Exposing the Hidden Self

2007 Short Story Contest
Exposing the Hidden Self
Ooligan Press Editors’ Choice
2007 Short Story Contest

Exposing the Hidden Self

Edited by the Advanced Editing Class
Winter 2007

Ooligan Press
Portland State University
Portland, Oregon
Copyright © resides exclusively with individual authors.

We wish to thank the following people for their contributions to this publication:

**Cover Design**
Dana Clark

**Interior Design**
Ruth Scovill

**Publicity**
Haili Graff

**Flier Design**
Paulette Rees-Denis

We are grateful to Vinnie Kinsella’s fall 2006 editing class for choosing the contest theme and to Laura Meehan for designing the flier that announced the contest.

On the cover is “Spinning Skirt,” from the NoBody Series of photographs by Peter Chen.

This journal is set in Adobe Jenson Pro and Caflisch Script Pro.
To Our Readers:

Welcome to the third 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 2007. Calling for unpublished stories about the self usually kept hidden, they challenged writers to expose themselves through fiction.

In three weeks, the “Hidden Self” contest drew many excellent entries from the Portland State community. Every class member pored over every story. Secrets and bodies were bared. We read tales of infidelities, impersonations, terrors, lusts, and shames. A man hid his heart, exposed outside his chest, with a vest of silver armor. A woman kept her beating heart in a box in her underwear drawer and remained young for generations. Chuck Palahniuk gave a heckler a bloody lip. A woman celebrating life made a naked skydive.

The class as a whole selected a short list of twelve 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:

Karen Brattain
Terra Chapek
Dana Clark
Rebecca Daniels
Jennifer Davis
Jay Evans
Abbey Gaterud
Rosalie Grafe
Haili Graff
Angela Hodge
Laura Howe
Ryan Hume
Anthony Jackson
Bo Björn Johnson
Jake Keszler
Paulette Rees-Denis
Irene Ridgway
Joanna Schmidt
Ruth Scovill
Contributors

Blythe Butler is a student in the nonfiction writing program at Portland State. She is a Montana native, and much of her writing draws from her experiences growing up in a small agricultural community. Blythe lives in Fürth, Germany, with her husband and son. She blogs at www.theblythespirit.com.

Dave Devine grew up near Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He’s won numerous awards in his career, including the 1982 Most Improved Tiger for the Oreland Tigers tee-ball team and the 1984 and 1985 Certificates of Completion for the Summer At-Home Program, a high school readiness curriculum he endured while his friends were hanging out at the swim club. He’s not still bitter about that, not at all. He’s currently completing his first novel, Lifting the Water from the Sea.

Kristin Thiel was “writing” stories, dictating them to her mom to put on paper, even before she knew how to form the letters of the alphabet. In 2006, she won the Elisabeth A. McPherson Award for Women Writers. She also reviews books, writes previews and features on Portland’s literary scene, and edits fiction and nonfiction. Kristin is an active member of Women in Portland Publishing and the Northwest Independent Editors Guild, and is online at www.kristinthiel.com.

Evan Matthews is a graduate student of publishing at Portland State University. He started writing in high school and never stopped. In addition to his work at Ooligan Press, he writes book reviews and news stories for The Rearguard. He is currently working on his first long piece, a novella, about the afterlife of American souls.
Contents

Secondhand 1
by Blythe Butler

In a small Montana town, a doctor struggles to overcome a nameless fear and reunite with his family.

On the Night Vinnie Phelan Nearly Did the Worm 5
by Dave Devine

Do the Worm, get the girl.
“’The dance floor was a star collapsing. . . . She caught his eye and raised an eyebrow at the open floor—Let’s see what you’ve got.”

Marry Me, Life 13
by Kristin Thiel

Come one, come all, the librarian is throwing a bibliothèque discothèque. Join the celebration and get whisked away in the magic of her fairy tale.

The Hidden Self 17
by Evan Matthews

Does your past define you? A fictional Evan returns to college and must decide what to reveal and what to hide.
Friday morning Mac leaves the hunting cabin early to go to the garage sales in town. His racing heart wakes him before dawn, and he lies in bed, trembling. As the sun rises, he climbs out of his sleeping bag and dresses in the cold, weary of his fear. After sitting for an hour in the chrome and vinyl chair near the woodstove, he often feels calmer. But this has been going on for almost a year and he’s terrified.

He pulls on his brown canvas jacket that he bought at a recent garage sale, the plaid flannel lining already broken in, and leaves the cabin. There is frost on his truck, even now, in July; a few mornings this garage sale season he has seen snowflakes. A woodpecker watches as he leaves, its red head like a streak of oil paint among the trees.

A green pickup truck pulls out from the Hutterite colony onto the highway in front of Mac. The two women sitting in the cab next to the driver have black headscarves with white polka dots. There are three young men riding in the truck bed, two of them with black cowboy hats and black garbage bags, perhaps full of cucumbers or heads of lettuce to sell in the bank parking lot, clutched in their hands. Mac recognizes the third man, the one wearing the John Deere cap and eating a tomato, though he can’t remember his name. Frost tips the weeds on the sides of the road all the way into town.

