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WHILE RIDING ON A TRAIN.

READ SEVEN SHORT STORIES BY

Etienne Barilier

Peter Bichsel

Anne Cuneo

Anna Felder

Ulrich Knellwolf

Milena Moser

Peter Weber

Etienne Barilier

The Gothard and the Pyramids

Etienne Barilier
Peter Borsari
Kurt Curoc
Arne Feiler
Ulrich Kowoll
Mona Moser
Peter Weber

are antithetical, that we have nothing in common with the ancient Egyptians but the countless tons of rock that have been shifted. I believe, on the contrary, that we have everything in common with them.

Yes, the Egyptians endeavoured to halt time, whereas we strive to speed it up. While they adored Amon, we prefer Mammon. But these are trifling quibbles. By the sheer scale, the lunacy even, of their enterprises, the Egyptians transcended their gods entirely; just as we, in turn, transcend ours. Enterprises of such pharaonic magnitude – ancient or modern, commemorative or functional – engender an autonomous power that disdains the intentions of their inceptors. The immensity of them, their monumentality, gives rise to a unique mystery: that of human potential. Pharaonic works do not simply occupy space; they reveal and possess it. They provide us with a vertiginous sense of space which is more than merely physical. In the tallness of skyscrapers like the Twin Towers – as in the myth of Babel – we cannot help but discern the desire to reach the sky, to stand upright. And when such towers fall, they bring down with them much more than a symbol of American capitalism.

The tallest tower in the world is in fact the 1,000-metre chimney that, from Sedrun, plunges to the central gallery of the Gotthard tunnel. The tallest tower in the world enabling work on the longest tunnel in the world. How could enterprises on a scale to rival nature itself not exert a fascination every bit as great as that of the deepest ravines and the most soaring peaks? No, indeed their fascination is the greater. Doubtless, the Alps are sublime. But something which, though in the midst of nature and as vast as nature, is yet the fruit of human hands, is that not the more sublime? We are that which exceeds us: this is the very core of the mystery of the human.

Soon, a few minutes will be enough to cross the fifty-seven kilometres of the Gotthard base tunnel by train. Should I personally ever be afforded the experience of that journey, I shall not be taking advantage of the absence of scenery to do some reading or, thanks to my laptop computer, to surf the net – a virtual tube embedded in a real one. Nor, during the twenty or so minutes of my gestation in the womb of mother earth, in the secret belly of Switzerland, shall I be thinking of the time I have saved. I shall be thinking of the Great Pyramid of Cheops and of the Great Wall of China, which is visible from the moon. Perhaps I shall remember the Tower of Babel; I shall certainly recall those of Manhattan. And in the calm of my railway carriage, I shall have the sense of sharing in the human adventure and of gaining something – neither time perhaps, nor eternity – but something at least as valuable.

✚

END

Peter Bichsel

Travelling with my Publisher's Reader Klaus Roehler

The first time I met Klaus Roehler was in 1987, when he was a young man, full of energy and ideas, and I was a young man, full of energy and ideas. We met in a small town in the south of Germany, and he was the publisher of a small magazine. I was the editor of a small magazine. We talked for hours, and he was very interested in what I had to say. He was very interested in what I had to say.

I explained to him that I had decided to move to London with the Frankfurt School, and he was very interested in what I had to say. He was very interested in what I had to say. He was very interested in what I had to say. He was very interested in what I had to say.

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«The disadvantage of travelling with the Transsiberian Railway is that in the end you gradually start talking to all the passengers», Otto F. Walter, the author and publisher, told me in the autumn of 1963, «but if you really do want to meet Klaus Roehler, you'll have no choice but to accept this disadvantage – along with others that aren't so important».

I explained to him that I had absolutely no intention of travelling with the Transsiberian, and that he was misinterpreting my great love of the stories about Triboll if he thought they made me feel such an urgent need to get to know their author, too.

He – Roehler, that is – would get on at the second station, which meant sometime during the first night of the trip, Walter said, but nevertheless he suggested that I might as well already board the train in Moscow. «Roehler is extremely stubborn and persistent in his ways», Walter said. «For example, he will on principle only get on trains at the second station, but you mustn't let on that you have found out about his habits – or he is capable of changing them on the spot. Don't let him notice that you are making the trip specially to meet him. And on no account let him take off his shoes in the dining car. He's unpredictable without his shoes. He will take off his shoes. You won't be able to prevent it. He will smile like someone who has just rid himself of the constriction of his shoes. He will stand up calmly. He will say a sentence in Russian and you will only understand one word of it: the word «porcelain». After that, the dining car won't look so tidy anymore and you will assume that he was talking about the bull in the china shop. So it is better if you note down the translation of the sentence right away. He will have said: «I was a porcelain manufacturer.»

