

About Five Hours Staring at the SUN

By Bex Peyton

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest Editor DIRK VAN NOUHUYS writes...There is so much to like about this story. I like its bold imagination; I like its surprises; I like its flashes of language; I like its willingness to ask for active reading. You get your first clue that there's something special going on in the eighth word, a small word: "an." This is not a story about 'a' earth or 'the' earth, but one of several. The story is opening out to possible Earths. There are many flashes of telling language: "the road must be edging disappearance," not 'getting far away' or even 'receding' but "edging disappearance," a phrase surprising in its vividness, which also echoes the overall plot and theme of the story. Likewise, the different images of deer that follow the protagonist to the end. I admire the economy: the protagonist's present day-relation to his mother is portrayed fully, but his upbringing is ringingly evoked in four words: "she was never kind." Enough said. There are genuine surprises of character, there are surprises of plot, I won't indulge in spoilers. I like this story because I see it comes from a special talent.*

Senior Editor CHARLES writes...*There are wannabes who will struggle all their lives to write like this 24 year old emerging author. There's talent and then there's this which only proves one of the laws of the universe here at FOTD: the number of great writers going into a Masters of Fine Arts in Creative Writing program equals the number of great writers coming out. Some things can't be taught.*

(Spacing and font size is author's own.)

QUALITY QUOTABLES (for the love of language)...

The beetles fly in cyclical paths around his fists like electrons, diving in once they've gotten a smell for the skin's saccharine spoil.

They kiss to a laugh track. His hand traces, trails down his boyfriend's flat stomach, lightly cups him, feels the precum through his briefs. His boyfriend shadows this, flickering between his eyelids, some handsy apparition at this point. The frisk yields an embarrassing softness. "What's wrong?"

Bex Peyton
2,840 Words

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Summer foliage reminds him of an old Earth. Leaves so green in the sunlight they appear almost neon, thickly draped over their wooden structure, he thinks: anything could be under there, ancient beasts overgrown and dormant, for now. It's so hot in the car he has both windows down; the disgust he feels swimming in his own sweat outweighs his fear of an insect getting sucked into the vehicle. Having the visor down doesn't help much when the light is raw gold and washing out the road, so he drives slow, just in case.

The destination slips his mind—there is something else clawing, something the absence of distractions is parting ways for, something he has avoided coming to terms with. He finds it easy to forget anyways when all he has to do is listen to the GPS and drive. He has made this trip so many times before, but something keeps him from memorizing the route. There could be music playing but the steady hum of wind through the car drowns it out. For now he just focuses on each bend, keeping the tires on the pavement, clearing the infrequent passerby. Occasionally, he wonders if this will last forever—if he'll stay trapped on these backroads forever.

And in the abstraction of the thought, he is reminded of a moment. *His father, heavy and hulking, drags the limp body by the antlers, leaving a slick trail of wet blood on the forest floor. "Hold this", he says, handing his son the rifle that did the damage, the butt still sticky red from the killing blow. His father was a terrible hunter. "You're not supposed to smash its face like*

that”, he thinks, holding the rifle an arms-length away, “even I know that”. A beetle, black, reflecting the harsh rays of mid-summer, trails toward his shoe. He lifts his foot to let it pass under, waits for its safe emergence on the other side of his sneaker. His father is busy tying the buck’s legs together with rope, so he kneels down and picks at the grass. The rifle drops to the ground with a harsh thud and his father is on him. “What the fuck are you doing?!”

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He feels every slant, every curve in the road, the rubber flexing and leaning into every bend, every yaw, riding the asphalt track like a bobsled. Something’s pressing his foot down and he thinks; he has never known anything else. The trees stretch out across the road, kiss at the top, locked together in huddle formation over the speeding vehicle. Telephone lines run alongside the road, bouncing between the two sides. He can’t remember if they had always been there. He wipes sweat from the back of his neck, peels his thighs from the seat. As his foot sinks lower on the gas pedal, he finds himself staring into the rearview, the small reflective strip perfectly shaped to his eyes, behind him: remains of a darkened forest.

