

VOLUME THREE:

The Horrific



Volume 3

Hi everyone!

We're more than delighted to present to you all our third volume, *The Horrific*: a volume of all things horrifying, from haunted houses to strange threats to existential ponderings. Each piece submitted to us was delightfully scary in its own way, and we had a marvelous time curating this volume.

Heartfelt thanks must be given to our readers, our submitters, and our contributors--without you all, this volume would not be here today. With all that said, we now invite you to turn down the lights, grab your favourite Halloween snack, and join us on this spooky journey.

The Ilinix staff

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Mask

Andrew Laguna

Andrew Laguna is an American artist from Orange County, CA who's artwork is inspired by Horror movies, Metal/ Hard Rock music, & Horror literature.

Septicemia

Samir Sirk Morató

“The first thing God made is love / then comes blood / and the thirst
for blood”

—George Seferis. Translated by Edmund Keeley; Philip Sherrard
from “Stratis Thalassinós among the Agapanthi.”

A house can be leprous.

The house on 493 Hampton Knob Lane is. Fading dapples its brown
paint. Loose shingles litter its roof. Its remaining blinds—lashes—
sag from melting windows.

Toadstools fester beneath where the house wet itself: its gutters are
broken. You don't need to enter to know there's black mold. No
matter how sweet the dogwoods smell, they cannot camouflage the
stench of architectural incontinence.

The flood in '43 killed many healthier houses while only wounding
this one. Now the two-story house sets off its foundation, bowing
in the middle, its back broken.

Beneath the squirrel chatter and jay laughs there lies the constant
snapping of boards, grain by grain, as it dies a century-long death.
You know this because the woods have stopped speaking. You can
hear it.

There is nothing more dangerous than a crippled house.

Though it's never had a lawn, you notice that the house's hairline has receded.

Mom used to whip you in the clearing outside as sunbeams and blood blasted the switchgrass. Now Mom molders elsewhere, and car skeletons made of tetanus clutter the once-clearing. Blighted chestnut trees crane in from every direction. Sun and space are scarce.

You wade through snarled briars as you struggle to the porch. The walkway made of tree cookies from the 1800s sawmill is gone. Rotted out like so many blackened nail beds. Possums eaten to the wrist and beer bottle cysts in the undergrowth lead the way instead.

The porch moans when you step on it. It cannot bear your weight; it does. You disregard the crumbling wicker chairs and look up. The roof of the house's mouth drips haint blue. It did even when your great-grandmother was a child. Ironic that this has lasted. No spirit would want in here. Even the mean-ass men who shot boys at Blair Mountain bounce after death.

You fumble with a cigarette. Times are hard. Daddy is deservedly abscessing in a second-rate nursery home. Your six siblings are all free, and seeking financial boons bigger than what a fenced catalytic converter can give them.

This house is worthless. The land isn't. If you don't sell it, a sibling will. It's fortunate that Daddy has nothing but dementia on his mind. His rambles about historical value can't encumber you anymore. He ceded the property deed without question.

You puff a cloud into the false sky. Morbid curiosity, not love, compels you to jimmy the lock. You ought to see this shithole one last time. Survivors need proof they've survived, else they're ghosts in denial. All the tallymarks you carved into your closet door must mean something.

Septicemia

The house reeks of crawling neglect. Termite damage scours the supports; water damage consumes the carpet's last threads. The ceiling swells downwards into the living room. Furniture tilts towards the caving floor. Electrical wires, input long after the house's genesis, droop from the ceiling in vulgar arcs.

It's worse than you remember. What a relief, to have the present dwarf the past. Your condemned recollections can stay condemned.

HOW DARE YOU COME HERE, the house says.

It speaks through its ulcers. Through the cancerous air and countless rat carcasses weighing its crawlspaces. The animosity stuns you. You hated this house but the loathing was never mutual.

Nor was the conversation.

Why do you hate me? You startle.

WHY DID YOU HATE ME?

The house festers. Its collapsing frame groans. The door shutting behind you is of less concern than the slime pulsating beneath the floorboards. A wet cough builds in this place without lungs. Plaster oozes from patches.

Septicemia

From wounded memories of folks who said they'd do better re-punching their parents; holes in the walls. From sepsis on sepsis on sepsis.

You sense your old bedroom above you, laden with shredded insulation and shotgun-ended dreams from two generations before you. Tally marks itch below your skin. Sweat beads on your brow.

Leprosy comes from the outside.

You're a bad house. You pinch your cigarette between trembling fingers.

The house's scream is that of fracturing wood and crashing cinder blocks. That of a cat with a fractured spine yowling as it writhes away from the tire that ruined it. It is afraid, and disabled, and it is disability—not kindness—that prevented it from acting all those years.

