

UNBOUND



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ONLINE LITERARY ARTS MAGAZINE FOR THE UNIVERSITY OF OREGON

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*Braeden Cox's "Flying Over" is featured
on the cover of this issue.*

Digital Photograph and Watercolor
20x27"

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JARED HINTON

A BEAUTIFUL MIND

35 mm slide film

*Jared is a Cinema Studies major.
Both models in the photograph are him.*

THE GAZE

— THOMAS CONNOR

His footsteps are the first thing I hear. Then a moan of the porch, a click of the lock; he walks into the house. I stay still. I don't have a choice. He walks into my room, sits on the couch and hits the little black device.

I light up; "Rose, listen to me. Listen. Winning that ticket was the best thing that ever happened to me. It brought me to you. And I'm thankful, Rose. I'm thankful. You must do me this honor... promise me you will survive... that you will never give up... no matter what happens... no matter how hopeless... promise me now, and never let go of that promise."

"I promise Jack."

"Never let go."

"I promise I will never let go Jack. I'll never let g--" I am interrupted as he hits the device again.

"Why did you bring a cheeseburger to a 5-star French restaurant?" asks an attractive blonde as the man settles in. To him I am an object. He sits, a statue among the furniture of the room.

"Cause I love America," says a man wearing a camouflage trucker hat. From the couch the statue stares blankly. This is his free time from a hard day in the office. His eyes glance at the desk in the corner of the room. Piles of drawings adorn it. Its messy and dust has started to settle atop of the green trees, blue people, and the other things he drew. He starts to walk over to it, his eyes and nose pointed at the pile of clutter.

"Ha ha ha ha ha," I laugh in a chorus of different voices. The noise is enough to ensnare him. He stops before making and returns to the couch. I show him a new group of people. Three white athletic looking men sit at a bar. The door swings open, a tall brunette woman walks in,

"Dude she's hot!"

"Hey boys, know how I like to cool down?" asks the woman before she cracks two cans open and sprays them all over herself. Her blouse squeezes her shape. "Oops."

His gaze freezes me. He stands and gets a beer and another. He hits the device again.

"--ly 300 calories a meal who couldn't afford to eat Momma Maria meals?" asks a deep voice as a young black woman bites into a ravioli from a plastic tray. I quickly keep him captivated. I show him a giant pizza.

"Pizza for breakfast, pizza for lunch, pizza for dinner and pizza for brunch" sings a small child biting into a large slice. The man on the couch takes another sip and walks to the kitchen before I can show him anything else. I hear the microwave beep as its buttons are pushed. I wait. Finally the loud "BEEP,

BEEP, BEEP,” signals that he should soon return. He does as he should. He comes back with a plastic black tray in his hands. I am successful. He eats in silence, sitting solid in the couch. I laugh for him. I cry for him. He thinks I am only entertainment.

Finally the sky gets dark. One by one the streetlights flicker on. He finishes his fourth beer. As he blinks his eyelids linger together longer. His breath slows. I continue to shine, fastened to the wall. He clicks the device. I go blank. His footsteps make the floor creek as he walks through the dark to his room.

*Thomas is a sophomore with a double major
in English and Philosophy.*



ANNA BUGBEE
BIRD BONE

20X12X2"

three panels of acrylic and a bird bone

Anna is a sophomore and an art major.

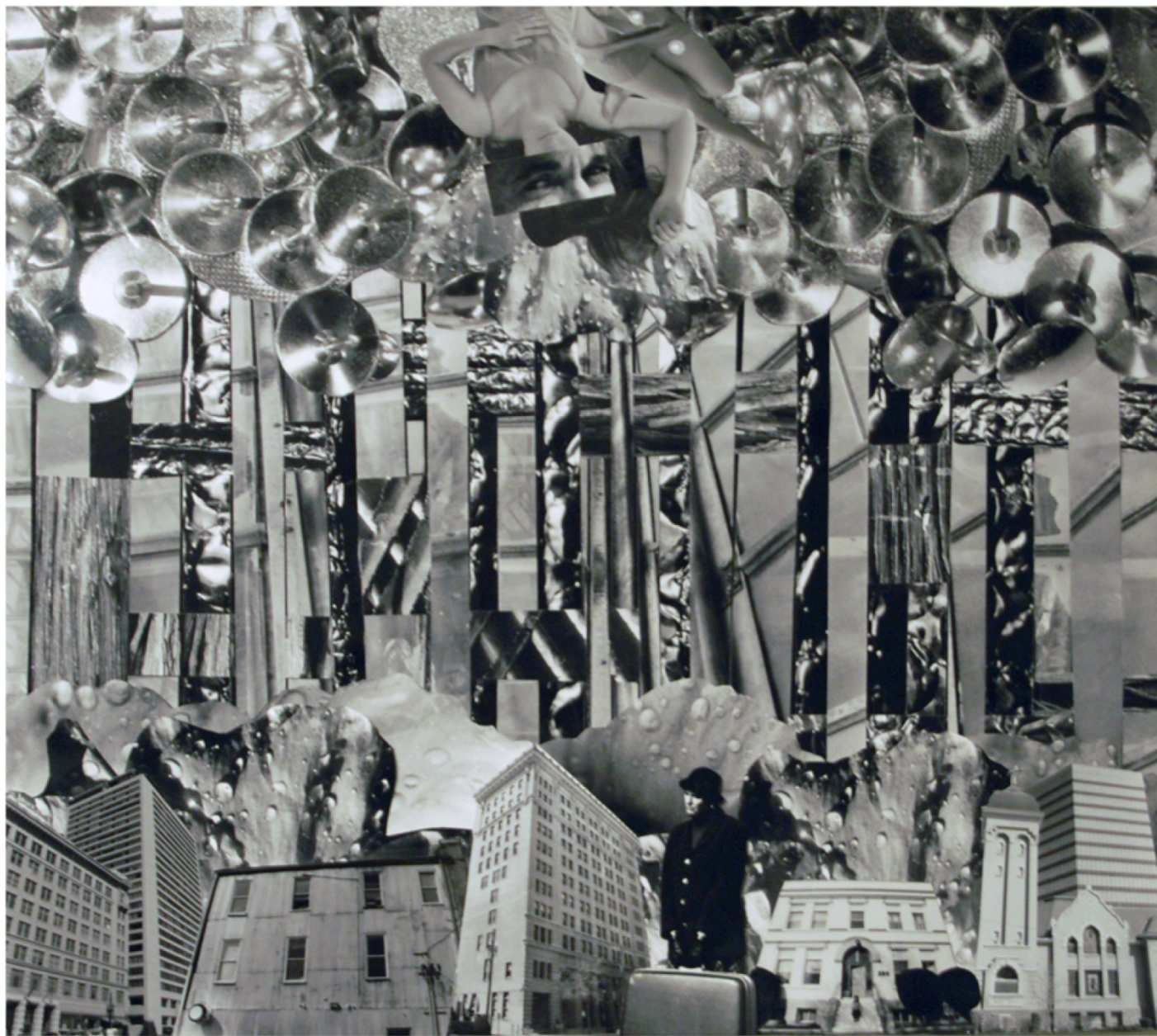
THE NEST

The plum orchards on Orcas Island
bore fruit, soft like velvet.
I walked where the trees grew thicker
and the sun, through the branches, flickered.
Behind a bush where the green had faded away

I found two baby fawns. Lifeless;
entangled with each other like a nest.
Both with delicate, knobby knees,
a sister and a brother, with eyes
that will never open, to see the other.

— NOELLE PETROWSKI

*Noelle is a freshman hoping to major in Comparative Literature.
This is her first publication.*



ANNA BUGBEE
SPEED OF A CITY

22x19.5"

silver gelatin prints

WHAT'S MORE AMERICAN?

CONNOR CALLAGHAN

The beers were getting warmer. It was grey outside. We all wanted to stay in. It wasn't raining. We huddled around a big coffee table in the upstairs annex. We played poker and, five of us: Sean, Will, Patrick, Robby, and myself. We talked of meaningless things at first. Then a commercial came on from the TV in the corner. It was a brief moment of silence where we all turned to watch it. IT was an awful car commercial. A man meant to look like Uncle Sam was driving a Dodge convertible down a highway. Classic Rock was playing in the background.

"Now that's America right there," Patrick said. "Doesn't get much more American than that."

"He could be drinking a Budweiser," Sean replied. "And have some blonde bombshell in the passenger seat."

"Ha, good point," said Patrick.

"Fireworks too," added Will. "In the background."

The commercial ended and no one said anything for a while. Then Patrick chuckled and said, "Nothing more American than that."

"You know, not all these American clichés are really that American. Not what America is all about," I said. "Sure they help, but check this out for instance: About a month ago I'm at the train station out in Klamath, you know on my way down

home, and I swear I saw the most American thing ever."

Will cut in, "Man, what are you talking about. I don't think there is anything more cliché about America than a goddamn train station."

"I know, but let me finish. Like I said, the clichés help but it's not what America is all about, they're just the stepping stones. As I was saying, I'm at the train station there in Oregon and I see a guy I know in line that I'm not really trying to talk to. I mean, I don't mind the guy, but he's not someone I want to talk with for the next half hour while we wait for our trains, so I walk outside to have a cigarette and figure I'll wait for the train out there. Now it's raining a bit outside so not too many people are out there. Then all of a sudden this guy and girl come out from inside. They're young too, maybe 19 or 20. And I'm wondering why they're coming outside when the inside is so warm and dry, and hardly crowded at all."

