

Stephen Robertson

A poem for free

The night mail rattles north to the border
(bringing the cheque and the postal order).
Rhythmic verses with echoed refrain
in the rhythmic clattering noise of the train.
Childhood journeys by rail come back
to my memory, patterns of clickety-clack.

But that was then. Now the rail joints are welded, and the dominant sound
is continuous and high-pitched. The borders we cross are eastward:
under the channel and then from France to Belgium.
But we don't notice them at all: the journey is seamless
and, in truth, a little dull.

From Brussels by local train to Ghent: canals and cobbled streets
and beer and chocolate shops
and churches, churches, churches
and buildings that turn out not to be churches.

Wonderful mechanisms in the civic belltower—
a giant musical box.

There once was a poet in Ghent
Who set out with the best of intent
In rollicking verse
On a galloping horse—
But Aix was as far as he went.

In Friday Market square
Jacob van Artevelde makes an expansive gesture
towards the setting sun.
Go west, young man? No, this is about
a century and a half before Columbus.
He is a leader of Flemish weavers, pointing the rest
towards their major source of trade:
England.

Back the way we came.

All verse is born free.