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Burlington Northern

I used to pull my clock under the blankets with me. I slept with my head covered, so I was sure to hear the alarm as one a.m. arrived. Instantly awake, I slipped from my bed and dressed. My mother and stepfather slumbered just above, so stealth was important. With recollected adrenaline burning in my chest, I entered the night tentative and slow, caressing the window's hinge closed.

In the Buick, I lit a Marlboro as 1:30 crawled onto the dashboard clock. The overpass at 145th dropped shadow across my hood like a gateway—Seattle officially ended here, and I began stretching the car out, slicing into the heart of what I thought of as “the sinister suburbs.” This was ironic, of course, because the era of grunge, heroin, and the fetishes of self-loathing and psychic pain were in full swing in Seattle. I lived, in fact, a short five blocks from Nirvana's Kurt Cobain (and his suicide), but among my crowd the darkest we got was some of Led Zeppelin's weirder tunes. The “Seattle Scene” was unrolling all around us, but it held sway, mainly, among twenty- and thirty-somethings—and many were transplants from other places. We remained, mainly, happily oblivious with our classic rock and hip-hop, sucking down malt liquor in city parks. You were more likely to find adherents to this subculture of the city among the suburbs' spoiled or angry adolescents—some of them the “victims” of their parents' white flight, but more often lifelong residents. The social contrast between the concrete grids of the city and tree-lined, quiet avenues caused many of these kids to feel soft, and thus they had much more to prove—and, usually, more resources to prove it with. Out in this warped periphery there was violence and drugs—but rarely for money. These kids were into darkness for the sake of darkness. As fathers sat around country club tables, clutching cocktails and congratulating themselves on their promotions, their teens ventured off into sub-urbanity, car-

rying with them dangerous things: complexes and boredom. They attended family suppers raging high on LSD, they bumped lines before math tests, and like teens almost anywhere, they forged alliances and feuds sometimes with blood.

My best friend, Dean, was now among these kids.

I swung off the interstate and slipped into the pack of luxury vehicles and family wagons moving leisurely up the hills. I caught the end of a yellow light and flew across Route 99, the long strip of sleaze that finally, decisively, marked the border to better living. A moment later I wound down Dean's woody avenue, weaving between yellow lane markers. His hillside home pulled itself around a bend, nearly indistinguishable from the other massive cedar houses. Except for the occupants. On the top and third floor, I could see the purple throb of his younger sister's black light, under the glare of which there was no telling what might be transpiring. His mother's bedside lamp winked meekly a floor below, as I knew it would until her daughter's activity ceased and Dean returned home with a whisper of sliding glass.

Dean and I figured his mother's hope was that the move to this neighborhood would wean him off mischief, steer him into football, science, and college. That it would purge his mind of the strange ideas and voices—the functional schizophrenia—that everyone quietly knew cursed his father. In the end, it did not. Recently we had endured an afternoon that was to change everything. That vile Tuesday in the middle of winter had broken me down and just plain broken my best friend—though he'd already been bound for it. To recap:

At eleven a.m. I split my city high school and drive fast to the suburbs, where I join Dean and eat three hits of acid on a cold, windy beach. At first there is merely the occasional hallucination—a figure in a rocking chair that, upon scrutiny, turns out to be empty

and moved by gusts. But then it gets weird. Dean, sucking on his cigarettes in the hungry way he has, tells me of a kid at school who unnerves him, deeply, though he cannot say why.

We're wandering a slippery stretch of stones under a bridge. Spray painted on a concrete pillar: TOOL. Who writes that? I ask, to which Dean says Chris Woolman — the dude I was just telling you about. That's odd. We move on through the nightmare colors of the day, dodging humanity, smoking and chopping up our theories of God. Driving back to his house, we come upon two kids walking the center of the road. They wave us over. Dean knows them and curses. They climb into my back seat, uninvited. They say Hey man this CD is the shit, gotta hear it man. At Dean's house they play the music. It is the metronome of a gun being cocked and unintelligible commands. It is horrible. Dean asks who it is. It's Tool, they tell us, grooving heads to the nonmusic. Dean and I look at each other, beg each other, simultaneously, to ask and not to ask: Where'd you get it? One of the kids looks up. It's Chris's man, you know, Chris Woolman's. Dean pushes stop. The music does not stop. Dean unplugs the stereo and is shocked, painfully, by the cord. He holds his wrist and I watch a certain cloud cross his gaze.

