

BRIAN BARTLETT

The Watchmaker's Table



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All the Train Trips

All the train trips I made in those years, alone,
along one province-to-province, through-the-night
route: the swaying, the braking, the shunting,
snacks in the knapsack, beers in the bar car
where strangers gathered like survivors —
houses burned down, families lost. In no time
some called each other “Friend,” “Pal,”
“Funny bastard.” The coach seats never went
back far enough for me to sleep, so after
the hobnobbers’ car closed at the border
and we were rumbling through another country
I read while midnight faded like some town
sped through, unnoticed in the murk and blur.
I’ll always read Lorca’s poems in the light
of one winter night when the world outside
was all snow — and overlap Aksakov’s memoirs
with one summer night when heat and body heat grew
until the coach was a kitchen with three dozen stoves.
I’ve forgotten the names of villages and towns
I knew only as crows know nests they fly over
on their way somewhere else. *Black’s Point*,

maybe, or *Hackmatack Corner*,
Moose Junction. Some day will I recall nothing
but how far in the dark I was? —

sleeplessness, the broken breath of strangers,
my face after midnight, haggard and vague,
reflected against anonymous woods.

Ghosts of Pier 21

Night has parachuted you here, onto the seawall.

You stumble,
regain your footing, your bare feet blue. You spread
sleep-numbed fingers
through diaphanous air. This was once a place of welcoming
and farewell,
like any doorstep. Breaking the mist, then slipping away
just as fast,
ships take possession of a moment again, lit by nothing
but memory:

*Aquitania Arosa Star Athenia Atlantic
Baltrover Bayano Beaverbrae Calgaric
Canberra Carinthia Cristoforo Columbo*

Watching the fast-forward drift, you think, *Unreal —
alphabetical!*

A minesweeper made over for refugees, moonlight
pouring into
the hollow cheeks of the exhausted ones on deck;
a once-white liner
now a troop carrier, humbled, turned reptile-green;
a hospital ship
whose wounded are hidden, like flaws inside an egg.
Up a gangplank
a doctor walks forever, his pale trenchcoat spotted.

Inside the shelter, ticket-takers, guides, and tourists
have vanished

for the night. Fuzzy light infiltrates, the ceiling distant
as sky.
Slowly, with whispers and mumbles, with a face flicking
here, dissolving
there, with a kerchiefed head, a kimono, a battered cap,
it's all at once
the flush of summer, the burn of fall, winter's nip,
spring's rush.
Iridescent pigeons of four decades fuss and flutter
in the rafters,
and the smells of coffee from as many years mix in
the past-saturated
air, while languages jostle like so many bones clicking
and clacking
in a shaken bag. You duck to avoid a badminton bird
knocked back and forth
by two girls in floral dresses and polished shoes, satin
ribbons in their hair —
as if the crossing were a day trip across a lake,
the water waveless —
while a boy lying on the floor turns a gasmask into
a plaything:
goggles with an anteater's black snout.

Your footsteps mute, you think, *Nobody sees me,*
because I'm alive.
On benches in rows, they wait, wait, biting their nails,
twisting their buttons.
From drawstring cloth bags — the continent's first gifts —
soap, razor blades,
toothbrushes, cigarettes, stamps, pencils, airmail forms,
slip into laps.

Many who don't know Corn Flakes and English
mistake the treat
for package filler, and spill the flakes — so sounds of
underfoot crunching
mix with the blessed rubber-stamp *thump, thump*
on precious papers.

Beyond the high windows, more ships slide past, your mouth
shaping their names:

Doric Drottningholm Duchess of Atholl
Hellig Olav Homeland Homeric Irpinia
Ivernia Marine Shark Montcalm Montclare

A mascot filly, sporting the banner 8th CANADIAN HUSSARS,
shakes straw
from her mane, her horseshoes knocking on boards,
while a war bride
hugs a one-armed man, one-eyed man with a two-part face —
white, purple.

In the luggage cage, among boxes, crates, and suitcases
with torn labels
and rusted buckles, a bushy-mustached newcomer paces:
Brune — ma valise, over
and over, *Ma valise est brune!* A stranger with missing papers —
Russian, you guess —
shuffles away, a purgatorial furrow in his forehead.

High above the crowd,
through windows, faces of those barred from entry
peer in, open-mouthed
but unheard —