



**MICHAEL**  
D. MELOAN  
**PINBALL WIZARD**

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"No one creates a sense of mood and place quite like Meloan. He's staked out his own turf."

—Joe Frank, Peabody Award winning NPR monologue artist



**Bukowski and I** decided to take pisses together in his front yard. We stood side by side on the grass next to his avocado tree.

"I like you kid," he said, turning his head. "Not on my roses, you fuck!" He grabbed my arm to jerk the stream back into the dirt.

"My mailbox contained a surprise a week or so ago: Pinball Wizard, a novel by Michael Meloan. It is one of the most satisfying reading experiences I've had in recent years, in part because it handles a famous writer (Charles Bukowski) as one of its main characters with nonchalant deftness. Meloan's slightly picaresque story is hard to classify, which is one of the things that makes it such a pleasure to read. He has a gift for writing unapologetically masculine prose; it's flavorful without being exotic, and it doesn't hurt that he has a fine ear for dialogue."

**Bill Mohr**, writer, critic, and English Literature Professor at California State University, Long Beach



# PINBALL WIZARD an EXCERPT

by MICHAEL D. MELOAN

My father was in free fall. When he hit the pavement, a nauseating crunch shot through his body, then dreamy numbness. He sat on the sidewalk, unable to stand. His face turned ashen. Slowly he rolled over on his side and vomited into the sand. Three men who had been sunbathing on the beach carried him to the alley behind the condo to wait for an ambulance.

As I entered his room at Cedars Sinai, he looked at me with bleary unfocused eyes.

“What happened?” I asked.

“I’m not quite sure.” He paused and turned his gaze to the ceiling. “I was standing on the balcony looking out at the ocean...” Then he slowly spread his arms like wings, and his face twisted into a cracked smile. A rattling sound came from the bottom of his throat, like an engine. “I flew.” There was a mad look in his eye that I had never seen before. “My heels were shattered,” he said. Then he cut his eyes over at me. “Your mother is really pissed-off. I’ve never seen her like this.” Pause. “I need to get some sleep. But I want you to bring me five Jack Daniel’s miniatures the next time you come. Will you remember that?”

“I will,” I replied.

I was on a business trip to Onizuka Air Force Base in Sunnyvale when he fell. My mother sounded exasperated in the voice mail message she left at my hotel. She said he lost his footing while trying to climb over the railing and drop down onto the beach. He’d seen younger men in other units do it, but he couldn’t hang on and plummeted to the pavement. An orthopedic surgeon performed three hours of emergency surgery. He also had a concussion from smacking the back of his head on the sidewalk.

After leaving Cedars, I drove my old Citroën DS south on the 405 Freeway at 90 mph. By the time I reached Redondo Beach, the engine was running hot. I could smell burning oil as I hit the remote-control button. The metal mesh garage door strained and rattled as it slid sideways. Then I descended into the huge underground garage of “The Excelsior,” an aging singles complex with a lap pool, two Jacuzzis, and a large cedar sauna. The elevators were lethargic and the hallways smelled of mold.

When I walked in, Chrissie threw her arms around me and planted a big wet kiss. She had moved into my apartment three weeks earlier. We met at a wild mid-summer costume party in Hermosa Beach. I was dressed as a seafaring yuppie, with a navy blazer, slacks, aviator sunglasses and Sperry Top-Siders. After we talked and drank wine for about an hour, I asked her to leave with me. A rare pea soup fog had descended on the entire beach area.

As we looked for my car, she asked, “Do you drive a Porsche?” I don’t think she realized I was in costume. I told her I didn’t drive a Porsche, but she came back to my place anyway.

We started making out as soon as we got inside the door. Then she peeled off her ‘60s micro-miniskirt, big gold-tone peace sign, and white turtleneck. But she kept the calf-high black patent leather boots. Reclining on my futon with long outstretched arms, she beckoned to me with a sly smile. I was nervous, but I fell into milky whiteness and flowing red hair.

For the most part, I was happy that she had moved in. There was a kind of healing power

in her touch. Sometimes when I had a horrible hangover, she would gently cup the back of my neck with her hand and draw out the evil humors. I could feel it.

