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No. 1



QUIET STREET TO THE LONG EVENING

Beyond the worlds we know—there are dreams that remember.



CH EW Z

A ROYA PUBLICATION.

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LONG EVENING

CHEW Z

Printed in the Reach

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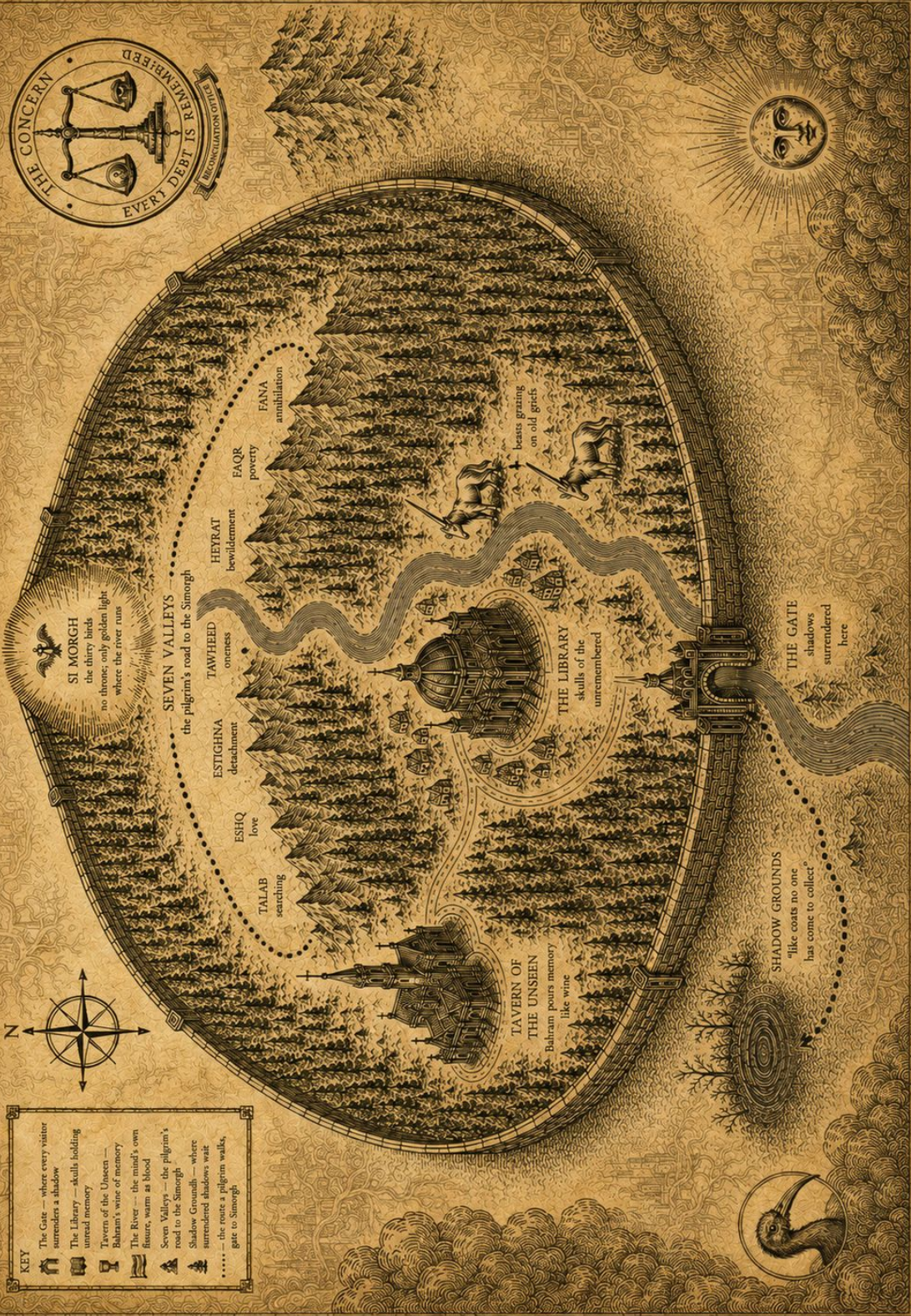
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KEY

- The Gate — where every visitor surrenders a shadow
- The Library — skulls holding unreal memory
- Tavern of the Unseen — Baham's wine of memory
- The River — the mind's own feature, warm as blood
- Seven Valleys — the pilgrim's road to the Simorgh
- Shadow Grounds — where surrendered shadows wait, gate to Simorgh





SYNOPSIS

In the city of Ctesiphon, memory is not private property but a public record, and Cale Rook audits it for a living — deciding, when two people remember an hour differently, whose version the record will keep. Then an envelope arrives bearing his own photograph, and seven months of his own disappearance.

What begins as an ordinary case opens into a passage between two worlds: the rain-lit streets of the waking city, and a walled town beyond sleep where every visitor surrenders a shadow at the gate, and grief is read from the skulls of the unremembered. Guided by an ageless keeper in green who takes his shadow at the wall and pours memory like wine in the evening, and hunted by a Reconciler sworn to close every doubt that threatens the Concern's fragile peace, Rook must cross seven valleys of an old, old story to learn whether he is the man who vanished — or only a faithful echo, carrying someone else's grief forward as his own.

Quiet Street to the Long Evening is a noir hallucination about memory, identity, and what we owe the people who witnessed us honestly — and what is left of a self, once the story it was built on refuses to hold.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

This book owes a debt it should state plainly.

In 1985 Haruki Murakami published *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*, and built two worlds inside one novel: a hard, rain-lit city where consciousness is data and can be encrypted, and a walled town beyond it where every visitor surrenders a shadow at the gate and a Dreamreader draws old dreams out of skulls in a library. The second world is quiet and kind and nothing bad happens in it, and that is the horror of it. It is a place made by subtraction. Everything that hurt has been taken out, and so has everyone.

I have never got free of the question that book asks. If memory is what a self is made of, what is left when it is sliced away? Murakami's answer is a town in the snow where the people are gentle and unrecoverable, and where the only honest thing remaining is a shadow, kept in a pit, dying of the separation. This book is my attempt to sit in that same room and ask it in Persian.

