Kevin Esser's fame as a writer rests not just on his intergenerational fiction but on his gay works as well. His first novel, "Street Boy Dreams" told of an unfolding relationship between a teacher and a Puerto Rican street boy in simple, unadorned language. It was followed by "Mad to be Saved" an almost hallucinatory account of a young man's drunken revels when he returns to his old college and takes up where he left off with his old college friends. It was a remarkable tour de force, clearly one of the best, and most poetic, gay novels of 1985. The Acolyte Press plans to publish his third novel, "A.D. 2020: In the Land of Warriors" within the year. In it America has absorbed the other countries of the Western Hemisphere and has turned into the kind of military theocracy envisioned in Esser's short story, "The Dying of the Light" (published in The First Acolyte Reader). It tells of a 13-year-old boy's rebellion against the evil state and gives hope that the logical extension of Reagan-Falwell mentality will not enslave us forever.

Dangerous Boys

by Kevin Esser

HIS NAME IS TINO. He's fourteen years old, and he lives in a low-rent Sandburg housing project with his parents and five sisters. Everyone agrees that he's a bad kid—lazy, disruptive, a definite good-for-nothing. He's failing all his classes at school, and he refuses to enter a counseling program to help him with his problems. "I'm droppin' out at sixteen, anyway," he shrugs, "so there ain't no point to it."

Privately, he doesn't expect to reach sixteen. He hears all the time about kids killing themselves, and he thinks it might be a good idea. He hates the housing project; he hates school; he hates everything. And there's another problem, too. Tino knows he's different. He doesn't like girls. Looking at other guys makes his dick hard. And being different, like that, is the worst thing anybody can be. It would be better just to be dead.

Alone in his bedroom, Tino wanders to the mirror above his dresser and stares at his reflection. His face is Mex-Indian dark and dour, with the high cheekbones and slanted eyes of an Aztec prince. His black hair is long and straight, hanging in shaggy strands over his ears. He's wearing red sneakers and grey sweatpants and a white T-shirt with the sleeves cut off (to show the little blue dragon tattooed on his left bicep). His body is lean and lanky. Tino thinks he's too skinny. He tries to eat as much as he can, but he never puts on weight.

There's a piece of paper on the dresser. Tino picks it up and reads it. It's a list of ways to commit suicide: carbon monoxide, gun, razor, gas, drug OD, jumping from the roof, stepping in front of a bus, drowning. Tino looks at the list every day, wondering which way would be the best.

Later, after dinner, he heads down the street to Steven's house. Steven Dixon is Tino's only real friend. They see each other every day. Steven is in the front yard when Tino gets there. He's still only twelve years old, but already he's built like a wrestler or a junior weight-lifter, a sturdy boy with wide shoulders and strong hips and a round, gleeful face. Thanks to a black father and a white mother (long ago divorced), he has dark amber skin and fluffy golden-brown hair. He grins when he sees Tino. One of his front teeth is chipped diagonally in half from an old biking accident, giving his smile a goofy gap-toothed charm. "I'm fixin' my fuckin' bike," he says to Tino. His hands are black with grease. The bicycle is upside down in front of him. He gives the rear wheel an experimental spin. "Yep, it's OK now. Chain came off."

"What you doin' tonight?"

"Don't know," Steven shrugs. "Not much, I guess." He's wearing nothing but yellow gym shorts and white hightops with no laces. A silver cross is hanging around his neck. He reaches down and scratches a mosquito bite on his left leg, leaving a black smudge of grease above the knee.

Tino lights a cigarette. He chain-smokes Marlboros. Already he has a chronic smoker's cough. But he doesn't care. "Sundays is boring, man. Ain't nothin' to do." He holds out the pack of cigarettes to Steven. "You want one?"

"It's too dangerous out here," Steven says, glancing from side to side. "What if the cops came by?"

Tino laughs, as always, at his friend's skittish, paranoid behavior. "They can't arrest you for smokin' cigarettes, shit-face. You're really nuts."

"Seems dangerous," Steven insists. He's always hyper and fidgety, full of nervous energy, wide-eyed and ready for action—but never quite sure of himself, always slightly baffled by life, comically naive.

