Vanishing Point

I have never been on a train. Or rather, I've never been on a train that was moving. I've traveled the high roads and back roads in a car, been on planes and boats and rafts; practically live on a bike, but I have never traveled anywhere by train. It was strange therefore, that about when I turned seventeen my life revolved around trains.

I grew up in Tucson, which is a city in a mountain valley of Southern Arizona. Saguaro forests dot the rolling rock landscape, which breaks into high canyons or spreads into wide bare desert. Javelinas and coyotes wander into front yards, and kids eat the fruit right off the barrel cactus. The sky is an enormous blue, onto which spills brilliant shades of sunset and sunrise. In summer the city and the landscape burn.

That said, Tucson is a large metropolitan area with a population somewhere between half a million and nine-hundred thousand. It's an urban environment encroaching and being encroached upon by the desert; a combination of Mexican, American, and Southwest tradition. There is gang violence throughout the city, though concentrated in South Tucson. The Foothills house the richer, more affluent estates. The University of Arizona is smack dab in the center; the area I grew up in.

The train tracks run along the highway to Phoenix (two hours North), through downtown, into the warehouse district, and beyond. Trains run on them several times a day, announcing their travel with a horn that can be heard for miles; for me, always a natural and familiar sound.

When I was seventeen, I was eating up daylight. I was dedicated completely to my Cross Country and Track team, running competitive times and pushing myself physically and mentally every day. I was (and am still) consumed by an overwhelming love for my teammates and for running. Practice was at six in the morning before school, and I was in a perpetual state of bliss, moving as the sun rose.

I had intense yoga practice four times a week, and rode my bike at least three times a day. I was an AP Student for Calculus, English, History, and Studio Art. I spent a great deal of time helping out my father, who is quadriplegic. For him, I cleaned, fixed, fed, and was (am, rather) an emotional anchor.

Around this same time, I became close to a small group of friends who knew my most intimate person. There are no human beings I respect and admire more. To them, I dedicated my nights.

At seventeen I never stopped. I felt like the desert and the sun, like the city streets and all the strength that existed in a body. I practically ate my mother out of the house. I left the dirt under my fingernails. And, I listened with rapture to the sounds of the trains coming through town.

As familiar as the train horn was, it represented not a calming childhood noise, but the grand arrival of its cargo. In the midst of high school, I was affectionately involved with a group of kids who, unlike me, slid on and off trains like cats on a fence.

Let's start with when I was fifteen; the year I started running. I drank for the first time at my older brother's after-prom party. It was probably the mellowest party in the city that night. The biggest event was that a girl two years older than me, who I had gone to middle school with, saw me there and was surprised. The conversation went: "What are you doing here!" "I live here, Liz."

Liz saw me as a sweet innocent girl who she could mother; she had recently run away from home in an immature, melodramatic fit, and was renting out a trashy house with a few other

kids. She invited me to come over any time I liked. A few months later, I took her up on the offer. Promising my mother I'd be safe, I rode my bike into the warm night to The Yellow House.

The Yellow House was not a pleasant place. It was filthy, and usually crowded with grungy teenagers who either didn't have anywhere else to be, or wanted to seem like they didn't have anywhere else to be. It perpetually stunk of weed, and there was drinking all the time. That first night, I stood nervously against a wall until I was drunk enough to smile freely at some stranger playing a guitar. I ended up passing out on the couch with Liz cooing over me. I woke up at five in the morning as I was accustomed, crept over the bodies of passed out kids, and rode my bike away into the pre-morning.

I didn't go to The Yellow House for three months after that; and another three after that. This became my steady pattern. At fifteen, I had not yet figured out how to spend my limitless energy, and would eventually be consumed by a wild desire to move, to take my bike and go. When the weekend hit, I would anxiously lay in my room, stretching and ruminating. When I drank, it was as much for the bike ride to get there as it was to experience a thoughtless night.

When I was sixteen, Liz dropped out of existence. The Yellow House disbanded. I discovered later that she, along with a few other kids, had hopped on a train and left town. I didn't see her again for a year and a half. In that time, I struggled with the self-awareness and discovery that teenagers generally go through. I began to run seriously. I took AP classes. I hung around 4th Avenue, which is the hip strip of local shops just before the underpass to downtown. It was where all the teenagers went after school to pretend they were cultured and cool. I love 4th Avenue; the buildings there are old, all the local festivals get held there, and it is the squat-spot for crusty kids and the homeless.