«But I won't be travelling with the Transsiberian», I said. Otto F. continued: «The language won't have been Russian at all, but Thuringian, and in Thuringia everybody knows what that sentence means: for if we associate the image of a thin, delicate and fragile material with porcelain, then we are forgetting that porcelain manufacturers are incredibly strong fellows who have to carry whole stacks of heavy plates to the ovens on pallets.»

Of course I cancelled the trip, or rather, I had never had the intention of going in the first place. «That's entirely up to you», Otto F. said. «But no one can avoid meeting Roehler. Wherever you go, he will inevitably board your train at the second station, and, you will see, you will get used to it.»

Since then I have always been travelling with Roehler. If I take the slow train from Solothurn to Zurich, he already gets on at Deitingen. If I travel by fast train, he only gets on at Olten. If I want to have a quiet day I choose a train without a dining car. These are the only choices I have, for it would be pointless to try to outwit him by any tricks. For example, I only travelled as far as Deitingen one day and got off there. But there was no Roehler waiting to board the train.

Ever since I have known Roehler I have never got around to doing any work any more. I have had to give up my job as a teacher, I have resigned my position as a member of the school committee for dental hygiene, and I can even barely find the time to meet my friend Otto F., who doesn't know anything about my travels with Roehler.

In the zoo at Den Haag I once observed a little chimpanzee pick a banana from the basket at feeding time, then sit on the outermost branch of the climbing tree trembling and holding the banana at arm's length without eating it. The other chimpanzees were munching away happily, and when everything else was gone, the largest one went up to the little one and took away the banana from its hand. The little chimpanzee gave a sigh of relief.

I experience the same kind of thing day after day when Roehler gets on the train at Deitingen, sits down opposite me and says: «Your notebook, please», holding his hand out to me in exactly the same friendly and natural way as the conductor when he wants to punch our tickets. I still cannot remember if I put up a fight the first time, but I think not. At least I am able to recall that Roehler only said the following sentence to me that first time: «Don't worry, I won't read anything, I'll just look at it.» Every time he hands me back my book with the remark: «You have written this; you are the author.»

Now and then he comes in, sits down and says: «Gone on writing?» That sounds almost friendly, and on such occasions I regret not having chosen a train with a dining car. And really only because of that friendly: «Gone on writing?» I have been getting up two hours earlier in the morning for more than twenty years to fill two more pages of my notebook before catching the train.

Incidentally, it is no use if I walk to Deitingen and take the train from there, either – for then Roehler gets on at Oensingen, sits down, and I hand him my notebook. Since I have been travelling with Roehler, I have never read anything in my notebook. I do not write anything in my notebook for myself, just for Roehler.

As I was running to the station last Friday, Otto F. waved to me from the other side of the street and shouted: «By the way, I forgot to tell you, Roehler steals blank lines and he will completely dry out your sentences.»

On board the train I took out my notebook and had a look at it again for the first time. Only two pages had writing on them, which was very cramped and small and without spaces. It wasn't my writing at all any more. When I brushed over it with my fingers in astonishment, the desiccated sentences fell onto the floor and turned to dust.

I didn't even notice that Roehler did not board the train at Deitingen. The conductor only came when we had nearly reached Niederbipp and said: «Our friend Roehler hasn't been travelling anymore lately. He is going to be sixty years old soon and he has settled down. He is working at a publishing house in Frankfurt. He gets the blank spaces sent to him there, that is more convenient for him.»

«You know Roehler?» I asked.

«Everybody knows him», he said, «you know, what happened with your notebook, that's your own business, that doesn't concern anybody but you yourself. But just think what he got up to

with our timetables. They're all in small print without a single blank space now.»

«Did you know that he was a porcelain manufacturer?» I asked, just to say something and to pretend that I did not mind travelling without Roehler.



END

Anne Cuneo

About Lausanne, Basle and other Railway Stations

Lausanne railway station is just a hundred yards from the house I lived in as a child. I was sung to sleep at night by the squealing of wheels, and the short whistles of the locomotives, by the voices coming over the loudspeakers which evoked in numerous languages places familiar or unknown. It was not uncommon for me, after falling asleep, to dream of distant cities: Munich, Vienna, Venice, Zagreb, Belgrade, Valencia, Madrid, Paris, Dieppe or London, Cologne or Frankfurt. During the daytime, I would sometimes go down to the station to study the timetables, or linger on the platforms, or gaze at tardy sleeping carriages. One day, I used to think, I too would leave for one of those fabulous cities hidden at the far end of the railway line – cities in which everything remained to be discovered. The station was the place where dreams of the future came together. Still today, I would exchange all the airplanes in the world for just one train. I have always had a particular affection for Lausanne, because it is a station open from east to west (or vice versa), and one can contemplate the horizon at both ends.

