



TAR

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THE APRIL READER

a literary journal
of prose, poetry,
and essay.

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The April Reader is a 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.


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FICTION

Comet With A Nasty Tale

By Tom Sheehan

The morning, at the outset, had no promise of being ecstatic, though Professor Clifton Agnuus put the rock into his briefcase. Every time out it was about eight pounds of drama for him, at least at the start of every term, and here he was off on a new year. A storyteller he should have been, he argued, a spinner of yarns, the kind of a writer that Professor Albie Short, over in A&S, his one good buddy, drooled over, and had been doing so for almost forty years. Albie was apt to open a conversation by saying something like, "The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as I best could, but when he ventured upon insult I vowed revenge." There was a time Albie would likely answer a telephone call the same way, or with Bartlesby the Scrivener's opening remark, "I AM a rather elderly man," but all that had sloughed off when he was burned by some wise-ass responses. For reasons best known by them, he and Albie liked each other. If anything, Agnuus might say Albie was the other side of the coin.

Earlier that morning Agnuus had introduced a scowl to his face, as much a part of his morning as getting out of bed, sliding his feet into slippers and having coffee. On this day he also thought of the rock first, and then coffee. So if he did live in another

world? So if it was his choice to do so, so what? How long would it take for the newest classes to discover the rock? "Who gives a crap!" he said aloud. He'd bullshit them as long as he could, see one wide-eyed coed smiling with the deepest mystery right back at his own eyes the way one of them always did, weather out another storm, find a few smart asses in the new classes, watch them move on. But he'd get tenure, and now and then a few late visitations, in the office, perhaps at home. It was in the cards; inevitably, dependably. *Almost ten years and not a spot of trouble. What the hell, they're old enough.*

Flick had yapped from under the bed and Agnuus put his hand down for the morning's first pat. Flick licked his hand and soon stood waiting for the morning bowl. He'd have his bowl of food and then his walk. The reverse start of Flick's day intrigued Agnuus, who patted the Boston Terrier and said, "Oh, good buddy, good morning to you." Flick licked his hand again. "Birds of a feather we are," and chuckled at his own strange expression of endearment. The one true thing in life was Flick, even though Flick was his eighth dog.

Later, after a short drive directly into the sunrise, the scowl still on his

face, traffic abysmal as usual for the start of another day, another year, he slipped into a parking space at the college, available only because he'd arrived early. *Tenure, among other things, will get me a permanent spot of my own. It will be worth it. And the rock, eight pounds of darkness and mystery, is trade-off for a bit of drama.*

In his first class he propped the rock on his desk, on top of the textbook for the course. History and government were as dry as alkali bones; they had always been that way for him. The trail of life was full of bleached bones, the dung of old days. Little else there was he could cotton to. Literature really had not drawn him in, or poetry in any form, or music, feeling he was tone deaf, or art in any form. There were nights he'd argue with Albie. "Forgive my crap, Albie, but they are all so terminable, so fruitless. You keep referring to my story writing talents by using the meteorite bit, my piece of a comet perhaps, but that's the only story I know, or the only memoir I have ever drawn together in one piece. It's the miracle of it that must have blessed me, to be able to tell it, to get to this point in time, to still be alive. Goddamn, man, it was something else!" Then he had gone ahead, the Scotch as tasty as ever, the evening in fair wonderment, immediate pressures education off and wandering, and told Albie the story for the hundredth time or so, with every item of detail he could scratch together. And Albie Short would nod again and smile, as he did each time the story came out.

Old Albie had given him a lesson when he had drawn out lyrically the first page and a half of cohort Reynolds Price's little book, *A Long and Happy Life* and a monumental ride on a motorcycle. It was the one thing he

remembered with relish, outside of his own delivery; he could taste the words.

From the second floor window of his classroom Agnuus watched the new buds coming up the walk, the glitter of the litter of them bouncing a few books on their hips, bouncing their young and eager breasts in loose arraignment, and their skirts almost an inch shorter than the year before. Too, their jeans were tighter, their crotches ominously like a jock's cup coming up to bat, mounded, headlining. The frosh males, all eyes, avid, most of them not yet sure of themselves, nodded involuntarily at near-scandalous buttocks. But one of them approached a coed in a blue skirt and a white blouse; her hair was black as sin, her body excised from Nirvana. They walked into Carson Hall together; moments later, still paired, they were sitting in the front row of his class. The bell rang, his new year was started, and he took the rock from his briefcase and placed it on his desk, immediately on top of the course textbook. It was, he felt, like bringing the horse into Troy's inner flanks. *Pardon the interruption, boys and girls, but I am here to stay.*

In the front row, the girl was stunning in a white blouse, blue skirt, and adorned with a frosh male sitting beside her hanging on her every breath (much as an earring), the one who had approached her outside and walked into the classroom as company, now mischief afoot in his eyes. Her eyes were sea green but for a moment, and went elsewhere when she turned her head, as if the tide had changed. On the first day of the new term of the new year, in the first minute, in the first row, Agnuus was drawn to another world. *The underworld*, he thought. Subtly he ran an inspection from the corner of his eye, took in a whole

framework, and made immediate judgments. She did not chew on the end of a pencil, did not flick her fingers at imaginary surfaces or exhibit any loose energy, did not cross her feet; *her legs are elegant, her calves touch neatly, oh my, they do go on.* A volume of breast was barely visible above the white blouse and against the material of the blouse. She stared at the black rock sitting on the textbook. Back came her eyes caught in the tide of an ancient sea, stories afloat, pronouncements at work.

