# SPEAK, HOYT-SCHERMERHORN

## Doom and romance on a subway platform

*By Jonathan Lethem*

When you're a child, everything local is famous. On that principle, Hoyt-Schermerhorn was the most famous subway station in the world. It was the first subway station I knew, and it took years for me to disentangle my primal fascination with its status as a functional ruin, an indifferent home to clockwork chaos, from the fact that it was, in objective measure, an anomalous place. Personal impressions and neighborhood lore swirled in my exaggerated regard. In fact the place was cool and weird beyond my obsession's parameters, cooler and weirder than most subway stations anyway.

My Brooklyn neighborhood, as I knew it in the 1970s, was an awkwardly gentrifying residential zone. The Hoyt-Schermerhorn station stood at the border of the vibrant mercantile disarray of Fulton Street—once the borough's poshest shopping and theater boulevard. Fulton had suffered a steep decline, from Manhattanesque grandeur to ghetto pedestrian mall, through the Fifties and Sixties. Now, no less vital in its way, the place was full of chain outlets and sidewalk vendors, many selling African licorice-root chews and "Muslim" incense alongside discount socks and hats and mittens. The station itself gave testimony to the lost commercial greatness of the area. Like some Manhattan subway stops, though fewer and fewer every year, it licensed businesses on its mezzanine level: a magazine shop, a shoeshine stand, a bakery. Most telling and shrouded at once were the ruined shop-display windows that lined the long corridor from the Bond Street entrance. Elegant blue-and-yellow tilework labeled them with an enormous *L*—standing for what exactly? The ruined dressmakers' dummies and empty display stands behind the cracked glass weren't saying.

The station was synonymous with crime. A neighborhood legend held that Hoyt-Schermerhorn consistently ranked highest in arrests in the whole transit system. Its two border streets, Hoyt and Bond, were vents from the Fulton mall area, where purse snatchers and street dealers were likely to flee and be cornered. The station also housed one of the borough's four Transit Police substations, a headquarters for subway cops that legislated over a quarter of Brooklyn's subway system, so perhaps it was merely that suspects nabbed elsewhere in the system were brought there to register their actual arrest? I've never been able to corroborate the legend. The presence of

*Jonathan Lethem is the author of six novels, including* Motherless Brooklyn *and, most recently,* The Fortress of Solitude.

Illustration by Andrea Ventura

cops and robbers in the same place has a kind of chicken-and-egg quality. Or should it be considered as a Heisenbergian "observer" problem—do we arrest you because we see you? Would we arrest you as much elsewhere if we were there?

However ridiculous it may seem, it is true that within sight of that police substation my father, his arms laden with luggage for a flight out of JFK, had his pocket picked while waiting on line for a token. And the pay phone in the station was widely understood to have drug-dealers-only status. Maybe it does still. I myself was detained, not arrested, trying to breeze the wrong way through an exit gate, flashing an imaginary bus pass at the token agent, on my way to high school. A cop gave me a ticket and turned me around to go home and get money for a token. I tried to engage my cop in sophistry—how could I be ticketed for a crime that had been prevented? Shouldn't he let me through to ride the train if I were paying the price for my misdeed? No cigar.

Undercover transit policemen are trained to watch for "loopers"—that is, riders who switch from one train car to the next at each stop. Loopers are understood to be likely pickpockets, worthy of suspicion. Even before that, though, loopers are guilty of using the subway *wrong*. In truth, every subway rider is an undercover officer in a precinct house of the mind, noticing and cataloguing outré and dissident behavior in his fellow passengers even while cultivating the apparent indifference for which New Yorkers are famous, above and below ground. It may only be safe to play at not noticing others because our noticing senses are sharpened to trigger-readiness. Jittery subway-shooter Bernhard Goetz once ran for mayor. He may not have been electable, but he had a constituency.

As it happens, I'm also an inveterate looper, though I do it less these days. I'll still sometimes loop to place myself at the right exit stairwell, to save steps if I'm running late. I've looped on the 7 out to Shea Stadium, searching for a friend headed for the same ball game. More than anything, though, I looped as a teenager, on night trains, looping as prey would, to skirt trouble. I relate this form of looping to other subterranean habits I learned as a terrified child. For instance, a tic of boarding: I'll stand at one spot until a train stops, then abruptly veer left- or rightward, to enter a car other than the one for which I might have appeared to be waiting. This to shake pursuers, of course. Similarly, a nighttime trick of exiting at lonely subway stations: at arrival I'll stay in my seat until the doors have lain open for a few seconds, then dash from the train. In these tricks my teenager self learned to cash in a small portion of the invisibility that is not only each subway rider's presumed right but his duty to other passengers, whose irritation and panic rises at each sign of oddness, in exchange for tiny likelihoods of increased safety.

