

TO LINDA WITH LOVE

By Jerold London

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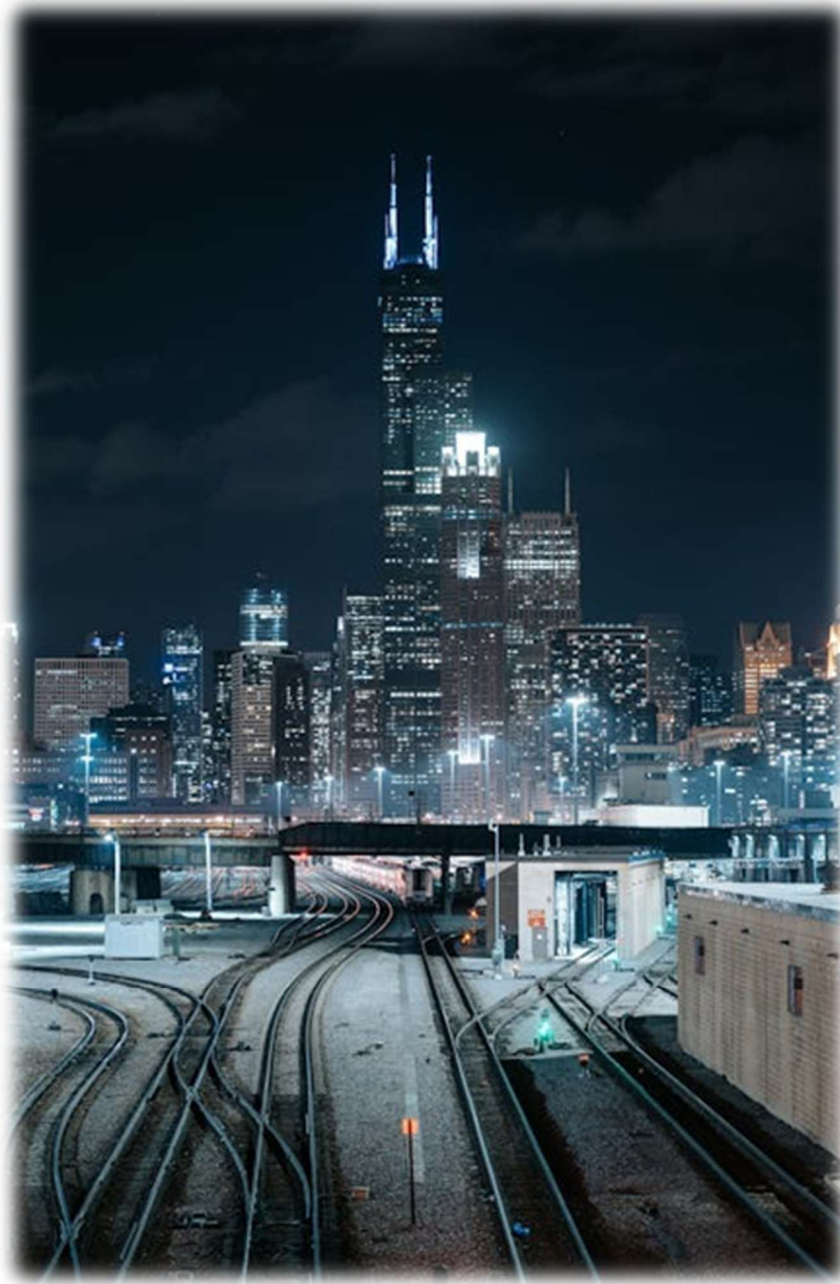


Photo by Luis Leon from Pexels

Me like a mare let out to pasture.

The Tao does not console me.

– Linda Gregg, Chosen by the Lion, 1994.

TO LINDA WITH LOVE
(A theatrical tribute to Linda Gregg's poem, Asking for Directions*)

TIME AND PLACE

1994.

Aboard a passenger train, the Lake Shore Limited, Manhattan to Chicago, just arriving at Chicago's Union Station.

Three months later, in a Chicago wine bar; and then back.

CHARACTERS

LINDA GREGG (1942-2019), American poet. 52 in 1994. Friend of Jack Gilbert's.

JACK GILBERT (1925-2012), American poet. Friend of Linda Gregg's.

DAVID, 50s. Linda Gregg's lover.

CAROLE, 40s or 50s. A friend of Linda Gregg's.

... in the dialogue indicates a thoughtful break.

SCENE

**LINDA is asleep across David's chest in
the seat of a passenger car as their train
approaches Chicago's Union Station.**

DAVID

Linda!... Linda!
Wake up!
We're here!

LINDA

Waking.
[startled] What?!

DAVID

It's Chicago. The train's arriving.

