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NeverEnding Loop

Joseph Nivens

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NeverEnding Loop

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

in

The School of Art

by

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Abstract

The intention of *NeverEnding Loop* is to depict the trauma of queer adolescence contrasted by the shadow of the closet that follows LGBTQ+ children into adulthood.

The reality for queer people is that coming out is a process that never ends and a task that can create a lonely existence for those that are different from the norm. The artwork aims to convey the very real and confusing struggle of finding your identity as a queer person existing in a heterosexual world.

NeverEnding Loop explores loops and cycles in short animations, sculptural forms with repeating imagery, and mixed media forms that require interaction from the audience.

By placing animated loops, interactive sculptures, and miniature environments together in the gallery, I hope to entice and overwhelm the viewer, so that they might begin to feel a fraction of what life is like for a queer child.

Introduction

Coming out of the closet is an unending cycle of life for a queer person. For LGBTQ+ people, it is something that you repeat over and over and over again, yet the result is different every time. As a gay adult man, I am constantly overwhelmed by very simple tasks. Tasks as small as getting a haircut often involve a deep level of intimacy with strangers. The small talk initiated by the hairdresser can dive into conversations about work, significant others, and family. Meaning that the simple task of getting a haircut can easily require the decision of whether or not to come out to a stranger.

Coming out is not something you do once in your life; it is something you choose to do each time that you meet a new person. This includes starting a new job, going to a wedding or a funeral, going to a new doctor, or participating in any other mundane task that might involve small talk with people you do not previously know. While coming out about one's sexuality might only occur once in a relationship, be it a stranger, family member, friend, or partner; the level of detail and intimacy that is shared with others naturally increases over time. When a child grows up having their natural personality suppressed by their friends and family, it is hard for the child to know as an adult what is or isn't safe to say, do, act, or be. It might feel possible to lose a friendship or relationship, possible to change the dynamic of a relationship, or in some extreme circumstances it might feel possible to have your physical safety jeopardized. The decision to come out is a looping, never-ending cycle that brings forward the childhood trauma of existing in a world that is not designed for queer people.

Coming out of the closet will never stop feeling scary since there are so few LGBTQ+ people. In the US, less than 5% of the population identifies as LGBTQ+. It is difficult to feel safe and secure when you are part of a small and sometimes hidden group of people, as queer people do not physically look any different from heterosexual people. Sometimes an LGBTQ+ person may change or queer-up their physical appearance, but at the core, that person appears just like the rest of their friends and family members. A parent's expectation for gender forces queer children into hiding, starting before they are born. For example, many parents begin planning a child's bedroom before the birth, based on its gender. Queer people are often in hiding for fear of retribution from the political act of authentically being themselves. As an LGBTQ+ child, my experience was to grow up without the feeling of queer support; I did not have queer family members, friends of family, or queer members of the community to fall back on or to ask questions. For many queer children, it can be scary to be different from the closest members of their family, schoolmates, and their local community. Someone could come from a liberal, educated, and accepting family, yet still feel terrified to come out of the closet.

The Cartoon as Self

Being a gay kid from a rural town in the 1990's meant carefully examining every step that I took, every word that I spoke, and every gesture that I made. It meant constant acting, rehearsing, and overthinking of every move in my life, for fear that the people around me might figure out my sexuality.

Naturally, the television became my best friend. At 4PM, I was usually found parked on the couch, flipping through the channels, looking for my favorite sitcoms and cartoons. The cartoons of the 90's often strayed away from the generic nuclear family and instead focused on one or two oddball characters. This was the start of my interest in animation. Everything in animation was possible; a character could live underwater, fly, take a journey to far off worlds, or live life with a "roommate" of the same sex. Many of the 90s cartoons centered around unhappy or different characters, characters that did not fit in to the group, or characters often in middle school or at the age of puberty. Characters like Pinky and the Brain, Ren & Stimpy, Timon and Pumbaa, Rocko, and most Disney villains were all examples of individuals that reveled in their uniqueness or queerness.

