

“It delivers milk to the town,” Pete said with a straight face. “But it’s hot coming out of the cow, see? So they take a turn up by the mountain lake to cool it off.”

“A whole railroad just for milk? That’s pretty stupid.”

“Would you just be quiet and watch for a minute, for crissakes,” said Bill.

“Oh, so now you’re telling me to shut up in front of your friends.”

Eloise had her train connected, and her face went ever so slightly dreamy. She toggled the black handle of her transformer, and the cars eased off the illuminated bumpers on the siding and onto the main track, like a ghost sliding on melted butter. Eloise had great hands, the best of all of us, although I was no slouch myself.

Cindy came over and slumped against my side, making me feel her warmth, the soft cushion of her hips. She slung her damp arm around my neck. “He doesn’t like it when I call him out for being mean to me,” she said into my ear in a stage whisper. I was manning my own transformer, so I had nowhere to go. I braced myself against her, and my eyes met Bill’s. He looked like he’d bit down on a bad peanut. Her arm was heavy on my shoulder, so I shrugged apologetically with just my face.

Pete cleared his throat. “Okay, let’s do this,” he said.

The four of us silently redirected our attention to Eloise’s train coming up slowly on the town. I started my own train way up on the hill. Today I was running a Baldwin Centipede with Santa Fe slogan reefers.

“What’s up with all those logs? What’s this, the clear-cut express? The spotted owl death camp train?”

“The logs are going to make baby cribs,” Eloise said. “Safe, natural wooden baby cribs.”

Cindy picked up my mailman and put him in harm’s way. “Look out! There’s an old guy on the tracks.” Eloise’s train knocked him off into the front steps of City Hall. His tiny mailbag broke off.

“You’re just going to run him over? You’re not stopping? Boy, you guys are something.”

Eloise’s train climbed, and she pushed the transformer throttle further open. The DynaChuff was picking up tempo like a snorting bull. Then she let loose with the quilling whistle. If you think about the physics of sound—about amplitude and frequency—the problems involved in mechanically making a *miniature* sound are just fantastically

complex. But it was shrill, it was lonely, and it wavered up and down, like a baby’s cry, like midnight in Mississippi with hellhounds on your trail.

My train triggered a banjo signal, and its arm flicked out just as neat as could be. I started coming down off the hill, toward the rock pier bridge over the crossing point of the figure eight. In a moment, Eloise’s train would barrel through the aperture in the jagged black rocks, while my train was rushing overhead on the authentically rusted steel girders. We barely breathed, both of us easing off our throttles in tiny increments, shooting to get both engines to hit the center of the bridge at the same moment so that the trains would be crossing for the longest possible time. We leaned forward in anticipation. The whistle quavered.

“Do you ever run them right into each other? Do you ever do, like massive Amtrak system breakdown, two hundred fatalities shit?”

“Right now,” Bill said. “The reason we do this is happening right now. And you’re missing it. You’re missing everything.”

Edward Porter’s short fiction has appeared in *Glimmer Train*, the *Hudson Review*, the *Gettysburg Review*, *Colorado Review*, *Barrelhouse*, *Best New American Voices*, and elsewhere. He holds an MFA from Warren Wilson College and a Ph.D. from the University of Houston. A former Madison, MacDowell, and Stegner Fellow, he is currently a Jones Lecturer in Fiction at Stanford University.

ROBERT BLITZER

Lucky, 2014

Acrylic and oil on canvas, 72 x 53 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST