

Train to Harbin

I once met a man on the train to Harbin. He was my age, just past his prime, hair starting to grease and thin in a way one might have thought passably distinguished in another context, in another era, when he might have settled, reconciled to finishing out his long career predictably. But it was 1939. War had officially broken out between China and Japan, and like all of us on that train, he too had chosen to take the bait, that one last bite before acquiescing to life's steady decline. You see, for us university doctors, it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. We all knew it. Especially back then.

Two nights and three days from Wonsan to Harbin the train clattered on, the lush greenery interrupted by trucks and depots manned by soldiers in military khaki. Despite the inspections and unexplained transfers, this man I shall call S remained impassive, shadowed by a dusky light that had nothing to do with the time of day or the dimness of the car's interior; he sat leaning against the windowpane, face set, impervious to the din around him. Later, I would come to recognize this posture of self-recrimination, but at the time I had barely recovered from our initial journey from Niigata to Wonsan across the Sea of Japan, and I was in a contemplative mood myself, in no condition to pause over the state of others, much less engage with my colleagues, who by now had begun drinking in earnest, liquor still being plentiful then, oiling even the most reticent of tongues. So I excused myself and must have promptly nodded off, for the next moment it was dawn, the day

just beginning to break, the length of the train still shrouded in sleep. I was the only one awake, the only one woken by the sudden cessation of rhythm, which drew me to the window, still dark except for my reflection superimposed on it.

We had apparently stopped for cargo, the faint scuffling I could hear revealing a truck ringed by soldiers, their outlines camouflaged against the paling horizon. Later I would learn the significance of this stop, but for the moment the indistinct scene strained my eyes, and I pulled back, hoping to rest for another hour.

Forty years later, this scene returns to me with a crispness that seems almost specious when so much else has faded or disappeared. Perhaps it is simply the mind, which, in its inability to accept a fact, returns to it, sharpening the details, resolving the image, searching for an explanation that the mind, with its slippery grasp on causality, will never be able to find. Most days I am spared by the habits of routine. But when the air darkens like this, turning the windows inward and truncating the afternoon, the present recedes, its thin hold on consciousness no match for the eighty-two years that have already claimed it. If hindsight were less truculent, I might have long ago been granted the famed view of belated clarity that might have illuminated the exact steps that led me into the fog of my actions. But hindsight has not offered me this view, my options and choices as elusive now as they had been then. After all, it was war. An inexcusable logic, but also a fact. We adapted to the reality over which we felt we had no control.