Mac stops at a two-story house with a yellow paint job. The owner, her hair under a bandanna, opens the garage door and walks out to press the metal prongs of a “Garage Sale” sign into the front lawn. Mac closes his eyes and sighs before exiting the truck. The woman busies herself with a box of empty perfume bottles. She turns and smiles uncertainly.

“Dr. Linden, good morning,” she says.

“Looks like I’m your first customer,” Mac says heartily.

His patients find it strange to see him without his white coat and stethoscope. They must find it stranger yet when he wanders through their garages, eyeing their castoffs. Lucinda, his wife,
used to hint that he might offend them by hunting for bargains after charging them to remove their warts or look down their reddened throats. This is why Mac has a no-haggle policy.

“You’re an early bird,” the woman says.

He ducks under the garage door and looks over a stack of books, mostly romance novels. He picks up a cookbook and leafs through the pages. *Wild Game in the Slow Cooker*. He pays for the book and then leaves.

Mac’s daughter, Paige, is sixteen. She has dark, short hair and is small like her mother, with Mac’s pointy nose. Sometimes she affects her mother’s southern accent, though she was born in Montana. She plays the tenor saxophone. During the summer, she works at Mac’s office. For minimum wage, she files patient records and sticks stamps on bills. They often go to lunch together at the coffee shop downstairs. Yesterday she asked him if he was coming home for dinner. He hasn’t been home in months.

It was last summer, over a year ago now, when Mac started waking up so early, his heart pounding in his head. Lucinda woke up too. She would get up and make him a cup of tea, and he would sit on the plaid couch in their living room with the mug clattering against his teeth, the fear invading his body. Lucinda, with her bright black eyes and silver bracelets, was good at appearing calm. She asked Mac if he was having bad dreams, if it was something specific. There was nothing to fear, Mac knew, yet he was terrified. He began eyeing the sample boxes in the drug cabinet at his office.

When fall came, his heart was still racing, so he began staying alone at the family cabin. This way he could climb out of his hunting cot without waking anyone. By dawn every morning Mac and the dogs were in the duck blind, shivering, waiting. If he shot something, he would bring it home to Lucinda, and she would stew the birds with fresh thyme that she grew in big clay pots.

When the hunting season first began, he was still sleeping at the house during the week. Then he started driving back up the mountain after dinner. Finally, he simply stopped coming home. His morning attacks disturbed the family’s rhythm, he told himself, creating sadness and frightening Paige. Lucinda went to the cabin twice to ask her husband to come back to the family. Mac told her that he had a handle on it. He hasn’t been back to the house in over seven months now.

Lucinda began bringing sacks of groceries and clothes for Mac when she picked up Paige at the office. He began to wonder if Lucinda and Paige would move to Atlanta to stay there with Lucinda’s brother. The two had gone without Mac at Christmastime. But the first week of January, Lucinda, looking serious and thin, came to the office to give her husband a jar of peach jelly. She kissed his cheek and wished him Happy New Year.

Mac is sure that the people in town know what’s going on.
Secondhand

Mac stops at another sale. The air is warmer now, so he leaves his jacket in the truck. The card tables on the lawn are laden with Levis and acrylic sweaters. A weed trimmer and a tightly wound plastic hose lean against a cheap bookcase. There's a small pile of toothless rakes and stacks of chipped flowerpots.

Mac buys a cup of orange Kool-Aid from two pony-tailed girls at the small table in the driveway. The girls' mother sits in a lawn chair, a cashbox in her lap. Their father, a former teacher of Paige's, greets Mac just as the pickup of Hutterites pulls up and parks behind Mac's truck. The women are gone, perhaps dropped off in town. The four men climb out of the pickup. Mac makes eye contact with the man with the John Deere cap and remembers his name, Pete. He comes to the office for weekly allergy shots; the two of them often talk about hunting. He is unsure why he didn't recall the name earlier.

One of the four men picks up a bolt of maroon brocade fabric and approaches the woman with the cashbox.

With a thick, German accent, he asks, “Would you take six for this?”
She shakes her head no. “It's nice stuff, we bought it in Billings to re-cover the davenport. Ten is as low as I'll go.”

The man says something in German, then props the fabric against a card table. The other men are already waiting in the truck. Mac raises his hand as they drive away, but Pete doesn't look at him.

“Damn Hoots stole that garden hose,” the teacher mutters, sounding unsurprised.
Mac's neck and shoulders tighten.

Paige once asked Mac why the Hoots don't have their own doctors, and he chastised her for calling them what everyone else in town calls them. Mac's bookkeeper shakes her head when the Hutterite women bring their children into the office, blaming one child's clubfoot on a shallow gene pool.

The teacher follows Mac into the garage. “Dr. Linden, do you know that Hoot?”

“Is that a Carhartt jacket?” Mac asks loudly, keeping his back to the teacher. “I still get surprised in July by the frost in the mornings. I guess when you grow up in the South, you expect it to be hot twenty-four hours a day. That's one reason we moved up here, to get out of the heat.”

“Every time we have a sale, they take something. I try to watch them, but they do it anyway. I don't know how they get away with it.”

