

Wilderness House Literary Review 7/4

Monty Jones

The Train

Is it from distraction
or a driving, pulsing absorption
that the child in the seat across from me,
appearing to ignore the real thing,
is saying "train" over and over,
to himself, to the air, to the wall
of blindness his imagination has thrown up?

He is clearly determined to say the word,
twenty-two, twenty-three times and counting,
until it loses any meaning and begins to float free
from the visible world as just a sound.

At twenty-nine or thirty he begins to stumble,
falling into a two-note song,
train/TRAIN, train/TRAIN, train/TRAIN,
that by the early forties has turned back on itself
as TRAIN/train, TRAIN/train, TRAIN/train.

His mother sleeps through it,
as if she has heard this story many times.
About the time we leave Grandview,
modest in everything but its name,
the word has become visibly harder to say,
the "t" and the "r" struggling against one another
so he has to slow down and force them together,
the word itself trying hard to disappear.

I did this with a word myself at about that age,
and I remember someone telling me to stop,
as if I were close to a dangerous ground,
some sort of incantation I might be sorry for,
and I speaking up and saying back that I wanted

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to say the word until the world changed.

That must not have been the first time I did it,
having discovered that a word could be depleted,
drained, bled dry, that I could put my mouth
up against it and blow the stuffing out of it
just through a steady, unbending persistence.

The boy began to seem satisfied
that he had gotten everything out of "train"
that he could get, and he sank farther back
and let the word go, rocked to a kind of sleep.
Someone up the car said, "Thank God."
I was kept stirred awake, the sound of the train
shaking me side to side as if it had something
to tell me that could no longer wait.

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Experiment

It is not an experiment,
no control group being possible,
and no way to try again
allowing for some variable
the second time,
no, in fact, second chances at all.

Still, you will try
to peer behind the mirror,
to find a place to stand
so you can observe
what didn't happen,
to catch such a world
playing What If and other games.

Anyone can try to reach
into the turbulent air
and catch a word, anyone
can wish he'd gone left
instead of right, turn over
and over hoping to undo
what he carefully or carelessly did.

But our buildings will collapse
and our bridges fall,
all our failings forgotten, when we are.

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Tales

Cancer was never spoken aloud,
at most a whisper that made the shame
of it burn in the throat – bad luck,
as it had been handed down, that calling
it plainly what it was risked calling it forth.

Old women in mourning shawls,
dipping snuff on the sly, survived so far
into the modern world as to appear
like stubborn ghosts from a past age,
bony fingers locked on every child's wrist.

When the last of them was, finally,
struck down no one told her anything
about how she was soon to die,
that she would soon vanish
into the stale air like one of her own sayings.

Afterward, someone would cry, someone
would order lilies, someone would make sure
to have all the right words said.

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Disappearances

One after another they disappeared,
acts worthy of any illusionist in a red-cape.

One after another they averted their eyes,
bowed their heads, whispered for you
to be quiet, warned you to play along.

At first it was only certain things
they wouldn't talk about, but that grew
until they seemed to lose the power of speech.

At first they kept some secret in a pocket,
but then they folded in on themselves.

That they didn't trust you was one thing
you were sure about, that they wished
for your own disappearance, you surmised.

While you hoped for a way out,
they began to find their own,
sometimes a lifetime of words in a sob,
a heaving of the chest. At last

they lay with their faces turned halfway
toward you. At the end you came to know
what the long silences would really mean.

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The Clock

The clock above the blackboard
offered no explanation.

I sat in the back counting
the days of the week,
trying hard to learn
the iconography of the months,
their pumpkins or fallen leaves,
their wind or rain,
and every time I looked up
the waving hands
made a different wild signal,
nothing I could understand.

Finally, just when I looked
the big hand stuttered onward
from one minute to the next,
not a long smooth sweep
through an endless circle,
but a click or a jerk,
every solid tick
with a beginning
and an end of its own.

I staggered under the weight
of this new knowledge,
like seeing something
I wasn't supposed to see.

I had looked on Time's
naked face and lived,
2:03 on a Tuesday afternoon
in October, 60 years ago.