Davidson and Robbin fished along the bank in the day, now that spring and high water had come. The warmer, deeper waters swelled with the largest and most abundant fish of the year, and fishermen of this temperate land lost nothing by staying ashore and catching the fish that fed from the nearby weedline. Mr. Davidson fished the weedline for bass, splendid, prize-winning largemouth that always outshone but never outweighed Mr. Robbin's quarry. Robbins chased what he called "porkers," the largest catfish in the freshwaters of America and perhaps ecologically the most damaging scavengers—muddy, unattractive giants called "flatheads."

"You can fish for them women fish," said Mr. Robbin, stepping behind Davidson's pier. At the dock's end, Davidson swore at his empty hook. Mr. Robbin added, "One of my porkers'll make eight of your fairy fish."

"Yeh, and when was the last time you caught one of your goddam porkers?"

Bothered, Robbin baited his hook with shad entrails and thought for a moment. "You know I'm only kidding you, Davey ... Good Luck," he said.

"Same."

This was routine. No fishermen were fishermen if they didn't give each other "shit" and give it constantly. And Davidson did not mind it. Only once, in fact, had he avoided his river buddies and their cackling teasing for an extended period. As he recalled, that spell was during that Mrs. Majors thing . . .

Mrs. Majors once lived to Davidson's north (Robbin lived to the south,) and every morning Davidson's awakening sight would be her, kneeling in a small fountain. There, she fed and teased her pet tropical fish: an odd hobby, Davidson had thought while he leaned upon the chipping window sill. Still, he would watch in mystery this woman he loved in a distant way, in an admiring, and yet protective way. He watched until the curtains' dust choked him.

Mrs. Majors had orange hair. Mrs. Majors had magnetically blue eyes, the blue so rich Davidson always imagined taking a fish hook, pricking her eyeballs with the point, and watching blue liquid run down
her cheeks. And even when he did that to her, he fantasized, she would still smile and bounce with that spicy invitation written in the eyes, and then she would smile primly, telling him she was forbidden, Do Not Touch. Every time he saw her, the encounter came to that message: “I am open to everyone,” she seemed to say, “with everything I have, except the physical love, the one and only thing my husband cherishes.”

More, however, than mere personality and physical beauty attracted Mr. Davidson to her. What was that extra attraction? Was it love; was it that satiably hungry love that comes from laughing and feeling natural with someone who touches him every way but physically? Finally, after years of knowing Mrs. Majors, he realized that it was that unique love they shared. Davidson first recognized the communion one Saturday afternoon when, as he wandered past a small woods, the woman sprang out at him from the weeds and began laughing wildly. Laughing, not with him, but at him. She had startled him but, instead of patronizing him with an “Oh, you’re still stronger than I” reaction, laughed while he shuddered. Yet, when Davidson would say or do something funny, she did laugh with him. Like the colors of a chameleon, her emotions changed naturally and truthfully, and with each moment of proven reality, Mrs. Majors warmed Davidson. Warmed—not burned; once he had grown to know her fully, he no longer throbbed for a quick backdoor bang with the neighbor woman. Instead, he did things like awake upon hungover Sunday mornings and cure himself by opening the window and watching his lady-in-the-fountain.

Somehow, she would always know he watched. And wherever nearby he went, it seemed, she would be there, and, eventually, the sassy, but polite message would come. She popped up everywhere Davidson looked or walked, perplexing him, for he wanted at once to tell everyone about her and keep her a secret. He wanted to pursue her, but that would be unnatural. Just follow your daily path, he told himself, and she’ll come naturally. And once he knew the rules of this game, he hated them, but prayed the game would never end—because of that warmth just above the abdomen, because it all felt good, loving this woman. The way he loved her.

Mrs. Majors died in a shocking mishap. Those who had not seen it happen never fully understood, Davidson included: it was something about the boat coming in to dock, striking something, a cable coming loose, and Mrs. Majors literally being whipped into the deep channel.
Something like that, Davidson recalled. No matter, they didn’t find her; it was hard to imagine her dead.

“Never catch any porkers out there,” a voice said from upstream.

“It’s been known to happen. Anyway—” Davidson said, “I don’t want one.”

“Everybody wants one.”

“Balls. You do because you’ve been lucky enough to have a couple swim to your feet.”

“Ain’t luck,” Robbin said warningly. Then he laughed. “‘Yes-sir, that’s quite a knack. You gotta know how to play them suckers so they’ll swim to you.”

“And how’s that, Captain Quint?”

“Logic. Fish swims away he feels your pull. Swims side to side, don’t feel anything. But most people’s so damn dumb they keep pulling when the thing’s running sideways. But if you don’t pull, like me, there’s a chance the fish will dart right to you, ‘cause he don’t know where you are.”

“What keeps him from just seeing you?” Davidson said.

“You’ll learn that a fish swims leisurely and sees. He fights blind; one that’s big does, anyway.”

“Hmmm. I bet they buck like the hell when they’re that fresh laying on the bank.”

