

# UNITED STATES LITERARY MAGAZINE

United States Literary Magazine, Fiction & Poetry

Our First and Finest Issue

**USLM; I1**

**MAY 2012**

WINNER OF FICTION COMPETITION ENCLOSED AT END

HOMOPHOBIC UPBRINGING OF TWELVE-YR-OLD PRODIGY

IS YOUR MAN NOT SEXY ENOUGH?

GAY TEEN TORMENTED, HIS FRIEND TELLS STORY

LEARN HOW TO ADD TEN YEARS TO YOUR LIFE WITH A SIMPLE CHANGE  
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NOTE ON BRAIN-FREEZE-COMMERCIALISM VIA VAMPIRE-STORY AS  
GOLDMINER BUST TOWN

GET RID OF THOSE EMBARRASSING BULGES UNDER YOUR FOREHEAD!

HEROIN ADDICTION AND BLISS OF SLEEP

HAD ENOUGH OF COOKING DINNER? SEE HOW EASY IT IS TO STOP!

PISSING ON CHILDHOOD SANDCASTLES, PULLING IT NICELY

KITCHEN SUCCESS SECRETS, THIS ISSUE!

ON THE DESIRABILITY AND UTILITY OF THE COMPANY OF MAN

TAKE TIME OFF WORK AND STILL GET PAID!

...SOME POEMS



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Read, Digest, Vomit, Reorganize, Submit...

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## FICTION

## I Touch Beethoven

by Stephen Baily,

who, as a side note, is from Paris – not quite in the United States, but certainly in the United States *Literary Magazine*.

It's the bottom of the ninth and they're ahead by two but we have two runners on when I come up. Everybody on our side is yelling my name and as I settle in in front of the sewer we call home the outfielders back up as far as they can. They sense I'm going to hit it out and I do too and I bounce the ball several times with my left hand and am all set to toss it up and smash it with my right when my mother appears over my shoulder on the other side of the chain-link fence.

“Come on.”

“In a minute.”

“Now or we'll be late for Madame.”

I can see she's on edge and in no mood to be talked back to so I fling the ball away and head for the gate.

“What the fuck,” the runner on first says as I pass him with a sullen shrug.

When I get to her I cringe. It's Saturday but she has my Sunday jacket with her and she doesn't even wait till we're out of sight to make me put it on. Over my protests she buttons the collar of my shirt and clips a tie on under it too.

“There. That's better. You can't go to see a woman like Madame dressed like a ragamuffin.”

“Hey, who's the pansy?”

“Have fun with your mommy, Fauntleroy!”

The look she shoots them through the fence fails to stop their guffaws.

All the way to the el I hang back a step behind her. People are wandering in and out of the stores on Castle Hill Avenue and I don't want any of them to think we're together. Likewise on the station platform I keep an iron pillar between us till the planks under my feet start shaking and the train flashes past us like a runner sliding into second. I can't get away with this once we're on the train though. In the train not only does she sit close up against me but she won't stop

fussing over me and smoothing my hair.

“You're not nervous, are you? Don't be. Your aunt says Madame is a lovely person.”

I pretend I can't hear her over the noise in the car and concentrate instead on an invitation I notice scribbled on the wall next to me:

*For a good hump call Anna at OL-4-3731*

In school there's a girl named Anna who paints her face. She's a year ahead of me and partial to black nylons. Just the other day during a change of classes she cut me off in the corridor and backed me up against the wall till I had nowhere to look but down the front of her tight pink sweater. I'm thinking about how she laughed at me and called me her dreamboat when without any warning we plunge from day into night. The noise is even worse in the tunnel and in a minute we pull into a gloomy station and a man and a boy get on and sit down across from us. The man's clothes are dirty and he needs a shave and the patches on the knees of the boy's jeans are hanging by threads. He's younger than me and he sits huddled against his father as if the banging of the cars terrifies him. I feel sorry for him till I remember Madame and then I feel sorrier for myself.

We have to change trains once but the second ride doesn't take long and we come up out of the subway at the foot of a brown building the size of a fort. The sidewalks in front of it are so crowded she holds on fast to my arm as she leads me around a corner and past a wall covered with peeling posters. Halos of light surround the heads of the people on the posters and they have dreamy looks on their faces as if their thoughts are far away. The men are dressed in tuxedos and the women in evening gowns and they're all seated at keyboards except for one or two whose chins are propped on the scrolls of violins.

A wobbly elevator operated by a man in a uniform takes us up to Madame's. I'm expecting the twin of my school principal, a gray-haired crone with a mean mouth, but the tall woman who greets us with a forefinger pressed to her pursed lips has a crown of vivid red hair the same color as her flowing robe. Without a word she turns and leads us toward a doorway through which a torrent of music is pouring. The doorway opens into an airy room in which the sole piece of furniture is a grand piano black and sleek as a panther. A kid about fifteen in a blue blazer with silver buttons is pounding away at the keys. Over the acne on his forehead a lank lock of blond hair has fallen and as we enter he comes to a sudden halt in four thunderous chords.

“Bravo!” Madame says. “Byron is one of my most promising students. Right now he's preparing for his first recital.”

“Oh isn't that wonderful,” my mother says. “You must have to practice a great deal.”

“Six hours a day.”

“Six hours! But how do you find the time to keep up with your schoolwork?”

“He doesn't go to school. He has a tutor.”

“A tutor—imagine that.”

“Yeah but do you ever get outside and play any ball?”

He looks at me as though nobody's ever asked him such an original



question.

"I like to go down to the park once in a while but I don't often have the chance."

As he's leaving my mother shakes his hand and assures him she'll be watching eagerly for the announcement of his recital in the newspaper. Then she turns to Madame.

"It's so good of you to see us."

"Don't be absurd. Why wouldn't I see you? Your sister's a dear friend. She tells me the boy's teacher died?"

"Mr. Mitnitsky was the brother of the famous violinist."

"And how long did he study with him?"

"Six years. He started when he was six."

Madame, who towers over my mother, finally notices my presence.

"Your aunt tells me you're a very talented young man. Come. Sit down here beside me."

Like my grandparents, she has an accent, only not the same kind. My grandparents make me sound good when they talk and Madame makes me sound like my grandparents. Reluctantly I join her on the bench at the keyboard.

"Close your eyes."

I feel stupid but I know what's coming and do as I'm told.

"Can you tell me what note this is?"

"E."

"And this?"

"C sharp."

"And this chord?"

"G minor."

"And this?"

"D diminished."

"You can open your eyes."

When I do my mother is nodding and beaming at me. She looks all of a sudden like a younger and prettier version of herself.

"This etude Byron was working on when you came in—are you familiar with it?"

I glance at the music open on the piano and shake my head.

"You've never played it before?"

"No."

"Well, let's see if you can."

She gets up and I slide into her place and put my hands on the keys. The piece starts with a loud chord high up in the right hand followed by a riot of sixteenth notes in the left hand but I seem to know what to do without thinking about it and only two or three times do I run out of fingers and have to break off and start again. When I finish my mother stops herself on the verge of clapping because Madame remains thoughtful.

"I assume he's prepared something for me?"

"The Moonlight Sonata—the third movement."

"You've brought his music?"

"He doesn't need it. He knows it by heart."

OL-4-3731, I say to myself.

“Play,” Madame says.

So I attack the movement—suddenly, the way I've been taught by the brother of the famous violinist. I play it even faster than I've been taught though, because my hope is if we can leave soon, maybe when I get back there'll still be enough of my friends in the playground for another pickup game. I regret the home run I didn't hit—the home run I'm sure I would have hit if only my mother had turned up a minute later. I'm imagining my triumphant tour of the bases when Madame lays a hand on my shoulder.

“He has some bad habits but they shouldn't be too hard to correct.”

“Does that mean you'll take him?”

“If he's willing to practice three hours a day.”

I jump up from the bench.

“The piano's in the living room and my father can't watch TV when I practice.”

“Your father watches too much TV as it is. I can't begin to tell you, Madame, how grateful I am.”

“The neighbors won't like it either—they're always banging on the wall.”

“The neighbors have nothing to say about it.”

“Look at me, young man.”

Madame waits till I grudgingly make contact with her green gaze.

