To Our Readers...

Welcome to the fourth annual Ooligan Press Editors’ Choice e-journal. The advanced editing students in Portland State University’s Publishing Program held a short story contest in winter term 2008 calling for unpublished short stories that illuminate the theme “After Dark.”

In three weeks, the contest drew many excellent entries from the Portland State community. Every class member pored over every story. We watched a young woman eagerly turning into a winged creature. A blind transcriptionist tapped her way home and shot an intruder. A pair of pot-smoking ninth-graders donned capes and went out to fight crime. A welder and his teenage daughter lived year-round in a tent near the Washington coast; a badly injured female robot was pursued in the desert; a woman became obsessed with “Radioman,” an early morning talk show host. The tales were intriguing and dark in a wealth of senses.

The class as a group selected a short list of eight stories. Then, laboriously, we settled on the top four. Each winning author is a writer to watch.

Karen Kirtley

Karen Kirtley teaches advanced editing in Portland State University’s Publishing Program
The Ooligan Editors...

Elizabeth Anderson
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McKenzie Gaby
Mike Hirte
Daniel Hubbell
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Malini Kochhar
Miala Leong
Clara Settle
Melissa Shore
Rachael Spivey

SENIOR EDITORS
Tony Chiotti
Daniel Hubbell
Amanda Johnson
Melissa Shore
Sean Davis has been featured on 60 Minutes and in the Oregonian, among other media outlets, for his experiences in Iraq. He recently started writing about his time in Iraq and his role in rescue operations that followed Hurricane Katrina. Sean’s writing successes include a novel, Motivation and Toleration, which was published under the pen name Ian Avi, and several one-act plays which have been performed at CoHo Theater in northwest Portland. He founded P-Town Independent Press in 2004, and is currently finishing his B.A. in English at Portland State University.

Rebecca English has lived in Oregon since 1992, following an escape from Los Angeles. She spent her teenage years in the small southern town she describes. She is an avid gardener, and she has three grown children. Her fascination with snakes continues unabated.

Chelsea Harlan is a student at Portland State University, where she is working toward a Master’s Degree in Publishing. She enjoys reading and writing short-story fiction, especially works with elements of the macabre and bizarre. This is her first published piece, and she looks forward to continued success.

Amanda Johnson is a self-confessed “word nerd” who loves to read the dictionary and is a graduate student in the Publishing program at Portland State University. Among her other interests are cats, fantasy and science fiction books, art history, unicorns, and vegan delicacies. She wants to be an editor when she grows up.
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After pre-combat inspections, we fill the time with whatever we can to keep our minds off the mission. We sit on the hot cement of the airstrip, smoking cigarettes and talking, waiting for the day to end. The boys talk about what type of food they’re going to eat, which women they’ll find when we finally get back. The moon is rising, but it’s still light out. We operate in the dark.

We wait until one in the morning. Then they tell us we have to wait some more. We wait until two, and they say the helicopters are on their way. At 0300h, we see the birds.

At first, they are indistinguishable shapes below the moon. Then we hear the distinct sound of Blackhawks, and this distant whisper stops all talk of home. The birds fly in low. We get up silently and snap into line. We lean into the rotor-wash to avoid being blown down, then we scramble through the door.

There are four rows of cargo-net seats in our helicopter. Four men are assigned to each row. There is no way to be comfortable with all of us, our gear and weapons, but we simply must fit. Once the crew chief is sure we’re all in the bird, it lifts off.
I’m in the jump-seat, looking down and watching the landscape roll by beneath me. We’re flying south over farmland and small villages. We’re heading to Baghdad. I know this but not much more. I know the general area, but that’s all. I wasn’t given pictures to look at, and I have no idea of the terrain or buildings we will patrol through. This should worry me. It did the first dozen times it happened, back when I expected things to make sense, back when I first got here.

So I sit in the dark, looking at the landscape as it rolls beneath me. The wind hits me so hard and so cold it makes it difficult to breathe, but I don’t care. I’m staring at the reflection of the moon on the palm fronds below. The full moon is reflecting the light from the sun that shines on my home, on the other side of the world. That’s where the light is for me, not here.

The crew chief holds a single finger up in front of my face, a signal telling me we’re one minute out. I hold a single finger in front of my team leaders. They hold their fingers up in front of the three men in their teams. By the time this is done, the crew chief’s hand comes back to me for the thirty-seconds signal. This looks as if he is telling me that something is only an inch long. I show my team leaders, they show their team. By the time the information is disseminated, the bird starts to drop. My stomach drops with it. Here it comes, another burst of controlled chaos. It’s the only way to describe these military operations. As soon as the wheels hit the ground, it is our job to get our asses out of the bird faster than humanly possible. There are two birds and three squads; soldiers with heavy guns and heavier packs jumping, gritting, turning, sprinting, falling, crawling, all within a second’s time, all in the pitch dark.

The birds take off quick, like they only needed to touch the ground to jump back into the sky. I look back and see the moon shining right through the empty belly of the one I sat in. It’s looking down as the landscape rolls by beneath it. The moonlight is now reflecting off of me as I lie on my stomach in this unknown field. I tear my eyes away to scan my sector and wait.

I wait for the end of the world. I wait for hell to come. I wait for the senior man on the ground to give the word that enough time has passed without anyone shooting at us so we can get off our bellies, reorganize the squads, and make sure we have all of our heavy bags before we start the movement to contact.

To see a World in a grain of sand,
And Heaven in a wild flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.

It’s part of a Blake poem that keeps repeating in my head. I don’t know how it got there or why. I really liked it when I was real, when the world was real. It’s the only part I can remember now. I don’t know if seconds are passing or hours. How long have the helicopters been gone? I’m sure the senior man is being extra careful because the LZ was supposed to be hot. The ground is so cold on my stomach. I’m dressed light because even though it is freezing now, I will be humping my seventy-pound bag in triple-digit temperatures most of the time I’m out here. My stomach is so cold I feel I might get hypothermia. Hypothermia in Baghdad—nothing makes sense here. I need to start walking. Please tell us it’s okay to get up and start the mission. I don’t care if they are out there
waiting for us to move, waiting to fire at us. A firefight would be better than this biting cold and frozen time.

Then I remember. It’s me. I’m the senior man. The chalks are changed this time. Everyone is waiting for me to give the word. A cold sweat hits me like an electric current and my stomach churns. Suddenly, I want to stay there on my freezing stomach.

My body jumps up before I tell it to. It wants to complete the mission. My body runs to the middle of this circle of men and takes a knee. My mouth calls the team leaders. One of my hands takes the map out of my right cargo pocket, and the other grabs the red-lensed, LED flashlight hanging off my webgear. My mind can only watch as this happens, amazed because I am not really a soldier. I only wanted the money for college, as cliché as that sounds. I want to be a writer or a teacher, but my body is doing all the things a soldier does. How is there so much determination in my eyes? I want to go back to where things are real. I want to go back to my home where the light shines and there is a reason why things happen. My body is going to complete the mission regardless of what my mind thinks or wants. My mouth barks orders in a hoarse whisper, in another language. “This is the Alpha Alpha, with tentative pick-up at zero five in two days. In five Mikes head to your AOs. For link-up use primary freq five point two two. Now Charlie Mike.” The squads split up and go different directions. My squad and I head into the darkness in a wedge-overlook formation.