I have always preferred such open stations to those that finish in a cul-de-sac, even if such railheads have frequently served as a pretext for the construction of splendid edifices of steel and glass and cabled columns. Just think of the Gare de Lyon or the Gare du Nord in Paris, for example, with their incomparably harmonious Art Nouveau spaces. Or think of Paddington in London whose immense hall is criss-crossed by tens of thousands every day. Or think of Grand Central Station in New York. Think of all those great stations in which so many stories have been made and unmade. Geneva still retains something of its end-of-the-line ambiance, even if the trains have, for many years now, gone on as far as the airport, and even if its architecture has little that is exalting to recommend it. One still has the impression that the locomotive is leaning up against the end of the platform, catching its breath against the buffers.

There is nothing like that in a station like Lausanne. When a train comes to a halt, it is as though the locomotive is suspended beneath the canopy – hanging between arrival and departure, creating, more than ever, a sense of time. Trains arriving bring with them our past; those leaving travel by definition towards the future.

And stations, like life, are complicated affairs.

This is all the more apparent when, having travelled along the foot of the Jura Mountains, we find ourselves in – say – Basle. To be or not to be in a cul-de-sac – that is the first question. Here the trains arrive and then, sometimes on the same track, leave again in the same direction, turning their backs on whence they came. Not a cul-de-sac then? Nothing is as certain as it seems, for on other occasions, the traveller is displaced in a complex dance of manoeuvring, with continual comings and goings of carriages and locomotives, so that though one has the impression of moving forward, actually the direction has changed. There exists another station like that in the region: Delemont. At first sight, there's nothing of the cul-de-sac about Delemont; yet that is exactly what it is. At Basle, at least at Swiss Basle, things are not so clear-cut. For another particularity of the place is that it stands on the border. In fact there are two stations here placed back-to-back. In one, you are in Switzerland, in the other, France. If I had spent my childhood sleeping a hundred metres from that station, the trains would doubtless have whistled several different tunes because – butting up against the SBB (Swiss) station – there is the SNCF

(French) station, and that one is definitely a cul-de-sac in every possible way. In the great hall of the Swiss station, a signpost shows the way to «Basle SNCF» – the French station. It is at the end of the corridor, after the newspapers, the large shop and the restaurant that you cross an invisible line: the border.

And so it ends, or rather so begins the cul-de-sac.

The lights of the Swiss station have faded; you arrive in a rundown fiefdom of obsolescence. In the hall, a solitary poster proposes a «getaway pass» for eighty French francs – nobody has thought it necessary to adapt it for the advent of the Euro. That which was once the ticket counter of the SNCF, the French railways, is now the lost property office of the Swiss SBB.

One continues through a gateway over which an inscription announces «FRANCE» in white letters. Behind this, there is nothing, just faded colours and silence. Sometimes your passport is checked. The waiting room walls are magnificently panelled in dark wood. Even this late nineteenth century panelling, however, can do nothing to dispel the dejected air of the place. You want to go to the bar? There it is, but it has been closed for years. It would have been pleasant enough with its 1930's counter of the kind that has come back into fashion nowadays.

If you want to travel to Strasbourg or to Mulhouse, there is a ticket machine – up to date this, it takes Euros. It only accepts coins, however. It dispenses tickets for the region and for Paris. You will have to feed in one coin after another – a few dozen Euros for Strasbourg, about a hundred for Paris. And you had better hope that the machine does not jam just before you put in the last coin, because there is absolutely nobody here to help you. The French railway workers are resigned, «we've told them about it, but things get decided at Paris, not Basle.» Nobody can explain why Basle SNCF, international railhead station with its half-a-dozen platforms, has been left to decline like this.

All one can do is hope that Basle SNCF will not perish completely. For nothing is sadder than a railway station that dies, and, over the last few years, that particular sadness has been repeated all over the place. Large and, especially, small stations dry up and disappear. Perhaps, it is a problem of economic viability, but that does little for the comfort or pleasure of the traveller. Even when they do not disappear entirely, a station reduced to a few automatic ticket machines – without ticket counters or restaurant – is a body without a soul. For us aficionados, those little stations – replete with the life of the place in which they are rooted – are to the great ones what vegetables are to the meat in your plate: they bring out the flavour. If these small stations are lost, part of what is unexpected about travelling, and, as a result, part of the desire to travel for the sheer pleasure of it, will be lost with them.

Great or small, stations that remain alive with activity are meeting places where, between past and future, time is for an instant suspended and moments of unique significance can be savoured.

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END

of the book, which is a collection of essays, is to provide a comprehensive overview of the current state of research on the topic. The book is divided into two main sections: the first section deals with the theoretical aspects of the topic, and the second section deals with the practical aspects. The book is written in a clear and concise style, and it is a valuable resource for anyone interested in the topic.