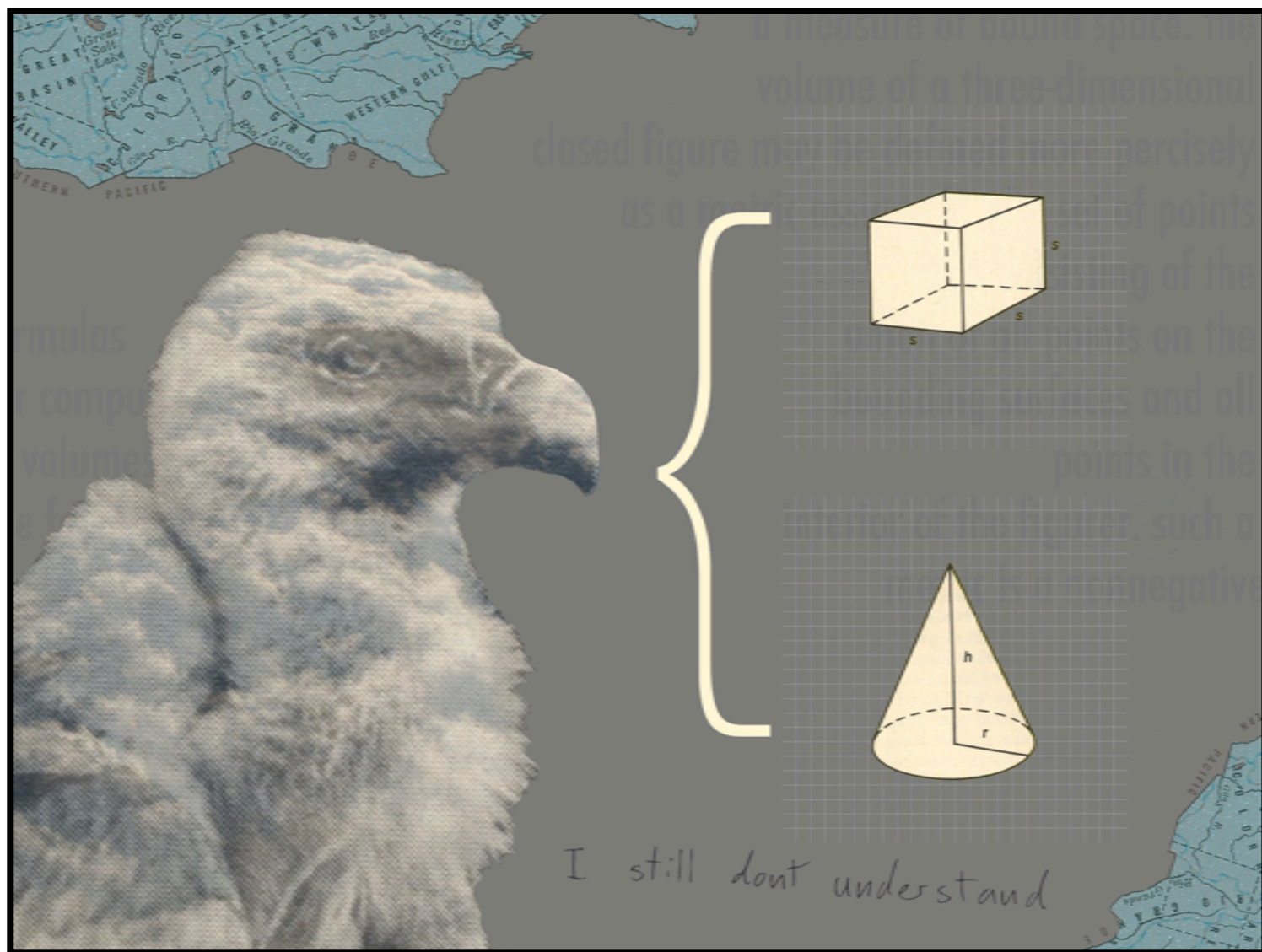
The guys were looking at me funny. I couldn't tell if they were really interested or if they just wanted me to shut up, but I kept going. "So I'm outside watching these two, and I figure one of them is probably saying goodbye because there's only one bag I'm seeing. They're smiling and he's got his hands around her waist, and she's got hers around his neck.

They're not even kissing or anything, just looking at each other real close and smiling. Now I'm not trying to make it obvious I'm watching these two, and I don't think they see me, but they weren't taking their eyes off each other anyway. These two young kids just staring at each other, with these goofy eyes, like nothing else mattered but them. They're not even talking, just staring

"Then out of nowhere the girl starts crying. There ain't any sign it's coming or anything. She just lets go. The weird thing is, she's still smiling. The crazy chick is crying and smiling at the same time. And all the boy does is lean in a little closer and

start kissing her. I don't know how, but they're holding each other even closer than before. Ha-ha, these fucking kids are standing in the rain, outside a goddamn train station in the middle of nowhere Oregon, kissing each other, completely oblivious to everything outside of them. Now come on, what could possibly be more American than that?"

The room was very quiet, and it made me nervous. The guys, all circled around me, just stared blankly for a second. Patrick sort of chuckled and Will followed suit. Then they stopped. Finally, Robby blinked. "Honestly, I'm not sure anything is," he said.



BRAEDEN COX

I STILL DON'T UNDERSTAND

41x30"

digital amalgamation

Braeden is a fifth year Digital Arts major. Her photograph and watercolor amalgamation, "Flying Over", is featured on the cover of this issue.

BELLA

— AARON WILMARTH

I. Wilson Family Property, Veneta, Oregon, July 1988

Flies swarm and crawl across
Bella's chocolate eyes and rubbery,
Warm, black nostrils.

She holds the tip of one hoof
On the ground like a ballerina,
An old injury not cared
For by the couple that owns her.

Heat washes over me
As I follow my mother
To stand before
The man and woman,
Their stares sealed.

My mother runs her hand down
Bella's flank, her hipbones wanting
To burst through the thin skin.
Her chest, an abandoned
Wooden ship, ribs poking
Through the rotting hull.

My mother can place
Three fingers in the gorge
Between Bella's ribs.

I'm only eight,
I don't understand her words
That pry, or her eyes
That dig for hidden
Humanity.

II. *Rising Star Arabian Stables, July 1989*

Bella stands still,
Her black tail cocked to one side,
And curled, like
A hay hook.

A stallion is straining against
The tight leads that can't stop
The quivering body, shaking
Head, Rolling eyes,
Clouds of dust rising
From stamping feet.

In a bucket of soapy water
The stallion's caretakers take a sponge,
Cleaning every inch of his
Elongated penis.

Bella's head shakes
In acceptance,
Or denial.

They allow the stallion forward.
He rears, front legs across
Bella's back,
Filling her.

She stands quiet.
I stand between my parents.

III. *Bake Family Property, Creswell, Oregon, June 1990*

The pre-dawn air envelops me.
Bella lies on her side, her chest
Heaving as life struggles
From the warmth and safety into
The cold.

Within moments, there is a foal,
Sticky and fresh, covered
In speckles of sawdust, stars

Against her dark fur.
She stands on shaky legs,
Unsure.

My mother runs a wet towel across
Her, wiping off the birth.
I run my hand down her forehead,
Her fur satin, new.
We look into each other's
Eyes, and I breathe into her
Nostrils.

IV. Bake Family Property, August 1990

Sun beats down on the dry earth.
Bella and another mare stand together,
Each with their own foal.

My mother pulls Bella from her pen,
Her leg limping behind,
A festering wound
Pulsing with the larvae
Of the flies that swarm
Her head.

The vet and my mother bring
Bella to her knees, pushing her over.
Straddling her, the vet
Injects.

Dust billows up as Bella
Rears first her head, then her back,
Black mane and tail hover and then crash,
Fighting as he re-fills and pumps his
Expired death into her.
She lays still.

The vet's hand grasps
The empty vial of stale venom.
Forgiveness settles with the tortured
Dust as I walk towards Bella's foal,

The cooling body vanishes
In the other mare's chocolate eyes.
She walks to the orphaned foal,
Nostril to nostril, she breathes deep,
And guides the foal's mouth
To her milk.

*Aaron is a senior majoring in English
with a minor in Creative Writing.*

OATMEAL AND INSIDES

— AARON WILMARTH

When I was young I saw a raccoon that had been run over by a car. The raccoon's head was smashed flat, its brains fired out of its skull, a dried mass of grey and pink smeared across the pavement. That's what oatmeal reminds me of. Smashed brains. Sometimes, I wonder if I've eaten enough oatmeal to feed some poor third world country. My mama always says that oatmeal is what gives a man strength to work through the day. So that's what she's fed me, every morning, for the past thirty-five years: oatmeal, drowned in whole milk and doused with brown sugar.

I've been stirring this bowl of oatmeal in front of me for the last ten minutes, every once in awhile choking down a spoonful. The whole time wishing it was bacon, or sausage, or chicken fried steak smothered in—

"Where's the newspaper?" Mama asks.

—gravy. Or maybe something else. Something fresher.

I wish Mama would let me have some chicken fried steak instead of

oatmeal. Folks call chicken fried steak comfort food. It makes people happy. I know a slab of that, smothered in gravy with two eggs over-easy on the side, would make me happy right now. I would slice my steak knife into it. Then I'd dab up a great gob of gravy and haul it to my mouth. I can taste it now. The pop of peppercorns, the steak, so tender it melts as I chew, falling down my throat—

"Curtis James Scoefield! Are you listening to me?" Mama says.

"Course I am, Mama. It's on the counter by the coffee pot." Mama grabs the paper and sits across from me.

—and settling in my stomach, where a warm feeling spreads and the oatmeal doesn't sit like a brick. That's what I'd be eating right now if I could. But I'm not sure steak, or even pork, could comfort me now. That comfort, that deep down soul comfort, that's going to have to wait. Maybe forever.

"Another poor girl has been killed by that murderer," Mama says. I look up from my oatmeal. She continues to read from the paper. "Says here, this is the fifth victim since the first in Eros. Such a small town too! You'd think someone would've seen something from the beginning, but they ain't got no clues yet."

Another death. The killer is getting closer. I've got a map hidden behind the clothes in my closet with thumbtacks pushed into each town he's killed in. I think there is a pattern and I wonder when he'll visit our little town.