Other peculiarities helped Hoyt-Schermerhorn colonize my dreams. The station featured not only the lively express A train, and its pokey but serviceable local equivalent, the CC, but also the erratic and desultory GG, a train running a lonely trail through Bedford-Stuyvesant and into Queens. The GG—shortened today to the G—had the sorry distinction of being the only subway line in the entire system never to penetrate Manhattan. All roads lead to Rome, but not the GG. Hoyt-Schermerhorn also hosted a quickly abandoned Eighties transit experiment, the Train to the Plane—basically an A train that, for an additional fare, made a quick express run to the airport. For my friends and me, the Train to the Plane was richly comical on several grounds—first of all, because it didn't actually go to the airport: you had to take a bus from the end of the line. Second, for its twee and hectoring local-television ad—"*Take the train to the plane, take the train to the plane*," etc. And last because the sight of it, rumbling nearly empty into Hoyt-Schermerhorn with the emblem of an airplane in place of its identifying number or letter, suggested an inglorious subway train that was fantasizing itself some other, less earthbound conveyance.

The Train to the Plane was actually the younger cousin to a more successful freak train, also run out of Hoyt-Schermerhorn: the Aqueduct Racetrack special, which ran horse-racing bettors out to the track on gambling afternoons. Begun in 1959, it flourished, as wagering's infrastructure tends to, until in 1981 it became a casualty of the even more efficient Off-Track Betting, known as OTB, the walk-in storefront gambling establishments that soon dotted the city. Both the Train to the Plane and the Aqueduct Racetrack special made use of Hoyt-Schermerhorn's most fundamentally strange feature: its two quiescent tracks and dark spare platform, that parallel ghost haunting the live platforms. As a kid, I took that dark platform for granted. Later, I'd learn how rare it was—though there are whole ghost stations, dead to trains, and famously host to homeless populations and vast graffiti masterpieces, only a handful of active stations in the entire system have a ghost platform.

Even if I'd known it, I wasn't then curious enough to consider how those two unused tracks and that whole spare platform spoke, as did the ruined display windows, of the zone's dwindled splendor, its former place as a hub, a center. Where I lived was self-evidently marginal to Manhattan—who cared that it was once something grander? What got me excited about Hoyt-Schermerhorn's eerie fourth platform was this: one summer day in 1979, I found a film crew working there, swirling in and out of the station from rows of trucks parked along vacant Schermerhorn Street. Actors costumed as both gang members and as high school students dressed for prom night worked in a stilled train. The movie, I learned from an assistant director standing bored with a walkie-talkie at one of the subway entrances, was called *The Warriors*. My invisible, squalid home turf had been redeemed as picturesque. New Yorkers mostly take film crews for granted as an irritant part of the self-congratulatory burden of living in the World Capital. But I was more like a small-town hick in my delight at Hoyt-Schermerhorn's being deemed lensworthy. I was only afraid that like a vampire or a ghost, the station wouldn't actually be able to be cap-

tured in depiction: what were the odds this crappy-looking movie with no stars would ever be released? By picking my turf, the crew had likely sealed their doom.

The origins of the New York underground rapid transit, like those of the city itself, reflect a bastard convergence of utopian longing and squalid practicality—land grabs, sweetheart deals, lined pockets. The city's first, thwarted subway was no different: a Jules Verne dream, one instantly snuffed by Tammany Hall, that paradigmatic political machine. The story has the beauty of a Greek myth: a short length of pneumatic subway built in 1870 *in secret* beneath Broadway by a gentleman engineer determined to alleviate the choking daylight nightmare of New York's foot, pig, horse, stagecoach, and surface railway traffic, against the status quo wishes of Tammany's Boss Tweed, who as commissioner of public works rolled in troughs of money extorted from trolley and omnibus companies. The tube's builder, Alfred Ely Beach, ought to be the hero of one of those elegiac novels of Time Travelers in Olde New York—one of the first editors of *Scientific American*, architect of American patent law, he was also a health nut and an opera buff, and the man in whose office Edison first demonstrated the phonograph ("Good morning. . . . How do you like the talking box?"). In fifty-eight nights of covert digging, Beach's crew created a 312-foot tunnel, then assembled an elegant wooden, horseshoe-shaped subway car, pushed by an enormous electric fan. When he unveiled his miracle to the press—in an underground waiting room fitted with curtains, frescoed walls, stuffed chairs, a grandfather clock, a fountain, and bright zircon lamps—his demonstration subway made a sensation, drawing four hundred thousand visitors in 1870. Boss Tweed, aghast at what had been hatched beneath his feet, roused a legal and entrepreneurial assault against Beach's tunnel, investing his influence—and New York City's immediate future—in elevated lines rather than subways. The life was gradually squeezed out of Beach's dream. His tunnel was rented for wine storage, then sealed, then forgotten. When in 1912 diggers excavating for what would become the BMT line stumbled unwittingly into Beach's intact waiting room, his drained fountain and extinguished lamps, his stilled wooden car, they must have felt like intruders on Tut's tomb.