The radio operator walks with me in the middle of the formation between the two teams. We have enough ammo, water, and batteries for three or four days, but our mission is only supposed to last for two. Sometimes they pick us up early. Sometimes they tell us we have to stay out longer. Sometimes they tell us where to resupply, and sometimes they don’t.

The mission says we are to walk this area within the Green Zone. It is the parade grounds and park. Both ends of the parade grounds have a fifty-foot, arch sculpture of hands holding crossed sabers. Saddam used to hold his shotgun high in the air as long lines of his soldiers walked below him. I saw it on the news once a year ago, and now I’m here. The mission says not to look at the crossed sabers above me, to keep scanning my sector. The forearms and hands that hold the sabers are said to be modeled exactly after Saddam’s, and I believe it. The moon is on the horizon now. It shines on the west side of the sabers as they pierce the sky. We are to walk this area and the area behind the parade grounds. The mission says there is a high probability that bad men are out here, and they will more than likely shoot mortars into the agricultural building we are using as a capitol building, the place where we are choosing the new Iraqi interim government. The mission says not to look at the crossed sabers above me, to keep scanning my sector. The forearms and hands that hold the sabers are said to be modeled exactly after Saddam’s, and I believe it. The moon is on the horizon now. It shines on the west side of the sabers as they pierce the sky. We are to walk this area and the area behind the parade grounds. The mission says there is a high probability that bad men are out here, and they will more than likely shoot mortars into the agricultural building we are using as a capitol building, the place where we are choosing the new Iraqi interim government. The mission says that all friendly civilians were evacuated from our AO, that if we see any personnel in our area of operations we are to consider them hostile. The mission screams at us that we are to engage and destroy all hostile personnel. Then the mission whispers to us that we need to remember our rules of engagement. The mission will be completed. The mission must be completed. My mind asks . . . why? I still don’t know why.

Why what?

Why anything. If you don’t like why, then who? Who are they? What is their motivation? What are their beliefs? How did I get involved with protecting people I don’t know or understand from other people I don’t know or understand while not knowing what is going on or how this will all end?
The mission doesn’t care about any of this and neither does my body. My arms raise my rifle up at the sight of a silhouette. I’m so tired and cold I can’t be sure anything is there. But if my arms went up, there must be something out there. It is 0430h, but everything is still midnight blue. The moon set a half hour ago. I raise my open hand to shoulder level, and the whole squad stops and takes a knee. I move my hand parallel to the ground at waist level, and the squad lie on their stomachs. I do the same and crawl up to the point man.

As we stare into the dark in front of us, time leaves me again. My heart pumps so hard and so fast I can feel the blood being pushed through every vein. Every square inch of my body and every hair tingle at once. A weird morning fog rolls in and makes our night vision devices useless.

“You see anything?” I whisper to the point man.

“Can’t tell, Sergeant.”

I keep staring into the darkness. I am convinced now that there are shapes out there. The morning is creeping up. The gradual light illuminates the fog, and neon ribbons dance around us. I can see the silhouettes now. There are many of them, on all sides. My body controls its breathing, but it can’t stop the nausea. The mission screams in my ear: engage and destroy.

The rules of engagement: I have to see what I’m shooting. I know that is the right way, but I’m terrified. My squad is surrounded, and I don’t know if they see us or not. To my right it looks like someone is on the ground. I can’t tell if they are crawling or still. Directly to our front there are four or five of them bunched together. I can see their dark outlines standing there. Why would they just be standing there? Do they see us?

Then the screaming comes. It is the call to prayer, way off in the distance from the speakers of the nearest mosque, and it makes the glowing fog dance faster. Then another prayer from some other mosque, farther away. The strange, spiritual, Arabic chantings echo each other. I don’t know what they are saying, but they are loud and they sound angry. The white ribbons dance around the looming silhouettes as the nasal screams of imams fill our ears. This cannot be real. I’m not real.

I don’t call it in. I’m afraid to make a sound. I don’t even dare move because I have no idea what is going on, and I don’t want the darkness to see or hear me. I can’t fire because I don’t know who they are. I can’t stay there in the middle of a field without cover. I have to do something, but I’m afraid if I move, machine guns will open up on us. My mind doesn’t know what to do but my body pops up again, without my consent. My legs start to walk toward the four or five men to my front. This is not courage. This is automation. I can’t stop myself from moving toward them.

They stay motionless. Maybe they don’t see me coming, or maybe they all have their weapons trained on me. I don’t know. I expect to be shot every second, but I keep walking. There is a sense of weightlessness and confusion. My body is here, now, walking toward the silhouettes. And four years later I am in this same moment again. This isn’t a flashback. I am simply living this experience from two points in time. The first time the risk is physical. This second time, my mind is just as open and vulnerable. The first time my mission is to engage and destroy. The second time, it is to connect and make whole.

I come out of the darkness and find myself standing face-to-face with a wild-eyed, cartoon horse head. There are
three bullet holes running down its long, wooden nose. The morning light reveals that we have wandered into a children’s playground: the four men to our front are actually characters on a merry-go-round; to our right the man crawling is an orange, plastic caterpillar with chipped paint; to our left a yellow jungle gym, with each place a small hand could grip or climb worn down to a dull silver. There are small, plastic ladybugs with kid-sized saddles on the end of rusted metal springs.

The mission tells my body there is no time to ponder these events, but my mind needs to. My mind tries to make sense of the change that has occurred. My body is relieved there is no danger, and we can continue the mission. But my mind needs to examine the two completely different circumstances. Who am I in the dark, and who am I in the light? My body and the mission can’t wait, so they leave my mind behind. And it’s been there ever since. My mind has been left in this playground and in dozens of other, darker places all across Iraq. I am only now, four years later, able to revisit this time, to shine some light on it. Every time is difficult, but I tell myself: after chaos there is order, after confusion there is understanding, and after dark there is light.

Swamp Woman

by Rebecca English

We took Suicide Hill with Florida screaming, and all four tires airborne. We were pushing ninety by the time we hit the bottom and hooked onto the rickety old bridge over the Boulé. That spit us out onto the 11, where I noticed that Jake had managed to spray his day-glo orange peace sign all over the Keep America Beautiful, Cut Your Hair billboard. That got me and Flo grinning just as the DJ shut up and Hendrix started getting his Experience. It was Easter, 1969, and God must have been real happy with the way his day was turning out.

As we dipped into the valley, we could see the carnival lights blinking on the Ferris wheel and outlining all the tents and that. I gunned it, finishing with a sharp ninety into the parking lot. The old guy under the official parking lot cap gave us the look, and Flo flashed him one of her 500-watt smiles. He just spit into the dirt.

Old—and blind too.

We were practically out of the van before I cut the engine. I grabbed Flo’s hand and took off running. She was flying out behind me like a flag, and I’d gotten her screaming again. I did that to Flo a lot. I slowed to a walk just like nothing, and she was on me right away.

