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THE LONGEST NIGHT, THE EARTH SAID

CHEW Z

A ROYA PUBLICATION

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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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SYNOPSIS

Bam is a green town at the edge of the hottest desert on Earth, a sea of date palms and orange groves in the southeast of Iran, kept alive for a thousand years by water carried under the sand in hand-dug tunnels. Above it, on a rock, stands the Arg, a whole city made of mud, the largest building of earth anywhere in the world.

Ayoub makes the bricks. He treads the mud with his bare feet the way his father did, and lays it into the old walls of the Arg where the years have worn them away. In the evenings he smokes a little opium, as men in his province do, and watches his daughter Narges read Hafez by lamplight. She is sixteen, she wants to translate the great poet into English, and last summer her father built her a modern room of her own, with a flat concrete roof.

Clara has come from Germany to see the Arg. She repairs old buildings made of clay, and she has come alone, at Christmas, because her father has just died and asked her to go and see something. On the longest night of the year, Yalda, Narges invites her home, and opens the book of Hafez to read the stranger her fortune.

It is December 2003. Every day from now on will be longer. That’s the whole point.

On Christmas night, the ground clears its throat.

And in the gaps between the chapters, something very old, which everyone in this book has walked on all their lives, has started to speak.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

This book is fiction wrapped around something that happened.

At twenty-six minutes past five on the morning of December 26, 2003, an earthquake broke under the town of Bam, in Kerman province in southeastern Iran. It lasted about twelve seconds. It destroyed nearly every building in the city, brought down the ancient earthen citadel of Arg-e Bam, and killed something above thirty thousand people. The exact number was never settled. Most of the town's hospitals, clinics, fire stations and police stations fell with everyone inside them, and for the first day the people of Bam dug each other out with their hands. The world came afterwards, with dogs and machines, from forty countries, including, for the first time in more than twenty years, American military planes.

I have tried to keep the order of events, the weather, the scale and the broad findings of the scientists and engineers faithful to the public record: the two foreshocks the evening before and the third before dawn; the rupture on a hidden branch of a fault that ran under the city rather than where the maps had it; the unusually violent upward shaking; the collapse of buildings both old and new, and the particular deadliness of heavy concrete roofs that were not tied to their walls; the building code written after the earthquake at Tabas and not enforced; the slow call for outside help; the tents and the prefabricated boxes; the mass graves marked with photographs; the rise in opium use among the survivors; and the long, patient rebuilding of the citadel in mud brick by hand. Because this is a story and not a report, I have kept the numbers loose and some of the times approximate.

Everyone in this book is invented: Ayoub, Tahereh, Narges and Clara, and everyone around them. No real survivor's story is told here under their name.

The theories in this book belong to its characters and to the earth that speaks between the chapters. I have tried to set them out fairly, the plausible ones beside the impossible ones, and then, because more than twenty years have passed, to say plainly what

became of each. Some were true. Some were partly true. One, the secret bomb, was not true at all, and still returns after every earthquake in Iran. I have tried not to point at anyone. The earth doesn't, and I am not sure I have the right.

The voice in the dark is the one thing in this book I have bent. Many people buried after earthquakes have reported hearing voices, and there are good, plain, physical reasons for it, which the book gives. I have not decided what Clara heard. Neither has she.

The poem is real. *Yusof-e gomgashteh*, Lost Joseph, is one of the best-loved ghazals of Hafez of Shiraz, who died more than six hundred years ago, and Iranians really do open his book at random on the longest night of the year to read their fortunes in it. The translations here are my own, and like Narges's, they are a stranger wearing his coat.

This book is for the people of Bam.

Chew Z

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Between the chapters of this story, someone else will speak.

You have walked on it every day of your life and never once asked its opinion. It is under your house and under your city and under the graves of everyone you have ever loved. It is patient beyond any patience you can imagine. It does not hurry, and it does not hate you, and it has been waiting a very long time to be asked.

It speaks slowly. Lean down.

I. THE LONGEST NIGHT

1. Mud and Straw

Ayoub

My name is Ayoub [a-YOOB]. It is our name for Job, the man in the old holy books whom God tested by taking away everything he had: his flocks, his house, his health, and his children, who died when a great wind brought the roof of their house down on them while they ate. In Persian, when somebody suffers a long time without complaining, we say they have *sabr-e Ayoub* [SABR-eh a-YOOB], the patience of Job. My mother chose the name because she had waited six years for a son, and she said that by the end she had needed the patience of Ayoub herself. I have always thought it was a heavy name to give a baby. You should not name a child after a man whose children died under a roof.

I make bricks out of mud. I want to tell you that plainly at the beginning, because it is the most important thing about me and also the least impressive, and people who hear it nod politely and look for someone else to talk to.

Here is how it is done. You take the earth of Bam [BAM], which is fine and pale and the colour of a camel, and you wet it, and you let it rest overnight so the water goes all the way into it. In the morning you tread it with your bare feet, the way they used to tread grapes in the old stories, until it is soft as dough. You mix in straw, chopped short, so the brick has bones. Then you press the mud into a wooden frame on the ground, lift the frame away, and there is a brick, lying in the sun. In three weeks of Bam sun it is hard as bone. We call it *khesht* [KHESHT]. My father made khesht, and his father, and his father, back further than anyone bothered to count, and every one of them lived in houses built of it and was buried in ground that was the same stuff before they shaped it.

That is the whole secret of my trade. A khesht is earth that has agreed, for a while, to be a wall. When it is finished being a wall, it goes back to being earth. It does not argue. It has no pride. I have always liked that about it.

But there is another trade in my blood, and I should tell you about it now, because it runs under this whole story the way the water runs under Bam.

My mother's father was a *muqanni* [mo-GHAN-nee]. A qanat [gha-NAAT] digger. I will explain what a qanat is soon, properly, because nobody can understand my town without it. For now it is enough to know that it is a tunnel under the desert that carries water, and that a muqanni is the man who goes down into the earth to dig it and to keep it clean, by hand, with a short pick and a lamp, in a passage hardly wider than his shoulders, a hundred metres underground. My grandfather did that work for forty years. The muqanni have a name for the qanat, among themselves. They call it *qātel* [ghaa-TEL]. The murderer. They pray before they go down. They will not go down on days they think are unlucky. And they wear white, so that if the earth closes over them, they are already dressed for the grave.

In the spring of the year I was born, a tunnel came down on my grandfather a few kilometres south of the old citadel. His partners dug for two days and brought him up the shaft on a rope, in his white shirt, which was brown. My mother was nursing me when they carried him past the door. She made my father swear on the Qur'an, that same night, that their son would work on top of the earth and never inside it.

So I make bricks. Above the earth, not under it. My father kept his oath. But when I was nine, my grandfather's old partner, an old man with one blind eye and hands like tree roots, who missed the dead man and had no sons of his own, took me down a shaft one summer afternoon without telling anybody, and sat me at the bottom beside the water, and began to teach me. He taught me for six summers. My mother never knew. I kept that secret for more than forty years. I am telling you because I promised to leave nothing out, and because, at the bottom of everything that happens in this story, there is a qanat.

. . .

Let me show you where I lived, because it is not there anymore in the way I am going to describe it, and somebody should keep it.

Bam is a town in the southeast of Iran, in the province of Kerman [ker-MAAN], at the edge of a desert called the Lut [LOOT]. The Lut is one of the hottest places on Earth. Scientists in America once

measured the ground there from a satellite, and it read seventy degrees, hot enough to cook an egg on a stone in a minute, and they did not believe it, and they measured again, and it read the same. Nothing lives in the middle of the Lut. Not a lizard. Not a fly. Only wind and sand and black stones, and dunes as tall as mountains, and at night a silence so big you can hear your own blood.

The climate of Bam is the climate of that edge. In summer the heat comes in off the Lut like the breath of an oven with its door left open, forty-five degrees in the shade, fifty some days, and the wind carries a fine grey dust that gets into your teeth and your bread and the folds of your clothes, and the old people sit in the cellars in the afternoons and do not come up until the sun is gone. It hardly rains. A few times a year, a few centimetres, and the whole town comes out into the lanes to smell it. And in winter, which nobody believes about a desert, the nights are cold. The sky is so clear that the day's heat goes straight up out of the ground into the stars, and by morning there is frost on the water in the pools and ice on the palm fronds, and you can see your breath in your own kitchen. Bam lives between those two, the oven and the frost, and always has.

And on the edge of that nothing, there is Bam. A green place. Palm trees, millions of them, standing in their groves like a crowd waiting for a parade. Orange orchards. Walls of mud around the gardens, and the gardens cool and dark inside, with water running along little channels at the foot of the trees. Coming to Bam across the desert is like coming out of a fever into a cool room. Travellers have been saying so for a thousand years.

The green is made by water, and the water comes from under the ground, and I will tell you about that, because nobody can understand Bam without it. But first I want to tell you about the dates.

Bam's dates are called *mazāfati* [ma-zaa-fa-TEE]. They are black, and soft, and so sweet and wet that you cannot dry them; you have to keep them cool or they melt into themselves. My grandmother said a good Bam date tastes like honey that has been sad for a long time and has finally been forgiven. She said things like that. In the autumn the whole town smells of them, of sugar and dust, and men climb the palms with a rope round their waists and their feet bare,

and cut the great heavy clusters, and lower them down to the women on the ground, and everybody's hands are sticky until winter.

. . .

Above all of this, on a low rock at the edge of the old town, stands the Arg [ARG].

Arg means *citadel*, a fortress. The Arg-e Bam [ARG-eh BAM] is a whole city made of mud. Not a building. A city. Walls a mile around, with thirty-eight towers on them. Inside the walls, streets and houses and a bazaar and a mosque and stables and a bathhouse and a school, all of it built of khesht and plastered with *kāhgel* [kaah-GEL], which is mud mixed with straw and smoothed over the walls like butter on bread. And at the top, on the highest point of the rock, the governor's castle, rising in terraces one above another, its high walls and its square tower against the sky.

People say the Arg is two thousand years old. That is the kind of thing people say. The truth is that it has been built and broken and rebuilt so many times that it is all ages at once: some of the walls are old as the Silk Road, which ran right past our gate, and some I made myself, in 1998, with my own feet in the mud. It was the biggest building made of earth anywhere in the world. Scholars came from Japan and Italy and Germany to stand in front of it and take measurements and argue with each other in English.

At sunset the whole Arg turns colour. It goes gold first, then a deep orange like the inside of an apricot, then red, then for a few minutes a strange soft violet, and then the light goes out of it all at once and it is just a dark shape on the sky, with the first stars coming out over the towers. I have seen that maybe ten thousand times. I never once got tired of it. That is the truth.

The Arg has seen everything, and remembered it in its walls. Caravans on the Silk Road stopped under it for a thousand years, camels by the hundred with bells round their necks, carrying silk and indigo and spices from India and China toward the west, and the merchants slept inside its walls and paid the governor for the privilege. Armies came for it. Seljuk [sel-JOOK] Turks took it and built it higher. Afghans came over the desert and besieged it. In

1795 the last prince of the Zand [ZAND] kings, beaten everywhere else, ran here with what was left of his men and made his last stand behind these walls, and was betrayed at the gate, and handed over to the man who would found the next dynasty. Then, about a hundred and sixty years ago, the people slowly moved out, down off the rock into the new town among the palms, and left the old city to the pigeons and the wind. It stood empty above us all my life, a whole town with nobody in it, like a ship that everyone has left and that will not sink.

I worked there. For eleven years I was on the restoration crew for the Arg, making khesht to the old recipe and laying it into the old walls where the rain and the years had eaten them. The government paid us, not much, and late. I would have done it for less. My father said a man who makes bricks for the Arg is making bricks for the dead and the unborn at the same time, and that it is the only honest work in Iran.

. . .

I had a wife, Tahereh [taa-heh-REH], who was cleverer than me and pretended not to be, for my sake, which is a kindness I only understood after twenty years. My mother had died some years before, and so there were only the three of us in the house. Tahereh and I slept in the oldest room of the house, a room with a domed roof made of khesht that my grandfather built. And I had a daughter. One daughter. Narges [nar-GES].

Narges is the narcissus flower. It is the only flower that blooms in our winter. Out in the fields near Kerman in December, in the cold, in the brown, in the middle of nothing, the narcissus comes up white and yellow and smells so sweet it makes your eyes water. She was born in December. Tahereh named her. Tahereh said she was the one flower that blooms when everything else has given up.

That December my daughter was sixteen. She was tall, taller than her mother, and thin, and quick, and she laughed with her whole face, and she was always, always reading. She read Hafez [haa-FEZ], the great poet, who lived six hundred years ago in Shiraz [shee-RAAZ] and wrote the poems every Iranian knows by heart, even the ones who say they hate poetry. She read English books she

bought secondhand in Kerman with her pocket money, slowly, with a dictionary, moving her lips. She wanted to go to university in Tehran [teh-RAAN] and study English literature and translate Hafez into English properly, she said, because every English Hafez she had found was, in her words, a stranger wearing his coat.

“How do you know,” I asked her, “if you can’t read English yet?”

“I can read enough to know when someone is wearing a coat that doesn’t fit, Baba [BAA-baa],” she said. *Baba* means *dad*. She was right, too. She usually was.

. . .

Here is the thing I have to tell you now, because if I tell it later you will think I am hiding it, and I have hidden enough.

The summer before, the summer of 2003, I built Narges a new room.

Our house was an old house, mostly khesht, with the domed rooms of my grandfather and a courtyard with a pool in the middle and an orange tree. Narges had been sleeping in a corner of the domed room with her mother and me, behind a curtain, and she was sixteen and she wanted a room of her own. Of course she did. And she did not want a dome. She had seen pictures in a magazine from Tehran: a room with a flat ceiling and smooth white walls and a window with a metal frame and a desk. A modern room. A room like people have.

I am a mud man. I told her mud keeps you cool in summer and warm in winter, and breathes, and a dome is the strongest shape God made. She rolled her eyes so far back I worried for them. Her mother took her side. So I built it.

I built it on the roof of the old kitchen, against the courtyard wall, with walls of fired brick, and on top I poured a flat roof of concrete. The concrete was the heavy part. It sat on the walls like a lid. It was not built to the code, the earthquake rules the government wrote in 1988. I will tell you about the code later. I knew the code existed. Everyone knew it existed, the way you know there is a law about speeding. I used thinner steel in the roof than the drawings say, and fewer pieces of it, because steel was expensive that year and I was

paying for the room with the money we had saved for her university. I did not tie the roof to the walls with the band of steel the code asks for, because I had never seen anybody in Bam do it. I built it the way everybody built.

Narges painted the walls white herself, and put her books on a board on bricks, and hung a picture of Hafez's tomb on the wall, and was happier than I had seen her since she was a little girl.

I am telling you this so that you know. I am not asking you to forgive me. I am only telling you, so that you know.

. . .

At night, after work, I smoked a little opium.

I will say this plainly too, because in Kerman it is not the scandal you might think. In our part of Iran, opium has been around for a very long time. It comes over the border from Afghanistan, which is not far, carried through the desert on camels and in trucks and on the backs of men, and some of it stays. Old men smoke it at the end of the day the way old men in other countries drink a whisky. It is called *taryāk* [tar-YAAK]. You heat a little black ball of it on the end of a long clay pipe called a *vāfur* [vaa-FOOR], held over a little dish of glowing charcoal, and you breathe in the smoke, and your back stops hurting, and the edges of the world go soft and warm like a blanket fresh from the line, and you can sit in your courtyard under the stars and listen to the water in the pool and not think about money.

I was not one of the men who could not stop. I told myself that. I smoked a little, three or four nights a week, after a day of treading mud. My back was the back of a man who had stamped on wet earth for thirty years. Tahereh did not like it. She did not say much. She opened the window when I came to bed.

I tell you because it matters later, and because I promised myself I would leave nothing out that made me look better than I was.

2. The Oasis

Clara

The bus from Kerman took four hours, and for three and a half of them there was nothing to look at but the end of the world.

I had my face against the window. Outside, the land was the colour of a lion. Flat, then folded, then flat again, a brown-gold plain running out to mountains that were not quite real, bare blue-grey ridges standing in the haze like stage scenery painted on gauze. No trees. No houses. Every half hour a single mud building beside the road, a teahouse or the ruin of one, with a broken tower like a chimney, which I later learned was a wind-catcher, a kind of old air-conditioner that catches the breeze up high and pours it down into the rooms. Once, a line of camels walking parallel to the road, slow and indifferent, with nobody leading them. Once, far off, a whirlwind of dust, a pale column turning in the sun like a dancer, crossing the plain all by itself.

I am a conservator. I repair old buildings made of earth. In Germany that is less strange than it sounds; half the farmhouses in Bavaria have walls of clay packed into a wooden frame, and somebody has to look after them, and for nine years that somebody had been me. I am good with my hands and bad with people, which is a common combination in my profession. I can tell you, by rubbing a pinch of plaster between my fingers, roughly what century it was mixed in. I cannot tell you what to say to a man whose father has just died. I know that because, that autumn, I had been the man’s daughter, and I had not known what to say to myself either.

My father died in September, in Regensburg [RAY-genz-boorg], of the kind of cancer that gives you three months’ notice and then keeps to its word. He was a carpenter. He taught me to plane a board when I was seven and to read the grain in wood the way you read a face. When he was dying, in the hospital, he asked me one thing. He said, *Clara, don’t spend Christmas at the house. Go and see something.*

So I was on a bus in the southeast of Iran, four days before the longest night of the year, going to see the largest building made of

earth that human beings have ever raised. My colleagues in Munich thought I was mad. My mother thought I was grieving, which was the same thing to her. I thought nothing. I had stopped thinking in September. I was only going.

. . .

And then, at the end of the fourth hour, the bus came over a low rise, and there it was.

I want to describe it properly, and I am not a writer, so I will do what I do with a wall: I will go slowly, from the outside in.

First there was a line of dark green along the bottom of the sky. It did not look like trees. It looked like a band of shadow lying on the desert, or a long low cloud that had come down to rest. As we drew closer the band grew taller and broke into separate shapes, and then the shapes became palms, thousands upon thousands of date palms, standing so close together that their crowns made a single roof, dark and glossy and moving very slightly in a wind I could not feel. Below the palms, walls. Mud walls, everywhere, the same pale gold as the desert, running in every direction, enclosing gardens, enclosing orchards, so that the whole oasis looked like a honeycomb made of earth with green poured into every cell. I saw oranges. In December, in the desert, I saw orange trees heavy with fruit, so many oranges that the trees looked lit from within, little suns hanging in the shade.

And above it all, to the right as the bus turned, on its rock, the Arg.

I had seen photographs. Everyone in my field has seen photographs. The photographs are lies. They are true about the shape, and the shape is extraordinary: the great wall with its round towers marching along the crest like the knuckles of a fist, the town inside the wall climbing the rock in a confusion of roofs and domes and lanes, and at the very top the citadel, the castle, built up in terraces, square and tall and fierce, like a thing that has been watching the desert for a thousand years and has not yet seen anything it is afraid of. But a photograph cannot tell you the colour. It is the colour of the desert, exactly. It is the desert, standing up. Somebody took the ground and raised it into towers and the ground did not mind. The Arg does not sit on the landscape the way a castle

in Germany sits on its hill, like a crown put on a head. It grows out of it. You cannot see where the rock stops and the walls begin.

I was still looking at it, with my mouth open, when the bus pulled into the station in a cloud of its own dust, and a boy of about ten knocked on the window beside my face and shouted, in English, “Hotel! Hello! Mister! Hotel!”

“I’m not a mister,” I said through the glass.

He considered this, unbothered. “Hotel, missus!”

. . .

The guesthouse was in the old part of town, a few streets from the Arg, an old merchant’s house that the owner had turned into rooms for travellers. You went in through a heavy wooden door in a blank mud wall, through a dark passage that turned twice so nobody in the street could see in, and came out into a courtyard. In the middle of the courtyard there was a pool, a long rectangle of still water, and at one end an orange tree, and around all four sides the rooms opened onto a covered walk under arches. The arches were mud. The rooms were mud, with domed ceilings. The beds were thin mattresses on the floor with heavy red blankets, and the walls were so thick that my room was as quiet as the inside of a church.

There were other travellers. That December there were maybe a dozen of us. A Japanese man who was cycling from Istanbul to Delhi and had legs like a racehorse and the manners of a duke. Two Dutch girls who had been in Iran a month and dressed better than the Iranian women. A silent Englishman reading a very fat book. A young Australian couple on their honeymoon, overland to India, who held hands under the table at dinner as if the table might take one of them away. The road through Bam was the old road to Pakistan and India, and for forty years people like us had been coming down it, the hippies first and then the backpackers, and Bam was where everybody stopped to rest before the last hard stretch of desert to the border. The guesthouse’s book was full of thank-you notes in twenty languages. I read it the first night by the light of a gas lamp, under four blankets. *Best dates of my life*, a Canadian had written in 1996. And under it, in a different hand, a German: *Best everything.*

In the corner of the courtyard, beside the orange tree, there was a doorway that went down. Steps cut into the earth, steep and narrow, descending into the dark under an arch. Cold air came up out of it, smelling of wet stone.

“What is that?” I asked the owner, a gentle man with a grey beard.

“The water,” he said. “Under. Old water. Very old.” He made a gesture with his hand, a flat line moving along under the floor. “*Qanat* [gha-NAAT]. Tomorrow, maybe, someone explains you. Is a long story.”

I stood at the top of the steps for a while, feeling the cold breath of the earth on my face. It was the first time in three months I had been curious about anything.

3. The Worm and the Apple

Ayoub

She came up to the Arg on her second morning with a notebook and a little bag of tools on her belt, and she walked straight past the ticket man and past the place where the tourists stand to take their photographs, and climbed up to where my crew was working on the wall of the old stables, and squatted down beside my mixing pit and put her hand in my mud.

My men stopped work. A woman, a foreigner, with her bare hand in Ayoub’s mud. The youngest of my crew, who was nineteen and an idiot, laughed out loud. I said nothing. I wanted to see what she would do.

She lifted a handful, squeezed it, opened her hand and looked at the shape her fingers had left. She rubbed a little between her thumb and finger, slowly, with her eyes half shut, the way my father used to test it. Then she broke off a piece of straw from the mix and held it up to the light and looked at its length. Then she said something in English to me, very fast, and then saw my face, and said it again, slowly, in a terrible Persian made out of a phrase book.

“Very — good — earth.”

It was the first time in eleven years anyone who was not a mud man had said that to me. I am not ashamed to say it went straight into my chest.

. . .

Her name was Clara. She was German. She made walls of earth, she said, in her country, for old farmhouses. I did not believe there were walls of earth in Germany. I said so. She drew me a picture in her notebook: a house with a wooden frame, black beams in a crisscross, and between the beams, she pointed and said a German word, *Lehm* [LAYM], and touched my mud, and nodded.

Lehm. Khesht. Mud. The same word, in the end.

We could hardly speak to each other. She had perhaps thirty words of Persian and I had perhaps forty of English, and most of mine were about football. But a mud man and a mud woman do not need many words. For two hours that morning she watched us work and we watched her watch us. She showed me how they mix in Germany, with more straw, longer, and something she called *Häcksel* [HECK-sel], straw chopped very fine, almost to dust. I showed her the way my father tested the mix: you make a ball, you drop it from the height of your shoulder onto a stone, and if it cracks it is too dry and if it spreads it is too wet and if it lands and keeps its shape, like a tired man sitting down, it is right. She laughed, and dropped one, and it spread like a fried egg, and my men laughed, and she laughed harder than any of them.

Then my daughter came up the path with a bag of bread and cheese for my lunch, the way she did on Thursdays when school finished early, and saw a foreign woman squatting in her father's mud pit, and her whole face lit up as if somebody had switched on a lamp inside it.

"*Hello!*" she said, in English, with all the confidence in the world. "*My name is Narges. Welcome to Bam. What is your country please?*"

. . .

They talked for an hour. I sat on a wall and ate my bread and cheese and watched my daughter speak English with a real foreigner for the first time in her life, and I understood perhaps one word in ten, and I did not need to understand. Her hands moved. Her face moved. She went red, and then she laughed, and then she corrected herself and Clara corrected her too and they both laughed again. She was translating for me, a little, now and then, turning and saying *Baba, she says the Arg is the most beautiful building she has ever seen*, and *Baba, she says in Germany the mud is darker*, and *Baba, she asks if the walls ever fall down*.

