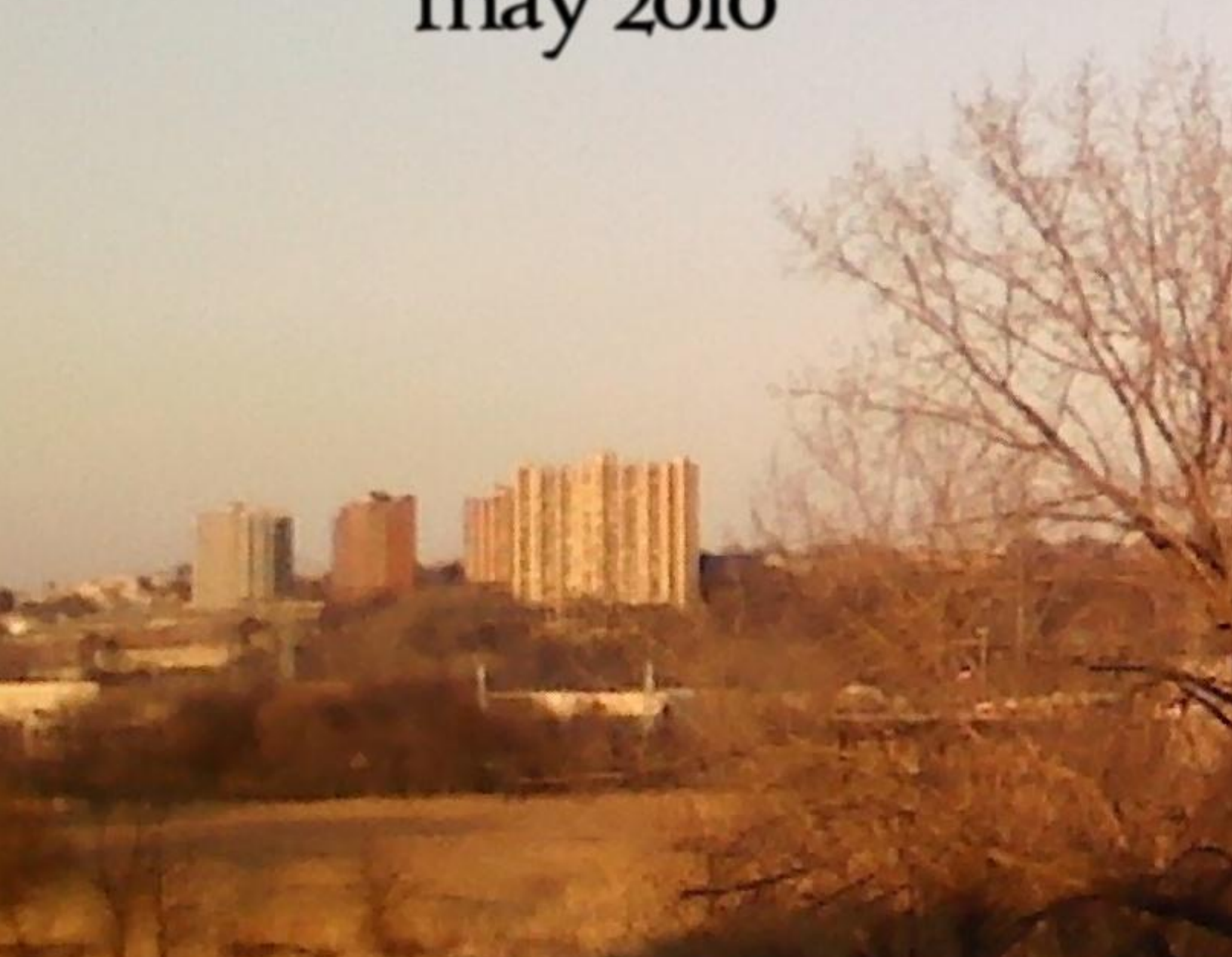


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Editor: Eirik Gumeny

Assistant Editor: Monica Rodriguez

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Editor's Note: Straight to Business, Son

Welcome to Issue Eight, boys and girls. It's been a long month, so let's get right down to it.

We start this issue with "Album of the Year" and the return of Gavin Broom, followed by Chantelle Aimée Osman's darkly comic "The Last Goodbye." From there we go for a swim with Tara King and "The Old Man and the Shark" and dry off with Brian Long's time-travelling tale, "Family Tree." Next is Adam Gilmour's all too realistic "Like I Wasn't There," and then we close with Rich Mallery's beautiful kick to the stomach, "Pulling Feathers Off A Phoenix."

There you go. You want stories, that's what we got.

What are you still waiting around here for?

Get to readin'.

-- Eirik Gumeny

Album of the Year

Gavin Broom

January 1st, 2009 – At Austin's

The new year is in its infancy – minutes, maybe only seconds old – and born to a drunken world already neglecting it. The antique clock facing Austin's bar that had everyone spellbound now looks out at our backs and people who'd shaken hands and embraced are strangers once again.

In the photograph, Claire and I stand near the usual mob at the bar who do their best to spoil the shot. My hand sits on her waist. Her blonde head finds its nest on my shoulder and her smile is warm and crooked like she's stifling a laugh. James is in front of me, typically worse for wear, frozen in celebration, cheering with wide eyes and mouth. Next to him, in a white dress, Kerry blows the camera a kiss.

That night, the booze fuels talk of approaching thirtieth birthdays, promotions at work, subtle suggestions of overdue engagements that secretly terrify as much as the idea of weddings. There's talk of seizing the day, of the less worn path, of not settling like our parents, of making something of ourselves, of having big plans. The thing I notice, though, through all the hope and expectation captured on our faces, is that none of us know what's coming. We don't have a clue.

February 15th, 2009 – Birthday

It was James who suggested this inspired way to combine Valentine's Day and Claire's birthday while picking up some Best Boyfriend in the World points along the way. The result of this idea is a stereotypical Parisian taking a stereotypical photograph of two stereotypical tourists.

Claire and I are rosy-cheeked, wrapped in long coats and scarves at the top of the Eiffel Tower. It's impossible to tell if we're smiling or grimacing against the brutal chill. Over our shoulders, the crisp, grey city does its best to look as though it hasn't posed like this a million times already today. There's no such thing as privacy up here and other tourists sandwich us as they have their pictures taken or talk with their significant others and it makes me think of all the paths, all the billions of decisions that have been made independently across the globe to make us all share this moment. It makes me think of my own path.

