

The Ballad of the Lac-Mégantic Disaster

by George Elliott Clarke, 7th Parliamentary Poet Laureate

Rail Co.—Montreal, Maine, and Atlantic—
Was okay to let one guy staff
Or stall a train. Downhill, Lac-Mégantic
Slept, and the conductor booked off,

July 6, 2013, post-midnight,
While locomotives snorted, spit
Sparks and belched smoke, their black freight—a real fright—
74 cars, left to sit,

Seemingly at rest, parked until sunrise,
With steel-drum seas of black crude oil—
A feasible firestorm—left without eyes
To watch air-brakes. But catches fail....

The train was unflinching as it inched free
Of brakes that had just broken down,
After 1 a.m., and oil—a black sea—
Shuffled loose, now rolled, set to drown

A town in tides of fire—indelicate,
Unholy, obscene—to slather
Citizens and streets in a blitz of spit—
A greased spritz of flaming lather.

Wheels vacated blatantly where they'd stopped—

Those tanker cars slid now downhill—
Parallel rails let nothing interrupt
As the freight squeaked, squealed, squalled—brutal—

And began to hurtle, no more halting,
And careened—quite terrifying;
Wheels—not just turning, but somersaulting—
Brought *Death*—huge cannonballs, flying—

Next expropriating, devastating flames—
Equivalent to an onslaught
Of napalm bombs blamming grass-hut frames
(As in Vietnam). Now, a juggernaut,

The train disintegrated—atomic—
To desolate and immolate
That town—Lac-Mégantic. Vitriolic,
The petrol—black ejaculate—

Smothered, suffocated, who didn't burn,
Or blaze to gore, each face charred, scorched;
Identities none could discern
Showed where scathing fuels tarred and torched.

The exploding freight dismantled the town—
Unilateral—like God's whims;
A toxic concoction besmirched each noun.
Smoke smeared and smudged, choking off hymns.

The rollicking cholic of septic air

Had all still breathin now coughin;
The purgative *Disaster* that chanced here
Cankered survivors: They sob when laughin.

An inquest was held; some persons got blamed—
For the damage, the dirt, the deaths.
Some had to cringe, crouch low, as they got named,
For those coffins, those monoliths.

But the disaster that's Lac-Mégantic
Marks no jinx? The *Injustice*
Was no runaway train? *Greed*—gone frantic—
May discount corpses countless?

The thirst for black ink can turn a blood sport
When *Profit's* the trophy, and scorned
Is *Safety*—some businesses' "last resort"
(Despite being sued, threatened, fined, and warned).

Too many lie dead at Lac-Mégantic;
Most due maybe to one mistake—
Failure that allegedly turned *Tragic*:
Expense-cutting that had no brake.

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