The sinking man

Richard A. Malloy
Iowa State University

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The sinking man

by

Richard Alan Malloy

A Thesis Submitted to the
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CATERPILLARS</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ONE ACRE FARM</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CLIFFS</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DUMPS</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DOWN OUT OF UP</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE GIVER</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TWELVE-PACK JUNKER</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RELUCTANT SHOOTER</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TAR YARD</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IDLE AFTER HOURS AT MY DESK</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOMETHING UNDER MY FOOT</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WINNOCK</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PALE MEADOW</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOBILITY</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE SINKING MAN</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DUMBBELLS</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A LATE SHARED VISION</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE COMMITMENT</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Bill kneaded the thin skin over his sternum. Students seemed to get more critical, less agreeable every year. He checked the clock, dreading the impending first invasion of the drear new day. There had been a time when he'd enjoyed his work. The girls had actually been affectionate once, had admired him for his having painted two national magazine covers and a mural for the local Y. But the flirtatious grins had faded gradually--like a sun-room-portrait--at first to pleasant smiles, then to cold masks of indifference and recently to disdainfully overt sneers. It had recently dawned on him that rescue by fame would never arrive either. The tightness in his chest lingered.

A bulletin board butterfly fluttered to the floor. He picked it up without a net, pinned it out. --Vivid, if sophomoric. The artist was a monarch too, but not for his net. Caterpillars were his league . . .

It had been one of those first small towns just over the eastern border into Montana. A multinational community where the nation of humans alternated their one- and two-story shops with the like-size brown clay knolls of the nation Molus Giganticus.
"I've never seen anything quite like it," Billy's mom exclaimed. "This is it. This is where we're moving." Billy knew that his mom was being cute; she'd made the same remark frequently during this vacation trip from Iowa where she and Billy's dad were disgruntled school teachers.

They all commented about the small city's unique ambience, its architectural edifices of sun-bleached, sandblasted and wind dried clapboard alternating with old-western-knoll-design argil and terra cotta.

Billy thought the knoll designs faintly sexual, breast-like, but of course he didn't say so to his mom and dad; even though he was eight years old, they still wanted him to be a little kid.

They drove right on through town, and then his mom seemed really happy when they spotted a public camping--free--area, just outside.

The Volkswagon van bumped over the railroad tracks that paralleled the highway, bumped along through the mud ruts of the camping-area driveway, got right down to the river bank amongst the willows and the cottonwoods. His dad sometimes made a joke about going camping out in the cotton woods. It was a pun, supposed to make you think of staying in a glen of cottonballs or something. His dad wasn't all that clever, but he tried to be good natured and stuff.

They did a lot of camping. His dad would tell people, It benefits Billy, or, We camp a lot for Billy's benefit. Like there was interest accruing somewhere for every time they woke up with icicles on their giggys. Like paying your dues and then later getting profit sharing, Billy thought.

They noticed right away that the tree branches were strung with a webby substance like from spiders only more cottony, thicker. Like the
angel-hair dressing on Christmas trees. Caterpillars were everywhere.

"Isn't nature beautiful," Billy's mom said. Billy thought right away about how pulling apart angel hair could make your hands and fingers, and your forearms clear up to your elbows, all prickly and itchy.

"I've gotta go," Billy said. Skipped off to the sentry-like privy of weathered wood design, similar to every alternate building back in town only smaller.

Most buildings personified easily; the toilet seemed kind of like a park ranger as he came up on it, but this one was a cadaver, swarming with flies. He opened the door. The stretching spring warned thousands to take flight, and then as he stepped back allowing the rotting door to slap shut, frenzied billions took to the air.

He ran like a farmer from a funnel cloud in the field. Slowed to a jog through their campsite. Didn't want to alarm his dad who was entering into that dubious state of revery, malediction and air-cursing that accompanied tent raising, a task he loved hating and greedily refused to share with anyone. His mom was taking cooking and sleeping stuff out of the van.

He ran on down to the stream that ran behind the campsite, sprayed the webbed bushes, tried to drown caterpillars. Flattened their orange and yellow fur. Turned the lethargic wooly worms slick and squirmy. Felt the power. Enjoyed it quite a lot and thought this could become a redeeming avocation for the duration.

His neck tickled; he slapped. A soft, fuzzy thing fell, almost inert, like one of the dry flies in his tackle box.

He lifted silk out of his path on the way back to camp.
The tent was nearly up. The van was unloaded onto the flaking picnic table. He flicked a caterpillar off of his sleeping bag and went off to gather wood.

The dried grass was tall, stiff, sneaked up his pant legs, tickled. He stopped, pulled up one leg. Flicked away the orange fuzzy creature that had spontaneously generated there.

Dead wood was plentiful under the cottonwood boughs. The living branches were draped with white, Montana-Spanish moss, and the down wood was still sticky with fiber. The cotton woods.

He carried an armful back to camp, dumped it near the fire pit. Rubbed his arms against his T-shirt, picked the balled up, stringy residue away from his forearms.

Threads, like a delicate version of the makeshift clothesline his mom sometimes rigged up, connected the van with the tent. He didn't see her right off, or his dad either. Didn't see anybody in the van. Went over to the tent. Flicked a couple of caterpillars away from the flap. Pulled it open.

Naked. His mom and dad. Humping and groaning. Like they were in pain, only enjoying it.

He withdrew, like from the privy, with repugnance. Ran back towards the river bank, fighting the sticky tangle that he'd been less aware of earlier.

He looked back. Could still see the tent faintly through the silk screen. Christ, would they ever come out of there? He looked at the water. Maybe a billion trillion gallons passed by in one instant.
He removed a caterpillar from behind one ear. Stomped it.


He trudged back up the path, wiping silk from his nose, pulling it from his eyelashes. When he got back, his mom just stood there looking at him for a second, and then she reached out, picked a caterpillar out of his hair and dashed it to the ground. "We're getting out of here, quick."

A train was on the track, a slow, tossing, screeching train . . .

The camp was draped with crochet work, like the intricate doilies of his great grandmother's bequest that occasionally, when his mom was acting eccentric, came out of the drawer at home to light, similarly grotesque, on stuffed chair and sofa arms.

The train . . .

The caterpillars had made no noise at all. There method was insidious. At a glance, almost seemed static. But the change that had taken place since they'd arrived was prolific.

He helped load the van. Noticed caterpillars clinging to the tire treads. Would be mushed soon. They would be picking caterpillars out of the gear for the rest of the trip. At first, soft, alive ones. Later, hard, smelly, dead ones.

They bumped back over the hard mud ruts, up to the barrier train. He felt powerless and hateful. He picked caterpillars off the seat, smashed them under foot against the floorboards.

A caterpillar dangled, resiliently, on stretched opaque saliva, down over
the open window. "I wouldn't live around here for anything," his mom said.

The train . . . the train from Topeka, from Rock Island, from Burlington . . .

The caterpillars were coming. Creeping up from the campsite, they would come crawling . . .

. . . The noisy train from New York, from Reading, from Sante Fe . . .

The caterpillars would come in silence.

The train would never pass . . .

Bill felt faintly nauseous now, tried for a satisfying breath, raised his chin, his eyes.

--The clock hands were silent creeps.

The pain would never pass . . .
ONE ACRE FARM

In summer I ran
around the house
and found rhubarb
and teased wasps
in the barn
and scared pigeons
and robbed apples
all on a one acre farm.

When did Maggie quit begging?

Grandpa would
give a tour.
He would lure us
through a maze
of pens, hives,
rabbits, bees,
pigeons and apple trees.

When did Grandpa quit playing mouthharp?

Folks sat
in on the front porch,
and always in summer
some overflowed
into the front yard
to slap mosquitoes
and wave at neighbors
when they drove down
the dead-end gravel
that ran by the front
just outside the sycamores.

When did the cars stop pulling in the drive right after we'd arrived?

The slamming screen doors,
the folding chairs,
the toys under the porch,
were all made of wood,
and in the side yard
the green bulbous fruited
walnut trees
still stood.

When did the pump handle rust up solid?

When inside,
grownups drank coffee
and ate Aunt Edna's
stale rolls,
while I looked
at family pictures
in the hutch
or played games
with balls of cloth strips
I found there.

When did I last walk the white-spackled,
winding backhouse sidewalk through
clicking chickens there cluttering the way?

In winter I stood
on the hot floor register
when no one was looking
until I began
to smell
my rubber soles cooking.

When did they decide to send Grandma away?
Jimmy groped frantically, searching for a firmer handhold in the damp gold (fool's gold) of the clay cliff. He had only wanted to impress his creepy big brother, Clifford, the jerk, and the clay cliff had been his golden chance to get back after all the taunts: "Sissy Jimmy can't walk the log . . . Sissy Jimmy can't jump the creek . . . Sissy Jimmy can't climb the tree."

He couldn't hold on much longer, suspended there vertically-sprawled like a four-legged spider.

"I told you not to go up there," Clifford yelled from what seemed like a mile below. "Sissys can't climb clay cliffs."

The exposed cottonwood root just above Jimmy was an offered shake from the outstretched hand of Hulk Hogan. It would be neat to have something like that to hold over Clifford. But the hand was out of reach, and Jimmy was trembling so bad that he'd never offer his hand--sissy-like--to the Hulkster anyway.

"Just let go. I'll stop you before you slide very far."

Jimmy didn't trust creepy Clifford for a minute. He might just let him
roll down against the big rocks in the creek below. "No way!" Jimmy said.

"You big sissy. You're too scared to pull yourself up and too scared to let go. I think I'm gonna nominate you for this year's big sissy Oscar."

The overhanging grass above was like green angel hair. Jimmy longed for its soft security, but he was stage frightened, like when he was a little boy and was supposed to sing a song at the school Christmas play.

The root above was like a cookie jar on the top shelf or a kitty up a tree. It was like all the times he'd so desperately wanted something he couldn't have--a ten-speed bike, a chemistry set--

A splat of mushy clay smacked against Jimmy's back. "Hey, that's not my brother if anybody's watching," Clifford taunted. "That's just some dorky Pee-wee Herman sissy that jumped up there cuz he saw a mouse."

"If you throw one more chunk at me, I'll--"

"You'll what, wimp?"

Jimmy couldn't answer. His energy was draining.

"I'm leaving," Clifford yelled.

At first Jimmy didn't believe it, but as the sing-song taunts, "Jimmy's a sissy, Jimmy's a sissy," faded in the distance he knew Clifford had really left.

Long seconds passed. Jimmy's trembling slowed, and then, kind of amazing-like, he felt as calm as could be. He felt he could hang on for a long time now, maybe forever. He pushed off with one foot, lifting the other to higher ground, feeling little real risk, until he was able to reach out for the root. --He had it!

It had been just that easy. He lay face down in the grass at the brink
of the cliff looking off at the space that his brother had not seen him conquer. Sometimes you just wanted a thing too much.
"Self-centered old man, huh? Well, at least I'm centered."

"You're centered, all right," Harry's wife said, belching. "Centered, nailed in place and super glued."

"I don't need getting slam-danced around out at that goddamned mall if that's okay with you."

Harry's wife got up slowly from her sofa place. "Your daughter-in-law's birthday is next week, and we can surely afford something."

"Yeah, right. To show our gratitude for the used chair. Maybe we could find them an old ringer washer somewhere, at a garage sale or something. Have it delivered. Plopped down right in the middle of their living room. But then, I'm guessing it'll be the grandkids you'll be looting up, for their mother's birthday. Loot that'll wind up in a pile right back here at Harry's Storage."

"You make my stomach hurt." Harry's wife applied kneading finger pressure. "That chair is staying."

He could argue just so far with her these days. He needed her—like a kid needs a mother. The thought rankled. "Well sure," Harry said,
sarcastically, kicking at the wooden rocker from his sofa place. "It's kind of a duty for a parent, isn't it, to make space for their kids' every whim. And when they go off on their next tangent and decide to live on a houseboat somewhere, we can just store the rest of their cast-off junk too." The rocker nodded agreement. "Who asked you?"

Harry's wife gave him a queer look. Injected him with a real fear of an impending tenure at the home. She had grown dumpy and gray, but retained some auburn streaks, still puttered out a garden in spring. He was tired.

"Why don't you call one of the neighbors? I think I'll stay here ... near my rocking chair."

Harry's wife had left with the old bag across the street, the one who never came in the house any more, since he'd set her straight about never speaking to him in his own house. Nobody cared about him. Maybe they could give her the goddamned chair, as a return favor for her lousy magazines.

He bent-walked over the carpet-pacing path out to the kitchen to grab a beer out of the fridge. Found one on the bottom shelf, but wanted it colder. Opened the freezer. Stuffed. Goddamned fish the kids had brought from the lakes six months earlier. He tossed a couple of packages. Inserted his can.

The phone rang. He turned. The ringing continued, invisibly. The phone stand, already objectionably placed, partially blocking the kitchen-to-living-room doorway, was stacked with neighbor-bequeathed
year-old Newsweeks. He grabbed some, stuffed them in on top of the fish. Any bastard that wouldn't let the phone ring at least six times wasn't worth answering anyway.

"Hello," he said, weakly attempting a disgusted bravado.

"Hi, Dad. --We're coming up this weekend."

