

GARY FINCKE
Fraternity Brothers, 1970

Two years Rich Cook had lived across the hall,
Giving me rides in his damaged car
Where we breathed the stink left behind
By a creek that flash-flooded hood high,
But this summer Cook was a soldier
In the Ohio Guard, and I was reading
The Victorians and Faulkner's novels
At Kent State where classes had resumed.
Since my second beer, I'd been posturing
As a near-miss survivor, and now Cook
Was drunk and angry and ready,
He said, to shoot me if history
Repeated itself. He carried
A pistol in the flooded Ford
I could see through the screen door
Where white moths were frantic to enter,
And he wondered out loud if I'd piss myself
If he decided to show-and-tell me
Just how cowardly I could be up close
With him and brother Bowers just back
From two tours and a pair of Purple Hearts,
A veteran who had survived
Hamburger Hill and nameless night patrols.
Cook asked if I was a Communist now
Or just some big-mouth asshole drinking
Beer with someone who was worth a shit,
And I was ready to renounce my years
Of second-hand graduate essays,
All of those sweet-sounding platitudes
Seeming as simple as pre-meal prayers
While I was composing apologies
And expecting both brothers to lay
A combat-tested beating upon me.
I could say the overhead kitchen light beamed
A Saint Paul moment of self-knowledge
And conversion, but what it did was
Flicker once when the refrigerator
Hummed into life just before Bowers
Said "Fuck the Guard" so matter-of-factly
I heard the period drop into place,
Ambushing one argument, at least,

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In Youngstown where May was fishtailing
Into June, the three of us positioned
As if we still occupied our late-60's rooms,
A telephone hanging outside Cook's door,
The black receiver he had twice torn loose
Before sweeping into my room
After 2 a.m., both times silhouetted
Against the light, spitting, "It's for you."