Booth

Volume 7 | Issue 12 Article 3

12-18-2015

Preferred Signals, 1985

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Recommended Citation

Skinner, Woody (2015) "Preferred Signals, 1985," *Booth*: Vol. 7 : Iss. 12 , Article 3.
Retrieved from: https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/booth/vol7/iss12/3

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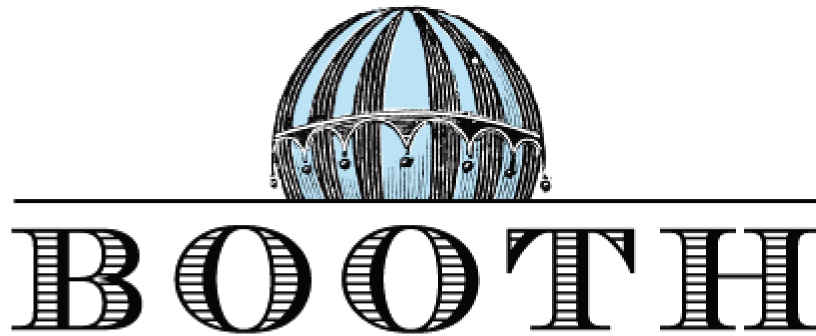
Preferred Signals, 1985

Abstract
We lived in a place where cable didn't exist. Our water was pumped from a well, our electricity streaming in on a TVA river wave. We lived in Izard County, Arkansas, where dirt roads ribboned through hills, where people were all but waiting on a filmmaker to document their poverty.

But we had a satellite dish in our front yard. A marvel of engineering, a jellyfish puffing toward the sky. Its frame stiff, shiny, a monument to mass communication. According to my father, we were devotees of manufacturing, people who made an art out of industry. The satellite dish, the Buick, the trailer—our lives made of metals.

Cover Page Footnote
"Preferred Signals, 1985" was originally published at *Booth*.

This article is available in Booth: https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/booth/vol7/iss12/3



A JOURNAL

December 18, 2015

Preferred Signals, 1985

Fiction by Woody Skinner

G6: The East Coast News

We lived in a place where cable didn't exist. Our water was pumped from a well, our electricity streaming in on a TVA river wave. We lived in Izard County, Arkansas, where dirt roads ribboned through hills, where people were all but waiting on a filmmaker to document their poverty.

But we had a satellite dish in our front yard. A marvel of engineering, a jellyfish puffing toward the sky. Its frame stiff, shiny, a monument to mass communication. According to my father, we were devotees of manufacturing, people who made an art out of industry. The satellite dish, the Buick, the trailer—our lives made of metals.

We were a space-age family, my father liked to say.

He was an expert dish adjuster, a champion of signal. A skill born of practice, dedication, more than science. Out there in our front yard, in the space between fat oak trees, my father shaped masterpieces, our dish's antenna locked onto distant targets, sending pristine picture to our television—we watched until our eyes ached.

My mother died during the motherly act—that's how my father always explained it. He was fifty years old when I was born. He cooked for the catfish buffet over in Strawberry. He liked to wear an old fireman's coat to the restaurant, chemistry goggles strapped around his head. He looked like a villain from one of the Mexican

dramas piped in through the satellite. He looked like a fellow with an obscure but absolute capacity for destruction.

In the mornings, before I left for school, we'd angle the TV so we could see from the breakfast room. We usually watched the East Coast news, places that seemed fathomable only in two colorful dimensions, weather-map geography. My father liked to hear horror stories of the human variety, robberies and rapes and murders. He said that we needed to hear them, that it was healthy to be reminded of how ugly people could be.

I would listen to the somber tone of broadcasters, their words drowned out by the sizzle, the pop, of fried meats. My father would pull baskets of food from the deep fryer, plugs of meat and potatoes, all of it soggy, grease dripping down your cuticles before dripping down your throat.

"What are we eating today?" I'd ask.

"Cheetah meat," he'd say.

