Spring 1985

*from Journeymen*

Neil McMahon

---

**Let us know how access to this document benefits you.**

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank](https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank)

Part of the Creative Writing Commons

**Recommended Citation**


Available at: [https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss24/5](https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss24/5)

---

This Prose is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in CutBank by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.
The road to Charlie's place was twisted and hard to find. I drove the deep canyons and rutted trails of memory, through a dark silent forest of blackened limbs and scorched stumps from a fire of years before. I could not see the moon, but I knew it was on the wax. We had crossed paths in the Oregon desert the previous night. Then, as now, it had been the only other thing moving.

No one had answered my knock at Beth's, though her car was in the drive and a light on in the living room. I had walked to the window and stared at a tableau that might have been arranged for me: her wine mug sitting on the coffee table, and beside it, an old-fashioned glass amber with the leavings of whiskey and ice. I was dimly aware that the drawings on the walls had migrated, disappeared, been renewed, but my gaze stayed on the empty place where the trophy I had brought home from the prison once rested on its high shelf, overseeing the life of the house. In the mountains, the night wind on my face carried the news of winter.

Charlie's gate was locked. I could see the silhouette of the house a hundred yards farther, sheltered by a belt of larch. Lights warmed the lower-story windows and smoke traced curls against the blue-black sky. Up this high, the Milky Way glittered like a spray of phosphorescent buckshot. I got out and waited for something to tell me what to do. Nothing did. I climbed the fence and walked on up the rise. I knew that Charlie would hear my tread on the hollow porch, that those steps were the last place I could turn back. I started up them, some part of me piloting, another observing almost without curiosity.

Beth opened the door. She was wearing a raglan wool sweater I had given her. At the back of the room, Charlie stood facing us with narrowed eyes. His hand hovered near the desk drawer where he kept his Smith & Wesson .357. I saw recognition come to him. His hand did not immediately move. I looked back to Beth. Her eyes were cool, but color had risen in her cheeks.

She stepped aside and I went in. The click of the door behind me closed out the world of common sense. Charlie's hand relaxed, but he kept watching me. The place looked softer than I remembered, and I became aware of small changes: a throw rug, a new couch, hanging plants and drawings on the walls. I recognized some of the drawings and plants.

Finally he said, "You drinking these days?" I nodded. He left the room. From the kitchen I heard the clink of ice in a glass. Beth moved too casually to the
stereo and thumbed through the records. When Charlie gave me the drink, we took care to keep our hands from touching. I tasted my first whiskey in more than half a year.

"I got the sweat all fired up," he said. "Why don't you come with us."

Beth stayed bent over the records, but her hands stopped moving. The sweat was the smallest and hottest place I had ever been inside. Charlie's face was grim.

"Yes," I said.

"You better have another shot. You're way behind."

As he walked again to the kitchen, I heard the hollow electric pop of the needle hitting vinyl. Many months passed before I awoke in the night to that music playing in my mind, and recognized it as a tune from one of her old Grateful Dead albums: "He's Gone."

***

From the embers of a fire, with a pair of tongs he had shaped and welded himself, he pulled smoking rocks and knelt to place them inside the tiny door of the hut, a dome made of bent saplings covered with hides. It was waist-high and perhaps six feet across at the base. The pit of heated rocks in the center took up all but a narrow ring of ground. They scorched your shins and knees as you sat cross-legged, and the arch of the saplings forced your face over them.

"Ought to do it," Charlie said, standing. He hung the tongs on a branch and set a bucket of water with a ladle in it next to the hut door. I could see the moon now, rising over the mountaintops to the southeast, dimming the stars. I had drunk three stiff shots, and I could feel the liquor coursing through my blood, warming me and blurring edges. I remembered that I had not slept in forty hours. Beth was standing a little apart, by the fire. I had not yet heard her speak. For many seconds the three of us stood there not quite looking at each other. Then she shrugged violently, throwing something annoying off her shoulders. She kicked off her mocassins and without pausing pulled the sweater over her head. Charlie started to unbutton his shirt. Slowly, I crouched to unlace my boots.

