

IN THE SEMI-COLON OF THE NORTH

Austin Clarke

GOING STRAIGHT NORTH AS AN ARROW, had I looked at a map to shoot my direction and progress, the Ontario Northland Railway was taking me to Timmins where I would work on the *Timmins Daily News* as a reporter for thirty-five dollars a week. It was December, nineteen fifty-nine. One week before Christmas.

One week before Christmas, six years ago, I was sitting in the warm friendships built from birth in Barbados, inhaling the fumes of new polish and varnish and paint that was green and dark blue on the furniture that surrounded me like the knowledge of those friendships. And six years later, now, I am sitting in a crowded coach of this CNR train, surrounded by women and by men who look like trappers out of the adventure books of the West I had read in Barbados, and out of the conversations I had heard from university students who came from the West, and who said they hated the East. My closest friends at the university were Westerners. But where are these Westerners now that I am taking this long journey into the semi-colon of the unpunctuated North?

The men sitting around me on the slow-moving train making up its mind on a divorce from Toronto where I had lived for five years, all looked like miners and prospectors. Their skin was rough-hewn and burned and tightened as if by a different kind of climate or sun-lamp from those I had seen in the tanning bedrooms of Rosedale and Forest Hill in Toronto; and they all looked half-asleep just as those women in the sun and under the lamp seemed to be. They resembled the Indian I had passed on Spadina Avenue, men and women of tanned skin, inheritors of abuse and scorn I had listened to in the streets of Toronto.

“Would you sell a *Molson’s* to a goddam Indian?”

I was myself like a prospector, travelling light and lightened by the uncertainty of expectation, no bags and baggage to suggest permanency, enough clothes to ensure personal hygiene, no notebooks and no typewriter for I was not yet a writer of fiction, no writer at all, but a dreamer of ambition larger than the land over which the train was taking me. I was equipped with the music, the memory

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of the music I had listened to in the jazz clubs and bars of Toronto, and in other places; and the three pieces I had selected to memorize and bring along on this journey, were *Milestones* by Miles Davis, Beethoven's *Third Symphony*, and the *Russian Easter Overture* by a Russian composer whose name I could hardly pronounce.

Milestones was the metaphor and the definition of this horse of a train, this horse of iron, with its slow pace, its excitement and strange smell of coffee weakened by the touch of cold hands, hardly any steam as it touched the lips, and no recognizable strength of caffeine to deaden the disorientation of the journey; Canadian apples that reminded me of cider when they were crushed by the strong teeth of these men, only because I had heard that you could make cider from apples; the smell of clothing, heavy shirts that were famous for their plaids in another country, and for some reason, the smell of fish, although the only sea was the waves of snow through which we were travelling. The music in my mind showed me a horse trotting slowly and surely, aware of its pace and destination. The snow outside the train was like a large white pasture over which the hooves were travelling; a "comforter" of pure white which looked blue in the distance. The wheels on iron, and my speculation of the time they took to make one revolution, were the hooves of the horse in the music, and the tempo of the drummer as he beat his measurement on skins and brass.

But the music that was in my mind belonged to a different drummer, to a faster means of travelling, to a land in which I was at one with the colour of sweat and the creed of labour and exploitation: Miles Davis was not a "comforter" on the brittle, rasping and sometimes piercingly clear trumpet; he was defining a journey of changing destination, of changing intention, of changing purpose. And it was making me nostalgic for Toronto. The journey on which my body was now being carried could not tolerate that excitement. For I was surrounded by nothing but whiteness. Snow.

Not even the wind outside, and I imagined that there would have to be a wind no matter how slight; not even the wind had succeeded in altering the patterns of mild undulations, careful hills of snow, without any purpose of rhythm and beat; and the wind gave the snow no threat of ever being conquered. Valleys and dales looked smooth, not treacherous, and exciting enough for the cover of a galvanized pail with a child in it, to slide down the disappearing sides from the train. It was all snow, and the windless caress of white rectitude and order and a puritaness of the snow itself.

