

# Katabasis: Seraphic Trains

by Sarah Monette

*snow falls in her open eyes*

Her name is Clair. She wears black, no jewelry, and has long straight hair, dyed a dark reddish-purple, the color of the foundries' breath against the night sky. If she feels any emotions, her eyes never reflect them. She does not talk about herself, and she has never cried. Her apartment is enormous and bare, and your footsteps echo hollowly off the parquet floor, giving the impression of even greater vastness, greater emptiness, as if you walked through a palace made of ice, cyclopean and uninhabited. The walls and the few pieces of furniture are stark, sterile white, like untouched snow. Clair moves like a shadow through the whiteness of her rooms.

*your hatred, like a sleeping beast*

It was a great city once, and powerful. It has power still, dark, corrosive power like smog. The foundries and factories are mostly shut down now. Those that still operate stain the sky with billows of black and gray; in some quarters of the city their roaring can be heard all night long, and they throw bruised and blurry rainbows against the clouds. A river flows through the city's heart, sullen and slow, but brown and hungry and strong. And the city itself is a snarl, a brawl, a festering wound. It seethes and roils and bides its time.

*the stings of winter wasps*

Beyond the window, snow fell like frozen drops of poison.

Clair looked at him, her eyes clear and pitiless. "It's very nice, Sean," she said.

"Nice?" he said. "That's it? Just 'nice'?"

"Oh, darling, I'm sorry." Her laugh, the sound of icicles shattering. "It's lovely, Sean, of course it is. I'm very impressed."

"It isn't finished," he said desperately. "I mean, I know there's weak spots, and I . . ."

Her eyes were a strange color, milky gray with touches of blue and green: dirty, dead-of-winter ice. Her gaze always upset him, dazed him; in the depths of his heart he knew that it had enchanted him. Now, cold and hard and full of light, her gaze silenced him, and when she was sure he would not speak, she said, "I'm not saying you're not talented, Sean, because clearly you are. But I think you've maybe overreached yourself just a trifle. It's such an *ambitious* project. I know you're very serious about it, but I think—"

"You think it's no good."

"I didn't say that."

"But it's what you meant, isn't it? *Isn't it?*"

And she looked at him, not alarmed by his nearness, his anger. His gaze dropped first. "I think it's awfully . . . traditional."

"You mean clichéd."

"Do I?"

"Well, don't you?"

"You're still young, Sean. It's all right to model yourself on the poets you admire."

"But I'm not!"

"Oh, please. Darling, I don't want to be cruel, but there's no sense in letting you delude yourself. You're dripping T. S. Eliot from every page."

"Thank you, Clair," he said with stiff irony.

"You're *young*," she said. "Give yourself time."

"Are you saying my writing's immature? Come on, Clair, say what you mean!"

"I thought certain passages were just a little . . . naïve," she said, and the cold clear eyes watched his reaction without changing.

"I'd better go," he said, aware of the blood mounting to his face, aware of the hot prickle of starting tears.

She let him leave; only as he was opening the door of her apartment did she say, softly, almost laughing, “You’ll be back.”

*silver ribbons for my love*

The river runs through the heart of the city, and braiding, around and over and under the river, the city’s rail system is a welter of tarnished silver ribbons. The tracks sear through the city with a fine disregard for its geography, soaring above and plunging below the streets as the whim takes them, sometimes following the lines laid by the major boulevards, sometimes running alone through empty lots, sometimes cutting a swath through residential districts so that top floor tenants could, if they were so inclined, reach out from their back windows and have their arms ripped off by the force of the passing trains.

It is said in those districts that not all the trains which run on the city’s tracks are listed in Metropolitan Transit’s compendious schedule. The residents will tell you that after midnight, on some nights, there will be other trains, trains whose cry is different, the bellow of some great beast fighting for its life. And if you watch those trains go past, behind those bright flickering windows you will see passengers unlike any passengers you have seen when riding the trains yourself: men with wings, women with horns, beast-headed children, fauns and dryads and green-skinned people more beautiful than words can describe. In 1893, a schoolteacher swore that she saw a unicorn; in 1934, a murderer turned himself into the police, weeping, saying that he saw his victims staring at him from a train as it howled past the station platform on which he stood.

These are the seraphic trains. The stories say they run to Heaven, Hell, and Faërie. They are omens, but no one can agree on what they portend. And although you will never meet anyone who has seen or experienced it, there are persistent rumors, unkillable rumors, that sometimes, maybe once a century, maybe twice, a seraphic train will stop in its baying progress and open its doors for a mortal. Those who know the story of Thomas the Rhymer—and even some who don’t—in-sist that all these people, blest or damned as they may be, must be poets.

*starless night*

For days after Sean’s suicide, Bram Bennett walked around without being aware of what she wore, what she ate, what she did. Her whole head burned with words to which no one would listen. She looked at the people she knew on campus and was dully astonished at how little she liked them. The idea of talking to her parents was

merely ludicrous, and she had gladly lost contact with the few friends she had had in high school. There was no one she could tell, no one who would understand her grief. She felt like a woman standing in the aftermath of Hiroshima, surrounded by debris and corpses, the only living thing for five miles in any direction and herself dying, dying of the radiation she could neither see nor feel.

*the twilight water*

The subway station is a long, barrel-vaulted hall, an echo chamber for sounds which seem to have no origin. No passengers board trains here. The iron benches sit desolate, their only company the illegible sheets of newsprint which fly and flap and skitter and scuttle from one end of the platform to the other.

Those who disembark at the Court of the Clockwork Kings do not linger.

*velvet death*

The interior of the train car (Bram thought) was a very good imitation of a Metropolitan Transit train done by someone who’d never actually been inside one. All the colors and shapes were right, but the textures were wrong. The walls were papered with something silvery that felt like velvet; the seats were upholstered in blue satin. The floor was carpeted in black brocade, the ceiling was pressed tin, and Bram wasn’t sure, but she thought the poles and safety fittings were solid silver. It made her feel small and grubby and excessively herself. Her black clothes were too obvious, and surely everyone in the car could tell she dyed her hair, that her light hazel eyes would never belong with hair that black. The rings in her ears and nose felt like something she’d done merely because everyone else did. She was morbidly certain that the black rose tattoo on her back, safely covered by her T-shirt and leather jacket, was nonetheless radiantly visible to everyone who looked at her. She sat on one of the blue satin benches, worrying that she was getting it dirty, and clutched her guitar in its case across her lap.

The other occupants of the car mostly ignored her. There was a horde of children with cat-heads—kittens, she supposed, since none of them could be more than four years old—playing some elaborate game up and down the aisle; she counted two Siamese, three brown tabbies, two tortoiseshells, and one white Persian. They were dressed like Victorian children in velvet suits with broad lace collars. Their round eyes, green and amber and gold, looked at her with perfect trust and perfect indifference; to them, she was merely one more obstacle to be incorporated in their game.