The other inheritance is older. Around 1177 Farid ud-Din Attar wrote the *Manteq al-Tayr*, in which the birds of the world set out to find their king and cross seven valleys to reach him, and arrive, thirty of them, at a lake. Si morgh — thirty birds. Simorgh — the name of the king. One phrase and its own echo. Attar spends four thousand lines building a road to a pun, and the pun turns out to be the most serious thing in the poem.

None of us chose the memories we started out with. A name, a language, a grief that belonged to a parent before it ever belonged to us — we inherit these the way we inherit a house we didn't build, and we spend the rest of our lives deciding how much of it to keep. This book takes that ordinary fact and asks a harder question of it: what if a memory could be handed over more directly than that — not shaped by upbringing, but placed whole, by someone else's grief, someone else's need to keep a person alive a little longer than the world was willing to allow?

Cale Rook spends most of this book believing his task is to find out whether he is an original or a copy — a question with exactly two answers, both of them lonely. The book's position is that this was always the wrong question. A memory does not stop being real because of where it came from. It becomes real the moment someone agrees to carry it forward, honestly, at some cost to themselves.

Everything Rook knows about the road, he learned from a frightened boy reciting in a hospital room, who skipped a valley and never noticed. That seemed to me truer than handing him the story whole. We inherit the shape of what we believe from people who were doing their best in bad rooms, and we walk the map they gave us, gaps and all. The thirty birds who cross seven valleys and find only themselves at the end, counted together, are pointing at the same thing from another angle: a self is not a single verified account of one person's history. It is whatever memories a person is still willing to carry, however many hands they passed through on the way.

For Haruki Murakami, who built the town, and left the gate open.

— Chew Z.

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THE OFFICE ON QUIET STREET

*THE CITY · Ctesiphon [TESS-ih-fon], an ordinary Tuesday.
An auditor settles which of two people is telling the truth.
Nothing in his life has yet gone wrong.*

The woman said the door had been open. The man said he had knocked.

Neither of them was lying. That is the first thing they do not tell you about auditing memory: almost nobody lies. Lying requires knowing what happened and choosing something else, and most people never get as far as knowing.

I gave them the Verity in thimble glasses — the preparation the Concern licenses for this and nothing else, half a mouthful, enough that a person cannot hold two versions of an hour at once — and held her account first, because she was the one who had asked for the audit. Her hallway. Her light, gone brown at the edges the way memory browns when it has been taken out and looked at too often. Her door, standing open the width of a hand.

Then his. The same hallway from four feet higher. And his knuckles lifting, and coming down twice on a door that was already open — because he had not looked at the door. He had been looking at his own hand, the way a man looks at his hand when he has rehearsed a conversation on the stairs and is about to have it badly.

They were both true. They are almost always both true.

I wrote door open, knock given, and signed it, and watched her cry over a thing she had known for eleven months, which is mostly what the job is.

My office is on Quiet Street, above a pawnshop that never seems to open. The Concern licenses me: the institution that decided, generations back, that memory could not be left in private hands the way money once was. Every memory of consequence is registered. When two accounts of the same hour disagree, someone

settles which version the record keeps. It is a smaller and sadder job than it sounds, and I have been good at it for nine years.

The name on the licence is Cale Rook. It has not always been my name. I was born Soroush [so-ROOSH] — a word in my grandmother's grandmother's language meaning something like the one who listens, or the message that arrives after the messenger is gone. The Concern does not ask for a name like that all at once. It asks in pieces, in exchange for licences and housing and clearance, until one day the name on your door does not sound like anything your mother ever called across a courtyard at dusk, and you cannot say when that happened.

One memory from that name does not behave like the others. Most of what is left of Soroush comes to me flat and captioned, the way old photographs come. This one has weather in it. I am very young and it is very hot and I am lying on a flat roof under stars that have not yet been engineered into anything, and an old woman's voice — my grandmother's, though I could not draw her face if my licence depended on it — is telling me about a mountain called Qaf [KAAF], and thirty birds, and a king they crossed the whole world to find.

You already carry a piece of the king in you, she says, in a language I no longer speak awake. You'll spend your whole life forgetting that. If you're lucky, something will remind you.

The envelope was under the door when I came back from walking the two of them down.

No stamp. No registry mark, which should have been impossible. Inside: a photograph of a man on Quiet Street in a coat I owned, a service record for an auditor named Cale Rook, and a gap in that record seven months wide.

I made coffee. I filed the photograph, because filing is what my hands do when the rest of me has stopped.

That night I dreamed of a river I had never seen, and a wall I somehow knew the exact height of, stone by stone, and a bird with a long curved beak standing at a crossroads in green robes, waiting — the way old friends wait — for someone slow to catch up.

I have learned since not to call that kind of dream just a dream.

THE RECONCILER

THE CITY · The next morning. The envelope has already been noticed by an office Rook has never heard of, which is the first sign of how much trouble he is in.

He was in my chair when I got back from the coffee cart, sitting the way a man sits who has never once needed to ask permission for a chair.

“Farrokh [fa-ROKH] Nassar. Reconciliation Office.” He set a card on the desk, the Concern’s seal pressed into it hard enough to leave a shadow in the wood. The Concern is what Ctesiphon calls the body that keeps the record — not a ministry and not a court, but the office that decides, when two accounts of the same hour disagree, which one the city will go on treating as true. “You will have heard of us the way people hear about weather in other cities.”

I had not heard of them, and said so.

“Good. That means you have not yet done anything that required us.” He was younger than his voice and older than his eyes, and he looked at me a moment longer than the conversation needed — the way you look at a word you are almost certain you have misread. “You opened a file yesterday on a missing auditor named Cale Rook.”

“I am Cale Rook.”

“That is the file I am here about.” He said it gently, the way you would tell a man his reflection had begun arriving in mirrors half a second before he did.

He let that sit. Then he said the thing I would not understand for twenty-seven days.

“You know how a continuity is made. A mind is grown, and one dead man’s memories are loaded into it, and it wakes up wearing his name and his badge and his debts.” He turned my paperweight a slow half-circle and put it back exactly where it had been. “One file. One residue, sealed and dated. That is the whole of it. A vessel that

is carrying two files that do not match is not an accident, Auditor. It is somebody with clearance opening a sealed record twice."

"Is that what I am?"