He had to speak over her head, to a point at the back of the room where a puffy, bland-faced girl sat. *Not with a ten-foot pole*, he asserted quietly. "I am Professor Clifton Agnuus." He pronounced it like *goose*. "We will meet here three times a week as posted on the schedule. Our target is not a difficult one. At term's end you will be highly intimate with the first 180 pages of the text. And I mean intimate." In his voice he found a sense of joy, an edge of the risqué, a point hopefully of new departure for some of them. And he found it most difficult not to look where he could further discern that small cleft of white below her armrest, parting the blue of her skirt. If he allowed himself, he could have choked on the attributes. He heard himself say *beatitudes*; it seemed, without question, to fit appropriately. The announcement in his eyes was more than subtle.

Her voice had a bit of smoke in it, a late night residue, a channel marker, when she said, "Please tell us about the rock, professor. It sounds, *oh oh*, so fascinating." The *oh oh* was telegraphic. He was sure she could move without moving. *There's more of attributes.*

He'd tell it the way he told Albie each and every time. Albie liked all the details, every damn one of them; the temperature of the air, the degree of darkness, the accompanying sounds, the falling away sounds, the eventual silence and the solitary beat of his heart. The dog Jump, the very original dog, dead under the bed, crushed by the infinities of life.

He swore that he could feel it, could hear it, the implosion, the sudden demolition, the near combustion, and the soundless death of his dog. He was there!

"It's like this eight-pound hunk of eternity picked me out, came charging at me from out there. Way way out there!" He made arm movements, signals. "Whisssh! Whooosh!" He nodded over his shoulder, a universal nod. "I was asleep, dreaming, floating in some joyous liquid world. I was warm, in the lap of personal comfort, though I was extremely tired. I had just come back from a trip to Mexico, through torturous mountains, through strange small villages might not have seen a tourist in a decade or so." *Pause... pause... pause.*

"For four days I had driven, the sand in my eyes it seemed, the strain of sun and chromed glare dancing behind my eyeballs. You know the feeling. You've undoubtedly had the same feeling, how it grabs you and won't let go. I'll have no idea ever of what made me move on the bed, turn on my side. It was hot, no bed covers on me, a bare breath of a breeze coming over the windowsill." *Pause... pause... pause.*

The bland girl at the back of the room was mesmerized, mouth agape, staring at him. He caught a smile at the corners of a young man's mouth

that quickly disappeared. Silence sat in the room like a sentry.

“I had no thoughts of eternity, of survival, of anything but a sense of comfort, of liquid warmth. It was like I was shoved over on my side. I had rolled over, a breeze was touching me. Whoosh! Wham! It came down through the roof, through the ceiling, right past my head. Plaster falling in chunks, in dust like a cloud, a thunderous cloud. Hunks of lathes smashed loose. I could almost see the camel hair in the old plaster mix. Whoosh! Wham! It went clean through the mattress. Why am I still here? Wham! It went right on through. My dog Jump slept under the bed. He was a Golden Lab Retriever, a most honest dog, a most faithful pal. Oh, if I could only have another Jump.” *Pause... pause... pause.* Oh, shit, he’d almost lost it there.

But the real old-time mist was in his eyes again, the true mist; a piece of cake. “The best pal I ever had, I swear to you. The universe took him. This piece of the universe,” *pause... pause...* his hand now on the rock... *pause some more... wait... speak directly to her... now...* “came crashing down, missing me by inches, by a fraction of a second, and killed my dog Jump. Why am I still here?” His shoulders sloped, his face caught up with question and fright, he thought he could have been the guy in *The Oxbow Incident* waiting for the rope to snap or the true posse to arrive. In the air he dangled himself, waiting.

She wasn’t faking her reaction, he was sure of that, though she snapped a whole roll of pictures of him. He remembered the first time he’d propped the rock, wore it in excitement almost through the whole first semester any time he wanted it to grab

attention, move an argument, find a method of displacement. The kid beside her leaned over and whispered in her ear. She shushed him aside. He said something again. She elbowed him. Her eyes were wide and receptive. Agnuus thought she looked like a convert. One a year had been sufficient for him. Maybe this year would be a two-bagger. Perhaps he was ahead of the game already.