One morning the two of us were sitting there, staring at a weather map of New York, when my father said, "Looks like a heat wave's headed this way."

I looked at the map. The high in Buffalo was sixty-seven degrees.

My father walked into the kitchen, grabbed a pair of scissors usually used to clip fat away from meat. He came back and faced away from me, staring at the TV. He raised the fat-caked scissors and cut into the shoulder of his plaid shirt, circling his bicep until he'd detached the sleeve. He unbuttoned the cuff and pulled the sleeve off, tossing it onto the kitchen table next to my plate.

He was halfway through the other sleeve when he said, "Stand up, Edmund. We've got some wardrobe adjustments to make."

I was fifteen years old, and I listened to everything he said. I stepped in front of him, and he appraised my clothes—a pair of khaki pants that were tight in the crotch, an oversized plaid shirt I'd taken from his closet.

He examined my shoulder, looking back and forth, right then left. He raised the scissors and snipped above my collar-bone, gaining speed as he worked the scissors around my arm. He tugged the sleeve off my arm and dropped it to the linoleum. I stood there quietly while he cut fabric from the rest of my limbs.

Now, so many years later, it seems like my father's eccentricity deepened weekly during the last year of his life. I still have the satellite chart that hung over the mantle of our faux fireplace. Its markings are celestial, dots and pins angled into shapes, an astronomy of soap operas and sporting events, foreign films and public hearings. My father's scribbles crowd the edges, noting his favorite satellites, his preferred signals. It's easy to detect the absurdity, the nihilism, of sickness in his behaviors, his obsessions. But back then my father could tell me anything, and it was the truth. That, I've come to think, was my father's supreme illness: omniscience.

F2: Tennis

Tennis was always on, if not on a North American satellite then on one from Sweden or Bulgaria. My father admired the sport for its uniforms, the tight shirts and short shorts and high socks. I tried to take up tennis. While other boys my age were mastering their skills with chainsaws, fistfighting on the bank of the river, I attended tennis practice, where I tiptoed across weed-cracked courts, swatted the air with my racket, the ball lofting gently over the net to my coach, a man with a delicate beard whose loneliness surpassed his interest in my tennis skills. He'd stop halfway through a match to tell me what he'd purchased at the supermarket, to talk about cleaning out his gutters.

One afternoon I watched television from a folding chair while my father stood behind me with a hair clipper. Onscreen was a tennis match, a couple of European men with scrawny arms and hairy legs slapping the ball back and forth, their shoes chirping on the court.

I sat there patiently, my father mowing a row of hair every once in a while. I could sense his distraction, the tennis match getting more attention than my hair.

"Be careful around my ears," I said.

"Shit, that ball wasn't anywhere close to the line."

He began cutting with a bit more vigor, the blade tugging my hair, releasing it.

"I have a scar from last time," I said.

"You're being dramatic," he said. "Cartilage hardly scars."

"Is this match point?" I asked. I'd been playing the sport for a year and still struggled with the subtleties of scoring. The European broadcasts hardly helped matters.

My father moved in front of me, lifting my chin to look at me.

“This may be my best work yet,” he said. “I’ve highlighted your McEnroe qualities. Long enough to be rebellious but not so long as to affect your performance. Style and substance—that’s the ticket, Edmund.”

I heard the screen door swing open, heard someone padding toward us across the trampled carpet.

“Is it time to go already?” my father asked.

“It’s ten till five,” a female voice said. “I don’t want to listen to Randy bitch.”

It was Annette Meyer, a girl so pretty she made my breastbone ache, a quarter-sized pain that lasered through to the meat of my back. She had buck teeth, an almond-shaped dimple in her chin, black hair so thick it must’ve strained the muscles in her neck. She had a couple of years on me in school, and she had the rumors to keep me sleepless at night, squirming around in the heat of my sheets. She waited tables at the fish restaurant and often walked the mile to our place to ride to work with my father.

