

Omineca

Metal blasting against my ear drums
The heat of it inhaled through nostrils
Twitching as they burn
Trees and rivers blurring as I perch
Book resting on bare knees
Feet curled into the conductor's chair
A thousand tons of metal
Rushing through steel veins
As you sit calmly in brown overalls
Lips moving against the black voice box
Hands held steady on the controls

This is how I want to remember you
Clear-eyed and whole
Not sinking like a stain into stories
Of severed heads and overturned tomato trucks
Railroaders missing from the waist down

Because to me
They're only stories
And this is real
Me watching you die while you're still alive
Heart giving out
Like your mother's before you
Slipping onto those rails night after night

You would tell us about the times
You came face to face with grizzly bears
On black winter nights
"They're more afraid of you than you are of them." you said
I was sure that you weren't afraid of anything

When I was small I would lie awake
Listening for the far-off whistle of your train
I still lie awake
Listening for you

I guess there's more than one way to remember
As the tips of my fingers curl beneath the waves
And I wrestle a hook from the lips of a fish
You're still there
In the movement of my wrists
In my hopes and in my fears

Your struggles
Inherited alongside my eyes
The sunburnt skin and stubborn chin

It's still tough to explain
The way I felt you slip away
Bittersweet
Remembering
The parts of you I thought were lost
Derailed and disappearing in the smoke
Rediscovered in the rubble
This process of rebuilding
Sifting
For salvageable remains
For the scraps of love
That lay buried underneath your pain

At Christmas dinner
We talk about the railroader who died in Saskatchewan
Her third year on the job
“The first five years and the last five years are the worst.”
Missing some piece of the puzzle
That keeps your coworkers from picking you up off the tracks

Here
You mostly hit moose or deer
Which is more tolerable than people
So we stayed
Bought boats and quads
Working all the hours it takes to pay for them
Not many left over to enjoy all the toys

Some dreams look like a John Deere in the driveway
Until that gets stolen too
They found it out in Beaverley
Might have been someone at the company
But we'll never know

My brother buys a house at nineteen
Becomes a conductor
Then a locomotive engineer

Like his Dad and Granddad before him

The only time my Grandpa ever told Dad he was proud of him

Was the day he got a job on the railway

Lied about his age

Beat stealing sardines from the grocery store

Still short of nineteen

He picked his friend off the tracks

Head come clean off

And climbed back into that locomotive chair