The bell rang. The class was almost emptied. She was standing beside his desk, looking at the rock, looking into his eyes. “That’s the most fascinating thing I have ever heard. I wish you were teaching my English classes. I’ll bet they won’t be as exciting as this. This is the real thing.” Her hand was on the rock. She was looking in his eyes. A hundred years old she could have been, or ten. “My friend, the one that was sitting beside me, doesn’t think it’s a meteorite. But he’s awfully pessimistic about things. I went to high school with him. He’s kind of a jock, if you know what I mean.”

“Jocks hardly know what a meteorite is.” He stopped. He didn’t even know her name. It was on the list. He couldn’t look down, could not look away from those angel eyes. He thought of the white tunnel as an energy traveled his body. It could have been alertness or expectation.

She was receptive, alert, as if she could read his mind. “My name is Shioban Furlong. My friends call me Shovey. My old classmate’s name is Diold Mackey. We’re both going to be here for four more years.”

Later that evening, in his house off campus, on a sofa, the shades drawn low, she sat across his lap and took him into another world.

“My god, where did you learn this? I never felt so good in my whole life.”

“In the front seat of an old Fairlane, my knees against the back of the seat. I always want to be on top. Always.”

Shovey could have any reason she wanted, he assented later. Life was sweet. The first day, the first night, made it miraculous. His rock was magical and dynamic, was far from ephemeral, brought out the best in everyone, including himself. Tenure would not be far away. This is going to be one grand semester, perhaps one grand year. He slept and Flick’s tail slapped at the bottom the bed. Flick’s tail slapped at the bottom of the bed three more times in the next two weeks. A torturously distant comet, tail afire, came into his dreams.

Diold Mackey started the conversation near the end of class. It was in the third week of the semester. Shovey’s clothing had become slightly daring, joining some of the others seeking attention, making statements. He thought all of it was strictly for him. “What do historians say when one of their contemporaries misrepresents the past?” The student’s strange arm caught his eye again; perhaps he could use it as a method of equalization, of balance, of evening up the score? “Perhaps,” Mackey continued, “it conjures up events to match his own interpretation of things. Like secret meeting we know nothing about. Or secret alliances that never fully, until him, come to light? What does the establishment have to say about that?”

Goddamn baboon! Why didn’t that smart ass kid own up to what he knew

about rocks, if anything? Was he hiding something? “That’s a whole mouthful, Mr. Mackey. Did you memorize it? Is it spontaneous? What are you really reaching for?” *Get him off this kick right now. There’s always one like him, every year, some smart ass! Treat ‘em as they come. Kick ‘em in the ass as they leave.*

Diold Mackey said, “What I’m asking about, professor, is your star rock!” Beside his chair, standing somewhat at attention, one arm really seemed longer than the other, perhaps an imperfection Agnuus had barely noted before. His voice was deep, a sense of awe in it, distilled but carried awe.

How did he mean the words that he stressed? Those words? Star rock? “We’ll have to leave this for another time, Mr. Mackey. That piece of rock, that swift meteor, that piece of a comet, has played a dear hand in my lifetime.” *What distance lies between a Fairlane and a comet?*

“Simply put, I think your star rock is a piece of blast furnace slag, either from the Saugus Iron Works or further up there in Maine, at the Katahdin Iron Works. Fake pieces of meteorites are found all over the place. Like basalt stuff. I read that, on the Internet. Maybe some huge catapult threw it.”

Malevolent little son of a bitch. “You have a lot of nerve, Mr. Mackey, putting yourself up as an expert geologist.”

Shovey was looking at the floor, not her high school classmate. He wondered, *Did Mackey own a Fairlane?*

Oh, God, he hoped not.

“I didn’t start this, professor. You did. That chill and kill story you spun off the first day, that’s distorting history, or inventing it. That’s more like it. An invention.”

“And what do you really know, mister?”

“Common meteorites, the stony ones, are easily confused with basalt. Like I said, I read it. A boulder of basalt worn down by water can look like a meteorite. Travel or water surge can treat it like it was in a kind of tumbling machine. My father had one in his shop. Basalt is a very common rock found all over the world. There is a huge basalt intrusion down there in Medford and by the overpass near Kelly’s Roast Beef in Saugus. You can see it right from the seat of the car as you go by. Some hills, I’ve read, are made up of lava flows that were pumped out of ground during the time of the dinosaurs. Water-worn, rounded fragments of this basalt might look like meteorite to some eyes. Some of that same kind of basalt is found in the Bay of Fundy, and in New Jersey at the Watchung Mountains, and all along our East Coast from the Maritimes to the Carolinas. It’s all over the place, professor. Basalt, as they say, is one of the most common rocks, even a first year student would know, and it’s commonly mistaken for meteorites by the lay person.”

