

Heading West (1974)

(Notes written on the CN train between Ottawa and Vancouver, July 9-12, 1974)

In early July 1974, after a disappointing two-month stay in Ottawa where half-hearted plans of finding work and applying to grad school were dashed, I headed to Vancouver seeking a new start.

The following is a transcription of notes kept during that four-day train journey, and a brief stocktaking after arrival.

The writing is at best uneven: spontaneous impressions often interspersed with ideas from undergraduate studies, not fully digested. Yes, the writing is self-absorbed and sometimes stilted—but still I am given to defend its peculiar appeal:

In one young man's restless first journey westward is something not captured of the universal hope for renewal? If nothing else, perhaps these notes offer glimpses of bygone cross-country passenger service with the attendant charm of the bar car.

Whether or not any potential reader would agree with the assessments of an old man's uncovering of an artefact of boyhood—he has nonetheless decided, with all attendant vulnerability, to bring this artefact to light.



Northern Ontario:

After twenty-four hours still crossing the mighty Canadian Shield: stretches of jack pine and birch, jack pine and birch. The monotony broken only by the lakes (cold blue with dark green eelgrass and the lighter green lily pads): Can every one of the thousands of these puddles of glaciation that dot the ice-scraped expanse be possibly named?

Standing between the rattling coaches, one can almost catch the sound of mosquitoes and horse flies (big as hummingbirds, hungry as piranhas?) humming in the blue air of high solstice summer. A deep breath of the rushing air teases with whiffs of wild strawberry, suffused with hot crushed coal and the grease of railroad ties...

As for human habitation of this Nordic expanse: apart from the cities of Sudbury and Timmons and the villages such as Capreal and Hornepayne—the signs in the seemingly endless forest are few.

There are only glimpses of upended canoes, rusted oil drums and treadless snowmobiles outside tarpaper shacks.

Back in my seat in the ‘Day Nighter’ coach (\$8 extra for reclining seats and purple wall to wall carpeting) I glance around at fellow passengers: a dozen whining towheads, a few teenagers with knapsacks and a score of middle-aged potbellies... Whether they are headed homeward or merely tourists on vacation, I cannot guess. As for me, I am cutting losses and heading west...

‘This ain’t no vacation, boy!’ I tell myself. So, for the moment, I can’t deny being nervous about taking this huge gamble—striking out alone to territory unknown with my paltry belongings (knapsack in the overhead bin and a trunk of books and a bicycle in the baggage car) ... After the goring of the last 8 weeks—I feel stripped to the bone. Yet I cannot deny that I probably take myself too seriously.



Over the last 48 hours, I have reminded myself (partly in reassurance—partly in warning) of the autobiographical stats: I was born in New Brunswick in the early 1950s and grew up in a dreary little junction on the New Brunswick-Maine border seemingly settled by those too timid to light out for better prospects.

With the opportunity of finishing high school in the port city of Saint John providing a modest boost to self-confidence—I went on to the University in the provincial capital—although I faltered (by native timidity?) at taking on anything more challenging than a general arts BA program.

Only in the third year of college did I enter a first serious ‘relationship’. She was a fellow English Major, but with surer footing in the middle class and markedly greater ambition. During our year of cohabitation, I became more sensitive to the tuggings of native soil and heritage: particularly the self-destructive elements.

I toyed with the notion that the bleak Fundy shores from which more ambitious kinfolk traditionally migrated—could be fertile ground for literary tilling. Yet in my final year at college, I grew cynical of the conceits propagated by several local academics and artists—many of American origin. Most implausible was the idea that rural New Brunswick, especially the Miramichi region, was as rich in story as Faulkner’s Mississippi.

Yet I cannot deny that an aversion to what I regard as native narrow-mindedness and fatalism verges on the claustrophobic. Thus, I gladly leave to others, the embrace of this region as source of inspiration. I am simply determined to get away...