LINDA

Rubbing her eyes.

O! my God, David!...

Damn it!

Why did you wait so long?

How could you do that to me?

Our trip together, and you let me sleep away the last few hours?

You're terrible!

DAVID

You were exhausted.

I couldn't wake you, you were so peaceful.

LINDA

[*beat*] Is that a new vest you have on?

LINDA feels it.

DAVID

Uh-huh. It's Chinese.

LINDA

The lining ... is it sheepskin?

DAVID

Yes.

LINDA

I knew I didn't recognize the smell.

DAVID

I've had it on the whole way.

LINDA

Look at me! So busy sleeping to notice you had a new vest.

And so busy staring out the window at those in-between places we went past,
with their backs turned to us.

DAVID

You called them something.

LINDA

The small, neglected stations of our history.

DAVID

Ah yes.... The small, neglected stations of our history.
Ever the poet.

They look long at each other.

DAVID

The train's stopped.

DAVID stands, gets his suitcase, takes the vest off, and hands it to LINDA.

LINDA stands, holding it.

DAVID

Linda?

LINDA

Yes?

DAVID takes her into his arms, and kisses her as though they would never see each other again.

Then he puts on his coat, picks his suitcase back up, and leaves.

LINDA stands by the seat dazed for a moment; then puts on the vest, her coat over it, gets her bag, and turns to look out a dirty window.

DAVID is outside on the platform, looking up at LINDA through the window. They look at each other without any expression.

DAVID walks away.

LINDA leaves on the opposite side of the car, puts down her bag (and her coat and the vest on it), and walks into a wine bar three months later. She sits at a table with Carole, nearly in tears

LINDA

I guess you could say I was chosen by a lion, Carole.
And the blood and pain are more in the losing than in the biting.
I loved him at a depth I can't comprehend, and miss him almost more than I can
bear.
I can't write anymore. Not even a stripped down verse, or a moment.

CAROLE

You came back so quietly, Girl, we thought you were still in New York.
Why didn't you call me? And tell me?

LINDA

I just couldn't talk about it. Not before today. Not to anybody.

CAROLE

Have you seen him? Or spoken at all?

LINDA

Not once, in three months.
And I started thinking this morning: Maybe this is it.
Maybe I have to accept never seeing him again.
Maybe I need to say my goodbyes, and leave Chicago for a while. Go South.

CAROLE

You know you can come stay with us.

LINDA

I know; but no thanks.

CAROLE

Why did it happen like that?

LINDA

We planned it. In New York. Nineteen hours on the Lake Shore Limited.
Our final trip together; and then I'd give him ten minutes to meet his family.
It was in that last instant looking at him, I saw the absolute magnitude of my loss.

CAROLE

I don't understand why. You two seemed so much in love.

LINDA

I've never stopped loving him, Carole. Every fiber of me. And he loved me back.
We could have been mistaken for a happily married couple, riding on that train.

CAROLE

So what went wrong?

LINDA

The gods don't protect careless lovers.... His wife found out.

CAROLE

He was still married?! Jesus Christ, Linda, you never told me that!

LINDA

And she got my phone number. At the apartment. And called me.
She called me a whore. Perhaps.... Perhaps that's what I was.
Jack told me it couldn't last. She was bound to catch on.
David "won't be able to sustain the passion," Jack warned me, "when it starts to cost him." And Jack was right.
Privacy has a river through it that runs dry when the privacy dies.

It's been a piece of hell. The love, and the fear, and the pain.
And it's the pain that reminds me most now of David.
The empty room waiting for him.
The few days at a time, that became only hours, and then none.
That brutal phone call.
His voice. Not his voice. His words. Not his words.
Keep me, I pleaded. *Keep me.*
I don't want to go back to the smallness without you....
I try to have the strength Jack has, losing his wife to cancer the tragic way he did.
He told me once: "If the locomotive of the Lord runs us down, we should give thanks that the end had magnitude."
But not yet. It takes time to get over the shock of a journey's end.
That's why I have to get away, don't you see? David can find me if he needs to.
The thought of our room forever empty without him is destroying me.
I sometimes wake up screaming in the night. There's no poetry in a life like that.

CAROLE

My sweet Girl, what you've gone through!

LINDA

Five years, but it should have been longer.
When I was fifteen, standing by the fountains in Paris where the water blew over me ... why didn't he find me there? I understood even then that love's not about pleasing the soul. The soul has no concept of the mightiness of love. The soul's just a place love finds its way to. Like two whales. Or like a train.

CAROLE

Like a train? What do you mean?

LINDA

Every time I hear the lonesome sound of trains at night I think of David.
The sheer power of them. The rhythm. The passage. The inevitability.
Miracles come in moments, Linda. And they can last a lifetime.
Just as journeys begin with a single choice that changes your life.
And when they end, you may not know it for months.

