

TAR

a Literary Journal

ISSUE

29

**August
2013**

THE APRIL READER

a literary journal
of prose, poetry,
and essay.

ISSUE 29

August 2013

You can find our **distribution website and archives** at
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The April Reader is a monthly publication of poetry, prose, and user-submitted content. Conceived as a successor to the Zine Writer's Guild, The April Reader aims to become a hub of online writing and content. Operating under the belief that the internet has allowed the written word to regain parity with mass-media and television, TAR hopes to serve as a launching point for the future writers of this generation.

From the Editors

The advent of August marks summer's second half, and TAR has struggled through the heat and humidity. As your air conditioner roars in its vain struggle, why not partake in an escape with some reading?

Basil Smith – who is quickly becoming a regular in TAR – has snagged Issue 29's award with a surreal trip to the laundromat; we hope you'll enjoy *The Mistake* as much as we did. Pratinav Anil's *Close-Up* puts the reader next to a car accident and a stroll through an occident bazaar. Tom Sheehan's *Caitilin*, *Tollgate Collector* speaks to TAR's tastes with a volatile thriller of rush-hour traffic and caged children. Issue 29 also features the first part of Basil's serial, *Outside of Heaven*.

Nicolas Ortiz was a strong contender for the award with *The Village Needs a Poet*, which opens up this issue's poetry section. From the pen that holds Ortiz's words, Robert Annis and Coral Fallon follow with a duet of sublime imagery and expressionist stanzas. John Grey's *Regarding The Feeder* brings the reader back to earth's ruthlessness. A nice close to an August issue, no?

This issue marks the departure of MrThrills from the core editing staff into the recesses of *volunteer-based editing*. Several readers have contacted TAR with an interest in helping out as volunteers and editors – if you are among these kind souls, TAR will soon touch base with you! For anyone else thats interested, why not drop us a message to see if we can fit you into our staff?

In the realm of miscellanea, astute readers will find that the formatting of Issue 29 has been toned down in comparison to previous issues. MrThrills has finally realized that TAR is a vehicle for quality literature, not his expertise with clip-art. Those who miss Danial Li's exceptional photography should not fret, as he will return for September's release.

TAR's policy on deadlines has also somewhat changed: as more-and-more submissions are fit in at the last second, it is safe to say that TAR accepts submissions all month long. Should your submission truly come too-late for the current release, you will be notified promptly, and your submission(s) will simply be considered for the *subsequent* release.

Anyone still reading this lengthy foreword must not have a solid grasp on the concepts behind a literary journal. Allow us to assist you, dear reader – proceed to the next pages and indulge in the craft that our kind authors have chosen to offer this month!

With Love,

TAR Staff

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FICTION

The Mistake

By Basil Smith

T A R A W A R D W I N N E R F O R L I T E R A R Y E X C E L L E N C E

Kevin Humphrey, who was deathly afraid of plastic, was the only male in the laundromat that night. It was a dank, humid night, and as such most of the room had taken to fanning themselves. Kevin and the girl next to him, who was college-aged and who he'd never seen at the laundromat before, both fanned themselves with gloss magazines. He tried to match his time to hers without being overt. The mother, in her cotton dress, fanned an actual fan between herself and her little girl; Kevin had at first thought it odd that she always brought her daughter with her to the laundromat, especially since he did his washing late at night, but one time he'd asked the mother and she'd explained it perfectly well: she was single and looking, she winked. The old lady, who manned the desk, sat hunched over on a wooden stool—old Margaret Thatcher as Kevin had taken to calling her, because for all her beauty she was not much of a conversationalist—true to her namesake though, despite the sweat clamming down her face, and despite the sweat slopping between her desiccated breasts, she refused, absolutely refused, to fan herself.

In the center of the room a light shade swayed side to side. Around the swaying lamp, a purple blow-fly, fat and succulent, zipped back and forth; Kevin Humphrey compared its dance to that of a drunk pigeon. Neither Kevin nor the college girl understood the analogy, but she laughed, and he laughed, and she flicked her hair back as if it was a good joke.

The fly caught wind of something more sumptuous and veered away from the lamp, bobbing, as it moved, up and down on minuscule currents. It landed on the drenched hand of a new arrival. But before

it could dip its tongue into the oil well of one particularly morsellent sweat gland, the new arrival, a Mr. Francis Blackbean, waved it away as well as he could without dropping the basket of clothing he carried in his arms. However, no sooner had the fly taken off did it land somewhere else on the poor man's skin.

The rest of the customers felt sick. The regulars managed just fine, for they were used to the spectacle, but the college girl was not so accustomed. She covered her mouth, but it was futile; through the gaps in her fingers she wretched onto the floor. "At least you're not a vegetarian," Kevin Humphrey chuckled. "I'm not cleaning that up!" yelled Margaret Thatcher. The girl shrank into her magazine and wiped some of the sick from her face with the wrist of her jersey. And why did she feel so nauseous? Why, because of that thing attached to Francis Blackbean's left leg. Attached to this leg, the staple wounds holding it there long since scarred over, was a padlock; and attached to this padlock was a length of elastic para-cord, which, despite many efforts to remove it, was as fresh as the day it had first been donned. With each step that Francis took, or really each shuffle, for there was much weighing the man down, the rope stretched until it reached the point of maximum tension, and then it snapped forward; and each time it snapped forward, the load on the other end hopped and slapped against the back of the poor man's, now hairless, left calf.

The man must have grown smaller since Kevin had last seen him, or perhaps the bag filled with rubbish—the big, black rubbish bag—that he dragged around with him had simply grown larger, but either way each of his steps were more laboured than they had been in the past. The scratching and clicks

that perpetually emanated from the belly of the black bag were also a touch louder. And they grew louder more every time he took another step, as the red draw string at the top unravelled an inch further, releasing, as it came undone, more of the sound along with more of the inquisitive fly's much beloved stench.

"Good evening Julie, looking as lovely as ever. Hi there Sammy, have you been taking care of your mum? Hi Kevin, who's that pretty girl beside you?" Francis Blackbean said, for them all, with a defeated look and a defeated posture. He worked his way to the industrial washing machine. Every few steps the bag caught on something and refused to budge. Each time it stopped, Francis rubbed its polyethylene love-handles to soothe the grumbling. It wasn't so bad though. The regulars breathed a collective sigh of relief, through their mouths, when Francis loaded the machine without a hitch. If not for the unnerving clicks that still sounded from the rubbish bag beside him, Francis would have made a nice addition to the symphony of washing machines and clothes in dryers dropping at the top of each rotation.

A stool sat in the center of the room, equidistant from everyone else. Taking their place on that stool he was conscious of how the process of lifting the bag onto the seat would unsettle it each time. During the last trip he had accidentally snagged one side of it on the corner of the chair, and he hadn't heard the last of it for days. As tender as he could, he dug his shoulder into the bag and grunted until the bag was on top of the stool. Try as he might though, this time, this unfortunate time, he had not been tender enough.