Anna Felder

Amen in Olten

The book is a collection of essays, and it is a valuable resource for anyone interested in the topic. The book is divided into two main sections: the first section deals with the theoretical aspects of the topic, and the second section deals with the practical aspects. The book is written in a clear and concise style, and it is a valuable resource for anyone interested in the topic.

All one can do is hope that the book will be a success. The book is a collection of essays, and it is a valuable resource for anyone interested in the topic. The book is divided into two main sections: the first section deals with the theoretical aspects of the topic, and the second section deals with the practical aspects. The book is written in a clear and concise style, and it is a valuable resource for anyone interested in the topic.

The loudspeakers announce my arrival, and I arrive. They announce my departure and I depart. I am a train, a passenger train. One of many, efficient and punctual, in the third millennium.

For the benefit of the public I hurtle up and down the world's tracks, with a terrestrial consciousness, on official business; decrescendo and crescendo, brakes screeching, wheels rattling, people coming and going, getting on and off; then off I go, carrying at full speed, under different skies, a thousand destinies all joined to one – mine. For a stretch of line, for a portion of life recorded in hours, minutes and seconds, I represent my passengers' fate. I carry them, take charge of them. It is no small matter and they know it. You only need to look at the lady who has just got into coach 3. She has hardly sat down at the window, hardly taken off her coat, not even had time to study the literary masterpieces scribbled on the walls or to inhale the lingering smell of dope in the compartment than her thoughts focus on the last things that are now looming, definitive. She has no eyes for her nephew waving goodbye on the platform or for the Olten station clock. She is already formulating her thought as a prayer – may this last hour be good for her, for her and for everyone else.

You can tell she is praying from her fixed stare, impervious to the comfort I can offer; from her folded hands, her trembling lips. We in the train will do everything in our power to make sure that her suitcase stays straight against her legs, that her handbag and her umbrella do not tumble off her knees. Personally I would like to say amen to her, amen and off we go. And to all the women who are sorely tried by the journey and the inexorability of the journey, to all the women lost in the immensity of the train, I say my enormous amen. To them first and foremost – so homely, seated for the afterlife with their tickets at the ready.

In contrast the habitué – and there is one in every coach – clearly does not want to miss a single minute of presence, of the journey, of opportunity. He takes advantage of everything, occupying two seats, ideally on the upper deck, for himself and for his newspapers. He scans the entire carriage for other passengers' dailies and grabs them immediately they stand up. He keeps his eyes out for a seat opposite that he can occupy when the train changes direction after Lucerne. But first and foremost the habitué makes sure he has the ideal view from his observation point. No, I don't mean the pastures, woods, the reeds at Sempach, with the belfry in the background recalling Sunday – all this he takes for granted. No, he needs to be absolutely certain, so he

reserves a position which, when he peeps over the top and the side of his folded newspaper, commands a diagonal view, of the pretty young woman talking on the phone, staring at the fields, reading, daydreaming, caressing the mobile phone, putting on make-up, writing up her diary, chewing, counting the days, snipping stubbornly at the strands of her hair so that she almost seems cross-eyed. Bravo I say to this impatient man – you hold time in your power, in a few moments you will be arriving before me at your destination because you are going about it so expertly and then you simply shrug off the train as if you were slipping off your tie, bravo for delighting – at least in the space of your newspaper, between one printed page and another and in a faint light without a headline – delighting in Juliet's long free time (let us call her Juliet), in time that is as smooth as a lake, as hair twirled like silk, hair by hair, above enchanted eyes.

Obediently in the silken strands of hair all the yeses and all the noes she has ever said or ever heard in her life are reassembled. Some she cancels as if pressing the delete key on a computer, others she saves and re-arranges to the right or the left of her parting with a political instinct. She is about to tie them back with an elastic band but then she changes her mind, shrugs, leans forward suddenly, everything gets tousled up again before her eyes and she starts all over again, more cross-eyed than ever.

For you, Juliet, I would slow down, I would do the impossible, I would circle the lake to infinity. I would trip lightly together with the swans floating in pairs on the water counting the midges with their heads upright but without distracting Juliet from her private calculations. The minutes are thinking of doubling, being reflected on the surface: white faithfully replicating white, 2 faithfully replicating 2, not knowing which one is really going to die, the number or its reflection. It is no good, scarcely have I formulated the idea of an innocent digression than I hear my inevitable sworn enemy cursing me: a chubby individual who dresses young, sunglasses and reversed baseball cap, as if at the wheel of a custom-built sports car. He even bangs his keys down on the compartment table, keys and cigarettes. To let me know loud and clear that the train does not do it for him.

– «If I had taken the car, I would be in Fanta now», he tells me.

