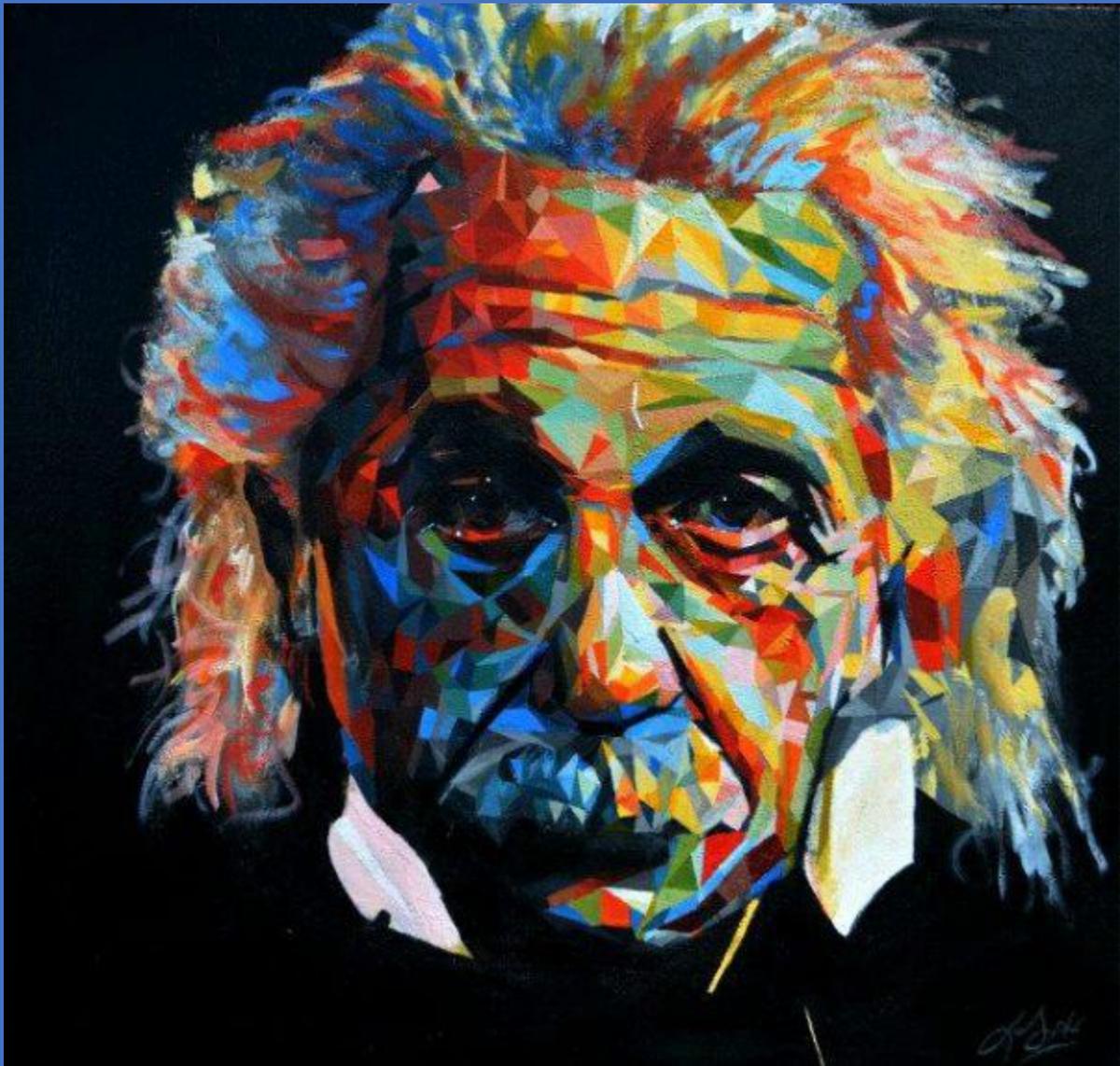


Buck Off Magazine

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Cover Art: *They Call Me Al*
by Mario Ange Lugo

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Summer Vance

Upon Two Letters She Fell

She knew him.

She had seen those eyes; like the sun over the sea after a terrible storm, the pupils always too big and dark. His voice met her ears with such recognizable tones; it might have been a sweet song her mother had hummed while kneading the dough for afternoon bagels. She remembered the way his butter-colored hair curled stubbornly up at the nape of his neck, even after he smoothed it down with thick gel that smelled like pineapple juice. And his solid grip on her arms, though rough and dangerous now, was somehow familiar to her.

She did not remember the uniform, or the insignia, or the dark monsters spitting fire beneath his pallid skin.

He grabbed the back of her head, clawing at the dark curls, and forced her to her knees. There was a black box there on the ground, maybe three feet across and tall, like something out of a magician's kit she and Susan would have played with up in the attic. More like a safe, she decided, as she noticed the thick metal walls and the formidable lock. "*Hineinkommen. Du dummer Saujude.*" Get in. You stupid, filthy Jew. She folded herself inside and the door slammed, the echo reverberating again and again between the close walls.

The box was a punishment. A new batch of prisoners had come in that morning and the new ones never catch on to the rules quick enough. She had overheard a boy at breakfast planning to ask for more food, which would be a deadly mistake, so she had offered him her roll. The guard had been nearby. Sharing food was also against the rules, but better her in the box than him in the pit.

The stale stench of nervous sweat and dried urine overtook her. She could almost taste the cool, metallic walls. There was one source of dimmed sunlight, a small golfball-sized hole in the middle of the door. She craned her neck downwards to peer out at the desolate jail. Fences bleached white by the sun enclosed the large paddock of barren land. A few dark buildings jutted up from the flat, but the sun was so high

She did not
remember the
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pallid skin.

they couldn't even cast shadows on the baked ground. A small girl with beautiful black hair and matching eyes sat in the dust, drawing carefully with one arm, the other in a makeshift sling. Two men carried a beaten body in a burlap sack, heading towards the large trench, the heart of the prison. The pit was filled with dead prisoners. Once it got too full they would cart the oldest, most rotten bodies off to be burned. She wasn't sure which was worse: the foul stench of the rotting corpses or the inescapable fumes of burning flesh. Yes, darkness would have been better. You can get lost in the darkness, but at a camp, you are always watched, always found.

The man that she knew had drawn away now and stood in conversation with another guard. They talked casually with animated hand gestures and an occasional chuckle. This was not for war. This was two old friends running into each other on the cobbled streets of Chemnitz during their midday breaks, or brothers reunited at holiday break after a semester apart. The conversation lulled and the man squinted up at the sun and pulled a light blue square of fabric from his back pocket, the only thing on him that wasn't beige or red, and dabbed at his forehead. Then she spotted them in the corner, two messily embroidered letters: RG.

She pulled away from the eye-hole immediately, gasping for air, and biting her tongue to contain the hysteria bubbling up from deep within her. Her bony, skinless fingers dug at her colorless cheeks, stinging with the salty tears flooding from her eyes. Her cage became smaller, walls closing in, cold metal pressing against her. Letting go, she closed her eyes and was seven years younger in the balmy sands of Kühlungsborn.

* * * * *

Their summer trips to Kühlungsborn never disappointed, and this year was going to be especially great. Ruth had spent hours thinking up the perfect prank for her last summer as a child in the country club. She and Susan pulled some sort of joke every year. Last year was swapping out the salt for sugar in every shaker, the year before was putting blue food coloring in the swimming pool. As for this year, the club kept their own cows in pastures close to the beach, and Ruth had always hated the thought of them being confined to the same acre of land their entire lives. Susan would distract their parents and the other adults while Ruth snuck to the pastures and opened the gate. She could just picture all those Bermuda clad sausages running off the beach from a herd of milk cows.

The beginning had worked out perfectly, too. Susan was a great distraction with her one-woman rendition of "Anything Goes," and Ruth was able to let the cows out easily. It was shortly afterwards when she was beginning to enjoy the show that the cowman spotted her and started yelling for security. Now she was running as fast as she could from the pen, which left her stumbling through the hot sand on the main beach past her spotted

accomplices. Just as her legs began to ache, she spotted a red striped changing tent and darted inside.

"Oh my-"

"Oh my gosh!" She had barged in on a man barely older than her who had just finished putting on green swimming trunks. "Shhh," Ruth pleaded, pressing a finger to her lips. She turned back to the flap and peeked half her face out. Most of the cows were no longer bothered by the howling adults and stood awkwardly in the deep sand. The cowman seemed to have given up his search for Ruth and had begun to herd the animals back towards the gate.

"So that's what all the noise was about." The man had popped his head out above hers and was peering towards the cows. "You did that?"

