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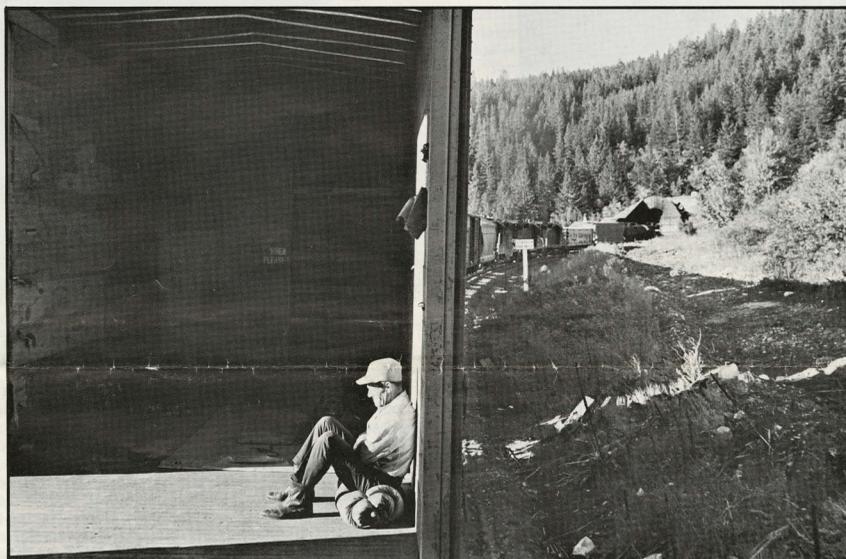
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RIDING TO WENATCHEE

Selections From *Work in Process*
by Doug Harper



Over Mountains

The train finally left Laurel, Montana and crawled slowly toward Helena. It was a beautiful ride, with half of the sky laced in the purple and pink of a prairie sunset, and the beauty of the land and the slow, gentle ride affected us both. The tramp stood by me and pointed out camps and jungles along the way, usually along streams or under bridges. He said he'd stayed in them all, one time or another over the past twenty-five years, and the trout fishing, when he could rig a line, had rarely disappointed him. The signs of hobo habitation would have passed by unnoticed; a bit of refuse around an old fire, or perhaps just grass matted down where it had regularly been slept on. Back behind a bridge was a shack, made from tarpaper and crates, and as we passed an old 'bo emerged and waved a greeting. The tramp said he'd stayed in that very shack, now probably different tarpaper, but still the same shack, seven years before, while he waited for a job on a ranch.

The tramp's manner softened considerably as he told stories over the noise of the train. I kept silent for the most part, and tried not to ask foolish questions while trying to decide whether or not I was relieved to have company for the night. There was strength in numbers but my companion was a sour and angry man whom I'd only known for five or six hours. But when darkness fell I became too tired to consider the matter any further. I fell asleep hoping to wake in the boxcar with my gear still at my side.

When I did wake it was still pitch dark but the train had stopped. When my eyes adjusted to the darkness I identified the figure of the tramp, perched by the door, keeping watch. He reported that we were only in Helena and he had already left the boxcar once to find out if our train was staying together and moving further west. He'd left his gear with me again and joked that he'd hoped that anyone trying to steal it would have made enough noise to wake me. I tried to stay awake but kept falling asleep. But after short periods I would wake, startled by my dreams, and always to find the tramp perched, keeping watch, by the door.

By sunrise four through-freights had passed our train. Our train was still made-up, but seemingly stranded on a siding off the main track. Carl invested further, and decided that we were waiting for additional engines for the trip over the Rockies. Finally, while the sun was still low in the sky, the power we had been waiting for idled into position. They were two engines, magnificently powerful even with their strength bound up in slow rhythmic throbbing. There were already four engines on the front of the train so the additional power for the ride up the mountains was placed near the middle of the train. The engines were jockeyed into position, and we were off once more.