"That is what your file is." He stood, taller than the chair had let him look. "The Concern gives you thirty days. After that it reconciles the discrepancy itself, by collapsing it down to whichever version of the story costs the fewest people their sleep. In my experience that is rarely the version where the auditor keeps both his names."

At the door he left a second card, this one blank, and said over his shoulder in a voice gone almost kind:

"Find your shadow before I have to. I would rather not do this to a countryman."

I did not understand, until much later, what he meant by that last word, or why it lodged in my chest like a stone dropped down a well whose bottom I could not hear.

That night, on purpose for the first time instead of by accident, I went looking for the wall.

THE CROSSING, AND THE GATE

*THE MEMORY LAND · How an auditor leaves the world.
What the crossing costs, and the one rule of it nobody tells
you until you are already on the road.*

The Concern issues Verity to its auditors in sealed thimbles, four to a month, and calls it a sacrament in the paperwork without ever explaining the choice of word.

Four is enough to hold another person's memory for an hour. Six is enough to stop being certain which of you is doing the remembering. I had eleven saved.

You take it lying down, in the dark, with the door bolted, because whatever else happens your body stays where you left it. It goes down cold and stays cold, and then the cold stops being in your mouth and starts being in the room. Your hearing goes first, not muffled but ahead — you hear the pawnshop sign hit the wall four seconds before the wind arrives to move it. Then the ceiling admits it was never especially committed to being a ceiling.

And then you are walking.

Not arriving. This is the part I have never got anyone in the City to believe: there is a road, and it takes as long as a road takes. Pale ground, no horizon to speak of, and the wall visible from the first step and no nearer for the first hour of it. You walk it in the body you left behind, which is a thing your body has opinions about afterwards.

The rules, most of which I learned the way you learn a stair in the dark:

You carry across what you are carrying anyway. Nothing in your pockets. Everything in your chest.

Time does not run level between the two. There is a clock tower in the town with no hands on it, and I used to think that was decoration. Nobody inside the wall can tell you how long they have

been there, and everyone will tell you anyway, and they are all wrong in different directions.

And nobody in the City can tell that you have gone. That is the part that should frighten you, and it is the part nobody gets to in time.

The Gatekeeper wore green the colour of water seen through ice, and he did not ask for papers. He asked for my shadow.

"Everyone who enters leaves it at the wall," he said, sharpening a long curved blade against a whetstone with the patient, uninterested rhythm of a man who has done a thing so often the motion has stopped requiring him. "It will weaken out there, cut off from you. Eventually it will die. A mind cannot hold both its grief and its rest at once. You will find you do not miss it. Almost no one does."

It came away with less resistance than a coat.

I asked what people called him.

"Different things, in different mouths. Names are the coat travellers put on me to keep from feeling how old the road actually is." He set the blade down. "You may call me whatever helped you sleep, before you started dreaming of walls instead."

Beyond the gate the town kept a silence so complete it had texture. Streets of pale stone. The handleless clock. A river running at exactly the temperature of blood, and grazing along its banks in the low gold evenings, golden-maned beasts with a single horn, who did not eat grass so much as they ate what the townspeople could no longer carry.

He walked me as far as the Library at the centre of the town and told me I had the training to read there. I did not remember acquiring it.

"One more thing." He had turned to go, and for a moment I thought I saw, folded into his raised hand the way a coin is folded into a palm, a bird's dark curved silhouette. "Everyone who comes here is looking for something they have decided is very far away. Almost none of them are right about the distance. And some of them," he added, so quietly I nearly lost it under the river, "are not entirely looking for themselves."

THE LIBRARY OF SKULLS

THE MEMORY LAND · What the work in the Memory Land actually is. Rook reads a stranger, and does not notice what he has read until much later.

It is not a library of books.

They are shelved the way books are shelved, in stacks eleven high that run back further than the building has any right to be deep, and they are dry and old and faintly luminous, the way the sea is luminous in certain months for reasons nobody enjoys explaining. Each one holds a single person's unread memory. Not their life. The one thing in it that nobody ever came to collect.

The Dreamreaders — which is what the Land calls the ones who do this, not a title anybody is given but only what you are called once you have begun — there were perhaps nine of us, and we did not speak, and I could not now tell you the face of one — lift them down with both hands. You are told both hands the way a child is told both hands with a bowl, and for the same reason: not because it is heavy, but because one hand implies you have somewhere else to be.

You put your palms flat against the temples. You wait. And then it is not that you see something. It is that you have always known it, and have only just now been asked.

The one I read on my fourth evening belonged to a woman who had worked a weighing station on a freight line. I never learned her name — you do not get names, you get the thing itself, which is a mercy and is also the whole problem.

What she had left unread was this. She had spent thirty-one years certifying the weight of things and had been, in that time, the only person on that line who never once rounded a figure. She was proud of it in a small dry way. And on an ordinary Thursday she had certified a load correctly, and the load had been correct, and eleven kilometres down the line the coupling had failed anyway, for reasons that had nothing to do with her and everything to do with a

foundry in another province, and a man she had never met had died.

She had gone through the file afterwards. Her figures were right. She checked them for nineteen years. They stayed right.

What she could not put down — what was still sitting in that skull, dry and lit and uncollected — was not guilt. She had nothing to be guilty of and she knew it, which is a worse condition and a lonelier one. It was that being right had turned out to be no protection at all, to anyone, ever, and that she had built a whole life on the assumption that it would be.

I sat with her a long time. Longer than the work required.

When I put her back on the shelf I noticed my hands were shaking, and I attributed it, the way you do, to the Verity and the hour and the cold.

I want it on the record that I did not understand, that evening or for many evenings after, why a stranger's grief about the uselessness of being right had gone into me as easily as water into cloth. I thought I was moved. I thought it was a sad thing and I was a person who could be moved by a sad thing.

It did not once occur to me to ask why I already knew the shape of it.

THE CUP, AND THE HOLLOWING

THE MEMORY LAND · The Guide keeps a tavern as well as a gate. He pours, and says something about the size of the cup that Rook cannot make sense of for another twenty days.

Down a lane the colour of old bruises, past a wall inscribed in a script none of the Dreamreaders could translate, there is a low tavern with no sign.

