

2000

the same way

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Recommended Citation

., druis (2000) "the same way," *SEEDS: The Literary Journal of the Sisters of Color*. Vol. 6, Article 19.
Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/seeds/vol6/iss1/19>

children love ice cream

It is dusk somewhere south of St. Louis. The land is lush and green — too green like the colors you only see if you're too high to do anything else. Inside the convenience store with the neon lights and the cheap key chains is a mother and a boy. While I get my cigarette and Doritos and listen to the top eight at eight, hick style, you see the mother corner the boy between the ice cream case that is rusted on the outside edges and the automotive supplies. She is trying not to beat him in front of everybody, but you can see that she is beyond rage, her voice hissing between her teeth and the boy looking away from her at anything that can take up the periphery of his eyes because he doesn't want to look at her that way. Even at seven or eight, is it? —he can see that he will remember the smell of freezer burn and the sight of highway dust caked on bottle of oil. But most of all he will not remember his fear but someone else's. The stranger who, looking for the ice cream he's been thinking about for 18 miles, sees the mother and the boy and eases away into aisle five cursing the next 25 miles to another sugar fix. Or the female with the BMW heading home from college with a car full of books to sell and mementoes from an uneventful first year who comes too close to the two and catches the boy's eyes—hovers there like a humming bird. Desperate to be relieved of responsibility, BMW smiles the same kind of smile when you hear the someone you don't know has died—it is inappropriate and momentary—but never forgotten.

You remember too, at seven or eight the humiliation and the mother. If you think quickly, while he is giving you change from the crumpled \$20—and because he has to work here and face all the money at the close of the night he is irritated with you and shows it by placing your change on the counter—you will remember this small tow-headed boy who can't be of legal age and if he is you know that his juice is without seed—he has no facial hair—he's an anomaly.

Behind you the mother continues her reign of terror, clutching the boy's T-shirt into shrink wrap with her tiny fist. And as I turn to walk back to the Buick, junk food in a sack, cigarette on the ready to light up when I clear the door, his desperate search for something in the periphery catches me, and you will remember the mother and the Sears department store and the chocolate smeared on a row of huge white panties. But here in the middle of the country on a one lane highway going south, you hold his eye and answer the SOS. Outside you move around the store to the large glass window near the ice cream case and puffing on the Camel light, you exhale, turn and face the mother, you wait. She notices your shadow—not you—and she freezes and looks up—through the glass you mouth slowly and deliciously—savoring language as if it were chocolate or ice cream—I SEE YOU.

S. P. Holland