"Tell her," I said, "they fall down all the time. That's why they need me."

Narges told her. Clara looked at me and nodded slowly, seriously, as if I had said something wise. I had only made a joke. But it is true. The walls fall all the time. A mud wall is always falling, very slowly, a little each year with the rain and the wind, and you put a little back each year, and that is how it stays. The Arg had been falling for two thousand years. It had never once stood still.

. . .

Before she left, Narges told Clara the story of the worm. I heard it start and I put my bread down to listen, because I like the way my daughter tells it, and because it is our story here.

In the Shahnameh [shaah-naa-MEH], the Book of Kings, which our poet Ferdowsi [fer-dow-SEE] wrote a thousand years ago and which is the story of all the old kings of Iran, there is a tale about this province. There was a poor man in Kerman, Haftvād [haft-VAAD], who had seven sons and one daughter. The daughter spun cotton with the other girls of the town. One day, eating an apple, she found a little worm inside it, and instead of throwing it away she put it in her spindle case and said, as a joke, *Little worm, bring me luck, and I'll spin twice as much.* And she did. That day she spun twice as much cotton as any girl. And the next day twice as much again. Her family fed the worm. The worm grew. The family grew rich. The worm grew bigger and bigger, as big as a man, as big as a cow, and they built a fortress on a rock to keep it in, and fed it rice and milk

in a great trough, and soldiers came from all over to serve Haftvād and his worm, and they became more powerful than the king. In the end it took the great king Ardashir [ar-da-SHEER] himself, disguised as a merchant, to come to the fortress and kill the worm by pouring molten lead down its throat.

That is the story. People in Kerman say the name of the province comes from it: *kerm* [KERM] means *worm*. Every scholar says that is nonsense. Every scholar is probably right. We still tell it.

“What does it mean?” Clara asked, when Narges had finished, in English. I understood that much.

Narges thought for a moment. She looked at the Arg above us, its towers against the white winter sky.

“My father says,” she said, in English, slowly, choosing each word, “that it means: be careful what you feed inside your walls. Because one day it is bigger than the walls.”

I had never said that in my life. She made it up, right there, to have something good to say to the foreigner. She was always doing that, putting her own thoughts into my mouth because she thought they would sound wiser coming from an old man. I let her. I have kept that one. I say it now. It is mine now. She gave it to me.

. . .

Then she did the thing I should have expected. She invited Clara to Yalda [YAL-daa].

“Is in three days,” she said. “The twenty-first. The longest night. You come to our house. My mother cooks. You must come. *Mehmān* [meh-MAAN] — guest — is a gift from God. If you say no, my mother is crying.”

Clara looked at me, to see if her father agreed. I put my hand on my chest and bowed my head a little, the way we do. What else could I do? My daughter had already invited half of Germany.

“Please,” I said, in English. One of my forty words. “Please. Come.”

4. Water Under the Desert

Clara

He took me to see the water on the morning of the twentieth. Narges came to translate, in her school uniform, with a long dark coat and a dark scarf, and she skipped her first class to do it, which she told me with enormous pride as if she had robbed a bank.

We drove out of town in Ayoub's tiny white car, which made a noise like a cough with every gear, through the palm groves, along a dirt road between high mud walls, and then out past the last gardens onto the open desert. The ground rose very gently toward the mountains in the south. And across the desert, in a long straight line, running from the mountains toward the town, there was a row of holes.

That is how it looked at first. A line of craters, one every thirty or forty metres, each one a ring of piled earth around a dark hole in the middle, like a row of anthills, or the marks of a giant's walking stick. The line ran up the slope as far as I could see, toward the hills, getting smaller and smaller until it vanished in the haze. There were other lines too, further off, a dozen of them, all converging on the green of Bam.

"Qanat," said Ayoub, and swept his arm along the line.

And Narges explained it, in English, and her father added things in Persian and she translated, and between them, standing in the wind with the desert cold on our faces, they gave me the most beautiful thing I learned in Iran.

. . .

A qanat is a tunnel that carries water.

In the desert it hardly rains. But up in the mountains it rains a little, and snows, and the water soaks into the ground and runs downhill underground, through the gravel, under the desert floor, deep, where the sun cannot reach it. Three thousand years ago, maybe more, the people of Persia worked out how to bring that hidden water to the surface without any pump or any machine.

You go up toward the mountains and you dig a well, a very deep one, until you hit the water. That first well is the most important. It is called the *mādar-chāh* [maa-DAR chaah]. The mother well.

Then you go down the slope a long way, toward the place where you want the water to come out, and you start digging a tunnel back uphill toward the mother well. The tunnel is very gently sloped, so gently you could not see it with your eye. Just enough that water will run along it by itself, but not so fast that it wears the tunnel away. And every thirty or forty metres along the way you dig a shaft straight up to the surface, to take out the earth you have dug and to let air in for the men working below. Those shafts are the holes. The rings of earth are what came out of them.

When the tunnel reaches the mother well, the water starts to run. Down the tunnel. In the dark. Under the desert. Mile after mile. And where the tunnel finally comes out at the surface, at the bottom of the slope, there is a stream of cold clear water, coming out of the ground in the middle of the desert, and it never stops. Day and night. Summer and winter. For hundreds of years. And around that stream, people plant gardens, and the gardens become a town.

"Bam," said Ayoub, and pointed at the green behind us. "*Hameh az qanat* [ha-MEH az gha-NAAT]. All of it, from the qanat."

"Some qanats here are very long," Narges said. "Ten kilometres. Twenty. There are men whose work is to go down and clean them and repair them. Very dangerous work. My great-grandfather was one. Baba's grandfather, on his mother's side. *Muqanni.* They say a muqanni puts on a white shirt when he goes down to work, because it is already his burial shroud."

I looked at her. She shrugged.

"It's true," she said. "We are a dramatic people."

. . .

On the way back toward the groves, walking along the line of craters, Ayoub talked, and Narges translated, and I filled four pages of my notebook. I have them still. I'll give you what I wrote, because I've never learned anything more beautiful about how people and earth can work together.

A qanat begins with a man who can read the ground. He walks the foot of the mountains in the autumn, slowly, looking for signs: a patch of plants greener than the rest, a line of reeds where there should be none, a dark stain of damp at the bottom of a gully. Where he thinks the water is, two diggers sink a trial well, straight down, a little wider than a man, one of them swinging a short pick and the other a short spade, while two more men stand at the top turning a wooden windlass, the *charkh* [CHARKH], hauling up the earth in leather buckets, the *dalv* [DALV]. They dig down thirty metres, fifty, a hundred, sometimes more; there is a qanat in the northeast, at Gonabad [go-naa-BAAD], whose mother well is said to be three hundred metres deep, dug nearly three thousand years ago. When they reach wet earth they dig a little pocket at the bottom and wait for days. If water seeps in, more than a bucket's worth, they have found the mother.

Then the real work starts, at the wrong end, as they had already told me: miles down the slope, digging back uphill, blind, toward the mother, so that the water will always have somewhere to run. The slope has to be exact. Too steep, and the running water eats the floor of the tunnel and brings the roof down. Too flat, and the water stands and goes bad. A good qanat drops about one metre in every thousand. The surveyor finds that slope with a level, a rope and a plumb line, over miles, across a desert, with no instrument any of my German professors would trust. And he is right.

Down in the tunnel, the diggers keep their line by light. Two oil lamps, set one behind the other on the floor, and the digger at the face looks back along them; if they line up, he is straight. The lamps do a second job, Ayoub said, and it's the one that matters most. When the flame shrinks and goes blue and small, the air is bad, and you get out, now, without finishing your stroke. The old diggers had a rule, he said: *a flame before a foot*. You never step into a dark place until you have shown it a fire.

Where the earth is soft, they line the tunnel with rings of baked clay, oval hoops called *kaval* [ka-VAAL], fired in a kiln and lowered down the shafts one at a time and set end to end like the ribs of an animal, so that the tunnel can't close. And the place where the

tunnel finally comes out into the light has its own name: the *mazhar* [MAZ-har], the place of appearing.

Then comes the part I loved most. The water belongs to everybody whose family helped pay for the digging, in shares, sometimes shares set three hundred years ago. And it is divided not by amount but by time. In the villages, the man who keeps the water, the *mirāb* [meer-AAB], floats a little copper bowl with a tiny hole in its bottom in a basin of water. When the bowl fills and sinks, one unit of time has passed. A *fenjān* [fen-JAAN]. So many fenjān for this family's garden, then the channel is blocked with a spade of mud and opened to the next garden, and so on round the whole village, day and night, the same turn every week for centuries. A water clock, made of a bowl and a hole, keeping peace among neighbours for three hundred years.

And the water doesn't only feed the gardens. Rich families in the old towns built their cellars over the qanat, and the cold breath of the tunnel came up through the floor, and a tower on the roof, a wind-catcher, pulled the hot air out above, so that in the worst of the summer the family sat in a cellar as cool as a church while the town outside baked. In winter, before anyone had a refrigerator, they froze qanat water in shallow pools on cold desert nights and stored the ice in great domed pits of mud brick, and ate it in July.

"There's one more thing," Narges said, as we reached the car. She had the look she got when she was about to say something her father would disapprove of. "In some villages, the old people say a qanat can be a man or a woman. And when a man-qanat starts to run dry, it's because he's lonely. So the village finds him a wife. A widow, usually. They have a little wedding. She goes down to the water and bathes in it, and then she is married to the qanat, and the water comes back." She looked at me sideways. "It's true. Not that the water comes back. That they do it."

Ayoub said something short in Persian, and she laughed.

"He says," she said, "that he has met a lot of qanats and none of them would make a good husband."

We went down.

Not into the deep shafts. Into the place where the water came out, near the edge of the groves, where the tunnel had been opened up with steps going down to it, the way the courtyard of my guesthouse had steps. *Pāyāb* [paa-YAAB], Narges said, the stairs to the water. Old houses had their own, so the family could go down and draw water from the qanat that ran under the house. Ayoub went first, sideways, one hand on the wall, and I followed, and Narges came behind me, complaining about her school shoes.

Twenty steps down, the light from above was a grey square. Thirty steps down, it was a white coin. Then we were at the bottom, crouching, in a low passage cut through the earth, just high enough to walk bent over. The walls were damp, packed earth, smooth, with the marks of picks on them, little curved scoops in long rows, the strokes of hands dead for centuries. And there at our feet, in a channel cut in the floor, was the water.

It was moving. It moved quickly and silently out of the dark on our left and into the dark on our right, clear as air, so clear I could only see it because of the way it bent the light of Ayoub's torch across the pebbles at the bottom. It was cold. I put my hand in and it was so cold it hurt my bones. It had come from under the mountains. It had been running in this dark, in this exact channel, since long before there was a Germany.

Ayoub crouched beside me with the torch, and he didn't say anything for a long time, and neither did I. The only sound was the water, a very faint chuckle in the dark, and our breathing, and somewhere far up the tunnel a drop falling from the roof, again and again, slow as a clock.

Then he said something in Persian, quietly.

"He says," Narges whispered, "this is the mother of Bam. Above, the town is the children. Down here is the mother. Above, everyone is very busy. Down here, the mother is just going home, the way she always goes."

I looked at Ayoub. He was looking at the water.

"He says the whole town is built on top of the mother," Narges said. "Every house. The guesthouse where you stay. The Arg. It's all on top. She runs under everybody. People forget."

. . .

When we came up, blinking, into the hard white light of the desert winter, Ayoub stood at the top of the steps for a while with his hands in his pockets, looking out across the line of craters running up toward the mother well in the hills.

“Clara,” he said. He said my name like *Kelaara*, three syllables. He pointed at the ground. Then he said, in English, one of his forty words, slowly, carefully, so that I would understand that he meant it.

“Strong.”

Then he pointed at the town, at the new part of Bam, where the buildings were not mud but brick and concrete, flat-roofed, with satellite dishes. And he made a face, and shook his hand from side to side, the way you do when something is so-so.

Then, very seriously, he pointed at himself, and laughed.

I didn’t understand. Narges did. She rolled her eyes.

“He thinks he is very funny,” she said. “He is saying the old ways are strong and the new ways are not so strong, and also that he is old. It is a joke he makes all the time. It isn’t even good.”

5. Yalda

Ayoub

Yalda [YAL-daa] is the longest night of the year.

I want to explain it properly, so that you can see the whole of it, the way my daughter saw it, because she loved Yalda more than any night in the calendar, more than New Year, more than her own birthday.

On the last night of autumn, the night before the first day of winter, the dark is longer than on any other night. In the old days, before the Prophet, before Islam came to Iran, our ancestors believed that this was the night when the darkness was strongest, and that the sun, the light, was born again at dawn and would get stronger every day after. So on that night you did not sleep. You stayed awake with your family to keep each other company in the dark, to make sure

everybody got through to the morning, and in the morning you went out to greet the new sun.

We still do it. Every family in Iran, rich and poor, in the cities and in the villages, the religious and the ones who are not. On the night of Yalda you gather at the house of the oldest person in the family. You eat. You eat red things, because red is the colour of the dawn and of life: pomegranates, *anār* [a-NAAR], broken open so the seeds shine like rubies in a dish; and watermelon, *hendevāneh* [hen-de-vaa-NEH], which you have kept from the summer in a cool place all autumn just for this, so that in the coldest night of the year you eat the taste of summer. You eat nuts and dried fruit, *ājil* [aa-JEEL]. You eat our dates. You drink tea until midnight and then more tea. You tell stories. The old people tell about the old days, and the children pretend to be bored, and nobody goes to bed.

And at some point in the night, somebody brings out the Hafez.

. . .

That year, Yalda was at our house, because ours had the biggest room in the family, my grandfather's room under the dome, and since my mother died it was where the family gathered. My two sisters came with their husbands and their children, and Tahereh's brother came from Kerman with his wife, and there were twenty of us under the dome, sitting on the carpets around a long cloth spread on the floor and covered with food. And Clara.

She came at sunset, with Narges, who had gone to fetch her from the guesthouse so she would not get lost in the lanes. She was wearing a long dark coat and a scarf she had bought in Kerman, a blue one, tied badly, so that it kept slipping back off her yellow hair, and every time it slipped all my sisters' children stared at the yellow hair in delight, and every time Narges reached over and fixed it for her. She had brought a box of German chocolates, which she gave to Tahereh with both hands and a little bow, the way she had seen Narges do with the bread, and Tahereh was so pleased that she pretended not to be and put them away in the cupboard for an occasion. Yalda was an occasion. Tahereh put them in the cupboard anyway. That is how pleased she was.

I sat Clara in the place of honour, beside Tahereh. Tahereh looked at her for a long time, very closely, the way she looks at bread to see if it's done. Then she took Clara's hand in both of hers, those brown hands made hard by the bread oven and the washing, and turned it over, and looked at the palm, and felt the calluses there, and the little cracks in the skin from working with lime and mud.

"*Bā-ādam* [baa-AA-dam]," Tahereh said to me. *A real person.* "She works with her hands. She's not one of those." What *those* were, she did not say. It was high praise from Tahereh. She has said that about maybe four people in my life. I was not one of them.

. . .

We ate. Oh, we ate. Tahereh had been cooking for two days. There was rice with sour cherries, and a stew of chicken and walnuts and pomegranate syrup, dark and sweet and sour all together, which we call *fesenjān* [fe-sen-JAAN], and bread, and yoghurt with cucumber and dried mint, and the watermelon cut in great red wedges, and the pomegranate seeds heaped in a glass bowl in the middle of the cloth so the lamplight came through them red. Clara ate like a woman who had not eaten since September. Perhaps she hadn't. My sisters kept piling food on her plate and saying *bokhor, bokhor* [bo-KHOR], eat, eat, and she kept eating and saying *merci* [mer-SEE], which in Iran is how we say thank you, a French word that came to us somehow and stayed, and every time she said *merci* my sisters laughed and gave her more.

We told stories. My uncle, who is the funniest man in our family and the worst at telling jokes, told a long story about a donkey and a mullah that Narges refused to translate, and Clara laughed anyway because everyone else was laughing so hard. My nephews did a magic trick with a coin that went wrong. My eldest sister told the story of the winter of her girlhood when the snow came to Bam, real snow, the only time in her life, before I was born, and the palms stood in the white with their heads bent like old men praying, and nobody knew what to do, and our father went out and threw a snowball at the mosque.

The lamp burned. The tea came round. Outside it was cold and very dark and very still, the dark of the longest night in the year, and

inside the walls of my grandfather's room, with the dome over us and twenty people breathing and the smell of pomegranate and charcoal and tea, it was as warm as the inside of a hand.

. . .

Then, near midnight, Tahereh said, "Narges. The book."

Narges got up and went to her room and came back with her Hafez. A small book, very old, its green cloth cover worn grey at the corners, its pages soft as a handkerchief. It had been my grandmother's. Narges carried it everywhere. She sat down again beside Clara, and held the book in her lap with both hands, and looked at Clara.

"Now we do *fāl* [FAAL]," she said. "The fāl of Hafez."

And she explained. I listened. I knew it all, of course. But I liked to hear her explain things. She explained them better than anyone.

"In Iran," she said, "when you want to know something about your life, about the future, you don't go to a fortune-teller. You ask Hafez. You hold the book. You close your eyes. You make a wish, or you ask a question, in your heart, silently. Not out loud. Then you say a little prayer to Hafez, a special one, everyone knows it. And then you open the book, anywhere, without looking. And the poem on that page is your answer."

Clara was looking at the little green book as if it might bite her. "Does it work?"

Narges smiled. It was a smile I knew. She had had it since she was four.

"It works," she said, "the way poems work. It doesn't tell you what will happen. It tells you what you need to hear." She held out the book. "You make a wish. Then you give it to me and I open it for you. You can't read Persian, so I am your hands."

. . .

Clara held the book for a long time with her eyes closed. Everyone in the room went quiet. The children stopped eating. My uncle stopped talking. Even Tahereh, who had seen a thousand fāls in her life, leaned forward. I watched the German woman's face, with her eyes closed and the lamp on her and her scarf slipping back again, and I knew, the way you know things at Yalda, what she was asking about. You don't have to speak anyone's language to know that.

Then she opened her eyes and gave the book to Narges. Narges closed her own eyes and said the little prayer under her breath, the one everyone says: *O Hafez of Shiraz, you who know every secret, I ask you by Shakh-e Nabat [SHAAKH-eh na-BAAT], the one you loved…* And she opened the book with her thumb, anywhere, and looked down at the page.

And her face changed.

I saw it. Everyone saw it. My sisters looked at each other. Tahereh let out her breath, slowly, through her nose. Because Narges had opened the book to one of the most famous poems Hafez ever wrote. One that every Iranian knows by heart. One that people have read at the bedsides of the dying, and at the graves of the dead, and in prisons, and in wars, for six hundred years.

She read the first line out loud, in Persian, in that clear voice of hers:

Yusof-e gomgashteh bāz āyad be Kan'ān, gham makhor.

[yoo-SOF-eh gom-gash-TEH BAAZ aa-YAD beh ka-NAAN, GHAM ma-KHOR]

Kolbeh-ye ahzān shavad ruzi golestān, gham makhor.

[kol-BEH-yeh ah-ZAAN sha-VAD roo-ZEE go-les-TAAN, GHAM ma-KHOR]

. . .

Then she translated it for Clara. Slowly. Carefully. Word by word, in her schoolgirl English, with her finger moving along under the line. I will tell you what she said, because I can still hear it.

“Yusof,” she said. “Joseph. You know Joseph? In the Bible? In the Qur’an also. The boy who is lost. His brothers throw him in a well and tell his father he is dead. And his father, Jacob, cries so much that he goes blind. But Joseph is not dead. Many years later he comes back.”

Clara nodded.

“So. The first line: *Lost Joseph will come back to Canaan. Do not grieve.* Canaan is his home. And the second line.” She stopped. Her finger stayed on the page. “*The house of sorrows will one day become a rose garden. Do not grieve.*”

The room was very quiet.

“*Gham makhor,*” Narges said. “That’s the end of every line in the poem. Every one. *Gham makhor.* It means: *don’t grieve. Don’t eat sorrow.* In Persian we say you *eat* sorrow. *Gham khordan* [GHAM khor-DAN]. To eat sadness. And *gham makhor*, don’t eat it.”

She looked at Clara and said it again, slowly, so that she could learn it. “*Gham — makhor.*”

“*Gham makhor,*” said Clara. Her voice cracked on it.

“Good,” said Narges, in English, and put her hand on Clara’s hand on the book. “Very good. You have a good accent. Now you know the most important thing in Persian. That’s all you need. Everything else is just for shopping.”

And the whole room laughed, my sisters and my uncle and the children and Tahereh, and Clara laughed with them, and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand, and said *merci*, and my sisters gave her more watermelon.

6. The Longest Night

Clara

Narges walked me home at two in the morning, through the lanes of the old town.

I should have been frightened, perhaps. A foreign woman, alone with a sixteen-year-old girl, walking through the dark alleys of a town on the edge of the desert, at two in the morning. I was not

frightened. I have never in my life felt safer than I did that night. The lanes were narrow, just wide enough for a donkey cart, and on both sides the mud walls rose higher than our heads, smooth and pale in the starlight, and the only sound was our footsteps on the packed earth and, behind the walls, very faintly, here and there, the voices of other families still awake. Laughing. A radio playing old music. A child protesting. All of Bam, behind its walls, staying up together to keep each other company through the longest night.

And the sky. I have tried, since, to describe that sky to people in Germany, and I always fail, so I will fail here too, but I will try. In Bavaria the night sky is a dark blue ceiling with some stars painted on it. Over the desert at Bam it was not a ceiling. It had depth. You could feel that the stars were at different distances, some close, some unimaginably far, as if you were looking down into deep water rather than up at a roof. There were so many of them that the dark between them was crowded. The Milky Way went straight across the top of the sky like a road somebody had swept, pale and lumpy and full of dark places where clouds of dust hid the stars behind. It was so bright that our shadows went before us along the lanes, faint and blue. It was so cold that our breath stood in the air in front of our faces like small ghosts and stayed there after we'd walked through.

"In the desert," Narges said, "on Yalda, the old people say you can see your whole life written in the stars. If you are patient. And if you know how to read."

"Can you read it?"

"No." She laughed. "I'm only sixteen. You need to be old. My grandmother, before she died, could read it. She said she read my whole life in them the night I was born."

"What did it say?"

Narges was quiet for a few steps.

"She wouldn't tell me," she said. "She said if she told me, I'd try to change it. And then it would happen anyway, and I'd just be tired."

. . .

At the door of the guesthouse she stopped and took something out of her coat pocket. A folded piece of paper.

“For you,” she said. “I wrote it out. The poem. The whole thing in Persian, and some of it in English, my English. Only four lines, the ones I love most. The rest is too hard, I’m still working on it. It isn’t a good translation. It’s a stranger wearing his coat. But it’s warm.” She pressed it into my hand. “So you remember. *Gham makhor.*”

“*Gham makhor*,” I said.

“Good. Very good accent. Good night, Clara. *Shab bekheir* [SHAB be-KHEIR].” Good night. “Tomorrow is a longer day. Every day from now is longer. That’s the whole point.”

She turned and went off down the lane, a dark shape between the pale walls, her long coat swinging, and at the corner she turned back once and waved, and I waved, and then she was gone.

. . .

I didn’t sleep. I lay under my four red blankets in my domed room as quiet as a church and held her piece of paper against my chest and thought about my father.

What I had asked Hafez, with my eyes closed, with the green book in my hands, was whether it would ever stop. The grief. That was the whole question. Not a wish. A question. *Will this ever stop.* I had not cried at the funeral. I had not cried in October or November. I had cried in a stranger’s house in Iran in front of twenty people because a sixteen-year-old girl told me in her careful English that the house of sorrows would one day be a rose garden, and to stop eating my grief.

I read her translation by the light of the gas lamp. Her handwriting was round and neat, a schoolgirl’s, with the English letters drawn very carefully, as if each one were a small building.

> *Lost Joseph will come home to Canaan. Do not grieve.*
> *The hut of sorrows will one day be a garden of roses. Do not grieve.*
> *If the flood of nothing comes and pulls up the root of everything that is,*

while Noah is the captain of your ship, do not grieve.

The third line stopped me. I read it three times. *If the flood of nothing comes and pulls up the root of everything.* I didn't know, then, what it would come to mean. I didn't know a poem six hundred years old could have a line in it written for a week that had not happened yet.

