



portland noir

EDITED BY KEVIN SAMPSELL

ARIEL GORE JESS WALTER BILL CAMERON KAREN KARBO

ZOE TROPE JONATHAN SELWOOD MONICA DRAKE AND OTHERS

PORTLAND NOIR

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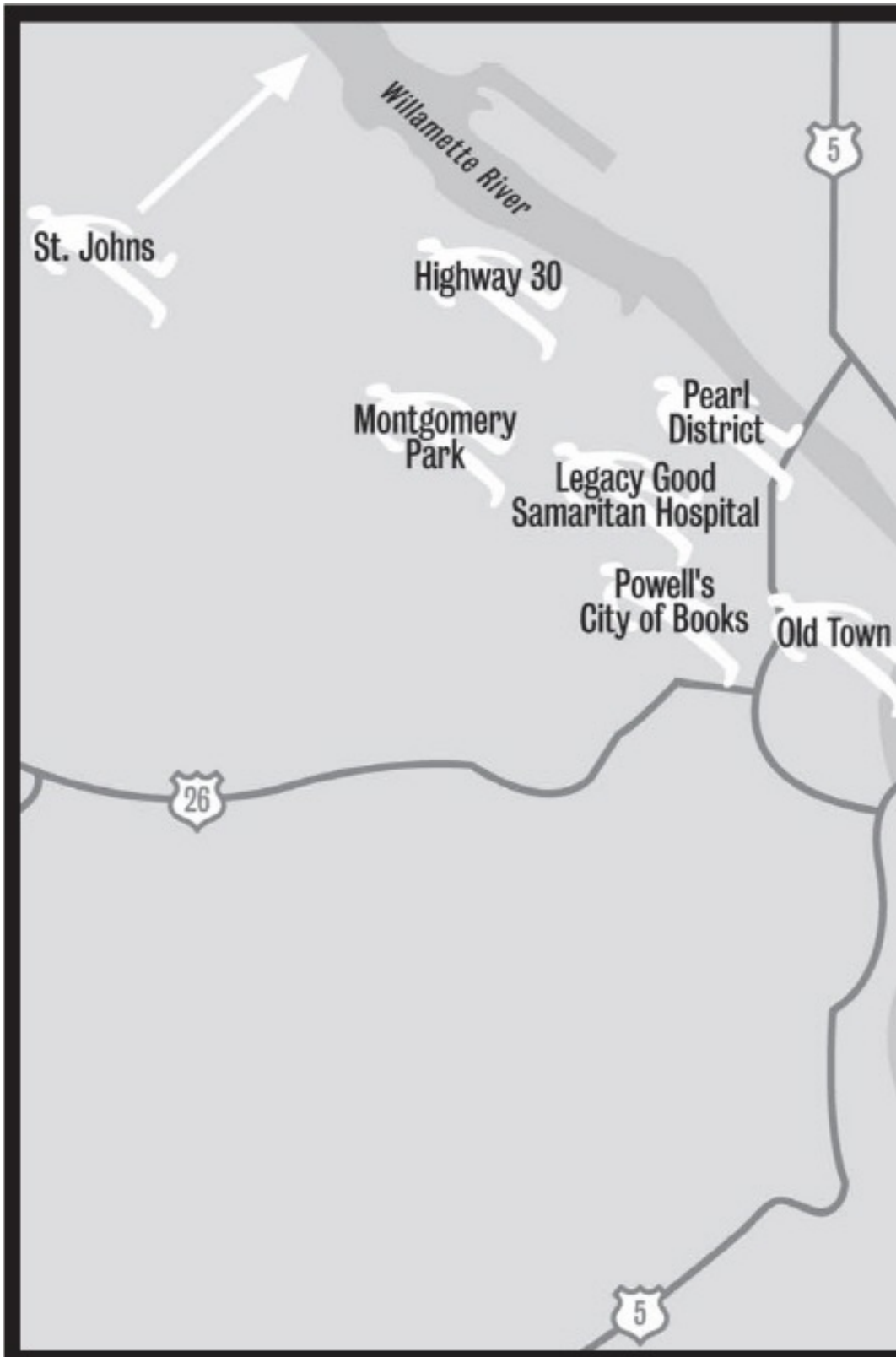
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PORTLAND



TABLE OF CONTENTS

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[Introduction](#)

