

The *Intermezzo*

by Cyan James

I like to ride trains because you can make your best could-have-been friends there. Men with professorial elbow patches and day-old beards, women with good hairdressers. Teenagers your daughter might become: sweet smiles and tattooed knuckles. L.I.E. and L.I.F.E. Not-beat-down-yet people mixed in with all the fish-eyed ones who stare at their screens. Stuck in the tar pits of their own little mirrors while hoping for something different.

Once on the redline train an old African American gentleman got his head out of his newspaper. He smiled gentle and easy at me while I was doing the same to him. Good friends who will never see each other again.

Walker Percy feels invisible in a car, but that's his need to be seen all over town. In some towns a car is just a box with wheels but in other places it's like walking down a long high school hall of teenage sweat and knowledge. You can know everything in a car.

In Biloxi, Mississippi, what matters are pickup trucks, F-150s that do steroid shots every morning. They drive slow and aggressive. Pre-historic alligators. Big studded wheels, big chrome engine guards. Extra lights and extended cabs, Big Mac wrappers blowing out the back.

I have a simple unnamed car with a sun roof. She is brassy red but looks in the Back Bay shipyard like she is asking all the trucks to please not pull her hair again. But the men at the shipyard are nice. Ham sandwich smells and Bud Light bellies, the same bad jokes every morning.

You wouldn't speak to any of us if you met us on the train. Shipyard work turns you ugly fast. Big floppy hat pulled down hard on your forehead. White sunscreen streaks on your cheeks; white paint streaks on your clothes. All your clothes mismatched because it doesn't

matter. Never sandals, always sunglasses. Headphones if you remember them.

INSPITEOFMYRAGEI'MSTILLJUST-ARATINACAGE—the men on the next door boat play heavy metal that starts at 8:00 a.m. and ends up somewhere deep inside your cochlea. In a boatyard, nothing is a secret. You know exactly what everyone is up to even though they hide from the sun in the port and starboard shadows. Sour adhesive smell from the *Jaunty*. Black spray paint for the motor housing on *Sanibelle*. Epoxy, plank strippers, strips of thin blue tape in the wind like tumbleweeds.

A used boat always looks her same battered self until all at once she doesn't. Startling and ready to eat off of, a white wedding cake of a boat. She's going back to her owner. All cleaned up for another ten years of saltwater corrosion and spilled beer.

Who knows if I can ever get the *Intermezzo* to look that good. She was moored between two bigger boats that hammered her hull all throughout Katrina. Then twelve years of weather cracked her rails and turned them gray and scattered dirt and mildew everywhere. Byron and I are the only ones Teddy says he can afford to put on the job. Byron is the cousin and I am the friendly drifter.

I'm never sure where Byron is trying to look. Sometimes one eye points at me, one at the horizon. Sometimes both eyes are going about their own business like a couple done with speaking to each other for a while. Pass the butter, hon.

Byron spends most of his time in the engine pit and I don't know how he keeps the grease off his hands. I have a heat gun and a varnish scraper and electronic music. Byron has a wrench set and two kids his, two hers, one theirs. If his older sister is 29, he has to be

younger than me, but all that sun burned hard living makes it look the other way round. Byron promised to bring a newspaper bundle of boiled crawfish over to show me how to crack and eat them. Every day he forgets. Some people call them mudbugs. Creole people here call themselves coon asses. Been eating mudbugs for more than a hundred years now.

I have seen photographs of the *Intermezzo* in her good old debutante days. Gleaming nautical white, gleaming chestnut brown teak brightwork. A big steering wheel between Teddy's father's hands. Teddy's father was one of those long-knowing Gulf captains. He used to take all the scientists and marine ecology researchers out. They wanted so many things then: dolphin sightings, site visits to artificial coral reefs, oyster beds for temperature monitoring, tarpon, crappie, other fish with names out of an Ikea catalogue caught as specimens at the yearly fish rodeo. Teddy's father always took them to the right places.