“Jesse James Fairfield!” She pounded me.
“Ow!”
“You think you’re so-o-o funny!”
“Ow! I am! Ow!”
“Stop laughing!”
“You stop laughing!” I grabbed Flo and started tickling her. She was laughing too hard to yell at me.
“Jeh-heh! heh! heh!—Jehhsssee! Stop it! Stop it!” She squealed a bunch of stuff like that, squirming around like a pissed-off cat. When I let up she was on me again, but I plucked her off and folded her up until she calmed down. That took some time.
“You’re getting me all messed up!”
“You look fine.” She did, too. Really fine. Especially when I got her all messed up. She slugged me in the arm, but I was expecting it. She couldn’t just let me get away with stuff.
I said, “Well, come on! Don’t take all day!” and then I shut her up with a kiss before she could start sputtering again.

You wouldn’t think people like my parents would name their son Jesse James Fairfield. My dad teaches college English for chrissake! So you think my mother is some prissy southern belle, right? Just stands to reason. Dad teaches English, no way he’d name his kid Jesse James. Had to be the Mom. Southern gal. Confederate flag and all that? Right? Right? No! First off, she’s from Boston. Dad too. Secondly, she teaches Art, for chrissake, Art at the same college as Dad. Prissy? Ha! Do I not sometimes wish. Not that I would trade my parents for anybody else’s lousy set. I’ve got a pretty cool pair.
This is the whole stupid way it happened. They both got jobs here around 500 BC or so. Here is Southern U., in—don’t laugh—Hattiesburg, Mississippi. I mentioned they’re from Boston. They thought the South was just hilarious! Preposterous! Ridiculous! Paradoxical! Charming! Darling!

Now, right away Mom gets pregnant. More hilarity! Mom? My mom? Pregnant? Oh, hahaha! My mom was much too unconventional to be interested in producing babies, like the rest of the automatons, the pedestrian, right-winged, norm-setting, rule-keeping sell-outs! There were pregnant pauses and pregnant possibilities, but pregnancy was not a word my mother would ever have associated herself with. But she ended up that way anyhow. She and Dad didn’t want to appear to take this stuff too seriously. It was embarrassing enough to be married, as opposed to living in sin—and besides, they were going to raise me differently. A little adult, sort of like. All cool and shit. As part of the big, hilarious joke of the pregnancy, just to create a little more irony, they decided on the quintessential redneck handle—Jesse James.

With all the teasing I got as a kid, it just stood to reason that I would have to become a crack shot to protect myself.
Course, Florida ain’t your everyday handle either. Flo’s mom got pregnant on her and Florida’s dad’s honeymoon. I bet she wasn’t too happy about that, either—but I am! You have figured out by now where they took their honeymoon, right? Riight. Silver Lake, Florida, to be exact. Not Tampa or anything. Tampa sucks, believe me. It’s all touristy and shit. Well, anyway, parents are weird. They’ll name you any damn thing!
The calliope was playing a polka, and I think the whole damn town must’ve been there, because they were all screaming. The carnival was shabby and two-bit, but I liked them that way. It was smack in the middle of this huge field just south of town, and we were smelling, like, five acres of newly mown grass. I had seen the farmer mowing out there on his tractor at dawn, when the sun was steaming off the last of the mist.

“You want cotton candy?” She did. We watched one of the carnies spin the pink fuzz onto the paper cone, then we meandered around eating and checking out the games. Carnie kids who couldn’t be more than ten hawked at us from every ratty canopy. They were uniformly small for their age and skinny, and they all looked like they’d done time in Sing Sing. They worked side by side with shifty-eyed old guys who probably weren’t really old at all. You could tell they had done some hard time. They pretended to treat the kids half-decent when anyone was looking, but you could see the little guys flinch when they got within popping distance of ‘em.

Florida has a real soft spot for kids that don’t have it so good. She smiled encouragingly—only it wasn’t the little kids that got encouraged, it was the nasty, kid-poppin’ letches, pretending like Flo was smiling at them.

I grabbed the shaved head of the little Barker while I shouted at the criminal element, “Get your damn eyeballs back in your damn head!” Didn’t want to confuse anybody about who was who.

“Jesse!” Flo’s eyes and mouth formed perfect little zeroes of outrage. The greasy jailbird spit some nasty brown stuff in the dirt while Flo hauled on my arm. I looked back at the kid and winked. He did likewise real quick-like.

“Jesse! Don’t say things like that!”
“OK, I won’t!”
“You just did!”
“Oh yeh.”

Suddenly she whirled around to face me, grinning like a pirate.

“Look Jess!”

I looked. Huge St. Bernards and panda bears filled the three walls of a shooting gallery. The little, crappy stuff most people win, the felons were sneaky enough to keep out of sight, but I knew what Florida was pointing at without looking: a stuffed snake. She collected them, and I won them for her.

“That’s the one I want.”

“You want that one right there or this one right here?” I pretended to force her hand over to the front of my pants.

“Jesse!” Flo jerked her hand away. She kept me laughing most of the time like that.

“Well, I’ll try.”

“No, Jesse. You will not try. You will succeed.”

“You sound like a school teacher. Anyway, it might be rigged.”

“Yeh, but you’ll know.”

“Well, OK.” Now, Flo was a sweet girl (you didn’t hear that from me!), but ever since the first time I put her initials on the back of that pinball machine at Shoney’s, I’d seen a different side of her. When it came to me winning games, Flo was out for blood.

“OK, we’ll come back…unless you want to drag that damn snake all over the place.” Flo had her mind made up, but she was a reasonable girl. That was one of the things I liked about her.

“I guess you’re right.”

“Course I’m right. We’ll come back. I promise.”
“OK…”

“Hey, Jess! What’s that?”

“What’s whaa… Uh-oh!”

“Come on!”

“You don’t need to go in there!”

“Are you crazy? You stay out here if you want to, but I’m going in there!”

Arguing was futile. As far as I was concerned, even those damned fuzzy snakes of hers gave me the willies, and now she had found a whole tent full of the live version! I did mention that Florida has this thing for snakes? She loves them! Well, not loves, really, more like she’s totally fascinated. It’s revolting.

I could have stood around there looking like a wuss while my girlfriend went charging into that tent, or I could have pretended like this didn’t scare the crap out of me and go in with her.

“Ah hell, Florida!”

Flo had already wadded some bills into the barker’s greedy paw, so he didn’t mind sneering at me with what was left of his teeth. He couldn’t decide where to keep his eyes—mocking me, or leering at my girlfriend’s ass. She was standing half-in, half-out of the tent-flap by then, not taking any chances on my talking her out of it. I looked up at the crummy banner strung across the top of the circus tent, as if I was deciding. Swamp Woman! Old Tobacco Teeth was barking out the details of how they had found Swamp Woman in (of course) a swamp, living (obviously) with hundreds of snakes, and darned if they didn’t talk her into joining their circus. Exotic Life of Travel! Worldwide Fame! Glamorous! Stupefying!

There was a lurid drawing of the sensuous Swamp Woman lounging around, wearing nothing but snakes for clothes.

“Oh, all right!” I started clumping over to Florida. Her foot was still outside, but her head was in. Ah, hell! I thought. There she goes! I hauled ass over to the ragamuffin running the tent and glared down at him.