"Oh, uh huh..." From across the room, the chair commanded his attention, sullen, like a skinny wooden invalid. The call seemed intrusive. He unplugged the phone cord. Would blame AT&T. Needed time alone...

Harry's wife came in with a sack of crap: a couple of blouses in colors fit only for costume parties, a doll--carrot patch, or was it celery--a pair of plastic shoes, a slime barfer and a shit dooby.

"The kids are coming," Harry said. The kids, the Russians...

While Harry listened to his daughter-in-law moderate contemporary issue talk, like how human beings were meant to be vegetarian since they didn't have canine teeth, he watched number one grandson do number two on the rocker's wooden lap and was tempted to set the whole mess out on the curb. He felt just a twinge sorry for the chair though. Knew what it was like to have somebody take a dump on you.

He kept his eyes open. A lapse of attention would invite a bludgeoning. The rocker was catching hell from the lettuce head of demure granddaughter's plastic baby. What a great mom she'd make someday.

"We thought you'd enjoy having the kids for a couple days. We want to
look around for a boat."

"That sounds nice, doesn't it, Harry?" Harry's wife was optically burning in.

"Oh, uh huh."

"Say, by the way, before I forget it, I've got some tires out in the back of the pickup. We bought all new. I thought I'd just stick the old ones out there in the shed for you and Mom. Still a lot of good wear on those you know."

"Oh, uh huh," Harry said. "It's nice that you'd think to let us have your leftover good-wears."

Harry's wife was burning in again.

The odor was rising. "Does somebody want to change the chair?" Harry said.

"... meat eating causes cancer, you know ... "

Harry tried to stop the rocker agitans with his foot. Carpet ruts were forming under both creaking chair-rockers. "Maybe the kids would enjoy running naked in the yard."

"... when you really get to studying your enzymes ... "

The living room was really only a small parlor. Close. Harry got up from his sofa place, allowed his joints to lubricate, kicked the coffee table leg, moving the table out, squeezed past the rocker, nudging it closer to the wall, careful not to nudge the brown-on-brown finger painting in progress. Continued his statement with a soccer kick to the hassock earlier upended in mid room. The house was small, and the city dump was expensive nowadays. It irritated him that nobody else seemed to worry about things like that.
He threaded his way into the kitchen, found the can of beer froze-up like a bomb-pop. Tossed it and another package of fish to boot. Jesus, he didn't want a bunch of tires in the shed, now. Couldn't get at the lawn mower as it was.

The house seemed suddenly to drop floor space like the cat dropped fur. They didn't need that cat, either, with its litter-box cluttering up the porch. He was ready to cease with the pretend gratitude for unsolicited gift horses. And now the kids had a Shih Tzu. How long before there were little shits to be divvied out?

Adrenalin surged in his veins. He straightened up, went quickly back to the front room and peeked into the bedroom. The toy box overflowed, threatened to come up over the bed like a high tide. He turned around, loudly interrupting Nutrition 101, his scowl fully intentional. Why don't you kids take some of those kids' toys home with you?"

"Oh, that's all right. It's nice to have some toys here for the kids . . ."

Jesus, why couldn't some people see a serious problem where one existed? The garden needed thinning. It was time to act. What if there was a fire? What if they had to call a junk hauler eventually? Who would pay for that? And what about him--what if he wanted to bring something of his own into the house? Where would he put it? But nobody gave a goddamn about that.

"I'll take those tires out . . ."

Harry's wife was staring scared at him. She knew he was getting worked up. Why wouldn't she say something to the kids? If she was so
damned afraid he'd say something to embarrass her, why couldn't she be the
one to say something? Well, he wasn't embarrassed. "I think we'll just have
to have a yard sale," he said deliberately.

There was no acknowledgment. He marched to the rocker announcing as
he sat, "I guess I've got to just sit in the shit." He rocked in it.

Harry's wife pressed her fingers against the pit of her stomach.

"... you have to be really careful about which foods you mix ... "

Nobody was listening to him. He jumped to his feet, setting the chair
in motion. Went straight into the bedroom, stepping over the clutter. He
changed his pants, brought the dirty ones back with him to finish cleaning up
the chair.

"I sat the tires on the ground out beside the shed. You probably want
to put them in there a certain way."

"Oh, uh huh." Harry was still holding onto the dirty pants, and the
rocker's lap was filling up again; Harry's wife's ceramics class project came
crashing off the end table. A small blessing, a tiny deduction from his
wife's habit of making junk. Harry's wife lifted her knees, held them
momentarily against her stomach, then dropped them and leaned forward from
her sofa place.

The next few days were hectic what with not knowing till the tests
came back. The kids had helped some. Had hung on back at the house,
holding down, loading down ... probably boat hunting. He'd spent a lot of
time at the hospital. Hospitals were big places.

The gall bladder looked beautiful, the doctor said, but the duodenal
opening was swollen twice normal size, which had necessitated an NG tube and intravenous feeding for a few days.

He'd been happy to hear the doctor say that he was going to try to avoid surgery. And now, he was grateful to have the Mrs. home again, even though the coffee table was loaded up with Tagamet and crap. He knew she shouldn't overdo. Had had a hard time today keeping her down on her sofa place. The kids would be leaving tomorrow . . .

"Boat World said, when the boat we decided on comes in, they'll just deliver it over here. So the next time we get up here . . ."  

Over in its carpet place, the rocker was half hidden with a lap full of yarn, magazines and dolls . . .

Harry addressed the kids now with deliberate assumption. "It's lucky you kids have that spare bedroom and all . . ."

No answer.

"I mean since Mom and I will be coming to stay for awhile . . ."
DOWN OUT OF UP

Through the blear (that haunts
the beer freaks at late day) I spy
Venetian-grid rays, sun's calibration of
stain of life spill.
Up out of down through
a slatternly slat pattern
rises a stale rug-musk,
essence of gravitated Bud and crud,
and down out of up
I spill from a tipsy vessel
that, lifted in a
toast of faked optimism, snags only cobwebs.
THE GIVER

Through the kitchen window, big Billy Hargitay watched the hard-luck cases. Now that the weather was getting decent—it was overcast, but warming up—he supposed they'd come crawling out of the woodwork. The browned out grass would have no chance to fill in the paths and patches that scarred and pocked the short long yard of the apartment complex. The stooped little guy next door was talking to the paperboy through one of those electronic gadgets people use to talk through after throat surgery. Billy shifted his four hundred plus pounds and tried to ignore the groaning floor boards beneath the grey, chipped floor tiles. He glanced through the streaked glass in the other direction, shifting his attention momentarily away from... R2D2.

A youngish grey man in cheap, unfaded denims hobbled after a football as though he had one foot in a bucket. The ball bobbed erratically and then rolled to a stop in front of Billy's window. --Bucket came clod-hopping into Billy's space and waved politely towards the window before he bent over to pick up the ball.

"Ditz," Billy muttered to himself, but he returned the wave.
Bucket fired the football back at his neighbor on down the way—Kojak, in corporal striped khakis. The gangly, slick-headed receiver's herky-jerky stiffness disclosed his late middle age. These guys were dry behind the ears—dried up.

It was one thing to move into subsidized housing on a temporary basis, knowing things would turn back around, but to go on just existing with no goals...

When the packing plant went out, Billy had drawn unemployment for a few weeks just for the vacation. With his entrepreneurial instincts he knew he could make it just about anytime he'd really set his mind to it. He had some great ideas on the back burner. Only thing holding him back right now was his weight. He'd eaten himself onto disability, and so he'd thought he might as well just cruise along for a bit, kind of extend his vacation. After all, he'd worked pretty hard at the plant for a couple of years there. He turned around now carefully on swollen ankles.

As he waddled through the unfurnished beige kitchen into the sparsely furnished beige living room, he felt vaguely sympathetic. He sat down on his favorite metal folding chair in the middle of the rugless, grey tiled floor, avoiding the flimsy low set couch.

After a few minutes, his belly still heaved rhythmically. Maybe there was a purpose for his being here. He could be a real gift to these humble jerks, give 'em back some self-respect, raise their spirits a little while he was here. Give 'em some dignity.

He hoisted himself, felt charitable and kind of fraternal. He moved ponderously back through the apartment to the front door, opened the screen
and lowered himself carefully to the porch. He tugged at the bottom of his stretched T-shirt, making sure it wasn't creeping up his belly. "Hello, there," Billy said. "I'm your new neighbor. Nice day."

"Buzz ... sure is," said R2D2 as he sauntered, stoop shouldered, closer to Billy. "I'm ... buzz ... glad to meet you." He wore a white dress shirt in need of pressing, industrial grey pants and old brown wing tips, the decorative little holes of which were mostly smoothed over with liquid polish buildup.

"I'm Billy Hargitay. Nice meeting you. You like to stop over later and get acquainted? Maybe play some cards?"

"Buzz ... should leave you alone, let you get settled ... buzz ... "

"No problem. I'm pretty well settled in. Didn't have that much to move. No point in decorating one of these dumps. I'm just here temporary. Plant shut down. I've got some deals'll be going through pretty quick, and then I'll be out of here."

"Buzz ... work at packing plant?"

"That's right."

"Buzz ... been closed two years?"

"Yeah, well 'course I took some time off at first just to travel some, and then I've spent a lot of time planning, developing in recent weeks. It's never good to break things too quick, you know."

"Buzz ... usually watch T.V. --T.V. stinks ... Might come over, have a beer."

"Sure, why don't you do that. Always a square meal at my place, too, if you're interested." At first, the monotone buzz of R2D2's speaking
instrument had captured Billy's attention, but now he noticed the man's nose was ripe with hemorrhaged capillaries.

"Buzz . . . just a beer, thanks," buzzed R2D2, grinning, reaching to pat Billy's belly.

"See you later then," Billy said as he nonchalantly turned around and waved at the other neighbors.

After Billy returned to his kitchen he realized there was no beer. He'd pick up some Special Export, or maybe Heineken. Wanted to share some culture with these people. He started towards the drawer where he'd stashed the stamps, realized they were no good for beer. He'd write a check. Most of these people out here probably didn't have checking accounts. He'd thought about canceling his awhile back when a couple checks bounced and they ripped him off for service charges.

On the way to the store the old GMC backfired a couple times and afterwards ran pretty loud. But he knew a good truck when he found one, and this one was worth hanging on to, wasn't rusted out or anything --cherry, for its age.

Back in front of the apartment, the truck came to a resilient testimony-to-coil-springs halt. Shocks were bullshit, adornment. The football whanged against the driver-side door now. Bucket came running, stepping and thumping. How the hell could a guy that could barely hobble around at all keep up a game of catch for hours?

Maybe he'd invite them to a game of chess--show them a game of the mind. They'd appreciate somebody with his background, somebody from a
higher social strata, sharing with them.

Skintight—secure in the cab of the truck, Billy shouted, powerfully.

"Hey, there. I'm Billy Hargitay. I'm your new neighbor."

"Right," Bucket said as he clumped to a stop. "Saw you earlier." His voice was gritty. "I'm . . ." He'd spoken his name, but it hadn't registered. He was Bucket. "Wanna toss the ball?" Bucket asked as he leaned down to scoop it up.

"Do you toss that thing a lot?"

"Played quarterback in high school. Goddamn good too. Phlebitis has kind of slowed me down some."

"Sure," Billy said as he propped his bare arm in the window—size enhanced, firmed against the door. "Need a pump?"

"Huh?"

"If you need a pump, for the ball, you can borrow mine. I've got one for air mattresses, for camping. Matter of fact, you can just have it. Never go camping anymore, anyway."

"Well, uh, sure, I guess."

"I think it's in the back here," Billy said, keeping his arm flexed and tight against the door as he pointed his thumb back at the topper. "I'll see if I can't grab it out of there for you later."

"Well, hell yeah, I'll take it."

It was warm, a soothing breeze.

Now, Kojak yelled to Bucket that he was going in, then disappeared into his apartment. "Nice guy . . ." Bucket vouched for Kojak.

"Say, why don't you stop over for a beer after awhile," Billy offered.
"The neighbor next door on the other side's gonna come over."

"Thanks, I would. Been workin' on a bookshelf I picked up at the flea market though. Was gonna sand her down, tonight."

"Need a sander?"

"Huh? --Oh, I was just gonna sand her down by hand."

"I'll bring my electric sander over. Saw some Formby's stripper too, when I was unpacking, stuck it under the sink. I'll let you have that, and then you can use the electric sander too, and it'll be a lot easier."

Bucket stared blankly and then replied. "No, don't bother. Maybe I'll just wait on the goddamn thing. Maybe I will stop over for a quick one after a bit."

"How about your shiny headed friend down the way there? Think he'd like to come?"

"I'll ask him." Bucket turned and rocked off towards Kojak's apartment. The truck door made a loud pop as he belly-bumped it open. He maneuvered himself out of the cab, being careful not to hit his ankles, then waddled off after Bucket who was awkwardly ascending the two low steps of Kojak's porch.

Just as Billy reached the porch, Kojak appeared behind the screen door.

"This here's Billy Hargitay," Bucket said, "our new neighbor. Bill, this is . . . "

Glad to meet you," Billy said. "We're having a little get together at my place later. Why don't you stop over, have a beer, and we'll get acquainted."

