

Tracks in the Field

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HIDDEN IN DRAINAGE DITCHES ALONGSIDE THE TRACKS, men wait for the train. I know the men are there. I've seen the damp green nesting places they trample out in the thickest stands of rushes, cattails, and teasel. For the past few hours, I've watched their covert return from St. Vincent de Paul's soup kitchen, the Salvation Army, and the liquor store. Even now, so close to train time, men emerge from the darkness of the viaduct under Interstate 15, skitter across the open field, and dissolve into the weeds. Workers driving home on that highway pass over these men without knowing, seeing only the tracks running through overgrown acreage.

But this is no wasteland. Magpies flap brilliantly overhead. Gulls sometimes gust up from a neighboring truckstop parking lot and settle into this field for refuge. Quail live here, their hollow in the weeds not far from the men's, their invisibility just as profound. Once I saw a duck and five ducklings march out of the cattails and cross the tracks. They never broke cadence, even though the last one reached the other side a cat whisker ahead of an inbound coal train.

The field is bordered on the east by the junction of Interstates 80 and 15, on the west by the Rio Grande railyard, on the north by a road to Nevada, and on the south by the water treatment plant. The noise from these directions drowns out sound in the field. Men and birds

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open mouths and beaks but are not heard. I watch a silent film about peripheral life forms, fluctuations in the plot marked by the music of cars, trucks, and turbines.

Some men claimed their spots in the ditch this morning. They left their packs and walked into Salt Lake with nothing, knowing the lumpy collections of everything they own would be seen by many other train riders but would still be safe. This astounds me. Imagine leaving all your belongings in a field for a whole day and coming back to find them untouched. Marginal living creates a heightened sensitivity to personal property and space, an aura of life on the edge that affects even the uninitiated. I've stumbled into these caches and felt each time like I've walked uninvited into someone's house. The space may be only three feet across, the walls nothing but decomposing vegetation, the roof nonexistent, but this is, for one day, home.

The most timid of men hole up here. Many won't respond when greeted; most won't meet your eyes. Once, walking around a bend in the tracks, I surprised one at close range. I felt an ancient fear—deserted area; stranger nearly twice my size. There was nothing to do but face him, so I stared directly into his eyes.

He was looking in my direction with terror, and I instinctively looked over my shoulder to see what frightened him. Nothing was there. He was scared of me. Even though my clothes were old, they were clean and they fit—I was not, like him, wearing every shirt I owned. I was the enemy, from that section of society with the rules on its side. He was there for a second, his eyes like those of a deer caught in headlights, and then he plunged into the brush.

The ones who wear denim and army jackets sometimes talk. They're regulars, men who began riding trains for one reason but continue because it suits them. They ask me which way I'm heading and recommend trains with good connections. They warn me about the yards. Stay clear of the Union Pacific, one says. Those guards are mean, just pure mean. Another swears he's never been treated so badly as by the guards at the Rio Grande. They show me how to grab on to hop a train, extending to me those secret hand grips that get them into heaven—the warmth of a car. When I practice on a sidetracked empty, they laugh. Tried hitchhiking? one asks. Just be careful, another says and disappears.

A dangerous way to travel, train riding. On the average two people are injured by trains each month around this city. Most take it in the lower limbs, slipping under the wheels from a poor grip. If they're lucky, they just lose a foot. Generally, though, it's all or nothing; either they break free and roll off the tracks, or their legs are pulled under and lost.

Transients. Tramps. Drifters. They belong to a group defined by movement, and officials encourage them to keep going. But some tire of the constant travel. Sometimes the men try to stay for a while, leaving their reed nests and making dens, caves, and burrows with whatever can be found.

There was a good place in the sluice pipe running under a nearby street. Pilfered hay bales made adequate beds. When the shelter was discovered, the city carted off the hay and put up a fence. But the men dug under it to sleep again in their den. A city work crew then welded close-set metal grating to each end of the pipe.

At the south end of the railyard, there used to be a patch of radioactive vitro tailings. This land was condemned; better yet, someone had dumped pieces of conduit eight feet in diameter in one section of the area. Men dragged mattresses from trash piles to make beds in these caves. They left trails of stuffing, clearly visible, but no one followed the trails for years. No one paid attention until the federal government forced the state to clean up the radioactive mess. Then health officials surveying the area found the shelters. They issued a warning to the men, via the press, that staying in the area increased the risk of cancer. Chances are, none of the men read the warning. No matter; most will die from other causes—pneumonia, cirrhosis, homicide, suicide—long before the radiation takes effect.

When that area was closed, some moved into the city proper. There is a middle ground between Union Pacific and Rio Grande territory where railroad guards have no jurisdiction and police surveillance is lax. The men burrowed into the stacks of fifty-five-gallon drums on the back lot of a scrap metal yard. Eventually they lost this place, too. City gangs responded to their burrowing with a new sport—knocking barrel stacks down in the middle of the night, burying men in the fallen piles.

There is a transient shelter now. It serves the city by keeping undesirables in one spot. But some of these men refuse to press themselves into the crowd. These are often the older ones, so long on the move, so long on their own, they will not be confined. They move north, past city and railyards, where cracks in the earth leak steam from sulphur springs. They build huts and spend their time sitting close to the steam vent.

It's a vulnerable position in an open spot; not long ago the body of one was found here with a spike through the skull. Police placed a generalized blame on "local youths" and dropped the case. The city responded with a program to stop up the remaining vents.

I saw one of these men sitting in his hut in January. He was facing the sunset, and the snow around him glowed orange with the last light.

His hair was hidden by a navy watch cap, but his beard was full and white and reached to the center of his chest. He would be “grandfather” in any country. The scene was a surrealist’s version of a Norman Rockwell painting; the fireplace, the family, the house that should have surrounded this man had all vanished.

Just at dusk, the train signals departure from the yard. A slight rustling of cattails in the ditches tells me men are shouldering their packs. Then, like quail hunted by dogs, the men lie motionless. The train’s wheels circle faster, creating a vortex of dust and grit. Men draw forward, hovering on the brink of movement. Suddenly, they can stand the hounding of the train no longer and are flushed. The flock breaks cover, rising from the ditches. One by one, they are sucked into the black holes of open doors. A flight into oblivion. The train moves on, its wheels rumbling—gotta go, gotta go, gotta go—down the tracks.