“You have a gift, but that gift is nothing in itself. Unless you're willing to dedicate your life to it, really you'd almost be better off without it, because why would you want to end up accompanying drunks at parties on some out-of-tune upright? That I won't be an accessory to. Give me your hand.”

When I hesitate she seizes it. The strength of her grip surprises me.

“Do you know when you touch me you touch Beethoven?”

At a loss I stare at her while she explains how as a girl she studied with a teacher who'd studied with a teacher who'd studied with a teacher who'd studied with a teacher who'd studied with a teacher who'd studied with the immortal Ludwig himself.

“I offer you the torch.”

A high C escapes my mother. Her eyes are shining with tears through which she's seeing me in a tuxedo with a halo of light around my head.

“Will you accept it?”

“Fuck no.” I yank my hand out of hers. “I hate the piano, it sucks, it's for fags.”

*~Other stories by Stephen Baily have appeared recently in Northwind Magazine and in the Atticus Review. His novel "Markus Klyner, MD, FBI"--currently ranked #720,210 on the Amazon best-seller list--is available, while supplies last, as a Kindle e-book.*

## Brick and Glass

by Jordan Kit

Terry and me were thick as thieves from the day we met. He lived four houses down, in a calm, tight knit New England neighborhood. The only fights we had ever had were innocent boyhood huffs that never meant anything more than a sour afternoon. This was a different matter altogether.

When Terry called me, crying, he explained that someone had thrown a brick through the windshield of the white subcompact, which he had bought the previous summer with his own money. The word “fag” was emblazoned in defiant red spray paint across the hood. I asked if he knew who might be responsible. He didn’t. I was madder than hell. I could see his face so clearly in my mind, tears streaming down his puffy eyes as he shouted, “I’m ruined, now everyone knows.”

I’d known Terry all my life practically, so he might as well have told me the time of day when he came out to me. I wasn’t shocked, offended, or any of that. I was proud of him, but I’ve never been very good with big emotional moments, so I just said, “Hey man, you know that’s cool with me.”

As we entered high school, we remained great friends, but fell into different sets. I took to sports and he took to the arts. Despite conflicting obligations and appointments, we still spent a lot of time together. He hung around my house and helped me with homework. He was a great writer, and edited probably every essay I ever wrote through junior year. I looked out for him at school, tried to keep him connected with goings-on, that sort of thing. We had this tacit brotherly relationship, and tried to offer each other what we could.

The next day there were police cars parked in both his driveway and in the road in front of his house. When they left, I went to see what the fuss was about. Terry was locked in his room. He wouldn’t even open the door for me. His pops led me to the den to talk.

“Listen son, I know you’ve known Terry, and you know about him. We’ve known for a while, and it’s always sat fine with us.”

“Yeah, I mean—”

“Let me finish, kid. I need you to help us with this. The cops just told us that they

had talked to some folks down the road that had heard the glass breaking and when they got to their window, a big orange truck was ripping on down the road.”

My stomach dropped to my shoes.

“Now, I think I seen this kid around town, and the cops said they can’t really do nothing since they can’t prove it really, and the school said they won’t look into it since it was off school grounds.”

It was Evan.

“Now, I think best I know, it’s this Hillridge boy, Evan Hillridge. His ma and pa live a few minutes down the way and I know he plays ball with you, so I need you to talk to him about it. See if you can get any info out of this kid. See if you can sneak it out of him.”

It could have been anyone in the world, but it had to be Evan Hillridge, I thought to myself as Terry’s pops said goodbye and I walked back home. Evan Hillridge and I went back to little league days, Pop Warner football, tee ball, and all that. I’ve never been on a team that didn’t feature star athlete Evan Hillridge. He could run a mile faster than some folks could bike one, he could make half-court baskets with one arm if he really lined it up, and he could throw a baseball almost 75 miles per hour. I wondered if he hit 75 miles per hour with the brick.

I was shocked when Terry’s pops said it was probably Evan, but I wasn’t surprised. He was just bad blood. I’m sure straight down the line he had supremacists and bigots of all kinds straight back to the cradle of civilization. Now, he had turned his discerning appetite on tormenting Terry.

I felt uncomfortable with the whole mess. I didn’t want to talk to Evan. I’d have a million and one opportunities with him in most of my classes and with practice right after school. But I knew how he’d react. I knew because I’d heard how he felt about these kinds of things. About Terry specifically.

It wasn’t even a week ago that in the locker room, he put chewing tobacco in his lip and spat into a water bottle, explaining his position. “Now listen, you hear—it’s not me that’s got the problem with nobody, but God’s good word what says I have to be a certain way ‘round certain folks because they living sinner-like. Now, that fairy neighbor of yours is the worst of ‘em.”

“Aw, come on man, come off it.”

“Now them’s the words of a faggot, or at least a faggot sympathizer. He turned you yet?”

I was embarrassed, and I just walked away. I didn’t want to be dragged through the dirt and shamed by this outspoken hillbilly of a kid. He was loud and never stopped talking. You can’t stop folks like that, they’ll always stick you with the last word, and it always hurts.

I languished over the whole thing and I wasn’t even the one with a busted windshield. Terry came by to drop off a paper he had looked over for me a few days later and asked if I had confronted Evan. “My dad told me what he asked you to do. Did you find anything out?”

“Ah, heck man, I haven’t talked to him yet. It’s hard to bring up.”

“Hard? Try being outed to the whole fucking school. That’s hard. You just have to see if he’s weird about it, try to dig and see if we can prove it was him.”

“I’ll think of something but I’ve got to be careful, we go way back.”

“And we don’t? That’s just great. That’s where I stand I guess.”

He started to tear up and walked toward the front door in a harumph. I called for him to hold on for a second, and he opened the door, said, “Why don’t you fucking grow a pair?” and slammed the door. I went to my room and lay in bed and sat in my shame for a long time before falling asleep. I felt lowdown and crooked.

The next morning I awoke to the sound of sirens. Lights flashed against my window shade. Reds, blues, and whites danced forebodingly. For a moment I didn’t understand anything – who I was, where I was – I was blank. I snapped out of it and grabbed a sweatshirt, which I put on as I descended the stairs, two at a time, and burst out the front door. An ambulance was pulling away, rounding the corner onto the main road as I emerged into the crisp morning air. I had a sick epiphany. I turned to the house and knocked at the door. No answer. I let myself in. “Hello? Hello?” Nobody home. I ran up the stairs and down the long hallway till it dead-ended at Terry’s room. The door was slightly ajar. I pushed it and let it swing open, waiting with fear of what might be. There were papers everywhere. There were books ripped down their spines, pages torn and tossed all over the bed and floor. The shelves that lined the walls were pulled from brackets and strewn about, drawers pulled and emptied from desk and dresser, and the paintings that once gave color and warmth to his room were now reduced to shredded canvas and broken frames.

I backed away from the room, turned and left the house. I got the keys to my pops’ Chevy and drove to First Mercy Hospital with clouded eyes, rolling through stop signs and taking curves and cornering turns at 60 miles per hour. I sped into the lot and ditched my car in the first space I found. In hysterics, I tried desperately to get the secretary to help me find Terry’s room. She could hardly understand me. I said it as slowly as I could, “Terry, he just came in, where is he?” He was on the second floor and she wrote down the room number for me because I told her I was his brother.

I ran up the stairs and then darted around folks in the busy hallway to find him. I came to the room, “203”, and crept in. As soon as Terry’s folks had turned to see me, his pops had already thrown his whole body into a real, Texas-bred right hook that caught me square on the jaw before I even processed what was happening. I heard the sick crack and crumpled to the ground. Orderlies piled in and tried to pull him away, as he had fallen on me with a flurry of shots to ribs, gut, anything revealed.

“If he doesn’t make it I’ll fix you and that friend of yours, I’ll kill you both with my bare hands for what you done!” I tasted blood and felt my consciousness slipping away from me – it had all happened so fast, so lightning fast that I hadn’t had a chance to even think about defending myself.

I came to a while later in a hospital bed. Terry’s ma was there. When I was awake I was confused, and panicked by my bandages. My jaw was sure messed up, and I could feel how swollen it was. I still tasted blood in my mouth. She looked at me with troubled, ragged eyes, with the countenance of someone trying to keep it together in the face of events beyond anyone’s ken. After a while she started to talk to me.