Later that evening, back at the hotel, we sit at the bar and drink whisky until our blood thaws. The bartender is disinterested and surly until he realises we're Scottish and not English as he'd assumed. After that, he's our new best friend and the three of us drink and chat into the wee hours. When he announces that he's originally from Cameroon, bored with Paris and looking to move on, it ignites something in Claire. Excited, she grabs my hand and suggests we deliberately miss our return flight. Instead, she wants to withdraw her life savings and travel through Europe to the Far East, working on a farm in Switzerland, pouring drinks or waiting tables in Dubai, sleeping on a beach in Vietnam. Over and over, the bartender says what an excellent idea it is and the more he says it, the more animated Claire becomes and the more detached I find myself. She looks at me for a reaction and I smile but when I don't

speak, she gives me back my hand and leaves me with thoughts of paths and how unmade decisions are still decisions and unspoken words can still be heard.

April 1st, 2009 – April Fools

James' reason for surprising Kerry with a party and proposal on April Fools' Day is surprisingly simple and valid: she won't be expecting it. And he's right. When she walks into the function room, her hands shoot to her mouth, her knees buckle for a moment and she needs to be calmed by her sisters and friends. Eventually, she collects herself and even though she's crying, she's laughing when she says yes.

Claire asks me to take a photograph of Kerry's hand, now seemingly as complete as her life thanks to a chunk of compressed carbon set in a platinum band. I'm no expert on such things but I have to admit to being impressed by James' choice. It suits her hand; makes her fingers look slender and elegant. I can't help wondering how much it cost, how much James earns and, if it's more than me, what he did to deserve it. Any of it. I do as I'm told and take the photo. As I review the image, I notice the French tips on Kerry's fingernails and a patch of uneven fake tan around her wrist and my stomach flinches at what I suspect may be a ruse.

At ten o'clock, the DJ takes a break for the buffet and it's while we're eating that Claire raises a subject I knew was in the post from the moment James told me of his intentions. Still, I pretend to be taken aback and tell her I thought the plan was to go backpacking across Australia or cycle round the world or work on a salmon farm in Tibet or open an orphanage in Mozambique. That's when something changes, something leaves her eyes and whatever it is, wherever it goes, it doesn't come back.

June 21st, 2009 – Solstice

Every year, my dad made a big deal of the shortest night. For as long as I can remember, he talked about setting off in the car when the sun went down and driving until it rose the next morning, just to see where it would take him. Given that this allowed him about five or six hours driving time, I would tell him that he'd either end up just past Birmingham if he went south, somewhere in Caithness if he went north and in the sea if he went any other direction. Neither option sounded particularly appealing. He'd look annoyed when I said this. Apparently, I missed the point.

On this particular solstice evening, much like all the others, he's going nowhere. The doctor says he can't get home, the surgeon wants to talk to my mother in private about more procedures planned for the morning and the nurse gives him a hard, square cushion to hug on to when the coughing gets bad. The cushion has a face drawn on it in black marker; cock-eyed with its tongue sticking out of its grinning mouth. Dad thinks this is hilarious and while Mum's still away, he asks me to take a photo on my phone. He holds the pillow next to his face and strikes a matching pose. When I show him the result, he's delighted. Twins, he says. He asks if I can print a copy and bring it with me tomorrow. I tell him that if the surgeons have their way, he might not be in the best shape to look through photos. It'll be a piece of piss, he insists. A piece of piss.

On the drive home, Mum repeats her conversation with the surgeon and talks about how she feels things have run away in the last few weeks and everything's moving too fast. It's all I can do to keep driving because what I really want to do is pull over, take the phone out of my pocket, show her the photo and see if between us we can find anything that'll make us smile. The phone stays where it is, though, and

the pack of glossy printer paper I buy after I drop Mum off isn't unwrapped until much, much later.

August 7th, 2009 – Satellites

Claire phoned me first. Being honest, it amazed me it wasn't the other way round and hadn't happened much earlier, especially as it had been a tough summer, during which I'd become well acquainted with the bottom of a bottle. Given these conditions, a drunken call in the middle of the night, begging for a reconciliation, wasn't so much likely as downright inevitable. I remember thinking it was good to be surprised. The feeling doesn't last.

We meet in a coffee shop in town the next evening and it's the first we've seen each other in three months. I have a latte. She orders a green tea of all things, which I read as a flag in the sand, a definite statement that things have changed and they're not changing back. For the next thirty minutes we're civil while we tiptoe through our conversational minefield and then she reaches into her bag – new, I notice – and hands me something I mistake for a birthday card. On the front of the card is a drawing of a teddy bear holding a balloon. Inside, there's a grainy, black and white photograph that looks like an image from a weather satellite. Just as I realise why a cloud looks like a tiny foot, it all falls into place and I become conscious that Claire's speaking to me, explaining something, saying my name, but the words are too bassy, too muffled, as though we're underwater. I don't move my head. I keep my eyes focused on that little foot. I let the waves of nausea crash and wash over me and wait for them to subside. Eventually, the tide goes back out.

It's only when she gets up that I notice the makings of a bump and puffiness in her cheeks. She tells me she'll be in touch and that I can be as involved as I want but, because we're still looking for different things, in every other regard it's business as usual. I'm left holding the photograph with the very tips of my fingers, as though it's made from the most delicate of porcelain. The sky is orange and shadows are long when I throw some money on the table. I notice that her cup of green tea hasn't been touched.

November 17th, 2009 – Removal

When I arrive at James' flat with the van, Kerry is somewhere else, just as she'd promised. I'm surprised at how little stuff he has and he tells me he travels light. I remind him that he's lived here for four years. He doesn't reply to that. Instead, he mutters about how he can't believe this is happening so close to Christmas and pays no attention when I say Christmas is really six weeks away and not that close at all. No sense in anyone doing stuff that makes them both unhappy, I say to him when it looks like he's pouting. No sense at all. He agrees.

In my haste to shift a chest of drawers, a photograph frame falls on the floor and cracks under my heel. The photo of Kerry and her dog is torn and just as I'm about to find James to apologise, I spot another picture underneath. This other, hidden photo is of the four of us at a restaurant table in Cyprus. James and I are in shirts and the women are in dresses; Claire blue and Kerry white. James is the only one without much of a tan because, I remember, he spent most of the holiday sitting in the shade at the pool bar drinking domestic lager and chatting up the Cypriot barmaid when he

thought no one was looking. I try to recreate the emotions from that time, the things that were going through my head, the happiness I'm sure I must have felt. For a second, I almost have it – I'm nearly there – but then it all feels too far away and not just time-wise. I flatten the original photo back in the broken frame and although I'm not sure for whose benefit I'm doing it, I tear up the Cyprus photograph and put it in the bin.