Dead on time passing through Scienza: no delays announced, the winter mild, no complaints. Except for him. The phoney young man protests, measures time negatively, thinking of where we have not reached, where we are not.

– «You are not even in Finta».

He takes off his cap, puts it back on, thrusts the keys back into his pocket, looks for snow where there is no snow to be seen.

– «It's so boring travelling by train.»

Those around him do not agree. Most are asleep, couples, families, telephone music. Two children laugh loudly with their mouths full.

– «I'll be there in half an hour.»

He looks at the time, adds, subtracts. His knee itches, first one, then the other.

Let him look instead at the skill and the dash with which I take the bends, leaning just enough to pull the carriages without slowing down, just enough to see the tunnels, points and station masters coming up, to give myself the all clear and to satisfy my passengers. Including him.

– «Fanta», he spits into the mobile phone.

– «Finta», I retort, going one better.

On the motorway, lines of motionless cars.

Finta, Finta station. The loudspeaker speaking through the strokes of the clock. It repeats the announcement in German, achieves a great success: an exuberant lady gets on, her arms weighed down with camellias almost in bud, with holly and calycanthus, transporting the sun. Nobody helps her, but the flowers smile in her hand, faithful to the garden. Unaware of discontent, mindful of hedgerows, they will have the chance to mature in their own time during the journey, to blossom in the train as if it were well into March, as if this was already Easter traffic, upsetting my timetable for the whole year as I hit top speed.

END

[Faint, illegible text, likely bleed-through from the reverse side of the page.]

The railways are my sphere of action – or my camouflage, you could say. My working instruments are a go-as-you-please first class railway ticket and a large, soft, light suitcase. At the beginning of an enterprise the suitcase is empty. In addition I require a raincoat, a hat, the day's newspaper and my mobile phone – nothing else.

At some place or other I board a train. It should be a rather large station and the train should be an only moderately occupied express. A further condition is that it should have a dining car or at least a buffet car. However, I do not board the train at the dining car, but at the first class carriage farthest away from it. Here I hang up my coat and place the hat and the suitcase onto the baggage rack. I do not sit down, but – plainly visible to anyone who might be observing me – pick up my briefcase and make my way to the dining car. On the way I keep a steady look-out. Female tourists are suitable. Not those rucksack-girls wearing far-too-tight jeans, but elegant ladies with brand-name suitcases and crocodile leather handbags. If I see such a person, I sit down opposite her. Now the important thing is to strike up a conversation with her within a reasonable time. There are various tricks to accomplish this. No one will expect me to go into details about that, since these tricks are my professional secret. If you do it the right way, you will almost always be successful. Many women travelling alone are only too glad to meet a pleasant person to talk to. On such a trip you will often hear the most intimate stories from complete strangers. However, right from the beginning it is my intention to lure the object of my choice into the dining car as soon as possible. For this and for what follows it is important that I have a fair knowledge of the timetable.

Let us for example assume that I take the fast train from Zurich Main Station to Geneva at 11:34. That train unfortunately doesn't have a dining car, but at least it does have a buffet car. I have to be sitting there with my new acquaintance by Berne at the latest. That is less difficult to accomplish than a non-specialist might think. We are already ordering and drinking something. Shortly before arriving at Fribourg I ask her to forgive me if I leave her alone for a moment while I make a short telephone call. When I stand up I draw the mobile phone from my pocket. I run back through all the carriages, pick up my new acquaintance's suitcase on the way, stuff it into my own one, put on the raincoat, turn up its collar, put on my hat and leave the train at Fribourg. According to the timetable it is 1:08 PM. At 1:09 the train continues on its way. And at 1:16 the next train leaves Fribourg for Zurich. I take it, but I get off at Berne and check in

my suitcase, which is slightly heavier now, as registered luggage. Of course not to Zurich, that might give me away, but for example to Basle, to St. Gallen or to Chur. There I am able to pick up my loyal suitcase on the following day at the latest and return home, and then I can begin with the evaluation of my haul. If you accost the proper kind of person, the contents of such suitcases can yield quite a lot. I don't live badly from it. Of course the jewellery is the most lucrative. It is amazing what things better-off ladies pack into their suitcases. Furs aren't bad, either. On the other hand, you won't very often find cash. However, once I found no less than 20,000 Euro in cash lying among the underwear and the stockings in the suitcase of an Italian countess whom I had travelled with from Chiasso to Zurich (of course I got off the train at Zug). It was a hard-covered suitcase and you would never have credited it with such contents. The lady didn't dare to take it along to the dining car for fear of it being too conspicuous.