“Oh, shit. Saw one knock a guy into the river one time.” Robbin laughed again, this time cackling. “Uppity man. Glad to see it happen . . . No, you’ve got to have a gun or something.”

“Can’t you stun him with a hammer?” Davidson asked.

“You gotta kill him. There’s no point in just stunning him. Saw one guy, same guy, in fact, stun a sixty pounder and try to keep him caged.”

“What happened?”

“It was time for a new cage—that’s what happened.”

Both men laughed. Davidson dropped his pole to the pier and walked up to his cabin. Inside the dark shelter, he stretched and limbered out the kinks in his legs and lower back. He took a six-pack of beer from the refrigerator and returned to the hot sun. Stumbling down the slope, he saw Mr. Robbin staggering about the brush and cursing something.

“You’re hung up again,” Davidson teased.

“Nossir,” said Robbin, “. . . Nossir. It’s a perch.” Perch were Robbin’s favorite food fish, except for the cleaning of them. Silver-gray
and roundish, the soft-boned perch die quickly once caught and this lack of durability, just the opposite of catfish, means the fish have to be cleaned very soon after they are caught.

“How big is he?” Davidson tried to spot the fish through the surface glare.

“Three pounds, I’d guess.” Robbin lunged further out into the weeds to guide the fish away from the pier barrels. “Here he comes.”

The fish came up a silvery flash and disappeared. Robbin felt the line go slack, and he stood still amid his own torrent and waited to see if the fish was swimming toward him. But after a moment of watching the glassy water, he snarled in disgust and reeled in his empty hook.

Trying not to laugh, Davidson frowned and watched for a storm—Robbins had busted as many as five fishing rods in a day, in frustration. But the red-faced fisherman turned to Davidson and laughed. “Don’t matter,” he said, beaming at Davidson,” it was your fish, anyway.”

“Huh?” Davidson looked closer at Robbin and saw that it was his pole Robbin had been using. Then Robbin pointed to a tree on the bank. Focusing his eyes to the shade, Davidson saw Mr. Robbin’s huge jayhawker pole secured between the branches of a tree. The black line swirled in a small eddy fifteen feet offshore.

“It’s just waiting for one of my big black babies to come up and grab it,” said Robbin. He pitched Mr. Davidson’s casting rod onto the bank and hoisted himself onto a row of steel cables, strung from the bank to the pier’s end. Robbin bounced playfully.

Disturbed, Davidson eyed him and picked up the pole and a handful of shad guts with it.

“Yessir,” Robbin said, staring off to the north, “that’ll do you good. Just throw it out into the channel and you can catch yourself a string of blues or channels or bullheads or anything you want.” He pulled the farmer’s cap from his head and scratched through his thinning red hair. A powerfully large man when he had first arrived upon the river, Mr. Robbin had since weakened, slumped. He retained only the boyish enthusiasm, the childish temper, all the emotional vigor that made him Mr. Robbin—the salt from Boston who came inland for good. Still, it was not enthusiasm, but disappointment that brought him in. Disappointment, from the diminished returns from the efforts of one man, and just one man, as many of Robbin’s boatmates had
grown weary of their daily fishing long before he had. They beached
themselves, and, alone, Mr. Robbin lost the concentration and desire
necessary for a successful catch. He moved to the river, and each
"porker" represented a thousand lost days on the sea. If I were to catch
enough here, he subconsciously knew, then maybe all those lost days
would be made up for.

He put the cap back on, looked out to sea, and said, "Yessir."

Davidson baited his hook and cast the spraying meat out toward
the fast channel. But the line caught, leaving the reel and the bait
backlashed to just beyond the weedline. Trying to free it from the reel,
Davidson tugged at the line.

"Too short," said Robbin.

"It backlashed," said Davidson, still tugging and looking inside
the reel. "Screw it—I'll just let it float."

"No good—"

"Don't worry about it," he snapped, frustrated from Robbin's
constant coaching. He placed the butt of the rod in its holder and
knelt, his back to the onlooking Robbin. He glanced at his line and saw
that it had slackened too greatly, wrapping itself among the surface
weeds. To increase the tension, Davidson carried the casting rod back
to the bank and secured it within a mental footrest. He looked to
Robbin, who rolled his eyes.

Moving toward the pier, Mr. Robbin reached upward, grabbed
Davidson's line, and lifted it free of the surface brush. The white
monofilament line slid down a reed and settled onto the surface. "Now
you're fishing," he said.

The line sagged next to Robbin and flattened out at the weedline,
the bait sinking to a point a few inches above the muddy bottom.

As Mr. Robbin moved back to his own station, Davidson lay next
to the footrest and looked skyward. Where are the clouds today? he
thought. That day Mrs. Majors jumped from the weeds, the sky and
the clouds were unlike any he had ever seen: the real light blue sky had
become shielded by a new, slightly darker sky, and the new clouds
formed into giant smooth yellow strips, radiating an otherworldly
beam. The ominous ray held many colors, each visible from a different
point of view, and its light changed the colors of the Earth—the gray
road turned blue, the browning grass bright green, the black water
deep purple, the dust yellow. Mrs. Majors' hair was blood red that day.
And yet, even though the unique weather thrilled Davidson, Mrs.
Majors—and the new sensitivity she yielded from him—outshone the
ray. Indeed, he remembered her more vividly than the unforgettable skies; perhaps, she was the only reason he remembered those skies at all.