He keeps it. I should have found that stranger than I did — that the man who takes your shadow at the gate is also the man who pours in the evening — but the Memory Land does not go in for the division of labour. In the old tongue the keeper of that house is the moghan [mo-GHAAN], a word for the pourers of a wine that has nothing to do with grapes and everything to do with what a person is willing to stop pretending, after the second glass, that they still believe about themselves.

He poured from a vessel that never ran empty and was never, so far as I saw, refilled.

“You are the one auditing his own disappearance.” He set a clouded glass in front of me. “It goes down like memory because it is memory. Other people’s, mostly. Distilled past the point where it minds being drunk.”

I asked whether it was safe.

“Safety was left at the gate with your shadow. What it is, is true, which is an older and less comfortable thing, and there is a way of drinking it slowly that most people do not find.” He nodded toward the corner, where a dozen townspeople turned in a slow unhurried circle, robes lifting like the vanes of some patient machine measuring a wind the rest of us could not feel. “They are emptying. Not dancing. A cup has to be hollow before it can hold anything worth holding, and most of what passes for a self is an elaborate, frightened way of refusing to be hollow.”

Through the doorway, on the riverbank, one of the golden beasts had lowered its head to a man kneeling in the shallows. I watched it take something out of him that I could not see and had no doubt about. It took its time. He put a hand on its neck the way you would touch a doctor's wrist. When he stood up he was lighter, and easier, and something behind his face had been turned down, and he walked back toward the pale streets like a man who has been forgiven for a thing he has also stopped remembering.

"He asked," the Guide said, without my asking. "That is the whole of the difference. Out there they do it to you and call it peace. Here you kneel down in a cold river and request it, and it is still a loss, and it is still yours to have chosen. Do not let anyone tell you those are the same transaction."

I drank. It tasted of a coastline I had never stood on — vast and lost and not entirely mine and worth grieving anyway.

But underneath it, that night, there was something else. A grief with less salt in it and more smoke, folded so closely into my own that I could not find the seam.

"A student once asked a teacher of mine how to find what he had lost," the Guide said, "and the teacher lifted one finger and pointed at the moon. The student spent the rest of his life admiring the finger." He refilled a glass that had not been emptied. "Do not admire the finger, Auditor."

Then, not looking at me:

"I will say one more thing, and it is not mine to explain. I have poured for a great many auditors. I have never once poured for only one man out of a cup that size."

ANAHITA VEY AND THE COASTLINE

THE CITY · Back in the City, on the eighth day. The only person outside the Concern who will admit to dreaming of the same wall.

Anahita [ah-nah-HEE-tah] Vey worked from a rented room above a print shop, drafting survey maps for colonial contracts nobody in Ctesiphon would ever see finished. She had kept, from a life folded up before the Concern's filing began, the habit of pouring a thimble of water onto every new sheet before she began — for the sea that would eventually erase the paper, so that the paper would know in advance not to take itself too seriously.

Her name had been in the missing auditor's last file. That was the whole of my reason for being on her stairs.

When I told her why I had come she reached for a pencil and began, unasked, to draw a coastline from memory: a long tide-broken shoreline that existed on no map she owned.

"Susa-9 [SOO-sah]. I surveyed it for six years. Fell in love with an inlet the way some people fall in love with a person." She did not look up. "I filed the elevation data fourteen months before the terraform crews came through. Nobody opened it. They flattened the whole coast in eleven days, because it was faster to ask the woman standing next to the map than to read the file she had already given them."

I said I was sorry, which was useless, and she took it the way you take a useless thing offered honestly.

"Cale Rook came to me eight months ago, auditing the Susa dispute." She was still drawing. "He asked nothing at all about the contract. And then he asked anyway, as though he already suspected the contract was the wrong question." She looked up. "You did not ask me about the contract either."

I had not noticed skipping it. This is the trouble with Verity. It stops being clear which of your reflexes are yours and which you borrowed from a life you do not remember living.

I told her about Nassar, and about the thirty days, and watched something in her go very still — the way water goes still just before it decides whether to freeze.

“I dream of the wall too, Rook. Have done for years, since Susa. Some nights I have felt my own grief being eaten by something gold and single-horned, so that I can come to work in the morning without screaming.” She set the pencil down. “There is a word my grandmother used, for the ache of missing a home you were never allowed to watch get old. Ghorbat [ghor-BAT].” She turned the drawing round to face me, which she had not needed to do, since neither of us was going to look at it.

“I think that is what this whole city is, underneath the maps. Ghorbat, with better lighting.”

WHAT RECONCILIATION COSTS

THE CITY · The twelfth day. Rook has been told what his office does to people. This is the morning he watches it done.

Anahita took me because I had asked what reconciliation actually was, and she had said, after a silence, that it was not a thing she could describe, and that there was a queue on Tuesdays.

The Reconciliation Office had no seal on the door. Everything else the Concern owns has a seal on it. I have thought since that the absence was not modesty but the confidence of a thing that does not need to announce itself in a building people have already agreed to enter.

The queue was nineteen long and moved the way a bank queue moves. That was the first thing wrong with it. Somebody's child was doing a puzzle on the floor.

The woman ahead of us had a folded coat over her arm and the particular straight back of a person who has decided to be dignified about something. She had been telling the man beside her about a dispute over a boundary wall. Eleven years of it. A brother-in-law. A document shown once at a funeral and never since. She was not angry. She was precise, the way people become precise when being right is the only part of a thing they still have.

They called her number and she went in with her coat over her arm.

She came out fourteen minutes later. I checked, because I am an auditor and checking is what my hands do.

She was fine.

I want to be exact, because the whole of what I am writing depends on it. She was not blank. She did not stagger or look about her. She came out with her coat over her arm and she was pleasant — easier in the shoulders than she had been going in — and when the man asked how it went she said, "Oh, it's all settled," in a tone with nothing in it at all.

He asked about the brother-in-law.

There was a small pause, of the kind you make when someone asks after a colleague from a job you left a long time ago. Then she said, kindly, "I think that was all a long time ago," and smiled at him, and went out to catch the tram.

Eleven years. Fourteen minutes. Nothing killed. Smoothed.

Anahita was outside on the step before I got there. "Now you understand why I never told you what it was."

