

Third Prize

Boxed Set

By JT Williams

It's called *Boxed Set*: four flat-screen monitors mounted to create a rectangle seven feet tall. *The piece was created to give the illusion of movement* says the information placard. Each screen shows a portion of a standing male figure: shoulders, head at the top; then midsection, upper arms; lower body from the waist, knees, plus forearms, hands; last, the legs from the knees down. Static whispers.

The shape appears to be a disjointed mannequin. It wears an irregularly spotted jacket, clownish lapels, gray-striped dress shirt, checked pants, weathered work boots. It holds a lit cigarette between left middle and index fingers. Head is a papier-mâché mask, puppet-like, crude, with beat-up white fedora.

Its face is yours.

The figure moves. No cameras are visible, though at least one must be feeding your movements to a computer wired to the screens, or so you assume. Nothing supports this idea except that the figure moves several seconds after you do. Each section shifts right or left, not in sync. Move your left hand, the figure's left hand follows roughly the same course. Turn your body to either side. Like a puzzle cube, each image on each screen does the same at different intervals.

Nobody stops at this exhibit. People glance at you, not at the piece. Its placement is odd; it should be with Contemporary Art. Behind you, another room. You don't much care for it: Pre-Columbian, depictions of corn mothers, crested serpents, anthropomorphized monkeys that touch too near the uncanny.

One figure makes you especially uneasy but always draws your eye. It stands upright, *Figure of an Infant, Xochipala, ca. 1500 B.C.E.* It has a full set of sharp teeth. The description tells you *This baby's piercing gaze, bared teeth, and clenched fists project a powerful, even menacing presence. The figure may depict the mythic offspring of a woman and a jaguar, known as a "werejaguar," and the red and yellow bands on its head may relate to astrology. Such hybrid creatures—often shown with slanted eyes, downturned mouths, and strangely deformed bodies—were considered shapeshifters and appear frequently in Pre-Classical art.*

That night, you have the dream. You're in tall grass. It whispers like soft white noise. Something, all stealth, moves quietly along the ground. You feel stalked. A feline form rises, lifts her muzzle. She comes slowly to her hind legs, walks upright. You turn to run.

The next afternoon something has changed, something around the mouth, a vague smile—no, a baring of pointed teeth. You move nearer, just over the red tape on the floor, the line nobody is supposed to cross, the line between observer and observed. But you need to touch. It's all you want, so you raise a hand.

“Sir!” Black rimmed glasses, khakis, blue polo shirt—museum staff. She is young, asks you to step back, tells you the exhibit isn’t running yet. You ask how the onscreen image moves. “There’s no image there,” she says. You can’t get out fast enough.

You try to stay awake but fall asleep in front of the television. Again—the hiss of grassland, approach of a jaguar rising to her hind legs. She is close. You can’t run. As she nears, new features appear. Eyes slant downward; human legs end in oversized cat’s claws; front paws blur into hands but retain their talons; narrow grin is full of sharp teeth. You wake up in the gray light of televised static. But it’s only that the dream has shifted. You are not awake. The scene warps. As if through glass, you gaze into the room. Something sits in your chair. It smiles.

In the morning, you smoke and wait for the museum to open. You are the only visitor. At the front desk, there’s a guard and a staffer. You don’t recall seeing them before. You are there to end this. Your hand closes around the hammer in your pocket. The exhibit room and screens are dark. You step inside. The top screen flickers, then the others. Each flashes alternating images of video feedback and various parts of the figure you have seen these last two days. An arm flashes across the top screen, disappears, replaced by static. There’s a leg across the second screen, torso on the third, face at the bottom. They appear, vanish, over and over, speeding into a disorienting blur.

The screens go black. All around, static—louder—louder still roars around you. You cover your ears, certain the noise will draw attention. No one comes. The place feels deserted. There’s silence. The monitors come to life again. The face, your face, but elongated, leering, takes up all the screens. You clench the hammer and can’t look away. The face recedes. The black background lightens—a grassland appears. The figure shimmers before you, becomes your own reflection in black and white. It steps forward. The hammer falls to the floor.

There was a doorway behind you. You face it now, but you haven’t moved. As if through glass, you see a figure standing in the exhibit room. It’s you, your body. Something is off. It stands, regards the electric images. Static hisses low again. In the exhibit room, the strange copy of yourself steps toward you. It’s the eyes, their downward slant. Static is louder.

You have to get out, now, while you can still think. The not-you lifts a finger to its mouth—*Shh*. Beyond your control, your arm rises stiffly, brings your finger to your mouth. The not-you smiles, bares its pointed teeth. You try to scream.

There is nothing but static.

JT Williams is a Pittsburgh native who now lives in Norfolk, Virginia, where he teaches college English and writes a horror movie blog, Blogferatu.com.