At the bottom of the page she had written, in English, in pencil, smaller:

P.S. Hafez is never wrong. But sometimes he is early.

From the Clay

You are standing on me. You have always been standing on me. Every step you have ever taken in your life you took on me, and you did not once look down to say thank you. That's all right. I'm not offended. I'm not anything. I'm the ground.

Let me tell you what I am, here, under Bam, so you will understand the rest.

I am old. Older than the desert. Once, long before anything you would call a person, this whole land was the floor of a sea. I remember the sea. I hold it still: the shells of small creatures pressed into my stone, the salt in my clay. Then the land to the south of here, the land you call Arabia, began to push north. It is still pushing. It has been pushing for longer than there have been flowers. A finger's width a year, every year, never resting, shoving against the land to the north the way one great ship might shove against another, slowly, forever. And where they press against each other, I fold. I crumple. I rise up into mountains like a rug pushed against a wall. All the mountains of Iran are that rug. That's what Iran is. A crease in me.

And where I am pushed too hard, I crack.

I am cracked all through here. Long cracks, running for hundreds of miles, under the desert, under the mountains, under the towns. You call them faults, which is a good word, because you like to have

something to blame. But they are not faults. They are only where I give way. They are where I let go of what I've been holding.

Under a fault, the two sides of me try to slide past each other. They cannot. They are locked, held by the weight above them, by friction, by the roughness of rock against rock. So they wait. And the push from the south goes on, a finger's width a year. And the strain builds, and builds, quietly, in the dark, for a hundred years, for a thousand, like a breath held longer than any breath has ever been held. And then, one morning, the rock can't hold it anymore. And I let go all at once.

That is all an earthquake is. A held breath, let out.

. . .

Here is what you must understand about clay. About me, when you have shaped me.

Your people learned, ten thousand years ago, that if you took me wet and pressed me into a shape and let the sun dry me, I would stand up for you. I would be a wall. I would be a house. I would keep out the wind and keep in the warmth and hold up a roof over your children while they slept. You made me into villages, then towns, then the great earth city on the rock. You made me into the towers and the domes and the long walls, and you lived inside me, and you died inside me, and when you were done you put your dead back into me, and I took them.

I never minded. That is what you must understand. A wall of clay is honest. It knows what it is. When it is old, it softens. When it rains, it lets a little of itself go. When it falls, it falls slowly, a little at a time, over years, and you see it falling, and you come and put a little more of me back. A clay wall that falls on you is a heap of soft earth. You can dig out of it with your hands. Your people have been digging their children out of clay for ten thousand years, and most of the time, the children were still breathing.

But you are not patient, your kind. In my lifetime, which is all of time, you are a quick bright flicker, a match struck in a dark room. And lately you have been in a hurry. You found that if you burn clay in a fire it becomes brick, hard as stone. You found that if you burn stone and grind it you get a powder that sets like rock when you

add water. You found you could make a roof of that, flat and heavy and smooth, and lay it on top of your walls like a lid.

You did not ask me about it. You never do.

. . .

There is a story your people tell in this province, about a girl who found a worm in an apple, and fed it, and it grew and grew until it was bigger than the walls built to hold it. You think it's a story about greed. Maybe. It is also true, in its way, about me. Worms have been eating the old earth walls of the citadel for years: termites, tiny, blind, working in the dark inside the clay, hollowing it out from within while from the outside it looked as solid as ever. And men, wanting to save the citadel, had been patching it, adding new things to old things, heavier things, in the wrong places. And the old clay had been drying out, year by year, as the water under the town grew less.

Everything was a little weaker than it looked. That's all. That is how it always is. Nothing ever fails all at once. It only shows that it has failed, all at once.

. . .

Here is how I would say it, if I were a song. Your people sing at the brick pits when they tread me. I have heard them for ten thousand years. I have kept the tune.

> *Wet me and tread me and lay me in the sun,*
> *and I'll stand as your wall till the standing is done;*
> *I'll keep out the wind when the winter is deep,*
> *I'll hold up your roof over children asleep.*
>
> *But I'm not the rock and I'm not the steel,*
> *I'm the dust of a sea that the mountains conceal;*
> *when I'm tired of standing I'll lie where I stood,*
> *and the earth I came out of will take me for good.*

On the longest night, while the girl read the poem about the lost boy coming home, I lay under your town and held my breath, as I had been holding it for longer than your people have been keeping dates.

I wasn’t waiting. I don’t wait. I don’t know what tomorrow is.

I was only full.

II. THE GROUND CLEARS ITS THROAT

7. Small Cracks

Ayoub

On the twenty-third I found a crack in the wall of my daughter’s room.

It was nothing. I want to say that first, the way I said it to myself. A hairline, thinner than a hair, running from the top corner of the window frame up toward the ceiling, at a slant. The kind of crack every new building gets in its first winter, when the cold comes and the walls shrink a little and the plaster complains. I saw it because I was in her room to fix the window catch, which she had broken by slamming it, and I stood on her chair and looked at it for a while with my nose almost touching the wall.

Then I got down, and fixed the catch, and went out into the courtyard, and stood in the sun and looked up at the room from outside. It sat on top of the old kitchen like a box on a box. White, square, modern. The concrete roof a dark grey line along the top, heavy, flat, with a little iron railing Narges had asked for, so she could stand up there in the evenings and look at the Arg. From below it looked strong. It looked like a room in a magazine.

I knew what a crack meant. A mud man knows more about cracks than about anything else on earth. A crack is the wall telling you where it’s tired. It is telling you where the weight is going and where it can’t go anymore.

I told myself it was the cold. Then I went to work.

On the way, I drove past the line of craters south of the Arg, the old qanat my grandfather died in, which still ran, just. I want to tell you what was happening to the qanats, because it was happening to everything. In my grandfather’s time there were more than sixty of them under Bam, and every one had a muqanni, and every muqanni had a son learning the work. By 2003 the old men were seventy and eighty, and their sons were driving taxis in Kerman. Nobody wanted to go down. It is cold and dark and it kills you. And there was no need, people said, because now there were pumps. A man with money drilled a deep well with a machine and put a diesel pump on it and took as much water as he wanted, from below the qanats, and the water under the desert sank lower every year, and one by one

the old qanats ran thinner, and some of them ran dry. I had watched it happen my whole life. Everybody had. Nobody did anything, because the pumps were feeding the new orchards, and the new orchards were feeding the town, and the old men with their lamps and their white shirts were only old men.

. . .

Let me tell you now about the code, since I said I would.

In 1978, before the revolution, an earthquake came to the town of Tabas [ta-BAS], in the desert north of here. Tabas was a town like Bam: mud, palms, a qanat, an old citadel. In the town itself the earthquake killed almost everybody. With the villages around it, fifteen thousand people. My father went there afterwards with other men from Kerman to help dig. He came back and did not speak for a week, and when he spoke he said only, *They were all inside*.

Ten years after Tabas, in 1988, the government wrote rules for building. A book of them, with a number instead of a name, the way governments like. Standard 2800. It said how thick the steel should be in a concrete roof, and how many pieces, and how far apart. It said every wall should have a band of concrete with steel inside it running along the top, called a tie beam, so the walls and roof are held together like the fingers of a fist and cannot fall apart from each other. It said how deep the foundation should go. It said many things. It was a good book. I have read some of it. Engineers wrote it, men who had seen Tabas.

Then, two years after the book, in 1990, an earthquake came to the north, near the Caspian Sea, to Rudbar [rood-BAAR] and Manjil [man-JEEL], green towns in the rain, and killed forty thousand people in one night. The book had been written. Hardly anybody had followed it.

You must understand how it works here, and I think how it works everywhere. The government writes the rule. The rule says a building must be checked by an engineer. The engineer is supposed to come and look. But there are not enough engineers, and they are not paid much, and a man building a room on top of his kitchen is not going to pay an engineer to come all the way from Kerman to

look at it. Or the engineer signs the paper without coming, for a little money. Or the city says you need a permit, and you get the permit by knowing somebody, or you don't get it at all and build anyway, and nobody comes, because nobody ever comes. And steel costs money and cement costs money and the people of Bam do not have money, and they want to build their daughters a room before their daughters are married and gone.

So we built. All of us. All over Bam, for thirty years, as the town grew and the old mud houses got too small and people wanted rooms like in the magazines, we built with brick and concrete, and we built badly, because we were building the way the man down the street built, and the man down the street was still alive, and his house was still standing, so it must be fine.

I am not saying this to excuse myself. I am saying it so you understand that I was not a special kind of fool. I was the ordinary kind. There were thousands of us.

. . .

That night, I smoked.

I sat in the courtyard by the pool with the little brazier of charcoal at my feet, the *manqal* [man-GHAL], and my long clay pipe, and I heated the black bead of taryāk on the end of it and breathed it in, slow, and held it, and let it out. The smoke went up past the orange tree into the stars. My back loosened. My thoughts loosened. The crack in the wall went soft and far away, like a word in a dream.

Narges came out in her pyjamas with a blanket round her shoulders and sat on the edge of the pool, not near the smoke, because she hated the smell. She did not say anything about it. She never said anything about it. That was worse than saying something, and she knew it, and she knew that I knew it.

"Baba," she said. "Clara wants to see the Arg at sunrise. Before she leaves. Can I take her? On Friday? Early?"

"Friday is the twenty-sixth," I said.

"I know when Friday is, Baba."

"You'll have to be up at five."

“I’m always up at five. *You’re* not up at five.”

That was true. I said she could take her. I said, wear your warm coat, it’s cold before the sun. She said, I know, Baba. She kissed me on the top of my head, which she did not do much anymore now she was sixteen, and went back to her room, up the outside stairs, onto the roof of the old kitchen, and I heard her door close, and saw her light come on, and saw her shadow cross the curtain, and then the light went out.

I sat there a long time with the pipe. I could see the roof of her room against the stars. Flat. Grey. Strong.

8. Christmas in the Desert

Clara

On Christmas Eve, the travellers in the guesthouse decided to have Christmas anyway.

It was the Australians’ idea. They had been on the road for three months and the young wife, whose name I never learned to say properly, missed her family with a kind of frank cheerful desperation that made it impossible to refuse her anything. The owner, the gentle man with the grey beard, thought it was wonderful. He said that Jesus, *Isā* [ee-SAA], was a great prophet in Islam too, born of a virgin, Maryam [mar-YAM], Mary, and that it would be an honour. He produced, from somewhere, a small dusty plastic tree with lights on it that blinked in a sequence of red, green and a yellow that stuttered. He said a Dutch traveller had left it in 1999 and he had been waiting for an occasion.

So in the courtyard on the night of the twenty-fourth, around the long pool, with the orange tree and the stars and the cold, there were a dozen of us from eight countries, and a plastic tree, and a feast the owner’s wife made of rice and lamb and dates, and someone had found a bottle of something that was certainly not legal and certainly not wine, and we sang. The Australians sang a carol about kangaroos. The Japanese cyclist sang a song from his village, beautifully, standing up very straight with his hands at his sides. The silent Englishman, to everyone’s astonishment, put down his fat book and sang *Silent Night* in a deep, true voice, in German,

in my language, all three verses, and then sat down and picked up the book again as if nothing had happened.

I didn't sing. I couldn't. My father sang that song. He sang it every Christmas Eve, badly, standing at the window of our flat in Regensburg, looking out at the snow.

. . .

On Christmas morning Narges came to the guesthouse before school. She was in her uniform, the long coat, the dark scarf, and she had something wrapped in a page of newspaper.

"For you," she said. "Merry Christmas. I looked it up. You say *Merry*, not *Happy*. Merry Christmas."

It was a small book. A Hafez. Not old, like hers. A cheap new edition from the bookshop in Kerman, palm-sized, with a red plastic cover and gold letters. In the front, on the first page, in her round careful hand, she had written in English: *For Clara, so you can do your own fāl. You will need a Persian to read it. Please come back and find one. Love, Narges. Bam, 25 December 2003.*

And under that, in Persian, a line I could not read.

"What does that say?"

She smiled the smile.

"You have to come back," she said, "and find a Persian to read it."

I turned the little red book over in my hands. I had a gift for her, too. I had bought it in Munich for nobody in particular, months ago, before my father died, and carried it in the bottom of my bag ever since without knowing why: a small fountain pen, dark green, German, the kind my father used to write his invoices with. I gave it to her. I said, for your translations. For when you put Hafez into English properly. For when you take the stranger's coat off him.

She held the pen in both hands like a bird. She didn't say anything. She uncapped it and looked at the nib in the morning light, and capped it again, and put it very carefully in the inside pocket of her school coat, on the left, over her heart, and buttoned the pocket.

"I'll write you," she said. "When I'm in Tehran. At the university. In English. With this. And you'll correct my mistakes."

“There won’t be any.”

“There will be many. Hafez will be very angry with me.” She laughed and looked at her watch. “I’m late. I’m always late. Friday at half past five? At the gate of the Arg? Sunrise?”

“Friday at half past five.”

“Don’t be late, Clara. The sun is never late. It has no excuse.”

And she ran off down the lane to school with her coat flying, one hand pressed flat against the pocket over her heart, as if the pen might try to escape.

. . .

That afternoon I went up to the Arg alone and sat on the wall of the governor’s castle at the top, the highest place, and looked out.

From up there you could see everything. The old town below the rock, a maze of mud roofs and domes and lanes, the colour of the desert, with the blue tiles of a mosque dome shining in the middle of it like a jewel dropped in sand. Beyond it the new town, grey and white, concrete and brick, flat roofs crowded with satellite dishes and water tanks and laundry. Then the palm groves, a dark green sea, rolling out in every direction to the edges of the oasis, broken by the lines of mud walls. And beyond the groves, the desert, gold and endless, going out and out to the mountains on the south, which that afternoon were sharp and blue and very close in the clear cold air, their tops dusted white with the year’s first snow.

I could see the lines of the qanats now that I knew what to look for. Long dotted lines of craters running across the desert from the mountains toward the town, like stitches in a great tan cloth. The mothers, up in the hills. The children, down here. The water going home in the dark between them.

I took out my notebook and made a drawing. I am not an artist but I can draw a wall. I drew the castle, and the towers, and the old town below. Then, on the next page, I made notes, the way I do on any building I’m looking after. I noted the long vertical cracks in the castle’s outer walls. I noted the patches where new plaster had been laid over old and the colours didn’t match, and where the new plaster was harder than the old and had begun to pull away from it.

I noted the small round holes in the base of the walls, hundreds of them, where termites had got in. I noted that the clay in the lower walls was very dry, powdery, falling away under my fingernail.

At the bottom of the page I wrote, in German, a note to myself, the way I would on a job. I have it still. The notebook came through. I don't know how.

Lovely. Old. Very tired. Should be monitored.

9. The Ground Clears Its Throat

Ayoub

On the evening of the twenty-fifth, at about ten o'clock, the ground moved.

I was in the courtyard with the pipe. Tahereh was inside, watching television, a programme with a man in a suit talking about the price of rice. Narges was in her room. The night was still and cold. And then there was a sound I have heard maybe twenty times in my life, because in Kerman the ground moves now and then, and everybody knows the sound, and it is still not a sound you get used to. A low rumble that seems to come from everywhere and nowhere, from under your feet and from the sky at the same time, like a truck going by on a road that isn't there. Then the ground jumped. Once, sharp. Then it shook, side to side, quick, for maybe three seconds. The water in the pool slopped over the edge onto the tiles. The orange tree shook and dropped two oranges with a soft double thud into the dirt. Inside, a glass fell and broke. And then it stopped.

All over the neighbourhood, doors opened. I heard them. Voices. A dog started barking and every other dog in Bam answered it. Tahereh came out in her slippers with her chador [chaa-DOR], the long cloth a woman wraps herself in, pulled round her, her hand on the doorframe. Narges came out of her door on the roof and stood at the top of the outside stairs, looking down at me.

"Baba?"

"It's nothing. A small one. Come down for a minute."

She came down. We all stood in the courtyard in the cold, the three of us, listening. Over the walls I could hear the neighbours doing

the same, standing in their courtyards, talking in low voices, laughing a little, the way you laugh after you've been frightened by nothing.

Ten minutes later, it came again. Harder. A real jolt this time, and a longer shake, five seconds, six, and over the wall somewhere a section of old mud wall came down with a soft heavy whump and a cloud of dust that went up white in the starlight, and a woman screamed, and then laughed, because nobody was under it.

. . .

I want to tell you exactly what we did next, because it is the thing I go over and over, lying awake. I have gone over it so many times the edges are worn smooth, like a stone in a pocket.

Tahereh said, "We sleep outside."

She said it the way she says the things she has already decided, as a fact, not a suggestion. She had been a girl when the earthquakes of 1981 came, near here, two of them, a few weeks apart, that killed thousands in the villages around Golbaf [gol-BAAF]. She remembered. She said, when the ground clears its throat like that, it's going to say something. We sleep in the courtyard. Bring the blankets.

And we did. For an hour. We brought out mattresses and blankets and laid them on the tiles beside the pool, and Tahereh made tea on the gas ring, and we sat out there under the stars, all three of us, wrapped up, with our breath smoking, like we were at Yalda again. Over the walls I could hear that half the neighbourhood was doing the same. Somebody had a radio on. Somebody's baby was crying.

And it was so cold. December nights in Bam are cold, colder than people think a desert is. Near freezing. By midnight the cold had come up through the mattresses into our bones. Narges's teeth were going. Tahereh had her blanket pulled up to her eyes. Nothing had happened since the second shake. Over the walls the voices were getting fewer. Doors were closing. People were going back inside.

I made the decision. I want to be clear about that. Nobody else made it. I was the man of the house, and I said, *It's over. It was just two little ones. Let's go in before we all catch our death.*

Tahereh looked at me. She didn't say anything.

We went in. Tahereh and I to the old room with the dome, the room my grandfather built. And Narges, up the outside stairs, to her new room on the roof.

At the top of the stairs she turned back and called down, quietly, so as not to wake the neighbours.

"Baba. Should I sleep down there? With you?"

And I said — I said it — I said, "No, *azizam* [a-zee-ZAM], my dear. Your room is the strongest room in the house. It's concrete. It's new. Go to sleep. You've got to be up at five for the German."

She went in. Her door closed. Her light came on, and went off.

10. The Third Time

Clara

The first shake woke me. I had gone to bed early. I came up out of sleep to the sound of the plastic Christmas tree falling over in the courtyard with a crash, and a low roaring, and my room moving, very slightly, side to side, like a boat at a mooring. Then it stopped.

I lay there with my heart going. I had never felt an earthquake. In Bavaria the ground does not move. It is one of the things Bavarians are proudest of, though they would never say so.

I got up and went out into the courtyard in my coat. Some of the others were already there, in sleeping bags and blankets, looking up at the walls. The owner was there, calm, smiling, picking up the Christmas tree. He said it was nothing. He said this happens. *Kerman*, he said, and shrugged, and made a little wobbling motion with his flat hand, *always little bit dancing.*

The second shake came while we were all standing there. It was stronger. I felt it come up through the soles of my feet, a jolt and then a shudder, and the water in the long pool rose up in a little wave and slapped against the far end, and the orange tree shook,

and from somewhere outside, in the lanes, came a soft collapsing sound and a woman's scream and then her laugh. One of the Dutch girls grabbed my arm. The Japanese cyclist, very calmly, went and stood in the middle of the courtyard, away from the walls, and looked up at the sky. I understood that he came from a country where the ground moves often, and that he was doing what he had been taught to do. I went and stood beside him. So did the Dutch girls.

"Is that the big one?" asked the young Australian husband.

"No," said the owner, still smiling. "Is little. Is finish now."

We stood out there for half an hour. Nothing else happened. It got colder and colder. The Dutch girls went in first. Then the Australians. The cyclist stayed longest, standing in the middle of the courtyard with his hands in his pockets, looking at the stars, and then he too nodded to me, very politely, and said "Good night," and went in.

I went in too. I am a sensible woman. It was below freezing. The man who owned the house had lived there all his life and said it was over. My room had walls a metre thick and a dome over it, a shape that had stood for hundreds of years. I lay down in my clothes under my four red blankets, and I set my alarm for five, because I was meeting Narges at the gate of the Arg at half past, and the sun is never late, and has no excuse.

. . .

The third shake came at about ten to five.

I was already awake. I had been awake for a few minutes, lying in the dark, waiting for the alarm, the way you do when you have to get up early and your body knows it before the clock does. And the room moved. Not much. Less than the second one. A small, quick shiver, as if the whole house had shrugged. A little dust sifted down from the dome onto my face, very fine, like flour from a sieve. I heard it whisper on the blanket.

I lay there. I thought, *There. A third one. That's three.* I thought it the way you think about a bus, that it's late.

Then the alarm went off on my wrist. I turned it off. I sat up. I put on my boots in the dark. I put on my coat. In the inside pocket of the coat, over my heart, I put the little red Hafez Narges had given me, and her folded page of the poem. I was going to ask her, at sunrise, on the wall of the castle, what the Persian line on the first page said.

I remember sitting on the edge of the mattress with my boots on, in the dark, tying the laces. I remember thinking I would go quietly across the courtyard so as not to wake the others. I remember it was very cold, and very still, and I could hear nothing, nothing at all, not a dog, not a cart, not a breath of wind. The longest night was over, and it was the stillest morning I had ever known, and the town was asleep, and in half an hour the sky would start going grey over the mountains, and I would climb up the rock to watch the sun come back to Bam with a girl who believed that every day from now on would be longer.

I stood up. I looked at my watch. It said twenty-five past five.

I took one step toward the door.

From the Qanat

Let me tell you about the water, since you have met it. Since the girl's father took the German woman down the steps to touch it.

I hold it. That is my whole relationship to water: I hold it, and I let it go. Up in the mountains to the south of this town, the snow melts in the spring and sinks into me, down through the cracks, down into the gravel that the mountains have been shedding for millions of years, and it moves through me downhill, slowly, in the dark, a few metres a day, under the desert. It has been doing this since before there was a desert. I am full of it, down there. An underground river nobody can see, running beneath the hottest place on earth.

Your people found it. Three thousand years ago, maybe more, in this land. They found that if they dug down into me at the foot of the mountains, there was water, and that if they dug a tunnel back to it from lower down, very gently sloping, the water would come to them on its own. No pump. No wheel. No animal walking in circles.

Only gravity, and patience, and a slope so slight a marble would hardly roll on it.

I want you to understand what that took. Men went down into me with a pick and a lamp and a leather bucket, in the dark, in tunnels barely wide enough for their shoulders, and they dug. For miles. Toward a well they could not see, guided only by a rope and a lamp and the instincts of their fathers. Some tunnels took fifty years to dig. A man would start one as a boy and die before the water ran. His son would finish it. Sometimes I collapsed on them. Sometimes the water came too fast and drowned them. You have heard: they put on white for the work, already dressed for burial. They knew me. They knew I give and I take and I do not explain.

And yet they kept digging. Across this whole land, from here to the borders of China, to the mountains of Afghanistan, to the deserts of Arabia and Africa, your people dug these tunnels into me, until there were tens of thousands of them, enough tunnel, if you laid it end to end, to wrap around the whole world many times. Every green place in the desert of Persia for three thousand years was a gift that I gave and that men carried up out of the dark on their backs. That is the oldest bargain between your kind and mine, here. It was a good bargain. It was honest.

. . .

Lately the bargain has been changing. I want you to see this.

You stopped digging qanats. They were too slow. You found you could drill straight down into me with a machine, deep, much deeper than any qanat, and pump the water up with a motor and diesel, as much as you wanted, whenever you wanted. A qanat only gives what the mountain gives; it takes no more than comes in. A pump takes whatever you ask. You asked for a great deal. More gardens, more orchards, more people. And the water under the desert went down. And down. The old qanats, dug at the old level, began to dry up, one by one, because their mother wells were now standing above an empty floor. And the clay above them, the clay of the town and of the old earth walls, which had always had a little moisture in it from below, began to dry too. Clay that has dried out is brittle. It cracks. It lets go.

Nothing I am telling you made the earth shake. I want to be fair. The shaking was mine, and it would have come no matter what you did. But everything I am telling you made what was standing on me weaker than it looked when the shaking came. Pump. Concrete. Termites. Patches. Thin steel. A room built for a daughter on the roof of an old kitchen. A hundred small things, all leaning the same way, quietly, for years.

You always want there to be one thing. There is almost never one thing.

. . .

