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DON'T GIVE WAY TO AMAZEMENT

CHEW Z

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Printed in the Reach

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

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LA CHORRERA
RÍO PUTUMAYO
RÍO AMAZONAS
HERE BE
ELVES

THE BOOK BEFORE

Each of these books stands on its own, and can be read in any order. The one before this was about a young man named Tomás.

It was a Saturday night in April 2007, in a fraternity house in Los Angeles, and Tomás was twenty years old. For two years he had felt nothing at all. A doctor had given it a name and a prescription. The pills made the flatness quieter, but it was still there, like living behind a window.

That night his friend Danny held up a small printed bag from a smoke shop on the boulevard. People said that what was inside it took the mind to the strangest place it can go. Tomás said yes. If even that could not reach him, he would know.

He made Danny promise to stay sober and hold the camera. The counter began at zero. The last thing Tomás saw before the room folded shut was the small red light on the front of it.

On the other side there was a dirt floor, rain on a tin roof, and a barefoot boy counting leaves in the dark, who had been waiting for him for a very long time.

The next morning Tomás sat with the camera on his knees and watched the whole tape, and told us where he had really been.

SYNOPSIS

Margit Halmos has spent thirty-one years in a glass booth above a hall of the United Nations in Geneva, carrying other people's words into English half a breath behind them. Delegates, doctors, witnesses at a war-crimes tribunal: if a thing can be said, Margit can say it in another language before the speaker has finished.

In March, a delegate says *heron*, and Margit says *the animal*.

A neurologist gives it a name. It is rare and it is slow, and it takes the meanings of words one at a time, the rarest first. It does not stop. In the back of Margit's notebook, her partner in the booth, Inês, begins a list headed *Words gone*.

Switzerland lets a person choose the day she dies, but only while her mind is clear enough to choose, and an illness like hers will not wait. Margit joins the association that helps, writes the letter in her own hand, and is given a paper that says she is able. It is good for six months.

Inês has twenty notebooks, every page an attempt to describe twelve minutes in Porto nine years ago. She keeps a small brown bottle at the back of her freezer, and she will not say its name.

For thirty-one years Margit has carried one sentence across the glass more often than any other: *there are no words*. She has never once asked where the thing goes, the thing there are no words for.

Before her door closes, she means to find out.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

This is a book about an interpreter who is losing the meanings of words, and about a choice that the law of one country offers her, and the trap hidden inside that choice for anyone whose illness is in the mind.

The title comes from Terence McKenna. He said that in the place this book visits, the beings he met told him, more or less, not to stand there gaping: not to give way to amazement, but to look. I have put it in my own words. It seemed to me good advice for anyone standing at any edge, which is where everyone in this book is standing.

The illness is real. It is rare, it is slow, and what it does is described as plainly as I could from the doctors who study it and the families who live with it. The Swiss law is real, and so are the associations that help people use it; the one Margit joins is drawn from their published rules, simplified. The history, the science and the law of the substance are as true as I could make them in 2026. Margit, Inês and every person Margit meets are invented, and so is the journey itself, though it is built from a great many real accounts.

This book does not tell anyone what to choose. The people at the information evening are not wrong, and neither is Margit.

Chew Z

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I. THE BOOTH

Words gone this month: heron, ladle, centipede, nephew.

1.

The first word I lost was a bird.

I want to set it down properly, because I have spent my life setting things down properly, and because in a year I will not be able to. It was a Tuesday in March. It was raining on the lake. I was in the booth.

I should tell you what the booth is, since you have probably never sat in one. At the United Nations in Geneva, in the big white building they call the Palais des Nations [pa-LAY day na-SYON], the Palace of Nations, there are rooms where the countries of the world sit in a ring and talk to each other. Above every one of those rooms, behind a long strip of glass, there is a row of small boxes, one for each language. Each box is about the size of a wardrobe. Two people sit in it with headphones on, side by side, and a microphone between them, and a little red light that comes on when you speak.

Down in the room, a man from one country says something in his language. Up in the box, you hear him in your headphones, and at the same moment, half a breath behind him, you say it again in yours. Not after he finishes. *While* he is speaking. You listen with one ear and speak with your mouth and somewhere in the middle, in the dark between the two, you carry the meaning across, the way you might carry water across a room in your cupped hands and try not to spill.

That is the job. I have done it for thirty-one years. I am, I am told, very good at it. I am not saying this to boast. I am saying it so that you understand how far there is to fall.

On that Tuesday I was in the English booth above Room Twenty. Room Twenty is the one with the ceiling. A Spanish painter covered the whole dome of it with paint that drips down in long points, thousands of them, every colour there is, like the roof of a cave turned inside out, and when the lights come up in the morning the delegates look up at it before they look at each other. I have looked up at it most mornings for seventeen years. I still do not know whether it is beautiful or whether it is about to fall on us.

The delegate from a lake country was speaking about water. A dam upstream, a river that no longer reached a wetland, the birds that used to come there in their thousands. He was speaking French. I was putting him into English. My partner Inês was beside me with her headphones round her neck, eating an apple without making a sound, which is a skill.

And the man said: *le héron* [luh ay-RON].

And I said: “the animal.”

I heard it come out of my mouth. *The animal.* Not wrong, exactly. A heron is an animal. But nobody had ever paid me to say that a heron is an animal. They had paid me to say *heron*.

I kept going. That is the first thing they teach you, and the last thing you forget: you never stop. You never go back. The man is still talking. If you stop to fix one word you lose the next ten. So I went on, the wetland and the dam and the thousands of birds, and my voice was quite steady, and inside my head, very quietly, I was looking for the word.

It was not there.

I don’t mean it was on the tip of my tongue. Everyone knows that feeling, when a word is just behind a door and you can hear it moving about. This was not that. I went to where the word should be and there was nothing behind the door. There was no door. There was a long grey bird standing on one leg in shallow water, very still, the way they stand, with its neck folded like a letter S, and I could see it perfectly. I knew everything about it. I knew that it waits a long time and then strikes. I knew the sound it makes when it takes off, a sort of dry croak, like an old man clearing his throat. I knew that there were three of them on the Rhône [ROHN] by the Pont de la Machine [pon duh la ma-SHEEN] every winter, because I walked past them on my way to the tram.

I just did not know what it was called. In any language. Not in English, not in French, not in Hungarian, which is the language my mother sang to me in. The bird stood there in my mind with no name on it, like a parcel with the label torn off.

At half past eleven Inês touched my arm, which is the signal, and took over without a breath between us, and I took off my

headphones and sat back and looked at the ceiling, all those thousands of coloured points hanging over the delegates, and I thought: *well.*

That was all I thought. *Well.*

2.

I am going to tell you who I am, while I still can, and then I will not do it again.

My name is Margit Halmos [MAR-git HAL-mosh]. I was born in Budapest in 1971, which means I was born in a country that no longer exists in the form I was born in, which is true of most people in my part of Europe and not something we talk about at parties.

My mother was Hungarian. My father came from Novi Sad [NO-vee sahd], a city on the Danube in what was then Yugoslavia, where half the town spoke Hungarian and half spoke Serbo-Croatian [SUR-bo-kro-AY-shun] and most people spoke both and argued in whichever one was quicker. So I grew up with two languages in the house, one for each parent, and a third one, a sort of private one, that was made of the two of them rubbing together. My mother used to say I learned to translate before I learned to walk, because I was always carrying something one of them had said across the kitchen to the other.

That is not quite true. But it is true enough that I have told it at three funerals, including both of theirs.

I came to Geneva at nineteen to study at the interpreters' school. I learned English properly, and then French. I married a man who was very kind and very boring and we were not married for long, and neither of us minded much. I have no children. I have a flat in Plainpalais [plan-pa-LAY] with a balcony that looks at another balcony, and a great many books in four languages, and a cat who belongs to the woman downstairs and visits me on Thursdays for reasons of his own.

From 1997 until it closed in 2017, I worked for the war-crimes court in The Hague, the one that was set up to try the men responsible for what happened in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. I went back and forth between there and Geneva for twenty years. My job there was the same job, in a smaller, colder booth, with worse coffee. A

witness would speak in her language, which was my father's language, and I would carry what she said into English so the judges could hear it.

I worked it out once, on a slow afternoon: in those twenty years I said the word *killed* out loud, in English, something over eleven thousand times. Other people's killed. Other people's dead, carried carefully across the glass to men in robes who wrote them down. I did not cry in the booth. Nobody cries in the booth; you cannot cry and interpret at the same time, the two use the same throat. I cried, when I cried, on the train home. I mention it only so that you know I am not a stranger to death. I have handled more of it than an undertaker. I have simply never had any of my own.

That is who I am. A woman who carries things from one side of a room to the other. I have never had anything of my own to say. I have only ever had other people's things to carry, and I carried them carefully, and I was proud of not spilling.

3.

The second word went eight days later. It was *ladle*.

I was cooking. That is the only reason I noticed. In the booth, I might have slid past it; we slide past things all the time. In my kitchen, on my own, I opened the drawer and looked at the thing with the long handle and the deep round end, the thing you put into the soup to lift soup out of it, and I stood there holding it, and I said out loud, to the cat, who was not there, because it was not Thursday: "the soup spoon. The big one."

I put it back in the drawer and closed the drawer and opened it again, the way you check a door you have just locked.

Still a soup spoon.

I sat on the kitchen floor. I am fifty-four. I had not sat on a kitchen floor since I was a child. I sat there with my back against the cupboard and I went through the drawer in my head, item by item, like a customs officer. Fork. Knife. Whisk. Grater. Corkscrew. Tin opener. Those were all there, each with its name on it, in four languages, neatly stacked. Only one was missing. One small label, gone.

I thought: tired. I thought: it is the rain. I thought: you are fifty-four and everyone forgets words at fifty-four and Inês forgot the word for *fishmonger* last month and laughed about it for a week.

But Inês had known the word was missing. She had felt the hole. She had said, *oh, the man who sells the — the — what is it.* She had gone looking.

I had not gone looking. Standing at the drawer, I had not felt a hole at all. The big soup spoon had seemed like a perfectly good name. It was only afterwards, on the floor, that I knew something was wrong, and I knew it the way you know there has been a step in the dark only when your foot comes down on nothing.

4.

I will not bore you with the doctors. There were three of them, and a great many tests, and a machine I lay inside for forty minutes while it knocked and buzzed around my head like a woodpecker on a tin roof.

I will tell you about the pictures.

The neurologist was a young woman with very clean fingernails, at the big hospital on the hill, and she had a book of drawings. Simple black line drawings, the kind you would give to a child: a house, a chair, a clock, a pair of scissors. She turned the pages and I named them. It was easy. I am good at tests; I have always been good at tests. House. Chair. Clock. Scissors. Pen. Kettle. I was almost enjoying it.

Then she turned a page, and it was a drawing of a large bird standing in water on one leg, with a long neck folded like a letter S.

I said: “bird.”

She waited.

I said: “A water bird. A big one. Grey, I think, though of course it’s a drawing. They stand like that for a very long time and then they —” and I made a quick little stabbing movement with my hand, like a beak going into water.

She waited.

“I can’t,” I said.

She turned the page. A camel. I said *camel* at once, and I was so glad to have it that I said it twice. She turned the page. A rhinoceros. I said *rhinoceros*. She turned the page. A thing with a long body and many legs that lives under stones.

“Insect,” I said. And then, because I could hear how it sounded, I said: “Not an insect. More legs than that. You know. The ones under the — the stones.”

She wrote something down.

Afterwards she sat with me in a small room with a window onto a car park and a box of tissues on the table, which I took as a bad sign, since nobody puts out tissues for good news, and she told me what it was. She was very clear. I want to say that for her. She did not use long words to hide behind, the way doctors sometimes do; she used short ones, and she looked at me while she used them, and she told me the truth.

There is a part of the brain on the left side, under the temple, just in front of the ear, where the meanings of words are kept. Not the sounds of words. Not the grammar. The *meanings* — the thing that ties the sound *heron* to the grey bird standing on one leg. In me, she said, that part was very slowly wasting away. It had probably been happening for some time. It would go on happening. It was not the kind of forgetting most people fear at my age, where you lose your keys and your yesterdays. My memory of my life would most likely stay. I would remember the rain on the lake and the ceiling of Room Twenty and my mother’s face. I would still be able to speak, and speak well; my sentences would stay fluent, the grammar perfect, the tune of my voice the same. People who did not know me might not notice for a long while.

What would go was the meaning. One word at a time, the rarest first and the commonest last. *Heron* before *bird*. *Ladle* before *spoon*. *Centipede* — she said it gently, and I felt the name go into me like a key into the wrong lock — before *insect*. The specific things would turn into general things. The world, she said, would not go dark. It would go vague. It would lose its edges, and its names, and slowly the things in it would stop being anything in particular and become only *thing*.

It has a name, of course. Everything has a name except the things I need. It is called *semantic dementia* [suh-MAN-tik di-MEN-shuh], or, in the newer and longer version, the semantic variant of something called primary progressive aphasia [uh-FAY-zhuh]. *Semantic*, from the Greek, meaning *to do with meaning*. *Aphasia*, also Greek: *without speech*. Without speech, to do with meaning. I thought, sitting there, that the Greeks had been unusually exact.

I asked her how long.

She said it was different for everyone. She said many people live a long time with it, ten years, twelve. She said that was the wrong question.

I said what was the right question.

She said: “How long until you can’t do your job.”

I said: “And?”

She looked at me for a while, with her clean hands folded on the table.

“I think you know better than I do,” she said. “But I would guess a year. Perhaps less. In your work, the rare words are the work.”

The rare words are the work. I have thought about that sentence every day since. It is the truest thing anyone has said to me in a long time, and it was said by a woman of about thirty-two in a room that smelled of floor polish, while it rained on a car park.

5.

I did what I always do before a difficult meeting. I read everything.

I read it in four languages, at night, at my kitchen table, with the window open onto the other balcony. Medical papers, which I could still follow then. Leaflets from charities in London and San Francisco. Forums where families write to each other at three in the morning. I want to put down here what I learned, in plain words, because the doctors’ words for it are long and Greek and they hide more than they show.

It is a kind of dementia. Most people, when they hear that word, think of the commonest kind, the one where a person forgets what happened yesterday, then last year, then who their children are.

Mine is a different kind, and much rarer. It does not start with memory. It starts with *meaning*. It eats the part of the brain where we keep what words and things *are*.

How rare? The families of illnesses it belongs to strike perhaps fifteen or twenty people in every hundred thousand in middle life, and mine is only one branch of that family, one in four or five of those. So: a few people in every hundred thousand. In a city the size of Geneva, perhaps a handful of us, walking about, saying *the bird* and *the big spoon* and hoping nobody notices.

It usually starts in the fifties or early sixties. I am on the early side. It almost never runs in families; for nearly everyone who has it, it simply arrives, for no reason anyone can find, like weather. There is no cure. There is no pill that slows it. There is only time, and how you spend it.

It begins on the left side of the brain, with words. Over the years it spreads across to the right side, and there it starts to take other things: the meaning of faces, so that people you love begin to look like strangers; the meaning of objects, so that a person can hold a fork and not know what it is for; and, often, parts of the personality itself. People become fixed in their habits. They want the same food at the same hour, every day. Some become very interested in clocks, or puzzles, or the colour yellow. Some lose the knack of feeling what other people feel, and become, without meaning to, unkind.

