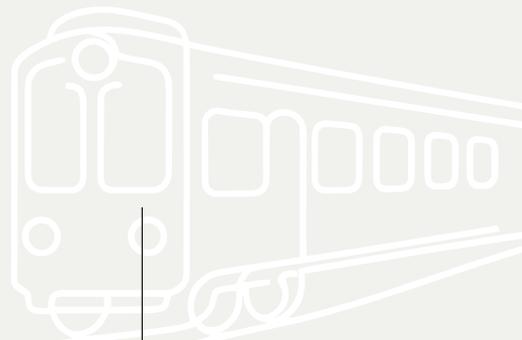


**A TRAIN'S RUMBLE
TOLD ME ABOUT
A WIDER
WORLD**

BY DANNY HEITMAN, *FORUM* EDITOR



When my grandparents courted a century ago, they often went to the rail station to watch the trains come in. It was the

1920s, and there wasn't much else to do in their small Southern town. Their railroad ritual was a pleasant exercise in expectation. I can imagine my grandfather sitting on the platform and checking his watch, wondering if the next locomotive would be punctual. He was fascinated by time throughout his life, keen to the way that hours and minutes might be marshaled and marched through a day in a familiar pattern. He would have been interested in whether each train was on schedule, even if he and my grandmother were waiting for no one in particular.

They would have recognized many faces as each train sighed to a stop and spilled out its passengers. The railroad was the bloodstream of their world

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back then, bringing friends and family back and forth, nourishing lonely corners with a sense of adventure. The very ground pulsed with its energy, vibrating with promise as each train approached.

It was not a bad thing, I suppose, for a young couple to sit at a train station and grow a shared sense of anticipation. They were learning to hold hands and look to the future, a small gesture that grew into marriage.

By the time I came along, the town had turned its back on the railroad. The tracks still hummed with commerce, but the passenger line had vanished, and the only thing in the cars was freight. Automobiles and planes commanded our common imagination, and the train's rasping horn no longer filled ears with excitement.

We lived only a few blocks from the track, but during the day, the sound of the train didn't register as anything special. Its slow roll through the town was just a bit of background noise, like static on the radio.

On some nights, though, the train's rumble would gently rock my bed. Lying in darkness, I'd think about the train on its midnight business, and all the other secret work that kept the universe moving while we slept. I'd also imagine the tracks near my house stretching far beyond my yard, my town, my state, an iron infinitude spanning the continent. The train and its rails pointed me toward the largeness of things, a wonder I'm still trying to fathom.

DANNY HEITMAN (Southeastern Louisiana University) is editor of *Forum*. He frequently writes about literature and culture for *The Wall Street Journal* and other national publications.