He sits with his best friend at a wobbly desk near the front of the high school gymnasium. She sighs, collects her long hair behind her head, lets it fall. He carelessly takes tickets from people filing up to the desk—they could be handing him toilet paper coupons for all he knows, he’s watching her instead. She’s beautiful, yes, but it’s not attraction he feels, rather some untraceable jealousy. His gaze traces her arms, her neckline, the distance between her doe-eyes, something so fascinating in the shape of her ankles. “What are you looking at?” During the game, the girls squeak their sneakers on the resin and he watches intently. Their bodies, at peak performance, contract, extend into impossible shapes—not impossible for them, but for him.

Their shorts hug tightly against wide hips, reveal smooth thighs, unpunctured meat, displayed in the wooden box of the gymnasium, he thinks: he really doesn't understand volleyball at all. At his feet, a blurred double reflects back to him from the grime on the floor.

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He can't recall when the last car passed. The gas pedal lies flat, choked down under the weight of his foot, a harsh speed carrying him under the treetops. The heat has dissipated, or he's settled in its hug, so he rolls up the windows. The sun seems to have moved positions, the trees throwing thick shadows across the road, dark hands clutching, crushing. Still, pangs of light hit his eyes between the shadows, the inside of the car flickering in some organic rhythm. His hand hovers over the wheel then finds rest on the gear shift. He palms the round head mindlessly and sinks into the seat, the windshield casting a refraction across the top of his hand. He squeezes, let's go.

In their apartment, his boyfriend watches reruns of some 90's sitcom. He slinks out of the bathroom unacknowledged, sits on the bed behind him. His boyfriend sinks back into his arms. "Hey". They kiss to a laugh track. His hand traces, trails down his boyfriend's flat stomach, lightly cups him, feels the precum through his briefs. His boyfriend shadows this, flickering between his eyelids, some handsy apparition at this point. The frisk yields an embarrassing softness. "What's wrong?" He sits back, forcing a distance. "I'm just tired", he says, repeats it to himself in his head, "I'm just tired is all". Later, while his boyfriend sleeps softly, a fawn on meadow grass, he slips into the bathroom. He jerks off standing at the toilet, his phone's volume at the lowest tick, the video titled "POV: Straight Jock Fucks You."

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So much time has passed, at least, it feels like he's been on this same stretch for hours. Sunlight strays from the road now, settles on the tops of branches, weighs them down. The trees bend in toward the car, close enough it seems he could open the sunroof and make contact, tunneling him in. The path is dark. His headlights flick on, perhaps his own mindless action, or something automatic—he can't tell. The lines on the asphalt go unbroken, soften in the corner of his eyes, fill the road with white. He can't move his head, just watch. Spots fall in front of the windshield, the undersides of leaves, then—

It's snowing. The sky and the ground share the same pale gray color, seamless, and in a way, he feels like he's standing nowhere. But he is somewhere, somewhere in the North East, somewhere he used to come maybe once or twice a year for Christmas, or birthdays, or sanctuary. It's now a chore. His mother, fallen ill in her cabin deep in Vermont's northern wood, expects him every three months or so. The drive is long, lonely, too much time to think, reflect, but he does it anyway, for as long as he can. She was never kind, but with her sickness came a defenselessness, a desperation, so she reached out to her faggot son. "If she only knew the half of it", he thinks. He stands on the porch while she rots inside, smokes a cigarette, avoids thinking of how many drives up he has left, how many more chances to see her, to tell her—to tell himself, really. Maybe one in the spring, by the summer—he's not sure. It's February now. Animal tracks freckle the otherwise smooth blanket of snow in front of the cabin and the bare trees remind him of a foreign planet. Branches so fragile they crack and whimper under the snow until the morning sun relieves them of this temporary costume, he thinks: something new starts with structure, life is bones, the rest just skin.

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—The sun shines into his eyes, golden, burning and in the vehicle's wake; nothing, a woodland void.

The trees curl into a green vortex; a ceaseless circuit, parallel bars: spin, turn, twist, the *light*, blazing through the car, a lifted chain, reversed, pulling into the mouth of shattered brilliance, speed: an illusion, an impression of some forgotten meter, some temporal gauge now, *nothing*, if not a million worlds away!

I'm in hell!

No, this is good, this is the pain of progress, the forbidden relief of understanding, the Earth, cast over you and engulfing you in its growth, the vessel, *unmanned*, pulled through the viridescent cyclone, stripped away by sheer velocity, every metal layer crumbling into the natural lacuna!