"We'll go for ten," he said. I looked up to see Beth, wearing only knee-length socks, folding her clothes. Her skin was the color of liquid bronze, and points of firelight played in the sweep of hair that hid her face. It was like being hit very hard in the stomach.

Charlie held back the flap while first she, then I, went in. Somehow she moved, as always, with grace and dignity. I could feel the sharp bite of pebbles beneath my knees as I crawled naked past his feet.

***

The dried laurel leaves he had thrown on the rocks smoldered with a dim
glow and filled the tiny space with the harsh clean scent of bay. Sweat shone
on the thick muscles of his chest and arms as he reached for the ladle. I closed
my eyes, heard the clink on the bucket’s lip, the liquid trilling of dripping water
rising rapidly in pitch. I dug the heels of my hands into the ground. An
unyielding strut ran the length of my spine as if it were the talon of some giant
leathery bird winging me through the night sky to its lair.

Steam exploded from the rocks like a cry of rage, like needle claws tearing
at my skin, digging deeper and fiercer in a great billowing swell. I was hugging
my chest, face buried in the crook of my elbow, eyes squeezed so tight I saw
bright yellow spots dancing into infinity, but it was futile. The claws raked my
eyelids, trying to get inside, swarming around my face until I thought I would
shriek.

At last it evened out, with the violently heightened temperature hovering
like a spirit of malice. I opened my blurred eyes to a faint thrashing sound.
Charlie was whipping himself rhythmically across the chest with a laurel frond.
He bent forward over the stones and Beth flicked another frond up and down
his back with the practiced air of ritual. The curve of the hut forced me to
hunch over the stones as if they held my future. I flicked my own laurel across
my chest several times, feeling its sharp sting upon my swollen skin. Charlie
straightened. His face gave nothing away. Beth let the branch come to rest
across her thighs as if it were a fringed garment. Her lowered gaze never left
the fire. Her knee brushed mine, then moved away.

“Six,” he said.

The howling steam blistered the skin on my shins and arms. I tried to back
through the strut. I forced open my eyes but the blinding mist closed them
instantly. I realized I was groping for something I could not see, and pulled
my arms back around my chest. The lashing sounds came again to my ears,
my lungs were filled with the choking scent of bay.

“Seven,” Charlie said, and this time I was clawing my way out through the
flap while the steam tried viciously to strip me of skin.

Then I was out, rolling on cool earth in cool air. I rolled and rolled and came
to my feet without stopping. My eyes were teared, and as I stared down into
the night, I saw a streak of light from a car, winding along the road in the can­
yon far below. I wanted that road to be a river of icy black water. I would plunge
into it facing upstream, holding rocks to stay myself against the swift current,
and rest there until my blood was as thin and cold as it. Then I would let go,
and sail with that river to the end of its journey in a forgotten dark sea, bobb­
ing above and beneath the surface like a sodden log. From the hut I heard
a muffled, “Eight,” then the hiss of steam. I hurried to the pile of my clothes.

I was lacing my boots when the flap moved. She stood, put hands on her
hips, skin gleaming, hair wild. Moonlight shone through the miracle of the dark absence between her thighs.

"Come with me," I said. I stood too. "I don't care about what happened. I'll take you anywhere."

She began to walk, hands at her sides now, not high at her waist the way she had once come to me, and she did not stop until she was so close I could see the glint of her teeth, pressed against her lower lip.

"Ten," said the iron voice in the hut, and was swallowed in the rush of scalding vapor.

"You treated me like I didn't exist!" she screamed, and then her hand lashed across my cheek. I felt the ripping of her nails. She jumped back, crouched, panting, fists clenched at her sides. I turned and walked the only direction I could, away.

At the gate I stopped and looked back. The two of them stood side by side, silhouetted by the moon, watching me. Behind them two dead larches rose like a pair of immense spiked horns, thrusting up out of the dark earth.

