



Joseph Keckler's
*Train With No
Midnight*. Photo:
Paula Lobo.
Courtesy of the
artist

JOSEPH KECKLER

TRAIN WITH NO MIDNIGHT

Train With No Midnight's World Premiere production was presented at the 2019 PROTOTYPE Festival, commissioned, developed, and produced by Beth Morrison Projects and HERE.

RUNNING ORDER

Apocalypse Song

Train With No Midnight

Laughing Song

Appearances

Opening Monologue

Frog Song

INSTRUMENTALISTS

City

Matthew Dean Marsh—piano, synth,
backup vocals

GPS Song

Times Square/Salome

Lavinia Pavlish—violin

Houses

Michael Hanf—drums, vibraphone, guitar,
bass guitar

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NOTE

Sung text is indicated by italics. Translations appear below those lines, representing what the audience sees on large surtitles. Occasionally certain details are conveyed in one language and not the other.

(A tree stump sits in the center of the stage. The space is painted in gold and black, with a big gold triangle painted on the floor or wall. The environment should suggest a ritualistic site and an opportunity for pleasurable delirium. There are many veiled objects, which will be unveiled gradually throughout the performance. Instruments, for instance, begin veiled and are unveiled at their first use.)

(MATTHEW unveils a small synth and begins a simple refrain on it, descending, slow and religious. JOSEPH moves center and stands at microphone. This moment should indulge in drama and spectacle. It's pop: red light, fog, haze, anticipation. Spotlight comes up.)

APOCALYPSE SONG

Do you remember the 2012 apocalypse?

It was big in 2008

12/21/12—I had friends who were “into” it

But they'd all long since forgotten by the actual date

(Music continues under monologue.)

2008. That's when various hucksters started selling their books about the end of the world by invoking some inscrutable Mayan prophecy, cobbled together with bits of scientific jargon about the magnetic poles switching, along with some various distressing—and probably accurate—statistics about the environmental

catastrophe we would all soon face. I had friends who roamed the streets, muttering forebodingly about the day our world was to go asunder: 12/21/12. These same people spent the next four years squeezing in every hedonistic life experience they could possibly imagine . . . and then never mentioned the apocalypse again! When that date finally rolled around, some of them were even Christmas shopping. And I didn't get the impression they were *relieved* the world wasn't ending. No—I got the impression they were somehow *resigned* to the fact. I guess they liked the idea of a clear deadline. A clean break, long-fated—

*Althoug were afraid of dyin'
I know we also longed for it
Now we all can blame the Mayans
For the apocalypse we wanted but did not get
The apocalypse we wanted but did not get
The apocalypse we wanted*

(repeating in different octaves and timbres)

But did not get

(Lights change.)

I don't know if doomsday art is passé, but it should be. Still, I always like to begin with an ending or several. 2012—we thought everything was ending, but it wasn't.

Often I have thought I myself was ending. Up to this point, I have not yet been correct. Someday I will be.

I don't know if this happens to you. I will be out, laughing with a friend, and then suddenly: I'm overcome, gripped by a terrible unnameable feeling, thinking, to myself—

LAUGHING SONG

(A march begins, quietly at first but increasing in volume, like an approaching brass band. The vibe suggests Purcell's "Music for the Funeral of Queen Mary," but here we are building towards doom rather than announcing a fate that has already befallen us.)

I. MARCH

Et si j'avais mangé trop de cheeseburgers de mauvaise qualité?

What if I ate too many low-grade cheeseburgers?

Et maintenant mourais
And now am dying?

Et si j'avais les fluides de quelqu'un dans un cuticule

What if I got someone's sex fluids in a hangnail

et maintenant mourais?
and now am dying?

Une amibe mangeant mon cerveau?
What's this? An amoeba, eating my brain?

Par mon nez à travers mon précieux pot neti?
It got in through my nose, from my precious neti pot?

Mais alors aussi—
More than this—

Et si la toute race humaine disparaissait?
What if the whole human race goes extinct?

Et si les rats évoluent et deviennent grands et sophistiqués?

What if rats evolve to be big and sophisticated?

Et s'ils découvrent . . . Et s'ils découvrent . . .
What if they uncover . . . What if they uncover . . .

nos chefs-d'œuvre
our masterpieces

mais ne les apprécient pas?
and don't appreciate them?

(VIDEO: We see the iconic touching hands from Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel, but a mangy rat paw slides up to touch too, and the image bursts into flames. JOSEPH unveils the RAT STATUE, stationed somewhere onstage.)

II. ARIA

(The rat statue has many counterparts projected on the wall. A virtual chorus of big rats wearing robes. They punctuate the song with laughter.)

RATS *Ha ha ha . . . !*

(The verses of the song have many 6ths and 7ths in the chords; if it were slower this might feel like a wistful ballad. But it trucks along and frequently changes keys, achieving a sense of mania.)