Him too!

Flesh, intricate systems of veins and blood, shed away, down to that primordial material, the untanned structure of dust pressed into universal shapes: a ghastly skeleton, engrossed in thought or fantasy or delusion, DRAWN *FASTERANDFASTERINTOTHE*SuN

And then—for a moment—the light flickers, and emerging from the shadow: some giant, awful vermin, black and reflective in its arthropodic shell. The massive insect's eyes shine incredibly bright. It blares its jolting song and in the moment before he's in its grille, he swerves off the road.

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The front of the car is molded around a tree, so far in he can touch the bark from the driver's seat. The massive hole in the windshield allows this. He places his hand on the trunk to steady himself, despite the fact he's sitting, and tries moving his head. Something is caught between the top of his head and the car's ceiling but he manages to turn his neck and look at the shattered passenger window. Glass from the top of the door is still breaking off, loosely dangling before crumbling into the seat, glaring thin rays of sunlight filtered through the overstory. There is no blood inside the cabin.

The driver's door opens with effort—the metal crushed at the hinges, scraping against itself when he kicks it from the inside. He peels himself from the corpse, stumbles into the knee-high ferns. He wades through them, away from the car, the road, deeper into the forest. Smoke rises from the carnage behind him, glass crunching under his feet, pieces of the vehicle integrating to the landscape. Hanging from a low branch, a side-view mirror, filled with the understory's dark green, sways from the impact, captures him between swings. He stops it with his hand, angling the reflection to his face. Inside: him—some version of him—unharmd, a pair of antlers stemming from his head.

He steps over a dismembered tire, does not drag himself but walks calmly, purposefully, pushing farther into the woods. The canopy funnels sunlight into concentrated rays. He stops for a moment, let's a beam illuminate his hand, steps through it, letting it trace up his chest, his throat, settle on his forehead for a moment. He reaches up and strokes the velvet skin of the antlers, soft and fresh. He struggles to keep his head comfortably straight, the newfound weight difficult to distribute. He traces the fine hairs from tip to base, moves on through the hair on his head, down his neck, his shoulders, realizes he wears no clothes. His hands drop.

The road must be edging disappearance, as he no longer hears the car's whimpering behind him. He does not look back to check. Instead, he focuses on the space ahead, the balls of his feet making imprints in the semi-wet soil, the shapes inconsistent but the trail almost symmetrical. In front of him there appears no end to the forest, just darker green, less distinct forms, a heat shimmer. A beetle flies past his face, circling his head before landing on an antler. The protrusions stand erect enough for him to see the tips when he rolls his eyes back and he catches sight of the insect as a still, black smudge. He shakes his head and the beetle flies off.

The forest is a moving panorama—the same trees, same brush, only marked with the occasional rusted bicycle, the remnants of a campfire, a tattered net strung between boughs. He passes with a steady speed until a spot of light spreads out from a break in the tree line. He slows down, approaches more carefully, blocks the sun with his hand— ahead, some sort of clearing. The antlers have begun to itch and he stops to feel them, turning his back to the light. His hands return wet from stroking the skin. He looks at his fingers, coated neatly with candy blood as if he were administering tribal markings, football eye black for stadium lights. As he reaches up to feel again, a piece of the velvet skin plops onto his hand in a thin, slimy pile.

Rubbing the antlers frantically, he feels dead skin peel off in damp chunks. The discomfort intensifies to an itch his fingers can't seem to satisfy, so he keeps his back to the sun, moves to a nearby tree. He hugs the trunk tightly, begins grinding the antlers on the bark. The skin sheds off easily, rolling up between the calcified bone and the tree's solid torso—the feeling beyond euphoria, something transcendental. Pushing away from the tree, he lifts his head in a fit of relief, an attempt at exhaling yielding only a gasping choke. The trunk is marked bright red; some indecipherable symbol, bits of skin clinging to the bark around the blood before curling into themselves and falling to the fern leaves below. He reaches up to find the antlers now

hardened, fragile, still slick with blood. Hung between the beams, a network of the peeled skin remains tangled around the antler's tips, something about it making his mouth water.

