The last

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train inward

by Leona Francombe

There are parts of old Brussels to which visitors flock without thinking, places so beautiful that like sirens they daze and enchant until one has no choice but to recover over an excellent lunch. You sip your cherry beer and tuck into that sizzling plate of *frites*, basking in the imperial loveliness all around, never guessing how close you are to the other places: those lost, grimy corners at the edge of nowhere that lie at the heart of every metropolis; places where, if truth be told, you might well want to visit once, in daylight, just to say that you did. Only be warned: you venture in at your own risk – at the risk, that is, of treading across your own secret landscape. It is a risk worth taking, however, and there is no better place to start than the underbelly of a train station.

The South Station (Gare du Midi/Zuid Station) is the point of arrival for most travellers from the south and west. Despite recent renovations, and the gradual retreat of ghettos that for so long have clung to the edges of this neighbourhood, a mood of dejection persists. Drift in on a local train, and the cityscape still grumbles and scowls. Grim-faced office blocks look down over the tracks, and you wonder who could work there, staring out every day at a colourless wasteland – at trains that moan in two-toned despair, and passengers who bolt away, as if to be left behind here, in this godless spot, could spell their ruin.

But linger a moment or two, and you might find that this is the sort of place where the mind does plenty of lingering. The last train creeps off with a metallic hiss and suddenly it is just you in the company of a vacant greyness and the empty, U-shaped waiting rooms poised on each platform like ghostly trawlers at low tide. The edge of the platform crumbles onto the track, as if it cannot keep you from falling – as if you must fall, at least over the edge of your own inner reaches, that wide and echoing vista where the mind spends more time than you think.

Perhaps it is the search for beauty that has always drawn artistic minds to such derelict places, for its very absence is like a blank canvas begging for colour, an untouched sheet of paper, an instrument waiting to be played. The artist recognises his own dark havens and comes alive.

South Station has seen the passage of many creative personalities since its construction in 1869. John Dos Passos and W H Auden left traces of their presence in doleful musings on trains whistling through the night and the dank, cold air of a foreign city. In December, 1960, the great pianist Clara Haskil arrived at Midi for a concert with Arthur Grumiaux and tumbled head-first down one of the main staircases, dying of a brain haemorrhage later that night. The memory of her fall was carried off by the streams of celebrated artists and poets who followed – who trod the same, haunted stairs, and turned up their collars against the same wind that funnels ceaselessly down the rails.

But it is a mistake to think that only luminaries have shaped the character of this place. Downstairs, in the main concourse, faceless herds of travellers surge and divide, surge and divide like buffalo crossing a rocky valley. They warm the air and bring to life decaying corners that would otherwise sink beyond salvage. Thanks to them, little eateries have sprung up and glow enticingly. Their bright interiors are beacons in gloomy corridors, oases where a croissant and coffee bring more solace than might normally be expected.

Those who become separated from the herd quickly stray into unfrequented stairwells and galleries. The river Senne – that poisonous, slow-moving sewer – enters its underground lair nearby. Here, in these caverns, the imagination throbs with the angst of any soul ever caught in a bleak, narrow space far from home. The raw innards of the city still pulse in these tunnels, waiting to be reclaimed, as if more than just the river was forced underground and forgotten.

Follow the stream of cryptic signs and arrows and soon you are on your way to the Gare Centrale/Centraal Station. The train shudders along its underground route, passing the phantom swamps and foundations of ancient Brussels. Now and then the windows flare with light and catch the weak, rhythmic gleam of fluorescent bulbs. Travellers disembark with the same yellowish cast to their faces, as if they have just emerged from permanent exile. Everything here seems jettisoned, scarred, aching. Three tracks over, the Thalys slinks through like a chimera and vanishes. The exiles lug their bags to the escalator and hurry up toward any source of

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natural light. You follow them quickly, past wires hanging in idle loops from the ceiling, past roped-off stairways and platforms, turning at a wall where graffiti sprawls insolently beneath original Art Deco lettering. A virulent perfume clings to your face in greeting, that unmistakable mix of burnt waffles and stale urine, and the smell of warm, damp metal blowing up from the tracks. Apart from the reborn Horta Gallery, a suprising phoenix of light and grace, it is almost impossible to imagine that the great Victor Horta himself designed this structure, a stark, utilitarian statement without a hint of arabesque or finery.

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Some of the city's hidden edges lie here somewhere – just around that corner, perhaps, or beyond that column. Although the police discourage it, vagrants congregate in the sombre passages of the station. Some play guitars. Others sit with dogs curled up against them. They could be your brother or father or friend, and you hasten by because they did what you could never dream of doing: they stepped off the edge. They inspire a strange mix of envy and horror, as if deep inside all of us lurks the dark impulse to confront hardship – the instinct to forge enterprise out of misfortune; to create something

out of nothing, in a place where before there was only emptiness.

But it's getting late: you must catch one of the last trains to the Gare du Nord/Noord Station before darkness swallows dim passageways; before fear wakes up and embraces another city night. This is the worst-reputed of the stations, after all, tainted by prostitution and run-down hotels, historically home to misfits and anarchists, as devoid of beauty as it is fascinating.

But a surprise is in store. The developers have come this way, and the station now rises up in a breathtaking sweep of glass and light. Outside, the seedy flop-houses have been concealed or destroyed, the red-light district pushed to a discreet arm's length. The crumbling hotels of literature are gone: Paul Verlaine's Hôtel de Liège, from where he set off for his fateful rendezvous with Rimbaud in 1873, has been swallowed by modernity.

It's strange, but you find yourself looking for the grit and isolation. You come out of this new, generic structure and smell the indifferent air of any big city. The plaza seems bland and lifeless. The gaze is drawn up against its will to the shiny surfaces of the tower blocks, but the eye finds no nourishment there, nothing to intrigue or delight. Then, on a whim, you head down the stairs off Rue du Progrès, down into the belly of the station, and at once your heartbeat mounts. Who is behind you? What is around the next turn? The wits sharpen agreeably. Adrenaline starts to simmer, and suddenly everything seems immediate and real, swept of all artifice.

The imagination rushes in.