For an entire morning we climbed the Rockies. Even with the six engines wide open the freight often slowed to ten or fifteen miles an hour. The fragrance of the pine forests filled the car and the view to both sides was spectacular. I stayed by the door and watched while the tramp sat, lost in his own world. Near noon we pulled into a siding on the peak of the mountain; there the additional engines were left behind. After an easy trip down the other side into Missoula our train was again switched onto a siding.

The tramp again left to investigate. He returned in twenty minutes, reporting that our freight was just one more bull local at the end of its line.

"There's nothing made-up that I could see heading west," he said, "it'll be three or four hours before we get out of here. Christ I wish we'd caught that hot-shot yesterday! We'd be in Spokane, maybe Wenatchee by now!" Then he added: "Did you see those apple trees as we were coming into the yard? They were loaded. I think I might take a walk over there and see if I can't get us some fresh fruit!"

The trees were near a store and we were running low on food, so I gave the tramp a handful of change to restock our supplies. I did not count the money and told him to get himself some tobacco. The store was at least two miles away so I settled in for more hours of waiting.

I was dozing when the train snapped into motion. It jerked ahead — then with a crash and a jerk the train slammed backward. Cars were being coupled and the movement inside of the boxcar was unnerving.



Once again the tramp had left me with his gear, and I guessed that the train was soon to be underway. I thought about leaving the train but the tramp might jump it on the tail end hoping to meet me at the next stop. If I stayed with the train and left the tramp behind he'd be telling stories all over the west about losing another set of gear to a punk kid. The lines were quickly hooked up, and the train began rolling northward. There was only one thing to do — I threw the tramp's gear, then mine, and jumped as the train departed. It was at least a mile from where I'd left my companion, so I assembled our gear and headed off in the direction from which I had just ridden. A freight train, heading toward the northwest, sat ready to go near the through track.

The day was hot and I was soon perspiring and tired. It was impossible to carry all of the gear in one load so I had to transport one set fifty yards ahead and leave it to return for the rest. I came across a brakeman who seemed amused at my antics but I was only impatient: "Have you seen an old man up that way? He's got a week's beard, dirty, smelly bastard . . ." "Sure, I seen plenty of them — what's the big deal?" "Nothing, forget it!" And so I continued, finally situating myself on a small rise near the westbound freight. The freight was set to go — brakelines attached and caboose moving into position, and I was tempted to leave the tramp's gear in a pile and move into the first empty boxcar. But he arrived before I made the move, more tired and sweating than I.

"Where have you been?" I yelled. "Let's grab that train!"

"You got my gear?"

"Yeah, I got your gear. What are you carrying, rocks?"

"Apples, and groceries. OK, we'll get that train."

We walked the train, one person on each side, for often only one boxcar door is ajar — and moved into the first "empty," a rusty and dirty car that appeared to be the only empty on the train. The heat of the afternoon sun radiated through the metal walls and ceiling of our car; refuse from previous riders mixed with the litter of sawdust, loose rust and metal strapping. But at that stage on our jack-rabbit trip across Montana, one division a day, we would have been happy with the rustiest bad-order in the employ of Burlington Northern, which, as it turned out, our car was one slight step above.

Boston Blackie

"I herded sheep for John Drafus, out of Wolf Creek there for two months," Blackie said. "I herded for John Cameron over there in Cascade." Carl answered. "Yeah, I was with old Crooked-Stem-Smitty there this spring. He ate me out of house and home!"

"That fella! Oh, Christ, everybody knows how he can eat!" Blackie rummaged through his sack and said, "You need some clothes?" An elaborate process of exchange was underway. It had begun with the coffee — Blackie had insisted that we take some but Carl refused. Then Blackie said, "Take some for your buddy, then," which Carl could not gracefully turn down. I began to suspect that the exchange involved past and unfinished business. The commodities were the most mundane of goods which had become scarce and important. But the exchange involved a more important element, I was to discover, for Blackie was attempting to salvage his reputation for being a skin-flint.

Blackie held out a pair of ragged woolen pants. "These fit you?" he asked Carl.

"Oh, I gotta' couple pair . . ." Carl answered.

