

ALISON BRAID-FERNANDEZ

## FIELD NOTES

**IN THE FALL**, I took the train into the city to spend the weekend with my parents. I would often visit them through the winter months, riding the train every second or third weekend. I sat in a seat by the window, looking out at the landscape and drawing my fingers through my hair. I liked that for every trip there was a set duration—a period of time where every minute was my own. There was a pleasing sensation of starting anew.

I was under no pressure to return to the city. It was out of habit that I continued to do it, and later I did begin to feel that I was expected. My mothers sat up for me on those Friday nights; they shared the loveseat and passed the newspaper back and forth. Most train rides, I sat with my thoughts, watching as the landscape changed, the orchards giving way to rolling hills, then light-colored fields of wheat and hay before entering the outskirts of the city with its burgundy warehouses and boxy industrial buildings. This time, I brought a book on the train, a mystery novel I'd found discarded in the pickers' cabin. It was a thick trade paperback with very small print and I found myself squinting to read. The story was engrossing; after nearly half the trip had passed, I looked up from the page to find my neck stiff and my vision momentarily blurred as the carriage came into focus.

As though she had been waiting for just this moment—the natural shift of my attention—a woman leaned across the aisle to speak to me. She wanted to know what the book was about and how I'd come by it, whether I went to the library or not. She was hoping it was from the library because the library was for the people; it was a tool to be used, she said, so that we might arm ourselves with knowledge. I didn't know how much I was taking from that particular mystery novel, but I thought I knew what she meant. I smiled, and told her it was indeed from the library. It was easier than telling her about my job managing the field crew on a cherry orchard, the ramshackle nature of the pickers' cabin, and the terrible state it was left in at the season's end, covered in clothing and books and—somewhat strangely—large blue or orange tarpaulins I took for myself and repurposed. Soon after, the woman went back to her own book, a translation of Dante's *Inferno*, and at one

point in the journey, was crying over a passage that she continued to read, over and over, without turning the page.

Other passengers were filling out puzzles, drinking secret wine and chatting, eating hard-boiled eggs, and taking calls. The clamour of the train became oppressive. Reading the book felt like wasting the time that belonged to me. I closed it and sat with my hands in my lap, watching the familiar landscape go by. I liked that it was there and then it wasn't. I would look again to be sure I'd seen what I thought I'd seen, and whatever it was would already be gone. It was easier to shape a narrative around those fleeting sights; I could pick and choose what to keep and what to discard when I thought back over my train ride.

While I was staring out the window, I spotted a man in the middle of a field. From the train, he looked like the tallest man alive, standing there in the low-cut hay. He wore white pants and a bright red shirt with a fringe. His arms were stretched out to the side, as if he was pretending to be a scarecrow. But he wasn't a scarecrow; his face had moved. I craned my neck. I thought he might wave or make some gesture to the train; he seemed so central to the land and the moment, but when I looked back, he was gone.

It was on that ride with the woman reading Dante's *Inferno* that the train put on its brakes, screeching to a halt, and we learned, much later, after sitting for a long time with no news, the train had hit a small child, a child who had run out onto the tracks following their dog. The dog had not been hit, and one or two of us thought we had seen it while we waited; a puppy with soft ears and a reddish coat who had torn up and down the length of the train outside, yelping and squealing until a fire-fighter had picked it up and taken it away. After hearing the news, the woman went quietly back to her *Inferno*. I looked at her with disgust, unable to see how she could return so easily to what she had been doing before receiving the news, although, as I stared at her, I began to realize that I also did not know what to do. I didn't know what to do with the news, or with my hands, which, I discovered with some surprise, were holding the book. Around us, there were people in tears, others looking stunned, and a few with their faces still pressed against the glass, commenting on what was happening outside.

It's a boy, said one man, shaking his head. When he turned from the window, a brilliant pink was spreading across his cheeks and nose like a rash.

How can you tell? asked another man, twisting a hat in his hands.

What does it matter, said a woman at the front of the carriage. She looked angrily at the two men and said it again, louder. What does it matter?

*Was* a boy, said the first man, very softly and without looking up, as if afraid of the woman's response.

As we sat there in the train, waiting for it to continue on, or waiting to be told a new train would be coming for us, a stillness came over the carriage, which had been so frenzied before. Everyone spoke quietly. They were making calls again, but the conversations were shorter and stilted.

My legs were tired from sitting and my feet itched terribly. I slipped off my shoes and rubbed the bottoms of my feet against the carpet. I couldn't phone my mothers with the news, there was no way I could form the sentences, not amongst all these people. And yet, the sky was growing dark outside the train, the sun was going down. My parents would be worried already, waiting for my knock at the door.

The Dante woman came to sit beside me and put a hand on my shoulder.

Is there someone waiting for you? she asked.

My mothers.

Can I have your phone?

I held it out to her. Eleanor and Helène.

The woman typed out a message and angled the phone for me to read it. I nodded blindly.

She handed back my phone and then pressed her own phone into my hand.

Susannah, she said. I wrote to Susannah, and noticed, though I was trying not to, that the woman had sent many messages to Susannah over a period of many days, to which Susannah had not responded.

