

Bob Strandquist / DREAMING IS A RELATIVE THING

A man is standing between the rails, somewhere on a vast dry plain, north of forty-nine, just east of Love. He is gauging the temperature of the day by counting ties. Yesterday he counted to sixty-three. Today the tracks lose their solidity, become fluid looking in the heat waves, at fifty. It's hotter today.

Last night he dreamed. He doesn't remember any of the dream's details, but something in it dealt him an overwhelming desire to masturbate, to stand naked in the dust of the yard, to fling his grain into the fine powder, and then to be ashamed. He needs to feel shame. From behind the screen door he watches the dust rooster tail of a red car passing.

He lays a slice of bologna between two sheets of white bread. The bread is stale. The meat by-product is sweating and a darker brown around the edges. He fills a glass tumbler with water from the plastic jug he keeps on the floor by the door. For some reason he believes it's the coolest place in the cabin. The refrigerator hasn't worked in months. There is no cool place, anywhere. He eats his lunch under the big white umbrella in the front yard. The shaft of the umbrella goes through a hole in the center of a white tin table. The chair is flimsy as well.

It's true what they say, he thinks, about a blank sheet of paper being death. His pen won't go near it. His thoughts make tracks in his mind like rain on a river, impermanent and uncountable. The river, his river, the Fraser river, fifteen hundred miles to the west, flows underground now through everything he thinks. Everything he constructs in his mind he builds on soggy ground. He should write about it, the river, the past, bring it to the surface. But he doesn't want to miss that river. He will not regret selling the houseboat. He will not populate his expatriotism with those hateful amateurs he left there. He forces the pen to the blank page and writes: *The children here have*

dry faces, the dogs lick themselves because they can, the men... lost, without their precious cold war... He crumples it up and tosses it onto the driveway. There is no wind in this place, and no rain; your mediocrity stays where you drop it, for months, perhaps years, maybe forever.

At midnight the eastbound train is hastening past, shaking the earth, on towards something important, but nothing is, so it's just on. He is sitting as close to it as he dares. He is inches from it. He needs to feel the wind it makes. He needs to feel the fear. His hair ruffles in the giant's little breeze. His face cools as sweat begins to dry. Fear provides him a measure of peace.

He stands in the driveway, his toes in the silky dust. The ball of paper he threw there centuries ago hasn't moved. The sun is directly overhead. He is surrounded by cricket sounds. It's hard to say for sure how many crickets there are, ten, twenty. Take a step in any direction and they stop. He is incapable of the subtlety of movement required to get closer. He has never seen a cricket. He doesn't know if they are black or white, or if they have any features at all besides their monotonous countdown.

Doug needs to talk to someone. To begin to like this place he needs to tell someone how much he hates it. An expression of anger would be refreshing. To share an afternoon like bread would be incredible. He walks down the driveway and crosses the tracks. He takes the silky road that winds up the hill. There is a man who sits in the doorway of a small farm house on the hill. He sits there most days. He wears a baseball cap. He seems to be watching, though is too far away to be accused of invasion. But he is gone when Doug gets there. Feeling abandoned, embarrassed, he tramps the river of dust back down the hill.

The eastbound train goes by at midnight, the west at five, just before dawn. Between trains he is lying on the tracks staring at the sky. The stars remind him of eternity. Eternity is cold. The air is hot, still; even in the middle of the night it's unbearable. With his hands he absorbs coolness from the steel rail. He gets on his knees and puts his cheeks on it, his forehead. He lies on his back, lifts his long hair out of the way and puts the back of his neck on the rail. For the first time in months he doesn't regret being here, or regret spending the money from the sale of his houseboat to pay rent on this fate. The next train

is hours away.

He falls asleep.

They are installing an air raid siren on the bank above the grounds of Hume Elementary School. It's a big sky blue trumpet with a motor. They are going to test it today. Everyone is waiting. The teachers stand together near the entrance with arms crossed, while the kids sit on the bank to wait. They said they were going to test it yesterday too. They haven't gotten it working yet. Everyone is anxious. They show a film about what to do in case of an air raid. It shows illustrations of people living in a basement. They have blankets and food and other supplies. They are calm. They have camping faces. This is an adventure. It also shows a boy and a girl who have dug an impression in the earth. They are smiling. They have placed branches over the impression, a protective dome. The illustration shows little dots like black snow. The dots are not getting past the leaves on the branches. The boy and girl are safe.

