

# Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal

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Volume 9 | Issue 2

Article 9

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January 2010

## Train Shoes

Vanessa Blakeslee

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### Recommended Citation

Blakeslee, Vanessa (2010) "Train Shoes," *Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal*. Vol. 9: Iss. 2, Article 9.  
Available at: <https://orb.binghamton.edu/harpurpalate/vol9/iss2/9>

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## Blakeslee: Train Shoes

### TRAIN SHOTS

Vanessa Blakeslee

Three days after his girlfriend broke up with him, a woman stretched out on the tracks in front of P.T.'s hurtling train. He'd just rolled around the bend leading into Winter Park and he saw her, first a white speck swathed in a bluish-green dress, and then, as he thundered closer, the white limbs of her body snapped clearly into definition. He threw down the emergency brake. But as usual he was too late. Squealing metal-on-metal deafened the scene fast approaching; the train's skidding to a halt reminded him of playing ball, the rush of sliding into bases, only without the glory. He shut his eyes and braced himself for the thump, as his front underbelly scooped and then devoured the woman. The train squealed and shuddered for another hundred yards before it finally stopped.

After the impact, he asked one of the crew to take over the controls. Police cars were already zooming up alongside the tracks; the emergency brake sent out an immediate statewide alert. But as soon as his foot touched the gravel, the whole bloody mess felt different than the other times. At the edge of the park, an unkempt man with a scruffy gray beard who looked like a bum swayed and cried out obscenities at the tracks. The officers met P.T., and he pointed to the bend where the middle of the train now rested, huffing. He described where he first saw the flapping dress and threw the brake, but he couldn't look down his shoulder at the base of the tracks. He knew the woman had been young, and he didn't want to see the years of possibility that had been mangled and smashed.

So instead of lumbering down to the spot where the police were pitching the yellow tape, he headed in the opposite direction to survey the train's frontal damage. He expected dented metal like a damaged fender. Only this afternoon, a gold metallic object shimmered in the sunlight, tangled in the undercarriage, between the track and the front wheels. A shoe. Her sandal. He crouched to free the strappy thing but stopped as soon as he

touched it. His fingers failed to grab hold. He rocked back on his heels and slid a few inches down the gravel bank.

A policeman hurried over, saying, "What's that? Don't touch any parts."

P.T. sank harder onto the ground, staring at the delicate, twisted high-heel. He held his face in his hands, fingers slick with tears.

"Expensive shoe," the officer said. "I haven't gone down to see yet, but they told me she's real young. We just called the college. Too much money and too many drugs with those kids. You okay?"

P.T. rubbed his face. "I'll be fine in a minute," he said.

"A replacement engineer's on his way," the officer said. "Why don't you go take it easy? Sit in the park for awhile."

When P.T. looked up, the officer had extended his hand to help him to his feet. P.T. said nothing but stared past the officer. The fountain in the middle of the park sparkled; children's laughter drifted over from the playground in the distance. P.T. rose and teetered for a moment, and the officer grabbed him by the shoulder.

The officer said, "Your supervisor in Jacksonville said they'd arrange a hotel room for you tonight. Pay for your ticket home tomorrow."

"Thanks," he answered. "I'm fine."

"You sure? Let me call the Park Plaza. It's right over there."

"Fine, go ahead," P.T. said. "But I'll be okay." He wandered past the officer and away from the heavily breathing train, down toward the park.

P.T. slumped onto a bench facing the fountain and let the gurgling sound rush over him. When he first started out as a freight engineer nineteen years ago, he hadn't factored in so many deaths—not only the suicides but the accidents, and not only the human lives but the sheer numbers of animals that he killed by proxy of the train.

He glanced over his shoulder at the tracks. A local news crew had joined the police activity, and the reporter was now

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speaking in front of the camera with the yellow crime tape and the boxcars in the background, the train immobile and waiting. He turned around just in time for two college girls to clip past with shopping bags, all thick flowing hair and flimsy tops. Their voices rang with an airy tone, like high bells. They stopped at the corner nearby to wait for the crosswalk.

"Excuse me," he called out to them. "Would you two come here for a minute?"

The girls stopped chatting and eyed him, their feet glued to the sidewalk.