I became a regular customer in 1978. That year I began commuting from Brooklyn to Harlem, an hour away in the upper reaches of Manhattan, to attend Music and Art, a venerated public high school created by Fiorello La Guardia. (Music and Art, with its sister campus, Performing Arts, was immortalized in the movie *Fame* during my years there, but since I was studying painting and no painters were portrayed in the film, I didn't take it personally.) The A train out of Hoyt-Schermerhorn was now my twice-daily passage, to and from. My companion was Lynn Nottage, a kid from the block I grew up on, a street friend. Lynn was from a black middle-class family; I was from a white bohemian one. We had never gone to school together in Brooklyn—Lynn had been at private school—but now were high school freshmen together, in distant Harlem. Lynn had the challenge of getting to school on time with me as her albatross. Some mornings the sound of her ringing the doorbell was my alarm clock.

Lynn and I had habits. We stood in a certain spot on the platform, boarding the same train every morning (despite an appearance of chaos, the system is regular). Most mornings we rode the same subway car, the conductor's car. Had we been advised to do this by protective parents? I don't know. Anyhow, we became spies, on the adults, the office workers, tourists, beggars, and policemen who'd share segments of our endless trip. We took a special delight in watching the bewilderment of riders trapped after Fifty-ninth Street, thinking they'd boarded a local, faces sagging in defeat as the train skipped every station up to 125th, the longest express hop in the system. Also, we spied on our own conductor. The conductor's wife rode in with him to work—she'd been aboard since somewhere before Hoyt-Schermerhorn—then kissed him goodbye at a stop in the financial district. Two stops later, his girlfriend boarded the train. They'd kiss and moon between stops until she reached her destination. Lynn and I took special pleasure in witnessing this openly, staring like evil Walter Keane kids so the conductor felt the knife edge of our complicity.

This was the year another student, a talented violinist, had been pushed from a train platform, her arm severed and reattached. The incident unnerved us to the extent that we were able to afford to maintain it as conscious knowledge: we couldn't, and so didn't. There were paltry but somehow effective brackets of irony around our sense of the city's dangers. Lynn and I were soon joined by Jeremy and Adam, other kids from my street, and we all four persistently found crime and chaos amusing. The same incidents that drew hand-wringing from our parents and righteous indignation from the tabloids struck us as merry evidence of the fatuousness of grown-ups. Naturally the world sucked, naturally the authorities blinked. Anything was possible. Graffiti was maybe an art form, certainly a definitive statement as to who had actually grasped the nature of reality as well as the workings of the reeling system around you: not adults but the kids just a year or three older than you, who were scary but legendary. The entire city was like the school in the Ramones' movie *Rock 'n' Roll High School*, or the college in *Animal House*—the dean corrupt and blind, the campus an unpatrolled playground. Our own fear, paradoxically, was more evidence, like the graffiti and the conductor's affair, of the reckless, wide-open nature of this world. It may have appeared from the outside that Lynn and Jeremy and Adam and I were cowering in this lawless place, but in our minds we romped.

The names of the three limbs of the subway—the IRT (Interborough Rapid Transit), the BMT (Brooklyn Manhattan Transit, changed from the original BRT, for Brooklyn Rapid Transit), and the IND (Independent)—are slowly falling from New Yorkers' common tongue, and the last enamel signs citing the old

names will soon be pried off. Slipping into shadow with the disuse of those names is the tripartite origin of the subways, the fact that each of the three sets of trains was once a completely separate and rival corporation. The lines tried to squeeze one another out of business, even as they vied with now-extinct rival forms: streetcars and elevated trains. On this subject, the language of the now-unified citywide system, the official maps and names, has grown mute. But the grammar of the train lines and stations themselves, with their overlaps and redundancies, their strange omissions and improvised passageways, still pronounces this history everywhere.

