Five Trains Each Way

Five trains each way means ten trains a day—five trains to campus and five home. Maybe someday you’ll get on the tenure track and it’ll be one drive, one bike, one walk each way. But it’s five trains away.

Each morning, you leave your home in Darlington, go to the Dollar Deal next door for a styrofoam cup of coffee and a crusty bagel, to the shuttle train that leaves from Ramapo College where you hadn’t been invited to interview, to the Northeast Corridor Line to the first PATH train, to a PATH transfer that cut out the long A train leg, to the L train, and then finally, finally onto campus and into the shared adjunct office.

For the first half-week you enjoyed the trains. It was time to read, to write, stare out the window, time to be away from Kathryn at home who at the end of the summer said you
needed to have a conversation about your future that you hadn’t had yet. Four days a week, ten trains a day: forty trains, ninety hours. By the second week, you had begun to try and frame it as opportunity: the best possible time and place to grade all the freshman papers, formulate rubrics for group presentations, prepare slideshows on whatever the next lesson on your syllabus was. Khomeini’s return to Iran. The Berlin Wall. Nazi death rays—the department chair said you have to keep the 100-level survey courses fun if you want anyone to show up. Death rays looks better on the syllabus than in the classroom, since death rays will never, ever exist and that’s basically the lesson. Everyone involved in the war said they had death rays to keep their enemies on edge, and nobody had one. And in 2018, you imply that the Nazis had one to keep the students on edge, engaged, or just in-class.

But by the third week, the papers have become another layer of stress on top of everything else. Shepherding the lopsided bundle of folders and papers roughed into and out of backpacks and clamped together with binder clips is hard. Shifty, slidy, squirmy. It feels like you killed Medusa and are transporting her head home to prove to your girlfriend that you do something important, you bring something to the table. What could be more important than incubating the minds of today’s youth? Besides, you tell her this makes you happy—what could be more important than being happy?

The two of you cannot be happy. There are no happy conversations.

You find yourself zoned out on the Northeast Corridor Line, fourth of five trains home. Zoned out with the green pen you use to mark because it’s less dismissive than red, hovering over a sentence that doesn’t scan, a sentence that makes you wonder if you’re sleep-deprived, that makes you wonder if sleep-deprivation is really all that dangerous, and how
the hell this Caleb Schwarz kid got into university and if he was even misspelling his last
name, too?

It’s late evening and the wires outside that bob next to the train at speed have almost
disappeared into the blueish charcoal of cloudy twilight. Of course, they’re stationary;
anchored to pylons every thirty, forty feet, but you like to believe they move, okay to let the
cable wash by in calm shadowy waves, but by the time you’ve forgotten you were looking—
after you’ve lost your estimation of where the train is—when the lazy ripple has mesmerized
you all together, it’s too dark to trace the loops and your attention teeters, teeters, falls back inside.

The train slows, gripes to a stop at Waterfront Station and a man steps onto your car.
You’ve seen him before and he’s seen you, and you see each other again right now—only for
a split second—and right as you think that maybe he’s started to smile you turn back to
Caleb Schwarz’s essay and declare with a question mark that the sentence isn’t worth your
time. In the peek you caught of him, you saw he was wearing that black buttonup, with a
green apron folded under his arm. This is how you’ve always seen him, seen him in frames,
like he’s under a strobe light, and you have to admit that you don’t actually know what he
looks like, that you have a composite image of him, a mental collage. All you know for sure
is he gets off at the same stop you do, though this is his last train and you run the other way
to make your final transfer.

During the first week, you bumped together as you stood up into the aisle while the train
eased into Secaucus, and he steadied you with one hand on your shoulder and one on the
middle of your back and laughed. Easy there, he said. No need to rush. You laughed too,
laughed to say long day, laughed to prove it was an accident and therefore didn’t matter, laughed a little too hard, a little too abruptly.

When you got home, and after you reheated pasta, once you’d slid undetected under the covers next to your sleeping girlfriend, you replayed the laugh, analyzed how easy-going, how airy, lazy, how harsh and grating, how much it felt like a reflex, an instinct, a cough, a chip sideways in your throat, and you wondered if he’d noticed all that too. At some point you fell asleep and when your alarm buzzed under your pillow at 6:30, you got up, careful not to stir Kathryn, and commuted to work. Coffee, bagel, Ramapo shuttle, Northeast Corridor Line, PATH, PATH, L. Then you taught Japanese internment to the half of the class that showed up. Then L, PATH, PATH, Northeast Corridor—and the guy with the apron got on at the same place again and this time he smiled at you with the very very corner of his mouth as sat down. There were days he’d stand with a hand on a seatback to sure himself, and his fingers would wrap around it like blues guitarists’ ropey digits swallow fretboards. You’d see each other two, three, four times every week, but he hadn’t smiled again.

You don’t know why; you can’t figure it out why it is that you notice him, can’t decide if he likes car three or if he knows you like it, can’t determine why you want to know where he lives, whether he buses or walks or bikes there from the station. But you don’t, you don’t feel this way. It’s not who you are.

Today, the smile you caught the first moments promised to be bigger, fuller, freer, happier, more hopeful, warmer than the first two. It somehow made you know you should go over and say hi, know you should ask if he works at a café and cool which one?, know
you shouldn’t do either, but know that you could, maybe even would, and above all else that smile made you want to. That is to say it made you want to find out if you want to, because you don’t know you feel this way.

You tell yourself you could be friends; you need more friends, people to invite over for poker, to watch the Bills with, or the Jets, or the Knicks, the Nets.

And so as the train hisses to a start you practice your café questions and put down your green pen and close Caleb Schwarz into the M-through-S folder and start rotating out of your seat when you see that the guy is sitting with a girl and she laughs and leans her head against him and her brown ponytail shimmers onto his shoulder like a fish.

You jolt. Freeze.

Maybe the movement caught his attention, maybe it’s for one last glance at you, but his head snaps your way, and you know that you’re in the outermost sliver of his sight, unable, unwilling to leave it. But then he turns, lazes back to the girl and you see he’s got his arm around her.

Twenty minutes later, as you turn the key in the deadbolt you laugh to yourself and think about how quickly you forgot about him, how little it mattered to you on the Ramapo train as you picked apart grammar in the last M-through-S essays, filled the space between question marks with a few checks.

That night, you heat soup in the microwave, you take a shower. You slink into bed, you wonder if he saw you, if he saw you staring, wonder if your eyes were as wide as they felt, wonder if he saw you taking him in in full-view for the first time, wonder if maybe he saw more of you than ever before too. You flick through your phone instead of sleeping or
thinking, make sure your alarm is off for the weekend, a weekend of no trains, no ways, and surely at some point you fall asleep.