"Oh, uh, sure," Kojak said, seemed hesitant, scratched his chin. He was
tall, and his stick fingers made his joints seem large, a Tinker-Toy man. "I, uh, did kind of want to get the windows cleaned ..." His long fingers fluttered. Bird wings, ear probing, chin fondling. "Those dirty windows have been bugging me all winter ..." His voice was high, shrill.

"Need a chamois rag?" Billy asked.

"What's that?"

"A chamois rag--you know, for windows. Best thing there is for cleaning windows. I've got one in the truck. I'll let you use it. In fact, I'll just let you have it. I've got another one in the glove compartment."

Kojak showed his appreciation with an affirmative nod. "Later for a beer, huh?" he said.

"Good." Billy gestured to Bucket. "Come on, I'll get that rag off the dash."

After he'd found the chamois and handed it to Bucket for delivery, Billy rested. He faced the cab, leaned forward, both palms on the roof as though being frisked.

"About what, seven?" Bucket asked.


Billy stared at the case of sweating long-necks on the seat. He'd settled for Miller's, the champagne of beers. These guys had probably never tasted anything better than Grain Belt.

Kojak and Bucket were at opposite ends of the clean-blanket covered couch. R2D2 sat in the faded green easy chair. Billy sat metal, against the interior wall where he could Ping-Pong his conversation. He'd gone ahead
and hung the yellowed shear curtains over the sliding glass double doors to the rear patio. "Should have bought some steaks," Billy said, "had ourselves a barbecue out back there."

"You know of a rich farmer?" Bucket said, "might wanna donate a cow?" He swigged a Miller's and smacked his lips.

"No problem," Billy said. "I'm buying." He glanced around the room. "Okay with everybody?"

"Fine with me," Kojak said. He took a long swill without removing his chin from its knuckle supporter, elbow propped on the arm of the couch.

"Buzz . . . fucking A," answered R2D2, and Bucket concurred.

In the next few minutes Billy found out, as he had expected, that the lot of them were basically losers and deadbeats--unskilled, on disability, welfare and the like. Kojak's baldness had something to do with chemotherapy. R2D2 was, by Billy's best guess, hopelessly alcoholic. Bucket had the phlebitis problem. All were divorced. --Who'd stay with such losers?

"You know," Billy said, "you could all just as easily have your freezers full of steaks." That got their attention. R2D2's beer came down from his lips, and there wasn't a lifted bottle in the room.

"Drink up," Billy said. "If anybody misses anything, I'll repeat it. Matter of fact, I'll just get you all another one." He hoisted himself, waddled to the refrigerator and returned with two bottles in each hand.

He passed out the beer and remained standing as he began again. "Find a need and fill it . . . " He paused to check their reaction--blank stares.

"For instance," Billy continued, "the guy who figures out a way to make solar
or wind power more practical is gonna get rich."

"Buzz . . . damn straight," buzzed R2D2 as he reached in his pants pocket and pulled out a half pint of Four Roses.

Switching chin support hands, Kojak nodded a meager acknowledgment, and then evidently decided the couch-arm-side supporter worked best.

Billy continued. "I'm always thinking about things in that area. 'Course it'd take money too, for development, or fighting the resistance from the oil companies, and for promotion and so on."

Bucket massaged his thigh above the knee of his game leg. R2D2 swigged his Four Roses and chased it with beer. They seemed oblivious. These guys had some serious attention-span limitations.

"What do you think?" Billy asked, focusing insistently on Bucket. "I mean what's your feeling, your reaction?"

"Well," Bucket said, drawling, still rubbing his thigh, "I was just sittin' here kind of in mournin' for the unborn dead."

There was dead air briefly. "The idea's been born. Now it needs to incubate," Billy said cleverly. "No, but I'll tell you another way to make it, though--mail order. Mail order's the way to go. Just place an ad for something catchy--on religion or sex, or something--charge a couple of bucks for it, and just sit here and watch for the mail."

"Magazine ads ain't cheap, you know," Bucket argued.

"Well, uh, maybe a person could start with a newspaper ad," Kojak offered.

"Yeah . . . well, maybe," Bucket said. And then pointing towards R2D2, he said, "How 'bout if we write a book on how Christianity
pulled . . . there up from bein' a alcoholic?"

"Buzz . . . kiss my ass . . . buzz."

After a small sip from his first beer, Billy sat down. He directed himself at Kojak who looked attentive and seemed a little more serious minded than the others. "I heard of a guy," Billy said, "who got rich with a guaranteed cockroach killer. He claimed it would kill any and all cockroaches safely and effectively, and he advertised it in all the national magazines for a couple of bucks a throw, and what it was--was two blocks of wood, and directions that said to place roach on one block and clobber the piss out of it with the other, and that guy cleaned up."

"Uh, huh," Bucket said.

A faint cracking sound accompanied the quick neck-twist of Billy's shooting glance. "You talk too goddamn much."

"That right?" Bucket said.

He was a quick one.

"I was just thinkin' . . . " Bucket said.

Would wonders never cease?

". . . maybe we should all take our checks and buy as many lottery tickets as they'll buy, and then if we don't win we'll all just jump off the goddamn Centennial Bridge."

"I've got a better idea," Billy said, holding a forced smile. "Why don't you take your check and buy a life insurance policy, name me as beneficiary, and then jump off the Centennial Bridge."

"That's dumb," Bucket said, slapping at his leg. "They don't pay nothin' if you jump off a bridge."
Billy struggled to maintain composure. These people needed compassion, not altercation. He changed the subject. "Why don't you get some of that analgesic balm, like the vets use? --For the leg?"

"What d'ya mean--horse liniment? You tryin' to be funny?"

"It's called analgesic balm. I've got some myself. Matter of fact, I'll just put some in a jar or something and send it home with you."

"Whatever," Bucket said.

You could only help people like them so much, though. His own concepts might be a little beyond them, after all. But he could still share some things with them, small things, less complex. He was determined to help them--to touch their lives while he was still here. "How about another beer? Everybody ready?"

"Buzz ... fucking A."

"I'll drink to that," Bucket said.

Kojak scratched his chin. "Well, maybe one more."

The barbecue was discussed and agreed to although they seemed pretentiously hesitant to accept Billy's charitable good will, saying they didn't want him to go out of his way or put himself out and the like. He wished they'd just let it all hang out and admit they were delighted. After all, he wanted to do it.

But the next night, just before the barbecue, Billy was still at Hy-Vee. He'd had a flat earlier on the liquor store lot, and he'd taken his time changing it. He hadn't pushed himself; it didn't pay. But now he hoped the guys wouldn't be thinking he'd skipped out on them. He had ... charcoal
and lighter ... steaks and sauce. His stamps would be gone. Chicken
today, feathers tomorrow.

At the checkout counter, he overheard some creep behind him in line
spout off how he had to give up half his income so that some people could
buy steaks. And then the checkout lady bitched Billy out about having loose
coupons in an unsigned book; she took her job a little too seriously.

Finally, as the carry out boy was about to take Billy's single large
brown bag, the store manager called him over to another counter to sack, so
Billy helped himself and waddled out of the store. A roving cloud forced the
shadows into a grey meld.

On the drive back out to the Village, the air was heavily exhaust laden.
Billy felt heroic, had a mission. His humble devotees would be anxiously
awaiting his return. By now they'd be growing uneasy, doubtful, but he
wouldn't let them down.

He turned onto the Village front street. Counted buildings back,
scanned numbers, found his own, the apartment's distinguishing feature. He
turned off the ignition key and waited while the engine ran on for a few
seconds before it choked and died.

Billy had latched the screen door to the patio, leaving the sliding glass
doors open for ventilation. As he entered the apartment now, he heard
laughing and good-time garble out back. He sat the groceries down and
slowly metronomed himself from one painful ankle to the other into the living
room where he hid himself against the back wall beside the patio doors,
listening. The gathering was next door, behind Bucket's. He expected maybe
some expression of disappointment that he hadn't shown up yet.

"Buzz . . . the giver . . . that's fucking good . . . the fucking giver."

"Hell," Bucket said, "I think maybe the giver done gave up on us."

"The giver," Kojak agreed. "It fits."
Collective laughter.

"Buzz . . . giver . . . un-fucking-real . . . fuckhead giver."

"The giver--the goddamn giver."

At first, Billy felt like charging out angrily. But then he considered the source and decided to file this one under, they just shit in their own nest. He put his choice rump in the freezer, his Sunny Brook in the cupboard and his charcoal under the sink and lumbered back to the patio door.

The screen door slid open noisily, and as Billy stepped out, Bucket got up and approached him enthusiastically. "Goddamn," Bucket said, "we thought you weren't gonna make it." He held out his hand to Billy and, grinning towards the others, said, "Give me five."

Declining the hand shake, Billy began apologetically. "I'm sorry I let everybody down, but I just couldn't afford to get the steaks I promised, or anything else. Got to paying bills this afternoon and just flat ran out of money." Make him the brunt of their jokes, would they; he'd teach them not to bite the hand that feeds.

A momentary hush was followed by unexpected congeniality.

"Don't worry about it," Bucket said. "Hell, I'll get my grill out from under the sink; ain't very big, but it's big enough for hamburgers."

"Buzz . . . I've got hamburger."
"Uh, I can throw in some potatoes," Kojak said.

"Hell," Bucket said, "we already bought some beer earlier down at the quick store, when you didn't show. I'll go in and get you one."

Billy began to feel a little petty about holding out. It'd been his goal all along to bring a little ray of sunshine to these people. And besides he could go for a little blood right now. He lingered indecisively while everyone else bustled in and out.

"Here's that beer," Bucket said, sparkling as he handed it to Billy.

"Hell, have a seat. Take a load off."

"Thanks," Billy said, eyes lowered. "I'll get my chair," he said and headed in. The screen door screeched open...

He came back with only the metal folding chair, and the unopened gift. Immediately Bucket met him. "Just sit down there and drink your beer, Bill. Our treat."

Billy studied the small can of Black Label in his large hand. Popped it open. It was good and cold.
"Wanna try me one time?" said the big dope next to Jimmy as he cocked his meaty arm on the bar.

"Ain't in the mood for that shit," Jimmy said. "Go find somebody you can beat. Maybe one of the girls."

"Who says I can't beat you?"

"Look, take it somewhere else or I'll hit you ten-twelve times before you can even get off that stool." Jimmy was only five foot two but quick as a cat. He didn't take shit from anybody.

Tall skinny filthy Strut came up to the bar now in a style befitting his name. Slapped the dope on the shoulder—leaving his greasy imprint on the guy's yellowed T-shirt. "Hey, man. Leave the guy alone. His brother just got killed. Give the guy a break, man."

Jimmy ignored them both, staring into the piss-colored fluid in front of him. Both of 'em dopes. Twelve-pack junkers, Jimmy called them. Scrabble up just enough scrap somewhere to keep themselves in beer money. Lotta guys that hung around down here on Sixth Street did that. Jimmy downed his half-glass and did a flashback: poor simple Bump lying there in that
ghastly goddamn casket. And then another: that pathetic flat stone out at
Oakdale with the chintzy bronze urn beside it.

Strut had sat down at Jimmy's other side, and now Jimmy felt
obligated. "Getcha glass a beer, Strut?"

"No thanks, Jimbo. I got money." He raised one hand like a kid in a
classroom. "Hey, Bert! Get me a bottle-a-Bud, will ya?"

Roberta didn't acknowledge Strut's request--never did say much to most
people. Seemed to be pushing just to keep her emaciated body moving
around behind the bar, lethargically--puttering, dusting, rearranging liquor
bottles. Moved so slowly she looked like she was afraid she'd throw
something out of place. But she'd talk to Jimmy alright. He knew how to
make people like him, if he wanted to. Could put the hustle on anybody.
Had some smarts. Could have got rich junkin'--when he had a reason to.

Eventually, Roberta got back to Strut, planked the bottle down in front
of him and snatched his money, still without speaking. Instead, she looked at
Jimmy, her hazel eyes sparkling above heavy dark bags. "Refill, hon?"

"Oh, sure, Bert."

"Stayin' late tonight aren't cha, hon?" Bert said as she picked up his
glass.

"Yeah ... I guess. Why not? What the hell's the use?"

Bert stuffed Strut's money in her apron pocket, didn't waste a trip to
the register and back. She drew Jimmy a beer. He pushed some change
over the cigarette burned mahogany. She pushed it back and set the glass of
beer in front of him.

"Look, hon. Maybe this ain't the time to say so, but you don't need
your brother, Bump, or any other man."

"You're wrong there, Bert. I needed a reason. Bump gave me a reason. Now that he was old enough to work with me, it gave me a reason to buckle down. And he was good. I mean he helped me a lot. Poor stupid sucker could move anything wasn't bolted down and most things that was."

Jimmy tossed back almost his whole glass.

"Take it easy, hon." Bert said, picking up his glass to refill it. Accomplished the refill in record time.

"Hell," said Jimmy, "I just don't have the heart for it now. I mean, I was doin' it for Bump. I mean the guy deserved it. So he took a bump on the brain as a kid; he was still a better man than most. The guy never got a lousy break. Nah, I felt like doin' it, with Bump. Motivated, you know? But now--sheeit!"