The early subways pioneered in crafty partnership with realtors and developers. Groping for new ridership, the early owners threw track deep into farmland, anticipating (and creating) neighborhoods like Bensonhurst and Jackson Heights. The latecomer, the IND(ependent), contrary to its name, was a political instrument, conceived from within a mayor's feud with transit's maverick owners. James Hylan, elected mayor in 1917, was widely understood to be a puppet of the Hearst newspapers—a man who, according to Robert Moses, "swelled instead of growing" in office. His credo—"the preservation of democracy and the retention of the 5-cent fare"—is only a glimpse into the scope of his obsession with transit interests, whom he accused of wishing to rape New York "like the conquered cities of old."

The legacy of Hylan's bullying was the eventual merging of this chaotic system into a confederated public trust. When subway unification came, in 1940 under Fiorello La Guardia, it was the largest railway merger in the history of the country—of, I suppose, the world. Under Hylan's own watch, though, the IND was a city-sponsored rival to the private interests, one nonetheless forced to run in the black and therefore to cling to established population centers, unlike its more adventurous precursors. The IND's circumscription within the city's previously established transit routes alienated the realtor lobby, previously the subway's great secret weapon. The city's destiny was no longer horizontal but vertical, perhaps fractal, a break with the American frontier motif in favor of something more dense and strange.

Construction of new subway stations and tunnels in a city already webbed with infrastructure was a routine marvel. According to Stan Fischler's *Uptown, Downtown*, tunneling for the IND required, among other astonishing statistics (22 million cubic yards of rock and earth displaced, 7 million man-days of labor) the *relocation* of 26 miles of water and gas pipes, 350 miles of electrical wire, and 18 miles of sewage pipes. What's striking, though, in photographs documenting that work, is the blithe disinterest in the faces of passersby, even at such preposterous scenes as workers tunneling beneath a street where both a surface trolley and an elevated train are being kept in continuous operation above. Construction of the Sixth Avenue tunnel at Thirty-fourth Street was an engineering marvel of its day, the tunnel having to be threaded under the Broadway BMT subway and over the Pennsylvania Railroad (now Amtrak) tubes, as well as an even more deeply buried water main. This, according to Groff Conklin, author of *All About Subways*, "the most difficult piece of subway construction which has ever been attempted," is almost impossible to keep in mind on an F train as it slides blandly through Herald Square today.

A scattering of photos of the Hoyt-Schermerhorn dig are available in the archives in the basement of the MTA's building on Livingston Street, just a couple of blocks from the station. The excavation method was typical: it was a "cut-and-cover" job, where an elaborate temporary roadway is constructed of wood and girders. The majority of the pictures document a not-quite-catastrophe: the collapse after a rainstorm of a portion of the wooden roadway into the tunnel, swallowing several cars and streetlamps but no lives. In several photos the landmark Quaker Meetinghouse is seen hovering on the crumbled brink of the hole. Another few feet and it would be undermined. The only newspaper account I could locate treated the collapse so glancingly it was occasion only for an admiring photograph of a crane picking a car from the pit, labeled with a brief caption.

Alfred Kazin, in *A Walker in the City*, wrote: "All those first stations in Brooklyn—Clark, Borough Hall, Hoyt, Nevins, the junction of the East and West side express lines—told me only that I was on the last leg home, though there was always a stirring of my heart at Hoyt, where the grimy subway platform was suddenly enlivened by Abraham and Straus's windows of ladies' wear . . ." When a friend directed me to this passage, thinking he'd solved the mystery of those deserted shopwindows in the Hoyt-Schermerhorn station, I at least had a clue. I searched the corporate history of Abraham & Straus—Brooklyn's dominant department store and a polestar in my childhood constellation of the borough's tarnished majesty, with its brass fixtures and uniformed elevator operators, and the eighth floor's mysterious stamp- and coin-collector's counters. In the A&S annals I found the name of a Fulton Street rival: Frederick Loeser's, one of the nation's largest department stores for almost a century, eventually gobbled by A&S in a merger. The 1950s were to such stores as the Mesozoic was to the dinosaurs—between '52 and '57 New York lost Loeser's, Namm's, Wanamaker's, McCreery's, and Hearn's; the names alone are concrete poetry.

