

On the Right Track

Since moving to Seattle from New York by train in 1998, *Carbusters* contributing editor Robert Zverina has done almost all of his long-distance domestic travel by rail. "It requires a bit more time and advanced planning," he says, "but the train ride is an end in itself, not just a means to a destination. In a sense, time stops on a train. There's nothing to do but be present with yourself and fellow passengers." The following are excerpts from train-related entries in his online photo journal <www.zverina.com>, continually updated since 1997. "Sarah" is his mate and travel companion.

Thursday December 31, 1998

After a late night in the smoking car we barely made it to lunch where we met a stylin' older guy named JC. He showed us a picture from a trip to Alaska: a tranquilized polar bear in back of a pickup, its fur spotted red where the dart had gone in. "If you really want to see polar bears up there, the best way is to hire a cab to take you to the dump," he said.

Monday October 30, 2000

Riding the Empire Builder east I ask the conductor, "Is this the line where they used to shoot buffalo?" "Yes. This was it." Three of us look out the window, seeing ghosts. Objects in the foreground tend to blur and in their rapid dark passing you can imagine the herd. It took only four years and then they were gone to make way for beef, the bones sold for buttons, horns for trophies. Powerlust and greed, half the world's grain goes to cattle feed while we are forced the lie that we have to live high atop the food pyramid, growing addicted so a handful can profit.

Saturday December 15, 2001

We board at night in Minnesota cold, sleep badly, then a day of nothin' to do but stare out the window. My shoelaces are bright yellow, too long, untied, and trail behind me. A little girl follows me from car to car, stepping on them, giggling each time she manages to stop me. I ask her, "How would you like it if I stepped on your face?" Gee whiz, that is not a very nice thing to say. When did I become such a mean old man? I have the rest of the continent to ponder that question and a propped pillow for napping when I can't find the answer.

Thursday December 19, 2002

The train stops for a smoke break in Whitefish, Montana. A few rogue snowflakes flutter and fall as we stretch our legs on the platform. I see James, who I first met in October '98 on this same train when I moved out west. Yesterday, we were surprised to see him and wife Nan in King Street Station; their couchette is just one down from ours. We eat breakfast with a 41-year Oregon fishing veteran; his dad had done 50.

Back in our room, we draw the curtain and get naked, just one of the many advantages of traveling this way. Mountains, plains; horses run from the sound of the train. A cattle skeleton lies where it fell — why move it? It could be Africa because I'm reading Hemingway. I imagine myself living out here, renting out colorful heavy equipment all day, then hitting the bar. One could probably go good and crazy without much interference.

Friday December 19, 2003

There are no words out here in the Montana flatlands so we peck some out on the Smith-Corona "super silent" portable manual typewriter I brought. The slapping of keys goes with the turning of wheels — how many more times will that combination be heard in the 21st century? Poem after poem, Sarah and I take turns until there are 40.

And when we're bored of that we read, trading books when they're completed. I start with *All Men Are Mortal* while Sarah burns through *The Bell Jar*. The first is about a man who cannot die and thus whose every action feels empty. The other is about a young woman who goes crazy and tries to end it all. Suicide and immortality, the train rolls on.

Monday October 4, 2004

Nothing beats the feeling of settling into a train seat for a cross-country ride. The journey is longer but there's very little waiting in line and unlike air travel since 9/11 there's no invasive security check and they let you hold onto your knife. There's nothing between me and my destination — Charleston, South Carolina — but an autumn continent and time. The train is a bubble of tranquility and calm. The sun burns bright and low over Puget Sound as we slip out. Coach class is half empty and aside from couples everyone has two seats to themselves, good for spreading out or curling up for a nap. It's quiet and dark but for reading lights and the pages they illuminate like wings in the night. Like a library on a rainy day, we're neither here nor there, with nowhere to go but the next page.

Tuesday October 5, 2004

The retired divorced sports fan talks up anyone who'll sit still long enough to listen. I'm not listening, I'm eavesdropping — there's a difference. The people he traps into listening are victims; I'm just an earwitness. The elderly couple he's caught this time are patient but look around, as if seeking an escape route from the lounge car.

The husband of the couple says he used to show up for work an hour early so he could have time to enjoy his coffee. The bore says for some reason he never liked getting out of bed. That much of what he says makes sense.

Thursday October 7, 2004

After a good night's sleep on the redeye from Chicago to NYC, I had a couple of hours at Penn Station in midtown Manhattan before switching to southbound Silver Meteor. Minutes before departure, watching the board for my gate, a dude approaches

and says, "Nice shirt." It's a red "One Less Car" Transportation Alternatives tee (a gift from Sarah, who used to volunteer there when she lived in NYC). "Do you know the organization?" I ask. "I'm the executive director!" He gives me a bunch of postcards to promote a carfree Central Park event.

Saturday December 17, 2005

I've never woken up in outer space. I sure would like to. Until that day, I'll settle for sunrise views from the train.

Monday December 19, 2005

Because the train was about five hours late, we missed our connection to Pittsburgh and had to stay overnight in Chicago. Amtrak was accommodating. They gave us \$30 each for food and put us up in the Hyatt Rosemont, a 30-minute drive northwest of Union Station. They chartered a bus with Church of God of Christ written in gold letters on the side and we joked that we were being taken to a Christian re-education camp.

Train riders are a special breed. Maybe just sheep. Despite being given a day-long delay, everyone just laughed when the hotel turned us away. You see, there are *two* Hyatts in Rosemont and our driver had taken us to the wrong one. We resumed our seats on the bus and he took us to the correct one just a mile away. The next day, the bus to take us back to the station was late. Luckily, Tex from North Dakota took the initiative and asked the front desk to call over to the *other* Hyatt. Sure enough, the bus (with a different driver) was waiting there.

Thursday December 29, 2005

I hadn't seen snow in two years. It was pleasingly sticky and Sarah and I threw snowballs on the platform while we waited for the "all aboard!" Boarding a train is the best feeling.

Monday October 30, 2006

From South Carolina to Minneapolis we got to see Autumn spread out in all her glory, from the green leaves, conifers, and palm trees of southeast Atlantic coast up through the mountains and river valleys to the north, resplendent with orange and gold, the midwest... (days pass) ... Crossing from St. Paul, Minnesota across the Cascades we drop down into sunshine, snowcapped peaks and rising mist among evergreens and deciduous trees; green, gold, water, snow, naked rock, trailer parks. It was cold and sunny at the end of the line...

We hugged and kissed. 🐻