The boys go inside. Steven's mother is at church, playing bingo. His older brother John is on the couch in the living

room. John is a senior in high school, a humorless boy who does his best to ignore his little brother. There's a baseball game on TV. Steven disappears for about fifteen minutes to take a shower, then comes back naked into the living room, drying his hair with a white towel. Tino has never seen his friend without clothes. Steven strolls to the middle of the room and stands there watching the ball game. His ass is baby-fat soft and plump, a creamier shade of cocoa than the rest of his body; he's smooth and hairless all over, except for a wispy shadow of pubic fuzz beneath his tummy. John throws a tennis shoe at him, says, "Come on, jerk, get outa the way!"

Never taking his eyes from the screen, Steven moves a couple of steps to the side.

"And put your clothes on," John adds impatiently.

Steven seems to realize suddenly that he's naked. He looks down at himself and laughs. Tino is staring at him from the couch. Steven's cock is circumcised and sort of small, still only a boyish half-grown wienie. Tino wonders how big it gets when it's hard.

Steven laughs louder. "I bet I can moon somebody outside," he says. His freshly washed hair is fluffed especially soft and curly.

"Don't even think about it," John mumbles, chewing a mouthful of peanuts.

"Could I get arrested?"

"Yeah, Einstein... so don't try it."

"I wonder if I could get arrested," Steven says again, intrigued by the potential danger. Still carrying the soggy white towel, he tiptoes to the front door and peeks out through the screen. The traffic in front of the house is light, only a few cars passing by on this quiet Sunday evening in May. The sun is almost down; the street lamps have already come on, flickering pale pink in the twilight. Tino gets off the couch and walks over beside his friend. "What you gonna do, man?"

"I should moon somebody," Steven answers, as if he has some sort of obligation to fulfill. His hair smells like peppermint shampoo; his shoulders are still beaded with water from the shower. "Do you think it's dangerous, Tino?"

"Probably."

"I should do it, though."

John shouts, "Put your damn clothes on, dummy!"

Ignoring him, Steven opens the screen door and pokes his head out. The other yards are empty. Three little kids are playing on skateboards farther down the sidewalk. One car has just passed the house; another is approaching about half-a-block away. "I should do it," Steven says again, then dashes outside, running on his toes across the grass. He still has the towel in his right hand. Tino shakes his head and laughs, watching as Steven runs all the way to the curb, sticks out his behind at the passing car, then runs back in. The driver of the car, either from amusement or outrage, honks his horn as he passes.

Back inside, Steven gives Tino a victorious hand-slap and starts laughing at his own crazy stunt. John is scowling from the couch. "You're really queer," he mutters. "If Mom finds out, she's gonna ground you for a month."

"Eat me!"

"Yeah, you'd like that, you little fairy."

"Bitch!"

"Asshole!"

Steven heads for his bedroom to get dressed. "It was a fuckin' blast, that's all I know."

"I'm gonna wait outside," Tino calls after him. Lighting another cigarette, he steps out into the front yard. The fresh air feels good. It helps to loosen the tight, cold knot in his stomach. But it can't make the pain go away. Nothing can do that.

ON A FRIDAY, as always, Tino and Steven meet after school. The weather is hot and muggy. Steven is wearing baggy pink

surfer shorts and a brightly flowered Hawaiian shirt with his floppy gym shoes. There's obviously something on his mind. He's waiting for Tino on the sidewalk in front of his house. "Come on," he says eagerly, "I wanna show you something."

"Show me what?"

"It's a secret. Come on!"

They walk together up the street—past the gas station, past the used-car lot, past the grocery store to the neon-bright hamburger joint on the corner. They both order french fries and Cokes, then take their food to one of the booths by the window. The plastic bench feels slick and cold beneath Tino's bare legs. He's wearing a faded old pair of denim cut-offs with his usual white T-shirt and red sneakers. His legs are long and brown and sinewy, just starting to show hair along the calves and shins. "OK," he says finally, "what's the big fuckin' secret, man?"

Steven takes a sip of Coke, wipes his mouth. "I want you to see my girlfriend."

"Where?"

"She isn't here yet."

"Since when do you got a girlfriend, anyway?"

"We started goin' together on Monday."

Tino laughs through a mouthful of french fries. "OK, so who is she?"

"Donna Courson," Steven says. "She's a royal fox, man, I swear. Totally radical." He stuffs a bouquet of six fries into his mouth. "I figured she'd be here by now."