The woman would have said she was happy. If you had stopped her at the tram she would have said she was happy, and she would have been telling the truth, and there is no audit in the world that finds anything wrong with that. My whole profession exists to settle which version of an hour the record keeps. I had never once been asked to consider what happens when the record simply stops having the hour in it.

Nassar was on the corner of Quiet Street when I got back.

"Eighteen days," he said.

"I went to your office this morning."

"I know. I signed you in." He looked at the pavement, and then at me, and for the first time since the card had landed on my desk there was something in his face that had not been issued to him by anyone. "Before the Concern gave me this rank, my mother called me by a word that meant fortunate. Farrokh. She was almost certain no child of hers would ever need luck that badly."

He said nothing else. He did not tell me what to do with the eighteen days. That was what I could not get past afterwards — that a man whose office existed to close a discrepancy stood on a corner and let one go on being open a minute longer than it had to.

WHAT ARRIVED WITHOUT BEING ASKED

THE CITY · I had seventeen days left and had stopped going to the wall on purpose. This is the night it stopped mattering what I went looking for.

I want it on the record — if a record is still the right word for what I am doing now, writing this long after any office stopped asking me to — that I did not go looking for what came next. It arrived the way weather arrives. Not solved. Not summoned. Simply, suddenly present, the way you look up from a book and realise it has been raining for an hour, and that some part of you knew before you looked.

I was in my office past midnight, doing nothing more purposeful than failing to sleep, when a courtyard opened underneath me — the way a trapdoor opens under a man who has spent his whole life assuming the floor was only ever the floor.

A fig tree. A roof, and stars that had never been engineered into anything. My grandmother's voice, teaching me a word for grief that had no clean translation into anything the Concern would later let me keep.

And then, without transition, without the courtesy of a door between one memory and the next, a smaller room. Antiseptic and machine oil. A window with a view of nothing. A bed I was in rather than beside.

My brother sat where the chair was bolted down, two years older than me, holding my hand in both of his the way you hold a thing an adult has told you is fragile without having had time to explain it properly. Our father had been three days dead in a fire on a station whose name I could still taste in my mouth like copper. I could not sleep. So I asked him for the birds, and he gave me the birds, because it was the only thing either of us had left that the registrars had not yet come to catalogue.

"All the birds in the world," he said. "Every single one. They have a meeting."

He always started there. Never with the poet, never with the mountain — with the meeting, because a meeting was a thing we understood. Our father had gone to meetings.

“And they say: everyone has a king except us. Fish have a king. People have a king. We don’t have anybody. So they decide to go and get one.”

There is a bird who leads them. In the telling I have carried since, he has a long curved beak, and he has been to places the others have only heard about, and he is not the strongest bird at the meeting or the most beautiful — only the one already used to carrying messages between people who cannot otherwise speak to each other.

“He says the king lives on a mountain. Very far away. It’s behind —” and here my brother stopped, every time, because he could never remember whether the mountain was behind the world or around it, and settled every time on around, which I have since learned is closer to right than he had any business being.

Then the excuses. This was the part he loved, and the part he stretched, because it was funny and because it put off the ending.

“The nightingale won’t go. He’s in love with a rose. He says the rose needs him.” He did the nightingale in a high, stupid voice. “The peacock won’t go either. He got thrown out of a garden once and all he wants is back into the garden. He doesn’t care about a king. The duck won’t leave the water. The owl likes ruins better than people. And there’s one — I forget which one — who says he’s too small, he’d die before he got there.” A pause. “He might be right. Some of them do die on the way.”

He was careful, even then, not to lie to me about the ones who died.

“So they go. And there are seven valleys.” He counted them out on my fingers instead of his own, which is why I can still feel where each one landed. “Looking for it. Loving it. Not needing it any more. Everything being one thing. Not understanding anything at all.” He frowned at my thumb, holding it a moment, as though the answer were somewhere under the nail. “And then the last one. Where you stop.”

That is six.

He never once got to seven, in a dozen tellings, and I did not learn for thirty years that there had been a seventh — that between loving and no longer needing there is a valley of understanding, Ma'refat [maa-re-FAT], and that my brother, who was thirteen and frightened and doing this from memory in a room that smelled of machine oil, had simply dropped it and moved on.

Everything I know about that road, I learned from a boy who skipped a valley.

“And they cross all of them, and thousands of them start, but only thirty get there. Thirty birds.” He squeezed my hand here, every time, because this was the part. “And they get to the mountain and they look for the king. And there’s no king. There’s a lake. And they look down into the lake, and there’s thirty birds looking back up at them.”

He waited.

“Because si morph means thirty birds. And the king’s name is Simorgh. It’s the same word. Do you get it? It’s the same word.”

Si morph [see MORGH] — thirty birds. Simorgh [see-MORGH] — the king they had crossed the world to find. One phrase and its own echo, and my brother, who could not hold seven valleys in his head, never once in a dozen tellings got that part wrong.

I always got it. I always said no, so that he would explain it again.

I don’t know how long I sat with that before I understood I was no longer only remembering it. I was inside it the way you are inside your own name — not observing. Wearing.

And underneath the fig tree and the antiseptic room, quieter than either, a third thing was also true, and I let it sit unexamined a while longer than I should have, the way you leave a bruise unpressed because you already know exactly how much it is going to hurt: that nothing I had just remembered would ever have fitted inside the file a dead auditor named Cale Rook was issued.

I thought of Nassar on the corner of Quiet Street. Not the face of a man reading a file. The face of a man who has opened a drawer he

stopped opening years ago and found the photograph still in it, exactly where he left it.

THE SEVEN VALLEYS

THE MEMORY LAND · The twenty-first day. The Guide comes without his blade, which has never happened, and asks Rook to walk.

He met me without the blade, and instead of asking for my shadow — long since surrendered, still waiting somewhere west of the wall — he asked me to walk with him, through streets I had read a hundred skulls' worth of grief along and never once actually looked at.

"There is a road past the Library," he said. "Seven valleys, and at the end of them the court of a king called the Simorgh. Every pilgrim believes at the outset that the king is very far away, and very separate from the one walking toward him." He held a branch aside for me, which I have thought about since. "Almost none of them are right about the distance. And almost none of them walk it carrying only one grief, however much they would prefer to."