Mr. Davidson settled into the brown grass and began daydreaming of the little fish in the fountain and how he would trade a million three pound perch for one of them. Drowsing, he felt himself soak into the scenery. His legs flowed easily with the river. His back dug into the earth. His stomach felt the heat of the day, and the rest of him—his chest and face—phased into the sky. He slept.

Only a second later, it seemed, he heard Robbin's voice, first only the voice, then the words. "She's flyin'! She's flyin', Christ!" Davidson jerked upright, leapt to his feet, and lunged for his rod, which had already pulled free from the stand and was sliding off the bank. He dove for it and missed.

Robbin tore through the water to save the pole. The rod tipped once on the slope, dropped into the waves, and began twisting out to sea. Robbin stumbled through a clump of weed and slammed his hand into the water.

He pulled out the clutching hand, and in it were grass, mud and rock, and amid them all, Davidson's grimy rod. Spitting mud and spanking dirt from his pants, Davidson leapt into the river beside Robbin—who turned the line control to RELEASE and dumped the water from the reel. The waves were a storm from Robbin's chase and Davidson's jumping in. Otherwise, there was no turmoil: whatever was on the other end of the line moved silently, inexorably, and—to Davidson—tauntingly away. Robbin handed him the rod and said, "I believe he's your bass."

Breathless, Davidson held the rod still and could feel the steady, heavy drive of the fish. But he knew that this thing was not a black bass; it not only moved too slowly to be a bass, but, most obviously, it was much bigger and stronger. He looked to the reel handle and saw that it was spinning as smoothly, as freely, as was the great fish. Excitement numbing his legs, he stepped further into the river—into the weeds, where, ordinarily, a dozen feeding fish would have shot away upon his splashing arrival. But none were there to shoot away this time.

"You better make sure you've got that hook in him," Robbin said. "He could be just swimming with it."

Shaken beyond control and concentration, Davidson looked at Robbin blankly and then back toward the invisible force.

"Hit him," Robbin said.
Suddenly aroused, Davidson held the line tight to the rod and jerked the pole upward powerfully. He couldn’t raise the pole. With the hook already imbedded in it, the power moved too strongly to relent. Instead of the rod bending in a picturesque arc, it began to pull straight from Davidson’s hands. Then, Davidson felt the true power of what he had hooked. It was a force, he knew, that seemed not only to have the power to pull him across the river, but also the awesomeness, the gravity, to crush him. Panicking and fumbling, Davidson release the line and regained his grip on the rod.

The line moved faster from the reel now. It hissed. Accelerating, it whined and threw off tiny water beads.

“What do I do?” Davidson said, frenzied. “What can I do?”

Puzzled, Robbin forgot his own station and plodded toward Davidson.

“He’s running me out,” Davidson said. The reel handle spun eerily, accelerating like a centrifuge. “Goddam, what do I do?”

“Give it here,” Robbin said, taking the rod from Davidson, who stepped back and spat. Davidson’s biceps and shoulders were slightly weakened from when he had tried to jerk the rod upward.

Using his index finger, Robbin pinned the line to the rod, released it, pinned and released it again. “Heaviest thing I ever felt on this damn river,” he said. Watching the spinning handle, then the quiet river, he said, “He might run us out and, if we’re lucky, he might not. He’s almost to the far bank now, but he may turn. How much line you got on here?”

“Less than a hundred yards.”

“Then you better hope he turns.”

But the driving force did not turn. Instead, it stopped, and lay still. The whining had stopped, and Robbin looked to the water and then to the reel handle, which eased to a slow spin, shifted eerily once, and held still. “He quit,” Robbin said.

“He’s off?”

“No. He’s gone to the bottom.” He returned the rod to Davidson’s unwilling hands. “Now here’s what you do: you pull up on that thing. Not slow and steady, but quick and hard—jerk it up and then ease off.”

“Why?”

“It’s the only way you can move him and get him to come back your way.”

“I’m not so sure I want him to come back,” said Davidson. He
grabbed a pier support and hoister himself onto one of the barrels. From there, he slid onto the pier, and once, just as he put a knee onto the wooden top, he felt the immovable tension on the line. He rose slowly and slumped with the butt of the pole held squarely at his stomach.

"Now do what I said," Robbin yelled, moving southward along the bank, "and I'll come up with a boat from the docks. Who knows, we might get the black bastard."

Who knows, Davidson mocked to himself. He's going to the docks at the camp, and he'll get either that little motorboat, and we'll chase this thing, just to see it, or his pontoon and, if the thing is slow, we'll try to catch it and slide it onboard. Lord, I don't think either will work.