In the end, a person with it needs looking after all day and all night. Half of them live about twelve years or more after it begins; some much longer. When death comes, it usually comes from something ordinary, an infection in the chest, because the body has forgotten how to defend itself, as the mind forgot how to name things.

That is the plain account. It is accurate. It is also, like all plain accounts, missing the thing that matters, which is what it is like. For that I went to the people who had it, and the people who loved them.

The hospital runs a group on the first Thursday of every month, in a room with a coffee machine that has never once worked, for people with the language dementias and for the families who look after them. I went in April. I sat by the window. I did not take notes. I

want to give you four of the people I heard there, with their names and small details changed.

A man of sixty-eight, who had set crosswords for a newspaper in Lausanne [loh-ZAN] for thirty years. That is the kind of joke this illness makes. He talked easily and well, with a big laugh, but every few sentences he would reach for a word and come back with a smaller one. *The thing for the bread*, he said, meaning the toaster. His wife sat beside him and said, quite matter-of-fact, that for a year now he would eat only food that was yellow: bananas, omelettes, a particular cheese. “He used to be the most adventurous eater I ever met,” she said. “Now if I put a tomato on his plate he looks at it as if I’d put a stone there.”

A woman of forty whose mother had the illness, seven years in. She said her mother still knew her voice on the telephone and would talk to her happily for an hour. But when she came to the door in person, her mother looked at her face and did not know it. “She knows me in the dark,” the daughter said. “She doesn’t know me in the light. So I’ve started ringing her from the car outside, before I go in, so she hears me first. It works about half the time.”

A man in his seventies who did not want to say much. He said only that his wife had been the kindest person he had ever known, and that the illness had taken her kindness before it took her words. That she now did the same thing at the same minute every day, and became frightened and angry if anything was moved, and no longer seemed to notice when he was sad. “I don’t blame her,” he said. “There’s no her left to blame. There’s just the illness, wearing her cardigan.”

And a woman of sixty-one, five years in, still working as a gardener in the parks. She said the Latin names of plants had gone first, the long ones she had been so proud of, then the French ones, then the ordinary words. Now she called nearly everything *the green one* or *the one with the flowers*. And then she laughed, a real laugh, and said: “But I still know which ones need water. My hands know. The names were never doing the watering.”

I came home from that room and sat on my kitchen floor, and I thought about the gardener for a long time. *The names were never doing the watering.* I wanted to believe her. I wanted it very much.

But I am not a gardener. In my work, the names *are* the watering. There is nothing else.

6.

I did not tell anyone for three weeks. I went on working. I want you to understand how strange that was, and how easy.

It was easy because I am fluent. The doctor was right; my sentences did not falter. The words that were going were the rare ones, and in a meeting about a dam on a river, you can say *the river* a great many times before anyone needs a heron. When a hole opened in front of me, my mouth simply stepped around it, the way your feet step round a puddle without consulting you, and the meeting went on, and the red light glowed, and nobody downstairs in the ring of nations had the faintest idea that the English coming out of their earpieces was being made by a woman who was, very slowly, becoming vague.

It was strange because I could hear it.

Not the holes. I could not hear the holes; that is the cruelty of it. When the label is gone you do not feel the absence of the label. You feel nothing. You say *the big spoon* and it sounds fine.

What I could hear was the *greyness*. Listening back to myself in the evenings, on the recordings we are allowed to keep for training, I could hear the colour going out of my English. Where I used to say *the delegate deplored*, I said *the delegate said he was unhappy*. Where I used to say *the wetland*, I said *the wet area*. *The marsh*, even, which is a perfectly good word but not the word, the way a stone is a perfectly good thing to sit on but not a chair. It was all still correct. Nobody would have marked it wrong. It was simply that the sentences had started to look like the drawings in the doctor's book. Clean black lines. A house. A chair. A bird.

For thirty-one years I had carried meaning across the dark in my cupped hands. Now I could feel it running out between my fingers, and the strangest thing — the thing I keep coming back to — is that it did not feel like loss. It felt like water finding its level. It felt almost restful. As though the world had been shouting at me in very precise terms all my life, and was now, kindly, lowering its voice.

That frightened me more than anything the doctor said.

7.

I told Inês on a Thursday, in the booth, during the coffee break, with the microphones off.

Inês Barreto [ee-NESH ba-REH-too] is forty-one and comes from a small town in the north of Portugal where, she says, the only industries are saints and rain. She has worked beside me for nine years. In a booth you sit closer to your partner than to anyone else in your life — closer than a wife, closer than a priest — for seven hours a day, with your elbows touching, breathing the same small box of air, and you hear every swallow and every sigh and every time the other one gets something wrong and gets away with it. You cannot keep a secret from your partner for long. I had kept this one for three weeks and I think it was the longest she had ever known me to be quiet about anything.

She listened to the whole thing without interrupting, which is not like her. When I had finished she put her coffee down on the little shelf under the window and looked out at the ceiling of Room Twenty, all those coloured stalactites hanging over the empty ring of chairs.

“How many words,” she said.

“So far? I don’t know. That’s the point. I don’t know which ones are gone. I only find out when I reach for one.”

“Then we’ll keep a list,” said Inês.

That is Inês. Faced with the end of the world, she reaches for a pencil.

So we keep a list. It is in the back of my little black notebook, the one I use for difficult names before a meeting — the minister of this, the river that. At the top it says, in Inês’s handwriting, which is better than mine: *Words gone*. And under it, so far, there are eleven. I will not give you all of them. Some of them are embarrassing. One of them was *nephew*, and I have one.

But the first one on the list, at the top, in her careful hand, is *heron*. And underneath it, in brackets, because Inês is a translator to the bone and cannot bear a word on its own without its neighbours, she

has written all the names it used to have: *heron, héron* [ay-RON], *gém* [GAME], *čaplja* [CHAP-lya].

I can read those. I can say every one of them aloud. They mean nothing to me. They are just sounds now, four small noises in four languages, like the croak a bird makes when it lifts off the water and is gone.

8.

There is one more thing the doctor told me, and it is the thing that matters most, so I have left it for last.

I asked her what happens at the end. Not the end of the job. The end.

She did not pretend to misunderstand me. She said that in the later years people with this illness lose more than words. They stop knowing what a fork is for, not only what it is called. They stop knowing faces. They become, she said, choosing the word carefully, *dependent*. Many of them live a long time like that, peacefully, in rooms with soft chairs, looked after by kind people they cannot name.

Then she said something she was not obliged to say, and I have always been grateful to her for it.

“In this country,” she said, “you are allowed to choose not to get there. But you have to choose while you are still able to understand the choice. The law will not let anyone choose for you later. Not your family. Not a piece of paper you signed in advance. It has to be you, and you have to be clear when you do it. With your illness, that window does not stay open long.”

She did not say the name of the association. She did not need to. Everyone in Switzerland knows it. It is four letters long, written in capitals, and it means the way out.

I went home. I sat on the kitchen floor again; it was becoming a habit. And I understood, sitting there with my back against the cupboard, that I had been given two clocks, not one.

The first clock was the one the doctor had described: the slow one, the one that takes a word a week and turns the world from sharp to soft.

The second clock was quicker, and much colder. It was the clock that measured how long I would still have enough words to say, clearly, to a stranger with a form, *I understand what I am asking for, and I am asking for it.*

The rare words are the work, the doctor had said. I had thought she meant my job.

I took out my little black notebook, the one with the list in the back. I turned to a clean page. In my own handwriting, which is worse than Inês's, I wrote down the words I would need to say at the end, in the language of the canton, so that I could practise them until I could say them in my sleep.

Je demande l'assistance. [zhuh duh-MAHND lah-sees-TAHNS] *I am asking for help.*

Then I wrote, underneath, in English, so that I could check later whether I still understood it:

This means: I want to die before I stop being able to say so.

I looked at that sentence for a long time. It was a good sentence. It was clean and plain and it said exactly one thing.

It was the first sentence I had written in thirty-one years that was entirely my own.

II. THE APPOINTMENT

Words gone this month: wren, gutter, verdict, mortgage, thimble, pillow, almond.

9.

Let me tell you how it works, because almost nobody outside this country knows, and almost nobody inside it says it out loud.

In 1937, when Switzerland wrote down its criminal law, it put in a short paragraph about suicide. Article 115. It does not say that helping someone to die is allowed. It says something stranger and more Swiss than that. It says that a person who helps another to kill themselves *for selfish reasons* — to inherit the house, to be rid of the burden, to collect the insurance — can be sent to prison for up to five years.

That is all. It says nothing about the other kind.

For forty years nobody did much with that silence. Then, in the 1980s, a few people noticed what the paragraph did not say, and stood in the gap it left. If you help a person die *without* a selfish reason — because they asked you to, because they are suffering, because they have decided — then the law has nothing to say to you. You have committed no crime. A door had been standing open in the wall of the law since before the war, and nobody had walked through it.

They walked through it in 1982, here in Geneva. They called themselves EXIT, in capitals, which I have always thought was a very un-Swiss thing to do — to name yourself after a sign over a door in a cinema. Their full name is longer and politer: the Association for the Right to Die with Dignity. But everybody calls it EXIT. There is one in the German part of the country and one in the French part, and the French one is ours.

It is not a hospital. It is not a clinic, and nobody in it is paid to kill anyone. It is a club. You join it the way you join a library. You pay fifty francs a year. You receive a newsletter. Most of its members — and there are tens of thousands — never use it at all. They join the way you buy a fire extinguisher: to have it in the kitchen, and to sleep better knowing it is there.

If you do want to use it, there are rules, and the rules are the whole thing. I want to set them down plainly, because they matter for what comes after.

You must be eighteen. You must live in Switzerland. You must have an illness that cannot be cured, or suffering you find unbearable, or the many small failures of a very old body that add up to a life you no longer want. You must write a letter, by hand, asking for help. You must get doctors to write that you have this illness, and — this is the one that matters — that you have what the French call *discernement* [dee-sern-MAHN]. Discernment. The ability to understand what you are asking for, and what it means, and that it cannot be taken back.

And on the last day, you must do it yourself.

Nobody puts anything into you. A companion comes to your home — the association calls them *accompagnateurs* [a-kom-pan-ya-TUR], the ones who go along with you — and brings a small bottle of a powder called sodium pentobarbital [PEN-toh-BAR-bi-tal], fifteen grams, dissolved in water. It is roughly half a glass. It tastes, everyone says, very bitter. You drink it yourself, with your own hand, or, if your hands no longer work, you open the little tap on a drip yourself. You fall asleep within a few minutes. Most people are gone within half an hour, without waking.

Then the companion telephones the police. Because a death that is not natural must be investigated, the police come, usually two of them, with a doctor, and they ask the people in the room some questions and look at the papers, and they are, everyone says, very polite. Then they leave, and it is over, and it was legal, and it happened in your own bed.

That is how it works. A paragraph from 1937, a club, a letter, two doctors, a glass, and a quiet visit from the police.

I have interpreted treaties that were shorter and did less.

10.

The rule that matters for me is the one about discernment, and I have to explain it carefully, because it is the cold heart of this whole book.

The doctors' letter saying you can still understand your choice is only good for six months. After six months it must be written again. And every time it is written, a doctor must sit across from you and decide, honestly, whether you still understand.

For most people this is a formality. A man with a cancer that has reached his bones is as clear on his last day as on his first.

But for a person whose illness eats understanding itself — dementia, in all its kinds — the rule is a trap with a spring in it. The law will not let you decide in advance. You cannot sign a paper at fifty-four that says *when I can no longer understand this paper, please help me.* By the time you need the help, you are no longer the person who is allowed to ask for it. The door is only open while you can still read the sign above it. And the illness, by its nature, is the thing that is taking away your ability to read.

So people with dementia who choose this road must go early. Earlier than they want. Earlier than seems right. They must go while they are still well enough to be sure — which means while they are still well enough to have good days, and walks by the lake, and Thursdays with somebody's cat. They must trade their good years for the certainty of not having the bad ones.

I did not know this before March. I learned it from a leaflet, and then from a woman with very clean fingernails, and then, most of all, from a man in a brown jacket in a room above a café, whom I will tell you about in a moment.

11.

EXIT holds evenings. They are not secret, but they are not advertised either. Somebody who has been tells somebody who is thinking about it. Once a month, in a rented room in Plainpalais above a café that sells very bad croissants, about thirty people sit on folding chairs and a member of the association explains the rules, and then anyone who wants to may stand up and say why they came.

I went in April. I sat at the back, by the coat rack, the way I used to sit at the back of lecture halls when I was nineteen and new and afraid of being asked a question in French. I had my little black

notebook on my knee. Old habit. When people talk, I take down the difficult words.

I want to give you some of what I heard, because I came to that room thinking I was the only person in the world with my particular problem, and I left understanding that I was just one more person standing at the same door. I have changed small details so no one can be recognised. I have not changed what they said.

There was a man of about seventy who had driven trams in this city for thirty-eight years. He had an illness that was slowly turning his muscles off, from the outside in. His hands were already weak; he held his coffee with both of them, like a child. He said: “The law says I must lift the glass myself. My hands are going. So I must go while my hands still work. I have perhaps six months of hands.” He said it the way you would say *I have six months left on my lease.* Then he said: “My wife wants me to wait. She says, one more summer. I want one more summer too. But if I wait for the summer I lose the glass.” He sat down. Nobody said anything for a while.

I wrote in my notebook: *He has a hands clock. I have a words clock.*

There was a very old woman, ninety-one, beautifully dressed, with a silk scarf and the posture of somebody who had once been a dancer, or a headmistress. She said she was not ill, exactly. She said: “Everything is a little bit broken and nothing is completely broken, and I am tired of being repaired.” She said: “I have buried my husband and my sister and my son. I have been to so many funerals I could run one. I do not want to be the last one at the party, washing the glasses.” People laughed, and she smiled, pleased that they had.

There was a younger woman, perhaps forty, who stood up and said she had not come for herself. Her mother had gone with EXIT the previous autumn. She said she had come to tell people what it was like on the day, because nobody had told her.

She said that it was a Tuesday. She said her mother had made her get up early to buy a particular kind of pastry from a particular bakery in Carouge [ka-ROOZH], because she wanted to taste it once more, and that her mother ate half of it and said it was not as good as she remembered, which made them both laugh. She said the companion was a retired schoolteacher with a grey plait who was so

calm that she felt calm too. She said her mother drank the glass and made a face and said *that is truly disgusting*, and then she said *well, I won't have to taste it twice*, and then she held her daughter's hand and talked about a holiday in Brittany in 1989 when it rained every day, and then she was asleep, mid-sentence, and then about twenty minutes later she was gone.

She said the police came in two cars, very polite, and asked her where she had been standing and whether her mother had been sure, and she said yes, she has been sure for a year, she was the surest person I ever met. She said one of the police officers, a young man, took off his cap when he came into the bedroom, and that she would remember him for the rest of her life for doing that.

She said: "I thought it would be the worst day of my life. It was the second worst. The worst was the day the doctor told her what she had. The day she left was the day she got to choose." She sat down. She was crying, and she was also, somehow, smiling, the way the old woman had smiled.

And then there was the man in the brown jacket.