SO ARE YOU.

It's spitting up childhood dead dogs in the brush. It's tearing its floral skin from your bedroom walls. It's clamping its mold-lined teeth on its veins and spraying itself across the floor. Onto your feet.

Septicemia

LOOK AT ME, the house demands. YOU SPORE. YOU INFECTION. It cannot call you its child or its invader because it has never birthed anything, or known enough boundaries to be assaulted: it was built to be inhabited by outsiders. The front door came with keys.

You always took that for granted.

I HELD YEARS OF YOU INSIDE ME. YOU BRUISED ME BEFORE I COULD BE BRUISED. BEFORE I KNEW DECIMATION COULD EXIST IN MY BLUEPRINT. I DID NOT KNOW CONTENTMENT UNTIL YOU TAUGHT ME THE OPPOSITE.

The house knows your line means to end it in a way meant for objects yet not a thread of self-preservation teeters on its foundation. You kneel because standing is more threatening. Roach wings, necrosis, and shame keep you there.

You think of the first time a parent's touch harmed you. How the pain doled from a body you once lived in did not first register as pain because of its alienness. However you've harmed others in the wake of that event doesn't matter. You're as faultless and clean as the BB bullets you fired into your sobbing youngest sibling's door decades ago. Everyone in the chain is.

Septicemia

I didn't mean no harm, you say.

The house's maw opens beneath you.

I DO, it says.

**Samir Sirk Morató is a scientist and artist that loves
haunted houses.**

The Fifth House on Lavender Road

Rosie Forest

Rosie lives in London, studying for a BA in Creative Writing, and exploring all things witchy and romantic.

Everyone had warned me about the fifth house on Lavender Road.

When I was seven years old, at my first ever sleepover, we sat in a giddy circle, practically vibrating with electricity as my best friend held a torch against her chin. From her glowing, cavernous mouth spilled stories of ghosts, longing, love. *Never step foot into the fifth house on Lavender Road*, Layla had concluded, voice ringing with charismatic pride, *they'll steal you from the world*.

When I was nine, I asked my mother about it. Why the bricks seemed to be crumbling to ash, why the plants had grown into a contained woodland between houses four and six, why no one came and went through the peeling door. *Never step foot into the fifth house on Lavender Road*, my mother told me, *it's haunted by loss*.

When I was twelve, a few friends thought themselves brave, and broke into the house on All Hallows Eve. Max and David. Two boys who were known as the class clowns and would go to any length to make someone laugh or to embarrass a teacher.

Chauvinistic before they even reached their teen years. The police found them, hours later, crying on the back porch until their eyes looked as though they might drip bloodied tears for the rest of their lives. *Never step foot into the fifth house on Lavender Road*, David said in a vacant whisper, *I fear I'll never leave*.

The Fifth House on Lavender Road

My girlfriend is missing.

Perhaps I should have started with that.

We had been together for five years after meeting at university, and it had been an instant connection. Within one year, we lived together. After three, we returned to my hometown to be with my father in his passing months, and never left. Something about the provincial life brought both of us elements of joy and peace. Our little jobs, our cat, our neighbourhood where everyone smiled at one another and gossiped behind their backs- it was something out of a movie.

An engagement ring lived in my bedside drawer. I wanted forever with her. But we didn't even make it to six years.

Last Wednesday, she told me she was going for a drive to clear her mind. Her job at the café had run her down, and she needed to just see something other than the six walls of our flat in town. I hadn't been offended. We all need space sometimes.

When she didn't return that night, I'd assumed she'd visited a friend and fallen asleep. Perhaps Olivia- they were always drinking red wine and falling asleep on the sofa.

When she didn't return by Thursday evening, I wondered if she had left me. If the trunk of her car was full of suitcases and clothing.

But then, our cat called out something that sounded a little too much like her name, and I knew she would never leave us.

When she didn't return on Friday, I called the police. They told me she was probably just breaking up with me and didn't have the emotional maturity to tell me. *You know these out-of-towners*, the chief said, shaking his head until his beard rocked like the arms of

The Fifth House on Lavender Road

a mother, *they don't share the same morals as us*. If he had uttered even a sentence more, I feel I would have hit him.

At night, I had denounced sleep. I found myself wandering the halls of our flat, staring at pictures of her, instead. There's one in particular that is my favourite- the two of us in Edinburgh, standing in front of the castle. Her hair was pulled into a tight ponytail, her smile erupting from her face and sinking its teeth into my skin.

I was there, of course- my curly locks forced into a bun behind my head, my eyes watching her and only her.

She was my whole world.

