

Mystery Train

In Johnny Cash's Folsom Prison Blues , he's singing from the perspective of a guy in prison hearing or seeing the train go by and imagining all the possibilities of going with it. The movie Walk the Line tells us that Cash composed the song when he was in the Air Force in Germany. Who knows? Maybe a train went by the barracks. The train goes right by my apartment too, and it has an effect on me I can't quite explain. I'm speaking of a freight train now, not a commuter train, or a light rail, or an Amtrak, but a good old fashioned east-west freight train...

Chicago is a railroad town. It was really created by the slaughterhouse industries. People could sell their cattle in Denver, or Omaha, or anywhere out West and the stock could come in on trains to Chicago for processing before it made its way east, either by way of the Lake or by train further. Where I live now is where the train comes into the center of the city from the west. It's south and west of downtown, just north of the Chicago River and Back of the Yards . Back of the Yards is the neighborhood in Upton Sinclair's The Jungle , a place where immigrants who worked in the meat processing industry lived. Many of them were Lithuanian and the neighborhood still bears the Lithuanian imprint. My grandfather was Lithuanian, which gives the history some kind of relevance. It's funny how you can move around this country and keep running into bits and pieces of yourself.

These days the train doesn't carry cattle. I think most of the trains that go by are part of the BNSF line , the Burlington Northern Sante Fe Railway. The vast majority are stacktrains, which are yellow steel carriages made to carry stackable containers, which are themselves modularly suited to trucks and ships. It's pretty cool if you think about it. You can stuff something in a container anywhere in the world and it can come into port, get loaded on a train, then come into a city, get loaded on a truck, and wind up anywhere in the country without ever being unpacked. Coal trains also go by. They seem to travel mostly by night. You can tell when the coal trains go by because the house trembles. I'm probably 100 yards from the track. That's how heavy those suckers are. The whole earth moves when they come in. They are the squeaky ones too, even the steel rails are straining under their weight.

I like the sound of the train whistle at night and I like the rhythm of the train when it passes. There are a lot of sounds in the city that I don't like. Sirens, car alarms, shouting, car tires, trucks in reverse, etc. But the train, even when it wakes me up, is soothing. I think it's because I have this feeling that if I'm ever really trapped I could just walk out there and get on it and go West. It wouldn't be that easy though. I know people still hop trains but I don't think you can do it on the up-to-date ones. There are still a few that pull traditional box cars, but the box cars are space age now and have a very elaborate door lock system. When you're out in the country you still see the old box cars. I don't see them here much if ever.

The other cool thing to note about the train is the graffiti . (A coal train is passing me now but it's empty so I'm not shaking. The coal trains are incredibly long.) The graffiti contest on the sides of the trains unites writers from coast to coast. If you're really into it and you make a point of visiting the railyards, you'll see the same writers' art over and over. I imagine secret messages moving across the country this way, some for good and some for ill.