PART I: BLOODLINES

<u>KAREN KARBO</u> <u><i>The Clown and Bard</i></u>	<u>S.E. Twenty-Eighth Avenue</u>
<u>LUCIANA LOPEZ</u> <u><i>Julia Now</i></u>	<u>St. Johns</u>
<u>ARIEL GORE</u> <u><i>Water under the Bridge</i></u>	<u>Clinton</u>
<u>FLOYD SKLOOT</u> <u><i>Alzheimer's Noir</i></u>	<u>Oaks Bottom</u>
<u>DAN DEWEESE</u> <u><i>The Sleeper</i></u>	<u>Highway 30</u>

PART II: CROOKS & COPS

<u>JONATHAN SELWOOD</u> <u><i>The Wrong House</i></u>	<u>Mount Tabor</u>
<u>MONICA DRAKE</u> <u><i>Baby, I'm Here</i></u>	<u>Legacy Good</u> <u>Samaritan Hospital</u>
<u>BILL CAMERON</u> <u><i>Coffee, Black</i></u>	<u>Seven Corners</u>
<u>JAMIE S. RICH & JOËLLE JONES</u> <u><i>Gone Doggy Gone</i></u>	<u>Montgomery Park</u>
<u>JESS WALTER</u> <u><i>Virgo</i></u>	<u>Pearl District</u>
<u>CHRIS A. BOLTON</u> <u><i>The Red Room</i></u>	<u>Powell's City of Books</u>

PART III: DESOLATION CITY

<u>JUSTIN HOCKING</u> <u><i>Burnside Forever</i></u>	<u>Burnside Skatepark</u>
<u>ZOE TROPE</u>	<u>S.E. Eighty-Second Avenue</u>

Hummingbird

GIGI LITTLE
Shanghaied

MEGAN KRUSE
Lila

KIMBERLY WARNER-COHEN
People Are Strange

About the Contributors

Old Town

Powell Boulevard

Sandy Boulevard

INTRODUCTION

CRIME AND UNREST IN UTOPIA

I wonder how people think of Portland from the outside. Is it a hippie haven where everyone reads Ken Kesey and hangs out at open mike night? Is it the gray, grungy, junkie-riddled streets of early Gus Van Sant movies? A cheap, trendy town full of myopic record labels and zinesters? Sex worker paradise? Bookstore heaven? A place where New Yorkers come to feel important and/or relaxed? Some wet old logging town that somehow became “one of the best cities in America”?

Yeah, it’s all that and a fancy coffee spilled on your Gore-Tex jacket (the same one you soiled with microbrew last night).

People who live in Portland love being here, despite its imperfections. We tend to love our mayors (even the currently scandalous Sam Adams) despite the sketchy police force, and we cherish the great public transportation even when every other neighborhood is being torn up for renovation. The restaurants are amazing and the music scene seems like it’s in a perpetual heyday. If Portland was Seattle’s kid nephew in the past, these days it’s more like Seattle is our creepy old uncle. (Sorry, I didn’t mean to get off track.)

I moved here in summer of 1992. I grew up in Eastern Washington and lived in a few places before this (even Seattle). I’m not ashamed to admit that I moved here partly because of Powell’s, the giant bookstore, where I eventually started working. I wanted to live in a city that valued reading and geeked out on books.

I quickly found out that Portland is a city of stories and uncertain history. I’ve decided that the shady history lessons (“people were kidnapped in the Shanghai Tunnels”), perverse sightseeing tours (“this is where Elliott Smith first shot up”), and cultish rituals (“you can get married at the twenty-four-hour Church of Elvis”) that make up the town’s mythology are more interesting if you don’t take them too seriously. Local fiction writers like Katherine Dunn and Chuck Palahniuk have obviously been inspired by this place’s blurry yin and yang as well.

Settled in 1843 and named by a coin flip (we were almost named Boston), Portland had troubles from the start. The first sheriff, William Johnson, was busted for selling “ardent spirits.” He had been “reduced by an evil heart,” said the indictment. The first couple of decades were probably pretty rough, what with the constant flooding and muddy streets making all the citizens cranky. In the 1870s, a couple of laws were created in an attempt to tame this wild west. You couldn’t fire a pistol downtown and the speed limit for your carriage was six miles per hour.