So it was that two months ago, at the end of the final semester (albeit with a major term paper

incomplete) I took the night train away from my native village. The first destination was Ottawa. I had a half-hearted plan to find work there—and possibly later enrol in graduate studies or even take courses in journalism. It was a plan based on bad faith given the underlying hope of resuming the relationship with the college girlfriend, who had moved there in the previous fall. While she had made clear her having moved on—I remained too long in pathetic denial. No surprise that I failed to find work and nearly ended up a charity case.

So it *is* that with the remaining shreds of self-respect—I make this bid for freedom. Thus, I find myself on this sultry July morning, riding in the CN Day Nighter car headed through the north woods of Ontario.



A few hours later, here in the bar car:

After a few whistlestops along what seems the endless southern fringe of the Canadian Shield—Northern Ontario is still rolling past...

We have passed hamlets in the forest, mostly native Indian settlements, the largest of which was Sioux Lookout. We stopped long enough to allow a quick run to the A&P supermarket (celebrating the Cucumber Festival) across from the main drag.

I picked up a copy of the *Winnipeg Tribune*. The printing seemed slightly faded—reminding of the Prairie conservatism that is still in mourning for being steamrolled by southern Ontario and Québec who gave the Trudeau Liberals, a new majority last week. The tone of the editorial page definitely struck a contrast from the *Ottawa Citizen*, the daily paper I read the last few months. That rag was delivered every day at 4:30 PM to the coop on the south side of the Rideau Canal where I ‘crashed’ having used the connection of a college friend. I assume that a few of the relationships formed at the coop were mutually respectful (With particular fondness I will remember FW, the Hoosier bicycle mechanic and ardent vegetarian). Still, I almost cringe in imagining just what discomfort was generated by a friend of a friend—ensconced on the couch for nearly 8 weeks...



As I scribble away at my little table in the bar car I overhear a conversation behind me:

"Where you goin'?" asks a slick haired guy to his buddy.

"Vancouver."

It was no surprise. He may even be a fellow Maritimer—judging by the accent—maybe even from

Fredericton.

"Fuck, man—can't you ever get outa the cities?"

Still, that remark almost jumps the pen out of my hand.

Can't you get outa the cities?

Just think of it! Here I am, headed to a strange city where I don't know a single person. I have hardly any money and nowhere to stay in a city three thousand miles from anywhere I've ever been. Arriving with all my worldly possessions, in a metal suitcase back in the baggage car. Just how reckless am I? And of all places to gamble on: Vancouver, the magnet for every misfit north of the 49th parallel running from the past. Does this smack more of clear-headed choice or cowardly flight?

I stare out at the blurring trees and steady myself. Be positive—this is about opportunity—the pursuit of freedom! There was little hope for it in Ottawa—and no hope for self-fulfilment whatsoever in New Brunswick.

New Brunswick... Just two months gone but it seems so far behind. The distance is widening with every jiggle of my hand—every flash of green over my shoulder... Still, I can't deny there was a tiny temptation to stay on. If I had got a decent summer job, I could have rented an apartment on my own—maybe enrolled in fall graduate school in English Literature. Maybe I could've met a nice local girl. Maybe another grad student: maybe someone like the old girlfriend?

No, there were too many ghosts—too much negativity from the native village just an hour's drive away always dragging me into vicious downward spirals.

Christ, this writing is stilted! All the while I've been scribbling here, I've been self-conscious. With the narrow aisles and these little Formica tables what a spectacle I am making for every gawking greaser stumbling though. Yet here I am hogging a table from those passengers who really need a drink and a cigarette along with a bit of conversation. Since that's not what I need right now best to just sit back in the purple tedium of the Day Nighter—even if I'm stuck with an aisle seat...



Manitoba:

It seems that as Ottawa and the *femme fatale*, slip further and further behind, the anguish is giving way to a more bearable loneliness. With every mile and every hour—slowly through the prairies and into mountains—the rawness will scab over. That's the hope...

Last night we hit the prairies. At sunset the bush country flattened out dramatically and the trees thinned out. Just as the sun set, the lights of Winnipeg loomed ahead.