Bert reached out, touched Jimmy's chronically battery-acid-stained hand. "In a few days, you'll feel different. I'd hate to see you give up. I never seen ya so pumped up--dedicated and all as you was the last few weeks. Gettin' up early, stoppin' off here afternoons for maybe one or two and then home again so's you'd be ready early again the next day. I been proud to see it."

"That's just it. Takes a whole lotta keepin' yer head on straight to make it. Ain't got the heart without Bump. --Gonna lose the truck anyway, likely."

Strut's stool groaned as he swung around suddenly, picking enthusiastically at the torn stuffing between his spread legs. "That's where you made your mistake, buyin' that big flatbed out there. Shit City, Mable, I
been junkin' with a pickup for years, and ain't gone bust yet."

"Oh, bullshit," Jimmy said. "Ain't gone bust no, but you never had the ambition or the know-how to need anything but a pickup truck. Twelve-pack junker, that's all the hell any a you guys ever'll be."

"Beer, Bert," said the big dope on the other side. 

"In a minute," she said curtly. "Jimmy, you just hang on. You're gonna make it."

"Nah. They'll be takin' the truck. I had to let the utilities slide to get up the down payment, and now they're gonna shut me off."

"Bastards," Bert said.

"Beer, Bert," said the big dope.

"Yeah," Jimmy said. "I was down there today arguin' with some bitch about it. I says, 'Look, lady, can't you cut me some goddamn slack somewhere!' She says, real prissy Miss Perfect-like, 'Well if you can't control your temper, I'll have to call the police.' I says, 'Lady, I'll have you killed before the police get here."

"Good for you," said Bert. She picked up the big dope's bottle and moved away slowly, repeating, "Good for you."

"Do yourself a favor," said Strut who was still adding to the pile of dirty gray cotton stuffing at the foot of his stool, "Trade that flatbed for a little half-ton or even quarter. So you had a pipe dream. We all get 'em."

"Pipe dream, your ass. I could a made it. Wasn't afraid to take batteries or whatever. Had a load on everyday. Big loads. Write 'em out a check, then turn the shit over down to Big Red's and hurry back an' beat the check to the bank. I'm sharp. I mean, I know metal. Nobody puts
nothin' over on me when it comes to metal, an' I can out hustle anybody else down here on Sixth Street ten to one. But I just don't care now. Bump had nothin' but a crumby break in life and winds up early dead too. I don't see why I deserve better. I been low-life, am now, an' always will be. --Don't give a shit."

"There ya go," said Strut. "Face reality, man. Quit dreamin'. Face facts. What kind of chance did ya really have--with Bump workin' with ya?"

"A hell of a good one," countered Jimmy quickly, suddenly hot again. He downed his beer. "Bump was slow, yeah . . . ."

"Retarded you mean," said the big dope. "Kind of stupid," he said snickering.

Jimmy faced off with the dope. "Bump could out work or out ass-kick just about any man alive."

"Yeah," said the big dope. "But he ain't alive."

Jimmy stood up. "And you ain't gonna be either if I stay in here much longer." He waved at Bert. "Might be back later," he yelled and began walking towards the door, attributing his stagger to the warped floor. He'd volley next door to Knobby's for a bit.

Strut's pickup was parked right out front. The gaping holes in the bottom panel of the rusted out relic were clearly visible even in the dim rainbow light of Roberta and Knobby's window beer signs. Jimmy peeked in the back, just an impulse; expected it to be empty, maybe a few beer cans. The bed looked relatively flat, but there was a tarp spread out over something. He leaned over the side, belly-suspended, feet dangling. Pulled the tarp back. Strut had himself some metal under there alright. Jimmy
reached, grasped. It was a bronze urn... from Oakdale! Couple dozen of 'em at least. One of 'em could have been Bump's. "Dirty son-of-a-bitchin' grave robbin' bastard!"

He dropped the urn and stomped back into Roberta's. Slammed the door behind him. Strut--still at the bar--had glanced back when the door slammed shut, but now he turned around facing the back bar.

Jimmy approached his back. "Strut! You grave robbin' scum. Turn around! I'm gonna get in yer goddamn face."

Strut's back twitched. "Now, Jimmy, calm down." His voice trembled. "Turn around! --If you wanna see it comin' you better look at me now cuz I'm gonna knock yer ass off that stool one way or the other."

"Jimmy, I needed a few extra bucks. You can understand that." Still the bastard hadn't turned around. "I didn't go near Bump's. I needed the bread, man. I got utilities too." Now he turned.

"Wham! Strut fell sideways into the big dope, then plopped on his ass at the foot of the bar. He sat there rubbing his chin, eyes lowered.

The big dope laughed.

Wham! Off the stool came the big dope. He sprawled out momentarily, then got up and sprang towards the door. "Later with this shit."

"Beer for ya, Jimmy," said Roberta, nonchalantly setting the glass down on the bar.

Jimmy took a stool.

Strut started to get up saying, "Well, da you feel better now, Jimmy?"

"Don't get up," Jimmy said.

Strut was up on one knee, about to stand, his hand reaching for a grip
on his bar stool. Jimmy jumped up. Wham! Strut plopped back down on his ass whimpering, "Jesus Christ, Jimmy."

"You know, Bert," said Jimmy, "maybe I got good reason afterall to stick with it--make a go of it." He sat down again.

"Sure you do, honey." She was patting his hand again. "Now what's this all about?"

"Oh, just that the bastard's a grave robbin' scum, that's all." He felt good now, strangely--rejuvenated, probably the adrenalin or something. "Maybe it was for a reason I caught that son-of-a-bitch with the goods. --I mean, hell, a damn chintzy bronze pot don't do nobody justice out there to begin with, and then some uncouth sucker comes along and rips that off." He man-handled the glass of beer with one swill. Strut seemed restless on the floor. "Don't get up!" Jimmy warned.

Strut seemed more obedient. Sat there, rubbing his chin.

"You know, Bert," said Jimmy, "I could really do somethin' for Bump if I had some goddamn where-with-all, 'stead of broke on my ass. Maybe put him up in one of those what cha call 'em?"

Bert picked up a clean bar rag from a stack beside a tray of clean glasses. "You mean a mausoleum or shrine or something?"

"Sure. That's it. That's what I mean."

A scoop of ice was rolled up in the bar rag before Bert handed it to Jimmy. "I don't know, honey. I think you just ought to be wantin' to make a go of it for your own self. Hand that rag on down to Strut there, will ya, honey?"

"Here, grave robber," Jimmy said. "But don't get up!" he added,
thrusting the rag at Strut. "Well yeah," he said then turning back to Roberta, "I'll be doin' it for myself too, but Bump can still give me the reason. If I make it, it'll be a kind of whad you call it--shrine to him, and maybe too I can really put up a monument to him or some kind of big gaudy-ass memorial, you know."

"I think it's a nice idea," Bert said.

"Course it won't be easy," Jimmy said. "Got to get up early and hustle, and I need to raise some big bucks fast if I'm gonna hang on to the truck. But now I got a reason to make the commitment. In fact, I feel damn good about it. --Strut!" Jimmy addressed him roughly, and Strut backed away a couple of butt lengths, cowering. "Get up here," Jimmy demanded. "I'm gonna buy you a beer. Bert, get Strut there a bottle a Bud on me."

Still holding the ice over one eye, Strut got up, took a seat beside Jimmy. "Thanks loads," he muttered.

"Now, what are you gonna do with those urns?" Jimmy said.

"I don't know, take 'em back out there I guess."

"Now you're talkin' smart."

Bert brought another round and charged them both from Jimmy's last five dollar bill.

"Now, let me ask you, Strut. Don't you think I've got what it takes to make it--I mean if I really want to?"

"Sure, Jimmy," Strut said as he move the ice down over his jaw. "Sure, you got what it takes," he said out of one side of his mouth.

How Jimmy did love that aroma of Sixth Street tavern stew of close
air. Tried to sort out the individual ingredients: beer; cigarette smoke; urine from the backed up toilets--cut with Pine-Sol; faint lingering vomit; body odor; the greasy cover-alls of the predominantly junker clientele; back to beer, always the dominant lovely reeking aroma of beer. Jimmy was really mellow now, felt like celebrating his new commitment, new set of convictions. What a difference attitude could make. He checked the clock over the back-bar mirror--too late now--to get up early tomorrow. He swallowed the contents of his glass. "Bert, 'nother one."

"Sure, Jimmy, honey."

After paying, he jangled in his pocket--down to mostly change, but enough for maybe a few more glasses if Bert was good to him. Right now he sure felt good about everything.
RELUCTANT SHOOTER

Bennie Hipshur looked around uneasily inside Wineberger's Sporting Goods. Shuddered. The exposed racks of shotguns and rifles menaced him—wall perched, poised to strike. At least the pistols, under glass, seemed adequately restrained, encaged. Bennie hated weapons but wanted one. Years ago, his cop brother had accidentally blown his brains out cleaning his pistol. Freaky. He'd seemed invincible, a tough guy, nothing like Bennie.

Bennie had saved enough, barely, to buy a pistol, had gotten his purchase permit with ease, and why not; only Betty White and Billy Graham, maybe were further from felons than he. But now he couldn't seem to find the nerve. Wineberger's would be relocating out to the shopping center soon, but Bennie was stuck here. A customer was speaking to the clerk. The back door to the glass gun cages slid open. The clerk reached inside. Bennie panicked, hurried out front, breathed deeply—acrid. Moved quickly along the sidewalk towards his apartment two doors down, a vice-grip of noise pressuring his brain—vehicle roars from the street, rock screams from the punk-rock bar between his apartment and Wineberger's.
A barrage of pow-pows, bleeps and buzzes greeted him as he opened the stairwell door. Inside, he stared for a moment at the crumbling plaster wall beyond which he and his wife had run a decent little gift shop for a few years before she died. Now, he was renting to a video arcade. A sudden burst of electronic gunfire made Bennie flinch. He breathed deeply again--musty. Began climbing the stairs--gritty with ground ceiling deposits.

The phone was ringing as he entered the apartment. Quickly, he bolted the door. Went to the phone, near the front windows. Answered--his renter downstairs, stalling him about the rent; the robbery last week had put him behind. Bennie thanked him for calling and hung up. Glanced out the window.

Three brightly and tightly dressed colored girls were squaring off under the unlit afternoon "Silver Moon" across the street. A territorial dispute, likely. Their ebony appendages conducted an orchestration of thick, garbled strains which rose audibly but undecipherably above the traffic noise. Drove Bennie away from the window, hand damping his ears. His hands came down as he tripped on the torn carpet. Regained his balance, entered the kitchen. Roaches streaked, vanished.

After he'd opened the refrigerator and found the lone egg carton empty, Bennie considered walking down to Levy's Grocery. He felt empty, not hungry really, but as though he needed to eat. But Levy's was no longer Levy's. Levy's was Washington's, and Bennie hated to go in there, let alone risk the walk. He no longer drove, or owned a car, and couldn't get out to a supermarket. A loud knock came at the door.

As Bennie walked softly back into the front room, he heard, "Police
investigator. Open up please." But Bennie knew better, didn't answer. Stood quietly in the center of the room. It could be about the robbery downstairs . . . or the rape out in the alley behind the arcade . . . or it might not be a police investigator at all . . . He heard feet shuffling outside the door and then footsteps fading in descent on the stairs. Waited a few minutes, his mind wandering back over the good times when the neighborhood had been green and clean and free of hoodlums, when Ethyl had kept flower boxes out in front of the store, when Sergeant McAnally still rattled the doors downstairs every night. Bennie wondered if it was decent anywhere now. Doubted it. Even the bigshots, the government leaders, were hoodlums with nuclear zip-guns. Finally, he opened the door. All clear. Decided to try again. Went out. Headed back down to Wineberger's.

One eye twitched as Bennie walked, knees trembling, back to the glass cabinet at the rear of the store. He was the only customer, was glad of it. Felt inept.

"Can I help you?" the clerk said, popping out from behind a high shelf of fishing tackle.

"I'd like to look at your pistols." Calmly stated. Surprisingly. Not at all tentative.

The stocky, punk-aged clerk walked behind the glass cabinet. "What'd you have in mind?"

The next words were harder. "W - well," Bennie stammered, "I don't really know much about guns." Now he opened up. "In fact, I've always thought maybe it would be best if handguns were outlawed, but the way things are now . . ."
The clerk interrupted. "Whoa! The way things are now is just like the way things have always been, seems like to me. Everybody should keep and bear arms. If they did there wouldn't be near as much crime as there is. It's in the constitution. Every spirited citizen's got an obligation to own a gun--to protect his home and family and that."

"Oh, sure, right," Bennie agreed. "What's this little one?" he asked, pointing.

"25-auto. They're a popular protection pistol, but if you ask me, I'd recommend something a little bigger. I mean, you could shoot somebody with that little thing, and it might not even kill him."

"Oh, sure, right."

"Now, take this 38-Special. Now there's a nice little piece." The clerk reached, offered the first nice-little-piece Bennie had been offered in years. He accepted it across his moist open palm. Shoveled it in closer. Hesitated.