The bag tripled its clicking until they couldn't even hear the washing machines. Everyone in the room covered their ears. The things inside it bleated like a thousand lambs watching their mothers dragged into a spaghetti grinder. Tears streamed down the college girl's face; wetting the sick on her chin which had almost dried. Margaret

Thatcher grew red with anger and vibrated on her little chair. The little girl pointed and asked a private question too loudly; her mother told her to let it alone, then fanned them both more vigorously than before.

In an attempt to calm it down, Francis Blackbean threw his arms around the bag and kneaded its sides as hard as he could, the sinews of his neck bulged, and he kneaded some more. He rubbed its pregnant belly. He looked at the onlookers apologetically and then, with a touch of embarrassment, he nudged his forehead into the bag's thighs. This did nothing again. The bag seemed indifferent to his affections. As a last resort, the poor man pecked the plastic with one kiss, and then another, each leaving a greyish smudge on its hide. These kisses, it seemed, did the trick: the clicks lowered in volume and grew less frequent. Just to make sure, Francis continued his kisses with increasing passion. He sped up, faster and faster. When Francis had begun moving so fast that all Kevin Humphrey could see was a blur, the bag became silent.

Everyone relaxed and the man on the stool next to his rubbish bag gave the burden a pat, like one would pat a dog.

Suddenly, the clicking and scuttling and shrieking resumed even louder and Kevin Humphrey felt the pressure sawing into his ear drums. The bag rumbled, dust fell from the ceiling and the still-buzzing fly lodged itself in Francis Blackbean's hair.

Kevin Humphrey was taken aback as, in an instant, the bag doubled in size. As it grew its partner shrank by the same.

They pressed their hands to their ears harder, and from Margaret Thatcher's forehead, the sweat began to boil and steam into the air. The college girl, hugging her knees, rocked back and forth in the corner, her thumb, wet, in her mouth. The daughter pointed and cackled; her mother picked her up to take her away from the scene—this was not something for children to see. Kevin Humphrey rubbed his eye-brow and he

looked around himself nervously. The tension had risen and then suddenly Margaret Thatcher jumped onto the front desk like a warrior and just as suddenly, EXPLOSIVELY, the bag expanded until it filled every free inch of the room. Margaret Thatcher, mid jump, was thrown up onto the ceiling, where she stuck; the mother and daughter, almost at the door, were slapped against the shop window for all outside – and there were many passerbys – to see.

Kevin, as it was said in the very first line, was deathly afraid of plastic and as such he did not enjoy being squeezed against the wall by the ass of the bag. When he turned it squeaked, and he felt the air rushing into his diaphragm and as it rubbed against his cheek and his bare naked legs and his eyeballs starting to make it hard for him to breathe through his eyeballs or even to think properly in this madplasticconfusion he had to do something he had to do something or his heart would quit.

"I apologise for butting in," his tongue wet the bag as he spoke, "but wouldn't it be better if you took this outside?"

It was a mistake. Anticipating the thing to come, the now minuscule Francis Blackbean squirmed between the wall and the bag. The innards of the rubbish bag, sensing the vibration of Kevin's voice, shoved against the draw string, rumbling, but not breaking it, yet. The things inside the bag shoved some more. Kevin could see them for what they really were. Thump. Francis moved upward, and with each waddle the elastic rope around his leg grew tenser, making his task more difficult. They shoved. Thump. They peaked from just behind the gap and glared at Kevin Humphrey. We are going to lap up your smegma and crush your soul and dreams, they hissed. They shoved once more and once more again and then they were free at last. A hundred thousand cockroaches scuttle scuttled out of the opening. As one, solid wall they streamed toward the unfortunate busy-body. A small number, a mouthful in quantity, fell ahead of the mass and landed on his shirt. At the top of the rubbish

bag, Francis Blackbean dived right in with a splash. The larger wave inched closer, and Kevin could feel the early arrivals as they began to unthread his clothes and his body hair. It tickled. Kevin became almost euphoric in the loss of oxygen. Then the wall reached him. Francis emerged again at the top, sludge-drenched, with something new in his hand. They crawled into Kevin Humphrey's ears and down his throat. An antennae flicked across his pupils, marking the diggings of one adventurous bug as it searched for a home somewhere near the cornice of his eye socket. They plugged his nostrils and rubbed his vocal chords, as if to start a fire. Kevin edged towards unconsciousness. Using the power of elasticity, Francis Blackbean slung himself along the ceiling, past the still ranting Margaret Thatcher, and slammed against the foot of the door with a thud. He popped right back up. He yelled something indecipherable and then, as hard as he could, he rattled the object in his hand, a snow-globe—a Christmas setting with the flakes moving like a blizzard in an earthquake. He rolled it into the traffic outside.

The cockroaches stopped.

"Sorry, sorry, sorry," they apologised to Kevin profusely. One by one, they released their grip on him. They filed out in an orderly fashion, taking everything they had brought with them as they left. On her way out, the roach that had enjoyed his eyeballs the most paused for a moment to rub her bottom on his eye lash, leaving a scent of herself for him to remember her by.

The plastic slid off his face.

He breathed again.

The column of cockroaches continued their march into the street, clambering through the traffic and over the snow-globe and each other until they had formed one giant, living mound. The vehicles, impassive beasts that they were, ploughed right on through the poor roaches. The headlights tossed the roaches into the air like salad.

With a slap, wheels slurped a slush of shell and hemolymph up into their tyre-guards. Watching it all, Kevin felt a pang of sadness and he almost cried.

For seven minutes more, he counted the time from his still running drier, the bugs emerged from the bag and joined the demise in the street.

Only when all the bugs had left did Margaret Thatcher fall from the ceiling, like a slice of processed cheese falls from a refrigerator door. The steam rising from her cheeks precipitated back to a liquider, more manageable, grumpiness. The mother handed her daughter a stick of gum from her purse. Kevin Humphrey retook his seat and dusted a few antennae off his hair and his shoulders. The college girl took a seat, closer than before, right next to him. She leaned against him slightly. Her jersey was a light material and he could feel through her shoulder, and through his shoulder, the beat of her heart. Francis Blackbean, now regular sized, stripped out of his clothing. The clothes dripped with a mucosal sludge. He threw them in with the rest of his load. Naked, except for a pair of damp tighty-whiteys, he sat down on the stool once again.

Yet after all that it was not quite over. Attached still to his left leg, momentarily satiated and spent, it slept on the ceramic floor, thin and heaving in the tepid evening breeze.

No one spoke as the driers and washing machines did their thing.

Down the street a well-groomed man in uniform pushed his cart. The man stopped outside the laundromat and knocked on the door frame.

"Evening folks," he said tipping his hat. "There's been a call-out to this location. Don't mind me, I'm just checking-in to make sure everything is fine."

Francis Blackbean, the man with the bag, continued to watch the washing machine as it did its thing. In a lovely way, the little girl snuck over, jumped on the stool, and wrapped her arms around him. Her human warmth sank into his back and tenderized his soul.

He turned to the man in uniform—his eyes brimmed with five years of pain and happiness—and he relented.

"Alright. Do it."

The man in uniform whistled his way to where the broken man sat. From a work belt, he took out a generic pair of scissors and cut the elastic band. As simple as that it was done.

