

## The Hummingbird · C. S. Giscombe

IN 1982 WE WENT OUT WEST to live in Seattle for six months because I'd won a poetry grant—money to spend on supporting myself while writing—and we went on the train because I love trains and because our car was dying then anyway. We went on VIA—the Canadian passenger railroad company—because it was less expensive and people said it was a more dramatic trip than the transcontinental Amtrak routes. We'd chosen Seattle too because it was cheap or because it was the cheapest of the sophisticated west coast cities. We chose the west coast because I wanted to be as far away as I could get on surface transportation—on a train—from the familiar landscapes. The four or five years that had led, as years do, up to this had been a series of trials—arrow followed by sling followed by more arrows—but even now as I think back on that time what I see around this or that incident is the lay and the roll of the land itself of central New York State, roads crossing it and myself on those hill and valley roads at the dying wheel of my Subaru through snow and summer-time overheating, but mostly through that snow.

(So I'd wanted too to be far away from winter, or the kind of winters I knew, had come to know from having spent about all my adult life there, in upstate New York. Winters in Ohio, where I'd grown up, had been similar: not as much deep snow, but the same dead cold. We could have gone south to, say, New Orleans or even Corpus Christi and some day maybe we will but Katharine's white and I didn't want to have that extra to put up with, the fear past the edge of town. I remember, from my childhood, winters in Birmingham, at my father's parents', the green lushness at Christmas or in January—and one time I nursed a fever all night long there high in a splendid nine-year-old isolation, heat pressing in at my edges from both inside and outside as I lounged in the converted daybed in their extra room, the tiny room they'd made into a library, watching the Late Late Show: Clark Gable tracked a mountain lion through snow, he was sick and crazed as I was—no, sicker certainly since whatever it was killed him and I had no fear of that, even at perishable nine—and then holed up in an ice cave and carved a panther effigy out of a piece of wood, this slightly before dying, while Birmingham sailed through the holiday night unscathed by the thought of snow. It wasn't

until the summer I was twenty, 1971, that I read Walter van Tilburg Clark's novel *Track of the Cat*, on which the movie was based; on a hot night in Montréal I finished the book on a hotel fire-escape, reading right under the green neon ROOMS/CHAMBRES. Buzzing. Too hot to sleep.)

We got the big train west out of Montréal in cold February — snow and slush all around the CN station downtown. We went down some stairs and there it was, all beautifully blue and gold, the high flat bolted sides were clean, almost antiseptic-looking in the dull platform light. We had a section reserved in one of the sleeping cars: that is we had two bench seats facing one another, and they folded down into a ¾-size bed at night. Around nine the porters would come through and make the beds, this being part of their job of running the sleeping cars. And it was known as a good job for black men in the US, the entry — someone described it once — into the middle class, in the '40s and '50s, even in the '60s, thanks especially to Mr. Randolph's union, to his fiery self. When I was a child going back and forth to Birmingham on the big train south out of Ohio, the Hummingbird on the L & N line, all the porters had been of course black. A book I had as a child — about a white boy, of course, riding alone going God knows where, to grandma's house or something — identified my man as "the colored servant on the train": class and race and function together for all time my friends, right there to be sucked in like or with the air of childhood. Such is the surface. But Canada's so white, I'd thought, who'll the porters be and in this the '80s? Black Canadian men, that's who: a profoundly bald no-nonsense man had our car and glided back and forth effortlessly between English for us and French for the ladies in the section across the aisle.