Recently, LGBTQ+ people have become more visible and accepted through film and television, yet for many of us, those lingering behaviors of hiding and personal suppression remain and may never go away. Coming out is a lifelong struggle to figure out who you are through the eyes of others. It is an uncomfortable and constant experience that queer people go through at every new introduction. Whether you choose to address it or not, the tension of that question always floats murkily beside you. The constant fear and anxiety of rejection never goes away.

For many children, dolls can be a useful tool for dealing with loneliness. My mother and grandmother kept dolls, Barbies, and other old collectibles around the house, but as a child, I did not dare to touch their figurines and keepsakes. I became obsessed with collecting my own antique tin toys, trinkets, beanie babies, Pokémon, marbles, and

anything else that had a lot of color and personality. It was not something that I was aware of at the time, but dolls do provide a sense of friendship and company. Dolls fill a void for children by allowing them to imagine what life would be like if the toy were living. The figure could represent a spouse, a child, a friend, or something else, but regardless of what it represented, it would provide comfort for the lonely. In high school, I began making puppets for stop motion animation. Puppets are different in structure from toys in that they are built with wire and epoxy at the core that allows the movements of the figure to have a memory. Stop motion figures have the ability to be tied down to the set with machine screws and to hold their form when moved, allowing the animator to create the illusion of movement over many frames.

Background and Process

The process for my work is different with every piece. *NeverEnding Loop* includes animation, paper mache, mixed media sculpture, wire sculpture, and an oil clay loaf. I was exposed to many different techniques and art forms at an early age. My father was a graphic design professor with a love for landscape and figure drawing and my mother was an art teacher with a full-time hobby for ceramics. Crafting and artmaking were commonplace in my home growing up.

At the age of 13, I won a poster contest held by the local fire department for Fire Safety. They gave me a \$100 cash prize and my posters were reprinted and hung up around my hometown. I realized in that moment I was going to pursue a career in art. My 7th grade teacher said, “and the winner is, Joe Nivens!” with a beaming smile on her face,

and my anxiety fell away leaving me to feel proud of something in school for the first time in a long time. School and sports were not my strong suit as a child, anxiety about my sexuality took up too much time to focus on anything else.

Throughout high school, I continued with my goal of becoming an artist at the strong discouragement of my guidance counselor. I took local college classes in drawing and working with human figures. I also went to summer camp for printmaking and photography. It wasn't until I attended a gallery opening on Chris Sickel's photo illustration work that I became interested in animation. He explained the process of stop motion animation and everything clicked in my brain. It was a magical format where you could bring things to life and fully control the world that you created. That weekend, I made my first animation using a puppet that I made of lead wire and Sculpey. I later learned to use aluminum armature wire, but the lead was what we had at the time because my mom had temporarily gone into a stained-glass window making phase.

For me, art was a way to escape my small hometown. It provided an avenue to a better life with the promise of finding myself. Growing up gay in Central Illinois, I found it increasingly more difficult to fit in the older that I got. I wanted badly to live in a colorful homosexual world like Armand's South Beach oasis in the movie Birdcage. I discovered California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) and became obsessed with their animation program. CalArts was an extremely queer friendly art school just outside of Los Angeles, known for being the top school in the country for animation. Their website was filled with imaginative and exotic films and animations that inspired me to pursue animation further.



Image 1. *Photo illustration by Chris Sickels of Red Nose Studios.*

I thought that moving somewhere liberal and queer friendly would lead to my immediate happiness, but life turned out to be much more complicated. My anxiety persisted into adulthood, regardless of my wonderful new circumstances. Despite moving away, I still did not feel comfortable in my own skin. CalArts was a magical place, but I needed to deal with my family and past friendships as I tried to find out who I was. To better understand what I wanted from my life, I enrolled in classes on alternative processes in animation, film making, directing, 2D drawn animation, stop motion animation, puppet fabrication, animation history, queer literature, written pornography, science fiction writing, and more.