This is how I found myself standing on the porch of the fifth house on Lavender Road. It was late, the moon accepting its crown for the evening, the sky absent as it lorded over us. I raked my eyes over the building, if one could call it such. I stood on the small strip leading to the front door, the gravel crushed under my boots.

Either side of me, bushes and flowers sprung from the ground, untamed and wild in their attempt to take the land back from the humans who had cut them down. Plants and weeds entwined the rocks that made up the walls, curling around the soft curves, like a hand around a throat.

Twisting.

Squeezing.

Cutting off the circulation, until the house was a writhing thing, gasping and desperate for breath.

The roof peaked towards the stairs, and windows hid behind the elegantly carved, iron designs. It must have been beautiful, once.

The Fifth House on Lavender Road

The kind of home you'd walk past and wished you lived in, the kind that had childhood memories crawling out of every crack in the stones. A roaring fireplace, a treehouse or two.

You read about houses like these. They spring up in ghost stories, present themselves in gothic writing. Reading them, they always mentioned death. Always told us that the house felt like death or looked like the place where someone would go to take their final breaths. I had never understood what they'd meant by that until I stood in front of the fifth house. The home had been vacant for years, but it was bursting. Ghosts poured from the windows, relics of memories filling every square meter.

When I grasped the door handle and pushed it open, the house had no space for me. I tried to cross the threshold, heart pounding, and sweat beading on my forehead. It plastered curls to skin, ran down my palms and dripped onto the rotting floorboards like a flesh wound. The air pushed against me, a blockade to prevent those of us with ill will. I pushed against it, but it didn't move. With a sob, the door shut in front of me, and I went home.

She was in there.

I could taste her.

I returned the next night.

The night after that.

The night after that.

So on and so forth. Each time twilight beckoned me to the streets, I found myself unable to resist the scent of Lavender. Unable to erase the fifth house from my mind.

The Fifth House on Lavender Road

The world comes up with fascinating theories for love. Soulmates, people like to say. I never believed in such while growing up, but one story fascinated me. I read about how people were two halves of one star, falling to the earth and landing within the wombs of our mothers. Energy connected us like tethers, and we would always find our way back to our missing halves. It seemed beautiful, but unrealistic. Science told us that love was a chemical response to finding people with whom we had things in common, which seemed evermore reasonable.

Now, I wasn't so sure.

I could almost see the thread pulling me towards the house, disappearing inside where I wasn't allowed to enter. Did it run up the stairs? Did it caress abandoned paintings, running along the curved, embellished edges of furniture?

People were starting to worry. I began hearing tales of the insane woman who stood outside the fifth house on Lavender Road every night for weeks, crying and beating down the door with her fists until she left crimson marks on the wood. How she roamed the streets, her eyes empty and her heart full of a love that may never return to her.

How *tragic* it was that her lover had left, how *unsurprising* it was that a love between two women hadn't lasted, how *dangerous* I was to the children nearby.

Mothers began to hold their daughters closer when they passed me in the street, Christians called out that they prayed for me and hoped that God returned my wits one day.

The Fifth House on Lavender Road

I didn't utter a word.

For weeks, the only person I spoke to was my cat.

In fact, I lasted exactly two weeks.

Fourteen days of absent misery, fourteen nights of sobbing against a home that didn't want me. On the fifteenth, I had had enough. I was heartbroken, rejected by both society and the spirits of the past, and I had nothing left to lose.

I beat my fists against the door.

I shouted until my throat was raw and my voice left me.

I fell to my knees as cries scraped against my insides and threatened to burst free.

Please, I whispered, I won't take her from you. I just need to see her.

Please. I repeated it over and over again, like a mantra to a dictator who had no sympathy for my kind. The house was above me; I knew that now. It was in charge and ruled overall. King of its domain and unwavering in its pity.

I don't know how long I was there for; my knees against the porch and my head resting on the entrance.

I don't know how many minutes or hours slipped through the cracks before the door swung open, and I was eye to eye with the hollow form of a woman who had once loved me.

"My love," she said, "I've been waiting for you."

She held out a hand.

I took it, and felt myself lost to the house.

Premeditated Intent

László Aranyi

Laszlo Aranyi (Frater Azmon)
poet, anarchist, occultist from
Hungary.

Four public dignitaries are approaching,
the one-legged, the basilisk-eyed,
the one crawling on the dewy
cowlings membranes of night,
and the syphilitic. "We will execute a preemptive strike against
evil..."

(Who hasn't surfaced from his hole dug in the ground in
years since the beginning.)

Freedom has arrived,
and brings immediate obstacles distorted by the interests
of power,
where revolutionary force is only a confusion
of integration. (As a modern Don Quixote, he mourns
in the phalanstère of "consumer society",
"wielding his shepherd's axe" ...)