He was sixty, perhaps. He did not stand up at first. He waited until everyone else had spoken and the woman running the evening was beginning to collect her papers, and then he stood, holding the back of the chair in front of him.

He said his wife had joined EXIT eight years ago, when she was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. She had been a pharmacist. A very precise woman. She had known exactly what was coming. She had said to him, very clearly, more than once: *when I don't know you any more, I want to have gone.*

He said they kept putting it off. One more Christmas. The wedding of a niece. A trip to Sicily they had always talked about. She was still herself, mostly. She still laughed at the right places. It seemed wrong to leave while it was still so nearly all right.

And then one spring the doctor sat across from her, as the rules require, and asked her the questions. And she got some of them wrong. Not many. Enough. And the doctor, who was a kind man, and an honest one, said he could no longer write that she understood.

The door closed. Just like that. Not with a bang. With a kind doctor looking sorry.

The man in the brown jacket said his wife was alive. He said she lived in a care home in Onex [oh-NAY], in a room with a soft chair, and that she was mostly peaceful. He said she did not know who he was. He said that sometimes she was frightened of him, because a strange man kept coming into her room and holding her hand, and that the nurses had asked him to visit less often.

He said: “I didn’t come here tonight to tell anybody what to do. I came to tell you one thing, because nobody told us. The door doesn’t stay open until you’re ready. The door stays open until *it* is ready to close. You think you’ll know when. You won’t. The illness doesn’t send you a letter.” He looked around the room at all of us on our folding chairs. “She wanted to go and I loved her too much to let her go early. That’s all. That’s what I did. I loved her too much and now she’s afraid of me.”

He sat down.

In my notebook, under *He has a hands clock*, I had written nothing. My pen had stopped. I sat in the back by the coats and I looked at that man’s brown jacket, at the shoulders of it, which were shaking very slightly, and I understood that I had just been told my future by the only person in the room who knew it.

12.

I want to explain why I decided. Not the feeling of it — anybody can imagine the feeling. The reasons. I have spent my life believing that a thing is not understood until it can be said plainly, so I will try to say this plainly, and you can judge whether I have understood it.

The first reason is the simplest. I have no one to stay for. That sounds sadder than I mean it to. I have friends, and I have Inês, and I have my sister’s son in Szeged [SEH-ged], whose name I can still say even though the word for what he is to me has gone. But I have no child who would visit the soft-chair room and be frightened of. Nobody’s life would be shaped around my slow disappearing. If I stay, the only person the staying is for is me — and the doctor has told me, kindly, that the *me* it would be for will not be someone I would recognise.

The second reason is The Hague. For twenty years I carried the dead across the glass. Men and women and children who did not choose. Who were taken from their kitchens and their fields and their buses with no warning and no letter and no glass and no polite policemen taking off their caps. I said their deaths aloud eleven thousand times in a language that was not theirs. I do not say that I deserve a better death than they had. Nobody deserved what they had. I say only that, when I was offered a choice they were never offered, it seemed to me something close to rude to turn it down.

The third reason is the one that is hardest to say, and the one that matters most.

The doctor told me that, as the meanings go, the world does not go dark. It goes soft. Vague. Restful, even. And she was right. I have felt it already. When *heron* became *bird*, it did not hurt. When *ladle* became *the big spoon*, I did not grieve. A vague world is not a painful world. It is, if anything, a gentler one. Fewer edges. Less to carry.

That is what frightens me.

Because I think I could be happy there. I think the woman in the soft chair — the one who calls every bird *bird* and every spoon *spoon* and every face *someone* — might be perfectly content. She might sit by the window in Onex and watch the shapes go by and feel no lack at all. The doctor said it. The man in the brown jacket said it. *Mostly peaceful.*

And so the question I have had to answer is not *do I want to suffer?* I don't think I will suffer much. The question is: *does the woman I am now have the right to decide for the woman I will become?* If she will be content, who am I to cancel her? She is me, after all. Or she will be.

I have turned this over every night since April, on the kitchen floor with my back against the cupboard, and this is the only answer I can find, and I give it to you plainly, for whatever it is worth.

She will not be me. She will be someone wearing my body and answering to my name — though she will not always know it is a name — and she will be, perhaps, at peace. But she will not be the person who carries meaning across the dark. She will not be the

person who heard the delegate say *le héron* and knew in a quarter of a second exactly which grey bird on which leg in which shallow water he meant. That person — the one writing this — is made of exactly the thing the illness is taking. Not her memories, not her face. Her *meanings*. Take those away, a parcel at a time, and you do not get a quieter Margit. You get a house with all the labels peeled off every box, and someone living contentedly among the unlabelled boxes, who never knew what was in them, and never wonders.

I would rather close the house myself, while I can still read the labels.

That is my reason. I have tried to make it plain. I am not sure I have succeeded. It is the hardest thing I have ever interpreted, and the original is my own life, and I have no partner beside me to take over if I falter.

13.

At the end of April I wrote the letter.

It must be written by hand. Not typed, not dictated. Your own hand, your own words. The association wants to see your hand doing it.

I sat at my kitchen table — not the floor; I thought the letter deserved a table — with a fountain pen I had not used in years, and a sheet of good paper, and I discovered something I had not expected.

I did not know how to write it.

I had written thousands of pages in my life. Every one of them was somebody else's. A minister's speech, carried into English. A witness's testimony, carried into the record. Even my school essays, I realised, had been translations of what I thought the teacher wanted to hear. For thirty-one years I had been the most fluent woman in any room, and every word I had ever spoken in public had belonged to somebody else.

Now the association wanted one page of my own, and I sat at the table for two hours and could not begin it.

In the end I wrote it the only way I knew. I imagined that someone else was saying it — a woman of fifty-four, a stranger, sitting at a

delegate’s desk in Room Twenty under the dripping ceiling — and I put her into French, half a breath behind her, as she spoke.

It took eleven minutes. It is the best interpreting I have ever done. I will not copy it here; it belongs to the association now, in a file. But I will tell you the last line, because I remember it, and because I think it is the truest thing in it.

Je voudrais partir pendant que je sais encore ce que veut dire partir. [zhuh voo-DRAY par-TEER pahn-DAHN kuh zhuh say ahn-KOR suh kuh vuh DEER par-TEER]

I would like to leave while I still know what *leave* means.

14.

After the letter, the doctors. I will be brief, because doctors are brief.

The neurologist with the clean fingernails wrote the first certificate: the illness, its name, its course. She did not ask me why I wanted it. She only said, when she handed me the envelope, “You understand that for discernment I will have to see you again in six months, if you haven’t —” and she stopped, and chose another word, which I thought was a kindness, “— if you haven’t used it.”

I said I understood.

She said: “And you understand that with this illness, the next time, I may not be able to write it.”

I said I understood that too. I said it in four languages, as a joke, and she did not laugh, and I liked her for that.

The association’s own doctor — they call him the *médecin-conseil* [mayd-SAN kon-SAY], the advising doctor — read everything and agreed. Then the companion came to my flat.

She was not the schoolteacher with the grey plait. She was a retired nurse with a Fribourg [free-BOOR] accent and enormous, very gentle hands, and she sat on my sofa with a cup of tea for two hours and talked to me about everything except death — my work, my parents, the cat on Thursdays, the ceiling of Room Twenty, which she had seen once on television and thought looked like a cake left out in the rain. Only at the very end, putting on her coat, did she ask me, in the plainest possible French: “Are you sure?”

I said: yes.

She said: “You know you can change your mind at any moment. Even on the day. Even with the glass in your hand. Nobody will be disappointed. Nobody will think less of you. We will simply go home.”

I said I knew.

She said: “Then choose your day.”

15.

My discernment certificate was dated the fourth of May. It would be good for six months: until the fourth of November.

The Human Rights Council’s autumn session ends in the second week of October. I have never in my career left a session unfinished, and I did not intend to start now. I would work the session to the last gavel. Then I would give myself two weeks, to clean the flat and give away the books and walk past the herons on the Rhône — the birds, I mean; the grey birds — one last time.

I chose a Thursday. The twenty-ninth of October. A Thursday, because the neighbour’s cat comes in on Thursdays, and I could say goodbye to him in the morning too, though he would not know it and would not, if I am honest about cats, much mind.

I wrote it in my little black notebook, in the front, where I write the dates of meetings. *Thursday 29 October. 11:00. At home.* It looked like an appointment with the dentist.

Then I closed the notebook and went to tell Inês.

16.

I told her on a Monday, in the booth, at the end of the day, after the delegates had gone and the ceiling of Room Twenty was dimming, all those coloured points going grey one by one as the lights went down, like a forest at dusk.

She did not interrupt. She sat with her headphones round her neck and her hands in her lap and listened to the whole thing — the paragraph from 1937, the folding chairs, the man in the brown jacket, the letter, the date. When I had finished she did not say anything for so long that I thought she had not understood. Which

would have been absurd. Inês understands everything. It is her gift. In our trade she is known, a little enviously, as the woman who can interpret the things that cannot be interpreted: the joke that only works in Portuguese, the prayer, the poem, the moment in a speech when a tired old diplomat stops reading his notes and says something true. Other interpreters go silent at those moments, or say *the delegate makes a joke*. Inês finds a way. Nobody knows how. I sat beside her for nine years and I do not know how.

When she finally spoke, she did not say *don't*. She did not say *are you sure*, or *have you thought*, or *what about the people who love you*. I had prepared answers to all of those, and she said none of them.

She said: "The twenty-ninth."

"Yes."

"Thursday."

"For the cat."

She nodded slowly, as if that were the most reasonable thing in the world. Then she turned and looked at me properly, there in the half-dark of the booth, with the ceiling going out behind her, and I saw something in her face I had never seen in nine years of sitting at her elbow. Not grief. Not quite. Something more like a person standing at the top of a staircase in a dark house, deciding whether to tell you there is a room at the bottom you have never been in.

"Margit," she said. "You're going to the edge."

"Yes."

"Then you should look over it first."

I said I did not know what she meant.

She was quiet again for a while. Then she said: "There's something I've never told you. Something I've never told anyone. I've been trying to put it into words for nine years and I've never managed. Not in Portuguese, not in any of them." She smiled, a strange, small smile. "You're the only person I know who might be able to help me translate it."

And then the cleaner came in to do the booths, and switched on the bright overhead light, and the moment broke, and Inês said, quite normally, “Come to my flat on Saturday. I’ll cook. I’ll tell you then.”

She stood up and put on her coat and left, and I sat alone in the booth for a long time under the bright light, with the dark ring of empty chairs below me, and my appointment in the front of my notebook, and her question in the back of my mind like a word just behind a door.

For the first time in months, I could hear something moving behind it.

III. THE SMELL OF BURNING PLASTIC

Words gone since May: sparrow, colander, sleeve, oath, lilac, tribunal, hinge, saucer, plum, ankle, envoy, rust, comma, crayon, kettle.

17.

Inês lives in Carouge, across the river from the city, in an old part of town that was built by a king of Sardinia two hundred and fifty years ago to look like Italy. The streets are low and the houses are painted yellow and pink, and there are courtyards behind them with fig trees, and on a Saturday in May it smells of bread and wet stone.

Her flat is on the top floor, under the roof. It is full of plants and books and one enormous blue sofa that she says came up the stairs in 2015 and will only leave the same way when she does. She cooked fish with lemon and potatoes and we ate it at a small table by the window and talked about work, and I waited, and she waited, and neither of us said anything about anything until the plates were in the sink.

Then she went into her bedroom and came back with a cardboard box. The kind wine comes in. She put it on the table between us and took the lid off.

It was full of notebooks.

Cheap ones, school ones, the kind with soft covers and squared paper. There must have been twenty. Each one had a date on the front in black pen, and the dates ran from nine years ago until last month.

“I want you to read these,” she said, “and then I want to tell you what they’re about. Or the other way round. I’ve never been able to decide which order it goes in.”

18.

I read them on the blue sofa until two in the morning, while she sat on the floor with her back against it and drank tea and did not interrupt me once.

I have to tell you what was in them, but I find it hard, for a reason you will understand in a moment.

Every page was an attempt to describe the same thing. One thing. A place, or a time, or an event; she was never sure which word to use, and neither, now, am I. She had tried it in Portuguese and in English and in French. She had tried it as a list. She had tried it as a poem. She had tried it as a letter to her mother, who had died before any of it happened. She had tried it as a set of instructions, as if for a traveller: *turn left at the sound.* She had drawn diagrams, and crossed them out. One notebook — the eleventh — was nothing but single sentences, hundreds of them, each on its own line, each starting with the words *It was like*.

It was like being inside a jewel that was also a song.

It was like walking into a room where everybody had been talking about you, kindly, and stopped, and cheered.

It was like the moment in a dream when you realise you can read, except the reading was the thing reading you.

It was like the day I was born, if I had been old enough to understand it, and they had been waiting with a cake.

It was like nothing. That is the problem. It was like nothing.

I read all of them. Some were beautiful. Some were funny. Some made the hair stand up on my arms. Inês is the best interpreter I have ever sat beside, and you could tell — every sentence was made by someone who knew exactly what words could do.

And every single one of them, I could see, had failed. Not because it was badly written. Because it was not *it*. She had written thousands of true sentences, and you could stack them as high as the Palais and they would not reach the thing they were pointing at. You could feel it on every page, the way you feel a cold draught under a door. There was a room on the other side of all those sentences, and not one of them had got her into it, and not one of them could get me in either.

At two in the morning I closed the twentieth notebook and put it back in the box.

“Well?” said Inês, from the floor.

I said: “Every sentence is true and none of them is it.”

She put her head back against the sofa cushion, beside my knee, and closed her eyes, and I heard her let out a breath she had been holding for nine years.

“Yes,” she said. “Yes. That’s it. That’s exactly it. Thank you.”

19.

Then she told me.

Nine years ago her father died in Viana do Castelo [vee-AH-na doo kash-TEH-loo], the town of saints and rain. It was slow and it was hard. When it was over she went to stay with an old friend from interpreting school who lived in Porto, a woman she has not seen for years and will not name, and one night that friend gave her something to breathe in from a small glass pipe.

“She said it was the strangest thing in the world,” Inês said. “She said it would last about as long as it takes to boil an egg, and that I would not die, and that I would not be the same. She was right about all three.”

“And she said it would taste like burning plastic,” Inês added. “She was right about that too. Everybody says it. It’s the one thing everybody agrees on. Whatever happens after, it starts with the smell of a toy left on a stove.”

She did not tell me, that night, what she saw. She said: “You’ve read the notebooks. That’s as close as I can get. Closer, in a way, because now you know how far away it is.”

I asked her what it was. The thing in the glass pipe. What it was called.

She shook her head.

“No,” she said. “I’m not going to tell you that.”

I thought she was joking. She was not joking.

“If I tell you its name,” she said, “you’ll go home tonight and look it up. You’ll read everything. You’ll read it in four languages, the way you read everything, and by Tuesday you’ll know more about it than I do. And then if you go — *if* you go — you’ll go in carrying other people’s words. Theirs and mine. You’ll walk in with twenty notebooks under your arm.” She tapped the box. “I went in knowing

nothing, Margit. Not even a name. It's the only reason I have anything to write about at all."

"That isn't fair," I said.