So there we were that afternoon on the Canadian, the VIA flagship train pulling out of the Gare Centrale on time, as they say, into the sunset and Katharine and I up in the very '50s, very deco-resurgence observation dome drinking Canadian Club from the bar downstairs as the snow flew, O Can-a-da indeed, O *Canada!* and, later, sharing our table at dinner with a pale mustachio'd man about our age — thirty-one then — going only as far as Brockville, Ontario. We'd actually got on the train, unconcerned about looking like the lower class, with an A&P bag full of enough non-perishable food (and enough bourbon) to see us at least as far as Calgary but when it turned dinner time we couldn't resist the dining car (as we'd been

unable, earlier, to resist the bar-observation car), despite the restaurant prices. The dining car was '50s too: there was real cloth on the table, the dishes were china, and the food was good. We passed the galley kitchen on the way out and stopped to speak with the cook and some of the waiters, all of whom were black, yes even in Canada, eh? And here I came in these the '80s, one of the darker brothers, o my brothers, eating in the dining car at the table with the company. One of the waiters, a huge man with glasses, studied us hard for a minute then introduced himself and shook my hand.

Dinner is often what my father still talks about when he talks about how it was to take the Hummingbird in the middle 1950s—before I could recall and before my mother, sister, and I would go anyway—when he'd travel down to see his parents. (He's part of that generation that left for the north after the war and did well there. Here. He's not a porter, though, he's a doctor; I grew up playing with the children of other black doctors, men who'd also come from the south, in those big back yards of the black suburbs just west of Dayton, this in the '50s and early '60s.) He'd eat dinner alone in the dining car—often it was crab, one of the specialties—and be the only black person there save those waiters who made sure his second bottle of beer didn't appear on the bill. And he'd take that second one back to the roomette or the compartment or whatever the term was then and watch the dark landscape slip on by, travel being accomplished in an ideal, meaning effortless, way. He'd thought about the train for a long while and rode it finally for the first time in 1952 or '53, it being synonymous with a kind of arrival or, better, presence, I think, in the country of one's adulthood, his metaphor—or one of them—for that presence. It was something money could buy (hence the effortless, hence the choice.) I'd asked him once about Jim Crow on the railroads in the '40s, the bad old days; coaches were segregated and all, but what about the Pullmans, I asked, what about compartments where you wouldn't be butting up against white folks anyway? "They didn't like to sell you one," he said, "they didn't like to but they would."

In our section on the Canadian train, at the end of the first night, I woke up, looked out the window, and saw we were on a long trestle: the train seemed to be backing up and I lay there for a long time trying to recollect in which direction I'd placed my head—toward the front of the train or

the rear — when we'd turned in for the night. It was grey, blank morning outside among the snow and scrubby trees and far away I thought from everything and going what way and even from where? I dressed and stepped into the aisle to check my memory about the placement of our section vis-à-vis the way the train had been pointed the night before, realizing I'd been right about us going backwards. The porter was up and told me how one of the three locomotives had failed and that we were going back to someplace called Parry Sound to drop it off and get another one. "They have a million miles on 'em," he said, not disguising his contempt for VIA's antiques, "you wouldn't keep a car that long." But the engines were those second or third generation diesels with the high snub noses, the kind I watched all through childhood. They'd been the power, as railroad people say, for the Hummingbird: I remember looking out the window once and seeing them — so dark a green was the L&N color that they'd looked black that morning — at the head end as the train had rounded a curve north of Birmingham. We were, it turned out, behind schedule that day which is why I remember: my mother had been alarmed by the country we were passing through, not recognizing it — we crossed a very high bridge over a dammed river then went by some particularly wild-looking ravines — from the mornings of previous trips. We were on our way to my great grandmother's funeral: my father was already there so my mother was travelling alone with my sister and me, both of us were quite young, and she'd been afraid we'd all slept through the stop at Birmingham — that the porter hadn't wakened us, which was logical since by her watch we should have been there a half-hour before we did wake up on our own — and were going further and further down into the south. It seemed like a bit of an adventure to me, being that I was northern and young enough not to be reading the papers much. Northern? I was born in Dayton, Ohio but for years I thought or, rather, assumed I'd been born in Birmingham; all or practically all the other black kids at school had been born in the deep south (the white kids had been, mostly, born in Kentucky) and besides that Dixie seemed real, even then, in a way Dayton never has to me. My mother's parents had moved when they were in their twenties from rural Mississippi up to St. Louis where my mother was born and raised but in Birmingham not only had my father been a child but there was a certain hilly neighborhood there where his parents, his fierce maiden aunt, and his storied grandmother — those three generations, that visible exten-

sion of family complete with adult siblings — all lived somewhat contentiously within a few blocks of one another through my earliest memories, my earliest cognitions.