The events of that day, however, made our present escapade — and all those to come after it — feel so much more appealing, so much more important.

I slipped in, negotiated the black room by rote, and shook Dean from his nest of porn, pillows, and ash. He rose, already dressed, and moonshine bloomed on his grin. We wasted no time slipping back out into the night.

There was more smoke than talk as I whipped the car through the rain. The moon spiked off the road and multiplied itself in each bead of water sliding across the windshield. The Pacific suddenly flattened the horizon into a line and we parked in a cul-de-sac. We

crossed the road and hopped the guardrail, over boulders and onto the railroad tracks that ran parallel to the water. We checked the oil silos a quarter mile down the beach for security patrols. But there was no one.

We walked the shoreline, the tide working constantly to suck out evidence of our footprints. We toked on a joint and talked fast, constructing flawed philosophies, getting tangled up in each other's words, losing track, we were sure, of invaluable revelations every few minutes.

Then a small tremor came through the air. We perceived it at the same instant and stopped, turning north. A half-mile away, a yellow light splashed and began to spread across the bulging white flank of the oil silo. Our eyes met briefly, we dropped our smokes in the surf and sprinted across loose sand, scrambled up the gravel embankment and onto the tracks.

The Burlington Northern materialized and as it lumbered around the bend its one headlight swung into our eyes. It charged a few dozen yards before the conductor saw us. That deep bleat, impossibly loud, lifted — a horn blast against the percussion of the engine. Steel screamed once as if the conductor, suddenly convinced of our insanity, had given a futile pull on the brakes. The boxcars leaned crazily and clanked. The air smelled of coal and metal and grew suddenly hot. I swallowed and erased the sweat on my brow with a sleeve. Dean shifted his legs. The horn lifted again, higher pitched, frantic, gobbling up the distance. And then the metal grid over the headlight appeared like a crosshairs before us. Our eyes watered and the train blurred. Then Dean touched my arm. And we launched ourselves sideways and skyward, twisting away, tumbling down the gravel, coming to rest in a tangle of driftwood. We leaped up, hurling stones at the boxcars, sparks exploding where they struck. We howled in rapture and lit cigarettes to await the next one.

This was the era of Bush Sr. I knew things in drastically reduced ways: that thousands of people were dying for oil; that my mother wept over it; that some abstract machine of war chugged forward anyway, undeterred. Coming from a lair of left-wing activism I was, as a kid, brought to protests and introduced to the rhetoric of non-violence, unity, to the responsibility to fight injustice that comes with privilege. It was not a coincidence that my mother had moved to what was nearly the most distant point in the continental U.S. from her home in South Carolina. She had fled the confines of thought and kin that had kept her stifled in Dixie and flew into the ranks of the antinuclear — and, then, antiwar — movement, where she eventually found my stepfather. Her white blonde hair, sun-weathered skin, and the slow curl of her southern accent (I always visualized her words as cursive) may have stood out some in Seattle, but she felt less strange there regardless. Thanks to her, early on, I was plugged into indignation, as an appliance to an outlet.

This era followed the committal of my first love to a hospital because her refusal to eat was eroding, day by day, her ability to live. Dozens of meals in the rising twilight, watching as she tried to bring a spoon to her thin lips, me tense and insistent and finally flinging plates against walls and storming through late-summer streets smoking furiously. Later, she dropped folded slices of notebook paper from a psychiatric window that whirled and fell to my cold hands. *Please, baby, save me or kill me, I don't care. I can't stay here.* I was stopped by linebacker orderlies at the entrance.

