The Gesture of Searching

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Metagestures.

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Two minutes late today. Five minutes late yesterday. And three minutes late the day before that. Which makes ten minutes late in total this week so far. The bosses will not like that. At least, not the city bosses. The managers who sit between these frowning men and myself will take the heat; even though it’s never really their fault. The further down the line you get — which, not coincidentally, means the further you get from the city — the less people worry about that sort of thing. Here in the country, people prefer the train to be a bit late. It gives them more time to prepare for the journey, speaking practically, like packing, or mentally, in terms of getting all one’s thoughts together, before stepping on board. I suspect that the drivers understand this, and slow down a little, once they pass through the second or third valley. They may lose a bonus here or there. But nobody drives trains purely for the money. There is a fellowship that springs up along the railways, stitched together by the tracks: each train reinforcing the bond, like a giant, steam-powered zipper. After working four years on this humble platform — four years in human time, which I’m obliged to work under; twenty-eight years according to my own body clock — I know every driver’s name, every conductor’s name, and every signalman’s
name; and also the names of many of their children. Because of my special status, railway employees make a point of stopping here and introducing themselves. I suppose because I’m so quiet and obedient they find my presence soothing. They open up to me, in ways they wouldn’t normally so quickly. That was my experience for the first two years at least. But now the novelty has worn off, and people are more used to a canine stationmaster, they wave and smile, but don’t go out of their way to get to know me (or rather, give me the opportunity to know them). For my life isn’t terribly complicated. I rise at dawn in summer, or two hours before in winter, and conduct an inspection. I make sure the cleaner did her job in the evening, and that the waiting room is free of all rubbish, and that the grate is filled with firewood, or the fans are already on, depending on the season. I make sure the washrooms are not dirty, and that there is plenty of paper for the customers. I then go to my office, where I listen to the railway radio for any news of problems in the network. If all is well, they play slow big-band jazz classics, which I have learned to like (even as they made me howl in the beginning). At 8am, I make my way to the large megaphone which blossoms over the main door of Platform 1, like a steel orchid. From its rusting throat a metallic voice provides instruction for a ten-minute exercise routine, around which I am obliged to improvise, because the choreography involved was designed for humans, and not for the dozen or so dogs like myself, dotted around the network. (I was only the second dog to be employed by the Company here in Japan; and I like to think I have been doing such a good job that they felt confident in employing the others.) I bark my company pledge at the end of the exercise, and then return to the office, to communicate via telegraph with the signalmen down the track, who will have much more accurate information about my own line. A telephone, specially designed for my species, is also available to talk with other station masters along this particular route, which stretches approximately North–South from Mount Hiba to Yonago. (Obviously I cannot talk to the other stationmasters in their own language, but they have learned my different barks or whimpers to match the limited set of possi-
bilities around our various tasks.) On a normal weekday, I have six trains to shepherd on their way North or South, three in each direction. (This is excluding the two express trains which rumble through my day like angry dragons, and for which I must make sure there are no unsupervised children, or confused grandparents, ready to totter across the tracks.) Once my morning duties have been fulfilled to my satisfaction, I take a few laps of water from the bowl near the side of the station, below the tap (for this is thirsty work), and then take an enjoyable fifteen minutes to gnaw on the soup bones and random gristle which the owner of the nearby ramen stall brings for me, without fail, on his way to work. When the first train arrives, heading North, scheduled for 9.28am, I am back on the platform, ensuring that all visitors to the village have disembarked safely, before giving the signal to the driver that all is well to continue the journey. Our station is so small that only one human works here during the day — Kazumi — an old widow who sells tickets, as well as overly salty snacks that she makes in the evening. At the beginning of my time here we were very close, but over the years we found ourselves with less and less inclination to communicate, so have since drifted into a friendly kind of respect for each other’s spaces and silences. On festival days, however, Kazumi will give me a special treat, and tie a colorful ribbon on my collar. A series of different buzzing bells alert me to the progress of trains as they approach the station, but I don’t need them once they get to Aokakiyama. I can smell them. And once the passengers arrive, gathering like small flocks of birds on my platform, counting their luggage, or testing umbrellas, they arrive like a riot of fireworks for my nose; each person a cloud of olfactory information, most of which I am forced to ignore for the sake of keeping my mind on the job. They trail a pungent ribbon behind them, which remains for at least an hour after they depart, depending on the strength of the winds, and the resin density of the nearby pines. These people can be nuisances, especially the teenagers, who want to pull my tail, or take photographs with me when I’m in the middle of dealing with an urgent situation. I will admit that some of the more beautiful young women, or tender-heart-
ed young men, who stoop to admire my coat, paws, eyes, or ears will fill me with a warm glow. But mostly I consider them incidental to my day, even as I sometimes speculate about what brought them to my station specifically, of all the stations in the land. Some appear to be in mourning, returning — too late — to say goodbye to an estranged family member. Some are excited, embarking on some kind of expedition, which they no doubt hope will change their fortunes. Some are anxious, heading towards the nearby boarding school, or nurses training center. Others are distracted or suspicious, involved in shady business.