His new place isn't as nice as he described it. It's dark, one bedroom and the smell of damp in the air pounces on me as soon as the door opens. James seems happy, though, so I try not to be too negative. We sit on cardboard boxes and share a four-pack as a reward for our efforts and he remarks about how strangely things have worked out, considering how they looked at the start of the year. I try to remember the thoughts about my path but the finer details escape me and the best I can do is explain that I'm convinced things were always going to work out this way, regardless of any plans. Except, I tell him, I thought he'd be the one to cheat on her. He laughs and for the second time today, he agrees.

December 31st, 2009 – At Austin's

The year has minutes – maybe seconds – left to live. Looking around, I see enough familiar faces to feel like this used to be home. Toasts are raised to what's left of 2009 and I'm reminded it's also the end of a decade, maybe even the end of an era, and this, along with turning thirty, makes me feel old; too old to stay here. Big Ben starts his preamble when I whisper in Kerry's ear that I want to leave. She smiles and without asking why, she follows me outside. I suspect she knows.

As far as I can recall, it's always windy at the bells. Tonight, though, it's calm and the cloudless, speckled night sky allows a frost to shroud us while we sit on the car park wall. Fireworks trace above as 2010 makes its entrance and I'm reminded of shooting stars and then of my dad. Through the explosions, I end up talking about him and I mention his unfulfilled plan for the summer solstice. She says I should do that. She says we should both do that and reckons it would be great if everyone did it. We could start a trend. She laughs at my raised eyebrow and insists it would be fun to see where we end up and what adventures might be waiting for us there. The way she explains it makes me understand what I think the whole world's been trying to tell me and I shiver, but not from the cold.

A little later, we go back inside where once more the new year feels like it happened a long time ago. James and Claire are nursing soft drinks in separate corners of the bar with their halves of the usual mob. They glower while conversations happen around them. I'm not sure of the meaning of the smile I send to Claire. Maybe I'm apologising. Maybe I'm saying that none of us know what the next twelve months will bring. Either way, she manages to send a smile back. I haven't brought my camera with me tonight, so none of this is documented and if in years to come my kid decides that he or she needs to know what Daddy got up to on this particular Hogmanay, they're just going to have to take my word for it.

GAVIN BROOM lives in the Scottish countryside with his wife and his cat. He's had work published in Menda City Review, Bound Off, Espresso Fiction, flashquake and SFX amongst others. At time of writing, he doesn't own a house at the beach.

The Last Goodbye

Chantelle Aimée Osman

They said she was able to utter a few words before she died.

Of course that was just hypothetical, because, bored from our never-ending death vigil, we decided to blow the hospital and head for the nearest Starbucks. That white chocolate frappuccino tasted like heaven. Sweet blended heaven. I still regret that I dropped it when the nurse rushed by with the paddles. . . And that the doctor slipped in it, and slid into the EKG machine.

At least it saved us from making the decision to pull the plug.

CHANTELLE AIMÉE OSMAN is a mystery writer whose short stories and flash fiction have been published in anthologies and online. She is also one of the founding members of The Sirens of Suspense, a blog by a group of award-winning authors on all things writing and publishing (www.sirens ofsuspense.com). In her other life, she own a script consultation company (www.twistofkarma.com), and speaks to writing conferences nationwide about selling screenplays to Hollywood. Her non-fiction book on screenwriting, "Keys to the Kingdom," will be out in October.

The Old Man and the Shark

Tara King

An old man met a shark while swimming in the sea. He stopped swimming when he saw the dorsal fin, afraid of the teeth that could shake and tear his flesh, his blood a cloud in the wide blue waters. But the shark nuzzled the old man and said, "Hang on." The old man was startled, but grabbed the shark's dorsal fin before it swam away.

Vaslav tried to relax and let it pull his limp body through the warm water, feeling the lateral muscles contracting and stretching against him.

"What's your name?"

The shark's voice was dark, warm and scratchy, like dying embers.

"Vaslav. Yours?"

"Don't have one."

"You don't talk much," he said to the shark.

"I'm rusty. I get lonely with no one to talk to."

The shark laughed, the sound coming from deep underwater. Vaslav thought it sounded like a big dog barking.

The barking subsided. The shark said, "Are you feeling alright?"

Vaslav nodded and gasped, "Would you mind not swimming for a moment? I'm a bit dizzy."

"Can't. Not how we work, not even in our sleep."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

“There are worse ways to go.”

Vaslav nodded.

“Would you like to go back to the shore?”

The shark was dallying, swimming slowly in a tight zig-zag.

“No, I’m okay.” Vaslav’s heart beat very fast. He said, “When I was young, I could swim back from here.”

“I saw a man try that once. He swam out farther than anyone I ever saw and didn’t make it back.”

Vaslav said nothing for a long time as the shark swam. He thought of Betty, in the resort casino, playing the same Cleopatra slot machine she played at home. He invited her to swim with him, but she turned him down without looking away or taking her hand off the button.

Vaslav asked the shark, “Do you know about Cleopatra?”

“No.”

“She was a queen. She was the most beautiful woman who ever lived.”

“Why do you ask?”

“My wife, Betty—she thinks she was Cleopatra in a past life. She’s a very nice person. Maybe you’d like her.”

Vaslav thought of Betty, her curly grey hair straightened and dyed into a black broom of thinning hair. Once, maybe ten years back, Betty didn’t straighten it, and her dark curls reminded Vaslav of Sergei, whose naturally dark and curly hair bounced around his face while he conducted the orchestra. He loved to hear Sergei laugh during rehearsal. Vaslav told Betty he liked her hair better straight.

Vaslav looked in the nearest of the shark’s wide-set eyes.

“Would you like a name?”

“Sure.”

“How about Sergei?”

“Sergei. Okay. Why?”

Vaslav had memorized the lines of Sergei’s neck, the beds of his nails. The day Vaslav overheard that Sergei was engaged, he took a very long time to pack away his violin, keeping his head down and breathing shallowly so the rush of sorrow and envy he felt would not be seen in his face.

“It means *helper*.”

“Alright. Nice to meet you, Vasilav, my name is Sergei.”

The old man laughed as they swam. He could no longer see the shore. The light blue waters of the resort hotels had darkened. The streaming water soothed his sunburn.

Vaslav remembered a letter from Sergei’s wife. It smelled of wax and glue. She wrote that Sergei was found shot in the head in an alley. The letter was full of overwrought words and uneven handwriting. She claimed that Sergei was followed by men in dark coats and claimed it was all Vasilav's fault. He wondered if it was true.

“Vasilav, should I take you back?”

“No, Sergei. This is nice. Maybe I can come visit you again tomorrow.”

Sergei swam on with Vasilav clinging to him.