"That lock there will take a bit longer, I'm afraid sir, but it'll fall off in good time." He patted Francis on the shoulder and ruffled up the girl's hair. "You're a sweet thing aren't you." He peeled the rubbish bag from the floor and tossed it into his cart. "Good evening everyone." He tipped his hat and continued on down the street, whistling. The little girl patted the man one last time then ran back to her mother.

And so it was over. The old, elastic paracord flipped about in his hands. He laughed at how pathetic it was, at how easily the trouble had been taken care of. How could he have been such a fool? The washing machines did their thing. The weight was finally gone. The fly unlodged itself from his hair and left through an open window. Relaxing, he doubled over and squeezed his torso into his knees. As he stretched, the nodules of his spine protruded through his thinning skin.

"NO!"

He ran out into the street.

Close-Up

By Pratinav Anil

The car just skid over the pavement trying to dodge that truck in front of it. It knocked off a few peds and a few students who were eating frankies and sandwiches there. Man, messy afternoon. Don't think anybody or anything could survive that. A few men were trying to come out.

'Wait a sec.'

'Yeah, just go and do something.'

There was a little crowd around the upturned car now. We pulled the dead and alive folk out. A few cops had reached there, too, and they were clearing the way. I moved back from the heat and blood and crowd. She stood there, silently following my movements with her eyes.

'Some helluva accident, huh? Mr. Alpha-male was driving at eighty kilometers.'

She didn't reply. I could see she was visibly shaken. The wind blew and the leaves and dust started moving in spirals. That usually foreshadowed rain. The clouds indicated the same. Her fingers were all shaking. I could guess what she was thinking. 'They were college kids. Dying inadvertently for nothing.' I wanted to cheer up the old lass. I pointed to the café in the distance.

'How about some coffee beans to cool your nerves?'

'That don't cool.'

'Okay, some cold coffee or something.'

She was silent. I ruffled the long curly hair. 'You've seen it in them movies. All real-

life car chases and crashes are some form of Bullitt or Duel or Crash or something.

'But this isn't twenty-four frames per second. This is just more depressing.'

We crossed the road passing by those little clothes shops. She got most of her apparel from there, and another shop called Apparel in Khar.

'How come them brands are so cheap here?' I remembered asking her.

'Oh, they're export rejects. When they don't land up in global showrooms, they drop into the Third World. Vietnam, Sri Lanka, Nepal, 15th Road Khar.'

It was raining lightly now. Few people were running for shelter as if nuclear armageddon had just begun.

'You know there's a park behind these shops? Its just that you never see it from Linking Road.'

'Oh? They still have a few left in these parts?'

'Surprised that the Bandra girl didn't know if its existence.' That gave me another chance to run my fingers down her thick black coiffe.

'Lets go for a walk.'

It wasn't much of a park. A few dotted trees and patches of grass. There were a few hobos lying around and a few kids were playing cricket.

'Rich kids don't play sports.'

'They eat fast-food instead. They hang around in gaming arcades, tuition shops, doctors' shops, restaurants.'

'The sedentary life.'

'How's your badminton scene going?'

'Good. You could join me. Try lose some of that heavy muscle weight, you'd start playing good baddie, too.'

'I wanna learn boxing.'

'You just wanna be Hemingway.'

'That a crime?' I inquired.

'Ah, not really. I like the Hemingway types.'

She laughed, revealing her gums and teeth. She had a big mouth. And my mind was wandering again.

We turned into Waterfield Road. There were fancier shops here, the new transnational corporations that were trying to survive the whimsical rents of the city. Clean, well-lit open spaces, selling little or nothing - those typical overstuffed, overpriced, overbearing shops.

'I think someone's calling you.'

'Huh?' I woke up from my dream.

She pointed with her eyes. Fair enough, there was a voice heading towards us.

'Hey men. Don't recognize me?'

I couldn't and was about to say the Groucho quote about not forgetting a face but making an exception in his case, when it dawned on me.

'Oh, Francis, what's up, man?'

'Same bleddy thing - football, studies.'

'So not signing up for the next alliance français class?'

'I'm in it, you're the one who ditched. Now you don't even notice your friends on the road. Oh, and I got a girlfriend now.'

'That's great, man. Who's she?'

'She's this pomo chick, your type actually. At least she's not a behenji.'

'Progress, man. You'll get Sandra from Bandra some day.'

'Thank man. Bye. Got to go. Late for class.'

He ran off.

'Some makapao friend.' I explained.

'I figured. You know some oddball characters, don't you?'

'Yeah, he's the typical "Eh, what men, going to church men" types.'

'Haha. You saw that funny nose-piercing? It was hilarious.'

'Yeah, guess its punks like him that keep Al's shop running.'

'Hey look.'

'Whoa?'

'I need to buy glasses.'

'Awright, but from that shop?'

'Why not?'

'You mean that schmuck's shop?'

'Why you so anal about them Tatas anyway?'

'Aw, c'mon now. Your glasses are going to fund the next corporate lobbyists. Don't

think you're buying new glasses, you're just sponsoring the next Niira Radia.'

'You're so anal.'

'Yeah, I'm anal about Radia.'

'Anal.'

'Anal.'

'Anal.'

'Anal.'

We were trying to outscreeam each other while laughing with equal decibel.

'Ssh, there's a shrink's shop next doors,' I whispered.

She burst into another peal of laughter.

'I might as take an appointment. I've spent too long with you.'

'I take that as a compliment. Cool, lets get your glasses.'

We wiped our shoes on the dirty mat.

'Is this the Tata shop? I've a search warrant.'

'Ssh. Don't listen to him,' she was talking to the salesman now, 'I want box-framed glasses.'

The salesfool began his soliloquy. 'It's all about the design. The style is scientific,' I heard him say, 'The frame's for 8-9-9-9.' The clever guy behind the counter had made a perfect blend of pseudoscience and clever salesmanship. That's pop culture for you. He rambled mumbled something about cylinders, axes, stress and strain, sturm und drang.

'Too much, mummy doesn't give me so much,' she said.

He went on with the glasses. 'These glasses give you a very decent feel.'

'Uh, maybe she's a girl of decadence.'

'My nephew mumbles and grumbles all the time. Doesn't he sound like a toad?'

'Your nephew indeed? So I'm family now? Nephewzoned.'

'Toady,' she said, mimicking my voice. 'Hey, don't these look sexy?'

'No, these are meant for Chinese eyes. Imagine the poor Chinese, they must have to bend their necks all the way up when they go to the cinema. And bend it all the way down when they're reading a book.'

'Its a pity to be Chinese.'

'Its a pain in the neck, anyway.'

'Hey, I'll get my number checked.'

I remembered the first time we met. I was immediately attracted to that rich tan skin and the grizzly hair. Her big eyed stare really turned me on. She had similar glasses. And with that Balzac Age syndrome coming on, it was another attraction. Made her take great pains to retain that fading glory. She looked so sexy in her kolhapuris, bangles and that Hawaiian T-shirt with all those floral designs.

She came back wearing those testing glasses for testing eyes.

'My number's changed. I see you in a close-up now.'