Mama peers over her paper at me and says, "You've barely touched your oatmeal. You know it's everything a growing boy like you needs."

"Yes, Mama. I surely know it."

“Well get to it. Can’t be wasting any food now. The lawn needs mowing and it’s only going to get hotter from here on out. Don’t need you falling down from sun stroke.”

“Course you don’t, Mama.” I shovel the oatmeal past my teeth and swallow. Almost done.

Mama looks back down at the paper. “Listen to this! Curfews are to be enacted in towns throughout Franklin Parish starting tonight at eleven p.m. City and Parish police announced that in an effort to apprehend the Eros killer, preemptive action was necessary in areas that they expect the killer to strike next.” Mama slaps the newspaper on the table, the curlers in her dyed brown hair wagging back and forth. “Wisner’s one of the towns that’s gonna be under a curfew. How will I ever sleep at night? You think they’ll catch this killer soon? This is just gettin’ too darn close to these parts.”

I don’t like the idea of a curfew. Between Mama, work, and the people of Wisner, the only time I’m not being watched is in the middle of the night. Wisner is a backwater little town of just over a thousand people in Franklin Parish, Louisiana. It has two catfish plants and acres of catfish farming. Sometimes the smell of the plants comes seeping in over the afternoon breeze. The rotting carcasses of cast off fish parts baking in the sun make my stomach churn. I hate catfish. I like my meat fresh and unspoiled. Mama doesn’t travel much, so I ain’t been too far astray from home. Maybe a hundred miles at best in any direction. Not even to New Orleans.

We live in a cramped two-bedroom house on a small lot, though it’s got a nice

sized backyard and a shed where I spend most of my free time. I’ve had trouble keeping it up. Paint’s peeling, roof leaks, I think we got rats, and National Geographic is the only place I’ve seen roaches as big as ours. We ain’t got much money to speak of. Papa died when I was five, and Mama never remarried. She always says that no man could replace Papa and what does she need with another man underfoot when she’s got her hands full with me. She needs to watch over me and keep me safe. When I finished High School, I’d gotten a scholarship to go to college to study to be a doctor. I wanted to be a surgeon. After spending so many years dissecting animals, thought I’d be pretty good with people. When I told Mama, it didn’t go so good. Mama sobbed and begged. Threatened hurting herself. Told me she’d never talk to me again if I left. That kept me home. I couldn’t imagine life without my mama. She keeps me in control. Without her I don’t know what I would do. What I might become. Sometimes I think about leaving and getting out of Wisner. The pressure to get out builds and builds. But I never do it. So here I am.

I work at a copy place. *Copies in a Hurry* it’s called. Been there for almost ten years. The work’s all right, not too busy and not too slow. Everyone always seems to want to have a yard sale on the same weekend. That’s when we’re busy, yard sale weekends. On slow days, we’ll get maybe three or four customers. Those are the days my co-workers are bored and looking for entertainment. Travis Chapman, got to be in his seventies, wanted three hundred copies of an advertisement for quality pipe jobs. My co-workers made fun of old Chapman putting

his mouth where it don't belong. The joke made me feel sick inside.

Sex doesn't interest me. I can't remember the last time I sinned on myself and when I did, it made me feel like the dirtiest pervert in town. I can never understand what people find so interesting about each other's outsides. Now, what's beneath the skin, what's not supposed to touch the air, that fascinates my mind. The little bits and parts that keep a man moving, the muscle and flesh that holds it together. Tear past the skin and you see the truth. All of us are made of flesh and the blood that pumps through it, keeping it alive. That's where the power of human kind comes from, where control comes from. The insides.

"I've finished my oatmeal, Mama. I best start on the lawn."

"That's a good boy. Keep that strength up, ya hear?"

"Yes, Mama." I head out to the back shed for the mower.

It's hot. Mid-August in Louisiana is not the most pleasant and today is hotter than normal. I've finished the backyard and I'm on to the front. I can feel my clothes sticking. There's not a single breeze to cut through the baking sun. Running down the street is Rosa Lee Moser. She lives a block away. Rosa Lee's in her late twenties and she ain't the shy long legged girl I remember peering at me from the other side of the church pews. When she was twelve she fell out of a tree and broke her ankle at the park near my house. I happened to be walking by and I ran over to help. I remember kissing her ankle, something Mama would always do when I hurt myself, and carrying her home. She's

been watching me ever since. I was never sure what she saw in me. I guess some would say I'm fairly attractive. I keep myself in good shape. A girl once told me I have the most startling blue eyes. I still got a full head of hair, but I've started to find grey mixed in with all the brown. I guess I just don't spend much time thinking about my looks, though I always seem to catch Rosa Lee looking me over.

She comes running up to me and I let go of the throttle, bringing the mower to a lurching halt.

"Hey there, Curtis," she says. "Haven't seen hide nor hair of you recently. How ya been?"

Mama's Affenpinscher, Boo, starts barking from the house. Mama doesn't like me talking to girls. I hope the little mutt will shut up.

"Been fine. Out for a run?" I try not to look at her.

"Course, silly. Almost done five miles. Saw your face and figured I'd stop to say hi." Her curled blonde hair is tied back, the roots darkened with moisture. "You know, you're quite the talk of the town."

"What?" I say. "Why?"

"Oh, you know." She gives me a gentle push on the chest with her hand. An image of her sweat soaking through my shirt and mixing with mine pops into my head. I want to wipe it off. "A fine handsome man like you, still single, and still living with his mama. Makes a girl wonder, when was the last time you was on a proper date, Curtis?"

I don't date. I take a good look at her. There's a fine film of sweat on her chest, slick, wet, and rank. Isn't much meat on the girl. Waist is too small, buttocks flat, though her calves are muscley. All I can

think about is peeling away the skin and looking for the power that keeps her moving, making it mine. All that finely crafted muscle and flesh. Tender and young.

I've been silent too long. She sees me looking her over, and I believe she's doing the same to me. She takes a step forward.

"Well Curtis Scoefield? What do you think?" She says. Her voice is deep and husky.

After the tree, she'd come by on her way home from Kennedy Junior High. Her parents lived between my house and the school; there was no reason for her to drop in. She'd ask me how I was doing and if I wanted to play. Mama caught on pretty quick and told her to stop bothering me and go home. After that she would wait up the block from my school and walk me home. Those were happy memories, but it didn't last long. The thought of Mama finding out made me take a different way home to avoid her. I think she may have been the only friend I ever had. If I could be comfortable with someone, it might be her. "I think you might be right, Rosa Lee. Would you like to go get a soda sometime?"

"A soda? Aren't you just the cutest. Of course I would! Saturday at 8? Pick me up." With that she jogs off, giving me one last pretty smile. I wonder what her cheekbones look like under that pink skin or how much fat is riding all that muscle. I can't seem to help it. I have to control myself.

Mama's waiting for me when I come back into the house. I look down at Boo, a tail wagging black ball of fur. Thanks for

ratting me out.

"Was that Rosa Lee Moser?" Mama says.

"Yes, Mama." Here it comes.

"She's nothing but trouble, Curtis. She's been around the block more than once, if you'd believe what the ladies say, and they got no reason to be lying to me."

"Mama, it's just an innocent date. I ain't been on a date since..." I only had one girlfriend. I was sixteen. Her name was Annie. I lost my virginity to her. It ended after that. I almost puked while we were in the act. I liked the comfort of having someone to talk to other than my mama, but I couldn't look at her the same way after she had put her mouth all over me. Mama found out about it before I could dump her. She beat me black and blue and locked me in the closet for a week. I never told her we had sex. I was too scared of what'd she'd do. "Since I don't know when."

"That don't give you no excuse to be with some harlot." Mama's face is getting that scrunched up look she gets when she's not going to back down on something. Reminds me of a prune.

"You say that of every girl that talks to me." Which is true. It's just been years since I was interested enough to talk back. Once I realized I felt like throwing up after sex I stopped caring. I don't want to blame my mama for it, but she had a way of making sure I wouldn't become a sinner. She caught me touching myself once when I was fourteen. Mama asked how many times I'd done that. After I'd told her, she stuck sewing needles in my penis, one for each time I'd sinned. I screamed and screamed, but she wouldn't let me pull them out till I swore to never touch it in

that way again. I never forgot the pain.

"You don't need no woman when you got your mama." She reaches up and strokes my hair.

I want to rest my head in the palm of her hand, but I can't. Not this time. I take a step back and say, "Why you always got to control me? I'm a grown man. Can't I make my own decisions?"

"I'm your mama, baby. I'll always know what's best for you."

"Bullshit."

Mama gasps and then slaps me. "How dare you talk that way? You go on up to your room, right now. And you won't be eating for the rest of the day, either. If you didn't have work, I'd keep you locked in the closet for all of tomorrow, too."

I try and stare her down, but I can't win. When she glares at me I feel like I'm still eight years old.

"Yes, Mama," I say. I walk towards my room, my head bowed. I can feel the heat from her hand on my face, like pin pricks.

It's midnight and I'm out with Boo. He'll scratch at the door for about two minutes before he gives up and pisses all over the floor. You have to have a keen ear to catch him before it's too late. Mama used to be up the second his claws hit the door, but she's lost a lot of that famous hearing of hers. She would never let me out of the house this late, even if Boo were going to drop a load on her favorite rug. I take him out because I'm worried that if he started crapping and pissing everywhere Mama might keep him in her room at night. Then she could wake up at any time and might notice me gone. Taking care of him lets me escape. After I take him home I

head out into the night, away from prying eyes, and satisfy my hunger. Usually I find an opossum or a raccoon, sometimes a stray dog or cat. They haven't been keeping me satisfied though. I keep wanting more.

