



**THE
ADA
CAMBRIDGE
BIOGRAPHICAL
PROSE
PRIZE
2024**

FIRST PRIZE

CAN YOU HEAR ME? *by* CATHERINE PADMORE

You're still at the desk. A quick glance at the clock. Ten past four. Yep, time to smash out one more email before legging it. You press 'send' and shut everything down, and then you're off. Racing down the hill to the station with wings on your feet, timed to the minute. It's hotter than you thought out here, the afternoon sun scalding, but you hurry on with an awkward gait, backpack bumping your sacrum in a weird, syncopated rhythm. There's a lunchbox in there, your keep-cup too, clattering together with every step, but you haven't got time to stop and sort it out. You stagger onto the platform, sweat all down your back, and check the board. You made it. A minute to spare even. Train's late anyway, delayed by five minutes, but you weren't to know. You pace the platform, pace again, inhale deep to let your breath settle. At least you're getting some incidental exercise. You check your watch, check the board again. Somehow it's still five minutes until the next train. Feels like the board will say 'five minutes' for ever.

At the end of the line, your kid's in after-hours care at his primary school. You and your partner have got into a rhythm to manage the pick-up and drop-offs. This morning you were

at work crazy early, and now you're bailing early to get your child. The timetable is burned into your mind. If you catch this train, or the next one at the very latest, you'll be there before the place shuts at six. And if something goes wrong? Then he'll be stuck with the last staff member looking at her own watch and totting up the late fees. Is it sixty bucks every quarter hour? You can't remember, but hopefully the train will pull up soon and you'll be alright. You haven't had to deal with any fines yet, but it's been close. Too close. Twice you've arrived as they're locking up, just in time to whisk away your kid without penalty. You hate that he's always the last to be picked up, that you have to hurry him home and burn through the evening processes at light speed, but it's just how it is right now. One day it will be different. One day there'll be time.

When the horn blasts around the bend towards the city, you shuffle up to where you think the door will stop. Others lurk as well, everyone keen to get in first and maybe snag a spare seat. Unlikely, though. This time of day they're hard to come by. You ready yourself for entry, keep an eye on who's standing nearby so you don't get shoved. It wouldn't happen like this in Japan. The platforms are crowded but

they have footprints painted to show exactly where the doors will open and where the incoming passengers should stand while those on the train stream out. Everyone waits their turn; it's not some free-for-all where the fastest in gets the prize. The trains wouldn't be late there, either. A memory comes to you, then — being on an intercity platform in Japan, your kid agape as the bullet train slid quietly past. The wind on your faces. A fast ride out to Kyoto, then a slow walk through one of the temples. Stillness, despite the city's hustle.

When the train pulls up it's crowded, ridiculously so, every window gliding by like a Cubist nightmare of ears, limbs and headphones. They must have cancelled the previous train, and now everyone's piled onto this one. The doors open, and by some miracle you're not too far off. A few commuters pour out, but not as many as you'd hoped, and the air coming out with them is hot and fuggy. Of course the air-con is stuffed. You step in under someone's raised arms, position yourself awkwardly in a tiny space. Breathe deep to hold yourself there, to fend off the feeling of others piled right on top of you. You can taste perfume; someone must have doused themselves before they left the office. God knows what's in it, but it's coating your tongue, like the night-fur when you wake in the morning.

The train races away and you steel yourself upright, clutch the nearest seatback so you don't sag into the person pressed next to you. Underneath the train's hum are tinny sounds from headphones. Music maybe, or podcasts, or voice-overs from TV: all buzzing like mosquitos. Everyone near you has their phone poised high

in front of their face, or low, with them bent forward at some weird angle, scrolling avidly. You've read somewhere that kids doing this a lot develop bony growths on their skulls due to the weight of the head in that pose. Horns even. Ha. The thought appeals. You hate their self-satisfied smiles, beatific, even the wry ones too. The little snorts people make at whatever they're watching. Others have their faces scrunched up in some odd private expression, like they're half asleep or they've forgotten they're in public. There's often a woman on your usual morning train who sits one booth down and uses her phone's camera in reverse, like a mirror, to put on her make-up. Goes through the process carefully: foundation, blush, eyeliner, mascara. Manages to avoid great splats of it, even when the train lurches round tight bends. On those mornings powder swirls about her in clouds to land on your own skin. Part of you wants her to stuff it up, to trudge into work with a slash of rogue eyeliner, or lipstick all smeared. Never happens, though. She's perfected her routine. This afternoon the train is getting hotter and hotter. Everyone around you is flushed and shiny now, and no amount of cosmetic will sop that up. The work-friendly clothes don't help: nylon hangs well and won't crease, but by this point in the day it's like being wrapped in clingfilm. The armpit nearest you is emitting dangerous levels of BO_2 ; you inhale only shallowly.