“Now, your jaw’s busted, son, so don’t try to say anything. Your folks are on their way. Terry’s going to be okay, but from what I gather things ain’t square with you two. He done swallowed a lot of pills and different kinds too, so the reaction was complicated but he’s stable. He swallowed them pills and smashed up his room and came wailing into my room and told me what he done. He said he didn’t have nothing left, that everyone

left him. I think given Red's reaction earlier you know right well where you stand in all this. I just wanted you to know Terry's okay and that when all of this is settled, we're moving away. We don't think you should try to keep contact with him because it flat nearly killed him for whatever you done."

She reached for her purse beside her seat, stood up, and began to walk out of the room. "You think long and hard." She left and I never saw her again. Everything was settled out of court, so I never saw Terry's pops again. Worst of all, I was too much of a coward, like I've always been, to apologize to Terry, so I never saw him again either. I was just a yellow shame of a man who didn't ever deserve a friend like Terry, and I thought about what I stood for as I lay there broken in that bed I done set for my own self.

*~ Jordan Kit is a writer and a student of international studies at Baldwin-Wallace College just outside Cleveland, Ohio. His poetry has appeared in The Collective: Ink Stains and Heart Beats. He is the managing editor of Buzz Magazine and also helps with other various literary magazines.*

Vampire Story

by [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]



Dearest Reader:

Apologies. This story has been redacted in full. It is too soon. Just like the big old oil wells, coalmines, and rock drills will dig up a town like Treece, Kansas so good and thorough that the roads collapse in 300-foot holes and the waters get poisoned with lead, so too will other commercial ventures dig up and destroy other human things. There is a boom and bust that happens to ideas just like the boom and bust that happens to towns. The profit seekers come in and suck up all the goodies and leave just a bone-dry skeleton of what once may have been of great use and potential. So it is with the vampire stories. The industry has come in and sucked it clean. Any story about vampires will be so feeble that its content will be crushable between infant fingers. The existing associations -- subconscious, sliding under our skin and our thoughts -- that follow the word *vampire* and the regular actions of the vampire character are too overpowering to defeat. It is too impossible to reap meaning from this theme. All we can do now is sit in wait for the soil to grow fertile once more. But this doesn't mean that we must wait and do nothing. We are not powerless so long as we are observant. There are wells as of yet un(recently)tapped. Somebody write me a story about a prince.

Sincerely,  
Simon Turkel, Managing Fiction Editor, USLitMag



## Some Times

by Steve Inganamort

Sometimes, the most insignificant things can only mean so much.

For example, how upon descending the stairs I found her curled up on the cold cement floor. There was vomit along her cheek and in the tangled webs of what were sallow locks of hair. Here was one of the roads diverged in wood.

It was only last summer that she'd smile and actually mean it. The way her iris would turn a radiant sapphire in response to the sun. At first only her lips would widen, but with enough persuasion, you could force them fully open so that they'd reveal every bit of her smile, in such a way that might bring joy to the lowest of the miserable.

Curled on the floor now, her teeth were yellowed and her eyes were shut. Despite knowing that she was unable to hear me, I asked her: "Come on kid, can't you remember the breeze at Argyle Lake? Wasn't that enough for you?"

I reached for what was left of the tar and examined it. There was only some light residue left in the bag. After slipping it in my pocket I drew her pale hand into my lap and felt her frigid fingers, now reduced to bone.

I put her arm around my neck and reached under her ribs to pick her up. It was no task; she was practically a broom at this point. As I cradled her in my arms like an infant, I thought for a moment that I saw the same chipper personality in her countenance from days old. But no, I thought, it's over.

We reached the top of the stairs and I crossed into her sullen bedroom. There were no windows, which prevented any revelations the sun could have bestowed upon her. There were only scattered bottles, wrappings, knits, and splinters. She didn't look comfortable in her own bed. There were stains in the faded sheets and rips in the pillow. The silence in the air only served to amplify my tensions and frustrations.

Didn't she know better? If only I had been here. Who started it? It can't be too late. She sounded fine on the phone. Argyle Lake. Laughter. Her eyes in humorous conviction. My eyes in serious. Tears.

I found myself in the bathroom staring at the mirror, watching as all else faded except my face. She wasn't the only one who was turning into a stranger.

Where had I been this past year? It was all too frantic to remember, and for all I knew, I could have been rolling naked in the pits of Tartarus. This life works in peculiar ways in that sometimes it doesn't work. The dreams veil the eyes as one wanders in the very filth they have made for themselves. As the veil remains attached to the face, the

face changes and leaves one in shock when it finally comes off. I stood, I saw, and I wept.

I was broken from my trance by a choke that sounded from the other room. I crossed the hall and laid my eyes on the shivering delicate body that was before me. The choking ceased and our eyes met for the first time in over a month.

“Hey, is that you? What are you doing here? Please don’t see me like this,” she managed to whisper.

I took a seat on the bed and for a while stayed silent.

“Just sleep, please, we’ll talk in the morning,” I said. The truth was that I didn’t know what to say.

An awkward silence loomed over us for a good five minutes. Her eyes gazed into the ceiling in an utmost discomfort at my presence. I remained stolid, aching in every part of my body, waiting for the unseen sun to rise. The silver digital clock in the corner read 4:43 a.m.

She shifted herself up in an upright position and her mood changed violently.

“What are you doing here?!” she yelled as she pushed her head forward. “You can’t just come into my house like this! Hey, do you hear me?”

I kept my focus on the clock and remained silent. She didn’t mean that, it was simply a defense mechanism. Knowing her for all these years had sprouted an eye for all reason and run in her behavior.

I did what I knew would calm both her and myself. I shifted over so that I was right next to her and wrapped my arms around her. I gently moved her head to my chest. With this, the room sat as still as a star in the sky, and we slept. Focusing on every intricacy of our breath, we found ourselves disbanding from the eons of complexities we had established for ourselves. We noticed right there that every beauty and every flourish could never match the tranquility of sleep.

*~Steve is a musician currently residing in Tempe, Arizona. He is studying Music Therapy at Arizona State University and writes for leisure. He is a fan of Palahniuk, Salinger, and Paul Neilan.*

## New Castles

by Walter G. Williams

“Alright, well where is this cooler?” Alex asked me.

“It’s in the garage. Chill for a minute. Just leave the beer in the trunk. I’ll go grab it,” I said. I walked away from the tan car sitting parked in the driveway, under the porch, and in through the basement door of the house, leaving Alex at the car along with his girlfriend Emily, my roommate back at college Sam, and our friend Chris.

I was a little bit nervous on account of the general wrongness of bringing four of my college friends to my childhood beach house while my grandparents and mother sat reading upstairs.<sup>1</sup> And on top of it all we were planning to get drunk down on the beach later in the night. I shrugged off the hesitance anyways, and stepped through the hallway into the garage. In the garage I blindly felt for the switch, found it, and searched for the cooler I had promised would be there. The cooler was back in the cobwebs and the mold behind the refrigerator and I reached behind and pulled it out—my hands sticky, coated with the spinner’s stringy web.

Dragging the cooler along the floor I suddenly felt quite conscious of what I was doing, of the racket I was probably making. Afraid of notifying the adults upstairs of our plans, I lifted the cooler off the ground and carried it the rest of the way to the front of the garage where I set it down, bent over and pulled the garage door up into the ceiling.

“Okay! Now we’ve got something,” Emily said.

“Yes we do. You guys want to bring the beer and ice over here?” I said. “Go quick, though, I don’t want my family seeing us.”

Sam and Chris helped Alex with the beer and ice. In all, we had purchased forty-eight beers and two bags full of ice. It was Alex’s opinion that, when drinking beer, one should always purchase a quality brew to suck down sober and then solidify your

---

<sup>1</sup> My grandparents had raised my mother in Charleston, SC where she was sent to a private all-girls school and raised in the conservative southern manner. They were staunch Republicans and Fox News seemed to perpetually scream its angry outlook on the United States from their television set. My mother had broken free from her upbringing and moved to the North where she faithfully voted for the more liberal candidate in each election.

drunken state with cheap cans of domestic beer produced at a macro-brewery.<sup>2</sup> I didn't see a way to disagree with him so that's what we purchased. Eighteen frosted bottles and thirty warm cans went into the cooler along with the two bags of ice.