Later that week, just before lunchtime, Mac pulls Pete's chart from the basket outside his exam room. The fear is still with him, cramping his shoulders and neck.

“Did you bring me a berry pie this time, Pete?”
“No, not this time,” he says with a tiny grin. “Martha says no more for you until you cure these hives I’ve been getting.”

“These are new,” Mac says, placing his hand on Pete’s bare arm where the skin is red and lumpy from shoulder to elbow. Pete’s suspenders, pulled off his shoulders so that he could remove his shirt, hang below his waist. His cowboy boots sit empty under the window. His brown socks have orange darns in the heels.

“Yup,” Pete says, rubbing his wrist.

“It looks like something might have bit you,” Mac says, his temples throbbing slightly. “We’ll keep up the normal routine this week. But call me if the swelling doesn’t go down by Monday.”

“Okay,” Pete says.

Mac administers the vaccination. Pete’s face remains relaxed, but his toes curl tightly when the needle enters his arm.

Mac’s heart races as he leaves the exam room.

“Jackie, why are there two doses of this vaccine recorded on Pete’s chart from last week?”

Jackie, Mac’s nurse for the past fourteen years, takes a deep breath and looks at the chart. “You asked me to prepare a second one. That’s your handwriting.”

“Dammit, Jackie. Dammit! You’ve got to monitor these charts better.” Mac slaps the chart down onto her desk. “We’re lucky his reaction wasn’t worse.” He shoves the file toward her, accidentally slicing Jackie’s finger in the process.

Jackie stands and looks Mac in the eye as blood drips onto the chart.

Mac’s fear overtakes him. It is blinding. It suffocates him. Finally, he allows it to flood his body. Then he realizes that he can’t help it, that the fear does not belong to him, and his headache begins to subside. Outside the office window a woodpecker hops along a tree branch. The tension in Mac’s neck and shoulders begins to dissipate. Tears stick to his eyelashes. He knows that his daughter is waiting for him. 🙌
On the Night Vinnie Phelan Nearly Did the Worm
By Dave Devine

The music stopped and they peeled apart.

Vinnie made sure to do it the right way: linger with his hands, stare at something in the distance—the wall, the deejay, the kid getting a wedgie in the corner, anything but her eyes. Don’t look at her boobs either. Stretch out the moment. Say as little as possible. The talking is always worse than the dancing.

Vinnie angled his hip to prevent contact with his pocketed chubber and ran through his options. Give her a hug? Stupid. Promise to get her for the next slow song? Complicated. Ask her name? Too early. All he knew was that she went to Nativity BVM, a parish in Amblerton. Everything else was a cipher. That wasn’t entirely his fault. He was just trying to leave the dance floor after an eternal “You’re the Inspiration” with Angela Poskowitz’s chunky thigh in his crotch, when this girl grabbed his arm—clenched it, really—and whispered, “Rescue me.” She meant from the pizza-faced kid with imitation Air Jordans who shaved the space between his eyebrows. Vinnie didn’t know the kid. He might be from St. Luke’s, maybe St. John’s. Either way, the guy was an ogre. Vinnie didn’t recognize the girl either, but it didn’t matter. The deejay was running back-to-back slow songs and Poskowitz was still hovering nearby, rubbing sweaty hands down the pleats of her skirt. Nativity Girl had a fuzzy pink sweater and a Molly Ringwald thing going on with her lips. Pretty rad. She didn’t wait for Vinnie to respond. She just planted her forearms on his shoulders and took him straight through the end of “Careless Whisper.”

The next song was a fast one— “I’m So Excited”—which meant it was time to roll. Vinnie only did slow songs, same as the rest of the guys in his class. A few flamers danced the quick ones, mainly pink-Izod guys who gave friendship pins to hot girls and helped them French-braid their hair at recess, but didn’t get any play when it counted. Vinnie didn’t get any play when it counted either, but at least he went for it.
Which is why, with “Careless Whisper” fading out, Vinnie found his right hand palming the ass of a girl whose name he didn’t know. He let it drag off slowly, cool and casual. No reason to rush—he’d spent most of the song just getting it there. Of course, it wasn’t all him. Whereas most girls tsked disapprovingly and pulled an errant hand back up if it crossed the sacred equator of their hips, this girl actually let him go for it. Even with the weird arm-grab at the beginning, the dance came off pure textbook.

It started, as always, with some room for the Holy Spirit, then Vinnie got into the song:

- I feel so unsure—
- as I take your hand—
- Bet she knows his name. Don’t ask her. Voice might crack.
- and lead you to the dance floor.
- Play it straight. Hands on waist. No eye contact.
He let her make the first move, which she did, lacing her fingers behind his neck.
- Okay, game on. Hands down a bit. Cup the hips.
- I should have known better than to cheat a friend—
- Play with the bottom of her sweater.
- And waste a chance that I’ve been given.

Then she leaned into him and he got a whiff of baby powder and something else.
- Binaca breath spray. Nice. Game definitely on.
- Maybe it’s better this way—
- Top of the butt. Hands spread out. Thumbs touching.
- we’d hurt each other with the things we want to say.