The sun is on his face like a starved rat. The rails are hot as fever. He leaps up in a panic, as though the train is almost on him. It's not. There is only cooked silence. That there was no train this morning, an amazing stroke of luck, sends a thrill through him. He ejaculates. But maybe there was, he thinks. Maybe he's already dead. Maybe death is a relative thing. He touches the sticky wetness in his pants. He smells it. Was there a derailment, a stubborn animal on the tracks? What? He tastes it. His heart is wet with shame. It helps him feel normal, enough that he is able to write a little:

He is racing home on his bike. He takes the alley. It's a short cut. Barely slowing at cross streets, block after block, the five minutes it takes him to get there seems a life time. He drops his bike against the fence in the alley and runs into the house. His mother is crying. Mum, guess what! The president was assassinated. He says this with rapture. He wants to be the first to tell her the news. Assassinated is an amazing new word he learned today. Mum, the president was assassinated. That means killed. The TV is on. She already knows. Walter Cronkite has beat him to it. His disappointment is toxic; it makes him dizzy. He goes looking for his little sister. Maybe he can make her understand. But she smiles the wrong smile.

At the side of the cabin the porch light illuminates the landlord's garden. Doug pisses into the dust. He looks over the large green leaves

of the rhubarb, and the pumpkins that are bigger than a man's head. He decides to get drunk tonight. He opens a warm beer and puts the cap in his pocket. He drinks slowly. He revises what he's written. By eleven o'clock he's had ten beers and has revised his paragraph to death. When he reads it again he hates what it sounds like. He crumples it up and pulls out a new sheet. He will start again. He opens another beer and forces himself to drink it down.

At midnight the train arrives. It comes from the east out of nowhere and leaves to the west going nowhere. It is only briefly material, while it's before him, in his senses. The caboose rushes hopelessly to catch the engine and falls off the world into darkness. The sound of its rushing remains for a while afterwards, like the echo of a falling man, the memory of an echo, the memory of a memory.

He stumbles into the garden and lifts a large pumpkin and twists until the stem breaks. It's larger than his head, as deep as his chest. He takes another gulp of beer and closes his eyes to let the dizziness pass. The man with the baseball cap is sitting in his doorway, lit from behind, a silhouette. Doug takes his beer and the pumpkin to the tin table in the yard. Enveloped by darkness, the man can't observe him. He closes his eyes to stop the dizziness. He carries the pumpkin to the tracks and places it on a tie between the rails. He takes the bottle cap from his pocket and puts it on the rail.

He wakes up on the ground, entangled in the folding chair, under the sun umbrella. Its shadow has just passed off his face; the direct sun awakens him like a fire alarm. He staggers into the cabin, takes a handful of Tylenol, and drinks three glasses of water. He makes a cup of coffee and wishes he had a cigarette. He fixes himself some soup and makes a sandwich. Sitting on the porch he prepares to eat. He rolls his shirt sleeves past his elbows. He combs his hair running his fingers through it. He contemplates the silence at the center of his suffering. He can hear it if he moves slowly enough. He remembers last night, and looks to the tracks where he placed the pumpkin. He finds the bottle cap in the gravel, flat as a coin. The pumpkin is gone.

A car rolls in from the west. It's the old red car that goes back and forth every weekday. The woman driving has long brown hair. She seems young. She is extraordinary. All women are extraordinary when their hair is long, he thinks. She glances at him, but pushes the car on

past and up the hill. It winds up the river of dust and doesn't slow down for blind corners and potholes, higher and higher until it slips like a drop of blood over the wavering top. The man with the baseball cap has just lit up a cigarette. There is a pumpkin on the steps beside him.

At five minutes to midnight Doug is placing a fresh pumpkin between the rails. At midnight he is sitting beside the tracks. At three minutes after midnight he senses the train. He tastes it before he hears it. Something about his teeth, the film on his teeth, some minute chemical change that alerts him. Then his hearing picks it up. It's alarming how quickly it comes into being once that sense is working on it. The slim earthquake surges past and provides an unsatisfactory breeze. He brings the pumpkin into the light and examines it. It is not damaged, or even scored. At four in the morning he takes a fresh beer with him to the tracks. He kisses each rail then lays his body between them. His heart is pounding. He thinks about the long-haired woman. He stares at the stars. He is a pool of adrenaline reflecting the stars. He tastes the train, explores it with his tongue. He hears it. He is paralyzed with magnificent fear. He is swallowed by sound, all the sound in the universe, so much sound that when he screams he becomes air. He is rocked and held by the mother. He is devoured by her and pushed to the center, and then born out again, left on the tracks like a babe in a basket. He lies without moving until dawn breaks. He is full. He has the train inside him. It's just big enough to fill that empty room in him. He puts his hands inside his pants and gets sticky wetness on his fingers. He puts them in his mouth.

