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*coins and tokens*

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A coin is many things: an object of exchange and value; a metal disk held close to the body in hand or wallet or pocket; or a miniature, portable relief sculpture. Coins mark out a narrow space where symbolic and material worlds coexist in dense proximity. Received as change, gifts or tips, bought from the bank or in flea markets, lost and found, saved and spent, they come from everywhere, go everywhere.

Since I was a kid, like lots of kids, I have flattened coins on train tracks. I lay them down in long rows on the track and wait. Sometimes I'll wait hours with a beer and the smells of milkweed and train oil. The weight will come on slowly, snaking forward with underground tones that send me back to the tall grasses. Huge and sudden, the engine comes, chased by the incredible noise of closed cars rattling like they'll shake apart and wheels hammering down on rail joints, metal on metal. There is an extra noise when the wheels pass over the coins, pounded by a momentum that could cut a truck in two. Endless cars crash and roll by, and then are gone, taking the noise with them. The crickets resume and I search the rocks for scattered coins, greasy faceless smears of copper, silver and gold.

Sometimes fenced in with chain-link and barbed wire, sometimes bordered by the blank backsides of warehouses, and sometimes left open like an unhealing scar, train tracks cut through cities like rusty blades. Even stray dogs steer clear. Everybody knows that when the engine plunges through, a careless trespasser will be diced into mulch. But in a city lacking green space, some are still drawn to the narrow and endlessly long wastelands of untended scrub and steel. In cities, where public space is the most policed and where private space must be rented, train tracks and the deprived currency-conversion enacted there provide an illicit liminality. Destruction makes space. And although it is narrow, unbelievably thin, is it there. A gap in the fence.

Spare change rolls around the earth. Paid with change, and returned as change, back and forth, exchanging and unchanging, forever. Like a wheel rolls between track and carriage, a coin rolls between exchange and value, mobilizing and materializing as it goes. But a coin is of such a small matter that sometimes it can slip out from this circuitous route. It can escape through a hole in a pocket, behind a dresser, down a well or into a pond as a polluting wish, or be accidentally sent to the landfill along with an emptied pocket's debris. When crossing borders it can become a souvenir, and when officially discontinued, as the Canadian Penny was in 2012, it can become dead weight. These lost, decommissioned or train-flattened coins remember other things it can do – it can be a screwdriver, two coins can open a beer bottle, and a coin with a hole in it is a washer. It can scratch a lottery ticket, level a wobbly table, or wedge an old window shut. A derailed object can be a tool, but always an improvised one; a hack and a trick.

Derailed coins like these are wheels without cart or carriage or track, that may roll willy-nilly, enjoying a wilder objecthood. They can slip from the loop, out through an impossible gap between system and symbol, exchange and value, track and train. The reeking strips of weed indifferently slice through city and wilderness, borders and properties, behind and in-between. And the derailed wheel rolls its weird blade, just as a snake cuts the grass.