Today, as a 32-year-old adult male, I still struggle with feeling authentic. There is a shadow left by the constant act of self-denial that I struggled with as a child. I hid in the closet for the majority of my upbringing trying to avoid the repetition of bullying from my

peers, but it came anyway. I was different from the other boys in my class and they always noticed. I found myself rehearsing everything in my head, before I would speak aloud. It made me hate school because being at school meant that I would be spending my entire day being harassed by the boys and girls of my grade. Leaving that small town became my mission in life; it fueled me to join every social group that I could find and every sport that I could tolerate. I recently wrote a short fictional story on my experience in middle school dealing with the daily anxiety that I felt when forced to come face to face with the children bullying me titled *5th Grade*. The piece is written about a time in my life when I was beginning puberty, dealing with constant bullying from my peers, and reaching a tipping point where I could not deny my sexuality to myself any longer. The story is fictionalized with the intention to help the reader experience a higher level of anxiety. (Please see Appendix A on page 15 for the story of *5th Grade*)

Individual Works

Baby Blue

This paper mache sculpture depicts a child's ride-on toy, but instead of an animal to sit on, there is a small boy. It is designed to rock back and forth, with a top-heavy figure on the rocker, colored in a pastel gender-reveal blue. When making this piece, I wanted the viewer to experience the show through a lens of anxiety and unease.



Image 2. *Baby Blue*. 2021.

The result was a baby form that appears to be crawling, falling, and flying while suspended on a rocker that is not actually functional. The rocker implies that it is designed to be ridden like a toy, but if the viewer imagines riding the sculpture, then it would encourage them to rock back and forth as they view the surrounding environment. If the participant were to sit on the ride-on toy, then the viewer would become the burden to the child.

Daily Performance

Daily Performance is made up of a large paper mache clown mask on a weighted stand with a projection of an animated bouncing head looping in the form of a boy's head changing back and forth from boy to clown to boy. This never-ending sequence is made in colored pencil and graphite. The boy bounces back and forth on a mask from real to

fake to show the constant alterations to personality that queer people must go through in order to navigate daily life.



Image 3. *Daily Performance*. 2021.

The form of the clown mask was chosen to represent the act put on by a young, closeted child. Living in the closet requires a daily performance which demands practice, rehearsal, and staging. It creates a divide in a person as they try to portray the person they think the people around them want them to be.

Stratacut Smile

Stratacut animation is a form of animation using cut away oil clay loaves. The loaf is cut bit by bit to reveal a visually chaotic animated image as it unravels. This sculpture is

made up of an oil clay loaf built with the potential to be animated. The animation built into the loaf is of an abstracted face breathing heavily as it is unraveled.



Image 4. Stratacut Smile. 2021.

Inspired by the artist David Daniels, who created stratacut animation, I chose this style to amuse and overload the viewer.

Expectation

This piece invites the viewer to manipulate and alter the appearance of a blank faced boy. The intention here is to bring the viewer in to manipulate the personality of the character with colorful and visually interesting face pieces.



Image 5. Expectation. 2021.

Whether a family is trying to suppress the sexuality of a child or not, the implied heteronormativity of the world we live in leads queer children to feel unease in the realization of being different. From the moment a child is born, a gender expectation is placed upon them. For boys it is cool colors like blue, sports, and action figures that reference violent war while for girls it is warm colors like pink, caretaking, and being a mother.

Expectation gives the viewer control of how the sculpture presents to the audience. It allows the audience member to manipulate the piece in the same way that adults manipulate children into their expectations. It is meant to represent the lack of control in how a queer child realizes who they are becoming.

Topsy Turvy



Image 6. Topsy Turvy. 2021.