White Midas

If you didn't look too close, the neighborhood seemed normal, working-class, although you might wonder why so many women in short skirts or hot pants were standing alone at the street corners. If you did look close, you would begin to see the peeling paint and sagging steps of the old Victorian houses, divided now into cheap apartments; the dust-caked, broken windows in the garages; the scraggly lawns, the garbage in the alleys, the curtains that twitched when a strange vehicle pulled over to the curb. A woman in a blond wig and red leather microskirt started toward me, purse and hips swinging almost comically. I shook my head. She gave me the finger and stalked back to her post. It was three o'clock in the afternoon.

Tony's gold Trans-Am waited in the driveway, gorgeous with racing stripes, louvers, mag wheels that could have come from the chariots in Ben-Hur. The entire inside of the car, except for the instrument panel, was done in eggshell white angel hair. Both interior and exterior of the vehicle were immaculate. His Mexican boys kept it that way.

Tony ran an insulation business and came around the job sites a lot, checking up on the wetbacks he hired through a body broker named Garcia. He liked to tell anyone who would listen that he made good money because he paid his labor next to nothing. Garcia took half of that, and threatened to have
the men deported if they complained. I doubted that either Tony or Garcia had ever touched a piece of insulation.

Tony also liked to talk about his real business, dealing dope. In fact, he had something of a big mouth, which may have been why he had gotten a good part of it kicked down his throat during the several months he spent in Santa Rita. The story went that he had drawn three-to-five for possession, but after the amateur dentistry, had decided to tell the authorities some things he had not told them before, and an early release was arranged. The story went too that some of the gigs he set up for the younger Mexican kids didn't have anything to do with fiberglass. You would have thought he would be more careful.

But he still talked, and if he took a liking to you, he gave you a card with his address in gold script. I had been by twice before, when I decided I needed chemical help in getting cheered up.

If the car was here, he was here. He never walked anywhere.

He was waiting at the top of the stairs. "What say, dude," he said, in the deep, hearty voice he cultivated, and offered me a bone-crushing shake from his heavily ringed hand. His hair was cut into a helmet-shaped mass of gold ringlets, with bangs and long sides that framed his face. It made him look something like an Afghan hound. Someone had once told me that he had huge, elongated ears, almost like a donkey's, and was careful to keep them hidden. His shirt, navy blue silk with a long pointed collar, was open almost to his navel. A gold medallion on a gold chain rested against his tanned, hairless chest. Belted beige slacks and loafers completed the outfit. He wore immense tinted glasses that hid his eyes. His smile exposed too many teeth, and clearly showed his bridgework. That was gold too.

"Hey, you got to check out my new system," he said. As I stepped through the door into his domain, through a pulsing wave of music with a beat I could feel in my back teeth, I caught a glimpse of a slim brown body in crimson bikini underpants closing the door to the bedroom. Sweet thick incense filled the air like something you could touch. A cut-glass decanter of a syrupy, gold-colored liqueur waited on a table, beside a single glass.

He dead-bolted the door behind me and hurried to a TV set the size of a Volkswagen, surveying it with something that was less pride than lust in his manner.

A woman who looked like an actress said to a talk-show host, "So then this voice from the bunk below says, Yes, but how's she going to get back?" Everyone laughed loudly except the fat man in the farthest seat. He smiled, but his eyes were mean. He cleared his throat and leaned toward the host. Tony's fingers snaked to a VCR and caressed buttons.

"Watch this," he said. The TV clicked, whirred, went out of focus. Abruptly, I was looking at a black-haired woman who appeared to be choking violently on something I could not quite see. After perhaps five energetic seconds,
she flicked her gaze at someone offscreen, nodded, and disengaged herself from
the object of her struggles. It turned out to be a penis, a pretty fair-sized one.
There was no visible man attached to it. "Hi," she breathed, sultry eyes fixed
on the audience. "I'm a tigress." The organ throbbed and waved in a void,
hopelessly trying to recall her attention.

