

The Roundhouse—Say *Beautiful* When You Tell Them Where You're From

from The Stations of the Trolley

On the Waterfront Trolley, I repeat
the stories of Whitehorse history till
I cannot speak; the words get fainter,
harsher, till, at day's end, they are
part of the trolley engine's drone.

Later, after we've let the trolley
into the roundhouse to sleep it off,
a couple comes to visit. I'm the only one
left at work, just locking up.

He has hairy arms, a T-shirt with the sleeves
torn off. His wife wears neon yellow,
her hair jet black. Their faces are burnt
around the cheeks because they've been
riding motorcycles from Denver, Colorado
to the Yukon. They smile broadly, just
happy they made it before we closed.

They want to see the trolley. I think
they'll want to hear the history of Whitehorse.
I tell them, "I'm sorry. I have no voice left."

Immediately, he signs that he can't hear me.
They are both deaf. He points to his eyes and then
into the room behind me;

Can we see the trolley?

Sure, I tell them. They murmur little gasps
of pleasure when I invite them
into the roundhouse, and gesture for them
to board the trolley.

We communicate with a small pocket notebook and pen,
and he can hear just enough when I speak.

I write down when the trolley was made, where it came from,
and he writes to me of trolleys in New York City and San Francisco.
Is this the brake? How is it powered?

He repairs pinball machines, signs to me
what it is like to play pinball, and I recognize
the flippers and the handle you pull to launch
the ball into play. He loves the lights
and vibrations. He has 40 pinball machines, he says.
He's very happy now that he's left his postal job.

Our conversation, half an hour, with few words.
We do it with expression, big playful gestures,
more than others might use in polite
conversation where the rest of the world
counts on the turn of a word,
or wit, to make their points.

In the silence, I can hear the creak of the boards,
as I use big hand-expressions about how beautiful
the Yukon mountains are now, or to show how
the trolley moves down the track
if it could, fast and bumpy. The bell would ring,
the horn blast. Their smiles explode from sunburnt
faces. If they could ride, I know he would
think we were *inside* a pinball machine.

They keep signing the word for *beautiful*
to talk about the Yukon, and it's the only word
he can speak, like a whisper,
and I know then, that if I only said
that one word on the trolley
all day long, to everyone,
it would be enough.