They straightened up. "Yeah," she said with an airy laugh, brushing back her curls. "I'm so sorry to have-"

"Don't worry about it." His voice had a nice ring to it, almost musical. The red stripes casted a warm light on them, deepening his swarthy tan and the hue of his bluish-gold eyes. He must have been a lifeguard, or else a swimmer: his chest was quite broad and his muscles rippled with every movement. Ruth was very conscious of how close they stood. "So..."

"So, yes, I'll just be going then." She stepped backwards into the harsh sunlight, with him following closely.

"It was nice to meet you."

"Very nice, yes." The silence was intense. "Yes, you have very nice swimming trunks." Oh, God, what did I just say? "I mean, you know, very green." Please stop speaking.

He laughed in a surprisingly deep pitch; smooth like a jazz song her father might play in the study. She took a deep breath. "Hey. I'm sneaking into the club ball tonight to get some chocolate-covered strawberries and champagne. Would you be interested?"

He smiled and shook his head. "Aren't you ever afraid you'll get caught?" he asked, looking past her at the parents still tripping up the wooden steps as fast as their thick legs could carry them.

Ruth instantly pictured the yellow wooden sign with blue print hanging in the hallway between the foyer and the kitchen. It was a quote from her mother's favorite author, a present to her from Ruth's father on their first wedding anniversary. "Fear is nothing if you choose it to be so," she said with a coy smile. She turned and began to walk towards the steps herself. When she heard his heavy footsteps in the sand next to her, she smiled. "I'm Ruth, by the way."

"Georg Huber."

"Ruth!" A pillow promptly collided with her face. Susan stood on the bed in her worn nightdress, eyes wide. "Where have you been?"

Ruth stooped to grab the pillow. "Oh, just out."

"Out?" She threw the next pillow towards her sister, who ducked out of the way. "I've been covering for you all day! Mom and Dad made me go to a salsa class with the Biermann boy. Salsa class!" She groaned and dropped down on the bed, cross-legged. Ruth tried not to smile as she picked the other pillow up and sat on the edge of the bed, but she'd been grinning all day. Susan's eyes narrowed. "You've been out with that boy again, haven't you?"

"None of your business," Ruth said sternly, but was still unable to control her smile.

"Is too! If it weren't for me, you two wouldn't have even met." She started muttering something about ungrateful siblings.

Ruth let herself fall backwards onto the cushy duvet and beamed up at the ceiling. "He's just great, Susan," she sighed and rolled over to her stomach to face her sister. "Did you know he's training to make the national swim team? Imagine that." Her eyes gazed mistily off, looking right through the floral wallpaper at some far off Olympic-sized swimming pool.

"Well, never mind that, what have you two been doing all day?"

"We went to the rose gardens and to the beach. But we ended up out front by the fountain and he had coins for us to toss in and make a wish-

"Corny."

"And he asked me what I wished for, and I told him it had to be a secret or it wouldn't come true, and then he said 'Well it's no secret that I wished for you.' And then he kissed me!"

"He kissed you!" Susan's excitement betrayed her and a sparkle of half-thrill, half-jealousy had touched her eyes. They gossiped about Georg, the Biermanns, and other club drama until the moon was high in the night sky. Finally, Ruth changed out of her wrinkled dress and climbed into her bed, still smelling of salty breezes, and vaguely of pineapple.

"Hey, Ruth?" Susan whispered through the darkness after a few minutes.

"Yeah?"

"Did you wish for him, too?"

Ruth imagined Georg's large hands holding hers; impressively gentle for the amount of calluses he sported. She could see him quickly wiping sweat from his brow when he thought she couldn't see, and the way his eyes darted downwards each time he invited her to do something else. A silly grin began to spread across her face. She could feel his lips on hers, the faint taste of Wrigley's doublemint still in her mouth, how he had laughed shyly as she wiped the red stains from his lips. It felt as though her blood had been replaced with ginger ale, a distinct tingle spread through her body, bubbly and light. She turned on her side and snuggled into her pillow, wishing it were Georg's chest instead. "Yeah, I did."

* * * * *

Ruth spent more than two days shut in the semi-darkness of her cell. Seven years later, and here they were, together again. She was so sure once he remembered her and they talked, this whole mess would be straightened out. Maybe he already knew it was her, and this was just a joke, just another prank. When she slept, she dreamt of him, waiting with a bouquet of white daisies in his green swimming trunks by the fountain. But there was always a red fence that kept her out, and when she called to him, he could never hear her. So she preferred not to sleep anymore, and focused on looking out the small hole, her heart aching every time he passed by. For two days she fantasized, filling the box with her desperation. When the box finally opened, there was nowhere for it to go but out.

It was he, of course, who came to open the box in the late afternoon on that third day. When the door flung open she tried to talk to him, to make him remember. Her throat screamed with every uttered word, raw and blistered. The sun's low rays scorched her skin and blinded her. She couldn't stand, starvation and madness taking all stability from her. He laughed at her stumble and fall; it was a dry bark, a monotone.

With balance regained he began to herd her back towards the barracks, evidently not hearing a word she was saying. This wasn't another game; Ruth wanted him to remember her *now*. She resisted. He ordered her to move. He yelled at her, swearing, and kicked her shins until they bled, but she would not move. She watched his face turn red, bits of spit spewing out with each new threat, his face contorting into something completely unfamiliar. "What happened to you, Georg?" Suddenly able to hear her, his face turned a darker scarlet. Calling a guard by name, breaking another rule- it's just two strikes and you're out at a camp. He gripped her bony wrists behind her back and they headed towards the pit.

"You know me," she whispered sharply through clenched teeth as he practically

carried her across the yard. If her words had moved him at all he did not show it. "The summer at the beach. Look into my eyes and tell me you don't remember."

"Shut up, filth. I could never know someone like you," he growled. She tried to push against him, struggling against their advances.

Her bare feet scraped at the sand and pebbles, trying to find purchase, leaving a trail of bloodied mud behind. The hole grew closer, the sour stench of rotting flesh swallowing them. A group of prisoners had gathered at the commotion, but gave the pair a wide radius, and wouldn't look directly at either of them. If he could just remember her somehow, everything would be all right again; somehow this could be a happy ending. "You loved me!" she shouted, "You told me you loved me."

With a jerk of her shoulder she was spun around to face him and his concrete fist collided squarely with her jaw. The momentum sent her tumbling back to the ground, and dirt instantly filled her mouth and eyes. Curled in the dust, she relived the panic of the night her father's shop had been burned, all his beautiful instruments melting, and being taken to a train station by soldiers with vacant eyes. Ruth had been placed on a caboose that was pulling away. She saw Susan struggling against a man twice her size as he tossed her into a train cart, and her mother's desperate tears as they ripped the old yellow sign from her and forced her towards a different train. Her father was nowhere to be seen. Hours later, a guard had spit on her cheek when she'd refused to exit the train, and then dragged her by the throat to their first roll call. And Georg was one of them. He was a monster now, no matter what he had been seven years ago.

There was
no hope of
remembering
anymore;
he was gone.

As she felt herself being picked up off the ground, she faced this hell-born beast disguised in a man's frame. There was no hope of remembering anymore; he was gone. The fear had caught up with her, icy and heavy in her frail chest. She tried to fight, swinging at him with her gangly arms, digging at the skin of his chest and face. Like a field mouse trying to battle a tomcat. He ignored her struggle, marching her forward; they had arrived at the edge of the pit. He released his grip and backed away, drawing his pistol.

"How brave your little friend was. Let her be a lesson to all you brutes," his voice was hollow with disgust. He set his wicked glare back on Ruth. "Face me," he ordered, "and let them see you welcome death."

Ruth turned and looked not at him, but towards the skinny, beaten, dying people in a half ring around her. She could remember them from when they were living instead of skeletons: the small boy with the loose tooth, the dark skinned man who could whistle any song you could think of, the white haired woman with sixteen

grandchildren. How much damage could one, two, six months at a camp do to someone? How long before you were dead inside, just waiting for your body to follow? A few deflated tears ran down sunken cheeks, but most eyes were too empty and already numbed to the torture before them. They looked at her with a broken compassion that burned holes through her skin; did they have no hope at all? Something shifted in Ruth. The cold fear melted within her and boiled with injustice and rage. This camp, this *war*; her family all dead or else tortured just as she was. People wasting people for nothing. Her anger threatened to overflow and drown her in fiery malice.

“Fight,” Ruth said, repressing the quiver in her voice. “Never stop fighting.” Georg raised his gun and took aim at her chest. She locked eyes with him. “Fear is nothing if you choose it to be-”

Bang.

What did she just say?

