The Express

Stephen Spender

After the first powerful, plain manifesto   
The black statement of pistons, without more fuss   
But gliding like a queen, she leaves the station.   
Without bowing and with restrained unconcern   
She passes the houses which humbly crowd outside,   
  
The gasworks, and at last the heavy page   
Of death, printed by gravestones in the cemetery.   
Beyond the town, there lies the open country   
Where, gathering speed, she acquires mystery,   
The luminous self-possession of ships on ocean.   
  
It is now she begins to sing --- at first quite low   
Then loud, and at last with a jazzy madness ---   
The song of her whistle screaming at curves,   
Of deafening tunnels, brakes, innumerable bolts.   
And always light, aerial, underneath,   
  
Retreats the elate metre of her wheels.   
Streaming through metal landscapes on her lines,   
She plunges new eras of white happiness,   
Where speed throws up strange shapes, broad curves   
And parallels clean like trajectories from guns.   
  
At last, further than Edinburgh or Rome,   
Beyond the crest of the world, she reaches night   
Where only a low stream-line brightness   
Of phosphorus on the tossing hills is light.   
Ah, like a comet through flame, she moves entranced,   
  
Wrapt in her music no bird song, no, nor bough   
Breaking with honey buds, shall ever equal.

**An exceptional honesty about himself and the world, allied with a very personal lyrical gift of expression result in a tension that gives the reader the sensation of walking through unfamiliar country where paradoxically the landmarks are all known. The initial warning of the imminent start of the train, the black statement of the pistons, without more fuss but gliding like a queen, leaves the station without bowing and with restrain unconcern; careful and deliberate indifference. The Express passes the houses which humbly crowd outside, the gas works and at last the heavy page of death that are printed by the gravestones in the cemetery. The open country lay way beyond the town and when gathering speed, she acquires the mystery of like the luminous self possession of ships on the ocean. When her speed becomes steady and consistent, she begins to sing; initially quite low, then louder and at last with a jazzy; wild and riotous; madness. The song of her whistle screams at the curves of deafening tunnels, brakes and innumerable bolts.  
It is always light aerial and underneath it goes the elate meter; joyful rhythm; of her wheels. Steaming through the metal landscape on her railway lines, the express plunges into new eras of wild happiness where her speed throws up strange shapes, broad curves and parallel clean like the steel of guns. At last, further than Edinburgh or Rome and beyond the crest of the world, she reaches the night where only a low streamline brightness of phosphorous on the tossing hills is white. Like a comet through flames she moves entranced; hypnotized; and wrapped in neither neither her music with no bird song nor bough with honey buds, shall ever be equal to her.**