

Respect for Your Elders · *Sydney Lea*

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 wombfull 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.