I'd nailed my tile-work *L*: Loeser's created display windows in the new Hoyt-Schermerhorn station to vie with A&S's famous (at least to Alfred Kazin) windows at Hoyt. Kazin's windows are visible as bricked-in tile window frames today, but like the smashed and dusty Loeser's windows of my childhood, they go ignored. Meanwhile, aboveground on Fulton Street, the name Loeser's has recently reemerged like an Etch A Sketch filigree on some second-story brickwork, as lost urban names sometimes do.

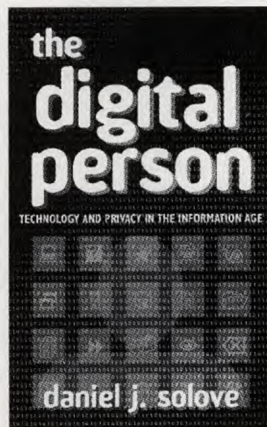
The abandoned platform was a mystery shallower to penetrate than Loeser's *L*—in fact, it is the station's bragging point. The extra track connects the abandoned platform to an

abandoned station, three blocks away on Court Street. This spur of misguided development was put out of its misery in 1946, and sat unused until sometime in the early Sixties, when the MTA realized it at last had an ideal facility for renting to film and television crews. The empty Court Street station and the curve of track between it and the ghost platform at Hoyt-Schermerhorn allowed filmmakers to run trains in and out of two picturesque stations along a nice curved wall, without disturbing regular operations. For this distinction Hoyt-Schermerhorn sporadically stars in human-interest stories in the *New York Times* Metro Section: who doesn't enjoy reading about film stars slumming in urban locations? The nonpareil among thirty-six movies made utilizing subway property just between 1970 and 1975 is the subway-hijacking-hostage thriller *The Taking of Pelham One Two Three*. It was in Hoyt-Schermerhorn's approach tunnels that Robert Shaw and his cohort stripped off fake mustaches and trench coats and, clutching bags of ransom money, made their hopeless dash for daylight, and it was in Hoyt-Schermerhorn's approach tunnels that Shaw, cornered by crusading MTA inspector Walter Matthau, stepped on the third rail and met his doom.

And then there is *The Warriors*. The film is based on a novel by Sol Yurick, itself in turn based on Xenophon's *Anabasis*, an account of a band of Greek mercenaries fighting their way home, against impossible odds, through enemy turf. Yurick translated Xenophon into New York street gangs. His book is a late and lofty entry, steeped in the tone of Camus's *The Stranger*, in the "teen panic" novels of the Fifties and Sixties. Walter Hill, a director whose paradigm is the western, turned Yurick's crisp, relentless book into the definitive image of a New York ruled by territorial gangs, each decorated absurdly and ruling their outposts absolutely.

The movie inspired reports of theater-lobby riots during its theatrical run. It's a cult object now, fetishized on websites, celebrated in hip-hop by Puff Daddy and the Wu-Tang Clan, and cherished by New Yorkers my age, we who preen in our old fears, for mythologizing the crime-ruled New York of the Seventies more


**Find Out About *the* Other You**




"**An important contribution to the privacy debate**, and Solove's discussion of the harms of what he calls 'digital dossiers' is **invaluable**."

**JEFFREY ROSEN** | author of *The Unwanted Gaze and The Naked Crowd*

**$29.95 cloth**

**NYU Press**
▸ WWW.NYUPRESS.ORG



*Harper's Magazine* is accepting applications from college students and graduates for its editorial and art internship programs.

• Editorial interns serve full-time for three to five months and gain practical experience in critical reading and analysis, research, fact-checking, and the general workings of a national magazine. Each intern works with an editor on one section of the magazine and takes part in the creation of the *Harper's* Index.

• Art interns serve part-time for three to five months and view current exhibits at museums and galleries, take part in the selection of art for the Readings section, and gain skills in electronic page layout, color separation, art and photo research, and working with freelancers.

All interns are encouraged to generate ideas, read widely, and approach problems creatively. Both positions are unpaid.

