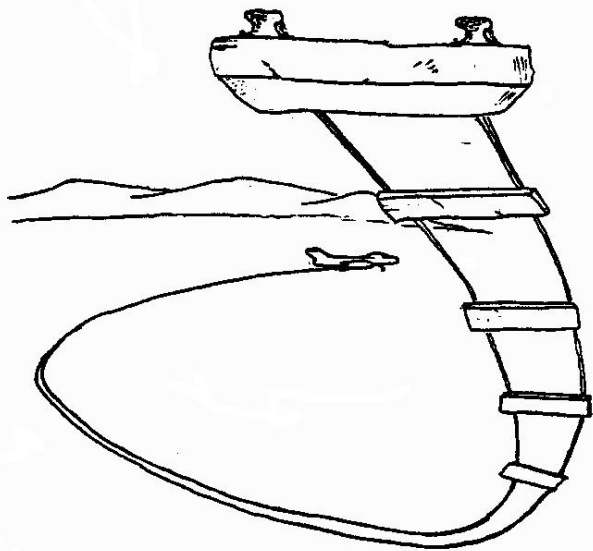


The Accident



Richard Hill

The Accident

"the railroad and the carriages upon it, make up a complex machine whose parts cannot be considered separately"

Anon, 1821

"The man, for the time being, becomes a part of the machine in which he has placed himself, being jarred by the self-same movement, and receiving impressions upon nerves of the skin and muscle which are nonetheless real because they are unconsciously inflicted. "

The Book of Health, 1881.

*From The Railway Journey by Wolfgang Schivelbusch.
(Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1979)*

for Alan Clare Burton

Richard Hill : The Accident

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and what had happened?
a train
moving down a hill
coming in to land
and what had happened?

he read of the tragedy
men in tall hats
the spilled train beached and steaming
like a whale
sunny when it happened
and later
wet
the sky pressed down on the mountains
the grey on green
birds white as paper
creeping through the dim
wet
so that the rescuers
held paper
boards
snatched bits of wreckage
over the victims
trapped inside the shower
the rain that pecked their faces
washed away the blood
one (of the rescuers) told
of one man dead and how
rain (wet he was and shivering)
patted the dead man's eyes
filling and refilling them with tears

running he had almost lost his hat
had caught the train
those first few minutes
sitting there
he puffed and panted
aping the engine as it wheezed and chuffed
up the first gradient from the station
the other passengers trying not to smile
at his exhausted dignity
his choler
his moustache
it moved inside his coat
the stolen money
who would have thought
so easy
each time he bent
he changed position
it moved
it pressed against him
so much
who would have thought
so much
the train moved chanting
up the hill
' by now they know by now
they know'

crouched in the attic
hot
he closed the book
how long ago
and where?

thin wartime paper
in the mess
had it been Taylor's
who disappeared?
he held the book and wondered

cold
in the cutting
it was always cold
even in summer
he could only see the season's progress
move on the cutting's pitted wall
across from him
for company he learnt poetry
sang hymns
even the cat who slept
summer and winter by the stove
made conversation in his mind
always too busy to leave the signal box
until his time was up
leaving.-at night
he'd feel the open air
whirling and dancing
raking his face
his head
moving always away

you could feel it
drum against your flesh
your stomach tighten

overhead
the air
heavy with their weight
the roaring
as if the sky were sagging
like a storm they thundered
the ceiling
china
would vibrate
and with her fear she'd feel
the power
pride

he left the office party early
the music juggling in his ears
inside the car he shivered
blew his nose
turned on the radio
' said today that wages must
be stabilised '
the town slid by
thirsty
he yawned

when he was tired or overworked
the bombers of his dreams returned
strung across ninety miles of sky
when they went down
banging like slammed doors
he felt the shock

against his feet
his spine
his bad back held him to the past
sometimes the pain held tight for days
sometimes went suddenly
but always took his mind away
and to the past
once at the grocer's he had bought some spam
had dreamed of it
and snoek and porn
and all those wartime almost foods
it tasted thin
and far away
and most of it he left

after the riots
the soot
black moths
had fluttered through the air
smudged against windscreen
turret
signal box
burning
on his lips
the taste
familiar
had stayed with him
would not be washed away

that they should both be taken
lost

that they should die
she and the baby
even now the shock would rend him
would explode
against him
like the trains
out of the tunnel
and the noise
raging
against the cutting walls