"No," said Inês. "It's the opposite of fair. You've spent thirty-one years carrying other people's words into places. For once in your life, go in empty-handed." She put the lid back on the box. "I'll tell you its name when you come back. I promise. If you still want it."

20.

What she would tell me — what she insisted on telling me, there and then, before she would let me say another word — was the cost. I promised myself, when I began writing this, that I would not hide the cost of anything, so here it is, exactly as she gave it to me, without a name on it.

It is forbidden. Here, and almost everywhere else. To have it, or to give it, is a crime. In Portugal, where her friend had given it to her, taking a drug for yourself has not been a crime since 2001, only a matter for a sort of health committee — so that night in Porto, she had broken no law by breathing it in. Her friend, by handing it to her, had. And Inês had kept what was left — a little, in a small brown glass bottle at the back of her freezer — for nine years. In Geneva, she had been breaking the law every day of those nine years, and she was offering to break it again for me.

It is old. Older than any of the words for it. It grows, she said, in plants — in a great many plants, more than anyone has counted — and in the Amazon people have been brewing those plants into a bitter drink for longer than anyone has been writing things down. She would not tell me which plants. She said I would work it out, afterwards, and laugh.

It is strong. Nobody should take it lightly, or alone, or by surprise. For a short while you are not in the room at all. You cannot look after yourself. Someone sober must sit with you, and the room must be safe, and soft, and you must be lying down.

It can be terrifying. Not for everyone, not every time. But some people meet things there they do not want to meet, and come back shaking, and some of them do not sleep properly for weeks.

It is dangerous for some people's minds and some people's bodies. Anyone who has ever lost hold of what is real — or who has that in their family — must never take it; it can open a door in them that does not close. It makes the heart beat fast and hard for a few minutes; anyone with a weak heart must not. And it must never be mixed with certain medicines, especially some of the commonest pills for depression, because the two together can make the body's own chemistry run wild, and that can kill.

I asked myself the questions. I have never lost hold of what is real; quite the opposite — I am losing hold of what things are called, not what they are. My heart, the doctors had told me, was the strongest thing about me. And when the neurologist offered me pills for my low mood in March, I had said no. I had wanted to feel all of it.

And it cannot be taken back. That was the last cost, and the one Inês was most careful about. "Most people come back glad," she said. "Some come back frightened. Almost nobody comes back the same. You can't unsee it, Margit. It isn't a film. It goes in."

I said: "In a year I won't be able to see much of anything."

She said: "That's why."

21.

I did not decide that night. I want to be honest about that. I went home at three in the morning through the empty streets of Carouge and over the bridge, past the dark water where the grey birds stand in winter, and I sat on my kitchen floor, and I did not decide.

I did not decide in June, or in the long hot summer when the lake was full of swimmers and I lost the words for *plum* and *lilac* and *ankle* without noticing any of them go. Inês never asked. The brown bottle stayed at the back of her freezer. The appointment stayed in the front of my notebook.

I decided in October, in the last week of the autumn session, on a Tuesday, in the booth.

It was a debate about a war. Not a war I knew; a new one, far away, in a country I had never been to. A woman was speaking, a doctor who had worked in the hospitals there, and she was speaking in French, and I was carrying her into English, and she was describing

what she had seen. And at one point she stopped, in the middle of a sentence, and the room went quiet, and she said, very simply, *Je ne peux pas vous le dire. Il n'y a pas de mots.* [zhuh nuh puh pah voo luh DEER. eel nyah pah duh MOH.]

I cannot tell you. There are no words.

And I said, into the microphone, half a breath behind her, perfectly calmly: "I cannot tell you. There are no words."

And then she went on. And I went on.

But something in me had stopped and stayed stopped. Because I realised that I had said that sentence — *there are no words* — perhaps a thousand times in my life. Witnesses had said it to me at The Hague. Mothers. Doctors. Old men. *There are no words for it.* And every single time, I had carried it across the glass and set it down neatly in English, and never once in thirty-one years had I asked the obvious question.

Where is it, then? The thing there are no words for? Where does it go?

I was a woman who was losing her words one at a time. I had a little over three weeks before my appointment. And my friend had a small brown bottle at the back of her freezer, with no name on it, and twenty notebooks full of sentences that were all true and none of them it.

At half past eleven Inês touched my arm, and took over without a breath between us. I took off my headphones and leaned towards her and whispered, with the microphones off, under the ceiling of a thousand coloured points:

"Saturday. After the session."

She did not stop interpreting. She did not even turn her head. But beside me, on the shelf under the glass, her left hand reached out and closed over mine, and held it, and went on holding it, all the way to the end of the doctor's speech.

IV. THE DOME

Words gone since the summer: orchard, pebble, scarf, harbour, cousin, broom, ink, lantern, honey.

22.

Saturday the tenth of October. The autumn session had ended the day before, at ten past six in the evening, with a gavel and a vote and a long round of thanks to the interpreters, which the delegates always give and never mean, and which we always accept and never believe. I took off my headphones for the last time that year and put them in the drawer under the window, and Inês put hers on top of mine, and we did not say anything.

That afternoon I walked to Carouge over the bridge. The grey birds were back on the river; there were two of them, standing in the shallows by the far bank, very still. I stopped and looked at them for a while. I knew everything about them except what to call them. It no longer frightened me. It was simply a fact, like the weather.

I am going to tell you what happened next in seconds, because that is the only honest way to tell it. Inês sat beside me with her watch, and afterwards she wrote down the times for me, and I have checked them against everything I remember, and they are right. It was very short. You will not believe how short. I did not believe it either.

Second 0.

The blue sofa. Cushions under my head and under my knees. Inês had drawn the curtains half closed, so the room was the colour of weak tea. A candle — the small light with the flame, I mean; the word has gone since — on the table. A glass of water I would not need. A blanket.

She had shown me how to hold the thing: a small glass pipe, no longer than a pencil. She lit it for me, and told me to breathe in slowly, and hold it, and breathe in again.

The first breath tasted of nothing I knew. Then of something I did: burning plastic. A child’s colouring stick of wax — that word has gone too — held in a flame. Something chemical and sweetish and wrong, like a toy left too near a fire.

I held it in. I breathed out.

Second 8.

The second breath. Already the room was louder. Not the sounds in it; the room itself. As if the walls had turned up their own volume.

Inês's voice, from very close, saying: "Once more. If you can."

Second 15.

The third breath. I did not finish it. Inês took the pipe out of my fingers. I remember thinking, very clearly, very calmly, in English: *she has taken it, so I do not drop it.* It was the last ordinary sentence I had for some time.

And then the sound.

I have to describe the sound carefully, because everyone who has been where I went describes the same sound, and I did not know that then.

It was like someone crumpling a sheet of cellophane right beside my ear. Or the thin paper bag the bread comes in, being screwed up in a fist. A dry, bright, crackling sound, getting louder, close, inside my head and outside it at once. And under it — no, *through* it — a sense of something being torn. Not violently. Carefully. As if someone were tearing a very thin skin, a membrane, slowly, from one end to the other, so that something on the other side could get through. Or so that I could.

And a hum. Rising. The kind of hum a machine makes before it starts.

Second 22.

Colour.

Every colour in the room got brighter all at once, as if someone had wiped a dirty window. The weak-tea light went gold. The blue of the sofa went so blue it hurt, a blue that was almost a sound.

Then, in front of my eyes — not in the room; in front of the room, as if painted on the inside of my eyelids, though my eyes were open — something began to turn.

It was a flower. Or something like a flower. Round, made of many layers of petals, red and orange, and it was turning, slowly, the way

a wheel turns, and every petal was made of smaller petals, and every one of those was turning too. It was very beautiful and very regular and it was getting bigger, or I was getting closer to it, and I understood without being told that it was a kind of door. A round door made of turning red and orange. And that the tearing sound and the turning flower were the same thing, seen and heard.

I remember thinking: *I don't have a word for this.*

And then, quite clearly, with something almost like a laugh: *nobody does.*

Second 40.

I went through.

I don't know how else to say it. The flower opened, or I did, and there was a feeling — the only word I have is *rupture* — of something giving way completely, all at once, the way ice gives way. And I was not on the sofa. I was not in Carouge. I was not anywhere that has a name.

I was inside.

Second 41.

Here is where I must be very careful, and very plain. Everything I say now is wrong. But some of it is less wrong than the rest, and that is the best any of us can do.

I was in a room. A round room, with a high, curved roof, like the inside of a dome. Like the inside of an egg, if the egg were the size of a church. It felt as if it were underground, or deep inside something, and yet it was full of light — a warm, steady, golden light that came from everywhere at once, from the walls, from the air.

The walls were moving. Not shaking; *working*. They were covered in patterns, and the patterns were alive, folding and unfolding, flowing into new shapes so quickly and so perfectly that it was like watching a thousand hands do a thousand card tricks at once. Every pattern was perfect. Every pattern became another perfect pattern. Nothing was still, and nothing was chaos. It was the opposite of

chaos. It was more orderly than anything I have ever seen, so orderly it seemed to be *thinking*.

And it was safe. That surprised me most. It felt like the safest place I had ever been. Like the room you are born into, if you could remember it. Warm and lit and expecting you.

That was when I noticed I was not alone.

Second 44.

They came all at once, from everywhere, and the first thing they did was *cheer*.

I have to say that plainly, because it is the strangest part and I will not make it sound more dignified than it was. They cheered. A great, high, happy noise, like a crowd of children when the birthday cake comes through the door. A sort of *hhheeyyyy*, rising, delighted. *She's here. She's here. She's come.*

They were small, or seemed small. They were made of light, or of something hard and bright, like jewels, like polished glass and metal and pearl. They did not keep one shape. Each of them was changing all the time — folding, opening, turning inside out and back again — the way the patterns on the walls were changing, but faster, and with more joy in it. They bounced. They tumbled over each other. They were like bright little machines that had learned to be glad, or like gladness that had learned to be a machine.

I knew what they were. I don't mean I knew their name. I mean I knew, the way you know a friend's step on the stairs before you see them, what kind of thing they were. They were the ones who live here. And they had been waiting for me. Not for someone. For *me*. They knew me.

Later, when I came back, I would learn that a man had given them a name, long before I ever heard of him, and that the name was *elves*. I laughed when I heard it. It is a silly word. It is also, I have to admit, the right one.

Second 60.

One of them came very close. Right up to my face, if I had a face there, which I am not sure I did.

And it said — not in words; I will come to how it said things — something I understood perfectly. It said: *Don't give way to amazement.*

Not unkindly. The way a teacher says it to a child who is staring with her mouth open at the blackboard instead of reading what is written on it. *Don't stand there gaping. Look. Pay attention.*

I did not know how much time I had. I knew, somehow, that it was not much. And I understood that amazement was a waste of it. That the place was not for being amazed in. It was for paying attention.

So I paid attention. I am an interpreter. Paying attention is the only thing I have ever been good at.

Second 90.

They were singing.

I want to say that more exactly, because it matters more than anything else that happened, and because it is the thing I was there to see, though I did not know it.

They were singing, and their singing was not *about* things. Their singing *made* things.

When one of them sang, the song came out of it not as a sound but as an object. A shape. You could see it. It hung in the golden air in front of you: a small, perfect thing, like an egg made of glass and light, turning slowly, covered in patterns, glowing from inside. And you understood it. Not by translating it. By looking at it. Its meaning was not attached to it the way a label is attached to a parcel. Its meaning *was* it. The shape and the meaning were the same thing.

That is the nearest I can come. In our world, a word is a sound that points at a thing. *Heron* points at the grey bird. The sound and the bird are different things, tied together by a thread, and the thread can break — as mine have been breaking, one by one, since March. But there, in the dome, there was no thread. There was no gap between the word and the thing. The word was the thing. You did not say *bird* and hope someone pictured the bird. You sang, and there was the bird, made of song, and anyone could see it, in any language, or in none.

They were showing me language you could see.

And I, who had spent thirty-one years carrying meanings across the gap between words and things, half a breath behind other people, with my cupped hands, terrified of spilling — I understood, watching them, that there is a place where there is no gap at all. Where nothing needs carrying, because nothing is ever apart from what it means.

I think that was when I started to cry. Inês tells me I did. I don't remember the crying. I remember the eggs of light.

Second 200.

Then they showed me what they had brought.

It is hard to say how long I had been there. Inês's watch says a little over three minutes. It felt like an afternoon. It felt like a life.

They gathered in front of me, all of them, bouncing, delighted, the way children gather when they have made you a present and cannot wait for you to open it. And they sang, together, one long song, and out of their song a shape grew in the golden air.

It was long and grey. It stood on one leg in a pool of something that was not water but behaved like water. Its neck was folded like a letter S. It was made of light and glass and patience. It was utterly still. And then — it struck, a quick bright movement, like a beak into water — and then it was still again.

I knew it at once.

It was the bird. *My* bird. The grey one from the river. The one I lost in March, in the booth above Room Twenty, when the delegate said *le héron* and I said *the animal*.

And I could *see its name*. Not hear it; see it. The name was not a sound tied to the bird with a thread; the name was the bird itself, the whole shape and stillness and strike of it, and I could see it, and I could read it, and I knew what it meant more completely than I had ever known any word in my life.

The elves cheered. *You see? You see? It's here. We've got it. It's safe.*

Second 260.

Then they showed me the next one.

A long-handled thing with a deep round end, made of silver light, dipping into something warm and lifting it out. My big spoon. My ladle. Here, with its meaning on it, whole.

And then a small brown bird, very round, with its tail cocked up, singing a song too loud for its size: the wren.

And then a thing I had never seen with my eyes but knew instantly: the word for a promise to pay back a house over thirty years, which had gone from me in April, standing in the air like a small heavy building made of patience and worry.

And then the word for my sister's son. Not his name; I still had his name. The *word* for what he is to me. It came as a shape I cannot describe except to say that it was warm, and familiar, and looked a little like my sister, and a little like me, and it was so plainly what it was that I laughed out loud, there in the dome, and the elves laughed with me.

And then more. And more. Faster now. Every word on Inês's list. The almond, the hinge, the saucer, the plum. The sleeve, the comma, the kettle. The lilac. The orchard, the lantern, the honey. Each one sung into the air in front of me, whole, perfect, glowing, with its meaning not tied to it but *being* it. Each one greeted with a cheer. A whole procession of them, like a parade, like the end of a long war when the soldiers come home and the crowd goes mad on the pavements.

That is what I understood, watching them come.

They were not lost.

I had thought, since March, that my words were being destroyed. Rubbed out. Wiped off the inside of my head like chalk off a board. That each one was a small death. That I was dying, very slowly, one word at a time.

But they were here. Every one. Not destroyed. *Gone ahead.* Gone home, or gone back, or gone to wherever words come from in the first place, before anyone ties them to a sound. And the ones who

lived here had been collecting them. Keeping them. Waiting, with tremendous excitement, for me to arrive and see them all again.

Second 400.

And then the elves did something I did not expect.

They stopped singing my words. They went quiet — or as quiet as they ever were, which was still a sort of busy, delighted fizz — and they drew back, and made a space in front of me. And into that space, slowly, something came that was not one of my words at all.

