

The Locomotive of the Lord

*If the locomotive of the Lord runs us down, / we should give thanks that the end had magnitude—*Jack Gilbert

1.

I have never lived so far from the tracks I could not hear a train, its whistle and chug washing over me like dawn across an ocean or a prairie, if light could grow loud as it came on, or you could feel it rising in your feet, swelling in your chest, as if the train had started somewhere inside you as something small and far away and was growing closer, growing larger, so you want to dive out of the way, but you can't

dive away from yourself—it is always

too late. The mother pulls her child back from the tracks—even though he is already 10 feet away—her breath warm against his face, her lips close to his ear, saying *no honey, this is not the one, this is not our train* and his eyes widen in wonder at the sheer momentum, the speed and force of it, the flash of metal, its windows blurring into a single sheath of all the tones of silver and the rushing sound and the bell ringing the end of the world and the feel of those fingers on his shoulders tightening their grip, digging in, knowing how the train is not only the train but the space

it makes, the pressure wave, how it goes through you, and goes on, pulling you by the belt of your coat, lifting, longing to follow after it, so you must lean against/into its wind, then leaving you behind, unbalanced and dizzy in the settling of leaves and dust and longing, the gentle sadness and surprise that we are still here, that it has faded, that wherever it is going it is gone and you can't chase it, and whatever and whoever it carries away, it is not you and yet you feel

a part of you is going with it, the long string of your breath maybe, or
a scrap of wonder that wonders if perhaps that was, in fact, your train.

Someone told me once, all metaphor is

2.

a proof for how the world connects or tries to. So, even the saddest darkest angriest poem is an act of love, an act of joy, lovemaking, being full of, being packed with, things, the stuff of life reaching for itself and for others, each thing getting as close as it can to the other things and throwing sparks. Dreaming of entering each other bodily then pulling away, sated and unsated. The sheets tangled around their feet. Maybe they tease each other about who will sleep in the wet spot. Maybe they spoon. Maybe they sleep. And on waking, reach for each other again.

I think

3.

of transfers and connections and tracks going everywhere, strong cables coupling cable-cars, coupling towns to cities, clasping the country together. As a boy I would walk down to the tracks with my best friend and we'd put pennies on the rails, then wait. Placing our palms to steel to feel the first vibrations in our hands as if the train could ride our nerves, our veins, as if in feeling it miles away we were connected, boy to rail to train. As if we were the train. Then scrambling up the embankment, then the explosion, the roar of wheels and wind. I do not know what happened to those pennies, flat and curved, the fingernails of some bronze god, but I remember their smooth heat, alive in my hands.

And if I were to rise

4.

from this chair and wander like a desert saint, down the stairs and out of the house, barefoot, bareheaded, onto the damp road alive with stars, leaving behind this desk and this laptop and coffee mug, and the 1099s and W2s and the poetry book and guitar in the corner, impatiently leaning against the wall—like some teenager, bored and nervous—waiting for a pair of hands to press the strings and make them sing. If I were to get up mid-

line, and walk out through the woods down to the holler where the tracks are alive with the 765 rattling and steaming from Huntington toward Hurricane and step onto the ties, arms outstretched, legs apart in front of that train, to catch it and let it take me in one bright flash and the screaming of brakes

I can't help but wonder at the ways we seek that brightness, desperate for contact, grappling with the angels as they moan and scratch our backs and bite down on our shoulder-blades, at how we tear down roads too fast, and dive

off of cliffs, and out of planes, taking the needle or the pipe or the pill, holding the smoke in our lungs as long as we can, falling into beds and out of them again, coupling to uncouple, and if we're lucky, walk away knowing you never really walk away which is, I think, a trying to unhitch, to interrupt the signal, the hive-like buzz, by going through a thing, feeling it completely and emerging, shaking off the salt and sea and drying in the wind and sun's heat, cleansed. To live for an instant, in the instant, with no expectations or regret. Someone else

will read that book, pay those taxes. The guitar will be sold at the church yard sale to another skinny boy with long fingers and a head full of music who will play it better than you ever could with your heavy, brick-

layer's hands. And it is a relief to know the world does not need us. That it might be better off, in fact. Have you ever seen a house off the road, overgrown with kudzu, so the edges are rounded and green and the shape of a house is only a suggestion, discernable from a distance? Have you ever wanted to part the leaves and enter it, hot and dark like a lung? Loss can be a deepening too, the maker of poems and songs written by your wife or son and much better than yours with all their angry love and abandonment.

I know too much

5.

about this, I think. And nothing. I know it is a privilege

to be restless and dream of throwing a perfectly good life away. And I'm not going to. I am only saying

there is something about standing too close to the tracks as the ground begins to shake and the urge that it creates that reminds me

of good bourbon which reminds me of good sex and good poems which contain all the colors and flavors of sweat and risk (and the metaphors too) which makes you

want to dive into them. In front of them. Which is to say, there is something about the sound of a train.