Vinnie asked one question.
- “So, where do you go to school?”
She answered, “Nativity.”
That was it.
Her head was already on his shoulder.
- Time for the palm.
- And I’m never gonna dance again—
- Ass. One hand, not two. Light pressure. Leave it there.
- guilty feet have got no rhythm.

Nativity Girl wasn’t doing fast songs either.
She turned away, mouthing Thanks for the rescue over her shoulder. In her shy smile, Vinnie got his first look at the braces. No rubber bands, thank God, but heavy on the cement. It made her lips stick out too much. Scratch the Molly Ringwald thing—definitely not first-base
On the Night Vinnie Phelan...

material. Maybe second, if you skipped first—her fuzzy pink sweater was hiding a pretty nice pair. The problem was Vinnie had never gotten to second base. He was fairly sure none of the other eighth graders had either. Bras were as mysterious as French braids. Just thinking about it gave him a halfie.

Nativity Girl looked back one more time then bounced over to her friends on the far wall. Vinnie beelined it for the Mother of Consolation crowd under the sign. His classmates always had the same spot at the dances, next to the entrance, underneath the wooden Knights of Columbus sign. The Knights of Columbus were a senior citizen church group that threw six dances a year for the Catholic grade schools in the area. All the dances were held at the Order of Columbus Hall, a cavernous room with paneled walls and a stage draped with fraying velvet curtains. At the far end, behind a sliding corrugated divider, was a snack bar staffed by the Knights themselves—a bunch of pious-looking geriatrics with pressed shirt sleeves and swirling combovers. They weren’t really knights, as far as Vinnie knew, but there was a good chance they were born in the Middle Ages. They handed out popcorn in red-and-white-checkered boats like there was a ration being enforced.

Mitch Agnew was halfway through his third boat when Vinnie found him under the sign. Mitch extended a handful, most of it burnt.

“Told you,” Vinnie said.

“You’re good,” Mitch shrugged, and shoveled it in his mouth. “You see the Snuka match last night?”

“I wish. We had basketball practice.”

“Too bad. Steel cage match for the Intercontinental title. And Snuka—swear to God—did a Superfly off the top of the cage.” Mitch spat a few scorched kernels back into the boat. “Must’ve been, I don’t know, like twenty feet up.”

“Bullshit,” Vinnie said, watching Nativity Girl tap three friends and point to the door.

“Swear to God,” Mitch said. “Maybe thirty.”

The four girls skirted the dance floor, angling for the exit. The friends all wore Coca-Cola sweatshirts and collections of Swatches up their arms. Nativity Girl led the pack in her fuzzy pink sweater. Vinnie elbowed Mitch, who followed them with his eyes out the door and into the hall. They giggled into the bathroom, and Mitch glanced back, shaking his head, “Prisses.”

“Not the pink sweater,” Vinnie said.

“All of them. Trust me. Nativity girls are bitches.”

“The one I danced with was pretty cool.”

“The one you danced with has a mouth like Mr. Ed.”

“Pretty hot bod though.”

“Yeah?” Mitch said, not sold. “Got proof?”
Vinnie waited a beat for his words to gather gravity. “I palmed her ass.”
Mitch gagged on a popcorn kernel. “No shit! Chaperones see it?”
Vinnie smiled. “What do you think?”
The chaperones at the Knights of Columbus dances inherited the jobs that the Knights were either too decrepit or too nervous to carry out—checking tickets at the door, watching the dance floor for immoral activity, breaking up fights. It was a volunteer position, which meant the chaperones were mostly vision-impaired parents with no better offers on a Friday night.
Mitch grabbed another fistful of popcorn. “Get her name?”
Vinnie didn’t answer. He pulled a few unpopped kernels from the boat and hurled them at two girls making up dance moves to “It’s Raining Men.”
“I gotta take a piss.”
Mitch didn’t offer to go along. Guys usually didn’t, but it was fortunate in this case because Vinnie didn’t really have to piss. He had to dry out his underarms. The dance was only a few songs old, but the sweat rings were already showing.
At the previous Knights dance, one of the Consolation girls witnessed Kenny Schlepmann leaving the floor after a slow song and cried, “Omigod! He’s like, totally pitting out!” All the girls looked. Vinnie looked. Kenny thrust his hands into his armpits and bolted for the snack bar, where his grandfather worked the popper. Vinnie was too terrified to check his own armpits, certain they had betrayed him. With the attention on Kenny, he’d slid into the bathroom, waited until it emptied, and angled the electric hand dryer at his underarms. It took several minutes, but no one caught him.
This time there were already two kids at the mirror, plastic combs thrust into their back pockets. One of them was the pizza-faced guy from the dance floor. Vinnie recognized the other one as the starting center for the St. Luke’s basketball team. Vinnie nodded a quick Hey and unzipped in front of the urinal, hoping they’d leave. They didn’t. They shot back chin nods in the mirror and pulled out their combs. The center started feathering his hair, trying to get it even on both sides. Pizza Face ran a finger over the stubble between his eyebrows, checking the length. Vinnie dropped his head and thought about waterfalls, rivers, firehoses—anything to get the piss going. Nothing came. He leaned in further, wondering if they noticed.
“Good dance,” he mumbled, covering the silence.
“No doubt,” Vinnie said, praying for enough fluid to make some noise in the urinal. He gave a few half-hearted shakes. Nothing.
He zipped back up.
Pizza Face scowled in the mirror. “Dude, you even take a piss?”
“Thought I had to,” Vinnie said, speaking to the tiles.
On the Night Vinnie Phelan...