"Christ I got enough for all winter . . . I don't need these. Here, stand up and see." Carl stood up — the pants were ridiculously long. Then Blackie turned to me — "Here, you take 'em." I could see he really enjoyed directing Blackie's attention to me. Neither of us wanted the pants. I told Blackie: "Well, I think I'm pretty loaded down . . . thanks though." I wondered if I would put the man off with my refusal, but Blackie kept on and on: "Where I'm going, I got these new jeans, washed once, another pair, washed once or twice . . . I won't have to tear up the ones I got on now, when I get to work." Carl finally took Blackie's pants and stuffed them in his pack, saying: "Yeah, I just got to get to work!" He hated being dependent on me for food, and to be the object of Boston Blackie's charity was too much! "Somebody's got to be pickin' pretty soon!" he said.

Some started yesterday," Blackie answered.

After a long break in the conversation Carl asked, "You seen Woody around here? You know . . . that little guy."

Blackie answered: "No, he pulled out — they don't know where he went." "I'll be damned!" Carl said and Blackie continued: "He got a bad name. You get a bad name on the road and you get scared to go . . . Woody stayed all the goddamn fuckin' winter in that old shack — never paid that man a nickle's worth of rent. Gettin' welfare, and the stamps every month — never paid that man a dime!"

"You know that guy that was with him with the black dog?" Carl asked.

"Yeah, Al. He caused trouble all over here . . . He was stayin' over there with Woody and everything was goin' along pretty good . . . I went over to that grocery store and that lady said: 'Hey Blackie, I'd like to get two apple pickers . . .' (Blackie shifted his voice into a ridiculously feminine lilt) and I says: 'I'm sorry little lady, i can't pick your apples now because I got to go up to Branches the ninth . . .' Then go and find me some apple pickers, Blackie! I came down and told Woody and Al. 'You fellas want to pick apples for that lady that works in the grocery store? Four acres she has to pick, payin' six dollars a bin . . . go right over and see her.' Well, they went right over and talked to her. 'Yeah, you bet, O.K. — the usual bull shit.' So they go to work pickin', stayed sober four or five days of pickin' and then the next thing you know Al got drunk; they all got drunk. Al took a high-powered rifle and shot — the old pollack was in his shack but he was in the back sittin' on his toilet . . . coffee pot sittin' on his electric hot plate — and BANG! BANG! Al shot right through the fuckin' window, shot the coffee pot all to hell; shot right through the ceiling." The story was delivered in the most peculiar style. It was a monotone, but the rhythm of the sentences gave the delivery an entertaining, stagelike quality. Then Blackie, without pausing, fell into another story: ". . . and they had another big scrape. Pollack laid Al's head open with an axe, cut him down here" (motioning along his ear lateral across his cheek) ". . . sheriff had to get him. They found blood on the floor at the pollack's and saw the pollack layin' in bed, drunk, and that sheriff said, 'You might as well come along too,' . . . Yeah, they had nothin' but trouble over there. Now Dutch Shorn is livin' there with that Big George . . . and over there, up in that area there . . ." (he pointed to where the bushes were thickest) "That's where I am sleepin' these days . . ." Carl interrupted: "I won't sleep in these yards at night!" Blackie ignored him and went on with his story. "Dutchy's got a three room house, and McLure got a three room shack but I don't go in with them. I go in and drink coffee, maybe wash my hands and shave or somethin' . . . 'bout all." "I don't ask for anything to eat, if they offer it to me, I don't want it." "Causes trouble," Carl said. "I don't want any," Blackie continued in the same monotone, "because I don't want to be under obligation. Not that I would be, far as they're concerned cause they've known me for years — they'd do anything in the world to help me . . ."

"How far you goin' up the branch?" Carl asked.

"Oh, I'm goin' to get off first at Pateros. See that Jack Nichols."

"I used to work in Brewster."

"I was in Brewster," Blackie said, "Huey Clark's up there." Carl interrupted: "I worked for that Doc English outfit and that . . . uh . . . Maddin, Blair Maddin."

"You know Huey Clark?" Blackie asked.

"Yeah, I know him."

"He's in Brewster; he's got a big house there. He's just putting in thirty days in Waterville."

