

Arrivals and Departures

by Foster Trecost

The End of the Line

1. Waiting on a Train

Because of her I showed up early. And like I knew it would be, the train was late. I paced the platform to pass time, then settled in a quiet section, but gave up on solitude when someone settled next to me. I sized him up, he seemed feeble, safe enough, so I spoke: "I bet if we'd been late, the train would've been on time and we would've missed it."

"That's not how it works," he said, his voice wrinkled like the rest of him.

I questioned his response, but only to myself. Then, when I'd thought of something to say, I soaked it in sarcasm, and asked, "Then tell me, please, just how does it work?"

"Trains get here when they get here," he said. "And we get here when we get here. But these things have nothing to do with each other."

As much as I wished it didn't, his answer made sense. I was considering a response when, like a sentence-ending punctuation, a whistle burst onto the platform, making it clear there was nothing more to say.

2. An Hour Earlier

"You better go or you'll miss your train."

"If I leave now, I'll be early. I hate waiting for trains. They're never on time anyway.

"This one might be."

"I'll get stuck talking to someone. I never know what to say."

"Maybe you'll learn something."

"To keep my mouth shut, that's what I'd learn."

3. On the Train

I claimed the first empty seat I found, happy to leave our conversation on the platform, but when he wedged next to me, it seemed certain to continue. I decided to speak first, and shifted to a less-lofty subject. "How far you going?" It was a simple enough question and I anticipated a simple enough answer.

"I'm taking this train to the end of the line," he said. "And if this one doesn't get me there, I'll take the next."

So much for simplicity. To think about it now, this was my cue to escape to a less crowded car, but I hesitated, frozen in phobias that sometimes slink away, but not this time.

"I came into this world on a train," he said.

4. 82 Years Earlier, On a Different Train

It mattered little where they were. It could've been a hospital or even at sea, but as it happened, they were on a train. Miles from the next stop, she birthed a baby boy into a moving world, but through the windows the landscape raced past in such a way, it seemed the train sat still and everything else moved.

"I'll call him Pullman."

The gentle sway relaxed Pullman. He slept and stayed asleep until they reached the next station. When the train stopped moving, he woke and began to cry.

5. Back on the Train

"And I reckon I'll leave on one, too."

More than my palms began to sweat. I opted against asking for clarification, but sensed it was coming.

"Maybe this one will get me there," he said, "maybe the next. I don't have much control over the when, but I can sure as hell dictate the where."

With this, I spilled into the aisle before he could say anything else. I got off at the next stop and caught the first train going in the same direction.

Later that night and all the next day, and for many days later, I scanned the news. I searched headlines and obits, but never found anything. I suppose he's still looking for the end of the line,

hoping he's riding the rails when he gets there. If I ever see him waiting for a train, to be on the safe side, I'll wait for the next.

6. The Obituary

Pullman Smith, 82, was found dead on a local train. A piece of paper folded in his wallet were the words, "I came into this world on a train, and I reckon I'll leave on one, too." That he did. Fowl play is not suspected. Family members have yet to come forward.