the vicar's eyes had glistened
still
and wet as stones
then
in the churchyard
as the mourners left
the rain had drummed like fingers
impatient
angry
on the black umbrellas' wings
had almost drowned his words
' pity ...endurance better life ...'
the sweet sour smell of wine was on his breath
that Florence
whose body burned at night
should lie so cold
her baby
their son
lost
o

he felt the rain wash down his cheeks
felt his flesh stiffen in the cold

it was hot in the hospital
air dry in his mouth
the carrier bag
the flowers
sticky in his hand
behind him noises
metal
voices clapped and echoed
he thought of swimming pools
ammonia
the screams and shouts
booming
propped up in bed his daughter smiled
hand resting on the cot beside her
the baby's fierce undaunted eyes
' he's beautiful'
outside
the windows filled with trees

and every second nearer home
and trying to keep awake
above the roar
the engines' roar inside his head
mareseatoatsanddoeseatoats
mareseatoatsanddoeseatoats
mareseatoats
trying to keep awake
to keep awake

she turned
sometimes
clutching in the night
at the sound
the engine
pulling and heaving at her sleep
among the mountains
rolling its noise
buzzing against the windows
the way her father's voice had
once and always
filled it
she could not shake the fancy
that Papa
had ridden
had been taken
by the train
those nights she thought she heard him
banging
muttering about the house
she saw him still and feared him
but in his prime
not the old man she'd nursed
clutching at his slow death
his eyes clenched tight against her tears
at night she prayed
for his return
for her release
escape

her head on his shoulder
in the cinema
she watched the film
mirrored in his eyes
dancers
buildings
great events
he never smoked
she longed for cigarettes
her mouth
to hold him here
like this
his face above
still far away
but held

he hated those rare daylight raids as much
even the milk runs held the chance of death
then you could see the flak
postules
black
flowers
full stops
once
over Cherbourg
he watched a Boston fall
no parachutes
the port wing buckle
falling free
no parachutes
the pulse in his head

pounding
shaking legs
wanting to run
to run
the sky so blue
so like the ocean
and so deep

'Googie Withers' Ollie shouted
' none of your yanks, just Googie,
oo, Googie, Googie, Googie! '
men at other tables
turning heads
the hot mug solid in his hand
he smiled at Ollie
at the window
shivering with rain
' they're sure to scrub' he said
' they're sure to .. .! '
'oo .. Googie, Googie, Googie .. .! '

he had boils
usually on his neck
they chaffed against his scarf
the m.o. gave him poultices
its pain revived his fear
of burning
fear of fire)

' and slowing down'
the doctor said
' things slowing down
librium might help
not a young man anymore'
the doctor's hand he noticed
trembled as he wrote
outside
the sky above them
turned shallow
blue to black
pierced by the sudden pinholes
of the stars

the crash
the impact
had made the teacups dance
her father
in the picture
moved his head
she straightened it
then ran to the window
caught at a chair
her skirt tugged back
' something has fallen
something is smashed'
she said to no one
her voice
a trapped bird
fluttered round the room

after they dragged him clear
they all began to laugh
to sing
jostling and shouting
picking up perspex
bits of metal
talismen
the crew all laughing
the crowd of watchers grim
his leg
the impact
and the floor turned ceiling
the torn wood
metal
squealing to a stop
and the coins spilled like the sun
shining and sticky
and then lost
in the darkness
stolen so carefully
lost
and the wing torn
tearing
and his leg
lost between one step and the next
and what had happened?
a train moving down a hill
coming in to land
and what had happened?

MERSEYSIDE POETRY MINIBOOKS SERIES

RICHARD HILL, born in Yorkshire in 1941, has lived most of his life on Merseyside. His poems have been read on stage, TV and radio, and published in magazines in England and overseas. His work appears in many anthologies, including *Love,,Love, Love* (Corgi). His previous publications include *Hard Up* (Driftwood), *Love poems and others* and *Les demoiselles de Sauve* (both Glasshouse) and *Five Dinners to Cheap Cuts* (Toulouse) with Al Montesi.

In 1978 he was awarded the *Felicia Hemans Prize for Lyrical Poetry*. He is co-editor of the magazine *Divan* and performs with the poetry band *Burning Deck*. He is married with two children.

“The frisson of real poetry ... Richard Hill has a Liverpool accent but his own voice”

Adrian Henri

WINDOWS

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