

Arnie Beckett

This verse, which came out fitting the tune of *The Little Red Caboose Behind the Train*, was inspired by two events. The first was the late Jack Cady's wonderful 1965 story, *The Burning*, which was awarded an *Atlantic* "First." Cady was a man of many experiences, who called himself a "truck gypsy." The second event was my own experience of returning from Mexico and, at three in the morning, coming upon a just-wrecked trailer truck on a superhighway south of St. Louis, Missouri. The driver was trapped inside. Aside from a woman with a baby, who flagged us down, Bob Vinopal and I, returning from a field trip to Mexico, were first on the scene. Bob had a tenderness about blood and accidents and would not go near the truck. The woman with the baby took the driver's companion to the hospital. As we understood it, he had been flung from the sleeping compartment out through the windshield and on to the berm in only his under-shorts.

I spent 45 minutes inside the cab, under the upside-down mangled wreckage of the truck, trying to comfort the trapped driver, and digging his arm free. Conscious, and in considerable pain, he was pinned between a part of the cab door and the ground, and his arm was twisted beneath a slab of glass with part of the weight of the truck upon it. Outside the wreckage a mass of humanity gathered and discussed the seriousness of the situation, unanimously agreeing that none of them would even consider entering the wreckage or touching the trapped driver. I was carefully digging the driver's arm free, while lying in the darkness a few feet from the legs and feet of the gawkers, visible under a part of the truck door, and watching them snuffing out their cigarettes in the diesel fuel that was draining down across the cab and flowing away in the grass because the tanks were perched on top of the inverted wreckage.

When the man was finally freed I was embarrassed to discover myself showing inane concern as he was carried to the ambulance. Without my knowing it the stress of the situation had almost destroyed my ability to think clearly. I think this made me appreciate the incredible incident the hero of the *Atlantic* story had gone through. My song is made to be about a time before Route 23 was straightened and some of its slopes reduced in steepness.

Arnie Beckett was a truckin' man, he drove a big old diesel van;
For nineteen years he kept those eighteen wheels against the road;
Whether rain or sleet or snow he was always on the go,
And a better man you'd never find on any kind of load.

Chorus

Poor Arnie met his fate, he was shaggin' Wakefield freight,
Listenin' to his good old diesel roar.
With that big wheel in his hand he went to the Promised Land,
Arnie Beckett he won't never ride old 23 no more.

Headed north on 23 toward the state of Tennessee,
On a winter's night old Arn had taken Pete MacKenzie's run;
It was all that I could do just to keep his rig in view;
Track a jammer like old Arn, and you will get some travelin' done.

When I topped that long old hill forty miles above Asheville,
Old Arnie's rig was streakin' toward the valley down below.
And the sight gave me a chill because on that distant hill,
A little car pulled out to pass without the room to go.

Old Arn could see it too, and he knew what he must do.
I held my breath and prayed as he went roarin' off that turn,
But the gully there was deep and the mountainside was steep,
He rolled her and I heard the crash and saw her start to burn.

Arnie's rig was all aflame, and I could hear him call my name;
He told me that his legs were trapped, and the heat too much to stand.
His face was framed with fire, and he was trapped inside that pyre,
Starin' through the windshield with that big wheel in his hand.

I could see old Arn was dyin', I could hear his rig a-fryin',
They say I moved like lightning to my rig and back again.
He was staring straight ahead but I heard every word he said;
The message that he gave me still is printed on my brain.

Well, that little car kept goin' and old Arnie's fire kept growin';
Someone called the sheriff as a crowd was gatherin' around.
The people all stood silently, and when the sheriff came by me,
The tears were streaming down my face, the gun was in my hand.

They questioned me a while, then they put me in this cell.
The sheriff shook his head and said, "What kind of man are you?"
Well, that bullet stopped the pain and I would do the same again.
Like old Arn I guess I'll be the kind who does what he must do.

Arnie Beckett

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