Boo stops at a tree and begins his sniffing routine. He's damn picky. Has to be the right tree or it just won't do. The street is quiet except for the constant buzzing of insects. I'm outside of Rosa Lee's house. I certainly didn't mean to walk this direction. It just seemed to happen. The light is on in her living room and her shades are pulled up. Rosa Lee is sitting on her couch, watching TV, and eating chips or pretzels. Her legs are folded up against her chest and I can't tell if she has any pants on. I swallow. Am I actually attracted to this woman? I thought it would be nice just to have someone to talk to. Her hair is wet again, not from sweat this time. Something in me stirs. Would it be so bad to be with a woman again? Maybe Mama is wrong. Maybe she doesn't want to lose me and she's keeping me from being myself. Even with all these thoughts, I can't help wondering if Rosa Lee's liver is healthy or not.

Flashes of red and blue attract my attention. I turn to see a cop car pulling up. Its spotlight blinds me.

"Curtis Scoefield?" someone says from the car. I recognize the voice. Buddy Williams. The lights shut off and the door opens. He walks over. Boo starts barking. Damn dog. I'm hoping Rosa Lee didn't see the lights, but with the dog barking...

"Shut up Boo!" I yank on the collar, hard. He stops. "Hey there, Buddy." I can see the line of his lips move into a deeper frown. Using his first name wasn't a good

idea. Back in high school he was the class bully. Not a day went by that he didn't find some excuse to make fun of me in front of people. Called me names like Curtis the Turdis. Trip me in the cafeteria as I was walking with my tray. He always had to be in control. That was his game. It always comes down to control.

"What are you doing out so late, son?" Son? We're the same age.

"Just walking old Boo here, Officer Williams," I say.

Buddy looks down at Boo, back up, then past me. I hope Rosa Lee isn't still in the window. "Enjoying the sights are we?" Buddy says.

I look over my shoulder. Yup, still in the window. "Well, I'll be. Didn't even notice that."

"You know there's a curfew in effect?"

"Guess I hadn't realized." It's always best to play stupid.

"The curfew is eleven. Now you know. So you gonna tell me what you're doing outside of Rosa Lee's house in the middle of the night?"

I reach down with a plastic bag in my hand and scoop up the tidy bit of Boo's poop. I straighten and offer the plastic bag to Officer Buddy. Evidence. "Letting the dog do his business," I say.

Buddy's frown deepens, but he takes a step back. "Just get yourself straight home and don't let me catch you out after eleven again. There's a serial killer on the loose and this town could be next.

Part of me hopes that I'll run into the serial killer. I could ask him why he kills. Find out if he's different from me. "Sure thing, Officer Williams. Straight home," I say. Yanking on Boo's leash I head off. I

can't help looking behind me. Buddy is standing by his car watching me.

I'm drinking lemonade on the front porch. The sun is sinking toward the roof of the house across the street. A warm breeze slides across the tops of the trees, whispering to me. I want to be as free as that breeze, flowing from city to city, state to state. Just being, somewhere, anywhere but here. I can't though. Not until I know I can stop wanting what's inside of people.

I'm feeling the urges again, but there's a problem. For the past couple of nights and during parts of the day there's been a car parked on the other side of the street from my house. Sure enough, it's Buddy Williams. After I ran into Buddy I've only been letting Boo out in the backyard. Having him parked outside is frustrating. I'm unsure what might be giving Buddy the thought that I could be his number one suspect. I think I handled the situation outside of Rosa Lee's pretty well. But I could have not reacted quite right or said something that sparked his cop instincts.

There's Rosa Lee again. She waves to me as she runs by. Her beautiful smile lighting up her innocent face. I wave back. Buddy tracks her as she runs past. He steps out of his car, watching until she's out of sight, then walks towards me.

"Afternoon, Officer Williams," I say as he steps onto the porch. "Is this a social call?"

"Cut the crap, Curtis," he says. "What's your connection to Rosa Lee?"

"She's a neighbor." I can't help but notice how large Buddy's head is. I wonder if his brain actually fills the entire skull or if there's a lot of empty space in there. In one of Mama's family recipe books I found

a Cajun dish of fried beef brains. All you need is cornmeal, flour, Cajun seasoning, oil to fry. And a brain. I know I should feel strange about these thoughts. But I just can't.

"You this friendly with all your neighbors? Stalking them outside their houses?"

"I was walking the dog." You remove the membrane and pick out any clots in it. If it's a large brain, which I doubt Buddy has, takes 5 minutes to fry. Or you can cut the brain into smaller chunks and it fries quicker.

"Maybe you'd like to come down to the station and answer some questions?" Buddy says.

This isn't going so well. Honesty can be the best avenue. "We're going on a date this Saturday." Buddy's face falls as I mention this. Could Officer Williams have a crush?

"Will she corroborate that?"

"She's the one that pushed for it. I did the asking, but she sure seemed to want it." I can see the pain in Buddy's eyes, he's trying to hide it, but it's there. No wonder he's been watching my house. Put Buddy's personal interest in Rosa Lee with my known oddness, you got yourself a suspect. I have to admit I'm enjoying the look in Buddy's eyes, it feels good, real good, to give some pain back to a guy that used to kick the crap out of me in high school.

"She fits the profile for the victims of the Eros Killer," he says.

"Isn't she a bit old? I thought they were in their early twenties."

Buddy gives me a cold look. "She looks the right age and how would you know that?"

"It's all over the news. It's hard to miss what's on TV all the time."

The screen door opens and Mama walks out. "Well, I'll be. Officer Buddy Williams. How are you this evening?"

"Just fine, Mrs. Scoefield. How are you?"

"Peachy, just peachy. What brings you here?"

"I was just asking Curtis some questions, ma'am."

Mama looks at me, one eyebrow raised. "What would you be asking my fine boy about?"

"Just some questions related to the recent murders, ma'am."

"You mean the Eros Killer?" She whispers the name as if he might pop out of the bushes at any moment. "What would my boy know about these murders, now? Really, Buddy. You ought to be ashamed of yourself, questioning Curtis. He's a good boy, never done nobody no harm." She's got Buddy under her eye now, giving him that squint that tells him he better back off and back off soon.

"Of course not, ma'am. Just asking routine questions is all. Do you know where Curtis was last Saturday night?"

"He was here all evening. Didn't leave for a thing."

"Can anyone verify his whereabouts after you were asleep?"

"These don't seem like routine questions to me, Buddy." Mama is starting to bristle. I might even start feeling bad for Buddy. "But if you must know, I got the best hearing in all of Louisiana. If Curtis so much as walked three steps, I'd be up like lighting to see what was the matter." I'm thankful Mama still thinks this is true. "You want to waste my time with any more silly

questions, or are we about done here?"

"No, Mrs. Scoefield, I'm done. Thanks for the information." Buddy looks at me. "You stay outta trouble now."

"Sure thing, Officer Williams."

"You two have a good evening," Buddy says. He walks off the porch.

"Glad to see you're working so hard, Buddy. I don't think that killer has any idea who's on his trail. You have a right good week," Mama calls after the retreating form of Buddy.

Buddy climbs into his car and peels away from the curb.

"Well! That boy sure hasn't grown more polite since he was little," Mama says. She strokes my hair and smiles down on me. Her loving touches always used to make me feel calm. But not anymore. My stomach is doing loops. "Don't you worry about him. They'll catch that killer soon and he won't be bothering you no more."

"Thanks, Mama."

I want to leave this house. I want to get out into the night. I have a feeling Buddy will be back this evening and parked outside. I don't think Mama convinced him of my innocence. I'm not sure how much longer I can wait.

Copies in a Hurry. The problem is, who's ever really in a hurry in Wisner? I'm standing behind the counter double-checking an order of advertisements when Bessie Smith comes waltzing in. She's a 5'2", two hundred and sixty pound black woman with a large purple hat and an attitude. I'm not sure what's more disturbing, her fat moving in waves under the floral patterned moo-moo or the hat that looks like a mushroom growing out of her head.

She comes straight towards me, and I'm a little worried she's going to keep walking and break right through the counter top like a bulldozer. But she stops inches from the counter, slams the package of copies she'd picked up earlier from me on the table, and pounds her fists into her expansive sides. I think of tenderizing meat.

"Hi there, Mrs. Smith. Something I can help you with?"

"Damn right there's something you can help me with. Considering you didn't do your job," Bessie says.

I take it she's a little upset. "What seems to be the problem?"

"The problem? Ya'll are a bunch of idiots! That's the damn problem!"

I begin to contemplate how long it would take to reach edible flesh on a woman of this size. She must be two-thirds fat.

"If you could tell me what the mistake is, ma'am, I would sure love to fix it for you." And hammer your skull till it looks like minced meat. Between my Mama and Buddy, I got enough people trying to control me. I wish I were the killer, then I could teach her to try and tell me what to do.

Bessie rips one of the copies from the manila folder and slams it down on the table. She sure likes slamming things. "The edge of this copy is off center. It looks like a drooling idiot child did this."

"Well, ma'am, I don't think we have any idiot children on our staff, but I'll do my best to correct the mistake."

"Are you getting fresh with me?"

"No ma'am. Wouldn't think of it. Why don't you come back in three hours and I'll have this all fixed up for you," I say.

It should really only take about fifteen minutes, but I'm sick of this.

"Three hours?" Her face begins to turn the same color as her hat. "Three hours? Lord in heaven, I thought this place was called *Copies in a Hurry*."

"Unfortunately, today, everyone's in a hurry. Tell you what, Mrs. Smith, I'll bump yours up in the line. You come back in two hours, and we'll have these all straightened out for you free of charge."

"Damn straight it'll be free of charge. Two hours! Ya'll ought to be shut down." I'd like to shut her down. She manages to swing her body around and head for the front door. The ground shakes as she stomps her feet.

I finish packing the advertisements away and look up at the clock. Two hours left and nothing to do. It's unlike me to act the way I did with Bessie, or with anyone. I don't like being the center of attention, but I need to learn how to take care of myself. I've been feeling a little out of control recently and I don't know if Mama can help me anymore. I need distraction. I hope someone else comes in soon.