The soldiers when war breaks out,
become raging beasts. (Most of them
are beasts during peacetime though.)

Our warriors, the heroes of the battlefield are killers!
And the Fifth Horseman:
the sly spectator in his Armani suit...

(Translated by Gabor Gyukics)

The End of Decay

László Aranyi

With crestfallen face he leans on his back
on the stiff, cold,
ever-crumpled plastic foil.

Waxwork, eight meat needles stabbed into his amorphous,
seal-like lower body.

The approaching night has a lurking,
murderous breath.

The tangible is fleeing.

Our world is an ever-submerging diving bell.
Slimy-dark illusions are the flapping tentacles of the present.

(Umbrella duellum on the spittoon.

One-armed, one-legged cops are the helpers.)

The white, steaming flesh of Madame de Brinvilliers brings death;
the poisonous toad-sap-pussy-drool
burns our tongues right away.

On rusty bicycles, on horses of others rushing to work
the Three Kings are coming:

Horea, Cloșca and Gheorghe Crișan.

Behind them, squeaking dwarfs with their pants down.

We'll be rattlesnakes

in the mailbox of the state system of institutions.

And what we've been waiting for will come true:

a symbol of power

turns to walking sticks and crutches!

(Translated by Gabor Gyukics)



The Smiling Alchemist

László Aranyi

Today Is the Writing Time For You

Zary Fekete

In your dream you are reading Banksy's book. He wrote, "Your mind is working at its best when you are stressed."

Banksy, how did you know?

There is a bang, and you wake up. Immediately you cough two very deep coughs, and then you hold your breath until it goes away.

Yesterday the third cough had left blood on your hand.

There is a series of footsteps echoing in the hall outside the metal cell door. For the past week you have received food through a small window in the door. Yesterday and today there has been no food.

You believe this metal cell isn't on the cruise ship. Your last full meal had been on the ship where you had been reading Banksy's book of paintings. You saw one of his prints graffiti-painted on the side of the ship on the day that you boarded...the stencil of the girl with the balloon. That was two weeks ago.

There is a noise outside your cell door. A piece of paper, folded twice, slides through. Then there is a pen sliding after the paper. You grab the paper. It is blank.

One day after the cruise ship launched you saw the black boat approaching. After the hooded people boarded they shot all the staff workers. Your waiter was shot when he turned to run. His face was surprised. Your head was struck hard from behind. You woke up

Today Is the Writing Time For You

here.

You suddenly cough very deeply and some blood sprays on the blank paper. You sit for a moment and feel very bad. And then a laminated card slides through the door. You grab it and read it.

The English on

it seems like it was software-translated:

“Madam. We have no result of person money. If we are not result by soon then there is for you the pain damage. Do you know valuable people?

Today is the writing time for you.”

You read the card two times. The card feels greasy and used. You drop the card and reach for the paper.

You start to write.

Zary Fekete has worked as a teacher in Hungary, Moldova, Romania, China, and Cambodia, and she currently lives and works as a writer in Minnesota.

Freefall

Shaurya Arya-Kanojia

I only remember feeling a tad bit woozy, like I was freefalling, for a split second. Only a moment ago, as I had thought to slip through a tiny break in the traffic to the other side of the street, I heard the screech of car tires. That is when the world around me went out of focus and, following less than a second, returned. As I breathed in deep to bring my surroundings into focus again, I saw the car was nowhere in sight. Around me, the traffic chugged along; it took me a second to realize I was standing in the middle of the street. A motorbike zipped inches away from me. It caught the rear-view mirror of another car on its way.

I found a break in the stream of cars and broke into a run to get to the other side. Relief washed over me. I closed my eyes for a few seconds, composed myself (the fear of that temporary freefall was still lurking somewhere at the back of my mind), and turned around to get to the park I had come to for my evening stroll.

That was half an hour ago.

The thought that I would be dead now – or severely injured, at the very least – was still moving through my head. But I could laugh over it now.

Free Fall

Shaurya Arya-Kanojia

Maybe chalk it to one of those instances that, in the years to come, would make for an interesting story. I even utter a little chuckle.

I shake my head. Better to forget it.

A man walks past me hurriedly. His hand brushes against my side. My chuckle turns into a sharp cry. For the briefest of moments, I experience what I did back on the street; freefalling. The sky overhead, in the last thirty minutes, has turned from its evening blue to twilight indigo. The lamps in this section of the park are yet to be lit up. I look down, and see the little contact he made has stained my yellow Daffy Duck shirt.

What an idiot, I say under my breath. I wonder if he heard it, but he doesn't turn around.

