

UNFINISHED BLUE LINE

MEMO 2006

I do some of my best writing on the train. If I know it's going to be a long trip, like to and from my mother's house in Berwyn, I make sure to bring my black composition book. There's the people, the scenery passing by, even underground, something about the rhythm of the train that helps me get into a writing groove and forget about my own troubles.

That day I was heading home, if you can call it that, to the stained mattress on the floor of Gato's studio for which he expected to get something from me in exchange. When it was not convenient for him or I was broke, I'd wind up sleeping in Humboldt Park. I spent most of my time outside that summer. That's why my clothes would get so bleached out, not from Mama's washing machine that I used when I went to see her maybe every six weeks.

The writing doesn't come quick on the train. There are a lot of scratches in that composition book, but there's also a lot of good poetry, too. I try to sit in the next to the last car, in the last seat before the conductor's area. From there I can scan the whole car, until

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it gets so crowded I can only reflect on the other passengers through their images reflected in the windows. On that day it wasn't until 18th Street that I caught my stride.

Riding on the train, riding on the Blue Line

That's a start, I thought.

I read the faces like others read the Times.

Not bad.

*Days of stress drawn in brows,
Nights of anticipation, fidgeting hands,
Drooped eyes, bobbing heads sleeping
Ears on edge listening for their stop
Crowded in seats, standing braced against poles,
Hanging from the bars,
Swayed, sometimes jolted, side to side.*

Among those getting on at Lawndale was an African American teenager replete with denim shorts probably six sizes too big for his thirty-two-inch waist. As he headed away from the door, his shorts fallen down to the round of his cheeks, his plaid boxers were exposed. Similar arcs fell higher up on his slim body, gold bling around his neck, plastic cord from his ears ringing with the tinny sound of his cheap MP3 player.

I contemplated a verse about him, but rather than writing anything on the spot, I let it ruminate and weave through memories of my own teenage years estranged from my parents, especially my father.

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At Polk Street Medical Center, a late fifties Polish woman, possibly from the housekeeping staff at Rush, got on and took the last seat in the car behind the teenager with the falling shorts. I wondered if she was from my first neighborhood near Pulaski Park or farther up Milwaukee Avenue in Avondale. See how I imagine things I couldn't possibly know.

*Polish cleaning woman,
hands tight around
shopping bag on her lap,
Whitening hair pulled back,
On her mind, her daughter,
Barely fifteen, soon to be a mother
By a Puerto Rican.
Why my granddaughter?
I told her to watch out for that boy.
I thought the Catholic School would help.
How will I manage?
She'll just leave the baby with me,
How will I care for her,
So tired, cooking, washing, scrubbing?*

I wanted to close my eyes so I could rest before the frenzy of the Loop. But as the train left UIC-Halsted, I noticed a middle-aged man and a teenager who had squeezed through the train's accordion doors. This wasn't father and son. The man's longing glances at the youth were all too familiar to me, as was the wary return gaze. I wondered if this were a return encounter or a first time. At least my first was with a schoolmate, not a teacher.

At LaSalle, an Indian woman in an orange and pink sari brushed past these two and grabbed the rail behind the second seat

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with her left hand. In her right hand she clutched a manila envelope to her chest. Had she been to the Immigration office at Clark and LaSalle, the one I went to with Gato to try to get him copies of his papers?

“Jackson, transfer to the Red Line” wakes me and my writing pen.

*Amid the stream
Of white collar dulled minds,
An artist boards.
Obtuse angles delineate
This forty-something male,
Still brown straight hair
Falls at a slant
From retreating hairline,
Angled eyebrows,
Long nose, Adam's apple,
Elbows pointing, tilting posture,
Hands that think.*

“Monroe, Madison.” No one's getting off.

*Madison Avenue, an ad man,
Pressed clean,
Pressed tightly to the window
By the too heavy
Carson's cosmetic girl.
Fumbling in her bag
Thinking I'm looking at her,
Looking down
To avoid staring eyes.
He's thinking he's so smart,*

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*Bold ideas
Holding up the structure
Of an empty life.*

“Randolph, Washington, Daley Center, transfer to the Red Line.”

*Three punks in Yankee caps
Coming from a courtroom,
Brims flat and askew,
Sox not good enough?
The hell with you.
In them, I know myself
Too well from twenty years ago,
Selling blow for gangs.
So cool standing by the doors,
Swaying larger than oversized jerseys,
Larger than the space should allot
Leaving less for clerks
Coyly avoiding a scene.*

“Clark and Lake, Thompson Center, Transfer for the Orange, Green, Brown, and Purple Lines.”

*A dusty hard hat,
Steel-toed boot type,
Lucky Strikes rolled
In chest tight T-shirt sleeve,
Black lock curled on forehead.
Like me on the docks,
Fork lifting pallets
He's thinking he's pretty bad,*

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Shooting looks

There's a babe across the aisle

Filing her nails, chomping gum

Wondering why

He's giving her time of day.

It wasn't until days later that I was able to read again these verses I wrote. They helped me remember the before, but not the during. It was not until I was in the tunnel, choking on smoke, my head pounding, eyes tearing, that I knew more than the hands that lifted me, guided me past caged bulbs and numbered signs. And the first thing I knew was that I didn't have my composition book.

I stopped and tried to turn around, but others kept coming.

"You can't stop."

The voice had a familiar sound. Was it the one who asked, "Are you all right? Can you stand up? Let me help you."

"I have to go back. My notebook, I don't have my notebook."

"You can't go back."

I heard yelling and coughing. "Hey, what's the idea? Keep it moving."

Again the hands of the familiar voice were on my arms. "We all left things on the train."

We were moving forward again, too many people behind us to do anything else.

"That book isn't just anything, it's my everything."

"Let's get out of here. Then we'll talk to someone about your notebook."

It was getting brighter. Stairs loomed ahead, leading up through a shaft of light. Outside, the bright sunlight blinded me and accented the pounding in my skull. My legs gave way.

A vaguely familiar face was close to mine. The words and voice

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I recognized, “Are you all right?” This was the first I could put a face to the voice. It had been so dark and smoky in the tunnel I could not see more than a silhouette of the person helping me. It was the man who I imagined to be an artist, the one with the long arms and angled features. But somehow he seemed more familiar than that.

I couldn’t respond to his simple question. He stood up. “Paramedic,” his voice boomed. “Paramedic. We need a paramedic here.” In a lower voice, “Give him room, give him room to breathe.”

I couldn’t see much. Someone was shading my head with a jacket. Someone else cushioned my head with a bag of some sort. Legs with dark blue pants came into view. At the top of the trousers was a holstered gun. I heard an electronically muted voice. When awhile later a plastic mask was lowered to my nose, all I could see was the light blue shirt above the mask as I experienced a new kind of rush from oxygen entering my lungs.

I must have passed out. When I awoke I was in a hospital. The first thing I saw was the face of the familiar voice. This time he didn’t ask, “Are you all right?” He just smiled.