The center pocketed his comb and planted a hand on the door. “So you just come in here to check us out, or what?”

Pizza Face followed the lead. “Yeah, maybe you need the room next door, dude. The one with the skirt sign.” They laughed, saying as they went out the door, “Consolation pussy.”

When the door closed behind them, Vinnie whaled on the hand-dryer button as hard as he could. It gave up a faint whir and then nothing—no air flow, no armpit relief. He tried again, less violently—still no air. Vinnie stepped to the mirror and raised his arms, fingers behind his head. It was a fucking disaster. His green Le Tigre had stains from his armpits to his ribcage. He scanned the walls for a second hand dryer, knowing he wouldn’t find one. The paper towel dispenser was useless. Toilet paper was even worse. There was only one thing left to do. Vinnie entered the toilet stall, dropped the latch, sat down, and held his arms over his head, wondering how long they would take to dry.

C

hrist—you fall in?” Mitch said.

“Long line,” Vinnie said.

“Well, you made it. Barely. They just started.” Mitch hustled him toward the circle forming on the floor. Vinnie jogged to keep up, peering through the gaps to catch the action. Through a mob of shoulders he saw someone’s Adidas low-tops freeze upside down, spin for a moment, then corkscrew back into the throng. The dance floor was a star collapsing—walls and corners emptying as everyone crushed the center. Stage lights kaleidoscoped off the walls in time with the music.

It’s tricky to rock a rhyme,
To rock a rhyme that’s right on time,
It’s tric-kay—tr-tr-tr-tric-kay—

Vinnie catapulted off Mitch’s bony shoulders, craning to see past the bobbing heads. He felt the familiar rush, the throb of being this close. “C’mon,” he said to Mitch, elbowing in, “we gotta get to the front.”

The circle of breakdancers had a shelf life of about three minutes. It materialized the moment the deejay dropped the needle on a rap song and lasted until either the song ended or someone started a fight. The smart money was on a fight. Rival schools battled for supremacy, sending in their best breakers to hijack the show. Reputations were earned or flattened with a single, clever dis. The chaperones circled like raptors, arms crossed and vigilant.

When Vinnie broke through, the clearing was even narrower than it looked from the edge. It was claustrophobic and breathless. Kids plunged in and leaped out, shoved reluctant friends to the middle and reeled them back. A guy from St. Mark’s called Skeletor took the floor, dropping from a windmill into a backspin and then up to a handstand. He flipped onto his feet, threw a

9
crotch-grab at a bunch of booing Sacred Heart kids, and wheeled into a wall of high-fives. Sacred Heart sent in a pair of twins with hooded sweatshirts who moonwalked from opposite sides, collided in the middle, and lock-stepped matching robot moves that had the crowd exploding.

“Back up!” someone yelled, “Give’em room.”

Vinnie leaned out to widen the circle and got Mitch’s elbow in his back. “Get out there,” Mitch urged, “do your moves!”

Vinnie didn’t answer.

He didn’t really have moves. He had a thing. One move: the Worm. Sort of lame, but he could do it better than anybody else at his school. He mastered it on a flattened refrigerator box in Mitch’s basement. After gym class one day, when Mitch stole the teacher’s boom box, removed the Jazzercise tape, and slipped in a rap mix, Vinnie dropped the jaws of the entire eighth grade by falling to his knees and performing the Worm across the parking lot. His friends went crazy. He got a new nickname. Even fifth- and sixth-graders started calling him “The Worm.”

In the cafeteria, at recess, in the bus line, wherever a breakdance circle formed, they chanted Worm!Worm!Worm! until Vinnie hit the ground. He threw in a few other half-assed moves, but the Worm was his showstopper.

Mitch nudged him again. “Hey man, I think pink sweater’s waiting for the Worm.”

Vinnie glanced across the circle. Nativity Girl was standing there, cheering the action. She caught his eye and raised an eyebrow at the open floor—let’s see what you’ve got. Vinnie bounced lightly on his toes, a boxer between rounds. He tasted burnt popcorn in the back of his throat. It was one thing to do the Worm for seven fourth-graders and a crossing guard in the Consolation bus line; it was another to do it at the Knights of Columbus dance with a hundred people watching.

He took a step into the circle.

Mitch’s hand was on his back. More hands were there, other guys from Consolation. They picked up the chant. Worm...Worm...WORMWORMWORM! Nativity Girl smiled, her braces improving with the distance.

This was it.

No wussing out.

Vinnie dropped to his knees.

Three girls barged past him.

They wore tight cornrows and matching blue windbreakers. There were no Swatches up their arms. No Coca-Cola sweatshirts. Just windbreakers and attitude. The cheering stopped. Everything stopped. All three girls struck a pose in the center, jabbing thumbs at the words St. Rose of Lima Track embroidered on their jackets. Vinnie had never seen them before. Kids from St. Rose of Lima rarely came to the Knights dances—the parish was all the way out in West Philly.
“What are they doing here?” Mitch said.