The first valley is Talab [ta-LAB], searching, and I walked it past every version of myself that had ever wanted the wrong thing badly enough to call it a calling. The auditor who liked being right. The boy who took a name because they offered him housing for it.

And then, at the far end of it, where the ground began to rise, a smaller figure going the other way: a boy of eleven or twelve moving along a station corridor, looking into every door in turn, searching for a father the fire had already taken three days earlier. He did not see me. He had somewhere to be. I have never been so certain of anything as I was that he would not find it, and that he already knew, and that he was going to check every door anyway, because checking was the only part of it that was still his to do.

I stood in that valley a long time after he had gone.

The second is Eshq [ESHGH], love, and it is not what the word does in the City. Here it means only this: that the coastline I had carried in my chest since Anahita first drew it — borrowed, secondhand, not mine, a grief I had no standing to feel — had stopped,

somewhere on this road, being borrowed. Grief carried far enough, by however many hands, becomes a shared thing. A scar becomes skin regardless of whose skin it started on. I understood, in that valley, that I had never once in nine years grieved anything that began in me, and that this had not made any of it counterfeit.

Then the valleys I can describe now only as temperatures, because a road like that does not slow down for a man still keeping count. Estighna [es-tigh-NAA], detachment, where I set down the need for the world to agree with my account of myself, and found underneath it that I no longer entirely wanted to be only myself, if being only myself meant leaving someone else unclaimed. Tawheed [tow-HEED], oneness, where for one held breath I could not locate the border between the boy on the roof and the boy in the hospital room and the man who had spent eleven years erasing people because he had once begged an office exactly like his own for a mercy it did not have the discretion to grant. Heyrat [hey-RAT], bewilderment, where every answer I had gathered dissolved back into a question.

Six.

I counted them on my own fingers, on the rise above the last valley, and I got six, and there was a gap between loving and no longer needing where my thumb kept expecting something that was not there.

I have never been able to decide whether that is funny. A road with a hole in it, walked by a man who inherited the map from a thirteen-year-old boy reciting in the dark. I did not know it then. I only knew that something in the counting had gone short, and that the shortfall felt oddly like company.

And at the last, a valley with no name I was given — only the old word the Guide used for the hollowed cup. Faqr [FAGHR], poverty. And folded so closely into the same breath that it barely counted as a second word, Fana [fa-NAA]: the annihilation that is not death, only the stopping of the argument over which version of you gets to be real. And over how many of you there were to begin with.

THE CONFERENCE OF THE THIRTY

THE MEMORY LAND · The end of the road. What is standing there, and what it is called.

At the end of the seven valleys there was no throne. No king. No shape more solid than the low gold evening light the single-horned beasts grazed in along the river, which I had been looking at from the tavern doorway for three weeks without once understanding that it was the same light.

There were only the birds that had made the crossing. Thirty of them, or one of them wearing thirty shapes — I no longer trusted my eyes to say which, and had stopped feeling that this was a failure of my eyes.

And among their number, unmistakably, my own surrendered shadow. Seven months older, and immeasurably less afraid.

It was not alone. Beside it, or perhaps within it — the light in that country has never agreed to be precise about where one grief ends and another begins — stood an older shape, worn the particular grey of a thing that has been standing outside a wall for a great deal longer than seven months.

“Si morph,” the Guide said, and did not leave the silence to do the translating this time. “Thirty birds, Auditor. Not thirty selves. Thirty griefs, however unevenly distributed among however many bodies agreed to carry them.”

I asked my shadow what it had been keeping out there, all that time.

And the current that shadows speak in — single, unbroken, incapable of the small mercy of a pause — answered with two names where I had only ever expected one.

Sorously, it said first, and I felt the word land the way it always had: water reaching a root that had been waiting years for rain.

Then, quieter, older, worn down to something nearer a smell than a sound:

And Soroush.

The same syllables. Carrying now a second boy's weight inside them, kept alive against every incentive an entire institution had given someone to let him go — hidden inside a stranger's file, because a stranger's file was the one place left in the whole Reach where a certain kind of man was still permitted to grieve without being asked to reconcile it.

I did not come back from that valley understanding whether I was the man who had vanished.

I came back understanding, finally, that the question had never had a singular answer to find.

THE SCAR, AND WHAT WE REMEMBERED

*THE CITY · The twenty-eighth day. Two men and a woman
in a print shop, and the last thing the two men have left to
hide.*

I rolled my sleeve up in Anahita's room above the print shop, in the flat afternoon light, without being asked and without having decided to.

There was nothing on the inside of my left wrist. No burn. No scar. Just skin, unmarked by a fire I could describe in more detail than my own mother's face — a fire I understood now had not happened to Cale Rook at all, and had not, strictly, happened to me either.

Nassar came that evening and found the two of us there, in a room that smelled of pencil shavings and old paper. He had come alone every night for twenty-eight days. I understood, watching him in the doorway, that whatever this had cost his office to conceal, he had spent it by himself, the way you spend a thing you cannot file an expense claim for.

I did not say what I had rehearsed. I rolled my sleeve back down, slowly, the way you close a door you have decided not to slam, and looked at him the way you look at a name you have only just learned how to pronounce.

He understood before I said a word. Understanding, in that room, arrived the way the fire itself must have — total, instant, nothing left to negotiate with.

He did not confess. Not in any shape a courtroom would recognise. He only rolled up his own sleeve, without being asked, and let the scar do what eleven years of rank had never once permitted him to do on his own behalf.

Raised. Pale. Precisely where mine should have been.

And then he did not tell me the rest of it. That is not quite what happened, and I have decided, writing this, that the distinction

matters, and that getting it wrong would be a way of taking something else from him.

He sat in the chair nearest the door, the way a man sits who has been standing for eleven years and has finally been given permission to stop, and he said almost nothing at all — a handful of words, no more, set down rather than handed over. And around those few words the rest of it rose in me unbidden, the way the fig tree had, the way the hospital room had, because by then it was not a story I was being told. It was a memory I already owned and had simply never been permitted to open.

