



* Stories of Knowing Otherwise *

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There And Back Again

Extra-Ordinary Being in Ordinary Worlds

Gasping, sprinting to keep pace with the dark, gliding mass, the heavy pack slogs across my back, my bobbing hand extends, pursuing a grip. The low volume, high-pitched ringing oscillates through the damp darkness, gravel crunching beneath my flailing boots. Out of breath, I lunge for the glint of steel rods, fingers just catching hold. The impact jerks me off balance. I swing my other arm for a second grip but the weight of my pack tips me, sideways. I hang by one hand in darkness, legs dangling somewhere near the unseen, ringing juncture of massive 3" wide steel wheels, and rails. I am unable to raise myself nor better my tenuous grip. I feel the unimaginable mass of the monster surge ahead....

Surely I felt only fear and anger; fear for life and limb, anger over having deliberately chosen to put myself in such an extra-ordinarily undesirable position. And yet...yet, at a later date I would recall the same moment with an air of epiphany, as though I took some pleasure in it. How can this be done? Did I actually experience both such opposite feelings? Is there such a thing as dual states of consciousness? Did I reinterpret the event or are the two extremes of feelings somehow connected? How much of one's mind does one really know? How much of experience is actually discovered after the event? Ah, the heart must be quicker than the mind.

Opiate of the People

Why do people long to "go off" on trips? Is there some innate need to leave hearth and home, some "Call of the Wild?" Or is it just the dashing fantasy of adventure and safe return home we require? Do we each really want our own Odysseys filled with travail, or just well planned tours? Ulysses, some have

supposed, was never again content once he finally returned home. Either way, what exactly is it we long to leave behind, what go off to experience or bring back? The world? Are we not always in it?

It is embarrassing to tell people I buy an airplane ticket to fly somewhere so I can hop a freight train. At my age, it could be said, this smacks of adolescent indulgence, some grasping at lost youth or flight from the responsibilities of "mid-life." But what is a would-be Yuppie to do to escape the weight of his failure to ascend? Freight train riding may be archaic and arcane, certainly not Club Med, but better ideological baggage for a hybrid child of the ante-sexual revolution protestant work ethic and hippiedom. Bless those who have found redemption through personal ambition and material gain. Oh, that I might join their ranks. But, in the absence of that particular narcotic, what drug can be found to keep body and soul together? I am a desperate man -- quiet desperation, of course.

So, frustrated that my great scheme is not fitting together with The Great Scheme of Things, regardless how I plan, push and shove, I think, "Why not some diversion? Why not a week to contemplate autumn in mountain air and a little adventure? I shall make a fine little trip out of this and come back recharged for the battle. "He who fights and runs away lives to fight another day." Wonderland, here I come!

Down The Rabbit Hole

Taking flight from the City of Lost Angeles and crushing celluloid dreams, I wing off to the great Pacific Northwest. There, loaded with the accouterments of the Comfortable Backpacker, I join forces with my old comrade in the ambivalent struggle against cultural assimilation, Great Scott. Re-creational hobo and habitué of glacial mountain climes -- when not overseeing the bureaucratic shuttling of the old and infirm as a professional social worker --he is my High Priest of the rails. I am a novice to his years of experience, having ridden only twice before. But I am in the good hands of a rational man. He is never reckless, though he hears the Call of the Wild and responds often. So often that I wonder what he gets from routine adventure. Could he be an addict?

We prepare with Spartan seriousness for the austere life of the rails, packing such essentials as ear plugs, goggles, leather gloves and set off -- Wonderland or Bust. (Though not before consecrating the occasion by eating \$20 worth of dinner.) Our point of departure is the railroad yard in Vancouver, Washington, 9 o'clock at night. Our destination, Missoula, Montana, 800 miles eastward. Emerging from the warm restaurant in jolly conversation, we shoulder our 45-pound packs and venture through the benign patchwork of residential darkness, seeking unobtrusive entry to the Dragon's Lair. Beyond the reach of streetlights, past no trespassing signs, by

real hobo haunts under the highway over-pass, down steep, brambled banks, we cross the borderline.

Stepping over the first steel rail, one enters a separate dimension normally observed only from a safe distance, or the insulated comfort of the modern passenger train. But here, feet on greasy dirt and gravel, acrid smell of diesel fuel and creosoted wood enveloping, the perspective changes suddenly.

The rail yard is pair after pair of glinting steel tracks strung with various quarter mile hunks of the chain of American commerce. Rail cars tower 50-ton bulks loaded with as much as 150 tons of payload 15 feet overhead. Each track is the potential path of a guillotine, on which a "severed" car can roll in utter silence down from the "hump" where trains are broken-up, catching the unwary with assuredly terminal results. All this towering steel rests around us in eerie quiet and surreal black shadows cut only by streetlights from the highway overpass.

Crossing between the motionless cars puts one between the faces of two hammers. They can be triggered without warning by the slamming contact of an engine coupling-up far down the line. I grip steel rungs and struts fiercely, struggling for foot holds as we clamber over their couplings, all the while trying to keep my pack clear and my head away from any surface that could suddenly leap forward to smash my skull.

Crawling under the cars' long bellies exposes one to the unswerving path of those impartial steel wheels, mounted in sets of four on frames called trucks at either end. This place, even more so than the middle of the highway, is a part of the human landscape which has no consciousness for the pedestrian, where there is nothing and no one to look out for you. It is a place of great but oddly quiet danger even for the professional railroad employee.

So what in Hell or on earth am I doing here?! Standing in the dark, narrow passage between two towering rows of cars, I am suddenly seized by this thought. This is not 1933. I am not destitute -- at least not quite yet. There is no earthly reason for my being here! What possessed me to do this? Am I having fun? And Scott, he's been doing this for years, usually alone. What's wrong with him? The paranoid phase has begun, enhanced by the dark, the quiet disturbed only by distant rumblings of engines, the sudden chill of night air.

Our vigil of waiting for a ride commences. We walk the yard this way and that, attempting to discern what chain of cars is next destined to become a train. We seek to be unobtrusive, yet, if seen, appear innocent of any criminal intent but trespass. This yard is not a "hot" one and no one but the "Yard Bull," the railroad cop, is likely to take notice of us.

Short on stature but never courtesy, Scott speaks to a car man passing on the steps of the Yard Engine, shuttling cars.

"Hello. Could you tell us of any trains going East?"

"Couple hours," he says disinterestedly, jerking a thumb toward several long

lines of cars and is gone.

"Which one did he point to?" I ask.

"Not sure," my comrade replies.

Such information, I begin to remember, is standard issue from the workman who seem to know only what is necessary to perform their specific jobs, like workers on an assembly line or enzymes in the stomach. Usually inconclusive, it is none-the-less sufficient to fuel considerable speculation. Within the organism that is the freight hauling railroad there appears no set schedule. It is a model of Chaos Theory, order constantly in flux, a system continually responding to changing inputs of differing types of freight with different destinations in conflicting directions all running on the same line. One discovers numerous hints, clues and opinions as to when a train might leave or where be bound, but you can never be sure till you are long gone.

In search of a logical strategy, we cross the yard by the highway overpass to reach the Main Line. Stretched below us are the numerous parts of trains, most so long that one or both ends cannot be discerned. We squint for the hopeful sight of flashing yellow lights on engines or Power Units (referred to as either Power or Units).

Across the bridge we find the Main Line or through track connected to that single ribbon extending out across the national landscape, pumping the country's commercial lifeblood. To us, however, it is the avenue of adventure (one man's freight way is another's Yellow Brick Road). Also known as the High Line (for its higher roadbed) it and the second and third tracks are empty. But on the fourth sits a chain of cars of various types. We walk it in search of an empty box or flatcar, our preferred rides, but without luck. Perhaps this is an omen to abort the mission. But is it cowardice to retreat or foolishness to continue? I think of the potential losses from injury or death -- termination of relationships with friends, family, my dog, pain and mutilation -- posed against what gains? For no obvious reason, I keep these thoughts to myself.

We enter into the arcane considerations of how to pick a car. There are concerns of concealment from observation, protection from weather, safety in a wreck, noise levels, position in the train (close to any propane or chlorine tank cars?), proximity to valuable cargo (cars) that may make our presence threatening and, of course, quality of view. To think that real Hobos used to ride steel rods underneath the cars' bellies!

We settle for a gondola, an open top car with solid five-foot sides. Often filled with scrap, this one is loaded with huge 14 foot long, 3 by 4 foot solid aluminum ingots. Stacked two deep on the diagonal, they weigh many thousands of pounds each. When tapped, they ring like chimes, these silvery bars extruded from massive vats of molten metal by the magic of electric current. We climb in to examine them.

Why have we picked on this particular train as likely to leave? Being close to the mainline in fact means nothing. Betting this way would be like always backing the horse running closest to the rail. But a person needs some plan of action, right?

Some expectation to keep them going. And so, as normal time is transmuted into railroad time, Scott and I argue the safety of riding with such companions as the aluminum bars, speculating on the potential noise they may generate and how much they might behave like match sticks in a derailment. My apprehension at this whole idiotic endeavor is suddenly rekindled by such thoughts. Hours pass unnoticed in the dark, damp quiet of the yard as we consider possibilities far beyond our practical knowledge, as well as when or if our chosen train will depart.

Eventually our speculative reverie is broken when, without warning, the cars jerk into motion, one after another, the impact of the power units coupling-up rippling down the line. The clever, spring-loaded couplings allow each car to be nudged into movement individually. For, you see, not even five times our two 2,500 horse power diesel/electric engines could budge a train's quarter million tons of dead weight were it solidly connected. The cars lurch, hesitate, then begin to roll. The humming, thrumming growl of the units passes back along a quarter mile of cars to us. The worn tracks of the siding creak and wobble, causing the cars to tilt and groan, the wheel trucks to squeal painfully.