I made my largest haul ever last week. Since then I have had a problem. The piece of luggage in question was a large expensive-looking trolley case belonging to a very elegant and extremely attractive lady wearing a lot of make-up, who was travelling on the train from Zurich to Geneva as I explained earlier. Especially that piece of luggage, but also its owner had already attracted my attention on the platform at Zurich. Everything went very smoothly. At Burgdorf we were already sitting in the buffet car, at Fribourg I excused myself in the manner described. There was only one snag about the whole thing, but I didn't think that was too terrible at the time: My suitcase was too small to contain the lady's trolley case. So I left my reliable travelling companion lying in its place and only took along my raincoat and my hat. I feared there might be a search operation if my travelling acquaintance discovered her loss too soon, so I checked in the trolley case right away at Fribourg as registered luggage to Basle. On the evening of the same day I already had it handed over to me without any difficulty shortly before closing time.

The difficulties only started at home when I opened the trolley case. I should have been immensely pleased by its contents. There was jewellery lying there wrapped up in pieces of cloth – I should say it was worth about half a million Swiss francs altogether. I knew at once where the stuff came from: It was loot from the raid on a jeweller's at Lucerne that had taken place the previous week. Not only had the shop been raided, but the owner had been kidnapped as well. Although his next of kin had paid a heavy ransom, he had not turned up yet. And he would never turn up again – the proof for that was lying before me. For apart from the pile of trinkets the trolley case contained a large plastic bag filled with clothes – blood-smearred clothes.

One can imagine just how horrified I was. I was just wondering how to get rid of the incriminating textiles in the least conspicuous way when the telephone rang. A man's voice that I didn't recognize said: «Have you got them?» I played the innocent. Without another word the other person rang off. Through half the night I waited for another call, trembling; there was none. I was already calming down when the telephone rang again at eight o'clock: «Good morning. This is Tiefenbrunnen Station. You asked to be informed when your suitcase had arrived. It is here now.» I had not phoned them and I was not expecting any luggage, either.

I check in my bags as registered luggage at Tiefenbrunnen Station when I am going on a holiday trip and not travelling on business. They are very helpful there and treat me almost as part of

the family. «I'm coming right away», I said, so as not to arouse any suspicion. I was full of foreboding when I left the house, and had a look in the letter box, just to make sure. There was an envelope there with a ticket inside: «Registered luggage, registered: Lausanne, destination: Zurich Tiefenbrunnen.»

It was my suitcase. When I opened it at home I nearly fell over backwards. Inside the suitcase there was a severed human hand, to which a note was attached, saying: «We hope you will offer a hand to a good cooperation with us.»

I still didn't know what to do when the telephone rang yet again. I lifted up the receiver hesitatingly. «Yes, this is Tiefenbrunnen Station again», the kindly official's voice said. «Yet another suitcase has come for you. If I didn't know you as a good customer of our's, that most certainly would give me the creeps!»

~

END

Your next connections... He spent more and more time aboard the trains. Whole days ran away from him on the railway lines. But the hours he spent aboard the trains were not wasted. They followed a higher principle; they were subject to the timetable. The hours made sense.

Shortly after Isabelle's death he had sold the car and had treated himself to an unlimited railway ticket. They had given him a senior citizen's ticket without asking. Why not? He had no job, no wife. However, people who are sitting in a train, this he realized quickly – people who are sitting in a train are not accountable to anyone for anything. On a train he was a man with a mission. A man with an aim.

During the last months he had learnt some new things: He now knew which connections could be caught without too much unnecessary running along platforms; he knew at which stations the buffet trolleys were newly stocked with goods and where they had the freshest coffee in the thermos flasks. He knew above all on which sections of the railway system the longest announcements were made on the loudspeakers. For the voice on the loudspeakers was what mattered most to him. It was the only voice he could be bothered to listen to.

Additionally, he had acquired the habit of travelling in the silence compartment.

This train continues to Aarau... The way she pronounced the name Aarau with a dark A, spoken from the far back of the throat! «Aarau» was a foreign word to her. Just like it had been to Isabelle, too. That voice from the loudspeakers had attracted his attention at once, because it sounded just like Isabelle. Like a young Isabelle. Without the sharp overtones her voice had acquired in the course of their married life, and also without the supercilious, almost detached polish of the later years and the misty slur that came from the bottle of kirsch. It was a quiet voice, very clear and decisive, but solicitous as well. I know exactly what you have to do, the voice said. On the other hand, it was generous enough to allow him to believe he was the one who made the decisions: to change or not to change...

This train...

Sometimes he could observe other fellow travellers letting their newspapers drop while they listened to the announcement concentratedly, dreamily, leaning their heads back into the upholstery and smiling. In the seat opposite him there was an older man, older than he was, a rightful bearer of a senior citizen's ticket. He was unpacking a sandwich – ham and cheese – unwrapping it from its greaseproof paper. It was rustling far louder than should be permitted in a silence compartment. It was rustling right in the middle of an announcement.

