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Riding The Train, Zimmer Sees Willis Close To Death

Paul Zimmer

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When I began trying to make poems some years ago I was not able to write about myself. This was due to a lack of self-confidence, stemming from the fact that I was not a good student when I was in school and was made to suffer the public and private indignities because of my poor performance. So I began by making poems about other people, mostly folks that I would make up—witches, warlocks, bullfighters, football players, sailors, preachers, writers, jazz musicians, etc. Later I began to give my people (voices?) names—like Cecil, Peregrine, Phineas, Alphonse, Wanda, Willis, Imbellis, Mordecai, etc. When the time came to begin making poems about myself it very quickly became apparent to me that, since I had been making the Peregrine poems or the Cecil poems, I was now making the Zimmer poems. The whole thing has now evolved into a kind of dialogue between myself and these very personal myths I began with.

—*Paul Zimmer*

RIDING THE TRAIN, ZIMMER SEES WILLIS CLOSE TO DEATH

The landscape flicks between
Power poles, days and days;
The smoke of my passage
Is over my head.
Yonkers, Galion, Muncie,
Wichita pass like timbers
Under the wheels.

Each hour I unpeel
Out of green seat cushions
To drink oily water from
Paper cones. I munch food
Stamped out of styrofoam,
Spit out the ancient nuts
Of candy bars and feel
Like the dirt between
The panes of glass.

But as we roll out
Of some yellow town,
I see Willis tossed and
Splayed on the outskirts.
He weeps with cinders,
His temples ashen from
Engine fires, his hands
Constricted from grasping
The rods. He has fallen
Off the train again.

I guess we choose the way
We die. I will go down
Like I sleep on the train
With slight awareness
Of pain in the night light.
As conductors quietly shuffle past,
Water slops in the coolers
And stop cords tap on
Luggage racks, I will sputter
And hiss slowly to a stop.

But Willis will go under
In a screech of friction,
Wheels will pass over and over
His body, his fluids squirt,
His toes and knuckles grind
In the gravel as he sunders.