

Riding Toward Everywhere

William T. Vollmann

Ecco

270 pages, 64 pages of photographs, \$21.08 cloth

ISBN: 9780061256752

by

Jeff Bursey

There used to be a time when a good few people—primarily men—thought that travelling in a boxcar was romantic, expedient, and freeing. William Vollmann’s latest non-fiction work is based on his own adventures on the tracks. His journey is as much about finding a spiritual place inside oneself, that has a physical counterpart (if one is very lucky) situated somewhere in the land, as it is about escaping the constricting embrace of “safety nazis” (which he termed the too-cautious and the security-minded in a *Bookforum* interview from the winter of 2007) who, among other things, increasingly control railroads, airport terminals, and lobbies. A libertarian and contrarian, he’s nostalgic--within limits-- about an era, and lifestyle, that largely “are gone, and a Union Pacific spokesman readily allowed: Most of the folks who hop the trains are not out to get anybody. --He also said: We have maybe one fatality per year on the road, one guy falling short in an effort to hop off or that kind of thing.”

Travelling inside a boxcar may be exhilarating, or numbing, and it can be dangerous for several reasons: if there’s freight in what’s called a “lumber gondola” it can move unexpectedly, crushing people; authorities are on the look-out for unwanted passengers, though sometimes the engineers turn a blind eye to their presence; tunnels also pose risks.

An old man once told me about riding a freight in some nebulous northern realm where a tunnel was so long that the hobo on top of the gondola fell off dead... Was that a tall tale? I don’t know. But I can assure you that the tunnel-darkness beyond the window of a subway car or passenger car, however eerie it might be, is quite innocuous [*sic*] compared to the *real* blackness that wrenches breath away.

Menace is provided by the railway authorities, and by shadowy groups with names like FTRA (Freight Train Riders of America), the Wrecking Crew, the Goon Squad, and Pachacos, who may or may not match precisely the various descriptions provided to Vollmann. He hears stories about them, comes across their traces, but not meeting them deprives his tale of a certain kind of tension. But there is tension of another sort when he uses a bucket with a rope attached to board the trains, which is no small feat for a man with a cracked pelvis and unsure balance due to “a series of small strokes.”

Set alongside these perils are the times Vollmann, sometimes accompanied by a friend named Steve, experiences a spiritual reawakening:

In winter, my freight-dreams are very different than in summer. The act of trainhopping in and of itself stimulates the same feelings in me that a schoolboy has in spring when he contemplates summer: an infinite, wild green freedom will soon be within reach! But it is only in summer that that freedom actually grows infinite and

green. It is then that I dream myself into the past or even into other universes. In winter, my freedom remains wild, to be sure, but the cold darkness constricts me; I am just as alive as in summer, and thankful to be so, but my body reminds me of its vulnerability.

His vantage point on a train can take in “dolphins leaping beneath the moon,” followed by a “single white diagonal of wave-crest... motionless across the ocean. Then the air brightened, and all the other waves burst into view with their related motions.”

The “anywhere” of the title is one universe Vollmann imagines, and for him it can also be Everywhere. Geographically, it can exist in golden farmland; temporally, it can be in the future or the past; and Vollmann tracks its textual locations in the writings of hobos (published and unpublished), Thoreau, Twain, Jack London, Hemingway, Kerouac, and the Japanese poet Cold Mountain, “named after the wild place he inhabited.” Cold Mountain’s song 16, as translated by Vollmann, reads:

People ask the way to Cold Mountain.
Roads fall short of Cold Mountain.
Ice stays all summer;
fog dims the dawn sun.
How did someone like me get here?
Our minds are different.
Otherwise you could get here, too.

Cold Mountain performs multiple functions: it’s an existential problem, a romantic quest, a mythical place lying just over the next hill, and a narrative hook. We can all recognize what Vollmann means--what the poet Cold Mountain means--and what he’s looking for.

By hopping trains--‘catching out’--to escape the present world and its confines, Vollmann looks for Everywhere with an open and poetic spirit. At times this contrasts with the pragmatic nature of his main companion. Admiring the shadow of the train on gravel coloured “like kernels of Indian corn,” Vollmann wonders “whether this might be the place where Fate meant me to disembark and commence my more perfect life; meanwhile, Steve worried because the righthand wall of the boxcar was warm, implying that we must be going north instead of west--and he was right; we’d arrived in Idaho!”

Along the way, the majority of people Vollmann meets warm up to him, even if he is, in their terms, a “citizen.” Life on the road has left them suspicious--though some must have started out that way--but by now they’re bored, lonely, crazed, tired, or content within limits, and he is an audience.

Real life stories can live alongside the lushness of the land and the feelings it causes to arise, but romance is not encouraged. “How many places are there where one human being pushed another human being out of a boxcar, where half a dozen men raped a woman, where a drunk froze to death or a daredevil jumped off incorrectly?” This ugly side of illegal train travel appears regularly. “Do I truly consider [Emmanuel] my brother? Would I leave my backpack with him? Would I trust him to sleep beside me in a boxcar and not go for my throat with his new sharp knife?”

The freedom of not living by the law is brought into sharp relief whenever Vollmann contemplates how civil liberties in the US have been whittled away under George W. Bush, “the

torturer President". He leaves an airport "sick and angry" after the security officer has fiercely controlled his father's goodbye wave. "Year by year, those good Germans march deeper into my life," states Vollmann a few pages in. Riding the rails symbolizes, along with everything else, the right--a right under peril, in his eyes--to move without constraint, in an environment that has guidelines and rules but no laws, that involves risk, that has minimal social contact and is almost totally unconnected to systems (save for train schedules) but connected, if one is fortunate and if one perseveres, to a path that will lead to Cold Mountain.

"The longer I live, the closer I get" to Everywhere, Vollmann says near the close of the text (*Riding Toward Everywhere* ends with evocative black-and-white photographs), and the ambiguity of that remark allows for interpretations that Everywhere might be a mystical state, or a euphemism for the grave. "Things come to an end when there is no longer any hope or faith, when the life force surrenders to the death instinct," Henry Miller wrote in the 1940 edition of *The World of Sex*. Overcoming health concerns, and despite "safety nazis," Vollmann continues his sojourns outward as well as inward, and this dual journey may be what reinvigorates his life instinct.

Neither the ecstatic openness of Kerouac's road voyagers, nor the dogged cat-and-mouse triumphs of London's freight-jumpers, and certainly not the canny navigations of Twain's riverboat youth define me. I go my own bumbling way, alone or in company, beset by lapses in my bravery, energy and charity, knowing not precisely where to go until I am there.

Though our "minds are different," we can travel with him part of the way, at least.

[end]