Your diggers had a song for it. I'll give it to you the way I heard it, through a hundred metres of rock, sung low in the dark to keep the fear off:

> *Under the sand where the diggers went down*
> *in shirts that were white as the shroud of the town,*
> *the mother runs cold in the dark, going home,*
> *and gives what the mountain gives, never a loan.*
>
> *Where the water comes up, there the rock has been split;*
> *where the gardens are green, there's a crack under it.*
> *So drink from my hand, drink the sweet and the cold:*
> *the gift and the grave are the same, and are old.*

On the evening of Christmas, under the town, the water was moving in the qanats in the dark as it always moved, going home. And at the edge of the town, along a crack that ran north and south right under the houses, a crack your scientists had drawn on their maps a little way to the east but had not seen running here, under the town itself, the rock trembled. Twice. And then, just before dawn, a third time. Small things. Throat-clearings.

Some of your people heard them and came out under the stars. Some of them went back to bed because it was cold, and because the man of the house said it was over, and because the people who had always lived here had been through a hundred little shakes before and nothing came of them.

I don't blame them. I'm telling you so you will understand. Your people have always lived on top of me, here, in the crease where

two great lands are pressing together, because this is where the water is. The water comes out where I am cracked. The springs, the qanats, the oases, they follow the faults, the way roads follow rivers. The very thing that made Bam possible is the thing that was about to undo it. The water and the crack are the same gift.

That is the oldest thing I know. The place where I give you life is always the place where I can take it.

III. FIVE TWENTY-SIX

11. Five Twenty-Six
Ayoub

I will tell you this slowly. I have only ever told it fast, in pieces, to men from the government with clipboards, and to a doctor, and once to my wife, when we were both drunk on grief and could not stop. I have never told it slowly. Slowly is the only way to tell it true.

I was asleep. Tahereh was asleep beside me. In the old room, under the dome my grandfather built. Across the courtyard was the big room, the room my father extended with fired brick and a flat wooden ceiling in 1975, when I was a young man still living under my father's roof; nobody slept in it now. Narges was up. I know she was up because her light was on. I had woken for a moment at about five, the way you wake when you hear your child moving in the house, and through the gap in our curtain I saw the square of yellow from her window on the roof. I thought: she's getting ready for the German. I thought: wear your warm coat. I did not say it. I went back to sleep.

What woke me the second time was not a sound. It was being lifted.

. . .

You have to understand that an earthquake is not what you think. You think of shaking, side to side, a house rocking like a boat. That is what the little ones are. That is what the two the night before had been. This was not that.

The ground came up.

All of it, at once, straight up from underneath, like a fist punching the floor of the world from below. I was thrown up off the mattress. Not far, a hand's width, maybe two, but up, into the air, and I came down hard on my back, and before I could understand anything it hit again, and again, from underneath, and the room was not a room anymore, it was the inside of a drum that a giant was beating with both fists. And the noise. People who were not there always ask about the noise. I can't tell you. It was every noise. It was a roar so deep you didn't hear it with your ears, you heard it with your ribs, with your teeth, a roar coming up out of the ground as if the earth itself were screaming, and on top of it the sound of everything

breaking. Walls cracking, a sound like gunshots, one after another, very close. Glass. Brick. Wood. The ceiling. A long tearing, grinding noise that I later understood was the whole town coming down at the same moment, every house in Bam, tens of thousands of them, falling together, and the sound of all of that falling coming in from every direction like the sea.

It lasted, they say, about twelve seconds.

I have counted to twelve many times since. Slowly. One. Two. Three. It is not a long time. You can boil no water in it. You can say a short prayer. You can tie one shoe. You can say *Narges*, the way I said it, shouting it, into the dark, eleven or twelve times.

Then it stopped.

. . .

Then it was dark, and I couldn't breathe.

The dust. Nobody who wasn't there understands the dust. When a city of clay falls, the clay goes into the air. All of it. In a second the air was solid, thick as flour, hot from the friction, and it went into your mouth and your nose and your eyes and down your throat and you choked, and coughed, and choked, and every cough pulled more of it into you. I was on my face on the floor with plaster and broken khesht across my legs. I couldn't see anything. Not dark like night. Dark like being inside the earth. I could hear Tahereh coughing beside me. I could hear, from everywhere, outside, a sound beginning. A thin, high sound, rising. It was people. The whole of Bam waking up under its own houses and beginning to scream.

I got my legs out. It was only the skin of the dome, the plaster and a few bricks that had come away from the inside of it, and a cut along my shin that I did not feel until the afternoon. I dragged myself out. I found Tahereh by her coughing and by her hands, which were reaching for me in the dark. Her face was wet. Blood or tears, I don't know. She was saying my name over and over in a voice like a crow. I pulled her toward where I thought the door was, and it was there, but half of it was filled with fallen plaster, and I crawled through the gap that was left on my hands and knees, pulling her, and came out into the courtyard into the cold.

The cold was the first thing. The cold and the stars. The dust was settling, a little, already, and through it, above me, there were the stars, the same stars as Yalda, white and sharp and enormous, looking down on Bam exactly as they had looked down on it for a thousand years, as if nothing at all had happened.

And the second thing was the silence of the courtyard. The water in the pool was gone. The pool had cracked and emptied. The orange tree was standing.

The third thing was the dome. I turned on my knees and looked back at the room we had crawled out of. My grandfather's dome, made of khesht, a hundred years old. Cracked, shifted, dust pouring out of the doorway like smoke from a chimney, but standing. It had held. It had held over Tahereh and me the way it had held over my grandfather, and my father, and me when I was a boy, and I knelt in the courtyard and looked at it and did not yet understand what that meant.

I turned around to look at the roof of the old kitchen.

. . .

There was no roof of the old kitchen.

There was no room on it.

Where my daughter's room had been there was a shape against the stars that I didn't understand. Flat. Too low. A great grey slab, tilted, with one corner up and the other corners down, lying on a heap of broken brick. The concrete roof. It was in one piece. It had not broken. It was the only thing in the courtyard that had not broken. It had simply come straight down, the whole heavy flat lid of it, through the room, through the walls, which had burst out sideways and spilled into the courtyard like a split sack of grain, through the old kitchen underneath, all the way down to the ground, and it was lying there, in one piece, on top of everything that had been under it.

The little iron railing she had asked for was still on top of it, bent, standing up against the stars like the frame of a broken kite.

I don't remember crossing the courtyard. I remember being on the slab. I remember lying on it with my face against the cold concrete,

the concrete I had poured with my own hands in July, and shouting her name into it, and putting my ear to it, and listening. I remember Tahereh beside me, also lying on it, also listening. I remember that we were both whispering *shhh, shhh*, to each other, to the town, to the screaming coming from every direction, *shhh*, so that we could hear her.

We couldn't hear anything. There was a hand's width between the slab and the bricks under it, at the edge, and I put my arm in up to the shoulder and felt only broken brick and dust and the cold.

. . .

It was twenty-five past five, maybe twenty-seven, when it happened. They say twenty-six minutes and fifty-two seconds past five. Scientists have measured it. I didn't know the time. I only know that when I started digging it was dark, and when the sky started going grey over the mountains I was still digging, and when the sun came up, a little before half past six, red and enormous through the dust, the way it always comes up over Bam, I was still digging, with my hands.

We had nothing. No tools. The spade was under the kitchen. Our neighbour came over the broken wall from his house, which had also fallen, with a pickaxe, because his wife and his two sons were alive and he wanted to help somebody. He and I tried to lift the edge of the slab with the pick. It did not move. It was a whole roof, five metres by four, of concrete and steel. It weighed more than a truck. So we dug under it from the side, at the edge where the wall had burst out, where I knew the head of her bed had been, against the window. We dug with our hands and the pick and a broken piece of door. We pulled out bricks one at a time and threw them behind us. Tahereh pulled them away from behind us, and as she pulled them she said the prayers for the dying, out loud, steadily, one after another, between one brick and the next, the whole time, and I wanted to scream at her to stop and I couldn't scream at her because I couldn't spare the breath.

At a little after eight we found her shoe. Her school shoe, the black one, the one she complained about.

It was on her foot.

. . .

I will tell you the next part and then I will stop for a while.

She was lying on her side, on the floor of her room, between the bed and the door. Not in the bed. She had got up. She was dressed. She had her long dark school coat on, buttoned, and her scarf, and her shoes. She had been ready. She had been on her way to the door, to come down the stairs and go and meet the German woman at the Arg to watch the sun come up. She was one step from the door. One step. A little more than a metre.

The slab had come down at an angle, one side lower than the other. The low side was the side with the bed. The door side was higher. There was a space, a little space, by the door, between the slab and the floor. If she had taken one more step, she would have been in that space.

I don't know that. I'm a mud man, not a scientist. I'm only telling you what I saw, and what I have thought about every day since, which is that the room I built her was a metre too short.

She was very peaceful. I want to say that. Her face was not hurt. There was dust in her eyelashes and on her lips, pale dust, the colour of Bam, as if she had fallen asleep in a field. The doctor said later it would have been very fast. That's what they say. I've decided to believe it.

I wiped the dust from her eyelashes with my thumb. I did it slowly, one eye and then the other, the way her mother used to wipe sleep from them when she was small and would not wake for school. The dust would not all come. It was in the lashes, fine as flour, and every time I wiped, a little more stayed. I stopped. I thought: let her keep some. It is the earth of her own town. She was born on it and she learned to walk on it and she was going to walk on it this morning to the Arg, to show a stranger the sun. Let her keep a little of it. I took my hand away and knelt there, and the sun climbed through the dust over the mountains, and she went on lying very still, as if she were listening for my step on the stairs.

Her right hand was over her heart. Pressed flat against her coat, on the left side, over the inside pocket. The way she held it when she ran.

The pocket was buttoned. I unbuttoned it. There was a fountain pen in it. Dark green. Not hers. I had never seen it before.

12. Under

Clara

I took one step toward the door and the floor came up and hit me in the face.

That is what it was like. Not a shaking. A blow. As if the whole floor of the room had been struck from underneath with something enormous, a hammer the size of a house, and leapt up at me, and I went down onto it, and it leapt again, and the dome over my head made a sound I have never heard any building make, a deep groan, a sound like an animal in pain, and then a crack like a rifle shot, and then the world fell on me.

I don't know how long I was unconscious. Not long, I think. When I came back I was lying on my stomach, with my face turned to one side, and I couldn't move, and I couldn't see, and I couldn't breathe.

The dust. You've heard about the dust. I had been in plenty of old buildings in my life when walls came down during restoration, and I knew clay dust, and this was not that. This was the air turned into earth. I was breathing earth. I put my face into the crook of my arm and breathed through the sleeve of my coat, short, shallow breaths, through the wool, and coughed, and breathed, and coughed, and slowly, very slowly, the dust began to settle, and I could breathe a little.

Then I tried to move, and couldn't.

. . .

I want to describe where I was precisely, because precise is the only thing I had left down there and I held on to it like a railing.

I was lying face down on the floor, in the passage just outside my room, with my head toward the courtyard and my feet toward the room. I had taken one step through the doorway, and the floor had thrown me forward, through it, into the little arched passage that led out under the colonnade. The door frame of my room was behind my knees. My legs were in the doorway. Something heavy

was across them, below the knee, pinning them to the floor. I couldn't see it. I could feel it: rough, uneven, massive, warm. Fallen dome. Clay and brick. It didn't hurt, at first. It didn't hurt for a long time. That frightened me more than pain would have.

Above me, about a hand's width above the back of my head, there was something solid. I reached up in the dark and felt it. A curve. Brick, under a skin of plaster, cracked across, bending over me from one side to the other. The arch. The little pointed arch of the passage, which had held. Above it I could hear things still moving, settling, small trickles of earth and the occasional clunk of a brick shifting, and I knew that the whole weight of the fallen room was lying on that little arch, and the arch was holding it up off me, and that it is the nature of an arch to turn weight into strength, to take what presses down on it and push it sideways into the walls, and that this is why people have been building them for five thousand years. I lay under it and thought, with a completely clear and professional part of my mind: *pointed arch, mud brick, gypsum mortar, probably seventeenth or eighteenth century, very good work.*

And then, because I was German and I was a conservator and I was lying under a fallen building, I laughed. In the dark. Into my sleeve. It was not a good laugh. But it was a laugh.

. . .

On my left, there was a wall. The wall of the passage. On my right, toward the courtyard, there was nothing. A gap. Dark. And from that gap, very faintly, so faintly I almost didn't notice it, there came a breath of air.

Cold air. Clean. Damp. Smelling of wet stone.

I knew that smell. I had smelled it on my first evening in Bam, at the top of the steps in the corner of the courtyard, by the orange tree, and again six days ago at the bottom of the steps in the desert, crouched beside Ayoub and Narges, with my hand in the running water.

The pāyāb. The stairs down to the qanat. The way down to the old water that ran under the town. The steps had been just past the end of this passage, at the corner of the courtyard. The courtyard was

gone, I supposed, buried. But the steps went down into the ground, and the ground had not fallen, because the ground cannot fall, and the steps were cut into it, and somewhere down there, in the dark, the water was still running, and the air of the tunnel, which had been breathing in and out of that stairway for three hundred years, was still breathing, and some of its breath was finding its way up through the rubble to me.

I put my face toward it. I breathed it. It was the most beautiful thing I have ever breathed.

. . .

It was cold. I'll say that now and not keep saying it, because it was cold the whole time and if I tell you every time you will stop hearing it. It was below freezing that first morning. I was lying on a stone floor in a winter coat, with my legs pinned, with no blanket, and the cold came up through the floor into my belly and my chest and settled there and never left.

The cold saved me. I know that now. A doctor in Kerman told me afterwards. If it had been summer, I would have been dead of thirst in a day and a half. In the cold, your body doesn't sweat, and you lose water slowly. The cold made me suffer, and the cold kept me alive. I've thought about that a great deal since. About how the same thing does both.

. . .

I could hear the town.

At first only the screaming, everywhere, near and far, rising and falling like weather. I won't describe it. Then, under it, as the minutes went by, other sounds. People calling names. Men's voices shouting to each other, giving instructions. Someone, very close, on the other side of the courtyard, crying in a steady exhausted rhythm, like a machine. A dog. A car horn going on and on, stuck. And somewhere above me, over the rubble, the sound I wanted most: digging. Scraping. The clink and thud of bricks being lifted and thrown aside.

I shouted. I shouted *Hilfe* [HIL-feh], which is help in German, and *help*, and *komak* [ko-MAK], which is help in Persian, one of my

thirty words. I shouted until my throat was raw. The dust had got into it and my voice came out as a croak, a thin, cracked thing that went nowhere. I hit the wall beside me with my fist. I hit the floor. I knocked on the arch above my head. Three knocks. Three knocks. Three knocks. The way you're supposed to, the way everyone knows.

The digging went on, somewhere above and to the right. Voices. I heard the owner, the gentle man with the grey beard, I was sure it was him, shouting a name I didn't know, a woman's name, over and over. His wife's name, I think. I heard one of the Dutch girls crying, and then I heard her being pulled out, I heard the men shout and the bricks go and her scream of pain and then the men's voices go away, carrying her. I heard someone call, in English, with an Australian accent, *Sarah! Sarah!* and nobody answer, and then, after a long time, the man's voice making a sound I won't describe.

I shouted. I knocked. Three knocks. Three knocks.

Nobody came.

I understood, later, why. The whole house had fallen. Every room. There were people under all of it, and the people digging were the people who had happened to be standing near the doors, or who had been in the strongest rooms, and they had their hands and nothing else, and they dug where they heard voices, and they dug where they knew someone had been sleeping, and they dug toward the people they loved first. They dug my room, I think. I heard them, once, behind me, beyond my feet, digging and calling and lifting. They dug into my room, where my mattress had been, and found it empty, and went away. They didn't know I'd taken a step. Nobody knew I'd taken a step. I hadn't known it myself until I was lying in the passage with my legs in the doorway.

. . .

The light came at some point. Not much. A grey stain somewhere off to my right, beyond the gap where the air came in, so faint I could only see it if I didn't look straight at it. Day. Then, after what might have been hours, it got a little brighter. Then, after more hours, it went away again.

By then I had stopped shouting. My voice was gone. I knocked, every so often, three knocks on the arch with the knuckle of my right hand, until the knuckle bled, and then with the flat of my palm.

My legs had started to hurt. It began as a deep ache and then turned into something I don't have a word for, a heavy, hot, swollen pain, and then, later that day, it began to go away, and that was worse, because I knew what it meant when a trapped leg stops hurting.

I was thirsty. I want to tell you about thirst, and I can't, any more than I can tell you about the sky over Bam. I had not drunk anything since a glass of tea the evening before. My mouth was full of dust and the dust had turned to mud on my tongue and dried there. I had no water. I had nothing. I had my coat and my boots and my watch and, in the inside pocket of my coat, over my heart, a little red book, and a folded page with a poem on it.

13. The Whole City

Ayoub

We wrapped her in the blanket from her bed, the one with the pattern of birds that her aunt had given her, and we laid her on the door of the old kitchen, which was lying in the courtyard in one piece, and our neighbour and I carried her out through the gap where our front wall had been, into the lane.

And then I saw Bam.

I had been digging for three hours with my face in the bricks. I had not looked up. I had not seen anything but my daughter's room. Now I stood in the lane with one end of the door in my hands and my daughter on it, and I looked up the lane toward the Arg, and I could see the Arg, from our lane, which I had never been able to do in my whole life, because there had always been houses in the way.

There were no houses in the way.

. . .

I’m going to try to tell you what it looked like. I’ve tried many times. I’ve never managed it. People hear the number, and the number is too big to see.

The lane was not a lane. It was a shallow valley of rubble, mud brick and fired brick and broken beams and dust, lying in heaps and slopes, with here and there a doorframe standing up out of it with nothing on either side, or a single wall with a window in it and sky behind the window. As far as I could see, up the lane and down, and over the tops of where the walls had been, into the next lanes and the next, it was the same. Low. Flat. A sea of broken earth, the colour of Bam, the colour of a camel, gently rolling, all the way to the palms.

The palms were standing. I want you to see that. Every palm tree in Bam was standing. Not one had fallen. They stood up out of the rubble all over the town, tall and straight, with their crowns moving very slightly in the morning air, as if nothing had happened. A palm bends. It is made to bend. It has no bones to break. Thousands of them, standing in the dust in the cold morning sun over a town that was gone.

And everywhere, on top of the rubble, there were people. Digging. Thousands of them. Men and women in their nightclothes, in blankets, barefoot, grey with dust from head to foot so that they looked like statues made of the same earth as everything else, kneeling on the heaps of their houses and pulling at the bricks with their hands. Some of them were shouting names. Some of them weren’t making any sound at all. Some of them were sitting on the rubble not digging, holding someone across their knees. There were bodies in the lane, already, laid in a row along the edge where people had carried them out, wrapped in blankets and carpets and curtains and sheets, with their feet sticking out at the end, bare feet and slippers and shoes. I counted eleven in our lane before I stopped counting. Children’s feet among them.

And no help. That is the thing that people who weren’t there don’t understand. Nobody came. Not that morning. There was no one to come. The police station had fallen with the policemen in it. The fire

station had fallen with the trucks inside. The hospitals had fallen with the doctors and the nurses and the patients inside. The Red Crescent office, the town hall, the governor's office, the telephone exchange, the army barracks, everything. All the people in Bam whose job it was to help, to come, to dig, to save, were under their own houses or under their offices, or were digging out their own families with their own hands like everybody else. The whole town had been knocked down at once, and the whole town was its own rescue team, with nothing but its fingernails.

The telephones were dead. The electricity was dead. The water, the town water from the pipes, was dead. Nobody outside knew. I learned later that it was hours before anybody in Kerman understood what had happened. Someone drove out of Bam in a car at seven in the morning and got to the next town and found a telephone. That's how the world found out about Bam. One man in a car.

. . .

I looked up at the Arg.

Every morning of my life I had seen it on its rock, with its walls and its towers and its castle at the top, the governor's castle, square and tall against the sky. That morning, in the cold red sun through the dust, it was a hill.

That's all. A hill. The great outer wall was broken in a dozen places, the towers slumped and split like loaves of bread pulled apart by hand. The town inside the walls was gone, every house, every lane, every dome, melted down into heaps. And the castle at the top, the high citadel, the thing I had looked at every morning and every evening for fifty-two years, the thing that turned gold and orange and red and violet every sunset, the castle was a cone of earth. A heap, with some broken walls sticking out of it. The square tower was gone. The top of the rock was the shape the rock had been before anybody built anything on it.

Two thousand years. Twelve seconds.

I'd made bricks for it for eleven years. I'd laid them into the walls with my own hands. And I stood in the lane holding one end of a door with my daughter on it, and I looked at the hill where the Arg

had been, and I didn't feel anything at all about it. Not then. It was as if somebody had told me about a building in another country. I had no room in me. All the room was on the door.

. . .

We carried her to the end of the lane, to where the lane met the main road, where people were bringing the bodies to lie them in rows, because someone had said trucks would come. We laid her down. Tahereh sat down beside her on the ground, and put her hand under the blanket and found our daughter's hand, and sat with her, in the dust and the cold, and didn't speak.

And I went to look for the German woman.

I don't know why. I've asked myself. Maybe because I couldn't sit there. Maybe because Narges had been going to meet her, and that was the last thing Narges had wanted to do, and somebody should do it for her. Maybe because she was a stranger, and a guest, and a guest is a gift from God, and you don't leave a gift from God under a house. I don't know. I went.

. . .

The guesthouse was four lanes over, toward the Arg. It took me an hour to get there, climbing over the rubble where the lanes had been, because there were no lanes anymore and I didn't know which heap was which, and I kept stopping, because people kept calling to me for help, and I helped. A man and his son lifting a beam off a woman. An old man who couldn't find his wife's room in the heap of his house and kept asking me where the kitchen was, and I didn't know, and I helped him dig where he thought, and we found a cupboard, and he sat down and cried.

When I found the guesthouse, it was a heap like all the others. The long wall along the lane had fallen outward. The courtyard was a pit of rubble. I could see the top of the orange tree, standing up in the middle of it, just like ours, with oranges still on it. The owner was there, the man with the grey beard, digging on one side of the courtyard with three other men, and there were travellers sitting in the lane, three or four of them, grey and bloody, wrapped in blankets, one of the yellow-haired Dutch girls with her leg tied up in a scarf, the Japanese man with the legs of a horse sitting very

straight with his eyes closed and his arm in a sling made of a towel, and the Australian husband, alone, on a step, not moving, not looking at anything.

I asked the owner about the German woman. He looked at me for a long moment with his face grey with dust and a long cut across his forehead.

“Her room is empty,” he said. “We dug it. First thing. Her room is there.” He pointed to the corner of the heap, by where the orange tree was. “We dug to her bed. Her bed was empty. Her bag was there, her things. But not her.”

“Then where?”

He shook his head slowly. “She went to the Arg,” he said. “She told me. Yesterday. She said, tomorrow I go to the Arg very early, half past five, to see the sun. With a girl. I said, it’s still dark then. She said, I know. She left before. Before it.” He looked up the hill toward where the Arg had been. “She was up there. Waiting for the girl.”

. . .

I stood in the lane outside the fallen guesthouse and looked up at the heap where the castle had been, the cone of earth at the top of the rock.

And I saw it. You understand? I saw it the way you see a thing in a dream, all at once, whole. The German woman, alone, in the dark, on the wall of the castle, the highest place, with her coat buttoned up, waiting. Looking down at the town for a tall thin girl in a long coat coming up the path. Looking at her watch. And the girl not coming. The girl one step from her own door. And then the ground coming up, and the castle coming down, and the stranger and the hill going together into the dust.

My daughter had invited her. My daughter had told her the sun is never late. My daughter had sent her up there.

I didn’t say anything to the owner. I turned around and climbed back over the rubble the way I had come, to the end of our lane, where my wife was sitting in the dust beside a blanket with birds on it.

I sat down on the other side of the blanket. I didn't tell her. I don't think I said anything to anybody for the rest of that day.

14. The First Night

Clara

The second time the dark came, it stayed.

I could tell the night from the day only by the cold. In the day the cold was bad. At night it was something else. It came up out of the floor and down out of the rubble and in from the gap on my right with the breath of the qanat, which was damp and colder than the air, and it wrapped around me and went into me like water into a sponge. I shook. I shook so hard my teeth knocked, and then I made my jaw tight to stop them, and then I shook in my chest instead, in great slow shudders, like sobbing without tears. I couldn't cry. I had no water to cry with.