“So you’re Swamp Woman,” I said. I looked from him to the banner and back down again. “You’re much prettier in your picture.” I waggled my eyebrows at him and winked. He was still mouthing air when I ducked inside.

It was a steam bath in there, and yeh, the whole damn town had turned out. You could smell ‘em. Florida was dancing foot to foot, barely pretending to wait for me. The second I cleared the canvas she got a vice grip on my arm and started hauling me through the sea of warm bodies to some kind of flimsy-ass barrier. There were a bunch of beefy old guys in the audience with big tits and a lot of black hair sticking out of their pits. You could see it because they were wearing their wifebeaters. They rested their paws on the shoulders of their old ladies, occasionally reaching down to pat a rump straining against Easter-egg colored capris. Their younger counterparts lounged around in skintight Levi’s and Western shirts. They looked all studly and aw-shucks with their long skinny legs and cowboy hats. Their wives were pretty little country-western types with rat-ted hairdos. Course, they’d knock your teeth down your throat if they heard you say that.

Some kids from school were there too; not the ones you know or talk to especially, but the ones you say hi to when you bump into them anywhere else besides school. I graduated last year. Florida’s still a sophomore. Lots of families still had on their Easter get-ups, having worn them both to Sunday School and to Training Union. (That’s Baptist for boring.)
We all looked kinda sheepishly at each other across the big circle of hard-packed dirt in the middle of the tent. The perimeter was maintained by some sticks pounded into the ground with canvas stretched around them, and it was empty except for Swamp Thing—woman, my ass!—and every kind, color, size, and description of snake imaginable (in your nightmares anyway). Swamp Thing was wearing a muumuu-inspired tow sack. Big brogans stuck out from under this costume, and a rope bisected his middle, à la Friar Tuck. The transformation was made complete by a black piece-o-shit wig hanging down over his face to cover up his five o’clock shadow. It was made out of that cheap spider-webby crap you buy for Halloween. The carnies kept the tent nice and dark, and maybe some senior citizen really getting on in years mighta been fooled, but people that old don’t get out much.

I bravely stood right behind Florida, who was ready to jump into the pit and start handling the merchandise. I was busy sizing up this lousy fence thing, which looked like it might come down at any moment and which any self-respecting serpent could probably crawl right underneath.

All of a sudden Swamp Thing, who could have played linebacker for the Texas Aggies, unfolded himself out of his creaky metal chair and began a slow parody of what I took to be his version of a zombie summoned by its master. What this had to do with swamp life, I couldn’t tell you. He stretched his mighty arms straight out in front of him, in the universal sleepwalking position. Meanwhile, a slithering reptile lounged, looped, wriggled, strained, and scritched its scutes against his calloused hands. Disgusting! Damn this stupid fascination of hers! I was getting increasingly edgy. A big drop of sweat meandered down my spine. What was he up to? Well, I’ll be damned! Didn’t he just have to pick out the most wholesome-looking girl there, my girlfriend, the beautiful, blonde-haired, blue-eyed Florida, age fifteen, still wearing her blue Easter dress because it was Sunday night and I had picked her up from Training Union. I could see where this was going! I know Florida didn’t get it until he held that snake out for her to take. She was supposed to scream and run, or maybe swoon so that the Swamp Swain could catch her. No way, Swamp Breath! I didn’t care if he was big enough to have his own zip code.

Of course there was no need for me to have worried. By now you know what she did instead. It brought the house down. She not only took that snake from the Swamp Zombie, she refused to give it back when he shouted, “Give that back! It’s poisonous!” Florida admitted to me later that she had not spent the millisecond it would have taken for her to ascertain whether it was or wasn’t poisonous. But she had no intention of passing up this opportunity, and if the thing hadn’t bitten the Swamp Zombie, it wasn’t highly likely to bite her. Now she checked her specimen for a triangular head and pits where its cheeks were supposed to be.

“No it’s not! This is a rat snake! They’re not poisonous!” Encyclopedia Florida!

Swamp Breath snatched his critter away from Flo. The whole tent was hooting and snorting with laughter by now. Swamp Swain stood and glared at Florida through his bedraggled headgear and then stomped back to his metal folding chair, where he had been slouching when we came in. The second he turned his back, Florida reached inside that damn barrier and picked up another snake—and she didn’t check this one out either! She had just this small window of oppor-
tunity, as she tells it. I have been known to point out to her that not everyone would see that as an opportunity. The Barker started herding us “ladies and gentlemen” back through the tent flap. Swamp Swain spotted the reckless Florida in possession of another reptile and started to come up out of his seat, so she dropped her wee treasure back down onto the dirt with a disgustingly thud and a puff of dust. Flo hightailed it for breathable air, where she could savor her profound luck and fifteen seconds of fame.

The sweaty crowd was still talking about it when we got out, and for the rest of the evening we got shy smiles and giggles from people we didn’t recognize, and numerous “you showed ‘im’s!” from backwoods types. I hesitate to point out to them that a dimwit could have showed him! I knew that Florida was entirely too pleased with herself, in addition to being completely unrepentant about dragging me into a place just crawling with reptiles. If that wasn’t enough, she has to go and handle the damn things, not even knowing if they’re poisonous.

“Oh, yeh, Florida? So just where does that put me on your list of priorities, huh? Don’t you ever take a chance like that again! What if you would have gotten bit? You ever think about that? You ever think about how I would feel?”

Silence…

“Well, have you? No. You never think about that, do you? You gonna pick up scorpions too? Some tarantulas, maybe? Let’s go find some black widow spiders for you to snuggle up to! You got a death wish, or what?”

“Shut up, Jesse.” Florida kissed me.

“That’s not gonna work, Florida. I’m not kidding! I have had it…! Quit kissing me when I am yelling at you…! Now stop it, Florida! I’m serious here…”

“Jesse, you’re so cute when you’re mad.”

“If you think you’re getting out of it that easy…!” She would have been right, actually. She’d gotten me all disoriented.

Then she just stood there grinning up at me. I tried to be stern with her, but it didn’t work, and we both started cracking up.

“You maniac!”

“Well…”

“Maniac!”

“Well…”

“Come here Florida Elizabeth Brill. I think it’s high time somebody taught you a lesson!” She took off screaming. I caught her after about five seconds and tickled her until she almost wet her pants.

Later that night, after we’d screamed on the roller coaster, gotten whipped around by the Octopus, made out on the Ferris wheel, and had the floor drop out from under us on the Centrifuge, Florida was sleepy-eyed. Even though she was only three years younger than me, she sometimes looked like a little kid when she got tired.

“You about ready to go home?”

“Mmm-hmm.” She rested her head on my shoulder. I kissed the top of it. We scuffed off toward the front gate, all out of things to say, which neither of us minded.

She suddenly stopped, jerked her head up and turned to look at me. “No, wait! Jesse, I want my snake!”