The stop in Winnipeg was long enough to walk out onto the corner of Broadway and Portage. In the 90° humidity of early July there was no hint of the notorious fortress of winter...

"It's a city of extremes," said the girl with a guitar who took the seat beside me in the Day Nighter last night. She said she'd lived in Winnipeg all her life. When she later saw me reading, she said that's she has reached a stage in her life where she was bored with books and now embraced "feeling and art". She said she loved her Winnipeg winters and celebrated the cold that "lets you know you're alive."

Both of us equally bored, managed to get our seats switched this morning. At the same time, I had to wonder just how typical she was of her province. She was easy-going, yes, friendly—although in a superficial way. Soulful? She seemed far from that although no doubt she felt the same about me. But if she was a common 'type' of westerner—that does nothing to encourage prospects for compatible female company in the months to come...

At the same time, what a contrast is her breezy self-confidence with the manner of the beehive-haired woman whom I briefly sat across from in the bar car last evening. She was from Newcastle, New Brunswick. In her late thirties with crows' feet—she said that she had worked in the cafeteria at University of New Brunswick, in 1971, the same winter I was in residence there. She said she and her old boyfriend had been working their way across the country washing dishes before they split up (I guessed that she had been dumped).

In the interim she sat across from me, her eyes roved for better prospects. Still, at one point I closed my notebook and we briefly chatted. Oddly enough, within ten minutes she was telling me about her bad dream:

"I kept starin' into the river," she said in her in her dreary nasal accent. "Thinkin' I was gonna fall down into the black water. I had that dream a dozen times since I was a kid. I get rate scared!"

She blew out a long drag and blinked towards the window.

"I don't blame, you," I said.

In hearing that I had been a college boy she probably expected me to say something about her dream's "deep meaning". She was saved from further awkwardness by the entry of ruddy fellow with a fat belly whom she had met earlier. When she joined him at his table, I stuffed notebook into my Khaki carry bag and repaired to the Day Nighter, darkened in purple nightlight.

For the next hour or so, the train was stopped—somewhere on the dark prairie west of Winnipeg.

Shivering in the over-active air conditioner, I was still thinking about the lady from Newcastle, New

Brunswick. There was something about her gloom that seemed almost contagious. Was she a typical New Brunswicker?

After twisting about, I turned on the nightlight and reread the pages I'd written in the bar car. Yes, still a little stilted. I crossed out a few overwrought paragraphs. So much easier it is to write amid sleepers in the soft purple light—almost under the cover of darkness. Perhaps I can pick up a rhythm attuned to the clacking of the rails.

Finally there comes the comforting jolt—we are again slowly headed west....



Next afternoon (western Saskatchewan):

Even with the recliner seats and the dimmed light I dozed for no longer than an hour last night. With the sore back, the lack of decent food (stomach aching from dried apricots) and the itchiness of the three days without a shower, it is hard to enjoy the scenery. The car is half empty now, many passengers having departed in Saskatoon. Apart from the folksinger gal (at the opposite end of the car) I seem to be the only person under fifty. Several slack-jawed old men with dowdy wives look like railroad retirees travelling on their free passes. At least now I have a seat by the window—out of which all day, there have been magnificent prairie views.

"Ride off any horizon, and let the measure fall where it may..."

Looking across the vast fields, I recalled a poem by one John Metcalf, a prairie poet, with whom I exchanged suspicious glances one snowy night in Fredericton last winter on the path to Tilley Hall, University of New Brunswick, where he gave his reading. So, this is his heartland and now I appreciate his lines...

His landscape, at least here in mid-summer, looks far more interesting than previously imagined: vast expanses of green wheat and yellow rapeseed; crossroads with parish grain elevators purple and federal white; pickup trucks, horses, slough ponds and coulees; tidy towns like Bigger and Red Fern... With lightning storms tracking silently from distant horizons—the vistas seem more of ocean than of landscapes. If it weren't for the Arctic winters, I think I could comfortably sojourn here.

A few hours later:

Now the landscape is changing again: the prairie is rolling—first gently but gradually undulating into low hills as the train passes like a ship through rolling sea. Trees are growing more thickly and in the pastures there are fewer horses and many more cows—square headed beef cattle. We are into ranching country.