Zurich Airport, Oerlikon, Main Station.

The man had raised the sandwich half the way to his lips. It was hanging in mid-air. His mouth was open while he listened to the voice: «Next stop, Zurich Airport.» He took a bite, chewed. Looked up, looked over, smiled. «That voice», the stranger said.

Weren't you supposed to be silent in a silence compartment?

«It reminds me of my wife. Deceased wife.»

Did he expect an answer to that? Those frowning businessmen from across the corridor were already giving them looks.

«Elizabeth», the other man said.

Elizabeth?

«Marianne», came a voice from the other side of the corridor.

«Verena.»

«Helen!»

«Ruth.»

†~†

END

I ordered another coffee and a glass of water from a diminutive waiter in a white uniform. The sun had already begun to set and its rays were silver through the dull glass of the windows, they fanned out and were refracted as they entered the room. The faces of the passers-by blurred as they streamed on, pulled along by strings of light, while those waiting were plunged in half shadows, the great majority of them grouped around the big clock. The escalators disgorged a constant flow of new people into the silvery space, in time to a private, restless rhythm: now following more densely on each other's heels, now arriving separately. (...)

The light was now coming from behind the big clock. The white cube of time rises up above everyone surrounding it, high on its slender columns. We orient ourselves by the clock. There's a face with black indicators and a red second hand turned in each of the four directions. Underneath the cube there hangs a metal ball, barely the size of a head, from which in turn a little blue cube with a white dot and an arrow on each side is suspended from four rods, showing the way to the meeting point. The same is set in stone on the floor below. Beneath the clock there is calm, round about surges the maelstrom. The newcomers huddle in close to the clock. The longer one remains here, the more readily one is driven out to the edges. (...)

The first clock-towers were those the British used to impose world time on their colonies, and they were little copies of Big Ben. Time is money: this motto, emblazoned on every English clock, was taken literally by a certain young West Indian, who filled the case of the clock that stood on the central square of his country's capital with English pounds, thinking that he could thus gain time. Soon shells and floral wreaths began to be heaped up beneath clocks all over the South Sea islands. In order to unify the various temporal habits of His Majesty's peoples, the royal astronomer invented the Time Games, for which representatives of all the continents were invited to London, to a playing field laid out in Greenwich Park just below the observatory. An empty clock case was set upon stilts above the meridian line. This was where the various peoples were to deposit their tributes on the occasion of the opening ceremony. The royal family was also in attendance, taking in the spectacle from an appropriate distance on a raised platform above the park. The astronomer directed his telescope at the heap of tributes and gave a minute account of the treasures he saw magnified there and the amount of time that had thus been gained. He ensured that, with proper balance, a large drop of wax formed beneath the clock case, which he then referred to as the common drop of time. And now the clock was ready for milking.

The tallest of the players kept their sights trained on the growing bulge, awaiting the perfect moment: then they sprang in the air, plucked the ball from the casing, and began to run in their ranks through the park, passing the wax ball back and forth (both hands and feet were allowed). The aim of the whole mass exercise seemed to be to promote the maximum physical interaction of the greatest number of players, and thus to gradually diminish the size of the ball until it was no bigger than a marble, then to be laid back within the case amid solemn applause; and so the games were ended. The rules had been clearly established, and nevertheless they remained utterly mysterious to continental Europeans, for all their valiant attempts to understand them. This cultic process was in turn to give rise to the entire range of ball games.

The time sport is played once a year here in our station hall as well, which is divided into four sections for the occasion: Asia, Africa, America, Australia. The Europeans are both organisers and spectators, and they call the game folkball. Only the male railway employees are permitted to take part, emerging from the kitchens for the event. The restaurants are closed for the duration, and on the sidelines the players' wives sell specialities of their far-flung continents. Various groups take advantage of the warm-up period to make announcements of all kinds, and word has already got around that the most interesting part of the folkball match will take place between eleven and twelve: the scent of lemongrass and red spices wafts up, with a snatch of bass-heavy music, spokesong and glimpses of dancing figures in every corner. On the dot of noon the diminutive waiter climbs up his long ladder and unscrews the glass ball. The indicators on the mother clock stop, as do all the indicators on all the other clocks. Ball upon little ball descend from the casing, to be snatched up by the players and brought into play in a variety of ways: dribbled, sprinted, tossed, traded and blocked, shoes squeaking on the floor. The African and Afro-American players are noticeably dominant, and the youth who gather at the clock after work and at weekends with their cheap balls have long since been infected by their artistry. They dress like them, listen to the same music, move to the same rhythms. There are whole contingents of Asian kids from the inner city for whom the railway station is the only place they really feel at home. They have their own version of the time sport, which they play in their own sector with a multitude of little balls passed nimbly back and forth. The speed with which they serve the Europeans pressing for attention at their stands flows over into all the processes taking place in the hall.