* * * * *

The past week may have been the greatest of his life. Forget Kühlungsborn and summer vacation and his father's promotion— he had met a girl, a terrific girl, named Ruth. She was beautiful, with copper eyes and auburn curls just past her shoulders, the same length his mother's had been. Her voice was surprisingly smoky, perhaps a little raw from always adding her two cents, or maybe from telling the most captivating stories with exaggerated hand gestures and a different voice for each character. She wore the brightest red lipstick, even though her mother didn't approve, and the dark moles that flecked her skin alone made her a piece of art. She was so confident and ambitious. He was really taken by her; 'dizzy with a dame,' his coach would say.

They had spent the entire week together, swimming and tanning, playing pranks and having picnics with her younger sister, Susan. He hadn't felt so content since before his mother had passed, when she would let him stay home from school and they would spend the day reading books from her wooden chest in a fort made of pillows and blankets. On their last full day together, Ruth and Georg went for a long walk through the meadows where Ruth could say goodbye to the cows, past the club's front fountain where they had first kissed, and to the beach. She didn't live in Berlin, so only God knew how long it might be until they would see each other again.

They spent the night sitting in the cool sand talking about nothing and everything until the ebony sky began to paint itself violet and apricot, and then blue. When her eyes began to droop, and her sentences became less coherent, Ruth wrapped her arms around his and laid

her head on his shoulder. Her breathing became slow and deep, and she turned so that her forehead pressed against his neck. She radiated warmth. "I like you a lot," he whispered as softly as he could, "I don't think I've ever liked anyone more." The sun began to kiss the tops of the waves and he hoped more than anything that she wouldn't stir yet. He wished he had a camera that could capture all his senses; her hair tickling him in the breeze, the taste of salty sunblock from her pale skin, and her scent like a vanilla flower in full bloom. He had the overwhelming feeling that his entire future lay within the girl next to him.

"I love you, Ruth." He wasn't even sure if she would hear.

* * * * *

Her body crumpled forward rather than backwards into the pit as they usually did. He walked slowly towards the pile of sharp bones masked in a skin of scabs and bruises. Her eyes were still open and caught the evening sun, lighting up as if she were laughing at one last joke. *Ruth?* An excruciatingly red drop of blood trailed from her cracked lips, danced on the curve of her jaw, and fell to her slender neck. His uniform felt too stiff, the collar biting at his neck like it had that first day his father had brought it home.

He knew he should just kick her in, like with the rest of them, one good kick to the spine should do it and he would be rid of her forever. But her eyes were still watching him, a smile playing on her face. One last prank: he had to pick up her small, broken body and move it to the pit. She was so light, so fragile in his conditioned arms. As he descended the dirt steps he allowed his eyes to caress her beaten face, let her lean too far into his chest.

He laid her on top of the broad back of a nameless man. The job was done, yet he lingered longer. Long enough to close her eyes gently, and to brush his hand against the stony cheek. He pinched the bridge of his nose, groaning quietly. After a moment, he knelt beside the girl and fumbled through her pockets until he found her official papers, folded carelessly and torn down one edge. He could feel the labored beating of his quickened heart, the ragged breaths escaping in puffs. A fuller, more beautiful version of the girl lying dead before him stared out at him from the paper. "Ruth Gimbel," he whispered hoarsely, "Chemnitz, Germany."

The documents fell from his paralyzed hand. Drunk on the smell of decaying bodies, he grabbed the small handkerchief out of his pocket and ran his thumb across the stitched letters. "For you," he could hear her saying, "don't forget me, Georg Huber." And with a half smile of those red lips she had disappeared into the crowd. Happy families in summer pastels disintegrated, and he was in his father's office, holding his head in his hands, a letter from the National Socialist German Workers' Party on the floor. His entire future was ruined. A tear escaped and landed on the letter below, blotting the red and black emblem. That was the first time his father had ever hit him. New walls formed, grey and cold, a cool sweat clung to him: his

first night as a guard at the camp. "Yeah you'll get used to it real fast," his bunkmate said, sucking deeply on his cigarette, "Just remember: they aren't people. They deserve it." The scene distorted. He was back on his knees in the bitter dirt with his head lying on the still stomach of the woman he had fallen in love with. Somehow, death had become second nature to him. He fingered the two letters on his collar. "Such a privilege," his father had said, the unfamiliar smile breaking up his creased face, "Such an honor."

Suddenly he was very aware of his pistol still in hand, cold and hard. His skin burned where he held it but he couldn't let go. It looked up at him and it was mocking him, its dark mouth open wide in bouts of cruel laughter. "Shut up," he said shaking the gun violently, "Shut up!"

The other prisoners had moved towards the shouting and looked down on the man. Their eyes were turned on and searched his face openly with no shame, no fear. Had they always looked so human?

"Move!" another guard was approaching the lip of the trench, "Get away or you're all dead! Huber," he looked down at Georg with raised eyebrows, "What the hell are you doing? Get up, man."

Georg felt the sting of tears in his eyes, a hard rock forming in his throat. He stood slowly and stepped away from Ruth only to feel his back press against a tall pile of bodies. Now he could see their faces, their pasts, he saw their ruined futures all at once, and thousands more; every soul that had walked through this desolate jail, guard and prisoner alike. And then still all he could hear was the sound of the gunshot ringing in his ears and his heartbeat was quickening to the point of exhaustion, determined to clean his blood of hers. He looked down at Ruth again, limp and drained of color, such an insult to her beautiful memory. The gun felt heavy in his sweaty palm.

He knew her.

Summer Vance is an undergraduate at UC Davis studying in the College of Biological Sciences. Vance also competes on the Division I Track and Field team in the one hundred and four hundred meter hurdles.

Drew Philip Toop

**Andy Warhol and a Frisco
Burnout in Heaven**

In Heaven, your fifteen minutes
last forever.

Andy Warhol pulls out a long,
slender cigarette,
smokes it like fellatio,
and supervises
the Factory of Angels.

One of them is a Frisco Burnout,
eighteen, nineteen years old.

Has hair like Da Vinci's
John the Baptist,
wears his halo
Constantly-
Even to bed.

Andy made it
out of the lid of a soup can,
said it didn't mean anything,
except that it was made
out of the lid of a soup can,
and the Burnout said:

"Whoa."

Andy's wings
were made out of folded newspaper.
They fluttered a lot
whenever he got an idea.

"We'll do some silkscreens
of the face of God,"
and the Burnout said:

"Awesome."

The Burnout missed the surfboards,
missed home,
missed Coca-Cola and CSI,
missed cannabis and
a thousand Mohammedan angels.
He thought about it,

And said,

"Harsh."

The Factory was full of rumors;
that the Burnout loved Andy-
that Andy loved the Burnout-
All of them were true,
Like Andy said,

The critics are right.

They'd hold hands and
walk into the sunset,
and they'd discuss Hegel,
and hope things are getting better.
They'd hold hands, and
walk into the nightscape,
and discuss Nietzsche.

"God's dead,"

The Burnout would
say.

"No, he's not,"

says Andy,

"I've seen His face."

Born in Yakima, Washington, Drew Philip Toop spent four years of his youth writing for the Yakima Herald-Republic before attending Washington State University, where it was his privilege to take a class under the distinguished Alex Kuo. Now in the United States again (Seattle area after years abroad), he currently writes for Diabolique Magazine, a horror news and fandom rag based out of Los Angeles. In life, he's found, contrary to popular belief, that the road of excess leads not to the palace of wisdom, but to Issaquah, Washington.



Willow Lyon

Dusty Strawberries

She knelt in the musky mulch
Plucked one berry-
Ripped it from the vine
With cruel cartilage teeth
And offered up the fragile flesh
Pinched between her mousetrap lips
Dusk prickled him
Darkness bit him through the overalls like intrepid rats
And from the flicking farmhouse windows
Far off down the hill
Papa whispered
Come home, this one smells like disaster
But to him
She smelled like fresh-cut sugarcane
Sun soaked lilacs
Steam venting from the slits of a strawberry rhubarb pie
Like all things new
And sweet
And beguiling
So he took the morsel
Willfully forgetting a Sunday school story-
That one with the fruit
Ripened on ignorance
And magic serpent venom
He tasted red juices

Straight from her mouth
A moment of barebacked ecstasy
Like licking the pool of cream from around the moon
For only a moment-
Then they were dust
A playful summer zephyr swept through the town
Through neat rows of berries dotted with knee impressions
And the sun rose
The soil warmed
A father wept
It had always been a placid village
Until the day that Thomas left
And babies
Bundled up as tight as rosebuds
Were found sleeping on every doorstep in the county
The babies grew up raucous
Straw-haired boys and girls
Prone to sunburn
Skin ruddy
They filled the dance hall
Flooded the creek
Emptied the fields
With an insatiable zeal
For strawberries

Willow Lyon

Peter Dark

The Prophet in the Cardboard Cocoon

Eight stories is plenty of acceleration. Newton's law. Less than ten seconds to the subway grating below. Then the screams, covered eyes, eyes staring, taking in the tragedy, thinking, *glad that's not me*. The sirens, the neighbors sickened, shocked, thinking about the space that would now be available. Some of me would seep through the grating into the subway vault below the sidewalk.