'Everything is a close-up in our postmodern age. Cinema, life, pornography, spectacles. Eyes and the visual experience are the fad of our age.'

'My power's gone up. My number shouldn't increase at my age.'

‘Its a game they play. They give you the feeling of empowerment. They even call it ‘power’ - they tempt you to become more powerful, have a higher power.’

‘Do you like these frames?’

‘Yeah, they’re real sexy.’

‘I knew it. They’re so sixties. And you know what? I’m gonna buy these frames just because you like them.’

She pointed a finger to me and accused, ‘You,’ and winked. She was high.

‘You know, you were always the domineering one in the relationship. Its good to have role reversal. You know those big black box-frames turn me on, don’t you?’

The salesfool interjected, ‘Would you like progressive lenses?’

He went on about how she needed reading glasses and spoke of distortion and distortion correction. How progressive glasses corrected all. ‘Just pay ten grand and everything’s gonna be good, thank you, come to my shop again.’ That kinda thing.

‘Don’t let all this talk about progressive and distortion fool you. This is not rock’n’roll. It’s spectacles.’

‘Exactly. A perversion of the rock subculture.’

‘Let’s get the hell out of here.’

‘Just let me buy these frames quick. We’re off in seconds.’

‘Wearing spectacles has become a spectacle itself today. The society as spectacle.’

‘Look at this guy. See the phallic way he sells the glasses. Sheer macho power. Talks about cylinders and spheres. Makes it seem so ballsy. He expects me to fall for that crap.’

‘Maybe he’s just hitting on you.’

‘Who cares? We’re off.’

We left the shop. The clouds were getting darker. Mumbai was about to become Venice and I could see it coming.

‘Inviting me home?’

‘My sis is over at my place till tomorrow. We’ll meet after that.’

She had this little studio apt in Bandra. Must’ve cost her a fortune of rent and upkeep. But that rich uncle was paying, so it was fine. The old man had practically adopted her. The usual thing. Rich uncle, no children, adopts niece. It was a swell thing to have uncles like these. Money in return for keeping the old folk in good humor. We spent many an afternoon in that midair space. She refused to go beyond second base. The relationship was stagnating, contrary to the appearance on the outside.

‘You’ve got sex on your mind.’

How did she know?

‘No, I’ve got sex in my body.’

‘You’ve this idiotic grin on your face when you do. Try making it less obvious.’

‘Obviously I’m not the card-sharper, Miss Poker-face.’

‘The first time we met, you had that grin. The sizing-up-women grin. Same as a post-coital kinda grin.’

‘What d’you know about my post-coital grins?’

‘Is that a complaint?’

‘C’mon, we’re men and women of the opposite gender. Let’s face it.’

Things were coming out on the surface.

And hell was breaking lose. I could hear the Lou Reed song playing in my mind. 'Now we're coming out/ Out of our closets...'

I mistook that grin for a pleasant, charming grin back then. Maybe I'd never have got around to seeing you if I knew what the grin meant.'

'Everything is not a symbol. A grin is a grin.'

'And a disturbing grin is a frankly disturbing grin.'

'You've a wild imagination.'

'You've wild expectations.'

'Your mind is like the Wild West.'

'As in?'

'Barren. Isolated.'

'Huh? Was that some kind of joke?'

She laughed wildly in exaggeration. Maybe her menopause was coming on. How old was she anyway? Could never figure.

There was a time. We had our moments. It was a whirlwind of a thing. We met at cafés everyday. She taught me to cook in the apartment. Little odds and ends, anyway. Her room was a junkyard of little artifacts. It had this low-key lighting of naked yellow bulbs. Very Hollywoodish. She'd got the idea from an IKEA magazine she subscribed. Well, you get an idea what kinda person she was. Subscribed to IKEA magazines. The noir lighting gave it the feeling of a sinner's den. But it was more a nun's salvation den in reality. I'm sure even Vatican nuns go second base. Alright, she wasn't a nun. She was the quite belle, academic, didn't like to admit it, really funny when she wanted to be, brilliant interior designer, lazy, seductive.

'Hey, I really got to go. Wanna meet tomorrow.'

'Cool, cool. Hell, why not?'

'Sis's leaving tomorrow. My place at six.'

'Fine, yeah.'

She gave me a broad smile. 'Hey.'

'Hey, hey, hey.'

'Tomorrow's gonna be a surprise.' There was an erotic lilt to that tone.

'Really. I'm looking forward to it.' I grinned. I was thinking of Henry Miller novels and Russ Meyer films.

'Bye,' she said, elongating the word into three distinct syllables.

The barometer hung low. It was dark and the neon lights were all over Linking Road. The torrent began. Visibility was almost nil. It was the first rain.

Caitlin, Tollgate Collector

By Tom Sheehan

The sun, angling into her eyes, had come up “like thunder out of China ‘crosst the bay,” and even as Caitlin Bordeaux made music of the poet’s words, she couldn’t remember his name. Nothing was right in the scene though the day had begun in promise. Nick had just gone through mere minutes earlier, the load piled high on his flatbed rig. Most of the night the truck had been parked in front of her house, the neighbors probably talking again. She didn’t care, his mouth still alive on her.

Now here’s this turkey of a traveler playing music so loud it was damned oppressive. A ‘98 Nissan Maxima, gray, four-door; she had identified every car for a whole year, and hadn’t dropped a bill or a coin in months. Why would some idiot heathen play music as if he were leading a marching band, and obnoxious music to begin with? Something in the day was going to bother her, she just knew it. Why wasn’t the loud music ever something she loved, some Puccini, something with body to it? Or a decent dream song? In the back seat of the Maxima she saw the piled-up blanket moving with slight jerks, some living thing in motion. A thousand and one sights she’d seen in her two years here catching coin and currency; people in the back seat swapping favors, or so still they looked dead, once a huge snake sunning at a rear window. Surprises were never too far away. Obviously this was another one. She wouldn’t even hazard a guess.

The monoxide fumes swirled through the door and her own cubicle exhaust system sucked them up, but the stream passed around her, touched her. Every time out it made her think of Bill Gennaro’s garage back home in Indiana. They’d lived upstairs for ten years and oil and gas fumes and the smell of car rot she thought were environmental, were part of the universe.

It came again with the Maxima, odd for a car only four years old. Would the fumes cling at her skin, age her quicker than another job? On each shift she came to work, she looked at the mirror propped up in place. Some of the collectors kidded her about it. Only Chauncy, in the next booth, had refrained from ragging on her. Every day thousands of people handed her money and looked at her, eyes at times so leveled and so degrading she’d want to smack them. Thirty-four, she was and holding on for the ride. So far there was but the hint of wrinkles, and a thin line curving down beside her nose and getting lost at the corner of her mouth. The teeth of her smile were attractive, she believed, which made her smile reassuringly, an inner dictate making visible its demands.

Blue eyes, hiding a bit of pain as always, might give her away if she let them. Nick said she was goddamn beautiful, but how could she count on that; didn’t he smell of oil and gasoline and the fumes that 18-wheelers seemed to lug in their wakes forever, invisible tails of huge road comets. She was resigned that it came from having a trucker as a lover.