Topsy Turvy dolls are antique dolls which typically depicted two polar-opposite characters. The dolls often depicted a form considered to be good on one side and a form considered to be evil on the other. An example that was pointed out to me was the topsy turvy doll depicting a wolf on one side and little red riding hood on the other side, but the toy also has a long and problematic history dealing with race.

With my piece, I wanted to play off the idea of good and evil with gay and straight characters. As there are no physical differences between gay and straight people, I decided to use the forms of a boy and the boy's adult form as a man. I painted the forms to look like aged metal and added rust to the boyish form to give it the effect of blush. To continue with the theme of opposites, I used black and white fabric covered in stars to cover the body.

First Day

This piece is based on the attached story titled *5th Grade*.



Image 7. First Day. 2021.

The sculpture depicts a child dressed as a clown on their first day of school, embarrassed and terrified while looking at the viewer. When bending down to view the piece, the audience member is placed in the shoes of the implied classmates. The figure is physically larger than the classroom to point out how different and odd a queer child might feel in a school environment.

Hi, My Name Is...



Image 8. *Hi, My Name Is...* 2021.

This is another piece based on my short story titled *5th Grade*. These two figures represent a queer boy and his heterosexual mask. They are placed on separate walls at the same height, with the boy figure looking toward the ground while the clown figure stares maliciously at him.

First Dance



Image 9. *First Dance*. 2021.

A blank faced dull metal child stares at a distance towards the faces of his colorful and vibrant bullies. Children often use intimidation tactics learned from their parents and older siblings to rid the group of anyone who is dissimilar. These tactics continue throughout adulthood for anyone who is different whether it be in race, gender identity, or sexuality.



Image 10. *First Dance (Alternative View)*. 2021

Conclusion

Coming out of the closet is a looping cycle of life for an LGBTQ+ person. It is something that queer people repeat over and over and over again, each time they interact with someone new. By gaining a deeper understanding of the suffering that queer people go through, hopefully we can all be more empathetic to those that are different from ourselves.

NeverEnding Loop is a show about the LGBTQ+ experience. It is intended to give the general public an insight into how these experiences continue throughout the entire life of a queer person. Although the show focuses on queer themes, there is a universal theme of bullying that is looped throughout the work that could be applied to anyone who has ever experienced or witnessed bullying. The work also provides a perspective to those who have bullied others in the past as to how their actions can cause long-term trauma to those around them. It is my hope that queer individuals, victims of crime, and all those that have suffered with identity will find comfort in knowing that they are not alone.

Fifth Grade

By Joseph Nivens

Mrs. Bones' massive legs straddled my chest as her hands wrapped around my neck choking every last breath from my body. My face was burning redder and redder, expanding like a zit about to burst. I was panicking. I scratched the floor beneath me trying to escape, but with every fingernail that broke off, I only became weaker. My fingers grew limp as they spewed blood across the grey linoleum. I gave in to the inevitable death that was coming. Another screaming blow from Mrs. Bones... Another, and then another... The classroom had gone insane; the students were losing their minds; kids were shouting and flailing about like giant primates during mating season. Julia leapt across Gabe and stabbed through Sarah's training bra with a #2 pencil. Her teeth barred to the world as she roared like a rabid psychopath ready to complete her times tables. Joey and Chris cheered her on from the sideline as I suffocated and spun into darkness. The walls around me were vibrating now, pulsating with the heavy beat of my blood pressure. Mrs. Bones jumped up and shot Gabe in the face with a water gun then moaned from an orgasm. Juicy and wet, she licked the sweet liquid off her fingers.

The vapor from my inhaler shot into my lungs while the principal, a middle aged, loose-skinned woman with a hair helmet and a pencil skirt, stared me down, glaring into my eyes with disgust. Desperately trying to catch my breath, I realized that I just had my first panic attack. My face was red and burning and my palms were drenched with sweat. This was my first day of fifth grade, at a new school, a school ten times the size of my previous one.