Agnuus thought the kid wasn’t letting go! *He hasn’t done enough. There has to be a Fairlane back there. Maybe his old man never taught him how to drive.*

“Now, I don’t know a helluva lot about these meteorites, professor, but I’m going to do a paper on them. There

are some great sites that pop up if you type meteorite into Internet search engines. They explain there are two types of meteorites, stony meteorites and iron-nickel meteorites. The iron-nickel meteorites are much heavier than the stony type but less common. The stony types are from pieces of rock spinning in the universe, pieces of very old stuff when the solar system was forming, about as old as the earth, and large ones strike our planet every million years or so. You know what those odds say, professor, about a rock being a meteorite or plain old basalt.”

The little son of a bitch is in the sandbox playing with me.

“The other cool thing about meteorites is that some come from the moon and some come from Mars, but also quite rare. They come from meteorite strikes on the Moon or Mars and the collision generates enough escape velocity for the pieces of rock to get out of Mar’s atmosphere.”

All alone now, Jump gone forever, Albie hearing the story again, Shovey staring down at the floor, measuring some idea he had no credentials for, Clifton Agnuus could hear the guy in the TV commercial saying, “Wouldn’t you rather be some place else?” He couldn’t remember if he had seen an old Fairlane sitting out there in the parking lot.

#485281 to #485284

By Basil Smith

Zack Mayer, age 44, parked his car at the edge of the canyon. The sun had yet to rise and his family were asleep. His wife, Charity Mayer, snored lightly beside him. Their three children slept at the back of the car. His oldest girl was huddled in one corner. She held herself angrily as if she was in the middle of an argument. Beside her, the baby girl was propped up in a kiddie chair. A string of spit rolled off her chin and fell onto the head of the boy dangling across her; despite the many warnings from his mother, their son had spent the entire trip hanging out of his seat-belt playing with the girl.

Zack hopped out of the car, careful so as not to wake his family. He walked up to the rail guard. He waited and watched the horizon. When the sun showed, he pulled a silver watch from his pocket. The watch read **4:21 PM, Sunday, July 20th, 1947**. He pressed it to his chest, closed his eyes, and he prayed.

With as much strength as he could muster, he threw it out over the crevasse. It fell down past the edge. From the darkness, he heard a single crack as the watch smashed on the rocks below.

Zack Mayer walked back to his car. He opened the door and paused. They

were so peaceful in their sleep. What a wonderful, beautiful, relaxing, calming sleep. As hard as he could, he slammed the door. They awoke and rubbed the dreams from their eyes. He beamed.

"Rise and shine family it's a beautiful day!"

Charity Mayer, age 70, stirred her arm through the soapy water of the bathtub. The temperature was just right. She dried herself on a towel and went into the adjacent bedroom.

Her husband still slept. She grabbed his shoulder and shook him.

"Dear, it's ready," she breathed into his ear.

She shook him harder and that ear, the knobby, hairy ear, twitched.

"What is it. Who's there? What is it? Charity?" said Zack Mayer, confused.

She gripped his arm gently.

"Yes dear. It's me, your Charity. Your bath is ready."

"Oh, good." He blinked a few times and regained his composure. "That's very good Charity, thank you."

She wrapped her arms around his back and propped him up.

"Thank you, dear." He motioned for a kiss and she lent him her cheek.

He threw his feet over the bed and they sank into the carpet. She supported him as he walked. In the past he may have protested but now he was too old to worry over such a trivial thing

The linoleum felt cold.

Charity Mayer undid her husband's buttons and sloughed the shirt off his rubbery skin. She slid his trousers to his ankles and helped him raise each foot in turn. She folded the clothes, as if they were not soiled, and then left the bathroom, closing the door on her way out.

Through the bathroom door she listened to her husband's laboured sprinkles. Each time they stopped she began a count to twenty. After making the bed she laid out a fresh change of day-clothes. White old man undies, a woollen vest, a nice shirt, corduroy trousers, and a good warm hat. When she hit her number she peaked in.

Her husband stood before the toilet looking at the spots of urine on the seat. They had grown more numerous in the passing years.

As she wiped down both the toilet seat and her husband, she talked about their grandchildren. "Molly's little girl speaks so clearly now," she said "Why, just yesterday she managed her first four syllable word. Molly and Rick are considering enrolling her in The Rocket program. We might have a few more doctors in the family yet!"

In truth, the old man could not picture the little girl. Even this daughter, this 'Molly,' had faded mostly to a concept: *Molly is your youngest daughter. Her first husband passed away*

and she was left with three kids. Still, he hummed and hoed in confirmation as his wife ran through their daily routine. She was not such a fool as to believe that her husband actually understood, but she let him play along with her. She threw the paper into the toilet bowl and closed the lid. She would flush it, but not with him standing there; sharing something like that, something so grotesque and personal as a flushing toilet, would be unseemly.