He waved them over until they slowly approached. The shorter of the two girls had darker hair and a pigeon-toed walk that he found charming.

"Are you two aware that a girl from your school got killed here a few minutes ago?" he asked.

The taller girl gushed, "Oh my God," and the other one demanded, "Who?"

"I don't know," he said. "But you need to be careful. This is the second college girl I've hit—my train's hit—in a month. University of Delaware's got tracks running near the campus, just like yours. A girl left a bar one night without her friends and stumbled down near the tracks and must have laid down or something. But she got killed and so did this girl here. So you watch your friends, okay?"

"I'm sorry," the one girl said.

"That's terrible," the other girl replied, shifting her pigeon-toed stance. "But I don't have any suicidal friends."

"It's just that I don't know what to do now," he said, resting his elbows on his knees. "What do you suggest that I do?"

Neither of the girls said anything. He stared at his hands clasped together, and, by the time he looked up, the girls were scampering across the brick-paved street.

P.T. returned to the train. The officer he knew approached, handed him a slip of paper, and pointed out the hotel through the park. "And here's your Amtrak ticket for tomorrow, down

to Miami," the officer added. "Is there anyone at home I can call for you? I'm Officer Dubee."

P.T. shook his head. "I better go on and grab my things," he said.

"You're staying on Park Avenue, so you'll have everything right here," the officer said. "Good food, nice park. Plenty of churches within walking distance."

"Thanks," P.T. said. "But I'm not a churchy type of guy."

The officer smiled. "We've got lots of places to have a drink, too."

P.T. didn't answer, just swung up onto the stairs and boarded the train.

But as soon as he climbed inside, he felt dizzy. The crew and the replacement engineer said some kind words, patted him on the back, but he hardly heard what they were saying. The air inside the train smelled stifling and gritty. He muttered for someone to fetch his duffel bag and toiletries. Then with his duffel slung over his shoulder, he jumped off and back into the sunshine and clear sky of February, the palm trees rustling overhead and shiny as new pennies.

The gates clanged down in front of the tracks, red lights flashing, and the train crawled to life, picked up, and rushed past him out of sight.

A police car pulled up alongside him.

"Here's my card," the officer said, extending it out the window. "Call if you need anything. I don't mind, even if I'm off duty."

P.T. nodded and tucked the card in his wallet, underneath the photo of his ex-girlfriend. The police car drove off.

It was quarter after four when he entered the lobby of the Park Plaza, a tunnel of polished wood and plush furniture. The receptionist seemed startled as he meandered over to the desk and then her face melted into ordered sympathy. "You must be the CSX conductor," she said. "I'll get you up to your room right away."

"Engineer," he corrected, but she had already buried herself in a fluster of keys and paperwork.

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"How nice of the company to look out for you after something so terrible," she said. "Will you be getting some time off?"

"I just came off leave," he said. "Third person killed in four months. With lots of deer in between."

She stared and slid the room key over.

The room was loaded with wooden furniture like the rest of the hotel. A balcony overlooked the avenue below, but not the train station—that was one block behind him. He sighed. What to do now? He pulled street clothes out of the duffel. Everything wrinkled and casual, nothing suitable for an uppity neighborhood like this place. Nonetheless he changed into jeans and a button-down shirt. Outside the buzz of traffic seemed to pick up as the end of the workday approached. He picked up the phone and dialed Shelley, who still didn't feel like his ex.

"Aren't you supposed to be driving right now?" she said.

"I killed someone today," he said. "A woman. Really young. All dressed up and stretched out on the track."

"I'm so sorry," she said. "But stop saying that you killed someone. She killed herself. That's all there is to it. For you it's an accident."

"How is it an accident?" he said. "I don't believe in that word anymore. Not lately."

"Suit yourself," she said. "How much time off are you taking?"

"I don't know," he said. "I don't think I can take sitting home on grieve-leave for another couple weeks. Going through all the same crap with the counselors. All I've ever wanted to do is drive trains. But this is getting to me."

"What's getting to you?" she asked.

"All the sadness," he said. "It's incredible."

She sighed. "I'm surprised you've lasted this long. You're such an idealist, P.T. A little boy who just wants to play choo-choo."