"Crusty kids" are those ratty young people who walk around with dreads and backpacks, with happy dogs and the smell of alcohol and sweat. I became strangely familiar with crusty kids, more so perhaps than I had right to considering the overall stability of my situation. The family lives of crusties are usually dangerous and sad. Sometimes, they have issues, mental, emotional, or both. Sometimes, they're just bored. Generally though, these are the youth who have seen the underside of the world, and reject the structure and convention that most people follow. It's a rejection of responsibility, but it's made by those who can see that they will never be able to fit into mainstream society while retaining their sense of self and sanity. They pierce, they gauge, they scratch tattoos, and they do odd jobs so that they and their strays can get by. Their mode of travel is by train; this is how Liz disappeared. They pass illegally hidden in compartments or between cars, moving as they please or to where their means allow them.

It was through a series of coincidences that I met my particular crowd. Being of a quiet nature, I suppose, did not hurt in slipping unnoticed into the lives of those always watching the train tracks disappear at the vanishing point. At sixteen, I retained only loose connections with the group of dissatisfied teens from the Yellow House, and mostly I let them fade from my life. Through them, however, I met Marie and Jenna. I had had art classes with Marie since I was fourteen, and admired her greatly for her skills as a drawer and painter. She was leagues above me. Jenna had been at that first after-prom party, and had a reputation for being crazy; she did a lot of drugs and was wild beyond reproach. I ended up spending a lot of time with Jenna. She's a smart, compassionate person. And she is absolutely crazy (never again do I hope to be in a car where the driver announces suddenly that she has just taken acid).

It was never possible for me to engage in the crusty lifestyle. I kept my grades, had to take care of my dad, and quite frankly have a loving mother and support system. But, I had the

energy. I had the wild drive. I expressed it through athletics, yoga, biking, and furious writing. At sixteen, I was a lonely teenager trying to discover what it was that separated me from my peers, and in that process I became so drunk on my own poetics and pondering that there was no need for any other intoxication.

When I turned seventeen, Liz arrived back in town. I had just made friends with a girl named Natalie. Natalie moved to Tucson from Nogales, Arizona, which sits just ten miles or so from the border with Mexico. We hung out for the first time at the annual Book Fair on the University mall, which was the day after our AP Exams. She understood, I think, the way I look at the world. In her I found someone unfathomably intelligent and brave. Sometimes, you just meet people with whom you connect. Our senior schedule matched up, and we ended up spending literally weeks together without realizing it. Another friend of mine, Anita, whom I had known for longer but never really talked to, ended up in our company. She expressed a kind of artistic mindset that I could only see the pattern of and not really follow. She is, I think, a genius. The three of us were, if I may use the term, the best of friends.

Natalie was at the time dating a boy who had connections to soon-to-be crusty punks. As well, she was bolder than me in becoming friends with Marie, the artist I had long admired from afar. Because of these two connections, I suddenly found myself at Liz's new doorstep, which was a house near 4th Avenue. It was a new group of smokers and drinkers inside.

Liz had traveled all over the country, and hated it. She'd been hungry, cold, dirty, and hurt. But, she had met an incredible group of kids that eventually followed her back to Tucson. These were not angst-ridden high-school sophomores looking for an edgy hangout. These were young adults, wearied and sad, used to a life on the open American landscape. Nomadism is both freedom and the burden of the road.

In the Crusty House, people came and went, staying only so long as they could stand before catching the next train. The core members of the household fought constantly about money and politics, having open, angry discussions on sexism, racism, capitalism, and propaganda. Though these conversations were mostly naive and circular, it was one of the first places I encountered such free vocal expression. Particularly in public schooling, students are encouraged not to care unless a test is involved. I was lucky enough to have excellent, open-minded teachers, but I still felt the apathy of the system. As Natalie, Anita, and I were coming into our own as independent persons in our last years of high school, we practically lived in the Crust House environment. We drank with them into the night, walked the dogs in the morning, and busked on the streets for money. As my life exploded into a constant stream of movement and obligation, I'd listen for the trains to come by. Inevitably, I ended many days lounging on the communal couch, listening to someone play music and watching my friends dance without care or shame. Those who really lived there, the young men and women struggling to make ends meet, often walked to the train platform to stare longingly at the machines rushing past. William, one of the boys who disappeared quite frequently, told me once that he watches the cars, and if he can count every single one that goes by, it's slow enough for him to catch.

The striking thing about the crusty kids that I knew was that they just wanted to live freely. They didn't want to have to face the destructive nature of themselves or their families; they just wanted to run and run, experiencing life for what it was worth before they died. None of them expected to live long. In this way, they are the best people I have ever met. They don't care for labels, for stereotypes, for archetypal expectations; they ignore conventional gender and image rules, and they reject any structure that might limit their experience of the world and themselves. In other words, they do not judge and do not want to be judged. As Diane (one of

the ladies) once said to me, "I don't want to jump through the loops. I don't care if I'm screwing over some vague future self; I'm not going to keep jumping loops and waiting for society to tell me 'that's it! You did it! You succeeded in life!' 'Cuz that's not what it's about at all. I want to be alive." The summer after I graduated high school, Diane took her bike and left. That same summer, Marie deferred her art school scholarship for a year and hopped a train.