Tino isn't sure what else to say. He feels strange inside—a little jealous, maybe even a little angry. The draft from the air conditioner makes him shiver. "Too bad she ain't here," he says after a few seconds. "So you wanna leave or what?"

"We should wait a little longer," Steven decides. He washes down his french fries with another sip of Coke, then leans forward over the table and lowers his voice. "I'm gonna fuck her pretty soon."

"Yeah, I bet."

"I'm serious! She told me she wants to do it, no shit."

Finished with his food, Tino lights a cigarette and shakes his head. "You ain't even old enough to fuck no chick, man."

Steven leans closer. 'Yeah, I am! I've been jizzin' since before Christmas."

"Serious?"

"Yeah, no shit. I bet I could even get Donna pregnant and have a baby and everything." He nods soberly. "It only takes a teeny drop of sperm, that's all."

Tino flicks his ashes into his empty Coke cup. "So when you gonna do it?"

"I don't know, pretty soon." Steven looks around in sudden apprehension. "Do you think the cops can hear us?"

"You're the weirdest," Tino laughs. "Why you think the cops is always around?"

"Seems like they might be," Steven shrugs vaguely. He pauses to check out the other tables, then pops the last french fry into his mouth and gets up. "I guess she isn't comin' today."

"Too bad, man."

"Maybe tomorrow."

"Yeah, maybe."

"Anyway... you wanna come over tonight?"

"Sure," Tino says. "What time?"

"After supper."

"OK, I'll be there."

They split up outside the restaurant. Tino wanders back to his apartment in the housing project. His little sisters are playing and screaming in the living room. His mother and father are in the kitchen, drinking coffee and listening to a Spanish station on the radio. Tino goes to his bedroom and closes the door. He can't stop thinking about Steven. Seeing him naked last week was bad enough; hearing him talk about jizzing and fucking makes it even worse. The pain in

Tino's stomach is like a cold, queasy sickness.

He looks at the list on his dresser. Time is running out. He can't keep going much longer; he can't keep fighting against the fear, the anger, the constant emptiness. Carbon monoxide, gun, razor. He has to decide soon on the best way.

He has to decide tomorrow.

AFTER SUPPER TINO goes back to Steven's house. The front door is unlatched. Tino pushes it open and steps inside. The television is on, but the living room is empty. Steven's gym shoes and Hawaiian shirt are lying discarded on the floor. Tino is about to call for him when Steven suddenly appears from the back of the house, wearing only his pink surfer shorts. "I didn't know you were here," he says. "What's up?"

"Same old shit," Tino shrugs. "Where is everybody?"

"My mom is out with her boyfriend and John went to a ball game with his stupid friends."

"So you wanna go to the mall or somethin'?"

With a sly chipped-tooth grin, Steven holds up a handful of magazines. "I found these in John's room. They're the baddest. We should look at them."

"Aw, man, he's gonna *kill* your ass if he finds out."

"You think it's dangerous?"

"Yeah," Tino chuckles, giving his friend a playful swat on the head, "real fuckin' dangerous, shit-face."

"But maybe we should look at them... in my room."

"Yeah, it's OK with me. Let's go."

They hurry together into the bedroom. Steven carefully shuts and locks the door. "So the cops can't get in," he explains. "We'll be safer now." He spreads the magazines across the bed. "Which one do you want?"

Tino picks up a copy of *Hot Sex* and sits on the edge of the mattress. "I guess this one is OK." All the magazines are hetero, but at least they have pictures of naked guys. Anyway, that's not really important. Tino can tell that some-

thing else is about to happen, something weird and risky and exciting. A few months ago, Steven didn't seem interested in girls or sex or his own body; but that's all different now. He's like a new kid lately, full of a hotter, hornier kind of energy than before—more like a regular guy than a little kid. Instead of playing with toys, he wants to look at dirty magazines—and maybe do something even wilder.

Tino flips through the glossy pages. Steven is across the room putting a cassette of Magadeth into his boom box. The music blasts suddenly from the speakers, a heavy-metal sonic boom that rattles the windows. He rushes back across the room, then flops down on the bed and grabs one of the magazines. After a few minutes of studying the photos, he jabs Tino in the back and shouts, "These are awesome, man! This one lady has the biggest tits I ever seen!"