Conversation unceasing she helped him into the bath tub. When he was standing passed the rim she wrapped her arms around him once more and lowered him into a seating position. She patted him then left to finish a few more chores, making sure, as she went out, to leave the door open.

The old man eased into the water all the way up to his chin. The bubbles popped and tickled his skin. His eyelids grew heavy as his wife spoke from the other room. A relaxing warmth spread out from his chest along into his arms, down his legs, and then finally into his face. He was enveloped by the warmth. Zack Mayer closed his eyes and passed away

Wilson Marlow's first solo drive had gone without a hitch. He'd delivered the payload on time and he was making good time again for the reverse trip. When he had lost his job as an accountant he had imagined driving haul would be an easy thing. But despite his brain, maybe even because his brain was so honed to the abstract, it had taken him weeks on weeks of supervision to get around the truck's fifteen gears. It would be a while longer before he could handle it without having to think.

He snorted cocaine off a hooker's arse. Unnecessary. He may have been tired but he would grow accustomed to the work, he hoped.

A bridge rose ahead of him. He ran through the steps.

From the brown hatchback directly in front, a silver object flew out the window. The watch read **4:26 PM, Sunday, July 20th, 1947.** Wilson could not hear the sound as it smashed into a million pieces under his front tire.

"What a prick," he fumed.

He ducked down and looked into the car. The driver was a man and he was alone. Wilson Marlow blew the truck horn. In the car ahead, in an instant, there was a flash of light and a plume of blood flew out, splashing against the passenger side window.

Wilson swore. The car ahead began to slow. Wilson knew that, with this load, there was no way he could stop in time. To turn one way was to choose his own death by drowning, assuming the fall from the bridge didn't kill him; to turn the other way was to kill a bunch of innocents who hadn't thrown away their lives. Wilson made the only decision he could make, the correct decision; he eased his brakes, but with the momentum of the haul pushing him on, he plowed right on through the back of the car.

The Mayfairer Bridge connected Erik Robinson's house and his ex-wife's house. The bridge was one giant arch. Erik loved the feeling he got when he drove over it. Going up, his stomach solidified and dropped into his pants. Going down, it untangled and rose into his lungs. It was a thrill alright.

With his free arm he patted his son.

"Dad! I'm too old for that."

"Woah." Erik snapped back his hand. "My bad. Sorry big man. Dad forgets sometimes."

Erik Robinson smirked. His son was growing older. This thought gave him an odd mixture of sadness and happiness; mostly happiness.

Out of no where, a brown hatchback in the opposite lane veered into his path. Try as he might Erik Robinson could not avoid the collision. Erik and his son were killed instantly.

Zack Mayer, age 22, woke up in a hospital bed. He was aware that his body hurt. He could feel it emotionally but the morphine stopped his brain from connecting the idea that his body hurt with the idea that he should show that it hurt. He felt around himself. His head was covered in bandages. The watch was nowhere in sight, that was something at least.

He ripped the drips from his arms, tossed the sheets off the bed, and stumbled over to the window. He was seven stories high. He admired the city.

The landscaper for the hospital was good. He wondered if they were a public servant or a private hire. He took a better look. Definitely private.

He heard a siren coming from down the road. It grew louder and an ambulance skid around the corner into the parking bay. Two EMTs popped out of the front cab and rushed around the back of the vehicle. They saw it. They walked away much slower. One of them shut off the sirens.

An impression of two conversations ran through Zack's head in a jumble.

The first, spoken at the foot of his bed by a pair of angry police officers; and the other, well—He opened the window. It was a warm night. He jumped.

Zack Mayer, age 22, drove through the city streets. He adjusted his rear view mirror and found the Mayfairer Bridge behind him. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the silver watch. The watch read **4:36 PM, Sunday, July 20th, 1947**. He gave up and put it back into his pocket.

Mr. Almond

By Steve Williams

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 Staties 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 2)

By Basil Smith

PHIL TATES WAS IN A POSITIVE BUT NERVOUS MOOD. He parked the work truck as quickly as he could and jogged to the office box, where Doreen--mid 50s, dyed and permed hair--manned the reception.

"It's only three. Where are you off to darlin?" asked Doreen.

"Clockin out. Today's the day."

"Today's the day, huh. Break a leg. Or I suppose: break a stick." She smiled inwardly at her cleverness.

"Hey Phil, Clifford and I we're thinking of hosting a bit of a do tomorrow. One of our family friends is bringing their daughter. She's around your age. She's pretty. She likes big books too."

"Sounds lovely Doreen."

"Should I prepare a plate then?"

"Of course. No sarcasm whatsoever."

As he drove he whistled to the radio.