But there were a few negatives, and the negatives gnawed as time went by. Because of her buck teeth, there was a problem with her diction.

How did things go ‘wif’ your father?” she asked.

“O.K.,” I replied, “but he seems out of touch. Disoriented. A little bit psycho, to be honest. But he does have a concussion, so maybe that’s to be expected.”

“Come here,” she said, dropping her magazine and stretching her arms in my direction. Without saying anything else, she pulled me into a perfumed jungle. There was no more talking, just slow kissing and caressing, no internal monologue. Sexual healing.

Chrissie made sandwiches at Linda Beighle’s Elysian Fields health food restaurant. Linda was the live-in lover of Charles Bukowski.

One Saturday afternoon, Linda, Chrissie, and I were sitting around the restaurant after closing time, blasting old Jimmy Cliff and Bob Marley records. Linda had turned off the neon sign and shut the Venetian blinds. Then she brought a huge water bong from the back, and fired it up with some Maui buds. She and Chrissie took massive hits. Thick ribbons of smoke wafted through the air. After a while, they started twirling slowly to the metronomic reggae beat. I sat on a big pillow watching them, drinking a can of Coors.

Suddenly a car pulled up to the curb and came to an abrupt halt. I caught a glimpse of a black Acura through the blinds. Someone beat on the door.

“Open up!”

Linda quickly opened it.

“Turn it down!” Bukowski bellowed. “I HATE THAT SHIT! AND PUT OUT THAT DOPE!”

“Hello Papa. I’d like you to meet Chrissie’s friend, Ralph.”

“Fuck Ralph,” he said. “The computer dumped five poems I was working on, and I can’t get them back.”

“I’m sure Ralph could get them back,” said Linda. “He’s a computer expert.”

Bukowski narrowed his eyes and looked at me with a little Indian cigarette clinched between his lips. “You’re a computer expert?” he asked in a gravelly drawl.

“On a good day, I’m definitely a computer expert,” I said.

“Well, I hope this is your day. Will you work for wine?”

“Sure,” I replied.

Chrissie and I followed Bukowski and Linda back to his house on a hilltop in San Pedro. Bukowski led me up a narrow staircase to a tiny writing room with a view of the harbor. He had a plain wooden desk with a Mac on one side and an ancient black Underwood manual typewriter on the other.

“I still use the old Underwood,” he said, “when I need inspiration.”

He sat me down at the Mac, and I went to work.

“Deleted files are not really gone,” I explained, “only the pointers to them have been erased. But eventually they will be overwritten.”

Bukowski had the Norton Utilities on his system, and I was able to scan the hard disk and search for the titles of the poems. In a half hour, I’d retrieved four of the five poems he had dumped.

When I brought his poems up in the word processor, he looked at me as if I had performed sorcerer’s magic. Then he asked if I knew anything about probability theory. He played the horses three times a week at Santa Anita, and he’d been working on a complicated betting system for years. He was dying to run it past someone who really knew math. I told him I had taken advanced probability theory for engineers, but I didn’t think it had much applicability to the track.

Bukowski and I went back downstairs to drink red wine and talk. I told him about “the hut,” a plywood shed my high school friend Rickey Stanley’s father had built in the back yard. It was our hangout for years.

“What the hell did you do in this hut, fag each other?” asked Bukowski.

“We’d sit around on filthy pillows with a bare light bulb hanging down, smoking cigarettes, talking about girls, and looking at porno mags. Sometimes we read your *Notes of a Dirty Old Man* column in the *LA Free Press*.”

“Sounds educational,” said Bukowski, grinning. “Glad I could help.”

“When we got bored with that, we trained Fritz the dachshund to masturbate. We pushed his butt down over and over against a pillow until he got into the rhythm. Once he got the hang of it, he was like a machine. As he pumped and pumped we cheered him on.”

“Jesus, that’s pretty sick shit,” said Bukowski laughing. “You’re putting me to shame.”

At one point, I put one of his stubby Indian Beedis in my mouth and narrowed my eyes.

“Listen kid,” I drawled, “If you write *their* way, they will smash you down into a flattened turd.” I nailed Bukowski’s vocal delivery so perfectly that Linda was doubled up laughing.