"Do you think this is the right one?" I ask Scott in a last spasm of indecision.

"It's moving isn't it?!" he shouts back over the atonal symphony of protesting steel. What logic the man is possessed of. I fumble in my pack for earplugs and goggles. At last we are in motion and the trill of adrenaline sparkles through my limbs. The dark greasy air of the yard slips by till we see into the windows of plush restaurants and warm automobiles interrupted at crossings. Yes, yes this is it. We outward bound. Montana here we come!

The Open Road

Out on the main line, the tracks are heavier and more securely spiked to their crossties. The screeching fades, the ride is smoothed to a vibrating undulation. The city passes away at moderate speed. The train moves into darkness along the great river, the Columbia, Mississippi of the Northwest. Perched atop our great aluminum ingot we feel the wind off the river and long for full speed of 50 to 60 miles per hour. I fluctuate now between the thrill of motion and the expectation of speed.

Soon it is the river on one side, spitting distance, the steep shoulders and canyons of the Cascade Mountains on the other. The river's passage through this volcanic mountain range was given grudgingly. It cut its way through one lava flow after another as they were thrown down in its path, sometimes delayed, never defeated. So, on either side of the river, tiers of vertical basalt cliffs face each other off in retreating levels, nature's castle battlements spewing forth a hundred waterfalls, some which simply vanish into mist. Stout stands of Douglas Fir trees form ranks on every flat space and lights are few and far in this last undeveloped stretch of great river.

The Milky Way spans the strip of sky above "The Gorge", as the passage is called. Stars are intense in absence of moon or city lights. Though there is no silence, the sound of the distant engines and the train wheels become almost one with the feel of motion, so that it is no longer noise. I lie upon my back and watch the stars ebb and flow along the passing cliffs. Our gondola car is in good repair, its wheel trucks "square," wheels round, there is no aberration in the rhythm of its motion. The vibrations pass through four feet of pure aluminum into my prone body with astonishing evenness. I feel a strange physical excitement, like the flush of stimulants, a sensual harmonic like sexual anticipation, response even, the vibrations focusing in upon my groin. I mention this to Scott, who is pondering the same sensation. He recounts how research he conducted in the back of a Pick-up truck on the top level of an auto-pack rail car traveling 50 miles per hour in a snowstorm through the Siskiyou Mountains with Crazy Lily verified the train's erotic influences.

At this high point we come to an abrupt halt. Suddenly there is true silence. We pluck out our earplugs. Not even the purr of distant engines. We feel the real wind off the river. Shortly another train, a "hot shot" pulling priority freight, mostly "piggy-backs" or truck trailers, shoots by us. A pattern is here established. We are to be passed at every siding. WE are riding a "dog train," a "drag."

"Son-of-a-bitch," I wail. "If we had only waited a little longer we could have caught that high-baller. We'd be half way to Montana by morning!" Scott looks at me. The Gods of the railroad did not deem it so.

We sleep remarkably well between the stars and aluminum in goose-down bags, awakening occasionally to the curious vista of the great river and gorge in pure starlight, sensual vibrations reverberating in our bodies. Eventually I awake to daylight and silence. Our train is in the tiny Wishram yard on the east side of the mountains. Here the gorge opens out in a treeless, voluptuously curvaceous landscape of short-grassed hills, patches of blue/grey sagebrush and reddish/brown basalt outcroppings.

Dwellings are a handful here. But some distance off and high above us on a bench sits an exact replica of the original Stone Henge, undamaged by time, a memorial to the soldiers of World War I. A mile or two distant squats a stolid three story English manor house, built to entertain the Queen of Romania, it is said, whose trip was spoiled by that famous gunshot in 1914. It keeps lonely vigil over the great sweep of river and bald hills. These are the conceptual works of a highway engineer who married the daughter of Sam Hill, founder of the very railroad we now ride. He apparently thought this an ideal climate. Evidently he was mistaken. For, besides these strange monuments to grand delusions of grandeur (the house now holds an amazing grouping of Rodin bronzes and remarkable collection of Native American art) there is little of civilization here but railroad and highway.

As Scott and I bask in fine autumn sunshine contemplating breakfast, two more trains rumble through on the mainline. I curse the "dog" on which we are stuck. We

examine other trains on the sidetracks for signs of life. None. We are wasting time. We should already be in Pasco, 90 miles east. We debate a change of plans, perhaps taking a shorter loop and going south across the river here via the railroad bridge. But that way lie no high mountain passes. We are intent on seeing Autumnal Glory, for which we must reach the Rockies or North Cascades.

So we stay the course, chew the fat and some jerky, make a cup of coffee on Scott's mountaineering stove, nearly change our minds when a train pulls out to cross the bridge and, after two or three hours, are off again as our very own trusty conveyance lurches to life and rumbles onward.

Ah, what a gorgeous day! The air is vibrant in its clarity. Blue, blue sky expands with every mile as the yellowed hills smooth and flatten away until there is a strong sense of arc to the heavenly dome. We are entering the vast, arid drainage of the Columbia, the Great Basin, sprawling between the Cascade and Rocky mountains. The wind is westerly out of the Gorge, whipping up white caps on three foot waves in the river and stringing out cumulus clouds across the sky, while fluttering the leaves of leather-red sumac and yellowing cottonwoods clumped near the water's edge.

Our view from the gondola car is entirely uninterrupted. It is so enveloping it threatens to suck one upward off the train. Scale in the gorge is grand here where there are no forests, no human works save the railroad, the super highway and the fascist concrete mass of the John Day Dam, one of the prison warders of the great river's once brawling, tempestuous spirit. Sunk beneath today's inscrutable river lie its series of fabled rapids where Indians once fished from precipices for leaping salmon, which caused the early river traffic to portage 5 times in 150 miles, between which paddle wheelers steamed, carrying the likes of my Great Grandmother, her 10 children and piano migrating from Sweetwater, Tennessee. No more dangerous passages, harrowing floods, galloping bands of wild horses. And yet, for all that is gone, there is wildness here still.

Two sailboards windsurf on the choppy water. These wind sprites criss-cross the nearly mile width of the river at astonishing speed, surely 30 miles per hour, leaping from wave crest to wave crest. The Gorge has become Mecca for this newest of water sports. Bumper stickers in the little town of Hood River read, "New York, Paris, Tokyo and Hood River." A mammoth tugboat levels the wind-whipped waves towing a three hundred foot barge loaded with wheat down river. The wind is at our backs so there is little in our faces as the train speeds ahead. Oh, what air, this gloriously empty panorama with its thousand variations of gold and brown set off against blue water and sky!

Our course follows the great but thoroughly tamed river around its first arc northward, skirting the "horse heaven hills" to the northwest, leaving the Oregon border and reaching the Tri Cities of Washington State; Pasco, Richland and Kennewick (not to mention Hanford, home of the nation's first nuclear reactor and leaky depository for its radioactive feces). The Tri Cities, commercial hub of this

agricultural landscape, sport one of the world's more elegant suspension bridges. Its double tiers or' leap the wide water on cables that hang umbrella-like from twin towers with arachnid precision. This work of engineering art has supplanted the little image of the nuclear reactor as the town's emblem, it seems.

We, being secondary citizens riding the rails, clang across the river on an old engineered steel bridge from the 1940s just as the sun sets. Pasco is an Indian name, by the way. I've always thought it odd how we white men bothered to take names from the Indians. Seems all we really wanted was their land. Perhaps we feel better stealing a few names as well, though we never seem to get them right or know what they mean.

An Old Haunt Haunted

Scott is already eager for dinner in a restaurant and we are now passing Pasco itself en route to the rail yard some distance north. So, with sudden trepidation, I hoist my pack to my back and prepare to de-train. I have vowed many a time to only get on or off motionless trains, having had a Technicolor fantasy of my right leg being severed neatly at the knee joint by those impartial steel wheels. I can see the crushed white bone and cartilage, the torn, bloody muscle fiber as vividly as the illuminated color transparencies of gun shot wounds in the Smithsonian Institute, which transfixed me at age twelve. Yet here I am, following the light footed imp down the vibrating ladder to the borderline between now and forever.

My Gods, the gravel of the roadbed drops away sharply! How the hell fast are we going? We hang an eternity from the side of the rumbling car. I hope he has changed his mind, but suddenly he vanishes from below me and it is follow or walk back the couple miles from the yard -- if the train actually stops here. Death must be preferable to abandonment, for I instinctively face forward and step downward toward the blur of rocks. Holding tight to the ladder I begin to run before touching down, being pulled faster than I can keep pace with. Gravel scatters under my boots until I finally feel my balance to be over my feet. I let go the grip of my hands and surge forward in my stride. In a few steps I best my own momentum and dig in to halt. My heart pounds, but it is all thrill. I have struck the perfect bargain, my balance never faltered. Turning, I see Scott already hoofing it toward the city lights.

Packs on backs, Spanish beret on my head, we make for the landmark Top Hat Cafe and its wonderful old neon sign, which shows a 1930s walking stick and tipping top hat. Along the track we meet a real "Bo" who has come in search of a job, temporary of course.

"Yep, left Spokane after they bulldozed the Jungle. Somebody killed a 13 year old girl and all hell broke loose. Yard there's sure hot now. Used up my two weeks at the mission, anyway." (The hobo jungle is a place along the tracks where hobos and tramps camp and missions usually only allow "travelers" to stay a certain length of

time--during which they have to pray before receiving meals.)

"Is it hard getting on and off trains in the Yard there?" Scott enquires.

