

Travelling on Trains: 'Window to the World'

Trains are such exceptional travel vessels. Planes are exciting, but you're crammed together like British sunseekers on Brighton beach, and apart from the adrenalin rush of takeoff and landing, all you see out of the tiny window tends to resemble ants in the desert. Buses admittedly do run on the ground and can at times offer delightful views, but again jampacked and fighting for elbow room, while the vista of traffic jams or other vehicles can be extraordinarily boring.

Trains by comparison, offer unconfined spaciousness, where you sit back to be entertained by each passing scene as it drifts past your gloriously wide window ... one long scene in fact, that moves ever onwards, through town and country. The first poem (set in India) conveys this distinct feeling that train travel *does* present an unrivalled 'window to the world':

View from an 'A/C' chair

*The wire-meshed fans whirred overhead,
Though it was by no means hot.
The double-glazed window
Of the 'A/C Chair'
Gave view to a lush
And monsoonal green,
That could not be felt,
But could only be seen
Perfect answer to elite traveller's dream:
A safe and secure little spot.*

*Now through the window our vista had changed
From the tranquil and verdant scene,
For we had passed
To an urban scape
Where buildings and people
Supported the sky;
The structure we're close,
The walls were high
With uncountable numbers passing-by:
A continuing people stream.*

*Then a station came into my picture frame view,
Stopped alongside, allowed me to stare,
Making it even more obvious,
It seemed to me,
That I was travelling a land
Filled with struggle and plight,
That responded to those
With power and might:
A memorable view, but an anguishing sight,
As viewed from an 'A/C' Chair'*

Pune to Mumbai, August 2002

View from an A/C Chair is a snapshot of many journeys by rail across India. This time it's a relatively short three-hour ride on the 'Deccan Express', from Pune to Mumbai, in Western Maharashtra. The term 'A/C Chair' is India-speak for a carriage with a comfortable, recliner chair and air conditioning. This provides an elite vantage point from which to view the ever-changing, hot and humid scene outside.

Leaving Pune, the train traverses the Deccan Plateau before meandering through the beautiful Western Ghats, then winding down to the outskirts of Mumbai. It makes a number of brief stops at small towns along the way. This is late in the monsoon season and the hills are lush green, with waterfalls cascading down rocky cuttings on the steep slopes. This peaceful rural scene contrasts with the townscape, where tall buildings are crammed together, and people pass by (as it says) in a 'continuing people stream'.

The last verse moves from viewing the scene in literal terms to contemplating the larger metaphorical frame that it represents: that while looking out from a privileged vantage, towards an urban scene, I am in fact observing a microcosm of Indian society. The vista may remain as a memory, but behind the picture-poster scene is the wider story of many millions of poor people, their destinies controlled by powerful entities.

.....

Alternatively, in the poem **Misty for Me** (below) the author is trapped in a seat where the window is scratched and the view obscured. He extrapolates from this that life is often like that (for him the traffic lights turn red, but for others they are always green!). On the surface, a simple poem, but submerged beneath are much darker meanings.

Misty for Me

*I had this window that was blurred,
On this train,
That was absurd,
I could only see a misty sort of green.*

*It was the only one you see,
On this train,
Reserved for me:
All others had an unobstructed view.*

*So as I peered to watch things pass,
Through my grey
And opaque glass,
I began to feel a little bit dejected.*

*What could on Earth have made this so?
When the others
Went 'Ah' and 'Oh',
I could only voice a mumbled sort of groan.*

*Was this my lot: to be mistreated?
Should I become
A little heated,
As I do when traffic lights turn red.*

*For as it always seems to me
That those lights
Just seem to be
Synchronised, to stop me in my stride.*

*While my friends and mere relations
Just sail through
Crossroad stations,
As lights for them turn back from red to green.*

*Perhaps it was just a fearful plot,
To make sure
I got my lot,
Or could it be my droll imagination.*

*For whether it is lights or trains,
I know deep down
I hold the reins
To overcome these cruel deliberations.*

Train to London, 2002.

Thought trains (below) is much more an introspective poem but inspired by visions glimpsed of green fields and darker forests, villages and farmhouses flying past the window, as this Intercity train speeds across England. It reflects old and new relationships, times in the past and times yet to come.

Thought trains

*Brain whirling,
Speckled thoughts:
Present, future, past.
Ambitions live
That once were fraught,
With chasms deep
On mountains steep.*

*Train journey,
Windows wide
The speeding, fleeting, scene.
Conjures now those
Thoughts inside:
Of wondrous world,
Of devilled world,
Interspersed
By pastures green.*

November 1984

Training Italia (below) is interesting both in terms of form and content. I remember not being happy with the first verse ...that it failed to capture all the meaning. Then a second 'take' came about. In the end I could not decide which verse was best, but because their meanings overlapped to some degree, I decided to keep them both.

The poem also comments on the scaffolded town, where wonderful medieval surrounds were obscured by crude building works, something which seemed to be happening all across Italy at that time: a necessity, one can only assume, to preserve these ancient town centres for future generations to know and admire.

The last verse came to be, simply because the lady who looked so fine and elegant, was wearing an English slogan which supported her beauty, but unfortunately was misspelt. I never knew whether it was ignorance or impudence that facilitated the statement.

Take 1, take 2.

TAKE 1

*Train speeds across the plain,
Close view blurring distant mountain view.
Beige-washed structures from centuries past
Clinging to the hillocks like magnetized glue.*

TAKE 2

*Rollicking train parts the harvest in progress:
Sweetcorn, sunflower, grapes and veg.
Teaming and tumbling the houses cling
To the hills that made them centuries before.*

*A change at Foligno gives chance to view
Stately mansions and medieval walls.
Fortunate or not to be shrouded in dust:
A building-site province, as often the case.*

*Strutting between the scaffolded sites,
A haute-couture lady with aquiline form,
Displayed her slogan in strict black and grey,
Which said: "Am I beautiful. Yes I'm."*

Italy 1999
