

Les Wicks

THREE RAIL WORKERS

In the signal box, elevated
beyond tracks, freight or people
Jack was smoking
& talking
like a great steam engine while
Neal just sat quietly, his
body so at ease it was like
the different parts were talking to each other,
shootin' the shit.

I was younger, more stories
than scars.

& Jack pulled up a bottle from
that busted brown leather bag
he took everywhere.
A few loose sheets of paper
were caught up in his hand along
with the bottle &
it seemed they were hanging onto that bourbon
like a bunch of desperate men.

But one by one
each page
dropped back
into Jack's sack.

There was a quiet to the place, each
bell or mechanical clunk discrete & isolated
so that by themselves the noises barely registered.
Up the tracks
an express freight stood at the second home with
the patience of some sedated circus elephant.

Neal wrote a poem with his huge (caressing) right hand.
Took Jack's reduced bottle
to his rolling lips.

*Nervous amongst elders
my jokes aim for original
but often just "off."*

I was the first one to break, that
train's power held back by only
the insubstantial
fakery of rules, coloured lights.
Pulled the lever & the locomotive began its
tectonic shift towards momentum as
Jack's bottle sunk to the desk.

Jack scrawled the time in the signal box log.
He was always the recorder.

"Boy lacks staying power" Neal mutters.
I take up a tin of oil & a scraper—
leave to clean the points.

Jack smiles,
his pages writhe in the darkness.

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