For one horrible moment, I thought she meant she wanted to steal one of those reptiles from Swamp Thing. But then I realized.
“Your snake, huh?”
“Well… yeh.”
“I might not be able to win it for you.”
Florida looked a little worried, but she wasn’t about to let me know it.
“Don’t be ridiculous. You always win.” Florida is shameless when it comes to bragging on me, partly because she wouldn’t dream of bragging on herself. You might think she’s too humble, but she’s really too proud. Flo wouldn’t be caught dead doing anything that obvious. I wanted her to talk me into it. I was still a little sore about the snake incident.
“I’m pretty sleepy, Florida.” She stared at me, trying to read my mind, not sure if she should push it or not. She pushed it. You can count on Florida to do that.
“Jess…”
“Yeh?”
“Yes?”
“We-e-ell… OK.” That got a big smile. We trudged our way back to the shooting gallery, where the barker was still at it, that Step right up ladies and gentlemen routine. She flashed him a toothsome smile—we Southerners always mind our manners. Well, Flo does—and then she turned away and ignored him, focusing all her attention on me. The aim was off. I tried a hair to the right, a hair to the left, and that was it. I adjusted left. Florida looked on fiercely. She gave a little smile every time I hit tin and got a quack. We traded our Kewpie dolls for a pink and a blue kitten, the kittens for some dogs, and so on, right up to the cat you can drape across your bed and comb its hair. Florida had a little trouble giving that one up, but she had her sights set on a green, orange, and blue snake, which I draped around her shoulders after my next win. The barker wanted us to stay all night—we made it look easy—but we had other plans. I took both ends of the snake and pulled her to me.
“Come here Florida Elizabeth Brill.”
She laughed. “OK Jesse James Fairfield.”
And she did.
The leaves were beginning to fall. Or they would be falling if there were any leaves. They were falling in Eugene, Oregon; in Bangor, Maine; in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. But in Red Cloud, Nebraska, there weren’t any trees and therefore no leaves. Here, there were only wide swaths of towering grasses, stretching flatly into the distance.

Nathan Finch sat in one of the plastic swings of the jungle gym at the park, rocking back and forth, watching the toes of his sneakers scuff the patch of dirt beneath him. The park was deserted, except for him. It was almost five o’clock, and most kids were at home having dinner with their families. He needed to be getting home as well, but instead he sat and looked at his feet. The wind moaning over the open expanse of yellowing grass beyond the park was the only sound, aside from the clink of the chains holding his swing. In the distance a grumbling pile of dark clouds gathered on the horizon, advancing steadily. The endless flatness of the land and the wide stormy sky made Nathan feel like he was being slowly squashed, like a bug on the sidewalk.

The rapid tattoo of what could only be a bike with a playing card in its spokes startled Nathan from his stupor. He looked up to see a boy emerge from the waving grass, dismounting
his bike and heading toward the creek that ran along the far side of the park. Nathan became very still on his swing and didn’t call out to the boy in greeting.

A quiet and solitary boy by nature, Nathan was the son of an army officer and his compliant wife. Being an army brat causes some children to act out, but the constant moving from state to state, and from school to school, had the opposite effect on Nathan. His parents and teachers could frown down at him, rant or cajole, threaten or bribe, and receive only a blank stare from an emotionless face. He spent a lot of time alone. Red Cloud, Nebraska—their most recent, and inevitably temporary, home—was no exception.

Nathan thought he recognized the kid with the bike: Jeffrey Newcomb. He lived down the street from Nathan, with his parents and older brother, Daniel. Daniel was in the grade above Nathan, and Jeffrey was two grades below Nathan. The two brothers were sandy-blond and small for their ages, but quick and agile. Nathan was also small for his age, but his narrow chest, sunken eyes, and pale skin suggested he didn’t spend much time outdoors—which he didn’t. His arms and legs always seemed to have minds of their own, and he would flail about like a sack of bones on marionette wires.

Rain began to land softly around Nathan, kicking up little puffs of dust at his feet. He knew it would get worse, and he really didn’t want to go home wet—his mother would be angry—but then he saw Jeffrey crouch down and poke at something in the water with a stick. Nathan leaned forward to see what he was doing, home and rain forgotten. Both of them were so intent upon this action that neither heard the approach of the other boys.

“Hey, weenie! Whatcha doin’, nerd?”

Both Nathan and Jeffrey started in surprise and whirled toward the voice, Nathan’s heart hammering painfully in his chest. There were four boys standing at the entrance to the footpath; they looked older and bigger, maybe twelve or thirteen. Nathan’s first instinct was to run, but then he saw that the boys were walking toward Jeffrey. He suddenly realized no one knew he was there.

The boys advanced on Jeffrey while Nathan sat in petrified fear. He watched while they took Jeffrey’s stick and broke it, while they threw his bike into the creek, while they turned shoving him around the circle they made with their bodies. He kept watching when Jeffrey fell to the ground and when the boys kicked him again and again, jeering and laughing as Jeffrey screamed and cried, curled into a defensive ball. As they held Jeffrey’s face in the grass, Nathan saw his arms and legs flop about for a long time, before finally growing still. He heard the muffled sobs drift up from the grass, until they, too, were silenced.

The boys stared down at the limp form. One of them glanced around, and as his face angled toward the jungle gym, Nathan finally leapt from the swing and ran. He struggled through the damp grass that slashed at him, through the rain that blew directly into his face. When he burst from the field and onto the street, he was bright red and gasping for air. After a few moments, he realized he didn’t hear sounds of pursuit. He hesitated a moment before dashing up the street toward home, panic washing over him anew. As he ran, all he could think of was how still Jeffrey lay, how his face stayed motionless in the grass. As if it smelled so good he couldn’t stop breathing it in.
Rain patters against the sidewalk, dotting the concrete with rapidly fading splotches of water. Disappearing ink. The sky, brown and watery like a footprint left in mud, glows translucent with light thrown up from the city below. The roar of cars on the freeway and the rumble of the subway underground are muffled by the insistent drumming of the rain. The streets are nearly deserted, except for those who cocoon themselves in their coats and umbrellas, marching briskly toward their destinations. It’s early fall in Boston.

Nathan moves slowly down the street, watching the tops of his brown loafers turn dark and hide-slick with the rain. He has no umbrella, and although his collar is turned up against the wind, the water beats upon his bare head and slides down his neck, into his sweater and against his skin. He will be soaked by the time he gets to work. He’s oblivious to all this, aware only that it’s late September—his least favorite season. Around this time each year, the memories that crowd his head begin to seep out.

Hugging his coat tightly around himself, Nathan strides the last few blocks to The Four-Leaf Clover, where he keeps the books. The Four-Leaf Clover is a bar—or a pub, rather—run by Malone Flynn, who looks remarkably like a leprechaun. The pub, known to its employees and regulars as The Clover, is a small and miserable affair, tucked in between an equally miserable tattoo parlor and an Asian food mart. The walls are gray from decades of cigarette smoke and fried food; the few booths are upholstered in green polyurethane, yellowed foam seeping from the cracks. The air has a greasy smell and feel that clings to skin and hair; it cannot be scrubbed away.

Miriam, a fleshy woman who has completely given up, tends the bar, and a muttering, angry man named Sam cooks. Nathan rounds out the roster of employees. He works alone, as he prefers, in the cramped, disorderly office at the back of the pub. He has almost half a degree in accounting from the University of Boston, where he took classes for a year before dropping out. He couldn’t concentrate. His semi-complete degree is good enough for Malone’s pub but not good enough to get Nathan a job anywhere else—which is fine, because it doesn’t matter either way. The days move in and out in shades of gray.

