

Amen in Olten

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Anna Felder

Amen in Olten

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