*Et une fois je me suis cogné la tête à Paris, cogné
en sortant du lit*
Once I bumped my head in Paris, getting out
of bed

J'étais convaincu que mon cerveau saignait
I was convinced my brain was bleeding

Je me sentais "bizarre"
I just felt "off"

RATS *Ha ha ha . . . !*

*Finally, au milieu de la nuit, j'ai marché aux
urgences*
Finally, in the middle of the night, I wandered
to an emergency room

*J'ai navigué parmi des centaines de manifestants,
de policiers*
Outside the hospital, I had to wade through
hundreds of protestors and police

*(The song veers perversely into another chord pro-
gression and adopts a rhythmic feel reminiscent of
"Please Mr. Postman.")*

La police étaient les manifestants! Hub?
Wait, what? The police were the protestors!

Donc aucune des confrontations habituelles
So there was none of the usual tension

RATS *Ha ha ha . . .*

*(A high choir of MATTHEW's voice enters singing
"la la la" harmonies.)*

*Dans la salle d'attente de l'hôpital la télé mon-
trait la manif à l'extérieur—aux infos—*
In the hospital waiting room was a TV, and the
news showed the scene from outside

*Le personnel regardait la télé, mais pas par la
fenêtre!*

The staff watched on TV, but not through the
window!

*J'appris qu'un officier blessé était dans le coma,
mourant*
I learned a wounded officer was in a coma,
dying

J'ai attendu huit heures
I waited eight hours

RATS *Ha ha ha . . .*

*Puis une jeune femme a pressée chaque partie de
mon corps nu: "Vous sentez ça? Et ça?"*
Then a young woman poked at every part of
my naked body: "Can you feel this?
What about this?"

*Puis elle a essayé de me dire quelque chose. Je ne
pouvais pas comprendre*
She tried to tell me something I couldn't
understand

Vu que je ne parle pas français
Since I don't speak French

III. CODA

*(This part shifts to ¾ time, modulates around,
and includes some rat-a-tat-tat action in the
percussion, like a sorry yet spirited tap dance.)*

Ensuite un homme est entré
Then a man came in

"Vous allez bien," dit-il
"You are fine," he said in English.

"Vous devriez rire!"
"You should laugh!"

*(We arrive into an opulent meditation—
glissandos, swells, French impressionism meets
Alice Coltrane. The melody is a variation on the
theme of the laughing rats, in major now.)*

En partant, la télé marchait toujours
As I left, the TV still played

On voyait une scène nocturne bondée
It showed a crowded night scene

Mais marchant dehors, les rues étaient vides et le soleil se levait

But as I stepped outside the streets were empty and the sun was rising

Et je prenais des moments de soulagement—sexe, nourriture et pot neti—

I used to take moments of relief—sex, food, and neti pot—

Et les sculptais en instruments tranchants
And carve them into sharp instruments

Mais j'étais jeune et ridicule
But I was young and ridiculous

Maintenant que les temps sont plus dramatiques
Now that times are more dramatic

Je n'ai plus besoin de plaisir pour être tragique
I no longer need to turn pleasure into tragedy

(Lights change.)

This show will have an ending. I know when that is and you don't.

So, for your sake, to remove any possibly ambiguity, I'd like to do the ending right now. This way you will recognize it when it comes for real. Think of this as a fire drill that won't save your life.

When the end comes. . . All of us onstage will still be here. All that is now veiled will have been unveiled. And then and only

then will I stand on this two-hundred-year-old tree stump and intone the final number. As the last notes ring out, we will have a . . .

(He pulls at the air, and the lights fade to black, engineering the feeling that this is the end of the show.)

(Lights back up.)

That was the ending. Here's another beginning.

(Eb theme begins.)

Welcome to the Train With No Midnight.

I wrote this theme song in hopes it would sound like it could accompany the opening credits for a mystery show on PBS—shots of turbid waters, of white-haired women with secrets peering through curtained windows, a well-dressed man walking briskly down the street, and pausing as he realizes . . . he's being followed.

In reality it's the theme song to this show, which is about things that didn't happen. Impactful non-events. A collection of shorts, a sequence of open endings, each like a stop on a late night train.

I spend my life like someone on the beach with a metal detector, looking for bits of trash I can take home and polish.

Each of these songs is about the state of transition from one reality to another, from what you expected to happen, what you thought was happening, and what did happen.

The musical score is written in 4/4 time and consists of two staves. The first staff contains the following chords: Ebm, Fm(sus4), Ab/Eb, Ab(sus4), Bbm/Db, Cb, and Ebm. The second staff contains: Fm(sus4), Ab/Eb, Ab(sus4), Bbm/Db, Abm/Cb, Cb, Ebm/Bb, and Bb. The melody is primarily composed of eighth and quarter notes, with some rests.

The past number of years, I have been in a constant state of—not necessarily of transition, but transit—

I spend my life going from city to city—I'm always on trains, planes, buses. And then when I'm in these cities, I wander the streets. Each song in the show is about wandering.