*For further information and an application, call (212) 420-5720. Please specify which program you are applying for.*


SOLUTION TO THE NOVEMBER PUZZLE

| P | H | A | L | L | U | S | E | A | S | E | O |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| E | E | R | E | I | N | V | E | N | T | E | D |
| A | F | F | A | B | L | E | S | A | U | C | E |
| S | T | A | T | I | O | N | I | N | F | O | S |
| B | O | R | E | D | O | U | G | H | F | M | E |
| O | H | M | E | O | S | A | H | L | L | I | L |
| O | I | A | N | S | I | C | K | L | I | C | K |
| T | O | S | S | A | N | T | I | C | E | O | H |
| E | I | S | I | N | G | S | C | O | U | Z | O |
| A | L | I | E | N | S | E | K | U | D | Z | U |
| K | I | S | S | S | H | A | M | P | A | I | N |
| M | A | T | T | R | E | S | S | E | Y | E | D |

NOTES FOR "SENSITIVITY TRAINING—A POEM":

*Puzzle editing by Dan Asimov. Anagrams are indicated with an asterisk (*).*

SENSITIVE CLUES: A. c-Y-CLI-c.; B. psy*-chic; C. bo(rdeua*)x; D. K-am(1-K)aze; E. boutique (hidden); F. champ-(ag)ne; G. matricide*; H. fall-ac(1)es; I. p(harm)ac[if]ist.

ACROSS: 10. *; 11. a-F-fable; 13. *; 15. no-ti(at)s (rev.); 17. so-fu(n) (rev.); 21. oh me*; 22. Sah*-l; 24. lil(y); 26. to-S.S.; 27. ant-ic(e); 30. sin(g)s; 32. hidden; 33. a(lie)ns; 35. homophone; 37. K(is)s.

DOWN: 1. homophone; 2. (t)heft; 3. a-E-1 (rev.); 4. li(bid)os (rev.); 5. *; 6. S(e)ven; 7. an-a; 8. two mngs.; 9. *; 16. teens-iest; 19. O-hi-O; 20. *; 23. (t)act; 24. lieu(tenant); 28. coup-E.; 29. ail-1 (rev.); 31. se[nor]as; 34. She(a); 36. da-ay(overlapped).

sweetly and absurdly than *Kojak* or *The French Connection*. For, in the film, it is the gang members themselves who become the ultimate victims of the city's chaos. Even the Warriors wish they'd stayed home.

For me, a fifteen-year-old dogging the steps of the crew as they filmed, it was only perfect that a fake gang had occupied Hoyt-Schermerhorn's fake platform. The film was etching my own image of the city into legend, and for me it had begun its work even before its public life. (In fact, I couldn't imagine that anyone would want to see it.) Yurick's book has just been reissued again, with a movie still on the jacket and a long new introduction, detailing the classical and existentialist roots of the project, and fascinating for its rueful and erudite perplexity that this least ambitious of his books should be the one to survive: "There hasn't been one film made in the United States that I would consider seeing five times, as many who loved the film version of *The Warriors* did." Years later, by chance, I met the wizened Yurick on a train platform, though not the subway. We disembarked together in Providence, Rhode Island, each a guest at the same literary conference, and, unknowingly, companion riders on an Amtrak from New York. Our hosts had failed to meet our train, and as the locals all scattered to their cars, the family members or lovers to their reunions, we were left to discover each other and our dilemma. Yurick shrugged fatalistically—should we have expected better? He summed his perspective in a sole world-weary suggestion: "Wanna nosh?"

Michael Lesy's 1973 book *Wisconsin Death Trip* is a mosaic of vintage photographs and newspaper accounts of eccentric behavior and spastic violence in turn-of-the-century rural Wisconsin. It makes a case, not polemically but by a flood of miniature evidence, that stirring just under the skin of this historical site is mayhem, sexuality, the possibility of despair. The book is a corrective to homilies of a pastoral American countryside, a catalogue of unaccountable indigenous lust, grief, revenge, and sudden joy.