Later, in the 1940s and ’50s, the city practically thrived on criminal activity. Speakeasies, brothels, and gambling dens popped up across the downtown area. The police, the district attorney, and local Teamsters were all in bed with local vice pushers. Portland became known as quite the decadent town, even prompting Bobby Kennedy to wrangle up its main bad guys for a televised Racketeering Committee meeting in 1957. One senator said at the hearings, “If I lived there, I would suggest

they pull the flags down to half-mast in public shame.”

A lot of these places of “shame” remain standing, and while many are occupied now by salons and offices, some of them are probably still home to gambling and stripping. (Portland does, after all, have more strip clubs per capita than any other city in America—and yep, they take it *all* off here.)

Our history of bad behavior just doesn’t go away.

In putting together this collection, I was thrilled to see the contributors capture fascinating details from the various neighborhoods and settings, including the aforementioned Shanghai Tunnels and familiar locales on Burnside Avenue and in the posh Northwest part of town. We also got the depressing warehouse area that borders Highway 30 and the old Americana vibe of St. Johns. On the other side of the Willamette River, you get wild skateboarders, anarchists, lesbian damsels in distress, and a junkie breaking into a house in the Mount Tabor neighborhood. (Note to outsiders: Mount Tabor is our very own volcano!) And because Portland is essentially a small city, you may notice some intentional déjà vu, some bleeding together of stories and places. Like pieces of a puzzle that snap together to show a colorful map.

When I first moved here, I thought the statue of that guy in Pioneer Courthouse Square, the bronze man with the umbrella (on the cover of this book), had a panicked look about him. Like he was hailing a cab to get the heck out of here. But now I see his dapper suit, his forward-moving pose, and his confident hand gesture as a comforting symbol of strength.

Portland continues to update its own version of a contemporary utopian society as more and more people flock here. But even in utopia, crime and unrest are always bubbling right under the surface.

Kevin Sampsell

Portland, OR

March 2009

PART I

BLOODLINES

THE CLOWN AND BARD

BY KAREN KARBO

S.E. Twenty-Eighth Avenue

Charlotte is sprawled on the bathroom floor of my apartment on Southeast Ankeny, the one I rented because I thought she'd like it. Rundown but arty, with forced-air heat and bad plumbing. High ceilings, creaking stairs, walls plastered in thick, sharp stucco. The lobby smells like mold and cantaloupe two days past its prime. The couple downstairs has a pirate flag tacked over their front window, and the landlord is twenty-three and walks around her apartment in a red thong and T-shirt. The building is shaped like a V, so I can easily see into her windows. She has a small wrought-iron balcony where she grows orange flowers in green plastic pots.

Since Charlotte deceived me with the film critic, I've done pretty much whatever I've wanted to do. Free rein is what I've got. She bombed the country and I'm just looting the shops. She would say I mixed my metaphors right there. That's what being married to Charlotte got me. Now I know about mixed metaphors, and how it really is possible to feel someone pull your heart straight out of your chest like in *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, then stomp on it.

I drop the toilet lid—*bang!*—and sit down. It's possible Charlotte's not dead. This is just the sort of thing she would do to make me feel bad. Like all chicks, she's a drama queen. I stare down at her head, angled like she's trying to lay her ear on her shoulder. Blood trickles out of one perfectly round nostril. There's no blood coming out of her ears that I can see. Most likely she's just conked out.

Charlotte thought she had the right to have an affair with the film critic because I occasionally found myself associating with Lorna, my ex-wife, the mother of my son. Once in a blue moon, after I'd taken Ray Jr. to the zoo or Malibu Grand Prix, I'd return him to Lorna's apartment and we'd knock one out for old time's sake. It was like looking through a photo album. Associating with someone after you've been married is not the same as meeting a film critic at the bar in Esparza's, where you share a plastic wooden bowl of chips and hot sauce and listen to Patsy Cline and comment on the stuffed armadillos hanging on the ceiling and then share an order of ostrich tacos, all the while talking arty crap.

The film critic has more hair than I do.

Once, when Charlotte refused to show me respect by answering whether she was in love with the film critic, I was forced to shove her into a bookcase, so she knew we weren't just having one of our usual arguments. I meant business.

I said, "This thing with the film critic is a dalliance, right? There's nothing to it, right? Answer me. Yes or no."

She said, "He's actually more of a film *reviewer*."

She bruised her back on the edge of the shelf. It wasn't that bad. What's a little bruise? She's hardy. Skis and ride horses and takes kick-boxing classes. Most of the top row of books rained down upon her head and neck. They were only paperbacks.