It was a ten dollar bill the man in the ‘98 Maxima had handed her, a good looking guy, maybe fifty, gray hair, but eyes out of a far grandstand, deep, labored, bedeviled. She hunted for more of the poet’s words, but the music could have killed her. A diamond on one of driver’s fingers, she thought, could pay off the mortgage. She made a face at the music, but he didn’t make a move to turn it down. Then her heart leaped! Out of the corner of her eye she saw the high-crowned blanket move in the back seat. It fell partly away from what it was draped on and she saw a little blonde girl poking a straw through the bars of a small cage even as she handed the man his change.

Her heart leaped into her throat. She thought of her daughter Mercy still in bed at home and her own mother sleeping in the next room.

The man looked into her eyes even as he stepped on the gas pedal. The Maxima jumped out northward on the turnpike. The panic was on her, in the bloodstream, her heart jamming her throat. Nick was up the road ahead of the Maxima, the next exit about twelve miles away. Nick, with the lovely mouth, with the great hands, was the only hope. The only hope! Caitlin Bordeaux made her move. Screaming for Chauncy Dewitt in the next booth, she scared hell out of a man and woman in a '95 Chevy. She grabbed her cell phone and dialed Nick's number, praying he had his phone on. She held up one finger as Chauncy ran to her booth and she stepped outside. Cars plugged her lane. The fumes were rampant. She held her hand up for Chauncy to listen.

Nick answered.

"Listen, Nick. Life or death. If you want to see me again, listen." The demand was in her voice, in its ascension, that breathless lift. She tried to shake the scream out of it. "Behind you, maybe three or four minutes, a gray '98 Maxima, man at the wheel. He's got a little girl in a cage under a blanket in his back seat and he's playing music loud enough to drown out her cries." He started to say something but she wouldn't let him and Chauncy Dewitt ran to get his own cell phone. Traffic had slowed. Now three gates were stopped tight. "If he gets to the next exit that little girl could be lost forever." She had to tell a lie. "I called home. There's no answer. It could be Mercy. I don't know." She hoped it was a lie. Oh, God in heaven wouldn't punish her for such a little lie.

Nick's voice boomed back. "What the hell can I do, Caity? I can't stop him. What did you call me for? What the hell can I do?" Nick could choke every time he thought of her. His breath could hide in his gut waiting to blow him up, he thought her so lovely, how her hips would mound, how her mound would hip him. Driving the long days on the road he would play the little games of memory, the recall of taste and wonder, the softest touch coming in a moment of such clarity he could spend hours thinking about it, recreating it, the road spinning out ahead of him apparently in absolute control. Now it was done for sure. The screaming in his ear, making new demands.

"Goddammit, Nick, stop the truck. Block traffic. Don't be afraid of a goddamn ticket." Her voice was ascending. "The States aren't going to bite you. Stop the damn traffic! Make a roadblock! It's a little girl, Nick. I swear to god you'll never see me again if he gets away with her. It's only twelve miles to Exit Five."

Chauncy was on his phone and waving at her, pointing back down the road and up the road and then overhead. It was as if he were on television and explaining to an audience what was going on. He rushed over to her booth. "Caity, you sure?" His hand was over the phone and his eyes were wide but he was a new grandfather and a former Marine, a rock-solid man. Balding and rugged and smiling a lot, he never ribbed her about looks, never asked embarrassing questions. He'd come out of the fire-flung jungles of Viet Nam where he'd made life and death decisions by the hundreds, sometimes every day. Kicking in was the old adrenaline on the loose, the "you are it" pin tagged on his chest. The M-16 seemed to be frozen in his hands again. The plea in her eyes came universal, the mother's plea, and the knowledge of thousands of years of motherhood. He bet on her. "I saw him and the kid, Lieutenant. Is that you, Bubba? Yes, I saw him myself. '98 Maxima, gray four-door, music playing loud as hell like he was drowning out her cries. Son of a bitch, I get him I'll kill that bastard!"

It had been perhaps seven minutes since Nick had left, Caitlin thought. Twelve miles to the next exit. If he did 70-80 the Maxima could be there in minutes, the girl gone forever. It was up to Nick. She wondered what kind of a father he'd make. Now he had the chance to show her.

In the Diamond-T, the flatbed behind him piled with new but empty pallets, Nick Pridon saw the sign saying Exit Five was a half-mile away. Never had he met anybody like Caity in his twelve years on the road. Whenever he got to her place it was like coming home. That had to be important. If he went by the exit, let the guy and the kid get away from him, she'd know somehow. That truth snapped through him like a whip. The shift knob fit into his hand firm as her breast. The marvel of Caitlin Bordeaux came over him once more. His feet began to dance on the pedals, the gears taking on a new hum, the light load shifting slightly and Nick Pridon pointed into the floor to a trucker he was about to pass. He could have been saying anything but was obviously in need of some help. The brake pedal banged against his foot, the load shifted with a slight

creaking, easily, like a snake in the grass, and the Diamond-T began a hitching slow-down on the turnpike.

The newly cut grass at the exit popped up just ahead on his right and the overpass beyond it where Exit 5 raced off to the west. Four American flags snapped in the morning air above the overpass chain link fence. The Kenworth rig beside him, one that Nick had seen before with a State of Maine map on the driver's door, ground slowly to a halt with him. Behind them came the screech of brakes, harsh screams coming off the pavement. But there were no impact sounds. Traffic stopped. Nick stepped down from his cab and looked behind him, back down the road toward the toll plaza almost twelve miles behind him. The traffic all along the pike was coming to a standstill. On a crown of the road, over a quick rise, vehicles coming to a crawl looked like dominoes edging into line.

A man leaped out of his car immediately behind Nick's rig. "It's on the radio. Some son of a bitch has a kid in a cage in his car. Between here and the last toll plaza unless he got past us and took this exit. The guy on the radio says the police are sending out a helicopter and they're coming down here from Exit 5. Says the guy is playing music loud enough to kill you."

The man looked back over his shoulder. Nick looked. The driver of the immense Kenworth looked. They could hear the music like a hundred boom boxes at work, and down the median strip, speeding on the narrow grass plot, careening, swerving in and out of sudden swales and dips, came the gray Maxima, the heavy music leaping out front of it like the blast of trumpets. Nick looked at his rig. He'd never get it across the median in time. Morning traffic was heavy going in the opposite direction. The man who talked about the radio announcement looked at him. All around them people were out of their cars, some yelling, some saying "kidnap, loud music," some complaining and swearing. The man behind Nick leaped into his car and pulled it broadside across the median just as the Maxima came up out of another deep swale and stalled on a crest of ground.

The man in the gray Maxima leaped out of his car and heard sirens in the distance, their wail as harsh and cutting as screams. When he tried to jump back into the car, half a dozen men pinned him against the side door. Nick pulled open the back

door, flipped the blanket off the cage, unlocked the top and picked up the little girl. She screamed in his ears and struggled and he showed her to people gathered around them. A grandmotherly woman reached for the child and held her in her arms. The woman kept shaking her head and clutching the little girl against her bosom.