We sat in silence until a slight woman in a dark uniform entered our carriage and told us, curtly, to disembark and board the train that had pulled up on our right-hand side. We shifted in our seats, turning to look out the windows, pitch black by now, and I felt a small sense of wonder that something so large had appeared next to us without anyone noticing. I put my shoes back on.

There it is, said one of the men from before. He pointed into the dark. There it is. I see it now.

We disembarked. The new train looked much like the old one. A long queue formed. The steps to board were tall, and people held on to the rails to draw themselves up. No heads turned in the direction of the

old train, where we knew the scene of the accident was still active. From the corner of my eye, lights flashed and I sensed an energy or bustle. There were people coming and going behind the yellow tape, which was strung haphazardly around the train.

When the new train finally pulled into the city station, there was Eleanor on the platform, her long copper-colored dress falling stiffly around her calves, and behind her, Helène looking up at the notice board to check the arrival time, and missing, as she did so, the arrival. I left the train quickly, forgetting to say goodbye to the woman with the book. We had not sat together for the final leg of the journey; it was as if our transaction had sullied any intimacy that might follow, or perhaps it had cemented all the intimacy there was to be between us. We had done each other a great service, but the thought of having to speak with her again seemed impossible.

My mothers were happy to see me. They kissed my cheeks and touched my yellow vest and tan cargo pants and said, *very chic*. Eleanor grabbed my suitcase and strode down the platform, the case bumping jauntily behind her. Helène plucked at my arm, circling her hand around my wrist.

You work too hard, she said, frowning. She pinched my cheek and ear.

Hurry! We left the stove on! Eleanor called to us over her shoulder. Her heels kicked her copper skirt up behind her. It looked like the rustling of leaves in wind. Helène wrapped an arm around my waist and swept me out of the station. The city was distant, aloof. Sirens wailed, the grates in the sidewalk hissed, and a man was yelling about the apocalypse. Seagulls circled above us, snatching wrappers up from the sidewalk to shake out for crumbs. We walked quickly; we all knew the way.

Inside, Helène finished chopping the onions, and Eleanor took a steaming roast out of the oven to check its temperature. They cooked together effortlessly, passing salt and spoons and bunches of radishes between them. I floated around the kitchen, more of a nuisance than anything. The table was already set with our same napkins and rings. I sat in the middle seat facing the wall, my mothers on either side. They had asked me about the accident when I first arrived, but only briefly—almost in passing, I thought. I had nothing more to say about it, and yet I felt we should be saying more. The notion plagued me through dinner and over dessert, I was furious and yet calm, my fork quiet against my

teeth, breaking apart a sour cream pie we ate in the living room with plates in our laps.

Eleanor cleared the plates and then the air in the room grew hot, close. I didn't want to be sitting here with my mothers who, I had just decided, never spoke to me of anything important.

I'll tell you a story, said Helène. She crossed her legs on the paisley armchair, underneath the reading lamp. The lamp was made of pink glass in the shape of flowers, and it gave her skin a feverish look.

Eleanor went to open the window. The latch was sticky. She jostled the mechanism back and forth until it relented. Night air swept in, sudden and cold. I felt out of place in the apartment, as I often did when I first arrived there. My body was stronger and more angular than it had ever been when I was growing up, and I had trouble making myself comfortable in the soft furniture.

Helène began. When I was only ten or eleven, my father told me about an outlaw. The outlaw would come to warn you of a death. It might be happening anywhere, but most often, the death was nearby; it was going to happen to someone close to you.

Helène brushed the hair from her face. The breeze was more insistent now, and the hair she tucked behind her ear came undone as soon as she'd moved her hand away. I watched the air moving through the rest of the apartment. It picked up the leaves of the hanging spider plants and shifted the yawning covers of the paperbacks stacked on every surface. Helène was looking at me, to see if I was listening, but I couldn't meet her eye. The story sounded familiar; I thought I'd heard it before, although I didn't know how it went. I was afraid of what she would say next.

The outlaw would be very tall. He was the tallest man alive, my father said.

I thought of the man in the field, the one I had seen from the train. I was as sure now as I had been then that his mouth had moved, that he had been alive, not a scarecrow or a figment of my imagination. Though I hadn't known it, I had been thinking of his shape in the field all evening, the sight of him rising up behind my eyelids.

What did he wear? I asked my mother, but she didn't know, her father hadn't said.

The story continued. I grew confused. Each time I blinked, a new tableau appeared in front of me, as if I was watching my mothers in a play. They were on the couch, talking, then Eleanor was switching off

the lamp. The last time, Helène was sitting up taller on the couch, holding Eleanor in her arms.

The child, said Eleanor, and she was crying, and Helène was kissing her hair. Finally, I realized I was falling asleep. I had fallen asleep on the couch. This often happened too, when I first arrived. I was overcome with tiredness.

