

## **Trains— by Brendan Abbott**

I took the same bus home every day from work. The number four southbound. I transferred at a terminal that overlooked the train-yard. For six and a half minutes, from 5:05 to 5:11 pm every weekday, traffic permitting, I would lean against the railing and watch the trains come and go. Not much ever happened and the show never changed but despite that, it never failed to give me a feeling of longing, sweet and sad. It wasn't until the one day something different happened that I understood the feeling.

It had not been a particularly bad day. The reality is that few of them were any worse than the rest and objectively, I should have been able to see that all my days were good. On that day my life had not once been in danger. On that day, and all the days that preceded it, I didn't have to worry about starving. I didn't have to worry about finding clean water. I had shelter waiting for me that I knew would be warm. It should have been a good day.

The yard was a dozen tracks wide. I had no idea if that was big or small, though I imagined it would be dwarfed by others around the world. The city had grown around it, expanding as fast as the oil-sands up north demanded and I guess nobody ever thought it might be a good idea to expand the train yard, too. The way trains shuffled through the never ending congestion didn't seem right. But what did I know about trains?

Hell, I didn't even like trains. I could appreciate them and their necessity and their ingenuity involved, and the hard goddam work laying all the rail. But they seemed so primitive. Slow, lumbering beasts from the previous century, and whose heyday was a century before that. And yet, I could never take my eyes off of them for those six and a half minutes.

The day the show changed was, up until the point of change, only remarkable because of the way the autumn sun sat just above the point where the tracks converged and disappeared on the horizon. The orange light was aimed perfectly down the spaces between the tracks, and any workers milling about cast long shadows in my direction.

When I first spotted the two boys by the fence I looked around to see if any of the other waiting passengers cared that something different had happened. There were none.

I turned back and watched as the taller of the two boys hefted one backpack, then another over the fence. I was a good distance from them, but I could still tell their clothes and the packs weren't the type found with young men who had homes and families, and who went to piano lessons after school. I'd had those things, and yet I was jealous of them.

The shorter boy unfolded a dark blanket and tossed it over the barbed wire. He climbed over delicately, but safely. The taller boy lost his balance as he straddled the blanket and flailed for a moment to save himself from a fall. He succeeded in this, but also in getting himself stuck by the crotch of his pants. Straddled around the blanket, taunted over barbed wire, he listed to the side like a ship taking on water, then froze.

I laughed at first. Perhaps it was my baser self seeking retribution for feeling jealous. There was still nobody around me watching and I stopped laughing when I could see the smaller boy struggling without success to free his comrade. They hopped the fence next to a boxcar and were out of sight of most of the yard, but there were many long shadows of men scattered between the tracks and they were all moving.

I don't think I would have gone down there if I wasn't wearing my work clothes. My morning were always laden in gray haze, but it was finally doing up my belt and slipping on the shoes that always felt like losing. Like giving up. Despite my hatred for the designer prison apparel, I never would have thought to go out of my way to ruin them, but in that moment I felt fully justified. It was one of those pleasing moments when you confidently break the law knowing you're fully justified in doing so.

It took me a minute to walk, quickly but inconspicuously, to the end of the overpass. My bus, the number four southbound, passed me by.

The embankment was far steeper than I could appreciate until I was skidding down its gritty surface on the side of my right leg. The pants were ruined and I smiled, somehow relishing the pain of the road-rash.

The boy was still stuck when I got there. This relieved me as I feared looking like a fool if they freed themselves before I arrived.

I greeted them and introduced myself awkwardly. They didn't reciprocate the introduction and looked both confused and defensive at my presence. They softened when I asked if they needed help. The taller boy stuck up on the fence, I soon saw, was not a boy. His age was difficult to tell, his clothes were youthful, if ragged, and his slender build wasn't that of a man's; but his facial features were hardened and surrounded by lines and grooves. He looked at me with the distrust and cynicism of a veteran of his lifestyle or of life in general. The shorter one, though, was a boy. A teenager who didn't look like he shaved yet. He simply looked scared.

There was a small amount of blood that had made its way down the man's leg, but he said nothing grievous had yet happened. He accepted my help, and together with the boy we righted him. Now upright and with the pressure taken off the barbs the man looked weakened and he rested a moment.

I almost asked them if they were train hoppers, but thought better and simply asked where they were going. West is all they would say. I asked if they'd pass through the Rockies and the man straddling the fence began to speak so highly of the journey he suddenly seemed a missionary. The boy looked up at him with a smirk, like he'd heard it all before and enjoyed it nonetheless. The man said that it was a once in a lifetime thing, seeing the mountains from under the slanted end of a grain car, and he was about to do it for the third time.

Gingerly, the man gathered himself and climbed down to rejoin the boy on the other side. When he told me that I should come with them a jolt shot through me like my subconscious almost leaped out of my body. Just the thought thrilled me, and with them standing on the other side of the chain-link it didn't seem like a mere fantasy. Many things, like the thought of never going back to my office again, were incredibly persuasive. Slowly trundling through the mountains just once seemed almost worth pushing the switch and imploding my entire life. I knew it was stupid; anybody with a comfortable life would do the same.

I was as far as eyeing up the toes of my dress shoes, wondering if I could even climb the fence with them, when I noticed the dark lines snaking up the man's forearm and the unpleasant crated centerpiece in the crook of his elbow.

The thrill left me then.

The man put his arm around the boy's shoulders. The disparity between them didn't appear so wide as to be father and son, but nor were they close enough in age to feel comfortable with the way the boy nestled into the man.

I asked the boy his age, perhaps emboldened by the fence between me and them, and he said that he was sixteen. The man told me to relax, that growing up hard meant growing up fast.

The ride through the Rockies was then, and has always remained, a vivid dream. The kind of dream with an air of regret like a life unlived. I remember walking back to the embankment and how difficult it was to climb back up. I wanted desperately for it to be an easy thing to walk away from them, but it was not. I'd only briefly broken free of my own rails. A single foot, perhaps, off my circular track. For a moment I'd know what it was like to untether from the mundane safety, the mind numbing predictability, and the putrid warmth of my good life. But I was an impostor. A tourist. I was soft and delicate. My soul lacked the scar tissue, my heart lacked the callouses.

The sun had disappeared by the time I got back to the bus stop and only the glow of twilight remained in the sky over the train yard. I never saw them again. I ignored my bus driving by half a dozen times as I watched the long snakes of cars depart the yard, wishing for just one last glimpse of my unlived life perched under the end of the westbound grain car.