

Whooooooooooooo

*By Nancy Martz*

Train music has always seduced me. Growing up a few miles outside of a small, remote town, I could hear the deep sighing whistle and the low muted rumble before they got swallowed up rolling on and away. No distant music has ever summoned in me such longing as those sighs and rumbles, but also an uneasiness. In my imagination they promised a thrilling life I might live someday, while at the same time, they provoked a melancholia, a dark haunting that I didn't understand.

I did get to ride with my older sisters and brother that antiquated, little black train from our town when I was three and a half. It was a big deal and our parents saw us off with exaggerated pomp. We rode the little one passenger-car train to a town even smaller than ours where an aunt and uncle were waiting for us to spend the night. The ride was intoxicating, and the magic of being a traveler with my own suitcase wasn't lost on me. I loved the noisy clickety-clack of wheels over rails and ties and the shriek and moan of the whistle. That we were rocked slightly sideways added to the thrill.

The closest I got to the big city trains as a child happened when my dad drove our family to Omaha, Nebraska, for my annual visit to the Satrang Asthma Clinic. We always had to stay overnight for the appointments, but one year the only motel vacancy we could find was a seedy looking place by the tracks. My parents were apprehensive, but I was thrilled. I listened into the late night as multiple trains performed their music just outside the window. I felt a rush of joyous expectations, seeing the motel room wall lit up brightly by all the passing train lights and listening to the crescendos of the train music. Still, the dazzle blended ominously with my increasing sense of doom.

Back on the farm, and later that summer, my friend Linda who lived on a neighboring farm closer to the town, and close to the railroad tracks, invited me to play. All in fun, she pulled up two bunches of rag weeds and put them in my mouth with the stems pointing out the sides. Then she pulled them causing me to get a mouthful of the heads, some of which I swallowed. My throat closed up and I stopped breathing. I saw a hazy black and white tunnel that spiraled around me over and over, pulling me into itself. I heard a train in the distance and began running to it, but I fell and couldn't stop falling.

I awoke in a white room where I had been in and out of a coma for three weeks. The train depot was just blocks away from the hospital, so the train music in my near death experience was real. I doubt my youthful conflicting emotions about train music were a premonition, but perhaps they were. I am still in love with and haunted by those musical sighs and rumbles over the rails.