He slowly turned and looked at me. “You’re all right kid. Have you ever tried to write anything?”

A few things,” I said. “...they were all shit.”

“Too bad,” he said. “Try again sometime.”

Bukowski drank glass after glass of expensive cabernet. His speech slowed and his consciousness seemed to recede. Linda was busy telling Chrissie a long story. When she mentioned traveling on a private jet with *The Who*, Bukowski cut his eye over.

“Bragging again about your days as a rock ‘n’ roll hooker?”

“You bastard! I was never a groupie or any of that shit! Pete Townsend and I were into the teachings of Meher Baba. It was a spiritual connection, and I was celibate at the time. I’ve told you that again and again.”

“And when you drag your ass back to my house at 3:30 in the morning, I’m supposed to believe you’ve been drinking tea with the girls and discussing Meyer Bubba.”

“You think every woman is a whore. You hate women. Admit it! That’s why you’re so obsessed with pussy and cock and all that down and dirty shit. You can’t look a woman in the eye and relate to her as a human being. All you see is fishnet stockings, tits, and a hole.”

“You’re starting to piss me off. If it wasn’t for me, I don’t know what the fuck you’d be doing. That shitty little restaurant would be out of business in a week. What would you do if you had to go out and get a real job? I guess you could make Slurpees at 7-Eleven. Or sell oranges on a freeway on-ramp.”

“You’re the kind of vile piece-of-shit that makes people jump off buildings or blow their brains out. You have a genius for sucking every ounce of hope and joy out of anyone around you.”

“At least I have a genius for something. How many even have that?”

“You’re right. I’m sure Hitler was a genius too.”

“Why don’t you move out? Go ahead and go! Do you think you’re the only woman I can get?”

“No, I’m well aware that the lure of fame—even second-rate fame like yours—is a powerful aphrodisiac for trailer trash women.”

“That’s it!” Bukowski planted his foot underneath the wooden coffee table and kicked it over, launching glasses of wine into the air. “Get out of my house! You don’t live here anymore! I mean it. We’re through!” Bukowski and Linda stared at each other. Linda’s jaw flexed rhythmically. Then he moved in close. “I mean it! LEAVE!” he screamed, spewing spittle in her face. Tears streamed down her cheeks.

She stood up and looked at me. “Get me out of here,” she said.

“OK,” I replied.

Linda, Chrissie, and I wandered slowly down the long tree covered driveway and past the dense hedges and rose bushes that blocked a street view of the house. Linda started crying, and Chrissie hugged her under the orange sodium vapor streetlight.

I looked up at the second story window which was visible above the hedge. Bukowski was violently pounding the keys of his Underwood. Typing like a madman, head down, with machinegun rhythms. Completely absorbed, never bothering to glance out the window. We dropped Linda off at the Manhattan Beach home of a gay lawyer she had known for years.



I had been coding all night inside a nuclear hardened bunker at RAF Mildenhall in Suffolk, England. Things were not going well. The real time data link to Ramstein, Germany was failing again and again. It would be a major black eye for the company. And the blame would come down to me.

Closing my eyes for a few minutes, I tried to think of nothing. Suddenly, the door opened. A blond-haired Captain was standing there in a one-piece olive drab flight suit. He carried a helmet under his arm with the name “Snoopy” painted on the front.

“Hello Mr. Hargraves, I’m Captain Balfour. I heard you’ve been on a coding binge. I have a master’s in computer science, so I know what that’s like. How about a break? Would you like a tour of the F-111?”

I hesitated, wondering if there was anything else I could do to the software.

“OK...that sounds interesting,” I said finally.

“Then let’s head out.”

Snoopy told the Tech Sergeant on duty that he would be escorting me to the flight line for some hardware testing. I followed him out of the communications facility, through a labyrinth of concrete passageways that finally emerged into a cavernous hanger area with four F-111 fighter-bombers inside. They were huge, with long black javelin noses, large wing spans, and sleek under wing fuel pods. Next to each pod, there was a large bomb. The Captain picked up a helmet and oxygen mask from a wall mounted set of cubby holes.

