

John W. Gilbert

Watching the Train, Moving the Steel

He stood on the asphalt path. He wore an apple-green sweat suit and held the hand grips of his bicycle so hard his knuckles bulged. The train moved by him to the west, on the overpass. The long cars lurched with their hulking freight – *clack ka-chung, clack ka-chung* – in the amber light.

He was fit and slim for a man in his sixties. He knew where the cold-rolled steel on the flatbed cars came from – *clack, clack ka-chung*. He looked at his watch for no reason. He waited. He passed the time.

That's what he does now. He watches the steel; the industry he used to work in. The trains turned south and took the steel to cities to make automobiles. He moved the narrow handlebars of his bicycle back and forth.

He remembered the pride and sweat in his eyes when he looked at those seemingly impossible rolls of steel as a younger man standing on the cacophonous, cavernous plant floor, with ceilings so high they might have reached heaven. Now, he could not claim that feeling, though it still clung to him like his shadow under a naked bulb.

His guts filled with longing and nostalgia for it. He could see the hands of all the men and machines that went into making it: the light, the fire, the cascades of molten sparks, the blood. He looked at his watch again, for no reason. He passed the time. That was all. The last car rattled by. The tracks made sprung-steel *krangs*. He thought they would buckle and break under the immense weight.

He didn't get on the bicycle but pushed it through the oval underpass. The soles of his sneakers scraped on the rough macadam. His eyes were heavy and turned down in the darkness under the tracks. The steel was substantial. Even if it would not always be there, one would think it to be so. Sometimes he could not bear to look ahead. He emerged into the late dusk, making up for lost time.