Tino responds with a silent nod. He throws down the first magazine and picks up another, something called *Pussy Supreme.* A moment later, Steven gives him another jab in the back. "I wish my girlfriend was here," he yells over the music. "I feel like fuckin' her right now, no shit!"

"Yeah," Tino yells back, "I feel like it, too."

"Let's play like we got chicks in here!"

"What d'you mean?"

"Let's just pretend," Steven says. "I'm gonna use the pillow." He puts down the magazine and takes off his baggy shorts. He's wearing white briefs underneath. The crotch, stained yellow with piss, is stretched out in front by five hard, pointy inches. He mounts the pillow and starts humping it, glancing back and forth at Tino, grinning and lolling his tongue and making silly faces. "I'm fuckin' Donna," he shouts. "She loves it, too!"

"You're screwy, man!"

"Yep," Steven nods, "I'm screwing," either misunderstanding Tino's comment or making a joke, it's impossible to tell. He pumps his hips faster, then slows down, then speeds up again, doing rapid bunny-thrusts that shake the

bed. Tino is watching him from the other side. Suddenly the music stops. The silence is abrupt and startling. Steven jumps up and flips the cassette. On his way back across the room, he looks down at himself and touches the pointy bulge in his underpants "Did you see my boner?"

"Yeah, man, I seen it."

"Maybe I should take these off," Steven says, tugging at the waistband. "It might be more fun."

"Go ahead," Tino shrugs, "it don't matter none to me."

"You don't care?"

"No, it don't bother me."

The music is once again roaring at full volume, forcing the boys to shout back and forth. Steven steps next to the bed and leans against it with his knees. "It's not queer or anything like that, right?"

"No, man, it ain't queer," Tino says. He stands and pulls a pack of Marlboros from the front of his denim shorts. The red-and-white box is slightly dented in the middle. He takes out a cigarette, lights it, tosses the little box onto Steven's desk. "Go ahead and do it."

"It might be more fun," Steven nods. "More like really fuckin' my girlfriend." He steps back quickly and peels the underpants off. Letting another boy see his erection makes him laugh self-consciously. He stands there for a few seconds batting it with his finger, playing with it like something he's never seen before, then hops onto the bed and hugs the pillow to his crotch. "This is a lot better," he yells, stretched out on his back now, moving his hips slowly up and down. "It's gettin' harder all the time."

Tino takes a drag on his cigarette. The forgotten ash drops suddenly to the carpet. He doesn't know what to do or where to look. He glances down at his own shorts. Because he isn't wearing any underwear, and because the old cut-offs are too small and too tight, there's no way he can conceal his hard-on. It's as obvious beneath the blue denim as eight inches of smuggled sausage. But he doesn't turn away or try

to hide it. Things have gone too far for that. Steven is looking at one of the magazines, still rubbing the pillow between his legs, bobbing his head to the frenzied music. Tino finishes his cigarette and drops it into an empty Seven-Up can on the desk. It sizzles in the leftover soda. He kicks off his red sneakers and sits on the bed next to Steven. "So you can jizz for real, man?"

Steven looks up quickly, seemingly surprised to find someone else in the room. "Yeah," he says, "I can do it for real. But it takes a long time to come out." He glances at the front of Tino's shorts. "Jesus, man, you got a *gigantic* boner!"

"I guess them magazines made me horny."

"Do you think we should do something?"

"Like what?"

"Like jack off or something?"

"Maybe, yeah."

"And we can play like we're fuckin' our girlfriends," Steven adds eagerly. "It'll be more fun that way."

"I ain't got no girlfriend."

"We'll just pretend, it doesn't matter." Steven chucks the pillow aside and puts the magazine between them to share. "We can both look at it," he grins, already stroking himself with his right hand. Tino nods, then unfastens his shorts and pulls them off. There's a sudden strong smell of stale sex and pee from between his legs. His uncircumcised cock is curved back stiff and reddened against his belly. He has a heavy bush of black pubic hair and some black frizz on his balls. Steven is looking at him, obviously fascinated. Tino starts masturbating. He can't believe this is happening. It's too good.

"You still got your shirt on," Steven tells him after a moment. "Aren't you gonna take it off?"

