

Train

by Roland Foster

Late at night,
by the railroad crossing near our house, you can sit and wait for the midnight freight. You don't hear anything for a long while but at last you know it's coming, you still can't hear it but you can just begin to feel it in your bare toes against the rough wood of the railroad ties. It's coming, now you know you feel it and you squirm around so you can kneel down with your ear to the rail and sure enough, the rail is singing its little welcoming song and the earth begins to vibrate just a little you think you feel it in your knees and suddenly you see the glow of the headlamp like a trembling firefly and hear the distant air horns wail, feebly still, at the night, and then fade away into the beginnings of the rumble of the steel wheels rolling on the steel rails carrying countless tons of freight from there to yonder.

The glow is suddenly steadier and twice as big, and the rumble gains another note and you recognize the murmuring bass voice of the diesels, five or six of the mighty iron horses chained nose to tail and straining forward to pull their heavy load, but not struggling because they are strong, strong. Now the air horns sound again, louder than before, and the glow is getting bigger and brighter and the rumble blends with the vibration of the earth and the rails and your feet as you step off the track and move aside, not too far, but not too near either, out of respect and the light is gleaming and the sound is growing swelling fast now getting closer and louder and closer and **louder and brighter and wham! the blast of sound and air and the traaaaaaa!!** of the air horns are right in front of you and even though you knew it was coming and you've seen and heard it dozens of times you can't help being startled and thrilled, and the light is gone but there is moonlight so you quickly begin to count the cars as they roll noisily by at seventy miles an hour because who knows, this one might set a new record, even longer than the 217-car train of two years ago. As you count you marvel at the artistry of the graffiti on the cars and imagine what certain ones contain and where they're going and you're thrilled by the ponderous grace of the train that wastes no motion, just goes where it's going smoothly and with no fuss except to say "get out of the way, please, I'm in a hurry to get to yonder."

Finally the last car slips by and it quickly fades to gray, then slowly shrinks and disappears as the sound follows the train into the far dark distance. Only 165 cars this time, but it was a good train anyway, and you wish it well. "Catch ya next time," you call after it down the track, then you turn and walk home and slip into the house without waking anybody and snuggle into bed and lie in the dark and enjoy the train for a while before you slide into the sleepy distance.