I think I love wandering because it is . . . endless.

(Musical resolution, new theme.)

Even when I am at home, travel looms above me—I live under the J train.

If the J train were to derail it would derail into my living room—and I hope someday it does.

“Isn't it noisy?” people often ask.

Yes is the answer. In the summer, in the living room, if I'm having a conversation with a friend, with the window open, and the train goes by, we have to pause—it forces us to put our existences on hold. I respect that.

“Doesn't it keep you awake at night?” people also ask.

The answer is no. I keep me awake. As do the entities from the beyond that surround my bed and harass me. Ever since I was a child, it's been hard for me to have a bedtime, to “go to bed.” Usually I just collapse at dawn like some unholy figure, defeated at long last. This is because I see shadows moving in the dark and only when the sun rises do I know it's *safe to rest*.

When I was little I used to crawl in between my parents in bed to escape the shadow figures. Even then, there was an Arthur Rackham illustration on the wall in their bedroom with a cat in it, and the cat would saunter out of the picture and through the air above me.

Once as a child I saw something that wasn't a shadow creature. I saw a creature

made of light. First I heard a *ribbit*, and then: a radiant, holographic frog burst up from my pillow and then disappeared back into it, as though it had just leapt a little too high, exceeding the boundaries of its dimension and passing momentarily into mine.

Aristophanes located frogs between our world and the underworld; in my experience this is accurate.

I still have no explanation for the glowing frog.

Then, a few years ago, I had another encounter.

(Piano begins.)

FROG SONG

I. RECIT

*Zurück in meiner Heimatstadt wanderte ich
durch die Winternacht*

Back in my hometown, I went for a walk late
one winter night

*Ich war frisch verliebt
I'd started dating someone*

*(In a moment of call and response, violin now
plays a spritely ascending scale.)*

*und fühlte mich wie ein “neuer Mensch”
so I felt like a “new person”*

(Violin: another.)

*“All die Sorgen sind nun vorbei,” dachte ich
“All my sorrows are behind me,” I thought*

(A nasal character voice for the quoted line.)

*als ich durch meine Vergangenheit spazierte
as I toured an old life*

*Sanft fiel der Schnee
Snow fell softly*



II. ARIA

(MICHAEL unveils the vibraphone and begins playing descending arpeggios like falling snow.)

Ich war allein auf der Strasse
It was only me on the street

Keine Autos, nicht mal die Polizei
No cars, not even police

Die mich immer jagte wenn ich spät unterwegs war
They always tried to catch me when I was a teen out past curfew

Die Stadt glitzerte, ein Museum ihrer selbst
The town sparkled, a museum of itself

Häuser, geschlossene Geschäfte . . .
I passed houses, closed shops . . .

und das Amphitheater in dem Cheap Trick gespielt hatten . . .
and the outdoor stage where Cheap Trick once played . . .

an meinem Weg
according to legend

Ich kroch unter eine Brücke
I crept down, under a bridge

Und stand in der Dunkelheit
stood in the dark

Ich hörte ein Geräusch—tief, seltsames . . .
I heard a sound—low, strange . . .

ein Frosch?
a frog?

Das kann doch nicht sein, das kann doch nicht sein
But it can't be, it just can't be

Das kann doch nicht sein, das kann doch nicht sein
But it can't be, it just can't be

mitten im Winter
never in winter

Noch mehr Frösche quakten nun
More frogs croaked all around

Sie sangen ein Lied
Then they began to sing

Joseph Keckler's
*Train With No
Midnight.*
Photo: Paula Lobo.
Courtesy of the
artist

CHORAL INTERLUDE

(FROG VOICES *enter like a chorus of Russian basses singing a wordless Christmas song, a version of the Eb theme. JOSEPH listens in awe.*)

FROG VOICES *ab . . .*

Nun sangen sie ein anderes Lied!
Then they sang another song!

(Random ELVEN VOICES *burst forth with a Christmas classic.*)

ELVEN VOICES *Jingle bells, jingle bells, jingle all the way*

Oh what fun it is to ride in a one horse open sleigh

(*He reacts to "Jingle Bells" with quiet devastation, then cries out.*)

Nooooo!