"Depends on the Bull on duty. Preacher Bob's not bad. But they been making arrests just for trespassin'. Haven't seen that in years."

We thank this toothless comrade for the news and he bids us farewell with a touchingly sincere, "You boys be careful, now."

Trudging into the dusty, cement block and yellow brick burg of no character that "modern" Pasco has become, we find the Top Hat has lost its classic sign, and more. Inside it sports wall mounted chemical deodorizers, which belong in a waste treatment plant. The rug is worn through and the air is heavy with stale grease. The food is uncooked or unrecognizable, certainly terminal. The Plexiglas pie-display cylinder mercilessly rotates its array of solidified whipped hydrogenated palm oil deserts. A shoddy, dirty memory of its glory days, it has become yet another Cafe From Hell.

Hearts broken but enlightened by the police blotter in the local rag -- lots of drunk driving charges -- we hike for the rail yard. Ah, Pasco. At one end of the downtown blocks, pictures of its ebullient pioneer beginnings, at the other, the biggest, flashiest sign on the newest, biggest building invites us to the "X-plicit Delights of Deserie..."

Passing through tree-lined residence streets, we seek to fill our water jugs -- the first, foremost and, to my unending amazement, often only piece of essential equipment carried by the true Bo. People know when you are on the bum, though. It's not easy to fill your jug. They give you the evil eye. But you're a fool to board a freight without water, as you might not be able to get off for a long time. We search a city park, some back yards, then find a dribbling faucet in a closed gas station. I lose patience with this slow medium, and we reach the rail yard with half a gallon of water. But what is this? Ablaze with lights in the industrial zone blackness, a new white and blue, Denny's-clone restaurant shimmers just across the street from the rail yard itself!

When In Doubt, Eat

Cool, dewy darkness envelops us as we leave the street and pass into the nether world of the yard, watchful for an eastbound train. Silence reigns. We pass time in traditional conversation about which chains of cars might be from or bound for where, hiking our packs up and down their length. We discuss the possible origins of their contents intent on deducing likely destinations. Clues are few and conflicting. Several amorphous hours and miles later -- remember we are on railroad time again -- Scott is desirous of another quart of coffee. He only drinks in quart units. And pisses thusly, too. Makes me feel terribly inadequate.

I fear missing a train if we leave the yard, but it is getting quite cold, depressing really. And there, on the edge of darkness, in another dimension, "Polly's" bright lights beckon. Easing down into a warm, padded booth we note the rail road "Dick" or Yard Bull, sits not two tables away, his two-way radio sputtering as he rests the newspaper on his ample abdomen. He pays us no notice. Suddenly self-conscious, I realize my coat and pants are a camouflage pattern of streaks and stains, my hair permanently styled. Every thing about the railroad is grimy, exposed to diesel smoke, oil and the thousand dusty, greasy cargoes it hauls. We are marked men. Scott goes for waffles and eggs. I am a sucker for these promise-all menus. I make my eternal error and opt for "The Special": mushroom baked steak. Two hours later we waddle out into chill night air, lard swilling in my guts.

Returned to the other world, we finally we spot two carmen at work coupling power units to cars.

"Howdy," Scott ventures, "This one going east?"

"Yup."

"Can you tell us when?" There is a long silence as he works.

"Hour," comes the minimalist reply.

Perfect. We walk back along the train, one on either side, searching for open boxcars, empty flats. But there are no easy rides. Boxes are closed and sealed. Flats loaded with lumber-- considered very dangerous if it shifts -- and great tub-like grain cars with no openings. Two-thirds the way down the line the slack is suddenly jerked out of the couplings. The train bangs into motion. Scott shouts to me unintelligibly, somewhere out of sight. Did he say, "Get on?" There is nowhere to climb up save a ladder on the side of a closed box. I might get stuck there if the train speeds up, unable to get in or off. I start to run. I stop. The passing cars show no rides whatsoever. The caboose clatters past and . . . no Scott. My heart sinks. Then, down the track a bit, he reappears.

"Son of a bitch!" I say, "That guy said it wouldn't leave for an hour."

"Yeah. And it sure didn't take fifteen minutes to walk this far. But..." he admonishes, "This is the railroad."

"Besides, there wasn't one good ride. Every single box closed, flat loaded!" I continue to complain. Scott too is surprised.

Our vigil drags on, and on, occasionally enlivened by the hopeful passing of the yard engine. God, this is boring. No light to read by, no music. When are they going to move a train!? Amtrak flies through the yard on the mainline, a truncated little train of seven half-filled cars, faded memory of the real passenger trains long gone. Can't this affair be arranged to get the thrills the endurance of all this time?! My feet are frozen, a condition I cannot tolerate...normally.

"Sometimes I wished I believed in the power of prayer," I venture, breath fogging the still night air.

"Never know," Scott replies from where he sits atop his pack. "The placebo effect works approximately 32.8% of the time."

Then, at last, power units are coupled up again. We find an old box with open doors and a wooden floor in their line of cars. But which way is it bound? East or West? Some of the lumber on its flat cars comes from Idaho mills to the east, but the grain cars look empty, so they should have come from the port to the west. How to decide? Now air hisses into the brake lines. Slack slams out of the couplings. Yes, yes it moves east. We haul ourselves aboard and are away again. Escape from boredom and idleness! It's back to the high road.

So, into our sleeping bags we slither, content with success...well, almost. We are, I think in the rocking darkness, nearly 24 hours behind schedule. My Schedule, that is. Sleep is bracketed by dark images flickering across the huge squares of the open doorways, like dim, towering video screens set in utter blackness. These vague scenes enter my consciousness by changes of speed or a passing light. Odd how one can sleep through most any event, in any environment if the experience remains consistent, uninterrupted. Ah, the stupor of regularity.

A curiously luminous grey dawn steals into my awareness. Whitish light emanates from trees, grass, fences. Yet the sun is not yet risen. Smudges of yellow and red contrast this unearthly landscape. Finally focusing my consciousness, I discern a heavy frost laid on every twig, stifling all color but that of autumnal cottonwood and aspen leaves.

Soon into old Spokane we roll. Not that the city hasn't done the compulsory urban renewal performance, spurred by the world's fair of 1974. But the rail line is older than most everything and its path is often bordered by the backsides of the past. The line through the city is elevated above its streets. Many downtown buildings show long unused loading docks with rail sidings. They may have three new faces to the streets, but their backs face the railroad with bare bricks, fading signs and architecture that would make a movie set for "The Sting" or "The Untouchables." We approach the yard. The "hot" yard where jail awaits the trespasser. It does not sound a good place to tarry.

Faint of Heart

As our train rumbles into the yard between others standing on sidetracks I begin to equivocate. We probably can't make it to Missoula and back in the six days allotted before Scott has a contract meeting with the county bureaucrats and I think I must return to the real business of my life. As I broach the subject we pass two men standing beside the tracks. By their overnight bags we reason they are crewmen. Our speed is just slow enough to get on or off the step of a caboose or power unit. Of course -- they have changed crews on the run. We are going straight through the yard!

We had assumed a stop was in order so that we could get off and have breakfast in the Grand Manner. Scott is always for this plan. Always, that is, except when on an outbound train. The hobo's creed seems to read, in part at least, if you want to travel and there is a freight rolling, you better jump it. But I am suddenly in retreat. It snowed 14 inches in Minot, North Dakota last week. It will be freezing in the Rockies. We might encounter further delays and have to --Gods forbid -- resort to public transport to "get back in time." Blah, blah,blah. Scott, ever open-minded, is swayed more by breakfast than my rationale, I suspect.

The issue is argued in haste as we are gaining speed and it is soon now or never. This dismount is trickier than last night's. It is a five-foot drop to slanting gravel with no ladder or hand holds. My mentor drops to a sitting position in the gaping doorway.

"Pitch your pack first then go yourself. Face forward!" He is out, stumbling and vanished. Is this reassuring? That he always gets on or off first? I feel again that sense of urgency, lest I be born away from him, his experience and guidance. I lurch downward, shoving my pack and swinging my legs out and down. Down, down, my hands clutching at the edge of the boxcar floor until my feet finally strike rocks. The first few steps are unsteady but I lean forward -- mostly by luck -- lurching wildly as I veer away from the train into the tall grass till I finally catch my balance. Over my shoulder I see Scott coming up out of a somersault to his feet. The guy has nine lives. I don't fall because it would kill me.

Terra firma, once again. As I try to slow my breathing I realize there is a railroad equivalent to sea legs. But, it is time for breakfast, so, unsteady or not, we set off afoot, packs on backs for the nearest known restaurant --truck stop style, of course. My city slick feet are not overjoyed with their new occupation. But, with the Imp to pace me, I could probably go any distance, eventually.

Once ensconced in our padded booth, surrounded by the modern cowboys of the open road (truck stops have changed by the way, we have our own private telephone) I am reminded of the nature/nurture debate. How is it people who share a social milieu often share physical traits as distinctly as they do those of behavior and attire? The patrons of this bustling establishment seem all of one genus. Is it this food, which would congeal the heart of any reader of New Age magazine? I see at least a dozen of the Long Tom spindlers with the spidery legs and magnificent potbellies, advanced cases of Dunlop's Disease (their bellies done lopped over their belts again).

And in case you have not been out lately, redneck fashion has definitely gone "killer hippie." Lots of beards, especially on the middle aged, and scraggly, unkempt hair (as my father used to say) with clothing to match on the under 30 boys. Every man wears a folding knife in a leather snap case on his belt. I have no fear, though. The grease and dirt have eradicated all evidence of my L.A. origins and haircut.