He did as Robbin had said, snapping the pole up and lowering it again to his abdomen. The handle shifted ominously again, and, for the first time, something happened at the water's surface: more than two hundred feet out, beyond the channel, a great swirl altered the surface; in an area of about fifteen feet square, the river moved clockwise, then counterclockwise. And slowly, as Mr. Robbin had hoped, the line began to slide aimlessly along the surface, back toward the pier and Davidson. Davidson froze.

And for the first time, he felt frightened. It was not painful fright, however, nor was it a great fear. It was an anxious kind of fear. He did not think the thing would burst through the surface and devour him. He did not fear for his safety at all. Still, watching the line swirl peculiarly through the small waves, Davidson felt the grip of something unnatural and had the desire, the need, to finish the adventure now. But not by escape, not by running a universe away, the shortest distance he would need to travel to lose that feeling gripping him. Although he did not know why, he would have to unmask that thing beneath the surface...yes, it all came to that. That is what must be done to remove an alien emotion that, although not an agony, will not just go away—ever. The emotion will build and build and, eventually, take over every other emotion. Simply cutting the line—an escape, in effect—can not exorcise the emotion. The question must be answered.

And then, the possibility—the strong possibility—of the line being broken, or the "thing" pulling free from the hook, struck Davidson. The realization brought an irony: once, Mr. Robbin had left Davidson to hold one of his "porkers" the exact same way; then, Davidson did fear for his safety; then, Davidson needed for Robbin to hurry back to
his aid: then, Davidson wished the thing would break free. This time, however, Robbin's hasty return was, although far less blatant than for physical safety, to save Davidson from a deeper misery, invisibly vast.

Davidson watched the thing slide, tighten, and swirl crazily across the surface. This sight increased the alien fear.

Something huge popped up next to him. He jumped to his left and looked to the right, where the thing had showed. It was not next to him, but rather far in the distance to the right. It was Robbin captaining his pontoon at only two knots, the motor quietly humming. Robbin held his finger to his mouth and smiled broadly, as if saying "shhh," careful not to scare the big black bastard. Focusing expertly upon the water, Robbin spotted the line moving across the waves and turned his boat toward the bank. He shut off the engine and let the boat float.

Holding the rod under his left arm, Davidson raised his right and mouthed, "What do I do now?"

Robbin stepped out from under the sun roof onto the open deck and summoned him with a sweep of his hand. He then moved his hands as if feeding line from a reel—signalling Davidson to make sure he did not create unnecessary tension upon the line.

Cautiously, Davidson walked to the back of the pier. Feeding line as he went, he soon was on board with Robbin, and both men, perplexed, looked out upon the mystery. "Look, we've got miles of slack out there," said Davidson. "It could get tangled up in something."

"The dummest thing we could do right now is reel it up, because then all the fish would need is one tug and he'll be gone for good. You won't get him to come back next time."

"So what are we going to do?"

Robbin sat at a table under the roof and stared into the water beside the boat. Small waves slid lightly into the boat. "We'll let him swim until he decides to show himself and then we'll kill him someway." He pointed to a shotgun and a bow and arrow that lay on the floor. Next to them was an open cooler full of beer and ice. "We're going to get him drunk?"

"No dumass. The weapons there." Robbin shook his head and tried again to spot the fish. The line lay in so many huge coils on the surface that it was impossible for him to know exactly where the fish was. Still more mysteriously, one of the giant coils occasionally would stand up and fall over, without straightening. Then several coils would slide across the surface together, try to intermingle, bob with the waves, and slide another way.
Robbin and Davison looked at each other. With the line run out in all directions, the force might have been beneath the boat—one big coil floated at the near starboard side. Yet, it might have been beyond the weedline, for the line lay there too. Robbin ducked beneath the pole and stepped to the stern, and he pulled the motor up and out of the sandy shallow. As water streamed from the still blades, Robbin said, “If this baby’s in shape we’ll be ready for a little Cat and Mouse.”

The rod propped up on the railing, Davidson knelt and shut off the release, securing the line in the reel. No need to let him sneak all the line out, he thought. “Have we got a full tank?” he said.

“Yes sir, that we have, and a can-full on board.” Robbin grabbed a cloth and wiped clean the blades. Then, feeling the boat’s bottom scraping the sand, he yelled, “Woops! We’re in too close. Hop back here and help we slide us out, Davey.”

Davidson leaned the pole to the railing and hurried to the stern, where he crouched under the railing and dropped into the shallow by Robbin.

“OK, here we go.”

Robbin tried at once to lift and push. Pushing with his head down, Davidson saw a large coil bump against Robbin’s leg. The boat eased from the sand and Robbin, gripping a rail, rested and laughed to Davidson, who pointed to the coil and said, “Look.”

Robbin saw it and shook his head.

“Scary, isn’t it?” whispered Davidson.

As Robbin nodded and laughed in amazement, another giant coil leapt up at the pier’s end. Suddenly, the coil flattened into a boomerang shape, and the one by Robbin pulled away smoothly, quickly. The men watched as every coil jumped once, straightened, and began swimming in a monstrous arc that began at the boat, bent toward the pier, out into the channel, downstream, and back toward the boat.

