

Model-Train Display at Christmas in a Shopping Mall Food Court

These kids watching so intently
on every side of the display
must love the feeling of being gigantic:
of having a giant's power
over this little world of snow, where buttons
lift and lower
the railway's crossing gate, or switch the track,
or make the bent wire topped with a toy helicopter
turn and turn
like a sped-up sunflower. A steam engine
draws coal tender, passenger cars, and a gleaming caboose
out from the mountain tunnel,
through a forest of spruce and pine, over the trestle bridge,
to come down near the old silver mine.

Maybe all Christmases
are haunted by Christmases long gone:
old songs, old customs, people who loved you
and who've died. Within a family
sometimes even the smallest disagreements
can turn, and grow unkind.

The train's imaginary passengers,
looking outward from inside,
are steaming toward the one town they could be going to:
the town they have just left,
where everything is local
and nothing is to scale. One church, one skating rink,
one place to buy a saw.
A single hook-and-ladder truck
and one officer of the law. Maybe in another valley

it's early spring
and the thick air is redolent of chimney smoke and rain,
but here the diner's always open
so you can always get a meal. Or go down to the drive-in
looking for a fight. Or stay up
all night, so tormented by desire, you can hardly think.

Beyond the edges of the model-train display, the food court
is abuzz. Gingerbread and candy canes
surround a blow mold Virgin Mary, illuminated from within;
a grapevine reindeer
has been hung with sticks of cinnamon. One by one, kids
get pulled away
from the model trains: Christmas Eve is bearing down,
and many chores remain undone.

But for every child who leaves, another child appears.
The great pagan pine
catches and throws back wave on wave of light,
like a king-size chandelier, announcing
that the jingle hop has begun,
and the drummer boy
still has nothing to offer the son of God
but the sound of one small drum.