The Board would try to get the MTA to clean it up, but they won't. The task will fall to Eddie, the Porter below Hector the Cuban Super. Eddie will put on his gauntlet rubber gloves and wash away the gore. At the Morgue, my brother will come and do his duty to say it's me.

My ex will hear from a neighbor that stayed in touch. She will be sad, and think of the financial consequences. *Good thing there are no children*, she will think, *to have this blot on their family medical history*. "What about social security, his will," her astute financial adviser will ask. There will be a small memorial where, in the men's room the word "coward" will be spoken, and in the ladies' room the word "bastard" will be heard *sotto voce* into the mirror while smoothing with powder a reddened face.

The agency will distribute a brief note, for business reasons. No work mates will show up. An urn will be stored in the cupboard at my brother's house, along with an aunt and a grandfather. At New Year's, he will drink a toast to all the dust, and be sad at two of the urns, and angry at me. *Coward*, he will think, *you added a curse to our lineage*.

"Any suicides in your family?" the therapist will ask the troubled teenager. "Just Uncle Dave," he will answer. "He worked in Advertising."

Why the sudden leap? Money in the bank, a successful career, attractive to women. Except for my mind, I was in excellent health. What heaviness was I carrying that became an unbearable load, oblivion the only destination I could go to?

I gripped the low ornamental fence at the edge of the roof. Ornamental in that it would not prevent an accidental fall. The subway rushed by under the street. The same sound that clocked the time, night after sleepless night. Dark hours passed uneasily in a waking nightmare, with the inexplicable dread turned over and over again. Caught in a rip tide, drowning. Lying there with my eyes closed, never resting. Various medications helped for a while, but then back to the same hell.

The hand-wrought iron of the fence, from the 19th century, felt like a frozen vine in my grip. I looked over the edge. Eight stories was enough not to end up in a Uriah Heep, broken but alive. No, this would do the trick. I leaned forward.

Then the strange calming rush from the place behind my heart stopped me as it had before. A voice. *Do I really want to do that? Did I really want to never see the dawn again? Did I never want to see the sun set again? Was there joy that I would miss out on? Was there another woman whose embrace would heal me? Some triumph that would raise me up? Did I want to be a hurtful disgrace to my family?*

I leaned back away from the edge. I looked at the stars, dimly flickering in through the heavy city air. Satisfied I'd considered a sudden demise carefully enough to say "no, not this time," I headed back down the narrow stairs that lead to the hatch. The roof was off limits to tenants, if you cared to follow the rules.

*"Death awaits us all;
today is your turn" he
said in a preacher's voice.
"And death will free you
from your pain; rejoice!"*

On automatic now, I showered, dressed for work, avoiding my own gaze. There were new anti-depressants in my cabinet; I gobbled them down. Like roommates, I was just getting to know them. The beard that hid my face kept me from having to shave. I put on the same sort of clothes I always wore, saving me from having to think about it.

I had no stomach for breakfast, although groans began to ask for one. The walk to the subway brought me past the man in the cardboard cocoon with the one blue eye. He shuffled himself out and stood when he saw me approach. I had made the mistake of meeting his gaze and taking notice of him long ago. He was as dependable as the sunrise, always in his cocoon, winter and summer. He never asked for money, only attention.

"Death awaits us all; today is your turn" he said in a preacher's voice. "And death will free you from your pain; rejoice!"

Not today, I thought, and headed down the grimy steps to the roaring platform below. He shuffled back into his cocoon.

At the towering entrance to the massive building where I worked, the doorman made his perfunctory nod, acknowledging that he knew me, and I did not need to write in his book. I was one of the known. I went to the newsstand and bought a doughnut, and a large black coffee. Eating them wolfishly, I felt the momentary rush they provided.

The girl at the front desk of the Agency gave me her noncommittal greeting. Now that the dress code made only the top brass in suits stand out, her strategy was to greet everyone the same way.

My “creative partner,” Nanna the art director, was already in our “workspace.” None but the biggest dogs had offices here.

“What shit do we have to pass on the public today?” she said. She only tolerated men, preferred women. Her artfully strange hair matched her bizarre clothing and tattoos. Was that a frog on her breasts, or an Asian character? I pondered that every day, but never asked. I had been given her as my partner because she “liked” me. I was as disheartened, disillusioned and reluctant to be excited about anything as she was. We actually got along.

We also had the theater of this job down. When the big cheeses came in to comment and squat over our work to shit, and lay assignments with impossible goals and time frames on us, we **wat** into our act. Overly clever creatives ready for any challenge, any schedule; worker bees would appear out of our gray and sullen husks. We sang our song well. Just the singing of it was enough. When clients were around, we went into high gear, almost desperate with wry and stylish enthusiasm. Buzz words galore. Lots of raw energy.

Your salary and the “lifestyle” it afforded was like a blinder that always hung in front of your eyes. It blinded you to the fact that, except for giddy denial and high times (in the addicted sense) in your downtime, this was nothing at all like a life. Ads were trash a month after they did their work beguiling and convincing. Awards could be bought by entering plenty and often, their masturbatory statues gathering dust, honors stuck to resumes like ribbons, lures for better jobs. There was a lot of discussion on these points in the most blasted downtimes, but I had stopped listening. What of it? It all goes forward relentlessly, spinning in its own circle. I’m not going to change it. I will wave to the crowd from the edge of the float, smile, and be numb.

Nanna said, “Okay, here’s today’s trick. We need thirty words that are tangential to the real point that people with Hep-C are sort of a ticking time bomb, and need to be careful. Words to give meaning to my inscrutable graphics, based on zen art: ‘Be careful, don’t give it to others.’ Satisfy that, bunky, and let’s get out of here early. I’ll mock up ten pieces so they have plenty to choose from, and we can say we stayed up all night and broke our asses coming up with all this stuff.”

I gave her the look that she most wanted from me. Complete acquiescence. I did not care how we got through this, as long as it was as painless as possible.

I mumbled, I scratched my groin. I went to the same heap of jargon, slang and simple-minded medical platitudes that always please. Bang, bang bang bang. Thirty words.

The big dog came into our space to review. Mark the Cruel had a reputation for smiling brightly while calling you a talentless hole. It was good if he thought it was good. It was bad if he felt it was bad. There was no objective standard. Might as well throw dice, i ching, tarot cards. Today he almost smiled. He was satisfied. He picked two that "did not suck."

When he was gone, Nanna exclaimed that her art direction had carried us through yet again. My words merely filled the spaces she left for them. She said that to my face, smiling, knowing that I would not object. I was silent. It was for the best to remain so.

I thought of my brother toasting the adjoining urns, and grimacing at mine. I did not care.

Now that we had completed our task for the day, all that was left was sneaking out and drinking. At the front desk, we informed Lily (Nanna knew her name by now, being interested in young women) we were headed to the client.

I did not care how we got through this, as long as it was as painless as possible.

Lily smiled as if we had let her in on a joke. She whispered "you mean the bar called the Client around the corner."

Nanna seemed charmed, and made a face that said "look how smart you are." I knew it actually meant "I'm going to do you soon."

"No," I said, "really, the Client. Coslely Pharmaceuticals."

She wrote it down. "That's not necessary," Nanna cautioned her. "It's confidential."

Lily crumpled the note and put her finger to her lips.

Nanna shifted in her shoes so that her ass cheeks bulged, and smiled weakly.

We went down the fire stairs, and emerged at the back end of the lobby. The doorman noticed us, but knew the drill. We escaped onto the street and headed for Tito's Lounge, a half block away. It was a dive, but it was our dive. Only locals would go there. It was always happy hour.

There in the gloom, Ricky, the bartender, brightened up when he saw us. We were the dependable mid-afternoon semi-alcoholic ad folk. "Ricky-tiki!" Nanna exclaimed as he made our usuals - Manhattan for me, Martini for her, back up soda.

"Are we toasting today?" Ricky said.

"Not today," Nanna replied. "Just business as usual. Same shit as always. There is almost no sport to it anymore."

Then a new face appeared, a Latin looking, nicely round brunette. Oddly, she was Eastern European from her accent. "Polly", explained Ricky as he introduced her, was in training. Her real name was Polieska, she explained. She was still in college, but wanted to earn some extra cash as a waitress. "In training" meant that Ricky had her suck his reportedly immense dick, and drilled her on serving the customers, while screwing her from behind.

"Hello, Polly", I said, watching her carefully to see if she would be mesmerized by my intense gaze. She was not. Nanna on the other hand, put her arm on Polly's shoulder and squeezed, like she was buying an avocado.