“What’s happening!”

“Get on board,” said Robbin as the giant arc began to feed below the surface ten feet from the boat. Scrambling aboard, Robbin dove for the rod, bending, its reel screaming. Davidson clawed at the railing and fell aboard behind Robbin.

“Jesus Christ! Why’d you tighten it?” Robbin cried.

Davidson ran to the railing and stood next to Robbin, who fed the sweeping arc as rapidly as he could. Robbin brought the pole around a horizontal rail, then another, to keep the line from tangling beneath
the boat. The force, whatever it was, was gliding beneath the boat. A frighteningly large wake lifted the boat, and Robbin cried, "We can't be in five feet of water! See him! See him!"

Davidson stumbled to the stern and looked into the strange turbulence. But there was a fog of mud so thick he could not even see the still blades of the motor. "I can't see it!"

"Look again—he has to be there."

Davidson squeezed shut his eyes and opened them. He tried mentally to filter out the mud and perceive only the force sweeping past. He saw, he imagined, a shadow dart by and nothing after. He blinked and looked again. "I can't see what it is."

"Did you see it at all?" Robbin pinned the rod to his chest and, following the moving junction of line and water, tried to spot the fish below. The sweeping arc was continuing, he saw, and retracing its course: again, the line swept downstream before the boat, turned and arched inward—at the boat. "Come here," Robbin said to Davidson. "You hold this sucker and let me look."

Davidson squeezed the rod as had Robbin. Crouching to Davidson's left, Robbin fixed his eyes upon the water, upon the top waves, into the waves beneath them, into the upset current below those waves. With his head beneath the railing and his hands gripping the railing, he waited.

The boat seemed to slide for an instant, and, again, it rose with the giant wake. Robbin crouched and followed, crouched and followed, the sweeping line to the stern. "Nothing! Goddammit," he cried.

Just then, a power greater than any Robbin had experienced slammed the outboard motor out of the water in an explosion of water and mud and agonizing sound—a loud metallic ring mixed with crunching. The motor splashed back into the water. The line moved back out to sea.

Cursing, Robbin knelt at the stern and hoisted the motor from the water. "We're luckier than hell," he said. "The bastard must've hit the bottom harder than the motor—"

"Will it still run?"

But before an answer came, the air filled with another sound—a scream at first, rising into a very high, echoing, yet sighing wail. It had started somewhere in the offing, moved to the air above the river, and swelled frighteningly. It might have come from an animal, a bird, perhaps the lucky soprano of a large farm animal. But to Davidson, the sound could be related only to the power making the arc on the water.
As the line swept across the channel, he watched it. And that was all involved—the line streaming, Davidson's face, the line streaming, Davison's stupefied expression, the line streaming, Davidson's sweating face. The line streaming away.

"And Away We Go!" a voice said from somewhere and something jolted Davidson. And soon wind blew his hair, water rose and flew at his sides, and the river skipped beneath him. "The race is on!" the voice said, laughing, coming closer.

The boat made a turn, and Davidson discovered that he was walking toward the bow, onto the open sun deck. The railing there was only a foot above the deck, and that hazard plus the fact that the railing was open at the bow's exact center, meant danger for a standing passenger.

"Wake up Davey," said Robbin. "Take a seat."

Davidson eased into a patio chair, and Robbin steered the boat at the stern, beneath the orange roof.

"You scream if he stops on us, Davey!" he yelled. "Don't wanna run over the bastard." Robbin accelerated to fifteen knots and ran to Davidson, both men trying to spot where the line 'burrowed' into the waves. "Can you still feel him?" said Robbin.

"I don't know." Although he was now more alert than moments before, Davidson could no longer sense the force on the other end, whether it was struggling, if it even knew it was hooked.

Robbin ran to the back and increased the speed to seventeen knots. Still, they did not gain. The line remained taut, without great pressure, making the force seem adaptable to the boat's speed, as if it were operated by some strange mechanism, some instinct, that kept it always the same distance ahead.

"Now you tell me whatever that thing does," said Robbin. "I don't want to break him off by some dumb mistake."

"Neither do I," said Davidson, rising and stepping toward the front railing. He wanted to see it, that was all. Just see it. If it were in fact a fish, if he saw a dorsal fin, the flat black tail of a "porker," then he would be satisfied. But the thing on the other end would not let that happen; it kept just out of reach, just beyond vision.

"Faster," Davidson said.

"I don't know." Robbin pushed forward the throttle to MAXIMUM, and the boat jumped, accelerating little. "Shit."

"We'll never get her," Davidson whispered.
Suddenly, the line swept to the right of the boat and headed for the south shore. The line tautened and rose and, as one climatic swell filled Davidson and Robbin, the surface trembled. The men would see it.

But suddenly, the river became smooth again where the line had risen, not as when the weather calms, but as if a giant hand had failed to wipe clean an error. The line borrowed again, and the force drilled to the river's bottom.