Thankfully I have only been obliged to alert the police on one occasion, due to a middle-aged couple who appeared respectable, but I could smell their intentions. They were stealing purses from the waiting room. I cornered and barked at them until the sergeant came, wheezing out of breath, red-faced at the prospect of using his new handcuffs. Not all the passengers are humans, however. Some lapdogs accompany their owners, of course, but I don’t have the time of day for these freeloaders. Occasionally I will steal a glance out of curiosity, but then I feel a flash of disgust in my stomach when I see their stupefied faces, fattened or flattened by their idle and meaningless lives, too lazy to even hold their tongues inside their closed mouths. There is one true dog I see on a regular basis, who rides up and down this line as part of a research project regarding his family. Our conversations were amiable enough at the beginning, but once we discovered that we both shared the same partner, perhaps even at the same time, things became a little strained. We still nod to each other when we cross paths. And we will even share a few stilted words about the weather, if the train is late. It seems rude to do otherwise. My closest friend, however, is Koichi. Koichi is a crow, blessed with the famous crow sense of irony. Koichi is something of a philosopher, and fills my head with all sorts of insightful observations, which I promptly forget when I hear a bell from the signalman, or a passenger needs to check the Lost & Found. Koichi has great contempt for the humans, which I secretly enjoy, even as I don’t share in this particular investment. He calls them “swarming shell creatures,” since they scurry be-
tween moving shells and stationary ones, rarely spending time in the Open. (And when they do, they cover themselves in soft shells, so as not to burn, or feel panic from exposure.) Koichi scavenges cigarettes from the waiting room, which he offers me every time, even as I have not once accepted. “Stupid humans,” he would mutter, sometimes with sake on his breath. “They jump on and off these racing shells. They puff smoke into the air to move faster than they are supposed to go. They are always in a hurry.” “Not always,” I counter, for the sake of conversation. “My customers can be very patient when need be.” Koichi would scowl: “No no. Always moving; unless they are forced to slow down because the shell-snake is late. That is so rare they build a special space for it. Waiting Room. They hate to be in one place for more than a minute, unless they are eating or copulating. They suffer from boredom, which is really just a form of blindness.” I often chuckle at such portraits of my masters, as I can see the truth in them, even if for me the knowledge has no sting or lesson. Koichi continues undaunted, however: “And blindly they search for the next moment, which lies around the corner. They do not understand that life has no direction. It radiates outward, like ripples in a pool. Time only becomes an arrow if you build giant bows, and launch missiles weighted with feathery futures.” Koichi’s poetic turns of phrase keep my mind as active as the megaphone voice does for my body. “But Koichi,” I respond, “do you not look forward to summer? Do you not anticipate your next meal or cigarette — just as I sit suspended until the next train arrives?” To this he sharpens his beak on the ground in exaggerated consternation. “Nonsense, canine. You understand nothing: sniffing with your ears and listening with your nose. In any case, you have spent so much time in proximity to these arrogant creatures that their blindness rubs off on you. I have seen you in the grip of boredom, during blackouts or strikes. You chase your own tail for want of a task.” To this I first shrug, since I know he prefers a jaded monologue over spirited debate, before adding: “The humans are restless, it is true. They are forever searching for something, which lies over not only my horizon, but seemingly theirs.” “Precisely!” caws Koichi. “They grope into
this imaginary space called *tomorrow*, with their hands and blind eyes. They hide in shells, but then send such shells into the sky, across the sea. No doubt they will build train tracks to the moon soon enough. But what are they searching for?” To this I merely blink and wait, guessing the answer from so many similar conversations. “Aaaahhh,” Koichi says. “You take me for a two-bit sage. You think I am going to say ‘themselves,’ as if this were some great revelation. But no, they search for an escape from themselves. They envy us our ability to lead an unsearching existence, beyond the bare necessities of life. And so they seek the origins of their driven nature. They suspect that the secret of their restlessness is hidden in the place where it began: their ridiculous ‘humanity.’ Clearly these shell creatures are lost monkeys, and they want to take the rest of us with them.” I nod, persuaded by Koichi’s words more than I care to admit, as he continues. “They think they scare my kind with those absurd scarecrows. Those effigies to their own spiritual inertia. When the most frightening thing is when a human arrives with measuring tools and clipboards. My blood goes cold when they measure and point and plan. You don’t remember how beautiful this area was before the puffing shell-snakes came. My ancestors keep detailed records, which they sing to us as children. I have played in this landscape before the trains, through these songs. If you knew what these forests were like, you would not be so proud of your work, dreaming about your big bonus bone from the Company when you retire.” I involuntarily move from a vigilant sitting position to resting my chin on the platform. “Who knows,” Koichi concludes. “You may even start smoking, like me.” Together we would always reach such impasses, and then share a silence together that meant more to me than all his clever and bitter words. Then, eventually, when we could hear the signals warning traffic of an oncoming train a mile away, I would remember that I was master of this station, nod my parting respects to my friend, and prepare for another freight of these intriguing soft shell-creatures: the first to drive a wedge between time and space, before trying to stitch them back to-
gether again, as witnessed in the fading timetables, pinned to my office wall.