Which were tied up with trains. To me (as a child and as I progressed through childhood) trains were mostly their tremendously physical selves, bearers — because of that — of a certain sexual power, obviously, but more it was how interested I always was in their capacity to relentlessly, physically cover distance and in that way make space — the unseeable space surface takes beyond, say, a horizon — actual. Verifiable, reachable via the surface itself. And so it was how they connected the nowhere that Ohio was with the south — I'm thinking of the Hummingbird drifting out of Cincinnati at dusk, out of that border town's station (where the huge heroic-worker friezes rose over the concourse), and then across the Ohio River there to arrive thirteen or so hours later in Birmingham and how surprised I'd invariably be, stepping down out of the vestibule, at the heat. I remember the "new" L&N station, the one built by the railroad in 1961 or 1962, but not its predecessor where I, as a young child, got off and then back on to the train God knows how many times. The new one I heard about in my grandparents' talk before it went up, my grandmother's voice in particular in my memory still, saying how they'd promised the colored waiting room would be just as nice as the one for the white people, the voice neither prideful nor resigned but somewhere, I think now, past even irony.

We crossed the wild country of Ontario all the second day behind the smudge-red Canadian Pacific freight engine they'd coupled to the remaining blue VIA units at Parry Sound. It was nothing but forest, frozen lakes, and snow but the train stopped at Musk and again at Woman River — the stations were shacks with snowshoes leaning against them and snowmobiles parked outside, no roads — and people got on. This was the vaunted transcontinental service and also as close to a class act as railroads in the 1980s came in North America, but out there it was also the only way, in winter, in and out. (Years later I made up some lost time on a bike trip by catching a train on the Ontario Northland Railway and riding it up to North Bay. It had a name too — the Northlander — and the conductor explained to me, when I questioned her, that the actual train itself had been something called the Trans-Europe Express at one time and when

that line had gone electric “they sold the equipment to us.” The equipment was those Continental coaches with the aisle down one side and the big glassed-in compartments on the other. But the people in the compartments were not particularly Continental, or not the Europeans that people films: my fellow travelers were burly white men with tattoos, burly Indian men with tattoos, stick-thin barely post-teenage mothers with stick-thin kids dressed in homemade duds, cool white high school students with ghetto-blasters and enormous rucksacks. This is the other ideal vision: the best equipment for ordinary travelers, fanfare for the common man. That train — which still runs daily from Toronto way up to Cochrane — was full of commoners being transported in grace, with that good fanfare, through the woods and abandoned fields which were going-back-over-to-woods of north Ontario. I rode that day from one market town to the next, sitting up in the dining car drinking coffee with a burly tattooed white man on his way home to surprise his mother.)

The next day, early in the day, the woods stopped rather shortly—I remember it now as a wavy North-South line of trees at which the bare prairie started but figure it was probably a little more gradual—and a short time later we came to Winnipeg, where there was a three hour layover and where the crews changed. I sought out the porter who’d had our car as we came through the suburbs and railyards and thanked him for being good to us and pressed five US dollars on him, feeling weird as I did it but I did it as my father had, by his example, taught me. My father was in those days on the train, the Hummingbird—and is still this rainy evening as I keyboard these parentheticals, these qualifications—a doctor, a physician, an M.D., he occupied that place in the village economy: I mean here that all the redcaps (the men who handled baggage for train passengers and who were also, to a man, black) at the Dayton Union Station seemed, all through my childhood, to be his patients and he treated them, when they’d meet there or on the street when I’d be with him, as gentlemen like himself. And the porters on the train he’d treat the same way, the tip being token of the respect for the brother man who was making it as ain’t we all? and the respect the role demanded, both; the tip being the coin of the realm, a lingua franca and not a kindness then bequeathed to one’s inferior. But this was 1982 and in another country that I was making the same gesture with the same intent I understood from my own coming up, which had occurred profoundly elsewhere. Maybe I only imagined the

man treated us different—as equals and in that way better, both in treatment and estimation—than the other passengers.