She stepped in front of me, stood next to my father. I kept my eyes down—she was too much to take in up close. These glimpses of her outside of school seemed thick with intimacy, with private knowledge—her high heels replaced by a pair of worn Asics. Her scent—Dial soap and bug spray—made my hormones roar.

She stared at me for a long moment, what felt like minutes, before she said, “It’s a little bit lopsided.”

“Yeah, it is,” my father agreed.

“He has expressive eyebrows,” she said. “Sort of like a young Louis de Funes.”

She’d spoken about me before speaking to me. I’d never heard of Louis de Funes, but the name, spoken from those lipstick-thick lips, somersaulted between my ears.

When the two of them left, I sat there looking at the television, listening to the whap of tennis rackets.

F4: The Sex Channels

The mailman was a woman who wasn't my mother. On the weekends my father would travel with her to Memphis. While he was gone, I'd spend most of my time in front of the television. One of the few frequencies I'd memorized was the F4 satellite—it delivered the sex channels to our living room. Watching them was like witnessing the events of a history that hadn't happened yet. Those onscreen bodies, slick with sweat and oil and other barely fathomable lubricants, popped together with gaudy pleasure. The women panted raspy falsettos, the men grunting from time to time.

I wouldn't call what I experienced watching the sex onscreen arousal, not exactly. Not compared to what I felt in the company of Annette. I was inured to the television, having spent so much of my life in front of it. My father said porn was a performance in which every moment was the culmination, the event we'd been waiting for. He said it was drama without the tedium of context, that it transcended the cause-effect paradigm. And nothing was more important to a boy's development than the abandonment of narrative morality, my father told me.

Late Sunday evenings, my father and the mailman would come home with bleary eyes and stiff bodies. My father, who talked about everything, who was incapable of discretion, never said much about Memphis. At the time I hardly gave it a thought, but over the years I've come to wonder if he didn't want to tell me what he was doing. Whether he was up to something he shouldn't have been or he was doing something that embarrassed him, whether he was seeking some kind of medical treatment.

"What's Memphis like?" I would ask, when he returned.

"Elvis and disco and pisspots," he'd say.

F1: French Cinema

Annette came over more often in those last months of my father's life. When my father stopped driving, she got her license, started driving her mother's kelp Ambassador. The car was low and wide, a raft over the dirt roadway, and as she drove, gravel pinged into the undercarriage, her tires spraying the shoulders with a wake of grit.

Annette clung to my father like he was jarred firefly, like she better savor his every blink, absorb his last light. I did not share her awareness, her sensitivity. My antenna was focused on Annette. She'd all but moved in with us. At first she slept on the couch, a thin t-shirt stretched over her beautiful knees. I coveted that curving cotton,

stretched taut over her thin body. I hurt for her, with vigor and virginity, my blood humming in her presence, my jaws grinding in their sockets.

They spent evenings in front of the television, the satellite tuned to a station that played French films. They'd sit on the couch Indian style, their knees rubbing, pretending to play the roles they saw onscreen, interpreting the lines. They'd laugh at the dramatic moments, the expressive faces of the actors. Sometimes I'd march up to the recliner and plop down, as though it was nothing to have Annette Meyer right there next to me.

But I could hardly breathe. I certainly couldn't talk. I'd stare at the screen. The French people communicating big feelings. The depth, the emotion of their faces, the fluttery octaves of their voices—I wasn't sure I would have understood even if I were a Frenchman.

It's still difficult to fathom Annette's presence in our living room. Sure, she pined for our television, for the international programming, but it was always more than that. My father had a way of bringing the world, the things he wanted, close to him. Perhaps it is naive of me, but I believe, even now, that nothing more than companionship passed between them. That they were simply magnificent friends, people who shared a sensibility, who bonded as they breaded fish filets.

G1: Politics of the Soviet Union

One night we watched the live broadcast of a Soviet congressional debate. The Soviets argued with dramatic hand gestures, flecks of spittle bursting from their lips.