At a crossroads a pickup truck bears 'Wild Rose Country' plates. We're crossed into Alberta! Edmonton is just a few hours away, and not long after that, Jasper. Just a day away from the west coast! For the first time, Vancouver seems a palpable reality. Dare I believe that a new beginning there waits?

The excitement fades in an unexpected twinge of memory. The old girlfriend worked here in Alberta, at the Château Lake Louise in Banff, in the summer of 1971. The first time I met her in the Student Union building cafeteria, she had just returned from Alberta and was wearing a cast on her wrist. She sitting in a booth was with her friend, the sometimes girlfriend of my fellow villager and one time university buddy. She first struck me as far more talkative than beautiful. At that first meeting there was no extraordinary spark—but how that was to change!

Two years thereafter—a period that included nearly a year of our cohabitation—she graduated and moved to Ottawa. In the letters and phone calls of the first few months of separation a degree of the former ardour was still affirmed. By winter, though, it became clear that I was not included in her new plans. Still, I ran up an enormous phone bill and further depleted my dwindling student loan with two anguished winter visits to Ottawa. I rushed back to Ottawa in spring.

In my two-month sojourn there I failed to get any job apart from a couple of weeks of pre-election door-to-door voter registration. Beaten down—I barely scraped together enough for the train ticket out. Yet retreating back to Fredericton—even into the womb of the provincial university—would have been devastating...

That was only three days ago—but even Ottawa is now two thousand miles away. With eight hundred miles more of mountains to cross, eight hundred miles further from the source of my pathos, can the healing not begin?

Having no personal connections—nowhere to 'crash'—of course there is trepidation. With barely \$40 cash, I have no choice but to find work within a few days. Maybe even dishwashing—like the bee-haired lady from Newcastle?

Still, there is a chance for a fresh beginning. Unlike in Ottawa where I ended up for all the wrong reasons—heading west is a leap away from timidity—*my gamble*—whatever the outcome.

Still, I am carrying all of this emotional garbage across the country. Just as I pulled my Maritimer angst with me to Ottawa now here I am dragging the burden across the Canadian Shield, the prairies and now into the foothills. In passing though the Rockies—might the load be jettisoned? Can the cleansing begin this far out from the Pacific shore? I think of Ariel's song from '*The Tempest*': ("Full fathom-five thy father lies...") Dare I hope for a sea change with an emergence of "something rich and strange?"



Back in the bar car (near Edmonton):

I still have the *Winnipeg Tribune* under my seat but this afternoon I'm looking through the *Edmonton Journal*, getting a feel for the readership and the public discourse in the provinces traversed. Even more than solidly Tory than Manitoba, Alberta still seems in shock over the victory of Trudeau last week. British Columbia, with its NDP government, is hopefully not quite as hostile to the alliance of the East.

In the last few minutes, I've reread paragraphs written earlier relating to the break-up with the old girlfriend. Definitely to be deleted. At least that is the impression here in the bar car wherein I've again repaired. Perhaps it's the drinking and smoking around me (although I am not indulging) that makes me maudlin.

Be that it may, I will revise the earlier cynical view: It must be said that no matter how ugly it got in the end, I cannot deny that for a brief time, she and I shared something ineffably tender. It will take more than just some new erotic encounter to get over the sense of loss.

Yet how much of this is masochistic self-torment? It is not hard to understand why I was so rattled by the lady from Newcastle, New Brunswick. We probably have much more in common than I dare admit. For the moment, I can only take a few deep breaths...



Back again in the bar car (in the foothills):

Edmonton is now an hour behind. While we stopped there, I walked through the train station and saw ordinary middle-aged couples in white Stetsons, entirely unself-conscious.

