

Robert McNamara

STILL LIFE WITH TRAINS

Firangi, says the wife's comportment
coldly, not in *my* compartment,
while her husband kindly welcomes guests
he is solicitous to assist—
So that you don't come a cropper,
the train loping south toward Jaipur,
avoid that market, this quarter, elephants.
His work, he says, is in government,
their son studying maths in the States.
And my profession? I hesitate
as at home. *Teacher and poet.* His eyes
widen. *How wonderful,* he cries,
hands clasped before his chest. *Did you hear,*
he asks twice of his wife's deaf ear.
Wonderful! A half smile. And poetry!
Such *respected callings!* A foreign country,
I think, as he begins to recite
Sukanta's famous poem on the cigarette.

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--tutoring Hector, 6th Grade, Lower East Side, NYC 1967

Camouflage, he says of the ballpoint ink
on his hands and face. For war games on the docks,
those rotten floors of an abandoned house.
Any step could land you in the drink.

In school he reads the husks of stories stair-
stepped for "skills" in vocabulary and syntax.
He writes essays to harvest red corrections.
Math is a rope to tie him to the chair

he's hurled at one or another dullard teacher.
We get along: he is keen for attention,
license to run the black and chrome and steel
steam engine. Plugged in, water added, we watch

the piston budge, trudge, then punch like Ortiz
as the teapot of an engine spits out steam,
steel wheels biting the air with all his hunger
for tracks receding from the classroom door.

(section break)

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The car doors open, Second Avenue,
stop for my father's nursing home, a breath
of hot air sweeping in as passengers
thread in and out like novice marching bands.
It is summer, and next door is an Alphabet City
bistro with a garden where I eat
while they feed my father through a stomach tube.
Over Merguez sausage and roasted peppers
on a fresh baguette, I think of food he loved,
over a croque monsieur remember
my year as a teenage soldier in the War
on Poverty, the neighborhood then gang-drunk,
and how after tutoring, my street-smart kids
would walk me to my bus. My father never
wanted that tube but got it anyway,
and in a Catholic home no way in hell
they'll pull it out. Respect for life, they say,
though the otherwise incomprehensible man
has made himself on that point understood.
Blessed are the poor, the sick, the poor
in spirit. Please stand clear of the closing doors,
a Flatbush inflection blunting the PA's static.
I finish my espresso and go back in.
Vanity [or emptiness] says the teacher,
as the car doors close like the nursing home doors,
and it's cool again. And now the station's gone.

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No station here, just hawkers selling food
we buy through the train car window. The passengers
across from us become curious,
breaking their reserve to haggle for us.
Then shutters close against a sudden rain
that hammers on the roof like gravel.
In slatted light we share our meals and pictures,
our Swiss army knife, and stories half
pantomime and pointing. When the shutters open,
we're on Ararat, in a green sea
of paddy, the Shan hills looming in the east.
We're told the army kidnaps the Shan boys
to use for sweeping mines. Others they take
for porters who have to walk until they die.

(stanza break)

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In another month, tourists were segregated,
Burmese beaten if they spoke to them.
There'd be no snapshots, sharing food and knives.
No news. We'd been two happy hicks amazed
by elephants like semis in crowded streets,
the monks in single saffron file at dawn
winding through city with begging bowls,
and everywhere those shapely gilt pagodas,
their silent chimes in an unraveling dark.

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