

The Last 2,500 Miles of Cataract Jack

by Luke Bryson

I ran a cargo train with an old man named Cataract Jack. It's the kind of train that's miles long when it cuts you off at an intersection. The kind of train you swear you could just run alongside of and hop onto. The kind of train that's nostalgic no matter where you're from. They're only run by two people, you know. These vast machines crawling through rust and rain across desert and mountain and plain and town are run by two people.

Cataract Jack, as you might assume, could not see particularly well. I started running the train with him three years back or so and slowly took on the old man's duties as his vision went. In the past year he's taken to sitting on the engine's roof during our treks. I asked him, before we began this last ride, why he sits up there, exposed to the wind. "Moving's not enough, boy," he told me. "You gotta know that you are. Walk around the world and you end up in the same place. You'd best remember every step."

By the time the engine warmed up and we were moving, the last flurry of the season fell, and New York City settled into dust and smog behind us, another sea ahead.

The East

A couple days later, our rig trekked into the heart of the rural east where we watched the setting sun roll along the spines of over-farmed hills. A single warm bulb creased shadows deep into Jack's crow's feet, and his pale eyes reflected the orange light as he told me, "Used to be this trip would take a few days."

I grunted in agreement. "Seems like forever ago. Especially for a whippersnapper like me." I traced my fingers along the deep grooves on the backs of my palms, and then through my rapidly thinning hair. I wasn't like this even just a few days earlier.

A long pause in the light. Jack broke the silence. "How long'll this one take?"

I unfolded the map. "Weeks. Maybe a month. Rail conditions keep getting worse. Our engine's busted up too."

The old man sighed. "We gonna be able to outrun it at that pace?"

"As long as nothing goes wrong it should stay right at our tails."

"Can you still see it?"

I peeked my head out of the window, back towards the Atlantic. The sun had finally fallen beneath the deserted land, and our tail disappeared into the night. Still, something about the darkness wasn't complete. The nights had turned gray, rather than dark. "Won't be able to tell until the morning. Why don't you get some rest." The old man nodded and took his place in a sleeping bag.

Ahead, a neon moon on stilts rose over a hill—4.99 a gallon. The lights of a town stumbled closer as I slipped two shells into Jack's 12-gauge and leaned it against the console—no one would be home, but precaution is safety. As we began to crawl by the outskirts of the town, it was clear the place was abandoned. Not the kind of abandoned that grows tall grass through

picnic benches or sags porches into smiles, but a fresh abandonment. Like the milk in the fridges could still be sweet.

I found myself lost in the emptiness of the place. Then Jack scared the shit out of me. "How old are you now?"

"25."

"You been around long enough to be in love then." I shifted in uncomfortable silence. We didn't talk like this on the tracks. It had a way of spoiling a night with loneliness. In hindsight it makes sense that the end of the world would change the rules.

"I guess."

"Who was it?"

A water tower lumbered by the engine, spraying a fine mist across the glass. I pointed up at the tower. "That leak'll never be fixed now."

"This one of your metaphors?" Jack asked. He loved to give me shit about my bachelors in American Lit.

It was quiet for a minute. He waited for me.

"Her name was Corrin."

Jack grunted as he lifted into a sitting position. "Tell me about her."

The supports of a cell tower drifted away in the wind, turned quickly to flaking rust. It would join the rest soon.

"She was something special. An artist. Made things I didn't get—gritty little collages of stones and wire and sea glass. There was something actually real about them—texture...I don't know. She lived in Laguna Beach—this little artist's community not too far from LA." A pediatrician's office crawled by, the door held open by a baby's car seat. I must've paused for longer than I thought because Jack prompted me again.

"What was she like?"

A mural, rainbows and flowers and butterflies, spanned the parking lot wall of the pediatrician's office. Just a week before I saw Corrin for the last time, some beachside sunglasses shop hired her to paint a mural on their storefront. As a fairly unsuccessful artist, this would be her most public work yet, and I asked her over a cup of coffee and a joint if she knew what she'd paint. *I'm not sure yet*, she'd said. *Something that'll change the world*. I knew not to laugh at this. That, in all its absurdity, it wasn't a joke. Still, I think I scoffed just loud enough for her to hear.

"I knew I'd never find another one of her."

