

S a m M a r t o n e

The President Travels

for Roger Taylor

A rumor: the college's president has been spotted down by the tracks, recording the sounds of the trains. Students claim they have seen him crouched, his arm extended, clutching a tape recorder as graffiti-covered tanker cars roar past. When the college's president travels, they say, he brings with him this handheld tape recorder, tucks it safely in his carryon. From his window seat, he looks down and sees how the tracks weave through the town, how they surround the college on all sides. It is comforting to him, the way the trains swaddle the campus, keeping it safe in his absence. His wife points out their house, so small from up here, but he only pays attention to the boxcars being pulled along the rails. Later, they say, when he lies down in the hotel bedroom wearing his pajamas, patterned in purple and gold, the school colors, he reaches over to the nightstand, where he has carefully placed his tape recorder, and presses play. The tape recorder is like one a journalist might use for important interviews, sleek and compact, with a built-in microphone and speaker. (When they whisper this part of the rumor, the students wonder what questions he asked the trains, what responses he received in return.) Perhaps his wife listens with him in the hotel room, or maybe she

is already asleep by the time he begins this ritual, which he will repeat, so they say, every night as long as he is away. He listens to the sounds emerging from the small speaker like steam engines from a tunnel: the tinny reincarnations of long low horns, the harsh grinding and screeching, the unrelenting calls of the trains. It is the only way the college's president knows to find sleep when separate from this, his prairie, his alma mater, his home, a place where rust-colored nights swell with mechanical song. In the lull between one horn and the next (and this is the part you imagine, the part you add to the rumor you've been told), he can hear his own voice, crackling with static and age, asking the trains if they will follow him, wherever he might go, after this.