

William Goede / COW ON THE TRACKS

Dedicated to the memory of Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961)

Rising skies and clusters of oak trees, rolling seas of timothy and alfalfa, choirs of sparrow in silver willows beside the woodshed, and across the creek and up through goldenrod meadows, edged in daisies and sassafras lying up against the sun, the drumlin hills. I lifted the window and squared it with a ruler and watched my mother and my sister kneeling together in the strawberry patch, a car honking to them on its slow roll toward town.

I had to get out of the house.

I didn't know where I was going but I was going anyway . . . out and out, across the porch and past the iron pump and down the steps and through the backyard and into the barn empty now and morning cool and buzzing with cowflies and then out into the pasture and up the cattle lane and when at last I recovered my footing, I had reached the crown of the knoll of the South Forty, and at my feet, carpets of wheat and corn and timothy, and I knew I had to keep on running till I reached wherever I was going and then maybe think about whether that was where I really wanted to go or maybe just take a good rest and get a bearing on Chicago and New York and Paris, the Golden Crescent, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, the Silk Road, the Great Wall of China. . . .

All the world stood before me like an open book. I studied the rolling green horizon, the unscrolling of the fields and hills, like ocean waves rolling away in all directions. There was no end to it, it all went round and round and there was no end to it.

Then I saw smoke and heard a steam engine chuffing, little yellow flags flicking, the wheels clanking down through The Cut, the whistle and the clatter and screech of one hundred twenty-two

yellow and green freight cars, the smoke funnel folding up into itself. Yes, it was fitting: there was always a train, always a singer. I was Mickey Rooney, I was Donald O'Connor, I was Fred Astaire. I danced down the cow lane toward the tracks hearing the orchestra of the world, and the words sprang to my lips even before I knew them: *"It's a grand night for singing, the moon is riding high and somewhere a bird who is bound he'll be heard is throwing his heart at the sky . . ."*

Then I saw a huddled, round black and white cow, it was blasted up and down the track, all scooped out, red guts flung across the grey stones. I threw open the gate and ran down to the tracks. The legs were gone, the head splayed, the tongue flaring. One eye watched me, terrified.

Just a heifer. A yearling. I knew her. She used to dance around and around her mother. Refused to act her age. With those legs and that dance, I had named her "Betty Grable." Her dancing days were over. I had to get her off the tracks now before another freight came slicing through. I looked up at the fence and saw one of the posts down — a hole through which Betty had climbed.

Suddenly there came a swishing sound somewhere behind me.

I turned and saw a dark and ragged man, his long arms held out to balance. He skated and swished along an iron rail, his legs long and skinny, his moccasins swishing. Something was wrong with him. The nose was all mashed down, a long scar up the side of his face, one eye all sunk in. When he came closer, he smelt like corn silage left too long in the silo.

"That your cow?" he said. He giggled and leaned over and looked down at me as if he were high up in the air. He pinched his nose with two fingers and hopped down onto the cinders, wobbled like a wind-up toy and waddled like a duck and hunched down beside me and stared at the dead cow.

"You live round here, boy?"

I looked up across the fields. "Over there."

He stood up and cupped a hand over his eyes and studied the horizon. "Don't see nothin'."

"You can't see it from here."

"How far off?"

I hunched my shoulders. "Don't know . . . half a mile."

"Your folks to home?"

"My mom is."

He sat on the rail and held his head in his hands as if he discovered it heavy. "You got a name, boy? Well . . . what is it?"

"Junior."

"C'mon over here and sit down, Junior," he said. I got up and went and sat beside him on a rail, drying my tears on my sleeve. He threw an arm around my neck and pulled me in his chest. "Now looky here, it's just a . . . just a cow. It ain't like it's a person or nothin'." He placed one of his hands on my arm and looked up across the field to where the herd of cows moved across the pasture. "I mean you got lots more."

I looked up at the cows and tried to smile.

"Let me ask you something, Junior."

"What?"

"I wanna ask you somethin'."

"What?"

"What I wanna ask you is if that thing you got down there between your legs . . ." He placed a hand on my leg. "Why I bet you got one real big one down there somewheres."

"One what?" I knew what he was talking about, but I didn't want to let him know it.

"You know."

"No I don't."

"Boys yo' age know."

"Know what?"

"Why don't you . . . well, jes' haul it on out here. Show me how big it is? Bet it's twice't as big as the one I got." He was studying me with that one eye which flicked back and forth between my face and my lap. "See, lookee here . . . now . . . now here's mine," he said, pulling his hands off me and unbuttoning his fly and dredging his penis out of his pants. "Now, what'd'ya think of that? Look at it!"

"Mr. Daniels!"

At that, he jumped up and I jumped up and he turned and I turned. We both saw him. Another man. A black man. Me, I'd never

seen a black man before. Well, I mean, sure I'd seem them in the movies. But they sure didn't look like this one. This one was huge and had a round face fringed with short white whiskers and wore gold-rimmed glasses that glistened and flashed in the sun. He stopped and stared down at me as if maybe he had never seen a white boy before either.

"Mr. Daniels," he said again, without taking his eyes from me, "you put that thing right back in your pants before I chop it off! And you, boy, you git yo' little lilywhite ass over here beside me! C'mon, step it out real quick now! That's right, Mr. Daniels, you keep tucking it away and don't you take it out no more."

I stood and looked at both of them and didn't know which one scared me more. I took a few steps toward the black man figuring which way to run in case the two of them decided to come after me at the same time.

"Mr. Daniels, you vamoos off like that," he barked out, his eyes still burning into me, "you don't say nothin 'bout leavin' me to clean up the campsite."