“You know, I can’t believe I’m doing this. I mean, this is a very unnatural situation. At any moment you could eat me, but I don’t feel scared,” Vasilav said.

“What?”

Vasilav hesitated.

“You’re a shark. I’m a human. Sharks like meat.”

“I don’t know what you mean, actually. I thought we were friends.” Sergei sounded upset. “I don’t eat my friends.”

Vaslav shifted his grip. “I’m sorry, I don’t mean anything by it. I was just thinking out loud.” He pulled himself in front of Sergei, looked down the shark’s nose. “Can I look at your teeth?”

Sergei opened his mouth wide and Vaslav saw rows of teeth in uneven, jagged beds. Vaslav saw shreds of rotting flesh flutter as water rushed across Sergei’s teeth. His arms were tired and he was very far from shore. His hands slipped from Sergei’s nose and he floundered.

Sergei gently caught Vaslav between his jaws. Vaslav felt teeth pricking; some punctured his skin and he began to bleed. Sergei closed his mouth around Vaslav’s belly, careful not to crush him, and headed towards the shore.

When Vaslav felt the teeth pricking on both sides of his torso, he became hysterical and tried to wrestle his way out of Sergei’s mouth. Sergei tasted the blood running from Vaslav’s back. He hurried as the taste of blood clouded his mind. He wanted to crush Vaslav, to tear his old soft flesh from his bones and to absorb the salt and iron of his blood, but instead he thought of Vaslav’s wife, Betty, and how she kept her hair like Cleopatra. Vaslav passed out.

As Sergei approached the beach, a man saw him and yelled. Soon everyone stood on the beach, watching the fin advance. They could see the figure of an old man lying prone in the shark’s jaws; blood streaked behind them, billowing out in the clear water.

Sergei continued swimming until his belly stuck on the sand. He could not see anyone with straight dark hair to her shoulders, neither Betty nor Cleopatra. He wondered why they had not come, when there were so many people screaming.

He opened his mouth and hoped Vaslav would wake up. He heard children crying and he became very afraid. Vaslav groaned. Two men in red shorts ran up; one had a long pole. Sergei tried to move backwards to deeper water, but he could not. One man in red shorts pushed the pole against Sergei's upper jaw and held his mouth open. The other man rushed in, nearly tripped, grabbed Vaslav and placed him on the sand.

Sergei writhed, struggling to get into the water. A woman gathered her children and ran away from the bleeding old man and the shark. The men in red shorts held their arms out and told everyone to stay back. A small cart drove up and a man in khaki pants got out.

"This one's a killer," he announced, as if he were in a movie. The audience murmured. He pulled a shotgun from the back of the golf cart. When the tourists moved far enough back, he took aim at Sergei, who was tired from carrying Vaslav and was slowly suffocating. Vaslav sat up. He could not remember the English word so in Russian he screamed, "Stop! Stop!" The young man in red shorts hushed him and held him still. Vaslav strained toward the panting shark and moaned, "Sergei, Sergei, not again, Sergei, I'm sorry."

TARA KING lives in Minneapolis, where she writes weird fiction, rides a weird bike and makes weird collaborative dance/theater pieces. In 2005, she did not minor in creative writing at Macalester College because she didn't fill out the necessary paperwork, even after taking the necessary classes. More recently Tara started a writing group where she tortures her writing friends on a twice-monthly basis.

Family Tree

Brian Long

Joe was enjoying his day off from work – which, thanks to unemployment, was every day. Cracking open a beer, he plopped onto his lumpy, pea green couch which made him feel warm like a lover’s embrace. He stared at his broken television, which he had temporarily repaired by pasting a picture of a red-headed centerfold model over the screen. The theme for that issue was “Working Women” and the model was a veterinarian with an impractically short skirt who was giving a shot to an injured tortoise. Just as Joe was getting comfortable, a flash of light suddenly filled the room. When the flash faded, a young boy, who looked to be about fifteen years old, was standing in the middle of a circular burn on the carpet. He wore an all white jumpsuit and a pair of oversized green goggles. The boy lifted the goggles above his head. The boy had the same untamable curly hair and brown eyes that Joe had.

“Are you Joseph Peoples?” the boy asked.

“Y-yes,” Joe replied, “who are you?”

“Are you sure?” the boy asked with a disappointed tone.

“Yeah, who are you?”

The boy took a look around the room; he observed the discoloration of the carpet caused by Joe’s carelessness while eating. The stains were a visual timeline of everything Joe had eaten since he first purchased the rug. From the two large sausage and veal pizzas to the spilled box of wine that left a stain which slightly resembled the Dali Lama.

“That one totally looks like the Dali Lama right?” Joe asked the young man.

“Oh, this sucks!”

The boy threw the goggles onto the ground and kicked them towards the couch. Joe picked up the goggles which had landed next to him and read the label on the strap.

“Toronto Time Travel Institute?” he said.

The boy snatched the goggles away from him.

“Yes, you Neanderthal, time travel,” he said, placing the goggles back onto his head. “I’m supposed to be doing a report on our family history and THIS is what I find. I’m going to get an ‘F.’”

“You could probably get at least a ‘C’...” Joe replied, slightly hurt by this temporally misplaced adolescent.

“No, no, I couldn’t, you’re a slob,” the boy said.

“Hey... It’s my day off,” Joe said.

“Really,” the boy said, “and what exactly do you do for a living?”

“I sell hubcaps.”

“Where do you get the hubcaps?”

Joe looked down at his gut as it rose and fell with each breath.

“I steal them...”

“That’s what I thought,” said the boy as he pressed a few buttons on his oversized watch.

“Wait, are you leaving?” Joe asked.

“Yes, why?”

“I dunno, I thought you would tell me some stuff about the future.”

“I’m legally not supposed to, but you know what? You seem to be such a brainless dolt I don’t think telling you anything about events to come would damage the time-stream at all. There are flying skateboards in my future and they are all reasonably priced!”

“Oh man,” Joe said, “that’s awesome!”

“And if my calculations are correct, you die the day before they are released to the public,” the boy said. He finished typing on the keyboard and the room began to fill with the white light again. “God, I really hope my great grandparents are more interesting; although since they were spawned by YOU, I’m not going to hold my breath.”

The boy disappeared in another blinding flash. Joe began to take stock of his life. He looked around his ruined apartment. He had no job, no girlfriend, and no mature adult relationships with anyone. And then it hit him. Judging from what that kid said – and after he had looked up the definition of the word “spawning,” just to make sure he understood him correctly – Joe knew, sooner or later, he was totally going to get laid.

Like I Wasn't There

Adam Gilmour

Thud.

It's 4 a.m.

Thud thud thud.