As the train accelerates out from the next station, you count a few seconds and then know you're crossing the creek. Not a hope of seeing it now, wedged in as you are, but it's there. Only a little one, low and slow-flowing this time of year.

Nothing spectacular, just a weed-filled gully underneath a concrete bridge, but still. It feels important to look, to acknowledge even if you can't look. Before your kid was at school, when you used to travel with him on the train to the childcare centre near your work, you'd draw his attention to it. Maybe ducks were rippling the surface, or someone had thrown an old bike in there. Maybe the creek had busted its banks, swollen with winter rain. There was always something to look at. You made sure you'd talk to him all the way, or read aloud from his battered book, or point at the flock of corellas out the window, or the rainbow. It mattered to you to be present, to witness the world passing by. Tried to keep the screens to a minimum at home as well. He hates you for it now, for withholding when all his friends have unlimited access. Thinks you're a mean dinosaur because they've all seen R-rated horror films and he's still stuck in boring old PG. Sometimes at dinner he'll say, 'We need to have a conversation about technology,' and you direct him to eat his peas, and then try to articulate a logical argument. Mostly, though, you can't find words for it but feel the wrongness in your body every time you see a four-year-old stumbling down the street with an iPhone in front of its nose, or even littler ones in high-chairs at cafes with a tablet perched nearby and *Dora the Explorer* screeching. 'Just one more spoonful,' the parent says, and the child swallows without even realising. It makes you want to pick up the tablet, hurl it far away. Maybe you are an old dinosaur, after all.

Two stations up, the doors open and everyone shuffles to make room for new passengers. You

seize the opportunity, readjust your grip and stretch a bit, claim a fraction more space. Just as the doors are beeping shut, a man hurries on, phone to his ear. He's middle-aged, round in the tummy. Somehow he fits himself right next to you, like he has a radar for the space you just created.

'Mum?' he asks. 'Can you hear me? Mum?'

He pulls the phone away, squints at the screen, lifts his glasses up to peer closer.

'Oh,' he says. 'You're there. Dad was trying to get onto you. He was worried. I'll call him now.'

The man hangs up, dials, fills his dad in on the mother's situation. The train hurtles into a tunnel then, and in the sudden darkness the man's face is underlit with a blue glow from the phone.

'Dad?' he says. 'I've lost you.'

The dad doesn't answer, and it's quite poignant, the son waiting in darkness, the silence. All of us waiting with him. Then we're out of the tunnel and into the light again, and the man's back talking to his dad. Normality restored. Another phone blares, further down the carriage, with that incoming missile alert ringtone. The woman who answers has her caller on speaker. The doctors have found something, apparently, and they're going to go in next week for a biopsy. The caller's daughter's going to take her to the appointment, as long as the neighbour can look after her dog. It's a Dalmatian, terribly needy, can't be left alone for more than a few minutes. You hold them in your head, all these details of strangers' lives, wonder what will happen to them, wonder what will happen when your head fills up.

At the next station, a delay. The train just sits there. Passengers around you shuffle, look at their watches, murmur. You check the time yourself. Ten past five. Getting tight now. Should you text the after-school staff? Not yet, maybe hold off. There's still a chance. In the seat nearest you, two teenagers huddle close together, each with a wireless earbud, throwing banter back and forward and every second word an f-bomb. Playing on the phone between them is a cartoon version of Greta's speech at the UN from a few months back. The animated caricature is accurate, if cruel. Cartoon-Greta has the same neat plait and broad face as the real one, but the grimaces on this one's face are etched deeper. When she gets really emotional her eyes gleam, like some anime figure, and her face is extra-wizened. You can't hear the words, but you've heard them before. A plea for action. Planet dying. Tipping points. Feedback loops.

'How dare you?' she's saying. 'You've stolen my dreams.'

While you're all marooned at the station, the boys watch the video on repeat, laughing harder each time. Are they laughing at her? Or the prospect of the planet burning? Either way, you'd love to bang their heads together, make them see sense. They'll be the ones trying to solve this mess in the future, you realise, and something withers inside. 'I'm doing this for you, Greta,' you want to scream. You could be cruising home alone in your diesel-guzzling vehicle, crawling along at five kilometres an hour, maybe less, in total gridlock. At least you'd be in a little bubble of quiet, though, maybe listening to the same bands you did as a teenager, when you

shared earbuds with your own friend on the bus to school. But you've made a choice. For all the Gretas. For your own kid. So he's not left with some apocalyptic hell once you've gone.