At the risk of melodrama, I will say that in the dead chatter of those boxcars, the steel on steel, the baritone labor of the engine, the wail of the horn, mortars buckled the walls of homes half a world away, and my mother wept. I will say that the hospital PA crackled, announcing my half-drunken presence to security, that there were the veiled and unveiled pleas of salvation and mercy from a

girl I loved. But the freight was avoidable. It was conquerable. And it was sweet in the way that victory is as the caboose disintegrated into the south, leaving me gulping icy air and feeling alive.

Dean and I both came from families divorced from and cynical of religion. As a requisite part of rebellion, we spun toward the occult and vague spirituality. We ingested a lot of questionable jars of chunky fungi, laced our minds with a lot of LSD, and smoked a lot of the Northwest's strongest grass. We also stayed awake for long stretches, welcoming the hallucinations and strange streaks of inspiration that sleeplessness brings (later I would hear that sleep deprivation causes psychosis—figures). But we did these things, in major part, because we earnestly wanted to know God, wanted to image Him against the falsity of the rest our lives. I wouldn't claim that we glimpsed the thinnest sliver of Him in the shuddering seconds in front of those trains, but I will claim this: it was a taste of faith. We did not wish for death. We loved life—we were thrilled and fascinated by it, irrespective of its pains. As the freight thundered headlong toward us, as we trembled and touched one another's elbows lightly, shifting on our legs, as tears were pushed from our eyes by the fury of what was coming, we believed as deeply as I've believed anything since that we would live. We were teaching the spectators in ourselves, the parts of us that needed to watch and have everything proven. We were teaching ourselves to be as courageous as we would ever need to be—more than we'd ever need to be. We were reinventing ourselves as strong so that we could walk forward into a life that was getting brasher by the day.

I always felt ease as I passed back across 145th, the clouds rose-colored, the trees and mini malls giving way to more concrete and more cars. And when I inched back through that window, dropped muddied jeans and placed myself in the fold of sheets for an hour

before the alarm sounded again, I knew I'd rise more vital and refreshed than anyone I knew—except for maybe Dean. Perhaps it was all just catharsis.

And later that day, as I slouched in the back of a musty classroom, I'd play those early-morning hours on a loop in the back of my head. Our teachers postured half-heartedly before the chalkboard. My peers slept, gambled, gazed out streaky windows, passed bottles back and forth under the desks. In the midst of this, I could even conjure a little thrill, a tingle, recalling—enough to ride through three p.m.

Gettin' Up

“Do you write?”

From under a ball cap twisted to the side, through an exhalation of smoke, from a face fashionably obscured, the question was asked time and again, the mode of introduction between glassy-eyed, beer-clutching kids knocked into a lean by the invisible heft of hip-hop style. It was part challenge, part greeting, part aggression, part attempted camaraderie. It might not come until one of you noticed a crust of paint or the stray streak of marker on a knuckle.

For me, at the time when fat pens and cans of Krylon began to bulge and rattle in folds of clothing, I was almost completely ignorant of the hip-hop roots of graffiti. For me, it arrived with the allure of another card of mischief to play in the game of getting through high school.

Garfield High School slouches along the block between 22nd and 23rd Avenues in the Central District of Seattle. It has quite a history. Was a time—the older folks who sell you barbecue or catfish out of faded storefronts might say—that Garfield was proud.

Quincy Jones went there, goddamit. So did Jimi Hendrix and Bruce Lee. Then again, others will tell you, was a time that Garfield was so dangerous some kids came, got their assignments, and re-treated. A time when knives flashed like jewelry in the halls. There was a time when the Black Panthers made a stand and tear gas wafted through hallways like weed smoke did in my day. It was a place forever associated with “Blackness” and, as a result, inevitably under the thumb of hip-hop culture. No matter that in my day the social segregation was near-absolute, that with the exceptions of sports, the jazz band, drug deals, and a handful of parties, racial lines weren’t much crossed outside the classroom. Hip-hop influence was insidious even on us interlopers from Capitol Hill, Queen Anne, or the University District.

