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Respect for Your Elders

Sydney Lea

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Two things to start with: at the time of all this, there are—or were—trains; and I’m afraid that this is a male poem. A vision (let’s call it that) of a father settling onto the purple plush in a Pullman car,

homing from the business of a business trip: the feckless huckstering of wares, self-conscious interminable waits to windward of disapproving, scented receptionists’ desks, rich, indulgent, fried and reckless noontime meals that serve to distract from failure.

His lap is a grid: wrinkles crossing pleats. (I guess it’s an archaic poem.) The landscape’s black, there’s a dirty rain on the window panes for good measure,

and I’m afraid I haven’t titled this poem just right. It really has to do with learning before it’s too late to respect your father. Maybe even respect isn’t the right word. Listen. The night is so dark, your father might well confuse it with death. It’s possible daughters, confused, won’t understand—or want to—the poem. As I said, he’s headed home, which he knows is a clutter, though his heart’s desire, his breath of life. He knows his wife is busy with the kids. (Understand, I don’t say mothers are idle, and neither does he.) Five kids, but only the wife is conscious of anything, and not too clearly at that. As I said,

he’s a seller (erratic, given to doubt) of goods, most of them shoddy. (That’s where the doubt comes in.) It’s dark, as if they’ve entered a tunnel and won’t get out of it. He feels that a man has needs:

he’s full of clichés. You see, he isn’t a whiz at thinking, as he’ll be the first in the poem to tell you, and even believes that this may be a male fault—a man’s too busy to think, whatever he is.
Cliché: he doesn’t know what the needs are. He died, not knowing. He had a vision he couldn’t explain, as I see it in my vision: something of darkness and motion, the car wombful of northbound faces seething like tide.

This all takes place on a train. It’s about not knowing. Men, the moving darkness, and somewhere a late whistle blowing.