Nathan and his parents had moved, once again, shortly after the horror in the park, to Fort Worth, Texas. The remainder of his childhood was spent in this fashion: Moving every year or so; fading into the background of every school and neighborhood; getting just average-enough grades so his parents and teachers would leave him alone; waking every night screaming, the electric sizzle of the remembered storm surrounding him.

When he was finally old enough to move out of his house, away from his father’s dictatorship, he thought that moving around might help—that a new, foreign location might eventually let him forget. It took seven years of wandering for him to realize there would be no forgetting. That day is seared into his brain, is written on the wall of his skull, is a burn that will not heal.

There are moments, even hours, when he can go about his business and think of nothing but whether he remembered to buy milk, or pay the phone bill. But then, inevitably, the memories float slowly into his conscious thoughts, like drowned leaves surfacing in a puddle, gathering in substance and clarity.

It’s still the nightmares that are the worst. When he wakes in the middle of the night—his heart clawing its way up his
throat, the sheets twisted and damp with sweat—he hears
the drumming of the rain against the window. He is moment-
arily confused, transported back to that day at the park in
Nebraska. For those few tenuous moments between dream-
ing and waking, he is ten again, back in the storm, and there
is no summer sunlight or white winter chill to wrench him
forward twenty years. For those few moments, he is doomed
to relive that day.

It is nearly two o’clock in the morning, and Nathan is tired
as he leaves The Clover. The streets are silent, and a fog bank
unfurls its ghostly banner, drifting softly around him. As he
begins his walk home, something catches his eye: A jumble
of white poking out of an alley, stark as a bone jutting from a
limb. After a moment’s hesitation, he crosses the street, and
the pale mass begins to take form. It looks to Nathan like a
pile of impossibly white human limbs, random arms and legs
sticking out of the wire dumpster they lie in. As he enters
the alley, he sees that he is correct, but that they are actually
whole bodies, lying one on top of another in eternal frozen
discard. Mannequins.

Nathan stands quietly for a moment, taking in the discon-
certing sight. Some of the mannequins still have their par-
tially attached wigs and some are missing body parts. They
vary in size and sex. All have the same serenely blank faces.
Nathan suddenly becomes aware that the air is very cold and
the night very still around him; the rain has stopped for the
time being. He is alone, except for the dumpster and its silent
occupants.

Finding himself compelled to root through the heap, Na-
than shoves aside plastic parts, picking up and examining
each dummy. He’s not sure what he’s looking for—he’s not
sure he’s looking for anything at all—until he finds it: A
small figure with all its body parts intact and a blond, curling
mop of a wig glued firmly to its head. The mannequin of a
little boy.

Nathan jumps down from the dumpster and holds the dum-
my aloft in front of him. He feels sneaky, though he can’t say
why. After all, he’s not doing anything besides looking at it.
And nobody wants it anyway; it was thrown out. Then why is
his heart beating so hard? A car door slams from out on the
street, and the sound ricochets loudly up the alley. Nathan
starts in surprise and, without further thought, tucks what
he can of the mannequin under his overcoat and hurries out
into the night.

His apartment is as small and shabby as The Clover. Al-
though Nathan has lived here for almost five years, it has
an air of near-abandon. There are no personal touches any-
where in the single room, no TV or radio or books. It’s as if
no one really lives here.

Nathan locks his door and tugs the string for the overhead
bulb swinging above the table. His hands shake and he feels
strangely elated. A smile keeps tugging at the corners of his
mouth. He removes the mannequin from his coat and sits it
in one of the chairs. Without taking off his coat, he sits in the
other and stares at the doll thoughtfully. For a long time, the
only sound is the steady drip of the kitchen faucet.
The mannequin is about four feet tall, with bendable arms and legs sprouting from its small white torso. Instead of individual fingers and toes, there are lumps of plastic with grooves etched into them. The face is pale and bland as dough, with thumbprint indentations that suggest eyes, and a tiny, floury peak of a nose. The wig is dirty; the whorls of hair lie lank, are beginning to uncurl. The crotch is as smoothly ambiguous as the rest of the figure, and Nathan isn’t even sure why he thinks it’s a boy—but he’s sure it is. He rises and goes to his dresser, pulling out a long-sleeved flannel shirt, cargo shorts, and a pair of socks.

“You must be cold,” he says to the doll. He dresses it carefully, securing each button, tugging the socks up over its knees. He steps back to examine the results, then carefully brushes a curl off its forehead and smooths down the wig. “There we go,” he says softly.

He feels strangely fond of the mannequin. There is something innocently trusting in the upturn of its face, something vulnerable in its small figure. Nathan is glad he’s rescued it, though he isn’t sure what to do now. It’s ridiculous to think he will hold on to it for any length of time.

“Well, while you’re here, I might as well call you something.” Nathan thinks for a moment; then it comes to him: Thomas. It had been his childhood name for a hoped-for and never-received pet.

“Thomas.” Nathan says the name out loud and likes it. He feels a warm glow in his chest as he gazes at his new friend.

“Nathan!” It’s Malone, his face dark with impatience. “Jesus, man, how many times I gotta ask?”

“Sorry,” Nathan mumbles, straightening up in his chair and setting down his pencil. “What were you saying?”

Malone glares at him in deepest disgust. “Well, since His Majesty has decided to listen, let me repeat myself for the third frackin’ time. Miriam is out today, somethin’ about that kid a hers. We’re gonna need you behind the bar.”

Nathan’s heart plunges in horror at these words, and he scrambles up from the desk. “But—but I—I can’t! I have so much work to do back here—”

Malone has already left the doorway.

It’s the worst-case scenario, the one Nathan has hoped would never happen. They’d been short-staffed on one or two occasions over the years, but it had been slow enough for Malone to handle. Unfortunately, it’s a Friday night and also late December, the only time of year besides St. Patrick’s Day when anyone bothers to venture inside The Clover. He will have to leave his sanctuary.

With a sigh, Nathan sinks back into his chair. It’s then that he sees what he’s been doing all day: Sheet upon sheet of paper lie scattered on the desk, each one filled to the edges with pencil-drawn images of Thomas: Thomas sitting at the table eating soup, Thomas tying his shoes, Thomas throwing a baseball. Nathan is slightly unsettled when he sees this, and more so when he gathers up the pages and goes to toss them in the wastebasket—only to see it, too, overflowing with pages decorated with small, cavorting Thomases.

Nathan knows he’s been dwelling on the boy too much. He worries about him constantly: If Thomas has brushed his teeth, if he’s warm enough. It seems like a natural enough
response, to be worried about a child so young and helpless. But now it’s beginning to interfere with his work. He shakes his head to clear it, frowning as he tries to remember his routine. Up early; breakfast with Thomas; washing the dishes together; choosing which tie Nathan should wear to work (Thomas likes the one with brown stripes). That’s all perfectly clear. But when he leaves the apartment for work, sits down at his desk, the rest of the day is blank—completely empty. Maybe he should ask Malone about his productivity.

“Nathan!” Malone roars from the bar.