I BEGAN TO THINK OF DIFFERENT MUSIC. *The Russian Easter Overture* composed by that man of Russian origin with the unpronounceable

name, which I recognized on sight but could not put vowels to; this music which reminded me of Barbados and its own colonial puritanism, where the only snow, at Easter and at Christmas is the make-believe whiteness of the "marl" from the rock quarries; and which we spread around our homes in devout obedience to the purity of those two Christian holidays, or eating days. We ate more than we worshipped the sacred metaphors of those days. And in Toronto, where I had first heard the *Overture*, one Christmas Eve night among friends and drinks who were "artistic," I gained a more focussed understanding of the Russian countryside. It comes to me now, and with it comes that Group of men, Seven in number, who gave their art the same name as the number of their membership; and I wondered if they too had listened to this Russian music and had seen the fierce snow in its chords; if they had captured this part of the northern country with its desolate weather, or whether they had drawn the reality of this North, purely from the warm comfort of picture postcards and Toronto beer parlours.

The sun must have been still high in the Russianed sky, and fierce as the music, even at four; or was it already seven o'clock?; for I could feel light and life and wonder within the wilderness outside the murmuring train. The life outside was stronger than the life of the snoozing well-travelled passengers. Inside the train, these men and women had already arranged their bodies in a resignation of comfortable position to the well-known long journey. Although the journey was beginning to be broken up by constant interruptions of stops and stations. Miles Davis changed the pace of his journey on the trumpet from a gallop to a canter. And my understanding of the riffs of his climb was altered and heightened. But these men and women seemed to know when the train would stop, when their portion of the journey would end. They had become no longer so impatient as the colonial from the South about the clattering of miles. Their sense of destiny and music and long living was stronger.

They also ignored, through custom and perhaps with love, the coming and going of the "coloured" porter. He was a fact of the train, and a fact of their lives; a metaphor of this kind of railroad travel. They looked up, smiled, bought a cheese sandwich from him, or a red Canadian apple, and steaming styrofoam cups of dark liquid which made their faces redder, and then, as quick as it takes to forget a stranger, they closed their eyes, and re-settled themselves among heavy coats and blankets. The few children in the coach with me, were chewing gum to help them fight their restlessness. Two strong, handsome, unwarlike Indians stomached their steaming black coffees just as gamblers try to stay awake, to cut the journey into gulps.

And the trees; for I was looking and watching and hearing the *Overture*, and not eating nor drinking as the others were; the trees, green even at this death of time, unaware of the inhuman coldness that was sharp enough to kill a man, manly as a trapper and as noble as the two Indians, including those in storybooks,

the trees were just a little similar to the genius in the paint boxes of two of the members of the Group of Seven, I had seen in exhibitions.

I could have been crossing the Steppes, or the Himalayas, or the Canadian Shield, for the music was so international in the wideness, just as the land around me was wide; and the music could have been invented by a Barbarian to be played in any small Christian-Missioned church on a green hill, so constricting was it to my far smaller context of origin.

A man can imagine any colour to give to the whiteness of the snow outside, or to the gold of a sunset. And if he is fused to the electricity of genius, or if he is infused with enough of the natural means of keeping the body warm, as it was becoming almost impossible to do inside this train, then in his drunkenness of originality and craftiness, brought about by his heavy drinking and by the inordinateness of the alcoholic and surrounding beauty, then what he does do with the colours in the eyes of his art, is not so commonplace a trick as bending the normalness of colour and perception, but is merely the adding of his conviction to it.

I was now travelling on the brass and reeds of Russian movement, no blanket to match the white and green-bordered regal robes of the two Indians who sat facing me to make myself comfortable. They did not talk, nor blink, nor smile. They were mysterious masks.

The heat in the train was turned off after we pulled out of North Bay. This may not be a fact, but it is an artistic liberty of the fiction writer whose craftiness and words can see the land and the passengers becoming more wedded to their freezing surroundings; since he has seen with his artist's eye that there are no longer any politicians, nor reeves, nor managers of banks, nor cold-blooded southerners after we have passed North Bay, and that the only residents of this slow-moving cold-storage train are Indians and "coloured" porters, and people who are stupid enough to live in the North.

I had heard of North Bay before. Once. But I imagined it to be closer to Toronto. When it came, and when the train changed its tempo after it disappeared on the narrowing lines, I sensed that I had come to the end of the line, the end of all reasonable expectations and of survival without extreme violence. I had reached a state of awareness of a time before men became avaricious and greedy and adventurous, and sought to pan for gold and kill for skins, and kill everything that was not gold or bears, everything that lay in the sights of their transits. I could imagine men in the coach with me, as *those* men who had first prospected on the land which they thought was covered in gold, just as the streets of New York and Toronto were glittering with golden success for the immigrant. A colonial's dream, and a fool's fantasy. North Bay must have been crawling with men like these, my companions on a train, before the time when those two Indians and their families were pushed back even farther, back into the reservation and

into extinction, as the buffalo and the trees that impeded progress and development were shot and axed.