We ate dinner next, leaving the cooler back in the cobwebs and the mold in order to avoid the punishment that would undoubtedly follow if my mother or grandparents were to find the cooler. The dinner table was somewhat of an awkward affair. As my grandparents looked on, we exchanged sidelong glances and stifled laughter while sitting with my mother and discussing our class schedules, what we hoped to do after college<sup>3</sup>, etc.—we had no time for these conversations! we were about to get drunk on a beach!

Down on the beach we did start getting drunk. As Alex had prescribed we began with the bottled ale, which could not be opened with a simple twist of the wrist and forced us to use cigarette lighters as lever arms to get at the cool brown liquid trapped in the clear glass bottles.

Emily didn't know how to open a beer in this manner. "Alex, can you help me out, please?" she asked her boyfriend.

"Oh my god," he said. "You really can't do it? Come on it's easy." She tried again. "You're a disgrace. Just give it to me," he said plainly. Alex had a funny way of talking to Emily. It was clear that the two were probably not supposed to be together.<sup>4</sup>

My roommate Sam liked Emily, though the two had only met a few days before at a party in a town house in the historic part of Charleston, where horse carriages still carried tourists on foolish, downright obnoxious, "historic" tours of the city.<sup>5</sup> The five of us were all staying with the host of the party that night and I had to talk Sam out of a pass at Emily. ("What if I just walked right into her room and winked? She'd probably follow me out right?" – "I don't think that'd work. Plus, you know she's seeing Alex." – "Oh whatever." – "It wouldn't work, man. Don't even bother with it.") It was then that we made the plans to get together the next night at my old childhood beach house and bring some beers along with us.

We got good and drunk on the beach; we had to, it was much colder and windier than we Northerners had expected the Southern United States to be in late March, but that's not to say that we wouldn't have gotten drunk if it was warm. Once several beers were sloshing in our stomachs and we were well into the canned, domestic variety, Sam took out his guitar and started picking some old folk songs. Three of us on the beach could play a little guitar and we passed the instrument around awhile, from Sam to me, me to Alex, Alex back to Sam, etc.

It went like that awhile. At a certain point I got up to pee. I staggered, now pretty drunk and off balance, a good distance away and stood facing the ocean and listened to

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<sup>2</sup> In this case we had chosen the eighteen pack of the classic Newcastle Brown Ale bottles, a high-class choice for a bunch of underage college kids, as well as a case of Coors classic. Alex hated "that light bullshit."

<sup>3</sup> As liberal arts students, most answers fit firmly in the "grad school" realm.

<sup>4</sup> At a later time Alex had been asked if he thought he would marry Emily. He leaned over to the asker and murmured, "Nothing in this world scares me more." The two had simply been dating too long for a clean break-up, although that's probably what was needed.

<sup>5</sup> The locals complained constantly about these tours that held up traffic and few would stop short of blowing their horn at the carriages or even forcing them off the road with a piece of aggressive driving.

the waves beat against the sand like I had so many times before. I had never done it drunk before, or for that matter, even at night. I stuck a cigarette in my mouth and lit it with the dual-use bottle-opener/cigarette-lighter from my pocket. I stood there smoking for a minute, thinking about my childhood, the times I spent down at this beach, veritably in this precise spot, the sandcastles I built, the moats I dug, the waves I surfed, then I unzipped my fly and started pissing. I pissed all over the beach; I flooded the castle and filled the moat with that golden liquid that had already transformed from beer to piss on its way through my body.

I zipped my fly and turned away from the ocean, away from the crashing waves and away from the moon out over the water. I found myself peering back at the group, Alex with the guitar now, Sam listening intently and singing along when he could, Chris sitting their motionless, and Emily resting quietly with a towel covering her legs on account of the chilly breeze that was now blowing on the beach. I walked back to them and joined in their circle.

“I’m covered in sand,” Emily said. “I forgot how sandy beaches were.”

“Yeah I know, my beer is so sandy, I feel like I’m getting some in my mouth every time a take a sip,” said Sam.

“We’re on a beach, you guys,” I said. “They’re known for their general sandiness.”

Alex finished with the guitar and handed it back to Sam who put it down on the beach, allowing it to lean against his beach chair. The moon was starting to get pretty high overhead and we had made a lot of progress on the forty-eight beers that had started out on the beach with the five of us. Chris and Emily weren’t having such a great time anymore. Emily was too cold to enjoy herself and Chris was simply too drunk. He hadn’t spoken a whole lot and it was a foregone conclusion, at least to me, that he had fallen asleep in his beach chair and missed most of the night’s events.<sup>6</sup>

“I think I want to go back to the house. It’s really late and I’m freezing. Alex do you want to come in?” asked Emily.

“Not really,” he said. “It’s nice down here. How often do we get to sit on a beach and drink beer?”

“I’ll go in with you,” said Chris, catching me off guard with his apparent conscious state.

“Chris, you’re back with us,” I said.

“Shut up, man.”

“Okay, well the two of you can go back if you want, I guess. You can just watch TV in that room until we leave if you want.”

“Yeah, Chris, let’s go. See you guys later,” said Emily. She and Chris stood up and each shook off the sand that had coated their cans and stuck to their skin. They turned away from the three of us that would remain on the beach and walked off together through the dunes, down the street, and back to the beach house where there was no sand and no wind.

“Oh great, we got rid of ‘em,” said Alex. Because we had just met him, he was eager to spend time with Sam and I—he liked us for some reason, I didn’t exactly know

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<sup>6</sup> He was always falling asleep. Only days before the trip he had fallen asleep while Sam and I were drinking and we stacked a number of items on his resting body, including a jug of wine, six empty cans of beer, and two coffee mugs.

why, and his fondness for us had become quite obvious, although I had nothing against it, as I liked him as well.

“I can’t believe we’re in South Carolina,” I said. “I haven’t been here since before we started college. My grandparents probably think I’m retarded now.” As a child I visited my grandparents at least twice a year; they would take me to the aquarium and tell me old Civil War tales outside of The Charleston Museum, the oldest museum in the United States.<sup>7</sup>

“Yeah I’m pretty sure they think we’re all weird,” said Alex.

Sam stood up from his chair and stepped towards the cooler to grab another can of beer. He exchanged the empty one, covered in sand, for a new one that he drew up out of the melted ice.

“How many are left?”

“Two,” Sam said. “I’m actually getting a little bit cold. You guys want to finish these up and go inside?”

I agreed with Sam. I had started shivering when Chris and Emily had gone inside and I was a little bit worried about their presence in the beach house without me there to ensure that their behavior was responsible and would not be frowned upon by my family.

“Yeah for sure,” said Alex. “Should we shotgun these ones and go inside?”

“I’m down,” Sam said.

I was a bit hesitant as I was wholly drunk at this point, but I shrugged it off and agreed. “I’ll do it.”

Sam tossed each of us a beer and we stood up in front of our chairs. We each tilted the cans upside down and dug into our pockets for something to puncture the them with. Alex pulled out his car keys, Sam his pocketknife that he seemed to always have on him, and me with the cigarette lighter I always had in my pocket. I bashed the lighter against the can and formed a large space where the beer could gush out.

“Ready?” asked Alex. “1, 2, 3!”

I cracked the tab on the beer and elevated the can to my mouth. The liquid rushed in and I swallowed it quickly, retching on the sudsy foam at the end. I threw my can to the beach, I was always the first done when it came to shotgunning a beer, and watched the other two struggle to finish their own task. Alex was the next done and he threw the can down with a grimace and a belch and joined me in watching Sam finish. A few seconds later he did drain the beer and his can joined the others in the sand. He looked a little bit sick and he bent over putting his hands on his knees. “Let’s go in,” he said.

“You’re a champ!” Alex exclaimed. He started picking up the cans that were littered over the beach while Sam sat back down; if he wasn’t drunk before then he certainly was now. I helped Alex clean up the beer cans and we tossed them into the cooler, filling it with the now empty eighteen bottles and thirty cans.

On the way back from the beach now, Sam was in the front with a headlamp and Alex and I trailed behind him a few steps. I heard a slight rustling sound to my left; it came from what I knew to be an open field that I had walked by hundreds of times on the way to and from the beach. Sam heard it as well and swung his head around to face the disturbance, illuminating the grass with his headlamp. Eight pairs of glowing eyes stared back at the three of us through the misty shaft of light cast by Sam’s forehead.