Um die Ecke, hinter der Brücke
I turned the corner, out from under the bridge

Sah ich es:

I saw it:

Ein Weihnachtsspiel erleuchteter Frösche
A Christmas display of light-up frogs

Das kann doch nicht sein, das kann doch nicht sein

But it can't be, it just can't be

Das kann doch nicht sein, das kann doch nicht sein—mitten im Winter

But it can't be, it just can't be—never in winter

Es blitzte nur kurz auf, das große Wunder
Gone in a flash, my spiritual experience

Es blitzte nur kurz auf,
Gone in a flash,

das große Wunder meines Lebens
the great miracle of my life

Ich ging heim

I walked back home

Und rief meinen Schatz in der Ferne an
I called my faraway love

um von den Fröschen zu erzählen
and began to tell the story of the frogs

"Ich liebe dich!" unterbrach mich mein Schatz
"I love you!" interrupted my love

Ein Pfeil der Stille in mein Herz
A dart of silence pierced my chest

Wir wechselten das Thema
I changed the subject

aber ich war nicht fertig
though I was not done

(MICHAEL *plays ascending arpeggios and lands on a ringing high note—but then the song continues. Variations in the time signature contribute to a sense of malfunction, as does JOSEPH's repetition of the phrase, "I was not done," which becomes a reclamatory tactic to now postpone the ending of the song itself.*)

Ich war nicht fertig
I was not done

Ich war nicht fertig
I was not done

Ich war nicht fertig
I was not done

Ich war nicht fertig, aber mein Schatz—
I was not done, but my love—

Ich war nicht fertig, aber mein Schatz—
I was not done, but my love—

Ich war nicht fertig, aber mein Schatz—
I was not done, but my love—

(*The song slows at last, like a music box that needs winding.*)

wollte, dass meine Geschichte schon endet.
 wanted my story to end.

(Lights change.)

“How long has everything been so corporate?”
 a 22-year-old friend recently asked me.

“As long as I’ve been around,” I said,
 “but it’s a relief you noticed.”

*(He quotes himself in a low voice like a tough
 cowboy.)*

We were walking through Bushwick, a
 neighborhood where the price of some
 bedrooms has tripled in a few short years. The
 previous *it*-zone of Williamsburg used to feel
 eerily like a college town without a college.
 Now parts of Bushwick feel like a college
 party, with neither college nor town. Streets
 are lined with posh, discarded furniture.
 Drunks in sandals amble through them—the
 living dead, roaming a cemetery of expensive
 trash.

*(MATTHEW begins vamping on “City,” a haunted
 torch song that moves at a walking pace. MI-
 CHAEL bows the vibraphone throughout the song,
 and LAVINIA plays sul ponticello. In moments
 the vibraphone and violin are barely distinguish-
 able from one another.)*

Here I sit, grumpily, like a cat that doesn’t
 want you to pet it, complaining about
 the newcomers to the neighborhood, and
 shouldering so heavy a resentment against the
 chain restaurant that replaced my local diner
 that I am driven to treat it like Medusa, never
 looking at it straight on.

In New York, you don’t even have to
 wander for the landscape to change around
 you.

CITY

*When I was walking through your city
 When I was calling you by name
 Was anybody listening?
 Were those people all the same?*

*Drag my wings into the shadow
 A cracking wall, a coming train
 A war at daybreak, and I awake a widow
 Afternoon—I am out again*

*A crime paid in your honor
 Down, down
 That’s where I’m bound to go
 I dreamed that we were brothers
 Sometime, in a life before
 Ah—*

*I wore your face around the city
 Then a fresh specter I became
 Years ago now, my voice left my body
 It’s on the street somewhere, still calling out your
 name . . . your name . . .*

Your name

(Lights change.)

GPS SONG

I. RECIT

(Showbiz lounge feel.)

*I’ve had many names
 Some of my friends used to call me Spooky—ha
 ha!*

*And I had a love
 Who called me some nicknames
 . . . in a foreign accent . . .*

*And my love and I, we spoke in baby talk a lot
 The ultimate language of love?
 The atrophied language of love?
 Ha ha!*



My love

Called me many names . . . such as:

“Baby Animal”

“Little Baby Animal”

“Big Baby Animal”

“Black Chicken”

“Bird Fallen From Its Nest”

And I loved them all!

Even “Baby Potato”

Although it evoked something lumpy and sexless,

I said yes!

YES! I AM Baby Potato.

(The following interlude is mostly spoken over mysterious chords . . . chromatic searching, out of time.)

My love and I went bicoastal

So I was out in Hollywood

and I knew something was wrong

when my love

stopped calling me by these names

I said “Look, it’s me, Baby Potato. I’m still here, still lumpy.”

Nothing.

II. ARIA

(LAVINIA begins. Recorded strings enter simultaneously. MICHAEL plays guitar with an electronic bow in this section. Occasionally a dog bark is heard among the other musical sounds. Both authentic heartbreak and melodrama are present.)

si dɔ mi mi si də rɪŋ qɑ ma ba

*I sneaked around and looked at my love’s
phone*

mi si də spɛlz tɑ də wu pɔs

I found texts to someone else

wu pɔs bi ‘zibrəbɑ

Someone called “Baby Zebra”

ɔs bi tɑnzɑ də spɛlz

There were so many texts

ɪn də hu sei

And they were in another language

an mi snæp ɛm, an tæp də spɛlz ɪn ‘gugəl

træn ‘zleɪt

So I had to take pictures and type them into

Google Translate

(Surtitles display: GOD IS BICYCLE, RIDE SLOW)

nɔsn nu mi nɔs

Nothing made any sense!

umə dɔs bi pæl . . .