Chauncy Dewitt, standing in front of ten miles of backed up traffic at the toll plaza, danced across the pavement, waving his arms at Caitlin. He had the phone at his ear. People were all over the road, the radio still blasting out the news alert. Chauncy had called the local radio station. A gutsy early-morning disk jockey and news broadcaster had jumped the news with an instant headline for the morning travelers. "Here's in-process news breaking for travelers northbound between the Parkman Toll Plaza and Exit Five. A kidnapping is in process right now. A man in a '98 gray Maxima, playing loud music, has a small girl in a cage in the back seat of his car. Don't let him get off the road at Exit 5. It could be your kid he has." He had kept saying the same thing. The police had been called, the wheels had turned.

Caitlin Bordeaux, late that night, heard the engine of the Diamond-T grind to a halt, air escape the connection line, a door slam with a solid thunk, and Nick Pridon's footsteps on the walkway moving toward her. Mercy sat sleeping in her lap as she had for two hours, the night-light on, shadows bouncing around them, a few neighbors' lights throwing off a warm glow.

Outside of Heaven

(Part 1)

By Basil Smith

It rained along the highway. A single car drove down its length. Inside, a man listened to the radio. He pulled over to the side of the road. He inhaled what would be the deepest breath of his life and he counted to three.

Phil Tates lived for Wednesday nights. He was two years out of college and worked most of the week on a road crew. The work had appealed to him, at first, as he believed manual labour would make him feel more like a man. But it had not. Every Wednesday though, after work at 7:30 PM, Phil walked into the heart of the local university campus, into an alleyway tucked between two buildings, and down a small flight of concrete stairs. At the bottom of these stairs there was a green wooden door. And just above the door, pencilled in golden letters, a small sign read "Heaven".

The bar catered to several music scenes and general student life as well. Its interior reflected this mish-mash of ethos, with memorabilia from across the musical ages tacked onto the walls at random. Wednesday night at Heaven was Jazz night. On those nights, anyone who cared a damn converged into the small bar: glass wearing kids, ageing bums, up tight accountants, the lot. Phil Tates was a part of this scene as well, in a way.

He had discovered the Jazz night in his second year of college through a poster which had been plastered around a telephone poll. On the first night he turned up at the marked time, but, he would learn, this was much too early. To pass time, he made small talk with the bartender, a few students, and he waited. An awkward hour later, the now familiar faces—then new—finally showed. Some entered in groups. Some entered alone. But it mattered

little once they were inside; as each took their turn, tuning the house gear or the gear they brought with them, and playing together for the crowd.

The audience seemed, he observed, to know unconsciously just the right time to shut up. A saxophonist nodded to the drummer and the drummer tapped out a beat on his sticks. The piano, bass, and an alto sax cued in at once.

That first night, Phil had paid special attention to the drummer. He had himself taken lessons as a kid. He still practised along to records in his garage, but he'd yet to take it any further than that. That first night, he was hoping, would be his chance.

The drummer kept a quiet beat. I can do that, Phil thought as he tapped his fingers on the bar. But then came the solo and he lost it. The drummer wasn't wild, but as he moved in between and around the other instruments, he maintained a sense of musicality and cohesion that Phil was aware he could never match.

For the rest of the night, Phil watched the band members trading places off and on. All the drummers were better than him.

Not tonight, but one day, he thought. He upped his practice schedule twice as much to the dismay of his neighbours and flatmates.

Roughly four years had passed since that first Wednesday night and Phil's one day had still yet to come. The university's winter semester had just begun and a line led all the way from the door to the top of the concrete stairway. It snowed and as they waited a fine dust gathered on their shoulders.

The next few weeks would be crowded, Phil knew. But the crowds would thin out as most realized this wasn't for them. Only a select few would stay, replacing, as they did, the graduating seniors.

He didn't like crowds but for Phil it was, still, another night to live for. At the door, he beat the snow off his jacket and hung it on the rack. The bartender-come-bouncer nodded to him.

The inside was packed. His regular table was occupied by two girls sipping colourful drinks with straws. He took to standing.

Phil drank at the bar and watched as they played Goodbye Pork Pie Hat. He'd chosen an appletini for kicks. The night was still young but already a girl lay next to him face down in to the bar. She wore a white and formal satin dress. Her hair was a dyed black and fell into a pool around her arms.

He downed the rest of the drink and ordered the bottom shelf stuff.

The girl groaned. "Yuck. How do you stand that?" She slurred as she spoke. Her eyes were a light brown, almost green, and they had been outlined with a heavy eye shadow; a little racoonish, but it worked. She was pretty and she was legal, at least. Phil's only complaint was that she'd cropped her fringe like the models do and afflicted herself with that robot look.

She squinted at him. He tried to think up something witty but came up short. He sipped the drink and faked a cough. That's something, he figured.

"Do you shee it?"

"Shee what?"

He had no idea what she was referring to.

"Ah!" she tapped her nose. "You're old but you're a noob. One day you'll look at the music and you'll see it. It's nice."

The girl took his glass off the counter and sipped it. Apparently, it was not to her taste.

"You've been here for a while, right." She spat on the ground. "What do you play?"

"I was a drummer."

"And now you are—"

He thought of the car crash story he'd settled on years ago.

"The audience." he said.

The song ended with a bang and he couldn't hear her laugh.

"Who the hell actually listens to this?" She held out her arms. "The notes are all wrong And the people aren't so good looking either."

He'd come across this type before. To argue would be pointless. Although, that had rarely stopped him in the past.

"Alright, alright," she waved his protestations away. "Name a Beatle's song."

"All my loving." It was the first song that came to his head.

She slapped herself across the face.

"OK! Here, for the drink." She slid an old key onto the counter and stumbled over to the band.

The whole band smirked. She hugged the guitarist as if he was an old friend, but the way he stiffened suggested he was not.

She waved her arms around, tapped out a tune on her forearm, and scribbled over a few sheets of music with her lipstick. The piano player pulled out his seat and presented it with a courtly bow. She high-fived him. The pianist, as he walked back to his table of waiting friends, grinned.

She straightened herself as if she was a little girl at her first recital. "1, 2, 3, 4," she mouthed. The opening piano chords were played simply, accompanied only by the bass line and the drum. The room quieted down once again.

"Close your eyes, and I'll kiss you.

Tomorrow I'll miss you.

Remember I'll always be true.

And then while I'm away,

I'll write home every day.

And I'll send all my loving to you.

Her singing voice was deep but it was pleasant. Not a voice for recording, Phil knew, but it was enough for the local scene. From the second verse she instead voiced the melody with the piano. She didn't embellish the tune, but she played enough that the musicians in the room could see the outline of the picture to come. It was going to be something, he was sure. The chorus that'll be when.

But the saxophonist took the chorus, and at the return verse the rest of the band joined in. When they arrived at the solos she teased further by shaking off several cues to enter. She let everyone go before her and they all played better for it. He could see the veterans as they were when they were young, and the freshers as they would become. And then it was her.

She was something alright. If you took a picture of the girl at the piano, in her tight dress and with her shoulders bunched up, you would not have thought her anything special. But the sound, even the tone of her keys sounded more musical; to the point that the other pianists in the room could scarcely believe they'd played the same instrument.

