But leaning against the train window, drunk with the hope which anything so unbegun always instills, I remember my past returnings … Remember that although this initial intoxication disappears, yet these things in that hour moved you to tears, and made of an outward gaze through the dining-car window a plenitude not to be borne.

—Elizabeth Smart, *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept*

At the beginning of May I spent 24 hours on a train that crossed three states. It wound its way down the coast at first, from Seattle to Portland, before heading into the backcountry, through what felt like the America I knew from a lifetime of books and TV – acres and acres of agriculture and back yards. Then, just as the sun was setting, it ran a narrow passage through a national park in Oregon and my ears popped as I caught glimpses of lakes and mountains through a thick wall of trees.

I was worried I’d get bored, hungry, stiff, but I was fine. I spent most of my time in the futuristic observation car reading the Earthsea books, taking bad videos and watching a man get increasingly irate
as he tried to put together a powerpoint presentation. I went to sleep when it got dark and woke up to golden light in California. It was a dream.

I reached San Francisco around 9am on a Friday. It was too early to check in so I left my bags before heading out. Ellis Street was lined with shopping carts and blankets, and as I walked north I passed a woman hosing down the sidewalk where some of the homeless had slept the night before.

I kept walking. I knew the hills would be steep but nothing quite prepared me for how the streets rise up to meet you under a high sun. I valued the freedom of being alone, the luxury of walking without talking, the ability to stop and stare as another face in the crowd. I walked all over that day, looking for something I had glimpsed from the train. That night I ate alone and dreamt of a fast moving landscape.

The next day I walked through downtown and made my way to the museum of modern art. I deliberately hadn’t looked up what was on, excited just to see the permanent collection. Starting from the bottom I walked through room after room of familiar names, taking in what it was that I needed from them, feeling restored without knowing I had needed restoring to some other state of being.
As I rounded the corner of the third floor, I came across a show called *The Train*. I watched captivated as a screen in a dark room played back to me the journey I had just made. People in sixties skirts, hats and sunglasses stood before the very backyards I had cut through on my way down the coast, all bathed in that golden light I had watched with wonder.

I hadn’t taken in the wall text at first, too absorbed by the movement on the screen, but now I went back to read it. This was not my train but one carrying the body of Robert F. Kennedy from New York City to Washington DC in 1968. A completely different route, a different landscape, and yet the familiarity of this perspective was overwhelming. The green rushing past, the pairs of eyes tracking the windows, no time to see inside.

But something was off. I read the caption: Philippe Parreno, *June 8, 1968*, 2009. I went back to the wall text and read it for a second time, read it properly this time, and realised I had started from the end of this story.

Walking back to the first room I found a series of colour images taken by Magnum photographer Paul Fusco who was on the funeral train to document its journey. People stand by the side of the tracks holding banners, their faces stilled by the train’s movement, the weight of tragedy – the background
is a blur. Their hands are clasped in prayer, clutching handbags, or covering mouths, sometimes saluting, sometimes holding their own camera.

The next room showed images sourced by the Dutch artist Rein Jelle Terpstra who set about tracking down the memories in those cameras, the home videos and snapshots, to bring to light the people’s view of the journey, to give agency to those captured and left behind, those who had placed so much hope in the empathy of a senator.

And now here was Parreno, with his 2009 re-enactment of the journey, creating a false document of history, the mourning subjects of Fusco and Terpstra’s work now replaced by carefully styled actors.

When I realised this I saw the work not as a trick but a beautiful counterfeit, easily slipped in next to the real thing, like how something remembered too many times can inadvertently create new embellishments, details, in the mind of the spectator/witness/mourner.

So there I was, in my strange state of loneliness and freedom, implanting my own false document, imagining myself on that train and thinking about the difference between history and memory.
I found myself asking what it meant to be there, to mourn for something never experienced. I stood there for a long time feeling the weight of collective grief exalted by a nostalgia for clapboard houses and a ‘real’ America that doesn’t really exist.

At the same time other works to do with trains filled my mind; *Station to Station* by Doug Aitken and even an Edward Hopper or two, specifically the ones with people in plain rooms, their loneliness turned to rapture by the light from the window. Perhaps I didn’t know as many works about trains as I thought, perhaps it was the inherent familiarity of this perspective that led me to think I had seen this before.

Never has a chance encounter with art held such a sense of affinity. Looking at these works I felt compelled to align them to my own story, to see them with what Jennifer Liese calls ‘unfettered subjectivity’.

There is something lonely about travelling alone. Naturally. But it is not the travelling part, never the train, the airplane or that first walk through new streets. And yet the actual city or landscape can be lonely; full of lonely dinners and lonely beds and missed photo opportunities. But somehow when I am moving, when I am given the sense of purpose that comes from travel, I am free.
In the gallery I came face to face with that feeling again, sensing a connection between myself and the eyes of the various photographers. By bringing them all together in one space *The Train* spoke as much about their viewpoint as how we go about witnessing and recording a journey and a moment in time.

And so I recognised the view from the train that was not mine.

— Maria Howard, 11.18