And where was Teddy? At his father's knee, of course. Learning the arts of navigation and practical jokes. A good Gulf man always knows the genealogies of everyone related to his friends and always has room for the right stranger at dinner. Lots to learn. Southern memories are much different than everyone else's.

This boat yard used to be full of everyone's business all day long. You could tell how well the oystermen were doing by how many boats they could lift to scrape the barnacles off the bottom. Wouldn't want to foul good nets. Constant racket: old boats being refinished, new boats being built. A different whistle for each cannery blew when that cannery's fleet came in. The nursing home people still roll out on the porch: I heard the Diamond Queen whistle—must be time to work! Now you can hear every laughing gull and pelican. Quiet as the Vietnamese sailors who used to line the strip of sea oats to watch how American sailors made boats.

I get a Vietnamese po-boy every day for lunch. It's a nice walk to the café. Bubble tea and locals who feel good about eating another

country's food. Po-boy instead of banh-mi. French bread, pastry turnovers, green coconut rice with a little cup of sesame seeds and salt for sprinkling.

How can you eat that green stuff, Byron says. He likes a quarter pounder a day and two on the days he has to spackle. No one likes to spackle. I could joke about the mudbugs now but then he might actually bring me some.

Don't know what you're missing, I tell him. And he doesn't. All those kids already. He just lives to get out on a boat away from it all. That seems to be the coon ass way: have the kids as early as possible and spend the rest of your life trying to get away from them in various trucks and fishing boats and jet skis.

Teddy only made it to two kids, both girls. After boat shift, I can be a nanny type, too, if I feel like it. Zoo animal charades on the trampoline. Jelly jars in a line to catch fireflies. The fire ants bite our toes and their Jack Russell Terrier bites himself from excitement. When I'm done being a nanny, I wash the dishes and watch movies downstairs in the guest bathroom. I sleep so well there on two sleeping bags and a yoga mat I surprise myself. The bathroom is open to the air at the top. Night noise: frogs, sleepy birds, the freeway that sounds like the sea. Every morning I wake up to see what new pink chaos the girls have made and what pinks made it into the sunrise.

Teddy says he tries to keep it under control. Not easy being a single father. He does wash breakfast dishes and laundry but I never see him stack homework or move a single stuffed animal. Byron and I think he spends the day thinking up ways to make the girls happy. Camping trips to other beaches, Madagascar for summer break, fresh doughnuts every Tuesday morning. Maybe it's a very Southern way to be a daddy. I don't know.

He told me he wishes I could come with them on a sailing trip around the world. We had taken the jet ski and a picnic lunch to an island. Big white houses all the way up the river. Story after story about everyone who lives in those places. Teddy told me while I stood on one leg,

used the other leg to brush off loose sand and feel the edges of sunburn.

Why me? I'm only the boat refinisher. Temporary.

Yes, but the girls like you and I can tell you know what to teach them.

If you averaged things out, we would have one divorce and one daughter each. If I were from down here it would have been hard to make it past thirty without any kids. When you spend most of your time in grad school in a west coast city, it's not that hard. Don't I miss the shape of them? The children I could have had? Don't I hear little echoes of their voices following me around? Teddy doesn't ask and he also wants to ask. If he asked I would say I like the happy puppy hugs the girls give but that they'll be different in a few years. Also, you can't love girls and not their father. Complications. Also, I always choose the road and the car over the people themselves.

More loose sand. I think he's trying to say he would let me closer to the girls than any other female so far. That must be close to liking, maybe liking a lot. But not the usual man woman thing. Sort of a friend thing. In grad school no one talks about how to prepare for these kinds of offers. Ones where the one offering isn't even sure of the terms involved. That's the scary exciting thing about life.

We capsize the jet ski going too fast around a stump. The engine light goes on—sand in the thing's guts. Two fishermen Teddy knows—Teddy knows everyone—tow us home. Thin alleys of green river between live oak, azaleas, swamp orchid. Sudden flower smells like white water rapids for the nose. The jet ski takes almost a thousand dollars to fix.

