

The Vermonter

By Beth Kaldor

This is the part of the trip when you realize that perhaps going home—going to the land, the towns, the people who are not your parents—isn't really going home. So you try to write a song about the scrap metal you see up the bank from the train tracks and it sounds contrived, and as if you're trying to sound blue collar. You add the line, "I don't know where my home is." That part isn't fake.

The Vermonter train rumbles slowly along the spine of the coast, the backside of each New England town turned to you. The half-assed graffiti on buildings, sprayed in quick hisses at some dead hour, some amount of years ago, by boys with no reputation. Tool sheds fall down the bank, and heads of weed clusters peek over the crusts of snow. On the other side of the tracks, the Winooski gushes under the ice.

The train stops in towns that you didn't know had train stops. Of all the towns in Massachusetts, Connecticut, New Hampshire...how funny that these places got their names called out by the conductor and got to greet the slowing locomotive. A vertical line running down the east coast and the towns falling on that line are the lucky ones. You think of what that must do to the town's economy, and how that must fill the residents with pride. But something like an Amtrak stop, that's been there way in back of the town for so long, isn't a source of pride or hope anymore. Its sound doesn't fill every youngster's mind with pipe dreams of escape. It's probably not the site (as it might have been in the south) of the birth of every country song that laments the blow of the train whistle. The train stop is nothing but employment for a short old man who sits in the wooden, two-room station, not taking but occasionally selling tickets, writing up home-made signs alerting passengers that the toilet handle must be pressed extra long in order to flush.

You wonder, especially in the towns with graffiti, what the crime rate is like, and are there a group of decidedly low socioeconomic status kids who require teen support groups. You imagine them in the basements of churches, where they drink coffee and bug the 20- or 30-something Americorps workers who set up the program. You know the type; healthy living girls like you who came to work there, subconsciously hoping to glow within the blandness of the old people and the young people turning old. Hoping to illuminating everything quaint and rural about, say, Manchester.

You wonder if there are a great deal of white kids with loud, red pimples and wide leg pants that aren't popular anymore, walking around with slumped shoulders and basketball sneakers. Thick creases in the imitation leather and puffs of synthetic lining wiffing through. If these kids try desperately to be black and talk with rolled r's and say their 'o's with pursed lips, though their real inclination would be to talk like their fathers and their fathers before.

The top of a trailer rubs up against the horizon. A stack of tires stands stark against the grey snow. You can see, in the distance, a Grand Union grocery and a flower shop next to it. Your Mom shopped at GU for a long time for lack of other options and you always knew it as "the grocery store". Now you think about the name—Grand.Union. Think of union in terms of steel workers' union. Union-made clothing. A group of people struggling against oppression. This calls to mind something great of the past—something once grand and united, and then it kind of fits. The train has already passed this station.

You get closer to your stop, finally, and you chug through a town that you think is Woodbury, and you see the slope of a hill up beyond some trees and wonder if it is a certain road where you and an old boyfriend once drove, when he took you to see a waterfall on a rainy day. He went there to think, he said, and you asked what did he think about? Partly, you hoped that he'd say something like "philosophy" or "existence" and it would save him from being the person you knew he was. Partly because you knew there was a good chance he'd say something like "I think about you," and you'd be kind of embarrassed but proud anyway.

"A lot of things," he'd said, "I think about you a lot." And you'd pretended to be touched, and it wasn't a total lie because your ego was indeed inflated. And you smiled and said nothing because when you do that, you can almost make yourself believe that it's one of those moments where everything is meaningful though unspoken. You know now he probably had to trick himself a little, too.

The hill is most likely not the one you thought of. How can one differentiate a landscape of snow and gray, naked tree limbs, and assume that because the trees stretched together at just such an angle and because that house just off to the side of the road with the tri-colored roof looks somewhat familiar...how can one guess at where it is and in what relation to which main road. Foolish to think you know where it is.

Inside of the train, the seats are plush and dark red, new but still appearing smokey and aged. The train car is timeless, safe, new enough so as to remind you that it belongs not to Woodbury or Chester or New London but to the entire coast. Old enough to remind you that, just outside the window, the cars brush through dirt and snow puddles which in turn rise and break over the sidewalks and leave the town spattered with the color of shit from February until April. Empty enough to remind you that you are far, far above the Mason Dixon line and only when you hit NYC stop did you see people walking by too fast to count. Only then did you have a hard time imagining where they went home to, because it could have been so many places.

There is a man a few seats down with crinkled loafers and a shiny computer case that probably came with his computer. He balds a little on the crown of his head and his khaki pants rise up high against his back. He has spreading lady hips underneath them and takes his time lowering his ass into the seat. The computer case rests on the floor atop the hard, plastic, jawed things stuck to its bottom. You think that maybe he works for a small life insurance outfit, and you can imagine the sweet way describes each dusty, textualized plan to clients. How dutifully he has memorized all of those little details.

He clitter-clatters over the keys. At one point he walks down to the snack car and comes back with coffee and a candy bar. You have a soft spot for people who buy candy bars because you never know if they do it as a special, once in a hungry time treat, or if it's something they buy often without thinking about it. In other words, is fat and calories always on their minds or is it never. He gets off at the Rutland stop and you can't see if anyone is waiting there for him.

Soon, the back end of Montpelier comes into view and you can see the vacant ice cream stand along Route 2. And then you see the Winooski again, wider than you've seen it so far and moving at a pace that falls just out of beat with the train. You stuff all of your sprawled out books and plastic wrappers back in your bag and pull your sweater back on. Feel around in the pockets to check for keys and wallet. Put the strap of the bag back around your neck and wait in the seat, luggage hanging off of you and the three layers of sweaters and jackets back on. They feel unbearably warm inside the train but you know what's coming.

When the train stops, people that you remember from when you first boarded 13 hours ago pop up from inside the seats before you and they stretch and limp down the aisle, bags lopping off of them from all sides, straps choking their necks.

Your mother waits for you down on the concrete, jumping up and waving her arm side to side. Sweet, small, frail lady who birthed me, how fast can we get off of this block of asphalt, from which you fear you will fall back into the train tracks and get electrocuted. Her bones wrapped in soft skin poke against your cheek when you hug her. You wish you were smaller so that she felt like the big bed and you felt like the small mouse.

She laughs and it rings against the cold air. The cold air verbs inside of itself, captures you, makes you rock on your feet. Her goofy smile, which she does when she's excited, can't put any color against the gray sky and the closer-to-white snow and the faded red pillars of the station, but it breaks everything up a bit.

"Ugh. What do you got in here?" she asks, making a valiant effort to carry your bag with two hands despite the fact that it deserves to be dragged on the ground by its strap.

"Dead bodies." She doesn't hear you and it's not really the kind of joke she would appreciate. It isn't, after all, funny, not even in a morbid way. You walk away with her toward the car, which sits in the embarrassingly large, empty parking lot. A deep, red station wagon parked exactly where a parking spot must be under the snow and dirt, though she could have parked it slanted and in the middle of the lot if she chose.

The car is only a few years old and if you get into it for the first time in a few months, you can still smell the newness, just a whiff. Oh, that trace of factory-produced, sterilized anonymity!