It's a two mile hike into Love along the tracks, across the artless prairie, a more direct route than the highway, with no shade, and no turns. It's hot, a fifty tie day. When he gets there, he enters the Laundromat and drops his pack sack on one of the four washing machines. He buys a Coke Classic from the machine against the wall. He drinks it down without stopping to breathe. He exhales hard to cool the burning sensation. He dumps the contents of his pack into one of the machines. He adds detergent and inserts four quarters. He goes to the bar and picks up two cases of beer, then into the air-conditioned grocery store that sells liquor and asks for a bottle of Black Label rye. He also gets two dozen wieners, some canned vegeta-

bles, canned fish, a gallon of purified water, a handful of chocolate bars, a dozen oranges and some ground coffee. He gives in to an impulse to buy cigarettes. He smokes one on the steps of the Laundromat waiting for the rinse cycle to be finished. The dryer isn't working so he puts the wet laundry into his pack sack, puts as many groceries into it as will fit, ties the water to the pack with rope. He puts the rest of the stuff in pockets and starts back down the tracks, a case of beer tugging at each arm like dull children. When he gets back to the cabin he drops everything onto the kitchen floor. He turns the cold water in the shower on and soaks himself with his clothes on. He didn't have time to take them off; he was about to pass out from the heat. He hangs the wet laundry up on whatever will hold a piece: the porch railing, the door knob, deserted nails on outside walls. He curses not talking to the landlord about the broken refrigerator. The chocolate bars are liquid. The beer is hot. The clothes on his body are beginning to dry. He soaks himself again, and goes outside to feel himself evaporate.

He lights a cigarette. He sits in the shade at the side of the cabin. He stares without blinking at some obscure point deep inside him. Half the cigarette burns down before he takes another drag. An S in the dust moves towards him. He puts his foot on its tail and pinches it behind the neck with his thumb and fore-finger. He remembers tying a garter snake to fishing line and a rock and tossing it into Rose Valley Reservoir. Just below the surface of the water it formed and reformed the letter S. It carried on as if movement was important and distance not necessary. He and his friends wanted to know how long it would take to drown one. But after an hour the snake had not drowned. They had tossed it out of reach, and had to leave it to its fate. He still doesn't know how long it takes to drown a snake. He releases the one he's caught. His fingers smell like snake. Even after washing he can still smell it.

He dreams of snakes. He ties a red helium balloon with fishing line to a large garter snake. He releases it. He can see it out there, the balloon, on the hillside, or above the fields. At other times it doesn't move for days and he thinks the snake must be dead, but it then appears the next day someplace else, on the other side of the tracks, or behind the cabin. He ties a blue helium balloon to a king snake

and sets it free. The balloon moves steadily towards the horizon and eventually disappears. He ties a yellow one to a small rattler. It rises in the air. It makes the same endless S. It floats up higher than the cabin, higher than the hill. Doug dreams that it will eat birds, and cherries from the tops of trees, that when the rattler grows larger it will begin to come down, that it will be a snake that understands more than other snakes, and that it will come back to kill him for it.

From the outside, the windows of the hospital appear murky, liquid; ancient faces appear to float in them. Doug's heart feels bloated, sickened, on the verge of emotion, death. He cannot stand out here in this imbecile heat any longer. He sits on the brown lawn in the red brick shade and smokes. A yellow balloon floats above the town's water tower. He thinks about the cool, disinfected air inside the building. He's afraid of the sick and dying. He's more afraid of the living. His dad is in there, waiting for something.

A pumpkin in a wheel chair rolls down the hall. A potato face stares disdainfully. Through open doors he smells rotting matter, compost. Sound worms bore holes through emptiness — moaning, timers, phones. TV sets panic like mental patients in straight jackets, an endless cycle of resignation and panic, over and over until the end of time. Loneliness cranes at opened doors. A pink hippopotamus is cranked into the air on a stainless steel contraption that will lower her into a bath. She smiles like a whore at Doug. A faceless nurse turns the crank.