The prerequisite gallon of coffee, three pounds of cholesterol and local paper send us happily back to the rail yard to hail our next ride like the conquering

adventurers we feel. A lovely, warm autumn day softens the dirty industrial environment of the Spokane Yard. We park ourselves in one of the time-honored haunts of the hobos, beside the mainline track, under the highway overpass.

The graffiti and drawings of Alabama Blue, Hot Shot Sam, Bowevil, Mad Dog 20/20 and other royalty of the road adorn the concrete pillars (as they often do the train cars), reminiscent of the cave paintings of Lascaux. Some are clever symbols or hieroglyphs. A pair of rolling dice followed by a crutch, then a snarling bulldog. Take your chances, get hurt, become a "Mad Dog."

Ah, now we are in the groove. Following our new plan the next train will have to be our special ride west to the North Cascades and on to Seattle! In this pleasant reverie we are suddenly confronted by the dreaded Yard Bull, pulling up in his Burlington Northern Police car.

"Hello, boys." this neat, fatherly figure says from the driver's seat. "Gonna have to see some I.D." We stand and deliver documents of our specified existences, a process termed "being carded."

"You're two feet over the line here. Can't go into the Yard or we'll have to take you in."

"I never knew this yard to be hot before," Scott offers innocently.

"Yeah, I know. But there's been some trouble and the Sheriff's department is leaning on us. Been a lot more theft on the trains this year, too." He seems genuinely apologetic. "So watch your step. Especially after 3 o'clock. The guy on swing is hard nosed." He looks up from his clip board at our faces, attire, packs. "What do you fellas want to be hopping freights for? "

Scott and I exchange a look. How to answer this question in such a way as to make sense? Why do people sail silly little boats on the ocean or climb mountains? To hear the Muses sing?

"Because we like to." Scott offers. The Bull frowns.

"Nothing but danger," he says, eyes returning to his clipboard. After recording vital statistics, he returns our certificates of existence, enclosed in some religious tracts. With our sympathies for his having to terrorize the Hobo Brotherhood, he departs, leaving us standing just short of railroad property. This affable individual, we now know, is Preacher Bob. But we need not fear his successor. We will be long gone by then....

Anyone Going Our Way

The day wears longer, and thinner. Train after train passes -- eastward. But nary a one to the Golden West. My feet ache from standing. I begin to doubt my judgment. I resurrect the argument about East or West and chew it over to reassure myself, and show Scott I am conscious of my potential error. We stare in amazement at all

the freight going east, east, east, trying to rationalize it. The trade imbalance? Time of year?

Finally a sleek Hot Shot rolls through westbound. But this is no ordinary train. It hauls only rectangular sea-going cargo containers, called simply "containers", which can also be hauled on special truck trailers: Straight from Yokohama to your store door. These rail cars are a new design. Sleek and long, they are solidly coupled for over 100 feet. They have low bellies with no floors. Containers are stacked two high, butted end to end. There is no place for the likes of us to ride at all. It is the train of the future, going we know not where. It glides smoothly away on air-cushioned suspension.

Passing the time in idle chat, we kick rocks and hack about the question of whether "Mind" has an existence, which is immaterial, yet has causal effects on the material universe. The subject arises from a book titled "The New Story of Science." In this little tome I have brought along (in hopes it will show me Science may yet save our souls—or at least locate them) famous but evidently cracked physicists and neuro-biologists go on about the immaterial mind and its effects on the realm of matter, replete with references to "spirit," "soul" and even...God. Scott is having none of it.

"How can something that doesn't physically exist effect that which does?"

Not being a Nobel Laureate, who am I to say? The sun tips low. The day grows cold. I am damn fed up with sitting in this dirty hole, perched like a banished dog by the no trespassing sign at yard's edge. Oh, this helplessness, these long periods of time with nothing to do or effect. If only it would get

A Narrow Escape

We finally identify another Hot Shot preparing to leave. Loads of piggyback truck trailers such as these are not favored rides, leaving one exposed to weather and observation while putting you under a load of questionable stability. But in our growing impatience we decide to go in and check it out. Scott crosses the first line of tracks. There is a sound of a car on the gravel siding road. It is the witching hour.

Scott scurries back to my neutral ground just as the Mean Yard Bull skids his car to a halt beside us. It is clear this poor individual has a bad attitude toward life. He sits in his car, eyeing us where we stand on the very property line. He has come from behind in hopes of catching us in his territory. The lines in his face suggest a sadistic bent to me. Scott does a groveling act by sliding his feet backwards down the bank we stand upon, eyes averted. I lean on my walking stick, beret on head, looking at him as he snarls our one warning.

"Straight to jail, don't pass go. 30 days."

I look at him as if to say, "Yeah. But we have no choice. We have to try," and shrug my shoulders. Immediately I think this a mistake, like issuing a dare or challenge.

There is no conspiracy of compassion here. This guy is no Preacher Bob. He roars off, spewing gravel. Now I am really disgusted. What the hell am I doing here? This is really dumb! If I hadn't made us jump train into a hot yard we wouldn't be wasting a whole day in this depressing environment. But then, we might be freezing to death in a snowstorm. But then.... One can pass a lot of time in this manner, enumerating possible fates, punctuated with hot debates on the limitation of a materialist interpretation of mind and the universe.

Near dusk a train with various types of cars eases into the yard, heading westward. An old black "Bo" ventures over the first rail from our exile (there are several of us now) to yell at the engineer about his destination. "Seattle" comes the welcome reply. Ah-ha, salvation! But we see the Bull parked down the tracks, playing his spotlight on the passing cars, checking for riders among the tractors and lumber loads. No, he's coming our way now. Inspiration strikes. We'll out-flank him to enter the yard!

Hoisting our packs, we double-time it down a street parallel to the yard. We will slip in and catch this ride, which begs us with its slow roll past. Hearts pounding, we scurry through patches of light, jumping the mainline and entering the forbidden zone just as our train comes to a halt. We must cross a couple lines of cars to reach it, clambering over them, struggling not to catch our packs on levers or couplings. Noise suddenly takes on enhanced significance.

Everything is quiet except our feet scattering gravel, packs bouncing through car struts, lungs huffing. The long awaited cover of darkness itself does not seem so comforting. Any patch of light seems like a blazing spot watched by unseen eyes. We scurry down our train, finding an open boxcar, into which we scramble, seeking the darkest corner, expecting imminent departure and deliverance, twitching at every noise and flash of light.

The adrenaline has an acid, burning quality now. Son of a Bitch! This is not what I came on this trip for. I don't want to be playing cat and mouse with some asshole. This is a journey of aesthetics, for God's sake. But after a few scares from passing trucks and car men checking brake lines, we begin to relax.

"Shit," I whisper, "Here is the whole point. I mean, it doesn't really matter if I do get arrested. Not on the whole. Big fucking deal. That's not what's important about living to me. It's not of any real consequence. Like so many other stupid things on which I waste my time and energy. Why can't I focus my attention on experiencing what is of value to me?! Not the silly fears and contingencies of possible futures -- short of my life being at stake, which it is not. I'd do better to focus on the suspense and ENJOY it!"

"Ah, but that's not the way you feel!" Scott whispers back, one eyebrow up in shadow.

"It's not the way I act -- but it is the way I feel," I insist. "I really am not very interested in whether the Bull comes along and gives us a load of shit or not. So

why waste all this anxiety on it?"

A sudden sound silences us. Scott's head swivels slightly toward the door. We stand paralyzed in darkness, breathless. I feel my heart rate in my limbs -- thump, thump, thump. Finally Scott whispers.

"But it takes precedence. It has all our attention right now."

I suddenly feel beaten, hopeless, but no less anxious. It's impossible to live attentive to what I really value in spite of what chance and my own expectations and misunderstandings throw in my path. This fear could as easily not exist, or be pleasurable excitement, but it is not. Yet, slowly the moment subsides into routine. Creatures of habit, we quickly accept the insecure status quo as our fate. Scott fires his little stove and brews a cup of coffee. We turn to our obsessive speculations on train departures and destinations, speaking in ever increasing volume. Sounds indicate our train is being broken up -- or perhaps just enlarged prior to imminent departure?

I am prepared to take full responsibility for my blunder of the morning. I don't care if I ever do get back home again. Right now I just want to be rolling. I'll take the first train east. Please, please just get me out of here. I know Oz is out there somewhere. Besides, we have not had a proper lunch and it is well past dinnertime.

"If we leave the yard and go to the restaurant," Scott ventures, "which will take two hours, this train will leave in an hour and a half. But if we stay, it won't leave for three or four hours." We are beginning to get the hang of it. So, packing up, we take our leave of this hard won boxcar, heading for the truck stop cafe again. Oh, my blistered feet. Crossing the last track out of the yard I look down at a dark object by the rails. Drawn down for a closer look, I stare in disbelief.

"Scott. Look at this. A black cat cut clean in half." He turns back to look. The animal is sliced from belly to backbone as neatly as if cut by a Samurai's sword. Half the body lies on one side of the rail, half on the other.

"Do you realize how precise the timing had to be for a train wheel to catch a cat dead-center?" I ask, rhetorically, of course.

"Amazing," is all Scott says as he proceeds toward dinner. No symbolist, he.

"Well, it didn't manage to cross our path, eh?" I jest. Nor am I the superstitious type. I'm not sure I believe in any causal explanations that are not factually verifiable. But...what a vivid image this one is. Whack!

Another meal of estimable proportions renews the spirits of the downtrodden, preparing us to rejoin the battle. Our return to the yard finds the trains somewhat rearranged. Though there is no evidence of anything leaving, we dash into the heart of the yard as yet another eastbound approaches, threatening to cut off our access. Under the noise of the passing train we walk the length of two stationary ones. Empty cars are still a premium, but at last we find an aging box, which we manage to open.