Past Winnipeg came Brandon and then the sad list of the occasional small towns to barely break the wide gape of Manitoba, the gaze out the big window at snowy nothing, crossing the Saskatchewan border after nightfall, as if there would have been something to see if we'd done it by day. It had been dull, the flat sameness stretching to the blurry horizons, *dull* (but the unbroken sameness of the Ontario forest hadn't been the day before); I read around in a surprisingly dull book of Graham Greene's, one of his story collections, and by the time we'd been in Saskatchewan a good long time I was sitting in the lounge car finishing a piece that seemed, as I recall, politely homophobic when a new brakeman got on at Moosejaw. It's a fairly easy job on the passenger trains: you read some gauges, talk to the fellows up front on the walkie-talkie, hang out in the lounge car. The lad was a songwriter, he said, and so he sang me a song, insisted on it, that bore some thematic resemblance to Jimmy Cliff singing "You Can Get It If You Really Want (but you must try, try & try, try & try, & you'll succeed at last)" but that talked about them "throwing some dirty nigger in jail," which irritated me, the way the word does as it occurs in the mouths of aggressively hip or pseudo-hip white people—is there a difference, a border?—who profess to believe that they're living along with us in some personally post-racist floating republic, some WoodstockNation of mutually reinforced cool—here is a border, o best beloved. And it's this position that was familiar to me, this being called upon to bless some white boy or white woman after having them and their burden up in my face with that nonsense, being called upon to hear it as though, I think, another black person was saying something like it to me as we do, sometimes. To admit him to his view of my world as an equal. I called him on it, my brakeman, and he responded quickly that he was using the word "ironically, like they use it in the States." I said that the irony was strained but asked then about his other songs anyway—though now I don't know why, an antique & expansive sense of my own gentlemanliness I imagine, or wishing to avoid having to argue with him or both—before taking my leave.

The train, with the crew change at Winnipeg, had got aggressively white—porters, dining car staff, passengers (except for myself and an Asian woman and her baby daughter)—suggesting to me that one true line of difference about the various parts of the country. The Canadian

west I knew about only through white men's novels — Edward McCourt's *Music at the Close*, Robert Kroetsch's *Studhorse Man*, Sinclair Ross's *As for Me and My House* (and his brilliant book of stories *The Lamp at Noon*), a few others, things I'd read in graduate school. Some years later during a vacation in Gaspé, I read John Wideman's account — in his book *Brothers & Keepers* — of his fugitive brother Robby driving out to see him where he was living then, in aggressively white Laramie, and then dreamt of a map of Canada which revealed a black enclave hidden far north and west where the prairie provinces — Manitoba and Saskatchewan and Alberta — become the Northwest Territories, an enclave set off on the map by a row of crosses and heard Robby Wideman's voice (the voice portrayed so beautifully in his brother's book) saying it was stone jungle up there, man, where *we* were from. Such are dreams. I've read recently about John Ware, the famous black Alberta rancher who flourished at the turn of the century; but back then when we were crossing it the west was mostly Ian & Sylvia singing about how in Alberta "that wind sure can blow cold / way out there."

On the fourth day we pressed on into that country way out there, the like of which I'd never seen. We'd crossed all of Saskatchewan by night, my brakeman doubtless making up new songs of his own in the loneliness of the lounge car, and the next morning the Rockies had been visible from Calgary where we stopped for a long layover, the last before the coast. And as we left Calgary, Katharine and I, sitting up in the observation dome that morning, could see the upward tilt of the land, the inclined plane we were crossing, climbing steadily in a straight line, the track going on toward the obvious wall of white mountains. And then into them.