A few moments ago, the train came to the juddering stop on a lakeshore, hard to see in the misty dusk. I have been thinking about the native village on the CPR line between Saint John and Montréal. I've been thinking particularly about the boyhood buddies there: once blood brothers who may well now scorn my 'treachery'. Yes, over the last year during the breakup with the old girlfriend—I withdrew deeper in my studies. I spent more solitary time and avoided the kitchen chats and pub gatherings. The good ole boys may well have believed I was becoming a 'snob', just because of a smattering of college. I can almost hear their nasalized sneer: "*who to fuck do you think you are?*" Be that it may—it was an unavoidable rupture.

In the faint clang of a railroad-crossing bell we are now creaking slowly through the foothills. The weather is cloudy and cold. If there is fog or rain in the mountains tonight— we'll miss the view.

As we wind closer to the Rocky Mountains, there comes to mind another jeering voice I can never ignore. Here on the verge of the greatest trial of nimbleness and common sense: I cannot but hear the voice of an old soldier, which has taunted ever since I first tangled a fishing line: “*You are careless, impatient and easily led!*”

If that forever be the paternal judgement— then apart from defying his scorn, I can only hope for the wisdom to know what is fair-warning— and what is only self-torment...

Suddenly, I am aware that the grizzled man sitting across the table has been staring at me, probably getting up the nerve to ask me what I'm writing about. I close the cover of my notebook; both embarrassed and irritated to be knocked off focus. Anyway, time to take a break and watch the scenery. Maybe even strike up a chat with that old guy...



Still later (back in the Day Nighter coach):

The old fellow turned out to be a Saskatchewan farmer. He said he sowed flax back in the 1930s and enjoyed “Thirty-seven years of the freest life on earth.” Now he's divorced and working in construction in Prince George, BC. He was on his 4th beer.

Listening to his story, I marvelled in his unself-conscious ease. Never has an old timer who I'd ever had occasion to listen to, even a Legionnaire talking about the war, had ever been so riveting. The farmer's prairie accent sounded especially rich and resonate (“*Young man,*” he kept addressing me...). What a contrast from the drone of the native English New Brunswick accent, which that had always grated on the ear.

Shit, it's gotten cold in here! We're climbing into higher altitudes. Even though rain is spattering at the window, the air-conditioner is humming away here in this funereal purple coach.

“It's all automatic nowadays, you don't have to touch a thing,” said the loudmouth retired geezer across the aisle. He's been chattered on endlessly with his wife late into the night about the joys of riding on his lawn mower back in Manitoba. O, to be old and foolish – what a fate! That is definitely more to be feared than dying young...

Looking out into the blackness (not even the shadow of mountains discernable) earlier, I was thinking of ‘*the Great Stone Face*,’ a short story by Nathaniel Hawthorne read in childhood... It's about a boy called ‘Ernest’ (who was of course— dreadfully earnest) growing up in the village in the White Mountains where a crag on the mountain overlooking the town looked like a wise man's

face in profile. There were always rumours and excitement whenever a village native who found fame or fortune in the wider world, returned to the village. Was he the great stone face?

Throughout his life Ernest waited expectedly, along with fellow townsfolk for the one whose likeness would match that of the Great Stone Face. Of course, every candidate, by some flaw of character, disappointed the villagers. Meanwhile Ernest plodded on, never leaving his village, yet living a kindly and humble life. Then in the ripeness of his old age, one day as the sun was setting over the crag, the town folk began to hail: "*It is he! Ernest is the Great Stone Face!*"

How ironic, it seems at this moment, that such a tale would have so inspired me in boyhood. Here in my twenty-third year I shudder to the core in the thought of a lifetime of humbly tilling the native soil... Meanwhile, these Rockies, being so much vaster and wilder than the Appalachians, encompass myriads of forms to be interpreted by any number of 'earnest' gazers... Unfortunately, as we pass through tonight in the rainy dark, I will miss even a single glimpse...

I'm back in the aisle seat since an old man who came on near Jasper has the window seat. Also joining us at Jasper was an old couple now sitting two seats back across the aisle. The poor lady has some apparatus attached to her throat. When she talks to her husband, with worried eyes, she has to touch a disc on her throat before speaking in a voice like Woody Woodpecker's.