My mothers must have carried me to bed, for I woke up the next morning in my own bedroom and remembered the story Helène was going to tell. It was not exactly a story, or rather, it was a story her father had made up and fashioned to suit his purpose. What he had wanted to tell Helène was that she had to look out for him, she had to look out for the signs of his coming demise. The sign, he said, would be an outlaw. The outlaw would appear to her, and then Helène would know her father was in trouble, and to go for help. The outlaw had never appeared and Helène had not saved her father, whose heart had stopped in the produce section of the grocery store, under glaring lights, choosing between two pieces of fruit, one clutched in each hand.

Before I went back to the country, Eleanor asked me to look at a presentation she was giving to a university class. The idea was to get the students excited about entomology. There was a video of me as a child, stepping carefully between the June beetles that crowded the pavement. We'd been visiting my grandmother. I'd picked potato bugs in the dusty garden, flicking their hard bodies into a white bucket. My grandmother had paid me a nickel for every bug; it had taken me a day and a half to understand the pay wasn't worth my time. I remembered my grandmother as a sharp woman. She'd worn starched, neatly pressed clothing and wouldn't so much hug me as hold me lightly to her chest.

It's good, I said, when the slideshow ended. Really good.

But?

I was thinking about the Dante woman, what she'd said about libraries and knowledge. What was important was not acquiring knowledge, but rather what one did with it afterwards. I wanted to say something about the oral tradition, about storytelling and the exchange of information; that she was part of that lineage and she'd made me a part of it too. I was thinking of the way word of the accident had passed around the train. The way the Dante woman had known what I'd needed. The thoughts wouldn't align.

I cracked my knuckles, and Eleanor sighed at the sound. She turned away, packing up her laptop, shaking her head as she did. I rolled my

eyes. It was often like this between us, the moments for connection too brief, each of us turning away at the wrong time.

Put a slide in about forensic entomology, I said, trying to make my voice light, even. You know that's what everyone's actually interested in.

**ON THE TRAIN** back to the country, I sat without moving. I was facing backwards because I wanted to see what we were leaving behind. The mystery novel remained unfinished; it sat atop a stack of books in my parents' apartment. It might have been the accident that had turned me off of it, but I thought there was something more. I knew how it would go, not that I knew who the killer was, but that the killer would be revealed—there was really only one way the book could end.

Next to me on the train sat a man with a tally counter. Up the number went, into the thousands. I tried to see what he was seeing, to understand what made him click the button. Clouds, I thought. Then people. Trees. Fence posts. Nothing fit. On and on, he went on looking out the window and clicking. I sat up straighter in my chair. I believed the man was clicking his tally counter in order to contain what he saw, to claim ownership. These things belonged to his imagination now; the clouds, people, trees, fence posts, even my blank face as it met his. I turned my mind to what I might own in my imagination if I let myself, and as I looked out the window again I looked out with different eyes, and found everything was lit up by the afternoon sun and seemed important, it was all part of the same story I hadn't yet claimed my place in.

When I looked at my phone, I had two missed calls from Helène. She'd left a voicemail. She wanted me to know she had meant the story of the outlaw to be comforting. She felt now that it hadn't been. *What I'm trying to say is, there is no sign. No knowing. No way of stopping what will come to pass.* I could hear Eleanor in the background, moving around the kitchen. Soft glug of the sink draining. Slipped feet shuffling to the fridge and back. It did me good to picture them together in the apartment like that. The midafternoon sun would be filtering in, warming the tiles and lifting the sweet lemony smell of detergent into the air.

Behind us, a surgeon was describing his most recent surgical conquests in a booming voice. An eleven-year-old boy had come in after swallowing four magnets. They'd waited to see if the magnets would pass, but in his small intestine, the magnets had separated. The attraction was so great they'd caused his small intestine to fold in on itself. In

trying to reach each other, the magnets had almost worn through the lining of his intestine. The incision was small, said the surgeon, and I imagined him showing his seatmate an inch or two with his fingers. Through that incision, they'd brought out the entire length of the boy's intestines. They'd sorted through all of it, making another incision when they found the magnets. At one point, the small intestine had been piled on top of the boy's abdomen, undulating, the peristalsis still happening, even as it sat outside of the body.

Velvety, isn't it? asked the surgeon's seatmate. I made a face and the man next to me caught me making it. He clicked his tally counter.

I piped up. I couldn't help myself. I was tired of being a passive listener.

Was he alright? Was the boy okay? I asked.

There was a pause.

Hello? Surgeon? I said.

The surgeon swiveled in his seat so we could spy each other, eyeball to eyeball, through the gap in the seat cushions.

Sure! Oh, fine, just fine! he said, cheerily. Weren't you listening? It was only a small incision! He held his fingers up above the seatback. It was an inch long, as I'd imagined.

My enjoyment of eavesdropping left me. The rest of the ride, I sat with my chin in my hands, trying to close my ears to the conversations in the carriage, and looking out the window as the scenery rushed by. Instead, I saw something on the inside of the glass. On the window were two spiders. The larger spider occupied the middle; it stayed there, motionless. A small jumping spider moved hesitantly towards it and then away again. At first, I thought the small spider hadn't noticed the larger one, or that it had, but had not yet identified it as a spider. I was waiting for the larger spider to pounce, to make its move. But the small spider was too clever. It sensed something was amiss, and retreated to safety.