"I'm in kind of a hurry, Tony," I said, although I wasn't.
"Yeah, sure," he said. He backed away from the screen, glanced thoughtfully
at the bedroom, and opened the door to his office.
"I know another tigress," said the TV as I followed him in.
"Make you a deal on a quarter," he said, all business now. "Peruvian flake,
hardly been stepped on. Knock the back of your eyeballs off. Eight bills."
"Tony," I said.
"I know, I know it sounds high, but I am not shitting you about the quality
of this stuff. Here, let's talk to Johnny." He took the tube he called a Johnny
snowflake and a little gold snuffbox from a drawer. His fingers moved faster
and faster, shaking white powder out of a ziplock bag, chopping it with a razor,
sifting it back and forth, all with the utter concentration of a neurosurgeon.
His words tumbled out faster too, as if trying to keep up with his hands.

"... know you guys all think I'm getting fat, but I don't make shit on these
little deals, Kevin, and that's the no-bullshit truth, oh, once in a while I get
enough ahead to pick up a toy like that VCR, but Jesus, look at the piece of
shit car I'm driving, I got my eye on a real rig, a gold ElDee, already got it
picked out, and one of these days I'm going to be driving a fucking Bentley, man,
you bet your ass. There's so much beautiful shit out there I got to have, and
the jack comes in so slow, it drives me fucking crazy, it's torture. There's just
never enough." He laughed, an aggrieved sound. "Tell you something funny.
The other night I was eating at Rigetti's, I was all strung up, I knocked over
the sugar, and this white flash shot across the table just like a huge line. I stared
at it and thought, What if it was? What if I could just touch a sack of sugar
or flour and turn it into sweet, uncut cocaine?"

Hands and voice paused, perhaps in shock at the weight of the concept. I
said, "I just want a gram."

A second passed before his smile widened. He straightened up, fingers edg­
ing the lid back onto the snuffbox. "You know, Kevin, it's hardly worth my
time dealing that kind of shit. I mean, a guy's got to make a living." Wet smacking
sounds from the TV punctuated low spots in the music. I was suddenly very
tired, sorry I had come.

"Okay," I said, "forget it." I turned to leave.

"Hey, take it easy. I didn't say I wouldn't. I'm thinking of you, is all. I can
give you a quarter for eight, but I got to have one-forty for a gram, all there
is to it. Seven times one-forty, that's, lets see—" He reached for a calculator
on his desk. I waited while he punched buttons again.
“That’s nine hundred and eighty bucks. See what I mean? It doesn’t make sense. I mean, you go to the grocery store, do you buy one beer at a time? No, you buy a six-pack, because you know you’re going to drink it all sooner or later.”

His fingers had not stopped moving on the box lid. At last they made their decision and swept it off. “Come on,” he said magnanimously. “Try a pop. This stuff is un-fucking-believable. It’s like getting your rocks off.”

From the room behind me, I heard the TV say, “Tell the senorita I’d like to suck her pussy.” Tony was looking at me, eyes hidden behind the tinted glasses, teeth and hair and fingers glittering gold.

“Never mind,” I said. “I’ll take your word for it.” I reached for my wallet.

“The quarter?” he said hopefully.

“Just a gram. And a handful of Beauties if you’ve got them.”

His shrug was a mixture of pity and contempt. “That’ll be another ten.” He sat and took more paraphernalia out of a drawer. I laid seven twenties and a ten on the desk, and while he measured and weighed and counted, I glanced around the room. It seemed to be filled with cordless telephones, tape recorders, answering machines, cassette players. All of them were shiny, had clean lines, made satisfying sounds: clicks, locks, chirps, hums, you were in tune with the world. The TV was quiet now. Presumably everybody’s mouth was full.

Tony tossed a little paper packet and a baggie of shiny black capsules on the desk. He riffled through the bills and tucked them in a drawer. Then he leaned back and eyed me.