It didn’t matter. The girls snapped in unison and then launched into a flurry of moves, playing the crowd. The cheers were deafening. Vinnie watched in awe from his knees. Backspins, headspins, the wave — these girls had it down.

One of them moonwalked up to Skeletor and pretended to give him a hummer, right in front of everyone. She pulled a loose fist up to her mouth and thrust her tongue into her cheek, faking it. After three or four strokes she opened her hand, disappointed. She winked to the crowd and thrust a thumb and finger in the air, two inches apart. Skeletor turned scarlet. The girls spun away laughing. The ultimate dis.

Vinnie got off the floor, knowing it wouldn’t last much longer. Sex was worse than violence in the Knights of Columbus canon — especially simulated blowjobs. The chaperones were already signaling the deejay, jerking fingers across their throats — cut the music. One of them panicked and rushed the stage, pulling the needle from the record herself. The speakers hitched with feedback, grew silent, and then soared with the opening notes to “Don’t Stop Believing.”

The circle dispersed. Kids blinked into the corners and drifted to the hallway, still buzzing about the girls, their dancing, and the fake blowjob. The girls themselves were escorted to a back office to call their parents. Vinnie figured they’d have to relate the exact details of their activities at the dance. Chaperones were famous for things like that. He wandered off the floor, hating Journey, already losing Nativity Girl in the crowd. Mitch caught up and threw a consoling arm across his shoulder.

“Really thought we were gonna see the Worm tonight.”

Vinnie shrugged absently as his friend corralled him toward the snack bar for another boat of popcorn.

“Think you’ll get out there next time?” Mitch said.

“For sure,” Vinnie said. “Next time.”
The librarian was throwing a bibliothèque discothèque.

A lot of people, more than she’d hoped, had come. As instructed per public invitation, adults jangled and swirled in dance clothes, and children were decked out in their finest finery—princess costumes, pirate garb, elaborate dresses normally reserved for quincineras, or footie pajamas (the party was an after-dinner affair). The librarian, since she was the host, had dressed comparatively low-key, making a statement through silence. Her dress was red cotton, but it showed a bit of knee when she twirled, and a thin red ribbon crisscrossed her chest, underlining her small round breasts. Acceptable enough for a family-friendly event; delicious enough to catch the fathers’ eyes.

The DJ was one of the high school students from the librarian’s book club program. He had won over the little kids with his careless clothes and suave style and the parents by playing as many songs from the seventies and eighties as from the aughts. People drank ice-cream punch and nibbled cookies provided by the church ladies, who were themselves boogying near the DJ.

The librarian had roped off the bookshelves with streamers and Mardi Gras beads and charged a couple of volunteers with watching for flying punch and climbing toddlers. With the pulse lights and disco balls fracturing everyone’s movement, the books looked like they were dancing too.

“You’ve done a marvelous job,” the mayor said, surprising the librarian, who had thought she was alone outside. His satin sash, with Mayor spelled across it in sturdy velvet letters, caught the lamplight.

“Thank you,” the librarian said, recovering and giving him a mock curtsy.

The mayor reached into his blazer pocket and pulled out two cigars. “I heard you are a connoisseur.”

She laughed, an incredulous, “Hah!”
He shrugged. "Everyone's too busy dancing inside to see you. And even if they did" — he cut the tips — "who cares? Tonight's a party."

The librarian accepted the cigar he handed her and lit it. "Mmm," she nodded her approval, rolling the smoke around her tongue. She tilted her head up and blew a series of smoke rings toward the stars, lassoing one and pulling it down through the sky and close to her. She held the throbbing orb on her open palm, examining its bluish tint, the way its warmth sizzled up her arm and through the rest of her body, and then tucked it under the ankle strap of her right sandal. *Something blue.*

"Let's go dance," she called to the mayor, who was admiring his mustache, freshly curled into a handlebar for the event, in the smooth finish of the key to the city, which he often carried as though it were a cane. They nestled their cigars in two seams in the top of the low rock wall circling the library grounds, and went inside.

A tango, layered with hip-hop, was starting as they re-entered the building. The mayor tossed the key to the city to the housing developer's lawyer, grabbed the librarian's right hand, and pulled her arm straight against his, straight out in front of them. They tangoed the rest of the way into the party, where other couples were gliding across the floor, piercing the air with their arms. On a nicely timed dip, the librarian grabbed a rose from the lapel of a man in a tuxedo and clenched it between her teeth. *Something borrowed.*

Because it had a short stem, being a boutonniere, the rose stuck straight out from the librarian's mouth; the baby's breath taped to it tickled her chin. The librarian took it from her lips and wiggled it between her fingers. "Wocka wocka wocka," she said, like Fozzie Bear. The kids flailing in their own version of a hip-hop tango near her collapsed in laughter. When the dance ended, she snapped the flower into her barrette. Her fingers trailed a fine mist of sparks, like metallic confetti, as she released the flower and moved her hands to rest on her hips.