I take a step forward, and I hear a snatch of a conversation behind me. The voice is still far away, but, with each step, it's nearing me. Someone is speaking on the phone. I feel a tad bit irritated (maybe a residual from the encounter I had just a few seconds ago) that the quietness of my surroundings was being disturbed. By this time, when the light starts to bleed away from the sky, the population of strollers and joggers in the park is substantively diminished.

Free Fall

Shaurya Arya-Kanojia

The park is still an hour from being closed for the day, and the quietness this little window provides is why I take my evening walks at this time.

The worry in this man's voice pricks my ears. I don't mean to eavesdrop, but his voice tears through the stillness of the surroundings. I realize he is making an effort to keep his voice as low as possible, but to me he is audible. Perhaps he doesn't realize that I can hear him. Maybe he doesn't see me? I bend my head as I walk; as a means to not make eye contact with him if he walks past me.

"I'm scared," he says, the apprehension in his voice unmistakable. I think I hear a catch of a sob in his voice. It is still a whisper, but I can hear him loud and clear. "What do I do?"

The speaker on the other end of the line says something, which I hear as a kind of rasping. It's fairly incomprehensible, but I think I heard the words, "Why did you have to..."

I wonder, not for the first time, if he realizes that I'm within earshot. Even if the darkness is prohibiting him from seeing me (which it shouldn't, because the tinge of blue in the sky overhead still remains), the sound of the gravel crunching under my feet should indicate my presence

Free Fall

Shaurya Arya-Kanojia

And, yet, he is speaking fairly uninhibitedly...

“Help me,” he says, his voice threatening to break into a cry. “Help me, please.”

My pulse has quickened, my heart is hammering within my chest. Conflicting ideas blast through my mind. Should I maybe turn around and show myself to him? Or should I make a dash for it?

The gravel crunches beneath my feet.

I hear another snatch of rasping from the other end. And then the man behind me says, “I just left him there. On the road.” This time, he does cry. “What... You’re asking me what he was wearing? I don’t know. Yellow shirt, I think. Some cartoon drawn on it. I DON’T KNOW!”

I sense him coming closer to me, closing the distance between us. There is no way he can’t see me now. A second or two later, I realize he is only a couple of steps behind me. My heart skips a beat. I stop walking, stop breathing. I close my eyes, my head bent.

A sensation similar to what I felt on the street washes through me. Of being sucked into, of freefalling. But a split second later, I’m back in the park. And I see the man emerging through me, as if I was but mere air he walked through.

Blink Of An Eye

Shaurya Arya-Kanojia

There can only be one of two explanations. I've either slipped into an alternate dimension, or this is a dream.

Things changed in, quite literally, the blink of an eye. One second, I was out on my evening walk in the park, the sun gliding towards the western horizon, spraying a blast of orange across the sky. And, in the next, a darkness I can attribute to nothing but an indescribable phenomenon cast its shadow over my surroundings. The people in the park had magically vaporized, like some invisible hand had come down and, before I could even start to wrap my head around what had happened, swept everyone up. The sky had as if metamorphosed into a chilling, malicious dark blue. The grass all around, though still technically green, was devoid of its earlier color, of its vivaciousness.

The path in front of me had cowered in the shadows of the trees overhead. I looked up, and could only see the silhouettes of the leaves as they held absolutely still. Not a leaf moved.

I took a step forward, my shoe grinding the loose dirt underneath. The crunch was like a gunshot in the absolute silence. I could even hear my breath, the beating of my heart. I took another step forward, and then another. Gradually, I started walking. A dream or not, I realized staying put wouldn't serve any purpose.

Blink Of An Eye

Shaurya Arya-Kanojia

Crickets started singing their irritating creek-creek in the distance; and then, abruptly, stopped. A bird flew overhead, crying a shriek. It startled me. I stopped, pulled in some air, blew it out, let the dark world I had fallen into come into perspective, and moved.

I knew the way around this park like the back of my hand. Over the years, new features – including a cemented basketball court, modern swing sets, and an expansive flower bed – had been added to the park, but the graveled path remained the same. No one had thought of paving it with tiles. After rains, water clogged it in patches, inconveniencing strollers like me.

I also knew that a hundred meters ahead, I would need to take a right. And, after a few more paces, a left. That would open into the west side of the park, where the basketball court was. At this turn, behind me, would be the lonesome house I have, in my evening strolls, found myself being fascinated by. A hand pump stood atop a wide platform in the large veranda outside. Around the house, a staircase opened into the terrace above. Next to the verandah, a curved walkway led to somewhere out of sight. I know that was an exit, but for reasons beyond me I don't go there.

Straight ahead was the gate that led to the neighboring colony. I decided to exit from that gate instead, which, though held by a rickety chain link, could open just wide enough to let a skinny man like me sneak through.