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<sup>7</sup> I loved those stories and would listen for hours, but now I was too old and had my college professors to tell me the “real” versions of the stories.

“What the fuck is that?” asked Alex.

“I think it’s just some deer. We should fuck with ‘em.” said Sam.<sup>8</sup>

“No way. I’m going back to the house.” Alex walked away from the illuminated field and back to the beach house where he would be joining Emily and Chris in the TV room.

“Let’s try to sneak up on them. If you keep shining the light then I doubt they’ll run off,” I said. “Be quiet, though.”

We got within about twelve feet of the largest deer before I spooked him with a stifled cough, which sent him scurrying into the pseudo-forest of tall marsh grass and dunes behind the field.

“We could’ve had him!” exclaimed Sam.

“What would we have done? We don’t have a weapon.”

“Still. We could have at least touched him or something.”

“I doubt it, man. Let’s go back, I’ve gotta warm up,” I said.

“Alright fine,” Sam responded bitterly. “He’ll probably be back later, anyways.”

We walked back to the house where I saw the cooler lying in front of the house in the driveway; evidently Alex had already disposed of the empty bottles and cans and left the cooler, which was fine with me. I swung open the basement door and climbed the stairs to the house where I saw Emily watching TV with Alex on the floor in front of her armchair, and Chris across the room lying motionless, passed out on the couch snoring.

“Chris, you want to go up to bed?” I shook him awake.

He woke up with a start and opened his eyes, which were out of focus and dazed—at least I think they were as it was difficult to see past his half-shut lids. “Yeah, sure,” he mumbled.

“Here, I’ll show you the bedroom.” I took him up the stairs to the second floor and showed him the bunkroom, the same one that housed three of my cousins and me countless times. “Just grab one of the bottom bunks,” I said and left the room.

Back in the TV room, Sam was absent, missing the reality show that Emily and Alex were so engaged in.

“Hey have you guys seen Sam?” I asked Emily and Alex.

“Ah, I don’t think so,” said Alex.

“No he was definitely just in here a second ago. I think he might have gone back downstairs or something,” said Emily. “I’m not really sure, though.”

I figured he had gone out for a cigarette and I felt like joining him, so I walked back down to the basement and pushed open the door that led to the driveway. Sam was there sitting on the pavement smoking.

“Dude, I found a gun in your grandparents closet,” he said. “Two guns actually.”

“Yeah I know. My grandfather has them in case he has to shoot a snake or something like that. Pretty much everyone down here has a gun, though. It’s the South.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Sam was always trying to “fuck” with animals. Typically it was squirrels back on campus, which I usually refused. I had gone along with him a few times, twice in Maine when we messed around with some ducklings and chased a beaver in kayaks until it slapped its broad tail at us and raced off, and once in Ohio, when the two of us had gone fishing and cooked the captured sunfish over a fire, although that’s hardly “fucking” with animals.

<sup>9</sup> Liberal, educated, “Yankee”, and close-minded rationale. I probably should have known better than to assume this, but in my experience it held true.

He took a long drag on his cigarette and the tip glowed orange. “You want to bring it out here and shoot it?” he asked looking up at me, a glint of expectation in his eyes like a patient who has just been told there is one last option remaining. “We can just shoot the BB gun, it’ll be quiet.”

“I don’t know, man. That’s kind of sketchy,” I said. Obviously I saw the drawbacks of a situation that involved two drunken college students and a lethal weapon<sup>10</sup>, but I dismissed them. “I guess you can grab it.”

He handed me a cigarette and I took a few pulls of it while he ran inside, a bit off-balance, to retrieve the gun he so desperately wanted to shoot. A minute or two passed before he emerged from the basement gun in hand. He walked towards me and extended his hand asking for his cigarette, which I returned. “Okay then. What should I aim at?” he asked. “Should we go shoot the deer?”

“I don’t think so. Just aim at that over there.” I was referring to a small triangle of reflected light that stood across the driveway from where we were standing, perhaps twenty or thirty yards away. He drew the gun up to his shoulder and peered down the sight, cigarette in his mouth, bent on firing the BB into the center of the target I had just provided—the target that he was probably imagining to be the heart of the deer we had seen just minutes before. He took aim and pulled the trigger. The gun went off with a pop, only slightly louder than the bursting of well-inflated bubble gum, followed by a slightly louder ping as the BB struck the target.

“Ha!” he exclaimed. “Got it! Here, try it.” He offered me the gun with his left hand while his right removed the cigarette from his mouth.

I accepted the rifle; it felt warm where his hands had been holding firmly onto the stock. I hit the target on my first shot also, and felt the same twang of excitement that Sam had felt moments ago.

As I lifted the gun to my shoulder to take my second shot at the target, I heard the basement door swing open behind me. I turned to look who it was, assuming Alex or Emily, but it was my mother. She stood in the doorway in her pajamas and glasses, squinty-eyed, staring at the two of us, Sam with a cigarette hanging from his lips and me with a gun held to my shoulder.

“Oh,” I said. “Hey Mom.”

“Can I talk to you for a second?” she requested.

“Yeah, sure,” I answered. “Sam will you hold this gun for a second?” I handed it back to him and walked to meet my mother. I was certain she could smell the drunk on me and she could undoubtedly smell the cigarettes we had been smoking as her nose wrinkled up a bit when I came near.

“I’m a little bit worried about you guys waking up your grandparents.”

“Okay,” I said tentatively. I was nervous and shifted my weight accordingly.

“If you guys are out here shooting a gun, then I can only imagine that it’s going to get worse.”

“Okay. Sorry,” I said. “Goodnight.”

“Night.” She turned and walked back up the stairs to her bedroom.

Sam and I met eyes and burst out laughing in the way that often succeeds tense encounters with authority figures.

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<sup>10</sup> Some may take issue with the designation of “lethal” being applied to a BB gun, but I’ve been told countless times that a BB that connects with a human eye can be fatal, and I’m sticking to it.



“You want to go shoot the gun at a deer?” Sam asked me.  
“Might as well,” I said. “Fuck it, right?”

## Man Aglow

by Saul Termenne, *winner of USLM May 2012 fiction contest*

“Tonight’s the show, Kev! Did you get a ticket yet?” Lily and Kevin were having lunch together by the river down in the woods at the edge of town, just a stumble over roots and twigs down a muddy bank from the main Highway 21. Brought the food wrapped in a blanket because picnic baskets seemed a little too played out for their tastes. Kevin’s car was parked up the bank in the sun on the dried-up golden grass on the side of the road. Where they were, on a two-seater rock down by the river, it was well shaded by densely leaved summer trees. Thank God for that too, because it was presently upwards of ninety degrees (Fahrenheit; this story takes place in the states, northern Ohio, town of Odessa, home of Odessa senior high school, mascot the moo-cow) in the sun.

Kevin picked up a pebble and chucked it into the river, where it was snatched up by the crest of a passing spray of water and swept away downstream out of sight with close to the same pattern of movement as a sprig of Kevin’s thought when it is brought too close to the overwhelming momentum of one of Jamie’s amp-interference guitar solos<sup>11</sup> and is plucked by the sound robbed by the static battered by the drums and eventually eroded completely as the song wears on, no matter how Kevin tried to resist.

Jamie was a friend of theirs. He happened to be the one playing the show tonight that Lily had just asked Kevin about his ticket for. “Not yet,” Kevin said and asked Lily if she thought they’d have any tickets left at the door.

“I bet they will. You should buy one from Jamie though.” Because Jamie won’t get paid for sales at the door; he’ll only get paid for sales he makes himself, Kevin knew. But for some reason (unbeknownst to Kevin, Jamie had dated Lily for a month two years ago; Jamie was Lily’s first fuck) that Kevin had never been able to pin down (not that he’d tried extensively) Kevin didn’t like Jamie all too much, so he said, “I’ll buy one at the door. I’m not going sober though. When is your brother buying us alcohol?”

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<sup>11</sup> Jamie’s music was relatively experimental. Some of his solos sounded more like the static from a bad radio connection than a functioning musical instrument. Jamie always maintained that his sound was intentional and he insisted that it meant something.