Carl asked, as he had earlier, "How much they payin' this year?"

Blackie went on in his monotone: "I haven't found out. I worked in the summer apples between Pateros and Brewster. I drove tractor. Two dollars an hour. They paid the pickers ten dollars a bin for pickin' them apples. An that crooked nose Pollack he was there — he picked. Old Mike and me was together there seven days last week — jungle in Pateros. But there aren't many of them . . . I been sittin' around here three or four days . . ." Blackie's voice trailed off . . .

"You can't dispute the facts of my life!"

After a few moments, I asked: "What if at the end of the harvest, if you were traveling through Brewster and met four or five of the men we were jungling with — would you drink with them? Would you go

into a bar for one night and drink with them for one night?"

"If they're broke," Carl said, "I'll give them enough for a jug. I won't drink. I can have five or six hundred dollars in my pocket and I won't drink. It don't matter to me! I'll tell them right out — I'll buy them a drink but I won't drink with them."

"But you said that that is where you meet your buddies, in the barroom . . ."

"They're not my buddies," Carl said, "They're just acquaintances. My buddies — I got very very few. And, I can count my *friends* on one hand. Now, you're my buddy, you're not my friend — yet. Friends I make once, and that's all. I learned that in the Army, after a while you don't make them because it hurts too much to lose them . . . Army taught me that . . ." After a pause, he continued: "Friendship is hard to get. You know people use that word loosely. Very loosely. What



they should say is buddy, or pal, or something like that — but a real friend is damn hard to find. Because a real friend is just like yourself. You'd do anything for yourself; all right, you'd also do that for a friend. If your friend needs it, he takes it even if it means *you* go without. He's your friend. But if it's a buddy I won't do that. I'll share with a buddy, you know, equal shares — fine. But a friend I'll go out of my way to help. I'll look him up. That's different. There's a hell of a big difference there . . . no, my buddies, I can take them or leave them. Like these guys in the jungle? If I see them again: 'How you doin', where you been,' — all that. Same with the tramps in this orchard. 'How was the harvest, how much did you make? Who'd you see? Did you see "so and so"?' Like we did every night in Brewster. But to go drink with them in a tavern? No no. Even if I see them in a tavern if I don't want to drink with them I won't. If I'm drinkin' by myself I'll ignore them. I'll say hello, buy them a drink, but then I'll turn my back."

I didn't know how to respond to Carl's speech. After an awkward silence I said: "So it's not the kind of situation where you'll go in for an evening of sociable drinking . . ."

"— With *those* kind of people?" Carl asked. "no thanks!"

"But they're tramps!"

"Sure they're tramps," Carl answered, "but they're not drinking companions. You know those people change — they're like Dr. Jekel and Mr. Hyde. They take two drinks, and man, they want to fight. They might fight you!"

"I know that," I said, "I've been in boxcars with tramps who started drinking. I was with them when they were sober and there was nothing wrong with them. Then, after a half of a gallon of wine, everything changes. I've gotten more than a little worried a time or two . . ."

"They're wet-brains, those people," Carl interrupted.

"That's more than a little frightening," I continued, "because there's only one way out of that boxcar!"

Carl agreed, and then I asked him: "How do *you* change when you drink?"

"I just talk more," he replied. "And I remember more. I get a clearer mind. But then when I get off it my mind gets befuddled. You ever been on this . . . in the Army they gave it to us to keep awake."

"— Speed."

"I guess maybe. Benzadrine — they had those little tablets. But that wasn't strong enough. Do you know those inhalers? We used to chew those. It'd get you higher than a kite. And you want to see a guy that can talk! Your mind is just like that!" (he snapped his fingers) "It makes your mind real sharp . . . you can remember . . . ! but when you get off it, bad."

"Yeah," I said, "A lot of people begin on heroin as a way to make the end of a speed trip more manageable. After five or six days of coasting on speed, apparently the crash is terrible. Heroin smoothes that out."

"I've never taken it like that," Carl said. "Anyway, it can't be the same stuff. They gave it to us in the Army."