I took a walk after work today before going home. I found myself by Rosa Lee's again. She's been on my mind a lot. Part of me wants someone to talk to. Another part wants to dig into her, become close by taking her into me. I think I could resist those urges. I need something in my life other than Mama, the woman waiting for me as I walk in the front door.

"Where you been?" Mama says. Boo is barking and wagging his tail.

"Took the long way home," I say.

"Why?"

"Just thinking, Mama."

"You've been with Rosa Lee, haven't you?"

"I just took a long walk."

Mama points a shaking finger at me. "Don't you be lying to me boy. I know you been having impure thoughts since she came by the other day. I can tell something is different about you. Don't make me discipline you."

"I'm thirty-five years old, Mama! Jesus Chri—" Mama slaps me before I can finish. She sure can hit for an old woman.

"Don't take the Lord's name in vain, you hear me?" Mama twists my ear between her fingers and pulls me towards the bathroom. It feels like my ear is going to rip right off my head.

"Mama, stop! Stop, that hurts!" My words don't do any good. She pulls me along and grabs the soap. I can't fight back. I'm fourteen and she's got needles in her eyes. She gets the bar wet and forces my mouth open, sticking it in. My head starts buzzing and the oily mess in my mouth makes me gag. I can hear her from a distance telling me never to curse in her house again and that she's fed up with how I been acting. All I can see is red. Red like a freshly skinned animal. Red.

"Curtis?" Mama says from my bedroom door. I'm lying in bed and not quite awake yet. "You seen Boo?"

"No, Mama, I sure haven't," I say. It's Saturday.

"Boo! Boo! Here boy! Come on home now!" Mama is yelling out the back door. I get up and head towards the kitchen.

Not being able to wander the streets at night left me with Boo. I hated

that dog anyways and now I feel calmer. I've got Boo stashed in the shed right now and I'll have to do something with him before he starts to stink. Mama still has a damn good nose. I should order one of those big freezers, the deep ones with the lid on top. I could freeze a lot of different meats in one of those.

"This isn't like him. Where could he have gone?" Mama is standing in the doorway of the kitchen again. I don't think she's talking to me, but I respond anyways.

"Don't know, Mama. But I'm sure he'll be back soon. He probably just chased a squirrel or something." I pour myself a cup of coffee.

"A squirrel! Oh dear, I hope he doesn't hurt himself. He's so small, even if he thinks he's big." Mama scurries out to the backyard.

My urges are growing stronger. With curfews in all the towns and police scouring the neighborhoods, I'm not sure what I'm going to do. I feel locked in. Trapped in my own home, left with just my mind to wander and drive me. My nails are chewed down to nubs.

The oatmeal is bubbling on the stovetop. Oatmeal is not going to help my mood. Mama comes in from the backyard and says, "Sit yourself down, boy. You need your breakfast, then we'll go out and look for Boo together, you and me."

"Yes, Mama." I sit down at the kitchen table while she slops a pile of grey mush into a bowl. She sets it down in front of me and takes a seat on the other side.

Oatmeal. How much oatmeal can a man consume in his lifetime? I'm sick of oatmeal. I'm sick of feeling trapped in my home. I wonder what a man's breaking point is when he feels trapped. It's been

almost a week since the last murder. How does he keep from killing?

"Gosh! The paper says they caught the killer!"

What? "What?"

"They caught the Eros Killer last night. He was driving after curfew and there was a body in the trunk of his car."

Caught. I wish I could have met him. Talked to him about what I was going through. Asked him questions. What made him cross the line? What happens when you finally do cross that line? Why couldn't he stop, even with the world closing in on him? What should I do? How do I control these urges? What is—

"I'm certainly glad that's over. It was starting to feel like nobody was safe. You haven't touched your oatmeal, Curtis. We got to search for Boo, remember?"

"Yes, Mama." God, I wish she would just shut up! What is control? I feel like I'm losing it day by day, minute by minute, second by second. My urges are getting stronger, my thoughts more violent. The only time I ever feel like I'm in control is when I'm skinning an animal. Could that be the answer? I ain't never going to find control by ignoring my urges. It's going to come from listening to them. And what are they telling me? They're telling me that animals aren't enough anymore. Ripping an animal's insides out makes me feel like I'm in control, but it's never enough. It always fades so fast. There's no power in something that is weaker than me. I want meat. I want to sink my teeth into the heart of a human being and feel the power surging through my veins. I want—

"Curtis James Scoefield! Eat your oatmeal."

—control. I'll never find it if I don't

take it away from Mama, or Bessie, or Buddy Williams, or anyone that wants to tell me what to do. Even Rosa Lee wants to control me. She thinks she knows what's good for me. But they're all wrong. I feel a sense of calm. I finally understand. It's not a lack of control I've been fighting with. I've been fighting control. I need to take it for myself. And where is it? Control comes from the insides.

I stand up and walk towards the butcher knives. It's going to feel good to take Mama out to the back shed. Take her to the place where I've hidden myself for so long. And with Mama out of the way, I'll be able to be myself.

"What are you doing?" Mama asks.

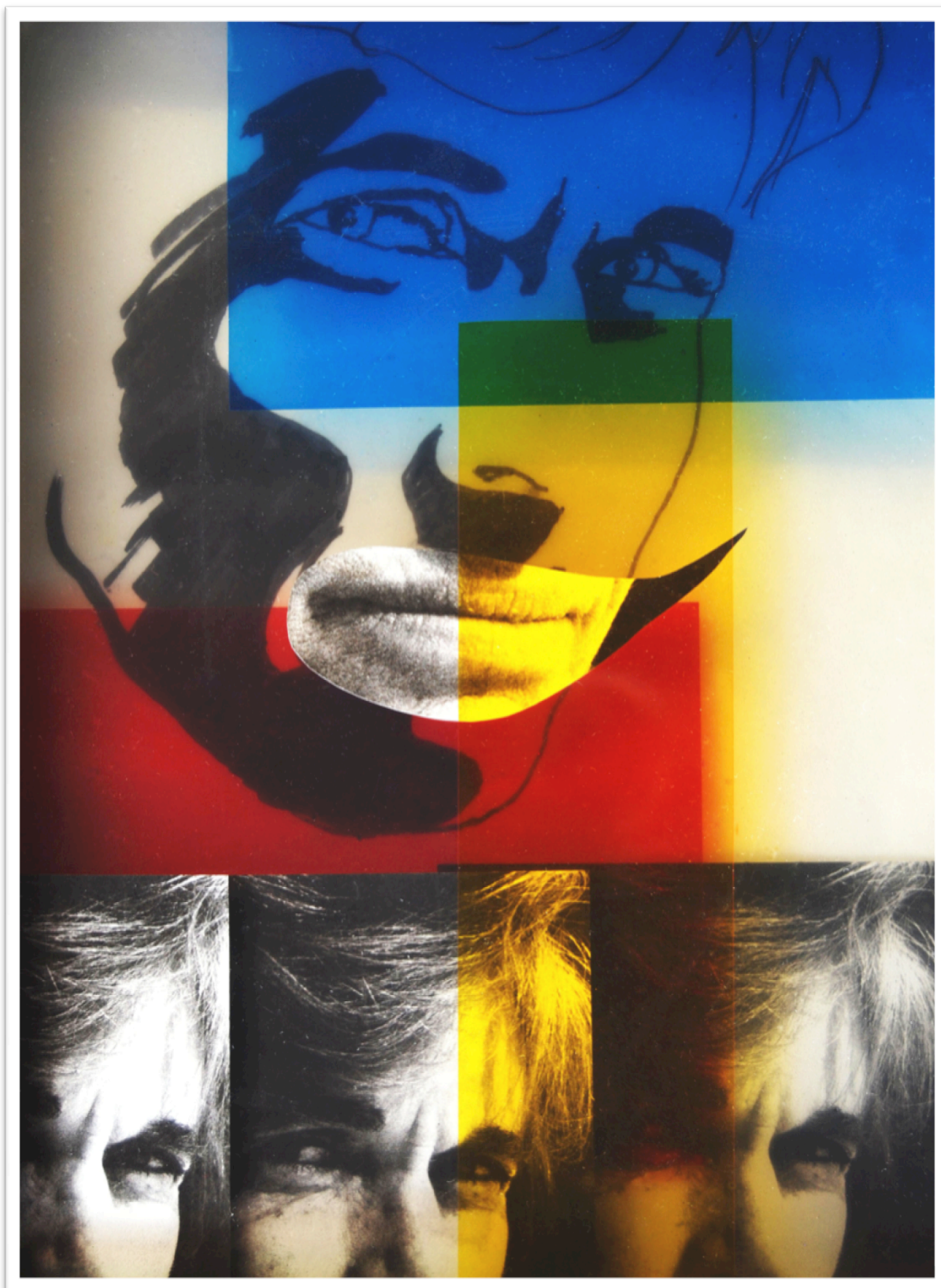
"What I want," I say.



ANNA BUGBEE
A PHOTOGRAPH REFLECTION

11x14"

silver gelatin prints



SHIGETSU

6x8x2"

colored filters, pen and ink, photographs
mounted between three layers of plexiglass

FOR DEANDRE

Child bent on palming the world—
you who walks undaunted on high walls.

A barren school teacher watches you with disapproval.
Dreams even secret to herself of drowning you
or breaking your little toes.

Wretched little ignorant One.
You spit on the kittens growing in the barn
but then they opened their eyes!

I saw you speaking to a field of wheat.
What made me envy you was the way the shafts bent
in response.

— KELLY RIGGLE

Kelly is a freshman majoring in Environmental Studies with a minor in History and Art. She has been previously published in the Oregon Voice.

LIZZY MYERS

winter 2011

NUESTRA VIRGIN MARY SERIES



LA PASSION



SINCRETISMO

black and white photography

Lizzy is a junior and a Spanish major.



