

old age  
is a jazzman  
i heard last summer.  
when he was not playing  
he smiled  
six yellow teeth ...  
after the crowd was gone  
i went home with him.  
he showed me  
his fourth common-law wife  
and pictures of sons  
who never came home  
from war.  
feather mattresses  
he stuffed for a living  
and rusty horns  
he played when  
he was not embarrassed  
to smile.

i have not seen the old man  
for months  
but when you pass his shack  
you will see  
feather mattresses  
-- lean as lepers  
on his front porch.  
and if you go up close,  
you can count  
yellow teeth  
in a small flower pot  
beside his front door.

It was warm for November  
that Sunday afternoon  
we sat outside  
on a library bench  
talking of freedom.  
we watched a rag man --  
his face buried in blizzards  
of hair  
as he pulled an open hearse  
of garbage,  
a parade of green-suited negroes  
pushing wheelbarrows of mud  
across the lawn I said hello to  
a sunglassed teacher  
on crutches  
who went to hide  
among the books.