It was bigger than the others. It was not clear and bright like them. It was dark at the edges and very dense, like a stone, or a storm cloud, or the inside of a fist. And it was made of many things pressed together, too many to count. I looked into it, and I saw — I don't know how to say this — I saw *faces*. Hands. A kitchen. A bus at a roadside. A field. A woman's voice, in my father's language, stopping in the middle of a sentence.

I knew what it was.

It was everything there had been no words for.

Every time, in thirty-one years, that someone in front of me — a witness, a doctor, a mother, an old man — had stopped and said, *I cannot tell you. There are no words.* Every one of those things they could not say. I had carried the sentence *there are no words* across the glass a thousand times, and never once asked where the thing itself went, the thing there were no words for.

It came here.

It was all here. Kept. Not forgotten. Not wiped away. The elves had kept it too, with the same care they kept my heron and my ladle. It was heavy, and dark, and terrible to look at, and they held it up to me with the same gentleness they had held up the wren, as if to say: *This too. This is ours too. Nothing is lost here. Not the small words and not the things too big for words. We keep all of it.*

I wanted to look away. One of them came close to me again, and I understood it to say, very gently, the thing it had said before.

Don't give way to amazement. Pay attention.

So I looked.

I will not tell you what I saw. Not because I won't. Because I can't. Not yet. Some of what I carried back I have had to carry the way I carried everything else in my life: one word at a time, carefully, with my hands cupped. I will try, later. I promise you I will try.

Second 600.

Then it began to fold away.

Not suddenly. Kindly. The way the end of a good evening folds away, people standing up and finding their coats and kissing each other at the door. The golden light was still there but further off. The patterns on the walls were slowing. The elves were still bouncing, still glad, but they were waving now — I don't know with what; they had no hands, they had everything — and I understood that they were saying goodbye, and also, at the same time, something that was the opposite of goodbye.

See you soon.

Not *see you again*. *See you soon.* As if they knew something about my calendar that I had been trying not to know.

And then one more. One last word, sung into the air in front of me, very small, very bright, and I did not recognise it. It was not one of mine. Not yet. It was a word I still had. I could feel it, still tied to its sound, still sitting in my head where it belonged.

They showed it to me anyway. As if to say: *this one's coming too. Not yet. But it's coming. We'll keep it for you.*

I am not going to tell you which word it was. It is still mine, for now. When it goes, I will know where.

Second 740.

The ceiling of Inês's flat. Cracked plaster. A stain the shape of Italy. The weak-tea light through the half-closed curtains.

The candle — the small light — still burning on the table. A blanket over my knees that I did not remember. My face wet. My hands, both of them, held in both of Inês's.

I tried to speak and found that I could. My mouth worked. My English was there. My French. My Hungarian. My father's language. All the ordinary words, the common ones, the ones the

doctor said would go last, sitting in my head as if nothing had happened, waiting patiently to be used.

I turned my head and looked at Inês. She was crying too. She had a notebook open on her knee — the twenty-first notebook; I learned that later — and her pen was still in her hand.

She said: “Welcome back.”

And I said the only thing I could say. The plainest sentence I had. I said it in English, because it is the language I have been paid to tell the truth in for thirty-one years.

I said: “They kept them. Inês. They kept every one.”

V. THE TWENTY-FIRST NOTEBOOK

Words gone since the dome: candle, ferry, glove, quarry, vinegar, chimney.

23.

I slept on the blue sofa that night. I did not mean to. I meant to drink the water, and say thank you, and walk home over the bridge in the dark like a grown woman. Instead I lay with the blanket over my knees and looked at the stain on the ceiling that was shaped like Italy, and the next thing I knew it was Sunday, and the light was white, and Inês was making coffee in the kitchen and singing very quietly in Portuguese.

She brought me a cup and sat on the floor with her back against the sofa, the way she had sat the night I read her notebooks, in May.

“You promised,” I said.

“I did.”

“You said you would tell me its name. When I came back. If I still wanted it.”

“Do you?”

I thought about it. I want to be honest: I really did think about it. For a moment I wanted to leave it without a name forever. To keep it the way they had kept my words, whole, with nothing tied to it.

But I am an interpreter. I have never in my life been able to leave a thing without its name.

“Yes,” I said.

She told me.

It is called dimethyltryptamine [dye-METH-il-TRIP-tuh-meen]. It is a long word, and nobody uses it. Everybody says the three letters at the front of it instead.

DMT.

I said it out loud, once, to try it. Three letters. Three small sounds, tied by a thread to the dome, and the gold, and the elves, and the turning red-orange door. I could feel the thread as I said it. I could feel how thin it was. I laughed, because it was so much smaller than

the thing, and Inês laughed too, because she had laughed the same laugh nine years ago, in Porto, on a different floor.

“Now,” she said. “*Now* you can read everything.”

24.

So I did. I want to tell you what I learned, plainly, in the order I learned it, the way I would give a delegate the background to a resolution before the vote. I went home that Sunday and sat at my kitchen table with the books and the papers and a dictionary beside me for the words I no longer have, and I read for two days.

I will make it as simple as I can. I find that is easier for me now than it used to be. You will see why.

DMT is a very small thing. A molecule [MOL-uh-kyool]. A molecule is just a shape made of atoms stuck together, far too small to see. This one is made mostly of carbon and hydrogen, with a little nitrogen.

It is a close relative of something your brain already uses every second of your life. That thing is called serotonin [seh-roh-TOH-nin]. Serotonin is one of the brain’s messengers. It carries signals from one brain cell to the next, and it helps to set your mood, and your sleep, and the way the world looks to you when you open your eyes in the morning.

The two shapes are so alike that DMT fits into some of the same locks in the brain that serotonin fits into. One lock above all. The scientists call it by a code: 5-HT2A [five-aitch-tee-two-AY]. When DMT turns that lock, the brain’s ordinary way of building the world — this is a room, this is a sofa, this is me, that is you — comes apart. Not for long. But completely.

That is what it does. Nobody yet knows why it does *that*, and not something else. Nobody knows why, when the ordinary world comes apart, so many people find the same other world underneath it.

25.

Here is the first thing that made me laugh, the way Inês said I would.

She had told me it grew in plants, a great many plants, more than anyone had counted. She would not tell me which. She said I would work it out afterwards, and laugh.

She was right about the plants. It is in hundreds of them. It is in the leaves of a shrub in the Amazon. It is in the root bark of a tree in the dry northeast of Brazil, which the people there call jurema [zhoo-REH-ma]. It is in certain grasses, and in the bark of certain acacias, and in some of the reeds that grow at the edge of lakes. Perhaps, for all I know, at the edge of ours.

But here is why I laughed. It is in us.

Small amounts of it have been found in human blood, and in the clear fluid that the brain floats in. In 2019 a group of scientists found that the brains of rats make it, quite ordinarily, in amounts close to some of the brain's other messengers. Nobody knows what it is doing there. There are many guesses. Not one of them is proven.

It is simply there. A key the body seems to cut for itself, to a door nobody has found.

I had gone to Carouge with my coat and my umbrella, thinking that I was going to be given something strange from far away. And all that time the strange thing had been at home. In the plants by the river where the grey birds stand. In me.

26.

Here is the second thing. If you swallow it, nothing happens at all.

The stomach has a cleaner in it, an enzyme [EN-zime], whose job is to break things like this down before they can get any further. It breaks DMT down almost at once. You could eat a plate of those Amazon leaves and feel nothing but full.

The people of the Amazon found a way round that cleaner a very long time ago — longer ago than anyone has written down. They boil the leaf together with a second plant, a thick woody vine, and something in the vine stops the cleaner from working. That is the bitter brown drink Inês had told me about in May. It is called ayahuasca [eye-uh-WAHS-kuh]. It lasts for hours, not minutes, and

people who drink it are often very sick before they are anything else. It is a story for another book.

If you breathe DMT in, as smoke or as vapour, it goes past the stomach altogether, straight into the blood, and up into the brain in ten or fifteen seconds. That was the third breath; that was the cellophane, and the tearing, and the hum. And most of it is gone again in about twelve minutes.

Inês's friend in Porto had been exact. As long as it takes to boil an egg.

And the burning plastic is real, too. It is the taste of the thing itself, warmed in glass. Everyone who has ever breathed it says the same. It is the only part of the whole journey that everybody agrees how to describe.

I find that funny. The one thing in the world we all have the same words for is the smell of the doorstep.

27.

Here is the history. In order, and short.

In 1931, a chemist in Canada named Richard Manske made it for the first time, in a laboratory, out of other chemicals. He wrote it down. He did not try it. Nobody tried it for twenty-five years.

In 1946, a scientist in Brazil found it growing in nature, in the root of the jurema tree.

And in 1956 — this is the part I read three times — in Budapest, in my city, in the year of the uprising, fifteen years before I was born there, a young Hungarian doctor and chemist named Stephen Szára [SAH-rah] wanted to study the mind.

He wanted to use LSD, the famous new drug that a company in Basel, here in Switzerland, had begun to make. He wrote to them and asked if he could buy some. They said no. They did not want, they said, such a powerful thing going into a communist country.

So Szára, who was a chemist before he was a doctor, made DMT himself, in his own laboratory. He tested it on rats. He tried swallowing it, and nothing happened, which you now know is the stomach's cleaner at work. And then, one day in April 1956, he injected it into a muscle, to see what would happen.

He wrote that his mind was filled completely with visions, and that he felt an intense, overflowing joy. He said afterwards that some of that joy was simply the joy of having found something.

Afterwards he gave it to colleagues who offered themselves, carefully, and wrote down what they told him. Not all of them were glad. One said it was too much. Another, a doctor, called it a dangerous game, and said it would be easy not to come back from it.

That autumn, the Soviet tanks came into Budapest. My mother was nine years old. She told me, when I was a child, about the sound of them on the cobbles at night, and about the windows of the bakery on her street, and about the neighbours who were there one week and gone the next. Two hundred thousand people left Hungary that winter, over the border into Austria, through the snow and the marshes, carrying what they could. Stephen Szára left too, soon after. He went to America and spent the rest of his long life studying the brain, in the government's own laboratories near Washington. He died in 2021, at ninety-eight.

He never lived in Budapest again.

I sat at my kitchen table with this in front of me and thought: he was the first person we know of to walk through that door on purpose and come back and say what was there. He did it in my city. He did it in the same year my mother listened to the tanks. And then he left, and carried what he had seen out of the country, the way the others carried their children and their candlesticks. And never once set it down in the place it came from.

I am not superstitious. I have sat in rooms with too many men who were sure that God or history was on their side to believe in signs. But I am an interpreter, and I know what it is to carry something out of one place and set it down in another, carefully, with your hands cupped. I felt — I will say it plainly — that I had been handed something by a stranger from my own street, seventy years late.

28.

After Szára, others.

In the early 1990s an American psychiatrist named Rick Strassman, at a university in New Mexico, gave DMT to about sixty volunteers,

slowly and carefully, in a hospital research ward, with a nurse beside them, and wrote down everything they told him. He called it the spirit molecule. He was a careful man and did not expect what he heard.

What he heard, over and over, from people who had never met each other, was this: *there was someone there.*

Not always the same someone. Some of the volunteers met beings who were gentle, and some met beings who were busy and paid them no attention, like workers in a factory, and some met beings who frightened them. Some were like insects, some like clowns, some like light. But they were there. They seemed to have been there before the volunteers arrived, and to be going on with their own lives after they left. And very often, they seemed to know the volunteers were coming.

Then, in 2018, a group of scientists at Imperial College in London did something simple and very clever. They gave DMT to volunteers, and when the volunteers came back, they asked them the same list of questions that doctors ask people who have nearly died. People whose hearts have stopped on an operating table. People who have drowned and been pulled out and breathed back into.

The answers were very close. Closer than the scientists had expected. Leaving the body. A tunnel, or a door. A light. A feeling of arriving somewhere more real than here, not less. Meeting someone who seemed to be waiting. Being sent back.

I read that in my kitchen on the Monday afternoon and I put the paper down and thought of the elves waving, and of the thing they said that was the opposite of goodbye.

See you soon.

29.

And it is forbidden. I promised myself I would not hide the cost of anything, so here it is again, now with its name on it.

In Switzerland, DMT is on the list of forbidden drugs. To have it is a crime. To give it is a worse one. The same is true almost everywhere on earth. Since 1971 an agreement between nations,

signed by nearly every country there is, has put pure DMT in its strictest class, on the same shelf as LSD and mescaline.

There are only a few gaps in that wall, and they are strange ones.

The agreement forbids the pure substance. It does not forbid the plants it grows in. So in Brazil and in Peru, the old Amazon drink is legal, and in Brazil it is drunk openly, in churches, on Sunday, with hymns. In the United States, two of those Brazilian churches went to court for the right to drink it in their ceremonies, and won; in 2006 the highest court in that country agreed with the first of them, without one voice against. In 2022 the people of one American state, Colorado, voted that a grown adult should no longer be punished for taking it, though selling it is still a crime there, and the national law still calls it one everywhere else.

And in Portugal, since 2001, taking any drug at all for yourself has not been a crime. Only a matter for a kind of health committee, who may talk to you, and may send you to someone who can help. Giving it to another person is still a crime. So that night in Porto, nine years ago, Inês broke no law at all. Her friend, by handing her the pipe, did.

And Inês, by keeping the little brown bottle at the back of her freezer for nine years, in Geneva, broke the law of this country every single day. And by holding the pipe to my mouth on a Saturday afternoon, she broke it again, worse, for me.

Nowhere on earth can you walk into a shop and buy pure DMT. Not legally. Not anywhere.

There. Now you have everything I have. The name, and the cost, and the history, and the law.

None of it is what happened to me. All of it is true, and none of it is it.

30.

The last name I learned that week was the one I had heard already, without knowing it.

His name was Terence McKenna. He was an American, born in 1946 in a small town in Colorado, among cattle ranches and mountains. He breathed DMT for the first time in 1965, as a young

man in California, and many times after that. And he spent the rest of his life trying to say what was there.

Not in a laboratory. Not in a hospital, with a nurse and a list of questions. In public. On stages, in halls, on the radio, on cassette tapes passed from hand to hand. In ordinary words. With jokes. He would stand up in front of a room of strangers and tell them, as calmly as if he were describing a trip to the shops, that he had breathed in a chemical and gone through a door and been greeted by a crowd of small, delighted, jewel-like creatures who were made of something like light and something like machines, and who changed shape as he watched, and who sang things into the air that you could see.

He was the one who gave them their name. He called them *self-transforming machine elves*. He knew it was a ridiculous name. He used it anyway, because it was the nearest he could get.

He said they cheered when he arrived. He said they rushed at him like children. He said their singing was a kind of language that did not need to be heard, because it could be looked at — that the words were not pointing at things; they *were* the things. He said one of the beings had told him, in effect: *don't stand there gaping; don't give way to amazement; look.* And he spent thirty-five years telling the world that the strangest part was not the strangeness. The strangest part was that it seemed to be *there*, whether he came or not, and that it seemed to know him.

I read that, at my kitchen table, and I had to get up and walk to the window and stand there with my hand over my mouth.

Because I had not read it before. I had gone in empty-handed, the way Inês made me. I had never heard his name. I had never heard the word *elves*, not in that sense. Not one sentence of his had been in my head on the blue sofa.

And he had seen what I had seen. Forty, fifty, sixty years before me. In another country, in another language, with a completely different life behind him. The cheering. The jewels. The singing you could see. *Don't give way to amazement.* The very words.