"Go ahead, get the feel of it. I mean dry fire it and that."

"It isn't loaded is it?" Stupid, of course it wasn't loaded.

"Pull on this little hickey, and push on the cylinder and it'll fall right open." The young clerk took the pistol, demonstrated, then handed it back.

Clumsily, Bennie imitated the clerk's moves, then closed the cylinder. Pointed the pistol with two hands, like in the cop shows. Closed his eyes. Tremor squeezed. Click! --Nothing much. Click. Click. --It was easy. He'd done it. He rubbed the nickel finish, masterfully, hands steady.

"Shall I write it up for ya?" the clerk asked. "I can throw in a box of cartridges and that."

"I'll take it," Bennie said smiling up at the clerk.
Bennie actually whistled on the way back up to his apartment. Inside, he sat on the sofa. Unboxed the pistol on the coffee table. It gleamed congenially, tamed. Enthusiastically, Bennie loaded shiny cartridges. Clicked the cylinder closed. Calmly, confidently pulled the hammer back. Placed the barrel to his temple. Squeezed the trigger.
There were a hundred squirmly snakes under the oily brown skin of the potato peeling wizard's forearms as he whittled and hummed and grinned. The peeling dangled like a slinky, then fell. Chad's mom had let him try peeling potatoes a couple times, but he could only lop it off in chunks.

The forbidden cave felt cool--out of the sun. It was his favorite place nobody knew about, only his mom and the potato peelin' man, and Sugar. But hardly anybody else.

A royal man walked by now just below the stair rocks in dead man's alley, but he didn't see the entrance to Chad's cave. The cave was magic. It led to a world of long legged fairy princesses and mumbling dizzy people with spells on them. And inside the cave was the wizard's cage. But you had to be brave to come here. There were giant squabbling bats, and you couldn't look right directly into the wizard's eyes or you might get a spell on you.

Chad pressed his soft cheeks--his mom always pinched--against the rough board slats of the wizard's cage. He risked his nose inside, pressing
his cheeks hard, toughening the skin.

The wizard watched with a grin that seemed to hide oodles of stuff that only he could know. He held up a carrot by the tip and kind of stroked it with the other hand, and then he spit between his teeth—sudden-like—right at Chad. But he didn't seem mad or anything, was still grinning really wise-like. Chad pulled back—spit blessed. He'd be able to fly even better now.

"Are you almost finished?" Marlys said trying not to sound bitchy.

"Yeah, Jesus!" Sugar said between pants and continued pounding away.

"I'm sorry, hon, but I've got to get up."

"Yeah, well I'm up now you know," Sugar said, panting, not missing a stroke. "That kid's alright."

"Let me up, Sugar, please. I'll come back and finish."

"Shit!"

"Thanks, hon, sorry. You know what happened a week ago."

She scooped up her panties, automatically checking them for roaches, then hurried into the kitchen that opened onto the roof. Standing in the open doorway, arms folded front, she called, "Chaaa... ad."

Just as she was starting to panic, the little yellow head popped out of the stairwell. Resting pigeons exploded upward. Chad came running obediently over the plank walk. He was two different kids according to whether she was or wasn't watching.

"I'm sorry, Mom," he said as he came up to her. "I forgot."

"Just get in here. You know I don't want you out of sight." She
grabbed a handful of corn silk and tugged out a light scolding.

"I'll stay in the yard. --Honest."

"Let's see your hand." They'd removed the bandage earlier, and the stitches looked alright. "You'd think you'd learn." The week earlier, she'd been scared to death by Chad's little episode. When he had come in wailing like a banshee with his hand wrapped in his blood-soaked cape, she'd been in bed with Sugar. It made her feel guilty. --But she needed Sugar too. She couldn't watch Chad constantly. The broken booze bottles were something she tried to watch for, tried to keep swept up; she couldn't prevent what sometimes went on out there late at night. Since the divorce, she thought a lot about moving back to Iowa, but her own folks were so damned condescending . . . and sometimes in the early evening after Sugar went to work degreasing spoons below and the roof was no longer hot and sticky and the breeze was not so monoxide heavy, she really enjoyed standing out there, gazing off at the night lights.

She held Chad's face against her bare stomach and stared off at the ventilator stacks and ancient skylights held together by chicken-wire impregnated in their cracked glass and the tired stairwell that leaned like the backhouse on her grandma's place and the old wasp ridden refrigerator and the crumbling low retainer walls that offered little protection against Chad's flying fantasy. Sometimes he made her frantic. "Chad, honey." She pulled his face upward. "I do not want to catch you going down to that loading dock again. You stay out of that stairwell. I don't want you hanging around that potato peeling man. After this, you keep your little butt up here where I can see you. Understand?"
"Uh huh," he answered meekly. "Can I stay out?"

"No," she said sharply. "I'm grounding you for an hour, for your own good, so you won't forget what I'm telling you."

"Crud."

"And you can just sit still on the couch too. Read your books."

He pulled away and stomped through the kitchen. She squinted at the sun—still headed upward. The roof would be a bear later. It was a mean yard.

Chad's mom came through—flopped through, jelloish, pudding skinned.

"Don't you get up till I say."

"Aw, Jes..."

"Watch your mouth."

"What's a matter with geez?"

She went into the bedroom. He knew what they did in there. Getting lucky. Yuk! That was a laugh. He grabbed a swords and sorcery and mostly just looked at the pictures. After the wall-rattle banging began, he got up, went behind the closet door. He felt kind of... not naughty exactly, kind of like when somebody dares you to do something, as he undressed in the front room, in the daytime with his mom never catching him. And in the closet was his mom's cape dress. He got dressed again quickly and went back to jail on the couch.

Maybe his mom would let him have the red towel with no holes in it. She'd thrown away the old scraggly one when it got all blood soaked. Come on in there. Jeees-us! "Mom," he yelled. "Can I go to the bathroom?"
"You just wait."

It seemed like a hundred hours, and then they both came out, dressed. Tall skinny Sugar always seemed to be kind of grumpy and just looked down at the floor as he went on into the kitchen. "Any beer left?" he said.

"I haven't touched it," Chad's mom said. She stood finger-brushing her hair, looking down at Chad. "Well?"

"Huh?"

"Thought you had to go."

"Mom, can I use that neat red towel?" There was something all mixed up about having to coax for a cape. Like the giant bats just had wings and his mom just had a cape—didn't have to ask anybody. He should be able to have a little cape without her thinking it was a dumb little kid thing . . .

Marlys hadn't grown up this way, and Chad shouldn't have to either. She and Sugar sat at the kitchen table, not talking. She reached for his beer, making sure her arm didn't touch down on the buttered, cracked formica tabletop. As she swigged back, she took in the grease-spotted ceiling and peeling paint around the shadeless light fixture. She picked up an acrid stale whiff of their nightly after-Chad's-bedtime smoking.

She had hated the stench of pig lots as a kid, and the monotony of corn fields . . . and grass. So in her infinite wisdom, she'd followed one worthless man out here where Chad could run in the tar. She clacked Sugar's can back in front of him and got up.

She stood behind the torn screen of the open doorway:
"Ha! Get back, monster tin men," Chad warned, kicking at their wire tentacles. He reached back to get even stronger by rubbing his thick magic cape. "I warn you--I got the power."

Little soldier, super kid had the smoking stoned horde scared stiff. Or maybe smoking had them stiff. Stay away from those skylights, she resisted yelling. You'll fall into the stew and drown . . . choke in the flour dust, angel dust, angelfood.

Now he kicked just a little, almost missing, at the forbidden den of hexed killer wasps. "I dare you. --I can fly faster than any of you anyway. Abracadabra! Open sesame!" He kicked again with super foot power, then quickly flew away. Weaving his way through steel monsters, dodging wire tentacles that tried to lasso him out of the air, his magic-charged feet smacked and popped, and giant grey bats scattered, and old hex wasps were nothing to him. He landed near the side edge of the roof and checked back toward the wasp den. He sure wasn't scared though because he'd probably zapped them dead anyway. He turned his back on all the evil armies of the roof.

He leaned out over the wall of the sky fort. He could fly right down on top of the backs of the grazing steel dragons, if he wanted to. But his feet felt sticky, stuck.

Get away from the edge, Marlys wanted to yell, but instead she just watched the pigeons flit from roof to roof beyond her tar perched
red-caaped-freckle-belly. Don't fly away, she resisted calling out. If they waited till the tar cooled and hardened and the stars came out--above and below--then they could both easily fly down into the stars. Silly, she thought.

Just standing still, Chad's neck burned. He felt his mom watching but didn't look. They lived in the sky. Sugar and the bats and the hex wasps were free to go, but not his mom. She did have that cape dress, but he'd never seen her wear it. He bet she thought it was just pretend that he could fly.
Empty chairs watch me
against the grain
of tung-oiled mahogany
sheen diminishing daily under
residue
of anachronism
--pipe smoke, end dust . . .
I need to walk out of here--get a life--but I'm
booked on the swivel rocker,
the Naugahyde ride. I'm
a one man tilt-a-whirl. I
bump the cup that
spills tarnished yellow
pencils that love, like old men, to
get drunk and lie in a pile. I
consider, then tilt away
from the urge to be lead. I'm
a swiveled back kind of guy. I elevate my brown wing-tips, and they disappear, submerged in a mahogany pool.
SOMETHING UNDER MY FOOT

I wonder what's under my foot.
Not what's stuck to my Neoprenes, but
what's really under my foot.
I don't mean
what's just under the rug either, or
what's under the hardwood floor, or
the subfloor, or
what's under the concrete floor
that's eight feet under the subfloor under my foot.
I don't mean
what's under the mantle or
what's under the crust, or,
beyond the core,
what's under the crust or
what's under the mantle.
I don't mean
what's wrapped up in a Chinese firecracker
down under the big blue ball.
I don't mean what's under the first couple of billion or so black holes. I mean what's really under my foot.
"You just really hate the feminists' guts, don't you?" Patsy kidded.

"What's not to hate about anybody's guts?" What do you want from me? I like their butts. Not Bella's of course. But that Gloria Steinam's not too bad." They had pulled the love seat up almost into the bay window, directing their view out away from the moving-in clutter. The lattice work gave them a fly's-eye view of the neighbor across the street. She was up on a ladder, painting the eves. "I didn't mean to imply that women shouldn't wear pants. What I meant to say was something more like that women with butts as big as barn doors should stay out of blue jeans and off of ladders."

"God, what a sexist remark," said Patsy over her own interrupted laugh. Of course Jerry wasn't really sexist at all and Patsy understood that. They'd come a long way together. Through the early days when she'd helped him through dental school. Through the struggle to get an office going. Through the bankruptcy. And more recently he'd helped her through nursing school--by playing with the band which had worked a lot after Patsy took over the booking and even more after she picked up on the bass, and the vocals. "Well, what do you think of your Winnock Cottage so far?"
"Canary House," Patsy responded emphatically.

The place was yellow, but he'd change that this summer, after he finished up his teaching certificate. Maybe they'd build a fireplace, after he found a job. "Winnock Cottage--its the perfect name. Winnock is Scots-Gaelic for window."

"Who cares?"

"All famous writers have names for their houses." He felt momentarily childish, heard himself whining.

"So? Aren't famous writers supposed to be famous?"

Jerry reached, gave the top of her head a light knuckle noogie. "I'm famous. Ask the in-laws." He'd made the papers for criminal trespass once, setting his brother-in-law straight. "I'm not rich and famous."

Patsy noogied him back a little rougher than he'd dared. "We really should get to painting your study."

"Relax, enjoy the new view."

Patsy turned to him with raised eyebrows. "You're not going to turn chubby-chaser on me now are you?"

"Your mom said I was a rainbow chaser. That's a petutie over there that'd put most rainbows to shame. You see a pot of gold over there under that ladder?"

"Let's hit it, Dink," said Patsy as she got up.

Jerry was overall pleased with the way things had gone lately. Patsy's nursing job had enabled them to buy finally. They'd seen their share of cockroaches. He'd felt good seeing his name too on the loan papers. What was maybe really her solvency was reestablishing his credit. You wouldn't
catch him checking for tartar in the mouths of gift horses. "I'm coming." But he sat tight for just a bit. "Keep your hot pants on," he said wondering what the remark really meant.

He had some cigars in the car. Wondered if Patsy would mind. --But maybe it wouldn't be a good idea to smoke around open paint.

Now he noticed at the corner of one of the lower window panes a perfect tiny hole. "Damn! I've never understood people buying little boys BB guns." Any kid too young for a real rifle damn sure wasn't old enough for an air rifle. "Patsy, come look at this."

"Are we gonna get started or what?" said Patsy arriving back with a paint roller in her hand.

"Look at this. If I catch any little air-gun-totin' wiener around here, he'd best drop his gun and protect his little behind, damn his hide."

Patsy stayed characteristically nonchalant. "If that's the biggest undiscovered flaw, I'm not complaining."

"Jesus! The things kids just get away with now-a-days."

"Shall we?" She pointed in towards the study.

"Yeah, yeah. I think I'm gonna go out an get a cigar . . . "

"I suppose." She seemed to stay good natured, always, sometime irritatingly. "Well, I'm gonna get started painting. I'll paint; you procrastinate," she said smiling.