The bibliothèque discothèque was billed as a library fund-raiser, but the librarian knew it was really a going away party for herself. No one else knew that. Her boss would know in the morning, when he found her resignation letter under his office door.

The librarian quietly slipped away from the party and crawled under one of the ropes of beads. Her volunteers had abandoned their posts, flocking to the elementary school gym teacher as soon as he arrived in a John Travolta jumpsuit. She ran her fingers horizontally along the books' spines; her nails made a pleasing scratching noise against the hardcovers. In the fluttering light, she couldn't read any of the titles, but it didn't matter—the book she was looking for she knew by heart. She found the slim paperback and slid it down the back of her dress, securing it under her bra. Warmth ran up and down the librarian's spine. *Something old.*

The librarian circulated back onto the dance floor. Something was afoot. Everyone was gathered around the fairy tales section. The librarian could see a glow filtering between bodies. She
hurried forward, pushing her way around people. The kids had found the one other book she was going to take with her; leave it to kids to spot the shiny penny amid the cobwebs—the one she’d been dreaming about, dangling in front of herself till the last possible moment, increasing the mystery, the anticipation.

The children were mesmerized with the images floating above the pages of the book.

“Hey,” the one holding the book said as the librarian squatted beside her.

“Something new,” the librarian said, cupping the image in her hands and pressing it under her arm. She took off running up the stairs. Clatter clatter clatter went her strappy heels, a blue glow like a beacon from her right ankle.

Kids in town love to bike to the library and read that book. “It’s not for checking out,” says the librarian’s ex-boss, who assumed the librarian’s duties until a replacement could be found. “It’s reference.” An image, a moving 3D image, like a movie scene, floats above each page, illustrating the text. Above each page, that is, except for the final one; the librarian took that image with her months ago. So now, where once a woman in a red dress danced, a rose between her lips and blue stardust lighting her moves, there’s nothing but air, with each child, like the librarian, supplying his or her own ending.  

Marry Me, Life
The professor announced a short story contest entitled “The Hidden Self.” I laughed to myself when I saw the flyer. I thought about all the hiding I did when I returned to school a few years back. It was a way of life for me. Hiding.

I remember standing in those long bookstore lines with my pack over my shoulder, looking at all the young students with their fresh faces and wide-open eyes. A new chill was in the air, and the branches of the park block trees had grown yellow with dying leaves. People were happy to see one another. They were smiling, chatting, embracing.

I felt like an intruder.

I walked to my first class and peered in through the door. It was almost full. I found a desk in the back corner near the windows and sat down. There were eyes on me that blinked away when I looked back at them. The class was Renaissance Literature. We all waited for the instructor as a few students spoke about other classes they had shared.

I looked out the window at the students walking beneath the trees. Some of them pulled their bags along with little leashes. I heard the distant chatter of a skateboard hitting rough concrete. Pigeons fluttered about. Apart from a few new buildings and a lot of cell phones, it was exactly how I remembered it.

“Hello.” The instructor walked into the classroom and students looked forward with attention. She introduced herself then suggested we all do the same, starting with the first row near the door.

As each of them spoke of majors and hobbies and histories, I wondered what I should tell them.

For a moment I humored myself with the thought of being truthful, of announcing myself as a felon returning to school as a condition of my probation. I could call myself an addict, a dealer, or a thief.

The Hidden Self

by Evan Matthews
Or I could be a new student and leave it at that.

I listened to them, one after the other, giving their personal introductions about classes they had taken or jobs they had worked. I wondered about their secrets. Did they have any regrets? Did they hate their parents? Did they cry themselves to sleep at night? I wondered if they too were hiding, if they were desperate, if they were holding on to a thinning mask of confidence.

Soon all their eyes were on me, staring.

“And you?” The instructor beamed down at me.

“Oh, my name is Evan,” I said, “and I’m returning to school today after a five-year break. Um, it feels great to be back.”

“Nice meeting you Evan,” the instructor said, “and what is the focus of your studies?”

Focus, I thought. For some reason, I was sweating. They were looking into me. I could feel the heat of their eyes.

I remembered my Probation Officer asking the same question.

“What is there anything you are interested in?”

I always considered myself to be a person of many interests, but I never could answer that question. I couldn’t see myself enjoying one activity enough to live for it.

What did I want to be? Who was I?

I used to like music. I played a few instruments. I even joined a band. But it got old. Living with musicians became unhealthy. We had to share rooms as more and more people seemed to move themselves in, at least two bands and too many members. The music became coarse and screeching with anger. Bands broke up or forgot to practice. What was once a music house slowly became a drug house. A world of filth seeped in through the dark crevices of that old, rotting foundation until bugs began to take over. They started in the kitchen, gradually expanded their colonies throughout the living room and up the stairway to our room.

My roommates and I fought them back with duct tape around the sides of the bedroom door. Every night we re-fortified the door with layers and layers of duct tape, especially along the bottom where they usually crept in. We would quickly open and shut the door as we left the room, trying to leave someone inside to do the taping. The garbage was included in the rent and was therefore neglected. When I returned from work in the evenings, I would see rats scurrying along the railing and hopping into the trash that piled up around the yard.