Inside there follows another tense wait in darkness for departure. Eventually Scott gives up the tension and crawls into his sleeping bag. I choose to string up my Mayan hammock and sleep in style. Half way through this process I notice the Bull's car approaching and rip down my hammock to cower in the corner. He is shining his light into the cars. He gets out and crosses under the train. The jig is up now. I prepare myself. But no, he returns to his car and departs miraculously. So I too relinquish all attempts to effect or predict the situation, crawling into my bag.

Consciousness flickers over the train's movement. Sometime in the early morning darkness we are departing safely from the clutches of the Burlington Northern Railroad Police. I surrender to sleep. But not for long. We make the edge of town and pick up speed. Not highball speed, just dog train speed. But this is enough, enough to activate the distinct behavior of a "hunter." The front wheel truck of our boxcar is out of alignment. It repeatedly rides up on the rails only to crash downward again. And again, and again. Half of this ride is known as the best possible, for you are in contact with nothing but soft and downy air. The other half is the worst possible, slamming one into the steel floor plates. These ascents and descents are accompanied by appropriate percussive clangs and mournful steely screeches. It is more penance than I wish to endure.

I rise in the frosty blackness and string up my large Mayan hammock. Placing my pack directly beneath the hammock, I climb cautiously into it. Once my hammock broke loose and I fell straight onto my tailbone with paralyzing results --thus the placement of my pack. In the hammock, wrapped in my bag, I discover the car's motion to be remarkably like whiplash. Just as I am growing accustomed to this coddling, I notice my pack edging toward the open doorway, driven by the floor's vibrations. So the night is passed in 15 minute stretches of sleep, between which I awaken and reach down to retrieve my pack from the lips of oblivion. At some point, Scott awakens to the fact that he is suffering the penitent's life alone and revolts by hanging his own hammock.

Do It Till You Get It Right

Dawn touches my consciousness again, but with pink light this time, and the river. That's right, I think, swaying and jerking, Wenatchee, the stop between Spokane and Seattle (more stolen Indian names) nestled amid apple orchards on the eastern slope of the North Cascades. Wenatchee is just on the other side of the northernmost great bend of the Columbia. Scott stands, silhouetted in the open doorway. He turns to me, I squint to make out his expression.

"Don't be upset, now," he says. I look beyond him to the dry, rolling, treeless countryside and search my memory. Where are the steep hills? I see a grain elevator.

"Pasco," I say flatly. Scott nods, the impish grin flickering at my expense. Our

expense? The Universe? What causal chain brought this event to pass in a materialist's view of the mind? Son of a Bitch! Pasco.

The morning is pleasantly sunny as our train eases into the now familiar yard. We detrain beneath the ubiquitous highway overpass. There is only one path to take at moments such as this one. It leads directly across the street to Polly's restaurant, haven for the vanquished. But even padded booths and two-inch thick waffles cannot dispel the fluttering of all those chickens coming home to roost in my head.

"Well, we'd be ogling co-eds on the hockey field at the University of Montana in Missoula right now if I hadn't lost my nerve. I suppose we might as well catch a train back down the Gorge to Vancouver now..." Scott cocks his head and raises that one eyebrow non-committally as he guzzles caffeine.

I am willing to beat myself because he is too much the gentleman to rub it in. Perhaps if I abuse myself and offer to admit defeat we will be spared further humiliation by whatever gods I have offended. Hearing a noise I look out the window. A hotshot train is rolling briskly through the yard, eastbound. "Shit. Every time we sit down to eat, we miss the right train!" Scott appears unconcerned, being deeply engrossed in the local gazette's police blotter. No train is more important than a meal in hand.

Somewhat mollified by our conspicuous consumption, we trudge back to the tracks. Idling there, contemplating graffiti (a lot of Spanish now-a-days) we encounter a fellow traveler. An old Indian in the escape mode from marriage, bound for the Dakotas with no more luggage than a paper sack and coat. He tells of trying to leave last night without either, but a brakeman convinced him to visit the Salvation Army for provisions.

"This one here," he tells, gesturing to a train in the yard, "I's goin' t' Spokane an' Missoula." Scott and I are equivocating about returning to that infamous place. Yet, to turn tail and retrace our "steps" further is to admit defeat and forgo the mountains in autumnal glory. Not to mention the fact that it will be very difficult to even catch a through train west, as they appear to by-pass this yard. So we turn once again toward Spokane and hopes of Heaven in the High Country.

Unless.... I put forth the mere conjecture that we might take exceptional measures. Would it even be possible to take a plane to Missoula to ride the train back? Or catch a bus to Wenatchee to catch a freight there? Scott's head cocks in his indication of consideration, but his expression reminds me that I have already 'purchased my ticket'—in the Other World of the railroad, the 'going is the goal.'

We trudge up the train our Indian guide has revealed to us, grain car after grain car after grain car. We leave our friend settling-in on one of the few grain cars with a tiny platform beneath the end of its towering tank. Half way along this train, another rattles into the yard from the west. Or is it from the east, just pulling around into the yard to be broken up? It rolls steadily on till its engines are lost from sight. It

rides on the mainline and sports many empty boxes and flatcars begging to be claimed.

We place and replace our bets, hesitate, then at last sprint. Other hobos appear from nowhere, making for this ark. Clambering up onto an empty flat car as it inches past, we dare not hope for victory. We pass the yard office, ease by the hump, continue out of the yard proper to where there are only three sets of tracks. We are alongside one other train of solid grain cars. Are we clear? Yes? No? We...stop. A two mile walk back? The air blows out of the brake lines.

Ah, so it goes. Fate is fate. The day is hot and we sweat as we trudge back toward Pasco. "I may get used to this," I say, almost cheerfully.

"It usually takes about a week," Scott assesses. "That's why I hate to go for less than that."

We stop to remove some clothes. He desires a snack. I pause while he munches, my pack still impatiently perched upon my back. He fusses with his boot, leaning against one of the last in the line of grain cars. We could be back in the yard by now, but for his fiddling about.

"We might as well cash it in if we can just get a train going back down the damn river," I put in. Before Scott can reply, the car against which he leans groans. Air flexes its brake lines, the brake drums click-click as the pressure retracts them. We look at each other. Bang, bang, bang. The cars jerk into motion, knocking him sideways. Glancing upward we see the very grain car beside us has the rare, tiny steel floor-plate under the bulkhead of its grain tank. Scott swings up the little ladder into this exposed, cramped space defined by bars and struts. I pitch my pack and struggle after as the car rolls away.

Our deliverance is not without flirtation as this train stops soon at an isolated grain elevator, causing us to careen into speculations about its being a local that will drop cars at every little elevator until it ceases to exist somewhere in the boondocks.

Soon enough, though, we are rocking and rolling through the afternoon colors of gold and brown that glance off the rolling hummocks and vales of the upper Palouse country where buffalo once roamed head-high prairie grasses, land of the Nez Perce Indians. Land my Great Grandfather Joshua Philander Theodore McCroskey homesteaded in 1878, where my Great Grandmother dragged that piano and ten kids, then died a mere dozen years later. Now it is all wheat, wheat, wheat. What would they think of me riding this silly train for the hell of it?

Oh, the rumble and the roar! The two rails gleaming, gleaming and glinting down there between the cars, flashing in jazzy counterpoint to the continually varying rhythm of a flat wheel thumping away beneath us. Now slow 3/4 time, now staccato 4/4, regular then irregular, somehow now polyrhythmic, and all accompanied by screeches and wails from the protesting rails which range from symphonic harmonies to atonal cacophony. All this great wall of sound is being generated before our own exposed platform by a quartet of rolling steel wheels. Every car we ride is a

different experience of sight and sound. But this one is the loudest ever. I doubt I can endure it, earplugs and muffs being a mere formality as the sound invades one's very bones.

Thinking of this assault, I look down at my crossed legs, the flesh of calves wobbling in the heavy vibrations. A poor, useless thing my mushy body, I think, in this environment of massive material existence and force. North and east we move, on a route now thrice traveled in two days, but for the first time in daylight. We pass defunct tributaries of this monster, arterial octopus that once ran to every little point of commerce and dominated their fiscal lives with a transportation strangle hold. Abandoned bridges—graceful arches of pre-war concrete engineering—and trackless road grades haunt the landscape.

Truncated or not, it is still the symbol of the twentieth century, circulatory system of the industrial revolution, hurtling, groaning and reeling forward, awkward yet irresistible, massive but intricate, driven on the decayed goo of eons, fossils of former existences. All that decayed vegetation, burning in internal combustion to turn the shafts of the mighty generator, pouring current into the electrical motor on each wheel of the diesel locomotive. Torrents of electrons bearing the vast production of the landscape off to ports and ships, mills and masticating molars half the world away.

Great agent of colonial and industrial expansion, the railroad, conveyer of laborers to work, the rich to vacation, coal, steel, grain, logs, products, fuel oils, ore, bread and butter. And, yes, soldiers, casualties, prisoners, exiles, refugees -- even Gypsies and Jews, all vibrated off to their various destinies by the intricate but flexible schedules of this amoral system.

The Arrival of Departure Going We Know Not Where

Each corner of the car we ride has a steel rung ladder on both front and outer sides. Across the middle of the car front is an open space. Scott motions to me not to sit or stand there, as an abrupt stop would pitch one straight down between the cars and under the wheels. He produces a piece of rope and in pantomime indicates I should tie myself to one of the bulkhead struts for safety.