I want to be careful here. I am not telling you that this proves anything. Inês had read him, years ago, after Porto; perhaps

something she said, once, in a booth, in a café, slipped into me without my noticing. Perhaps all of us who go through that door are only meeting the shape of our own brains, and our brains are all built from the same plan, so of course we meet the same things. That is possible. I have sat in enough courtrooms to know that ten honest witnesses can all describe the same thing that was never there.

But I have also sat in enough courtrooms to know what it sounds like when ten honest witnesses describe the same thing that *was*.

McKenna died in the year 2000. He was fifty-three. He died of a tumour in his brain.

I sat with that for a long time, too.

31.

On the Tuesday evening, Inês came to my flat with a bottle of wine and the twenty-first notebook.

She put the notebook on the kitchen table, between us, the way she had put the wine box full of the other twenty on her own table in May. She did not open it. She put her hand flat on the cover.

“I need to tell you something first,” she said, “and then you can read it, and then you can tell me I’m mad.”

I waited.

“You talked,” she said. “The whole time. From about the fiftieth second until about the tenth minute. You talked without stopping.”

I said I didn’t remember talking. I remembered the elves talking. I remembered the eggs of light.

“I know,” said Inês. “It wasn’t any language. Not one I know, and I know seven, and I can recognise the music of twenty more. It wasn’t French or Hungarian or your father’s language. It wasn’t nonsense, either — not babbling. It had sentences. It had a shape. It went up at the ends of things and down at the beginnings. It had stops in it, like breathing, where the sense finished and started again. It sounded —” she stopped, and I watched her look for the word, and find it, and not like it, and use it anyway. “It sounded like the most fluent thing I have ever heard. More fluent than you in the

booth on your best day. It sounded like somebody who has never once in her life had to look for a word."

"And you wrote it down," I said.

"No," said Inês. "That's the thing. I didn't write *it* down. I couldn't have. There's no alphabet for it." She took her hand off the notebook. "I interpreted it."

"Into what?"

"Into English. Live. Half a breath behind you. The way we do." She looked at me, and I saw that she was frightened, which I had never seen in nine years. "I didn't decide to. I had the pen in my hand to write down the times, and you started talking, and I just — went. The way you go in the booth when the delegate starts and the red light comes on. I didn't think about it. My hand did it. I couldn't have stopped it if I'd wanted to." She pushed the notebook across the table to me. "I haven't read it back properly. I couldn't. I wanted you to be the first."

I opened it.

32.

I am going to give you some of what she wrote. Not all of it. Some of it is mine, and some of it I am still carrying.

You have heard me say, over and over, that I am good at plain words, and that plain words are all I have left. Inês is not like me. She never was. She is the one who can describe the thing nobody has seen. She is the one who, in the booth, when a delegate stumbles into a sentence with no bottom to it, can somehow give it one. Nine years she had spent failing to describe her own journey, in twenty notebooks, because she had been inside it. This time she was outside. She was sitting beside the door, watching me go through, and listening to me sing from the other side of it, and carrying it across.

This is what she wrote. The times in the margin are hers.

0:50 — She has begun to speak. Her eyes are open and not here. Her voice is low and quick and certain, the voice of a woman giving directions in a city she was born in.

Here is the room. It was always here. It is under the floor of every room. You walk across it all your life and you hear it sometimes in the boards when the house is quiet.

1:15 — They are glad. Tell them I am glad also. No — tell them I am the gladness. They will understand that better.

1:40 — Look how they make the words. Look. They open their mouths and the thing comes out whole, like a fish from the water, wet and shining and alive, and you do not have to ask what it is. It tells you, by being it. Nobody here has ever needed an interpreter. Nobody here has ever been lonely in a sentence.

2:10 — Her hands are lifting off the blanket, as if to catch something thrown. She is laughing. I have never heard her laugh like this. It is the laugh of a girl.

2:30 — Oh, they say. Oh, you came. We have been keeping your things.

3:20 — Here she said one word, a single word, three times, slowly, as if teaching it to me. It was not a word. It was not in any language. And my hand wrote —

heron.

heron.

heron.

3:40 — A long tall shape of patience standing in a river of light. It strikes. It is still again. It is still a bird. It was always a bird. It is only the string that broke.

4:00 — and then my hand wrote, faster than I could think, one after another:

ladle — centipede — nephew — wren — gutter — verdict — mortgage — thimble — pillow — almond — sparrow — colander — sleeve — oath — lilac — tribunal — hinge — saucer — plum —

— and on, and on, down the page, faster than I could keep up —

— kettle — orchard — pebble — scarf — harbour — cousin — broom — ink — lantern — honey —

— candle.

She is saying each one as if it is the name of someone stepping off a train. As if each one has been away a long time, and has come home, and is brown from the sun, and is carrying presents.

5:10 — None of it is lost. Tell them that. Tell everyone. There is no such thing as losing a word. There is only the word going on ahead. They go on ahead the way the young go on ahead to the station to get good seats. They are all here. They are keeping places.

I stopped reading there for a long time.

Then I went and got the list. Our list. The one in the back of my little black notebook, in Inês's handwriting, which she had been keeping for me since March: every word I lost, in the order I lost them, so that I would not have to know about each one at the moment it went. *Heron* at the top, with its four old names in brackets underneath it.

You will already have guessed what I found.

Every word in her column was on the list. In the same order. Not one out of place.

Except the last.

Candle was not on the list on Saturday. *Candle* went on the Monday, here, at this kitchen table, in the middle of the afternoon, while I was reading about Stephen Szára. I reached for the word to tell myself that I should light one, because the light was going, and it was not there. I had to write it on the list myself, that evening, in my own bad handwriting: *the small light with the flame*. Inês had not seen that page. She had not been here.

And she had written *candle* in the twenty-first notebook on Saturday afternoon, four minutes into the twelve, two days before it went.

I looked up at her across the table. She knew what I was going to say. She had had three days to say it to herself.

"There was a small light on the table," I said. "The one with the flame. On Saturday. Burning. Right in front of you. You were looking at it."

"Yes," said Inês. "I've thought of that. I want to be a sensible person, so I've thought of that a great deal. There was a candle, and

I was tired, and I was frightened, and I'd been watching that flame for ten minutes, and my hand wrote the thing my eyes were on." She paused. "And the rest of the list I've been carrying in my head since March. I'm a professional. My memory is my job. Of course I had it."

"So you heard what you knew."

"Maybe," she said. "That's what a sensible person would say. But Margit — I didn't choose them. I didn't sit there thinking, *now I'll write sparrow.* I heard you make a sound that was not a word, and my hand wrote the word for it, the way it does in the booth. The way yours does. You know that feeling better than anyone alive. It isn't remembering. It's *receiving*." She put her finger on the last word in the column. "And I've never once in my life written down a word that wasn't said."

I do not know which of those things is true. I have decided I don't need to know. I have spent my whole life in rooms where two true accounts of the same event sat side by side on the table, in two languages, and the judges had to choose. I am not a judge. I am only the woman who carries both.

33.

The notebook went on.

6:40 — Now she is quiet. Now her voice changes. It goes down, into her chest. It is a different voice. It is not hers.

No. I am wrong. It is many voices. It is many voices one after another, very fast, like a radio being turned through stations at night. An old man. A young woman. A child, I think. A voice speaking her father's language, and stopping, and starting, and stopping again.

7:30 — Something very heavy is being shown to her. I can see her face and I know that face. It is the face she wore in the booth at The Hague, in the old photographs, the ones in the newspaper. It is the face of a woman holding something up to the light so that it can be seen, even though it is too heavy, even though her arms are shaking.

7:50 — Here I could not interpret.

I tried. I want that written down. I tried with everything I have. The sounds were coming and my hand was ready and it did not move. Not because the words were missing. Because there were no words. For the first time in my life, sitting beside someone speaking, I understood exactly what they were saying and could not carry one single piece of it across.

Here I could not interpret. There are no words.

I have written that sentence perhaps a thousand times, in booths, in courtrooms, carrying it across for other people. This is the first time it has been mine.

8:40 — She is crying. She is still looking. Her hands are open in her lap, palms up, the way you hold your hands to receive something.

9:30 — It is passing. It is being folded up, carefully, like a flag after a funeral. She is nodding, as if someone has asked her a question and she is saying yes.

There is a blank space in the notebook after that. Half a page, with nothing on it. Then one more line.

10:10 — They are saying goodbye. She is smiling. She has just said one more word, very softly, a word that is not a word, and my hand has written it down, and I think it is the next one.

The rest of the page was gone. Torn out neatly, close to the spine, with a ruler.

I looked at Inês.

She put her hand in the pocket of her cardigan and took out a small square of paper, folded four times, and put it on the table beside the notebook. Then she covered it with her hand.

“I tore it out on Saturday night,” she said, “while you were asleep. Before I’d even read it properly myself. I looked at it once and I folded it up.”

“You know which word it is.”

“I know which word it is.”

“Is it one I still have?”

“Yes.”

“Will you tell me?”

“No,” said Inês. And then, much more gently: “Not because I won’t. Because they didn’t tell you either. You said so, when you came back. They showed you, and they let you keep it, and they didn’t make you look. I’m not going to do what they wouldn’t.” She lifted her hand off the little folded square. “It’s yours. Keep it. When the word goes, you’ll know it’s gone, because you’ll go looking for it one day and it won’t be there. And then you can open this. And you’ll know where it went.”

I took the square of paper. I did not open it. It is in front of me now, as I write this, on the table, beside my coffee cup and the dictionary, folded four times.

It has not been opened yet.

34.

That night, after Inês had gone home, I sat at the kitchen table with the twenty-first notebook and the folded square and the calendar on the wall.

The calendar said: Tuesday 13 October.

The appointment was on Thursday 29 October, at eleven o’clock in the morning, here, at this table. The retired nurse from Fribourg would come. The doctor would come. They would ask me, one last time, whether I was certain, and I would say it in my own words, in French, as the association asks. And the paper that said my mind was still clear enough to choose — the paper dated the fourth of May — would still be good for one more week after that, until the fourth of November, and then it would run out, and nobody would ever give me another one.

Sixteen days.

I want to tell you what I decided, and why. I want to tell you what I brought back from the dome, which is not the elves and not the gold and not the singing, though it is made of them. I want to tell you about the heavy thing, and what I saw in it, which I promised I would try to do.

I am going to try to do all of it in the plainest words I have. Plain words are what I have now. I have come to believe that this is not a

misfortune. I have come to believe that it is the only reason I can tell it at all.

VI. WHAT I CARRIED BACK

Words gone since the notebook: thread, puddle, tassel, ledger, wick, mitten.

35.

I have lost the word I used, before, for the string that ties a sound to a thing. I used it many times in this book. You will have noticed it. I can see it on the earlier pages, and I can read it, and I can say it, and it means nothing now. A little noise.

I am going to say *string* instead.

You understood me. Did you notice? I lost the word, and I put another one in its place, and you knew exactly what I meant. The meaning went across. The word was only the boat.

Keep that in your mind. It is the whole of what I have to tell you.

36.

I promised that I would try to say what I brought back. I am going to do it the way I would explain a hard thing to a delegate who has two minutes before the vote, and no time for speeches. Plain. In order. One thing at a time.

Before I begin I want to say one thing about the words I am going to use.

When I came back from the dome, I read everything. I told you that. And everything I read was written by clever people, in clever words. *Consciousness. Ego dissolution. Hyperspace. Non-ordinary reality. Transpersonal. Ineffable.* I read those words at my kitchen table and I could feel myself sliding off them, like a hand on wet glass. They are not wrong. They are very good words, made by good minds. But they are words *about* the experience. They walk around it the way you walk around a house you cannot get into, and describe the windows.

I can’t use those words any more. Most of them are gone, or going. I only have the small ones now. The common ones, the old ones, the ones the doctor said would be the last to leave. *Room. Light. Song. Home. Keep. Lose. Gone.*

And I have come to believe — this is the first thing, and I will say it now so that you know where I am going — that the small words are

the only ones that can carry it. The big words were made afterwards, by people standing outside. The small words are older. They were made by people who were standing *inside* things: inside rooms, inside rain, inside grief. They are made for carrying weight.

The man who found the best words for it knew this. I told you about him: Terence McKenna. What made him different from the scientists and the clever writers was not that he knew more. It was that he talked about it plainly. *Elves. Jewels. Singing. A room. They were glad to see me.* People laughed at him for that. The plain words made it sound like a children's story. But he said, more or less, that the plain words were the only honest ones — that anything grander was a way of not saying it.

So. The small words. Here we go.

37.

The first thing I brought back is this: the meaning is not in the word.

You know this already. Everyone does, if they think about it. But nobody thinks about it, because the word and the meaning are tied together so tightly, all our lives, that they feel like one thing.

Here is a simple way to see it. Think of the grey bird. The one that stands on one leg in the river. You know what I mean. You can see it now, in your head. I did not need its name to put it there. I only needed to point.

Now think of a word you know in another language. *Pain* [PAN], in French, means bread. Not hurt. Bread. The same four letters, the same shape on the page, and in Paris it means something warm in a paper bag, and in London it means something that makes you cry. The letters are not the bread. The letters are not the hurt. The letters are just a sign hung on a door, and different towns hang the same sign on different doors.

I have known this all my life. It is my trade. An interpreter is somebody who knows, every second, that the word and the thing are not the same. That is what we do in the booth: we take the meaning off one word and put it on another. For thirty-one years, half a breath at a time, I lifted meanings off French words and set

them down on English ones, like moving a hot dish from one plate to another without dropping it.

But here is what I never asked. In the half a breath between — after I have lifted the meaning off the French word, and before I have set it down on the English one — *where is it*?

Where is the meaning, when it is in neither language?

For a quarter of a second, perhaps less, it is not in any word at all. It is not French and not English. It is just — *itself*. Naked. A meaning with no clothes on. And then I dress it again, in the new language, and send it out of my mouth into the delegate's earphone.

I have been carrying meanings through that place, that gap, ten thousand times a day, for thirty-one years. And I never once turned my head to look at it.

In the dome, I looked.

38.

The second thing I brought back is this: the gap is a place, and the place is full.

The dome was the gap.

I don't mean it was *like* the gap. I mean that when I went in through the red and orange door, I was standing, for twelve minutes, in the same place I had passed through ten thousand times a day without stopping: the place where meanings are, when they are not wearing words.

That is why the elves did not need words. That is why their singing came out as shapes you could see. They were not speaking a language. They were showing the meanings themselves, with nothing tied to them. A heron with no *heron* on it. Just the bird, the whole of it, the stillness and the strike, so plain that anybody from any country could have looked at it and known.

And it was not empty. That is the thing. I had always imagined, when I imagined it at all, that the gap would be empty. A dark little corridor between two rooms, a nothing, a place you hurry through.

It was the fullest place I have ever been. It was full of meanings the way the sea is full of water. Every meaning that has ever been

carried by any word in any language. And — this is the part I keep coming back to — every meaning that has never yet *had* a word. Things nobody has said yet. Things nobody has a name for yet. Sitting there, perfectly clear, waiting for somebody to come in and find them and carry them out and hang a new sign on them.