As my newspaper clippings accumulated, I began to imagine my equivalent: *Hoyt-Schermerhorn Death Trip*. "TWO ARE KILLED BY POLICE IN GUN BATTLE, 1/23/73: Neither of the slain men was immediately identified. But the police said that one of them had been wanted for several bank robberies and for allegedly shooting at policemen last Wednesday night in the Hoyt-Schermerhorn Street subway station . . ." "WOMAN HURT IN SUBWAY FALL, 6/19/58: A 55-year-old woman was critically injured yesterday when she fell or jumped in front of a southbound IND express train at the Hoyt-Schermerhorn Street station in Brooklyn. . . . Service on the southbound tracks of the A line was interrupted for fifty-three minutes." "37 HURT IN CRASH OF TWO IND TRAINS, One Rams Rear of Another in Downtown Brooklyn During Evening Rush, 7/18/70: . . . there was a rending of metal at the crash, she said, and then the car tilted. All the lights went out. She said there were sparks and the car filled with smoke. The girl said she was thrown to the floor and, terrified, began screaming . . ." "YOUTH ARRESTED WITH GUN, 5/26/89: A 13-year-old Brooklyn youth was arrested yesterday morning with a fully loaded, 9-millimeter handgun, and he showed up later in the day to ask the New York City transit police when he would get his gun back." "STRANGER PUSHES WOMAN TO DEATH UNDER A TRAIN, 2/2/75: A 25-year-old woman was thrown to her death in front of an onrushing subway train in Brooklyn yesterday evening by a man who apparently was a total stranger to her, the police said. . . . The incident took place at about 6:15 P.M. in the Hoyt-Schermerhorn Street IND station, which was crowded with shoppers at the time. According to witnesses, including the train motorman . . . [the] man suddenly stepped up to the victim, who had her back to him, and pushed her forward in front of the train without saying a word . . ." "400 BOYCOTTING STUDENTS RIOT, HURL BRICKS, BEAT OTHER YOUTHS, 2/18/65: Four hundred boycotting Negro students broke through police barricades outside Board of Education headquarters in Brooklyn yesterday in a brick-throwing, window-breaking riot. . . . The disturbances spread over a two-mile area and onto subway trains and stations. . . . A group of 60 youths attacked a group of six white high school students on the Clinton-IND's GG line. . . . They were apprehended at the Hoyt-Schermerhorn Station by 15 transit policemen . . ." "300 IN SUBWAY HELP TILT CAR AND RELEASE BOY'S WEDGED FOOT, 9/2/70: A rescue team of subway passengers, hastily organized by three transit patrolmen, tipped back a 54-ton subway car last night to free an 11-year-old boy whose foot was wedged between the car and the platform at a downtown Brooklyn station. The boy . . . was running for an IND A train when his leg was caught between the platform and train at the Hoyt-Schermerhorn station."

Contemplation of the density of meanings at a given site becomes, in the end, like Lesy's scrapbook, a tidal experience. The lapping of successive human moments forms a pulse or current, like the lapping of trains through the underground tunnels, or like the Doppler-effect fading of certain memories from the planet, as they're recalled for the penultimate time, and then the last: when will the last person to have purchased panty hose or a razor at Loeser's pass from the earth? When will the last of those 300 who rocked the train car off the boy's pinned leg, or the last of those 400 Negro boycotters, be gone?

A kid raised inside the liberal sentiments of a middle-class family yet living in an area fringed with crime and poverty met a choice. It was possible to identify with and assimilate to the harsher truths of the street, and so toughen, somewhat, to fear. Alternately, a kid could carry his parents' sensitivities, and standards, with him, out of doors. The price was obvious. Most of us, whether we ended in one camp or another, wavered. I was a "good" kid, and a bullied one, yet I recall dozens of moments when I slid briefly across the separation line. It was on a basketball court directly across from Hoyt-Schermerhorn's entrance where I allowed myself to meld com-

plicitly into a crowd of Puerto Rican kids, with whom I'd been playing, as they briefly halted our game to harass and threaten a single Asian man, a gay man, off a neighboring court. I wasn't violent; the incident hardly was. But the man was the boyfriend of a pal of my mother's, and I'd been a guest in their elegant town house. When my mom's friend, a gay man considerably huskier than his young lover, returned to the court with a baseball bat and, bellowing at us, broke up the game, sent us scurrying, his eyes met mine and I was disgraced, wrenched between concurrent selves.

The moment was precursor to a worse one. This was the summer between high school and college, which is to say the verge of my escape from Brooklyn for most of fifteen years. I've come to understand how fraught that moment was for me, as I considered or refused to consider what I was involuntarily carrying with me out of the particulars of my childhood environment. My girlfriend was from upstate New York but living in my city, my neighborhood, for that summer before we both embarked to college. She worked nights as a waitress in Manhattan and rode, yes, the A train, into Hoyt-Schermerhorn. She was frightened, as she perhaps should have been, to walk the several blocks home from that station after eleven, and so I'd promised always to meet her. I often lightly mocked her fear—but that bit of overcompensation, lousy as it sounds, wasn't my crime.