"That sonsabitchin' brakeman —"

"Forget that sonsabitchin' brakeman," he said. "Over here, boy," he said, watching Mr. Daniels. But I stayed put, so he came over to me. I was more scared of him now because of that blackness. But then he smiled and stuck out a hand. It was all pink on the inside. He laid it across my shoulder. It was warm and soft and strong. Then he looked down at the dead cow, whistled to himself, and took off his stained grey felt hat. "That yo' cow?" I nodded. "That through freight, I heard him bellerin' away crazy, 'n' I figured somethin's wrong somewheres, and, 'course, Mr. Daniels here, he vamoos off down the track without tellin' me where he goin'."

"That boy lives over there . . . on a farm," said Mr. Daniels. "His mamma the only one to home right now."

"You ain't studyin' no mommas neither." He looked up at the fence along the track. "What say *you* jes' go up there and fix it where the cow broke through? This boy don't want no more dead cows today." Mr. Daniels spit on the ground and stared menacingly at me. "You find you a rock and then you go up there and upright that post and pound them wires back into it."

Mr. Daniels leaned over and picked up a rock and cradled it in his hands thinking maybe he should throw it at me, but he changed his mind I guess and stumbled up through the high grass muttering to himself.

"Now, you listen real close to me, boy," the black man said, lowering his voice and leaning down to me, "and do what I tell you to do if you know what's good for you. Don't you blabber to Mr. Daniels nothin' more 'bout your mamma. Soon's that post's up, we gone out of here."

I looked over up at Mr. Daniels pounding away at the fence post. "What's wrong with him anyways?"

"The champ?" he said and thought for a moment before laughing to himself. "Well, maybe he don't look much like no champ now. Poor bastard. He took too many head hammers, Mr. Daniels did. You see, one time he was the lightweight champ, it was a long time ago now, won all his fights. But then, well, Trunky . . . that was his manager, ol' Trunky he run off with Mrs. Daniels. The two of them took all his money out of the bank. Mr. Daniels found out about it an' went out and got hisse'f a gun and went lookin' for 'em. Found 'em, too, but he didn' shoot 'em . . . jes' beat 'em silly with the gun and then took off, an' then the cops, when they found him, they put him away. San Fernando. That's where I met him. We was cell mates. He's a real good man, Mr. Daniels. But something's gone haywire inside him now. You got to watch 'im ever' minute."

Mr. Daniels came back with the rock gripped tight in his hands.

"That fence back up right now, Mr. Daniels?"

The white man scowled now, his eye fixed on me.

"Now . . . why don't you jes' hand me that stone?"

He stood there, the eye snapping, tensing the stone in his hands.

"The stone, Mr. Daniels. Hand me the stone."

The black man went and reached down and pried the stone out of Mr. Daniels' hands. The raggedy man began to snifle and the tears rolled down his cheeks. The black man came back to me and touched me on the shoulder, smiled, winked, and tilted his head back toward the cow lane. I knew what he meant. I looked over at Mr. Daniels, who was busy rocking back and forth on his heels, his good eye rolling, his fists all balled up and crying like a baby. I looked

once more at the black and white and red mound of cow and turned heel.

I hadn't got more than ten steps when I heard the shouting.

"Mr. Daniels! Mr. Daniels!"

I turned and saw him coming for me.

"Run, boy!" shouted the black man. "Run hard!"

I turned and ran hard but he closed on me and before I could reach the fence, he was all over me, and the two of us fell to the ground, him on top of me, and I smelled his foul breath and felt his hands running all over me, like he was trying to pry me apart. Then I looked up and saw the black man lean down over us and reach down and do something to the prize-fighter's neck. Mr. Daniel's eyes slammed shut, he flinched, sprang up in the air like a spring inside him had sprung, and the man fell off to one side. I sat up. Mr. Daniels lay beside me. He looked dead to me.

I said, "You killed him!"

"Shut up, boy!" He pulled me to my feet. "Now you run home as fast as those pins can run you home and don' you say not one word 'bout all this when you get there, you unnerstand? Not one fuckin' word! You say one word about all this and I come and git you! Maybe not tonight. Maybe not tomorrow night! But when I come, I like to come in the middle of a dark and rainy night when nobody's home with you. An' then I don' show no mercy neither!" He shook me a couple times and fixed his big eyes on me and growled, "Don't you even try an' risk it, you hear?"

"Yessir."

"Not one word!"

"Yessir."

He smiled suddenly and rubbed some dirt off my cheek. "Now, git!" I stared at him. "Git out of here before Mr. Daniels come to!"

I could scarcely get my legs moving fast enough.

He shouted after me: "And don' stop till you all the way home!"

My mother was standing at the sink when I walked straight past her and into my bedroom, and then she came and stood in the doorway and looked in at me.

She said, "Where you been?"

"Been?"

"You weren't here when we came in from the garden."

"No?"

She did something strange with her eyebrows. "You look like you seen a ghost."

I fought away the tears. "Up there . . . on the tracks."

"A ghost!"

"A cow. Fence is down . . . the train . . ."

She stared at me for a while and dropped her voice. "She was hit by the train?" I broke down and threw myself onto my bed, and she turned to go. "Well, I better go up there . . ."

"No!" I jumped up and ran to her. "No, leave her!"

"Someone's got to fix that fence."

"It's fixed. I . . . I fixed it."

"What about the cow? You better tell your father when he gets home. He'll have to go clean off the tracks." She came across the room and sat on the edge of the bed. "Which one was it?"

"I don't know!" I said, walking to the window and putting my back to her. "Just . . . a cow."

She came and stood behind me. She touched me on the shoulder and then walked out of the room, closing the door behind her. I looked out the window. The sky was overcast, the wind crawling along the ground on all fours. Cold. It was going to rain. You couldn't even see the hills now. The world was a wall. It didn't look like there was any way out.