" . . . and bring it in here . . . "

She didn't say anything.

" . . . and smoke it in here too . . . "

No objection.
"... smoke the piss out of it," he emphasized.

Patsy laughed. "Whatever turns you on. I'll get going on it, hon. I just want to make sure it's ready to go for you after spring break." She disappeared into the study.

He stood there, glanced around. Sure it was his study, but she had the kitchen. Of course he understood that the kitchen wasn't off limits to him either, but then neither was the study off limits to Patsy. She was in there right now wasn't she. And a kitchen was still kind of a woman's place, even though he'd spent plenty of time doing dishes in the kitchen when she was in school. Screw it. Maybe he should just go help her paint. He was lucky to have a woman he'd always been able to work well with. They complemented one another.

Patsy came back. "Is something bothering you, Jer?"

"Why?" he shot back sounding a little defensive.

"It is a nice feeling, isn't it? I mean knowing we'll actually own... own Winnock."

He put his hand on her waist. "I'm really proud that you've been able to do so well in such a short time, you know it?"

She smiled from deep inside. His praise always seemed to please her. He wasn't too big. In fact he'd always leaned towards the understanding side from the word "go" on the whole female emergence thing, except for the radical ones of course, like most of the belly achers on Oprah or Sally, which he and Patsy both understood were just women falling prey to that age old syndrome of feeling oppressed, like the line from one of Jerry's poems expressed: **Bold bards of gloom will cant till doomsday leading chants of**
feigned descry of sundry burdens, treasured grievances for which they strangely vie. He patted Patsy lightly on top of the head. "Does it bother you, babe, that I'll have the study, and you don't really have a room of your own?"

"Shoot no," she said. "I don't want you to flunk out of school. And after you graduate, maybe we'll turn it into a nursery. It's not too late you know."

"What's that supposed to imply?"

"Huh?"

So he'd had a little impotency lately. He had a lot on his mind. Grad school was tough what with commuting, and there was the thesis to worry about. "Was that supposed to be a dig?"

"What?"

"That nursery remark."

"Well no," she said softly touching his cheek. "It's still possible."

"You're too old for that crap."

"You're probably right. She pressed up against him. "Besides, I think you like my tummy flat, don't you?"

Just now, he noticed through the window a little girl in the yard across the street, a little BB gun toting redhead of nine or ten. He measured her through the lattice grid. "Look at this would you."

"Oh, isn't she cute?"

Jerry turned back sharply. "You condescending bitch."
PALE MEADOW

This is a little story about how something that seems like a disaster can really be just the thing that can get you thinking till you come to some new conclusions that finally make your life a whole lot easier, you know?

The meadow that led down to the hollow they called Shady Oaks a few years back, before the gypsum mills closed it off, was pale, you know, a sickly yellow-green everywhere it wasn't pure white. We'd walked up in reverse, from the river through the hollow. It was still there. I mean like all the trees and everything, just that you couldn't get to it from the other way, I mean the way you could back when there was a dirt road you could take over the meadow, down through the hollow, to the river, to fish or drink or make love, depending on your companion.

"Left my smokes in the canoe," said Trish.

"Enough smoke out here already, Toots," I said, but of course it wasn't really smoke in the air. Where there's smoke there's fire. The mill-dust haze had kind of just crept up over the years without anything so obvious as the accompaniment of fire. "Used to be all green this time of the year, you know? This looks like winter, but it was never this white and this warm at
"I'm going back."

"Please, Babe," I said, right away thinking of Wilson in "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber." Oh, please stop it, she said. Please, please stop it.

That's better, Wilson said. Please is much better. Now I'll stop it.

"You wanted to see it again. Well, you've seen it."

That's what she said, but of course I hadn't. "Doesn't this place bring back memories?"

"Look," she said, kicking the dust off and the shit out of a milkweed, "the memories ain't that great."

She said ain't just for emphasis, you know? It was only me that was pretty much of a dumb shit. It was like an ethic, you know, to stay that way I mean. She was a big reader of Shakespeare and that kind of crap. Of course I'm being ironic when I say crap. Me, I liked illiterate poetry--odes to the F word and such. She was always taking night courses and coming home spouting off with that feminist-criticism-of-the-patriarchy stuff. I pretty much just believed in raising hell, like I'd always read Ginsberg's "Howl" with interest, not for the didactic message about Molach and all that, but for the ballsie language and goings on. I just always have sort of dug on the irreverent, you know, or as the pedant would say, the iconoclastic. I work though, hard, at U.S.G. I load plaster all day, hundred pound bags, and that ain't woman's work. I tried to get sweet right now though. "Back when the road was open," I said with a little heart tug in my voice, "it was you and me, like that, you know?" I made the
two-fingers-entwined gesture.

"Right, and then it was you and you and you." She looked off into space, beyond me for sure, like she was squinting to see a road sign in the fog. "I'm glad it's closed," she said. "God, I'd never go down that road again."

"So why'd you come?" I said, and then I thought right away her expression said she never really had.

She looked right at me. "Melinda wants me to see you." Now she started walking, and not back towards the canoe either. "Sometimes I feel like a Siamese twin conjoined at the child."

"Wow," I said without exclamation, and then, keeping it pretty stoic, added, "What an image."

"I still love you too," she said, still walking, and instantly a little hardened cop screamed up from my shorts. Spread 'em. "But I've learned to love my dignity more," she added. Deposit your toll and keep moving please, the cop said with restraint.

The road was mostly grown over with kind of stunted looking milk weed, and blown over with dry white drifts, but you could tell we were on it, the road I mean, by all the beer cans left over from the pre-nickle-deposit days. I didn't see any condoms, though there'd never been any deposit on them either, if you get my drift.

"Remember when we found a turtle on the road and stopped and picked it up, and you kept it for me until our next date, because I couldn't take it home or my mom would know I'd been out in the country with you, and then when we went out again we just brought it back out here and let it go?"
"Yeah, Sweetface. Sure I do." So, like there it was, you know, the basic difference, the two different splendors in the grass, turtles and condoms, and nothin', I thought, could really bring back the zit-faced hours anyway, so why was I trying?

"That's a nice memory." She stopped kind of like a snow ball rolling down hill might stop, I mean if a snow ball could realize what it was doing, you know? "I'm going back now."

"Please," I said, and somewhere Hemingway rolled over. There was a faint thunder of dynamiting off in some distant quarry.

"The poem you sent me, by the way, was offensive, condescending. I'm just glad Melinda wasn't home when I read it. I burned it of course." She hadn't started back yet, and I kept edging on, hoping she'd follow. "I wasn't being condescending," I said. "It was just sort of very Anglo Saxon, you know? It was supposed to kind of praise the nobility of the elemental, or maybe expose the vanity of the pseudo sophisticated, or some such shit." I had noticed that the dust in the air seemed moist. I mean, there was like a perpetual low hanging cloud out here anymore, but some of the dry fog was turning into the real thing. And then she noticed it too.

"It's getting awfully gray. We'd better start back."

"It's always gray out here," I said. "It's just the mill dust, Babe." I wanted to keep her up here away from the river, the mainline out of my life, you know? But now I was getting a little out of comfortable talking range ahead of her, so I came back.

"It was like crude, you know?" said Trish. "Immature, I mean."

The like, you know, and I mean were like Trish's parody of me, you
know? "I'm sorry," I said, like with flaunted insincerity, you know. "But how can you get offended by art?"

"Art who?"

Right away I thought of Art Pritchard that borrowed my pickup truck and brought it back with no muffler and never offered to pay for it—a real ass. But then I guessed Trish hadn't said Art who as an invitation for me to get desultory, so I just dropped it.

"I think I felt a sprinkle," Trish said. but she wasn't walking back yet, and I wasn't holding her or anything either, you know? The last line of the poem she was talking about came back to me right then, and frankly, even I thought it sounded a little crass: You made me feel like a fork truck ramming the pallet under a pope malt suspended in the highest bay of a freezer warehouse. That's what I wrote to her, you know, and yet even after that she was with me again, right then I mean.

Let's sit down for a minute," I said pointing to a sitter-size gypsum boulder that gave me the opportunity to try a little witticism. "Feel like I'm sitting on the left nut of the Cardiff giant," I said after we sat down.

"And I'm sitting beside another nut."

"Hostile," I said, but I really didn't think she was, right then, I mean.

The wind was coming up. There were a couple cottonwood trees across the way from where we sat, and the leaves were jiggling even under the kind of almond-bark crust, like. And then you could start to see like the fresh powder sprinkling and twirling down through the air under the tossing branches like Ajax or Babo or something. And then you could hear Zeus and Holy Joe joining forces with the blasting crews of Celotex and Georgia
Pacific. It got dark in a minute, I mean like really dark, you know?

"It's too late," Trish said.

"No it isn't, Babe," I said, like getting ready to plead, you know, before I realized she just meant there was no way we'd make it back to the canoe before it really cut loose. Like it would have done us any good to get back to the canoe anyway, I was thinking. But then she said, "My cigarettes will get soaked," which kind of clarified for me what she thought it was too late for.

Lightning streaked across the dark sky really awesome bright, like a linear sun or something, and then almost right away there was a several-syllable crack, and Trish grabbed my arm, squeezed. She got up then, but not like she was really ready to leave either, even though the rain was starting. She mulled around me and the rock saying stuff about how men had so much to learn, and once she said I looked like Rodin's Thinker, or maybe she said stinker. I didn't go much for that Oprah rhetoric, you know, and anyway even if I'd been a good listener I couldn't have caught much of it since by then it was raining bullets, and the sky kept doing just like the repeating box-car-switching concussions you'd hear all night when you worked on the loading dock. We were already soaked, and the lightning was scary, but it was really dark and coming down so heavy that it would have been hard to make our way back, and at least the rain felt warm. I felt a strange sensation that me and the rock were sinking. I got up, but just then we--the rock and me--were sucked down to my knees. And then the ground really gave away. I plummeted in terror maybe twenty feet, then realized almost matter-of-fact that I was looking up through the downpour
from the core of a sinkhole. I was waist deep in mud but unhurt.

I could see her standing above me, a dark, hands-on-hips figure against the flickering sky. I couldn't see her face, her expression, but I heard her laugh. "How does it look from the sulphurous pit beneath the tangled bramble lip?" I knew it was Shakespeare or some such, but so what else was cryptic?

"Wanna mud wrestle?" I yelled back.

"What are you looking for down there, an earth mother?"

"Huh?" I tried to pull one leg up through the mud but realized right away that the effort made the other leg sink deeper. "Hey, I can't get out of here."

"So quit struggling. Think of it as a kind of experiment in pacifism."

"Shit, do something."

"What would you like? A T.V? A six-pack?"

"Hey, this shit's not funny."

"Reach in your pocket and flip your knife up here."

"What, so you can use me for a target?"

"I'll go back for the anchor rope."

So I flipped it to her, you know. I mean that's the way I was still thinking, you know.

"Hold still, don't struggle. I'll get back here as soon as I can."

After she left I felt something hard against one ankle, then realized it was the gypsum boulder I'd been sitting on earlier. I managed to move one leg up enough to push my foot down on top of the rock. It seemed secure, had evidently bottomed out. At least I no longer felt panicky waiting there,
still almost waist deep in mud.

I thought after a bit that I could pretty easily get out on my own but why not play this one for all it was worth. I mean Trish was coming back because she thought I needed help. So I didn't make any effort, you know. Right then, I mean.

It was still raining hard when she got back, but the wind had let up. "Waiting for someone?" she said when she first appeared back at the brink above me. I mean it was like rhetorical sarcasm, you know, to kind of give me humility. But I thought I'd play along since I had her where I wanted her. I mean with me as opposed to not. So I even like made a pretend attempt to get out. But real quick I found out I wasn't pretending. I couldn't get away from the rock without sinking too deep to move, and at that point I felt really pretty vulnerable, you know?

But she tossed me the nylon line right away, and I thought I was okay because when she sets herself she can pull a bale. I grabbed a hold of the red and white candy stripe and yelled, "Set your heels!" And she did, long enough for me to get dangerously free of my rock. But that's when she made this big symbolic gesture, I guess you might call it. She had the cord tied around her waist, and just then she flashes my pocket knife and yells, "I'm cutting you off, Babe." I guess the Babe thing was like a parody on my own pet names for her. Anyway, right then she cuts the cord, and I get mud-sucked down to my nipples. And that's when she really laid it on me. "When is a man really a man?" she yelled.

"What's this, Trivial Pursuit?" I said, and I wanted to say, Who are you, Alexis Trebec? But I didn't.
"When she's a womb man."

"Yeah, right. Now get me out of here, okay?"

And then she got really didactic, you know, about how I should discover the benefits of--I'm paraphrasing, you know--the emergence of woman and like that. I remember she said something like, didn't I want her to just be a passive reactor or shouldn't there be more interdependence, and how I stifled the urge to say back something meaninglessly arcane about nuclear reactors or linked July fourth celebrations or whatever, just to keep things on a simple-stupid level, you know.