It had been of course profoundest winter — early February — for all the time we were traveling across the continent: when we'd gotten off during the layover in Winnipeg, which isn't even Alberta, we'd suffered in that wind as we'd walked down Portage Street from the station. But all that long day in the mountains, in the white elevations, alongside frozen rivers and the crags against that sky, it seemed that winter was a place or that it had a geographic heart-place there out of which it came. Finally the train crossed a long and incredibly high trestle over what must have been the Columbia River, affording us a view southward of a particularly infinite white desolation going over to haze for the end of the day. This was the dramatic farthest away I'd ever been, I figured, high on a skinny bridge

way up within what seemed like hundreds of mountains, creeping through them on a train. Before this the big trips of my life had been the journey south, that train arriving in Birmingham from Ohio, a difference that was less one of geography, of course, or climate than it was about rules and insularities. Typically, my grandfather would be there to meet us, car keys in hand, and then whisk us back to the neighborhood where we'd stay until it was time to go back up to Dayton. To resurface. When I think of Birmingham even now it's that neighborhood and the ones contiguous to it that I remember with any semblance of identification—I mean my strongest memory of non-black Birmingham is the signs that directed white people to unseen areas and services and these were like coming across the footprints of some identifiable and common though rarely glimpsed animal in, say, snow. As an adult I've traveled extensively in the outlying areas of both New York and Ohio, driving through all weathers, butting up against white people all the time. Brave boys have yelled Nigger! from pick-up trucks before speeding off and I wonder sometimes, more or less idly, what gets said after I've left a roadhouse or after Katharine and I have driven slowly through a small town, making the grand tour amid some stares, but that's about as bad as it gets. Or as bad as it's gotten. In a diner in Saratoga Springs, years after we got back from Seattle, an old fat white man stared at me all through my breakfast and then sang "Bye, Bye Blackbird" in a stage whisper on *his* way out past our table.

The last time I was in the South was in 1978, four years before we went out west, when I flew into Birmingham in February for my grandmother's funeral. It was the first time I'd got there by air and as the plane came in low I could see the networks of dirt country roads north of town, the aggressive red slashes of them through bright green pine woods. (My mother had, in a whisper appropriate to the situation, pointed out the redness of the Alabama dirt to me when we'd stood, finally, under a canopy at my great-grandmother's funeral, at the graveside service: a mound of it was covered by fake grass mats somewhat past the lip of the open grave itself.) My grandmother was the last of my father's family to die, her sister, husband, and her mother having all gone in a three-year period in the early 1960s. They "preceded her in death" the funeral brochure went. I remember visiting all three graves with her once, she picking birdshit off her mother's tombstone muttering about how the birds had so little respect. But through most of the late '60s and '70s we hardly went, as a

family, to Birmingham: instead, my grandmother visited us with some regularity in Dayton. So my trip to her funeral in '78 was both the last time I was in Birmingham and the first time I had been there in more than ten years. The train, the Hummingbird, was by then long gone—a loss my father still mourns—and the old Cincinnati Union Terminal was closed and its heroic-worker friezes had been moved to the Cincinnati airport: at the train station they'd been displayed just below the cathedral ceilings, half-lit and majestic in the correct socialist way, but now, as one waits for one's plane to commence loading, you're right up against them, close enough to count the tiles they're made of, close enough to feel the grout between the tiles. The new L&N station, the one my grandmother had been talking about in terms of the last ditch effort of "Separate but Equal," was gone too: it had seemed, I remember, rather like an airport on the inside—hidden fluorescent lighting, pastels, a lot of space that looked more open than it actually was—and it had had that smell of infinitely recirculated air. The white waiting room was down a corridor to the left, I think, of the information desk, the colored waiting room was to the right: I can't imagine that the former was any less bland and perfunctorily comfortable than ours though I never, of course, actually saw it. I do remember, though, the white waiting room in another railroad's station, the Birmingham Southern station, from having gone there with my father once, probably in 1960, to pick someone up. It had been visible to us through a wide arched doorway: sunlight streaming in from big windows to a spacious area of benches set widely apart, white folks moving around under a high ceiling. The colored waiting room was dark and cramped, windowless; people stood up because there was no room to sit down. It was a cartoon bifurcation, one that would be embarrassing if it wasn't true.