They won, eventually. Roaches, ants, bugs without names made it into the room. Every night I heard their little patterings in the carpet, the walls, the furniture. They brought the stench of the lower floors with them; a wet, rotten smell that grew worse around the corners. I couldn’t sleep. I stared into the dark while the bodies of my roommates breathed up and down in the light of the television static. When I pulled the blankets over my head, I could still hear them, an orchestra of skittering legs and chewing.
I started sleeping in my car outside the restaurant where I worked. It was easier than making the drive back out to the house. And I could finally sleep alone. No people. No mice. No bugs. I suffered from terrible insomnia until I started buying drugs from the dealers around my car, anything that put me out, rather than up.

That was the beginning. Living in my car was the start of a great falling on my part. As an alternative to the house, I almost enjoyed it. I found it strange that I wasn’t lonely. I was often lonely at the house, crowded as it was. But in my car, alone and high, I was surprisingly comfortable.

I spent my time dreaming and watching the city rise up with the day. I had very intense dreams, breathtaking dreams. I swam at top speeds through cool waters, surrounded by friends and family and everyone else. Water was always around, bodies of water, waterfalls, clean blue rivers that washed up against the city streets.

I would wake around five when the drugs wore off. The light of day would start from the horizon and grow in through my windows. I would light a cigarette and watch the streets stir up like boiling water while I read the newspaper or listened to the AM radio. People would fill into the streets and rove about, rushing to earn and spend and make time for lunch. I stayed a window away from them, resting. It was my home. An old and rusted sky-blue Falcon.

“What about writing?” my P.O. once asked me. “Your counselor in rehab tells me that you wrote some great stuff. Is that something you are interested in?”

Interested in? I wasn’t sure.

Yes, I often wrote. But what was it? Certainly not a career. Not really a hobby. It was part of my life, like a habit. It was spontaneous and impulsive. I wrote about self-absorbed things and whiny little things and things I just wanted to remember.

“Is that something you would like to do in school?” my P.O. continued. She was so dedicated. She wanted some kind of success story. Looking at my reflection in her lenses, I could almost believe in myself. I was something else in her eyes.

Here was a person who knew exactly who she was and exactly what she wanted. She was Persian, grew up in the war years of Iran. Now she was fighting the drug war in the states and wouldn’t put one minute of effort into something unless she was absolutely sure it was just. She was with the good guys, saviors of the American pariah. And she was right about everything. School, the job, the future, it was what I wanted. All of it.

What else could I want? I lost my car, my home, impounded by the police after they searched it and found pills, liquor bottles, paraphernalia. I grew sick, depressed, and self consumed. I was stealing and dealing and getting caught. Even the dreams had sunk into madness. The water remained, but it became murky and haunting with depth. Dead friends and relatives began to visit my sleep with strange and prophetic messages. I would walk into a great oasis of falling mist and
waters only to look down from the sun-lit shores and see bodies beneath the waves, corpses flopping about in the current and passing under deep rocks. I recognized their faces. It was my past. Faces of a past I thought I'd forgotten, a past with a future.

“Yes,” I said.

“Yes?” my P.O. asked.

“Yes. Literature interests me. Journalism interests me. Working for a magazine or something. I could see myself enjoying that.”

“Well that’s great,” she stood up. “Why don’t we get you back in school.” She said it as if I had a choice. By the time I left her office, it was decided. School or jail.

Of course I missed our next meeting and ended up in jail anyway, but after many days and weeks and months, I was released from the halfway house for my first day of school. My P.O. even hugged me, like a parent sending a child off for the first time.

I caught the rail into town, watching the city unfold as it carried me to campus. I fantasized about a future of comfort, even family. When I reached my stop, I walked straight into the busy halls. It was tiring, walking through them, but I would get used to it. I bought my books and went to class.

“My name is Evan,” I said, “and I’m returning to school today after a five-year break. Um, it feels great to be back.”

“Nice meeting you Evan,” the instructor said, “and what is the focus of your studies?”

“English, for now,” I said.

And I left it at that.
Ooligan Press is a general trade press founded at Portland State University. In addition to publishing books that honor the cultural and natural diversity of the Pacific Northwest, 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. Ooligan Press is staffed by students in an apprenticeship program under the guidance of a core faculty. Acquiring, producing, and publishing profitable books in real markets become projects where students combine theoretical knowledge and practical experiences.

Publishing courses are open to both graduate and undergraduate students. The core curriculum leads to a Master's in writing with a concentration in publishing, through the English Department's Center for Excellence in Writing. Various levels of participation and responsibility in the press are available to degree candidates and other students.

The press is open to book proposals from inside and outside the university. Special editorial interests include

- writing and the teaching of writing, editing, publishing, and book arts
- new or rediscovered works with a social or literary impact and a Pacific Northwest connection, especially those giving voice to the frequently unheard
- cookbooks with an unusual focus, particularly those done in a narrative style
- occasional volumes of poetry, special broadsides, and works of art.

The press believes that all forms of publication should be considered, and all technologies used as appropriate.

Visit us at www.publishing.pdx.edu. We welcome your support. 