SINCRETISMO II

LIMBS & CONTRAPTIONS

— NICHOLAS EKBLAD

I don't sit here— but there.

Disconnected, quite contrarily, from this interconnection.

I thought I might take such form as that of this blade of grass in the lawn and wave uniformly to the wide neglected blue skies above us. I thought this thing called a university would embrace me, and I it. I thought maybe this wide world would unify me with its other accoutrements. However, I feel no connection to these creatures— no, these machines, programmed to put one foot in front of the other...

As I sit on this bench, worms drag themselves across the sidewalk in search of the earth— the earth that has been excavated for the benefit of these contraptions— and these machines face forward, ignoring their subordinates, their managers and, worst of all, their peers. Vulnerable but not outnumbered, a lowly worm nears the far end of the concrete, gradually and humbly closing in on his destination. He gets so close, and at the very moment when I feel a strange but true connection with him, one I fail to find every day in this sea of green under the vacuous sky, the worm is swiftly smeared across the cement among deceptive algae.

The machine, whose responsibility for my loss goes neglected, maintains its pace, strutting away in frayed jeans and a polo shirt.

The worm is no more. I tear my eyes away from the silent atrocity. Looking up, I notice a tall lumpy tree poking the corner of my eye, waving to me with her limb. She offers her gaze unconditionally. We share this connection for an unmeasured amount of time and I begin to think of other connections.

I sympathize with the worm, but have given up in my own search for earth. It is far beyond me, far out of reach for this self-disgusted machine. Instead, I search hopelessly for a gaze. I search hopelessly all around me in the most obvious and fantastic places. Most *fantastic* are the eyes of my fellow machines.

The sad thing is that they are far more advanced than I. Their hair is finely tuned, some even freshly greased. Their movements are gracefully predetermined— but feel awkward to me (no matter how I look at them, nor how I try to imitate them), unnatural; but when they do it, that's not the case. One big organism— I mean, cluster of technology, that's it— acting with preprogrammed cause and effect.

Their eyes (as I said, the most *fantastic*) are the worst. They are dark and shallow, but contain an emptiness so vast, it challenges the vacuous blue sky. Locked forward in their one and only line of sight, they grapple in their predetermined trajectories, making sure not to create new tracks. The irreverent convoy with its individual gazes all acting as one, all gazing in their own respective forward direction (which is, contradictorily, the same

calculated route) creates a rip in multiple dimensions of the sidewalk, dominating both sides of the concrete and all immediate surroundings, too. *It is a vortex, a commanding void that I find myself in. A whirling current of emptiness to which I inquire an acceptance.* The spiraling, consuming motion of these eyes never ceases, and yet their gaze is constantly locked forward, bound with endless diamond chains and adamant deadbolts.

In my desperate searching, I heedlessly allow my eyes to fall upon these exhaustive devices. Already I wish to draw back, but they reach out and clamp down on my soul, without breaking the cold stare held on their sightless predetermination. My soul is spun violently in a refracted course of my original direction. *I want not to agitate these machines, but simply to assimilate comfortably.*

I tear my streaming eyes away from those of the stubborn instruments yet again, this time frustrated only with myself. I turn my gaze back to the judicious old tree. She is still there, despite my erraticism and neglect. She allows my eye to wander from limb to limb, even to travel from the tips of her hidden roots to the minute veins of her leaves. Rather than sucked into an ominous swirling contrivance of sorts, I am then enveloped, oh so willingly, in her compassionate presence. Her leaves, gently swaying in this now full and inviting breeze, trickle unto me and I gaze. I gaze high and low, far and near, searching eagerly for I knew not what. Then, I saw it. Caught on one of her lower branches, was a twig— *a branch, I mean*— one of her disconnected limbs.

And there it sat, balanced by one of its peers, suspended in the full breeze, swaying and trickling, alive as ever.

Nicholas is a sophomore double majoring in English and Spanish. He has been writing for the Oregon Commentator since Fall 2009 and has previously been published in Unbound.



BRAEDEN COX
DESPAIR

6x4"

collage of found images

ROADKILL OPPOSUM

— T.J. CARTER

Her head a range
Of bony peaks;
Her tail a curved peninsula
Gasping for sea;
Her belly a treaded valley
Of black, red,
Clumps of forest fur
And dried river bowels.

The Earth is small.
A trail extends beyond her body
Onto every continent.

An old man watches from his stoop
And wonders what died
For the mountains in the distance
Or the cool lakes of his youth.

He wonders what kind of world he'll make,
Or where he'll go
When the Lord's Grand Cherokee
Runs him over.
He's always expected to bleed a little
Onto His pallet,
But sees the opossum's trail
And wonders if there's something
He won't become;
A place
He won't go.

*T.J. is a senior majoring in English with a minor in Creative Writing.
He has been previously published in Unbound.*



CHAD HUNIU

AN ACCIDENTAL DOUBLE EXPOSURE IN SAN FRANCISCO

photography

*Chad is a sophomore with an undeclared major and a minor in Creative Writing.
He has been previously published in Bang! magazine.*

PLANNED MEALS

— IAN GERONIMO

We cooked every night for the first two-and-a-half months we lived together. Every Sunday, no matter how late it got, we gathered up our 100-percent recyclable polypropylene grocery bags with the trees stitched on the sides, pulled on our hoodies and went out for groceries. This regimentation was new for me at the time. It saved us a lot of money we might otherwise spend eating out, and I think we both found it a cozy routine.

She's a better cook, but I do my share of the meals all the same. Tonight I'm cooking cauliflower soup (mom's recipe). Last night, she made Tom Yum soup; a dish so bitter sweet that the smell of lime leaf comes off the surface in a pungent steam that'll make your eyes sweat. This was a particularly well-balanced batch, and she reveled in her good work, sitting cross-legged on the rug, sipping loudly from a ceramic ladle. "Soup is my most favorite thing," she said, blinking teary-eyed.

On Monday, she made chicken fajitas with a Mexican rice and black bean

medley. I got home after sunset and followed the smell straight to the kitchen. Taking successive bites, I shouted to the bathroom, where I could hear her running a bath. "Needs more Cumin!" I said around a mouthful.

I heard her stir in the water, then she shouted back matter-of-factly- "I know, it's kinda boring ... but Cumin falls flat if you add too much."

I wondered about that, angling the foody envelope to my face and taking another mouthful.

Tuesdays were usually my nights to cook, but this Tuesday we made cheese quinoa soufflé, dinner was a joint operation. She minced while I grated. When we finished, a thin, zesty smoke filled the air in the apartment. I forked a charred bite from my plate and looked off into the dim space before me, chewing slowly and considering the taste.

"Cayenne pepper is a tricky spice to use well," I said.

She nodded in agreement, fanned her cheeks and took a sip of water from a purple plastic cup.

If I've made it sound like we were connoisseurs, it's only because we took the pretending so seriously that I can't now, even in hindsight, fully surrender the mystique of our kitchen life. It was our adult version of house. We planned meals when there was nothing else to talk about. That smoking crock-pot atop the stove represented our fecund ritual, our precious daily practice, which, as with any ritual, needed unquestioning respect and eagerness to remain relevant. If cooking for oneself is markedly "adult" in nature, then the serious pretense and secret joy we both approached our home-

cooked meals with seemed to me unmistakably child-like.

The comfort of domestic life gave me confidence in my daily to and fro.

I could feel it reciprocated in the world around me, in the eyes of that girl in my Thursday afternoon lecture, with her slightly oversized sweaters with long sleeves like cozy burrows for her hands to disappear into. She was the type of girl who didn't need to wear make-up, who probably dressed frumpy just to put the outside world a little more at ease while in her presence. She was the type of girl who could collapse a room just by drawing her hair back behind her ears. I thought of her at night now, especially on nights when we had dinner early, and my stomach ached with hunger as I waited to fall into dream.

About halfway through the semester, I casually befriended her. We walked together about a hundred yards each Thursday afternoon amongst the ancient trees and nostalgic university architecture, talking over the surfaces of things, agreeing with each other alot, the conversation a forgettable excuse to make eye contact and smile. We parted abruptly each time.

Sometimes I would ride my bike home as the sun set and the pink clouds above would get tangled in the black trees. Sometimes the world would glow electric blue in the hours after sunset, and a single high-flying jet would etch an intense white line directly overhead, adding deliberate geometry to an otherwise lovely empty sky. Some nights were chilled, and I biked urgently through the autumn air, blind between streetlights, but the cold wasn't enough to cut me, and the smells would

announce themselves in the darkness—sweet-fabric softener of laundromat, wintery scent of firewood smoking somewhere, a slight whiff of dog shit — and I rode with a welling sense of urgency in my lungs, and felt profoundly weary and knowing by the time I reached the warmth at the top of my stairs.

On one such Thursday night, she was in the kitchen already cooking, flipping brussel sprouts on the stove with a giant wooden spoon when I entered looking over the mail gloomily. She had finally started watching Breakfast at Tiffany's, and needed to clarify one thing:

"So Holly Golightly is definitely a prostitute?" "A daughter of the game," I corrected.

She smirked, and a moment later, hugged me from behind, wooden spoon still in hand.

My cauliflower soup is drab again tonight. We don't get as excited about dinner these days, but on the whole, we're probably much better individual cooks. But tonight's soup, it's missing something – not salt, not garlic, not turmeric or soy sauce or hoisin sauce or sugar – I can't figure out what.

After doing dishes, she comes in the bedroom and sits down on the bed beside me, the aura from the kitchen back-lighting her softly. Half a bottle of red wine is touring my circulatory system, warming me from within. I put my hand up the back of her shirt, and trace patterns with my fingers. Soon she unhinges her bra and lets her head hang deep, enjoying the feeling of my rough finger-tips moving aimlessly from the small of her back to the nape of her neck.

"You have no idea how much I love

this,” she says, her eyes still closed. “Do you love it more than soup?”