I wrote in my journal—back when I wrote—about her. I don't have it anymore but the gist was that she was the kind of person crafted by God in his spare time. A passion project constructed with leftover scraps between the creation of others. An opus he couldn't bring himself to finish so he affixed, always, more and more clay and stained glass and paint. Somehow she made her way down here, as a monstrous collection of unfinished beauty. Heartbreaking to God, surely. He must've known that reality could never have suited her.

"Blonde?"

I shook my head. "Get some rest, Jack." I lay back, and fell asleep with an absence beside me.

* * *

In the morning, Jack was leaning out the window, looking East. I joined him, and he asked for the fifth day in a row, "Can you still see it?"

In the distance, trees that we passed in the night, then healthy, now sagged under their own weight, the leaves turned a grayish green. Shrubs shriveled into themselves, becoming a similar shade. A gradient of sick desaturation extended to the horizon. The edges of this west-bound disaster licked at the rocks next to the train, dissolving them so that a thin curtain of dust melted from the stones' surfaces. Last night's town would soon be swallowed up like the rest of the Eastern seaboard. I traced my fingers across my now-ancient palms. The smell was fortunately faint this far away. A lingering odor like a long-rotted cup of strong mint tea.

I looked down at the old man. His eyes were massive and strained, desperate to see his approaching death.

"No. Must be too far away now." Jack nodded. He kept looking anyway.

"Is the grain still good?"

I answered too quickly. "Yeah, Jack. It's still good."

"You didn't check."

"Alright, fuck. I'll take a look." I stepped onto the makeshift stairs leading to the top of the engine car, feeling the sun fail to warm my face. I opened the hatch to the cargo car loud enough for the old man to hear and I looked in, knowing it would be empty. Climbing back inside, I told Jack, "It's still good for the most part." There never was any grain.

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"What'd you stop us for?" Jack asked once the brakes stopped whining.

"We're passing through a little town. We need to pick up some supplies—our food's almost gone."

"Where are we?"

I hopped out and extended a hand to guide Jack down. "Kentucky."

"Kentucky?" Jack took a step back, refusing to take my hand. "We're supposed to be farther South by now."

"I know but—"

"The food needs to get West."

"I know, Jack. This was our best bet. The big cities we'd have to go through down South are shitshows right now." There were moments where Jack visibly grappled with losing his sight. His reality was filtered solely through clouded pupils and me. He had believed we were in a different part of the country, and I'd let him. "I need help carrying stuff. Let's go, it's catching up." The old man grumbled and exited the train.

It was a colorful town. I had stopped the train just out of view of Main Street. Remembering its stone fountain, its faux-antique storefronts, and its chili festival at the end of the summer, I steered Jack the opposite direction towards the suburbs.

Next to the tracks stood a flat red house that seemed to sag into its basement. The grass and trees and shrubs had all browned and brittle, and the surrounding homes leaned slightly away from the single-floor red house by the tracks.

As I helped Jack mount the steps onto the porch, he asked, "Is this a house?"

"Yeah, the shops downtown are probably empty. I thought hitting a house or two would be more successful." Jack shook his head. I wished I'd told him more at this point, but it would have felt like a betrayal to explain this far in.

"Is it locked?"

I pulled a key from the top of a sconce beside the door. "Let's see." I unlocked and pushed open the door. "Guess there's no reason to lock up if you're not coming back."

The door opened to a maroon living room. Dust swirled in sunbeams over a cracked leather couch. The walls of the room were barely visible behind the dozens of hanging photos. A family of redheads posed at the beach, at a laughably inauthentic Tex Mex restaurant, at graduations and birthdays, at what must have been every moment of their lives. A small frame lay face down on a rolling wet bar in the corner. Jack looked over my shoulder, straining to see the photo as I flipped it over. Within the silver frame, a young red-haired woman dressed in an oldschool conductor costume, pinstripes and all, stands proudly in front of a cargo engine. I have my arm wrapped around her in the photo. The camera captured her still laughing after I refused to kiss her while she wore the comically large prop mustache.

"What's it of?" Jack asked.

"Just a family photo." The red-headed woman looked out at me from the hundred hanging photos as a baby and teen and adult, surrounded by a kind family I'd never see again.

With that we collected cans from a well-stocked pantry.

"We've spent too long here," Jack said.

It was true. I could feel the sickness picking at my bone mass, and it had to be worse for the old man. As we hurried out, passing the pairs of shoes still waiting by the front door, I slipped the photo into my backpack.

* * *

Jack had his elbow propped on the windowsill when a hard-edged pit emerged off the left side of the train from behind the treeline. I put my hand on Jack's shoulder and told him, "We're passing an old quarry."