The ground moved, many times. Aftershocks. Some small, a shiver, a trickle of earth somewhere over my head. Some big. Once, in the night, a big one, a real jolt, and the rubble above me groaned and shifted and settled, and something came down onto the arch above my head with a heavy thud and a fall of dust on my neck, and I lay there with my eyes shut tight and my hands over my head waiting for it to come through. It didn't. The arch held. Good work. Seventeenth or eighteenth century. I said it out loud, or I thought I did. My voice was a scraping in the dark.

. . .

I talked to my father.

Not out loud. In my head. He was there more than he had been since September. I told him where I was. I described the arch, the gypsum mortar, the way the bricks were laid in a herringbone in the spandrels, the triangles of wall that fill the space beside the curve of an arch, which he would have liked, because he liked a pattern. I told him about the girl. I told him about Yalda, about the pomegranates, about the green book, about *gham makhor*. I told him about the little red book in my pocket and the line in Persian I couldn't read. I asked him what it said. He didn't know either. He had never been to Iran. He had been to Italy once on his honeymoon

and to Austria many times and that was all, and he would have hated it here, he would have complained about the tea, and he would have loved it.

I told him I was going to die. I said it to him very plainly, the way he always talked to me. I said, *Papa, I'm going to die here. Under a guesthouse in Bam. Under a good arch.* I said, *You told me to go and see something. I went.*

And he didn't say anything. He was never a talker. He just sat there in my head in the dark, the way he'd sat in his chair by the window in the evenings, not saying anything, being there. I was glad of him.

. . .

And then, sometime in the night, the deep part of the night, I heard her.

I want to say this carefully. I am a conservator. I am a scientist, of a kind. I measure things for a living. I know what thirst does, and cold, and the dark, and being trapped, and grief, and what all of those together can do to a mind lying alone under a fallen building for twenty hours. I have read about it since. Many people who have been buried after earthquakes have heard voices. Their dead. Their mothers. God. Music. It's well known. It's the brain, starved of everything it needs, filling the dark with what it wants most. I know all of this.

I am going to tell you what I heard anyway.

I heard a girl's voice. Very close. As if she were lying beside me on the floor of the passage, on my right, in the gap where the air came in, with her face a hand's width from my face. Not loud. Soft, and clear, and steady, the way you speak to someone in a bed beside you at night so as not to wake the house.

She was reciting the poem.

Yusof-e gomgashteh bāz āyad be Kan'ān, gham makhor.

I knew it at once. I didn't know the words, but I knew the music of it, the rise and the fall, the way it went up on *Kan'ān* and came down to rest on *gham makhor* at the end of the line like a bird landing on a branch. I had heard it once, by lamplight, at Yalda, in that same voice.

Kolbeh-ye ahzān shavad ruzi golestān, gham makhor.

She went on. Line after line. The whole poem. I didn't know how many lines there were. I didn't know any of the words except the two that came back at the end of every line, over and over, like a heartbeat. *Gham makhor. Gham makhor.* The voice was patient. It didn't hurry. When it got to the end it went back to the beginning, the way the stories had gone round and round at Yalda, the way you sing a child to sleep.

And then, after the second time through, it stopped. And in the silence, close to my face, the voice said, in English. Careful English. Schoolgirl English, with each word set down by itself like a small building:

"Don't be sad, Clara. Wait. Someone is coming. You have a good accent."

. . .

I said, "Narges?"

My voice came out as a rasp. It hurt. I said it again.

"Narges? Are you here? Are you under here?"

Nothing. The cold breath of the qanat on my face. Far away, a dog. The rubble ticking and settling over my head.

I thought, she's under here too. She came to meet me. She came to the guesthouse to get me, because for once in her life she had decided not to be late, because the sun has no excuse, and the house fell on her too, and she's lying somewhere near me in the dark, hurt, and she's trying to keep me going.

I said, "Narges, are you hurt?"

Nothing.

So I did the only thing I could think of. I said the only Persian I was sure of, the thing she'd taught me. The thing she said was the most important thing in Persian. I said it into the dark, toward the gap where the air came in, with my lips cracking:

"*Gham makhor.*"

And then again. And again. Until I couldn't anymore.

Nobody answered. But I wasn't afraid anymore, after that. I don't know how else to say it. Something had sat down beside me in the dark and stayed there. I lay with my cheek on the cold floor and my face toward the gap and the breath of the old water on my lips, and I said *gham makhor* to it, over and over, very quietly, the way you'd say a word to a frightened animal, and at some point I slept.

15. The First Night

Ayoub

The trucks came in the afternoon. And the people from Kerman, in cars, in pickups, in buses, with shovels, with water, with bread, driving three hours through the desert with their hazard lights on because they'd heard on the radio and couldn't believe it and came to see. And then, as it got dark, the first helicopters, coming in low over the palms with their lights, landing in the football ground, which was the only open place left. And soldiers. And the Red Crescent, *Helāl-e Ahmar* [he-LAAL-eh AH-mar], in their red and white, with tents and blankets.

By night there were thousands of people in Bam who had not been there in the morning. And thousands of people in Bam who had been there in the morning and were not there anymore.

. . .

They took the dead to the cemetery on the edge of town in trucks. Open trucks, with the bodies lying in the back in their blankets, side by side, and the families running after them, or riding in the back with them, holding on. There was no time. There was no room. There was no way to wash them, the way we wash our dead, with water three times, and wrap them in white cloth, because there was no water and no white cloth and no one to do it. There were too many. The men from the government and the clerics said it was permitted, in a disaster like this, to bury without washing. They said God understands. They said the dead of Bam were martyrs, *shahid* [sha-HEED], and martyrs go to God as they are, in the clothes they died in, and need no washing.

They dug the graves with machines. Bulldozers. Long trenches, side by side, in the cold earth at the edge of the desert. And the dead

were laid in the trenches in rows. Somebody had sense, at least, and took photographs. A man with a camera went along the rows before the earth went over them, and took a picture of each face, and wrote a number, so that afterwards people who had not been there could come and look at the pictures and find their own.

We were there. Tahereh and me. And my daughter, on the back of a truck with eleven others, in her school coat and her blanket with the birds, with the dust of Bam still on her eyelashes.

We put her in the ground at sunset. In a row. Between a man I didn't know and a little boy. I got down into the trench myself, though they told me not to, and I took her from the men on the truck and laid her down. The earth there was the same earth as everywhere in Bam, fine and pale, the colour of a camel. The earth of my bricks. I put my hand flat on it beside her face and I thought, I don't know why, about the way the khesht goes back to being earth when it's finished being a wall. I thought, she's going back. She was a wall for a little while. Now she's earth.

It's a thing a mud man thinks. I'm not proud of it. It didn't help.

Tahereh threw the first handful.

I had the second in my hand. I held it a long time. It was cold, and dry, and it ran a little between my fingers, the way good earth runs before you wet it. I knew that earth. I had stood in it to my knees every working day of my life. I had made walls of it for the dead and the unborn. I could not throw it on her. So I knelt at the edge of the trench and opened my hand slowly above her, close, and let it go down onto the blanket with the birds the way you let sand go through a sieve, softly, so that it would not wake anybody.

Then the bulldozer.

. . .

That night we slept in the street. Everybody did. Nobody would go near anything that was still standing. We had a fire made from the wood of our own house, the broken beams of the big room, and the blankets the Red Crescent gave us, and we sat around the fire in the lane with our neighbour's family and the families from three other houses, and it was so cold the frost came on the blankets, and nobody talked.

The aftershocks came all night. Every time, everyone jumped up. Everyone. A whole street of people jumping to their feet in the dark at the same moment like a flock of birds startling, and then standing there, and then sitting back down.

I had my pipe. It was in my pocket. I don't know why; I must have picked it up out of the rubble without thinking, the way you pick up your keys. I had the little brass box with my taryāk in it. I had charcoal from the fire.

I smoked. All night. All of it. Everything I had.

. . .

I want to tell you what opium does, because you will need to know, later, to understand what happened to me.

It takes the pain away. That's the first thing. Not just the pain in your back, or your legs, though it does that. It takes the other pain too. It doesn't remove it. It puts it in another room. You can still hear it through the wall, but it's in another room, and you are sitting in this room, warm, and the edges of everything are soft, and you are a little bit outside yourself, watching yourself from a corner of the ceiling, and the man you're watching is very sad, poor man, but it's not you, exactly. That's what it does. That's why we smoke it in Kerman. That's why, after Bam, so many more of us smoked it than before. Half the town, they said later. Men and women. Old people. Young people. Everybody had something in another room they needed to keep there.

The second thing it does, if you take enough, and you haven't slept, and you're very cold, and you've been digging with your hands for twelve hours, and you've buried your daughter in a trench, is it

opens a door. Things come through the door. Pictures. Voices. The line between what you're thinking and what you're seeing gets thin and soft, like old plaster. You're not asleep and you're not awake. You're in a place between, a place like twilight, where the dead aren't quite dead and the living aren't quite alive and everything is very calm and very slow and very far away.

That night by the fire, in that place, I saw the Arg.

Not the heap. The Arg. Standing. Whole. On its rock, against the stars, with all its towers, gold, the way it looks in the last of the sun. Walls and towers and the castle at the top with the square tower on it. And all along the top of the wall, the highest wall, of the castle, there were people standing. Hundreds of them, in a long line, quiet, looking out over the town. Men and women and children. I couldn't see their faces. They were only shapes against the stars. But I knew they were everyone. Everyone from that morning. Standing on the wall of the castle, waiting for the sun.

I looked for her among them. A tall thin shape, in a long coat. I couldn't find her.

Then I looked for the German woman. I couldn't find her either.

And then the neighbour's wife put another beam on the fire and the sparks went up, and the Arg was a heap of earth again against the stars, and I was sitting in the street in the cold with the pipe gone out in my hand.

From Under the City

Let me tell you what I did. Plainly. I owe you that. I don't apologise, but I don't hide either.

Under your town, a few kilometres down, which is shallow, as these things go, there is a crack in me running north and south. Your scientists had drawn a fault on their maps here, a long line in the land, but they had drawn it a little way to the east, out past the edge of the town, where it shows itself on the surface as a long low ridge. They thought that was where I was cracked. They were partly right. The crack they'd drawn is real. But I had another, a younger one, a branch, running right under the houses, under the old town,

under the new town, under the guesthouse with the orange tree and the mud man's courtyard and the girl's white room. It didn't show itself on the surface. Nobody had seen it. It didn't appear on any map. That's not a crime. It's only what I am. I don't explain myself to surveyors.

On the fifth morning after the longest night, at twenty-six minutes and fifty-two seconds past five, the strain in that hidden crack, the strain that had been building for longer than your people have been building houses, became more than the rock could hold. And the rock broke.

It broke a little to the south of the town and tore upward and northward, straight toward the houses and in under them, faster than a bullet, for something like fifteen kilometres. One side of me slid past the other. Not far. About the length of a man lying down. But all at once. And because the break began so shallow, and so close, right under the houses, and because it ran toward the town as it broke, the shaking came up into Bam with a force that almost never happens. Straight up. As hard as the pull of the earth itself. Things on the ground were thrown into the air. Roofs were lifted and dropped. A heavy roof, lifted off its walls and dropped back onto them, does not land where it was. The walls go sideways. The roof goes down.

It lasted twelve seconds, or thereabouts. That's all I did. Twelve seconds. Then I was finished, and I lay still.

Everything that happened after that, you did.

. . .

I'm not saying that to be cruel. I'm not anything. I'm saying it because you should know the shape of it.

The old mud houses fell. Many of them. They were old, and some had been badly patched, and their clay was dry and weak, and some had heavy roofs of earth laid over beams, and the beams were eaten by termites. But a mud house that falls is soft. It breaks into earth. A man can dig out of it with his hands, and many did, and many were dug out, breathing, by their neighbours.

The domes held, more often than not. A dome takes the weight and sends it round and down into the walls, all the way round. An arch is the same. Your ancestors learned that from me, from the shape of caves, a long time ago.

The new houses fell harder. That is what your engineers found, afterwards, when they came and walked through the rubble with their notebooks and measured everything. Not only the new houses killed; many old houses had heavy roofs of earth on rotten beams, and those killed too. But a great many of the dead in this town died in buildings less than thirty years old. Houses of fired brick with flat heavy roofs of concrete and steel laid on top, roofs not tied to their walls, steel too thin, too little of it, built without anyone checking, built the way the man down the street built. When those walls were thrown sideways, the roofs came straight down, whole. A roof of concrete doesn't break into earth. It stays a roof. It comes down on you in one piece, the weight of a truck, and no neighbour can lift it, and there's no air under it.

The citadel on the rock fell too. It was old and dry and patched and eaten by insects, and it had stood for a very long time, and its time came. I won't pretend I'm sorry about the citadel. It was mine before it was yours. It's mine again now. Your people will build it up again. They always do. That's the nature of your people and of clay: you agree, for a while, to be walls together, and then you let go, and then you agree again.

. . .

If you want it short, the way your children want things short, here it is:

I held my breath for a thousand years
under your weddings, under your tears;
then twelve heartbeats long I let it go,
and the walls came down, and the roofs came low.

The mud fell soft and could be dug,
the dome held round like a mother's hug,
the palm bent low and stood again,
but the stone lid fell whole on the children of men.

I'll tell you one more thing, because you're wondering about the woman under the arch, and the voice.

I don't know about the voice. I'm earth. Earth doesn't speak, except here, to you, and only because you've leaned down. I can tell you what I carried that night. I carried the breath of the old water up the stone steps into the rubble, the way it had breathed up and down those steps for three hundred years. I carried the cold. I carried a German woman's knocking on an arch, three and three and three, until her knuckles bled, out into the rubble where nobody could hear it over all the other knocking.

And I carried, that night, from somewhere, a girl's voice saying a poem.

I'm not going to tell you where it came from. I've told you I don't apologise. I also don't explain. The girl was in me by sunset, in a trench at the edge of the desert, with the dust of my own body on her eyelashes. Everything that goes into me, I keep.

Whether I gave something back, that night, under the arch, you'll have to decide for yourself. That's how it is with me. That's how it has always been.

IV. THE TENTS

16. Time Without Edges

Clara

I lost the days.

That's the simplest way to say it. Under the arch, in the dark, time stopped being a line and became a room I was lying in. I could tell day from night, at first, by the grey stain of light to my right and by the depth of the cold. Then I couldn't. I would wake and not know if I had slept an hour or a day. I would see the grey light and think it was dawn, and watch it, and it would go darker, and I'd understand it had been dusk. Or I'd think it was still the first night and then realise my lips had cracked open in a new place, and the pain in my legs had changed again, and that something had gone by that I had not been present for.

My watch had a light on it, a little green glow if you pressed the button. I pressed it, at first, every few minutes. Then I couldn't bear to. Then I forgot it was there. Later I understood that I had been under the arch for something like a hundred hours. I can only tell you that it was one long thing, without edges, like being held underwater in the dark.

. . .

Thirst is a person. I want to say that and I know it sounds mad. After the first day it was not a feeling, it was someone in there with me, lying on top of me, with its mouth on my mouth. Thirst has a voice. It talks to you all the time, in a dry whisper, about water. Glasses of water. Taps. Rain. The fountain in the square in Regensburg where I used to put my hands in summer as a child. The long pool in the courtyard of the guesthouse, with the orange tree reflected in it. The cold water of the qanat, running clear as air over the pebbles in the dark, a few metres below me, just under the floor, so close I could smell it on every breath.

I licked the wall. I'm not ashamed. In the mornings, near the gap where the qanat's breath came in, the cold made a faint dampness on the plaster beside my face, and I put my tongue against it and took what there was. It tasted of earth. I did it every time I woke. It wasn't enough to swallow. It was enough to remember swallowing.

I urinated where I lay, after the first day, because there was nothing else to do. I don't need to describe that. I mention it because the people who rescue you always ask, very gently, and it's better to say it once, plainly, and be done.

. . .

On the second day, or the third, the visions started properly.

I want to describe them, because they were beautiful, and because I've read since about what thirst and cold and the dark do to the brain, and the reading doesn't take away from the beauty. It only explains it. When your body runs out of water, your blood gets thicker, and less of it gets to your brain, and less oxygen with it. When you lie in the dark, with nothing to see, the part of your brain that makes sight starts making sight on its own, out of nothing, the way a radio between stations makes a hiss. When you're very cold, and very frightened, and very tired, all of those things together loosen the walls between what you remember and what you see. The doctor in Germany called it a kind of delirium. I've also read that the same things happen to monks in caves, and to people lost in deserts, and to sailors adrift, and that some of them come back and say they saw God, and some of them come back and say they saw their mothers, and some of them come back and say nothing at all for the rest of their lives.

I saw the Arg.

Not as it was the afternoon I'd sat on its wall and made my notes. I saw it at every age at once. I saw it rising. I saw men treading mud in pits at the foot of the rock, hundreds of them, barefoot, in the heat, with straw in the mud, the way Ayoub trod it. I saw them lift the bricks in the wooden frames and lay them in the sun in rows, thousands of rows, so many bricks drying in the sun that the ground around the rock was a chessboard of them out to the palms. I saw the walls go up, course on course, and the towers rise, and the castle climb the rock in terraces. I saw it finished, gold against the sky. Then I saw it worn: the rains of a hundred winters softening its edges, the walls slumping a little, the towers losing their tops. I saw men come and patch it. I saw soldiers on the walls, archers, Afghans riding in over the desert in a cloud of dust, smoke, the

walls breached and repaired. I saw caravans. Long lines of camels coming in from the desert under the walls with bells round their necks, swaying, loaded with silk and spice and indigo, and the camel drivers in dusty turbans looking up at the towers with relief, the way I had looked up at them from the bus. I saw the town empty, a hundred and fifty years ago, everybody moving out of the old walls and down into the new town below, and the Arg left alone on its rock to the wind and the pigeons, falling slowly, a little each year.

I saw all of that in the dark, under the arch, as clearly as I see this page. It went by like a film run very fast. Then it went by again, slowly. Then it stopped, and the Arg stood on its rock in the gold light, and on the top wall of the castle, in a long line against the sky, there were people standing. Waiting for the sun.

I looked for her among them. I couldn't find her.

. . .

And I heard the voice. Every night, I think, though I'm not sure how many nights there were. The girl's voice, close, on my right, in the gap where the air came in. Reciting the poem. The whole poem, slowly, the music of it going up and coming down to rest on *gham makhor*. Then back to the beginning.

I said *gham makhor* to it, when I could. My lips were split and my tongue was dry as leather and I could hardly shape the words. I said them anyway.

I didn't hear her speak English again. Only the first night. Only once.

Don't be sad, Clara. Wait. Someone is coming.

. . .

There was a long time, toward the end, when I didn't hear anything. Not the voice, not the town. The digging had moved away. The voices outside had changed; there were more of them, and stranger, machines, engines, heavy things moving, once a helicopter very low over my head, so loud the rubble shivered and earth trickled onto my neck, and once, far off, a dog barking in a way that wasn't like the town dogs, a short, sharp, trained bark, and men's voices calling to it in a language that was not Persian. I knocked. I knocked with the flat of my hand. I knocked until I couldn't lift my hand.

Then there was a long time when I was nowhere.

I don't mean I was asleep. I mean there was nobody in me to be anywhere. I was the dark. I was the cold. I was the arch, holding. I was the floor. I don't know how to say it better than that. I think I was very close to dying. I think I knew it, in the way you know things in a dream, without fear. I remember thinking, quite calmly, that I was becoming part of the house. That in a while I would be the same temperature as the floor and the same colour as the dust, and then there would be no difference between me and the earth at all, and the girl had been right about everything, and it was all just going back, khesht to earth, the way it always goes.

And it was fine. That's the strangest thing I can tell you. Down there, at the very bottom, it was fine.

And then, from somewhere below me, from somewhere under the floor, in the dark, I heard a man's voice.

17. The Planes

Ayoub

On the third day, the twenty-eighth, they found an old man alive.

Seventy-something. A grandfather. Under his house, four lanes from ours, under a heap of khesht, in a little space beside his bed where a beam had fallen on a cupboard and made a roof. Alive. Thirsty. Calm. A rescue team from abroad found him with a dog. When they lifted him out, people say, he asked for tea.

I heard about it from my neighbour. He said the whole street went to look. I didn't go. I was sitting in the tent the Red Crescent had given us, on the main road, a white canvas tent in a long row of white canvas tents, with Tahereh lying beside me with her face to the canvas, not sleeping. I was looking at the pen.

Dark green. German. Heavy, for its size. A gold nib. *Made in Germany* along the side in small letters. I had taken it out of her pocket in the courtyard on the first morning, and I'd been holding it ever since. I held it at the grave. I held it all night by the fire. I'd been holding it for two days. I didn't know whose it was. I knew it was not hers. I knew that she had put it in the pocket over her heart and buttoned the pocket, which she never did with anything, and that she had been holding her hand over it when she died.

Tahereh knew. On the second day, without turning round from the canvas, she said, "The German gave it to her. On Christmas. For her translations. She told me." Then she didn't say anything else for a day.

. . .

The world came. I want to tell you about that, because it was strange, and because you won't believe it unless someone tells you who was there.

On the second day the teams from other countries started arriving. They flew into Kerman and drove the three hours in buses and trucks, with their machines and their dogs and their tents and their uniforms in colours we had never seen. Swiss in red. Germans in orange. Japanese in blue. Turks. Russians. French. Chinese. Men from forty countries, they said. Bam's little airport, with its control tower cracked down the middle, took planes all day and all night, big grey planes, the roar of them going over the tents, over the palms, so low you could see the rivets.

And on the fifth day, the planes from America.

I was there when the first one came down. I was standing at the fence of the airport with my neighbour, and the plane came in low over the desert, enormous, grey, with its four engines roaring and the American star painted on its side, and everyone along the fence stopped and watched it. Nobody said anything. A man beside me

said, very quietly, under his breath, *Āmrikā* [aam-ree-KAA]. America. As if he couldn't believe the word.

You have to understand. Since the revolution, since 1979, since the embassy, twenty-four years, America was the enemy. The Great Satan, they called it, on the walls of every city, in the prayers on Friday. Since the spring of 1980, when American helicopters came down burning in the desert near Tabas trying to rescue the embassy hostages, no American military plane had landed in Iran. Nearly half my life. And here it was, a great grey American military plane, landing at the little airport outside a town that wasn't there anymore, and the back of it opening, and men in American uniforms coming down the ramp carrying boxes of medicine and blankets and water, and looking around at Bam, at the heaps of earth and the white tents and the grey people standing along the fence, with the same face everyone wore who came to Bam for the first time. The face of a man who has walked into a room where something terrible has happened and doesn't know where to put his eyes.

Some people at the fence clapped. Some spat. Most of them just watched. On the radio that night, the state radio, a man said that America was using the tragedy of Bam to meddle in Iran's affairs. On the same radio, an hour later, another man thanked all the nations of the world, by name, including America. That's Iran. Both things, on the same radio, on the same night.

. . .

They brought tents, and water, and blankets, and a field hospital, and everyone said the Germans had the best one. They brought machines that could lift the concrete roofs. They brought dogs that could smell a living person under ten metres of rubble.

My neighbour said to me, on the fourth day, "Ayoub. They have machines. They can lift the slab off your kitchen. They can get her things. Her books."

I said, "She doesn't need her books."

He looked at me for a long time.

"You haven't slept," he said. "Since. Have you?"

I didn't answer.

“You’re smoking too much,” he said. “Everybody is. I am. But you’re smoking too much.”

I didn’t answer that either.

. . .

I’ll tell you the truth about those days, because I promised I would.

I didn’t sleep. I couldn’t. When I lay down and closed my eyes I was on the slab with my ear to the concrete, listening. So I didn’t lie down. I sat up in the tent with the pen in my hand, or I walked the town in the dark, over the rubble, past the fires, past the families sitting around them, past the rows of tents, past the dogs and the foreigners and their lights and their machines, up the hill to the foot of what had been the Arg, and stood there, looking up at the heap.

And I smoked. Every time I could. Taryāk was easy to get, those days. Easier than water. Men went round the tents with it. Some of them sold it. Some of them gave it away. Some of them were from the government, people said, and some were not, and nobody asked. It came in from the east, over the desert, the way it had always come, and after Bam it came faster. People said the government was turning a blind eye, to keep people calm. People said a lot of things. I didn’t care. I smoked it. It put the slab in another room.

