

Ali Smith, Public Library (2015)

Last

I had come to the conclusion. I had nothing more to say. I had looked in the cupboard and found it was bare. I had known in my bones it was over. I had reached the end of my tether. I had dug until I'd hit rock bottom. I had gone past the point of no return. I had come to the end of the line.

But at the end of the line, when the train stopped, like everybody else I got off and walked back along the platform to the exit. I scrabbled in my pocket for the ticket, fed the ticket into the slot in the machine. The machine snatched it with what felt like volition but what was really only automation, then opened its padded gates for me and shut them behind me. Then I walked out past the taxis, across the dismal car park and up the pedestrian bridge.

From here I could see the empty train, the same train we'd all just been on, as it shunted from the

platform to wherever the empty trains go. From this angle I could see into the carriages, in fact I could see right into the carriage I'd just travelled to the end of the line in.

The carriage had been packed, all the seats taken ten minutes before the train left and the train still filling with people until the moment before its doors closed on us; the journey had been an exercise in aloofness, with people who didn't know each other swaying towards then carefully away from each other in the aisles, people trying to not sway into each other in the doorways, people towering above the rather buxom woman in the wheelchair, reading the magazine. She'd been there in the special wheelchair-designated place when I boarded the train. Somehow the swaying standing people were worse above her head, I thought, than they were above the heads of people just sitting ordinarily in the train seats; somehow it was the last word in rudeness, that the edge of one man's open jacket kept brushing against the back of her head.

That's how I knew, from up here on the slant of the bridge, that this train below was the same train I'd just been on, and that's how I could spot exactly the carriage I'd been on, because that woman in the wheelchair who'd been in the same carriage as me was still there on that empty train, I could see from here that she was leaning forward in her chair and

beating on the train door with her fist. I could see she was yelling. I knew she was making a lot of noise and I knew I couldn't hear any of it.

I watched the silent beat of her. Then the train slid out of view.

The driver will find her, I thought. Surely they check to make sure their trains are empty. Surely people must fall asleep or be caught on trains like that all the time. Probably she has a mobile and has called people and let them know. It's even possible that she wants to be on that train, that she's meant to be on it, there, alone.

But through the scratchy perspex of the other side of the pedestrian bridge I could see that there was a footworn footpath going down towards the rails, the kind we used to make in the riverbanks and slopes of the fields when I was a child, the kind that people make in places where paths aren't supposed to be.

At the bottom of the path the barbed-wire fence that shut the station off from the public was splayed open the size of a big dog or a crouching adult. Next to this hole was a sign which said, in letters large enough for me to be able to read them from here, that trespassing was prohibited, that the only people allowed past this point were rail personnel. If we find you trespassing you will be fined.

I found I was thinking about the person, or people, who'd originally worded that sign. Had

there been special meetings held to decide the wording? Did they, or he, or she, pause for a moment at all over find and fined?

And why, anyway, did the word fine mean a payment for doing something illegal at the same time as it meant everything from okay to really grand? And was it at all connected that the word grand could also mean a thousand pounds? Did that mean that notions of fineness and grandness, in their travelling etymologies, were often tied up with notions of money? I hadn't a clue. But I had an urge to look them up in a dictionary and see. It was the first urge to do such a thing I'd had in quite a while.

I turned round. I retraced my steps down the slant of the bridge and under the little barrier between the bridge and the grassy bank. I went down the path towards the hole in the bent-back fence. I slid myself through the space without catching my clothes on any of the sharp cut-open bits of it and I stood up straight again in the litter next to the bramble bushes. I glanced one way then the other along the set of rails in front of me. A train was up ahead of me. I wondered if it was the right train. There was something fine in it, just walking along a forbidden track, thinking pointlessly about words. Travelling etymologies, that was a good phrase. It would be a good name for a rock band. It would be a good social-

anthropological name for a tribe of people who jumped rolling-stock and lived on it, sheltering under waterproofed tarpaulins when it rained, sitting when it was sunny on the footplate spaces, if that's what they were called, or lying stretched out on the tops of the cargoes of carriages; reprobates, meaningful dropouts, living a freer, more meaningful life than any of us others was able to choose. The Travelling Etymologies. It was a good idea, and now, background-murmuring through my head again, for the first time in ages, was a welcome sound, the sound of the long thin neverending-seeming rolling-stock of words, the sound of life and industry, word after word after word coupled to each other by tough little iron joists, travelling from the past through the present to the future like rolling stones that gather moss after all.