A sort of urgency struck the old man's face. "Which side?"

"You're looking at it." Somehow his eyes stretched wider.

As the train lumbered up a hill, the chasm seemed to yawn outwards. "I grew up in one." We'd never talked about his childhood. "My pa worked it. Foreman of the whole operation. He built a cabin a couple hundred feet from the edge of the pit. I lived there with Ma, and Pa spent half the week there too."

A titanic saw reaching up out of the chasm passed by the engine car, its teeth still silvered. Jack clenched his jaw at the mechanical thing as though he could see it and continued his story. "Ma worked to keep the machines running—they broke all the time and nobody could fix them like her. Pa spent most of his time in the office, 'arithmetickin' the numbers' like he liked to say. The two of them only worked together when someone got hurt down in the mine."

The late morning sun pressed the shadow of the steel saw down onto the tracks. As we passed through the shade, Jack sucked a pocket of air through his teeth and spoke again. "I saw plenty of machine injuries as a kid, but there was one that...there was one in particular." I wondered what happened behind the cataracts at moments like this. "A group of men covered gray with sweat and dust came into the cabin while I was helping Ma peel potatoes. I must've

been seven. They were carrying a canvas sheet between them. There was a red-sagging—a thrashing, yelling, red-sagging in the canvas. They set it on the dinner table and Ma pulled back the cloth..”

The shadow passed and Jack turned his face to warm in the sun, forgetting that it didn’t quite do that anymore. I held my breath, afraid that even a shift in the air would disturb the moment. “A chain had looped around just below the man’s knee and a mining truck yanked it to loose a section of stone. His calf was dangling from a tendon. They tossed his foot onto his torso to keep it in the canvas sheet.”

The old man’s graveled voice tightened. “Ma ripped a curtain from the window above the sink and wrapped it right above the man’s knee. ‘Get a spoon, Jack,’ she said. I did and she pushed it between the cloth and his leg and started twisting. The man stopped yelling then and went limp. The men shuffled out, and Ma started telling me what to do. Told me she had to run into town for medicine, and that she and Pa wouldn’t be back until sundown, but the man needed his tourniquet replaced after an hour and a half with a new one. We didn’t have a working clock so she told me I’d have to count the hour and half on my fingers.” He turned away from me then, sharply ending his sentence, and following it with a “That’s enough of that. We best get back to work.”

“Sure, Jack.”

The Midwest

The train began to slow down as we moved into Missouri. It was an old engine, and the nonstop wear of this last ride hadn’t been kind. In fact, the metal floor had started to sink slightly thanks to the sickness that pressed down on us, like, as Jack put it, “a wet burlap sack over the head.” What once must’ve been heaving hills of corn rows were now windswept ashes and decomposed husks. Jack and I tied bandanas around our mouths and noses to protect against the pollution of decaying agriculture.

It wasn’t until we started to pass through a little college town that I realized how much we were in the radius of sickness again. The metal of lamp posts had dissolved, smashing their globes into crumbling pavement. The chains of a swingset deteriorated and the plastic seat had slapped to the ground. A brick building eroded into a dune of pale red dust.

I noticed a head then, peeking out of the dust pile.

I shook Jack and said, “I see someone.” The sound of the train roused the figure, and it extended a weak hand towards us. “They’re alive.”

“Go get ‘em.”

I swung the 12-gauge over my shoulder as the train grinded to a halt and took a tentative step onto the asphalt. My shoe sank into it with a slight spongy give, leaving a footprint. The person’s face was so packed with degraded material that I couldn’t make out any features. I clasped their hand and felt the sickening thinness of their skin, feeling it move as if no longer connected to the bones and tissue beneath. As I lifted the body, the dust cascaded off, and I was horrified at how impossibly light this ashen creature was.

With this pitiful thing cradled in my arms, I felt a crinkle of plastic in its breast pocket. The wrapper of a licorice packet poked out, alarmingly red against the drained world. The ruddy

smell of the candy drifted up as the first whiff of anything other than decay and oil for weeks. I was catapulted back to the day I met Corrin in mall jail.

* * *

I'd been in there for an hour or so when she walked through the door, entirely soaked. She sat into criss-cross on the floor, pulled a package of licorice from her bra and looked up at me. "Wanna bum one?" she asked.

"Sure."

"What'd they get you for?"

"Well I just broke up with my girlfriend..."

She interrupted, "What for?"