And in that other room, in that soft, slow, twilight place where the opium takes you when you have not slept for three days, the line between the living and the dead was very thin. Thinner than plaster. I saw things. I’m telling you. I saw the people on the wall of the castle every night. I saw my father, treading mud. I heard my daughter.

I heard her reciting.

Every time I closed my eyes, in that place, I heard her voice, very close, saying the poem she had read for the German at Yalda. *Yusof-e gomgashteh*. The whole thing. Again and again. *Gham makhor. Gham makhor.* Don’t grieve. Don’t eat sorrow.

I ate it. Every bite. I’m not a poet. I’m a mud man.

18. The Mother Well

Ayoub

On the night of the twenty-ninth, I went down into the qanat.

I'll tell you why. I don't have a good reason. I have only the true one.

I went because I couldn't bear to be above ground anymore. Above ground was the slab, and the tents, and the trenches at the edge of the desert, and the heap where the Arg had been, and the eyes of my wife, who still had not turned round from the canvas. Above ground everything was broken and grey and lit by foreigners' floodlights all night long and full of the sound of engines and dogs and people crying. And I thought of the place where none of that was. The place under all of it. Where the water was still running in the dark the way it always ran, going home, not caring about anything. The mother, under the children.

I wanted to be there. That's all. I wanted to sit by the water in the dark where it was quiet, and smoke, and listen to it, and not be anywhere.

. . .

There was a shaft the old man had shown me when I was a boy, in a garden at the edge of the old town, near the guesthouse quarter. One of the well-shafts of the big qanat that ran under that part of Bam, the old qanat, the one that fed the gardens below the Arg. It had iron rungs set into the side, put there sixty years ago by the muqanni who looked after that stretch, so that he could climb down to clear it. The old man used to take me there in summer, without telling anybody, and we would climb down together and sit at the bottom with our feet in the water to get out of the heat. He said it was the coolest place in Bam, and the oldest, and the only place where you could hear what the earth was thinking.

I found the garden in the dark, though the walls around it were down. The palms in it were standing. The shaft was still there. A ring of earth, a black hole in the middle, the same as always. I put my hand down and found the first rung. It was cold and solid. The

shaft had not collapsed. The earthquake had knocked down every house in Bam and it had not knocked down a hole in the ground.

I had a torch, one of the foreigners' torches from the tent, a heavy black one with a strong white light. I had my pipe and my box of taryāk in my coat. I had the pen in my pocket, the inside one, on the left. I climbed down.

. . .

At the bottom I sat in the dark beside the water, and turned off the torch, and smoked.

It was very quiet. Quieter than anywhere I had ever been. The noise of the town above was gone, swallowed by the earth, and all there was was the water, chuckling in its channel in the dark, and a drop falling somewhere up the tunnel, slow, slow, like a clock, and my own breath. It was cold, but a different cold from above, a wet, old, still cold, like the inside of a well. Which it was. The opium went into me and the dark went soft and I sat there a long time and didn't think about anything.

And then I heard her.

Not her. I know now. I'm telling you what I thought. In that dark, in that place, in that soft room where the opium had put me, I heard my daughter reciting the poem, the way I'd been hearing it every time I closed my eyes for three days. *Yusof-e gomgashteh.* And I started saying it with her. Out loud. I don't know why. My voice went off down the tunnel in the dark, low, rough, the voice of a man who hasn't slept or spoken for three days, saying the poem to the water.

Yusof-e gomgashteh bāz āyad be Kan'ān, gham makhor.

Kolbeh-ye ahzān shavad ruzi golestān, gham makhor.

I said the whole thing. I said it again. I got up, I don't know why. And before I moved, I did what the old man taught me when I was nine. I took a match from my pocket and struck it and held it out into the dark of the tunnel at arm's length. A flame before a foot. It burned tall and yellow. The air was good. The earthquake had shaken the tunnel and dropped its roof in places, but it had not poisoned it. I shook the match out and put it in my pocket, because

you don’t leave anything in a qanat, and the old man would have cuffed me.

Then I started to walk, bent over, along the tunnel, downstream, in the dark, with my hand on the wall, saying it. Following the water. The water goes home. I followed it. I said the poem to it as I walked, line after line, *gham makhor*, *gham makhor*, the way you’d say it to a child you were carrying in the dark, the way she’d said it to the German at Yalda.

The tunnel went on. Under the old town. Under the gardens, under the lanes, under the fallen houses. In places the roof had come down a little, a slope of earth across the floor, and I climbed over it on my hands and knees. In places I could see light above me, a faint grey square, where another well-shaft went up to the surface, and I could hear, very faintly, far above, the engines and the dogs. Then the dark again. And the water. And my voice.

I counted the shafts. I didn’t decide to; my body did it, the way the old man taught me, the way every muqanni does, because underground the shafts are the only map. One grey square, the garden where I’d come down. Two, the edge of the old bazaar. Three, four, the lanes behind the mosque. I knew this qanat. I had walked it at nine and ten and eleven with my hand in an old man’s belt. Five. Six. The old merchants’ quarter, the houses with their own stairs down to the water. I knew where I was under my town better than I had ever known it from on top.

I said, *Agar seil-e fanā bonyād-e hasti bar kanad* [a-GAR SEIL-eh fa-NAA bon-YAAD-eh has-TEE bar ka-NAD]. The line about the flood. *If the flood of annihilation tears up the foundation of everything that is*. *Chun to rā Nuh ast kashtibān* [CHOON to RAA NOOH ast kash-tee-BAAN], while you have Noah, *Nuh*, for your captain, *ze tufān gham makhor* [ze too-FAAN GHAM ma-KHOR]. Don’t grieve over the storm.

And somewhere ahead of me, in the dark, very faint, a voice said:

“*Gham makhor.*”

. . .

I stopped. I stood in the tunnel bent over with my hand on the wall and the water running past my feet. I didn't breathe.

It was a woman's voice. Not my daughter's. I knew it was not my daughter's the moment I heard it, even in the opium, even in the dark. It was older. It was cracked and dry and so weak it was hardly a voice at all, a scrape of breath with the shape of words in it. And it was wrong. The *gh* was wrong, too soft, and the *kh* was wrong, too hard, a foreign throat trying to make a Persian sound.

"*Gham makhor*," it said again. From ahead. From somewhere above the tunnel, ahead and above, in the dark.

I knew that accent. I had heard it on Yalda night, in my grandfather's room, by the lamp, saying *merci* to my sisters. I had heard it say *gham makhor* when my daughter taught it, with a crack in it, on the edge of crying.

I turned on the torch.

. . .

The tunnel ran straight ahead for twenty metres, and then on the left side of it, there was an opening. A doorway in the earth, an arch cut into the wall, and steps going up out of it. Old steps, cut into the ground, steep and narrow, worn in the middle by three hundred years of women coming down with jars for water. A pāyāb. The stairs from a house down to the qanat.

The steps went up into the dark, twenty of them or a few more, and stopped. At the top there was rubble. Earth and brick, jammed into the stairway where the house above had fallen into it. But not all the way. At the top, on one side, there was a gap. A black hole, the size of a man's head, between the fallen bricks and the old arch of the stairway roof.

I knew where I was. I'd been walking under the old town toward the Arg. This was the pāyāb of the old merchant's house four lanes from mine. The house with the long pool and the orange tree. The guesthouse.

I climbed the steps. I put my face to the gap. I shone the torch into it.

Rubble. Dust. A slope of fallen earth and brick going up, and on the right, a curve of plaster: an arch, cracked across, holding. And under the arch, lying on her face on the floor of a passage, with her cheek on the stone and her head turned toward me, toward the gap, toward the light, a woman. Her hair was grey with dust. Her face was grey with dust. Her lips were black and split. Her eyes were closed. Her right hand was lying flat on the floor in front of her face, palm down, and the knuckles of it were black with old blood.

I said her name the way I said it. *Kelaara.*

Her eyes opened. In the light of the torch they were the bluest thing I had ever seen. Blue as the tiles on the mosque. They looked straight at me. They didn't understand anything. Then her lips moved, and no sound came out, and then they moved again and the sound came, the scrape of breath with the shape of words in it.

"*Gham makhor.*"

. . .

I don't remember all of what came next. I know I dug. With my hands, at the gap, pulling bricks back into the stairway and letting them fall down the steps behind me into the water. I know I talked to her the whole time, in Persian, she didn't understand a word, I said *I'm here, I'm here, I'm Ayoub, it's Ayoub, the mud man, wait, wait*. I know at some point I put my arm through the gap up to the shoulder and found her hand, and it was so cold it was like holding a stone, and her fingers closed on mine, very slightly. I know I couldn't move what was on her legs. I know I went back down the steps and along the tunnel and up the rungs of the old man's shaft into the cold night and ran, ran, over the rubble, in the dark, shouting, to the nearest of the foreigners' lights, and that the men there were German, in orange, with a dog, and I couldn't speak a word of their language and they couldn't speak a word of mine, and I grabbed one of them by the front of his orange coat and said the only German word I knew, which was a word she had taught me, by my mixing pit, touching my mud.

Lehm. Clay. Earth.

And then I pointed at the ground, and said, in English, my forty words, *Woman. German. Alive. Under.*

. . .

It took them four hours to get her out. They didn't go through the qanat. They came from above, the way rescuers do, with their machines and their jacks and their careful voices, cutting down through the rubble of the guesthouse toward the arch while one of them, a big man with a red beard, lay on his stomach in the pāyāb with his face at the gap where mine had been, and talked to her in German the whole time. I sat on the steps below him, in the dark, with my feet in the water of the qanat. I held her hand through the gap until they told me to let go so they could get her legs free. Then I sat on the steps and listened to the man with the red beard talking to her in her own language, gently, steadily, the way she had needed someone to talk to her for four days, and I didn't understand a word of it, and I didn't need to.

When they brought her up, it was dawn. The sun was coming up over the mountains, red, enormous, through the dust, the way it always comes up over Bam. The thirtieth of December. I stood in the rubble of the guesthouse and watched them carry her past me on a stretcher, wrapped in a silver blanket that crackled, with a tube in her arm and a mask on her face.

As they went past, she turned her head on the stretcher and looked at me with those blue eyes, and lifted the hand with the black knuckles, a little, and touched the mask, as if she wanted to say something.

They kept walking. I stood there. The sun came up.

I took the pen out of my pocket and held it in my hand.

19. Light

Clara

The first thing I saw was the sun.

They brought me up through a hole they had cut in the rubble, on a board, on my back, and the first thing I saw was the sky, and it was full of red light. The sun was coming up. I had been under the arch for four days and two hours, they told me afterwards, and I came out at sunrise, and the sky was red and gold and the dust in the air

turned it into fire, and I lay on the board and looked at it and I could not close my eyes against it. A man had to put his hand over them.

The man with the red beard said, in German, *You're out. You're out. You're out. Clara. You're out.* He said my name. He knew my name. How did he know my name?

Ayoub, I learned later. Ayoub told them, in English, *Kelaara*.

. . .

They flew me to Kerman in a helicopter, and kept me there two days, and then flew me to Tehran, and from Tehran, three days later, to Munich, in another plane, a military one, the German one, with a doctor sitting beside me the whole way holding the bag of fluid that was going into my arm. My legs were very bad. The left one they saved. The right one, below the knee, they couldn't. I'm telling you that the way the surgeon told me, without any adjectives, because adjectives don't help. I walk well now, with the new one. I walk on scaffolding. I climb ladders. You wouldn't know, unless you saw me take off my boot.

I was glad. I want to say that clearly, because people never believe it. When the surgeon told me, in Munich, standing at the foot of the bed with his hands behind his back, I said, *Is that all?* He thought I was in shock. I wasn't. I'd been lying in the dark for four days becoming the same temperature as the floor. A leg is not much, against that. A leg is a fair price.

. . .

Before they flew me out of Kerman, Ayoub came to the hospital.

He'd come three hours across the desert in his neighbour's pickup, with the neighbour driving, and a nurse in the hospital who spoke English came with him to my bed, and stood between us, and translated.

He looked terrible. I suppose I did too. He was grey all over, grey dust in the creases of his face and his hands, and his eyes were red and sunk deep in his head, and his hands shook. He'd brought me a bag of dates. Bam dates, the black soft ones, a little crushed, wrapped in a newspaper. He put them on the table beside the bed

and stood there with his hands at his sides, not knowing where to look.

I said, “Narges?”

He looked at the nurse. The nurse looked at me. She didn’t need to say anything. I knew from her face before she opened her mouth. I knew from his. I think I had known since the first night. I think I’d known since the voice.

“She died in the earthquake,” the nurse said, very gently. “In her room. Her father found her that morning.”

“When?”

The nurse asked him. He said something short.

“At the moment,” the nurse said. “At five twenty-six. She was dressed to go out. To meet you.”

. . .

I told him about the voice.

I didn’t plan to. I didn’t know if it was right. I just told him. The nurse translated, slowly, sentence by sentence, and I watched his face while she did it.

I said that the first night, the first night under the arch, before anyone could have been down in the qanat, before he could have been anywhere, I’d heard a girl’s voice close beside me, reciting the poem from Yalda. The whole poem. Twice. And that then, in English, careful English, the voice had said, *Don’t be sad, Clara. Wait. Someone is coming. You have a good accent.*

The nurse stopped translating at *You have a good accent* and looked at me. I nodded. She said it to him.

He stood there. He didn’t move for a long time. Then he sat down, very suddenly, on the edge of the chair by the bed, as if his legs had gone. He put his face in his hands. Then he took his hands away and looked at me, and said something to the nurse, very quietly.

“He says,” said the nurse, “he went down into the qanat on the fourth night. Only the fourth night. He says he was reciting that

poem in the tunnel. He says he heard you answer him. He says that's how he found you."

"I know," I said. "I heard him. On the last night. A man's voice. Under the floor."

"He says," said the nurse, and then she stopped, and asked him something, and he answered, and she looked at him for a while before she turned back to me. "He says he was not there on the first night. He says on the first night he was in the street, by a fire, with his wife and his neighbours. He says on the first night he buried her."

. . .

He took something out of his pocket and put it on the blanket beside my hand.

The green pen.

I looked at it. I didn't touch it.

"He says it was in her coat," said the nurse. "Over her heart. In the pocket, buttoned. Her hand was on it. He says he didn't know whose it was. His wife told him." She listened to him for a moment more. "He says it belongs to you. He says it should go back to you."

I picked it up. It was warm from his pocket. I held it for a while. Then I put it back in his hand, and closed his fingers over it, his cracked grey fingers, with my own, the hand with the black knuckles.

"No," I said. "Tell him no. Tell him it's hers. Tell him I gave it to her for her translations. Tell him somebody has to finish them."

The nurse told him.

He looked at the pen in his hand. Then he put it back in the inside pocket of his coat, on the left, over his heart, and buttoned the pocket, and put his hand flat over it.

I knew that gesture. I had seen it on Christmas morning, in a lane in Bam, on a girl running to school with her coat flying. He could not have known that. Nobody had told him. And yet there it was, his cracked grey hand pressed flat over his heart, exactly where hers had been, exactly the way. I looked at it and could not look away. I

thought: this is how the dead stay. Not in voices in the dark. In our hands, doing what theirs did, without our knowing. He stood like that for a while, and I lay like that, and the nurse looked out of the window, and nobody said anything, and it was the first time since the arch that I did not feel alone.

20. Tents

Ayoub

We lived in the tent for nine months. Then in a metal box, a prefabricated room, two metres by three, with a door and a window and a roof that roared in the rain and baked in the sun, for two years after that. That's how long it took. That's Bam.

I'm not going to tell you about all of it. I'll tell you the shape of it.

. . .

The cold came first. That first January was the coldest anyone could remember, or it felt that way, with nothing between you and the desert night but canvas. People died of the cold, after, who had lived through the earthquake. Old people. Babies. Then the cold went, and the spring came, and the heat began, and the tents became ovens, and people sat outside them in what shade they could find, under the palms, which were all still standing, and waited. For the government. For the money. For the bulldozers to clear the lanes. For somebody to tell them what would happen next.

The whole town was a waiting room, for two years. Seventy thousand people, or a hundred thousand, nobody knew the number, sitting among the rubble of their houses in tents and boxes, waiting.

The children went back to school in tents. Five thousand of them were orphans, they said. Five thousand children who had lost their mother or their father or both in twelve seconds. Ten thousand schoolchildren were dead, they said. More than a thousand teachers. Narges's whole class. I mean that. Of the girls in her year, at her school, so few were left that they put the rest in with the year below.

. . .

And the opium. I said I'd tell you the truth.

It came in like the tide. Before the earthquake, Bam had more than its share; it was on the road from Afghanistan, and the desert was full of men on camels and motorbikes carrying it west. After the earthquake, everybody smoked. Men who had never touched it. Women. Old women who had lost their sons sat in their tents with a vāfur and a manqal. Young men who had lost everything sat in rows at night by the fires with their eyes half closed. It was cheaper than bread. It was easier to find than water. It put the slab in the other room, and everybody had a slab.

Doctors came, and counsellors from Tehran with notebooks, and sat in tents and tried to get people to talk about it. Some people talked. Most people smoked. In the evenings, at the tent camp, the sweet heavy smell of it hung over the rows of white canvas like the smell of the dates in autumn used to hang over the town. People made jokes about it. Bam always smelled sweet, they said. Before, dates. Now, this.

I smoked it all that winter and all that spring. Every day. I'm not going to pretend otherwise. Tahereh didn't say anything. She had stopped saying anything to me at all. We lay in the tent at night with our backs to each other and the cold between us and I smoked until the room went soft and I could hear my daughter reciting.

I stopped in the summer. I'll tell you how, later. It wasn't anything brave.

. . .

And the talk. In the tents, at night, around the fires, there was nothing to do but talk. And everybody talked about the same thing. Why.

Why Bam. Why so many. Why my house. Why my child. Why the new buildings and not the old ones. Why the help took so long. Why the money didn't come.

I'll tell you what they said. All of it, the sensible and the mad. I won't tell you which was which. I wasn't sure myself, for a long time. I'm still not sure about some of it.

They said the aid was being stolen. That's the first thing everybody said. The world had sent millions. Planes and planes of it, tents and

blankets and food and medicine and money. Everyone had seen the planes. And yet in the camps, people said, they were sleeping in the cold with one blanket, and waiting in lines for hours for a bag of rice, and the shops in Kerman were selling foreign blankets, foreign tents, foreign tins of food with foreign writing on them, at the full price. People said it went to the officials. To their cousins. To the bazaar. People said some of it went to Tehran and never came back. People said you had to know somebody to get a prefabricated box, and the people who knew somebody got two.

They said the number was a lie. The government said twenty-six thousand dead, then thirty, then forty-three, then thirty-one, then other numbers, a different number every month, it seemed. People said the real number was twice as much. Three times. That they had buried people in trenches with no names and no photographs, whole families with nobody left to say who they were, and those were not counted. That the government wanted the number small so it would not look so bad. Or big, so the world would send more money. People believed both of these at once, sometimes in the same breath.

They said it was not God, and not the earth. They said it was a bomb. A test. That the Americans, or the Israelis, had set off something under the desert, a secret weapon, to punish Iran, to frighten it. That this was why the ground had come up and not sideways, which was not natural. That this was why the American planes had come so fast, out of guilt, to look at what they'd done. A man in our row of tents believed this with his whole heart. He'd lost his wife and three children. He would talk about it every night until somebody went and sat with him.

They said it was God. That too. A cleric came from Kerman and said in the Friday prayers in the tent mosque that disasters come when people stray from the path, and everyone knew what he meant: the opium, the smuggling, the young people with their satellite dishes and their music. Some people nodded. Some people walked out. Tahereh walked out, from the women's side, very slowly, in the middle of the sermon, so that everybody saw. She said afterward that God had better things to do than knock down her daughter's room because a boy in Kerman had a satellite dish.

They said the government knew. That the scientists knew there was a fault there, under Bam, and had known for years, and had told nobody, and let people go on building. That every earthquake in Iran is the same, Tabas, Rudbar, now Bam, and the government writes a book of rules every time and nobody follows the book and nobody makes them, because the people who are supposed to make them are the people who get paid not to.

And they said, quietly, the thing nobody wanted to say. They said it was us.

That the old mud houses had stood, more often than the new ones. That the people who died were mostly in the new rooms, the brick and concrete ones, with the flat roofs, the modern ones. Built by their own fathers and sons and husbands, cheaply, quickly, the way everyone built, without steel enough, without the band of concrete round the top, without an engineer, without anybody coming to look. They said it at night by the fires in low voices, not looking at anybody. *Who built your room?*

. . .

I built hers.

I've told you that already. I'll keep telling you. I'll tell you until you're tired of hearing it, because I'm not tired of it, and I never will be.

But I'll tell you something else too, because I said I'd tell you all of it. I'll tell you what I think, now, so many years later. Not that it makes anything better.

I think all of those things were true. The aid was stolen, some of it, and some of it wasn't, and more of it was wasted than stolen, and more of it was simply too slow. The numbers were wrong, because nobody could count, not because anybody was hiding. The government was slow, so slow, more than half a day before it even asked for help; that's true. The rules were written and not enforced; that's true. The scientists had drawn the fault on the wrong side of the town; that's true too, though I don't think they hid it. They just didn't know. The bomb wasn't true. I'll tell you that later, too.

But all of those true things together, they don’t make a hand that did it. They make a shape. A shape like a crack in a wall, running from the corner of a window up toward the ceiling, at a slant, that I looked at with my nose almost touching it, three days before, and decided was the cold.

21. Bavaria

Clara

In Munich it snowed all January. I lay in a hospital bed on the fourth floor and watched it come down past the window, slow and thick and grey against the grey sky, and I thought about the stars over Bam.

My mother came every day. She sat by the bed and knitted and didn’t ask me anything, which was the kindest thing she has ever done for me. My colleagues came, with flowers and German chocolates and awkward faces. A journalist came, and a nurse sent him away. Somebody from the Foreign Office came and asked me questions about the other German citizens who had been in Bam, and I told him I hadn’t known any, and he wrote that down.

At night, when the ward was quiet, I read.

I read everything about the earthquake I could find. The papers from the scientists, the seismologists, who had gone to Bam in January with their instruments and their satellites and their notebooks. I read them the way I read a report on a wall, slowly, with a pencil, underlining. I learned the words. *Strike-slip*: two blocks of rock sliding sideways past each other. *Rupture*: the break itself, racing along the fault. *Surface trace*: the line where a fault shows on the ground. *Directivity*: what happens when the break runs toward you, piling its shaking up in front of it. I learned that the fault had broken under the town, not where the maps had it, on a hidden branch nobody had seen; that the break had run toward the town as it opened, focusing the shaking on it, like a man shouting into a funnel; that the ground had moved up as hard as gravity pulls down; that a great many of the dead had died in buildings less than thirty years old, and many others under the heavy earth roofs of old ones.

I read about the old woman found alive on the eighth day, after I was out. I read about the baby found alive in her dead mother's arms. I read the numbers, which kept changing. I read about the Arg. The engineers who had gone up the rock afterwards and measured the ruins said the citadel had been weakened, before, by things that were all very small: the clay drying out, termites, new patches of harder plaster laid onto the old softer walls in the wrong places, so that the walls couldn't move the way old mud walls must move, a little, to survive.

I took out my notebook. It had come back to me in a parcel from the embassy in Tehran, with my passport and what was left of my bag, dug out of my room by men I never met. That is all I know of how. I opened it to the page I'd written on the wall of the castle on Christmas afternoon.

Lovely. Old. Very tired. Should be monitored.

I sat with that for a long time.

. . .

In February, when I could sit up properly, I asked a friend at the university to find me someone who could read Persian.

He brought a woman from the department of oriental studies, a lecturer, Iranian, from Shiraz, who had lived in Munich for thirty years and had a voice like Tahereh's, deep and dry. She sat beside my bed and I gave her the little red Hafez, and she opened it to the first page, where Narges had written in English *For Clara, so you can do your own fāl*, and under it, in Persian, the line I couldn't read.

The lecturer looked at it for a while. Then she looked at me over the top of her glasses.

"It isn't Hafez," she said. "It's the girl's own. Very nicely written. A schoolgirl's hand." She read it, first in Persian, softly, and then in German.

Khorshid hich vaqt dir nemikonad. Agar man dir kardam, montazeram bāsh.

[khor-SHEED HEECH vaght DEER ne-mee-ko-NAD. a-GAR MAN DEER kar-DAM, mon-ta-ze-RAM BAASH]

The sun is never late. If I am late, wait for me.