Comforted, I do as instructed, only to look up and see him crossing free hand between the two cars, over the gap of death, from ladder to ladder. Once on the car ahead of ours, he climbs upward and vanishes over its top. That is something I will surely never do. It is an act only a seasoned "Pro" would attempt. Or perhaps an idiot. Time and the ever-varying noise wear on. My legs and back become stiff as I ponder the passing landscape from my cramped nook, though the view on this car is much more limited than the other types. What can have happened to Scott? What is he doing up there and why is he doing it?

I stare at the gaping distance between the two car ladders, their shifting

couplings, the flashing wheels. Inexplicably I untie my rope and venture forth. Nervous hand after hand I swing out on the front ladder -- a sudden jerk now and where would I end up? Not the way to think, idiot. Be confident and precise. I reach my foot across the roaring abyss, place it on the great knuckle of the couplings and leap till my gloved hands grasp the further car struts and swing in under the bulkhead. Piece of cake.

Then I look up. Do I need to go up there? What if Scott has disappeared? I have never considered myself brave. But, having come this far, what difference is it to climb to the top? Unbelievably I edge out and inch up the ladder. Peeking over the car top I see metal grate catwalks along both edges of the roof and three large lidded "portals" down the center. Scott stands mid-car, facing into the heady wind.

There is nothing up here—no railings, struts—it's just a flat surface 20 feet above the ground vibrating along at 50 miles an hour! I slither onto the roof, reaching for a symbolically comforting handhold on a portal lid. Here the sounds of the thumping wheels and wailing rails are distanced. It's like the souls and machinery of Hades or oar men in a war galley suffering far below while we ride high in the wind.

Scott turns and sees me, approaches and somehow manages to shout in my deadened ear, "Good to have you up on top!"

I smile and shake my head. This guy kills me. No reckless daredevil who brags of his exploits, he is simply here, now, just for the sake of being here—and perhaps not specifically somewhere else. But does he reflect on these experiences, process them into the rest of his existence, or simply leave them apart, returning to repeat them, again and again? I think too much, do too little. But how does he think? Is the going really the goal? What in hell are the differences between a tourist, an explorer, an adventurer, a traveler, and a pilgrim? 'Here' we are, where we have been, going back and forth, with no guarantee of arriving where we intend as we have no control over our 'transport.' We really don't know our destination but we are 'on our way' and that feels extra-ordinary right now.

The bellowing dragon snakes its way on into the countryside of scattered lakes and increasing basalt outcroppings near the town of Sprague. These waters, bordered by stands of cattails, waving their downy phallic heads, are the favored resting ponds for winter travelers. Great flocks of ducks and geese arrive here even now in October where my Grandfather loved to come on Wednesday afternoons from his Spokane medical practice to hunt and fish alone.

The pinkish light of sunset puts scattered clouds in coppery reflection on the water against the blue of the sky's backdrop. In even distribution across the water's filmy surface I see dots, which do not resemble shapes of waterfowl. A strong smell assaults my nose. An odor of decay...of rotting fish. Soon we draw close enough to make sense of the scene. Carp, imported to these waters by settlers, displaced all other species of fish in their triumphant adaptation. So, they have now been summarily exterminated by oxygen suffocation, utilizing a film sprayed upon the

water's surface. They float, white bellies skyward, by the thousands. Scattered flocks of birds paddle among the carcasses. The carp's very success seems to have proved its failure. But then, this is the work of man, provoked by the work of men -- and women, I suppose.

The glow of the day, rush of travel in the light and wind, discomfort endured until it's forgotten in a hypnotic state, give over once again to...anxiety. Approaching the gates of the dreaded Spokane yard at dusk, fearful of the clutches of the evil yard bull, we abandon ship in the sunken sections of track just before the yard. This getting on and off moving trains is becoming routine. We hike the steep embankment, seeking a vantage point from which to peer into the yard. The game of train poker begins another round. I am now again all for the first ride westward, on to Wenatchee and the North Cascades. But how to know which train goes where, for, as we have proved, the Pasco traffic leaves the yard by the same track and we are here removed from all sources of information, reliable and otherwise.

Scott is not to be deterred from tradition, however, so it is off in search of dinner we go. Ah, the rewards of a hard day's work. Cushy Naugahyde, a local paper, soup, sandwich, coffee...and, three young men in the adjoining booth speaking railroad-ese. Eves dropping tells me they are employees of the one and only, Burlington Northern.

"Say, would you fellas know when the next train might leave for Wenatchee and Seattle?" I ask as they rise to go. They do not bat an eye.

"Well, there'll be a couple hot shots out carrying pigs. Then they'll make up a regular freight later on," one replies amiably.

"Could you say when it might go out?" I enquire, seeking that ever-elusive concrete information, feeling embarrassed at the suggestion such exists.

"Oh, sometime between one and six in the morning," he says laughing. With my best wishes, they are gone. Scott looks at me, head cocked.

"Well, we have ridden a grain car, might as well crawl under a piggy back," I offer. As usual, he reserves judgment.

Heroic Effort for Its Own Sake

Fully restored, once again, we tote our packs back down the dark street to our section of sunken track. I realize I hear an amplified voice and soon make out the announcer calling the horse races at Playfair racetrack. I am pondering this irony as we reach the top of the embankment above the rail line. And, lo and behold, there is our hot shot, easing out of the yard like a thoroughbred being led to the starting gate.

Scott shoots me a look and is off down the hill, over rocks, through brushy shadows. My pack bounces around my back as I scramble in a long improvisation for balance. We stumble to the bottom of the grade, already separated, the train gliding by with that eerie quiet air of acceleration. It is all truck trailers anchored on flat

slab cars. There are only three-runged, chest high ladders flashing by to grab at. The air is damp and cold in this depression. The narrow roadbed makes us stand lower than the tracks and wheels.

I see Scott make a play so I sprint. Trying to match the train's speed, pumping for all I'm worth in the rough gravel, the cars still passing me, my consciousness reduced to the ringing of wheels on rails and the glint of the passing ladder rungs. Lounging, I grab for a hold at the front of a car, catching it with my fingers. The pull of the train tips my body and the weight of the pack swings to accentuate the shift. My feet are swept from the gravel before I can overcome the imbalance. I flail with my free arm for a second grip, but cannot get turned to reach the ladder. My legs trail in darkness somewhere beside the ringing wheels. I hang by one arm, thinking, "What am I doing here? This is insane!" I see my rag doll legs where I cannot see them, dragging beside those massive wheels.

Gradually, or so it seems, the shock of the train's momentum is absorbed. I struggle to raise myself, twisting until I bring my other hand to bear on the ladder. Grunting and gasping, I finally manage to heave myself onto the flat car. I have traveled 200 yards. In 50 more...the train halts. Amazement overlays my terror. I look down the line to see Scott scamper along a car, then feel the chain of cars ease into reverse, heading back into the yard. Scott lightly dismounts. Still panting, heart thundering, legs aquiver, I lurch after him.

"Going back into the yard," he notes evenly.

Standing amid the garbage and graffiti of yet another hobo haunt, in the black shadow of another highway overpass, I rage at myself inside. I could have -- as so oft imagined -- cut both my legs clean at the knee. I remember a friend of my brother's from college who had lost an arm and a leg trying to jump a moving freight as a kid. I could be safe at home. Damn, I will never do this again. I am so pissed I do not betray my feelings.

Scott climbs the hill to spy into the yard. My heart settles. The vigil continues. I listen to the announcer call the racehorses' names as they battle it out for the gamblers' delight, running in circles. What an unpleasant place this damp, dark, dirty hole is. Suddenly I feel...well, not beaten, but I just could not care much less what happens next. I sit down on my pack and, well, just sit.

Somewhere beyond the moment when time is completely lost track of and my focus is nowhere I can name, another hot shot rolls obediently out, stops chivalrously to let us board, then promptly pulls away through the city, across the long high trestle over the Spokane river gorge and then transforms itself into all noise, wind and diesel smoke, bellowing through the night. We hunker down in our sleeping bags, squeezed between the double tires of a 40-foot truck trailer, which groans and shifts upon its flat rail car. Though I can imagine my head squashed between the steel deck and one of these huge truck tires, I am a reformed and religious man.

Spokane is behind, Wenatchee ahead. We are back in the saddle again. Westward

Ho

Sleep of a curious sort ensues. It is neither the jerking shock treatment of last nights "hunting" box car nor the steady rocking vibration of the previous one's wooden floor. Slumber here is intimate with a chorus of un-deflected smoother high-speed voices. The ringing-sing of rails and wheels, creaking and groaning of piggy back truck trailers leaning into their tethers, throaty vibratory thunder of the units are more constant, insistent, like the more rapid vibrations of the steel car deck, all invading one as the wind does the opening of the sleeping bag. Struggling to secure the edges of my bag but grateful for its warmth, I think how particular I am normally about suitable places to sleep. Here I am about to find adequate rest on vibrating cold steel moving 65 miles per hour amid a cacophony of sound. It could be worse, right? It could be raining. I could be in jail in Spokane. For some reason, I don't seem to mind being here.

Dreamtime takes us across the croplands of the upper Great Basin, by darkened farmhouses till, in pre-dawn, we are awakened by the new sounds of crossing a long, steel bridge. With the lights o little hillside Wenatchee looming nearer, debate is again in order. The train eases into the yard to change crews.

"We can roll up on the river bank till daylight," Scott says, grabbing for un-stuffed articles in the dark.

"But when do you think we'll get another ride?" "There's got to be something by noon. If we stay on this one we'll be through the mountains before light." He is ready to bail out. "Besides, we can't leave Wenatchee without breakfast." We jump.

