

Take the 'A' Train

By Jonathan Marcantoni Rosa

The old man had said life is a manifestation of the place your mind is in, and as I traversed the cramped corridors of what I believed to be 59th Street, on my way to the A Train to see my friend Chris, who told me—Don't go south of 59th it's madness trying to go north this time of day and by the time you get to Brooklyn I won't even be here.

Take the 1 to 59th and the A to High St. and it all sounded like code, like we were Navajo code talkers during the Great War, which the old man looked like he fought in, a face of craters and deep ravines, but eyes as alert as a teenager at a peep show.

Life is a manifestation of the place your mind is in, and where is your mind, son?

I have to admit I couldn't say. My journey was only supposed to take under an hour and I sensed that time had stretched far beyond that. But what is time when you are underground and can't see the sun, and what makes the sun day and the moon night? How do we know we are moving in the right direction?

You ask yourself worthless questions, Chris was fond of saying between sake bombs on Lexington Avenue with his new girl, or was she soon to be his old lady, one could never tell. Your friend sounds like a busy man, you could say that, but Chris was a person of velocity, a person for whom inactivity was death, if he could run in his sleep he would, and I knew this because I was the same. We always said we could have been brothers, cut from a cosmic cloth and sent to different ends of the earth. Condemned to lives of what Pieper would call "true leisure," for inactivity is not leisure but rather doing the things you love. To dedicate one's life to useless introspection for the sake of passing time or mindless work for the sake of money was a lazy human being who had wasted life, and I had spent the previous months wondering which track I was currently on. It depends on the day.

That sounds like you, always in crisis. Fuck you, friend. Do you always speak of your friends in such a way? Only when they speak the truth.

The collision of conversations, the ghosts of sounds once emanated from human mouths, now free from the bodies and personalities of the people who spoke them, filled my inner ear as I entered the train and the sounds were replaced by the conductor announcing the next stop, but it was enveloped in static so that might as well have been a memory too.

And as the train proceeded I felt as though its roar had torn through my body and time became unhinged as I realized that in the dark of the earth there are no clocks, no sense of place, that the hour and minute I held myself hostage to was an invention I understood very little about, and what else do I not know? What other truths had I taken at face value without asking why it was a truth to begin with? Deep in the belly of Manhattan the gentle sway of the train coerced to the surface a thought that appeared to me the way a dream reveals knowledge you always suspected but could never put into words. I am not my own person.

The old man laughed when he grabbed my shirt on the platform and looked at me the way a comedian scans the audience after saying an unfunny joke.

- How many times have we passed each other?
- I would say eight, but in truth I haven't counted at all.
- All to get on the A Train? From where?
- 145th Street.
- And where are you going?
- High Street.
- That's one transfer, the only thing easier would be a direct shot.
- But every time I get off, I can't find the A train.
- Well, of course you can't. Now you have to take the 2 uptown to the 7, then 7 east to the 4 uptown to 51st to catch the A.
- And which station exactly is this? So I can tell my friend?
- Young man, this is a conversation only New Yorkers could understand. And you are clearly not a New Yorker.
- So what do I do, change where I was born?
- Not the weirdest thing that's ever been done. If you can alter your reality with the weight of your thoughts, why not alter your history as well? Think on it, for the next time we talk.

When I had last seen sunshine I was hung over while chatting with Chris on the phone, when he told me to take the A at 59th and not to go south of it. At that point we lost reception and the last blade of sunlight was shut off by the tunnel ceiling. At the time, I had been thinking about the nature of civilization and how man appeared to be in a ceaseless loop of suffering, madness, domination, apology for said domination, continuation of oppression under new terms, rinse repeat, found a city and then watch it burn and found it again. It was madness, and I couldn't let it go. The dark heart of mankind transcends race and ethnicity. We make the same mistakes in every century and only progress in the creation of the means of destroying ourselves, yet we continue existing and I don't understand why, when the nature of nature is its perpetuation, that our nature appears to be annihilation. Was nature keeping us in existence as a counterbalance, as a force to fight against? The questions kept coming and the only answer I could bring myself to was that mankind was an aberration that both needed to be erased and could not be erased. We tinker on the brink of demise without ever toppling over and the whole planet suffers as a result but there is no escape, that was obvious. The exit signs were everywhere but the door could not be found.

I got off on what I believed to be High Street but when I went up the stairs the corridors resembled where I had been given the labyrinthine directions from the old man. My cell picked up just enough reception to receive a call from Chris, who repeated his directions to his destination and when I said I believed to be lost and freaking out about it he just laughed and said I was always in crisis.