And so the afternoon went. One Manhattan became three; Martinis followed suit. Polly became more and more alluring. I had a vision of Nanna and me sharing her in some way, many ways! This sudden arising of sexual passion was invigorating. Depression did not usually allow that.

Manic-depressive. I liked the new drugs. The label warned against mixing with alcohol. Fuck it. My roommates had gotten me over to the manic side.

Then both Nanna and Polly went missing. The back room, the ladies' room, it did not matter. Sensing it was time to leave, I paid, tipped Ricky too much and made my way to the door. No waiting for them. Ricky grinned: he knew everything.

I was not confident that the cheery state I was in would last for more than an hour, and then pass like the booze and medication in my blood, turning to piss. That was what usually happened.

Duly numbed for the subway ride home, I stepped into an overheated car going downtown locally. I went to the next car, which could be a meat locker, its chill evaporating my sweat instantly. I was thankful for my semi-unconscious state. The crush of strangers, heaving and lurching like a carnival-ride-dance-club-sinking ship. I got off at an entrance I did not usually use, because the blue eyed man in the cocoon was at the other one. I did not need to hear "You will die soon" right now. I was intent on my good mood persisting. I was slightly hungry. The two bowls of nuts I ate at the bar without thinking had made me hungrier. It was evening, and I had had no lunch.

The thought of making food in my apartment disgusted me, but I put together a mental picture of what I could make. It was not the ingredients that mattered; it was more the energy to do it.

I decided that was an absurd notion, and would only end up with me at the refrigerator eating from jars. I headed for the red sauce Italian place on my block called Bon Giovi. Everything had extra cheese, and "made in advance" was actually a sign on the wall behind the bar. The owner, a Yugoslavian, Hugo the Yugo, had heard that New Yorkers wanted things fast. That's where his slogan came from.

I glanced at a Tabloid left on the chair beside me. "If your moon is in Uranus." I laughed out loud at that. The sexy blond woman sitting at the next table was startled. I gave her a silly smile. She took that as an invitation, and ran her finger around the edge of her drink, hooding her eyes.

I stared at her. There was a feeling coursing through me I recognized. I was having fun. She was likely my age, but it was hard to tell. She finally said "Hi!" and introduced herself as Alice-Ann, but liked to be called Annie. Her hand was soft and warm. Her scent was subtle and classy.

Since the drinks had made me drunk, and a little obnoxious, I said to her out loud, "Do you know what happens when planets are aligned in Uranus, Annie?"

She blushed, then laughed. "Is that a come-on, or do you take me for an astrologer?"

We smiled the same smile. I went and sat at her table. She moved around to make room. In the process, she revealed her cleavage. Her ample bottom had a nice swing to it, too. Very promising.

I ordered a bottle of red wine, at her suggestion. It was unimpressive, and I said so. She batted her eyelashes at me, as if impressed with my expertise. I liked the way this was going. I finished my veal. She picked at her salad. We drank all the wine,

and ordered a desert that she had a desire for – Cannollis.

We could have them at... her place, she said. I blinked for a long time, taking in the moment. Finally I said, "Ok, pack up the cannollis!"

Her nearby apartment was remarkably small, even for New York. There was nowhere to sit but on the bed, which, in this case, was fine. Then, to my surprise, sending an erotic shiver up my spine, she took one of the cannollis out of the box. Her hand went under her skirt.

Then she raised her short skirt up above her waist and invited me to enjoy dessert. I paused, amazed. Still quite drunk, I went down on her, getting every last bite of the canolli stuck in her vagina. I was turned on by the sound of her pleasurable groans, and the oddness of her fetish.

When I started to get on top of her, she stopped me. "That's enough for tonight," she said.

"How about my... canolli?" I blurted out.

"Not tonight," she replied. "But that was a very special dessert, was it not?" she said.

"Yes. Yes, it was," I replied.

The next moments seemed excruciatingly long. Was I supposed to force myself on her? Plead? Certainly the foreplay had left me aching for more. We sat there staring at each other. I felt like I was back in High School.

"Okay, next time," I said, and went to use her tiny bathroom.

I wanted to wash my face, but could find no soap. I opened the medicine chest, and was confronted with an array of pill bottles. I looked more closely, because one of the prescriptions caught my eye. These were the medications of a person treating... Hep-C! I was an expert on that subject from working on the ad.

My brain went on fire. I had infected myself! I now could see a future of being deathly ill for years, then dying of liver cancer. I found a little wrapped soap, and put it in my mouth, drinking water at the same time. I let it stay until I gagged, and spit it out.

I burst out of the bathroom and shouted "you have Hep-C! Are you nuts, letting me go down on you? It's highly contagious!"

She smiled an evil smile. "You're a big boy. Don't you know better than to fool around with strangers? It's a risk. You enjoyed yourself."

I started blubbering incoherently while feverishly putting my clothes on, and left.

I threw up on the steps to her building and was accosted by a large angry man who lived there. He offered to break my face, but I escaped.

I walked the twenty-eight blocks to my apartment in a daze, and climbed up to the hatch that led to the roof. A nail had been driven in to hold it shut. I went to my room and reached under my bed. I retrieved a crowbar kept there for self-defense. I pried open the hatch.

Once out on the roof, I went to the fence, gripping it with one hand, the crowbar in the other, and leaned over. A breeze blew my hair and cooled my sweaty shirt. Certainly, the situation had changed since I stood here this morning.

Now early death was not an abstraction. Of course now, I suddenly realized, I no longer wanted to die.

I stared at the street below. Slowly, I stepped back. Behind me, I heard someone come up the stairs. Still holding the crowbar, I turned. Victor the Super had a pistol. He shot me in the chest, and, at the same moment, recognized me. He shouted, "Oh Jesus, I'm sorry!"

I crumpled to the roof, my face pressed on the asphalt still warm from the sun. I reached to the ornamental fence to try and raise myself up. I heard Victor running down the stairs to get help.

I fell to the roof on my back, staring at the stars flickering dimly through the heavy city air.

When help came, it was too late.

No one knew for sure why I was out there that night. Probably just to get some air. In any case, I should have followed the rules, and not pried open the hatch.

At the memorial service, the words spoken were "too many guns," "tragic mistake," and "prime of life."

When my brother raises his glass to sadly remember and toast the urns, I am included.

Peter Dark is a writer and artist who grew up in Manhattan and converted a commercial space into a residential loft in the 1970's. While playing bass in a rock band by night, an ad agency job by day (like Mad Men), Dark now spends time writing in a variety of genres and has been previously published both online and in print. www.petercasconeart.com.



Mario Ange Lugo Lugo

Point of No Return

Mario Ange Lugo Lugo is a Puerto Rican contemporary artist, who has flown over to Oahu to create some paintings for an exposition in Oahu and he has his studio on Mililani. He is a designer and architect student.

David Walker

Questions I Can't Answer

My girlfriend asks me how I could forgive him
and I say, "He's my father."

My girlfriend says, "I don't know
if I could do that," and I say,
"I didn't think I could either, but I did."

I say that when I was thirteen my sister
and I were watching the Sox
one night and my dad came home late,

sat down, and told us that something bad happened.
He went on, said that when he was visiting

family he had found someone and that he was going
to spend his birthday with her instead of us.
My sister said, "What do you mean 'her'?"

but we both knew. I say my mother was away
for the weekend, we were left alone with my dad,
and we planned on celebrating his birthday the next
day.

I say that my sister and dad
talked for awhile while I just stared
at the TV, picking out each pixel,

how it vibrated, looking scared of the millions
that surrounded it, but I don't tell my girlfriend that
last

part. She says, "That's horrible," and I nod.

I say, "But I don't think one bad thing can erase
all the good he's done for me," and think
that that sounds about right.

Say, "He's my father."

The songs he made out of our dog's name,
the candy bars he snuck home after Mom

said, 'No.' I say, "Now we have two
Christmases," and smile. "I barely
see him," I say and say that at least

when I see him I see him good,
not the bad too, no more eggshells,
and she says, "That's good."

I should've said, "No, it's messed
up. A dad stays with a mom because
he loves her, he loves his two kids,

his dog and three cats. He'd miss Christmases
with the family too much to leave,"
but I didn't say that.

I just say,

"He's my father" and leave it at that.

David Walker is from Massachusetts. He is getting married. They own a cat. The cat is off kilter. He has been published in several literary journals. David Walker, not the cat. The cat is female, anyway. He also has a chapbook forthcoming from Finishing Line Press titled Pause: A Collection of Moment Poems.