When they finished making out they left the food trash (Ziploc plastic bags and balled up tin foil) in the mud by the river and climbed back up the roots to Kevin's pickup truck. There was a flask in the glove compartment that Kevin had stolen from his dad<sup>12</sup> last summer and by 10PM the flask was filled with plastic-handle rum, Kevin's wallet was short about fifteen bucks, they were parked on the dark side of a CVS parking lot, and Lily was reclined all the way back in the driver's seat singing along to a song on the radio. Kevin took a swig and made a sour face saying, "Kgah!" and offered Lily a sip while beginning to screw the little silver cap back on top. He knew very well from past experience that Lily would politely decline.

But "Sure, I'll have a taste," Lily said.

"Look at you!" Kevin pulled his chin back into his neck so the skin bunched up and simultaneously raised his eyebrows so that a mirror image of the bunched-up neck skin appeared across the plane of his now wrinkled-up forehead. "Drinking and driving? Look at you!"

"I don't see why I shouldn't," Lily said in an obnoxiously loud voice.

Kevin unscrewed the flask cap and handed it over. Lily tilted a taste onto her tongue and immediately her face scrunched, as though it were an earthworm doubling up after being stepped on. Her whole face looked like Kevin's forehead and neck had just looked a moment ago. "God, that is awful!" Lily hissed, cranking open the car door and bending into the open air and spitting twice on the parking lot pavement. "Don't ever let me do that again!" she said loudly, handing back the flask, thrusting the flask in Kevin's direction, drawing an inordinate amount of attention to the flask.

The show was scheduled to start at 11, but Lily and Kevin knew that that probably meant Jamie wouldn't start playing until 1130, maybe even 12 depending on how the crowd liked the other acts, so they had some time to kill. They drove down 21 to where it meets the dirt road up by the Jefferson farm and then drove down the dirt road apiece to where it branches off into a dirt circle. Lily parked on the edge of the circle with the side of the car pressed up against the hushing tall grass. The surrounding field was dark and extended out empty for what seemed like miles. Lily shut off the engine and the two of them climbed out, bantering ("Hey turn the game back on." "It'll kill the car battery." "I don't care I was listening to it." "Fine." "Where are you going?" "Outside." "Should I come?" "No, you stay in the car." "Really?" "Of course not really. Come out with me.") and hopped up on the tires and into the bed of the truck where they undressed partially and had unprotected sex for a minute, Kevin listening to the Indians game on the radio and Lily to the *hush-hush* of the wind in the grass, and then they lay still beneath the stars and the silence of the sky for the space of about an hour. After (it was 11 now), Lily drove them to Cleveland while Kevin split his attention between taking small sips from the rum and holding his head out the window, tongue lolling, and letting the wind

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<sup>12</sup> Kevin's father was, by profession, an airport layout manager for the Cleveland Hopkins International Airport. He was responsible for planning the layout of the gift shops and the fast food joints and all other sort of retail stand within the waiting area. His primary concern was that all of the customers' needs were systematically met. If they needed food, they would have it. Drink, it's theirs. Travel cushions by the truckload. Any need imaginable was to be met efficiently and it was to be met within the confines of the security checkpoints.

pull back and whip the skin on his cheeks. Once in the city, Lily found a parking spot near the club where Jamie was scheduled to play. The plastic-handle rum was stowed safely under Kevin's seat and he made sure to fill up the flask to the brim and tuck it away in his back pocket before getting out of the truck and entering the club for the show.

At the door Kevin paid twelve dollars for a ticket and walked in, following Lily's lead. It was beginning to rain outside but the music and talking in the building was loud enough for both Kevin and Lily not to notice. It was a fairly large club, six stages altogether. Neither of them had ever been to this particular venue, so they ended up waiting against the back wall in the Main-Stage room, behind a crowd of a hundred or so. Jamie was scheduled to play on Stage 5 though, one of the smaller stages upstairs. "This is a pretty big crowd, Kev!" Lily was standing up on her toes trying to get a good look at their surroundings. "I can't believe he got this gig," she said. One of Kevin's hands, the one that he was currently aware of, was spread on the small of Lily's back, stoking with thumb and occasionally peeking pinky into the top of her pants. The other of his hands, the one that he wasn't aware of, was fiddling with the flask in his back pocket. "I can't believe it either." Kevin suddenly realized the cold metal screw top between the fingers of his right hand and his attention shifted. He pulled out the flask, twisted off the top, took a drink, and shoved it back in his pocket. "When do you think they'll start?" Kevin murmured, but it was too loud for Lily to hear. It was too loud to communicate via anything but on-beat head nods and undulations of body.

On stage now was a metal band from Canada. Their music was dated, but they managed to have a good crowd going. The drummer was smoking a cigarette and the lead singer was stumbling back and forth over the mic stand, holding a half-full forty-ounce of malt liquor, screaming at the top of his lungs for somebody to "Do something already!" One of the bald guys in the crowd up front climbed onto the stage, shoved the lead singer out of the way, grabbed the mic, and started shouting, "New King! New King! New King!" while pumping his right fist up in the air as though there was something way up over his head that he couldn't see or reach but that he wanted somehow to destroy. A lot of the onlookers followed his lead. Soon a sea of outstretched arms erupted upwards from the body of the crowd, each crowned with a bald fist like the head of a dumb bird. When the lead singer regained his balance his first move was to take a long drink from his bottle of liquor, inadvertently letting it dribble out of the corners of his mouth and down the sides of his chin. The other band members weren't paying this picture much mind. In fact they were so caught up in their noise making, heads bashing up and down, faces scrunched up, eyes probably closed, that it was unclear whether or not they were even aware of the attempted coup. After wiping his chin with his shirt sleeve, the lead singer came up stage-right and punched New King full force in the face, strategically landing the blow so that New King's body went limp and his head snapped back and he got a blank look in his eyes, not dissimilar to the look in the eyes of a turkey struggling to breath in a heavy downpour, and he fell headlong back into the fists of the crowd. The crowd seemed to love this a whole lot. A group of five or six rushed in to catch the falling King and hoist him over their heads, passing him along to the back of the room where he was let down and dropped with a whump to the floor right beside where Kevin and Lily were standing. The New King, now sprawled on his back, twitched almost imperceptibly and then rolled stiffly up on his elbow, his thickly glazed eyes landing squarely fixed on Lily's clear ones. The King took notice of Kevin and his

pupils vibrated rapidly trying to hone in on the outline of his body. When finally he managed to make sense of his surroundings, the King stood up, stumbled once, and began to approach Kevin, making menacing hand gestures and breathing heavy breaths. He did so without any immediately obvious reason, though he had probably come up with one in his head by the time he was within striking distance of Kevin's face. For example: *Look at this faggot. What the fuck is this faggot looking at?*

Meanwhile, the crowd was absolutely digging the Canadians' performance. About twenty of them up front by the stage were pushing one another, throwing occasional punches and kicks at one another, trying to clear up enough space around themselves in which to stand safely. Way off in the distance someone was clamping his bloody nose with the bottom of a friend's removed t-shirt.

The spirit of pushing and shoving, as it swept through and possessed the crowd, had an interesting effect on the floor space (about the size of twenty portable toilets arranged in a five-by-four rectangle) directly in front of the stage. The space in question was, within moments of the King's fall, emptied of all persons but a very raucous few and occupied instead by a dense pocket of hot sweat and fear. It was mostly fear though, as the sweat in the air began to dissipate with time. On the edges of the pocket were people leaning hard against one another, trying with all their might not to be pushed in. Those who were weak enough to be pushed in, or adventurous enough or thoroughly wasted enough at heart to venture in of their own accord, were promptly pushed to the ground and kicked in the teeth if they weren't strong or quick enough to get out in time. A clever kid got pushed in and, thinking fast, pulled out a pack of cigarettes from his shirt pocket, offering them out free to anyone that looked stronger or more angry than himself. This worked and the pocket of fear calmed just long enough for the kid to get out with all his skin intact. Then there was one woman who thought it would be okay to dance in the pocket of fear. A young man trying to get laid helped her to her feet.

As when one climbs into a full bathtub and the water is displaced in proportion to the volume of one's body, so when a pocket of fear is dropped in the middle of the crowd are the members of the crowd displaced in proportion to the magnitude of the fear.

At the edges of the pocket people pushed up against one another, cowered against one another, huddled and hid for protection behind one another, all for the terrible fear of one another. This effect was felt through the entire crowd like a shockwave spreading from the center outwards. The people standing on the edges of the crowd near the walls, the extreme outsiders, for instance those standing near where Kevin and Lily were standing, would be shoved and rammed and piled up against the wall. Some would even be pushed out the door and onto the street. Others still would think the whole thing silly and walk out on their own, having pushed the pocket down beneath themselves and their opinions of it.

