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continental trance

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For Ellie and Sarah

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"We cannot retrace our steps, going forward may be the same as going backwards. We cannot retrace our steps, retrace our steps. All my long life, all my life, we do not retrace our steps, all my long life, but."

GERTRUDE STEIN
The Mother Of Us All

o

minus the ALL ABOARD

minus my father waving

minus the CN logo

minus my mother waving

minus seventeen years of my life

Ellie & me

our unborn child in her belly

heading east

out of Vancouver

July 27th

8 p.m.

nineteen eighty-

1.

●
○
what i wanted to write:
"this is how it begins" or
"pulling into New Westminster"

what actually happened:
took a different route
skipped the canneries of New Westminster entirely

(so much for nostalgia or
plotting the poem in advance)

walking up to the snack bar
seven cars to the front
the sleeping car porter three cars ahead
making the beds
the teenage kid said to him
(admiringly) "you've got it all worked out eh"
as he flipped the mattress down
upper to lower
berth

& the porter said
"if i had it all worked out
i wouldn't be doing this."

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crossing the Fraser River
Port Mann in the night
lights out the left window of
the train

darker outline of the mountains
dark blue of the sky
minus the stars
out this left window on the universe

●
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the old guy who spoke to the porter just now said:
“my wife wanted to take this trip
before she takes her heavenly trip”

my grandma, 96, earlier today said:
“i don't think i wanta stay around too many more”

Ellie's sitting across from me
reading Peter Dickinson's *One Foot In The Grave*
& in the first draft of this poem i wrote:
“minus these coincidences
what is the world trying to tell me?”

minus — the word returns
— some notion of absence (not a life)
subtracting the miles travelled east
(minus mine — us)
loosing all notion of possession
aboard this mixed metaphor

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upper berth swaying in the darkness
click as the wheels clack off the miles

two women pass thru
drunk from the observation car
the one talking at the top of her voice
i say “shut up” loudly

the woman shuts up
& her friend
lowering her voice whispers back
“fuck off”

lullabies in the real word

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insistent instances

Kamloops in the early morning

someone, going crazy in their roomette,
rings the porter's bell repeatedly

seven a.m.

no way to sleep again

stagger forward to breakfast
the eggs taste of plastic or pam

drink tea
lurch up to the observation car
watch the mountains loom by

back in the sleeper car
one porter scratches the other porter's knees
"stop it! you know what that does to me!"

Blue River at ten
my cousin Donna's nursing station visible thru the trees

you too, Nicky,
none of us escape these details
presences
even in these wilds
rocking back & forth
eastward on this western train

○
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beginnings & endings

discrete frames in
a continuous flow

the japanese family talking
words i don't know

a horse glimpsed from the window
a man at the river's side
things i have knowledge of but cannot account for

like the flowers i saw
earlier today
purple spikes driven up
interspersed among the charred stumps of the fired forest

or the mountain's high green meadow
visible above the clouds

or the brook the train crossed even as i wrote these words
rushing down
carrying its content
into the larger lakes & rivers of the world

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"because i was raised on trains"
— this is the line that kept recurring to me
all night

"because i criss-crossed the west with
my mother & father"
— the only other line i could find to write
remembering
as the woman across from us slaps her son's fingers
spilling the peanuts my father bought
all down the aisle of the train,
1954, or dad yelling at me, 1948,
because i was running back & forth to the water cooler,
the newsy's face that same trip,
pissed off at his job,
twisted in a grimace i was intended to read as genial

random information intrudes each time i ride these rails
maybe for the last time
headline in that Vancouver paper
GOVERNMENT AXES TRANS-CONTINENTAL LINE THRU JASPER
part of my memory disappears
1500 jobs & a slice of history

"because i criss-crossed the west with
my mother & father"

"because i was raised on trains"

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the conductor takes our luncheon reservations
"1:15"

but at five to 1 says "it's five to 2 —
set your watch ahead."

nothing's fixed aboard this paradox
affects more than we believe

flux logic

we eat at 2:15

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ten minutes outside of Jasper
the line between sadism & masochism is drawn

as his one year old son hits his other son with a wire brush
the father across from us says to him:
“hit yourself with it!”

masochism wins —
the kid starts hitting himself
at least once for every time he hits his brother

WHACK WHACK

following this tack
hitting the track to town

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“too much like a rock song”
— what i thot as i ended the previous poem

how come that voice keeps butting in?

why the need to resolve parameters?

why not the rush of
the asymmetrical
arhythmic
world?

why not the y *not* the z
in the unwritten alphabets ahead?