She sits in a silent trance, then gives a small, indifferent nod.

I turn my thoughts to the leftover cauliflower soup sitting in a plastic tub on the top rack in the fridge. Sometimes it takes a day or two for a bland dish to taste right, for the various flavors to mix up and saturate. On those lucky occasions, the ingredients keep doing their work after you go to sleep, and the leftover dish you eat the next day is what you wanted the meal to taste like originally: the final, secret ingredient for it to reach its fullest potential, was time. I hope that will be the case with my soup. Or maybe tomorrow will be one of those days when leftovers won’t suit my taste no matter what, one of those days I want something fresh and extraordinary, no matter how impractical.

*Ian is a senior majoring in English.
He has been previously published in Unbound.*



ANNA BUGBEE

DEATH OF A SALESMAN

9x11x2"

GRAY BABY

— CHAD HUNIU

Chapter 1: Silly Hope

We are forever alone and not alone in this universe. It is silly to think otherwise, even if it is only natural.

Five years ago...

“Captain,” he hears her say again through grinding teeth. “Captain!”

The spaceship America (NETAN, inc., model XES-t1) jerks back and forth, back and forth, side to side, dodging through the soup of meatballish asteroids that form a ring around the inner planets just beyond the orbit of Mars.

“Goddamnit, Harold Kadrinski!” she screams, trying to be heard over the alarm system guffawing perpetually red.

“Captain,” he replies at last, a slight smirk turning the corners of his mouth. “Captain Harold Kadrinski.”

“Captain,” she spits out with her teeth grinding again. “We have to turn back. NOW.”

He doesn’t answer her and keeps his focus on swerving through the asteroid

soup, only diverting his attention from it to consult the threat emanating from the circumference of the radar.

“We are going to get ourselves killed! We aren’t even half-way through the asteroid belt and the last hit we took left with half of the fuel reserve an’ more keeps spillin’ on out ev’ry gawdamned fuckin’ second! Not-tuh mention that hit to the starter engines.” Her Texan accent is back—she must really be terrified.

He swerves left and up, though he knows up is no different than down in the infinitude of space. Seems like up is up to him. At least it does to me. Yes, up is definitely up. But I’m just in the background right now and Harold doesn’t ask me.

The captain glances at the radar again, double-taking it. His right eyebrow lifts up in a curve.

“Captain!” Lisa yells again. “Don’t you understand what I’m gawdamned saying? We’re going to die a horriblefuck death in the freezin’ nothingness of space if you don’t turn this ship on ‘round RIGHT FUCKING NOW!”

“Alrighty,” says the captain. “Buckle it down everybody. We are blasting out of this asteroid belt. Prepare for light speed ignition. Thirty seconds. Starting...now.”

“You fuckin’ crazy?” screams Lisa, this time with the rest of the crew’s distressed stares on her side.

“I don’t think so,” says Harold.

She sends him a nasty sort of look, but it’s drowned away by all the ensuing chaos and outnumbered by the rest of the crew’s worried expressions. The rest of the crew and I look as though we’re just about to come or we’re in labor about to

pop a kid out of the oven—either way, we aren't quite certain if it's actually going to happen, and we're scared shitless out of our skulls, especially if it is going to be the latter. But we run and tumble on anyways, coloring the background of Harold and Lisa's sitcom rerun, fumbling over chairs and switches as we are rocked back and forth in a slish-sloshing, red nightmare.

"We're doing something important here, Lisa," continues Harold. "We aren't turning back."

"You're sending us to our deaths!" she screams.

"10-9-" begins Harold.

"Engines ready for light speed, sir," says one of the distressed crewmen to Harold's right—that's me, Weldon Roth.

"8-"

"Harold! You're out of your goddamned mind!"

"7-6-"

"Back up for fuel container sealed – check."

"Fuck! Fuck!"

"5-"

"Gravity regulating sustainer lock – check."

"4-"

"Window shields and lock – check."

"We'll lose the tail end with all the fuel!"

"3-"

"Ship set and ready to go, sir."

"2-"

"We're all gonna die!"

"1."

But nothing happens. Harold hovers his hand over the big, shiny grey button on the main console control board. We are all suspended in time, staring big-eyed at Harold, floating on the same breath we

took when he had uttered "one." We wait like thunderstruck deer on a highway of speeding headlights for Harold to push his big, stubby thumb into the button.

He checks the radar once more, seeing things align as he must have foreseen. A huge green smudge the size of a grapefruit passes by on the radar. The asteroid disappears off the left side of the circle and Harold strikes his thumb into the shiny, grey button.

In a few weeks, we will be the first humans ever to touch the ground of an alien planet.

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"What are we doing out here?" asks Keenaila Yltyl Clhortell.

"I don't really know," he says, looking up intently at the dark, starry, evergreen sky through black-rimmed spectacles.

"What are you doing?" she asks.

Brilloy Yulltart scratches at the snow white curly hair on his head and pushes his glasses up a little on the bridge of his nose. "Looking for UFOs," he says.

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah."

"And what if they don't exist?" asks Keenaila.

Brilloy shoots a pointed burnt orange finger into the sky so swift and suddenly, that the pen stuck between his fingers is flung out in the direction of the pointed finger like a speeding bullet that will travel on forever, never to touch the ground. But then, as always, the pen curves back down for a nice, sudden free-fall to the grassy blue below.

"Well, what do you call that?" says

Brilloy.

A ball of glowing chartreuse surrounded by an aura of bright yellow is screaming through the seaweed sky above the rolling, forested landscape, growing larger and larger, louder and louder.

Keenaila looks at Brilloy, nervousness and excitement spilling out of her turquoise eyes. Brilloy's mouth is dropped open in inexplicable, silent excitement, his eyes and orange finger still trailing the growing yellow-chartreuse blaze.

"No," he whispers and turns to meet her expression. "Oh my Shet."

Keenaila runs off into the blue woods to find Gastdf and Trupp, leaving Brilloy still frozen in the open field watching the yellow-chartreuse ball dim and fall behind the nearest butte. It falls gently for all its seeming massiveness, simmering down to just a light yellow aura haloing around the entirety of the craft (or whatever it is) just as it sneaks behind the hump. It hits the ground with a distant, quiet thud.

The others are now standing in awe beside Brilloy in the field, having run out from the forest just in time to watch it dip behind the butte.

"Everybody to the car," commands the young, white-haired Brilloy still in shock. He snaps out of it, shaking the white hair on his head. "Now now now. Let's go. Let's go. Woo woo woo!"

They sprint down the slight slope of the blue field to Brilloy's car, quickly piling in, huffing and puffing and gasping for air. They've never run so hard in their lives. Brilloy fumbles with his seatbelt, can't get it in the slip and realizes the absurdness, letting it fly back with a snap to his right

side. He turns the keys, jerks his car around and out of the dirt parking lot, and steps on the gas down the road towards Ryoltoll's butte.

"This is it, Nai baby," he tells Keenaila, who is sitting rigidly up on the edge of the front passenger seat, digging her nails into the seat's grey fabric. "This is it, this is really it! I know it is!"

"What? What? What?" she gasps out at last.

"The beginning. Of it all. Of this revolution we all think and talk and chatter and blather about. Of the spirit, of the spirit! It's going to happen. I can feel it! This is important! It's just got to be!"

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Chapter 2.1: Margaritaville

*"Wasting away again in
Margaritaville*

*Searching for my lost shaker of salt
Some people claim that there's a
woman to blame*

But I know it's my own damn fault."

-- Jimmy Buffett

Somewhere in the Bahamas, an aging blonde, her hair dyed, sits stock-still, transfixed on sparkling ripples of blue ocean, immobilized by sun, the fifth icy pink alcoholic slush she slurps and the sinking, spinning hole beneath her reclining mesh beach chair. Watching all the bouncing wet and tan boobs in two-pieces and the swaggering six-packs in sunglasses, she clutches the perspiring glass tautly and curls her toes into the warm granules of sand, which become lodged under her painted-black toenails. A

dark-skinned waiter in white strolls meekly by with a shiny silver platter of empty drinks. “Oh You, Mr. waiter boy. Another of these pretty puhlease. Oh no, where’s my key?”

In Texas, a kid, barely nineteen years old, looks up at the Bruce Springsteen concert that has been playing on repeat for hours, maybe days, on the TV screen, and decides, with one last puff of the bong, to pack it up. Around midnight, he passes the Texas-New Mexico border in a rusting maroon Toyota Carolla with faded blue doors. As he nears Roswell at the crack of dawn, he sees a McDonald’s glowing in the distance just off the highway. He swallows a Vyvance and a hit from his piece before the short, pudgy Mexican lady at the window hands him a large Sprite and two bags filled with Chicken McNuggets, a Big Mac and four orders of fries. Leaking onto the street from the drive-thru, smiling madly, one hand digging into the greasy bag of fries, a speeding SUV, railing on its horn, nearly slams into the left-front side of his car. The SUV speeds away, calling him a “retard” and a “fucking moron.” In an hour, his car, toasted and smoking, will be towed off the interstate to the nearest mechanic shop.

On Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, she wakes up at seven in the morning, gets to work by eight, and gets off at twelve-thirty. She hops in the car and drives the two hours north to school, where she is enrolled in nine different classes paid by student loans and a nice-sized scholarship (and still she’s going to be a couple thousand dollars short this term, oh boy). On those nights, she is sometimes able to sleep on a friend’s couch, otherwise she sleeps on a pile of

stacked cardboard with a couple of blankets in her school-assigned studio, setting her cell phone alarm to eight AM so she can sneak out before the studio inspector comes by; or she drives the two hours back down to her father’s house to sleep in her cozy queen-sized bed, but that means she’ll have to wake up at eight so she can drive back up to school in time for classes. Either way, she’s waking up at eight, she figures.