The official entrance to the practice complex was in fact a pair of sliding glass doors which faced out into the street. A concrete ramp led up to these doors, and at the top of this ramp sat one Dowry Castaway, her

forehead resting against the metal handrail. Her legs dangled over the side and she kicked the back of her heels on the ramp beneath her. She recognized Phil's footstep and gave a cheesy grin. She pulled herself up.

"Are you sure it's ok?" He asked.

"I told them I'm working on my magnum opus and I need the space to myself. Promised I'll put 'em into the liner notes. It's kinda true."

"But you aren't writing an album."

"Pssh. It's fine I can throw one together no problem." She said half seriously. "Anyway. It's a day of firsts." She ran to the other side of the sliding door and let it close again. "Now you!" she pointed with both index fingers.

In truth he'd walked through the doors, not so long ago, when he'd passed the place during a lunch break. But he entertained her. He shoved his shaking hands in his pockets and shuffled nervously.

"So is it real?" she asked.

A silent hall is usually a sad place. However her enthusiasm kept his spirits high, even in the face of ever worsening, and real, nerves. He took his place at the drum--no longer alien after so many nights--and they practiced into the evening.

Since meeting her he had improved

immensely. As Dowry was fond of repeating: "Before you were a metronome, but worse; now you make genuine music." She thought it was a smart phrase. Throughout their session he kept his eye on the clock. It turned slower and slower, a phenomenon he was thankful for.

Quite seriously, he contemplated knocking the girl over the head and moving to another part of the country. He ran through the steps. No one would remember him, he was sure. Reading his mind she stopped.

"You know, there's no running away."

"I have savings, god dammit."

"I told everyone your arm's fixed. Even put it as my Facebook status. *"Tonight we break Phil Tate's hymen."* Tagged you an all. Your mother's a lovely lady by the way."

"You can be a real bitch sometimes."

She clutched at her chest and reeled. "Such mean and spiteful words. Daggers in my heart, Phillip Tate. Daggers." She was not a good actress.

She told him to leave the car. To ease his mind he rambled as they walked. This spring weather, with the pollen and all. Spring has absolutely nothing on Fall. Fall is the most beautiful season with the maple trees and the cherry blossoms and the willows by the river side that let their leaves fall into the water. Fall is the most Japanese and literary season.

Dowry hummed Autumn Leaves.

When they arrived at Heaven, Ira sat outside leaning against a stone wall.

"Today's the day, huh." He slapped Phil on the shoulder.

"Apparently."

"C'mon. She'll be right, mate."

Phil tapped around lightly on the drum, careful, so as to make sure none one else

could hear him. The drum pieces were set out differently from the kit in the practice room. Perhaps it was best to let someone else take the stand, rather than him ruining the song by hitting the rim or missing the kit completely. A bassist, Art Blasterfield--early 60's, tenured professor, overweight with some remnants of hair --reassured him.

"Don't worry Phil. Relax and take it easy. Bring it right back to me if you lose it."

The audience had thinned out since that first day in winter, but for a spring night it was fuller than it had ever been. Most of beginning-semesterers were only looking for a place to drink, some place they could call *their spot*. However, typically, when the music got heated, when it actually became good, you could see them visibly wince and you knew the next day in class they would tell their friends that the whole thing was just noise. But ever since the day that one girl with the robot hair and the formal dresses had come along a few of those beginning-semesterers, who'd have otherwise moved on after the first night, had been made convert and stayed. On top of them, a few more people had been brought in through word of mouth. The band had dubbed it The Dowry Effect.

What was weird to Phil was to think that he knew most of the crowd more intimately by the *back* of their heads. He recognized his favourite right away: the middle aged woman with a red bob hair cut. She always sat at the front of her own single-sized table. She drank single-sized drinks and every night she arrived in a suit right before the performances began. When they played she really let it loose, dancing in her chair, back and forth with the old Stevie Wonder shuffle; pausing on occasion when she saw herself through everyone else's viewpoint.

And in the same way she arrived she would leave. When the band was done, she'd hurry off before anyone else could catch her and embarrass her by learning who she was. Phil had hypothesized that her eyes were closed in those moments of excitement; a prediction which he would soon learn to be

correct.

The musicians were also easy to spot, despite the poor crowd lighting . He could pick most of them by their specific brand of over sized button up shirt. Some, he knew, would be unpleasable as long as they weren't playing. So in that sense--

"Oi Phil. You ready? " Dowry interrupted his train of thought. "Try not to think about how nervous you are right now."

"And take it easy on the arm." Someone joked. "Don't want to break it again."

After the first song Phil left the stage shaking. At one of the tables he implored a regular to take his place. Phil refused to go again for the rest of the night, and no one begrudged him for the decision.

He shared a few drinks with Ira and enjoyed the settling of his nerves. Phil expressed his reservations but Ira cut him off.

"No bullshit mate, you did good."

Throughout the night the rest of the group shared a similar sentiment. He didn't know back pats could be such a nice a thing. Even the office lady, he swore, flicked him an approving nod.

