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# Cultural Commentary: Leaving it all Behind

Lee Torda

*Bridgewater State College*, [ltorda@bridgew.edu](mailto:ltorda@bridgew.edu)

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# Cultural Commentary: Leaving it all Behind

by Lee Torda



Photograph by Greg Thomas

I.

One day on my drive home to Brighton I found myself stopped in a long line of traffic in Brookline. I watched drivers jerk into reverse and U-turn directly into oncoming traffic just to go back the way they came and avoid the wait. Every once in a while a car driven by, I am sure, the worst sort of person would race ahead into the turn lane only to race back over to the right when the light changed, cutting people off, slowing things down for everyone just waiting to do what they were supposed to do. When I got to the light just such a car pulled up beside me. The creeping gave him away, that slow sidling of his car forward and forward still, evidence that he intended on insinuating himself anywhere he wanted to be. He was trying to look self-righteous. I actually was self-righteous: when the light turned green I punched the gas, and my Civic rattled past the man, keeping him stuck in the wrong lane. I did this with intent and some malice. And, as would only be right, I watched a silent rant pour out of his mouth as I did so. Then, for reasons I'm not entirely sure of, I blew him a kiss goodbye.

I left my driver blocking the turn lane, unable to get where he wanted to be, swearing at the world and at me. I didn't know where he needed to go and why he was in such a hurry. And I didn't care. That's when I knew I should turn in my gun and my badge and take the train to work.

In all honesty, it is not more convenient to take the commuter rail; it saves me neither time nor money. I am up at 5:00 AM—an hour of the day I wasn't sure actually existed six months ago because I, for one, had never seen it. I catch the B train on the Green Line at 5:50, change at Park. I'm at South Station by 6:30 to catch the 6:40 outbound. A 12-ride commuter rail pass—less than two weeks of riding to work—costs what it would take me to fill my gas tank for 3 weeks

worth of driving. The fastest the B train ever is—ever—is when I'm on it at 6:00AM, and it still takes forty minutes to get to South Station. Then there's another hour on the Commuter Rail to Bridgewater. It's forty-five minutes in my car if I make the lights, and there aren't any accidents.

But there are almost always accidents. And when you drive you get in your tin can and drive around cursing at all the other people in their tin cans. You get up in arms about pedestrians. You vow that when you are too old to drive you'll know it and willingly surrender your license, unlike the people in front of you trying to turn left—or perhaps not trying to turn left at all but only not remembering to turn off their signal.

II.

On the train I eavesdrop on lesser and grander dramas, suddenly implicated in something bigger than myself just by brushing past and up against the people I ride with. It's an odd intimacy you feel when you smell your father's cologne—something you've not smelled for three years now—on the man you don't know standing next to you on the T.

Once I saw a young couple fighting right at the top of the stairs at South Station. A pale blonde was hissing something through tight lips. All I heard as I rushed past was "Well then we'll have to." You'd wonder the whole way home, too, what they had to do—and whether it was something tragic or to stop and get a bottle of red instead of white.

I watched a perfectly sane looking woman—well-dressed, fur-collared coat—lick each and every page of the book she had seemed, only the second before, to just be reading. I thought at the time that I've wanted to swallow books whole, too.

On the train to Bridgewater, a young Latina screamed obscenity after obscenity at her baby's father because the father's mother wouldn't bring the baby to where this young mother was supposed to pick the baby up.

Then she hung up on him and called a girlfriend. The ugly moment past, she was suddenly laughing. I admire easy anger that is spent and then gone, not like the kind you keep with you only to have slip out in inappropriate ways at people who don't deserve it.

On the train I have witnessed the greening over of one season into another, the vague progress of the Dig, a pregnant woman growing more pregnant, conversations between friends, and full, ripe love. The most generous thing I've seen is how riders leave finished newspapers tucked away for the next reader—an odd little gesture of good will between individuals who don't otherwise seem to notice each other.

### III.

Riding the train, days hum. Meetings must end by a certain time and cannot start prior to the regular arrival in Bridgewater of the early train somewhere around 7:45. The impossibility of extending myself beyond these decided points is delicious to me. I seem incapable of making such decisions for myself and am grateful for the train for doing it for me.

The one thing that I've learned about riding the train is that you must think carefully about what you can carry. At first I found that I would carry too much—too many bags, too many papers to grade, letters to write, bills to pay, books to read. There is no way I could have gotten done everything I fit into my bag. So I started to unload.

When I drove I thought nothing of carrying two or three bags—even, obscenely, four—I'm not entirely sure what I was carrying. And it wasn't as if I got a third or even a quarter of whatever I was carrying done, but I took comfort just from carrying it around. Now I can't pretend that anything more has gotten done just by virtue of me carrying it. I've learned to forgo that luxury. Not that there's any luxury in the actual carrying: mules carry. But there is luxury in the idea that what I carried was important. It's a luxury to worry about stacks of papers and unread articles and not about where your baby will be dropped off or what to do about being pregnant or that your father is dead and gone.



I imagine, as I get on the train, that I'm leaving everything behind me, that worry and work, all of it, will fall away like the houses that loom up momentarily in the growing dark along side the tracks only to recede again into dark and blank. But it isn't that way on the train, really. Whatever I may be leaving behind, I am still careening towards something else. I am forever in the middle of coming or going on the train, right there in the dense, strangling thick of everything.

—Lee Torda is Assistant Professor of English