

Waiting

Vanessa Berry, author and artist, 2020

The clock on the cafe wall is at five minutes to ten. The early morning surge of workers to the factories is over and there is a lull. It is a winter morning, bright but cool, and only a few people are on the platform. Two women in coats are restless to be on their way. A man leans against the cafe wall, intent on his reading, taking in the warmth of the sun along with the words on the page.

Once, many cafes operated under the RRR name, the purring abbreviation of Railway Refreshment Rooms. Some were grand, high-ceilinged dining rooms with white tablecloths and vases of fresh flowers. Others sold pies and cups of tea and milkshakes from rooms with the homely atmosphere of suburban kitchens. All had the same white cups and plates with an insignia stamped on them, three Rs and a crown within a circular belt. Every day across the state, people drank from these cups as they took a pause in their journey.

A row of cups is stacked on top of the coffee machine and the waitress looks over them. The waitresses who work here know the pace of rush hours and race days and the sleepy stretches of quiet mornings or afternoons. Their days are measured in trains going by, in cups of coffee, by the people who linger indecisively at the counter, or those who hurry in to buy a chocolate bar or a packet of cigarettes.

Through the venetian blinds the waitress watches the reading man and the pacing women. Their train will soon arrive. The man will look up from his book and step aboard. The women will enter the carriage and settle into seats by the windows. As the train travels onwards they will look out over the western suburbs. The streets of factories and houses are interspersed by the path of creeks and rivers, the enduring shapes of land and water.

New passengers will arrive on the platform. Inside the cafe the clock will tick through into the afternoon, and then to closing time. The waitress will shut the doors, then walk from window to window, drawing the blinds. The next day will come, then the next and the next, and the cafe will provide more cups of coffee and milkshakes and sandwiches. People will sit at the tables

and have friendly or stilted conversations. Thousands of trains will arrive and depart.

Decades will go by. The RRR crockery will be packed up and sent for auction. The wood panelling and mirrors will be taken down from the walls, the linoleum floors pulled up and replaced by tiles. Yet I will still be able to recognise it on the day I go in search of it, 60 years after this photograph was taken. I walk down the station stairs to see that RRR Refreshments is a takeaway now, its vinyl chairs and formica tables long gone, replaced by drink fridges and an additional counter. A woman stacks cardboard cups behind the coffee machine, glancing up now and then, waiting for customers. On the platform, people lean up against the ledge on the outside of the curved wall, looking down at their phones.

Over this scene I imagine the photograph. I can see the people from it like shadows over the present: the man leaning back with legs crossed, reading his book, and further along the platform the two women in their long coats. Behind the counter of the cafe, I imagine the waitress looking out, waiting for the next customer. Our lines of sight cross over, across time.