The following Wednesday he managed a few more songs and a few more pats on the back. The week after that he was practically a regular.

"You know my father told me that there's no point in playing like every body else. He speaks with a lisp. I mean, it's not quite a lisp, but his voice is effeminate and it sounds a little like he's under water all the time. I think it's from playing the saxophone so much.

Anyway once he said to me in that wet

tone." She slouched in.

"Dowry, I never worried bout chords, melodies, or keys. Only sound. And the thing about it, there's only twelve notes that's satisfying the whole world." Dowry broke the imitation for an aside. "That's wrong by the way, but dad never listened to anything outside of the western tradition.

"And I said ooohh man, and then I realised these notes themselves don't have any power. Either you make something out of em or you don't."

"Sounds like a knowledgeable guy." Phil chimed in.

They were in between sets and Phil stared at her to see if she had anything more to add. She did but she stopped abruptly.

A girl leaned over the table in between them, her face only inches away from Phil. She smelt like vanilla beans.

"Do you remember me?" She asked.

He did. Her name was Kaitlin Halliwell. They'd gone to middle school together. One night, at a school camp, he saw her crying on her own. The mascara ran down her cheeks. He decided then that she was the most beautiful girl in the world. He could never forget that image.

Back to the present, he didn't know if life had taught him to be more discerning, or if it was just a product of age, but her face was no longer so perfect. Her hair too was dyed a darker, sadder shade of brown. She was pale and she'd lived to the south he gathered-- where she'd picked up half their accent. She'd also apparently picked up half their cuisine. But that was OK, Phil wasn't so youthful himself anymore.

She leaned deeper, closer to his face, the vanilla scent gave way to that of sweetened liquor.

"You don't remember me?" She pointed to her round face.

"Oh no I do. Of course I do. Sorry I was

thinking. If I'd forgotten my first kiss I'd be an idiot, right?"

"When was that?"

He was a little hurt that she'd forgotten.

"Todd Everest's birthday party. I think he was turning 12. We all hid in the attic and played spin the bottle together. I never forgot it--sorry, that's embarrassing. Uh, let me introduce my friend Dowry."

The girls shook hands and exchanged pleasantries. They seemed to get along just well, thought Phil.

"So you were in love with me then?" The side of her lip curled softly.

"Whelp," Dowry slammed the table, "looks like I'm up!"

Kaitlin Haliwell watched the girl move for the stage.

"I don't know what it is but that girl plays wonderfully, don't you think?"

Phil awoke in the middle of the night. He was still drunk and the hangover had yet to set in. He was covered in scratch marks and bruises. He did not remember falling.

The light from outside seeped in through a little square window onto the girl's shoulder. It didn't seem quite real. He ran his fingers down her hair and her back just to check. She was warm.

She rolled over to face him. He whispered an apology.

A strand of hair lay across her forehead and swayed a fraction. He brushed it back. He felt her brow, around the top of her cheek, the bottom of her lip, her collar bone. She breathed heavily.

"Are you awake?" he whispered again.

She didn't reply.

His heart beat so heavily in his chest that he couldn't sleep, so he watched her. His bladder had less sappy ideas.

Carefully, he lifted the sheets from himself. Before he could move though, a little hand wrapped itself around his wrist.

"Where are you going?" She whimpered still pretending to sleep.

"I'm not going anywhere, I promise." And he kissed her forehead.

In the dining room the table was covered with bottles and empty wine casks. He had not remembered all the people leaving. He picked up a half empty glass that might have been his but then decided better. He took a piss then crawled back to her room.

Morning through the window was grey. His temples ached and he felt like vomiting; maybe he had already. He was alone but the spot where the girl had been lying emanated still with the remnants of her body warmth. He picked his clothes off the floor one by one and dressed. Underwear, Jeans, Shirt. He couldn't find the second sock.

It was a girly room alright. The walls were painted purple, and small animals--an elephant, a dolphin, a mongoose--along with a few stars had been detailed on the ceiling overlooking the bed. A small TV sat on a dresser and an open laptop beside it. They must have watched a movie.

The girl had less make up than he'd expected. Most of her stand was covered with pictures. Pictures of her with friends, young friends out in the country, and different, older friends from her college days: at the snow, by the beach, beside the campus sign in their graduation robes. She had a few intimate photos with her father and her siblings. And a few even more intimate with an ex-boyfriend--they smiled with an intensity that happens only when you're young, smiles he was unlikely to see her match.

The kitchen had been cleaned. The smell of booze remained. A girl he had definitely never met slept on the couch. She was pretty. On the table a note in a careful cursive read:

"Morning sunshine!

I'm craving pancakes. Gone grocery shopping.

XXX Kat

P.S. Why are you up so early? Go back to bed."

He read it several times and searched for signs.