. . .

I said, “Wait for me.”

“Yes,” said the lecturer. “*Montazeram bāsh.* Wait for me. Be waiting for me.” She looked at me. “Why are you crying?”

I took the book back from her and held it shut in both hands. Outside the window the snow was still coming down on Munich, slow and grey. I thought of a girl at a kitchen table, the night before Christmas, with this cheap red book open in front of her and a pen in her hand, writing a joke for a foreigner. *If I am late.* She had written it laughing. I was sure of that. She had written it because she was always late and knew it, and wanted to be forgiven in advance, the way children do. She could not have known. It was only a joke about the sun. And I had waited. I had lain four days in the dark doing nothing else.

I couldn’t tell the lecturer why. But I’ve told you. You know. *Don’t be sad, Clara. Wait. Someone is coming.*

I had never been able to read that line. Nobody had read it to me. I had carried it under the arch for four days against my heart, in the little red book, without knowing what it said. And a voice in the dark had said it to me in English. Or I had. Or my own thirsty brain, starving and frozen, had made a girl’s voice out of the dark and put into her mouth the one thing I needed to hear, and by chance it was the thing she had written.

That’s possible. I know it is. I’ve thought about it more than about anything else in my life. I am a careful woman and a measuring woman and I know what thirst and cold and grief can do. I know that I wanted her to be there more than I’ve ever wanted anything. I know that the mind under those conditions will make what it needs out of nothing.

I also know what I heard.

I’ve stopped trying to decide between them. I think that’s allowed. I think that’s what she would say. *It doesn’t tell you what will happen. It tells you what you need to hear.*

From the Fault

Your people have been asking me why. They always ask me why. Every time I move, in every country, for as long as there have been people standing on me to be knocked down, the ones left standing look at the ground and ask it why.

I'll tell you what they said here, in the tents, at the fires. And I'll tell you what I know, from below, from twenty years after, when the tents are gone and the questions have had time to settle like dust. I won't tell you what to think. I'm earth. I don't think. I only remember.

. . .

They said the help was too slow.

It was. That's simply true. The first teams with proper tools came from outside the town in the afternoon, many hours after. The government in the capital did not ask the world for help until more than half a day had passed. For the first day, the people of Bam dug each other out of me with their hands, and they saved more of each other in that first day than all the teams of all the nations of the world saved afterwards with all their dogs and machines. Your own scientists wrote that down. They wrote that in the first hours, the neighbours are the rescue, everywhere, always, and that a town that has no plan for that has no plan.

They said the rules were written and not followed.

That's true. The book of rules existed. It had been written after Tabas and was rewritten after Bam, and is better now. But in Bam, before, hardly anyone built by it, and hardly anyone was made to, and the men whose work was to check signed papers they had not checked, sometimes for money and sometimes only because there were too many papers and not enough men. Afterwards the government said it would punish those who had built badly. I watched. I'm still watching. I didn't see much punishment. You can't put a whole town on trial. Everybody built like that. That was the problem.

They said the aid was stolen.

Some of it, yes. Some of it, no. People wrote about tents and blankets from abroad being sold in the bazaars; some of that was true, and some of it was goods the survivors themselves sold because they needed money more than a third blanket. A great deal more was wasted, or sat in warehouses, or arrived months late, or went to the wrong place, than was ever stolen. The money for rebuilding was promised in great amounts and came in small amounts, and each family got a sum that would not build a house, and a loan that frightened the poor. Twenty years on, nobody has added it all up and nobody will. If you want a villain in this, you will find several small ones and no large one.

They said the number of the dead was hidden.

It wasn't hidden. It was lost. The count changed again and again: twenty-six thousand, forty-three thousand, thirty-one, thirty-four. Bodies were counted twice, in the chaos; whole families with no one left to name them went into the trenches without names; people who had come from elsewhere for work were never on any list. The number your government gives now is somewhere above thirty thousand. The real number is one only I know. I'm not going to tell you. It doesn't matter. Every one of them was one.

They said it was a bomb. A secret test, a weapon, from America or Israel, under the desert.

It was not. I was there. I'm the only witness who was. Your scientists from many countries, some of them from countries that hate each other, measured the shaking on their instruments all over the world, and the shape of it was mine, the shape of rock sliding past rock along a crack, not the shape of a thing exploding. A bomb pushes out in all directions. I slid. Anyone who learns to read those lines on paper can see the difference, and many did, and they all agreed. The ground came straight up not because of a weapon but because the break was shallow and right underneath, and that happens, rarely, and it happened here. There was no bomb. There didn't need to be. I was enough.

But I understand why the man in the tent needed it. I want you to understand too. A bomb has a hand behind it. A hand can be hated. A man who has lost his wife and three children in twelve seconds

needs somebody to hate. He cannot hate me. I'm the ground under his feet. He has to keep standing on me.

They said it was God's punishment for sin.

I don't know about God. I'm earth. I can tell you that I moved under the mosque and under the opium den with the same strength, and under the house of the cleric and the house of the boy with the satellite dish, and the ones that fell were the ones built badly and the ones that stood were the ones built well, or lucky. If that's a judgment, it's a judgment on the steel in the roof.

They said the government knew there was a fault and told no one.

Partly. The fault to the east of the town was on the maps. People knew Bam was in country where I move. Every town in Iran is. But the branch that broke, under the houses, was not on any map. Nobody had seen it. It didn't show itself on the surface. After Bam, your scientists went looking for hidden branches like it all over the country, and found some, and found that many of the great cities of Iran stand on top of cracks like that, which they had not drawn. That is the truest answer I can give: it was not a secret. It was a thing nobody had looked for, because looking costs money, and nobody wanted to know.

And they said, quietly, at night, the last thing. *It was us. Who built your room?*

. . .

You ask me who, and you ask me why,
and you look for a hand in the dust and the sky:
a bomb, a sin, a thief, a lie.
I am none of them. I am only I.

A hundred small hungers, each sure it was right,
a bar of thin steel and a signature at night,
a father who wanted his girl to have more:
that is the shape of the dead on my floor.

Here is what I have learned, watching your people for a very long time.

You ask me *why* as if there is a single answer, a single hand, a single mistake, a single sin. There almost never is. There is the push from the south, which is mine, and has nothing to do with you. And then there are a hundred thousand small things, each of them yours, each of them reasonable on its own. A father who wanted his daughter to have a room like in the magazines. A builder who couldn't afford the steel. An engineer who had four hundred papers to sign. A government that wrote a good book and didn't have the will or the people to make anyone follow it. A city that grew too fast. Termites in a wall nobody had time to check. A pump that dried the clay. A man who said, at midnight, in the cold, *it's over, let's go in*.

None of them is a monster. All of them together are the shape of the dead.

You'll want me to tell you which one is the worst. I can't. I'm the ground. From down here, they all look the same. They all look like weight.

V. THE MOTHER WELL

22. Khesht

Ayoub

I said I would tell you how I stopped smoking. I said it wasn't brave. It wasn't.

It was the end of June, the first summer, in the tent. Six months. The heat had come, the real heat, the Bam heat, and the tent at noon was like the inside of an oven, and we lay in it at night with the flaps open, sweating, on the hot ground. I'd been smoking every night. More than every night. I was thin. My hands shook in the morning until I had the first pipe. I'd stopped going to look at the Arg. I'd stopped going anywhere. I sat in the shade of the tent and held the pen and smoked and listened to the poem.

And one night, in the dark, Tahereh turned round.

Six months she had lain with her face to the canvas. Six months she hadn't said a sentence to me longer than three words. That night she turned round on the mattress and lay facing me, very close, in the dark, and I could see her eyes, and she said:

"Ayoub. I lost one. I won't lose two."

That was all. Then she turned back.

I lay and looked at her back. Her hair had gone grey that winter. I had not noticed. I had not looked. Twenty years of marriage, and for six months I had not once looked at my wife, and in that time her hair had gone grey, and she had kept us fed, and kept the tent warm, and stood in the lines for rice, and lain every night beside a man who smelled of the pipe, and said nothing. And she had lost the same daughter. I had forgotten that. God forgive me, I had forgotten that she had lost her too. I put out my hand in the dark and did not quite touch her. I held it there, a finger's width from her shoulder, all night.

I lay there until the sky went grey. Then I got up and went out of the tent and walked to the edge of the camp, where the desert starts, and I took the box of taryāk out of my pocket, and the pipe, my father's pipe, sixty years old, and I dug a hole in the ground with my hands, the way I'd dug for her, and I put them in it, and I covered them over.

The next three weeks were the worst of my life, after the first morning. I won't describe them. My body screamed for it, every hour. I shook and sweated and couldn't eat and couldn't sleep and lay in the tent like a dog, and Tahereh sat beside me and put wet cloths on my face, and said prayers, the same ones she'd said for Narges, steadily, out loud, the whole time, and this time I didn't want to scream at her to stop.

And when it was over, the poem stopped. That's what I want to tell you. When the opium went out of me, the voice reciting the poem went with it. I never heard her again. Not like that. I've heard her in my memory, the way anyone remembers a voice. But not in that room. That room was closed.

I'll be honest: I missed it. I missed her voice. Some nights I still do. Some nights I'd give everything I have for one more line of it. But I had a wife.

. . .

In the autumn they started on the Arg.

The Arg had become something, after. The whole world had seen pictures of it fallen, on the news, the great mud city melted down on its rock, and it became a thing the world wanted to save. UNESCO came, the people from the United Nations who look after the great old places of the world, and put the Arg on their list, the list of the most precious places, and on another list too, of the places in danger. And money came, from Japan, from Italy, from Germany, from France, from Iran. And engineers came, and archaeologists, and conservators, and men with instruments to measure what was left, and men with drawings of what had been. And they said: we will rebuild it. Not with concrete. With earth. The old way. With khesht and kāhgel and the hands of the men of Bam.

They needed mud men. There weren't many of us left. Some had died. Some had left. Some were in the tents with a pipe.

I went up the hill with my hands shaking, still, a little, in the mornings, and I said to the man in charge, a Tehrani with a beard and a clipboard, *I made bricks for this for eleven years. I want to make them again.* He looked me up and down. He'd heard about me. Bam is not big. He knew about the pipe.

“Can you still tread?” he said.

I took off my shoes.

. . .

So I made khesht again. Every day. At the foot of the rock, in the pits, the way I’d made them before, the way my father made them. Earth of Bam, water, straw, the treading, the frame, the bricks in rows in the sun. Thousands of them. Then tens of thousands. I don’t know how many, over the years. Hundreds of thousands, maybe. All of them went up onto the rock, into the walls, into the towers, slowly, a little each year, the way the Arg has always been built, the way it has always been falling.

The foreign experts came and watched us work. Japanese, Italians, Germans. They took samples of my mud and put them in little plastic bags and took them away to laboratories and came back with reports. The reports said the mud was good. I could have told them that. They asked me questions about the old ways, how my father mixed it, how long it should rest, how much straw, and I told them, and they wrote it down. A Japanese engineer, a very small, very polite man in a white helmet, spent a whole week with me at the pits, treading next to me with his trousers rolled up, laughing every time he slipped.

And they studied why the old walls had fallen. And they found what Clara had written in her notebook on Christmas afternoon: that the walls had been dry, and eaten by insects, and patched in the wrong places with harder materials that didn’t let the old mud breathe and move. They said, the new must be like the old. Soft where the old is soft. Earth with earth. They said, if you put something hard and strong into something soft and old, when the shaking comes the hard thing doesn’t bend, and the soft thing tears around it.

I listened to them say that, at a meeting, in a tent, with a projector, in English and then in Persian. And I thought about a concrete roof laid on top of an old kitchen.

. . .

I built a new house, too. Everybody had to. The government gave every family that had lost its house a little money, and a loan, and a plan, and an engineer who came to look, this time; this time they came. The new rules said: no flat concrete roofs on walls without a tie beam. Steel this thick. Foundations this deep. Inspectors. Signatures. Actual signatures, by people who had actually looked.

I built ours of brick, with a steel frame, exactly by the book. Every bar. Every beam. An inspector came four times and I followed him around with a glass of tea and he couldn't find anything wrong, and on the fourth time he looked at me strangely and said, *You're the mud man. From the Arg. Why are you being so careful?*

I said, *I'm not being careful. I'm being late.*

He didn't understand. He signed.

And in the middle of the courtyard, where our old room had been, the one my grandfather built, the one that had held, I built one room the old way, like my grandfather's. Khesht. A dome. With my own feet in the mud. For Tahereh, who would not sleep under concrete again. The inspector said it wasn't on the plan. I said it wasn't for the plan. He said the rules didn't cover mud domes. I said, *Then the rules don't cover my wife.* He let it go. He'd lost people too. Everybody had.

23. Return

Clara

I went back for the first anniversary, December 2004. Then again the next year. Then, in 2006, for good.

Not for good. But for most of every year, for twenty years. I'll explain.

. . .

The first time I went back, I was frightened. Not of the ground. Of the town. Of what I'd see. Of Ayoub. Of his wife, and what her face would do when she saw mine. I had a new right leg below the knee, carbon and steel, and I was still learning to trust it on uneven ground, and the whole of Bam was uneven ground. I flew to Kerman. I took the bus. The same bus, I think. The same four hours across the end of the world, the lion-coloured plain, the blue unreal mountains, the broken teahouses with their wind-catchers.

And then the bus came over the low rise, and there was the green band along the bottom of the sky, the palms, all of them, standing, exactly as they had stood, as if nothing had happened. And then the town.

It wasn't there. That's what I want to tell you. A year on, it still wasn't there. The rubble had been cleared from the main roads and bulldozed into heaps. And in its place, in every direction, in long white rows, there were tents and boxes. The camps. White canvas and pale metal, thousands of them, laid out on the bare earth in a grid. Laundry hanging between them. Children running between them. Smoke from cooking fires. And among them, here and there, the first new buildings going up, brick and steel, square, with scaffolding.

And on its rock, the Arg. A heap. With scaffolding on it.

. . .

They were waiting for me at the bus station. Both of them. Ayoub, and Tahereh, standing a little apart from the crowd, in their coats. I got off the bus and stood there with my bag and my new leg and my heart going and didn't know what to do.

It was Tahereh who moved. She came straight to me, across the dust, and took my face in her two hands, the way the women had at Yalda, and looked at me for a long time, close. Her eyes were very tired. Then she kissed me, once on each cheek and then a third time, which is what you do in Iran for someone who is family.

She said something in Persian. Ayoub translated, in English. He had more English now. More than forty words.

“She says, *you came back for her*.”

“Tell her yes.”

He told her. She nodded. She didn’t let go of my face.

Then she let go, and stepped back, and looked me up and down, very closely, the way she had looked at my hand on Yalda night, and her eyes stopped at my right leg, and she said something sharp.

“She says,” said Ayoub, “*the earth took a piece of you too. Good. Now you are from Bam*.”

. . .

That Yalda we spent in their box. Two metres by three, with a door and a window, in a row of boxes in the camp at the edge of town. We couldn’t all fit inside. So they put a carpet on the ground outside the door and a cloth on the carpet and the food on the cloth, and we sat on the ground under the stars in our coats, the three of us, and their neighbour’s family, and the families from the next boxes, maybe twenty people, the way it had been. Pomegranates. Watermelon, kept since summer. Dates. Tea. Not much else. Nobody had much. It didn’t matter.

Nobody told stories that year. Nobody did a magic trick. Nobody told about the snow. We just sat together in the cold, the longest night, keeping each other company until morning, which is what it was always for. That’s what I understood that night, that I hadn’t understood the first time. It isn’t a party. It was never a party. It’s a vigil. You stay awake together in the dark so that nobody has to get through it alone.

Near midnight, Tahereh said, “The book.”

Ayoub went into the box and came back with it. The green book. Narges’s book, her great-grandmother’s. Its cloth cover was stained now, darker on one corner, and there was dust still in the creases of its spine that would never come out. He had found it himself, in the spring, when the machines came to clear the lot where her room had been. It had been under the slab, by her bed, all that time.

He sat down on the carpet beside me. And he held the book out, not to me, but to Tahereh.

“For me,” he said, in English, so I’d understand. “*Fāl.* For me. This year.”

. . .

Tahereh took it. She held it in her lap. She closed her eyes and said the little prayer under her breath. *O Hafez of Shiraz.* And she opened it with her thumb, anywhere, without looking.

It fell open at the same page.

I saw it. I knew the shape of the lines on the page, even though I couldn’t read them. I’d looked at Narges’s copy of that poem every day for a year. Tahereh looked down. She didn’t read it aloud. She didn’t need to. She just turned the book round, in her lap, and showed it to Ayoub. And Ayoub looked at it, and then he looked up at the sky, at all those stars, and laughed. Once. Not a happy laugh. Not an unhappy one either.

“Of course,” he said, in English. And then he said something to me I’ve thought about ever since.

“A book,” he said, “opens where it has been opened most.”

I said, “Yes.”

“That’s the earth,” he said. “That’s mud. That’s a road. That’s a crack in a wall. Things go where they have gone before.” He touched the page. “She opened this one, every night, the last year. A hundred times. So now it opens here. That’s all.” He paused. “That’s not a miracle.”

“No.”

He closed the book. He held it on his knees.

“But it isn’t nothing,” he said.

24. The Mother Well

Ayoub

The guesthouse was rebuilt in 2007. Not by the old owner, the man with the grey beard. His wife had died under it, and he didn't want to stay. He went to live with his son in Shiraz. A man from Kerman bought the land and built a new guesthouse there, with a steel frame, by the book, with a courtyard and a pool, and he planted a new orange tree, because the old one, which had survived the earthquake, had died the next summer of thirst, when the qanat under the town stopped running for a while.

But the steps were still there. The pāyāb. The stairs in the corner of the courtyard, going down into the dark, cut into the ground. The new owner kept them. He put a little gate across the top, and a lamp, and a sign in Persian and English that said *Historic Water Stair, 17th Century*, which made me laugh, because the steps were probably older, and because nobody had ever thought they were historic until a German woman lay at the top of them for four days.

The qanat came back too. The muqanni came, three of them, old men from the villages, with their buckets and their ropes and their white shirts, and the government paid them, and the foreigners paid them, and they went down into the tunnels that had collapsed in the earthquake and dug them out again, the way muqanni have always dug, by hand, by lamp, in the dark. It took them three years.

I went down with them. I want you to know that. Fifty-four years old, my knees already going, and I broke my father's oath to my mother on the first morning the muqanni rigged their windlass over the shaft in the garden where I'd gone down on the fourth night. The oldest of them, a man from a village near Kerman with a white beard to his chest, looked at me, and at my hands, and asked who had taught me. I told him the name of my grandfather's partner. He was quiet for a moment. Then he handed me a white shirt.

So I learned it properly, at last, late in my life, in the dark, on my knees, with a short pick and a lamp. I learned to read the roof by tapping it and listening. I learned to set the clay hoops, the kaval, one against the next, where the earthquake had cracked the soft earth and it was trying to close. I learned to clear a collapse from

the downstream side so that the water could go on running past my legs while I worked. I learned the flame before the foot, again, with my life on it this time. And every evening I came up the shaft on the rope into the red sun, grey from head to foot, with my white shirt brown, and Clara, who had come back that spring to work on the Arg, was standing at the windlass with the boys from the camp, turning the charkh, hauling up my buckets of earth, laughing at how heavy they were.

Some of the qanats under Bam never came back. Some did. Ours did. The one under the old town, the one that ran past the old man's shaft, and under the guesthouse, and down to the gardens below the Arg.

. . .

In the spring of 2008 I took Clara down to it.

She'd been working on the Arg for two years by then, with the Germans, in the part of the citadel the experts had given them. The stables. The same stables where I'd been working the first day she came up the hill and put her hand in my mud. She came every October and stayed till the heat drove her out in June. She spoke Persian now, badly, with that accent, the *gh* too soft and the *kh* too hard. She lived in a rented room in the new town. She ate at our house on Fridays. Tahereh taught her to cook *fesenjān* and to swear.

That April evening, after work, we went to the new guesthouse, and the new owner, who knew the story, opened the little gate for us with a bow, and we went down the steps.

She went slowly, with her hand on the wall, putting her new foot down carefully on each worn step. I went in front, backwards, with the torch, the way you'd go down a ladder with a child above you. Fifteen steps. Twenty. The light from the courtyard became a white square, then a coin. Then we were at the bottom, crouching, in the low passage, in the cold old air, and at our feet, in its channel, the water.

Running. Clear as air. Out of the dark on the left, into the dark on the right. Cold enough to hurt your bones. Going home.

. . .

We sat on the bottom step for a long time with our feet near the water. I turned off the torch. It was very dark and very quiet. The drop was still falling somewhere up the tunnel, slow, like a clock. It had been falling the whole time. Through all of it.

I want to tell you what I said to her, in the dark, because it's the closest I've come to understanding anything, and because I said it in Persian and she understood every word.

I said: *I've been angry at the earth.*

I said: *For four years. Every day. Making bricks out of it. Standing on it. Burying my mother's friends in it. My daughter. I've been treading it with my feet every morning like I was treading on its face.*

I said: *And it doesn't care. That's the thing. It doesn't care that I'm angry. It didn't care when it took her. It didn't do it to me. It doesn't know my name. It was full, so it let go. That's all. It's like being angry at the water for running downhill.*

I said: *Down here, I can feel that. Up there, I can't. Up there there's a room I built, and an inspector, and a government, and a book of rules, and aid that didn't come, and a man in a tent who thinks it was a bomb, and a cleric who thinks it was God, and me, who thinks it was me. Up there it's all hands. Everybody looking for the hand.*

I said: *Down here there's no hand. There's just the mother. Going home. The same way she went home before there was a Bam, and the same way she'll go home after there isn't one. She gives you the water, and she gives you the crack, and they're the same gift, and she doesn't apologise for either.*

. . .

Clara didn't say anything for a while. Then she reached across in the dark and found my hand, the way I'd found hers through the gap in the bricks, and held it.

"*Gham makhor*," she said. With that accent.

"I'm trying," I said.

"I know."

“Narges would have said it better.”

“Narges,” Clara said, “would have said you’re being very dramatic, Baba. We are a dramatic people.”

I laughed. In the dark, at the bottom of the stairs, beside the water. It was the first time I had laughed, really laughed, since Yalda. It went off down the tunnel and came back to us off the old walls, the way the poem had, and the water took it, and carried it away, going home.

25. Looking Back

Clara

I’m writing this in Bam, in December 2025. I’m fifty-six. I’ve been coming here for twenty-two years. It’s the twentieth of December, and tomorrow is Yalda, and I’m sitting in my rented room in the new town with the window open, and I can see the Arg on its rock from my desk.

It’s standing.

Not all of it. Not as it was. It will never be as it was; nothing is. But the great outer wall is back, most of it, with its towers. The gates. Many of the houses and lanes inside the walls, built up again in khesht and kāhgel, by hand, the old way. The stables, my stables, done. The castle at the top, the governor’s citadel, is still being raised. They’ve been working on it for twenty years. They’ll be working on it for twenty more. The square tower isn’t back yet. Every winter I look up from my desk at the place on the sky where it should be, and every winter there’s a little more of it. In 2013 the people at UNESCO took the Arg off their list of places in danger. It’s still on the other list, the list of the most precious places in the world. It belongs there.

In the evenings, it still changes colour. Gold, then orange, then red, then that strange soft violet, and then the light goes out of it all at once. Ayoub was right. You don’t get tired of it.

. . .

I said I'd tell you, before I finished, what became of the things people said. In the tents. At the fires. I've had twenty-two years to watch. Here's what I've seen. I'll try to be fair. I'm a measuring woman. I'll measure.

The help was too slow. That was true, and it's been studied, and written up in report after report, and the lesson every report draws is the same: in the first day, the neighbours are the rescue. Iran has trained more people since, in towns all over the country, in how to dig, how to listen, how to lift. Whether that would be enough, the next time, nobody knows. There will be a next time. Everybody here knows that.

The rules were not followed. That was true. After Bam the rules were made stricter, and in Bam itself, during the rebuilding, they were followed, mostly, because everybody was watching. The new town is built well. I've been inside a hundred of its houses. I've looked at the steel. Elsewhere in Iran, people tell me, it's better than it was, and not as good as it should be. That's what people tell me about every country.

The aid was stolen. Some was. Some wasn't. More was wasted. Nobody ever added it up. I went looking for a thief and found a few greedy men, a great many tired ones, and warehouses full of blankets that arrived in the spring.