Meanwhile, the folk singer gal from Manitoba in now in the back of the coach (by a bit of sweet cunning, she still has a whole seat to herself) crooning along with her guitar. Oblivious to the consideration that some may want to catch some sleep; she has been strumming away and singing silly lyrics in her insipid voice. Strange juxtaposition!

Still, we shudder westward. Arrival in Vancouver is scheduled for mid-afternoon tomorrow. It will be a long day—terribly needed here is just a couple of hours of sleep.



Next morning (in the mountains of B.C.):

From late last night and through the early morning we have been winding through the fog-shrouded B.C. interior. In the middle of the night in semi-consciousness, I seemed to hear a Rocky Mountain Oracle speak in a number of voices. Among them were mysterious warnings and sobbing farewells: some were female voices, faintly recognizable...

As the fog lifted in early morning we arrived in Kamloops. Before we pulled away, I began talking with the retired railroader or the seat across. He's getting closer to home in New Westminster and growing excited:

"The Fraser River's a mighty one," he said, "near the mouth, nearly a quarter mile wide."

He then described the Fraser River canyon where he once saw: "the river red with salmon like something out of the Bible..." Describing the River closer to the ocean, he spoke of "ships going in from the salt water of the Pacific up the river to where the barnacles fall off..."

It was only 6:30 AM when we started forward out of Kamloops. While the railroader and I were talking, other passengers were awakening, rubbing their eyes in wonder of the B.C. landscape. Even old lady with the throat disk seemed to stare out with a girlish delight.

At the moment, we are heading down along the North Thompson River. The sun is just clearing the top of the rounded mountains in a dazzle of reds and browns and deep black shadows.

In the distance, there now appear snow-covered peaks and steep valley where tiny lakes are blinking like blue jewels in the early sun. Majestic!

At dusk last night, passing through foggy Hinton, Alberta, I thought of how a couple of my boyhood village buddies hitchhiked there last fall. Having no luck finding jobs, within a week they hightailed back east. I imagined seeing them loitering on the main street under a garish streetlight outside the Kentucky Fried outlet where the striped barrel turned on a lopsided axis in mountain air. No, they are homebody Maritimers who would never be at ease in a boom or bust frontier town...

Can I claim to be of different stuff?



South from Kamloops, B.C.:

It's 7:30 AM, and we are passing through a semi-arid landscape of brownish-topped mountains ("It looks carpeted," said the folksinger girl) over the sapphire blue Thompson River. The 'carpet' is composed of clumps of blue-green sagebrush and spiky grasses on the hillside stretching to lusher green on the river's far side. A moment ago, we were swallowed by the blackness of a tunnel and then ejected back into clear blue morning light. Although the train seems to be snaking along a winding canyon, now the sun is slanting horizontally over my left shoulder, shining directly onto the page as I write.

This afternoon we'll be in Vancouver— on the Pacific Ocean. For the first time, the stomach butterflies flutter wildly. I've made it to British Columbia— Canada's California— where roses bloom in January! Who needs orange blossoms and palm trees?

Stretched back here amid the purple upholstery of the Day Nighter, I'm certainly no Tom Joad on

the run from dustbowl Oklahoma; no hobo headed for the Big Rock Candy Mountains. Yet even though I'm not riding the rods west, in some manner I share the spirit of those migrants of the 1930s. In some manner I am 'escaping' the East— seeking a new start.

Fortunately, unlike the lady from Newcastle, New Brunswick (who got off in Edmonton— maybe for another dish-washing stint), I am lucky enough to have a bit of formal education. Not that a few years of college is worth much these days. Hopefully, it'll be enough to boost my prospects a little above those of 'Pete and Joey', those fictional Maritimers, pathetically depicted in Don Shebib's Canadian classic: *'Goin' Down the Road'*. Still, it is unsettling that after so miserably fucking up in Toronto, Pete and Joey were last shown escaping into the sunset toward Vancouver.

At this moment, we're snaking east and the sun is slanting in from the right. Coiling beneath us is the dark blue Thompson River...