Garfield was a word, which, if dropped in the company of suburbanite kids, would elicit respect, fear, and envy. Actually, Garfield wasn’t any more dangerous or tense than any other school—and, judging by statistics, was in fact a good measure safer than some “white” schools. What was true is that it suffered more than others from the bureaucratic neglect that plagued the Seattle School District: the insufficient funds, tenured and listless teachers, and outdated and minimal resources. With the exception of the Advanced Placement classes and a handful of inspired younger instructors, the twelve hundred students were hurried through the factory and out into the streets of their lives. As the indolent security force realized that a great deal went on beneath their unwatchful eyes, they made a decision to avert them—at least until the class of 1995 was gone forever.

At any rate, we didn’t mind the blind eyes that greeted us on the stoops of that old building every morning. The license to idle the days away in the city parks, to clown around in classes, was fine by us. I hesitate to say, therefore, that tagging was anything more than just another form of mischief. But because of the political

root of graffiti, I suspect there was some anger or disillusionment in it, however unconscious.

In my fuzzy recollection, it happened all at once, though that's surely inaccurate. It just became visible to me all at once. Bubble letters and flat black quadrangulars, the most honed and most amateur, the most traditional and most new school, in glossy paint pens and traditional Marks-A-Lot, the tags piled up. They ballooned and crashed over lockers and doors, across desks and windows, on the bumpy cinderblock of rotting bathrooms. *Liveevill*, *Def*, *Chaos*, *SCM*, *enigma 1*, until a tsunami of letters covered much of the lead paint. The janitors buffed the walls futilely. It was terminal.

I buffed the walls myself, in fact. One winter morning I knocked into school an hour late, figuring I'd make a nominal appearance in Spanish class. I stopped at a water fountain. As I wiped my mouth, the unblemished wall in front of me proved too tempting. I was circling the A of my ugly, huge "Chaos" when I heard an outraged yelp. I cursed and turned from the "Ch@" to Mr. Ball, the polyester-clad shop teacher.

"What do you think you're doing?" he demanded, already lurching toward me. With pretended befuddlement and incredible arrogance, I pocketed the pen.

"What? I was just trying to get this ugly tag off the wall, Ball. Chill out—yo!" The quiet man must have had some athletic or military training because he twisted my arm back with efficiency, extracted the pen, and marched me to the security office with barely restrained rage, ignoring my threats to sue him. He left me with the graying head officer, Gus, who leisurely finished a donut, shaking his head at me with each bite.

For the better part of an hour after school Gus marched me around the building, every few seconds pointing at a tag.

"Who write that?" He'd fire at me, popping corn nuts in his mouth. I'd shrug. He let it slip that if I ratted out a big-deal writer, I'd be

free to join my friends in the park. That was the first time that I was asked to bust Karl Coulton; I chose not to. Gus left me alone with a rag and a bottle of sharp-smelling chemical. I scrubbed away a handful of wack tags.

The first time that I dashed and climbed through the narrow alleys and deserted streets of downtown and put my mark on warehouses and buses and offices, I felt reborn. Tagging— or, more exactly, the process of “getting up” — was irresistible: fun, exhilarating, cathartic, and addictive. It was Us against Them. That “They” were amorphous, poorly defined—Cops? Business owners? Metro transit? Corporations? The school system?—didn’t much matter. They weren’t Us.

There was something else in the circus cage of high school: the need for respect. Sports, academics, music, and other traditional sources were not so valuable in my little corner of Garfield as was delinquent feat.

As I followed Karl or Ike or Zinn across a four-lane freeway and shimmed up a thirty-foot pole to slash my tag across an exit sign, all of this brewed in me, temporarily lifting off burdens that I couldn’t even identify. It didn’t matter that I was an atrocious artist (actual graffiti art was something I dared to try my hand at only once) and a pathetically small-potatoes writer—in short, a total phony. I was running silent and fast through my mutating city, my mutating life, alongside people I considered *mine*, putting down scrolls of evidence that I existed and was not afraid.