"Go play choo-choo, okay," he said, his eyes boiling with tears. He jerked up on the bed. "Wait 'til I tell that one to the crew. Hell, can't wait to tell the guy who took over the controls for

me today." Bitter sobs bubbled up inside him, and he welcomed them, let them spill out of his lips like steam.

Shelley told him she had to go and hung up.

A few minutes later P.T. took off down the sidewalk along the avenue. Through the trees he eyed the station, the path of railroad ties and track neat as the yellow brick road. Why did he love an occupation so laden with wreckage and blood—the light-footed deer, statuesque cows, and human beings who came crawling over the tracks around the bend?

Church bells tolled at the far end of the avenue. He decided to see if the church was open; maybe if it was he'd just sit there in the quiet coolness. The disheveled man who had screamed at the train earlier now occupied a table at one of the outdoor cafes; P.T. wondered if he was a bum. A server brought the man a coffee. As P.T. passed by, he saw that the man played with the dials on a squawking hand-radio placed on the table. The man reminded him of the bum outside of Jacksonville who had died right before the college girl in Delaware. The train was thundering along just before evening, like now. An older man in drab, loose clothing stood on the tracks as if to face off with the train. As the brakes squealed, P.T. hadn't looked away but stared, spellbound as to whether the bum would flinch or not. But instead the man raised both arms wide and lifted his chin as if to welcome home a god. In the last instant before the train struck, P.T. could see the tilt of the man's thick glasses on his face, his balding orb shining through matted gray hair, the tape binding the seams of his coat.

P.T. hurried on.

The heavy church door gave easily but as soon as he stepped inside, a cacophony of sounds swelled around him instead of silence: rustling pamphlets, heaving breaths, the measured cadence of the pastor amplified by a microphone. Was this an evening service? He tiptoed inside a few paces more, straining to hear. Then the smell of carnations hit his nostrils. An usher approached him at a mute clip.

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"Step aside, please, sir," the usher whispered. The whine of bagpipes from right behind jerked P.T. out of his skin; a bagpiper had slipped out of the foyer vestuary and now marched in slow motion toward the pulpit and the casket below. P.T. fled outside.

The sun hung low and orange in the west. He rubbed his bare arms; the air was turning brisk. He stood there for a moment, shifting his weight from one foot to another. He punched the crosswalk button a few times and jaywalked to the other side. He skated through the sidewalk café featuring the bum, who was now chatting in earnest to the empty chair across from him. He window-shopped and decided to browse the stores, but most of them were closing. In the gourmet kitchen place, he asked if any of the others on the avenue stayed open later. "You can try the consignment shop around the corner," the clerk suggested.

The consignment shop smelled like mothballs and potpourri. He roamed through the cozy thicket of circular racks and wall displays, stopped to rifle through some dinner jackets. Behind a counter in the back of the store, a middle-aged woman with blonde hair to her waist asked him if he was looking for something in particular.

"Not really," he said. "But it's a little chilly outside. I could use a jacket."

The woman sidled up to him and shuffled quickly through the hangers. "How about this one?" she asked, holding up an eggplant-colored velour blazer. "Vintage 1970s. Isn't it fun?"

"For Halloween, maybe," he said with a laugh. But he allowed her to guide him into the jacket.

In the mirror, he studied the jacket from several angles. He rubbed a sleeve, the material like a warm second skin and rich to the touch, so different from the same creased cottons he wore every day. The saleswoman appeared with a white shirt and slim ankle boots in his size, and his outfit was complete. The total came to just under forty dollars.

"That's all?" he asked.

"I gave you a discount," the woman said. She gathered her hair at the nape of her neck, draped the mass over one shoulder, and quickly



brushed her fingers through it several times. She smiled and said, "Doesn't have to cost much to do something a little different."

The shop's doorbell jingled as he exited. His old button-down and scuffed shoes were tucked away in a shopping bag. The corners of his mouth curled up slightly until he rounded the corner. There he landed in the bustle of Friday night on the avenue. He broke away from the noisy corral of café tables clustered underneath heat lamps and escaped to his hotel.