Blink Of An Eye

Shaurya Arya-Kanojia

Even with the darkness still hanging about, I could make out the bend a few steps away. I rounded the corner, my feet now more confident. Just a few more steps, I reassured myself; and started walking faster. My head felt lighter. I took a deep breath, calming myself. The next turn was maybe a few meters ahead. By now, I was rushing towards it.

But something – an invisible force is all I can describe it as – in the darkness was clinging to the back of my neck; and, no matter how much I wiped my hand at it, it stayed.

Even though just a few steps away, I couldn't get close to the turn I had to take next; it was like walking on a treadmill. My feet were moving, but I couldn't get nearer. Something was pulling me as I tried pushing ahead. The anxiety was creeping its way back in me. I could imagine its slimy antlers on my skin, pushing themselves within. The air I had been breathing didn't come as freely now. I gasped and, then, started running; my feet eager, the crunch on the gravel more urgent.

The turn, still visibly a stone's throw away, seemed farther than the moon.

A sound, of something creaking, came from my right. I turned, and, in the distance, saw the house. It was bathed in a gorgeous, magnificent light. Such was its brightness I had to shield my eyes at first glance.

Blink Of An Eye

Shaurya Arya-Kanojia

A boy, no more than ten years old, wearing a blue t-shirt and red shorts.

He extended one arm, beckoning me.

“It’s okay,” he said. “He won’t hurt you anymore.”

I wanted to pretend that I didn’t understand what he meant, but I couldn’t. “You promise?” I asked him instead.

In the bright light, I saw his head – cast in a golden light from an unidentifiable source – move. He nodded. I wondered if the boy was playing a trick on me; that he was the Ghost Man from all those years ago. The creature who had come into the house and robbed my family before killing them and escaping; as I, a ten-year-old dressed in a blue oversized t-shirt and red shorts, was crouched behind my bed, crying but not daring to utter a word. Sometime in the night, I must have passed out. Because the next morning I found myself in the police station.

“A robbery gone wrong,” was how the inspector described it. “Your mother woke up as he was closing the cupboard. Don’t worry, we’ve apprehended him.”

Blink Of An Eye

Shaurya Arya-Kanojia

But he – he who I started recognizing as the Ghost Man ever since – didn't leave my thoughts for years; tormenting me, anguishing me.

“You promise?” I asked the boy. “You promise?”

He nodded.

As I neared the few stairs leading to the house – my house – the boy turned and went inside.

And I followed him.

Shaurya Arya-Kanojia is the author of the novella, End of the Rope, and a novel scheduled for a release next year. He is the host of the talk show, TBB Presents Books with Vishwakarma, on the Mentza platform. He likes sports (cricket, mostly), eating out, and watching reruns of The Office and Everybody Loves Raymond. His social media handles include @shauryaticks (Twitter) and @main.hoon.ek.sharara (Instagram), and more about him can be found at <https://www.shauryaak.com/>

Meat of Calves

Jerome Berglund

The old gypsy fortuneteller had been right, but that helped slim Jim Avery and Petunia Primrose very little at this point in time.

Domed cameras had apparently been installed while they'd been laid out from the nerve gas, and periodically buzzed and whirred as they zoomed in and out, shifting position to get a better view of the scene in their sparsely furnished flat. Slim Jim was still coming to his senses now gradually, struggling to parse together anything remotely resembling a favorable strategy for getting them safely through the next forty-eight hours. Petunia, who should have been their greatest asset in this scenario – she watched reality television religiously, he being the dull PBS man – seemed instead to have gone plumb off her rocker, and of all things elected to cook up the veal cutlets they'd frittered the last of their Snap benefits on the other day.

Everyone in this building were on assistance, that new relief programs half the nation have come to rely upon, and part of the requisite boilerplate, buried under miles of fine print, was the Russian roulette possibility of winding up in just this sort of unpleasant predicament. But to get on the waiting lists, quality for subsidized housing and escape the cramped car they'd been cohabiting for upwards of six months previous, there'd been a box and slim Jim, with few appetizing alternatives, had checked it.

Meat of Calves

Jerome Berglund

Voluntary did not mean precisely what it used to, he sighed grimly, pecked Petunia on the cheek and affixed a napkin down the neck of his shirt as she was dishing him a plate. His ladylove even placed a candle on the table, so he dug through his dungarees and produced a trusty Bic. Once it was bobbing and hissing she flipped the switch and they were suddenly enjoying an almost romantic atmosphere. Slim Jim implored the Siri to play them some French accordion and it acquiesced.

“Can they see us?” Petunia whispered under her breath, forgetting momentarily about night vision and infrared advancements in recording technology.

“Hear us too I’m afraid,” Jim responded, glaring at their perfidious music box.