"Did you ever think you'd like to broaden your horizons--skip rope, play jacks, hop-scotch, or more importantly, just not be afraid to care about something?" Some of this comes back to me now in direct quotes, but a lot of it didn't really make sense, like this one: "When you're ready to accept some people for all of what they are, then you'll be released from pretending against part of what you are." I think that was it, anyway. Now isn't that just prolix? The whole chance for her to say a lot of tough stuff seemed kind of, well you know, opportunistic or something, what with me stuck there in a mud hole. But after awhile, she came out of it and held the line for me again and stuff. She's got some set of shoulders just incidentally.

You know what's funny and the main reason I tell this story is that that was the first day me and Trish got back together, I mean really back together. I remember on the way back to the canoe, the rain was quitting, and the dust had just like dissolved to a large extent, and the meadow was green, I mean like verdant, if you'll excuse my borrowing from a bazillion old nature poems. And the sky had this pale green cast. I started a poem:
Serene green light, aura over town, the rain's all down . . .

Even though we weren't in town, I said over town, because it rhymed.

Trish kissed me, on the lips, you know, after I recited just that much.

Maybe because I usually don't make things rhyme.
A man in coveralls comes
out of a cracked stucco.
He is bearded,
hard edged even through the mill-dust haze.
He surveys the dry fog, then thrusts himself
beneath a pickup truck up on cement blocks.
Rust hangs over the man
who looks
not quite polite, but real.
Inside the house is a strong
woman with un-saloned hair
and ruddy cheeks, and
later, she and her man will come
together in a humble bed,
not in purity and sweetness,
not in ritual devotion,
but in passion as raw

NOBILITY
as their knuckles.
She'll look up at him with the quaint promise to remain his through the lives and times of a thousand softly dimpled.
The Cardiff Giant was born with a heart of stone. No woman could ever make him go down. The gypsum quarries southeast of town had been Mark's favorite healing retreat since earliest memory. He'd skinny dipped here as a boy, parked here at the birth of manhood and camped-convalesced here as man and daughter just after the divorce. And now he was just a man.

He'd driven out this way feeling some kind of nebulous urge for a sojourn of drifting spirits. He'd more or less pronounced his x dead, devoid of practical purpose, redeeming value, or carnal instinct. But this had backfired. It was clear by now that Jill, at her mother's urging, had in kind declared her daddy's death. Two weeks past his birthday he still hadn't received a card though he'd sent hers as always. He and his little perpetually-tanned princess had been birthday soul mates. With his own soul dead hers couldn't be more than half alive.

As he passed their neo-colonial tomb of the living dead, he wished he could stop--exhume his dimple-interred heart. While you're wishing, why not wish for a million dollars, his wife would say. Dimples were cheek graves,
voracious swallowers of male egos, tombs sealed over now with indifference. He accelerated, guiping through fourteen, fifteen, sixteen blocks of house-sandwiched wall-board and siding. Sheet-rock and sheet-metal. Solid things. Something solid always somewhere at the core . . . or at the facade . . .

But East End had become a flimsy project of cardboard containers filled with cardboard x-wives with cardboard daughters. And the carpenters were women, and testicles were just vestigial organs. The men had been banished, the men and the souls of the women.

Now there was a gap of country, a zone of thickening white dust where the street became a road and the maples became a memory. Small cottonwoods leaned, root eroded, out of sink holes. Danger--Area Undermined, read a flocked red-letter sign on a fence post. Purple burrs of thistle flowers were a powdered down light lavender. Leaves and tall grasses were motionless under a summer hoarfrost. Nothing trembled. Nothing flew up through the haze over the pale stoned meadow.

After the meadow came the real east end of town. East Lawn Acres was much like East End had been when Mark was a kid. The houses were shacky, sided with brown fake-brick shingle, cracked stucco, rotting unpainted clapboard or combinations thereof. A few basement-onlys remained with their tarpapered stairwells sticking up like periscopes out of unfinished dreams.

A man in coveralls came out of a cracked stucco. He was bearded, tough looking, hard edged even through the mill-dust haze. He surveyed his domain of dry fog, then maneuvered himself down beneath a rusted out
pickup truck. Up on cement blocks, the truck was precariously poised, but the man had that indomitable look now dead in polite society, an omega man, the last of the real. Inside the house would be a staunch hearted woman with stringy hair and a raw, dishpan complexion, and later she and her omega man would come together in a humble bed, not in purity and sweetness, not in ritual devotion, but in passion as raw as the woman's complexion.

Her ... would look up at him with the quaint promise to remain open through the lifetime of a thousand dimpled coquettes.

It had been three years ago now, in the interim between his wife's figurative death and their eventual divorce, that he and his daughter, Jill, had waded across a river-width stretch of South Woods Creek, examining along the way littler forms of life, digesting the emerging marvel of her skimpily clad in halter and cutoffs. The dimples, the marbles. The naturally dark outer contours, the pink inner reaches. The seen and the unseen, the seeable and the unseeable, blooming out of the wet bed of that coursing moment. She stumbled toward him, their arms intertwined, then slowly began to peel apart.

"I tripped on a rock," she said giggling.

"I know," he answered.

She waded ahead. At thirty he would have led her, or carried her on his shoulders, her benign little vulva tight against the nape of his neck. But now at forty, he followed, mystified as she walked out onto the opposite bank. He was her child as they climbed a dusty knoll. At the crest they could see down into the gray lake of an abandoned quarry.

"I'm glad you brought me camping," she said.
He looked into her huge blue eyes.

"Maybe we could do this again."

"Maybe so, I don't know."

His head dropped. They were still dripping. Her toes wriggled in a white paste. Stuff of the Cardiff Giant.

Now he came back to the present and found the primitive dwelling of East Lawn fading in the rear view mirror. Once again he was in mill country. The gyp-rock giant, the quintessential man, had once duped the world. But now, that a rock had ever been a man, or man a rock was a myth long ago exploded. They had all driven (before death) out through Cooperstown, had stopped at Farmer's Museum, on the west shore of Glimmerglass, where the Fort-Dodge-conceived giant lay anachronistically in somber repose. Their own local Fort Museum had a replica, a real donkey dick, but the real thing had been more convincing.

The galvanized roofs of Georgia Pacific were covered with, the stacks spewed billowing clouds of, and the air for miles around was tainted with white rock ground to powder. It was Christmas in July, and the gift was death. This was a country of choked meadows, drained marshes, excavated earth, and sink-ridden neo-sylvan areas of ancient undermining technology. He passed the crumbling brick facade of old Celotex, passed from gravel to dirt, wound back into Shady Oaks where he had taken Jill camping a thousand days ago.

Ooo, neat. Let's get out.

Keep your tube top on. I want to give the battery a little extra charge. He raced the motor. You can get the tent out of the back if you
want to. Doors flew open. Tent poles clattered.

When he got out his sylvan nymph had disappeared. He trudged alone through Shady Oaks towards South Woods Creek, along the way helping dwarfed underbrush slough powder. He kicked at a large free-standing chunk of gyp-rock that appeared everywhere like fish out of water. He reached down, scratched it. Soft. The left nut of the Cardiff giant. If the giant would have an erection into perpetuity, it was really only a pretty soft erection. He wondered if there had ever been any man over forty, anywhere, who'd had more than half-a-hard-on.

Just beyond the first willow he spotted her again. She was throwing rocks side-arm out into the wide creek and with each effort they would sink, like a rock.

Find yourself a flat one, he yelled. What'll you give me for three skips? he asked coming along side.

She smirked up at him. Nothing.

He tried several times, finally achieving a sweet little defiant three or four skipper.

Luck, she said and went off wading.

He followed, like the man chasing rainbows. Over the bank, up the familiar knoll.

And at the crest there was no sylvan nymph . . . no Jill . . . no pot of gold. He worked his way side-long down to the rock lip over gray water. Removed his shoes, his pants, slowly, looking for . . . something. Jill, he yelled finally. Watch my dust! He reared back. Leaped, doubling his legs tightly, arm wrapped. Splashed noisily, sunk down, down, for what seemed an
impossibly long time to hold his breath. Colder and colder, ever darker. His descent slowing. And then magically, without effort, he began to rise; up he came gaining momentum until he broke the surface where he allowed himself to bob for a moment, then released his legs to tread. He gulped tainted air into his buoyant flesh.
Linda Dawson could feel her glutes tighten as she bent over the heavily loaded barbell. After a final deep breath she began the upward pull. The bar came up easily beyond the knees, slid over the quads with some difficulty, then slowed perceptibly at the sticking point. She struggled, unremitting, savoring the intensity of the moment, muscle conquering iron, until, with a final burst, she brought her shoulders back, locking it out. Exhilarated, she quickly released her grip, allowing the bumper plates to crash down on the platform. Leaping over the conquered bar she yelled, "Hey somebody! I did it!"

Nobody heard her; nobody else was dedicated enough to still be here. She'd surpassed her own best-ever deadlift by a full ten pounds. She was ready for the tournament Saturday. Hell, she'd be in the hunt at the Nationals. And someday, she'd set a world record.

After a quick shower, she stood in front of the mirror furiously rubbing the towel against her short blond hair, stopping momentarily to admire the definition of her arm musculature.

After she'd dried off, she decided to stop over to the new campus
student center for a bit. She jogged across the virtually empty ten acre parking lot, the relentless cool spring drizzle tickling her nose. As she reached the other side, still reveling at her own rapid lifting progress, Linda's easy stride carried her insidiously beyond the blacktop where she came quickly back down to earth with alternating splashes and slurps, nearly bogging down totally in the yet unseeded mud before she reached the student center sidewalk with feet of clay and juicy socks to boot.

Now, she attacked her cement canvas like an oil painter long on burnt umber--a glob here, a streak there until she arrived at the front door with empty hoofian brushes. Quickly glanced back at her abstract. Entered the center.

A couple of dull-boys--loud buffoons--had the ping-pong table. She slipped out of her sweat top and approached one of them between points. "Can I challenge the winner?"

The dope looked her up and down. She had on a tank top and her sweat pants, knew she looked showy--sinewy--and was proud of it. "Sure. Why not?" said the loud buffoon turned instantly serious and arrogant.

She gave him a quick little your-ass-is-grass grin and walked away to let the buffoon match continue. She was having a coke over by the pop machine when the front door opened.

In waltzed Mark Randolph, gracefully--exuding self-assurance--with another gold-digging, slinky fox. The honeys were all after him--husband shoppers, as brainless as they were muscleless. Little wonder. He was something. Stood out. Flowed into the room now like fluid hunk. Tall with dark wavy hair combed back at the sides, just long enough to cover the tips
of his ears. But that was the least of it. He was going somewhere, was easily the smartest guy in her sociology class. He was headed for the Peace Corps after graduation, unless one of those gold diggers had her way with him. What a waste it would be if Mark succumbed to one of those sexy little albatrosses. He was like her. She wouldn't like to see him bogged down, obligated to a slinky opportunist, and ultimately to two or three Junior Miss Slinkys. Yuk! It would be obscene. The tedium would destroy him.

Linda moved quickly toward the side door. She didn't want him to see her like this—such a stark contrast to the fox at his side. She went out.

They'd sat next to each other in class for several weeks now and had had some fantastic conversations: bourgeois versus the proletariat, different government ideologies, the world wide waste of human potential. Serious things, worthwhile. Not the usual asinine student fare about beer blasts and balling.

She'd wished they could get together after class, but he'd never asked her, even though she'd been careful to wear long sleeve tops to class and had avoided saying anything to him about her power lifting. She wasn't ashamed of it, just hoped for a closer relationship with Mark and hadn't thought that coming on in diametric opposition to the dollies she'd seen him with would be wise.

The next morning, Mark came into the classroom with his usual springy enthusiasm for another new day. "Hi, Linda," he said as he sat down beside her with a smile that could melt glaciers.

She'd left her raincoat on over her shoulders, shawl-like; she'd worn a short sleeve blouse. "Morning, Mark." She checked under his eyes to see if
he'd stayed out late; they carried no taint. They had both come in a little early and were alone in the room. There seemed to be an unspoken understanding that they enjoyed talking to one another. "Decide yet what your term paper's gonna be about?" she asked.

"You bet. Just about have it written already. Fascism-- Left and Right, I'm calling it. I discuss fascism at both political extremes. You know?"

_He really has such a great mind._ "Would you let me read it?"

"You bet."

People were starting to trickle in already. "Maybe after class, huh?"

"Well, right after class I've got to go to . . . " He hesitated. "I have something that I have to do after class."

_Failed again._ "Well, maybe I can look at it tomorrow morning, if we get here early enough."

"Sure, you bet."

And now the professor walked into the classroom.

After the lecture, Mark left the room like a shot. Linda had an hour to kill before her next class. Oh, well. _Head over to the student center for a bit, I guess._

As she approached the center, she noticed Mark's car was still there. He wasn't about to leave either. He'd backed into a space in front of the student center, and his rear tires had gone beyond the blacktop. He'd already dug himself in, and nobody seemed anxious to stop and wade behind those mud slinging tires to assist. Mark got out, spotting her instantly.

"Would you say I've got a problem?" he yelled, looking sheepish.
"Looks like," she said joining him beside the car.

"Could you do me a favor and maybe get behind the wheel while I push?"

Sure, no problem." She hopped in while Mark positioned himself behind the rear bumper. Gave her the gun.

