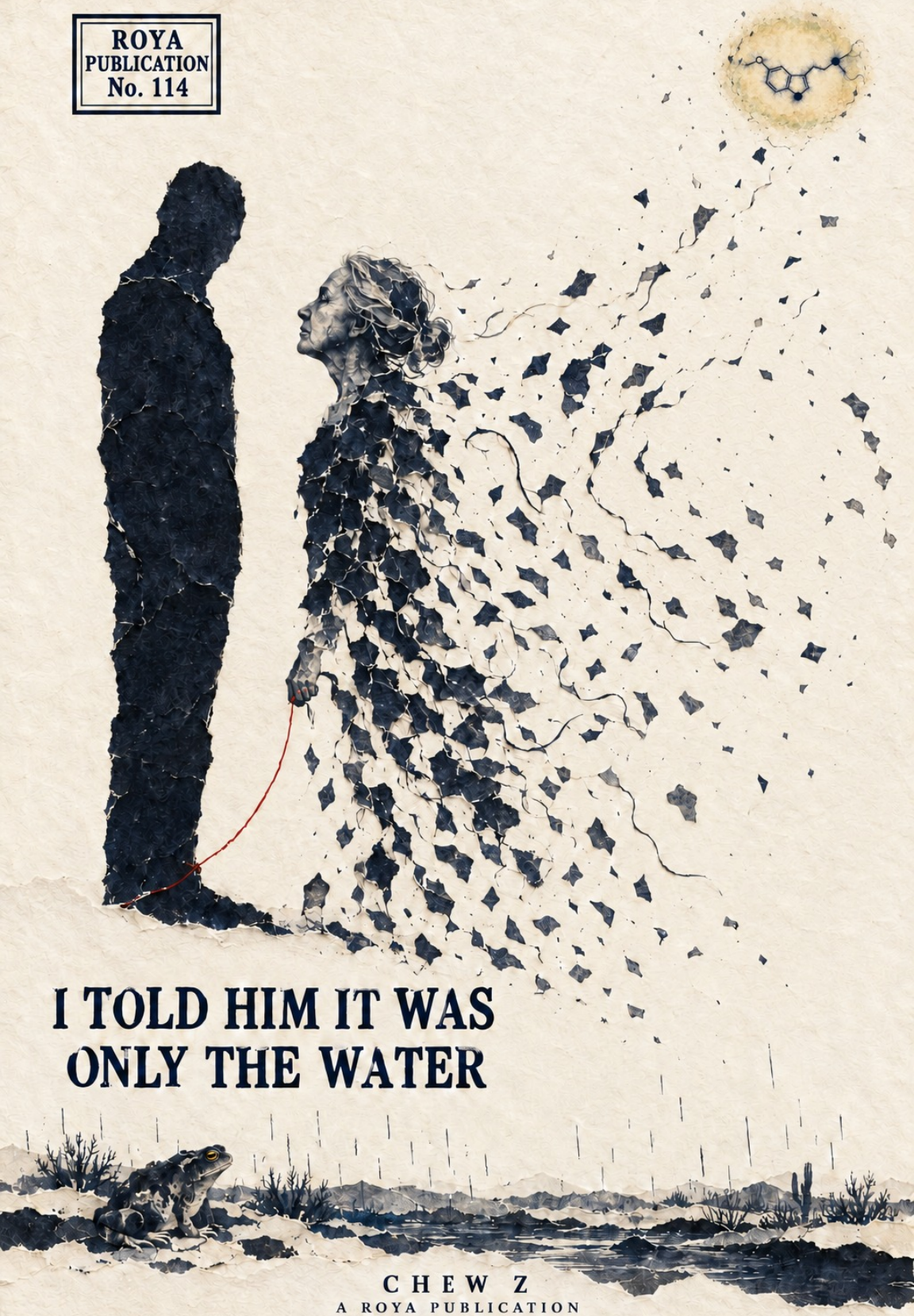
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I TOLD HIM IT WAS ONLY THE WATER

CHEW Z

A ROYA PUBLICATION

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Printed in the Reach

Roya Publication No. 114

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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RÍO GILA
SONORAN DESERT
TUCSON
HERE BE
WHAT COMES WITH THE RAIN
GOLFO DE CALIFORNIA

THE BOOK BEFORE

Each of these books stands on its own, and you have missed nothing by beginning here. But if you would like to know what the one before this was about, here it is, the story of it, and not a word that would spoil it.

There was a woman who had spent her whole working life putting children to sleep and waking them safely again. Thousands of them, over the years. She was the one in the bright room who counted them down into the dark before the surgeons began, and the one who stood over them and brought them back up when it was done, and in all her long career she had brought every single one of them back. It was the thing she was proudest of. It was the thing she knew how to do.