"She used semicolons when we sexted."

Corrin laughed way too loud. "You're a dick."

I nodded. "I broke up with the one before her because she couldn't differentiate between the different 'theres.'"

She laughed again. "I guess standing up for your beliefs is important." It was quiet then—something she clearly couldn't stand. "So what, is it a fear of commitment?"

That got a smile out of me. What a wild thing to ask a stranger. "Something like that."

Corrin seemed satisfied with that. "You didn't finish your story."

"You interrupted me."

"I'm sure that's not the case. Go on."

My smile returned. She was stubborn and I enjoy a challenge. "The semicolon one snuck an expensive watch in my coat pocket. As you can imagine, security wasn't very understanding when the alarms at the door went off."

"Classic."

"Classic," I agreed. "What'd you do?"

"Swam in the fountain."

I blinked at her, hard. "The one inside the entrance?" She nodded. "Why?"

Corrin stood up, looked me in the eyes, and started jumping. The pockets of her parachute pants clinked and jingled with what must've been fifty bucks worth of wishing coins. I snorted, and she smiled. "What do you do?"

"For work?"

"Well it would be an insane question if I wasn't asking about work."

The way she moved and spoke was erratic, blinding, kinetic, like she could pluck a twig of lightning from the sky and hold it in her hand. I couldn't keep my eyes off of her.

"I'm a writer."

Her eyes lit up.

"Very cool. I'm an artist too." She said it with such conviction that I felt guilty for even needing to ask.

She sat next to me on the bench and said, "Once we've done our time, what do you say we go get a cup of coffee? I'll promise to use both correct and situationally-aware grammar, and you promise to keep working on not being such a dick."

I shook her hand. "Deal."

When the mall cop let us out, Corrin jumped into my arms and instructed, "Carry me across the threshold as a bride of freedom." She was so strange, but there I was, holding a beautiful girl in my arms in a time where I was chasing profundity like a fading need to sneeze. So I carried her.

The figure coughed in my arms and moaned in agony from the convulsion. As I climbed into the engine car, I wondered if Jack flashed back, smelling blood-stained canvas. As soon as I boarded, Jack got the train moving. I set the body against the sagging metal floor as gently as I could and brushed the debris from their face. Any age, race, or sex had been stripped away, leaving a vaguely skeletal shape. I tipped a swallow of water into their mouth and asked, "What's your name?"

Their voice trembled as if balancing over a precarious drop. "Blake." A long pause. "Is anyone in the East left?"

Jack tipped back some whiskey before responding. "Not a one. We weren't too far from New York when news struck that it was coming." Jack pointed at me, "Your savior here knew a buddy of his was prepping for a cross country haul with a trail full of grain. I figured food was going to get scarce for the people out West, so the two of us saddled up and found the cargo in the outskirts of the city. Didn't see a soul. Most of the food in the cargo cars has gone bad by now, but we may be able to salvage some when we hit California." I did my best to keep from fidgeting.

Blake fell into a fit of coughs. When they were done I asked, "Why didn't you go with the rest?"

"I was waiting for my brother. He went to school in Illinois and I hoped he'd come through town to pick me up. Illinois has been swallowed up by now." They looked to me for confirmation, and I realized they were asking a question.

"Yeah. It's gone."

The sun began to set. Blake faded in and out of consciousness, groaning every few minutes. Jack and I stood, looking at the thin body on the ground. I thought I heard Jack murmur something so I leaned in closer.

"Five hundred and seven, five hundred and eight, five hundred and nine..." He was whispering numbers.

"You're counting, Jack."

The old man started when I spoke as if I'd woken him up. He looked sheepish, and admitted, "I didn't ever really stop." Thin tears welled against the cataracts as he stared down at the weezing body. "I got to that hour and a half and peeled off the cloth while still counting. I counted every time I wrapped the new cloth around him, and then every second until Ma and Pa came back. By the time they did, the worker was dead."

A sharp, shuddering breath leaked out of Blake, and Jack took a shallow inhale. A shadow of confusion fell on his face and he furrowed his brow. When he spoke again, his voice wasn't its usual, hard self. He sounded more like a boy. "The cabin was different after that, I think. Every day they dug out a bit more of the quarry, and the edge moved just a little closer to the house. Ma and Pa didn't notice how close the mine was getting, and by the time I was ten I swear I could have stepped off the porch and into the pit. Eventually, Ma must've noticed and been afraid I'd fall in, so she and I moved to the city while Pa stayed back to run the company."