Ripping the skin free from the bone in fevered fistfuls, he balances himself between jabbing steps into the earth. An aroma so strong—so him—wafts lazily from the shreds in his hands, scrunching his nose with its pungency, baring his teeth with its succulence. Before he can bring the remains to his mouth, a beetle, the same beetle perhaps, appears, or returns, fluttering to a stop on his wrist. He watches for a moment, entranced, the sunlight now so close; he has stumbled to the edge of the clearing in his fit, clinging to the forest by only thin trees dotting the in-between. In the clearing: some dilapidated hunting cabin, lost to the woods, lost to the world.

The visitor on his arm has crawled to the shed skin splintered through his fists, joined by another, another, until a swarm begins to form in his hands. The beetles fly in cyclical paths around his fists like electrons, diving in once they've gotten a smell for the skin's saccharine spoil. They begin devouring the skin before he can. They have taken the last of him for themselves, and that, he cannot accept. He brings the fistfuls of gore to his mouth, taking ravenous, reckless bites, crunching the insects between the soft leather, folding them into the skin with gnashing teeth. The ones who have made it out of the carnage take to his face, buzz around his eyes in a thick cloud until he's unsure of what his teeth are tearing. The scream is silent, but the pain is real. bits of his fingers drop from his hanging mouth, half-alive beetles fly from the open chamber, join their brothers in the attack on his crying face. He swings violently, blindly around in the open air until the insects scatter. Black smudges fly away, some too weak, their wings shredded in the chaos, struggling in the air until they begin to fall slowly, slowly, until, they are no longer black, but white, slowly, falling, falling in front of his face, white, slowly, snowing.

He steps forward, transfixed, the snow falling quicker, more consistently, sheeting the clearing, the cabin now one he recognizes. His steps freckle tracks in the otherwise smooth drift of white leading up to the cabin, the stairs to the porch not five feet from his body. His body, no longer his—or maybe now, finally his—moves with an unstoppable autonomy, pain unravelling into the pale ether, tugging at the last of his mortal form. From above him: a cracking sound. One of the antlers flops loosely down to his forehead, breaks off into his hand, dry and light in its emptiness. He drops it into the snow, continues walking. Reaching up to the other, he snaps it easily from the stem, examines it in his palm for a moment. Bone white. He drops it, imagines it blends in, disappears into the snow, but she feels no need to look back. A few more steps, and then, her knees grow weak, collapse under her body, one, then the other, until she kneels on the freezing ground, the cabin now some altar in front of her. The rest of her body soon follows, twists under her weight before it's a silenced thud in the white blanket. The snow continues to fall, covering her new body, and somewhere behind her in the twisted metal remains, the body she no longer knows is covered with a different white blanket. The trees buckle, twist into impossible shapes under the weight of their new skin—this one not melted by the sun, but her mother will know nothing of burying a daughter.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *As a gender non-conforming person, I've bounced around a question in my head for a while: "Will I be my true self in death?" I've been wondering if I would be trans in the afterlife. If, God forbid, I crash my car, will my ghost reflect the form I want to take but am too afraid to admit to other people? If so, do I even need to admit it then? Stylistically, I was interested in mixing expressionism with stark, transgressive moments, something I observed in John Rechy's *City of Night* that changed the way I thought about realism.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: My name is Bex Peyton. I am a 24 year old emerging non-binary writer living in Nokesville, VA. I'm currently an undergraduate student at George Mason University studying film and video. My only previous publication will be appearing in Screen Door Review's upcoming February issue. I was once told by a fortune teller that I'm gonna die a painful death. I think she was kidding but I guess we'll see right?

EDITOR'S BIO: I'm a native of Berkeley with a BA from Stanford in creative writing and an MA from Columbia in contemporary literature. I worked for decades as a tech writer in Silicon Valley. A few years ago I devoted full time to fiction. I write short stories, some experimental forms, and occasionally verse, but mostly novels, four of which have been published in excerpts or serially. About 80 items of fiction and a few poems have appeared in literary and general magazines. I occasionally publish translations and photography. You can learn more about me at my website www.wandd.com and see a complete list of publications at <http://www.wandd.com/Site/Publications.html> His story **discipline is the bread of contentment** was published in Issue 6.