Looking down to the swift-flowing water, I think of a boyhood fishing trip with my father when we trekked more than two miles through alder swamp before reaching the tangled bank of a stream called Dead Brook (how often I have dreamed about this?). Being the first to reach there in the season— possibly the first in years— as soon as our fishing lines touched the water they were grabbed by voracious speckled trout. When their pink bellies flopped onto the muddy the bank, the old soldier looked at me, eyes shining. Such a look of bliss was so strangely out of character— never before or afterwards did I see anything remotely like it... (Suddenly, blue green sagebrush on the bank has just *deja vu*ed me to the landscape of Andalucía, where I briefly stayed three years ago).



Now the river is on the left of the train again. We have passed the junction of the Thompson and the Fraser rivers and are snaking down the north side of the canyon.

There is so much to feast the eyes on— yet I keep open the scribbler on my lap. Hundreds of pages could've been written of the flood of impressions of the last 4 hours. I've been trying to do both— keep a moving commentary and watching the riveting scenery as the rails follow the Fraser gorge. Here near Hells' Gate' the river is roiling and boiling before the final push to the sea.

Below us, the silty green rapids are dazzled by white foam while high above the steep walls of the canyon is dark green forest: what looks like stands of pine and fir crowd upwards interspersed with patches of ragged bare rock— up almost to the snow-capped peaks partially clouded.

In this moment, as never before— I apprehend H. D. Thoreau's profound truth: "*in wildness is*

the preservation of the world”... I also flash on Gordon Lightfoot’s ‘Canadian Railway Trilogy’, the eulogy to the thousands of Chinese coolies of the last century who laboured right here in this wild canyon to build this railway. Above the rattle of the train and the roar of the rapids below, can ghostly hammers not be heard echoing?

Yes, I’ve really made it—this *is* the glorious west! Like the thousands before me, I feel ready claim the birthright of every “young man” to journey towards toward the setting sun in the bid to start anew—even in realizing that the exhilaration and terror (suddenly it’s black—another tunnel passed through) in chasing a dream that will outlive each one of us...

Even amid this excitement, there is the annoyance of the folksinger girl now at the front of the car. In the last few minutes, she’s pulled out her guitar again, and without invitation has begun serenading the entire Day Nighter coach. Worse, she is subjecting us to her own compositions. The ears cringe—not so much in her voice (blandly tuneful enough) but in the very fact of knowing that the very scenery that launched my excesses in the last few paragraphs have ‘inspired’ her spontaneous lyrics (“*Come on people now let freedom ring through the seagull ringing Mountains...*” etc. etc.)

In rereading my own ‘free writing’ in the last few paragraphs, can I honestly believe that I have done any more justice to the overwhelming beauty we both beheld?

Of course, the irritation with the folksinger girl goes back to the first half hour she took the seat beside me a year ago in Winnipeg. I admittedly make an awkward impression in the first few minutes of our chatter—proclaiming that although I was not city-bred I dwelt in the province of books. Almost immediately, she rebuked that she was not so much from Manitoba but from the province of ‘feelings’ and had little use for “heads without bodies.” Of course, in the immediate shutdown of further communication there was no opportunity for me to make the point that heads and bodies—even thoughts and feelings—are ultimately one and the same. Yet by not being quicker of wit, two days later, I still am irritated by a silly girl’s presumption that she is more authentically *alive*, than I can ever be... Even without earplugs—why give a shit? For the moment, there is just too much out the window to be missed...



The canyon is widening out: there are no more waterfalls cascading down cliffs and now there are more clumps of deciduous trees on the banks. With the river widening and calming, we are soon to enter in the Fraser Valley. For a few moments I recalled Jack Kerouac’s ‘*Dharma Bums*’ in which he lyricized the big timber country of the Cascade Mountains just across the American border from here...

... Now we are out of the canyon and into the valley. There is cleared land on the banks with fields and barns—even a few grazing horses. The old railroader across informs that we’re

beyond Hope and have only seventy miles to go. The world's greatest ocean should soon be within smelling distance. Like so many voyagers from the edge of the green Atlantic, I come with a weary head, hoping to be dunked (like a used tea bag?) and rinsed clean in the Pacific blue...