"This is beautiful," my father kept repeating. "This is governance. These men know what it means to be powerful."

"It's so erotic," Annette said, and then she and my father looked at me, laughed together. My father's lungs hocked, he laughed so hard.

Annette acted strangely all night, sexualizing programming that was otherwise sterile. Weather reports and suitcase infomercials, even the off-air rainbow stripes. The clipped accents of the Soviets were steady, reassuring somehow, and I fell asleep, while my father and Annette mumbled to each other. I woke up with Annette on my lap, my nose pinched between her thumb and forefinger, my pants clumped at my ankles. She pushed me to the couch, pulled her skirt up her haunches, settled down on top of me. She pummeled me with her pelvis.

When I finished, she leaned back, rested on her arms, and looked at me. Then she raised her leg and kicked me. Her heel cracked my nose, blood filling my nostrils. She dragged my pants up from my shoes and led me to the bathroom. Blood gummed over my lips, crusted onto my shirt. She soaked a rag in warm water and gently scrubbed my face. She stroked the rag along my chin, wiping away the matted blood. I was lightheaded with pleasure, with confusion, with pain.

“I love you,” I said.

I’ve said those words so many times since then, but that was, as far as I can remember, the first time I’d uttered them.

“I’ll slice you to pig meat if you tell anyone,” she said, and then she left me with the blood-soaked rag.

At the time I assumed that Annette shared my strong feelings, but in the days that followed she went back to ignoring me, snuggling up to my father on the couch, the two of them whispering jokes again. And after he died, she stopped coming over altogether. Last I heard, she was a draftswoman for an architectural firm in Little Rock.

For a while I wondered if my father put her up to it. If the sex was their way of distracting me, consoling me before I even needed consolation. And there was the other possibility, too—that she was the one who needed distraction. That she was avoiding her own sadness about my father’s waning health, his shriveling figure.

Over time I came to believe her reasons hardly mattered. I came to believe that Annette was a medium through which I communicated with my father, our love for one another channeled through her. How separate he and I were, always. He had his own kind of gravity, a force that pulled me into orbit, closer and closer, before I stabilized into rotation, circling him at a distance, never close enough to collide.

G3: Dobro Jutro, Croatia

This is what I remember of my father’s death: that it happened during the leftover broadcast of a Croatian morning show. The anchor was a blond woman with a boy’s haircut, a white dress gripping her body like cling wrap. The show had ended, and she was seated on a beige couch, eating noodles from an oversized bowl.

I called my father’s name—he liked leftover footage, and he liked blond women.

A crew member entered the frame, headset clasping his neck. He spoke to someone offscreen.

I called my father's name again. The crew member approached the couch. Then he leaned over, kissed the woman on the cheek.

I waited for my father to come back, as he always did, to the television.

F4: The Pittsburgh Pirates

When I asked my father why he'd quit the restaurant, he told me that the grease spoke to him, a language of sizzles and pops. That one day, as he stood over the fryer, the grease finally said, "Stop." It was important to listen to the messages the world delivered, he said.

He stopped cooking altogether, even at home. I was left with frozen lunches and store-bought sandwich meat, with white bread and mayonnaise. For a while my father craved salads. The mailman brought over heads of lettuce, stacked them in the refrigerator. My father peeled the leaves apart and ate them one ragged layer at a time, dipping them into saucers of ranch dressing. One day I opened the refrigerator and found a single rotting head, its leaves brown and shriveled as pond weeds.

"When's the mailman coming over?" I asked. "You need some lettuce."

"I'm done with the mailman," he said, "and I'm done with food."

He had quit eating, altogether. He looked like a dogwood during winter.

He spent most of his time in front of the television then, but he'd stopped adjusting the satellite, stopped changing the channel. He settled for mainstream programming I knew he despised—cop shows and legal dramas and baseball. He'd point to the screen and say things like, "This is vulgar, watching these Americans butcher their own game. If I were a player, I'd go play in Japan. Now that's baseball, their movements measured and precise. Chicago Cubs and Pittsburgh Pirates—this is like watching overgrown schoolboys flail around, their swings all muscle, their throws all shoulder. American players don't have the inner peace necessary to play pretty baseball."