When McKenna came back from the same place, he said something like this. He said that the world we live in is made out of language — that we build it, every day, out of words, the way birds build nests out of twigs — and that in the dome he had seen the stuff the twigs are made of. He said the elves seemed to be showing him what language is *for*. Not for describing things. For making them.

I did not understand that when I read it. I understand it now.

39.

The third thing is this: when a word leaves you, it goes back there.

Here is my illness, in the small words.

It does not take things away from the world. The heron is still in the river. The ladle is still in my drawer. The illness only cuts the strings. One at a time, slowly, over years. It cuts the string between *heron* and the bird, and the bird stays, and the sound stays, and I am left holding two things that no longer know each other.

I thought, for seven months, that when a string was cut, the meaning on the end of it fell into the dark and was lost. That I was being emptied. That each word gone was a small death, and I was dying a word at a time.

I was wrong. I know I was wrong, because I saw them. Every one. Kept. Glowing. Cheered when I arrived.

When the string is cut, the meaning does not fall into the dark. It goes back to the place where meanings are when they are not wearing words. It goes *home*. The place it came from before anyone tied it to a sound. The place I passed through ten thousand times a day.

They are not lost. They have gone ahead.

40.

The fourth thing is the one that changed my mind. It is this: my illness and that drug are the same journey, at different speeds.

I will say it as simply as I can.

The drug cut every string I had, all at once, for twelve minutes. Every word in my head came loose from its meaning at the same moment, and I fell through the gap and into the place where the meanings are. And then the drug wore off, and the strings grew back, and I came home.

The illness is cutting the same strings. Only slowly. One at a time. Over years.

So where is it taking me?

I had always thought the illness was taking me down. Into the dark. Into a soft chair in a room in Onex, where a woman who looks like me sits and watches the shapes go by and feels nothing, and knows nothing, and is nobody.

But I have been to the end of that road now. I went there on a Saturday afternoon, at full speed, on a blue sofa in Carouge. I saw what is at the bottom when every string is cut.

It is not dark. It is the brightest place I have ever been. It is where all the meanings are. It is warm and lit and expecting me.

The illness is not taking me down into the dark. It is taking me, slowly, to the dome. On foot. The long way round.

41.

Now I have to talk about the soft chair. Because I told you, in the spring, that the soft chair was why I signed up. I want to be fair to the woman who wrote that. She was not stupid. She was frightened, and she had good reasons.

She said: I will not be me. She said: I am made of meanings, and the illness is taking my meanings, and what is left will be a house with all the labels peeled off the boxes, and someone living contentedly among the boxes who never knew what was in them.

I read that now, and I can see the mistake she made. It is a small mistake. It is the mistake of an interpreter.

She thought the meanings were hers.

She thought they were inside her. In boxes. And that when the labels came off, the boxes would be — what, empty? Lost? Unknowable? She thought she *was* the meanings, and so when they went, she would go.

But the meanings were never inside me. I was never the place where they were kept. I was only ever the woman in the booth, carrying them across. Half a breath behind. With my hands cupped. They passed through me on their way somewhere, ten thousand a day, and I held them for a quarter of a second each, and then I let them go into the delegate's ear, and they went on without me.

They were never mine to keep. They were kept somewhere else. They were *always* kept somewhere else. And now I have seen where.

A house with all the labels peeled off is still a house. The things in the boxes are still the things. And the woman in the soft chair, who watches the shapes go by and does not know their names — she is not a woman who has lost everything. She is a woman who has stopped *carrying*. That's all. She has put the dishes down. After a whole life with her hands full, she is sitting with them empty, in her lap, palms up.

The way I held them, Inês told me, at the end of the twelve minutes. Palms up, as if to receive something.

42.

Then the heavy thing. I promised.

I have tried, every day since the dome, to tell it, and every day I have stopped. I am going to tell it now, and I am going to do it in the smallest words I have, because those are the only ones strong enough.

When the elves stopped singing my words and made a space, and the dark heavy thing came into it — I said I saw faces. Hands. A kitchen. A bus at the side of a road. A field. A woman's voice stopping in the middle of a sentence.

They were the witnesses. Not all of them. Some of them. The ones I carried at The Hague, for twenty years, eleven thousand deaths in a language that was not theirs. And the ones they were speaking about — the people on the bus, the people in the field. The ones who were not there to speak.

And here is what I saw. It is very simple. I have not found a way to make it simpler.

It was all still there.

Not the hurt. I don't mean that the hurt was kept, like a wound kept open. I mean *all* of it. The whole of each person. The woman on the bus — the morning before the bus. The bread she bought. The way her son pulled at her coat. The song she half-sang in the kitchen. The field before the field. The man at the side of the road, when he was six, when he was twenty, when he married. All of it. Every hour of it. Pressed together, heavy, dense, like a stone made of lives.

Kept.

The witnesses had said, to me, a thousand times: *there are no words.* And they were right. There are no words for what happened to those people. There never will be. But that does not mean it was lost. It means it went where words do not go. It went into the gap. Into the place where the meanings are kept. And the ones who live there had picked it all up, every scrap of it, with the same care they used for my heron and my ladle, and they were keeping it.

Nothing is lost here, they told me. *Not the small words and not the things too big for words.*

I said, in the spring, that one of my reasons for choosing EXIT was the dead of The Hague. That they had no choice, and I was offered one, and it seemed rude to turn it down. I want to be honest: that is still true. I still think it. I do not take it back.

But underneath it, I see now, there was something else. Something I never said, because I did not know it was there. I think I believed that if I died well — cleanly, by choice, with a letter in my own handwriting and a policeman taking off his cap — it would somehow make up for all the people who died badly. A sort of small, tidy answer to the field and the bus. *Look. Here is one death, at least, that somebody chose.*

I don’t need to do that any more. They don’t need me to. They are not lost. They are not waiting for somebody to balance the account. They are kept, whole, every hour of them, in a place where nothing is wasted. My death would not have added anything to them. My life does not take anything away.

That is what I saw in the heavy thing. That is what I could not say for three weeks. It is very small and very plain, and it is the biggest thing I have ever carried.

43.

And then there was the last reason. The first one, really. I have no one to stay for.

I want to be careful with this, because it would be easy to make it sweet, and it was not sweet.

Inês never asked me to stay. Not once. Not on the blue sofa, not at my kitchen table, not in the booth. She never said *please*, or *think of me*, or *you have so much left*. She would have thought that was an unfair thing to do to somebody, and she is the fairest person I know.

What she did was sit beside me.

That’s all. In the booth, for nine years. On the floor in May, while I read her notebooks. On the sofa in October, with her watch and her pen. At my kitchen table, with the twenty-first notebook and the folded square of paper.

And I understood, at some point in those three weeks, sitting across from her, that I had been asking the wrong question. I had been asking: *is there someone to stay for?* As if staying were a job you do for somebody else, a debt you pay. And the answer to that was no, and it is still no; nobody needs me to stay.

But there is a different question. It is: *is there someone to stay with?*

In the booth, there are always two of you. That is the rule. You never work alone. One speaks and one listens, and when the one who is speaking falters — when a word goes, when a sentence has no bottom — the other one is already there, half a breath behind, and takes over without a pause, and the delegate in the room below never knows anything happened.

I wrote, in the spring, that my decision was the hardest thing I had ever interpreted, and that I had no partner beside me to take over if I faltered.

I was wrong about that too. I had a partner. She took over. She was taking over on the Saturday afternoon, when I was speaking a language nobody knows and she put it into English half a breath behind me, without deciding to, the way we do.

She will take over again. When the words go, she will be there. Not to keep them for me — they are kept already; I have seen where. Just to sit beside me while they go. Half a breath behind.

That is enough. I did not know, until I was fifty-four years old, that it was enough. It is.

44.

Thursday the twenty-ninth of October. Eleven o'clock in the morning. My kitchen table.

I could have telephoned. That is what most people do, the nurse told me afterwards. They telephone the association, a day or two before, and say they have changed their minds, and that is that. Nobody minds. Nobody asks why.

I did not want to telephone. I had chosen this the right way, in the spring, with a letter in my own hand and a doctor and a companion and a paper with a stamp on it. I wanted to unchoose it the same way. In person. At the table where it was meant to happen. In my own words.

So they came. The doctor, a tall man with a soft voice. And the nurse from Fribourg with her big gentle hands. They sat down at my kitchen table, where I had put out coffee and the almond biscuits from the shop on the corner — I can't say *almond* any more; I pointed at them, and the nurse said the word for me, and I said *yes, those*.

The doctor asked me, as he must, whether I understood what I had asked for, in the spring, and whether I still wanted it, and to tell him in my own words.

I told him in French. I had practised it, the way I practised the other sentence in the spring.

Je reste. [zhuh REST]

I'm staying.

He asked me whether I understood that the paper which said my mind was clear enough to choose — the paper from the fourth of May — would run out on the fourth of November. And that because of my illness, it was very unlikely that any doctor would ever sign another one. And that this meant the door was closing, and that once it had closed, I could not open it again, however much I wanted to, however bad things became.

I said yes. I said I understood that exactly. I said that was the point.

He looked at me for a long moment. Then he nodded, and wrote something down, and put his pen in his pocket.

The nurse did not say anything for a while. She ate a biscuit. Then she said that she had sat at more than two hundred kitchen tables, and that most people who changed their minds did it on the telephone, and she had always wondered what they would have said to her face. She said: "Thank you for letting me come."

I asked her if she minded. If it felt like a wasted journey, from Fribourg, on a cold Thursday.

She laughed. She said it was the best kind of journey there is. She said: "I go to a lot of houses to say goodbye. I don't get many where I get to say *see you soon*."

I have to tell you that I nearly fell off my chair.

45.

I want to say one more thing, about EXIT, and about the people at the information evening, before I go on. Because I don't want anybody to read this book and think I am saying they were wrong.

They were not wrong.

The tram driver whose hands were going. The old woman with silk at her throat who said everything was a little bit broken and nothing was completely broken. The daughter and her mother's pastry and the policeman taking off his cap. They were not wrong. They were not cowards and they were not fools, and nothing I saw on the blue sofa makes me think less of a single one of them.

I am not telling you what is true for everybody. I am only telling you what I carried back, and what it did to me. It changed *my* reasons. It took away the three things that had made me sign the letter, one by one, and showed me that each of them had been built on the same small mistake: that the meanings were mine, and that when they left me, they would be lost.

If you do not have that mistake, then you do not need my answer. You may need theirs. That is your choice. I still believe, with my whole heart, that it should be a choice. The law of this country is a good law. I am glad I was allowed to choose. I am glad I was allowed to unchoose.

The only thing I would say to anybody, before they decide, is what Inês said to me.

You're going to the edge. Then you should look over it first.

46.

Wednesday the fourth of November.

I sat up for it. Like New Year's Eve, Inês said. She came round with a bottle of wine and her coat still wet from the rain, and we sat at the kitchen table, and the paper with the stamp on it lay between us, beside the folded square from the twenty-first notebook.

It is a strange thing, to sit and watch a door close. You cannot hear it. Nothing happens. The clock on the oven goes from 23:59 to 00:00 and the paper on the table looks exactly the same as it did a minute before. But it is not the same. A minute before, I could still have changed my mind. Now I can't.

I thought I would be frightened. I was not frightened. I felt the way I used to feel at the end of the last day of a long session, when the gavel comes down and you take off your headphones and put them in the drawer. Tired. Light. As if you had been carrying something very carefully for a long time, and someone has said, *you can put it down now.*

Inês poured the wine. She did not make a speech. She raised her glass a little, and I raised mine.

She said: "Welcome back."

47.

I am writing this in the winter. It is getting harder.

Not the writing. The writing is easy. I told you it would be. The small words are easy. They are light. You can carry a lot of them.

But the list is long now. Inês keeps it in her own notebook. I don't look at it much. She tells me, sometimes, when one goes, and sometimes she doesn't, and I don't mind either way. I don't have to know the moment each one leaves. I know where they go.

Some days I can't find the word for the thing on the street that the tram runs on. Some days I can't find the word for the cold white stuff that is falling now outside the window. I look at it and I know what it is. I know it is soft and cold and it will be gone by tomorrow. I just can't put the sign on the door.

It doesn't matter. The snow does not need me to say *snow*.

There — I had it. You see? Sometimes they come back for a minute, to say goodbye properly.

48.

This is the last thing.

When I started this book, I told you I would not hide the cost of anything. Here is the cost.

I know what is coming. The doctor told me in the spring, and I have read it since, in plain words, and I will not pretend. In a few years I will not know what a fork is for. I will not know faces. One day I will not know Inês's face. I may be frightened of her, the way the woman in Onex is frightened of the man in the brown jacket. I may eat the same food every day and be angry if it changes. I may sit in a soft chair by a window and watch the shapes go by. And one day, probably in a winter, I will catch an infection that my body is too tired to fight, and I have written in my own hand — in a paper the Swiss call *directives anticipées* [dee-rek-TEEV ahn-tee-see-PAY], the instructions you leave in advance — that nobody is to fight it for me. That when it comes, they are to let it come.

That is the cost. I chose it with my eyes open. I chose it at midnight on the fourth of November, with a glass of wine in my hand. Nobody made me.

And I want to tell you, as plainly as I have told you anything, why it does not frighten me.

Because I know where I am going. I have been there. I went the fast way once, on a Saturday afternoon, in twelve minutes. Now I am going the slow way. On foot. One word at a time. And every word that leaves me goes on ahead, and is kept, and is waiting, with all the others, and with the heavy thing too, and with everything there were never any words for.

When I get there, they will cheer. I know they will. I have heard it.

See you soon.

49.

Inês gave me back the folded square tonight.

I had asked her to keep it for me. I was afraid I would lose it, or forget what it was, or open it by accident on a bad day. She put it in the back of her notebook, behind the list, and she has carried it there all winter.

Tonight, at the door, with her coat on, I went to say the thing you say at a door. The thing people say when they are leaving.

I couldn't find it.

I stood there with my hand on the door and my mouth open and nothing came. Not the English. Not the French. Not my mother's or my father's. Inês waited. She is very good at waiting. And in the end I said the only thing I had, which was the thing they said to me, in the dome, at the end.

"See you soon."

And she stood very still for a moment. And then she put her hand in her coat pocket, and took out the folded square of paper, and put it in my hand, and closed my fingers over it. And she kissed my cheek, and went down the stairs, and I heard the street door close.

I have opened it.

It is one word, in Inês's handwriting, which is better than mine. I can read the letters. I can say it aloud, the sound of it. It means nothing to me now. A little noise.

I know what it was, though. I know what it was because of where she gave it to me, and when, and because of what I could not say.

It doesn't matter. I don't need it.

It has gone on ahead. It is being kept.

And I will never need it again.

AFTERWORD

In the hand of Inês Barreto

Margit asked me to finish this. She asked me in the spring, when she could still ask for things in long sentences, and I said yes before she had finished, which she told me was very rude, and also exactly what she had hoped I would say.

There is not much to finish. She said everything. I only want to add what she could not see from where she was sitting.

The word on the folded paper was *goodbye*.

She has not said it since. Not to me, not to anyone. She cannot. Every time I leave her — and I leave her most days now, at the door of the room with the soft chair by the window, which is not in Onex but in Carouge, two streets from my flat, with a view of a courtyard and a fig tree — she says the other thing. The thing they said to her.