After the accident

6.

when I was still relearning how to walk (there is so much I should explain) and couldn't drive and needed crutches to stand, and I swayed and ached with every tug and wobble of the world and was always in pain and Darius was little, only four. We rode the Amtrak from White River Junction down to Newark to visit Susan's parents, rumbling through the green-gray hills of Western Mass into Springfield through the chill concrete of mid-December. I had to get up early from my seat each time we had to change a train and it was cold in the vestibule between the cars and everything creaked and shook and rattled and the walls and floors shifted and vibrated. And it was hard to balance, so Darius kept tightening his grip around my leg. And the ticket agent came to check on us, *Sir? Are you ok?* And I said yes because what else could I say (there is so much I could explain). And I remember never wanting to reach that station, get off that train, but to stand there in the iron cage and ache with my boy's death-grip on a shattered hip, wanting to tell him to hold on with all his fear and strength and never let go. And I remember how he looked up at me through his wild hair, shivering, and how his looking ran me down and ran me through. Sometimes I don't know if grief may be love's measure or maybe just a part of this, that unrelenting pressure on a healing break, a muscle trying to reknit itself as the cosmos shakes.

There is so much

7.

I can't explain—any more than I can translate the language of a mountain, its trees ablaze with wings, how love like pain like hunger makes us strangers to ourselves, and makes us do strange things: steal and plead, and suffer, and dance like David to the trumpets in the street, sharpening our senses as we lose our sense, making visions come, so I wake in the night, certain I am still in the house in Georgia with the yard full of chiggers and the chain-link fence where kudzu grows and creeps and the railroad tracks behind it are always on the verge of humming and trembling into life so that all the china rattles in the cabinet and Susan shifts and groans, her long black hair spread on the sheets like a downed raven's wing spread across a highway. I have heard the voice of the son I lost so many times and have risen from the bed and tried to find his room only to stop and stare about in disbelief at who and where I was and then slide down the wall, shaking, grateful, sick in the gut, sweating, chilled. This life is a beautiful

accident made of accidents we try to shape. And sometimes the sound of your son in the night is the distant whistle of a train rolling away.

After the honeymoon Rachael and I rode the Wolverine from Chicago

8.

back to Kalamazoo. It snowed through the service at St. Marks in Coldwater, through the reception, and the wedding night, and breakfast at her parent's farm, and the three days in the city spent mostly in hotel rooms. Glass boxes within boxes stacked on boxes, hovering over other boxes. All of them shining with their own light and heat and lights of the city. Warm spaces floating in the freezing air. Like stars among stars. If stars were packed close as they seem from a distance. Instead of millions of miles and years way. Separated by freezing space. How do I explain?.

Do you ever think of her when you are making love to me?

and I said no (it's like an ache, this ache at my hip maybe; she is there but over there and still inside of me and all around but not). You can make love in grief, in pain. You can dance to the Lord in a crowd and still be dancing as if they were not there, as if He weren't watching, as if She were watching (we do it all the time) make love in a box of warm air in a building full of other boxes other people, clicking through the channels, showering, making their plans for dinner, dressing for the show, undressing for each other, teasingly, slow, or quick and desperate. I think of Susan. I think of Cyrus in the way you think of deer on a hillside outside a bedroom, throwing on the floodlights as you sleep. You know that they are there and sometimes you would wish to run a hand across a back, feel their bones and heat, their hunger but you can't and sometimes you wake and stare and lock eyes for a minute and then they run off, run away.

And so

9.

we drank champagne we smuggled in a coat as the train plowed through two feet of powder on a clear blue day and the snow exploded and whirled around us, caught in the wind that the train had made

around the train, glittering in brilliant constellations, a comet entering the atmosphere. A tunnel of sunlight, starlight, and frost wheeling and dancing in space

I have been thrown onto the tracks and run through, felt the blast of it, the heat and shudder, and have risen to find myself in disbelief, uncoupled,

bones reaching for each other for themselves, only to be run down again and that is how it is, for most of us I think. Unless

you are lucky and find yourself one day shivering, someone whispering *this is the one. This is us, our train* and then maybe you step off the platform and step up onto the stairs and find your seat. And you think, I will ride this wherever it takes and be thankful. Thankful for the hand in your hand and the blazing world outside your window picking up speed as it goes, losing its shape, becoming a wash of white and green and blue and gray. Thankful

for the city and the buried fields of wheat and corn. Thankful

for the son you've lost in a shower of sparks and the son waiting for you at the farm and how sometimes you find one in the other. How one hand becomes another, sometimes painful in their transformations, and how they slip from your grasp. Thankful

for the grinding ache that reminds you of who you were and are. Thankful

for the fleeting moments when you forget it's there. Thankful

for how it returns each morning as you rise from bed. Thankful for the
impact and the magnitude

even as you hurtle toward your destination, knowing that you must

get off this train. Knowing you will

be run down and through

again.

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