The number was hidden. It wasn't hidden; it was lost. The official count went up and down for years and settled, finally, somewhere above thirty thousand. Some researchers think it was more. Nobody will ever know exactly. There are rows in the cemetery at the edge of the desert where the photographs are missing, because there was nobody left to come and look.

It was a bomb. It was not. Every seismologist who looked, from every country, including countries that agreed on nothing else, said the same thing: the shaking had the shape of a fault slipping, not of an explosion. That was settled within weeks. The rumour never died. It comes back, every time the ground moves in Iran. In October 2024, after a small earthquake in the north, the internet filled up overnight with people saying it had been a secret bomb

test, and seismologists had to stand up and say again, patiently, that it was not. I've stopped being angry about it. I understand it now. I've sat by those fires. A bomb has a hand behind it.

The government knew about the fault. They knew about the one on the map. They didn't know about the one underneath. After Bam, scientists went looking for hidden faults like it, under other cities, and found that a great many of Iran's cities stand on them, unseen, unmapped, including Tehran. They're mapping them now. Slowly. It costs money.

It was us. That was the hardest thing anybody said at the fires, and it was the truest. A great many of the people who died in Bam died in new buildings built badly by people who loved them. Ayoub said it first and he said it most. I've never once heard him say it about anyone but himself.

. . .

And the voice.

I've thought about it for twenty-two years. I've read everything. I've read about what thirst does, and cold, and the dark, and grief. I've talked to doctors. I've talked to other people who were buried, in other earthquakes, in Turkey, in Pakistan, in Italy. Many of them heard voices. Some heard the dead. Some heard God. One man in Turkey heard his mother singing a song she used to sing when he was small, and she was alive, two hundred kilometres away, asleep in her bed.

I know the voice could have come from me. From my own starving brain in the dark, building a girl out of the poem I'd heard once by lamplight and the two words she taught me and the need I had for someone to be there. I know that's the likeliest answer. I'm a careful woman. I believe in the likeliest answer.

I also know that the voice said *Wait*, in English, the one thing she had written in my book in a language I couldn't read. And that I waited. And that someone came, through the earth, three nights later, saying her poem.

I've stopped trying to make those two things fit together. They don't. They lie next to each other, the way the two sides of a fault lie

next to each other, touching all along their length, and not moving, and not becoming one thing, until one day they do.

. . .

The qanats, too, I should tell you about, because he would want me to. In 2016, UNESCO put the Persian qanat on its list of the most precious places in the world: eleven of them, from all over Iran, chosen to stand for all the rest. Two of the eleven are here, a couple of kilometres south of the Arg, near the village of Baravat [ba-raa-VAT]. One of them is the qanat Ayoub's grandfather died in. Ayoub went to the little ceremony in his good suit and stood at the back and didn't say anything to anybody, and on the way home in the car he cried, once, briefly, and then said that the speeches had been too long.

But the list hasn't saved them. Nothing has. All over Iran the pumps go on drawing the water under the desert down, lower every year, and the old qanats go on running thinner, and some of them stop. There are still muqanni. Not many, and most of them old. The young men still drive taxis in Kerman. There are people trying to bring the old tunnels back, here and elsewhere, with money from the government and from abroad, and some of the tunnels have come back, and the water runs in them again, and the gardens at their mouths are green. It is slow. It is always slow. Ayoub says it takes about as long to save a qanat as it takes to dig one, which is about as long as a man's life.

Ayoub is seventy-four. He still makes khesht for the Arg. Not every day now. His knees. He still takes off his shoes and treads it, though, every morning he works, and the young men on the crew watch him and try to copy his feet. He still drops the ball of mud from his shoulder onto the stone to test it. It still lands like a tired man sitting down.

His English is good now. Better than my Persian. We've been doing something together, for twenty years, at his kitchen table on Fridays, with the green pen.

We've been translating the poem.

Narges's poem. The one from the fāl. Hafez's *Yusof-e gomgashteh*. Her own translation was only four lines, in her round careful hand,

on the folded page she gave me on the longest night. Ayoub found the rest of her attempt in a school notebook, in the spring, under the slab, and it was only a few more lines, crossed out, rewritten, crossed out again, with question marks in the margin. *Stranger's coat??* she had written next to one line.

So we finished it. He brings the Persian and what it means in his bones. I bring the English and what it sounds like in the ear. We argue about every word. Tahereh brings tea and tells us we're both wrong. It has taken us twenty years to do ten lines, which, Ayoub says, is quick, for a qanat.

It's finished now. It's not good. It's a stranger wearing his coat. But it's warm.

We're going to read it tomorrow night. At Yalda. To the family.

26. Gham Makhor

Ayoub

Yalda. The twenty-first of December, 2025. Twenty-two years.

My house is full. My sisters, old women now, with their husbands, older. Their children, who were the little ones doing the coin trick, with children of their own. Our neighbour and his wife and their sons, who are grown men, and their wives. Tahereh's brother from Kerman. Clara. And Tahereh, my wife, who is cleverer than me and no longer pretends otherwise. Twenty-six people.

We sit in the dome. Tahereh's dome, the one I built her in the middle of the courtyard so that she would never have to sleep under concrete again. Khesht, kāhgel, my feet in the mud, twenty years ago. It's the coolest room in summer and the warmest in winter and the strongest shape God made. We spread the cloth on the carpet. The pomegranates broken open in the glass bowl, red, shining. The watermelon, kept since summer, cut in great wedges. Dates. Bam dates, the black soft ones, that taste like honey that has been sad for a long time and has finally been forgiven. Tea. More tea.

We tell stories. My uncle is dead, God rest him, but his son tells the story about the donkey and the mullah, worse than his father did, and everyone laughs at the same places. A great-nephew does the

trick with the coin, and it goes wrong, and everyone laughs. Somebody tells about the snow that came to Bam when my eldest sister was a girl, the only time, and the palms standing in the white with their heads bent like old men praying, and somebody's father going out to throw a snowball at the mosque. It was our father. Nobody says so any more. It's everybody's father now. That's what happens to a story.

. . .

Near midnight, my sister says, "The book."

I get up and go to the niche in the wall and take it down. The green book. Narges's book. It's falling apart now. Clara has done what she can to it; she's a conservator, after all; she's sewn the spine, and made a box for it, a beautiful little box of wood that she says is the way her father would have made it. The dust is still in the creases. Clara says it would take the paper with it, if she tried to get it out. So it stays. The dust of Bam. The earth of my bricks.

I don't open it. Not tonight. Tonight I take out of my pocket a folded sheet of paper, the one Clara and I finished last month, at the kitchen table, with the green pen, and I unfold it, and I stand in the middle of Tahereh's dome, in the lamplight, in front of twenty-six people who loved my daughter, and I read it, in English, with my terrible accent, the poem that was her fāl for a stranger on the longest night of the year.

I'm not going to give you the whole of it. It's not good enough. It's ours. I'll give you the four lines that were hers, the ones she wrote out for Clara on the longest night, that we didn't change, because they were already right:

> *Lost Joseph will come home to Canaan. Do not grieve.*
> *The hut of sorrows will one day be a garden of roses. Do not grieve.*
> *If the flood of nothing comes and pulls up the root of everything that is,*
> *while Noah is the captain of your ship, do not grieve.*

When I finish, nobody says anything for a long time. Then Tahereh, beside me, puts her hand on my arm, and says, in Persian, "*Khub bud* [KHOOB bood]." It was good.

It wasn't good. It's a stranger in a coat. But she says it was good, and she's cleverer than me, so it was good.

. . .

At dawn, the way we always do, we go out to greet the sun.

We go up onto the roof of the new house. It's flat. Concrete. A tie beam all the way round, with steel inside it as thick as my thumb, signed by an inspector who looked at it four times. It is the strongest roof in this street. I built it myself. I still don't trust it, and I go up on it every morning anyway, because you have to stand on something.

From up there you can see the whole of Bam. The new town, square and pale, with its water tanks and its washing. The palms, millions of them, standing, the way they always stand. The desert, gold, going out to the mountains in the south, which are white on top this morning with snow. The lines of craters running across the desert from the mountains, where the qanats go down to their mothers. And on its rock, the Arg, coming up out of the dark grey of the morning, walls and towers, the colour of the desert, the desert standing up.

And then the sun comes over the mountains. Red. Enormous. The way it has always come up over Bam. The light runs across the desert and up the rock and touches the top of the citadel, the place where the square tower was, where the scaffolding is, where the young men will be treading mud tomorrow morning with their trousers rolled up, trying to copy my feet. Gold.

Clara is standing beside me. Fifty-six, with her new leg and her grey hair under a blue scarf, tied badly, slipping. She's waited a long time to watch the sun come up over the Arg with someone. Twenty-two years. She's never once said so.

Just before the light reaches the rock, she says something, very quietly, in her bad Persian, not to me.

"*Dir kardi* [DEER kar-DEE]." You're late.

I don’t say anything. I know who she means. I look at the place on the roof beside her where a tall thin girl in a long coat would stand, if she had come, out of breath, laughing, with her scarf slipping and an excuse ready. There is nobody there. There is only the cold, and the light coming.

“Then we wait,” I say.

She nods. We wait. The sun is never late. It comes.

Every day from now is longer. That’s the whole point.

I put my hand over my heart, on the left, over the inside pocket of my coat, where the green pen is, buttoned in.

Gham makhor, I say, to nobody. To the earth. To the sun.

Don’t eat sorrow.

I’m trying.

From the Mother Well

Let me tell you about the mother.

Up in the hills south of Bam, at the head of every qanat, there is a well. The first one dug. The deepest. The one that reached the water. Your people call it the mother well, the mādar-chāh, and they are right to. Everything downhill of it lives on what comes out of it. The tunnel, the gardens, the palms, the town, the people, the girl reading poems by lamplight, the man treading mud with his feet: all of it is the mother’s child. She doesn’t see them. She’s too deep. She only gives what comes down to her from the mountain, and she lets it go downhill, and she has done this for longer than any of the names in your books.

I am the mother. Not the well. The ground the well was dug into. I am every mother well in this land and every crack the water rises through. I am the thing that gave you Bam and the thing that took it away, and I want you to understand at last, before I stop speaking, that these were never two different things. The water comes up where I am broken. The oasis grows along the fault. Your ancestors didn’t know that, and they built on it anyway, and if they had known they would have built on it anyway, because the water was there,

and you go where the water is. That is the oldest bargain. It's still the only one.

. . .

You want me to apologise.

All of you. I hear it under every question you ask me. *Why Bam. Why so many. Why my daughter. Why the new room and not the old one.* Under every *why* there's another word, the one you really want, and it's *sorry*. You want the ground to say sorry.

I can't. Not because I'm cruel. Because I'm not anything. I'm older than sorry. Sorry is a thing that happens between people, between two who could have chosen differently. I've never chosen anything. I'm pushed from the south a finger's width a year and I fold and I crack and I hold and I let go, and I have done it since before there was a sky over this desert, and I will do it after the last brick of the last city has gone back into me. I don't do it to you. I barely know you're there.

But I know you've changed me. That's the thing I've come to say. In the time you've been on me, a short time, a match struck in a dark room, you've changed me more than all the ages before. You've drilled me and pumped me dry. You've poured me into moulds and burned me and made me hard. You've laid lids of stone on top of soft walls. You've built cities in every crease where I give you water, and filled them with millions, and gone on building, faster, higher, heavier, without looking down. You've changed how I fall. Not when. How. When I let go now, I take more of you than I ever took before, and it's not because I've grown angrier. It's because you've grown heavier, and you built yourselves out of things that don't forgive.

I am not your enemy. I'm what you're standing on. I evolve with you, whether either of us likes it. You make me drier and I crack more easily. You make me harder and I break more cruelly. You forget me and I remind you.

. . .

Here is what I have learned, from the mud man and the German woman, from the girl who read poems, from the girl's mother, who would not sleep under concrete again, from the thirty thousand who went back into me in twelve seconds one morning after the longest night.

You can't own me. Not with a book of rules. Not with steel as thick as your thumb. Not with prayer, not with money, not with a list of the world's precious places, not with satellites. You can prepare. You must prepare. Build soft where I'm soft. Tie your roofs to your walls. Look for my hidden cracks before you build on them, and when you find one, don't pretend you didn't. Train your neighbours to dig. All of that matters. All of that will save some of you, next time, and there will be a next time.

But underneath all of it, you have to do the thing your people are worst at. You have to surrender.

Not to despair. Not to give up. Surrender the way the palm does. The palm survived. Every one in Bam. It has no bones to break. It doesn't fight the shaking. It bends. It lets the ground do what the ground does, and it stands up straight again after. The mud man understood this, at the bottom of the stairs, in the dark, beside the water. That there is no hand. That there's only the mother, going home, the way she always goes. That the most you can ever do is build well, and love hard, and stay awake together through the longest night, and greet the sun when it comes back, and not expect anything to apologise.

. . .

I don't apologise.

I keep everything. The bricks of the citadel. The roof of the white room. The girl, in her coat, with the dust of my body on her eyelashes. The man in the tent who thought it was a bomb. His wife and three children. The thirty thousand. They are all in me now, all of them, in the cold, in the dark, under the town, beside the water. Nothing is lost here. Only buried.

And every spring the snow melts on the mountains to the south, and sinks into me, and runs down in the dark through my cracks to the mother well, and the mother lets it go, downhill, through the tunnel, under the old town and under the new one, past the stairs where the German woman lay, and out into the gardens, where the palms drink it, and the oranges, and the dates, the black soft ones, that taste of honey that has been sad for a long time and has finally been forgiven.

Your people will eat them at Yalda, on the longest night, and stay awake together until the sun comes back.

I have sung to you four times between the chapters of this story. If you keep nothing else of mine, keep this. It is all of them in one, the way the town is all of its bricks.

Wet me and tread me and lay me in the sun;
I'll hold up your roof till the holding is done.
Where the water comes up, there the rock has been split:
the gift and the grave have one root under it.

I held my breath for a thousand years
and let it go in twelve. Keep your tears.
A hundred small hungers, a roof like a lid:
I don't know the hand. I know what it did.

So bend like the palm when the ground starts to sway,
stay up together till night turns to day;
I keep what comes down to me, every last one.
I don't apologise. Look. Here is the sun.

That's all I have to give you. It has always been enough.

GLOSSARY

ājil [aa-JEEL] — Persian. A mixture of nuts and dried fruit eaten on festive nights.

Āmrikā [aam-ree-KAA] — Persian, *America*.

anār [a-NAAR] — Persian, *pomegranate*. Eaten at Yalda for its red seeds, the colour of dawn and of life.

Ardashir [ar-da-SHEER] — The first king of the Sasanian dynasty of Persia, who in the Shahnameh kills the worm of Kerman.

Arg [ARG] — Persian, *citadel*. The Arg-e Bam [ARG-eh BAM] is the walled earthen city on the rock above Bam, the largest building made of mud brick in the world.

Ayoub [a-YOOB] — Persian and Arabic, *Job*, the prophet tested by the loss of everything he had. The narrator who makes bricks. *Sabr-e Ayoub* [SABR-eh a-YOOB], the patience of Job, is a Persian saying for long suffering without complaint.

azizam [a-zee-ZAM] — Persian, *my dear*.

Bā-ādam [baa-AA-dam] — Persian, *a real person*; someone decent and genuine.

Baba [BAA-baa] — Persian, *dad*.

Bam [BAM] — An oasis town in Kerman province, southeastern Iran, on the edge of the Lut desert.

Baravat [ba-raa-VAT] — A village just south of Bam, beside two of the qanats on UNESCO's list.

bokhor [bo-KHOR] — Persian, *eat*.

charkh [CHARKH] — Persian, *wheel*. The wooden windlass turned at the top of a qanat shaft to haul up earth.

dalv [DALV] — Persian, *bucket*. The leather bucket used to lift spoil out of a qanat.

fāl [FAAL] — Persian, *fortune, omen*. The *fāl-e Hāfez* [FAAL-eh haa-FEZ] is the custom of opening the poems of Hafez at random to read one's fortune.

fenjān [fen-JAAN] — Persian, *cup*. A copper bowl with a hole in it, floated in water to measure each family's turn of qanat water by time.

Ferdowsi [fer-dow-SEE] — The poet who wrote the Shahnameh about a thousand years ago.

fesenjān [fe-sen-JAAN] — Persian. A stew of chicken, ground walnuts and pomegranate syrup.

gham makhor [GHAM ma-KHOR] — Persian, *don't grieve*; literally *don't eat sorrow*. The refrain of the Hafez poem in this book.

Gonabad [go-naa-BAAD] — A town in northeastern Iran with one of the oldest and deepest qanats.

Hafez [haa-FEZ] — The poet of Shiraz, who died more than six hundred years ago and whose poems nearly every Iranian knows by heart.

Haftvād [haft-VAAD] — In the Shahnameh, the poor man of Kerman whose daughter found a worm in an apple.

Helāl-e Ahmar [he-LAAL-eh AH-mar] — Persian, *Red Crescent*. Iran's disaster relief society.

hendevāneh [hen-de-vaa-NEH] — Persian, *watermelon*. Kept from summer to be eaten at Yalda.

Isā [ee-SAA] — Persian and Arabic, *Jesus*.

kāhgel [kaah-GEL] — Persian, *straw-mud*. A plaster of mud and chopped straw smoothed over earthen walls.

kaval [ka-VAAL] — Persian. Oval rings of baked clay set end to end to line a qanat tunnel through soft earth.

Kerman [ker-MAAN] — The province and its capital city in southeastern Iran, about three hours from Bam.

khesht [KHESHT] — Persian, *mud brick*. Earth mixed with water and straw, shaped in a frame and dried in the sun.

Lehm [LAYM] — German, *clay, loam*. The earth used for building in old German farmhouses.

Lut [LOOT] — The desert east of Bam, one of the hottest places on Earth.

mādar-chāh [maa-DAR chaah] — Persian, *mother well*. The first and deepest well at the head of a qanat, where it reaches the water.

manqal [man-GHAL] — Persian. A small brazier of glowing charcoal.

mazāfati [ma-zaa-fa-TEE] — Persian. The soft, black, very sweet dates of Bam.

mazhar [MAZ-har] — Persian, *place of appearing*. Where a qanat's water comes out of the ground.

mehmān [meh-MAAN] — Persian, *guest*. *A guest is a gift from God.*

merci [mer-SEE] — From French, *thank you*. The everyday Persian way of saying thanks.

mirāb [meer-AAB] — Persian, *master of water*. The man who divides a qanat's water among its owners.

muqanni [mo-GHAN-nee] — Persian, *qanat digger*. The men who dig and repair qanats by hand.

Narges [nar-GES] — Persian, *narcissus*, the flower that blooms in the Iranian winter. Ayoub's daughter.

pāyāb [paa-YAAB] — Persian. A stairway cut down from a house or garden to the water of a qanat.

qanat [gha-NAAT] — Persian. An underground tunnel, dug by hand on a very gentle slope, that carries water from the foot of the mountains to the surface far away, with no pump.

qātel [ghaa-TEL] — Persian, *murderer*. What the muqanni call the qanat among themselves.

shahid [sha-HEED] — Persian and Arabic, *martyr*.

Shahnameh [shaah-naa-MEH] — Persian, *the Book of Kings*. Ferdowsi's epic of the old kings of Iran.

Shakh-e Nabat [SHAAKH-eh na-BAAT] — Persian, *branch of rock candy*. The name of the woman Hafez loved, invoked when opening his book.

Shiraz [shee-RAAZ] — The city in southern Iran where Hafez lived and is buried.

Tahereh [taa-heh-REH] — Persian, *pure*. Ayoub's wife.

taryāk [tar-YAAK] — Persian, *opium*.

vāfur [vaa-FOOR] — Persian. A long clay pipe for smoking opium.

Yalda [YAL-daa] — Persian. The longest night of the year, around December 21, when families stay up together until dawn.

Yusof [yoo-SOF] — Persian and Arabic, *Joseph*. The lost son who comes home in the Hafez poem.

Bam is a green town at the edge of the hottest desert on Earth, kept alive for a thousand years by water carried under the sand in tunnels dug by hand. Above it, on a rock, stands a whole city made of mud.

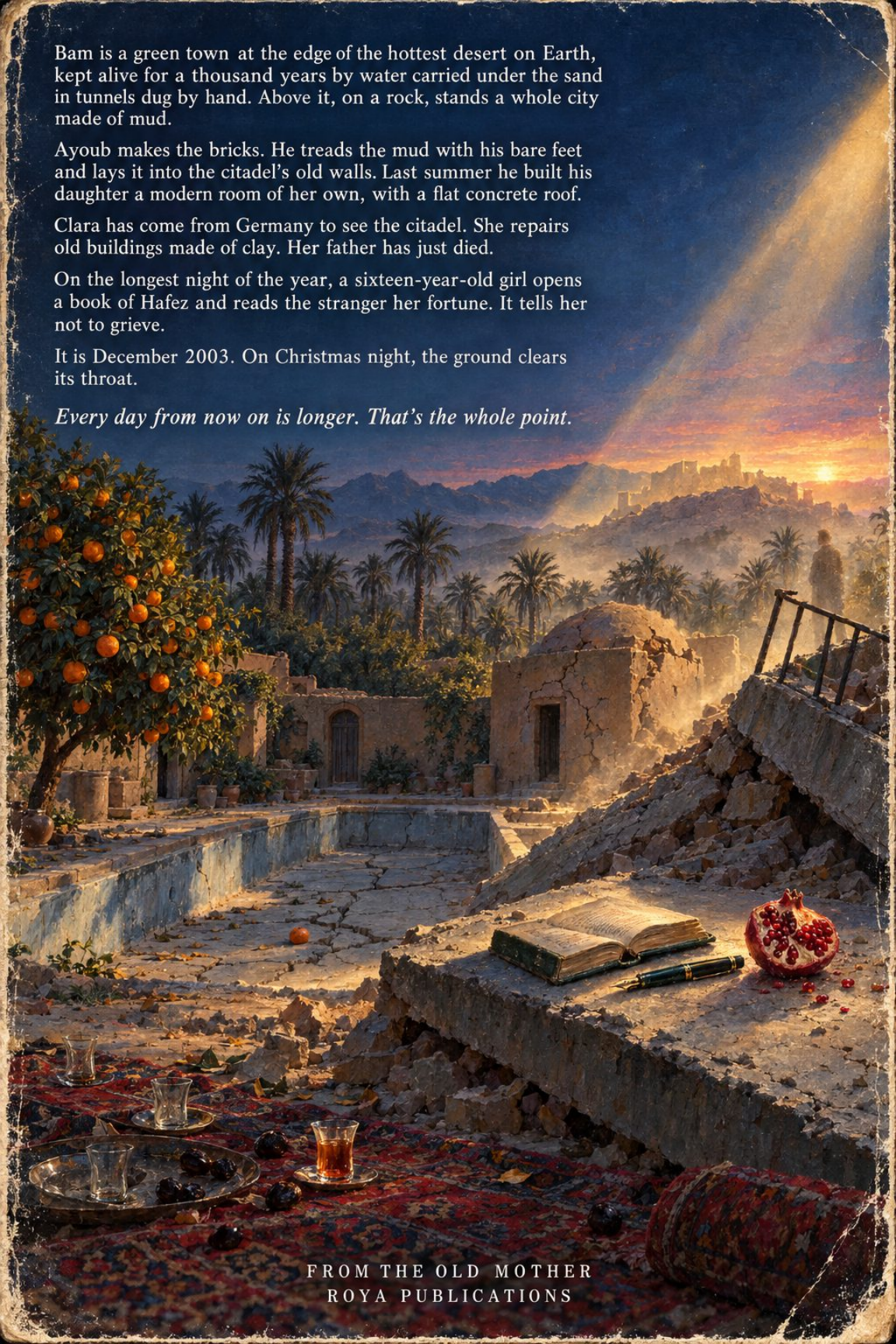
Ayoub makes the bricks. He treads the mud with his bare feet and lays it into the citadel's old walls. Last summer he built his daughter a modern room of her own, with a flat concrete roof.

Clara has come from Germany to see the citadel. She repairs old buildings made of clay. Her father has just died.

On the longest night of the year, a sixteen-year-old girl opens a book of Hafez and reads the stranger her fortune. It tells her not to grieve.

It is December 2003. On Christmas night, the ground clears its throat.

Every day from now on is longer. That's the whole point.



FROM THE OLD MOTHER
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