As I said, I have never been on a moving train. Once, a crusty punk showed Natalie and me how to nick supplies from a caboose cabin on a still one. We climbed up the metal side ladder and slid over to a door in the end car. It was unlocked (he said they usually are). Inside was a traveler's dream: medical supplies, changes of clothes, water bottles, and blankets. For a long time, we explored the inner compartments of the train car, careful not to displace anything. When we heard muffled voices, we slipped out, shut the door, and hid in the shadows of a mesquite tree until we felt safe enough to walk away.

The year I was eighteen, my life was in turmoil. The stress of graduating and going to college had disrupted my delicately balanced schedule. I entered and left a relationship with just enough time in between to fall in love and be ripped apart afterward. I struggled through the last months of senior year. Anita became depressed, and would deviate between desperation for company and total rejection of friendship. Natalie began sleeping and drinking at the Crusty House throughout the week, coming to class in disarray. I listened to train horns anxiously wondering whether she would soon disappear on one.

One night, Natalie and I went over to the Crusty House later than usual. The crowd was sitting on couches on the porch, smoking cigarettes and talking quietly. Lee was on a beer run, they said. By beer, they actually meant rum, vodka, box wine, and Four Lokos. Four Lokos are dangerous drinks, they taste like watermelon candy, but are a high percent alcohol. For the crusty kids, it was maybe three shots of vodka. They'd share the whole box wine. But one Four Loko, and that was it for the night. Natalie and I each drank one. The night spun, the conversation became unintelligible; I sank into a couch corner and let a dog nap on my stomach. At some point, someone suggested we go to the train platform to watch the trains pass by. I have no idea how I walked to the platform; Natalie and I steadied each other. We lay on the cold concrete until we felt the ground tremble. A horn sounded, and there was the train rushing past us in the night. We were all drunk, and I was without fear or reason. We clambered down to the tracks, the blackness disguising the true size of the beast ‘til we were nose to nose with it. I stood with my face perhaps two inches from the train, watching and feeling the roar of it. I spread out my arms, and held my fingers as close as possible without having them ripped apart. The others were shouting, delighting in their own profanity. I was reverent. Natalie grabbed my hand and led me back to the platform, where Liz was waiting with one of the dogs on a leash. We volunteered to walk it back to the house, and in some miraculous trip that neither of us remember, managed to get both ourselves and the dog back to the Crusty House before we passed out inside.

That summer before my freshman year of college, I had to let that lifestyle go. I biked and pulled odd jobs to scrape together a living fund for school. I centered myself and spent as much time as possible with my family. In July, I house-sat a family friend's place for three weeks taking care of her deaf cat and watering the plants. Natalie came to live with me, and we spent those days suspended in the summer heat, a limbo period of our lives as we waited for our plane rides to the Northwest. She was going to a private school in Portland. I, of course, was bound for Pullman, Washington.

We slept in late one morning, and awoke to the sound of the cat demanding to be let out.

He couldn't hear his own mewling, so would always shout as loud as he could to be heard. I let him out, gave the plants their morning water, and picked a few of the eggplants that had finally ripened. Natalie was coming down the stairs. A train horn blew, and we both stopped mid-step to let the sound pass. Neither of us said anything. It's strange to be aware of the young nomads of America, who are traveling from the Southwest to the Northwest to the Northeast, illegally tucked onto the back of trains. A train goes by, and I wonder about its secret cargo; who it's dropping off into town, who it's taking with it.

Natalie asked me, "Does Pullman have train tracks?" I said yes, though they're dilapidated and I didn't know if they were in use. "That's dumb," she said, though she really meant, *good*. Because the trains and the train tracks are not just a historical narrative for the United States; they're a historical narrative for our personal lives, for my life, and for my loved ones.

A few weeks later, I said my goodbyes to the city and boarded a plane to Spokane. I landed in a green place of pine trees and running water, of rolling golden hills straight out of a children's book. I became accustomed to living a new sort of life, in which I existed by myself and not for my family, not for my dear friends, and not for teammates. That is, of course, I started my first year of college at Washington State University.

One night in October, I walked by myself down to the train tracks. Pullman is a lovely, tiny, seemingly empty town. There were no cars out this night; no walkers or smokers, no young wild kids. I walked along the tracks for a long time, balancing on the rails and hopping like a child over holes in the boardwalk. I sat on one of the bridges over the stream that runs through town. I marvel still, months later, at the novelty of running water. I kicked my legs on the bridge and watched the black shapes, feeling the structure of nails and metal beneath my hands.

Everyone I used to know is strewn out like beads somewhere out in this country. My heart, planted solidly within my body, roars like a train horn and rushes out to meet them.