I mean, take a rich, full word like buxom, which was a word I knew the history of, since at another point in my life, in what felt like a life centuries earlier than this one now, I had liked words immensely and thought a lot about using them and about how they were used. At the beginning of its history buxom meant obedient, compliant, gracious. Then later in time it meant blithe, and lively, then a bit later still it started to mean overweight, because larger people are traditionally seen as blithe and cheery. Then it stopped being about both men and women and became only about

women, in a revealing fusion of compliant, obedient, merry and big-breasted.

Or the word aloof, which was a shipping term, came from luff, the word for the command to distance your boat from something too dangerously close to it. Or the word clue, too, which came from the word for a ball of thread and the coinage of which was probably something to do with the big ball of string Theseus took into the labyrinth with him to mark his way out and defeat the Minotaur. Ariadne got it from Daedalus, the inventor, and she gave it to Theseus, with whom she was in love, and the ball of string saved his life and made him a hero. Then he abandoned her on Naxos island. She woke on the beach and she hadn't a clue where he'd gone till she saw the sails of his ship disappearing over the sea's horizon. Now that's what I call aloof. I was walking the outside length of a dark, dead, switched-off train. Words were stories in themselves. Stamina was another good one, whose root and path I couldn't remember wholly but knew was something to do with the length of a person's life, the length of the life-force allotted to each of us at birth. Strength and fragility both, something lasting and something fearfully delicate, held there in the one word, and there in front of me was the door with the woman in the wheelchair behind it, who, when she saw movement below her – I say below her because I was down on ground level,

quite different from platform level and platform perspective, and could look in through the dark glass of the door and make out her ankles on the chair's fold-out footrests – knocked what she could reach of herself and her chair against the glass with such eagerness, force and determination that I knew properly for the first time exactly what the word stamina meant.

Hello! I shouted up.

I saw her mouth open and close. I looked high above my head at the buttons with which we usually open the doors of trains. They were unlit, as I expected.

I stood back in the grass so she could see me more clearly and I waved my arms about. I realized I could say anything to this person and she wouldn't be able to hear; I realized that unless she could lip-read she'd not know what I was saying. I could ask her what had happened to her, why and how she was in a wheelchair. I could recite the whole of *Kubla Khan* by Coleridge, or tell her all about Theseus and Ariadne, and she'd have to listen, while not listening at all, obviously. It had the makings of the perfect relationship. I could tell her endlessly, boringly, about words and how they meant and why they mattered, and what had happened in my life to make them not matter.

Instead, what I found myself talking about was the place where my father had his workshop when I

was a child, and how it had been at the back of the railway, so that I had spent a lot of my holiday hours in the grassy banks alongside sets of rails much like where we were now.

It's been bulldozed, years ago, I said to the woman behind the glass doors. There's a furniture warehouse on it now, it's a shopping mall and a station car park where the old workshops were. It was a kind of nowhere, a nowhere before the new nowheres that shopping malls are now. It was quite a special place. The grass there was thick with clover, presumably it still is, if there's any grassy space there that still goes straight down to earth. Finding four-leafed clovers there was pretty mundane. We found five- and six- and seven-leafed clovers there too, and once an eight. I put what I found in a book. I've no idea which book. They must still be somewhere on the shelves in the house, folded flat in there with their ridged green leaves arranged so you could see how many. I wonder if I'd find any if I were to go home and look for them tonight. Needle in a haystack. Clover in a shut book.

When I finished speaking the woman behind the doors began saying something impatient-looking. But listening for what I couldn't hear had made my ears different. Now I could hear birds, air, the traffic in the distance. Then what I could hear most clearly was unexpected music.

Three boys were coming along the path I thought of as my path now, along the side of the train. One had a ghetto blaster. A black dog with his lead trailing on the ground was ahead of them, stopping to sniff the grass and stones, then loping off in front again when the boys got ahead instead. The dog saw me and stopped. The boys stopped. They were all in clothes that looked too big for them. The dog was streamlined in comparison, held in one neat piece by his skin. They backed up two or three steps as if they were all part of the same single body. Then they shrugged apart and came forward again, because I was no threat to anyone.