Light and wakefulness return when another westbound train rumbles in, stirring us from our riverbank slumber in the hobo jungle. I worry that we should jump it, but breakfast calls. Ham, eggs, waffles, coffee and more exciting local news are found in a cafe looking down steep streets to the tracks. Forking up waffles, syrup and jam I watch almost contentedly as the latest train departs without us. The waitress/owner chats of apple picking time.

Here on the dry but irrigated eastern embankments of the North Cascades is some of the finest apple-growing climate in the world. To pick the perfect fruit must come those willing to toil for the minimum wage. It is not Adam and Eve, but Juan and Rosarita. Illegal aliens from south of the border make the local economy possible, but have brought a sense of social class to a once rather classless region, and one complicated by racism. As usual, there is trouble in the garden. Ah, life, you can never have it the way you want it.

Packs a-back again, we are off down main street, peering into windows and passers-by. An old farmer type with decades of weather on hands and face, erect stance and strong suspenders to his trousers, moves purposefully towards us, talking animatedly to no one in particular, at least no one I can see. I feel an urge to enter the conversation, but he is gone before I can think of what to say. We now gird ourselves for the "purpose" of our pilgrimage: The Journey into Autumn in the

High Country. A stop at the market brings forth the essentials of food and wine. The sky grows grey, foreboding rain.

"Hell. It was so beautiful the last time we were here." I complain as we walk down to the tracks. Along the three rail lines that amount to most of the Wenatchee yard, we pass some real hobos and a trio of Indians; two young and one middle-aged man. This latter one bums some bills from we obvious imposters with the greatest of ease—no offense or pandering. Alcohol long ago laid claim to him, but in the style curiously peculiar to them. There is something almost endearing about the way he wears its ravages, about the humor, which is not easily embittered, and that strange air of acceptance.

Our wait is long enough to fuel the perennial speculation on trains, but soon we leave this tea leave reading and turn to the ongoing discussion arising from my little book. Scott remains intransigent about accepting the defacto argument that since Mind is "thought" to influence matter yet scientists cannot identify Mind as matter, then Mind must have an existence beyond the realm of matter.

"You can't say there is another existence just because there isn't one," he insists. He is a pragmatist, this curious sprite, one not about to be convinced of the existence of immaterial spirituality by default -- not even by this host of Nobel laureates and iron-clad physical scientists. Yet he is addict to the mysterious forces of Nature, call of the wild mountains, echoes of human identification with unseen forces.

"There must be something there, though. Right?" I posit.

"Maybe. But if you don't know what it is, you don't know what it is." He is not the religious type.

I watch the Indian trio in conversation and wonder what subjects they find to occupy their idle time. The many apple packing and cold storage warehouses murmur with the machinery of refrigeration, lift trucks rattle about with enormous crates of fruit.

Goin' To The Mountain Top

Noon comes to pass and anxiety, as always, receives some answer. A fast hotshot and a mixed freight pull into the yard one after the other, both westbound. Two teenage boys jump onto the short ladder of a piggyback flat car, ride past us, jump down and up again as the train slows to stop. I shake my head.

"Flirting with disaster," I mutter. Scott looks at me, head cocked. I shrug my shoulders. We grab our packs and scurry down the line between the trains, equivocating between speed and luxury. The mixed freight offers a variety of cars. A handsome box presents itself, both doors gaping. Peering in I see a cheery Mexican man. He smiles, saying "Seattle? Portland?"

"Si, Senor," I reply, "Portland." But Scott and I move on, searching out the

perfect platform for an aesthetic quest. We find a fine, empty, green, 55 foot flat car with full bulkheads -- 12 foot high steel walls at either end for good wind breaks. The sun appears to warm its steel plate as we stack our packs against the forward bulkhead. A couple 5 gallon steel cans we scrounge do for easy chairs. The wine bottle opens as we settle in. Ah, life!

Up comes the air in the brake lines. Out go the blues. Off we rumble past the apple packing warehouses, turning up the Wenatchee river valley at town's edge, cutting through bounteous groves of apple trees, many still laden with masses of fruit. The rippling river is lined with yellowing birch and cottonwoods. The day is Saturday and fishermen angle its shimmering riffles for fall steelhead. Sunlight flits in and out of drifting clouds, flashing off golden hillsides and the silvery undersides of fluttering apple leaves. Our train pauses on a grade where fruit groves rise steeply on either side of us. Scott and I stand facing past each other, taking in the panorama. The engines rev up the line, their idling thrum, thrum, thrum suddenly blurring.

Hearing, or perhaps sensing something, I turn backward, catching sight of a motion above us in the orchard. With uncharacteristic precision, I note a man standing beside a tractor and trailer heaped with dark red apples, his arm flung high, eyes on mine, an enormous red fruit arcing from his hand -- all this like a painting but perceived in the very instant the train jerks into motion. I step into my stumble generated by the train, reaching without lunging for the falling apple. It escapes my hand by inches to splatter off the steel deck. Without breaking our dance, the farmer pitches again, a high underhand lob. I step long once more, part of the same motion, lean out farther, reach lower, and the waxy red skin slaps into my palm. Coming erect I raise my arm and apple in unpremeditated salute. I see him only for an instant, returning the gesture, a blue-denim coverall clad figure, tall and stout, a large head with close-cropped grey hair, before he vanishes beyond the rear bulkhead of our rolling car. I stand, flat-footed again, beside Scott, who smiles his grin of admiration for life: part shock, part ravenous lust.

Onward, all upward now, climbing past basalt cliffs, into narrowing valleys scattered with farms and orchards, fringed with thickening pine forests and spots of shimmering yellow aspens. Oh, what a marvelous platform from which to see the mountains rise upward, this great empty car with its stage-like deck some 660 feet square to sway and dance across.

Over the first pine topped ridges we cut and vanish into darkness. Now the frequent tunnels begin, the steep drops on either side of the tacks into river runs among jagged boulders and green, frothing pools. Then the great sweeping vistas of the train's undulating spine wrapping this way and that across mountainsides ahead and behind while the units bellow in the distance. And the weather proves the greater for its flirtation between dark and light, clouds gathering then parting, showing colors in all their hues.

Pines give way to Douglas Firs sprinkled with the dark yellows and reds of

western deciduous trees as we near the Cascade crest and the air turns moister. Mist and light rain among the peaks reveal astonishing transparencies in the forest colors, rock esplanades. The slender luminescent yellow spires of the needle-shedding conifer, the Tamarack or Mountain Hemlock, pierce the dark green flanks of fir-dense slopes. Early snow dusts the rock-faced bases of

Scott suddenly sprints the length of the car, swings around the blind side of the bulkhead and disappears from my sight. Momentarily he emerges at the top of the steel wall, throwing one leg over and hanging there in the wind at 50 miles an hour, taking in the 360 degree view. What a sight, this puny little creature atop the great steel snake's spine.

Leveling out over the top of the pass, we skirt a high lake then come to a halt amid dense forest. Silence abruptly envelopes us. A light wind rustles. Bird song is heard. We detrain to urinate, sniff the woods, which we have just been hustling past. I pick a branch of translucent red Vine Maple, its small, perfect maple leaves so many idealized Canadian emblems. We climb back aboard our private car. Sunrays slip down to illuminate my maple branch as I hold it, leaning against the bulkhead, sipping wine.

This moment, this flash of godly light is emblazoned on me. It is the kind that overwhelms. This is a distinct state, of being, but are their "feelings" be described? Scott stands at the car's long edge, a foot out on a protruding bracket, shifting his weight from one foot to the other, idly rocking there, poised above the roadbed. I drink from the wine bottle and peel the great apple.

"Time has no leverage on me here," I sigh.

"Amazing how silent it is. Not the slightest sound of the units. No other train passing." Scott remarks.

"Wonder why they stopped, then?"

"The beauty of the railroad; no rhyme or reason to be known."

"Have you ever gotten off at one of these reason-less stops in the middle of nowhere, let the train leave, and wait to see if another stops for you?" I ask, enchanted by our fairytale surroundings. There is no answer. I heard something, though. I look up from my glowing leaves and the pungent fragrance of the peeling apple. Scott is not there. He has vanished from the car deck. Startled, I get to my feet, walk to where he last stood, look down. He is picking himself up from the gravel.

"What the hell happened?" I exclaim. He looks bewildered. I am incredulous. "Christ Almighty. Did you just slip?"

"No." He grunts. I see a dark maroon scrape across his cheek. It must be painful, but it is clearly not physical injury alone that is distressing my comrade.

"I was shifting my weight from one foot to the other," he explains with difficulty, "watching the foot out on that bracket. Then I just missed it completely. Down I went, head first."

I cannot imagine such a thing. Obviously Scott cannot either. But then, he ought to be dead. I help him back up on the car and administer the Blood of Our Lord from its green bottle chalice, offer him a piece of the sweet apple of mortal knowledge to suck upon. The car jumps and rolls, his spirit quickens visibly.

We wander the deck from vista to vista as all toeholds for anxiety and expectation slip away from me. Who could ever mistake this for anything one might expect, however many times you had been here? We toast the train, the mountains, each other. Then bang, blackness. We have entered the longest train tunnel in North America, nearly seven miles of roaring dark and smoke.

The delicacies of the forest are obliterated in suffocating diesel exhaust. Caught near the middle of the car, I stand frozen, rocking gently through the warm, heavy dark, trying to filter my breath through my coat collar, eyes stinging.

Moments pass until the confined din of rails and engines begin to distort my sense of direction, even balance. I dare not move lest I step off into oblivion, yet feel totally isolated, unfixed in the unstable blackness. There is no blindfold to remove, no light switch to throw. I wait, try to breathe steadily, wonder where Scott is and how long this can possibly last. When something touches my shoulder I am preserved from leaping only by not knowing which way to jump. A feeble electric bulb flashes by on the tunnel wall. I see Scott's hand resting on my shoulder. I see his quizzical face in freeze-frame. Then he is gone. Can he find his way around even in the dark with death on either side? Or is he just crazy after all?!