By the time Nathan rises from his chair and goes out front, he’s already forgotten about the sketches and his intention to speak with Malone. He’s wondering what he’ll make for dinner when he gets home to Thomas.

The bar is busy, as Nathan feared. He’s managed to skulk in the background and avoid the customers for most of the shift, but now Sam and Malone are arguing loudly in the kitchen and a group of men is wandering up to the register. Trapped, Nathan shoots a desperate look toward the kitchen.

“Why in the holy hell would I ever tell ya to do it that way, you frackin’ moron!” Malone thunders.

Nathan sighs and drags himself over to the register, missing Sam’s rejoinder. He keeps his eyes lowered as he rings up each customer, crossing the items off the bill and making change. He’s totaling up the last man’s order when the man turns toward his friends, who are bundled up by the doorway in scarves, hats, and gloves, and calls out to them, “You think this is cold, you guys oughta come visit me in Nebraska sometime! Red Cloud sets the state record for cold every damn year!”

Nathan cannot move. He is paralyzed, frozen, stuck; his hand lies inert upon the stack of tens in the till. His breathing rasps in and out; he feels like he might start choking. The man doesn’t notice. He’s still turned toward his friends and laughing at something one of them said. Nathan dares to raise his eyes. They take in the man’s short, stocky form in his black wool jacket, and come to rest on his profile.

“Excuse me.” Nathan is surprised and annoyed at the crack in his voice. “I couldn’t help but hear you say Red Cloud. Red Cloud, Nebraska. Do you know it?”

The intensity of the question appears to take the man aback, but after a moment’s hesitation, he says, “Yes, I was born and raised there. Why do you ask?”

“I—it’s just that I—I was there once. When I was young.”

The man brightens. “Well, how about that! Were you there for any length of time? It’s a small town, only about a thousand people. I bet I’ll know who you stayed with if you tell me the name.”

“Finch,” Nathan blurts. “I stayed with the Finches. They’re relatives of mine.”

“Hmm,” the man frowns and rubs at his chin. “Sorry, can’t say that name rings a bell.”

“They lived on Mayview, Mayview Drive, just north of—”

“Mayview! Shoot, I know it, I used to live on it! Finch, did you say? Huh. Nope, that just isn’t familiar.”

“Well, they don’t live there anymore. But maybe my relatives will remember you, I can ask them. What’s your name?”

“Daniel Newcomb.”

Nathan isn’t as surprised as he thought he might be. He’s always known that Jeffrey’s brother was still out there, liv-
ing and working, like Nathan. In fact, he has often suspected their paths would cross again.

This makes Nathan want to laugh out loud, as suddenly as it makes him unbearably sad. It’s somehow disappointing. Anticlimactic. He’d been certain the macabre thread binding Daniel to Nathan was so potent that they would inevitably feel it when they met again. Yet, here they are, standing face-to-face, and neither recognizes the other. If it weren’t for Daniel’s passing comment, they would have gone their whole lives never knowing this chance meeting occurred.

“And you are?” Daniel asks, reaching out a mittened hand toward Nathan.

He takes it carefully in his own pale, bony one. “Thomas.”

“Well, Thomas, it’s always nice to meet folks from back home. Say hello to those Finches for me, whoever they might be.” Daniel smiles warmly and moves toward the door.

As he pushes it open and goes to follow his friends out into the night, Nathan hears himself call, “Your brother! Jeffrey. I heard about him. In the park.”

Daniel stands still in the doorway, leaving his back to Nathan for a long moment. Finally, he turns and peers at Nathan with a puzzled expression. “My brother? How do you know about that?”

Nathan swallows hard and comes out from behind the register. “Jeffrey. I heard about how he—about what happened to him. My relatives. They told me while I was staying there.”

Daniel looks down at his shoes and then up again, shaking his head slowly from side to side. “I haven’t thought about that in years. Guess I’ve been tryin’ to forget.” He gives a wry snort. “And then I run into the one guy in Boston who’s ever been to Red Cloud. The one bar with the one guy who knows. Small, small world.”

“Yeah, well.” Nathan folds his arms across his chest, unsure why he even brought the whole thing up. None of this will help; none of it will bring Jeffrey back. “I guess I just wanted to say that I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. For all of it.”

“Yeah, well, it was a long time ago. Kids can do some pretty awful things to each other. It’s unbelievable.” Daniel is looking at him strangely.

Nathan nods, rubs his nose. “I’ve never forgotten it, ever. I never will. Never.”

This last never is emphatic enough for Daniel to reach over and pat awkwardly at Nathan’s arm. “It’s all right, it’s okay. I mean, it was a horrible thing, truly horrible, but it turned out fine in the end, right? I mean, his jaw still clicks when he moves it a certain way, that’s for sure. But kids are damned resilient, and he bounced back pretty quick there.”

Daniel may have gone on; Nathan isn’t sure. The world simply stops after the words “his jaw still clicks.” It drops away until there is only blackness and a loud buzz in Nathan’s ears. He’s not quite sure he understands what is happening.

“Wait, wait, what?” he interrupts, staring at Daniel in disbelief. “Jeffrey, he—I mean, he’s—he’s alive?”

The bewilderment on Daniel’s face melts into alarm. “Well, yeah, of course he is. He’s livin’ over in Miami, doin’ some investment banking, whatever the hell that is, makin’ more money and datin’ more women than you or I will see this lifetime!” He laughs uneasily and edges toward the door again. “I’ll tell him I ran into you. He’ll be ’round for Christmas in Red Cloud. Take care now.”

“He’s alive?”
The door whooshes closed, and Nathan is alone at the entrance.

The dripping faucet plinks away as Nathan sits at the table, hands clasped in front of him. He’s been sitting like this for over two hours; his back and shoulders have gone numb. He isn’t thinking about anything, only staring straight ahead. Finally, he stands up, turns off the overhead bulb, goes over to the bed in the corner, and gets in. He cries himself to sleep as he hugs Thomas tightly to his chest. For the first time in twenty years, Nathan doesn’t dream. And later that night, when Thomas wakes screaming, Nathan rocks him gently back to sleep.

You Got the Silver

by Amanda Johnson

for Marley

It is midnight, and I am surrounded by massive redwoods and messy undergrowth. I can’t see the trail we are walking on. I can barely see Sonny in front of me, only the tiny orange ember of his burning cigarette, an insufficient guide in the sea of darkness. I focus on that light and follow.

The dark is not void; it explodes with neon pinks and greens, rococo flowers and vines crawling like living wallpaper, checkerboards unfurling in every direction, fireworks falling around me. My eyes are filled with shooting stars.

Two hours earlier, Sonny had held the small, brown bottle out to me: an offering, an apology. That morning he had returned from a foray into the world of the itinerant hippie, reveling in newfound, long-lost freedom—that is, until his money was stolen and his so-called family abandoned him while he was taking a piss at the Circle K in Coos Bay. So he hitched a ride down the coast, came back to me. Came back with a gift.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Silver,” Sonny said. “Liquid acid. Clean, strong.” He looked at me, questioning. I hesitated for a heartbeat, then nodded.
“Just one hit, though, okay?”

