Incident on Hangman Creek Road

Robert Wrigley
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The old man's car jerks to a stop in the middle of the crossing. No more trains should come along today, and I want to keep on going. But I can't, and what pains me most is that he doesn't wave or nod, doesn't even look my way, but holds on to the huge wheel as though he believes God Himself will spin the starter. I'd be gone already but now must stop and walk back. It looks like rain, or maybe snow, there are clouds at the top of the northern hills, and above, a plane drones out of sight. I tap at the window, bend to look, and see right away he's dead.

It's obvious, but I say "Hello? Hello? Hello, Sir?" and press my forehead to the glass. That the doors are locked does not surprise me, nor the windows rolled tightly up. And I'm not the least shocked to believe I hear the dull eerie blow
of a whistle. Who'd drive this road out of nowhere but me and an old man surprised by dying, though he might have showed the grace to die one car-length farther on. And it is a train whistle after all, distant but bearing down, that makes me strain against the back bumper, that makes me yell Goddammit! the minute it starts to rain.

In that sudden shower, I don't linger a moment but break the front window out with a rock and unbend each gnarled finger from the wheel and collect his knocked-off hat coming out the door and into the rain. Off the right-of-way, onto the shoulder, we're headed for my truck when the freight train rolls into sight and his old car, older than me, remains, doomed in a place no one but a fool would return to. Try to see, in your mind's eye, how I waited there one or two seconds, then ran, thinking not me, not me, drunk in the starter's queer grind, eyeing my ancient face in the mirror.