Forty five minutes later, my 17 year old sister Natasha pulled up in mom's army green Toyota Camry. My mom was the art teacher at her high school, so whenever I needed to be picked up, my mom would write Natasha a pass out of class and have her bring me over to the high school art room. Natasha pulled up to the front door where I was standing, purple faced, next to a very sad looking secretary in glasses.

"Get in the car, Dumbass." She said.

Natasha was wearing an aqua colored tube top with a loose flannel shirt around it, jeans with more holes in them than fabric and a pair of 5 inch wedges. Dressing appropriately for school was never her thing. Rules weren't really her thing in general. Regardless, Natasha was first in her class - grade wise, the captain of her volleyball team, and had a whole group of high school boys that followed her around like lovesick puppies. They were all in love with her. So much so that during the previous Halloween, our house was tee-peed 14 times. One of the times, the words, "MARRY ME" were inscribed into the ground with toilet paper. So, naturally every girl at her school hated her, including my other sister.

By the time I got to the high school art room, I had calmed down. My face was pale white again and my palms were dry. I sat down at my mom's desk and started working on the art project that she'd assigned her ninth graders. They were using exacto blades to cut colored paper into drawings, which, according to her, were much like the one's Matisse made towards the end of his life. I started designing a giraffe in a sort of mid century modern living room. I meticulously designed it in pencil first before cutting out the layers of colored paper with my exacto knife. This school was calm, and the people weren't scary. I felt at home. I cut out my giraffe in his luxurious room and

showed it to my mom's star student Steven. He was a tall mousey guy with thin eyes and an angular face. He had a higher pitched voice than the other guys in his class and my sisters thought he was weird, but he was one of the best art students in the class and he was always nice to me. I sensed something familiar about him, like maybe I wasn't the only one that got made fun of.

"That looks awesome man! Want to trade projects? You're way further along than I am." He said with a twinkle in his eye, knowing that my project didn't compare to what he was making.

"Yeah right!" I said, "You don't deserve this high of a grade! I'd totally give you a C so far."

"Damn, harsh bro."

"Sometimes my mom lets me help her grade, you know. You're gonna to have to step it up if you want an A!"

"Alright, alright." He said smiling, as he got back to cutting his project.

The next day I woke up sweating at 7am with a sense of dread. I had to go back to that giant school with the dungeon lighting and see all of those kids again. I got into the shower and let the hot water fall over my chubby pale face while I thought about going back to Jefferson Elementary School: the long dark hallways full of strangers, the smell of mildew and pubescent bodies, Mrs. Bones drooping neon pink clown cheeks. After drying off, I searched for the right combination of clothes to wear. I tried on shirt after shirt but nothing felt or looked quite right. I looked fat in everything I put on and no matter how many times I tugged at the fabric between my nipples, I felt uncomfortable. Those angry kids were going to chant my name again no matter what I wore. A girl

named Patricia had followed me to Jefferson from my previous school. She found great joy in teasing me during third and fourth grade, so much so that during recess she enlisted a group of boys to chant my name with her. They weren't chanting in favor of me, they were mocking how I said my name during the attendance check.

I sat down on the living room couch and turned the TV to Nickelodeon. It was now 7:45AM and even though school started at 8, I was in no hurry to get there. My dad worked from home, and didn't pay much attention to the time. We got in his car at 8 and drove to school. My sisters had left earlier with my mom, they were a year apart and went to the same high school that my mom taught at, so it was common for them to carpool.

At 8:11, my dad pulled his van up to Jefferson Elementary, and panic started to set in. Every horrible thing I could imagine flashed before my eyes. I pictured my parents getting into a car crash, an earthquake destroying our house, my dog getting ran over by a truck. Fear was all I felt. I asked my dad for something to hold onto, something of his, and he gave me his old university ID from a previous school that he'd taught at. I accepted the ID and put it in my pocket, gave him a nod like I was ok and then got out of the van.

"Today's going to be a great day! See you at 3, son!" he said as I closed the door.