"Oh... yeah," Tino murmurs. He yanks the T-shirt over his head and drops it to the floor. There's a trail of dark fuzz from his belly button down to his curly bush. He starts

jacking off again, keeping his eyes fixed on the magazine beside him, too embarrassed to look up. He's stroking rapidly, eagerly; he knows he should slow down and enjoy himself, but he can't, not this first time. He wants to finish; he wants his friend to see him shoot off. He's already getting close. It won't take long.

Beside him, Steven is still beating off lazily. But he's more interested in watching Tino. "It's weird," he says, "your dick havin' skin on it like that. Does it hurt when it slides back and forth?"

"No, man, it don't hurt."

"Does it feel good?"

"Yeah," Tino says, laughing softly, "it feels good. Just like yours, probably. It ain't no different."

"But yours is *huge,* no shit!"

Tino laughs again. For the first time in his life, he actually feels proud of his body—and especially of his dick. He rubs it more slowly, pulling the foreskin all the way up into a fleshy nipple, then back down again over the shiny pink knob, working the whole big thing with special care, letting his friend ogle every inch of it. A few more times up and down, and then his stuff starts coming. He can't hold it any longer. "Here it is," he mumbles, remembering suddenly that he doesn't have any tissues. But it's too late. He's already spilling a big, sloppy load all over his stomach. One strong spurt lands up between his nipples. He keeps stroking until every drop is out, then releases a long, exhausted breath and shakes his head. "Awesome, man."

"I never knew anybody could jizz so much," Steven marvels, still working at his own hand-job.

"There was lots of stuff," Tino agrees. He reaches beside the bed and grabs a dirty towel from the floor. "It felt pretty decent." He uses the towel to clean himself, then lies there on the bed doing nothing, just watching the other boy masturbate. It seems that Steven will never finish. Tino finally reaches over to him and nudges his hip. "You want me to do

it?"

"Serious?"

"Sure, man, I can try."

"It takes a long time, like I said."

"Tell me if it's OK," Tino says. He wraps his fingers around Steven's penis and starts rubbing it. He's never touched another boy's dick before. It feels small and thin compared to his own.

"Not so rough," Steven tells him. "Your hand is too strong."

"Sorry, man."

"Yeah, that's better," Steven nods. He closes his eyes, spreads his legs wider. "Feels weird, no shit. Go faster now."

"Like this?"

"Yeah, radical."

The music stops. The room is silent. But the boys don't even notice. Tino moves closer to Steven. Their legs touch. Nice and warm. Tino presses closer. He rubs his knee back and forth against the other boy's thigh. Steven grins. "That tickles," he says, his eyes still shut.

Tino keeps doing it. "You feel like shootin' pretty soon?"

"It won't take much longer," Steven says. "Go a little faster."

There's no sound in the room but the rhythmic friction of skin against skin. Suddenly, Steven's dick swells a little harder, a little bigger. Tino rubs it faster. Steven raises his hips off the mattress, arches his back, squeezes out three milky drops onto Tino's hand. He keeps squeezing, but nothing else comes out. Tino licks the semen from his hand. Steven opens his eyes and sits up. "That was a radical jizz," he says. "The best one ever, no shit." He looks at Tino and smiles.

A few minutes later, both boys are dressed and out in the front yard. The magazines are back in John's room. "We should look at them again tomorrow," Steven says.

"No doubt, man."

"And we can play like we're fuckin' our girlfriends again."

"Yeah, OK."

Steven thinks of something special, something that makes him grin especially wide. "And maybe we can play like our girlfriends are givin' us blowjobs."

Tino pauses to light a Marlboro. "Yeah, man, that sounds cool."

"But you can't tell anybody."

"I ain't gonna tell nobody, don't worry."

"You can't tell anybody at all, because we could get arrested."

"OK, shit-face." Tino gives his friend a gentle punch on the shoulder. "I gotta go, Steve."

"Come tomorrow after lunch."

"No problem."

Tino heads quickly for home. He runs upstairs to his bedroom and stands in front of the mirror. He still looks the same, but he feels different. The pain is gone.

He picks up the list. Carbon monoxide, gun, razor. It doesn't seem important any more. Messing around with Steven has changed everything. And tomorrow, things are going to get even better.

Tino smiles at his reflection, then crumples the paper and throws it away.