"It's the same stuff. Speed. Goes by many different names. Truck drivers are the biggest bunch of speed freaks in the country . . ."

"But they used to give us that in the Army," Carl repeated.

"Were you in the front lines?" I asked, "I've heard that they gave it to the men who were in the thick of it."

"I was. In the islands. They gave it to us to keep us awake. Christ, we'd be up there for ten, fifteen days at a crack. They didn't have nobody to relieve us. Guadacanal, Iwo Jima . . . I'm a combat veteran, you know."

"You were on those *beaches*?"

"Why certainly. What do you think I'm talking about? How many times do you think we lost Henderson Field?"

"Where is that?" I asked, feeling stupid.

"Guadacanal . . . we lost it seven or eight times. Lose it one day, take it back the next."

"You must have seen a lot of men fall around you . . ."

"That's what I told you," Carl said, "you make friends only once! You never make a friend again. When those guys used to come as replacements in the front lines — nobody would talk to them. And they couldn't understand it. But they learned after a while. When they saw their own buddies fall they learned."

"You mean you were on the front lines that landed on the beaches?"

"Hell yes, what do you think? LST's . . ."

"The front of that boat dropped open and you charged that beach against that . . ."

"— Fire," Carl interrupted.

"Jesus Christ."

"Packsack on my back . . ."

"I always wondered," I said, "what would make a man jump out of that boat, people shooting like crazy . . . I am sure I wouldn't do it."

"Yes you would," Carl answered, "Do you know why? You don't want your buddies to think you're yellow. You're shittin' in your pants, but you go . . . yeah, we'd fight and fight for a piece of coral, bombard the shit out of it, and after we'd capture it there'd be nothing left of it anyway!"



"How many of those landings did you participate in?"

"Seven or eight." Carl described the battles, remarking that there were few that lived through them all. He mentioned that he used to go to the VFW halls, but they were just bars like any other and if he wanted to drink he'd go into a tavern and not pretend he was doing something else. He described the battles vividly, and shuddered when he described using a machine gun on "suicide" attacks. I asked him if that had screwed him up and he said that for more than five years he'd had nightmares. The conversation was becoming difficult, but I asked, straight out, if the Army experiences had had anything to do with his hitting the road. He said "No!" and did not elaborate, and when I pressed the topic further he just shrugged his shoulders. Then I asked if he drank while he was still in the Army.

"I drank," he answered, "like any soldier did. Three-two beer . . . that's where I got *this* —" he exposed his arm and an old faded tattoo. "The first time I ever drank in my life I was nineteen years old. G.I. party in the barracks, 'forty-three. I drank about three cans of three-two beer and I'm drunk! Next morning I wake up with a sore arm. Huh? Tattooed!" He laughed at himself, "I went home, saw my mother, oh Christ!"

He talked for many minutes about MacArthur, asserting that all the GI's hated him because he had his furniture transported off the Philippines but left the nurses, and "all of them got raped." He spoke, as he often did, in a very Victorian way about women. They should not be exposed to vile talk or bad company, and rape was the most despicable of crimes.

He was getting into a fairly bad mood, and one of his few remaining teeth was loose. He pushed and pulled on it, and then continued: "Yeah, *this* mess is due to the army too. When I went in everything was above boards. They're going to take good care of me — fine, wonderful. So they put twenty-three fillings into my teeth — all temporary — and sent me overseas. Six months later they all dropped out. What am I going to do? There ain't no dentists over there. Well, my teeth went to hell. They been dropping out, and everything else, since. And if you let them go for a year and a half or something like that — you're too late. It'd cost me a fortune to get them fixed. So I pulled them and the government says it's not service-related. They conveniently lost the dental charts."

We sat in silence until I asked, rather clumsily: "Do you have everything you want?"

"He-ell no!" Carl replied. Then he thought for a moment and said: "I do *now*; I'm still alive, I got a job, a place to sleep. What more? . . . I got money coming, if I want to leave I can leave . . ."

I thought about it for a few moments and replied: "I think that I want too much stuff."

"Sure," Carl was quick to agree, "you know what you want, don't you? You want to keep up with the Jones."