I realized at that moment that I had a choice, I could either walk into the school or run away. Unfortunately I made the wrong choice, and I walked into the school. My sweaty palms pushed the front door open to reveal a dark, quiet hallway. I was very tardy at this point but I didn't care. This place was not safe. I hesitantly walked toward

Mrs. Bones' classroom knowing that I'd be written up, knowing I'd be ridiculed by Mrs. Bones and that my name would be written on the board for everyone to mock in unison.

I stepped into the doorway and everything went silent. Mrs. Bones turned to me in slow motion and at once all 25 of the kids in my class turned towards me in unison. Their eyes were all on me as I stood in the doorway paralyzed and unable to enter the room. Mrs. Bones screamed at me to sit down and wrote my name on the board in big fat capital letters:

GARRET FERGUSEN - TARDY

She laughed and in unison she and the students chanted:

GARRET FERGUSEN IS TARDY, GARRET FERGUSEN IS TARDY, GARRET FERGUSEN IS TARDY, GARRET FERGUSEN IS TARDY, GARRET FERGUSEN IS TARDY, GARRET FERGUSEN IS TARDY, GARRET FERGUSEN IS TARDY...

The teacher sensually rubbed the face of her star student Sarah and began aggressively shitting through her ankle length denim skirt. A large brown log fell onto the floor with a wet thump from between her legs. Mrs. Bones picked up the slimy brown piece from the tile and stabbed Sarah's eyes out with it. Howling with laughter, Mrs. Bones skipped around the room dragging feces along the walls and rhyming limericks about young bodies changing.

I looked down at the ID my father had given to me, hoping to find peace in his smile. When that didn't work, I ran out the door before she could get me. The entrance

doors to the school were locked so I ran into another classroom. It was an empty room with only one window and when I tried to open it, the window was locked. I grabbed a book to break the window but the glass was too hard. Suddenly Mrs. Bones face sprung up behind the glass.

"I'm going to eat you, fat child. You are all mine now."

I ran screaming into the hallway where I encountered 15 more Mrs. Bones. Somehow she'd multiplied and each time she multiplied her back got more mangled. The 15th version of her looked like an accordion with a rat head. Mrs. Bones stabbed me with a tongue depressor and I fainted, smashing my head into the checkered hallway tile.

The vapor from my inhaler shot into my lungs as a middle aged woman in a pencil skirt and navy blazer stared me down menacingly. My sister was on her way to get me and the principal was now lecturing me about calming down.

"You can't just run out of the classroom like that, son. Mrs. Bones is a lovely woman and you have said some very hurtful things to her. What were you thinking anyway? You need to write her an apology immediately!"

"Yes, Ma'am. (catching my breath) I am sorry, (catching my breath) I don't know what happened. I just couldn't breath. (catching my breath) I can't go back in that classroom."

"You will go back, and you will apologize. What is wrong with you? You aren't sick. You don't have a fever. You seem fine."

"I don't know. I'm sorry. Is anyone coming to get me?"

The secretary took me outside to wait for my sister, who pulled up in the Camry.
"You don't look sick. what happened?"

I got into the car and we drove to the high school. It was third period and the art club was tie-dyeing shirts. My mom had a box of extra shirts in case students forgot theirs. So I grabbed a white tank top and started knotting rubber bands around it.

"Hey little man!" Steven said, looking very well kept. His hair was combed over and kind of nerdy looking, but his face had a little bit of blond stubble growing on it; when he smiled I couldn't help but notice how full his lips were.

Suddenly, I was floating across a field of blond wheat that smelled like Abercrombie & Fitch. It was soft and wonderful, and when I rolled in it I smelled like Abercrombie too. There was a bag of gummy bears on a blanket and I sat down to enjoy them while the sun set in the distance. I was filled with electricity and excitement and then, just as I felt a hand brush across the hairs on my arm:

RIIIIIINGGGGGGGGG!!!!!! The bells rang and the high school's period was changing.