In the Fraser Valley:

Arrival time in Vancouver is now just over forty minutes away. We've passed Chilliwack and Masqui and now the Valley is wide and green with a few snowcaps still visible beyond rounded-top mountains. Already, passengers are fidgeting and beginning to pull their luggage down from the overhead racks.

In complete contrast of the wildness of a few hours behind, the landscape is now drab and tame. Suburbia is stretching across a wide and peaceful Fraser as we enter a dreary industrial scape on the edge of New Westminster: pulp mills, sawmills, even a penitentiary (pointed out by the old railroader) along the muddy Fraser.

As we screech slowly into New Westminster, I crane out at the grasses growing along the side of the tracks. Surprisingly, they look no different than those of the summertime ditches back east. Can this really be the wild growth of frost-free soil?

There is a scurrying all around. It is time to make ready to hop off the train. I pat my pocket where with the baggage car ticket for the blue trunk and the bicycle—the sum of my worldly belongings. The butterflies are now madly thrashing. No more delay! Time to close the notebook and tie up my knapsack.

It's all over now—or it's just beginning.



Day #2 in Vancouver (Pacific Hotel, Hastings Street 'Skid Row'):

In spite of the mountain backdrop, Vancouver already seems just another city—no less ugly or impersonal. All the vices are here (certainly in the Hastings St. neighbourhood) and in tremendous force. Over the last forty-eight hours, every species of malady—alcoholism, heroin addiction, prostitution, and madness—has been already witnessed on this block where I have rented a fusty room for a week for \$30. Still, with the old loggers, fishermen and native Indians on the street and in the pubs, there is a unique restless spirit of the west.

At the same time, there is a profound sense of remoteness—being cut off by the barrier of the coastal mountains. Even though maple leaf flies above the post office here, this definitely does not seem part of Canada.

Another impression from the last two days is of a crass hedonism here. On the street (especially on the garish Granville strip) tackily dressed men and woman seem to be hungrily eyeing one another in passing. Even if I did have currency in the meat market, I would avoid it. Not out of any puritanical streak, most certainly, but because of the vulgarity.

Still, I wonder just how things might have been different had a single hook up last winter back in Fredericton. Despite all the personal mythologizing over the last weeks about 'fleeing west'—would I be so restless were it not for hunger of the very flesh?

That being the primary concern, I have certainly come to the wrong city. Unlike in civil service Ottawa (or even Fredericton) I am in now a city where single men, many carrying fat wallets, vastly outnumber single women. No chance in hell in this city could I be approached in a park—as I was along the Rideau Canal—by a cute French-Canadian secretary ready to exchange phone numbers. (Her name was Lucy: what an idiot I was—still pining for the old girlfriend and not following up with a date!)

More telling is the observation that more passersby on the street here are jarred by what starkly juts like an exclamation mark jutting from my stiff right sleeve: a steel hook. Perhaps it was only because the more discrete Easterners only glanced and immediately looked away, whereas the more unself-conscious westerners have a greater tendency to gawk. It seems, at least by first impressions, that there is no choice but to deal with the fact that I'm now seen as just one of many oddities blown across the country, roaming the downtown.

Anyway, there is no time to afford the luxury of self-torment. I have only five days of accommodation left in the Pacific hotel and no funds to renew for another week (Not that I care

to stay even one more day here in the heart of skid row). Meanwhile, the stomach is rebelling against the diet of dried fruit, honey, granola, almonds, peanut butter that has sustained me from Ottawa. The little cash remaining is another bag of ready to eat groceries. Plain and simple, I have exactly five days to find a job.

At the moment, it's time to sleep. After two days I'm almost used to the foul smells (sour beer, cigarettes, hints of vomit) and the hacking and coughing echoing through the night. If I report here tomorrow, hopefully, it will be in a brighter mood and with better news.

(Transcribed from brown spiral notebook, 2017)

fwt