Maybe the zebra was just a friend . . .

vʌt ‘tɔstəl stʌf bi sɪr, mi tɑ wei mi

But things got bad, I had to leave

mɑ bɑ wɪl mi tɑ flɑɪ mi, dʒi-pi-ɛs bi wei k

*As my love drove me to the airport, the GPS
was on*

mɑ bɑ nɔs də rut vʌt tæpt də plæn pɛr də fu

*My love knew the way but had entered the
address to a later appointment*

sɔŋ sei tɑ rəʊnd də wei!

So the voice kept telling us to turn around!

Recalculating, recalculating

Recalculating, recalculating . . .

mɑ mi bɑ prɔʊf də hɔsm bɑt sei

*As we neared the terminal the voice
instructed:*

*rəʊnt də ɛm wei! rəʊnt də ɛn wei! rəʊnt də ɔs
wei!*

*Turn on M Street! Turn on N Street! Turn on
O Street!*

‘tɔsdəl də spɛlz!

Every letter of the alphabet!

sis ɛm, mi plɔr

“Can we pause that?” I asked

nɔs, sei mɑ bɑ

“No,” said my love

Joseph Keckler’s
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Paula Lobo.
Courtesy of the
artist

də stəʊnz bi ɛndə də stəʊnz dɑ ma mi ba
 These were our last moments after five years
 together

ma ba sei ɛntə ɛn də wɑ
 My love said a quick goodbye on the sidewalk

wʌt dʒi-pi-es sɔŋz bi sɔŋ
 The GPS sounded strangely more alive

i'plɔr meɪk ə ju tɜrn
 Its plea emanated from the car window:
 "Make a u turn"

ma ba bi wei
 My love was already somewhere else

mi, də fɜr, də flɑ
 I, the animal, the black chicken

sei də riəl
 tell some truth

mi, də fɜr, də flɑ
 I, the animal, the black chicken

sei də riəl
 Tell some truth

wʌt mi sɔŋ sei
 But I speak nonsense

ɪn də hudi spɛɪz
 Even now, I sing to you in an extreme baby talk

(Singing low, animal-like.)

ɪn də hudi spɛɪz, də hu bi nɔn
 A shadow language, which does not exist

(Singing in a high, theremin-like sound. Song ends. Lights change.)

("City" theme resumes.)

Now away from Hollywood endings to New York, a place with a particular relationship to endings, since people are always saying that it's over. Is it? Is New York still the beating heart of American culture? Or merely the locus of a cadaveric spasm at the end of an empire?

Is part of what New York *is* that it's always being declared over?

Being an anachronistic type, I always feel there's an old spirit in need of recovery.

It's warm in Bushwick tonight and the rats are running through the streets, ransacking our garbage, poised to inherit the earth. I am not throwing stones from a glass houses, just seated on a wet sofa on the sidewalk, launching paper airplanes to pass the time.

TIMES SQUARE/SALOME

(A measure from Strauss's Salome has been looped and built on in various ways during the Times Square/Salome monologue.)

Dead dead dead.

It sounds the same backwards as it does forward.

If you go around pronouncing things dead, sometimes you can sound like a philosopher, a coroner of belief.



“The future is dead,” I announced several years ago, in my own head, in the back of a taxi, stuck in traffic in the middle of Times Square.

I was gazing out at the gargantuan screens—impressive yet underwhelming.

My eyes wandered then from the screens to the other goings on in Times Square.

Times Square:

A place where beloved cartoon characters of the past have fallen from the sky into hard times

A place where a bronze figure called Father Duffy guards a red staircase to nowhere

A place so well-lit it is never truly night

A place where there is a man who impersonates Doc from the old movie *Back to the Future*. He stands next to a DeLorean and you can pay to take your picture with it or with him. He is always stationed, suspiciously, outside a restaurant where it is *always Friday*.

The place where New Year’s Eve happens—but only once a year. The other 364 days people still flock there—simply to be there. Even though to be there is to be surrounded by invitations to somewhere else

“Times Square is the cemetery of the future! These screens are tombstones,” I went on in my head. “This is where our dreams have been laid to rest.”

We used to dream about the future—we used to think maybe someday we’d have rockets on our shoes. We thought it would be fun. Technology used to seem fun. “We used to dream about the future,” I said to my friend, who was sitting next to me in the taxi.

She didn’t look up from her cellphone. She just said “Yeah, it’s not a thing anymore . . . cuz we’re there now and it’s a bummer. . . . Everybody complains about how they changed

Times Square, got rid of all the porno theaters and made it all corporate and stuff. But I used to turn tricks in Times Square, when I was a hooker back in the ’70s. And you know what? It was a ridiculous place *then* and it’s a ridiculous place *now*. Ridiculous.”

I looked at my friend and imagined her in the ’70s. I looked out the window and imagined it in the ’70s. I imagined my friend as a hooker in Times Square, turning tricks in the ’70s.