It's around my head, reverberating off the bed frame: the heavy bass thump, beating away. The rhythm comes in slow, inconsistent blows, making me guess. Each beat thuds and then lingers, like methodical punches, delivered with relish. With satisfaction.

It's 4 a.m.

I have to be awake in four hours.

At 4:15 a.m., I shall go and complain.

The shelf above the bed, a thick wooden plank, fixed to the wall of this apartment which I cannot afford, only accentuates the vibrations. I sit up to listen: the thudding is still there, but it is quieter. I fall back against my pillow and I am being beaten up again. I try lying the other way, with my feet towards the bed head. This means re-placing pillows, and turning around the duvet. Once I am rearranged, I am even more awake.

I lie here in this alien position, trying to get comfortable. My alarm clock is on the bedside table, next to where my feet now are. The room looks different from here. I know that when I open my eyes in the morning, I won't recognise this new scenery and, even if only momentarily, I will panic:

Where am I?

Here I am.

I must somehow try to sleep while knowing this.

I lie still. I listen. The music's still there. Just quiet enough to ignore if I was asleep already. Just loud enough to be irritating now that I'm awake.

It's 4:05 a.m. In ten minutes I shall go and complain.

I try to think what Chloe might have meant earlier on in the night when she said, as she knocked back yet another fluorescent shot, that I needed to get out more. I get out enough. Just because I had left them all to it when they decided to move from the Black Dog to Lloyd's doesn't mean I'm socially challenged does it? I don't go in for all that Hard House, all that dancing they have in Lloyd's. I get enough of that when I go to bed at night.

A comfortable position seems just out of reach because I know that lying this way is unnatural and malodorous: my face is where my feet normally are, and five inches away from my head is the laundry basket. Why should I have to lie like this? Every bed I have slept in, I have always slept with my head towards the wall. Nobody sleeps like this.

I have to sit up to see the clock.

4:07 a.m.

I wonder when they work. To be able to do this, five, six nights a week. How do they pay their rent? I think it's a couple. It sounds like a couple. I saw the guy once. He had a number two cut and a gym bag. He was strolling down the corridor to his door, phone trapped between a craned head and hunched shoulder. I was on my way out. I locked my door, tried pushing it to be sure, once, twice, like I always do. I

looked up and made to nod at him as he went past, but he just carried on and let himself in, like I wasn't there, swearing at someone down his phone in calm disbelief.

No. No you fucking didn't. Never.

I think I can see the first tinges of dull daylight coming in through the open blinds. Outside, black is changing to dark blue.

It's no good. I can't position myself. I re-rearrange the bed, putting everything back the way it was. I can't deal with the thought of that momentary morning shock. Back to the Thud... Thud...

4:09 a.m. Six minutes. They might stop in that time.

No! No you fucking never!

How would I phrase it? He wouldn't be above telling me to where to go if I got it wrong. I'd have to be careful, not too aggressive, not too meek. Don't stutter. Don't shake. Deep voice. I can feel myself hyperventilating already.

Chloe should be home by now. I feel like I should message her and see if she got back okay, but then that might seem like I'm caving in. Her friends had probably spent the last five hours saying things about me because of the way I left. I had every right to be abrupt. The way she and Craig were sidling up to each other in the pub. Why stick around? I guess that must be allowed when you start something with someone and agree not to tell your friends right away. Craig doesn't know that I have a right to be pissed off at him.

Hi, you alright. Sorry to bother you, but I was just wondering if you could turn your music down a bit? 'Sorry to bother you?' That won't wash. I'm not sorry to bother them. I'm fucking sorry they've bothered me, and they should be sorry too.

4:13 a.m. Two minutes.

Alright, mate. Do you reckon you could turn it down a bit?

I'll have to say it loud. I can't let him say 'what?' and make me repeat it. I'll stumble if I have to repeat it. Say it once, say it loud. Say it sharp.

4:14 a.m.

I will text Chloe. She might feel bad about tonight. Then, that'll give her an opening to text back.

You get back okay?

That's it. Keep it simple. I want to know that she's back safe, but I'm still pissed off.

Send.

4:15 a.m.

I hope she replies. I'll only worry more if she doesn't.

I knock. I am even more awake now that I am semi-dressed in hoody and cargo trousers. No answer. I knock again. I'm trembling but I try to stifle it, breathe normally. No matter how I stand in the corridor, my limbs feel awkward and heavy. I put my ear to the door. Waves of bass strike against it, rattling it in its frame. They can't hear me over the music. I knock again, louder. I wait.

4:21 a.m.

Chloe hasn't replied.

The heavy beat still thumps away, vibrating off the bed frame.

At 4:30 a.m., I'll try knocking again.

Nine minutes.

They might stop in that time.

ADAM GILMOUR, 27, lives in Manchester, England. He is currently studying for an MA Creative Writing at Manchester University. He tries to have a varied taste in literature and reading, but generally leans towards John Wyndham, J.G. Ballard and Chuck Palahniuk as favourites. When not writing or studying or reading, he spends most nights working behind the bar of a Japanese restaurant. You can find him at nothatwouldbetooeasy.blogspot.com.

Pulling Feathers Off A Phoenix

Rich Mallery

Leonard Gold was always barking about shutting down the Overlook. At least once a fiscal quarter he'd waddle through the front door in his scratchy over-sized suit, shadowed by a pair of New York's finest. That weasel would snatch the Bic out of his mouth and tap the chewed end on his clipboard, shaking his tiny head in disgust.

"No, no, no," he'd mutter. He'd shake his head more and dandruff flakes would settle on his sunken shoulders. Although his suit hadn't once been dry-cleaned and his Payless pair had never been shined, the fuzzy horseshoe of hair on his head was always neatly trimmed. He'd run a sweaty hand through it and then shove it in his front pocket, clanking together a fistful of dimes. "My supervisors are not going to like this."

He'd turn and staple an official-looking sheet of government paper by the front door and that would be that. The last time this happened someone shot a spit ball at his head. It smacked into the splotchy bald center of his scalp. He was too timid to turn and face the culprit, of course. Instead, he slouched forward and hunchbacked his way outside. Even after the state-issued sedan door slammed shut behind him, a trail of his dollar store deodorant lingered in our nostrils.

But this time Leonard meant business. With about a dozen uniforms, Leonard stampeded through the front door determined. He waved a handful of documents and squealed, using his authority as vengeance for years of being shoved into high school lockers.

The Overlook had been a safe haven for runaways like me for over a decade. But last week after a socialite overdosed and was photographed by paparazzi exiting on a stretcher, our group was third page news complete with the mayor's vow to take immediate action.