I'd spent my years in school learning to string words together, but in this moment I couldn't find the right thing to say. I settled on, "I'm sorry, Jack."

"For what?" The confusion faded from him.

"I'm just sorry."

I slipped a blanket over Blake, and noticed that I could see his heart beating weakly through his ribs as if they'd turned to rubber. In the morning his heartbeat was gone so I rolled his body off the train as we passed over a river.

Texas

Up in the panhandle, I stopped the train in a small city dwarfed by the meat processing plant that sustained it. We rumbled past an old brick rectangle of a hotel where a woman stood on the roof, teetering near the edge as if unaware of the drop just a foot away. She extended an arm to the sky and swayed a step closer to falling. She was holding a phone, I realized. Trying to find bars. A beam of refracted sunlight leaped from her hand, dancing across the engine car. The square of light flashed across Jack's white eyes, causing him to flinch.

"What was that?"

"What?"

"Nothing, I guess." The hotel drifted by, its windows the first to be affected by the sickness. The centers had drooped as if melting, soon to collapse into quartz particulates against red dirt.

We stopped a few blocks from the college. As the train lurched to a halt, Jack turned to me. "Why'd we stop? We've got plenty of food."

"I just have to get out here for a minute."

Jack spat on the floor. "For what?" I didn't know what to say, so I stayed quiet. Jack pinched his brow. "Whatever's here doesn't matter. It's as good as gone. What we need to do is get this grain out West before...." The old man's voice echoed through the empty grain cars as I ran my thumb across the cracking skin of my face, overwhelmed for days now by the stench of rotting mint that had crawled into my head, burrowing into my sinuses, and I swear I heard his echoed voice pierced by the sound of a useless phone crashing into pavement back by the hotel, and—

I couldn't take it any longer. "There's no fucking grain!" It was quiet for a long time. Neither of us moved. Jack's eyes flicked around my face, surely thinking back to every lie I told him on this trip. He closed his eyes and took a seat. "I'll be back soon. Stay here."

The train felt different as soon as I stepped off of it. But then again, there's always something strange about a stopped train. As I headed away, I turned to see Jack climb the makeshift staircase to the engine's roof and stare into the grain car at an emptiness he could not see.

Ahead of me stood a single-story building with large abstract swirls of paint in the windows. Above it, a sign read "Hale County Art Gallery." The bell at the top of the door made a dull *thwap* noise when I entered, and the sickness reached into the gallery alongside me. I felt my fingernails begin to thin under the stress of it as I walked directly to the back of the place, passing melting wireframe sculptures, canvases sloughing off of their frames, and film photographs crumpling themselves into little balls.

At the very back corner, a large piece of plywood, the size of a door, maybe, fell from its nail and leaned against the yellowing wall. I'd never seen this one in person, but I heard about it a lot. She had cut large riverstones in half and affixed them to the board in a snaking pattern moving from light to dark shades of rock. Shells and bottle caps had been stuck to the tips of the rocks, and at the very top of the board a thin, almost skeletal figure held a big blue ball made from layer after layer of paint. The paint had started to turn to sky blue dust that trickled through the paths between stones.

The ink on the identifying placard next to the piece had drifted away on the air, leaving the piece title-less. The first name of artist name was still partially legible: 'Corr n.' I spent a moment just watching the shifting blue sands before peeling the placard from the wall and going back to the train.

The train wasn't any less strange once I was back on. Jack said nothing when I boarded. As we began to move, I said, "We're heading to an ocean, Jack." He looked out onto a landscape he could only presume was there. "There's nowhere left to go." The old man ran a hand across his beard, refusing to turn to me. "Listen, Jack. No one's lasting long enough to need that grain."

I guess some people need some purpose to keep them going. For the old steam trains it was coal. For this one it was diesel. For Jack it must've been the grain. He didn't last a week past that West Texas town.

The West.

A thunderstorm rolled westward across the Arizonian landscape as if escaping alongside us. For a few days since hitting the desert, the feeling of the sickness had faded almost completely. My hair stopped thinning, and the cacti were still green. The desert sand grew into lazily swirling pools of mud beneath the rain, and I even saw a lizard scamper across the tracks.

I had hoped the healthy landscape would revitalize Jack, but the wet atmosphere filled his chest. He'd done more coughing than breathing on that last day.