Inevitably a crew formed. We called ourselves CDW: Criminally Disposed Writers. Somehow we invited an offensive. Our scarcely dried tags wound up sliced through with Xs and taunts of TOY!—wack writer—above and below them. We retaliated.

This was about the time that Karl Coulton broke out and cleared a space for himself as a serious graffiti artist—in fact began the rise

toward the legendary. Part of this was the cultivation of “pieces”—the large, elaborate murals that graffiti is fortunately still associated with. But Karl also had to establish an inviolable rep as a writer—and as a member of a crew. There were a couple of nights when I nearly called it quits, when a duo or trio of silent figures shouldered past, smoke floating up from cigarettes in their facelessness. Karl was legitimate to my phony; he was decidedly in this game and I knew from sharing a soccer field with him he did not play games solely for fun. When rivalry came up, so did his Irish: his broad face hardened and a grayness that was not mere theater backed up his gaze.

One night I was with Karl and a couple CDWs at a “legal wall” (a space allotted for graffiti art)—the west side of the Greyhound bus station. Karl was twisting flourishes onto a piece. A couple of joints or smokes, tiny red circles that smeared the dark, had been dancing in a fifth story window and now a call floated down to us.

“Ey, yo! You guys CDW?”

The speaker dragged on whatever he was smoking. His tone unnerved us. Everyone, I realized then, deferred to Karl.

“Who, man?” He asked, his back to the speaker, eyes on his work.

“CDW, yo. Are . . . you . . . guys . . . C . . . D . . . W?” The stranger spoke slowly, with mock mental retardation. By now we were looking over our shoulders at the ample shadows around the bus barn, less sure about the neutrality of the place. Karl stalled with a grin.

“Naw, man, we’re not CDW. Those dudes are fucking toys. I see their shit all over town and it makes me sick. We’re just up from Ballard. Not really a crew.”

Disarmed, the two heads in the window chattered about this and that, mixing in invective about the CDW toys. When we gathered our cans to split, Karl issued a glance that said pay attention.

“Hey yo, we’re about to go,” he called up to the pair who were now distracted, chatting. “But I got something for you real quick.”

He stepped to the front of their apartment building, snapped his fattest cap on a can of black, and carefully applied a five-foot CDW onto the brick.

“Fuck man, what’s up with that? This is our pad, dude,” they protested—but they couldn’t lean out far enough to see. Buzzing with pride and adrenaline, we ran off into the night, toward the illicit side of writing.

But it wasn’t to last for me; as I knew in my heart was the case, it would only take one decisive scare to knock the paint out of my hands for good.

I turned a sweatshirt inside out and laced high-top Nikes. I pulled the hood on and slipped two cans of Krylon—red and flat black—into the pouch pocket and pushed a felt pen into my back pocket. I killed the light and climbed through the window.

Zinn was visible a half block away. He drove a white Ford Escort coupe that fairly screamed teenager. The cherry of his Marlboro floated back and forth as his nervous hand compulsively ashed it.

We cut across the sleeping city, Zinn chattering nervously as was his way, me watching the vapor lights coat buildings. Zinn drove erratically, aggressively, clutch-lurching, impatient. This unsettled me so I lit the joint—to get rid of it and to dull my nerves.

“Fuck, dude, keep that low, bro,” Zinn chided. He drove more conservatively to Karl’s block, doused the headlights. Karl thudded against the driver’s window, startling the smoke out of Zinn’s hand. Karl opened the door and crammed himself into the back. He was laughing to himself and the glassy, half-cracked burn of mischief lit his face.

“Shit, dude, you been bombing already, man?” Zinn asked, clearly uncomfortable with the idea.

“I been gettin’ up for an hour, bro,” Karl replied, suddenly seri-