

Subject: what I saw: travelogue October 23, 2001

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From: "Meyer, Klemens" <KMeyer@lifecspan.org>

To: lpmeyer1@ix.netcom.com, cmatmeyer@earthlink.net

Dear Leah, Benjamin, Nathaniel, Rebekah, Laura, Mommy and Daddy,

South of Springfield, the railroad runs along an embankment; the low-lying woodland outside my window is largely flooded. In the distance, I catch glimpses of Interstate 91. The red and yellow leaves are wonderful, although muted by the gray of the sky. The train was almost empty when we left Boston. It was only when the conductor told me that it would fill up in Springfield and Hartford that I realized that we would not be on the coastal route. It would be a little longer, he said, but the leaves were very pretty. I was pleased. I have always regarded the glimpses of ocean in Rhode Island and Connecticut as disappointing and too brief. I have never been this way before. It is very rural. It is reassuring how empty the world is once one leaves the city.

The landscape is mute, empty, and soothing. Most of the right of way is not too dirty. There was a bad stretch as we passed through Worcester, but somehow, it didn't bother me. I wondered what it would be like to spend one's life cleaning up a stretch of railroad embankment. Now we cross the Connecticut River. It is very shallow. There is nothing but water below my window. When the track curves East a bit, I can see the four or five cars ahead, and the engine. Watching the train in which one moves through the landscape seems a sort of metaphor for consciousness. Now we pass the old canal in Windsor Locks. It is full of green algae and leaves. Swans, ducks and perhaps Canada Geese are feeding on the river. We pause at the station. The door alarms, and the brakes creak. This track must have been repaired, for we are moving faster than on the run out to Springfield.

It is very comforting to sit here, my lap warmed by the computer. The CD I kept in my briefcase was Michala Petri playing Bach, Haendel and Telemann recorder sonatas. I brought headphones. It plays over and over again. The Realplayer software provides several 'visualizations', images that change with the pitch and volume. One is a cartoon of a cow nodding, but the others are tastefully abstract, and I play one, an experiment in Gesamtkunstwerk. Perhaps I would do better not to distract myself from the scenery. Now the whistle moans. We pass a field full of pumpkins, some broken, some half green, a junkyard, and a new prison. It is capped by rolls of shiny razor-like metal that makes barbed wire look gentle. The skyscrapers of downtown Hartford appear. Off to the left is that hard stretch of Route 84. We pass a burned out brick switch house. I have seen so much vacant real estate in the last three hours. The old church at the top of the embankment has barred windows. We pass through a tunnel. Here is the old brownstone railroad station in Hartford. There is a television cameraman filming the

train, and enough of a crowd of people on the platform that I wonder whether I will be able to continue to claim two seats.

Hurrah. We have left Hartford, and I am still alone. Now we are behind the Colt factory, now crossing under the highway. It is industrial wasteland. (Ten minutes later, after a trip to the bathroom, which is very clean, and doesn't smell). We have stopped at a small brick station. I see no sign. The arched window beneath the center gable has stain glass panels. In the waiting room, a ceiling fan spins. As we leave, I see that it is Berlin, CT. In the gully down below grade, two men in bright yellow reflective gear lean against a new backhoe. Everyone watches the train go by. An old woods road, now covered with grass, is blocked by two large white concrete blocks. And now the river again. Swans, some with their white bottoms in the air, others dignified and superficially observant. Here cedar bushes are growing up by the track, like those that line so much of Route 81.

Someone, perhaps Belinsky, writing of Gogol, compared his early works to a mirror travelling down the highway. That was of course nonsense. We should try reading Gogol out loud.

We stop at Meriden. The station is ugly and new. In the windows of the control room, the cars are reflected brightly; I see the conductor life a baby carriage off, and a boy with a backpack leaps on. The conductors, in their tall caps and dull blue uniforms, look timeless. What other uniform has changed as little in 100 years? This one looks at his watch - a timeless gesture. He consults the timetable, looks at his watch again, squints at the sky, as if it had something to do with the train's departure. He grasps the handrail, and steps aboard as we start to move, taking a few steps before stepping up. He would not otherwise be a conductor.

2:30 pm

My judgement that the trip via Springfield was prettier was correct. South of New Haven, it is harder to be enthusiastic about the view. There are four tracks here, two in either direction. In each direction, one has the new cement ties, and one has wood. On a siding, gray freight cars announce the Ringling brothers, 'barum and Bialek circus. The circus must have come to Bridgeport. Here is a large church. The school or parish house behind it has rolls of razor wire on its flat roof. At first I think that the church itself is unremarkable, but then I see that the cement statue standing in front of it, a bearded male figure carrying a child I believe, has a long staff in his right hand. It is a flagstaff, and he is carrying an American flag. A white ferry, the Park City, steams up into the channel as we pass. It is a car ferry. I suppose that it comes from Long Island. Here is the part of the Circus encampment. I look for tigers, but see no one.

2:49 pm

We are out of the city again. From time to time, a view of the shore opens up, and one sees marshes, cattails, a few birds. Then it vanishes again. The

foliage is earlier here, just yellow, with little red. Someone is eating something that has a very lingering sweet smell, or perhaps it is an ointment of some sort. Here is Norwalk. Up there on the hill that must be the hospital. It can't be a castle. Here is what seems to be a railroad building converted to a dwelling; there is a wooden deck, and there are window boxes.

5:00 pm

Now I am sitting in a low-ceilinged but elegant first class lounge at Pennsylvania Station. The walls and ceilings mix dark panelling (probably stained plywood) with faint grey and blue. The illumination is from small recessed lights with reflectors, very intense, spaced every 3-4 feet. The television is muted, and I can ignore it. As I entered, I encountered a cardiologist from the hospital, taking the train home from Charlotte, having stopped in New York to give a talk. He was very elegant in his pin-striped suit, but also friendly. I stopped to talk to him before submitting my ticket to the attendant behind the counter, and the latter eyed me curiously, wondering whether this character in his Polaroid belonged in the first class lounge. He was enthusiastic about my ticket on the Silver Meteor, and told me when dinner would be served. That's a good thing. Lunch was a cup of coffee and a big chocolate chip cookie, for \$3.25.

I have gotten a lot of work done today, answered or filed or deleted perhaps 200 of 750 email messages that had accumulated, and did some other paperwork as well.

Love,

Klemens