In his room he lifted the suitcase off the bed and onto the floor, and was surprised by the lightness it carried over into his hand. He'd almost forgotten that lightness belonging only to a life in motion, zooming from station to station, depot to depot. How simple life felt, reduced to a suitcase.

He needed some food and asked the night desk clerk for an affordable place within walking distance. "Try Pop's," the clerk said. "Couple blocks up, right next to the train tracks. College hangout, but it's cheap and good."

So he trudged up the dark road along the bare tracks.

Pop's turned out to be a dive-bar with chubby but cheerful waitresses in tank tops and a packed bar of margarita drinkers. In silence he inhaled a chimichanga and washed it down with a Pacifico. He was sitting there sipping the last of his beer when cheers and whistles broke out across the small restaurant. The bartenders whipped out bottles of gold tequila and began pouring rows of shots.

"Train shot?" the bartender asked, pinching a shot glass between two nail-bitten fingers.

"What?" P.T. replied.

She rattled off, "Every time the train goes by, tequila shots are two dollars. You wanna train shot?"

"I don't like tequila," he said.

"Now you do," the bartender said, slamming down the glass and dumping tequila to the brim. "On me," she said. He glanced out the window at the red gates clanging down across the intersection, the toot of the horn as the train approached.

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The bartender clanged a cow bell hanging down from the ceiling; another wave of drunken cheer passed through the crowd. P.T. clinked shots with the guy next to him and threw the burning contents down his throat.

He ordered another beer, and, before he was halfway down the bottle, another train blasted through. The bartender rang the bell, her gold hoop earrings swinging against her young neck, and he pushed his shot glass toward the other pretty bartender parading around with the frosty tequila bottle. A group of college kids milled at the corner of the bar, and he plunged his small but sloshing glass into the middle of their hooting toast. He caught the eye of one of the girls in the group. She and her friend were the two college girls he'd spoken to earlier in the day. They approached him, all fancy purses and unblinking lashes, margarita glasses held high.

"Are you okay?" the darker brunette said. Her pigeon-toed stance was even more pronounced in her high heels. "It turned out that the girl who killed herself didn't go to our school."

"Oh," he said. "I didn't hear."

"You made us so worried," her friend replied.

"Sorry," he said.

"It must be so hard for you," the dark one said, and to her friend, "We should buy him a drink. What's your name?"

He introduced himself. "I'm Casey," the pigeon-toed girl said. "And this is Gibson." He stuck out his hand, but Gibson just peered down into the remainder of her margarita and poked at the ice with the straw.

"That's okay," he said. "I was just heading home. Best thing to do is hit the sack and forget about it." He stepped down from his stool and tossed his wallet onto the bar.

Casey squeezed his arm. "We're buying you a drink," she said. "Fun is what will make you forget about it."

He didn't answer but slid back onto the seat. "Do you know who the woman was?" he asked.

Casey told him the gossip: that the girl had been a twenty-one-year-old, a drug addict who had spent her entire life in

Winter Park and waitressed in one of the cafés. A year before she had slit her wrists and barely survived.

P.T. excused himself. In front of the restroom mirror, he stared at his reflection as he rinsed his hands; he splashed some water on his face. The hallway leading out of the restrooms was wallpapered with ancient Polaroids along with brighter photos of the staff linking arms with customers in holiday party hats and raised mugs, and he lingered to scan the faces. In some of the pictures, the subjects were clad in polo shirts that looked like the kind restaurant servers wore, with the establishment's logo in the right corner. His eye caught on every young woman wearing a polo shirt with her hair pulled back into a ponytail. He wondered if one of them was the woman. Why had she chosen him, waited for him to barrel over her? For a quick, surefire death because her own hands were too shaky?

Another train rumbled past as he slid back onto his bar stool. The college brunettes ordered shots. "Should we toast in honor of the girl?" Casey asked. P.T. shook his head no, so they then proposed a toast to his days ahead. Gibson complimented him on his purplish blazer. He proceeded to get drunk.

"Do you have someone I can call?" the bartender asked later.

He slapped his credit card on the counter, and he stared at her bare wrist above the clenched towel for scars.