Mark was giving it a heroic effort while she tried to get the car rocking in sync with his bursts of exertion, but they got nowhere. She got out.

"Maybe you should get up here, Mark. I'm sure you can drive better than I can. I'll push." And then she added, sounding demure, "I'm pretty strong."

"No, you'll get yourself all dirty, Linda."

He wasn't lying there. He was a mess. But she insisted. "It's all right, really. I don't mind. Let's give it a try."

They switched roles. The car came right out. Mark got out looking astonished. "That's incredible! How did you do that?"

There would never be a better time to level. "I told you I'm pretty strong. I meant it. I've been into power lifting for three years now and I'm good. In fact I might even win the Nationals this year. Should win the Tri-State Open this weekend for sure."

"No kidding! I'm impressed. Where's it at? Could I maybe come watch?"

"Really? You mean you'd really want to?"

"You bet!" He grinned at her. "You know something? We look like we just got done mud wrestling each other."
Might be fun at that.

Mark really did come to the Tri-State Open and Linda really won her division, and Mark really finally asked her out the next night—for pizza.

They sat in a booth in the back corner where the light was subdued and romantic, and after a few minutes of Mark's recapitulating her victory, Linda changed the subject. "I'm surprised to find myself out with you like this, you know that?"

"Why's that?"

"Well, because of the lookers I've seen you out with."

"What? Lookers? Oh, you must mean the Bettendorf sisters. They're, uh, dancers. Look, I might as well tell you. I don't know why I haven't before, except I wasn't sure how you'd react. I'm studying ballet, and I'm really serious about it. I love it. The Bettendorf sisters belong to the same troupe, and I've been with them a few times after rehearsal, but not like on a date or anything. I was headed for rehearsal yesterday after class when I got stuck in the mud. I knew right away after you were able to push my car out, and after you told me about your lifting, that you were for real—world class. I'm pretty strong myself you know—do a lot of lifts, dancing—and I couldn't get that car to come out. Anyway, we're performing two weeks from tonight at the Fine Arts Auditorium." He bowed his head slightly; his eyes peeked up at her. "Maybe you could come?"

"Wild horses couldn't keep me away." What a couple of dumbbells we've been. "Why haven't you told me about your dancing?"

"Well . . . you know."

"Uh-huh, I think I do."
A LATE SHARED VISION

Because the real Melinda no longer wants
any part of parking along mill roads,
he follows her apparition over a rocky edge,
down into a liquid-ice-filled quarry,
then realizes the cliff behind
is too steep to climb,
he will have to swim across,
but the water is cold and he is tiring.
An image of Melinda's old
cellulitic swimming instructor,
flashes before him as he strokes
toward a distant low embankment.
Melinda runs ahead on top of the water,
glances back at him, a taunting Venus.
Blood thickening, arms and legs slowing,
he RAM scans
all the women he's ever seen in hard hats
--working highway construction, building bridges.

--Some have thick figures and weathered complexions,

some have a gaunt intensity,

some seem to have eyes on fire

with a vision he has always been indifferent to.

He strokes on, slowing through icy waters.

Melinda is still there, but she is not there.

She has never really been there

because he has never really been there for her.

She is simply an ideal.

He has recreated her as an ethereal thing.

And now he needs, has needed all along,

someone intensely corporeal.

Melinda could have been real,

but he has never let her.

The muse that only resembles Melinda

drifts ahead over the cold water

as though she does not care to hear any more,

and then, too late, she is gone.
THE COMMITMENT

Ira Dunham bent over one of his rabbit pens to check the food supply. There should be enough for today, he thought. He stood up again, but his shoulders remained slightly bent. He couldn't stand as straight as he used to, but he was still a handsome devil, with his full head of bushy white hair.

As Ira walked back to the barn to get the smoker—he wanted to check the hives—he crossed over the white spackled, winding backhouse sidewalk through the clutter of clucking chickens. He stopped abruptly.

A plump rooster lay motionless in the gravel. A bright spot of red glared against its white breast. "Damn! Those rotten kids again."

Ira reached down and grabbed the rooster's head. He was about to twirl the head free from the body when, suddenly, the pigeons on the barn roof burst into the air. He dropped the rooster and ran to the back of the yard where he spotted two young boys with BB guns running out from behind the barn. They fled down the alley and got away, but not without Ira giving them a good chase.

Afterward, Ira, still puffing heavily, sat down on the wooden folding chair under one of the walnut trees in the side yard. He removed his pipe
from his breast pocket, and, without bothering to light it, began chewing on
the stem. He looked out over his unpainted picket fence at the surrounding
ranch style homes.

The yards were manicured and sterile looking. He and Mabel had
bought this place quite a few years ago, before Ira had retired from
teaching, and before the neighborhood had changed. Now, the day didn't go
by that somebody didn't complain to Ira about something—the rabbit pens
when they'd get to stinking, or the outhouse; there was an ordinance against
outhouses. Or they'd claim one of their kids had been stung by Ira's bees.

Lately, several neighbors had been trying to get him to move out to
Hillcrest Manor, pretending they were concerned about him. A defenseless
old man, they'd argue, shouldn't be living in this neighborhood alone—with all
the break-ins and everything. "Bullshit," said Ira to himself. They just
wanted to get him out so they could make his place look like all the rest.

The crime was real though. Most of the neighborhood's residents had
installed those fancy wrought iron gates on their doors, and bars on the
windows. Again, it made every place look just like the next.

Now, Ira heard "anybody home?" from over by the house, and the sound
of his front door spring being stretched out. He turned to look. That pushy
damn Sam McDonald again. "Over here," yelled Ira as he placed his pipe
back in his breast pocket.

The wooden screen door slammed shut as Sam Mcdonald released it and
stepped off the doorstep. "Afternoon," he said as he came toward Ira.
"Done anything yet, I mean about getting in out at Hillcrest?"

"Hell no, I haven't. And I don't intend to either. Not for awhile,
anyway. That place is for peeps. Nothing wrong with me. Why should I go out there? I got my own place here."

Dressed in blue putter pants and shirt, a pair of two-tone sneakers and a straw hat, Sam McDonald looked like a real dude. "Now Ira. Only a few people out there are senile or anything like that. Most of them are just normal older people who realize they're better off out there. You know how many break-ins and things go on. We're only thinking of your own good when some of us, like Amy VanDork and her husband and the Smiths and myself try to make you see the light."

Ira reached down and scooped up several bulbous green jacketed walnuts and began pitching them toward the wooden bucket half hidden in the high grass. "For my own good, huh? Get the hell off my own place for my own good? Is that what you're saying?"

Sam McDonald stared crossly down at Ira. "That might be just exactly what I'm saying. There's been talk about forcing you out, and don't think we can't do it, either. Don't think this is an idle threat. You don't belong here . . ."

"No. I think it's all of you that don't belong. I was here first. Remember?"

Sam McDonald kicked a walnut through the grass. "We could easily have you put out there, you know. Is that what you want? You're in violation of I don't know how many laws here, the way you live. And, frankly, I seriously question your mental competence. Smith's kids have been telling stories lately about how you chase them down the alley with a whip."

Ira grinned. "A whip, huh? Not a bad idea for those damned hoody
kids."

"Well, that tears it," said Sam McDonald. "If you won't be sensible, we'll just have you declared mentally incompetent, and have you committed out there at Hillcrest, that's all."

"Get lost, will you."

"You'll find out," said Sam McDonald as he walked away.

Ira decided to forego checking the hives. He went in the house, and, for a few minutes, paced back and forth across the floor register between the kitchen and the front room.

He stopped in front of the hutch and stared at the portrait of Mabel. She still gave him strength. Her arms proudly graced their only baby son -- dead only weeks after the portrait was taken--killed by the water heater explosion and fire that had destroyed their first home.

A knock came at the door. "Yeah, come on in," yelled Ira.

The door swung open. Skinny Frank Smith stood in the doorway, huffing and puffing like a reindeer in heat--his alcoholic nose lit up like Rudolf. He shook one finger violently at Ira. "If I ever catch you chasing my boys down the alley, I'll . . ."

Ira interrupted. "If I ever catch your kids shooting BBs at my chickens again, I'll stick their barrels in their skinny little behinds. Now, get the hell out of my doorway and have your delirium tremens somewhere else."

"You've had it, old man," vowed Frank Smith as he did a nervous pivot and pranced away from Ira's door.

Ira continued pacing the floor. He counted the windows of the tiny single story wood frame. Two in the front room, one in the kitchen, one in
the bedroom. And the door. He'd call and get an estimate. There should be enough in the bank. If the neighbors followed through on their promise, he'd have no need for money anyway--where he'd be going.

Later that same week, Ira walked around the house puffing his pipe, checking on the workers at his windows. He passed a shirtless young man on a ladder. "Make sure these bars are on tight," yelled Ira jokingly. "I don't want to catch a cold."

Now, Ira noticed a hole in the rotting boards covering the old cistern. He pointed his pipe at the boards and yelled again. "Be careful you don't fall in here."

"Oh, gee, thanks, Mack. I already stuck my leg in that sucker earlier."

Ira grinned sardonically. "Well, be careful, will you? Those rotten boards are hard to replace."

By late afternoon, the workers had gone and Ira was seated under the walnut trees again, examining the house's austere new appearance in the contrasty late sunlight, when he noticed the motley assembly of determined looking neighbors marching up the sidewalk from down the block, across the street. The group approached him now in a straight line, crossing the street at a diagonal.

Sam McDonald was the general with his lieutenants, Frank Smith and dowdy Amy VanDork and others at his side. They pulled up their high horses, and, without bothering to dismount, Sam McDonald began voicing the decree. "We'll get right to the point. We want you out of the neighborhood, so you're out, and that's it. I don't know who you think you're trying to fool with those security bars you've installed."
Ira replied sarcastically, "I thought you were worried about me, Sam."

"We're a hell of a lot more worried about getting this whole goddamned eyesore mess of a property you live on cleaned up, and you know it too. Making one small, pretentious little last minute improvement won't stave this thing off. We've fought with you and fought with you, and we've decided you're getting the hell out, and that's it."

Ira rolled his eyes and pretended disconcern. He puckered his lips and whistled softly.

"You better be listening, old man. We've got signatures from everybody who's anybody in this neighborhood, and we're taking it before a judge tomorrow. Make it easy on yourself, and start packing. We'll be out to see you tomorrow night." The troop turned about face and rode away.

Ira puttered in the yard for the rest of the afternoon. He chewed a stringy stalk of sour rhubarb, and he breathed deeply of aromatic garden loam, and, when it was almost dark, he went into the house and sat at the table in the shadowy kitchen gazing out through the barred back window at the barn until it was just a silhouette in the moonlight.

The next day, Ira stayed inside, going through pictures he hadn't looked at for years and unfolding Mabel's crocheted tablecloths and doilies.

When it was evening, Ira opened the door to the hutch and removed the framed photo of Mabel. He slipped the photo out of the frame and inserted it inside his shirt. And now, Ira sat down on the sofa to wait.

After a few minutes, the knock came at the front door. Ira didn't get up. He answered in a calm but audible tone. "Just come in."

The door opened. There was Sam McDonald and Frank Smith and Amy
VanDork, but they had a new leader—an unrecognized man in a necktie stepped forward with some papers in one hand.

"Please, all of you, just come in and sit down," said Ira. "I won't cause any fuss. Maybe you could explain to me a little about Hillcrest. I mean, help me with the adjustment."

The sofa, the old rocker, and chairs brought in from the kitchen were all occupied, and, for a few minutes, Ira calmly discussed with the congregation what was proposed for him.

"The consensus," said the businesslike, necktied spokesman, "is that you're no longer responsible."

"I understand," said Ira calmly as his eyes studied the torn linoleum.

Ira's composure seemed to set everyone at ease. Frank Smith's glowing beak had faded slightly. And Sam McDonald had gone back to his old line. "You know, Ira, I'm really happy to see you take this in stride. After all, it's for your own good, and I'm sure everybody here wants what's best for you."

Now Ira stood up slowly, his lowered eyes and bent shoulders exaggeratedly demonstrating resignation. "Well, I'll be with you in a minute. Got to make a trip out back." And then, to reassure the throng of questioning eyes, "The toilet's out back, you know."

"How positively disgusting," said Amy VanDork candidly.

Appearing humbled, crushed and broken, Ira walked unopposed into the kitchen and out the back door. He quietly closed the iron gate and inserted and latched the padlock. Then, moving quickly, he walked around the bedroom side of the small house to the front door. He slammed the gate and
locked it.

The quiet gathering inside suddenly burst into frenzied realization. Amy VanDork pressed her fat face against the barred front window and shouted like a warehouse foreman. "You goddamned crazy old man! What the hell do you think you're pulling?"

Now, Ira jogged back to the barn, removed the barn lanterns from their hooks, and returned to splash kerosene against the weathered, flaking side boards of the old house. He reached into his breast pocket for a book of matches, and lit the wick on one of the lanterns. And then moved back and threw the lantern against the siding. It exploded, and the flames quickly crawled up the siding and ignited the rotting eaves. From beyond the flames came screaming and crying and swearing. And in the tall grass of the side yard an old man sat down and mumbled to himself. "What the hell, I'm not responsible."