“You know what your problem is, Kevin? You don’t have any style. Jesus, it’s dumb enough you do the kind of work you do. Killer shit. But look at the way you dress, fucking jeans and baggy shirt. Why don’t you get yourself some threads, get a decent haircut, a good-looking set of wheels. Next thing you know, people are paying attention to you. They respect you. The broads are all over you. Who knows? Maybe somebody offers you a decent job. Maybe somebody—” he leaned forward—“like me.”

I took the packet and baggie off the desk and put them in my shirt pocket.

“You picking up what I’m laying down, Kevin? Maybe I need somebody to help me out once in a while. Big dude like you might be good to have around.”

I buttoned the pocket. “Thanks, Tony,” I said, “but I’ve never had the inclination to dress like a pimp. Or to work for one.”

His face froze. I turned and walked out.

“You cocksucker,” he hissed. “I can have you busted up good. I can have you greased.”

“The senorita says you have a big one,” said the TV. “She says it is the biggest one—”

“Get the fuck out of here!” he yelled. “You see me coming on the job, you better run, cunt!” I knew he would be on his feet, leaned over the desk. I knew
he would have a gun. But I knew too that the memory of Santa Rita was fresh. Peripherally, I saw the bedroom door move as I turned the deadbolt: a single dark, almond-shaped eye, a flash of red in the shadows. This time I was sure. It was a boy.

I walked down the stairs and out to my truck, imagining that almond-shaped eyes watched me from all the windows on the street. The whore on the corner glanced at me scornfully. More than twelve hours had passed since I'd had a drink. It was time.

**Icarus Tremens**

I jerked awake: A child was crying. Sarah was already hurrying across the room, calling, “I'm here, sweetie.” When she threw open the door, the little girl was standing outside, one arm clutching a blanket to her chest, the other fist rubbing her eyes. She stared at me. I slumped back onto the pillow. The sudden jolt seemed to have torn something loose in my side. It felt like a small animal with sharp teeth was trying to eat its way out. Sarah pulled her daughter close, cooing and soothing. I could almost feel the warmth of skin on skin; it made me shiver. Through the windows, I sensed the first pre-dawn lightening of the sky. The pain behind my eyes was in rhythm with my pulse. My nostrils were caked almost shut, my throat aching dry and sore. I could not have slept more than two hours.

Sarah led Allison back to bed. She settled between us, staring down, her child's face tired and stubborn. The blanket was wadded tightly against her cheek, as if she were shielding herself from me. But then she looked at me owlishly.

“I know you,” she said.

“I know you too.” I tried to sound playful, but the words came out a croak.

“How come you've been gone so long?”

“I've been working.”

“Mommy works, and she stays here.” A faintly smug look came into Sarah's eyes.

I said only, “This is different.”

Allison's mouth moved to form another question, but Sarah reached out quickly to smooth back her hair. “Why don't you go downstairs and get yourself some cereal, babe? I'll be down in a minute.” The child turned to stare at me again, this time with outright accusation.
“Give Kevin a kiss,” Sarah commanded. Reluctantly, she pushed her closed lips against the side of my face. I hugged her with one arm, and for that instant, the contact of the warm little body seemed to underline every chance I had ever missed. I patted her shoulder awkwardly and lay back.

“Allie,” Sarah said. Slowly, she climbed out of bed. She walked across the floor without looking back, blanket trailing the floor, and left the door open behind her.

“You should have seen yourself last night,” Sarah said.

As if the words burst open a gate, a flood of images swept through my mind. A skinny woman with bad teeth and big breasts, loose beneath a tank top, next to me at the bar. Tables slick with beer, covered with empty bottles and cigarette ashes. Rock music booming from refrigerator-sized speakers, rattling the glasses in the rack. Housecats in chrome and leather, pretending to be bikers. A butterfly tattooed halfway down her right breast; thick, tantalizing nipples. Her knowing gaze sliding out from under mine as she smiled and raised the drink I bought her. A clone with a baseball cap and mustache, rising suddenly from a table, putting his arm around her and staring at me, trying to look menacing. Her pulling away from him in irritation.