(Music changes.)

I once read that it was opera that brought prostitution to Times Square in the first place. In the late 1800s, when the Metropolitan opened, hustlers began lining the streets, soliciting men as they streamed out of *Romeo and Juliette*, as they streamed out of *Faust*.

I read there were efforts to crack down on erotic activities and displays, both on the street *and* on the stage. Such was the case in 1907 with *Salome*, which was shut down after a single performance. The record is unclear as to what so offended Louisa Pierpont Morgan Satterlee. Was it Salome’s suggestive dance of seven veils? Was it the severed head of John the Baptist? Was it Salome rolling around, speaking baby talk, and making out with the severed head of John the Baptist?

All we know is that Louisa Pierpont Morgan Satterlee went to her father, J. P. Morgan, who was on the board of the Metropolitan Opera, and that all future performances were canceled.

(The Salome sample is momentarily played with nothing else, naked, so to speak. Other musical layers re-enter gradually.)

I saw *Salome* for the first time in Hamburg, Germany, on November 8th, 2016. The night of the American election.

I was over there on a scholarship to

study German for a few weeks. I was having a nice time. As the only American in my class, and as an American musician, I was viewed as very *cool* by the other students.

All the girls were giving me their WhatsApp numbers, all the boys wanted to sit at my study table.

But the morning of November 9th, I felt alone, as all the other students were indifferent to the outcome of the American election—though the instructor and some older Germans on staff had haunted looks on their faces.

I had not stayed up to hear the results the night before. For the first time in my life, I had gone to bed early.

That night I had a dream that Hillary Clinton won, which did give me some trepidation . . . because, in the dream, she was working as my showbiz manager, and I knew she was going to have a hard time keeping up both jobs.

As I awoke and learned the reality, the images strongest in my mind were still those of the opera:

(The following spoken lines also appear as coinciding surtitles.)

A naked soprano

A stage floor strewn with veils

The severed head of a prophet—and around it: the aura of a future that could no longer be seen.

(Music fades. Lights go down.)

SALOME/TIMES SQUARE

(The last supertitle comes back and then flips horizontally, a moment of animation. The lights come back up into the same cue we were just in, only now JOSEPH is backlit. Music sample fades back up but is now played backwards. Musicians remain still. JOSEPH speaks the textual passage he has just finished backwards [phonetically]. The

same sequence of surtitles plays out, in reverse, with backwards sentences. [For the reader's ease, the backwards lines are also printed forward here.]

nees eb regnol on dluoc tabt erutuf a fo arua ebT
[The aura of a future that could no longer be seen]

:ti dnuora dna—tehporp a fo daeb dereves ebT
[The severed head of a prophet—and around it:]

sliev btiw nwerts roofegats A
[A stage floor strewn with veils]

onarpos dekan A
[A naked soprano]

(He continues speaking backwards. No surtitles anymore.)

arepo ebt fo esoht llits erew dnim ym ni tsegnorts
segami ebt ,ytilaer ebt denrael dna ekowa
I sA

[As I awoke and learned the reality, the images strongest in my mind were still those of the opera]

(Music accelerates, being played at double speed for forty seconds. JOSEPH speaks more quickly in an abstract way that suggests a rapid rewinding. His body, too, moves as though being rewound. He walks backwards, approximating the staging of the last ten minutes. Music then slows to its original pace. JOSEPH is again truly speaking backwards, and now he reaches an ending, which was the beginning of his monologue.)

drawrof seod ti sa sdrawkcb emas ebt sduos tI
[It sounds the same backwards as it does forward]

(Music cuts.)

daed daed daeD
[Dead dead dead]

(Lights change.)

HOUSES

(Quiet and melancholy, this song tracks a figure who wanders through town, placeless, perhaps having undergone a traumatic, divine, and delirious transformation.)

*Where was I? In a kind of final night I lay—
my head down again*

*Was no chance to say goodbye, the light
in my eyes again*

*An endless morning,
a day for turning*

*Are all the houses dark now?
Are all the houses dark to me?*

*How could I? In a field of flowers I
became the thing
and they sang to me
Not a sign of passersby,
at least not in my memory*

*These places in me
to lose faces, but not the story*

*Are all the houses dark now?
Are all the houses dark to me?*

*Are all the houses dark now?
Are all the houses dark to me?*

TRAIN WITH NO MIDNIGHT

I. MONOLOGUE

(In this title piece, various musical motifs arise, both new and previously introduced.)

I didn't plan anything in my life for after the 2012 apocalypse, but I was looking forward to *it*, having learned that "apocalypse" comes from the Ancient Greek word for "reveal."

Once the world had failed to end on schedule, I promptly came down with the stomach flu in my parents' quaint and cluttered

West Michigan home, late on Christmas night, and ended up missing my flight back to New York City. My mother avoided me for several days, addressing me from the other room as "Typhoid Mary"—a name she assigns to any family member who is under the weather.