I sat down on the floor of the train car next to Jack. Over the pattering sound of rain, I asked, "Do you want to hear about her?" In a brief window of clear breathing, Jack nodded.

"In all honesty, she was eccentric. She vowed at 15 years old to never make money other than as an artist. And you know what? She followed through. I'd come out of college planning to write but pretty quickly ended up with a nice salary in sales. I just couldn't say no to the money. Corrin was living in her van when we met, selling trinkets on the boardwalk and moved in with me pretty quickly. A few months later we were bouncing between romantic paddleboard rides and fighting in the kitchen. She called me a sellout one time. I think that was the start of the end. Mainly because it was true."

In the distance, a separate storm raged, moving eastward. The clouds of the approaching were so dense I worried that they'd flatten the train.

"We didn't have a honeymoon phase. We started off reality-checking each other and battling to stay together despite that. I'd be an asshole and she'd yell at me, then forgive me, and then say she knew I was still working on it. She'd turn down a job at a gallery because they still housed art stolen from indigenous people, and I'd beg her to take it, back down, and seethe.

"The end approached fast once a store hired her to paint a mural. She couldn't for the life of her think of something worth painting. After the third email from the store asking where she

went, I told her, 'Just come up with something. Paint some surfer dudes with sunglasses.' That pissed her the fuck off but I kept going. 'It's just a sunglasses store. It's a small wall. Just do something and get the money.'

"She looked at me and quoted a line she had stenciled onto her favorite painting: 'What is a poet if not a Prometheus, reaching into the divine and—fingers wrapped in fire—returning to the earth scorched but bearing warmth?'

I looked her dead in the eyes and said, 'Unemployed.' All the anger vanished from her. Any spite faded as she realized this was the end. So she packed and left. She loved me more than I thought I'd ever let someone love me. She fell into her art with no concern for where she landed, like every moment of her life was a leap of faith. Being around that was as close as I came to being a writer."

Above us, the two storms collided, clouds spiraling into one another like drops of dye in water. Jack nodded as I ended the story, and asked, "Why are you on this train?"

"To give you one last ride before the end."

"You're looking for her." There was no longer any bitterness in the old man.

"Whatever's left of her."

Jack smiled at me. "*That* could've been our last ride, kid. I'd have gone looking for her, over the horizon, with you."

"I didn't know that's why we were riding when we started." It was just before sunset, and a mesa trolled slowly by in the distance.

"Stop us here and help me onto the roof." I followed the old man's request and carried him up the stairs. The rain let up as I sat down on the edge of the train, my feet dangling against the window below. I helped Jack sit and lean against me. We sat in silence for a while, watching the falling sun scatter shadows onto the mountain.

"You know," the old man said, "I remember every step."

"I know you do." Hearing that, he looked up into my eyes and I realized that that simple line of recognition meant everything to him.

We sat for a long time there. There where the cowboys once roamed. There where the rails connect East and West. There where Cataract Jack would rest.

I laid his fragile body into the empty grain car before disconnecting it from the engine and moving on. The old man was done counting, at least.

* * *

The stalled time with Jack took a toll, and the sickness was at my heels again. It would stay there until the train rolled to a stop in the beachside town that Corrin and I once called home. I left the engine behind, expecting this final walk to be solitary. It was not. A line of survivors stood at the edge of the water, caught between the sunset and the approaching sickness. The stench of withered mint swelled, intertwined with the scent of seawater.

I passed by the endless line of silent leftovers. The boardwalk crumbled as I walked it. The weight of the sickness fell heavier, and the members of the crowd began to sink to their knees.

Ahead, the orange sky silhouetted a giant pair of sunglasses sitting on the roof of a shop. The sand crumbled to fine dust, which the wind whipped onto the surface of the ocean, creating wave-shifting dunes.

And then the shop was before me. The wall beside the entrance swirled with decaying color. She'd done it. She'd painted it. The wall had begun to trickle away, taking the mural with it. I sat in the sand below the wall and watched the disintegrating piece. The color of the paint faded until I was looking at a world of muted browns, grays, and blacks.

There on the wall, Corrin had painted a train. The kind of train that's miles long when it cuts you off at an intersection. The kind of train you swear you could just run alongside of and hop onto. The kind of train that's nostalgic no matter your connection to it. In the engine car sat a caricature wearing cartoonishly large sunglasses and giving the "surfer bro" hand sign.

The wind whipped the eroding paint, settling it as powder onto its last viewer. The detritus of the world fell as dust, and I felt the unmaking of things.