Trespassing's illegal, one of the boys said to me when they were close enough.

I said nothing. I pointed to the woman in the train.

She's got wheels, man, the smallest boy said to the others.

All three waved to the woman. She waved back. One boy held up a packet of cigarettes. The woman nodded and shouted the silent word yes. The boy with the ghetto blaster turned the volume off.

Can't hear you, he shouted.

The woman mouthed the word yes again, with finesse, as if very quietly. The boy with the cigarette packet opened the packet, took out two cigarettes and threw them both at the shut door. Somehow it was funnier because he threw two cigarettes, not

just one. The woman held up her hand as if to say, wait a minute. She put her other hand in a bag on the side of the chair and took out an umbrella with a hooked handle. Then she backed her chair away from the door. She wheeled herself into the carriage, lined up the wheelchair next to the train seats and, using all the strength in her arms, she lifted and shifted herself from the wheelchair on to the seat. She got her breath back. She bent her head over the umbrella, lengthened the umbrella somehow, then she reached with the lengthened umbrella to hook open the little train window above her.

The boys cheered. I did too. Now we could hear the woman's voice through the open window. She said in a voice that was proper, rather upper middle class, that she wished she'd thought how to open that window earlier, and that she would love a cigarette, that she hadn't had a cigarette for over five years now, that she deserved one after today. She thanked the boys. She turned then and said a separate hello to me, as if we were all at a party she'd thrown and she was simply emphasizing how very pleased she was to see each and every one of us.

I saw you on the train looking so thoughtful, she said. Thank you for finding me.

The notion that I had been seen, and that from the outside I had at some unknowing point looked thoughtful, made me feel strange, better. The idea

that I had found anything filled me with wonder. As the boys took turns trying to throw single cigarettes up in the air and through the open window, I felt myself become substantial. Now the boys were scrabbling about on the ground trying to find the fallen cigarettes, arguing about picking the cigarettes up off the ground and not crushing them. They shouted with happiness when one went through the high window and landed on the woman's lap. They argued about whose aim was truest, who would be best to throw the little red plastic lighter.

Inside the train the woman waved her hands to get their attention.

She tossed the cigarette up at her mouth and caught it the wrong way round, like a minor circus trick. The three boys shouted their admiration. She took the cigarette out of her mouth, put it the right way round, then got herself ready to catch the lighter, which she did, with one hand. She lit her cigarette. The tallest, the shyest of the three, tapped on the sealed window with the stick he was carrying and pointed it at the No Smoking logo. He blushed with pleasure at the way his friends laughed, the way the woman laughed behind the window, the way I was laughing too.

I stood directly under the open window and shouted up through it that I was off to find someone to unlock the train and let her out.

The smallest boy snorted a laugh.

Don't need to go nowhere, he said. We'll get your friend out.

All three boys stood back from the train carriage. The smallest scouted about for a pebble. The other two bent down and picked up large stones. The dog started to bark. It was almost immediately after they began throwing the stones at the side of the train that the men in the luminous waistcoats came running towards us.

Shortly after this the afternoon came to an end. We said our goodbyes. We went our different ways. I myself went back to the station and bought a ticket home. What was it you were telling me down there? the woman asked me when she'd finally got off the train, after they'd backed it to a platform, opened its doors, brought the sloping ramp they use to help people in wheelchairs to get on and off and allowed her to wheel herself out. There were many apologies from people in suits and uniforms. Well, that's the last time I take the train! is what she said, with some campness and a great deal of panache, when the doors finally automatically hissed open on her like the curtains of a strange tiny theatre. The people on the platform laughed politely. She didn't mean it, of course she didn't.

In Shakespeare, the word stone can also mean a mirror.

The word pebble has, in its time, also meant a

lens made of rock crystal and a sizeable amount of gunpowder.

The word mundane comes from *mundus*, the Latin word for the world.

At one time the word cheer seems to have meant the human face.

The word last is a very versatile word. Among other more unexpected things – like the piece of metal shaped like a foot which a cobbler uses to make shoes – it can mean both finality and continuance, it can mean the last time, and something a lot more lasting than that.

To conclude once meant to enclose.

To tell has at different times meant the following: to express in words, to narrate, to explain, to calculate, to count, to order, to give away secrets, to say goodbye.

To live in clover means to live luxuriously, in abundance.