Were there Italians among these first "Canadians"? Were there Jews then, too? Some bears are like this "coloured" porter, and like me, only in colour.

It is too cold now, and too late, back in Toronto, for the Italians, the work-ants of the Fifties, to meddle in trenches and on scaffolds from which they fall like flies, and die like martyrs in their new hyphenated Canadian experience. "On the street cars, when you get too close to them, all you can smell is garlic . . ."

I can see a time before the Indian was skull-capped by versions of his resistance to national development, and how from scalping and raping he was turned from flesh and blood into symbols on coins, and into names of insurance companies and exclusive resort areas and lakes; and I turn to the Indians sitting before me and try to compare their silhouetted forward look to their images on American coins. My body is cold. And the coldness becomes the disposition of their fortunes and their prospects.

This train bound for my personal glory, stops nowhere. It has stopped, it is true, in a certain ordinary meaning of time, because I can see the trees are no longer evading the thrust of the train through the vagina of this Indian territory. But in the bigger meaning of time, this train stops nowhere. Little insects of specks of snow scurry just above the surface of the sheet of milk. A man gets off. There is a gust of steam like the overdue passing of gas from a tired human body.

I am scared. I am terrified that this man has pressed the wrong stop. And then I wonder how do you stop a train, except to lie in front of it? But this man gets off like a man would get out of a taxi. He must be an Indian. Or a fool. He seemed too much in a hurry to reach his destination, unwilling to remain in the belly of the train, and had decided to get out, and end the rhythm of movement. And now, I see him through the mist of the window, wandering through a path in the uncut wilderness. He seems more knowledgeable than the rest of us, who are too frightened, too unwilling to take up the heavy ploughs of chord in Beethoven's *Third Symphony*, of which I am thinking now, and become a part of that tragic retreat through a different country, but in the same thickness of snow. So, we sit and wait for another destination to come, one that is more habitable, for some unpure station that offers a habitable ordinariness.

The man injures the snow as he moves in a straight line in the lineless landscape, and he constructs his own highway, just as the Italians do on virgin land in a Toronto suburb, or as the tentativeness of retreat had done in the *Symphony*. And then, before the train abandons him altogether, before he can change his mind, as I would have done, and run back to the ordinary safety of the train, he walks and walks in the shrouds of interminable bandaging snow, and approaches a hill on which there is a tall noble tree, the sentry for many more, and then, from the distance he is from me, all of a sudden he finds his bearing in the rubberless-

ness of the field. I envision drums and horses and soldiers tired as construction workers, and silent defeated cannon and artillery that look like gigantic cement mixers.

The train is now at another angle of his departure. There are houses now in my view. And I become disappointed that he is not lost, that he is not going into a field of defeated battle and more snow, and possible suicide.

IF I WERE A PAINTER, I would paint this snow black. Last month, or last year, in the previous season, this whiteness was a field of wild growing grass, with flowers which we from the city could have picked or cut and put into a vase, or into a wine bottle of cheap Italian wine that we had for dinner, to decorate our crowded space.

The man who has left the train, is perhaps, now home.

But before that, before he enters the door, I see him as a black dot. I had ignored his progress before this diminution, to think of the rails and miles before me. The train takes me headlong into more towns in this disregarded North. I count the hours and I count the sheep in those hours, and I wonder what has driven me from the comfortable house on Grace Street near Bloor, to enter this landscape which I could have been satisfied to have *seen* in the music of Beethoven's *Third*?

I think of the thirty-five dollars I am to be paid each week, perhaps at two in the afternoon on each Friday, so that I might sled through the streets of Timmins to the bank on time. I think of the size of immigrants' wages, which is merely his means of buying necessities, which is the dignified alternative to begging and unemployment insurance, and which is not the important impetus for the immigrant's contribution to this country's wealth. It is my dignity that I can spend, and pay for things. Not my wage.

So, the wage may be a small wage. I cannot ask questions about its size simply because I have the immigrant's surrealistic optimism that says that larger wages will come with larger experience, even if, for the moment, that experience is called "Canadian experience."

I wonder if I can get the larger knowledge without the larger insults and the larger unhappiness?