David Holmes

Aiden's Muse

Aiden sat at the small round table nearest the door of the Chandler street cafe, fore and middle fingers pressed gently against his thumb. His wrist arched and rolled as he sketched on imagined paper with an invisible utensil the woman sitting across the room. She seemed oblivious to his presence, as she did the rest of the world. Her form-fitting jeans hugged tight to the contours of her hips. Legs crossed, she leaned forward reading intently. Aiden didn't know by whom the book was written, or the content held within; it mattered little.

Her hair flowed long and fiery; wild locks that danced loosely as she shifted in her chair. Aiden observed and noted these things as he continued to form her image in his mind, seeking to etch her into his memory. He would do this as he had for the last couple of weeks, only to retreat to his studio - her picture held in his consciousness, so that on stark white media he might recreate her visage in pencil and compressed charcoal.

Aiden didn't know her name; there was no desire to. His place was to capture, to reform, to reimagine this mystery woman. Her place was simply to be, to live and,

unbeknownst to her, to inspire his work, give it direction and focus, if only in brief. Aiden observed the rise and fall of her breast beneath the black V-cut shirt; sleeves and collar accentuated by a frilly lace pattern. He watched how her breath baited every so often with the turning of a page, only to release in a relieved sigh with the reading of the coming sentence.

The thought had of course entered Aiden's mind on several occasions to walk over and make an introduction. He was by no means shy when it came to matters of the opposite sex, and rare was a beauty that he found intimidating. Fascinating yes; this she was, but to cross the room and speak with this mystery woman would break a personal unyielding rule; she inspired in silence, in ignorance, like a tigress caught by the camera's lens. He would remain far from the danger of her rending claws and tearing fangs.

The Muse granted vision in this way, untouched, uninfluenced, pure and sublime in the simple act of being. Aiden sketched with his invisible pencil the slopes of her shoulders, the curvature of her jaw, the intensity of her eyes as she read the words off the inconsequential pages before her. Simple, blissful, unblemished and natural. With a few more quick motions, he finished the phantom sketch. He stretched a bit in his hard wood chair, poorly suppressing a yawn, wondering what time it was.

*"She inspired in
silence, in ignorance,
like a tigress caught by
the camera's lens."*

Aiden's question was answered by the silent vibration of his cell phone. He reached in his pocket to cease it as he looked up at the hands of the large, imitation redwood clock hung over the counter, reading 9:25 p.m. It was time to put away his imagined tools and head home if he was going to get started tonight.

He would drive back to the old weather-worn tenement on Union Street, climb the two flights of stairs to the top floor, open the door at the end of the hall and walk into his one-bedroom studio. He would draw the blinds, light the candles and recreate the Muse as true to life as his memory would allow. He'd release her image from the bonds of his thoughts, to those of the paper with practiced arches and sweeping gestures. His renderings were well defined; another person viewing them might even consider them exceptional. Something was off to Aiden though; something was missing, but he couldn't place it. Somehow despite his best efforts to create his perfect rendering of the mystery woman; all he could see when he stepped

back were flawed copies. And so the Muse continued its flirtatious dance, ever teasing upon the razor's edge of perfection.

The ever elusive Muse wasn't a woman; it was a peak of interest, a stirring of desire. It was an influence of the soul which simply manifested for Aiden within a woman. Once the work was done, its power exhausted, the Muse would shed its current form for another. Some held it stronger than others, but none held it forever, and so his eyes ever wandered, perhaps explaining why the young artist lived alone but rarely slept that way.

Aiden paused to consider this last point a moment before standing, straightening the creases out of his black buttoned shirt. He took one last sip of the overpriced cranberry smoothie he had purchased before tossing it, stealing one last look at the fiery haired tigress before moving toward the plate glass door.

"Have a good one." Aiden turned to see a young blonde haired woman with a pixie cut behind the counter. She beamed with a deep dimpled smile. He looked at her, returning the smile with equal measure. "You, too."

Aiden stepped out into the cool late April night. The rain had fallen for six days straight, with no end to the deluge in sight. It had slowed to a drizzle in the last hour. Living in New England was like a bad relationship; cold and abusive seventy five percent of the time, just to warm up and buy you roses for a few brief pleasant moments. Just enough to keep things going; just enough to keep them coming back. The worst of it was drawing to a close, the leaves were budding. Any day now they would burst, and the long dark chill of winter would at last release its hold. Aiden crossed the rain slick parking lot toward his black GT, reaching in his pocket to deactivate the car alarm.

He opened the driver's side, got in and placed his cell phone on the passenger's seat. As he closed the door and went to start the ignition, he heard the phone vibrate. The display lit up brightly flashing the name Sorana. Aiden felt displaced, and the sight of the name wreathed in the bright halo of the LCD screen threatened to pull him from the present to a past he would have been wise to move quickly beyond.

"Sorana." The name formed on his lips. Aiden closed his eyes. The hairs raised on the back of his neck as her scent washed over him once again, her laughter echoed in his ears from the recesses of memory.

Aiden opened his eyes and watched the phone shiver in quiet vibration a couple more times before the screen faded back into darkness. He was not moved to answer

the call; he was honestly too taken aback to respond at the moment. Now, though, he wondered if he should have. Aiden had not seen nor heard from Sorana in over a year; she had left him the way she had found him, confused and locked in the bounds of self-pity. He reached over and picked up the phone, running his thumb over the display, caught between a desperate desire to return the call and the wish it hadn't come. After being tugged between the two for a few more moments, Aiden put the phone back on the passenger's seat, sighing and rubbing his face with his palms.

He turned the ignition, putting the car into drive before pulling out of the parking lot and turning left onto Chandler Street. The rain renewed its vigor. Aiden watched as a couple walking down the sidewalk broke into a mad dash, finding shelter below the eaves of a three-decker. The weather was predictable only in its unpredictability. He passed a digital display that read forty-eight degrees; it was still possible for it all to freeze before the morning.

The traffic was unusually heavy for this time of the evening. Aiden slowed to a stop at the intersection of Park Ave and Chandler Street just as the light turned red; he would be sitting there for a while. Looking over to the passenger's side, he watched the phone, waiting for it to once again burst to life on the black leather seat. He wondered why she had called, what she had wanted. There would be no message; she never left them. Aiden would have to ponder her intent until he made a choice to pick up the call and hear her reasoning or call her back to inquire it. Until then he would simply have to wait.

The sound of the horn from the car behind brought reality crashing back. Aiden looked in the rear view to see the sour expression of an elderly woman in a Buick. He turned on the blinker and took a left. He had planned to head home, to get a start on rendering the mysterious woman in the café; home would have been straight through the lights. The grasp he had on her image had faltered, he could see nothing now but Sorana, clear and consuming as always, her claws, her fangs bit deep, and the wounds she had left were once again opened.

Aiden fought to keep the memories at bay through force of will, but the greater he pushed them away, the fiercer they pushed back. He turned right, driving up the hill alongside Elm Park. The park was draped in shadows, the lamps were not lit, the muddied paths and the arches of the weather-worn, iron-railed bridges were hidden. The rise of the hill steepened, and the familiar sight of an old colonial came into view. The building had been converted into apartments some time ago.

Aiden turned off of Elm and stopped on the opposite side of the street, across from the front door. The building didn't have a parking lot of its own – the one behind it belonged to the business next door. He put the car in park, killed the engine and opened the driver's side door, putting his shoe to the pavement. He paused and looked back at his cell, tempted to take it with him just in case she called again. He fought the urge long enough to step out into the chill wind and pouring rain.

Aiden walked briskly across the street to the sidewalk and up the short stone steps leading to a dented, slightly ajar white metal door. Stopping under the awning, whipping the water from his face with his sleeve, he looked at the names on the door buzzer. His eyes scanned downward, stopping at the piece of black labeling tape that read "A. Marx". He held his finger over the black button a moment ready to press it, and then reconsidered. He opened the dented white door and entered, Abigail lived on the third floor at the end of the hall, or at least she did a month ago.

The hall was dimly lit, saturated by the smell of foreign cuisine and the sound of broken conversations. Aiden's hand slid along the polished oak railing as he climbed the discolored carpet covering the hardwood steps until he reached the third floor landing. Abigail's door stood opposite. The sound of the neighbors fell to a low hum and as he stepped toward her door, Aiden heard the sound of a violin. He paused a moment, closing his eyes, allowing the skill of Abigail's bow to carry away his thoughts, to drown his memories in the commanding power of her sublime skill.

He waited for a pause, wouldn't dream of interrupting, disturbing her rhythm, not such a beautiful thing. He had spent hours listening to Abigail, like a cat caught in the hypnotic patterns of the falling rain. She was brilliant, but it was not her skill with a bow that had brought him here tonight. He waited patiently until at last the silence fell, deafening, chilling. Aiden let out a sigh and took a deep breath.