Sarah was sitting up straight, looking at me, her lips compressed. The pounding in my head was hard and steady. I squeezed my eyes shut. That bar was in Sacramento. Sarah had pulled the Jack Daniel's bottle from my hand when she found me on her porch in the Sierra foothills, nearly sixty miles away. How I made the drive, I had no idea.

Her fingers touched my chest. I opened my eyes. “Sorry,” she said quietly. “It's too early in the morning to be getting on your case. But you scared the absolute hell out of me. I didn’t even know who you were at first.”

From the kitchen came a faint, timid, “Mommy?”

“You stay here and sleep some more,” Sarah said firmly. “I'll get her on the bus and come back.” I watched her walk to her closet and slip on a robe the deep, rich color of wine.

“Kevin,” she said. Her voice sounded far away, coming to me through a filter of exhaustion and faulty connections, but I could hear the strain in it. “Are you going to stay this time?”

_Casually shift weight and separate feet. Line up two shots with my elbow, first to the solar plexus, second to the bridge of the nose. Where you from? over my shoulder._

_Eyes hot under the cap brim: What's it to you?_ or

Just wondering. You look like this cock sucker I used to see in the City. _Watch the blood drop from his face, the girl step back in alarm._ You ever hang around the City?
Sarah was waiting in the doorway, holding the jamb with one hand. I nodded. "I quit," I said, hearing the thickness in my own voice. Her shape blurred as I let my eyes close again.

***

It might have been seconds or hours later that I opened my eyes again. The light in the room was an indeterminate gray. In spite of my exhaustion, or because of it, I understood that there would be no more sleep for me. I rolled to the edge of the bed, again felt the clutch in my ribs.

Feet sticking to the sultry street. Crowd of Mexican kids hooting in front of a liquor store. Rumble of exhaust, shriek of tires, blare of tuneless music. Blurred, cunning faces beneath the harsh argon lights. A fat woman with a rose between her tits, leering from a doorway. Turn back to the liquor store. Hey, mon, why you don gimme a dollar. Unreal.

I pulled on jeans and shirt, went into the bathroom, rinsed my face, scrubbed away the trickle of blood beneath my nose. My teeth hurt when I brushed them. I walked quietly downstairs. As I crossed the living room, I spotted the Daniel's bottle on the table. Less than an inch remained. I uncapped it and sniffed. The pungent oak smell twisted my insides.

"Come on, Allie, you're going to make us both late," I heard Sarah say in the kitchen. Her voice was full of tried patience. Allie whined something in reply. I sipped furtively. The whiskey hurt my teeth too, and I had trouble keeping it down, but in a few seconds the burning gentled to a glow. I inhaled and stretched my shoulders.

Outside, a horn honked. "Christ," Sarah hissed. I quickly tipped the bottle, draining it, and dropped it into a wastebasket. The liquor rose in my brain like a soft explosion. When I walked into the kitchen, they both looked at me in surprise. Sarah was pulling coatsleeves around Allie's arms. Allie was not helping.

"Couldn't sleep," I said. I went past them to the coffeepot on the stove, wishing I had saved some of the whiskey. Straight coffee was going to be rough, and I could stand neither sugar nor milk.

Sarah gave the coat lapels a final tug and said brightly. "Come on, I'll race you to the door." It was more like a wrestling match. I watched, wishing I could do something to help—wishing I felt easier around children. They were like a foreign life form to me. Maybe it would be different if the child were my own.
Maybe it was just one more thing I would get used to.

A small, hastily built fire was struggling in the living room stove. The house was not cold; the stove seemed out of place, unnecessary. I unhooked the grate and rearranged the embers. By the time Sarah came back in, flames were beginning to leap and crackle. I stood close, feeling the backs of my jeans get hot. She dropped into a chair, looking worn.

She was a nurse, had put herself through school and raised Allie alone after the father abandoned her, while she was still pregnant. More than once in those days, dinner for the two of them had come from the dumpsters behind Safeway. She was smart, and tough, and warm, and practical, and nurturing—all the things that I was not.

I held up my cup.