I will therefore accept this pittance wage, and leave the North when the time is golden. And afterwards, with this "Canadian" experience, conspire to climb faster than the newest immigrant, rapidly, and suffer the castigation for being "uppity," in the silence of my integration.

I count the trees that run along the wires, with my eyes, until I must have travelled around the sea that surrounds Barbados, one thousand times. And if the

line does not end where I am heading, if the line could not end, and the train becomes a ghost train after the ghost towns we have passed, and could go on and on, I can conceivably end up right where I have started out, in the small village of Flagstaff, since too far North must be South. I begin to put my mind into that deceiving discipline of informing it that this is the best, most enjoyable journey I have ever taken. I tell myself that the journey is really not simply the two parallel lines which refuse to end within my sight, but that they are joined to each other in the unseeable distance. The drums in the retreat of the music are heavy, and I can see mothers along the way, including my own; discarded lovers hot from the shortened exhilaration of a climax of victory and orgasm.

I pretend that I have fallen out of the train. The train does not stop. I am merely a dot left to blacken the snow in one spot.

The "coloured" porter has just helped an old grey-bearded man down the slab of iron of the stopped train, to the ground.

"Been South?" the porter asks.

"Yeah, Joe."

He put his hand into his pocket and puts that same hand into the porter's hand.

"Been visiting the kids. Last girl got married. Temagami, ya know. She been living south these two years."

The music of retreat rushes over the snow, like an avalanche of thick spoiled milk. And before this conversation is off my mind, before I can fill in its spaces with faces and bodies of snow-bitten, beaten soldiers, we are at Haileybury. A little north of the South.

The train is warmer now. I had travelled through many towns with the heat off and my body was now acclimatized by the fresh northern Canadian experience. The distance between these towns was now speeded up like a magic-lantern slide show, played at the wrong, faster speed.

New Liskeard, Englehart and Swastika . . .

Swastika?

Could this train have passed through compass-points while I had been dozing between stations? Perhaps, this part of the wild bush had been an iceberg and had been drifting backwards through a slower snow that did not melt; perhaps this part of the bush was ignorant while other trains criss-crossed Europe bearing this same swastika, and filled with different passengers whose namesakes in Toronto could not rent a cottage in the weekend lakes. Perhaps other men than I were dozing while other passengers were being gassed and then buried. Perhaps, it was this cold that drove us to this drowsiness.

Through the breathing glass window that showed the hissing steam: rub the palm of the hand on the ice that has formed there, and clear the two-temperated air, and see if there is a swastika painted on the station door, if there are people goose-stepping on the platform. See, too, after you have seen that, if there are

any persons who “looked like Jews,” who have not got summer cottages to rent down South, and who are now come, or forced to come, to this destination.

I try to imagine how a namesake of those European times, would feel entering this northern Ontario town with its brazen name, for the War is still raging in our painful memories.

Look and see if you can recognize anyone in the small crowd of thick coats and furs, and women in mink’s clothing, if there is a Pierre Berton investigating here, as he has been investigating everywhere, including the pages of the *Toronto Star*.

Kirkland Lake was bellowed out, but it was too dark, and I was too sleepy and too numbed to see.

Ramore I could see. I saw the second “coloured” man in the North at Ramore. And an American army base was there, and many American “coloured” boys, so the porter said, were living there.

“Don’t bother nobody none,” he said, “and nobody don’t bother them. You won’t think they were such nice boys. When you think of it . . .”

I decided I would spend my weekends in Ramore. It is closer than Toronto. Ramore was also close to Rama, and although it had some similar sound to that Biblical city, I still was not discouraged to invest in its brotherhood.

But what were the Americans doing in the Canadian North? Had they come to gain “Canadian” experience, too?

After Ramore, with the “American coloured boys” changing the town no doubt, and making polka-dots of the beer parlours, dancing to the rhythm of the Ska and rock-n-roll, Fats Domino and Billy Eckstein and Jimmy Brown and James Brown, wriggling their black asses on the football fields of these northern white corsetted climes and times, like Friday nights along Spadina Avenue in Toronto, after Ramore, came Matheson and then North Porcupine, South Porcupine, and then, as God would have it! . . . Timmins. I had reached the end of my line.

TWO CAMERA POEMS

Michael Thorpe

1. *Obsolete Images*

Black-sleeved fathers
 Guide their new children
 In stilled old-brown streets
 Of Dublin, Vienna, London —
 Any foxed city
 Coffee-tables preserve.