— Fuck you, friend.

The line cut off and the old man approached me.

— Do you always speak of your friends in such a way?

— Only when they speak the truth.

The old man laughed and grabbed my hand, and for a brief moment I sensed not only his energy but that his and mine were one and the same, the way a child might feel when their parents hug them or picks them up after scraping their knee. Instead of recoiling from his grasp, I feared the sensation ending too soon.

— It is good to see you again. How many times has it been?

— I can't say, to be honest today feels like nothing but fragmented loops. I never see the station names, and I can't understand the conductor, I just count the stops and get off and wander around until I see the next train. Sometimes I don't even remember getting on. I was in the middle of a crowd, sitting on a bench, and before I could orient myself, we were all moving.

— And what about now? Or the last few times we spoke?

He smiled and I waited for him to change back to a neutral gaze, yet the smile lingered as I became aware that there was no sound, not from footsteps, not from talking, not from the trains grinding to a halt or accelerating forward. I looked around me and saw that everyone was frozen in place. I turned and the hallway had split into two tunnels, one moving toward the street, with a red EXIT sign hanging from the center, and the other tunnel descending to the tracks, yet it too had an EXIT sign. I turned toward the old man yet before me was the interior of a rail car, with me seated between an obese woman and a young man lost in the music of his headphones.

The sounds returned, people began to move again, and the static voice became just clear enough for me to hear 42nd street, Grand Central.

Tell me, is reality what you perceive, or what you feel that you perceive? Reality is what surrounds me. What of the things within you?

The streets of New York evolve with the day. What appears withered in the shadows is glorious when exposed to the sun. The sky is sectioned off by buildings and winding avenues and the people, their voices and bodies form a long series of distraction. Heat coming out of pipes and vents, freezing winds sweeping by without origin. Voices, languages, words cluttered and combined and confused. The city is a blur until the sun breaks through and forces your attention, that for a brief moment you stop what you are doing and marvel at the handiwork of mankind, elaborate stone carvings that took months to perfect, on buildings that developed over years, like children tended to by the designers who poured their entire being into the creation of this marvel that like everything else here is completely overlooked until you are forced to stop.

And then the phone rings, Chris again—I have to tell you what happened to me right now, unfucking-believable.

Can I believe what I have lived through? It was not a theoretical situation, it happened, yet language supposes that even the most concrete of experiences only occurred in the mind until someone else validates their existence.

— We'll talk about it when we meet up. Hey, I'm at 145th, what train do I take?

I stood on that platform looking for a sign, something to indicate which station I was at. The announcer, their voice garbled and then A train broke through, A train leaving in five minutes, second platform. I raced for the stairs and descended one flight after another, the faces passing me were nothing but shadows, not even fully formed bodies, and when the ground rose up and I touched down the corridor did not take me to a platform but rather to the main concourse of Penn Station, its vaulted ceiling reverberating my screams as I fell to my knees and pounded the floor. Screaming until I felt a palm touch my upper back, not to grab me, but to alert me of its presence. I turned and there was the old man, and we were the only ones in the entire station.

— My son, I know this is hard to take —

— What is happening?

— Listen, before you can understand, I have to ask you something and I want you to trust me that I know what I'm doing. Deal?

— Sure, whatever will get me out of this hell.

— Okay. Tell me, what came first: time, or reality?

— That makes no sense.

— Not in the present day sense of the terms, but when mankind was first evolving there were no watches or iPhones or massive clocks on the most important buildings of the cities proclaiming the minute and the hour. There was only the rising and setting of the sun. There was only light and dark. So did time come first, or was it invented, to give form to reality?

— Well...Man is an orderly animal.

— Yet he produces nothing but chaos.

— Time is fiction, the sense that order can ever contain the chaos of reality.

— So did hours just pass on your way to see your friend? Or more importantly, do hours pass in a dream?

— Of course not. But this is not a dream.

— That's right, because in dreams no one attempts order, and yet that is all you have done. Ordering the memories that haunt you. Ordering the itinerary of how to arrive at your destination. Ordering your understanding into a chronological story that makes sense right away when reality...reality is far too all-consuming to make sense when you are in the middle of it.

— How can I solve the puzzle if I cannot see the pieces?

— When you are enveloped in your day to day activities, your mind compartmentalizes to limit reality, and this is the prison from which humans live, and it is in that prison that you have remained, that is, until now.

— What?

— You have forgotten the disconnected omnipresence of your people. You have forgotten to observe and instead, you are acting upon the human form you were meant to follow at a distance.