Just in front of us, all the employees are forming a human pyramid. The diminutive waiter is collecting the remaining balls in a basket, climbing over thighs and arms, being lifted higher and higher until he is mounted on the topmost pair of shoulders: and now he is pouring the balls back into the casing. The second hand begins to sweep again, the games are over, the pyramid is dismantled, everyone goes back to work.

At all times, inconspicuous, elderly people stand among the columns, their features alert to the depths. They wear yellow badges bearing the words Railway mission. The mission is staffed by volunteers. Everyone knows that the station is a dark magnet, that the desperate will sooner or later find themselves at the station as they make their wild journey; that they will wind up here, beneath the clock, before they go to ground for good. This is what the ladies of the mission are here to guard against as they watch the zero point. Just recently a yellow garbage bin was erected

on the spot at chest height and topped with an ashtray, and below the clock the general ban on smoking has been lifted. As everyone knows, vanishing souls smoke a final cigarette before they evaporate. It is at this point that they can be addressed, carefully, in a whisper. They haven't spoken to anyone in a long time, or at most with themselves. The lady from the mission forms little islands of sense, attempts to connect with the people in a series of gentle sentences, to ensnare them in her whispers, to touch them with her hand, and she guides them into more protected zones where they are received by assistants. The ladies from the mission are supported and aided by the station staff as they dissolve into their mission. They require daily warm meals and coffee on the hour, brought to them by the assistants, who are themselves volunteers.

+~+

END

Etienne Barilier

Born in Payerne in 1947, he finished his classical studies in Lausanne with a doctorate in the arts, with a thesis on Camus. After that, he dedicated himself entirely to writing and translation. Painting, music and literature are at the centre of his work as essayist and novelist. His reflections on the role of the intellectual in French Switzerland are full of pertinence and also irony. He lives now in Pully.

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Peter Bichsel

Peter Bichsel was born in Lucerne in 1935, and grew up in Olten. After his education to become an elementary school teacher, he worked in this profession until 1968. From 1974 until 1981, Peter Bichsel was personal advisor of the then Federal Councillor Willy Ritschard. Between 1972 and 1989, he was working repeatedly at American Universities as «Writer in Residence» and guest lecturer. He lives in Bellach in the canton of Solothurn.

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Anne Cuneo

Of Italian origin, Anne Cuneo was born in Paris in 1936. After the death of her father, she grew up in various religious orphanages in Italy, then in Switzerland. She received her secondary school and university education in Lausanne, after which she taught literature and travelled widely in Europe. At first, she wrote autobiographical accounts, then documentary books and theatre plays. In 1989, she wrote her first novel, «Station Victoria». Anne Cuneo lives in Zurich.

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Anna Felder

Was born in 1937 in Lugano where she attended the gymnasium until obtaining the «Matura». Then she enrolled at the faculty of philosophy of the University of Zurich, where she studied the Romance languages. After a stay in Paris, she took her doctor's degree, again in Zurich, with a thesis on Montale. Now she lives and teaches in Aarau and has become a writer with wide recognition. Anna Felder's biggest success was her novel «La disdetta» (which even enthused Italo Calvino).

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Ulrich Knellwolf

Was born in 1942 and grew up in Zurich and Olten. After obtaining the «Matura» at the «Kantonsschule Solothurn», he studied evangelical theology in Basle, Bonn and Zurich, and was Pastor in Urnäsch, Zollikon and in Zurich at the church «zu Predigern». Since 1996, he has been working part-time at the foundation «Diakoniewerk Neumünster» in Zollikon, and, apart from that, as a free-lance writer.

His most recent works:

- Doktor Luther trifft Miss Highsmith, Geschichten. Nagel & Kimche 1998 (Fischer Taschenbuch 2000)
- Auftrag in Tartu, Roman. Nagel & Kimche 1999 (Fischer Taschenbuch 2002)
- Den Vögeln zum Frass, Roman. Nagel & Kimche 2001

Milena Moser

Milena Moser was born in 1963 in Zurich. After attending the «Diplommittelschule», she made an apprenticeship as bookseller, after which she wrote for Swiss radio stations. She was founder and publisher of «Sans Blague – Magazin für Schund und Sünde» (No hoax – magazine for trash and sin). She lives in San Francisco.

Bibliography (selection):

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- Bananenfüsse. Blessing 2001

Peter Weber

Born in 1968 in Wattwil/Toggenburg, canton of St.Gallen, he attended the gymnasium and obtained the «Matura», type B (languages and history). Today, Peter Weber lives in Zurich as writer, Jazz musician and theatre producer. In 1993, Peter Weber who was 25 years old then, succeeded in making a brilliant debut with «Der Wettermacher» (the weatherman).

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