Somewhere in the universe on a planet known to some as Second Earth and to its own inhabitants as Draaser, in a rat-shaped country about the size of Australia called Tolanert, a group of hip young geeks with minds for the much more, the much further and the ever-looming advisement of the easy and essential less (Do less! Do less! Because why try?), watch the clear and dark green night sky for satellites, shooting stars and UFOs, because at this point, any little signal of a world beyond this box will do.

You must see: Extraterrestrials—actual alien beings which call another planet in the universe Home—have lived amongst the people of Tolanert for five years now, and yet, nothing’s changed. Everything remains the same. For they are one and the same, these two species. Nothing given, nothing taken, nothing changed.

And somewhere in the universe, high on tyio or weed, drunk from prantimya or alcohol, someone asks if there might, perhaps, be some suitable way out of here.

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I can hear a baby gasping. It’s

getting ready to cry.

Five years ago, I am learning that things are mostly as they seem, but that this is not necessarily a good thing. I can't say it's all that bad either.

On a planet called Draaser orbiting around a star close to the Earthling solar system, in a country called Tolanert and a city known as Yerteldell Guann, we are being held as quasi-prisoners of the state and quasi-guests-of-honor.

Here, we are aliens, extraterrestrials, not szetlyll. We are automatically classified as a threat to the people and to the state (though not necessarily in that order) by the Tolanertan government.

At some point, five years ago, during our dead-of-night entry through the greenish atmosphere of the planet, our ship, already in bad shape thanks to the asteroid belt and some anomalous computer-navigation malfunctions, lost its tail-end, including the fuel tank. The starter engines were also toast.

We already understood, for the time being, we would have no way back to Earth. No way of our own off this planet. We were trapped—no escape.

I will later find out that this is not so bad after all.

On the night we crash land, we are quickly found by what seems to be a group of ordinary teenagers. They take us to their house, driving us in what is absolutely, in every way, an automobile, a car. It wasn't until we are situated inside their house—a two-story building, with a front porch, stairs, bathrooms, beds, a kitchen and kitchen table with cushioned and wooden chairs surrounding it, a television, even a damned fireplace!—

where it is lit better, that we both realize that we are the same.

Both of us are humanoid species. The only difference that we discern right away is our differing skin-tones, theirs being colored orange. They also have odd hair and eye colors. We will later find out that the different coloring between our species' physical appearances will be almost as far as our genetically based differences go.

I remember laughing, Harold and Lisa glaring at me to shut the hell up. But it was too ripe, too good.

The one who introduced himself as Brilloy had bright white hair and lemon yellow eyes that looked like a cat's. He wore thick glasses. He smiled constantly. He was short and a little scrawny, but did all of the communicating for the other three. The one who seemed to be his girlfriend, Keenaila, had long maroon hair with bangs and crisp turquoise eyes.

Brilloy and Keenaila are two good friends of mine now.

We don't have much trouble finding ways to communicate since we are both essentially human. Harold, Connie and Lisa do most of the communicating on our part. That's their thing. I just stand back and observe along with Jack and Kacie.

They give us water, or a liquid that is eerily similar to it, and some kind of food that tastes a lot like cinnamon and fried chicken. Before we had spent more than a few hours there, a military squad dressed in hazmat suits kicks down the front door, which was unlocked. They tackle the six of us, tying us up and throw us in the back of a van.

Now I, Weldon Roth, live a Second

Life.

Baby's crying again, so I stay in bed. Jilly gets out, takes care of it, takes away her warm tangerine ass with her, too. I open my eyes for a second to see her long silver-blue hair hanging in ripples down her back, letting up just before the beautifully curvy part just before her hips (my favorite part), light orange and bright in the light that's pouring in through a window of our blue-wood tree house. She holds Jimbyl so much like a mother.

I'm a father now. It's been over six months, but I still can't wrap my head all the way around it. Life is strange sometimes, isn't it? Especially when it's so normal. I smile and sink back into sleep.

In a few hours, Harold will yell at us from ground-level.

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Chapter 3: Doing it Live

"Fuck it! We're doin' it live!" -- Bill O'Reilly

Somebody shoves, somebody points a finger, somebody screams "dirt on his face!" ("They're no gods! They're smudgey blobs with dirty blood and pale faces!")

But this is later.

Right now, a fine mist is settling over the grey driveway out front Brilloy's house. Jilly is beside me holding our kid and watching Gastdf and Brilloy pack the car as the baby sucks at her nipple.

Gastdf, under the open trunk hatch of the tan SUV, scratches his purple-black beard trying to find the right place for each suitcase, duffel bag, blanket and box, as

though they were all pieces to a puzzle that doesn't have the picture plastered onto the box top to refer to for guidance. He looks at the puzzle with a blank expression in silent meditation behind his yellow cat eyes. Brilloy hands him each irregularly shaped puzzle piece, equally infatuated by the improvised puzzle. They move fast, like a machine, figuring things out as they go.

At last, Brilloy hands Gastdf the down-trodden nylon-stringed guitar and, holding it by the neck, he considers for a moment the progress of his puzzle. He scratches at his purple-black beard.

A pattern may exist somewhere in all that unplanned, seeming randomness; in that strange design. I can't say for sure. There is no apparent system besides, "get it done, make it all fit." He just goes for it, does it on the spot, creating as he went.

(I am six years old again. I am leaping from stone to stone, rock to rock, above the cool, salty ocean water of the Pacific coast. I leap with little thought, jumping as I choose. Simultaneously, almost.

I am nineteen years old again. I'm speeding through an ever-moving ocean of college kids on my bicycle. The Arcade Fire is determining the movements of my peddles. They move fast. But the college students, they move like slugs on crack, slow and unexpectedly. I swerve and brake and speed up and swerve and brake as the ocean billows and shifts. Finding my narrow passages, my pockets, my corridors, constantly readjusting to the fluid mass. I just want to peddle fast. So I find a way).

Gastdf shrugs silently and walks around to the side door, laying down the

guitar on the back seat. Brilloy snickers and pulls the trunk hatch down, slamming it shut.

Just above the license plate are the unsuccessful remnants of stickers that have been scraped away. But there is one that remains intact. It has been partially obscured by the Tolanertan flag Brilloy stuck smack-dab in the middle of it. The sticker used to say: "In a world where you can be anybody, be yourself." Now, with the Tolanertan flag covering much of it, it says: "In a world...be..."

Brilloy bought the car off his mother five months ago, but it wasn't until this morning that he decided the stickers had to go – "coexist," "make love, not war," "Vote Succortell/Budtgf," "Be yourself." They all had to go. But "be yourself" wouldn't let it's grip from the trunk hatch of the car go. So, of course, he slapped one of his Tolanertan flag stickers on top of it.

"Probably a smart move," I told him, helping him take off the stickers an hour or so ago.

"I mean, I'm not really looking to get shot by some rednecks or pulled over by some embittered, old Sheriff when we cross into the Southern provinces," he said.

"Smart."

=====

Somebody shoves, somebody points a finger, somebody screams "dirt on his face!" ("They're no gods! They're smudgey blobs with dirty blood and pale faces!")

But this is later.

Right now, we are pulling off the

interstate highway into Yerteldell Guann.

Four years ago, we were instructed by the Tolanertan government to never again return to this city or any big city for that matter.

It is for our safety.

Only one of our crew has been allowed to remain in the city. I haven't spoken to Connie Redding in over a year. Neither has Harold or Lisa.

Four years ago, Jack and Kacie are walking hand in hand down a polka-dotted, gum-ridden sidewalk to their government-provided apartment building – a spacious, brand new, two bedroom/two bath fourth-story apartment, of which is furnished with the finest Tolanert has to offer – a huge high-definition flat screen television with pristine surround sound, new laptop computers and digital cameras, and a hundred other top of the line electronic devices, pieces of furniture and appliances that only the top one or two percent of Tolanertans are able to enjoy simultaneously. I know this because I once had all of that nice stuff, too.

In seconds, they will be overrun by a mob of enraged Tolanertans of all shades of orange. Jack's hairless, perpetually schoolboy face will be beaten to a pulp and his neck slit. Kacie, with her short blonde hair and faded green eyes, will be shot twice, point-blank, into her curving, round stomach.

But right now, we are driving over the Ytreldi bridge, headed for the Square.

I am a little afraid.

Soon we will be in that chaotic sea of burnt orange again. I know. I can feel it.

At the exit, we pull into the parking lot of a fast-food joint near the Square.

"So. Where are you off to first?" I

say to Brillooy as he steps out of the driver’s seat.

“Well,” he says. “Like I said, first to my friend’s house to pick up some stuff I left there. Then, I don’t know. That way.” He points to the eastbound freeway.

He’s lying—the first time he said his grandmother’s. He just wanted to say goodbye one last time before taking off, I guess.

“I suppose this is it then,” he says.

“Well,” I say. “Have a good time.”

“Bye Jilly,” says Brillooy, going down the line. “Little Jimbyl.”

We all say goodbye to one another, with it somewhere in the back of our heads that this might just be the last time we ever meet face to face, but our interactions don’t quite show it. No one ever realizes the gravity of situations like that until they are long past anyways. Jilly hands me Jimbyl so she can hug her friends goodbye, beginning with Gastdf.

Brillooy, Keenaila and Gastdf situate themselves back into the SUV and pull out of the driveway. We begin our walk towards the Square.

=====

Welp. That was that, thinks Brillooy as he speeds up to 70, pulling back onto the freeway.

But it is what it is. And we are doing something important. Something bigger. Something tangible, I can almost grab it. I’m going to try.

I had hoped that extraterrestrials landing on our planet would change us somehow. Make us see that we could be better than ourselves. That we could re-find ourselves. Make us swing back in tune with our spirits, our souls.

And now the extraterrestrials are my friends. And I’m still the only one who seems to understand what that means.

For everybody else, it just made them fall back to xenophobic and racist tendencies, as always.

But the buzzing oval block in Brillooy’s pocket won’t let them get further than an hour away from Yerteldell Guann.

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