

SLACK ACTION

It goes through my mind like a train at night,
the train my father rode in the night, his mind
a train of thought far from where he rode.

When I pull into the senior's home I like to feel
the car drift in abeyance round the last corner,
another touch to come nearer, the braking slide

into parking easements and an end. Forty-two
years he leapt among the tracks, nights, to cobble
things together, shuffling boxcars and flat cars,

dealing their lengths part way into sidings – join
and hinge, muster and release – climbing the ladders
free of his uncouplings. It took some sorting out.

He listened hard for the word come down
from the Dispatcher. Too heavy now for the staff,
he has to wait for the machine that will hoist him,

strapped, over to his chair or back to bed again.
A sandbag, his sullen mass slumps into the lift
and rises sloppy and unresisting. He goes with it

staring in disbelief. I am borne here. For us,
mother and wife are let go, the love-ties
grappled loose in unbroken entanglements,

our new solitudes gathering and fanning out.
When the sliding door whispers open for me
– in hand his double-double and an apple fritter,

unlooked-forward-to, like a pill that you take –
I enter with purpose but am halfway off again.
Our family is convergence and divergence both.

I have a photograph of him in mind, a man
in his prime leaning out from the boxcar's ladder,
signaling ahead the slow recessions, the gaps

and clearances, the thrown switches and coupler
knuckles . . . ten feet and closing, five feet, good.
His grief looks poor on him. Plan was he'd be

the first to go – with drinks and smokes, half by
his own wishing – and Mum's years would ease
ahead of him by whole decades. But after



Alzheimer's and a kidney ache, her body still shining
with something fifty about it went off and left him
cajoling his clogged arteries past eighty and beyond.

We never spoke of this, but I always imagined
those seemingly endless trains he assembled
in the night, a hundred cars and counting,

how, when the engine pulls up a little
and the cars buckle forward in succession
but have not yet stopped before the hogger guns it,

it must be that all the fastenings along
let up in turn and spread fresh gaps throughout.
Cars and clusters of cars at once go

clutching and unclutching down their length.
And I try to picture how, the jolting instress
unravelling, their reciprocal momentums

would meet and intermingle, the forward push
backing into slows, and the slows pulling off
pulling forward ahead of their kickbacks and jostles,

and you would hear the whole thing down the line
at once parting and gathering, the entire train
getting on, undecided. But how too, if you really

listened for it, there would be single cars hidden
in the midst, scudding alone, neither pushed
nor pulled, left gentled into hiatus, coasting free

an instant in the long line's accordion folds'
uneasy breathing. A hovering out of waiting,
the glide getting on in the inertia, itself still moving.

He comes to with a jolt. I take in my stride
his pantomimed 'Look who it is!' and we embrace,
our private journeys sallying up behind us

in opposite directions, gently coupling. Not
a greeting or farewell, but a staying that is
neither between us. He keeps me close, and not

to come undone, I tell him what I've been
thinking about the train. 'Slack action, it's called,'
he says, and lets his arms fall open around me.

— JEFFERY DONALDSON

from Slack Action
The Porcupine's Quill, 2013



FROG HOLLOW PRESS

Scroll Series: number two

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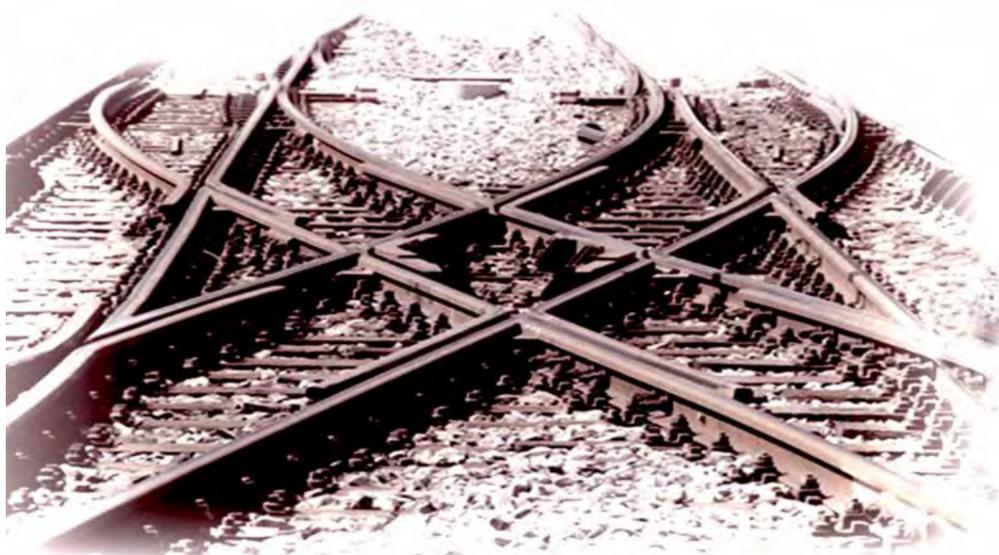
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