His dad's back is to the opened door; he is watching TV. He pulls the hearing-aid ear-piece out of his ear and spins a toothpick in it. He is scratching a deep itch. The ear piece hangs too close to the hearing-aid pickup creating a high-pitched feedback that his dad can't hear. He coughs loudly, a deliberate explosion of air, and again, and again. He is scratching an itch beyond the reach of the toothpick. Doug has seen this ritual a thousand times. The old man's skin is shiny with sweat and oil. His short-sleeved shirt hangs loosely on his frail body. Doug shudders at the image of what's underneath: bones, a log-jam of bones. And then he moves, hoisting himself on the stainless steel floor to ceiling pole beside his chair. He roots around the top drawer of his dresser and comes out with a bag of cookies and collapses back into his TV program. The desire to get drunk explodes in Doug's chest.

At the grocery store he buys a case of beer. He also buys a carton of cigarettes. He can't afford this. Before he left New Westminster he put his few remaining possessions in a storage room. The thirty dollars a month rent seemed like nothing to him then. He has already received one letter from the storage company demanding payment of overdue rent. They will turn his stuff over to the auctioneers eventually, he knows. His precious stuff: his masturbation machines, his women's underwear, his pornography. His depravity will be sectioned and sold off to the highest bidder. He will be exposed for what he really is. He can never return.

He remembers driving around New Westminster with his dad. It's Sunday. Later in the evening they will have a drink together. They have spend Sundays this way for the past three months, ever since Mum died. Doug is getting up the nerve to call his dad by name. Stanley. But when he puts the word in his mouth he can't move his jaw. The word seems abusive, vaguely sexual. He never gets a chance to say it. His dad becomes distant again. He turns off the life that was beginning to trickle between them. He announces his intention to move back to Love to take care of his own mother who has just entered the hospital. The next day he's gone. Doug's Mum was born in Love. His Dad married her in Love, and is going back to Love because he wants to be near the grave. He cares about his own mother about as much as he cares about Doug. They talk on the phone every other month for three years. They have a good telephone relationship. They seem close. Then his dad makes a suggestion, that Doug move out to Love too. He doesn't know why. He doesn't care. This is what he craves: to have his dad command him, and for him to obey. After a thirty-six hour bus ride, he stands in the door of his dad's hospital room, holding his suitcase, and his spent one-way life. There is a dispirited sounding *Well... so you came...* The voice comes from an old man of ninety, devastated by Parkinson's disease, not one of sixty as he's supposed to be.

He dumps the case of beer and cigarettes onto the kitchen counter. He strips and stands in the shower. The water is not cold enough. Not nearly. He throws on some pants and a shirt. He pours a glass of whiskey, grabs a pen and some paper, and sits out under the sun umbrella in the yard. He stares at nothing, his mind blank. He is alone

on a vast, empty sheet of paper. When he looks up, there is a child out of nowhere at the foot of the driveway. She is curious. She picks up a handful of dust and throws it towards him. A plume hovers around her for a moment. The child's name is called from far away. She runs across the road, and disappears in the sea of grain. A truck is parked at the far end of the field. He takes a drink of whiskey and opens a beer. He writes:

He hates his homesickness. He surrenders to it like a despised lover. He remembers his river. Giant ships filled with silence and space moved cautiously as hours past his place. And stepping onto his dock he could listen to the river licking to the sea. Recently, two bridges were built, one up river, and one down river, both far enough away not to intrude, but close enough so he could check on their daily progress. He had a small motor boat he would slip over to the market in, to have cappuccino afternoons, and write in his journal. He had his university degrees, all three of them. He had a houseboat, on an amazing river. He had it all. And it vanishes like a daydream in a slammed door.

He looks up from his writing. It's dusk. He smokes a cigarette.

At five minutes to midnight he walks down to the tracks. He takes his shirt off and lays it carefully beside the tracks. He takes his pants off and puts them with his shirt. He settles his body on the rail, lengthwise. He absorbs the coolness of the steel with his stomach, his thighs, his arms, his legs. He can taste the midnight express. He is rubbing his erection on the cool rail. Maybe he's dreaming. Maybe dreaming is a relative thing. When he reaches orgasm he rolls onto the ties between the rails as the freight shrieks over him.

When the train's last echoes are absorbed by silence, he drifts into sleep and dreams of walking. He is headed east away from the setting sun. His head is bent; he is deep in thought. He hears boots crunching over gravel. A huge rattlesnake appears in front of him at eye level. He sees it suspended from a yellow balloon. It opens its mouth and begins to swallow him. He wakes. He's in the belly of the snake. He hears an eerie laughter, gluttonous, sexed. He feels bones break. He is being killed with a baseball bat. He screams. He has no air. He feels wetness. He is pissing himself. He is bleeding. He is dreaming again. He is eaten.