Thanks to Jamie, the shockwave never quite hit Kevin or Lily. If Jamie hadn't seen them, walked up right then and grabbed Lily by the shoulder, gesturing towards the stage with manic arm heaves and pointed fingers and mouthing desperately over the din of crowd, "This is the wrong stage! We're playing upstairs!" then the King, who was still eyeing Kevin, would have, within seconds of Jamie's hypothetically non-existent arrival, been accidentally shoved from behind, sending his shoulder hard struck into Kevin's chest. Kevin would have, alarmed, pushed the King back, and the two would have fought, tumbling around on the floor wrestling, getting bloody and chip-toothed, until a

bouncer finally would have come barreling through and peeled them apart. They would have been thrown out of the club. Kevin would have missed Jamie's big show. The King would have passed out some place on the sidewalk.

But instead Jamie had seen them, and in so doing had managed to help them avert a potential disaster. Lucky. He led the two by Lily's hand upstairs to Stage 5, past stages 2-4, which Lily noticed were getting progressively smaller as their numbers increased.

Stage 5 was the size of a full bed. On it were a couple of people: a few black guys with microphones, one black guy with an unplugged electric guitar which he sometimes pretended to strum, two skimpily dressed black women, one on either side of the stage, jump-and-jiggle-dancing like battery powered bookends, and a boombox in the back corner from which all the sound seemed to be coming. Sometimes one of the guys with a microphone would say something like, "Yeah!" or "Uh-huh!" The guitarist was wearing dark glasses and he nodded along to the music with pursed lips and a purposeful poise that looked like it was practiced at least a lot of times in a bathroom mirror.

"Is that guy even playing the guitar?" Lily asked Jamie, leaning closer than she had to into his ear.

"Doesn't look like it," Jamie said, his lips tickling Lily's cheek.

"I'm gonna piss." Kevin went to the bathroom, managing to slide through most of the crowd without having to make contact with a single other person's body. It was a thin crowd, thinner than a great depression era dustbowl stew. It was so thin that you could see each individual person's face if you wanted. Kevin pissed. He didn't flush. He might have ripped the stall door off its hinges if someone else hadn't already done it. Same for the toilet seat. He went back out to the floor, re-zipping his fly, saw Jamie pressing his lips up against Lily's lips through the thin crowd, felt something unpleasant strike in his chest, reached for the flask in his back pocket, took a drink, was grabbed abruptly by the arm and startled by a voice in his ear that seemed to be yelling, "What the fuck are you doing!" He turned to see that it was a club bouncer. He cursed the bouncer and the bouncer escorted him out, saying that this club doesn't allow any sort of pleasurable items to be brought in from the outside. Kevin stood alone on the sidewalk, looking into the rain and drear of the empty gray Cleveland night, and spat.

Kevin's first instinct was to walk back into the club, but he was recognized right away and stopped at the door and told to leave. His second instinct was to take a long pull from the flask. It dribbled down his chin. His third and final instinct was to turn his t-shirt inside out and try again, but the bouncer was apparently wise to this trick. He grabbed Kevin by the shirt collar and roughly shook him. "I thought I told you not to waste my fucking time!" The bouncer was a relatively large man, so Kevin resolved not to try again. There was the pickup parked on the other side of the street, but Lily still had the keys with her and Kevin's phone was locked in the car so he couldn't call to tell her what had happened. He walked around the corner and up the street.

The neighborhood was deteriorating the further Kevin got from the club. About three blocks north now and the windows were boarded up and/or Duck taped shut with black plastic garbage bags and there was broken glass on the sidewalks and most of the streetlamps didn't work. Kevin could have handled the boarded up windows, because he took them like hieroglyphs to mean that these buildings were abandoned and thus free of any dangerous characters, but once he noticed the broken glass at his feet and the cracked traffic light bulbs overhead he stopped in his tracks, found a high ledge to stand under for

cover from the rain, which was beginning to let up a little by now but was still a bother, and took a moment to consider the relative-hypothetico-probabilistic risks and benefits of continuing to walk this route through the city. After a quick and frustrated “Fuck this!” and shake of the head, a momentary lament of his utter directionlessness and lack of belonging in life, Kevin decided to turn back towards the club.

First a little more of a break from the rain though. He leaned against the grate of a bodega storefront under an awning that would have been bright yellow if not for the layer or two of grime and bird stools. It was getting chilly out. A cold front may have been coming in from the lake and the north as sometimes happened this time of year. Kevin was wearing a black sweatshirt that, like the flask, he had stolen from his father-the-airport-layout-manager’s closet earlier that day. He pulled the hood of it up over his head to shield his neck and ears from the wind. It was a little bit big on him and the hood hung low over the tops of his eyes.

In way of illicit substances, Kevin had on him a pre-rolled joint, which he had slid into the emptied casing of a ballpoint pen (which pen, as is probably expected by now, was nabbed from the desk in his father-the-A-L-M’s upstairs office), stowed away in his pocket, and still about half the flask left. Before venturing back into the street and the rain Kevin polished off the rest of the rum. It was fairly easy to get down, as he was drunk enough to be indifferent to his senses, although he did gag and vomit a little, but with ease. He threw the flask at the sidewalk, “Finished,” and it clanked around and bounced over to the curb, coming to a stop beside the only parking meter on the street that wasn’t currently hooded with a plastic bag. This irregularity, the unhoodedness of the parking meter, caught Kevin’s eye, as a grown man in nothing but a diaper walking down the street in the middle of winter might catch someone’s eye, and startled him out of the rhythm of the tune he was humming, causing what was left of his attention to pull out from the moment, leaving his body standing idly on its way. From way up here, the world to Kevin’s attention looked like it was composed of nothing more than tiny plastic nubs, symbols, almost like plastic army men, static, each perfectly analyzable in its properties and position with respect to the others in space and in time. There was a little nub for the flask. There was a little nub for the unhooded parking meter, which now had forty-five minutes left on it. There was also a little nub for everything else. Kevin’s body was on its way. When his attention returned, and lucky it did, it brought news from the fourth dimension that if he didn’t go pick up the flask he’d just thrown, then tomorrow he’d be without a flask. This seemed true enough. Bending beside the parking meter, Kevin almost fell. Standing back up with flask in hand, Kevin saw a figure in the distance, the outline of a man, described in the foggy mist by the yellowish glow of one of the few still working streetlamps, standing on the corner of the next block up. The man was hunched slightly beneath the weight of a large pack and not moving. It was unclear what he was looking at. He seemed to have his hands pushed deep in his pockets, forcing a shrug at nothing or everything in particular. Kevin decided that this man was going to try and sell him drugs.

*Nigger’ll prolly shoot me if I don’t buy from him.*

Kevin really didn’t use language like this very often. He had been brought up in a good household. But on such a gray and rainy night as this, this kind of language seemed his only trustworthy protection and his only companion. It was the only weapon he’d carried out with him. He tried to take a sip from the flask but it was empty. There was

no Swiss Army knife in his pocket for him to compulsively run his fingers over. He'd forgotten that in the car with his phone and the rest of the rum. Getting spooked now, Kevin turned back for the club, being sure to walk at a deliberate clip.

Sometimes time will jump forward without anyone realizing.