He knocked and after a moment the sound of movement came from the other side. The hall was dark and the light from beneath Abigail's door glowed brightly outward. The shadow of two approaching feet appeared, ceasing with the sound of the door bumping against her tiny frame. Aiden imagined the violinist on the other side standing on her toes leaning her eye to the lens, peeking out into the hall. He wondered if she would open for him. It had been at least a month since they last spoke. Aiden heard the sound of the deadbolt and the sliding of a chain; the door opened and there was Abigail, leaning against the door frame, her dark hair tied in a tangle of wild beauty, wearing only a black button-up shirt. Aiden's shirt; something he'd left behind one night. His dark eyes ran a familiar course, beginning at her feet, toe nails painted an effeminate pink; gliding over her smooth bare legs, past the

violin that rested lazily against her thigh; following the curvature of her waist, her breast, her swan-like neck, at last coming to meet her gaze.

Abigail kept her secrets as Aiden tried to gauge her temperament. Her gaze held him firm but soft, unyielding as it was unrevealing. Aiden waited a moment longer; he would have to be the one to break the silence. "Hey," he began, trying to muster confidence, hoping that there were no hard feelings for abruptly leaving the last time they were together. Abigail stepped out of the doorway, opening a path to enter. Aiden stepped into the living area of the violinist home. The room danced with the flicker of candle light and bore the scent of opened merlot. He heard the door shut behind him and the sound of the bolt and chain clunking back in place. It took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the wavering orange hue. He turned to face Abigail, saying, "I was in the area, thought I'd say hello."

He looked for a change in her expression, an indication of his status, of her thoughts; she stepped forward, slowly pacing a path around him.

"I don't normally take in strays." she said, her voice low, barely perceptible. His eyes were held by hers, Aiden turned about, keeping with her as she moved.

"I'm sorry about leaving so suddenly." Aiden uttered somewhat clumsily. He had forgotten how her eyes could provoke such unease, a burst of heat, a chilling sweat, lost somewhere between fear and desire. That is why he had come to her tonight: he wanted to forget the call, to chase the thought of Sorana from his mind. Aiden knew, while caught in Abigail's gaze, there was no room for any other thoughts save those of Abigail.

She stopped her circle, standing between Aiden and the bolted door, "I'm sorry, too." She looked up at him with an unnerving calm.

"Abigail," Aiden began again, but her fingers stopped his words as they formed on his lips.

"I don't want your words, and you don't want mine. Not tonight. Let's not make this anything but what it is. No complications, no regrets." Abigail drew close, standing on tip toes, replacing her shushing fingers with a kiss.

All thoughts vanished. Sorana's call slipped into the darkness of his mind, a worry

for another time. Aiden tasted the wine on Abby's lips, wrapped his arm around her waist, drawing her snugly to him while the fingers of his free hand struggled to loosen the wild knot she kept her hair in. Abby's hair came loose with floral fragrance, washing over Aiden, causing him to grow weak. Her hand reached low, grasping firmly; Aiden swelled.

It was all so simple now; motion and response; no thought, just instinct. All pretense of civilities charade crumbled and Aiden felt the surge of a familiar and eternal truth: love is for poets and dreamers. As Abby sought to wrestle Aiden from his clothing, he knew what it meant to be fully present and awake. He reached beneath the shirt Abigail wore, his shirt, feeling the folds of Abby's bare, silky flesh. His heart leapt as his fingers moistened and the scent of wine and flora were washed away in the tide of Abigail's femininity. Her hand reached for Aiden's, guiding the tips of his finger to her desired destination. She bit hard into his shoulder as her legs threatened to crush his hand. Balance lost; she fell back against the support of the apartment wall, taking Aiden with her.

Her fire was a beacon on a starless night, the seductive sirens song guiding him to rocky shores. Aiden yielded. He knew his doom; he had tasted it time and time before. He sailed gleefully toward his inevitable demise. Verse whispered in the shadows, just a decibel above the sound of her breath, of his own heart's beat. She was poetry, walking in beauty along diverging paths in a yellow wood.

Their mouths met again with renewed intensity, a maddening hunger fed at last by lustful abandon. Aiden tore the buttons of the black shirt that veiled the violinists form, drawing it low until it fell at her feet, his lips following in eager exploration. Closing his eyes, he reached out with his other senses, etching Abby's image on the canvas of his mind with tools of taste and touch. He was drawn to the source of her intoxicating aroma, sticky, humid and bursting with the heat of damnation.

Aiden brushed his lips against her soft wet folds, applying only the faintest of pressure, an apparition's kiss. Abigail's breath came in short, desperate gasps as he teased her, as he tormented her; how her nectar flowed as though it were a ransom paid for her own release. Abby's fingers gripped Aiden's hair by the roots as she struggled to press his mouth to her; he resisted only long enough to raise her leg, resting it upon his shoulder. Aiden's tongue entered her deep and hungry, bringing Abigail to cry out in ecstatic emancipation. The world and all its worry was washed away in her flood.

Aiden grew lightheaded as he took in more of Abigail than he did air. She crushed

him against her with all the strength she could muster until it felt as though he would be smothered. He responded with the flashing of an eager tongue and the forceful sucking of her clit. As her muscles weakened, Aiden made his escape, rising up to kiss the violinist hot upon her mouth, that she may know her essence. Through entangled tongues and heated gasps, two words formed on Abby's lips, crude and unabashed. "Fuck me."

Aiden heard the words before they were spoken. Her body had screamed them. The moments built one upon the other to this most perfect of unions. He whirled Abigail about, pressing her hard against the wall; she pushed her bare bottom out to meet her lover halfway. Aiden finished what she had begun, unclasping his belt and freeing himself from his bounds. Abby continued to thrust backward with an aching impatience; "Fuck me" she said again, this time with a low, almost bestial, growl. Aiden obeyed.

The heat that bellowed from within guided Aiden; he thrust deep until she had taken all of him. Abigail cried out, leaning backward, coiling her arm around his neck, allowing no chance of separation.

"Hard; fuck me hard; you won't hurt me," she whispered breathlessly into his ear. Aiden wrapped his arms about her hips, reaching one hand between her legs, rubbing in whirling patterns. Though it had been some time since last they were so close, their bodies fell into a familiar rhythm.

She gave without hesitation; she took without shame, and Aiden matched her each to each. Her raven locks clung to his face and obscured his vision as she twisted, struggling to kiss him against the force of their bucking bodies. Abigail pressed a palm against the wall, pushing herself harder into Aiden and him deeper into her. Aiden's fingertips drew a feathering path along her abdomen. He could feel goose bumps rise in response.

The small apartment quickly grew hot, wet and fragrant. Through the sound of slick clapping bodies and the cries of desire unrestrained, the two artists fell into sync until they responded in echo to each other's seemingly insatiable needs. A mischievous smile crossed Aiden's lips as his eyes were drawn to a closed, white washed door. He pulled away abruptly from Abigail. Dazed and breathless, she demanded "Why are you stopping?"

In such moments, Aiden wasn't one for words. He took Abby's wrist and turned her around, leading her along a path of dying candlelight. Pushing the door with his free

hand, it opened easily without a creak, revealing the cramped confines of the studio's bathroom. Aiden pulled roughly, and Abigail stumbled forward into the darkness, into his arms. The bathroom wasn't made to hold two - it was barely a closet, but he guided her between himself and the sink. She leaned against it and in the low flickering light that reached the mirror behind them, Aiden saw his mischievous grin had returned.

Abigail's thighs quivered as she struggled to raise herself onto the sink; the evening's exertions had begun to take their toll. It had not been so straining on Aiden's resources; an often veiled bane of the female form is the capacity for sensation over indulged. He assisted the violinist onto the edge of the sink, resting her legs around his waist, holding her ankles crossed behind. Sealing them together. In the faint echo of dying candlelight he viewed Abigail, her hair matted, her body glistening.

Aiden's heart swelled, her beauty was almost painful to behold, perfect and raw. For a moment he felt the dangerous pull of sentiment; if love were true, surely he would have found it with Abigail. He brushed her hair from her eyes and the two looked into each other perhaps a moment longer than was safe. Aiden realized his lips mouthed words that would turn the simple and pristine into the complicated and messy. Before sound could escape, he moved in closely, kissing Abigail deeply, gently.

Her quaking stopped and she leaned forward, wrapping Aiden in a full body embrace, drawing him inside of her. The heated frenzy of moments past slowed as each sought fully to savor their lover's company. As Abigail neared climax, her breath would stop sharp and she would hug Aiden within her depths, but before she could know release, he would pull back just enough to deny her again and again. Her nails dug into his shoulders, the sting of sweat told him she had made her mark.

"Please," she whispered, "please, now."

He obeyed; thrusting hard, he held her close, unmoving deep inside. Abby's body seized and Aiden felt himself yield to her all he had, all he was. They cried out in unison the most ancient of songs.