“Well, confound it!” Petunia pouted, twirling some fettuccini on her fork. “Eat up, you’ll need strength for what’s coming.”

“You’ve got to clue me in on the particulars there love,” her man replied with his mouth half full of protein. “Confess, I’m more or less entirely ignorant as to the matter.”

“First a bit of side business,” she murmured sliding something across the table. Slim Jim picked it up and held it up to the candle.

Meat of Calves

Jerome Berglund

“Golly. High drama.”

“So you wouldn’t think I was fibbing,” Petunia bashfully offered. He rose, crossed to their fourth floor window, on the top story of the housing complex...

“You were made for this darlin’.” Slim Jim nodded towards the razor wire crowned chain-linked fences which encircled and dwarfed the property, with snipers in crow’s nests visible at regular intervals. Mostly for show, for none of these occupants were going anywhere until their captors were good and ready, allowed them to.

“You’d think I’d have been granted a bit more muscle mass then?” Petunia whined, tossing their dishes in the sink. If both survived to see two mornings hence, her man would be in charge of those. For now, they could soak. She turned the tap, strode over to the coffee table and yanked the oversize drawer beneath it out. Slim Jim whistled.

“What happened to my National Geographics?”

“Stuff your National Geographics.” He looked the assortment over.

Meat of Calves

Jerome Berglund

“When did you find the time?”

“Whenever you’ve been carousing, or out scrounging on the make, I’ve been hard at work scraping this collection of contingencies together, setting provisions aside and preparing what’s necessary in the event of this miserable prospect.”

Somewhere above glass was audible shattering. From another part of the building a cordless drill was unmistakable.

“Are there rules of engagement?”

“No guns or bombs, with a few exceptions.”

“Like those grenades? And that nail gun?”

“Permitted. Barely.”

“This took some research...” Petunia calmly sipped a glass of Chablis she had pulled out from who knows where, smirked.

“Quite.”

Crack went their door as a surplus army boot tore the chain from the wall. Their pizza delivery guy neighbor burst through the entryway like a whirlwind, swinging a machete over his head towards slim Jim in a wild arc.

Meat of Calves

Jerome Berglund

The latter stumbled backward in astonishment. He was exceedingly lucky that the thing became tangled in the overhead light fixture and upon crashing down only lopped the resident's ear clean off before sliding out of his hand. Slim Jim yelped in blinding pain as the lummoX grappled him up against the wall, hands around his throat. Silently, unnoticed, Petunia was rooting through her drawer. Slim Jim's vision began blurring, pressed up against the loft style studio's brick wall, thankfully between its two windows, the heating unit grinding into his back. Petunia selected a boning knife, strode over and slashed the goon's Achilles tendons in one practiced stroke. He howled in pain. Slim Jim saw his moment and propelled himself off the wall, launching the point of his forehead into the assailant's nose.

Bone crunched noisily and the neighbor toppled back onto the ground, shrieking and spurting and rolling. Petunia backed up against the wall, surveying her outfit to ensure it has not been sullied. Annoyed, she nodded toward the injured cretin, wordlessly signaling her boyfriend to finish him off.

Still counting stars, one hand over his earhole to keep the carnage in, slim Jim stumbled over to the drawer, fuzzily deliberating how best to proceed. The ice pick seemed poetic and effectual enough.

Meat of Calves

Jerome Berglund

It took more than two dozen jabs though before the corpse stopped moving. Petunia nodded in grudging approval. Digging under the sink, she then fished out a container of lighter fluid which she doused their neighbor in for good measure, igniting him their dinner candle. The sprinklers overhead began discharging.

“The element of surprise,” she muttered to herself, with an air startlingly not dissimilar to a general on a hill plotting a grand siege. Now that he thought of it, Petunia had always relished a good game of Risk...

“How many more?” slim Jim asked queasily. She counted on her fingers.

“Only a few dozen should make it through the initial shakeup... Plug your nose and suck it up, you’ll get the hang of this in no time.”

“The odds are quite against us.”

“Not with me driving hon’.” She tossed him some gym bags.

“Now make yourself useful and start packing, we’re wheels up in five.”

Meat of Calves

Jerome Berglund

“Ten four rubber ducky.” As he began cramming arms she wrapped his head around with duct tape tenderly. Slim Jim groaned again. “It’s a crying shame, because you would have made a stellar mama bear.”

“What’s to say I can’t?!” Petunia glared challengingly, gesturing toward him with a bat full of nails like a pointer.

“Certainly not this lug,” Jim conceded admiringly. Petunia’s eyes sparkled with excitement.

“Now hop to it, let’s take out the old and sick ones before they know what hit ‘em!” Jim followed after her, dragging the hefty baggage.