Much later, after Jamie's show was over, Kevin spotted Lily coming out of the club. Her hair was a mess and her face was shining under a thin film of sweat. She must have been dancing pretty hard in there. Kevin was sitting on a stoop about halfway down the block from the club entrance with a man named Nate, whom he had met just a few hours ago begging on the corner under a streetlamp a few blocks north in the empty part of town. Kevin and Nate had just finished smoking a joint. They were talking about the Indians and passing the time. When Kevin saw Lily he shot up to his feet and jogged towards her shouting her name. She looked surprised to see him. She thought he had left for the night. It hadn't occurred to her where he might have gone. "What took you so long in there?" Kevin said. They had stopped to talk directly in front of the club entrance. Kevin pulled Lily aside, out of the flow of foot traffic. "Where the hell did you go?" Lily wanted to know. Kevin would tell her about it later. First he meant to introduce her to his new friend, Nate, whom he had been chatting with for the past hour or so, whose life story he now knew a good chunk of, whom he had shared a joint and a good number of laughs with on the stoop halfway up the block. Lily and Nate were pleased to meet one another, though Lily felt uncomfortable shaking the man's hand. Kevin handed Nate a twenty-dollar bill and got back to the pickup truck. Lily took the driver's seat. On the highway Kevin turned on the dashboard radio. It was an old analog radio that you had to tune manually with a plastic knob. "So where the hell did you go?" Lily said. "Got kicked out." It was proving hard to get a clear sound. Between every station was an ocean of static hushing and crackling in the background behind the voices of radio announcers and the tunes of guitars, seeming like it was threatening at all times to break in and swallow them up. Kevin was trying to make out the final score of the Indians game but he couldn't hear through the steady garble. They drove past a large, well-lit rest area of whose layout it was probably somebody's job to manage. Eventually the confrontation of human voice with the unrelenting static backdrop became too irritating for Kevin to listen to. He turned the tuner between stations and resigned himself to listening to the pure *hush-hush* of radio waves rubbing up against each other and against himself and against Lily the same. "Will you turn that crap off?" Lily said. "I can't hear a thing." But Kevin was basking in the static, letting it whip his thoughts out of his head like a strong wind. He was drunk on it. Lily turned the tuner. Kevin's phone rang. A voice on the radio said, "At any rate it's like any narrative – you suspend disbelief and then become immersed." Lily turned the radio off. She didn't like late-night talk shows. She had really enjoyed Jamie's music.

There were fifteen minutes left on the hoodless parking meter. Kevin had managed to bum a cigarette from one of the club bouncers, who had agreed to give him one solely on the agreement that Kevin not dare try and get back in the club again. Standing outside near the back entrance, smoking, though not drawing the smoke into his lungs because he feared lung cancer, a technique for preventing cancer about as effective as pulling out is as a contraceptive, Kevin's attention left him again. This time it was in response to a group of four exquisitely large black males. Kevin recognized them as the group that had played on Stage 5 before he got hauled out. They were coming out the



back door now, leaning up on each other's shoulders as if they were on the edge of a mosh pit, talking casually, telling jokes and talking truths and smoking cigarettes having a good time. Kevin's attention recalled with precision the amount of time it took for Bodie to pull the gun out, from where it was being hidden on the back tire of a nearby parked car, and have it cocked to shooting position in Season 4 Episode 13 of *The Wire*: just under a second. He remembered hearing somewhere in the buzz of half-thought-out conversations and murmurs that people of a certain kind will sometimes kill innocent people of another kind for no reason but to bolster their own reputations. His heart began to pound as he imagined the newspaper stories of his tragic death and the mug shots of the cold-blooded murderers who had caused it. When Kevin's attention returned to the moment, his legs took him walking north, preferring the abandoned street to the huddle of frightening performers. It was no longer raining, but the ground was wet and well puddled. Standing still, Kevin would have staggered and fallen, but the momentum of his movement kept him afloat in the emptiness of the street.

His legs took him along in gliding strides, not in a particularly straight line, but at least still within the wide limits of the sidewalk. Past the quarter-sized glob, the bird-stool bodega, the not-blind parking meter with now only six minutes left before the red flag would pop up and its hospitality would expire, the glowing outline of the man – “Spare some change, sir?” – still standing beneath the only working streetlamp, Kevin walked. He was far from the club now, half a mile at the very least, and it was dark and nearly silent. Occasionally he would hear the whir of a car driving by on one of the adjacent streets or the crash of an alley trashcan in the wind, but aside from these few intrusions, Kevin was alone. He began to inspect his surroundings. There were more dark alleys than he remembered from his previous walk. They were as terrifying to his body as the rows upon rows of books in his father-the-A-L-M's office were to his mind. In them was a cozy home for as of yet unknown threats to his current state of being. But they seemed empty, aside from the wind and the trashcans, and Kevin was growing bored, weary and exhausted beyond words. It was getting late. He leaned against a light post and started to doze. *Can't fall asleep. Will get mugged or beaten up or both. The joint*, he remembered, but then it occurred to him that smoking a joint, though it would serve to hold his attention for the duration of its burn, would in the long run just make it more likely that he fall asleep. *Could try to explore dark alley*, but that struck him as an unnecessarily risky idea and he imagined more newspaper stories about himself. An image of Lily flashed across Kevin's closed eyelids, then an image of Jamie, then an image of Lily and Jamie together. Down the street a ways the parking meter expired and popped red. Somewhere else a little further south a college student was snapped out of a near existential crisis, which may very well have ended in suicide, by catching a smile from a walking-by stranger that, though he tried, he could not manage to wipe off. Kevin suddenly felt compelled to find and introduce himself to the glowing man, the man whose outline he had by now come to know.

He walked south and found the man still standing there. Up close he wasn't glowing so much anymore. He was missing two teeth, one on top and one on bottom, which sometimes made it hard to hear what he was saying.

POEMS

Subcutaneous

by Eric Wang

On our map of skin we wish for  
*A priori* regions safe in amnesiac mist,  
Cartologic blanks smoother than laser printer paper,  
Pure plains unscrolled, cool to the touch,  
Before the arroyos and crevasses of time, the carving of  
Fated blows and cuts; past vulcan vomit  
Of acne, cankers, boils; beyond the  
Tundra exuviations of dandruff, psoriasis, pox,  
The tectonics of varicose veins, scar tissue, the  
Lexicon of geologic forces that rift, rend, realize  
Our map of skin that we wished for,  
Finally ending the living eons in a  
Charred revelation of earth.

Fifty Laps Around The Sun

by William B. Jones

No black balloons,  
For me today;  
No cake and ice cream,  
That's OK;  
I didn't want a party anyway.

No folks,  
To gather 'round and cheer;  
Still, I'm not crying,  
In my beer;  
I made it through another year.

I chose to work,  
Instead of play;  
I've no close friends;  
What can I say?  
I've lived to work another day...

And still I say,  
"So far, so good";  
My life's turned out,  
The way it should;  
I wouldn't change it if I could.

So I sit here,  
And turn the page;  
The next one's blank,  
I'm not a Sage;  
I'll face the next one like the rest, with courage.

I'll fill each day,  
With laughs and fun;  
And look back,  
At a victory won;  
Another lap around the sun.

The Rifle

by Alexander Fisk

With a light heart, I am to bear the heavy burden.  
Commanded by the will of my country,  
I aid in substituting one oppression with another.  
The agony of doubt and the angst of fear  
Wears on my master, whose soul grows heavy.  
His grip is faithful and his caress, dear,  
Uttering prayers for me to be ever steady.

Amidst the battle, my voice carries further  
than my sheathed, elder brother.  
The universal language that is my violent sound  
is the cacophony the world can never smother.  
On this day, when men die in vain,  
I will fall upon the broken ground  
only to be taken up and used again.

Obnoxious Ginger

by 'Rob'

Midnight came like a drunken sailor  
crashing into tables heaped with empty bottles  
loud and obnoxious the clock gave a sigh  
and ticked on - the morning gingerly peeked  
through dusty curtains and blushed at the sight  
of a hungover breakfast jostled  
from the grill to the plate

## The Abashed American Voyeur

by Matthew Sprung

He needed more than bourbon soaking smirks  
Urbanity imbibed yet lonely stuck  
The darkened wood from bar to thigh converged  
Her hues to him held night's euphoric pulse.

She dared to air one gaze back to his plea  
Plucked time slowed through - his narrative set sea  
Knowingly her chin brushed shoulder blade  
He wondered was her strategy in jest -

In a booth I sat quite still, engaged  
Enjoying this routinely opening act  
Ever mundane yet countered by some rapture  
I sipped my judgments down and knew the rest

Her narrative was born between her legs,  
He only hoped and did not *know* as I  
A cowering lamb could not serve her brawn  
That needed a wolf that was my hostile charm

He did not know of smoother skin than lace  
She did enough, aroused me from night's droll  
I knew I could decode her unknown thoughts  
Fueled by nothing but my will to will

She stood and swooped not mortal, purely grace  
Wiped her lacy fingers down my face  
But bourbon had left its warm insidious stains  
As my own mug had fooled a crippled dog

It was not mine but the lamb that answered her call.

--END--