Davidson felt the agony a child feels when he pulls a big fish within inches of the bank and then loses it. Although he had not lost the fish, Davidson felt the opportunity would not return. For the first time since age seven, he wanted to cry from disappointment. Feeling a different frustration, Robbin slammed the railing and looked, mouth open in anger and disbelief, to Davidson, who returned no answer. Robbin threw his fist into the throttle so hard that the lever fell to SLOW. Damaged by the mistreatment, the engine coughed and blew out blue smoke. The boat turned about.

"Feel him yet?" said Robbin, watching the aimless course of the line. The line seldom slacked now, as the force knew it had been hooked and was acting instinctively.

"This thing's either too big or just too strong to move," Davidson sighed.

"We can tire him, surface him, pull up to him, and slide him on. Nothing's too strong," said Robbin.

"For a fly rod?"

"Just give him line when he wants it and let him swim his ass tired."

"It's not going to work, because this thing can swim for a month ... I don't think it's one of your 'porkers,' old Robby," he said.

"You're screwed—what else would he be? Just too big for anything else, but a sturgeon. We don't get sturgeon here."

"I didn't say I knew what it was. I'm just saying—"

The rod bent into a half-circle. "Oh shit. She's doing something," Davidson said, half-laughing.

"Hit the release." Robbin jumped up and grabbed the shotgun. "He's headed under us. I don't know how deep he'll be when he passes us, but I might get lucky if I just pop one down there with this thing."

"You're going to shoot blind without even seeing what it is I've hooked?" Davidson felt cold rush up his neck, then the same at the small of his back.
"Won't matter. Anything this big is just a worthless scavenger."
He leaned over the railing and peered into the brown water, smeared
with blue and yellow beacons of sunlight. The beacons flashed,
disappeared, and flashed somewhere else. Robbin smelled cleanliness
in the water out this far; at shore, dirt mixed with the water smell.

Davidson held the rod tightly to his side as the line moved slowly
from side to side toward the boat. Now, the pole not only bent greatly,
but it also bobbed with the rising and falling of the force—within
twenty feet of the boat.

"This'll be easy," Robbin said, leaning upon the railing with the
shotgun and rocking anxiously; He smiled.

The line moved within ten feet of the boat, and Davidson tightened
his sweating grip. "Try to see it first," he whispered.

"I will."

Robbin peered through the surface. He saw nothing, but said,
"There it is," and he fired the shotgun. The water exploded, and for an
instant the men could see the lead shot burrowing into the depth. The
rod bent so greatly its tip dipped into the water and scraped the
boatside beneath the surface. The force thrust downward with its
greatest strength and, with a final burst, the rod snapped upward,
throwing Davidson, and all the tension was gone. Davidson stumbled
into the other railing and fell onto his back. Stunned, his head hanging
out over the water, he looked up to his wide-eyed companion, who bent
and picked up the rod.

"Broke it," Robbin said. He looked back to the starboard side; he
was so hypnotized by the rocking waves he scarcely noticed that
something was cutting his thumb. When he finally looked to his hand,
he saw blood—and the line still running out. "Hey! It's still feeding!"
he yelled, half-stunned, yet laughing with new joy.

Davidson pulled himself up by the railing and staggered. Rasping,
he said, "She didn't break it?"

"He just stripped it. See, it's still going."

Davidson took the pole and watched the line flee the reel in tiny
oscillations. Robbin ran to the open deck and secured the anchor rope
to the steel rail and dropped anchor. "Now we'll stay put," he said to
himself.

He bounded back to beneath the roof and looked back out to sea.
"Where's he swimming?" he said.

"I can't tell. He's too far below the surface."
“Hand it here,” Robbin said, reaching out, but with his eyes still fixed upon the waves. He took the rod by the reel and tightened the drag, to prevent any more line from stripping away, and then hit the release. There was no slack now, but with the depth of the force, it was impossible to determine its exact angle and distance. And knowing this, Robbin realized there was little chance of even seeing the thing. It would continue away, swimming into a cold trench and remaining there, never to come up. Still, he did not want to tell Davidson or, for that matter, admit it aloud to himself, for it would mean spoiling the reprieve they had just gotten.

“Please stop,” he said to the thing.

A moment later, it did slow and stop, but in a place Robbin had feared, a pit at least seventy feet deep. The line remained at the maximum tension, and the force moved no more.

Robbin stared toward the pit for several seconds, and finally handed the rod to Davidson. “I don’t know,” he said, “You could probably prop the pole on the rail here and take a rest—”

“Why?”

“It’s sitting in that big hole and it’s resting too. Just be sure there’s nothing for that line to catch on, or we’ll lose him for good.”

Openmouthed, Davidson looked at Robbin and then the reel handle, still motionless. “Well,” he said, “OK.” He stood the pole against the rail, and the tip bent slightly. He checked to see that the line was not pinned to the rail, that the reel handle could spin freely, and that the line would come out of the reel freely. He stood and checked everything again and sat at a table beside the encased onboard engine.