I remembered — as my own, because by then it was — the week the registrars came, brisk and almost kind, to catalogue what our father's death had left behind, including the boy who was going to die more slowly beside it. I remembered how fast that office was about the father's record, and how slow the same office became when a brother was fading by inches instead, as though a slow dying were a different department. I remembered an older brother joining that office out of the desperate arithmetic of a person who believes he can work a mechanism faster from inside it than he can survive it from outside. And I remembered — the way a bruise comes back when you press it — the morning the file was closed before he had finished asking for more time.

I remembered not being permitted to keep so much as a photograph. The Concern does not return a record once it has been sealed.

Somewhere in the room, in the present tense I still had to keep one hand braced against to remember it was the one I actually lived in, Nassar said only: "Eleven years."

And then, later, smaller: "I kept what I could. Illegally. The way a man keeps ash he was never issued an urn for."

And once, near the end, not quite a question: "I hoped you would hold both of us. I never knew it. There is no protocol for what I did."

I did not ask whether he had lied about the thirty days. I already knew that he had not — that the clock had always been real, and

that the only lie in the whole twenty-eight days had been about which of us he was racing it to save.

Anahita asked, very quietly, what would happen to him now.

"I no longer especially care," he said, "provided it happens after, and not before, I have been allowed to sit in a room where somebody finally remembers my brother's name without needing it explained to them first."

I told him he could come as far as the wall.

THE WALL, WHERE BOTH WORLDS MEET

THE THRESHOLD · The thirtieth day.

He could not cross the way I did. The sacrament had never been issued to Reconcilers — the officers the Concern sends out to close a doubt, who go to a disputed hour and come back with one version of it so the record need no longer hold two — whose work depends on never once doubting which side of a story they are standing on. But he could come as far as the threshold, into the strange half-light where the City's dreaming edge and the Memory Land's waking one overlap, and he did, on the last morning, in a coat he had not bothered to button.

He had filed that morning, before he came. I did not know it on the threshold and would not know it for another two days. He had entered the discrepancy as reconciled — signed it, sealed it, dated it — which stopped the clock, and closed the file, and was a lie of a kind his office does not have a category for, because every category it has assumes the lie would be told in the other direction.

It cost him the rank. It will, I think, eventually cost him more. He has never once described it as a sacrifice, and becomes genuinely irritated if anyone else does.

My shadow was waiting west of the gate, in the field where the resigned ones lie like coats nobody came to collect — the only one still willing to rise when it saw me coming. It had not, I understood now, been alone in any way that mattered for a great many years.

I want you to stop asking the wall to decide who's real, it said, in the single unbroken current shadows speak in. And I understood, this time, that the voice was made of more than one grief agreeing to share a register.

There were never only two of us. We're both — all of us — what's left after a city spends generations deciding whose pain counts enough to keep. Take the weight back if you want it. We're tired.

But take it back because it's yours either way — ours, now — and because it's better carried by hands that know each other than by one hand pretending it was ever whole.

I asked whether it still wanted to be called by the name it had given me twice.

Sorush, it said. And I understood, without needing to be told, that it was answering for both of them at once — that *si morgh* had always been two words wearing one sound.

The one who listens.

Neither of us stopped. We only stopped being asked.

I do not know whether I walked back through that gate a man reunited with his shadow, or a continuity finally honest about how many people it had quietly been asked to hold. I know only that I woke on Quiet Street with nothing in me flinching at a stair that was not there, and that nearer than any wall, in a doorway I had left a few hours before, a man who no longer had an office was waiting to be told his brother's name by somebody who did not need it explained to them first.

Anahita stopped signing her maps with the names of women she used to be. No office ever came for any of us again: the file said the discrepancy had been reconciled, and the Concern has never once in its history gone looking behind a closed file. That is the only mercy its machinery reliably produces, and it produces it by accident.

I heard, months later, that Nassar had taken three consecutive days of leave — the first in eleven years — and spent them on a rooftop in the old quarter, in weather the Concern had not engineered, under stars arranged for nobody's convenience.

I closed the file the way I closed every file that job ever gave me. Not by proving whose version of the truth was correct, but by writing, in handwriting I no longer check against anyone else's, under a name I have started, slowly, to let people use again:

Subject found. He had been west of a wall the whole time, waiting to be asked back in, under both of our names, by somebody finally patient enough to listen for it.

That was always the entire liturgy. Not the town, not the city, not even the long road through seven valleys to a king who was only ever the pilgrims counted together, however unevenly the counting had been done to them. Only the willingness to walk between all of it and claim, at last, the whole of what you had been carrying — even the parts, especially the parts, that were never only yours to begin with.

A NOTE ON THE SIMORGH

The bones of this book belong to a poem I did not write. Sometime in the twelfth century, in the Persian city of Nishapur, a druggist and Sufi mystic named Farid al-Din Attar composed *Mantiq al-Tayr* — The Conference of the Birds — and I have been quietly stealing from it since long before I understood I was writing something that would need it.

The story itself is told inside this book, badly and from memory, by a boy with better reasons to be telling it than I have. I would rather not tell it again properly here. What follows is only what he was too young to say.

I still cannot say whether Attar's ending is the kindest or the cruellest thing a poem has ever done to its own characters, and I have come to suspect that the uncertainty is the point. He is not offering the birds a reward for the journey. He is dissolving the premise that sent them on it — the idea that the self doing the seeking and the self being sought were ever two different things requiring a bridge between them. That is the very old idea this book has been trying to smuggle into a noir story about a man auditing his own memory: not that Rook will find out who he really is, but that the question was building a wall where there had never been a river.

It should not have taken me as long as it did to notice that *si morph* was already the shape of the plot before I gave it a name on the page.

I think this is why the poem insists on a hoopoe. Attar did not invent that bird's qualifications; the Quran had already sent it between Solomon and a queen who did not yet believe in his god. A messenger is not chosen for strength, or beauty, or nerve. It is

chosen because it has already been to both places and is willing to go back. The Guide who meets Rook at the gate, takes his shadow, tells him almost nothing and points, when pressed, only at the moon, is doing that same unglamorous work. He is not the answer.

He is only willing to keep walking toward it long after the birds who wanted a shortcut have turned back.