Although the letters had fallen off the façade a generation ago, the Overlook was once the glorious Gold Lion Hotel. Every now and then someone brave would explore the upper floors and discover some yellowed stationary or piss-soaked towel branded with the ostentatious lion's head. Back in its glory days, the Gold Lion was overflowing with musicians and movie stars. The only difference now was that then the loiterers were Hollywood's darlings; now the ones that partied here were washed-up train-wrecks who couldn't even get cast on a reality show.

The five-story crash I called home for two years went by many names: Hell House, Paradise Lost, Amityville Horror, but to my crew it was the Overlook. It had no resemblance to the infamous hotel from *The Shining*, but that didn't stop us from inventing wild stories about a psychopathic bellhop who axed the entire third floor and shoved their limbs down the laundry chute. To which many open mouths would gasp, "Really?"

No. While there were scores of scandalous rumors about why the Gold Lion closed its giant metal doors for the last time, the truth was nowhere near as exciting; the neighborhood simply went to hell and business disappeared.

Since that tragic day in 1974, The Overlook had been condemned, forgotten about, and condemned again. It was an eyesore on a block full of eyesores, in a part of town that double-decker tour buses avoided. To an outsider the neighborhood was a lawless mess, with syringes sparkling on the sidewalk and junkies smiling rotten on

every corner. But for those of us with nowhere else to go, the only danger we feared was falling through the decaying floorboards on the Overlook's upper levels.

Fortunately, most people never saw past the lobby. That was where the real desperate crashed. Lumpy shapes squirmed underneath army blankets around the perimeter. Every now and then cigarette lighters would blink in sync, unleashing an addicts' concerto of bubbling liquid and wheezing exhales.

The walls were once sunflower yellow, but the paint had long ago chipped away, leaving behind grey cloud-shaped scars. The floor tiles had all been sold, and if you didn't step quickly, your sneakers would stick to the concrete. The whole room could be doused in bleach and would still harbor enough pathogens to shut down your insides. I can still taste the thick, burning plastic stench that would sting your throat if you lingered too long.

But once you made it past the dropouts, the place really wasn't that tragic. There were about thirty of us who officially called The Overlook home. Most of the hallways were piled deep by garbage, but the East Wing was off limits to everyone but us. Grandpa Joe, who lived at the end of the main hall, made sure we kept our spaces straight. He wasn't really a grandfather (at least not that I was aware of), but he'd lived here the longest. He spoke slowly, with a crunchy, matter of fact voice, and his face was scarred by enough prison tattoos to make him intimidating to even the hardest. But as long as you were straight with him, and didn't cause any drama, you were more than welcome to stay as long as you wanted.

The fact that my father left on my ninth birthday was entirely a coincidence, but that didn't stop Teresa for blaming me. My dad and her had been clawing at each other since the moment they met, but in her mind I was the catalyst that sent the love of her life's face between the legs of his twenty-year-old secretary.

So when Seth, the bottle-nosed accountant she was balling, decided he wasn't going to leave his wife and kids after all, the fault rested solely on yours truly. I was also the reason that the Arabs who ran the corner store didn't take her bad checks, the reason she overslept for work three times a week, and the reason her father died of lung cancer.

Seth had given her the "it's not you, it's me" speech on a Sunday. Two Thursdays later, she was still shoulder deep in a pill coma, sunk into the couch with her crusty pink bathrobe tied loosely around her waist. A Camel burned past the filter between her knuckles as she stared into her blackened reflection on the television screen.

If it weren't for the grating sound of her teeth grinding every time Bartleby, the schnauzer owned by the Russian's next door, barked, you would've sworn she was a wax statue. Teresa swore they left that dog outside to mess with her sanity. She was never able to understand that the whole world wasn't against her.

I'd seen her crumble before. This catatonic episode was nothing new. Her cheeks were perpetually stained by eyeliner tears. If her nails weren't dull, yellow stubs, she would've drawn blood from fanatically scratching at her neck. As far back as I could remember, she was a pathetic mess who refused to leave the couch. But unfortunately for Teresa, the breakup with Seth was one of those last-straw-type of disasters.

The last night my mother and I were both under the same roof, I was rolling a joint on my Geometry text book. My fingers were stubby so it often took me at least four attempts to craft anything that didn't canoe. This time I was ready to give up when her screaming shattered the silence.

I rushed to the window in time to see her thrashing Bartleby around the neighbor's yard by his chain. His body limply thudded on the ground behind her, trembling as it got stuck behind a potted plant. My mom gave the chain an abrupt jerk and toppled the planter over, spilling a landslide of dirt onto the concrete.

On the front porch, the Russians shrieked and shook their fists. My mom's bathrobe loosened and exposed her skeletal, naked body. But instead of covering her shame, she let the robe fall to the ground and, gripping the chain with both fists, swung Bartleby in a circle around her. His tiny body scraped pinkish chunks all over the driveway. By the time police arrived, Bartleby was road kill.

It took three officers to shove my mother into a black and white. The forth crouched down so he was at my eye level and rested his stony hand on my shoulder. In an emotionless voice, he asked if I had any immediate family I could call.

I didn't, so I did what any teenager would've done. I lied.

I dialed a random number and held my breath until someone answered.

"Hey dad, it's me."

"Who's this?"

"There's been an incident with mom. Can I stay with you till everything gets sorted out?"

"Is this a joke?"

"Great. I'll be there in a half hour."

"Go to hell."

“Thanks. I’m on my way.”

Long story short, instead of going to St. Jude’s Youth House, I went to a punk show at Coney Island High. That’s where I met Lek.

Lek (pronounced Lake) was the most striking girl I’d ever seen. Even though she always hid her face behind oversized plastic sunglasses, or underneath the brim of a dusty baseball cap, she couldn’t step off the subway without some pervert in a business suit stalking her. This drove her mental and she did everything imaginable to hide her appearance. She wore thrift store t-shirts that fit like dresses and rhine-stoned her winter trench coat with multi-colored sucking candies. She even smeared tar under her eyes instead of eye-shadow. Anything to keep horny boys from staring holes into her flesh.

It didn’t matter though. Regardless of how down she dressed, she always held the room’s undivided attention. Even when we were starving, her wicked smile would light up your insides and you’d be magnetized to the circle surrounding her.

Lek left Phuket for America when she was seven. Any memories of her native neighborhood were fogged out, but she could remember every detail of the closet-sized room that she shared with her parents and her baby sister Ai when they first came to New York. She could still taste the peanuty Thai food from her uncle’s restaurant bleeding through the floor below her. All she had to do was close her eyes and she could feel the creaky floorboards on her chest, and Ai clutching a handful of her hair as she tried to sleep, the snapping of rat traps jerking her out of a nightmare.