At last, the PA crackles: an unwell passenger had to be escorted off. Should be moving again soon. A chorus of sighs around you. A few months back, on your journey home, you had a woman faint on you. It was a remarkable thing. You were wedged near the door, wondering whether there'd be enough room to retrieve your book from your backpack. The train pulled up to the next station and people were filing out. This woman stepped over the threshold and then everything went limp. She crumpled. You were able to half-catch her, but both of you ended up on the floor, her in your arms with one leg poking out through the open door to the platform. Passengers nearby looked up from their devices briefly, then looked back. The doors started to beep, warning of imminent closure. You'd yelled then, for someone to help, but it hadn't got through their headphones. You eyeballed a young girl near the emergency stop button, who was trying hard not to catch your gaze. 'Press it,' you'd said firmly, your leg wedged in the door to stop it closing, but even then she held back. It took everything you had to keep calm, not to shriek obscenities at her. In the end she pressed the button and the safety processes kicked in: the train waited; the train officials came to help the woman and take her onto the platform; the train resumed its journey. Ever since, you have wondered why no one helped.

When the train pulls away, there's a little cheer from strangers united by inconvenience.

Twenty-five past five now. You're cutting it fine. Should you ring? You toss it up, decide to hold off. In the gap between this station and the next you try to remember what you dreamt last night. You didn't sleep especially well. Your kid never was a sleeper, so your body's long-trained to wake in the dark, quiet hours. About half two, usually. You lie there with brain racing, endless loops in your head about what needs to be done the next day, for which person. The looming deadlines. Often there's a generalised throb of anxiety and dread, but no sense of what you have woken from. Not even a fragmented image or residual emotion. You must dream, surely, but when you wake there's only void, and a thudding heart. It's hours before your eyes are heavy again, but most nights you catch a little more sleep before the alarm. Enough to keep you going. You wonder sometimes: how long can you continue before something gives?

The next stop's a transit hub; a lot of people get off, and only a few get on, and the dynamics within the carriage shift. Those remaining reposition themselves for maximum space between. There's probably an algorithm to predict it these days. You get a seat at last. In an empty booth, even, so you can sag against the window, feel the relief in your body as the train pulls away. You force your eyes to stay open, though, in case you fall asleep and end up carried all the way back into town. Can you imagine explaining that to the after-school care team?

The houses are further apart now, with gums scattered between; the suburbs ruptured by a strip of parched yellow paddocks under the

powerlines. Maybe there'll be kangaroos — you look, but the only moving things are tussocks of dry grass, a cockatoo wheeling high up. Half-five now: three stations to go. If nothing changes, you should just make it. You reach in reflex for your book. There's time for a quick read, just a few pages. It's still work — you're teaching this story tomorrow — but it's something. A moment for yourself, a wall to hide from it all. Your son showed you a photo once, of people in the twenties on a tram, heads in newspapers, and a worried commentary from back in the day about the loss of social connection. 'See?' he said. You clutch the book tighter. It's not the same thing. It's not.

In the booth closest to you, four teenagers have settled in. You steel yourself for more of the usual, all the barbs and obscenities, the brashness, but these kids are different. There's softness to them, the way they lean in close to talk. Their words are so quiet you can't make out what they're saying, just a few snatches about music, orchids, tempeh. All four are dressed in op-shop vintage — browns and burgundies, velvet and corduroy — but they're not clones. One boy has paint-spattered hands. The girl across from him holds a guitar, strums it gently as her friends speak. Between them thrums energy, enthusiasm, joy. Maybe the planet will be alright, after all.

At the next stop a man gets on, blocks the doors with his back so his dog can waddle in before they beep closed. The man sits right next to you even though there are plenty of empty seats, lets his legs flop open in a wide stance. You think back to Japan, of the separate carriages

offered there for women. You shift sideways so your bodies aren't touching, so his warmth doesn't reach your thigh. The dog is a great drooling mastiff, which pins you with its eyes. Takes your measure. One false move, the glare says, and I'll get you. The man scrolls through his phone. Your own eyes are drawn to it, can't help themselves, to scan what he is reading. The usuals: Facebook, Insta, Twitter. Somewhere in

China, a headline says, a mystery pneumonia has killed two people. You wrench your eyes away, refuse to look at the dog, barricade yourself in your book. Five forty now. Just two more stops before you jump off and sprint up the hill to collect your son. You heave a great sigh, readying yourself for the last dash, and put the book away.

You'll make it, this time.