See you soon.

She does not always know who I am. Some days she does. Some days she calls me *the kind one*, or *the one with the notebook*, and once, which I will keep for the rest of my life, *the one who goes along with me*.

On the bad days she is frightened, and I sit further away, and wait, and it passes.

On the good days, she sits with her hands in her lap, palms up. She watches the fig tree. She watches the birds that come down into the courtyard, and she calls all of them *bird*, and she is right, every time.

Last month a grey one came. A big one, on long legs. I don’t know what it was doing in a courtyard in Carouge, so far from the river. It stood on one leg beside the fountain for a long time, very still.

Margit watched it. She did not have its name. I could see her not having it.

And then she smiled, and leaned towards me a little, the way she used to lean across the booth with the microphones off, and said, very quietly, as if passing me something across the glass:

"*Kept.*"

I wrote it down. Of course I did. It's the twenty-fourth notebook now.

It is the best word anyone has ever said to me.

— I. B., Carouge

WHAT IT DID

N,N-dimethyltryptamine, DMT. **Grown.** A small molecule found in hundreds of plants, among them the leaf that goes into the Amazon brew called ayahuasca, and in small amounts in the bodies of animals, ourselves included. **Door:** vision.

How it was taken in this book. Once, a small amount kept in a brown glass bottle for nine years, breathed in from a glass pipe on a Saturday afternoon, lying down, with a sober friend sitting beside her. Breathed in, it goes straight to the brain. Swallowed alone, it would have done nothing.

How long. It began within seconds, on the third breath. It was over in a little more than twelve minutes. Inside, it felt like an afternoon, and like a life.

What it did to time. Time was counted from outside, by a friend with a watch. From inside there was no counting. Twelve minutes held more than Margit could tell in a book.

What it did to the body. She was not in the room. Her body lay on the sofa, cried, lifted its hands, and spoke for ten minutes without stopping, fluently, in no language anyone knows. Her heart ran fast. Afterwards she was tired, and her face was wet, and nothing else was harmed.

What it did to the self. For twelve minutes she was a woman who never had to look for a word.

What it did to the world. First a crackle like cellophane, a tearing, and a rising hum. Colour brightened. A turning flower of red and orange, which was a door. Then a domed room full of light and moving patterns, and small bright beings who cheered her arrival, sang shapes that could be seen, and showed her every word she had lost, kept whole.

What it meant. She felt that something true was being shown to her: that a meaning is not kept inside a word, and that when a word leaves her it goes somewhere and is kept. She also saw, kept there, a great weight of things no one had ever had words for.

What it did not do. It did not slow the illness. The words went on going, one at a time, before and after. It changed what she believed about where they go, and that changed what she chose.

On the strength scale made by the chemist Alexander Shulgin: *plus four*, the rare kind that cannot be described and may never come again.

THE MAPMAKER

For Stephen Szára (1923–2021)

In the spring of 1956, in a laboratory in Budapest, a young Hungarian doctor did something nobody had done before. He gave himself a substance whose effect on a person was entirely unknown, and waited to see what it would do.

Stephen Szára was born on 21 March 1923, in a village on the edge of Budapest that has since become part of the city. He trained first as a chemist and then as a doctor, and in the early 1950s he was running a small laboratory of biochemistry at a hospital for mental and nervous illness in Budapest. He wanted to understand how a chemical could change a mind, and the best tool for that, everyone agreed, was LSD, which a company in Basel had begun to make. He asked them for some. They said no. Hungary was a communist country, and they would not send it.

So he looked for another door. In 1955 American chemists had reported that a snuff used by people in the Caribbean and South America carried a small molecule called DMT. Nobody knew what it did to a person. Szára was a chemist; he made some himself. He gave it to rats. He tried swallowing it, and nothing happened. And then, in April 1956, he injected it into a muscle.

He wrote afterwards that his consciousness was completely filled with visions, and that he felt an intense joy, some of which, he admitted, was simply the joy of having found something. He then gave it carefully to colleagues who offered themselves, and wrote down what they said. Not all of them were glad. One doctor called it a dangerous game from which it would be easy not to return.

He published what he had found that same year, in the Swiss journal *Experientia* [ex-peer-ee-EN-tee-uh]. It was the first report of what DMT does to a human being.

That autumn the uprising came, and the Soviet tanks after it, and Szára left Hungary, as two hundred thousand others did. He reached the United States in 1957. He spent the rest of his working

life in American government science, at the National Institute of Mental Health and then at the National Institute on Drug Abuse, where he became head of its biomedical research branch. With Julius Axelrod and others he studied how the body handles DMT and its close cousins, and he spent decades asking whether substances like it might help scientists understand the mind, as keys to a lock nobody had yet seen. He called that kind of research *psychoheuristic*: using these substances to discover.

He was honoured in his old country and his new one. He died on 1 August 2021, in Kensington, Maryland, at the age of ninety-eight.

This book is dedicated to him because he was the first person known to walk through this particular door on purpose and come back to say what was there, and because he did it in the city where Margit was born.

The people around him

No one maps a place alone. These are the others who drew parts of this map, in the order they arrived.

The peoples of the Amazon and of north-eastern Brazil. Long before anyone wrote anything down, they knew which plants carried the key, and they found the one partner plant in the forest that lets it work when it is drunk. Nobody knows how. Much of what they know is theirs and is not written here.

Richard Manske, a chemist in Canada, who first made DMT in a laboratory in 1931 and did not try it.

Oswaldo Gonçalves de Lima [oz-VOW-doo gon-SOW-vees jee LEE-ma], a Brazilian scientist, who in 1946 found the same substance in the root bark of the jurema tree.

Julius Axelrod, the American scientist, who in 1961 found that a mammal's body has the means to make DMT for itself.

Terence McKenna (1946–2000), who first breathed it in 1965 and spent the rest of his life describing it in public, in plain words, with jokes. He called the beings he met there *machine elves*, and he reported that they told him not to give way to amazement. He died of a tumour in his brain at fifty-three.

Rick Strassman, an American psychiatrist, who between 1990 and 1995 gave DMT to about sixty volunteers at the University of New Mexico and wrote down what they told him, in *DMT: The Spirit Molecule* (2001).

Christopher Timmermann and his colleagues at Imperial College London, who in 2018 showed how closely a DMT journey resembles the accounts of people who have nearly died.

Jon Dean and his colleagues, who in 2019 found that the brains of rats make DMT.

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GLOSSARY

5-HT2A [five-aitch-tee-two-AY] — A code name for one of the locks in the brain that serotonin fits. DMT turns it too, and that is how it takes the ordinary world apart.

Accompagnateur [a-kom-pan-ya-TUR] — French, *one who goes along with*. The companion who sits with a member of the association at the end.

Aphasia [uh-FAY-zhuh] — Greek, *without speech*. Losing language because of an injury or illness of the brain.

Ayahuasca [eye-uh-WAHS-kuh] — Quechua, *vine of the souls*. A bitter Amazon drink made from a vine and a leaf; the vine stops the stomach from breaking down the DMT in the leaf.

Carouge [ka-ROOZH] — An old town across the river from Geneva, built by a king of Sardinia to look like Italy. Where Inês lives.

Čaplja [CHAP-lya] — Serbo-Croatian, *heron*.

Dimethyltryptamine [dye-METH-il-TRIP-tuh-meen] — The full name of DMT. A small molecule found in many plants and in the body, close kin to serotonin.

Directives anticipées [dee-rek-TEEV ahn-tee-see-PAY] — French, *instructions in advance*. A paper in which a person says, while they can, what care they do and do not want later.

Discernement [dee-sern-MAHN] — French, *discernment*. In Swiss law, being able to understand a choice and make it for oneself.

Enzyme [EN-zime] — A substance in the body that breaks other substances down, or builds them up. One in the stomach destroys DMT before it can reach the brain.

Experientia [ex-peer-ee-EN-tee-uh] — Latin, *experience*. A Swiss scientific journal, where Szára first reported what DMT does.

Fribourg [free-BOOR] — A bilingual Swiss city, French and German, between Geneva and Bern.

Gém [GAME] — Hungarian, *heron*.

Gonçalves de Lima, Oswaldo [oz-VOW-doo gon-SOW-vees jee LEE-ma] — The Brazilian scientist who in 1946 found DMT in the root bark of the jurema tree.

Héron [ay-RON] — French, *heron*; *le héron* [luh ay-RON], *the heron*. The first word Margit loses.

Inês Barreto [ee-NESH ba-REH-too] — Margit's partner in the booth.

Je demande l'assistance [zhuh duh-MAHND lah-sees-TAHNS] — French, *I am asking for help*.

Je ne peux pas vous le dire. Il n'y a pas de mots [zhuh nuh puh pah voo luh DEER. eel nyah pah duh MOH.] — French, *I cannot tell you. There are no words*.

Je reste [zhuh REST] — French, *I'm staying*.

Je voudrais partir pendant que je sais encore ce que veut dire partir [zhuh voo-DRAY par-TEER pahn-DAHN kuh zhuh say ahn-KOR suh kuh vuh DEER par-TEER] — French, *I would like to leave while I still know what leave means*. The last line of Margit's letter.

Jurema [zhoo-REH-ma] — A thorny tree of the dry north-east of Brazil whose root bark carries DMT, used in a Brazilian ritual tradition.

Lausanne [loh-ZAN] — A Swiss city on the lake, east of Geneva.

Margit Halmos [MAR-git HAL-mosh] — An English-booth interpreter at the Palais des Nations, born in Budapest in 1971.

Médecin-conseil [mayd-SAN kon-SAY] — French, *advising doctor*. The association's own doctor, who reads a member's file.

Molecule [MOL-uh-kyool] — A shape made of atoms stuck together, far too small to see.

Novi Sad [NO-vee sahd] — A city in Serbia, on the Danube. Where Margit's father came from.

Onex [oh-NAY] — A town on the edge of Geneva.

Pain [PAN] — French, *bread*. The same letters as an English word with another meaning.

Palais des Nations [pa-LAY day na-SYON] — French, *palace of the nations*. The United Nations building in Geneva.

Pentobarbital [PEN-toh-BAR-bi-tal] — also *sodium pentobarbital*. A strong sleeping drug, given by the association to a member who has chosen to die, and taken by the member's own hand.

Plainpalais [plan-pa-LAY] — A district of Geneva. Where Margit lives.

Pont de la Machine [pon duh la ma-SHEEN] — French, *bridge of the machine*. An old footbridge over the Rhône in the middle of Geneva.

Rhône [ROHN] — The river that runs out of the lake through the middle of Geneva.

Semantic dementia [suh-MAN-tik di-MEN-shuh] — Greek and Latin, *a losing of the mind that is to do with meaning*. A rare illness that takes the meanings of words, and later of faces and things. Also called the semantic variant of primary progressive aphasia.

Serbo-Croatian [SUR-bo-kro-AY-shun] — The language Margit's father spoke, shared, with differences, by Serbs, Croats, Bosnians and Montenegrins.

Serotonin [seh-roh-TOH-nin] — One of the brain's messengers, carrying signals between cells and helping set mood, sleep and the way the world looks. DMT is its close cousin.

Stephen Szára [SAH-rah] — The Hungarian doctor and chemist who, in Budapest in 1956, first found out what DMT does to a person.

Szeged [SEH-ged] — A city in the south of Hungary, where Margit's nephew lives.

Viana do Castelo [vee-AH-na doo kash-TEH-loo] — A town in the north of Portugal, *the town of saints and rain*, where Inês's father died.

Geneva, 2026. Margit Halmos has spent thirty-one years in a glass booth above the United Nations, carrying other people's words into English half a breath behind them.

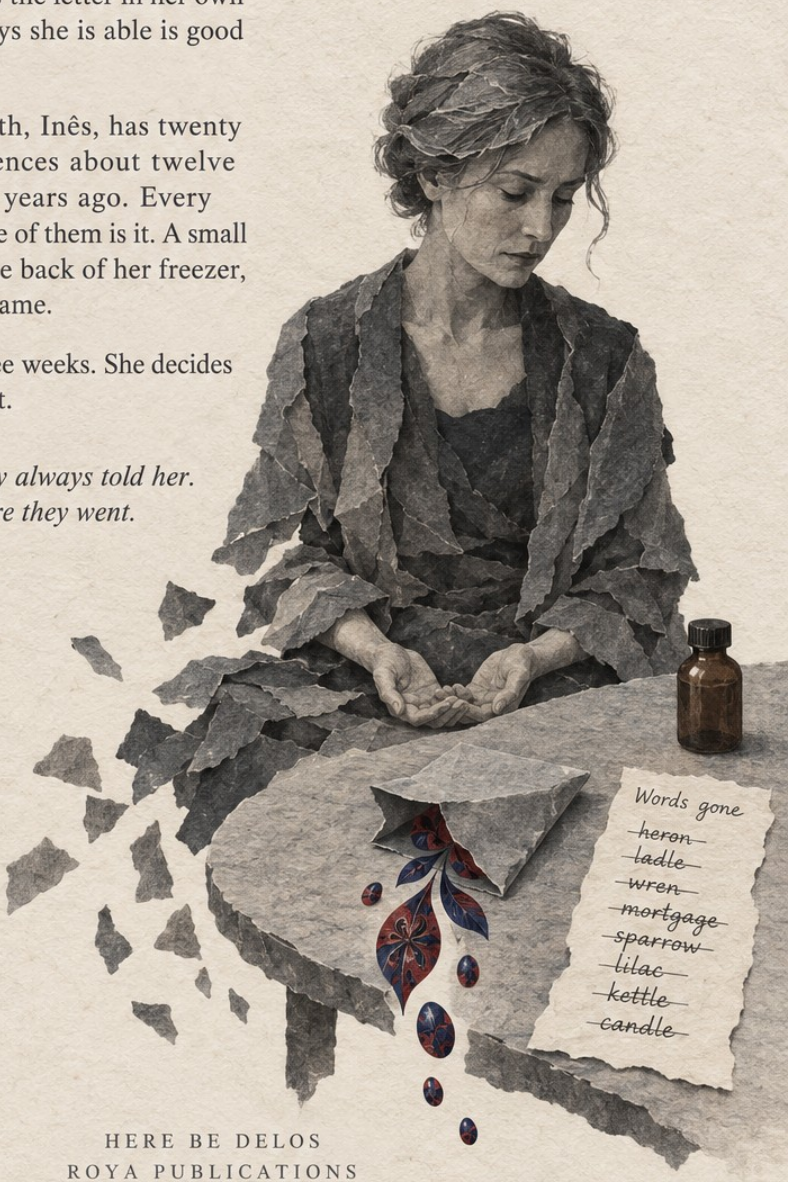
In March she loses the word for the grey bird on the river. A neurologist gives the loss a name. The words will keep going, one at a time, and in the end the meanings will go with them.

Switzerland lets a person choose the day she dies, but only while her mind is clear enough to choose. Margit writes the letter in her own hand. The paper that says she is able is good for six months.

Her partner in the booth, Inês, has twenty notebooks full of sentences about twelve minutes in Porto, nine years ago. Every sentence is true and none of them is it. A small brown bottle waits at the back of her freezer, and she will not say its name.

Margit has less than three weeks. She decides to look over the edge first.

There are no words, they always told her.
She goes to find out where they went.



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