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Heaven for Railroad Men

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HEAVEN FOR RAILROAD MEN

You're still a young man,
he says, not to his son;
it's his bitterness
he's talking to
and at the restaurant
he orders a fourth round
before dinner,
with mother wiping her glasses
at the table, still believing
she's not going blind.

I help him from his chair
to the john. He pees slowly,
fingers like hams
on his fly, a complex
test of logic
for a man this drunk.
I'm splashing cold water in his face

and he tells me he's dying,
don't say a thing to your
mother and please, Dave,
don't ever remember me like this.

I remember how you said you'd
love to
ride the baggage cars forever,
passing prairie towns
where silos squat like
pepper shakers on dry earth.
Father, I want to be six again
and sway with you
down the sagging rails
to Minot, Winnipeg and beyond,
your mailsacks piled
like foothills of the Rockies,
you unloading your government Colt,
unzipping your suitcase
for Canadian inspectors.
Father, when I touched you
I was trembling.

The heaven
of railroad men begins
with a collapsed trestle.
The engine goes steaming off
into nothing.
There are no rails to hold you,
you're singing country western
at the top of your lungs,
you go flying forever,
the door standing open,
sacks of mail scattering
like seed into space.