Outside he found his shoes among a pile. Unable to balance, he sat on the ground to tie his laces and immediately regretted the decision. A wetness ran straight through the bottom of his jeans and up his backside. The air was cold too.

He cleared the grogginess from his throat and forced himself up.

Phil went out to the mail box. House number 37, but the street? The houses weren't in great repair but they weren't awful either. Small beads of water hung from both the power lines and the leaves of grass that lined the curb. It was a nice contrast, he thought. All along the street plastic bottles and other trash lined the gutters.

He recognized nothing and he could see no good sign, but south was the way home, he was sure.

In the distance he spotted a thousand tiny shards spread across the road and they sparkled.

"But there's no sunshine."

A little kid, walking by in uniform,

overheard the conversation. As he passed Phil he maintained his gaze an exact metre ahead of him at all times.

Phil felt something on his cheek. He stuck out his hand and caught a drop of rain. He went back to bed.



Parable

On the morning after the great bridge
was constructed between here and there,
all the people from both villages
gathered at the center of the bridge
for a celebration.

A group of chiefs burned charcoal—
put a pig's head on a spit.

Women danced, cupping their breasts
in their hands, aiming their nipples
at young boys, laughing through the sweat.

Elders played dice and checkers and spun
tops on barrels.

But then, from the river below,
the snake summoners rose,
climbed the new framework,
perched themselves atop the railing
and hissed.

And so, the elders put away their games,
and the women covered their breasts,
and the pig's head was placed back on the
creature, who raised his pale body and
scampered into the woods.

For a moment, as the villagers returned
to their separate homes,
the hiss of air was all that existed—a serene
flow of sound, something breathless unimpeded.

Then the silence broke, and the cries started,
and both villages returned to the bridge,
running with axes and hammers and explosives
and they began destroying the bridge.

Villagers plummeted to the river below,
screaming they had been foolish.

As they fell, the summoners grew wings
and turned into moths.

They meandered into the empty villages
and fluttered beside the porch lights
of the vacant homes for the rest of their days.

Mark In Maine

He lived in a hut on a lake in Maine.
On summer days, he'd stride down
that old dilapidated dock in nothing but trunks
and dive off the very end
into the deep and day-warmed water.

He owned that gentle blue pond
and the tiny stream that fed it,
the trees that held its banks together,
the deeper trees that buffeted
that inner circle,
the hardscrabble track
that snaked away from
the main road.

Handed down through generations
were the stippled drops
that hung silver baubles from the skin,
the touch of toe on smooth pebble,
the serene bowstring smoothness
of the body
as it kicked in almost silence,
on route from shore to shore.

Ravens flocked to the high boughs
of the oaks.
Occasional fish flung themselves
up into the air,
then splashed down again.
Deer nibbled lush grass
with one eye on the swimmer,
one on their escape run.
An occasional bear feasted on berries.

Did I say that he owned all this?
Owned it enough
to know that none of it was his.

1971

I am in new york
at a gigantic
coffee shop I have
killed my wife and cut
her rather crudely
into small pieces

we are slightly lost

he is driving back
wards in a (water)
town to see Nicky
Ray's film Johnny Guitar

"o, precious symoblism!"

radiators are
collapsing the house
is falling apart
the opera looks
nothing like it should

a great tenderness
smashing the skulls of
the king queen and pope

each side counts its dead

Samuel Piccone

Common Existence

Around a picnic table, the homeless
watched the resuscitation of a dead man.
The paramedics arrived upon
the bar's last call
and circled around
as he climbed the dark mountain
toward reunion with family,
with friends in the armed forces.

He shook,
his body the quiver of time's arrow.
His flickered face the map
to somewhere beyond the visible spectrum,
a place where the deep color of life
suffers unintended long term effects
and a permanent shade of red runs
in circuits of fever beneath the forehead.

A kind of subway funeral, where the mourning
cries of rats singing,
love has lead us astray
resounded for decades,
and the whine of the city repeating,
you were the cancer
could be heard between
the cycles of the daily trains.

John Grey

Farmer John

The sky's in its prime.
The earth is old
and lets me know it.
A pebble represents a million years of history.
A pasture's just a child.
And unruly as all hell.

A few cows graze a meadow,
a slow, methodic nobility,
even when all roads lead
to the milking shed or death.
A rabbit darts from my footfall.
A twitching nose, a quick release -
it's what I inspire.

The corn stands high
when it stands at all.
A crop is a man's wallet -
the one with the hole in it.

Night puts a family in its place.
Some huddle before the television.
The youngest crawl off to bed.
Prayers are said in ascending order.
Sleep comes as easy
as the work is hard.

I make a living
out of fields, livestock,
occasional rainfall,
a cranky sun,
a wanting family.

A piece of paper says I own the land.
Sometimes the land agrees.
Sometimes it says, I own a piece of paper.

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