My father read to me in bed—some meandering essays by Carol Bly, no doubt harder for me to follow in my state of delirium—and he sang me "Dark as the Dungeon" and other bleak lullabies about miners and hobos on trains, just as he had done when I was a child.

My mother sang me a lullaby from the other room.

After a blurry couple of days, I awoke on New Year's Eve and felt back to myself again. It was too late to make my evening plans in New York; I discovered that flights were far too expensive, but train tickets for midnight that night were available and reasonably priced. Many people would find the prospect of spending a holiday on a train unappealing, but I am a glutton for awkward experiences. Therefore, instantly convinced that New Year's Eve on a train would be a night to remember, I insisted on heading back to New York that night, by train. Why, I couldn't wait to see all those strangers on Amtrak, whooping it up in the aisles, shaking their stuff in the café car, to welcome 2013. Perhaps some passengers would kiss one another. What a strange situation, I thought: to be in motion, barreling through the night, while arriving into a new year.

I bought the ticket. At once I contemplated all the New Year's Eves of my past and all the train rides of my past. Tonight the two tracks of memory would converge. Finally the sense of restrained festivity I associated with trains could become, well, a bit less restrained, I imagined. I thought too of the impossible

expectations that characterize New Year's Eve—all that heedless drinking in hopes of achieving some unprecedented metamorphosis. At least on a train, I thought, we would have a *reachable destination*.

My parents complied in driving me down to Elkhart, Indiana—the train to NYC is much shorter from that station, and it's just an hour from their house. I sat in the back seat, just as I had on family car trips when I was a child. At one point my mother turned to my father and remarked, "You are going to outlive me. But *if* I were to outlive you, I want you to know that I would never remarry."

My father shrugged and, without taking his eyes off the road, replied, "It's not like I'm gonna be ghostin' around."

Once in Elkhart, the three of us passed several businesses with names so generic as to be almost outrageous: "Easy Shopping Center" and "Quick Video." I didn't know video rental outlets even existed anymore, but this one seemed to be appealing to those who were at once *behind the times* and *in a hurry*.

Vowing not to do it again in the new year, in our fresh new lives which would begin in roughly an hour, my parents and I scarfed down McDonald's cheeseburgers, ordered from the drive thru. As we proceeded to the train station, I thought about trains and why I like them so much. For one, the culture of ground transportation in general is much less police-statey than that of air travel; one can express one's personality, even eccentricity, without having to worry about being suspected of terrorism. This is partly because crime on trains and buses in the United States is not so often politically motivated. For instance, that one man who decapitated another on a Greyhound wasn't a follower of any cause—he simply wanted to show off to his fellow passengers. Chatty schizophrenics, the Amish, anarchist types, babies with *joie de vivre*, temperamental Europeans, the unwashed,

and the unhinged—these are the people of the ground. Of course the atmosphere of the train is more sophisticated and delirious than that of a bus. And because the heyday of trains belongs to another era, riding the train makes you feel like you are somehow in the past. Even the most contemporary vignette, viewed through the windows of a slow-moving train, appears to be history.

"Your father had the idea for a sitcom," my mother smiled. "It's about a woman who, like me, has eight cats. And when she dies, her husband is left to care for the cats. And *he* can't see his wife's ghost, but the cats *can*. So he communicates with his wife's ghost *through* the cats!" They both laughed. "Don't you think it's a good idea?"

"I do," I said, amused and troubled.

The Elkhart station was small and old-fashioned, currently quiet and empty. We were the only ones there except for the attendant, who listened to a radio behind her glass window.

She looked as though she wanted to be left alone, so we tried not to bother her. We just sat on a bench, watching a clock on the wall, and conversing in whispers. We didn't even raise our voices to countdown to the new year. "Five, four, three, two, one," we mouthed in a huddle, as though marking a tradition in the midst of hiding from a predator. A low screeching echoed outside, precisely at the stroke of midnight. "That old freight train sure dragged in the new year," remarked my father. Then, sustaining our hushed boisterousness, we waited for my train to arrive. It was due at 12:30 a.m.

My train was younger and sleeker than the freight—it didn't sound anything like a wraith as it came streaming through the darkness a half an hour later. My parents walked me outside, we kissed goodbye, and I stepped aboard. I waved back at them from the stairs and then turned towards the future, readying myself for the *real* party.

TRAIN WITH NO MIDNIGHT

2. ARIA

(This aria alternates between English, Italian, and ancient Greek. The ancient Greek is not a literal translation, but a parallel text, fragments of the The Eumenides and The Book of Revelation. The audience will never learn this, nor will they have access to the true meaning of those certain lines, unless they are proficient in that language. I will include those hidden meanings here in brackets.)

(Underpinning this whole section is a vocal soundscape comprised of whispers, grunts, and so on—the sleep-noises of passengers.)

Era buio
Everything was dark

Prósthēn de t'ándros toúde thaumastos lóchos
[A strange group of women . . .]