"God, please," she said. In the kitchen, I mixed cream with the coffee, the way I knew she liked it. When I gave it to her, she smiled thanks. Her fingers brushed mine.

"The morning battle," Sarah said. "After I get her off, I have just about enough time to eat a piece of toast and get dressed. It's not usually this bad, though. She's not used to having a man around." The top of her robe fell open as she leaned forward to set the cup on the floor.

"Neither am I," she said.

I swallowed against the hollow burning that touched the back of my throat, and looked over to the windows. The day had begun.

"I thought I told you to stay in bed," she said, toying with her belt.

"I thought you had to go to work."

"I can be late. I'll call in. The super owes me a couple."

She spoke dreamily, gazing into the fire. Then her fingers slid down the insides of the robe, laying it open. She stretched out and let her head sink back onto the chair.

My gaze moved over her soft, no longer young, mother's body, and the loneliness in the lines of her face. As surely as I had gone to the whiskey, I moved to stand behind her. My fingers touched her cheeks, lips, and then drifted down, her own hands guiding. I shivered, hard, and inhaled as if it were the first breath I had drawn in months.

***

"I'd better get going," she whispered.

I lay on my back, one arm behind my head, the other around Sarah. Drained, warm, and safe, I had been drifting toward an honest sleep, coaxed by the memory of her murmured, "God that's good."
She sat up and rumpled my hair. "We're going to have to see about getting you a job, a steady one. I'll ask around. I know everybody in this town."

I stared at the room's vaulted cedar ceiling, automatically noting details of the finish work.

"Don't you ever want anything you can't have, Sarah?" I said.

"What do you mean?" She sounded puzzled. "What can't I have?"

"Things that are out of reach. Like when your old man took off after he'd knocked you up, and you couldn't get him back. Didn't that make you crazy?"

"That was the best thing that ever happened to me," she said, with a hard tone. "He was a shit."

"Maybe you didn't mind with your brain. But in your heart, your guts, didn't you feel like clenching your fists and screaming? Not even because you'd been fucked over, but because—you were so helpless."

Her fingers stopped moving on me, and she stared off through the window.

"No," she finally said. "I never thought of it like that. Things just happen the way they do. If you try hard enough, you get what you want, and you're stupid to worry about anything else. I mean, what else is there? I was sick of being poor, of living the way I did, and I decided I wouldn't any more. It took a while, and I'm not saying it was easy, but I did it. Now I've got a good job and I own this house, and dammit, Allie's going to go to Stanford."

"But suppose," I said, "what you really wanted was something you couldn't get with school or money or anything like that."

"I can't think of much of anything you couldn't get if you really, really tried. Just set your mind on it, figure out what you have to do, and go get it."

I began to give in to the fog that swirled through my brain.

"Like what?" I heard her say. "What is it you think you can't get?"

"I want to grow wings," I said. "I'd fly to the sun."

"Well," she said hesitantly. "You're too old to be an astronaut, but if you quit drinking so much, you could get a pilot's license."

I let my eyes close, let the drift of throbbing stupor carry me. She touched my cheek. With effort, I looked. She was smiling, with something dark and pained far back in her gaze.

"You used to make me laugh," she said. She leaned over and kissed my forehead, then swung her legs out of bed.

For a long time I listened to sounds that should have been comforting, of her moving through the house: running water, the clink of pans in the kitchen, firm footsteps on the hardwood floors. I was barely awake when she looked in on me one last time, but I feigned sleep.

When I went downstairs twenty minutes later, a grocery list and a note lay on the dining room table, in the precise spot where the whiskey bottle had stood.

***

20
I drove to the market determined to sober up. The streets wound through a bewildering network of cul-de-sacs and circles, with names like Elendil Drive and Buckleberry Lane. The houses were new, clean, similar in design. I had built dozens of them. Gleaming, sensible cars waited in driveways. Yards were carefully kept, flowerbeds and gardens bursting with life. When I was younger, autumn had filled me with a sense of promise.