Every once in a while I'd find him sucking on coffee beans, pouched in his bottom lip, mouth swollen like a light-hitting center fielder.

G4: Dallas

I'd come home from school hoping to watch reruns of *Dallas,* and my father had taken me into the front yard, to the foot of our satellite dish. This was about six months before he died. We stared up at the sweeping rim of the dish. It was the first time I'd seen it up close. It was big. It sprouted between trees like a giant flower, a steel lily. My father had never summoned me down there. He had always handled the dish on his own—his attentions to it crucial to his parenting philosophy.

"Why are we here?" I asked.

"We had a storm last night," he said. "The dish is off balance."

It looked fine to me, though I didn't know what to look for. My father placed his hand on the rim of the dish and held it there, as though he were taking its pulse.

"How do we straighten it out?" I asked.

He just stood there, staring past the dirt road, into the broad field of sage across from our property. He seemed to be considering something vast and unknowable, how our television reception was impacted by the steady expansion of the universe, maybe. I waited for him to say it to me. I waited for him to deliver one of his theories, one of those clever avoidances I'd been told all my life.

"Should I crank this handle?" I asked.

"I'm dying," he said.

I nodded, but I didn't believe him. I'm not sure I ever believed that he was dying; it was always so difficult to distinguish between his truth and the truth. Only in time would I understand that, standing there in the matted weeds below the dish, my father had delivered a truth unsullied, that he'd sent the message as clearly as he could.

"I am going to show you how to do this," he said. He aligned the dish with a distant barn, and then began cranking the handle. The dish tilted back, squeaking as it reclined. "We're trying to connect to the G4 satellite. You know where the G4 satellite is—you've seen it on the chart."

I watched while his forearm circled, the antenna angling toward the afternoon sun.

G2: Figure Skating

We were watching figure skating. A girl with tiny arms and hammy thighs skated around the rink, rising from the ice in spinning flourishes. My father lay on the couch, coming in and out of sleep. Annette sat at his feet, flipping through a design magazine, occasionally glancing up at the screen.

“I don’t really like skating,” she said. “How do you know the judges aren’t cheating?”

My father raised his head. “Trick sports are the purest form of athletic pursuit,” he said. “There are no rules confining the athletes. They are bound only by the limits of their bodies and their imaginations.”

And then we lost signal. The screen turned blue, its bewildering light shading our walls. None of us acknowledged the loss out loud. It seemed an impossibility, the three of us in that living room without any signal.

I knew what needed to be done. I went outside, walked toward the dish. I wasn’t as skilled as my father, but signal had become my responsibility, my contribution. When I reached the satellite, I cranked the handle, adjusted the angle of the receiver. I checked the living room window, hoping to see flashes of color, but the glass was tinted blue. I pushed the dish around, aimed its antenna across the sky, and still the blue remained. When I found nothing, when it seemed like I’d exhausted every starred corner of nighttime, I stopped.

I stood there for a moment, looking at the dish, pressing my hand against its rim. Its surface was dotted with cool dew. I leaned against it, testing my weight on it, before I pulled myself up, into the metal basket. I reclined there, my back cupped by the curved walls. Above me nighttime was a cluttered room, the moon chipped and swollen, stars dusty around it. I lay there cradled in the dish, staring up into those greater, more resilient bodies. Then I stiffened myself and waited for signal.

Woody Skinner received his MFA from Wichita State University and is currently a fiction student in the PhD program at the University of Cincinnati. His story “Things in Slow Motion” won *Mid-American Review*’s 2013 Sherwood Anderson Award, and other work has appeared in journals like *Hobart*, *The Carolina Quarterly*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, and *NANO Fiction*.