"No, no, that just isn't true! I want things like . . ."

"— You want *material* things, don't you."

"I don't think I do, but you might be more correct than I'd like to admit. But there is the thing of love and friendship . . . I still harbor the idea that I might have a family, children, all that. My family gets along well, really well, and I think that it would be good to have something like that myself."

"All of that is natural," Carl said, surprising me. "It's human nature. But is that what you're looking for now?" When I didn't answer, Carl said, "Or are you trying to find yourself?" I mumbled something unintelligible and Carl repeated: "Are you trying to find a family, or are you trying to find yourself?" — "I'm trying to find myself," I answered, and Carl replied: "Well, that's more like it! Now you're honest. There's something that brought you here, just like there's something that brought me, isn't there?"

"I got in that boxcar a long time ago, it seems . . ."

"You're not so different than me then, are you?"

"I don't think I am," I said. "I think that there are a lot of things about me that I wish were more like you."

"And there are things that you know you are *not* going to be like; ways that I am that are no good."

I had a hard time responding to Carl and told him again that my respect for him was based on some of his most basic values. I began criticizing traditional middle-class life styles, and Carl surprised me by saying: "But they're still livin' good. They can put their name on the line and get all those things, and I can't. And I'm glad of it! I can't even get food stamps unless I lie, and I ain't going to lie to get them. Why should I lie? I don't have to. I'll work for it first. If I can't work, that's a different story. Then I'll go ask them. But if I'm able, I'll work. If it's in the dead of winter I'll go see those people. And I'll tell them the truth. But to go out and lie like those people — you know they just came off the job and they spent it for liquor — they go right to the food stamp people. 'Have you worked in the last three months?' — 'Noooo, no-oo.' They sign their name and it's *notorized!* They could get it for perjury!"

"Or you can go into an employment office and see the same thing, only a different way. They lie about the work they've done in order to get unemployment payments. Perjury . . . lying under oath — six of one, half dozen of another. Something I can't do —" his voice rising, "You know, I'd rather be with a thief than a liar. A thief, I know what he's going to do. A liar I never know. A thief can hurt you financially but a liar can hurt you morally. They can hurt your reputation and everything about you."

We began our discussion about possessions again, and Carl asked me what I was going to do when the harvest was over. I told him I was going to go back to school. He asked me what I was going to do after, when all the school was finished, and I said I was hoping to be a teacher and a writer. "Are you going to write about this?" he said. I answered that I was, as I had earlier in our trip. I explained again how I felt about learning about the world that he inhabited, and how I felt that he was a more important teacher than most I'd had. He agreed, and said that his I.Q. was "damn high," and that he had more common sense than most intellectual people had knowledge. "I live the facts," he said. "The facts of my life are the same facts of your so-called scientific experiments. You can't dispute the facts of my life!"

And then mellowing some, he said: "I'm older, too. You'll gain that in time."

Among the Trees

Carl returned and we walked wordlessly across the tracks and into the orchard. A huge moon had risen above the horizon and lit our way with a pale yellow light. I followed Carl to what seemed to be the most obscure and overgrown part of the orchard. When he motioned to stop I waited until he selected a large tree, and then we crouched and worked our way under the branches. They were heavy with fruit and drooped almost to the ground, forming a canopy around the trunk large enough to sleep in. There were open spaces between some of the branches but my impression was that we had entered a safe and dark nest. We cleaned fallen apples off the ground (some larger than my fist) and rolled our sleeping bags out in six inches of lush, soft grass. It was as soft as a feather mattress.

We lay parallel to each other, separated by the trunk of the apple tree. I would have fallen to sleep in seconds but Carl had gained a second wind and wanted to talk.

The moon was high in the sky when we finally finished our conversation. I stretched out in my sleeping bag and noted that the grass was far softer than a boxcar floor. Enough moonlight found it's way through the foliage of the tree to provide a dappling of yellow illumination and when I stretched out to sleep Carl said he wasn't tired and would keep watch. He was there, sitting cross-legged in a space between two branches looking out into the orchard, as I fell asleep.