A long time seemed to pass in the dark confines of the bathroom. He listened to the violinist's quiet breathing for a few moments before reaching his arms around

Abigail and carefully lifting her. She locked her legs about him as he carried her the short way to an all-too-familiar futon. Aiden laid her atop it and then himself upon her. Abigail closed her eyes and held tightly to him. He brushed his fingers through the silken strands of her hair. How soothing and peaceful a moment. Aiden wondered why not this? Why did he leave her? Why did he not return until now? His eyes drifted to the digital clock on the end table next to his head. The display read 1:35 a.m. Abigail sighed and nuzzled closer, resting her head under Aiden's chin. The thought came again, this time forming silently on his lips "Why not this?" Aiden closed his eyes and began to slip into slumber; he didn't resist.

The sky had turned a pastel pink by the time Aiden awoke. He blinked, adjusting his eyes to the brightening room. He looked at the digital display; it read 6:26 a.m. Abigail slept soundly, still holding him snugly. He moved cautious and quiet, trying not to wake the violinist. Part of him wanted to stay, to go back to sleep, awakening to spend the day as he had the night: with Abigail. He wanted to hear her play again, to be swallowed by her brilliance. Part of him wanted to capture her, bare and untamed; a tigress in his lens, to talk of beautiful nonsense, to speak the artist tongue. That part of him never did prevail in the end.

Instead, Aiden dressed quickly, turning the bolt and removing the chain on the door. He paused, taking a breath as he went to leave. He couldn't bring himself to look back. Stepping out, he closed the door silently behind him and made his way down the discolored carpeted stairs. The rain had not frozen; it was warm and sunny. Aiden disarmed the car alarm as he crossed the street. Opening the driver's side door, he got in and turned the ignition. Rubbing his face, he spoke the words again, aloud this time "Why not this?" The sound of his phone bursting to life on the passenger's seat answered the question, sure as a bolt from the heavens. Aiden tried to resist, but at last he was felled by a need to hear her voice again; for the closure he knew she would never give but he would always long for. Aiden reached over, answered and brought the phone to his ear "Sorana."

David Holmes was born in Brockton, Massachusetts and currently lives in the Worcester area. David is employed as a social worker, where he utilizes tabletop role playing games as a tool for teaching life skills to transition age youth. David enjoys writing poetry, stories and self-help manuals. He became interested in poetry in adolescence and has been writing ever since.

John Davis

Kindness on Easter Morning

Kind, with knotted fur balls and a bark like a bell,
my dog shits on the path to the garbage can:
orange brown nuggets – perfect poop,
quixotic, blends in with the fallen fir.
Squish. I barely notice the squishy shit
under my shoe. Everywhere eggs are colored: Roy G Biv.
When she barks, she nudges her ball to my sox.
Yawning, I lean over. Smell. Forgive. Pet her fur-fuzz.
Ahhh, it's Easter morning. Forgive. She wags. I dab
cold fingers on her nose, hose off my shoe. Cold.
Eyes as wide as when she used to find buff-
green Easter eggs and eat them, she barks at a jaybird, starts to thrash
in the yard. Barks. There is no law that says she cannot bark a jay.

Lassie the Party Dog

Lassie, you bitch, get back to the farm.
No more dates with Rin Tin Tin, sniffing hello,
placing your paws on the bar. Mind your p's and q's.
Ruff ruff. Stop freebasing Little Friskies,
tie-dyeing your coat pink, being nouveau
Vichy riche. Listening to you gnaw
x-rated dog bones is one thing. Leaving Timmy
zero-eyed, crying, friendless – fucking A,
Bow wow. You're neither tragic nor comic.
Dig up that wholesome doggie
fido persona that can be heard barking
ha ha messages at U.S. postal carriers. Really, I
just think you're a nice dog with a sweet-ass bark.

John Davis is the author of Gigs (Sol Books) and The Reservist (Pudding House Press.) Lesser known is that he was a drop-out in the Charles Atlas Fitness By Mail program advertised in the back of Superman comic books. Although he followed Charles' strict regimen, he did not flex his muscles with bulbous precision when he was fourteen. There was nothing to flex. At age 26, he was threatened with a ticket by a park ranger for skinny-dipping in the back country of Yosemite. That summer, he placed second in a pie eating contest when he consumed an entire rhubarb pie in eleven minutes without using his hands. Perhaps this prepared him for running a two-man relay across Death Valley a few months later. Perhaps not. In any event, when his knees gave out a year later, he turned to poetry writing as a new obsession. At age 34, by using snuff tobacco for traction, he pulled leeches off his skin during a monsoon.



Choko

Black Friday

My artwork often takes on social critics and political issues. I inhale point of views, situations and social matters and exhale them into metaphors. Having replaced my words with images and my emotions with colors resulting in surreal sceneries. I use oil paint on canvas to create a window that shows you my view on different subjects.

In this piece, I felt the urge to depict that day when material becomes a reason to stomp on that old man or lady because he or she is in the way between you and a cheap giant High definition TV. That day we call "Black Friday." I wanted to portray how similar to animals we can get to act just to get that item we've been longing. Using a warm color palette, symbolizing the fierceness and determination and a surreal technique to blend humans into animals.

Philip Kuan

Peace on Earth

It was Dotty's turn to make the run, we insisted. In a way I think she was relieved. Last week had been harrowing enough, what with losing both Sanchez and Sully to a hug - A HUG - at Walgreens. But I think that deep down, she'd simply tired of struggling. I think that when she saw that hug, a part of her wanted in, which was why, as they moved the mattress beside the door, I was already divvying her rations.

Nobody bothered waiting for a return, so I volunteered for the next run. To the silent awkwardness of no objection.

Whispered profanities touched my lips as I scanned the cul-de-sac later that afternoon. Dotty, selfish to the end, had abandoned her car nearly two blocks away, leaving in between it and me an unforgiving expanse of suburbia. Already one of them was sidling into its front porch swing, hugging a cooler.

Someone's shadow consumed my own, chilling my bones. But it was only Walter, barricade already reappearing behind him as he mumbled something about a pack of smokes.

We almost avoided them. Ducking behind cars and trash bins got us halfway before Walter slammed his fat hip against a sedan door, triggering a car alarm which sent our neighbors sprinting over yelling about "BEERS and SODAS and JUICES and WATERS so FIZZY FRESH-" before collapsing into a guttered cry, broken and bleeding and blended with ice from its cooler. Somehow, it was still grinning at the echoing revolver's shot, gun now being holstered as Walt pulled me by my jacket towards Dotty's Hyundai. Others were scrambling out in droves now, drawn by the stench and grunts of escalating anxiety, and as we neared the car, they blocked our sidewalk with canisters of gasoline, steaming chowder, scarves or mittens "freshly knitted!", from one so vaguely innocent that I almost didn't swing my bat.

We made it. Sort of. As Walt repeatedly slammed his passenger door onto several hands, spilling their complimentary coffees across our dashboard, I rummaged blindly through my pockets. "Shit! I think I dropped them!" I cried while staring out, horrified, unable to look away at them turning upon their own, upon those we'd just crippled. Overwhelming mangled forms with bandages, sympathy, coos and comfort piercing my ears, searing my nerves, even tempting me to join in before getting caught by the force of a dozen housewives plastering the car, passing each

other sponges and rags to wash the bloodstains off our windshield. One flashed Walt her portable vacuum before fishing a familiar set of keys out of her patterned cotton apron, chuckling apologetically as Walt struggled to keep the doors locked.

Dottie leapt forward from the backseat and offered to drive, dangling her spare keys and waiting pleasantly as I un-holstered my revolver to shoot her twice. Without a word, we revved up the engine and barreled out of there.

Walter was much too quiet during the drive. But then, so was I. Other motorists kept giving us the right of way. Pulling into the market, we watched in disgust as strangers waved us towards blue spaces in front of the store, where bagboys were waiting to stumble toward us with freshly sanitized shopping carts.

“Want to try somewhere else?” whispered Walt, despair already fading his eyes. Instead of answering, I opened the glove compartment and pulled out a cigarette, my only one. When I offered it to him, his eyes widened.

“No man...not you too!” I didn’t object as he drew his gun and touched it to the roof of my mouth, muffling any attempts to point out his own dirty, infected tears. By the time he lowered it, unable to act, I knew that the virus had already run its course. With our bloodstreams tainted, we unlocked our doors. Together.

The last thing I remembered was the tender way we hugged, wondering what all the fuss was about. Right before the bagboys got in on the action.

Philip Kuan is an aspiring writer from Northern California, with a friendly interest in befuddling readers with interesting stories. Some of his favorite authors include Charles Dickens, Tolkien, and Franz Kafka, among others. He has been published in several short story magazines, and is always looking for constructive feedback at [The Subtle Emoticon](#).

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