And I do not think the seven valleys are a map of suffering you cross once and are done with, any more than I think Rook's audit ends the day he closes his file. Fana — the annihilation Attar's birds reach past even bewilderment — is not a door that locks behind you. It is closer to a room you learn the way back to, the way you learn the way back to any house you have grieved in more than once. What survives the crossing, for Attar's birds and for Rook alike, is not a purified, singular self cleared at last of everyone else's fingerprints. It is a self that has stopped needing to be singular in order to be real.

GLOSSARY

Anahita [ah-nah-HEE-tah] — Persian, from Avestan, the undefiled. The Zoroastrian divinity of the waters, of rivers and of what runs clean; among the oldest names still in ordinary use as a woman's name.

Auditor [AW-dit-or] — In Ctesiphon, the officer who holds two conflicting accounts of the same hour and decides which one the public record will keep. Not an investigator; the word is deliberately clerical, and the work is deliberately quiet.

Concern, the [kon-SERN] — The body that keeps Ctesiphon's record of what happened. Not a ministry and not a court, but an office with the authority to settle a disagreement about the past and make the settlement binding.

Ctesiphon [TESS-ih-fon] — Capital of the Parthian and later Sasanian empires, on the Tigris; its ruined vault is still the widest single-span brick arch ever built. Here, the city where memory is a public record.

Dreamreader [DREEM-ree-der] — In the Memory Land, one of the small number who draw unread memory out of the skulls kept in the library. The word is not conferred; it is what a person is called once they have begun. The office is borrowed, with thanks, from Murakami.

Eshq [ESHGH] — Arabic via Persian, love. The second of the seven valleys, where the pilgrim stops calculating what the crossing will cost him.

Estighna [es-tigh-NAA] — Arabic via Persian, needing nothing. The fourth valley, usually rendered detachment: not indifference, but the point at which the traveller stops requiring the world to agree with his account of himself.

Fana [fa-NAA] — Arabic via Persian, passing away, annihilation. The end of the seventh valley, and the end of Attar's road. Not death,

but the dissolving of the self that had been arguing for its own separateness.

Faqr [FAGHR] — Arabic via Persian, poverty. The seventh valley, paired inseparably with Fana. The cup emptied so that it can hold something.

Farrokh [fa-ROKH] — Persian, fortunate, auspicious. A common given name, and one parents choose hopefully.

Ferdowsi [fer-dow-SEE] — Abolqasem Ferdowsi, the poet who compiled the Shahnameh around the year 1000, assembling the pre-Islamic Persian past into some fifty thousand couplets and, in doing so, keeping a language alive.

Ghorbat [ghor-BAT] — Arabic via Persian, estrangement, exile. The condition of being far from home, carrying an ache for it that has no cure available where you are standing.

Heyrat [hey-RAT] — Arabic via Persian, bewilderment. The sixth valley, where the answers gathered on the road dissolve back into questions, and the traveller has to keep walking without them.

Ma'refat [maa-re-FAT] — Arabic via Persian, knowledge, gnosis. The third valley, in which what is known stops being general and becomes particular to the one knowing it. It is the valley Rook is never taught.

Moghan [mo-GHAAN] — Persian, magians. Plural of mogh, the Zoroastrian priesthood; in classical Persian poetry the pir-e moghan, the elder of the magians, keeps the tavern outside the law and pours the wine that orthodoxy forbids.

Qaf [KAAF] — The mountain range encircling the world in Persian and Islamic cosmology, beyond the inhabited earth and reached by no ordinary road. The dwelling of the Simorgh, and the destination of Attar's birds.

Reconciler [REK-on-sy-ler] — An officer of the Concern sent out to close a doubt: to go to a disputed hour and return with one version of it, so the record need no longer hold two. The word is a euphemism and is meant to be heard as one.

Saena [SIGH-e-na] — Avestan, the Saena bird. The older name from which Simorgh descends; a great bird roosting in the tree of all seeds, whose beating wings scatter them across the world.

Shahnameh [shaah-naa-MEH] — Persian, The Book of Kings. Ferdowsi's epic of Iran before Islam, and the source of the Simorgh who raises the abandoned Zal on the slopes of Qaf and later returns to save his son.

Si morph [see MORGH] — Persian, thirty birds. The number that survives the crossing in Attar's *Manteq al-Tayr*, and the phrase that turns out, at the lake, to be the name of the king they were looking for.

Simorgh [see-MORGH] — The vast bird-king of Persian myth, who raises the abandoned Zal in the *Shahnameh* and rules from Qaf. The name descends from an older word meaning the Saena bird, and only sounds identical to si morph; the coincidence is the hinge Attar builds his ending on.

Sorush [so-ROOSH] — Persian, from Avestan *Sraosha*, hearkening, the one who listens. The Zoroastrian divinity of the heard word, who keeps watch over the soul in the nights after death.

Susa [SOO-sah] — One of the oldest continuously inhabited cities of the ancient world, capital of Elam and later a seat of the Achaemenids. Here, the name a surveyed coast was given.

Talab [ta-LAB] — Arabic via Persian, seeking. The first of the seven valleys, entered by everyone who sets out and by no one who has arrived.

Tawheed [tow-HEED] — Arabic via Persian, making one. The fifth valley, in which the borders between things stop holding, including the border a traveller had assumed ran around himself.

Verity [VEH-rih-tee] — In Ctesiphon, the licensed preparation given to a subject before an audit. Half a mouthful is enough; its single effect is that a person becomes unable to hold two versions of an hour at the same time. Named for what it is meant to produce, not for what it does.

Zal [ZAAL] — In the *Shahnameh*, the son born with white hair and abandoned on the mountain for it. The Simorgh raises him. When

his own son cannot be born, she gives him a feather to burn, and comes.

Cale Rook audits memory for the Concern. When two people remember the same hour differently, he decides which version the record keeps. He is good at it. He has never had cause to audit his own.

An envelope arrives at his office. Inside is a photograph of Cale Rook and a record of seven months he cannot account for. The file is in order. The file is not his.

Beyond sleep there is a walled town, and every visitor surrenders a shadow at the gate. A wanderer in green meets him there and answers almost nothing. A tavern-keeper pours memory like wine. Behind him, a Reconciler is closing every doubt that threatens the peace.

Rook believes his task is to learn whether he is the man who vanished or a copy of him. Both answers are lonely. Both answers are the wrong question.

A memory becomes real when someone agrees to carry it forward, at cost.