I made out the shapes of sleeping people

heudei gunaikōn en thrónoisin hēmenos

[slept in chairs in front of the man . . .]

In blankets and coats—bundled against the
world

outoi gunaikas, alla Gorgónas légō

[not women, but Gorgons]

I wheeled my suitcase from car to car: each
was the same

Un cimitero—

A cemetery of the tucked out

Ero forse l'unico bon vivant?

Was I the only bon vivant on board?

Joseph Keckler's
*Train With No
Midnight*. Photo:
Paula Lobo.
Courtesy of the
artist



Finalmente, vidi una luce accesa
 Finally, in the last car, I spotted one seat with
 its light on

uomo . . . donna . . . bicchieri di plastica
 A man and a woman, drinking from plastic
 cups

Aha. Gli unici superstiti.
 Aha, the last soldiers standing!

(He speaks the next line in a character voice.)

“Weee like smokin’ weeeeeeeed,” said the
 man.

Mi sedetti di fronte.
 I sat down across the aisle

“Buon anno!” *dissi.*
 “Happy New Year!” I said

“C’è stato un party sul treno?”
 “Was there a party on the train?”

(And another character voice line:)

“We’re havin’ a party right now,” the woman
 said, raising her cup.

*gínou grēgorōn . . . ean oūn mē grēgorēsēs, hēxō
 hōs kléptēs,*

[Wake up . . . if you don’t I will come like a
 thief]

Hmm, maybe everyone else partied too hard
 early on and passed out before the
 countdown

Accadde una volta a Kalamazoo . . .
 I saw it happen once in Kalamazoo . . .

“*Che è successo a mezzanotte?*” *chiesi*
 “What happened at midnight?” I asked

I due si guardarono in faccia
 The couple turned to one another—

Mezzanotte? Non ricordavano nulla
 Midnight? They couldn’t recall

Guardai fuori dal finestrino
 I turned towards my window

Che succede qui?
 What’s going on here?

Finalmente capii tutto
 Finally it occurred to me

Il treno aveva attraversato due fusi orari
 The train had crossed time zones

Era partito da Chicago alle ventitré
 It set out from Chicago at 11

*Attraversando l’Indiana verso le ventitré
 e trenta, dove cambia il fuso orario*
 Crossed into Indiana the place where the time
 changes around 11:30

*Si è passati dalle ventitré e trenta a mezzanotte
 e mezza*
 The time leapt from 11:30 pm to 12:30 am

hē ouai hē mía apēlthen
 [The first woe has passed]
 There had been no midnight

kai eichon thōrakas hōs thōrakas sidēroūs
 [They had scales like iron breastplates, and the
 noise of their wings . . .]

I looked around at all the sleeping people. Was
 it even 2013 for them?

*kai hē phōnē tōn pterūgōn autōn hōs phōnē
 harmātōn híppōn pollōn trechōntōn eis
 pólemon*

[. . . was like the noise of many chariots with
 horses rushing into battle]
 Or were they children of 2012? Orphans of its
 forgotten apocalypse?

idou érchetai éti dúo ouai meta taūta
 [There are still two woes to come]

I had *my* midnight moment; I was a citizen of
 the future
 Or was I? Or was I the one most af-

fectured by this lapse in time, the chief mourner of the lost midnight? After all, I'd invested in this train, in these people, a heady sense of possibility. I thought of this night, these passengers, and the entire scenario the way most of us think of each coming year: as a promising stranger. A promising stranger who inevitably disappoints you, as it turns out, once you actually get to know her.

Anyway, I was getting a little drowsy myself. The train slowed down and became a bit jerky. Still, I drifted off, becoming one among the sleepers, only waking up for a moment, here and there, as we all went lurching forward—

It may seem odd, or deranged, that this moment has obsessed me for the past five years, but that fugitive hour represents everything I am trying to recover.

(Music is fading. Lights change.)

("Appearances" theme begins.)

(JOSEPH approaches the last veiled mass, walking with solemnity, with pomp and circumstance. He unveils: the FROG STATUE. He places a crown on its head, bows to it. He proceeds to the tree stump. He steps up on it.)

APPEARANCES

(Sung with longing, and with a quality of invocation.)

*I used to lose
I used to sing about it
I used to use what was not there
I've still got the blues but here's the thing about it
These days I'm so well taken care of*

*I never mean to go
to the other side of the city
But there's a lost thing living over there
Many nights
I'm just tryin' to get it
to appear*

*Sometimes I feel
that I should leave my family
start again out on my own
But is it real?
I think it's just some vanity
that makes me want to stray from home*

*I never mean to go
to the other side of the city
But there's a lost thing living over there
Many nights
I find myself in pity
When it's near*

*I never mean to go
to the other side of the city
But there's a lost thing living over there
Many nights
I'm just tryin' to get it
to appear
to appear*

(The blackout happens in the same way as before.)