If the *Intermezzo* were mine, I would just buy another boat. Byron would too. She's like someone who has champagne for lunch and doesn't stop all day—you don't know if she can ever be salvaged. Teddy will insist on saving her though, Byron says. Too many father and daughter and grandfather memories. I almost expect memories to fall out of the cupboards along with the tomato cans that have been

slowly leaking dark sludge since Katrina.

Why hang on to memories and old wood so hard? Byron doesn't know. He buys new stereo equipment and car parts whenever he gets money the kids don't need. His sister pays for her kids as casino company for old men. I don't have to think about saving money much even though I do it. It's just me. Baked potatoes. Ramen. Sometimes a dinner alone at Waffle House, where you can drink bad coffee as late into the night as you want. I know that sounds lonely, but I have my education and my pottery and my hopes.

I drive around a lot on the weekends. Lots of young women who have been watching their figures and saving up for breast implants on the beaches. It's all an investment that has to be cashed in before twenty-five. Every guy in board shorts yelling at his dog could be a key figure. Depending on his bloodlines. Maybe his dog's bloodlines too. The guys help make the early babies while practicing the hunting and fishing they'll need as an escape for later. Everyone knows the future is for fat and lung cancer.

I drive to Mobile to get out of Mississippi and to stay away from New Orleans. But I end up learning about Mardi Gras anyway. Mobile has a Carnival museum. Big orange dragon with LED lights. One black guy and a white couple on the demo float. Most of the museum rooms are full of just one thing: the capes from the Carnival King and Queen costumes every year. The guys who put on Carnival and pay for all the floats and beads and coronation suppers get to keep their names secret, but every year the same twenty last names rotate round and round like rotisserie sausages on the Royal Court rosters. PETA asks the court to please stop making capes from ermine and fox and lynx and leopard, but I don't see a lot of fake fur. Paraders have krewes and call themselves Mystics. They have one society (older) for whites and one for blacks and the courts visit each other socially. So it's all equal says the little white-haired lady who insists on giving a tour. Room after room of capes. Two rooms for the black society. All the other rooms for the white ones. Capes kind

of covering everyone's lineages. All these stories everyone remembers about each year of Carnival. Remember Robby and his tartan costume? Remember when Miss Emily used her pull to be crowned as First Lady even though she was already married? Remember when the Lebatt boys headed up the krewe all dressed as Aztecs and Mayans to honor southern heritage?

It's going to take another month to finish with the old varnish and get new coats of it on the *Intermezzo*. I'm aiming for eight coats and hoping for six, and there is still cleaning and sanding to do. After shift, I try to throw pots on the wheel Teddy let me set up in the yard. Peaceful, watching the great blue herons and osprey with your hands in mud. The most famous Gulf artist from around here was a potter called George Ohr. They called him the Mad Potter. You would understand if you saw his mustache or listened to him talk. From what's written down at least. Probably he didn't smell very sane either. He made collection after collection of squashed purple, black, brown, ochre pots people lost by the hundreds to Katrina. If you want to know what Mississippi clay can do, you study George Ohr.

Mostly I sit quiet on the dock with my hands in mud. The river muffles the brain. Kind of like removing varnish does. The same motion over and over until you're not anxious or concerned about what decisions to make next. Then the girls come whooping home. Sticky hugs again, the pink river, almost-drunken milk and almost-done homework and fireflies. Mosquitoes and heat rash soon.

Teddy likes to remind the girls how many people care about them. I've been asking for teak cleaner for two weeks now but he is thinking jet skis and pizza and gymnastics classes. He wants them to have so many good memories. Maybe I have time to help? The oldest girl likes Pocahontas least of all the Disney princesses. Why is that? She was fat. We throw candy away.