For her solo, she took it back to the original melody. She nodded to each of the previous so-

loists with small bits of what they'd said; an imitated flourish or even their mood. Earlier in the song, a young girl with a ukulele had fumbled through her own solo. Compared to the others it had sounded amateur. But when the robot girl mimicked that nervousness, Phil could see that even those mistakes had had their charms. Yet throughout it all, the robot girl maintained a distinct flavor of herself.

When the song was over even the band clapped. All who witnessed felt spent in having taken part in something so perfect. However, it wasn't all brightness. Hiding away in their satisfaction was a fear of what would follow. What if the next song was not as good and this was a fluke? What if the next song was just as good but unveiled some unfixable flaw? In spite of their fear they soldiered on to the next tune. Their worries were for naught. It was real.

In between turns the robot girl drank with Phil, when she wasn't being dragged to some table or a dark corner; that it to say, they spoke very little.

The band had finished for the night. The barkeep stowed stools onto tables. The musicians talked quickly as they packed away their instruments. Phil asked the barkeep for a last drink, and the man stopped his work to oblige. "Quickly," he said as he poured.

The ice cube swam around the brown liquid and Phil tried as hard as he could not to take his eyes away from it.

"Hello Mr. Cripple." She tapped him on the back.

"Jesus Christ."

She laughed.

"Walk me home? It's close, I promise."

They were the last ones out of the bar. As they slid into their jackets the barkeep, sweeping away, gave Phil 'The Look.'

Outside, the snow had stopped falling and the air was crisp. His shoes sank an inch at every step. They talked.

Dowry Castaway, 19 years old. Third year at the college where she majored in music and minored in literature. Her home town was a small place, more of a village really. Its Wikipedia page mentioned only that it lay in between one place of note and another place of note, and that it had a nice thermal spring. It was her first time in the city, but she was no bumpkin, she swore. She spoke mostly of her family.

"You know, my father he's a nervous man. One of those OCD types. He always dresses well. I mean, he's a banker so it's expected I guess. He wears these well cut suits and he keeps his hair slicked back all the time. Every day for him is like an audition for Reservoir Dogs. If it wasn't for these thick bottle glasses he wears he'd look the part too.

That's not true actually, he's a nerd to the bone. But even if he moved trollies for a living, I'm sure he'd wear a suit. Get this: the sweaters he wears around the house are tailored. Can you believe that? Custom fit sweaters! He does his hair on the weekend too. It's weird. But he looks good I guess.

His music though, his music is so wild. He used to sit me down at the piano when I was a toddler—he's a piano player you see, just like me. And he'd talk about music like it's this clear, tangible thing you can bite into, like it's a book or something."

She stopped in the middle of the side walk and waved an imaginary cigarette at a little girl.

"*You see, Dowry, when you play a song, always keep the spirit, the essence, of the song in mind. It's better to do something that's real and simple than play around the piece. That's a rookie mistake; they take a simple tune like this.*" Dowry played an invisible piano and hummed a nice melody. "*And they turn it inna this.*" She made a few fart noises. "*I don't want to make it hard for the listener to understand, you see. I don't want to make it hard for myself too.*"

She re-assumed her Dowry character. "He's like the freakin Hemingway of music! I can't explain it myself, but man if you saw it you'd know." She continued walking.

"And mum, well, she stayed home looking after us kids. Hardest job in the world, right?" Dowry laughed. "She's not a classic beauty, I guess. I think she's gorgeous, but her voice, by god, her voice. She speaks half an octave lower than most women, and it's always this calm slurred tone, like people get when they've been drinking (not that she drinks, she doesn't like it for some reason). When she laughs it does this hopping thing.

I love her. She turns everything she does into a song." Dowry counted on her fingers, "cleaning, washing, cooking whatever. It's always a song. And they're good songs too. That's the rub. I don't know how she does it, but you know that little thing I did on *Me and My Shadow*."

Phil did not.

"Well anyway, that's Mum's tune for when she's dusting. I asked her once how she does it and she said:" Dowry imitated a black man's voice, "*You know, ya gotta sing like Louis Armstrong played, you know.*" But that's just one of those theories talented people come up with, you know. So they can attribute what's god given to effort. I bet you a million bucks if she'd never heard a lick in her life she'd sing just the same.

She could have been something if she wanted, she still can, truly. But her voice was nothing against my Nan's, apparently, so it wouldn't be right, she says. Nan died when I was little so I don't remember her singing, all I have of her is this vague sense of warmth, maybe that's from the songs. Who knows. But when I went home over the holidays I was flipping through my family book and I saw a note in Mum's handwriting." Dowry recited it like a poem:

"Jan 3 1995. Juliet Elizabeth Andrews - My best friend and mother. Who always filled a room with laughter and happiness. She was always beautifully dressed and she had a voice like an angel.

You probably think it's sappy."

"No, it's lovely."

"Well I thought it was nice, you know, so I went over it and over it until it stuck. Mum could have practically written that about herself and it would be true.

Anyway, anyway, I didn't get jack. My older sister was the lucky one, she got Mum's voice and Pappy's looks. Bitch, right?"

They rounded past the southern end of campus to an industrial district with tyre shops and a coffee factory. In the day time, its chimney poured the ash of burning coffee into the surroundings. Some of the smell still lingered.

She stopped outside a long, thin building. He could see nothing through its massive windows except their own reflection in the street.

"Home sweet home."

"What is it?"

She warned him with a gloved finger to his lips. She produced a flash light and they followed its white circle around the building. She whistled as they walked and the tune unnerved him. The light fell upon a raggedy door, much cheaper looking than the building's street-facing exterior.

"You got the key?"

He hoped it would be missing and that they could walk home and do something fun instead, but there it was in his pocket.

"Excellent!" She opened the door in one practiced motion. He could see very little in the hall-way. She pulled him, falling along, to the end where she kicked in a final door.

Their steps bounced off the wooden floors and soaked into the padded walls. The room was cold and stank of mildew and sweat.

She didn't turn the lights on. The moon and street lamps were enough. It was large and almost empty. A double bass and a drum kit lay in one corner; a few brass pieces in another. The walls were covered in posters and propped up guitars. Not quite in the center of the room, sat a large piano, its surface black and polished.

"Beautiful, isn't he." She pulled Phil over to the drum kit and sat him down on the stool. She pried open both of his hands, with little resistance, and into each she stuck a stick.

His heart crawled up into his throat.

She dusted the piano seat in a religious fashion. She assumed the same careful posture from earlier in the night. But before beginning she caught herself.

"*Some Day My Prince Will Come*: thoughts?" She asked.

"Great opening but the bit where it modulates ruins it." He had spoken without thinking and he regretted the words as soon as they were said. "But I'd love to play it."

She showed no sign of annoyance.

"Come in when it feels right."

She played the song like someone who'd heard only the movie, like her father would have. Phil psyched himself up. One time around and then its me, he told himself. As it drew closer to the second pass, the left side of his cheek itched and his shoulders ached. The second pass came and he watched it go by. Half way through the third, she clanged down on the keyboard and stopped.