“Here, try this on,” he said.

I slipped it over my head. It fit. We approached one of the planes, which was painted light gray, to match the leaden European skies.

As we got close, I could see a cartoon of Snoopy wearing his Red Baron goggles painted beneath the cockpit. An aluminum stairway was positioned on either side of the plane. Captain Balfour climbed the ladder leading to the pilot’s seat, on the left side.

“You’ll be in the Wizzo seat,” he said, “the Weapon Systems Officer.”

“OK,” I said, slowly climbing the stairs on the other side.

When we were seated side-by-side in the cockpit, he reached over and helped me buckle the network of belts.

“We’re not actually going to fly, are we?” I asked.

He paused, and looked around the hanger. “It’s a slow night, light air traffic. And no exercises up on the board. A short run is a possibility. Are you up for it?”

“I...”

“Hesitate, my friend, and you are lost. Yes or no.”

“Yes,” I said.

He quickly made sure my oxygen mask was plugged in. Then he sat there flicking toggle switches, dialing rotaries, testing the ailerons, elevators, rudder, and checking in with the control tower. After he radioed for a flightline tech to remove the ladder platforms, an Airman came stumbling out from a back room. He quickly removed the platforms and the wheel blocks. Balfour shouted “Clear!”, then closed the heavy gauge Plexiglas canopy. As he ignited the twin turbofans, the entire hanger echoed with thunder and flickering light. We sat for a few seconds, then slowly started to move.

The F-111’s wings jittered up and down as we rolled over the undulating concrete. Then we stopped for a few moments at the end of the runway. With the brakes on, Balfour ramped up the power. The jet tensed for takeoff, like a sprinter in the blocks right before the starting gun. I heard the tower say, “F-111, one zero niner bravo, cleared for takeoff.” Balfour released

the brakes and pushed both throttle levers forward almost to the stops. The fanjet roar was astonishing. There was nothing but sound. Once we lifted off the runway, Balfour performed a *shit hot takeoff* with afterburners maxed out. His angle of attack was so steep it felt like we were climbing almost vertically into the night sky. I was pinned against my seat, barely able to breathe. He looked over at me and spoke through the comm system into my headset.

“You doing OK cowboy?”

I was a little woozy, but conscious. “I’ve never had motion sickness in my entire life.”

“That’s what I like to hear. Let’s rock.”

He gained some altitude, then rolled the wing over to set a new course. The afterburners were still on. I could see the airspeed indicator, we were already at 375 knots.

“Thought I might do some testing of the Terrain Following Radar. Hughes Aircraft developed the hardware and software. HighFrontier does some analysis and oversight of their work, right?”

“We do.”

“Then I think you’ll find this interesting. Simulations are good, but there’s no substitute for the real thing.”

Balfour started flipping toggles and dialing rotaries again. A ghostly image appeared on the CRT screen at the center of the cockpit. Terrain features could clearly be seen in the pitch darkness below.

“This is the Forward-Looking InfraRed night scope. You’ll like this, the aircraft has an onboard database of satellite mapped terrain from all over Europe and the Arab world. I can tell the system to hug the landscape at just above treetop level. In that mode, it’s almost impossible to pick us up on enemy radar. I’ll put the TFR on computer-controlled autopilot at Mach .8. I could go supersonic, but I don’t want to blow out any farmhouse windows. The base commander would have me on a spit.”

Balfour engaged the system and we started to descend. Finally, we reached an altitude of about 800 feet traveling at nearly 500 knots. Terrain features streaked by on the greenish cockpit screen. It was mesmerizing and nerve wracking. As we approached an area of rolling farmlands, the system automatically took us higher to avoid the hills. It was an amazing piece of technology.

Snoopy went on talking for about 15 minutes without a break, explaining all the whiz-bang aspects of the plane’s history, design, and technology.

Suddenly there was a lull. We were silent for a few minutes. Then he spoke again.

“I forgot a very important feature of the aircraft,” he said. “Guess what happens if I pull this?” He pointed to a fluorescent orange metal tab dangling from the ceiling of the cockpit.

“I have no idea,” I said.

“A lead foil shroud automatically unfurls over both of our heads.”