Her uncle was a degenerate alcoholic who owed a small fortune in gambling debts. When things hit rock bottom, he had someone torch the restaurant. Unfortunately when the cocktails started crashing through the front window, Lek and her family were sleeping upstairs.

Lek only told me this story once, but I could visualize it as if it were my own memory. Her parents were also drunks and it took Lek several minutes of screaming and tugging to pull them back into consciousness. She coughed burning smoke in their faces, pleading for them to wake up. When they finally came to, Lek's father dragged her under his arm outside into safety. Lek screamed for him to put her down and grab Ai but he was still too battered from the night before to listen. By the time he realized he had forgotten Ai in the doorway of their apartment, she had already suffocated from the smoke.

A fireman carried out a charred body covered in a soot-covered blanket and placed it on the curb. Her mother fell to her knees in hysterics. She even tried to run back into the burning building. Before she could even get close, Lek's father pinned her shoulders to the sidewalk and drooled tears on her face.

Despite all this, Lek hid her demons well, always charging headfirst into the outside world. Tick and Dutch were another story altogether. When Lek first introduced me to them I couldn't imagine what the three of them had in common. Lek was tiny and Tick towered behind her, protectively clutching her shoulders. He moved slow, and thought even slower. Even his facial ticks were sluggish. When he was nervous, his whole face would scrunch forward and his left eye would squeeze shut. It would take a lifetime before it reopened and his face turned back into the blank block it normally was.

Dutch was his complete opposite. He dusted pills by the handful and stretched his slurry sentences into one another so that they flowed like endless word salad. Embarrassed by his lack of height, he walked on his toes and compensated for his skinny frame by covering his body in layers, sometimes wearing four shirts at a time.

We were all misfits in our own ways, and bonded almost immediately. The night I met them, a fight broke out during one of the band's sets. After a skinhead sucker-punched Dutch in the jaw, I threw him to the ground and Lek immediately stomped her boot into his face. While security sorted out the chaos, we snuck out the exit and met at a diner up the block.

We tightened over stale coffee and without hesitation they invited me to crash with them at The Overlook. Tick was an expert at electronics and the bedroom they shared was overflowing with broken appliances and televisions he was fixing to sell so they didn't have extra room, but it didn't matter. The three of them took turns double-sleeping on a flat inflatable mattress that was stuffed with cardboard and newspaper. Their floor was actually more comfortable, since in place of carpet they had stapled sweaters to the floor. Two weeks later I joined them in stealing clothes from the Goodwill box to replace the ones that were starting to stink.

The first night, Lek slept on the floor beside me. We'd just met, but still her arm draped around my shoulder like I was hers. It took three nights before I was able to sleep, but that first night I savored feeling her body close to mine, her warm breath massaging the back of my neck.

We had only run a few blocks before we had to stop and let Tick catch up. Light buckets of snow tumbled wet on our faces. We weren't being chased, but a desire burned in our stomachs to put as much distance between ourselves and The Overlook as possible. We could've loitered outside, kicking the curb, watching police shove the disoriented campers into shiny vans, but there was always a chance our presence would've drawn attention and we would've ended up amongst them, choking on their sour body odor on the way to the precinct.

"I gotta quit smoking," Tick wheezed. He coughed into his palm and spit a chunk of black phlegm on the sidewalk. He spread it out with the sole of his workboot.

Tiny white specks sparkled in Lek's hair. She stuck out her tongue and let snow drift on top of it. From three feet away I could already see her delicate lips starting to chap.

"So now what?" Dutch asked.

I stared at the ground, my mind blank. Usually I was the one with the solutions. But this time, I had no plan whatsoever about our future. A taxi driver blurted his horn as traffic swelled behind us. I tucked my hands under my sweatshirt and rubbed them together for warmth. An unforgiving breeze stung the wet spots on the back of my neck where the snow had melted.

"My cousin might have room for one of you," Tick offered. "He lives over by St. Marks. Lek, you interested?"

Tick was harmless, but his constant flirting with Lek had started draining even her. She had the patience and compassion of a saint, but lately she didn't have the strength to ignore him. Tick thought if he persisted eventually he'd break down her walls enough to slide between her legs, but in reality it was only a matter of time

before she exploded rage in his face. She squeezed her fists until they turned burnt sienna.

“I have a few dollars,” I added, hoping to defuse the situation. “We can lurk in a Starbucks till closing.”

“Is there a bookstore around here?” Tick asked. “They’re usually open until at least eleven. We can hang for awhile and when they close Lek and I can go to my cousins. Maybe you two can meet an art student to crash with.”

“I know a place,” Lek smiled. “In Queens. It’s nothing special, but it’s four walls and a roof. At least there we’ll all be together.”

“Sounds perfect,” I answered.

“My cousin’s a douche anyway.” Tick kicked at a paper fast food wrapper tumbling in front of him. We all knew he was tortured by her constant rejection and if we weren’t freezing we would’ve stopped to sympathize. His failure to move on was pathetic, but Tick was family, no matter how much of a loser he was. Besides, its not like Dutch or I were any closer to scoring with her.

Lek hooked her arm around mine and led us to the nearest subway. The train was empty except for a snoring bum and the lack of distractions smacked the horrible truth across our faces. We were now officially homeless.

“This is us,” Lek shouted over the squealing brakes. The subway screeched to an abrupt stop and we lumbered off into a warm wall of piss and curry. I held my breath until we were up the stairs and back outside. Even as we exhaled, Lek wore a face that was sucked dry of emotion, as if she were a statue, a robot following her programming to guide us from point A to point B.

“Tomorrow, we’re going winter coat shopping,” Dutch shivered. This meant that we were sneaking inside Crunch Fitness and walking out with whatever people left on the hangers.

The sun had already set and the newly dark sky shoved winter onto us. It was still early, but almost every one of the neighborhood shops were locked down, with metal, graffiti-covered grates hiding their insides. The snowfall had stopped but a thin layer of powder was dusted over the ground. As cars passed they kicked a spray of wet behind them.

Lek led us a few blocks down to a row of abandonments. In the center covered a burned out shell of a building. Lek snuck to the front window and shoved the metal obstruction blocking it to the side. She crawled in and signaled with her fingers to follow.

“That looks safe,” Tick complained. Dutch and I agreed, but without hesitation we climbed in after her.

Lek flipped open a Zippo and held the flame over a pile of old newspapers in the corner. They were damp, but after a few minutes the stack was burning bright. Flickering light filled the room as the paper crackled. Tick tumbled through the window, landing with a deep thud.

“What the hell happened here?” he blurted. A foot-long rat scampered past us into a pile of rusted metal.

“A fire,” Lek answered. “Once upon a time someone started a fire.”

