

## T R A I N S

by Rebecca McClanahan

**THE TRAIN IS A ZIPPER RELEASING**, tooth by tooth, the Southern landscape. The swamp obliges, opens for our view, as do fields and meadows. Even the forest allows us its dark center. Months ago, a hurricane swirled through, sucking young trees free of the ground and snapping old ones at their weakest joints. The violence has filed the trunks to points, fingers stabbing at the sky as if to assign blame. Soon, summer kudzu and moss will spread themselves to soften the broken places. I have been four days away from my husband, garden, and cat. Four days, marooned with hundreds of others who love and trust the written word more than we should, in a conference hotel where we sit all day and dance all night and where a disc jockey keeps announcing that a wedding ring has been found and would anyone care to claim it?

Traveling by rail allows time to return to us. *Return* suggests that we've already turned once and are doing it again. It presupposes an origin, starting

place – call it home. At the edge of the woods, someone has set up housekeeping in a blue tent. Dozens of these tents are clustered along the way, on the outskirts of small towns. "Look," a mother says, nudging her young son. "That's where the homeless live." Which seems strange. If where we live is not our home, what is it? On this Sunday in early April, I have made my home in this window seat, among people who sleep and eat so close that it makes little sense to call them strangers.

The track rumbling, the occasional lurch, reminds us of how far we have gone, mile by green mile, and how far we have yet to go. The trip from Washington, DC, to my home in North Carolina takes ten hours, not allowing for the delays accustomed train travelers count on. Time is money, says my banker neighbor, who flies nonstop between power meetings, attached by cellular and modem, growing impatient with the slightest delay between communications. Train travelers forgive delays more easily. We have more time than money, and spend our currency in leisure. This second-class car is filled with young mothers and children, college students caught between sessions (it's the end of spring break), grandmothers, and the occasional middle-aged man wearing the shell-shocked gaze of the recently downsized. We pass a pond: still reflection, double world. Tall branches, as if weary of stretching upward, are trying to become roots, entering the water's surface and not stopping there.

We have brought our lunch bags and dinner buckets. The car smells of fried chicken,