Snow was piled up to the top of the platform shelters in Revelstoke, B.C., at the VIA station there, when we arrived and departed on the last night of the trip west. A loud mustachio'd white man in loud plaid pants got on and bought drinks for all of us in the club car but it was a sour fun he projected, a general ugliness I saw waiting to burst across the border without tune after, probably, his second scotch. It was only 10 o'clock and we were only 250 miles out of Vancouver but it was going to take all night to get there on account of the train having to snake through the mountains. We could have stayed up for a while and seen how that went but we went

off to bed instead so I could get up especially early the next morning: the travel agent in Ithaca had had some difficulty—actually he'd run into a computer-generated dead end—with the return portion of our tickets, since we wouldn't be coming back east until faraway June. And, since the train trip was affordable because of the low, low return fare, I needed to talk to the railroad people in Vancouver in the few minutes we had there before we got the connecting bus down to Seattle. Anyway, I was going to have to move somewhat fast and wanted to be awake and alert when I went up against the VIA boys.

It was grey, blank morning outside when I dressed and stepped into the aisle. The porter, a sandy-haired surly man, was up and standing in the vestibule where it says DO NOT STAND in French and English, smoking a cigarette. He had the top part of the door open, though, and beyond him I could see that we were traveling along beside open water, maybe the Fraser River, and that the hills in the near distance were dark and snowless; that the air coming into the car around the man's cigarette smoke wasn't frigid as it had been for days. February? I thought. We were right on schedule the man told me as we crossed a low bridge over more open water, due to arrive at 7:30. There would have been no pressing need for him to have wakened us for our station, Vancouver being the last stop, impossible to sleep through it. I washed up as best as I could in the tiny Gents' at the end of the car checking the reflection in the glass to see soap streaking the beard I'd had then for ten years. In Canada, I've learnt since, white people sometimes refer to Asians too as "niggers"; it's apparently Pakistani immigrants who get most often called thus out of their name. The skin's like mine but the hair is different, the beards aren't curly like this. Was it my face that fit my brakeman's song and what difference does it make?

In the early '70s my grandmother had moved to a brick house in an integrated suburb of Birmingham, the New South indeed, I suppose, *petit-Apartheid's* end, a domestic version of that, a contemporary referent for those who don't remember the '60s. A highway that had been in the planning stages for some time finally came, forcing her out of the old house and the old neighborhood. Imminent Domain. I'd never been in the new house so it was strange seeing the place for the first time with her gone from it. But then there was Birmingham itself to deal with beyond the obvious facts of death and family: I'd seen so little in the way of white

folks there that it was strange also when the moving company's packers — two middle-aged white women with those accents — came on the *business* side of death to secure my grandmother's things, her books from that little library (which had, of course, moved with her and to which she'd added considerably in the years since I was sick abed there) along with furniture and rugs to be shipped up to Dayton. They were efficient, chirpy, and they wore bandanas over their hair, the uniform of women who do housework for others for a living. My grandmother — and so all of us — came too from such, from what James Baldwin ironically called “sturdy, peasant stock”: my great-grandmother had worked very hard cleaning house for white Birmingham people precisely, the stories go, so her daughters would never have to. One of the women shyly asked if she could purchase one of my grandmother's china chicken pots for her own collection and my parents grimly sold it to her for \$15. One night in what must have been 1964 I had been startled at the train station by being in close proximity to white people in Birmingham: no one had mentioned to me that the station had desegregated, most likely by knocking out a panel or two, the first gasp of the New South. On the ride in to her new neighborhood, though, in from the airport in 1978, was a black side of Birmingham I remembered, acres and acres of those two-room urban cabin duplexes up on cement blocks looking just like the pictures of Soweto. Thousands of skinny black children playing on the railroad tracks that ran in between them.