I still have a painting—of horses in the Japanese calligraphic style—my grandmother made before lung cancer. Every day I ask myself

if I can throw it away yet. Not yet but maybe soon. Nana Lucia didn't like memories that much either. When you're a Mexican and you elope with a Dane and try to live in southern California how it was six decades ago, you better be good at helping people forget. Pack up your accent with the old china. You can live without tamales or certain friends. You can wash and starch and dry and fold your memories and put them in a cedar chest with a good lock on it. You can always draw or sculpt some new life. You can always forget something new. Some memories are like so much mud. Wash them off or recast them into something new, that's how to do it.

It would be good to go pretty soon. Before the girls get attached. When you don't have a good mom, maybe you settle for pretty much anything. My own mother is a good one, very patient. Long stretches of book-reading in the morning, walks around the lake. Popcorn and cheese and apples for movie-time in the evenings. The yard full of trees, one from each past Christmas when we bought live pines and planted them in January.

How are you, Mom? She's planning a tea for the church ladies. She's teaching the dog to roll over. How is Mississippi?

I like the live oaks in rows. Wish I could have seen them before Katrina uprooted so many. I like the swamp, actually. So pretty.

What's Biloxi like?

No black girls at St. Aquinas's. Just white girls in starched white shirts and tartan skirts. Hair in ponies. Casinos on the beach but nobody cares. Lots of rednecks, some of them who actually approve of gay rights.

That's good. Ten years ago my mom would not have thought gay rights were good but she has changed and now she does. She hopes I find the right man. I say I'm getting used to single. I'm not looking for a woman or a man. She says she is praying and there still may be a man.

Do you know what they would call me down here years ago? A thornback! That's a kind of hard-sided fish. It was the worst thing a woman could be. Old and single and stubborn

and dried out. No way to make her mind what anyone says. Selfish. Thornback.

Teddy might be a crawfish. I wouldn't want to know. Might turn out to be all legs and eyes, not much inside; hard to crack but pink and simple once you get past the shell.

Friendliness is the best kind of shell. You let people know you understand where they're coming from and then you just go and do whatever you want to anyway. Selfish. You smile at someone on the train and stop to varnish an old boat and see what happens next. ▲▼▲

Drought

by Lesley Brower

Nothing gave birth that summer.
The sepia-blached corn stalks buckled
and slumped, their leaves a chafing choir
in the corkscrews of wind. The cattle grew
gaunt, lipped at what fescue the ground still bore,
huffed dust, shook flies from their eyes.
The sky was a perfect blue. Everything starved.
My grandfather told of how he daily wandered
those fields, traced the new maps the ground drew
as it split. He walked beneath the stands of poplar
and oak, their shivering canopies rusted
and fractured from thirst.

Then one morning, a crawfish hole:
a pocked steeple of clay and sod rising
above blistered ground. Inside, he saw
water—thin, rank, but filled—somehow—
with the flickered dart of minnows.

And so he dug. With his brothers, his father,
the men from neighboring farms. With shovels,
post-hole diggers, turning plows. With more doubt
than hope, they breached the silt in search of water.

Scarves of dust wreathed their shoulders,
The skin of their palms grew thin and tore,
and still they dug. No talk. Only the heavy scuff of dirt
being moved, of breath shoving past chapped lips,

and at last a sudden flex of earth, a swell and buckle
beneath my grandfather's feet—broken ground birthing
water, a wound that pooled clear and cold,
sprouted icy tendrils that crept and spread across
a grave deep hole. Then an exhale, an unwinding
of the spool-grip far below, liquid geysering
in frothed trunks and tumbles that rose and fell
and filled the pond while the men clambered
up the banks to clap and cry and fetch buckets.

When he talks of it now, my grandfather
speaks most of the Angus, how after
the men left and the pond calmed,
they gathered by the water, the latticework
of their ribs shifting as they stepped forward
and drank, how the sun set
and the moon rose on that fresh mirror,
on the rawboned cattle
anchored ankle-deep in new mud.