Robbin sat and rested on the deck, with one leg bent and the other stretched out. Adjusting his cap, he blew out air and wiped the blood from his left thumb onto a rail bar. He looked thinner that way—he always stood, sat, and moved thinner in action. If he were on the bank, he would sit dumbly and look fat. But in chasing down a big fish, he assumed an athletic stature. He had limbered loose all the conglomerations of dormant muscles and meat, and he regained a little youth.

The sun was setting behind the west bank trees now, and slight overcast sealed most of the late afternoon sun. But, above the water, with the few penetrating rays cast across the surface, the gray ceiling appeared silver. In this special light, the dark parts of the surface, and the dark clothing of the men, grew darker. Meanwhile, the surface beacons and the men’s flesh became illuminated and a shade brighter.
The right side of Davidson's face was yellow, the left dark. Robbin's face was all shadow right now as he faced eastward. The white fiberglass rod shone a little whiter and the water's surface, where the deep pit and the unseen force lay, was dark blue and brown; in two hours, all would be nearly black.

Now, however, there remained plenty light for the men to continue the chase. But there was no chase to be run until the line began moving, the force swimming, again. If it ever would move. The thing might have tangled the line in rocks or on a log, for the line showed no sign of life on the other end. This stillness puzzled Robbin, who had had many giant catfish swim into the depths, float suspended in the currents, and tire. But then, the line bobbed and shifted on the surface. Now, the line held still, as if snagged, but Robbin could tell by the line's slope that the thing had not gone deep enough to snag, unless something else floated down there, something else for the force to take refuge within.

At the table, Davidson followed the slope with his eyes and shook his head. "We'll never get it back," he said.

Again facing the eastern shadows, Robbin blew out air and sank into old age a little more. "I've never seen anything like this. It's just laying in those currents and won't come up." His face moved a little, and he said, "It'll tire out and come up."

Davidson forgot the line for an instant and watched just the water. His eyes brightened slightly. He licked away the dryness of his lips. Straightening, he eyed Robbin and, after a thought, said, "When was the last time you hooked something like this?"

"September. I think. Didn't fight like this, though. He just ran up the channel and down the channel and just kind of swam to me."

"You think this one will?" Davidson said.

But Robbin was still in September, thinking. And remembering, he said, "These people up here—especially those on the lake—thought they'd really seen a whale caught." He laughed a kind of disbelieving laugh and gazed at his thumb. "Shit. These people, they get their boats and their rigs all ready to hit the waves. They got their big docks all stretched out, boats side by side, like they are on the sea . . ."

Robbin paused and Davidson watched him.

"These lakes and rivers are like a toy compared to the real water. The camps they got up north on the lake got big marinas with your damned . . . tourist Sunday fishermen, trying to get their boat out of the harbor and into this muddy shit." He looked toward Mr. Davidson and quietly said, "Like they were really going to do something."
“Is this something?” Davidson said.
“... It’s something.”

The men waited for nearly an hour before the next action occurred. This time the rod bowed and eased up, bowed and eased, both men rising slowly and standing to each side of the pole. The line circled a swell in the pit and began to move gradually upstream.

“Just take it easy,” said Robbin. “Let him play awhile.”

Only the two faces above the railing and the white line, reaching to the swirl, shone in the dusk. The rest was a haze.

Suddenly the force accelerated, guiding the casting rod to the starboard/stern corner.

“Bring the rod around!” said Robbin.

Davidson swung the rod around the vertical rail with his left hand and grabbed it with his right. But the fish accelerated still, taking him to the port/stern corner and forcing him to make the exchange quicker. He nearly fumbled the rod, but kept up with the force.

The force had now half-circled the boat at a distance of 200 feet and was still speeding, heading downstream now. On the port side there were three vertical railings, and, cursing, sweating, Davidson passed the rod from hand-to-hand-to-hand-to-hand-to-hand-to-hand as quickly as he could open and lose each fist. He chased the force to the open deck and said aloud, “What if she does this again!”

Laughing, Robbin tried to answer, but he could not. The line was streaming straight downstream, never breaking momentum, and Davidson followed to the very end of the boat—where he had to stop; if jumping in could have helped, he would have jumped. He watched the line run.

Robbin moved to the deck and said, “All we can do is hope he turns around.”

“But can’t we chase it? Come on, let’s get after her.”

Mr. Robbin knelt by the railing and washed his hands in the river. “It would be a waste.” Shaking dry his hands, he stood and said, “We take after it and it’ll panic for sure. Remember, you’re fighting this baby with a toothpick and dental floss. He’ll either break you or just hide at the bottom. Our only hope is if he swims himself tired, and comes back to the boat.”

The reel handle stopped. The men looked to it, then back downstream. “Wait a minute,” Robbin said. The line lay still upon the flat surface for a moment; meanwhile, Robbin began moving everything on the deck—chairs, bait cans and buckets—to the main
floor beneath the roof.

"What are you doing?" Davidson's head darted around as he watched the line and Robbin at once.

"I've run them right up on the deck before. I just want to be ready, in case," he said.