CAROLE

But he was married, Linda! Maybe ... maybe it *wasn't* actually love.

LINDA

No! He did love me!

His love was overwhelming. His desire. His eagerness.
He became utterly wild with me. Taking me apart like a beast. And it never went
away. The passion never weakened between us. It only drew us closer.
It was the most prodigious thing I ever experienced in my life....
Do you think I'll ever let myself talk myself out of that?
But now, never again lying in bed, hearing his key in the lock, and then seeing his
face. Wanting him to devour me.
My nipples to bite; my body to possess; to lie buried within him.
No longer the amazing smell of sperm on my thighs.
No spreading it on my stomach to show pleasure....
[beat] I think back to the last moment we looked at each other.
Like a photograph in my mind, through the dirty window of that train car.
That moment is what I will tell of, as proof that he loved me permanently.
After that I was a woman alone, carrying my bag, asking a worker which direction
to walk to find a taxi.

CAROLE

O! Linda! I'm so sorry for you. You've lost the love of your life I'm afraid.

LINDA

If that phrase weren't so hackneyed, I wouldn't say no.

**LINDA stands, and walks back to her
seat on the train, where DAVID rejoins
her – both sitting as they were at the
beginning of the scene – LINDA asleep,
the train approaching Union Station.**

DAVID

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**DAVID is outside on the platform,
looking up at LINDA through the
window. They look at each other without
any expression.**

DAVID walks away.

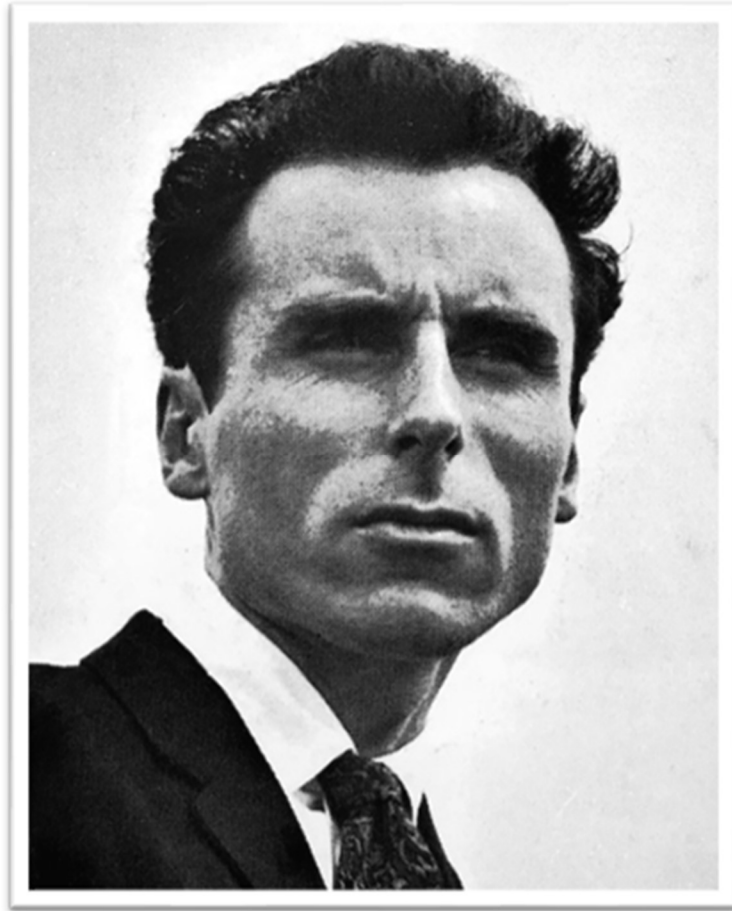
LINDA

That moment is what I will tell of, as proof that he loved me permanently.

END

*** Asking for Directions, Linda Gregg, CHOSEN BY THE LION,
Graywolf Press, 1994.**

"I have loved Linda Gregg's poems since I first read them. They are original in the way that really matters: they speak clearly of their source. They are inseparable from the surprising, unrolling, eventful, pure current of their language, and they convey at once the pain of individual loss, a steady and utterly personal radiance." W. S. Merwin, 2006.



Jack Gilbert, from [Wikimedia Commons](#)

**We must risk delight. We can do without pleasure,
but not delight. Not enjoyment. We must have
the stubbornness to accept our gladness in the ruthless
furnace of this world. To make injustice the only
measure of our attention is to praise the Devil.
If the locomotive of the Lord runs us down,
we should give thanks that the end had magnitude.
– Jack Gilbert, A Brief for the Defense, 2005**