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## ANOTHER NATURE

### A BRIEF NOTE ON THE NEW YORK SUBWAY

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“**T**o hawks, these gritty country lanes must look like shingle beaches; the polished roads must gleam like seams of granite in a moorland waste,” J.A. Baker writes in *The Peregrine*. “All the monstrous acts of man are natural, untainted things to them.”<sup>1</sup> *The Peregrine* tells the journey of a man who follows the birds obsessively, observing them throughout a full year as they fly, hunt or rest in Eastern England. Slowly, the reader notices changes in Baker’s tone: as he embeds himself in the nature of peregrines, he perhaps becomes a little bit of a peregrine himself. Through his intimate relationship with the birds, Baker also manages to attest to an unexpected nature of gritty country lanes and polished roads, gleaming from afar.

I read *The Peregrine* in the New York subway, an infrastructure that can easily be classified as one such “monstrous act,” equally natural for the rats that roam its tracks. Published in 1904, *The New York Subway: Its Construction And Equipment* begins with this hopeful suggestion: “The completion of the rapid transit railroad in the boroughs of Manhattan and The Bronx, which is popularly known as the ‘Subway,’ has demonstrated that underground railroads can be built beneath the congested streets of the city, and has made possible in the near future a comprehensive system of subsurface transportation extending throughout the wide territory of Greater New

1 J. A. Baker. *The Peregrine*. New York: New York Review of Books, 2005.

York.”<sup>2</sup> With the construction of this comprehensive network, New York City would emerge as what Rosalind Williams calls “a unified system,” its proper functioning depending on buried subsystems of electrical power, of sewer and water service, of subway and telephone lines. “Only when the underground was crowded with utility lines did it become possible to provide relatively decent living conditions for so many people crowded together above the surface,” Williams adds. “The networked city made possible the city of skyscrapers.”<sup>3</sup> The subsurface became the catalyst for this dense surface to sprout and flourish, serving as a prosthetic. But while unifying the city, the subway also introduced a whole new category of accidents, violence, and risks.

As I stand on subway platforms, I often imagine how it would feel to fall onto the tracks, and experience an inexplicable fear. I am afraid of speed, steel, and disfigurement, most likely death. The other day a friend, who knew about my emergent phobia, sent me an email with the subject line “You can survive!” where he shared links to two news pieces. One of them was about a man named Ralph Mercado, who survived the fall by lying flat between the rails. “It’s unclear how Mercado ended up on the tracks,” the article suggests, “Although he told police he’d been trying to rescue a woman who’d fallen on the tracks, witnesses say there was no such woman. Mercado was taken to Bellevue Hospital for psychological evaluation.” Three days after Mercado, a blind man and his dog fell onto the tracks in my favorite subway station: 125<sup>th</sup> street. “Miraculously,” the article underlined, “the blind man, who the New York Post has identified as 60-year-old Cecil Williams, and his dog, both survived. According to the MTA, after responders pulled them from underneath the train, both were taken to St. Luke’s Hospital.” The seeing eye dog, named Orlando, had tried to pull Williams from the platform edge, but once Williams was on the tracks, Orlando had jumped after him. “The man and his dog lay flat between the rails,” the article states, “allowing the train to roll over them. Only Williams’ face was injured in the accident.”

But perhaps my fear of falling onto the tracks was less about the train, and more about the people waiting with me on the platform. I learned from *The Peregrine* how birds find machines so much more reliable than humans. “Hawks perch near fields where tractors are working, because that is where birds are constantly on the move. There is always something to watch, or something to kill if the hawk should be hungry. They have learnt that the dreaded man-shape is harmless while the tractor is in motion,” J. A. Baker writes, “They do not fear machines, for a machine’s behavior is so much more predictable than man’s. When the tractor stops, the hawk is immedi-

2 Interborough Rapid Transit Company. *The New York Subway: Its Construction and Equipment*. New York: Interborough Rapid Transit Co, 1904.

3 Rosalind H. Williams. *Notes on the Underground: An Essay on Technology, Society, and the Imagination*. Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1990.



ately alert. When the driver walks away, the hawk moves to a more distant perch.” Some weeks after reading this passage, I saw a call for witnesses on the stairs leading to the 145<sup>th</sup> street subway station. An unknown perpetrator had pushed a 72-year-old man onto the tracks during rush hour. The old man had suffered serious injuries, unlike the two previously noted victims who had miraculously survived the fall and made it to the news. I imagined being part of this incident—as a perpetrator, a victim, a witness, or a detective—thereby becoming one of the many agents interpreting,

recording, or directing the subway tracks, and finally shaping them as the objects that I fear.

I also began thinking that my fear of the tracks might be more about speed, steel and disfigurement, and less about death, after I passed out inside of a busy subway car. I was standing up and reading Cesar Aira’s *An Episode in the Life of a Landscape Painter*, where German painter Johann Moritz Rugendas, who is trying to produce realistic representations of nature, gets caught in a lightning storm in South America, struck twice, and then dragged along the ground by his terrified horse. Soon after, his companion finds him unconscious. “They washed his face and tried to put it back together, manipulating the pieces with their fingertips; they applied witch hazel dressings to speed the healing and checked that there were no broken bones,” Aira writes. “His clothing was torn, but except for minor cuts and a few abrasions to his chest, elbow and knees his body was intact; the major damage was limited to his head, as if it were the bearing that he had rolled on,” I read, “The body is a strange thing, and when it is caught up in an accident involving non-human forces, there is no predicting the results.”<sup>4</sup> When I opened my eyes, the two women who were seated right next to me were offering me their seats, and asking if I’d like a sugary drink. I was so thin, and I looked so vulnerable. We remained stuck inside the subway car for a long time, because of an undeclared problem for which the conductor candidly apologized.

I finished *An Episode in the Life of a Landscape Painter* in a coffee shop outside the subway station, and found out how Rugendas, mutilated and

4 César Aira. *An Episode in the Life of a Landscape Painter*. New York: New Directions, 2006.

forever dependent on morphine to quell paralyzing nervous seizures, managed to survive. In some ways, Rugendas had embodied the violent moment of the lightning strike, serving as a corporeal representation of the landscapes that he attempted to paint. He had renamed his horse too, calling him Flash.

“I think [the hawk] regards me now as part hawk, part man,” J.A. Baker writes towards the end of his book, “worth flying over to look at from time to time, but never wholly to be trusted; a crippled hawk, perhaps, unable to fly or to kill cleanly, uncertain and sour of temper.” The author is an anomaly in the hawk’s world, a mutilated figure like Rugendas, only classifiable through his relationship to the birds. By interpreting, recording, or directing the subway tracks, or by merely imagining such agency, perhaps I could also embody the subsurface that I continuously inhabited. The neat categories of the human and its nonhuman environment would thereby disappear, opening the way for a subtle yet more complete unification.

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