The thought of another chance, and the thought of seeing the force, having it right there on the deck and sparkling in some kind of splendor, chilled Davidson. Again, he was anxious both in a thrilled way and in a scared way. Swallowing, he strained his eyes to sort line from foam, water from darkness. The line was slacking.

"It's either broken or she's coming back," Davidson said.

Holding the gun, Robbin walked to Davidson's left; he seemed to be mumbling to himself as he checked the chamber with a pencilsized flashlight.

"He's coming back," Robbin said aloud. Instead of slacking straight back toward the men, the line bowed greatly to the right, indicating to Robbin that the force was descending and swimming to their left. He closed the gun chamber and knelt beside Davidson, who shivered and yawned nervously. "Not going to sleep, are you. Davey?"

"Yeh. Sure."

The line bowed so greatly Robbin feared he would lose track of the force. He tapped Davidson on the leg and whispered. "Now reel just a little—but DON'T let him feel you." Then he whispered to himself, "Gotta get a gun on him."

Davidson cranked once, hesitated, cranked again.

"Enough."

The line headed almost straight down to below the boat, and moved slowly from side to side while still heading slightly left. "Ok, ease up," Robbin said. "In fact, don't even touch it . . . try to lean it here on the railing." He pointed to the low rail—only twelve inches above the deck—and said, "Slowly."

Davidson knelt before trying to lean the rod. He held the rod tightly at the butt with both hands, as if praying, and, fighting his greatest nervousness, he lowered the rod until he felt it contact the rail, and, gently, he placed the butt on the orange floor. He rose slowly, wobbling, and wiped his hands on his jeans.

"Why—" Too loud, "Why do you need the gun if we're gonna tire it out?" he said.

Robbin lay flat on his stomach now, with the gun next to him, its barrel over the water. He held up a hand and peered into the black
waves. He turned his face to Davidson. "We'll need to kill it anyway."

The rod's tip bobbed three feet above the surface and hypnotized Davidson. He though of the magic he had felt during the last hours, of the emotions rising and falling inside him, of the confusion those emotions brought. He felt a rush of fear, from the possibility of a miracle. And then he thought of Robbin aiming a shotgun into the water. Feeling detached from everything, he said, "Oh."

The tip did not bow greatly, yet it danced crazily—and Davidson felt very nearly sure of the miracle. The tip began to rise as if the force would surface, then it dipped, and rose again. This movement continued until both men twisted in anxiety. "God," Robbin said, while Davidson turned and looked to the moon. Looking again to the rod, he whispered, "Don't shoot until you see it."

But Robbin didn't answer. Instead, he slid forward and looked from side to side, to the rod and into the water, to Davidson, to the shotgun, and seemingly everything at once. He said, "Here it comes."

The rod straightened, and the water boiled. The men tensed. Robbin slid back a little as the water's surface opened. Twenty feet away there was a great splash, the line jerked upward, and the pole shot off the railing into the water. The men dove desperately for it, with Davidson leaping head first into the railing and falling to the deck. Each man dropped his face to the deck and gasped.

They looked to the river but saw only black, and then each looked to the other. They breathed heavily,mutely. For a moment, each lay still and, in a rush, relived the excitement and the anticipation of the day and the suddenness of defeat. Each felt burned, disgusted, and worse, as if he had lost part of his life. Davidson knew why he felt that emotion; Robbin did not know the whole reason.

Fifty feet from the boat, the force splashed again. Seconds later, the third splash aroused the men, and Robbin reached for the flashlight. A fourth splash. A fifth. The sounds were coming at about fifteen second intervals and were tracking northward and toward the west bank. The sixth splash was almost directly west of the boat, and Robbin turned on the light.

"Keep it hidden," Davidson said to him.

Then the seventh splash came. The men slid around on the deck to face the northwest. They waited.

The eighth splash came, and the light beamed to the commotion. There were waves, and Davidson thought he had seen something move. More than a minute passed before the next splash brought the beam,
but the light missed again, and Robbin cursed, slapping the deck. He rose slowly and moved to the stern, stumbling over chairlegs as he went. Davidson knelt behind the deck partition and watched Robbin. Another splash and, quickly another. Robbin flashed the light and desperately waved the beam about the river.

"Can't find it!" he screamed.

One last splash sounded in the distance, and the men gave up.

Later, they walked from the docks to their cabins. Each walked with head down, Robbin several steps ahead of Davidson. Davidson would have been positive of the miracle if it weren't for a contradiction that grew apparent quickly. The action of the fishing line had been miraculous, and there had been a special, spiritual pressure from the start, but, there was something wrong in the entire chase: and there lay the point; it had been a chase. Why had not the force appeared? Why had it been determined to taunt, yet hide? Of course no fish would behave that way, but neither would anything Davidson had known.

Confusion remained. That night, both men slept hungrily, Robbin dreaming of the sea, Davidson of the fish in the fountain.

"Maybe it's hard to believe in me in times like these, but if you had faith to start with, maybe the times would change. Maybe it would help to know I believe in you."

—God, played by George Burns, in "Oh God!"