okay we'll start there
with st utter's subtler statement

when the riddle's rid of rid
dle remains
ashine with its own kind of mystery

half words
half visions

the train pulls out of Jasper
three hours late

is this the st ate of my mind
or does that saint exist
beyond these twisting tracks
this train of thot?



so there it is

the literal metaphor or symbol

linear narrative of random sequential thots

accidents of geography, history & circumstance

the given

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—
i don't like the "symbol"
except as accent to the basic drum
of consciousness

i don't like the "like"
except as entrance to
a "pataphysical reality

i like the play of words
of life the moment when the feelings focus
absolutely a description

which is what st ate meant? yes
my st ate meant
this

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—
whistle

pulling over the level crossings
in the gathering dark into Edmonton

drainage ditches gleaming in the last light
clusters of buildings & trees

as night falls the sky reverses
dark clouds against a lighter blue

& the mind reverses
sleep takes
loosing the dream you

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two hours from Saskatoon
fingernail of moon in the eastern sky
the pastel gray clouds at dawn
blow over the pinkening horizon
train gathering speed all the while
the berth shakes back & forth &
forth over the prairie

the revelation is in the blue dome of air
beneath which this train & the dawn appear
as blue as the robin's egg i found age two
shattered on the sidewalk
bits of curved blue flung all about
& the train of thot it lead to

as blue as that imagined sky that day
when the clouds were white
& the prairies lay over the mountains
in my future

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mist of rain across the far horizon

heading out of Saskatoon
6:35 a.m. July 31st
the sky is a constant gray
& the fields of wheat, alfalfa, clover, grass, etc
stretch away for miles in all directions

encompassed we make our way
thru the middle of Canada
east towards Winnipeg

the mid-summer morning rain

these middle days

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later
a cultivator
then an elevator

somewhere between Nokomis & Raymore
(Semans to be exact)
two perfect stone circles
in a playground beside the tracks
except the circles are made of old tractor tires
(i can see this as we draw closer)

like that day
looking for the stones of Shap
saw a perfect circle beyond the crest of the next hill
lost sight as we raced down into the valley, thrilled,
up & over, it was gone,
only a raggedy row of sheep in that field beyond

this is how the world is
rimes that disappear as you draw closer to their sense
dense clumps of trees
scattered across the open fields
notation
in the landscape of a nation &
a revelation

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vanishing

down into the valley
tracking a forgotten river bottom
thru the farms, the ordered fences,
this old order is all around us
as we cross the border into Manitoba

saints you are gone
part of an older order of this poem
as Brun, too, is gone, sleeps with the other giants of his race
presence you can trace in Lampman, Roberts, et al
nineteenth century notions of this place

vanished
as we will vanish
despite the wish to carry on immortal
into stranger dawns
my unborn child
will never cover these miles we cover in this way
of life

vanishing
& nothing visible
except a vast shining

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hr
the field of sunflowers stretches to the horizon
under this july sun
the clouds are isolate
mirror the disparate clumps of trees
& the fields & sky weave thru & around them
rime in the clear blue sloughs & streams

we move as in a dream
the mothers down the aisle screaming at their children
the guy across from me whistling the Colonel Bogey March

it will make sense yet
this blue & green
these fragmentary lives & conversations
& the white world, saints' home, in between

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hr
two hour delay in the Winnipeg station
"they're looking for an engine for the train"

the things that get displaced are major
they leave you stranded tho you know your destination

"i'm getting out of here"

sometimes there's no getting
aboard a-
way

even if your ticket's punched

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okay saints
i hear you babbling
press your way with your complaints into this scenery

someone spoke of you
as tho you were a literary device
more a vice i keep returning to

tho the order here's another one
your faces rise above these tree lines
there's a conversation we all come back to

so many years spent talking with you
a willed hallucination
more than continental
a kind of lifelong trance

& these pauses
on these sidings
waiting for that load of freight to pass

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beside the track

drowned trees
water lilies

fish break
the surface of the lake

as i look back



“where is this poem going?”
“Toronto”

“what does it teach us?”
“how coincidence reaches into our lives &
instructs us”

the 19th century knew
any narrative, like life,
is where coincidence leads you

given, of course, the conscious choice of voice
the train of that you choose



this next bit doesn't quite cohere

already past tense
or converted to a noun
when its the bite of consciousness eludes you

the flickering light thru the trees
sets up an echo in my brain
petit mal
makes me want to puke

but the trees
so clustered
a bird could walk the branches
a thousand miles or more

it is a map of consciousness
what the light yields disgorges
perceived thru a pattern of branches
the birds fly free of