In my first summer of framing in the California valleys, I had driven a great deal, trying to escape the flatlands and endless sunshine, the cropped hair and perspiration and sullen afternoon exhaust fumes. One September weekend, in this town in the hills, I had smelled a thunderstorm, and found my way to the end of a deserted dirt road. There I sat for two hours, sipping beer while the rain poured around me—as close to content as I could remember being. I came back to the town again and again; and though I found no more rain, I finally found Sarah; and I had wasted nearly three years for both of us, forcing her to do the impossible; compete with a memory.

Inside the store, I thought of the long day ahead, waiting for her to get home from work. I needed to sleep; coffee would only make that impossible. I convinced myself that not buying whiskey would be a moral victory, and threw a twelve-pack into the cart, along with a can of V-8, to add the rationale of ingesting vitamins. The store seemed filled with bag ladies and kids with stringy hair and empty eyes. The man ahead of me in line had a greasy ducktail, long sideburns, green chino pants, and a key ring that would have opened Fort Knox. Why did those guys always wear green pants? The clerk snapped chewing gum, asked me if I played bingo, and seemed to take it personally when I said I did not.

Back in Sarah’s kitchen, I mixed my first red beer before I put away the groceries. My head still hurt. I ate four aspirin, but knew that while they might ease the headache, they would do nothing for the blood vessels too close to the surface of my eyeballs, or the pool of acid in my stomach that rose halfway to my throat each time I swallowed. As I raised the glass, I wondered dimly at what point I had accepted this as a normal part of my life. I drank, and walked to the living room. Through the window, I could see my truck. It did not look right in the driveway.

I stretched out on the couch. Its leather was cool against my skin. An ember popped in the fire. The new smell of the couch was foreign. I closed my eyes and imagined that I was lying in the back of the Power Wagon, lined with old sleeping bags that smelled like me.

As I turned onto my side, my hand dropped to the floor and sought the comfort of the glass. Fingers curled loosely around it, I gave in at last to the brother of death.
It was not just the space, not just the snowy mountains everywhere, not just the way the buck-brush bleached to the color of wheat in the fall, and the willows went dark red along the rivers, turning the water green as an uncut emerald, green as Beth's eyes; not just sitting high behind the wheel, skimming through that northern country heavy with forest, barren of cities; or the bars crowded with cowboys hooting and yelling over the wail of a country band; or quiet bars with half a dozen solitary men, sharing something beyond speech or acquaintance as another afternoon the color of slate died into evening; or driving home from a job, dirty and unshaven, clothes stiff with the wet blue muck of early spring, bones aching with the good fatigue of true work; or just driving, across mile after mile of snow frozen so hard it glistened blue under the stars, without another vehicle or moving thing until the first pink streaks of the late winter dawn began to show in the rearview mirror and you were still not even close to where you were going.

Even her skin had smelled different.

***

When I awoke, the fire had gone out. The light in the room suggested some vague point in mid-afternoon. Though it was warm now, I automatically knelt before the kindling box.

Then, as my fingers touched the iron on the stove, I raised my head and listened. It was like a call dying on the wind, but it sounded for no one else. For half a minute, I remained crouched, the feel of the metal on my fingertips like an icy electric shock, my eyes focused absurdly on the intricate mosaic of stones that lined the wall above the hearth.

"All right," I said. I rose and began to walk.

Sarah had left me a list of instructions for starting dinner. I turned it over and picked up a pen. But there was nothing words could add to what she would see in the empty driveway—to what she, what both of us, had really known all along.

From a hidden compartment beneath the driver's seat, I took a vial full of Black Beauties and crosstops. I ate one of the Beauties, washed it down with a swallow of beer, and put two of the whites in my shirt pocket. What was left in my apartment, I didn't figure I'd be needing.

The inside of the truck was hot; the steering wheel burned my palms lightly and the back of my shirt stuck to the seat. I rolled down the windows and once more began the long drive north, into the cooler air of night.

"Sweat," "White Midas," and "Icarus Tremens" are from Neil McMahon's Journeymen.