“Obvious,” Tick said. Giant Rorschach patterns stained the ceiling black. The walls were a mess of melted plastic and chipped paint. Although the fire appeared to have happened years ago, the room still held the stink of soot.

“Lek,” I said, “This isn’t—”

I couldn't finish the sentence. Lek's eyes were normally deep brown, but as the orange glow of flames danced below her, her pupils burned the darkest shade of black. She sniffled and nodded her head.

"This isn't what?" Tick interrupted.

"Forget it," I shouted. I turned to face her. "Why'd you bring us here?"

"I don't know," she said. She dragged her fingers down the wall and winced. "I've never come back, you know. I have nightmares that I come back and my sister's spirit is still here. Trapped. She's always crying. I never know what to do so I run away. Only usually my legs are moving in slow motion and I can't run."

"What is this shithole?" Tick asked.

"It used to be a restaurant," Lek answered. She knelt and fanned her palms on the floor, as if she were feeling for a pulse.

"Waitress, I ordered that burger medium rare," Tick chuckled.

"I'm sorry," I said. "He doesn't know."

"Don't be," she snapped back. "He didn't start it."

"Start what?"

"The fire, douchebag," Dutch huffed. He knew Lek's story well. He was the one who found her in hysterics wandering around Washington Square Park. That was when she was fifteen and came home from school to find a scribbled note from her parents saying they had moved back to Thailand. "You are slower than syrup."

Lek tiptoed over the pile of garbage in front of the staircase. Most of the steps were missing, but Lek's eyes followed them into the darkness, nodding her head as if she were answering an imaginary question.

"What really hurts the most," she started, pausing to regain her composure. She pulled her hair tight behind her and knotted it in a tail. "Was that I was supposed to

take care of her. My mom, dad, they were whatever. But me, I was her sister. Me. Lek. I was the one who needed to protect her. I should've just grabbed her and ran. I don't know why I was expecting them to do anything. It's not like they even noticed Ai other than to bitch about having to feed her."

I stepped behind her and rubbed a circle on the back of her sweatshirt. There was nothing I could do to comfort her, but I needed to let her know she wasn't alone. I grabbed her shoulders and tried to drag her into a hug.

"It's not your fault," I said.

"One thing I've learned in life," she huffed, pulling away, "is that blame doesn't mean fuck all. Things happen regardless, no matter how good or how bad a person you are. You can start a million fires, burn a million children to a fucking crisp and at the end of the day, the sun still rises in the morning and sets in the evening. You can still enjoy the taste of a steak, or the lips of your wife. Giving a shit is so pointless."

"I think we all need to drop out," Dutch said, squatting against the wall. He pulled out a prescription jar and tapped several pills into his palm. He placed them in a plastic crusher and twisted the top. "Lek, you down?"

"I don't think that's a smart idea," I said. "We need to find a place to stay before it gets too late."

"Yeah," Tick added. "We can't stay here."

"Why not?" Dutch argued. "It's not the plaza, but after a bump or two you won't give a damn."

"I guess," Tick muttered.

"I'll pass," I said. Lek ignored the conversation and paced further away from the light. A shadow draped over everything but her right arm.

“Looks like it’s just you and I.” Dutch grabbed Tick’s wrist and rolled up his sleeve. “Now let’s order room service.” The two of them disappeared into a dark corner. Lek collapsed on her knees and started crying.

“In my culture, a spirit can’t rest until they’re given a proper funeral. Monks have to chant and gifts have to be given or else the spirit suffers.” Lek’s watery eyes stared through me. A reflection of the flame flickered white in her irises. “My parents didn’t offer anything. They were too busy swinging at each other to even think about Ai and now, she’s suffering. She’s tortured.”

“What can we do to help her?” I asked. I didn’t believe in spirits or ghosts, but Lek did and that was enough to make them real to me. I imagined Ai reaching out her tiny hands, screaming for help.

“We need to give her something pure. Something beautiful to let her know that she’s loved. We have to show her that there’s nothing to fear and that soon we’ll be together again.”

“Wait here,” I said. Lek wasn’t listening. She was in her own world, mumbling under her breath. Her body convulsed, unable to cope with the pain throbbing in her guts. “I’ll be right back.”

I rushed outside into the darkness. I almost lost my footing on the wet concrete turning the corner and luckily I was able to grab onto a mailbox or else I would’ve cracked my head open on the sidewalk.

The freezing wind carved notches into my lungs, but I didn’t stop until I found a storefront that wasn’t boarded up. It was a florist, and inside beautiful bouquets and arrangements sat behind the giant window. I flipped over the garbage pail on the corner, looking for anything I could use to smash the glass. I tore through plastic and

paper bags until I found a chunk of metal the size of a baseball. The alarm blared as I fired it into the store.

I leapt inside and grabbed as many flowers as I could carry. Before anyone came to investigate I raced back to Lek. My ears, still ringing from the piercing shrill of the alarm, felt as if they were about to explode. When I climbed through the window, Lek was still on the floor, rocking as if she were in a trance.

“Here,” I said, placing the flowers on the floor in front of her. “I don’t know any monk chants or prayers, but these are for Ai. Can you let her know they’re for her?”

Lek’s face was covered in shadow, but a tear faintly sparkled as it trailed down her cheek. She grabbed my hand and pulled me down to my knees. Her grip was weak, but still a glow passed from her flesh to mine.

“Thank you,” she whispered. “Ai thanks you.”

“Anytime. I wish there was more that I could do.”

“Stay with me. Tonight, stay with us. Tomorrow we can go find someplace else to crash, but tonight, we need to be here with Ai.”

“Of course. I can stay as long as you need to. Just let me know.”

“Thank you.”

Lek rested her head on my shoulder. The flames started to fade out, teasing us with random flashes of light. The paper crackled weakly as it dissolved into ash. Every few seconds I heard a tear drop gently on the ground beside me. Dutch sniffled. Tick scratched the crotch of his jeans. Another rat scurried across the floor. Lek hummed a melody I’d never heard before. I closed my eyes and listened until the only sound left was the ringing in my ears.

RICH MALLERY stays pale in the summer, prefers pencils to pens and is easily distracted by ice storms. He refuses to look both ways before he crosses the street, colors outside the lines and dreams about living in a post-apocalyptic world. He writes every free second he has. He writes on walls, the stack of bills on his dresser, his arms- anything that has room for words. Although he deeply loves the city of New York where he's from, if the boroughs started burning, he wouldn't stop dancing.

Rich is currently a writer for Fangoria Magazine and has been published in several literary journals including Evergreen Review, Metal Scratches, 10,000 tons of Black Ink, Foliate Oak, and Drops of Crimson.