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in Hornpayne
the sign on the building i could see from the road read "OTHING"
i reconstructed as "NOTHING"
because it looked like it was falling down

a north thing called "nothing"
that as Ellie & i drew closer
i read, suddenly, as "CLOTHING"
windows boarded up & broken

like my life-long wish
that i might clothe myself finally in belief
& realize:

the name of death is "NOTHING"
the name of after-death is "NOTHING"
accept Lord Mother/Father
the briefness of this life you've granted
this bliss

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blueberry bushes, fruit shrunken, dried,
hot july day, outside this moving window

that leaning tree is static as we move away
vanish in its distance
won't be here the day it falls
or the bushes return again to bloom
sitting in the room on wheels
takes us

Pacific Ocean to the Great Lakes
middle passage the explorers dreamed of
died for
past the scattered daisies in the green ditches,
the drowning forests, bursting water lilies,
sun-lit glades

●
○

mile what?
a lack of notation
reaching for conclusions
tho none are there
you get the green forest
red dying leaves
off-white of the drowned birches
leaves you wondering what it is ends
or is it only an endless renewal
God my life ends
years before this poem possibly can

○
●

as night falls
it all falls

the sky gradually caves in
becomes the same still darkness as the trees

well past dusk
the husk of night's broken only by the train's light
stars & moon out of sight behind the clouds' wall
contains us in this cave
in whose mouth lie rumours of our shadows
other worlds round other suns
dim flicker of light
visible suddenly across the lake
before the train takes us round the bend
into the illusory dark

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is this the poem i wanted to write?

it never is

it's a thing of words
construct of a conscious mind

governed by the inevitable end-rime
time

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that's that tone

buried in the poem
a consciousness of its own mortality

or mine

a finality Homer

soon there's noone knows
whether your poem's your own

or if the name denoted a community of speakers
history of a race

(Ellie's an obvious we
draws our child's breath & her own)

i's a lie
dispenses illusions of plot

biography when geography's the clue
locale & history of the clear "you"

●
○

who to, Nicky?

only the future
invisible as my own

our first child died
this second waits its birth

all part of history
all what we call a life

echoes & screams thru these tunnels of trees
running on tracks we no longer perceive

Ellie asleep in the lower berth
voices & footsteps move all night
along the moving corridors of the train

○
●

mist again at dawn

heading into Toronto
“end” translates “home”

7 a.m.
August 2nd
1981

St Clair to Union Station
thru the junkyards, the backyard gardens,
decaying brick factories

scrawled across the one wall
I WANTED TO BE AN ANARCHIST

an ending
in itself
unending

○

●

Vancouver - Toronto
July 27 to August 2nd
1981

●

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Some thots on
THE MARTYROLOGY BOOK VI
— Half-way thru

THE MARTYROLOGY Book VI began in 1978 before I had even finished Book V. This in itself threw me off. Since the structure of much of what I am doing evolves processually in a journal-like fashion, I had grown used to the poem clearly announcing itself in chronological order. But of course the chaining structure that was Book V meant certain thrusts in the narrative of the piece ended much sooner than others and became, therefore, available for articulation in the next book of the work even tho the previous book was still writing itself. I wrote the opening parts of the first text in Book VI, *IMPERFECTION: A PROPHECY*, & then, a year later, Book V was still in progress, I began *THE BOOK OF HOURS*. I began to think I was writing a new work, a work I called **A COUNTING**, but in fact the counting was really a marking of time until Book V was finished &/or a structural departure from my own method of composition. With hindsight I can see that my compositional method had to change as a consequence of the decentralized narrative of Book V. I was free to work with chronology but was no longer bound to it processually. Which is to say I could work on a number of initiatives at the same time (each with their own secret narrative [a strict chronological one]) but who jumped & moved in time as a reading experience.

CONTINENTAL TRANCE, the third text in Book VI partakes of this interruption. It is, of course, absolutely governed by the narrative of the rail trip from Vancouver to Toronto, a journey that recurs again and again in **THE MARTYROLOGY** & even earlier in **JOURNEYING & the returns**. Chronologically however it falls between Hours 17 & 18 in *THE BOOK OF HOURS*, as the first three parts of *INCHOWATE ROAD* (the fourth text in Book VI) fall between Hours 19 & 20. The effect of all this is the effect of flashback, usually achieved by a more conscious manipulation of the sequentiality of materials but here arrived at simply by a decentralization of the narrative, its simultaneous appearance in multiple texts. This is much how we as people are

perceived by friends who know this or that element of our lives but receive this information at indeterminate points in an informational sequence over which we do not necessarily have control. The interruptions continue.

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September 1982



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