My crime was that one night, going to the station to pick her up, I impulsively waited in shadow by the entrance instead of making myself visible. I had no plan. I was fooling around. She looked for me, evidently afraid to stand there waiting alone, as she absolutely should have been: it was a different thing to walk swiftly home than it was to linger. I could have stepped forward easily, but instead my stupid jape distended, and I just watched her. And then, as she began walking home without me, I followed her.

I think I was certain she'd turn and see me, and that it would be oddly funny, but she never did. She was afraid to turn to see whose footsteps followed her, of course. I trailed her home, compounding my mistake with each accelerating footstep, until I at last overtook her just outside the door. While I tried to explain, she trembled, in fear that had converted immediately, and rightly, to rage. Denial has covered any recollection of my words by now, but I know they were hopelessly inadequate to repair what I'd told myself was a harmless joke—though I was walking behind her I'd still been protecting her, hadn't I?—and was actually such a cruel joke it wasn't a joke at all. Although I'd hardly claim to be Patty Hearst, there was a touch of the Stockholm syndrome in my behavior. I was bestowing on another a trace, or more than a trace, of fears I'd absorbed for years.

Here's where I am: in the subway, but not on a train. I'm standing on one platform, gazing at another. Moaning trains roll in, obscuring my view; I wait for them to pass. The far platform, the one I'm inspecting, isn't lit. The tiles along the abandoned platform's wall are stained—I mean, more than in some ordinary way—and the stairwells are caged and locked, top and bottom. Nothing's happening there, and it's happening round the clock.

I've been haunting this place lately, though the more time I spend, the further it reels from my grasp. And, increasingly, I'm drawing looks from other passengers on the platforms, and upstairs, at the station's mezzanine level. Subway stations—the platforms and stairwells and tunnels, the passages themselves—are sites of deep and willed invisibility. Even the geekiest transit buffs adore the trains, not the stations. By lingering here, I've set off miniature alarms in nearby minds, including my own. I've allied myself with the malingerers not on their way to somewhere else. My investigation of this place reeks of a futility so deep it shades toward horror.

By the same law of meticulously observed abnormalities that causes loopers to stand out, my spying at Hoyt-Schermerhorn triggers a rustle of disquiet. I'm not here for a train. What I'm trying to do maybe can't be done: inhabit and understand the Hoyt-Schermerhorn station as a place. Worse, I'm trying to remember it, to restore it to its home in *time*. There's no greater perversity, since a subway station is a sinkhole of destroyed and thwarted time. By standing here trying to remember Hoyt-Schermerhorn I've only triggered its profoundest resistance: I'm using it wrong.

Yet I'm stubborn. This was my first subway memory, the tunnel, those ruined Loeser's windows. I've returned to reclaim the seed of a lifelong romance, a New Yorker's typical romance with our limitless secret neighborhood, the one running beneath all the others. Nothing subsequent, not hundreds of high school days, not *The Warriors*, or my own feeble crimes, can displace this memory's primacy or fade its color. I held my mother's hand. I was being taken to her office, in Manhattan. Perhaps it was a day off from school, I don't know. I rode the subway for the first time I can recall, but I don't remember the train. I remember the station. ■

---

**December Index Sources**

**1-3** U.S. Department of Justice; **4** Colum Lynch, *Washington Post* (N.Y.C.); **5** Halliburton (Houston, Tex.); **6-7** Office of the Comptroller (N.Y.C.); **8** U.S. Department of Homeland Security; **9-10** Program Executive Office for Ammunition (Picatinny Arsenal, N.J.); **11** *Harper's* Research; **12-13** U.S. Department of Defense; **14** PoliticalMoneyLine (Washington); **15-16** Ballot Access News (San Francisco); **17** Green Party (Washington); **18-19** Juliet B. Schor, Boston College (Boston); **20** Delta Air Lines (Atlanta); **21** American Sociological Association (Washington); **22-23** The Brookings Institution (Washington); **24–25** *Harper's* Research; **26** National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (Silver Spring, Md.); **27** *Times-Picayune* (Jefferson Parish, La.); **28** Department of Health (London); **29** International Atomic Energy Agency (Vienna); **30** *Harper's* Research; **31** Embassy of the Republic of Sudan (London); **32** British High Commission (Wellington, New Zealand); **33** *Harper's* Research; **34-35** State Police Headquarters (Pordenone, Italy); **36** Richard Beeston (Baghdad); **37** Select (N.Y.C.); **38** Virgin Group (London); **39** Waseda University (Tokyo).