We are slowing, stopping. The sooty dark becomes tomb-like in this sudden silence.

"Scott?"

"Yo."

"What's this mean?"

"Don't know. Never stopped in a tunnel before."

"There's no end to the surprises, is there," I register.

"Seems to be the case." He produces a flashlight, playing it along the grimy concrete walls, defused in the smoky air.

"Barely enough room for the train to pass. I wouldn't want to try walking out," I remark. We start rolling, but backward. We halt and sit. The flashlight fails. "Think we can run out of oxygen?" I cough.

"I suppose that depends on if the units are in or out of the tunnel and whether the doors are closed," Scott observes matter-of-factly.

"I feel like I'm in a submarine stranded on the ocean floor. What a way to go: not crushed or sliced in half like the black cat, but calmly asphyxiated. Ah, well. You never know, huh?" I sigh.

"Nope," Scott concurs, "Might have been run over by a truck if you had stayed home." The train begins to roll again. But are we going forward or backward? It is

impossible to tell in the dark. We stop once more, start again. Now we are rolling fast, the sounds swell and --

On Wings Of Angels

Whoosh! The train breaks free from the mountain with no more warning than it entered in and there is air and light and space again. We hit the downhill grade toward the ocean. We and all water now run west. And run we do, urged onward in our loose and rattling decent by gravity's pull. It is a head-over-heels sort of sensation. What you fight on one side is your propellant on the other.

On the west slope of the Cascades falls the lion's share of the Pacific Ocean's moisture. Here the forest thickens with lush undergrowth, rocks are festooned with ferns, veined with creeks and waterfalls of every size. Moss and lichen flourish on stone and branch. Scents are damp, organic. The tracks span one stream or river after another over innumerable wooden trestles. Sweet, cold rain spatters our sooty faces.

I feel suddenly swept up into the wild surroundings, yet simultaneously hurtling in a way unlike that earlier thrill of raw power and speed. As the misty air drifts in and out of foggy density I pause by the slick steel edge of the car, staring down through open trestlework into rushing waters. For an instant I am overwhelmed -- physically, mentally swirling. Then just as quickly find I am standing still, at some incredible ease, resting like a tree plumb in the forest. Yet the train, the streams, even Scott and I are all rushing, onward, somewhere, careening. I cease to wonder.

The narrow valley opens now as we descend, revealing cabins, a road, and, finally, an occasional person going about their business. I realize I have seen none of these for the last few hours. Now these people appear differently somehow. They look so serious, so self-absorbed. Except for a young girl, nine or ten perhaps, who, when I wave at her, and spontaneously burst out laughing, erupts into animated gestures of...well, some kind of dance, some delighted gyrations.

Suddenly I am howling, roaring and staggering across the steel deck as we slash downward through little farms and hamlets, past motorists unsuspecting of the chasm that separates them from me in my fit of dissolution. The slimmest but keenest sliver of self-awareness stands like a needle behind me. I feel immersed in this moment while acutely aware of being in it, yet feel no control over it. Surely I am the greatest fool I have ever known.

I whirl dervishly, splattering on the steel deck, howling to Scott -- who appears not the least surprised at my behavior -- that whether or not the Mind is matter, it sure as hell does effect matter. I pace the very edge of the wet, swaying car deck, where the here and the now pass each other in inexorable permanence. What pulls me here, what keeps my tenuous balance? Fixing my gaze upon a passing point -- a tree, a yard, grazing cow -- I can follow it only momentarily from front to back

between the blinkers of the car bulkheads. What lies ahead as well as behind are shut out. Only what is parallel to my momentary position can be perceived. Yet, as I turn, I realize how much more there is even in each of these fleeting glimpses than I could ever encompass.

Now, and now, and now. Moments in time and space exist and cease. No matter how I try to dwell on each view, I am born onward, toward what I cannot know. No matter how I endeavor to impose myself on the future, even on myself, it is a futile task. Singing and cackling, I waltz the length of the deck as parallel travelers in autos pass face forward, only the children in back seats taking notice of my gesticulations. Scott joins me in a "dosey-doe" and we lock elbows, legs flashing in some version of that true Tango, the dance which expresses so much that is repressed, rain spattering our faces.

In this crumbling of my orderly delusions, I feel the dichotomy of moving and standing still, realize that what I feel in this instant is always present in my experience. Yet how seldom I have given the duality hearing. How seldom I have perched on the edge of my own self, savoring the balance between being and not, knowing the soft siren call to topple gracefully over the edge -- and the momentum which bears me onward with slightly greater insistence.

I feel as keen a command of sensory-motor control as I am capable. But command is exactly the wrong word. There is no difficulty in standing at the car's mortal edge, the rocks, rails and landscape blurring past. It feels like the balance point, the fulcrum. I am neither purely fearful nor simply triumphant. I am relaxed yet perfectly aware of where I am. It is such a simple, foolishly normal sensation I cannot help but be amused by its novelty. This is the dance of death, which is living, this walk along the moving edge, which is at the mercy of countless potential factors and contingencies, yet still lies within the influence of oneself, of Mind. So here my mind has taken a different track....

Brothers In Arms

Under power with the units pulling again, we move across the widening valley of the Snohomish river, along levees between green fields where hunters stalk pheasants, through the mill town of Everett and down at last to the ocean in the body of water known as Puget Sound. Afternoon light lays across the calm waters and forested islands some miles distant as palpably as the vibratory sensations of the train's motion remains in my limbs even when we have halted. Here our Indian friends disembark. As they pass the older man sees our half full wine jug. He raises an unsteady hand.

"Hey. How about a go?"

I scoop up jug and plastic water bottle, dumping the water and sloshing half the wine into its bottle. The Indian steadies himself against the car with one hand

wearing a three-fingered glove, his other grasping a ragged bundle. His bleary eyes hold unblinking on my jug. I reach the wine toward him as the train jolts forward. I watch him raise the very hand, which steadies him from the rolling car to grasp the bottle, his body loose but somehow steady. Even here there is astonishing elegance in his movement, spilling not a drop, nor tottering backward. He raises the bottle to toast us.

"Hey. You guys take care, hey?"

And we are off again, along the continent's island-dappled edge. The sea air is redolent, sweet. We pass occasional houses and cabins built to look westward, seaward, dwellings focused outward which allow us, eyes riding where none are expected, to gaze in from the growing dark on illuminated rooms whose privacy is meant to be intimate with sky and sea only. I watch figures now unlike those in cars or going about their business in towns.

I settle back against the bulkhead, seated next to the legs of my standing comrade. The roadbed of these tracks seems almost to float on the water, giving a sense of the train undulating as it rushes full tilt through the gloaming dusk. Islands darken into silhouette. Sky goes from pink to slate grey then blue in layers. My head tilts against Scott's knee, jostles there with the rocking of the car. I note a long windowed house where a man appears to be working over a great drafting table, surrounded by glowing wood-paneled walls. Scott's fingers come to rest momentarily upon my head.

Back to the Beginning

All too soon we enter the city of Seattle, looming its light-jeweled hills over bays and lakes, dark shorelines bristling with tethered boats waiting each for its Ulysses and some private Odyssey. The moment is at hand: journey's end. We rattle through the dark Ballard rail yard north of downtown, but do not stop. This train is destined for the main yard to the south, one often "hot." We must pull our focus down to our interaction with the corporation, the state, rules of property, law and social expectation.

No, no wait, I don't want to go back, not to Kansas or anywhere else...but, it is dinnertime.

It is also clear we must dismount on the run. Our speed is somewhat greater than easily managed. Scott knows the trick, though. We wait till we pass through the downtown waterfront, our last chance before the tunnel into the main yard. Abruptly the steep graveled sides of the roadbed are replaced by the much nearer, flat surfaces of city streets crossing the tracks. We pull packs to the car's edge, sit with legs hanging over, then just as we cross over a street, swing down, packs in hand, to stand spot-lit in the headlights of waiting cars, bathed in the flashing red of crossing lights. As our magic carpet rattles away, we hoist our packs, bow

graciously to the cheering, horn-tooting onlookers and are forced again, flat feet upon the street, to be normal members of society.

A few phone calls turn up no available friends for taxi service. So, afoot we go looking for...dinner, of course. We cross the canal between Puget Sound and Lake Union. I pause to look down from the bridge into dark water rimmed with countless boats. The edge of the bridge, edges of boats, the train car, the highway, all run together in my sensations. Autos rush by impetuously behind me, but I am happy to be afoot. We pass a pizza parlor, debate the merits of an old tavern promising homemade chili and end in a Yuppie restaurant where I find myself longing for the Truck Stop over my nouvelle cuisine.

Ah, but I am happy, if ever I have been. Though I feel the inevitable encroachment of my former self, the closing of an aperture, I realize I have experienced nothing new, but rather touched it again. This awareness is not original, but reasserts the same old challenge to live in the midst of "my life" while living it, rather than seeking to manipulate it, directing from above or beyond, expecting and anguishing. There is something comforting in the thought that I have not so much failed to learn this balance as faltered in practicing it -- and that seeking out reminders is part of the process. So simple. So obvious. Ridiculous.

All around us in the restaurant youngish people seem vigorously intent on themselves, exuding confidence in their personas. I am the traveler, drifting back as the journey's experiences expand within me.

In the steaming shower at a friend's house I relinquish the perspiration and grit of this little voyage with both new adoration of the old luxury of hot water and sudden fear of loss. I think of the black cat. He who lives and runs away, fights to live another day?

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