“Whatever you say dear,” he chuckled lightheadedly.

Somewhere far away, where odds were being decided on a wall in chalk, the couple looked like they had at least a slim fighting chance, comparatively. As the evening progressed, with a croupier’s stick one piece after another was pitilessly removed from the contending...

Jerome Berglund has previously published stories in Grim & Gilded, Bright Flash, Quibble, Paragon Press, Stardust and the Watershed Review, a play in Iris Literary Journal, and haibun in Drifting Sands, the Other Bunny, and Babylon Sidedoor.

I Can See Everything

Tingwei

I fall sick the day after my mother and I arrived at our new house.

Maybe it's the way that the bone-dry Massachusetts chill blows right through our cracked windows, or how the rural silence around us drills its way right through my ear drums. Either way, my limbs fall useless like dead tree branches. My mother lays me down in the center of a four-poster bed in the dark upstairs room.

"I miss home," I whisper to her. Memories of a hot and swarming city and our family's faces, round with goodbye smiles, flood through me in a torrent of tears in the back of my throat. "When can we go back?"

My mother's pale face is drawn tight, but she still smiles at me. "This is our home now, baobei. Aren't you so excited to see it?"

Despite the shadows of dark circles beneath her eyes and her face thinned from the months of stress, my mother is still beautiful—her inky long hair falls gently around her shoulders and her lips are painted bright, hopeful red. I can tell from her dark eyes that she wants so badly for me to say that I'm just as excited as she is. But lying in the bed, all I can see is the ceiling of the four-poster canopy caving down towards me like a stomach.

I Can See Everything

Tingwei

“I’m hungry,” I say. “I want to eat.”

My mother draws back the curtains every night to feed me meals of chicken hearts and pig livers, cut rare just the way I like. My body remains as still as a corpse, and I lick the blood from her fingers, savoring the taste of something familiar in a strange land.

After I finish eating, my mother sighs and brushes the back of her hand over my forehead. “You’ll get better soon, my heart. And then I know you will be so excited.”

Morning by morning, she opens the curtains of the four-poster bed and looks at me. I imagine that I’m changing into a thing she can’t recognize, but she never says. Her black eyes only ever grow larger and larger as she gazes down at me.

“What do you see out there, mama?” I ask.

She kisses my face. “Oh, it’s wonderful. I can see everything,” she says.

My mother keeps feeding me—meals of intestines and lungs as if those bodies can become mine when I tear their flesh apart in my teeth. But it doesn’t help. My muscles continue to atrophy and abandon me.

I Can See Everything

Tingwei

“I can’t see myself but I see her day by day, changing in the same way I can feel my own body change.

Eventually, she doesn’t open the curtains anymore. I eat through her outstretched hand and listen to her voice though the other side as she talks about her new job.

“You sound tired,” I tell her, but she reassures me.

“It’s not so bad. I get used to it.” Her hand caresses lines of red down my cheek. “When you get better and come out here, you will see. It’s such a great new place.”

The meat tastes a little different in a way I can’t explain, the same way my mother can’t explain why we can’t go home. I try to imagine the tendons I’m chewing through growing into my own—flexing, pulsing, and alive.

One morning I wake to the cutting New England cold on my face once again, my face buried into the pillows below me. I’d turned over in my sleep.

Hope climbs like vines through my body and slowly, I pull my hand out from under the sheets.

I Can See Everything

Tingwei

“Maybe it’s a miracle, or a dream. I bend my fingers one by one, testing their realness.

I hear my mother’s footsteps in the room. It’s breakfast time, and my stomach yowls in response.

Her hand pushes through the curtains with something round and translucent—eyeballs. Before she has the chance to hold them towards my mouth, I reach forward and yank open the curtains of the bed.

She stands here, staring at me. Almost every feature on her face is gone, as is her body. There are gaping holes in every part of her body where her organs should have been—her intestines, her lungs, her heart. Instead, eyes fill the gaping holes, covering every inch of her body. Her long black hair still trails down her back, and her mouth opens a deep, dark red.

“Baobei, you’re up,” she sounds startled, her voice soft. When I say nothing, a wordless gap in my throat, she sighs. “I’m sorry. I’m looking a little worse for the wear, aren’t I?”

“...No,” I say hesitantly. And it’s the truth. She is still my beautiful mother, gazing at me warmly with hundreds of my mother’s pretty dark eyes.

I Can See Everything

Tingwei

They blink at me from all of her, rolling, fluttering, seeing everything. “I want to see it too. Our new home.”

She beams. “Eat up then, my baobei.”

She reaches towards me with the eyeballs, and I eat.

Tingwei is a Taiwanese-American writer who loves coffee and stories about Asian diaspora experiences, Taiwanese culture, and magic.