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Forces

Jay Meek

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FORCES

On the Lake Shore Limited, a man behind me is talking about his trip, tracing the life of the birth mother he never knew. He says that she and his adoptive mother worked long ago at the same war plant, and when the man speaks he names cities and streets, as if writing the obituary to a vigorous and articulate life. I can't follow the whole story, except it's clear that he has gone looking for her, for some part of himself. He is crossing the country, mapping the woodlots and rivers that make up his life. Who can be listening, so empty and silent? At times, when the riders across the aisle begin talking, I can't make out the man's words, and by the time they stop, I have missed a new deposition, some further enchantment.

Nights in my apartment near the freight yards, I hear rims grind against rails, steel on steel, as the dark gondolas pass. Of force, Leonardo says, "It is born in violence and dies in liberty." He's talking about the power that turns people to stone. "Speed," he says, "enfeebles it." On the train in Massachusetts I hear him. In far North Dakota I hear him. For I have seen men in exercise rooms, walking beside me on the treadmill, step for my step. Mornings we work out on the arm curl and shoulder press, or rest on the rowing machine with towels around our necks, men like me who are gearing up, with the sun darkly risen.

Now, riding coach, I follow the Westfield River, which at times cuts away into deep woods and at other times rushes under a bridge we quickly cross. It's early morning, fall light in the trees. Yesterday, waking on a new campus, I looked out my guest room at children holding hands: two on two, on either side of their teacher—the children bumbling on, small and large—children of color and of pale skin—all of great wonder, walking with their teacher across the college green.