She sighed. Without facing him: "You know lately I've had a problem with books and movies. They always give you this average guy who's down on his luck. He works a dead end job, his looks are not so good, or he's a nervous kinda fella, maybe even all of the above.

But then in flies the manic pixie dream girl. She's gorgeous. Long beautiful hair. She's smart. She's funny as well. This wonder girl comes around, and she goes all gooey over him. He, of course, falls in love too and the drama ensues. They live together happily ever after, maybe they don't. But always at the end credits the man is a better person and maybe the pixie is bit more human and stable. Yeah?

But it's a bit fake, right. People say, oh well it's just fiction, it's the author's fantasy so let's let it slide, it hurts nobody. But you know what? I've been thinking about it and it's not all bull shit.

I think, these manic pixie dream girls, they're real and they're out there right now. Fucking someone. But the thing is they're not fucking losers. You know why? Because spontaneity—oh, so, crazy, spontaneity—in the real world, it isn't a character flaw; it's the absence of one.

So you see they have no reason to fuck the losers, because if they did they wouldn't be perfect, they'd be damaged. No, Phil Tate, those girls are real but they're fucking the men that actually do something."

"Yeah?" Phil laughed. "What...what's your point?"

"Well," she paused for effect, "do something."

And with that she jumped right back in where she'd left off. On the next pass Phil made sure to join in. His playing was nervous, his beats were uneven and off time, but at least they were there. No special fills or solos to night. He was a long way off, they both knew. But still, when the song came to an end he felt a fuller picture of himself. Sticks held in the air he let the moment wash over him.

When he came back down to earth he looked over to her at the piano.

"Dowry?"

She lay across the keyboard, a touch of the moon inched past the street lights and give her dress a slight glow. She was sleeping. It was after three.

A cellphone hummed across the floor. *Answer or Die*, it read. Not quite whispering, Phil answered. The voice on the other end was tired, frustrated, and male.

Yes, his girlfriend was there. There being the music school's practice complex, if he knew the direction. Of course he knew.

Ira Glass, age 20, was a good person. He was third-generation Chinese. He was tall and handsome. He wore corrective glasses which gave him a bookish quality. His family had dreamed of him being a doctor and so, naturally, he had enrolled at the school of medicine. There was however no sense of repression in this and he took an honest pride in what he did.

He made no acknowledgement of Phil. Walking straight past him, he carefully lifted Dowry into his arms and carried her to his still running car in the street. If it was difficult at all, he made no show of it.

Phil took the key from the piano top and locked the building.

Outside, like a father, Ira lowered the girl into the passenger seat. He adjusted her arms and legs and wrapped the belt around her, especially careful not to clip her skin.

"Look. We're just friends. If I had known," apologized Phil.

Ira analysed the road and then the coffee factory. He gave a quiet laugh. "Yeah, they never know." His eyes fell to Phil, more defeated than angry.

"Sorry."

Ira nodded and analysed a moment longer. "Well, see ya mate.

Phil stopped by a park on his way home. He lay down on a snow covered bench. The cold sank into his back but he did not mind.

He searched for Pisces; something he had not done for years. He played with the key in his pocket and let the music crowding his mind run its course. This was a feeling he'd conquered before. He was too old.

"No." The condensation on his breath dissipated into the night sky. There it was.



Nicolas Bianco Ortiz

The Village Needs a Poet

The church needs a priest
The mill needs a mule
The student needs a teacher
The teacher needs a school

Dust needs water
Earth needs seed
The grass needs sun
I don't know what I need

The mayor needs a town
The house needs a roof
Believers have silence
Bad men ask for proof

Milk needs a mouth
The child needs a boss
The people need a savior
This nail needs a cross

A ring needs a finger
A man needs a wife
A wife needs children
This infant needs life

I want her
I want gold
I need these words
That the poet's pen holds

The fire is dying
It needs a coal
The village needs a poet
To save its soul

The lightning's waiting
For the storm to start
The village needs a poet
To break its heart

Robert Annis

On Spectrum Drive

He hanged himself in the green
musk of gardenias. Knots tied
by leaves creaked. Toes tipped,

he swung like a pendulum drawing in sand

—the gardener cut him
down, hair dusted
with dew and pollen.

Coral Fallon

we are not/we are

people keep talking to me about their own ruin.
"I have no future,
I have gasping,
anxiety,
a fish mouthed sadness
that drags on and weighs around my ankles.
I don't think I can continue."

we are not broken.
we are bent faces of spoons,
our silver bodies are swans diving into another hour
or another day, our future is now, another moment
cracked over the continuum like an egg,
spilling out of its own shell and

we are not our dreams, we are scarred and scratched
and bruised little pieces of person,
growing and stretching in our new bodies
every moment, new and new and young
and learning;

we are moments spilling out into a river,
fish learning how to swim and breathe in air,
we are darting to new things, less distractable
by the sheen of hooks and baubles;
we are bruised and battered and torn at the fin and
tilting and turning in the water,
we are catching the light on our scales as we swim.

Nicolas Bianco Ortiz

Your Korean Daughter

You hang your coat up by the door,
sit down and turn on the TV.
Try to forget about the war.
Your Korean daughter says to me,
“The rope he put around my waist
is cutting me in half.
He pulls me from place to place.
Sometimes all I can do is laugh.
But not when I fall in love, like I always do.
I'm afraid this time it seems I've fallen for you.”

Put your feet up on the table.
Pour yourself a drink.
Scratch her name off of the label.
Did you ever stop to think
about your Korean daughter
and all the books she's left half-read?
Although I want her you've still got her.
And here's what's running through her head,
“What if I fall in love, like I always do?
I'm afraid this time it seems I've fallen for you.”

You ran away a wounded soldier,
Korean daughter by your side.
I wonder how hard that you pulled her.
I wonder how hard she cried.
If she's the best and you're the worst,
that puts me somewhere in between.
She's not the last, I'm not the first.
I still know just what she means
Because I'll fall in love like I always do
I'm afraid this time it seems I've fallen for you.

John Grey

Regarding The Feeder

Amy's at the window, eyes transfixed by backyard activity.
Why feed birds, she asks. Don't they have mothers?
My feeder occupies a squirrel's no man's land
in the center of the patio. Surrounding choke cherry
and sassafras are close enough to give birds shelter
but too far for some insidious rodent's diving board.
I mix my trees with flowers - black-eyed Susan,
pokeweed and wild strawberry. I'm not only cook
and bottle-washer for the finches and sparrows but
their exterior decorator. My daughter's fascinated
by the chickadee, the titmouse, the nuthatch
climbing downward. Even the mix of tiny plain
brown birds squabbling and feeding, soaring and alighting,
captivate. But our neighbor has no feeder, she says.
Do his birds starve? I don't tell her that birds
survive with or without our seed banquets, that
the trees, the flowers, the grass, the ponds,
provide more than enough. If anyone's hunger's
being sated here, it's my own. But I do assure her
that every last one of them had or has a mother
who's more than capable of supporting her offspring.
But why deny them the bounty of others?
Why not sit a child in a chair by the window?

INFORMATION

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