"Hey see you later little dude!" Steven said to me.

I fumbled to say see you later and bye man at the same time and ended up saying "Spy mater! I mean, um, slater!"

My mom gave me a suspicious look and told me to call my dad. "Can you have your dad pick you up? Maybe you shouldn't be hanging around all of these *older* kids."

The next morning, I woke up at 7AM drenched in sweat and dreading school. I ate a bowl of fruit loops with some 2% milk and watched Rugrats on Nickelodeon. Anjelica, from the show, called the babies stupid as I finished my cereal. I got dressed and got in the van to go to school.

As I walked into the classroom I saw Mrs. Bones in a school girl costume breastfeeding Sarah. The rest of the kids looked away from Sarah to stare at me. I noticed they all had milk stains around their lips too. One by one they started pointing at me and laughing, milk spilling down their shirts. Mrs. Bones began shooting milk at me from her breasts and asking,

"What's wrong Garret, don't you like titties? Are you one of those *weird* little boys that doesn't like milk? Com'ere Garret, it's time for your feeding."

I ran screaming down the dark hallway.

The vapor from my inhaler shot into my lungs while the mean old principal stared me down. This time, the principal refused to let me call home. "Phone bills are expensive, do you think you can just use our phone any time you want? What is your problem, Garret? You don't look sick. You don't have a fever. I think you just don't want to go to class."

I ran out of the office and sprinted down the hall. I smashed the doors open making my way to the escape. Once outside the principal ran after me screaming at me that I couldn't leave. I didn't care, I ran and ran until I found a nearby park. I sat down under the table on the cold hard concrete. Hours passed by and my mind filled with my peers chanting things at me:

GARRET LIKES BOYS, GARRET LIKES BOYS,

GARRET LIKES BOYS, GARRET LIKES BOYS,

GARRET LIKES BOYS, GARRET LIKES BOYS...

Finally, I heard: "What the fuck is wrong with you?" from my sister. "You realize that mom and dad are fully flipping out right now? Right?"

Natasha picked me up and took me to the high school, where I saw my mom speaking with two police officers. She ran over and hugged me and then slapped me on the shoulder.

"What were you thinking!"

"Sorry. I can't go back there again. I'm sorry."

A few days pass. My parents let me stay home from school, and they decide to start looking for a homeschool teacher. In the meantime, I go to my mom's school and work on the homework from Jefferson in her art room.

"Hey buddy." Steven says, smiling. His hair is spiked up with gel today and he is wearing a blue and white short sleeve button up. "You had the whole school worried the other day."

"Yeah, I know. They were serving pizza and I'm lactose intolerant; so I left."

"Uh huh, makes sense." Smiling like he doesn't believe anything I'm saying.

I can see a few chest hairs sticking out of his shirt, behind the top button, and all I can think about is ripping his shirt off and kissing him. In the background, a new song plays on the radio.

" If you wanna be with me,

Baby there is a price to pay,

I'm a genie in a bottle,

You gotta rub me the right way."

"Hey little dude." A girl I don't know, named Emily, walks up and puts her arm around Steven. She picks a piece of lint off Steven's shirt and giggles.

Steven gives Emily a kiss on the cheek and winks at me smiling.

"Hi" I say hesitantly, looking around the room for a door.

Vita

Joseph Nivens is a mixed media artist currently living in Baton Rouge. His background is in animation, having received a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in Experimental Animation from California Institute of the Arts in 2012. Before starting at LSU, he worked in props, puppet fabrication, and set building for Lift Animation, Screen Novelties, Stoopid Buddy Stoodios, and Netflix. He has a previous Master of Arts degree in 3D Studio Art from Eastern Illinois University. As a Master of Fine Arts candidate at Louisiana State University, he has worked as an instructor in Digital Art and Sculpture. If approved, Joseph Nivens will graduate with a Master of Fine Arts degree in Art from Louisiana State University in August of 2021.