, at Dachau, and in Siberia. He has seen expired domains and dungeons, oceans of loss. He has of course regrets. There are no guiltless departures. Expressionless soldiers. The statues of course about power and immortality. Someone here has had his way with the world. The hours, the labor, the lives that went into crafting them. They were not intended to extend the life of the warlord in any metaphysical sense but instead to send a message to everyone who would come after him. You are just another one among thousands. You are not all that, not so significant.

Providing electric power to a railway train, through a semi-continuous rigid conductor placed alongside or between the rails of a railway track. Typically used in a mass transit or rapid transit system, which has alignments in its own corridors, fully or almost fully segregated from the outside environment. Most third rail systems supply direct current electricity. The risk of pedestrians walking onto the tracks at street level or falling like Anna Karenina from the platform significant. Third rail is not obsolete. Still used in many urban centers, such as Paris, Milan, London, and Chicago. In 1992 the Illinois State Supreme Court awarded the plaintiffs 1.5 dollars because the Transit Authority failed to stop a man from urinating on the tracks. The Guangzhou Metro, he learned, is the system with the highest voltage, with 1,500 volts coursing through.

Some leave not a note but a whisper in the dark. Some leave unfinished manuscripts neatly arranged. Some make careful plans for their beneficiaries, while others make no attempts to craft sense or pretend at order. To say that it is always an act of despair is to repeat the obvious but to avoid discussion of the fact that despair comes in many flavors, with many justifications, real or imagined. And sometimes imagination fails us. Some go with rage against the living or the dead, some go in flames. Others simply get on a plane and disappear, never to be heard from again. Sometimes a train passes in the night.