Still, she bitched to anyone who would listen, her herd of sympathetic friends, her therapist, her divorce lawyer, and of course the ostrich taco-loving film critic. Charlotte wouldn't touch an ostrich taco when she was with me. Now it's the new white meat.

Now Charlotte's lying on my bathroom floor, wedged between the hot water pipe and the toilet. Is it laying or lying? Charlotte would know. She has a master's degree and a daily subscription to the *New York Times*. The hot water pipe serves the whole building, and why it goes through my apartment I don't know. At night it's hot enough to leave a blister. Charlotte hit it on the way down, which caused her to twist her body, which caused her to lose her balance and hit her head on the edge of the tub. I stare at her head. Her curly hair is coming out of its scrunchie. She doesn't look like she's breathing. I stare at her tits. I wonder if she still wears an underwire.

It's possible she's holding her breath just to piss me off, to punish me for going to Prague.

She acted like I planned this. That's what Charlotte never *got*. I'm a simple guy. I take life as it comes. When I mentioned going to Prague I was just talking, just filling the air with my words. She should know how it is. She's fucking a film critic.

It was the last week in August. The leaves hung exhausted on the trees. I was still living over on Northeast Sandy. We met for dinner at the Kennedy School. The film critic was at the Sundance Film Festival. I told her the next time we met he had to be in town, for her to prove to me there was still hope for us.

"I don't think there's any real hope for us," she said.

"Then why are you here?" I asked.

"I wonder that myself," she said. She ordered a gin and tonic.

"That's what he drinks, gin and tonic? *Tanqueray* and tonic?"

"Sometimes in the summer I've been known to order a gin and tonic," she said. "Jesus."

She lied. She was a liar.

She used to love me. Now she picked fights. Like about the gin and tonic. I buttered a piece of bread and put it in front of her. She folded her arms and looked out the window at the parking lot. A guy wearing a red plaid skirt pushed a shopping cart full of empty bottles. I could tell she was itching to get out of there. The back of my neck got hot, the way it did when she was pissing me off.

Suddenly, I said I had something to tell her. She looked back at me, but it was polite. She was so polite. I'd been fired from the pest control company out on Foster Road and was now working at a place that made clamps, couplings, screws, and knobs. They also made a really nice brass drawer pull. The week before, in the break room, one of the machinists was talking about quitting and moving to Prague, and then the HR chick, who'd never looked at this guy once, was practically in his lap. She said she'd always wanted to go to Prague.

"I'm going to Prague," I said.

"Prague? What's in Prague?"

"It's something I've always wanted to do."

"You have?" Her green eyes were on me. She leaned forward on her pale forearms. I could smell her grapefruity perfume, something called Happy I'd given her one Christmas. This was where she should have said, *Ray, you are so full of shit*. This

is where her master's degree failed her, where all her books and snooty left-wing websites let her down.

Did I say she worked in R&D at Intel, designing stuff she wasn't allowed to talk about? Something to do with microchips and biology. When I met her I didn't know what R&D was. She used words like *ebullient* just to make me feel stupid. Who was the stupid one now? Yeah, I'm off to Prague. The only foreign place I'd ever been before was Ensenada.

"Is this work-related? Like when they sent you to Chely-abinsk?"

"Sure," I said. "A business trip."

I'd forgotten I told Charlotte I'd done a business trip to Chelyabinsk.

Last year Donnie, a guy at the knob company, had found a terrific and extremely hot Russian wife on the Internet. Her name was Olga but she liked to be called Bootsie. She was a great gal. Once Donnie surprised Tootsie with a subscription to *Self* and she fell to her knees and sobbed with gratitude. She wrapped her hands around his heels and laid her forehead on his shoes. She then gave him the best blowjob he'd ever had, after which she went into the kitchen and whipped up a roast.

Donnie had given me the name of the website where he got his wife and I thought, *Why not?* Charlotte didn't love me anymore. She was off drinking gin and tonics with the film critic. So one night after work, after I'd had a few beers, I typed in Charlotte's height, weight, hair, and eye color, and out came Agnessa Fedoseeva.

She was studying to be something called an esthetician, but was hoping to find a big strong man she could love and kiss with enthusiasm. She was anxious to inquire if I was a big strong man. She was curious how many flat-screen TVs I had. She sent me a videotape of herself dressed in a red, white, and blue teddy and high heels, dancing around her living room with a sparkler sizzling in each hand.