— Like a god?

— Trapped in a labyrinth, yes. Tell me, is reality what you perceive, or what you feel that you perceive?

— Reality is what surrounds me.

— What of the things within you?

— You're wasting my time old man. I just want to get to where I am going.

— Where you are going doesn't matter. Your destination tells you nothing of what you are and why you are.

The whole ceiling of Penn Station broke away from its beams and ascended so that the light of day was no longer scattered but rather a tube of light bearing down on me, and then I knew, instinctively, I knew that what he had been saying was the truth.

— I am tired. I have lived a thousand lives and none have given me any clarity. It is just action and reaction, alternating between love and hate, connection and depression, aspiration and disappointment. Everything two sided, everything inevitable. I have lived all these years and yet I cannot break away from duality. I cannot break away from the anxiety when I realize that no matter how much I try to transcend the limitations of this species, incite equality over division, consensus over domination, peace over violence, and find a higher plane, all my plans come crashing down. These humans are incapable of progress. Hundreds of thousands of years and the same mistakes are made, the same hatreds arise, the same ends justify the same means. Different words are used, the faces change, the technology changes, humans remain forever chained by the inability to fully shed their animal tendencies and be the gods they were meant to be.

— What makes you think that these creatures could ever be like us? Understand that what you feel is the pain of the young god. The god of promise and hope, who sees civilization as the height of evolution, when it is anything but. Civilization binds the human animal to reinforce its tribal origins. For truth, you must retreat. You must delve into the experience that is not governed by laws or ever-changing social mores. Truth is eternal, trends only fade.

— Civilization is a trend?

— Yes, and it will meet its end. You, my son, you take this train and return to the life of the body you inhabit, but before you arrive, remind yourself of the deep wisdom that makes us what we are.

Like an exploding missile the sounds of humanity and machinery invaded my mind and I lifted myself up and joined the masses winding through the tunnel to the A train. As we stood on the platform, I listened to my breaths as they echoed in my ears and I felt the movement from my brain to my lungs. Entering the train, I felt the weight of air as my feet rose and the impact when they descended, springing off the concrete and into the air. Grabbing onto a pole with five other passengers, I sensed their presence, inhaled their smells, and inferred their moods by the looks on their faces. Some calm, some nervous, only a couple people around me visibly happy—probably tourists, but you never know. The New York soul can surprise you.

As the train cut through the hollowed core of Manhattan, I felt the absence of time, so that the movement of people in and out, the movement of steel against wheels against air against mechanics hurtling toward infinity, the boundless energy of life manifested in the restless bodies of the people surrounding me, and I sensed the rhythm that rests in these cars, waiting to propel toward the surface, the rhythm that caresses and leaps and is subdued only to escape, full throttle down these streets, the rhythm then synchronizes with the friends we make, the lovers we devour, the pets we adore, the rhythm that yearns for the sea, for openness, for freedom from the masses, to rest, and build, so as to create.

Propelling toward Brooklyn, I feel the self that is bound to time and place returning, I recalled his frustrations at the futility of modern culture, at the pettiness of the distractions that his fellow humans obsess over, the grievances that consume the people of this earth, some generations old, some created by the internet to fill its space, some created by lonely people trying not to be bored, or trying to create meaning for themselves while missing the whole point that meaning is fluid. The illusion of importance required in the absence of anything to create. For the world is nearly filled to the brim and there are more people than ideas and the love we yearn for is in fact small but our dreams are big and the anxiety over this conundrum blinds the entire species to the fact that our time here will be over soon, the catastrophes are around the corner and if only we would shut up and stop what we are doing we could all see that this masquerade of civilization is on its last leg and for all the obsessing over creating and mattering and doing, that the one thing nobody has bothered to solve is how do we evolve past this level of existence before it comes crashing down.

I understand, I understand why this body I inhabit is so filled with rage and disgust, why it can hardly rest and why it can hardly appreciate its gifts. To return to the fullness of his consciousness is to feel my own death, and before I lose myself I wonder if the fears and frustrations of this human are a reflection of my own knowledge or if he, in fact and contrary to what the old man says, is —

The doors opened and I pass through them, unsure of what just happened and why I felt like I had woken up from a month's long nap. The High Street station was more familiar than it had any right to be, but ascending the stairs to the street above I had the nagging intuition that I was exiting a womb, and as I stared out on the maze of boulevards and buildings of Brooklyn, which I had walked for years, I could not shake the feeling that it was in fact the labyrinth below my feet that I truly called home.