He regains consciousness in a shroud. It consists of blankets draped over him, of plaster that encases portions of his body, both

arms and one leg, of bandages that cover most of his head except for the tiny tunnel his is able to peer from, and of drugs, large doses of something marvelous. He feels angelic. The universe is a place he explores with his tongue, with his fingertips, with his penis. A doctor's face examines him. *And then God created doctors in his own image.* Now another face is peering into the cave where Doug dwells. This face is sarcastic, angry. This face was created in the image of cactus and stone. He recognizes the face. It recognizes him. There is a tear in its eye. It makes Doug feel warm and happy. He feels his heart beating, his breathing calm, his mind focused. He is real. He has been searching for his true self all his life. Now he has it. His father is shedding a tear for him.

The nurse has long brown hair that won't be contained in the nurses' cap. She drives a dusty red car. She pushes his wheelchair through the glass doors and out into the garden. The garden consists of autumn, of clean smelling air, except when a passing car dusts it, then it smells of traveling, of unfamiliar places. There are white plastic chairs, a table, a small brown lawn. There is a row of yellow flowers without a name. Doug notices the nurse's woman smell. He doesn't know if he can move his jaw. *Cigarettes*, he says to her. *He can talk*, she replies. She lights one and holds it to his lips. He smokes to kiss her fingers. He loves those cold hands. He loves that neutral face that neither blames nor praises. She tells him a story about Jesus Christ. He knows she wants him to be impressed. He imitates listening.

The cactus-and-stone man scurries along the hall like a giant ancient cockroach. He hasn't stopped in for a few days. They say Doug is improving. He tries different strategies to stay sick — he doesn't eat, he complains to the doctor about terrible pains in new places. He fills his bed with his own excrement. Cactus-and-stone man asks the doctor about Doug's latest infirmity; but he won't shed another tear. No matter what Doug does to appear sick, his cheeks take on a rosy glow, his eyes get clearer, and his fever flutters like a butterfly around normal. Cactus-and-stone stops coming by altogether.

Dougy is walking slowly home from school. It's Friday. His dad gets home today from a business trip. His dad usually spends the week on the road. He sells things to miners: front-end loaders, conveyers. He knows the remotest corners of the province. Dougy expects to see the

Plymouth in the driveway. He expects to feel his heart sink when he sees it. He cuts through a neighbor's garden. He stops under the maple tree in the back yard, studies the windows, expects to see his dad's face floating in one of them, but doesn't. He scurries across the lawn and bobs up the steps at the side of the garage. The car isn't there. Either his dad is late or he's had to stay on the road over the weekend. This happens some times. Dougy grins into the house, saunters down the hall, picks his nose and flicks snot against the bathroom door. In the kitchen he asks Mom where Dad is. She tells him he's not coming home until next weekend. She is smiling to herself. She is also relieved. She has been baking bread. The kitchen smells wonderful. She has saved some of the risen dough. She cuts it into strips and fries it in oil. She calls them dough-gods. When they're brown and crisp she scoops them out and puts one on Dougy's plate. He smears it with jam and pours a glass of milk. She puts one on her plate and sits across from him. *What could be better*, he is thinking, as he smiles at her, *dough-gods and you*. It's going to be a good night. They always have popcorn and cherry cola and watch *Mitch Miller And His Gang* on TV Friday nights when Dad's not home.

Afterwards Mum tucks him in. She puts her palm on his forehead, as she does when he has a fever, then puts her lips on his forehead. She turns the light out as she goes up the stairs. The furnace motor kicks in and lulls him. He is edging sleep when the motor shuts off, and he becomes aware of a sound outside, far away. It's a falling sound, a whistle, a descending whistle. He is startled awake. He knows what it is. He's seen enough films. He must have seen a hundred A bombs fall. The descending call gets louder, nearer. Fear mushrooms like an erection inside him. There is no place to hide. So this is what it's like, he has time to think. Then a truck roars by on the highway outside. It was a truck. It was the wind whistling through something on a truck, a mirror tilted just so, a hole in a fender. Fear stays in him for a long time afterwards, as though it forced an opening, and lived there; and when it's gone he misses it, his heart rate slowing, returning to not quite innocent.