“What for?”

With a fiendish grin, he said, “To protect us from the radiation fireball, after we deploy



our nuclear ordnance.”

He continued to grin. I think he was waiting for me to say, “Wow, bitchin’!”

After a few minutes of silence, he said, “We’ll be at the coast soon. This will be an interesting area to shake out the TFR.” Seconds later we flew into a massive zero visibility fog bank. Outside the cockpit, it was velvet darkness punctuated by a diffused white flash every time the powerful wing tip strobes fired. The countryside below continued rushing by on the green CRT screen in the cockpit.

“We’re in Scotland now. We’ll be at the northern coastal fjords in about 10 minutes. I think you’ll like this,” he said.

The ground images on the CRT had become rocky and complex. I felt the plane start to descend.

“The system is taking us right down into the canyon structure of one of the fjords. That’s how fine the terrain mapping technology is,” he said.

As I glanced over to the right, one of the wingtip strobes flashed. I caught a snapshot of the craggy canyon wall, which lingered for a split second in my retina. My heart raced. The F-111 descended again.

“We’re almost to the ocean. The system is taking us down nearly to sea level,” he said.

Just as Balfour said this, we emerged from the fog bank into clear sky. A crescent moon was near the horizon straight ahead. It created a faint shimmering column of light across the Atlantic. As the jet headed toward the ocean, our speed increased. My breathing was fast and shallow.

“Believe the system. Let it work, it can fly the aircraft better than any pilot,” said Balfour, seemingly to himself.

My heart pounded out of my chest. It looked like we were 50 feet above the water. Suddenly Balfour grabbed the stick and pulled back, shoving the thrusters to near max. The airframe shuddered violently, which I knew meant that we were near stall speed where he had little control. We climbed hard away from the ocean and picked up velocity. An electronic voice said, “TFR disengaged. Manual on.”

Balfour said nothing for a few moments as we flew. I could see that he was rattled and taking deep breaths to regain his composure.

“I think the system bounced radar off the ocean bottom, not the surface. A glitch in the transition between land and sea.” He paused and took another breath. “I have to admit...that was close.” Then suddenly he was angry. “Goddammit. Who is the HighFrontier director assigned to Hughes?! My commanding officer will want to talk to him about this.”

“I’ll get that for you, as soon as my program office guys come in,” I said.

Balfour said nothing else as we flew back to RAF Mildenhall. A deep indigo was forming in the east as we landed.

Climbing out of the jet, I noticed the armpits of his flight suit were soaked through with sweat. I looked down at my shirt—mine were too.



My mother drove slowly along Pershing Drive until she reached a tiny abandoned street in Playa del Rey. It snaked up a large hillside, and at the crest, she killed the engine and turned off the lights.

The area was once a residential neighborhood, but the city had razed the houses to make way for the north runway at LAX. Only cracked and weathered blacktop remained, with the curbs still intact. Tall parched weeds grew from where the houses had once stood.

From this vantage point, she could gaze down on the entire airport. The night was crystal clear and unseasonably warm. A constellation of distant jets seemed to hover in the flat black sky; the furthest tiny landing lights were 25 miles to the east.

She unwrapped a package of Benson and Hedges 100s and pulled out a cigarette. Suddenly realizing she didn't have a match, she ducked back into the car to use the lighter.

She hadn't smoked a cigarette in 10 years. As she took a deep drag, a 747 was on final rollout. It lifted off like a giant lumbering beast of burden. Then it thundered into the air with frightening power. Taking another puff, she watched it come straight toward her. The sound was deafening as it shrieked directly overhead.

It was so close, she could see the sooty filth on the underside, the intense rotating red beacon, and the massive landing gear clusters. As she turned her head, the jet continued climbing out over the ocean and started a slow sweeping turn toward the south.

The plane's onboard strobes illuminated VARIG—Brazilian. Suddenly she imagined being on it—en route to Rio, never to return. No contact with her old life again. Just paint, drink in cafes, and listen to wonderful music.

But this time, without a man. This time, only for herself.

After stubbing out the cigarette, she drove to a nearby gas station and stepped into a phone booth. Dropping a quarter in, she dialed.