I put the trip to Chelyabinsk on a credit card, and told Charlotte I was being sent there by the knob company, to set up a new factory.

"But why are they sending *you*?" Charlotte had wanted to know. "I think it's great. Really exciting, and really good for you. You need to have the dust of the world on your feet. But you don't speak Russian."

"They're impressed with my work ethic."

"You do work hard," said Charlotte. "When you have a job."

I'm tired of staring at Charlotte laying or lying on the bathroom floor, playing passed out, milking the situation, doing her best to make me look like the bad guy.

I walk back down the long hallway to the kitchen. I sit in the dark at my kitchen table. Outside, the streetlights shine on the snow, filling my front rooms with that weird aquarium light. I look out the window at the Laurelhurst Theater marquee. They're showing *Alien* and *Meatballs*. Charlotte would think that was funny. Agnessa spoke no English, but she'd laugh anyway.

Charlotte will come out of the bathroom eventually. For being so smart, she is so predictable. That's how she works. If I stand over her and wonder whether she's dead, she'll act dead on purpose, just to piss me off. But if I turn my back on her, leave the room, she'll come marching out and wonder what's going on.

The back of my neck feels hot. None of this would have happened if she had let the Prague business go. It was just something I'd said to get her attention. Then I

found myself saying I was moving in September, just after Labor Day, and would be there for at least six months.

“Six months?” she said, eyes big.

“Maybe a year.”

I thought she’d forget about it. She’d go home to the film critic and they’d open a bottle of merlot and discuss the early films of Martin Scorsese.

Charlotte started e-mailing me. Where would I be living in Prague? Did I know Prague was settled in the fourth century? Prague Castle was the largest castle in the world. There was also an entire wall of graffiti dedicated to John Lennon. I should definitely check out the museum of the Heydrich assassination. She sent me links to websites, and guidebooks she’d ordered on Amazon. She gave me books by Czechoslovakian writers. Who the fuck is Kafka? She signed the e-mails with *xo*.

Agnessa read romance novels. She loved stuffed animals. She was thirty-one and still lived with her mother, who needed new teeth and an operation. I’d sent her an international calling card and she rang me every evening. She confessed she had two other men who wanted to marry her, one who lived in Indiana and had four flat-screen TVs, and one who lived in Florida and had three flat-screen TVs. Did I know how dear I was to her, that she was still interested in me even though I only had one TV?

Charlotte and I started meeting on Wednesdays for coffee at a place that served stale pastries and had too many free newspapers. Every so often I’d take Ray Jr. out of school for the morning and bring him along, just to remind Charlotte what a good dad I could be. Being a good single dad is better than having a pit bull puppy when it comes to attracting women. I made Ray drink his orange juice and study his spelling words. Charlotte said she was really going to miss me.

One day I got her to go with me to Hawthorne to shop for presents to give to the family who would be putting me up in Prague, before I had my own apartment.

“Who exactly are we shopping for?” she asked. We nosed around a crowded shop that sold expensive journals, massage oil, and funny greeting cards. The rain had started. The shop smelled like wet dog and patchouli.

“There’s a thirty-one-year-old living at home, a girl who loves stuffed animals.”

“Is she ...” Charlotte looked at me, narrowed one eye a little like she does. I could feel my pulse in my forehead. She was going to ask me if there was something going on with this girl, if somehow I was going to Prague to see her. It was all over her face. Behind her a woman was trying to get at the wire card rack. I just looked at her. *Go ahead, ask me*. I waited. “... mentally disabled or something?”

I thought of Agnessa and her living room sparkler dance.

“It’s possible,” I said.

Charlotte picked out a hand lotion that smelled like apple pie and a stuffed panda.

I sent them to Agnessa, who loved the gifts. I loved Agnessa, for being so easy to please. I spent entire paychecks sending her shampoo, socks, Levi’s and one of those mesh bags girls stick their underwear in before it goes in the washing machine. I sent her some Happy too. Fuck Charlotte.

I gave notice on the apartment I was living in off Northeast Sandy. I told the landlady I was moving to Prague. Elaine was a chick with cats who worked in a bookstore and had a stack of books on Wicca beside her bed. She believed in the power of crystals and Match.com. I struck up an association with Elaine. It was an