"Here," he said, thumbing through his wallet. The photo of Shelley gawked back. He flicked Officer Dubee's card at the bartender. "Call him."

At first P.T. didn't recognize Dubee in his sweater, jeans and flip-flops. He staggered over to the squad car and collapsed into the passenger seat.

"Do you always dress like a refugee from the Love Shack and get blitzed when you hit someone?" Dubee asked.

"You don't know nothing about being an engineer," P.T. said. "Officer."

"It's Rick," Dubee said. "So you think you're the only guy

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with a brutal job?"

"Well, I'm through," P.T. said.

"I picked your sorry ass up, didn't I?" Dubee said. "I pissed and moaned while I was getting dressed, but here I am. You're what, forty? Forty-five? What else would you do now but drive trains?"

P.T. was quiet. They cruised through the residential neighborhood behind the restaurant, then past a corner café with black awnings and servers dipping between outdoor tables.

"That's where the girl worked," Dubee said. "I knew her."

"You did?" P.T. asked faintly.

"She waited on me a lot," Dubee said. "Nice girl. Sure didn't say anything about her problems."

"And you saw her like that on the tracks today?" P.T. said. "But you seem fine."

"I stood over and gave her a moment. I said, 'Oh, baby, you stuck it to yourself and everybody else.' Then I walked away and kept going with my day," Dubee said. "What else is there?"

P.T. didn't answer. They pulled up in front of the hotel. Across the street, the bum was swinging around a lamp post and wailing, shaking his coffee mug at passersby. Dubee said, "I had a feeling you'd call."

Before going to bed, P.T. leaned over his second floor balcony and watched the avenue below. A rowdy party spread out along a sidewalk café; from the midst of the staggered tables and chairs, someone chucked a piñata into the street. A Mercedes creeping by caught the paper donkey and dragged it up to the corner stoplight; by then, patrons were running out, shrieking with laughter, to gather the candy and little plastic squirt guns from the piñata's opened belly.

Across the street, the bum kept tottering and howling.

Had the bum been somebody once, steady and clean-shaven, of the shiny designer shoe crowd, even? P.T. wondered. Would his jabbering or perhaps, a single sidewalk jab, send him through the park one evening to meet the train? What twists made for a person's feet to stay glued to those tracks in the face of a

thundering machine, to be either tossed or scrambled?

He balled up the thrift store blazer while getting undressed, and tucked it into the far end of his duffel bag.

P.T. slept badly and awakened just before dawn, bouncing around in the caboose of a dream. In the dream he was in the engineer's seat, gazing at the scenery flying past. Which route was it? Golden meadows and emerald green woods glistened all around, and he rolled past sidewalks and shops where bright-faced teenage girls and grizzly-bearded burnas waved at him.

But then the light vanished and the tracks ahead were covered in mist and darkness. He squinted and tried to see the tracks ahead more clearly, but they seemed to disappear one into another, like pencils falling off the end of a table. And then a form that wasn't a railroad tie but a wiry figure appeared. He gasped and threw the emergency brake, but the train only surged forward. Before the impact, he looked ahead again at the figure. It was the girl in the blue-green dress and gold sandals.

In the shower only one line churned over and over inside him: the train sails along its routes, no matter the scenery, no matter the cargo, no matter the wreckage.

The next morning the world seemed even more different, more angular—like living inside a prism. He and Rick Dubee met on the other end of the park, at a café with an outside courtyard. The fine tobacco shop next to the café kept its door open and the air was tinged with the scent of cigar smoke. Across the street, the homeless-looking man sat drinking alone at his café, the rest of the tables topped with upside down stacks of chairs.

P.T. asked, "What's his story?"

"He's rich and out of his mind," Dubee answered. "Schizophrenia. That's all he does. Sits and watches the world go by."

On the Amtrak ride home P.T. lost track of time, enjoying the gaps—the moments of just sailing along in the space between places, just the train on the tracks.

Night had fallen by the time he disembarked at the depot

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and climbed in his truck. He drove around for awhile, ended up crawling past the park and the train station near his house. He parked and walked along the tracks until an approaching horn blew and the blinking red gates clanged down. Then he stepped back into the dewy grass and let the rush of the cars wash over him as the train flew past.