On Amtrak nowadays they show movies on the long trips: the Empire Builder, say (which is still the name of the daily from Chicago out to Seattle), plowing through the Rockies — bear, elk, and mountain lion country — and you can be relaxing in the lounge car with a traveling version of the Late, Late Show: “Batman” perhaps or “Splash!” Color photos of black and white families grin and play cards and eat dinner off styrofoam plates through the Amtrak brochures.

Katharine and I and our 4-year-old daughter live now in a big upper middle class WASP enclave, though the turn-of-the-century houses themselves are attractive enough: ours is quite nice with its quarter-sawn oak woodwork and two sunrooms, its garage. If we wanted “an older home” (which we did) this was the neighborhood we needed to buy into to avoid capital gains tax and to keep our options fluid (explained the lady from Coldwell-Banker) when we moved out here to Bloomington, Illinois

where houses are profoundly cheaper than they are in upstate New York. We sold our house in a funky, comfortable (but definitely not “preferred”) neighborhood in Ithaca for more or less exactly what this one cost us. The neighbors are polite—exactly what I require of neighbors— though in the few houses we’ve been invited to step inside of we’ve been struck by the absence of books or even magazines. I’m an English professor now at big Illinois State University but it’s bigger State Farm Insurance and its camp followers that employ most people in town and pay them enough so that they can have the privilege of being our neighbors here in Old East Bloomington, 61701. When we meet on walks they speak, usually to comment on the quality of the evening or the day just passed or to speculate on the quality of the coming one; no one points or stares at us—friends in other less genteel precincts of this aggressively white town have been so singled out—and so that’s been one thing that’s easier, isn’t it? It was nicer in that Pullman than in the Jim Crow coach, the one they’d couple up front—*we remember and compare notes on all we remember having seen, ourselves, as children or having heard in stories, keeping it which was not really very long ago at all in the past alive in that talk now—*, right behind the locomotive in “the glory days of steam,” the one coach that caught all the cinders. Money, if you’ve got it, even the little bit the state of Illinois pays me, means there’s less you have to put up with day-to-day—*Empty pockets don’t, the singer sang, ever make the grade.*

What’s my metaphor for my presence in this, the country of my own adulthood? Our Volvo isn’t of a recent enough vintage to be a yuppie- or buppie-mobile, nor is it enough of an antique to be a head-turning classic. It’s just the ’70s car we bought used for cheap in the ’80s, dying of rust in the ’90s. We have a small Arts & Crafts furniture collection, but I’ve always collected things—old stamps and coins in childhood, now old chairs and tables. Our cat is eighteen and dying. I’ll be forty in a few days and I don’t think I have any metaphors for what it is to be alive, no things to stand in for the life I have aside from what I do. Or I don’t know them. Maybe when she’s grown up my daughter will be able to tell me what they were.

When the train stopped at Vancouver we stepped down out of the vestibule and, in that physical surprise at the heat, commenced walking the platform toward the big ratty CN emblem—letters on some sort of wire

mesh perched above the station house over which flew seagulls—lugging the carry-ons, sweating some in our down and wool by the time we got up past the blue engines that had brought us out there from Montréal. Just beyond where they sat, the track ended at the back door to the station—it simply stopped there: the end, as people say, of the line. No resolution, the difference that was various parts of that country—or, really, the continent—was not resolved but connected by this and by going deeper into winter—*through*—winter—than I'd ever been before. We'd crossed the mountains of it and come down the far side into spring.

I went in and fixed things up with VIA and when I came out the front door Katharine was directing an ancient white redcap who was pushing our steamer truck and bicycles on a handcart toward the bright white and red Seattle bus. What do you *do* at the end of a line but go further? I thought, in the parking lot, that I could smell the Pacific Ocean, which I'd never seen then, from way over across town—a raw tartness was in the air—but maybe it was just diesel exhaust from the bus mixing with the diesel exhaust from those locomotives still idling behind the station.