I stuck out my tongue as Sonny unscrewed the lid, pulled out the dropper, and squeezed the rubber top once. Before I could close my mouth, he let a second drop follow the first. Tasteless, the liquid hit my tongue and was gone. I thought maybe it was nothing but water. That would mean no ensuing trip, no flowers or fireworks, only slow-coming disappointment.

Now all my doubts have dissolved. The night is awash with brilliant hallucinations—the Silver doing its thing in my eyeballs, in my brain. I know this, but the images are much more immediate, more real than the giant trees that surely surround me, the mighty boles that I cannot see.

“You okay?” Sonny has stopped, looked back. His face is a blank white blur in the shimmering darkness, a smooth round plate, empty and waiting. I don’t speak but jog a few steps to catch up, link my arm with his, and try to walk beside him. It’s awkward, the trail is too narrow; soon we are once again single file. This time I lead, stumbling up the trail into darkness. I’m not sure where we are or where we are going: we are effectively lost, but I’m unconcerned, amused by my lovely, morphing visions. Soon I am breathless from exertion and tobacco smoke, and I halt mid-stride. Fighting sudden vertigo, I turn around and reach out for Sonny, but he is enthralled by his own internal rainbows and doesn’t notice I’ve stopped walking. He plows into me and I try to grab hold of him but my hands grasp at air. Falling back on my ass with a thud, I laugh in surprise, and realize that the ground is precisely where I need to be.

Sonny stops and sits. We lie down in the dirt and undergrowth. Sticks and bugs make themselves at home in my hair. I am a forest creature. I look up and now I see the trees, telescoping away from me, into sky and stars. They are dancing in the wind, and singing too, in creaking, ancient voices. I am underwater, I am on the ocean floor, the trees sway with the currents, move with the sea, slowly undulate beneath the waves. I am a small speck in the infinite universe. I become tree, sky, star; grass, spider, squirrel; fire, tobacco, smoke. I am one with All-That-Is.

Then my cigarette has burnt down to the filter and Sonny reaches for it, takes it from my singed finger tips, stubs it out in the dirt, unzips my jeans, pulls pants and panties down to my ankles so they bunch up around my hiking boots, pulls me on top of him, and puts himself inside of me.

The mosquitoes are feasting on my bare ass as I move faster, loud and hard and primal. I grab his shirt, his hair, moan and mash myself into him, swallow him up. When Sonny comes he makes strange guttural noises in a voice I don’t recognize. For a moment, I worry that I am fucking a stranger, that there is an unknown entity moving inside of me, But I look down, I touch his face, and he is still Sonny—familiar, comfortable, my man. I hold him inside me for an impossibly long time.

We stay in the bushes beside the trail for a few more minutes, or maybe hours—time is difficult to gauge, slippery and sly. We smoke a cigarette, a joint, sip water from a plastic milk jug.

Every breath is singular and new.

Then it is time to leave. The decision is silent but unanimous, not exactly telepathy, but as if the drug has synchronized our separate brains so that they give simultaneous rise
to identical waves. My vision is clearing up, and I recognize our location: halfway up Trail 3 in the community forest park, on a path that I have walked many times before, in the daylight. We are close to the road and not nearly as deep in the woods as I had imagined.

There must be other people in the park tonight. I think about my exposed flesh and uncensored moans, and the paranoia catches fast as a summer fire. Suddenly it is crucial that we get out of the forest, into the light.

“Let’s walk back along the road?” I say. It is less a suggestion than a plea. I look up at Sonny, squeeze his hand, will him to agree.

“Sure, babe, yeah,” he says offhandedly, mind elsewhere. We cut a diagonal away from the trail, northeast. It is only a few minutes’ trudge through the trees to reach the road, but I am starting to panic, succumbing to the fear, feeling unseen eyes on me. Sonny is there in front of me, though, his gait steady and sure. I focus on the even rhythm of his steps.

Soon we are on pavement, bathed in the familiar pink-orange of a halogen streetlight. I relax, breathe, laugh. Light and asphalt, dependable and certain. Now: down the hill, one foot, then the other, left–right–left. Simple. Easy. Going home. We walk in silence, holding hands, joined by the afterglow of the Silver, by the night and the woods and the home we are returning to together. I think of how things will be different now, how we will both be content. The time apart, the time together, the drug, the forest—these have quietly changed us, mended what was broken.

I’m jolted from my reverie by the crunch of tires on the road. Before I can think, Sonny has pulled me off into the shadows and down to the ground.

I am lying in a mud puddle. The cold wet seeps through my clothes, making my skin clammy. I start to say something, to move, but Sonny puts his hand over my mouth.

“Shhh…” A cop car swings around the corner, headlights cutting through the night like scalpels. Sonny peers out from under the hood of his sweatshirt; his eyes shoot right, left, up the road, gathering data, making decisions.

“Listen,” he says, “they’re gonna turn around at the top and come back this way. Stay down, don’t move.”

I nod, grateful for his direction. Sonny knows what to do. I don’t need to think, don’t need to worry—only to follow instructions. I look over at him, our faces inches apart. Our eyes meet.

“If I run,” Sonny says, “don’t follow me.”

If I run, don’t follow me. The words reverberate, echo like a gong in my mind. If I run, don’t follow me.

A moment of blazing clarity: I am in the redwood forest, in the middle of the night, face down in mud. I have a bag of weed in my pocket, LSD in my brain, cum running down my legs. My lover is lying beside me, gripping my hand, and I am utterly alone.

The car is coming back down. I hold my breath, close my eyes, and press my cheek into the cold mud. The cruiser slowly passes us and drives on.

Sonny exhales and chuckles nervously. “Jesus, that was close. For a second there, I thought it was all over.”

Through gritted teeth, through mud, through tears, I say, “Yeah, Sonny. Me too.”
Ooligan Press and the Publishing Program at Portland State University

Ooligan Press is a general trade press at Portland State University. In addition to publishing books that honor cultural and natural diversity, it is dedicated to teaching the art and craft of publishing.

As a teaching press, Ooligan makes as little distinction as possible between the press and the classroom. Under the direction of professional faculty and staff, the work of the Press is done by students enrolled in the Book Publishing graduate program at PSU. Publishing profitable books in real markets provides projects in which students combine theory with practice.

The Press offers the school and general community a full range of publishing services, from consulting and planning to design and production. Ooligan Press students are ideal candidates for jobs in the country’s growing community of independent publishers, having already received important “real world” training while at the university and in various internship positions in the greater Portland area.

Publishing courses are open to both graduate and undergraduate students. The core curriculum leads to a Master’s in Writing program for PSU publishing students. Various levels of participation and responsibility in the press are available to degree candidates and other students.
As a general trade press, Ooligan is open to publishing books from a wide variety of genres, both fiction and nonfiction. We gladly accept submissions from authors both inside and outside the PSU community. As a press, our editorial interests include, but are not limited to:

- Publications with social, literary, or educational value
- New or rediscovered works with a Pacific Northwest connection
- Works that give voice to the region’s underrepresented
- Previously unpublished English translations of foreign titles
- Works on the craft and teaching of writing, editing, publishing, and book arts

Ooligan Press is also committed to publishing one collection of poetry and one children’s or young adult book each year.


We welcome your support.