And then, on an ordinary evening, with no warning and no count, her husband went down on the kitchen floor and did not come back up, and no one got to bring him, because the one person in the world who knew exactly how to was standing right there and it was not a thing you could do with your hands.

Afterward there was a boy she did not know, who had been very sick, and who, after a certain operation, began to say things. Small things. Things a boy his age had no way of knowing, things that had belonged to the dead man, that only the dead man could have known. And the woman, who had brought everyone back but the one she wanted, went looking for a grey room where she thought she might reach him, one more time, to say the thing she had not been allowed to say.

That is the one before this. It is about how far a careful person will go to finish a sentence the world cut off. You can read it after, and I hope you do, and I have told you none of where it goes.

SYNOPSIS

Tucson, Arizona. For thirty-six years Marian has taught the neighbourhood's children to play the piano, and she has taught every frightened one of them the same secret: that there is nothing a person cannot learn to do, if they are willing to go slowly enough, and do it again, and do it again, and do it again when they are sure they never will.

She is sixty-four when the doctor tells her, kindly, plainly, that she has until the rains, if she is lucky. And driving home in the gold October light she discovers a strange thing about herself. She is not afraid of being dead. She is afraid only of the *instant* — the single, unrepeatable, unrehearsable instant of letting go, of ceasing to be herself, the one performance no one is ever allowed to practice.

So she decides to practice it.

Out past the edge of town, where the pavement gives up, there is a dry old man who keeps watch over the gravest-faced creature in the desert, and who knows a door that opens for fifteen minutes, in the rain, and closes again. He has sat beside it with the dying before. He tells her what it is and what it isn't. He tells her it will not give her back all of herself, each time, and that she does not get to choose which part it keeps.

And Marian, who has spent her whole life holding on, lies down in the rain to learn, at last, how to let go — and finds, waiting for her out past the lights, in a place where there is no light to cast one, a shadow that turns its head when she comes, as though it has been waiting a very long time, as though it knows her name.

She spent her life teaching frightened children the one thing she could never do herself.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

The toad in this book is real, and so is what it makes, and so is the fact that it is vanishing. It has waited out the droughts of the Sonoran Desert for something like ten million years, buried alive and patient, coming up only with the summer rain — and in the span of a single human lifetime it has been pulled off the land in buckets, faster than the rain can bring it back, by people who read somewhere that it is a shortcut to something. It is not ancient wisdom. The plain history is in the back of this book, and the plain history is a toad, a chemist, and a man in Texas with a stapled pamphlet, and that is a better and truer story than any of the feathers people have since hung on it.

Everything in the front of the book is invented. The desert, the toad, the door, the cost, and the two people most responsible for our knowing any of it are not. I have tried, as these books always try, to keep the ground honest and make up only the house that stands on it.

The song is my own, written for this book so that it could be sung. If it does what I hoped, it is the kind of thing a person might make for a frightened child out of the sounds of the night, to turn the things that scare us into the things that keep us company — which is, when you think about it, most of what any of us is doing here.

And the thing the book is finally about is older than any substance. People have always known there is a last letting-go coming for every one of us, and have always, everywhere, wished there were some way to practice it first. This is one woman’s wish to.

Chew Z

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I. THE SINGING

1.

The rains came on the ninth of July, in the evening, the way they always came, which was to say the way nothing else in her life ever did: exactly as promised and not one day before she had given up.

Marian was on the porch when it broke. She had been on the porch most evenings for six weeks, through the long cruelty the desert people called the foresummer, the stretch from May into July when the sky is a white lid and the ground gives back at night every degree it took in the day, and a person sits very still in the dark and sweats and waits and is not sure, any more, that the weather is a thing that happens to everyone, and not just a punishment arranged for her. She had lived in Tucson forty-one years and she knew better and she waited badly anyway. Everyone did. That was the secret the brochures left out. The desert does not teach you patience. It teaches you how little patience you ever had.

Then, that evening, the light went wrong in the southeast. A bruise came up over the Rincons, green-black and towering, and the air changed its mind. The first thing was the smell, before a drop fell — the smell that has no proper name in English and that every person who has lived in that country will try to describe to you for the rest of their life and fail, the way you fail to describe a face. The books call it petrichor and the books are showing off. What it is, is the creosote. The whole desert is stitched with a low gray bush that most of the year smells of nothing, and when the first rain touches it the bush lets go of a resin it has been holding all through the foresummer, holding the way you hold your breath, and the air fills with a sharp clean green sweetness that goes straight past the nose and into some older room in the skull, the room that was built before language, and in that room a bell rings and the bell says: *it is over. You lived.*

Marian stood up. She was sixty-four years old and her knees made their small complaints and she ignored them, because the first rain was not a thing you received sitting down.

It came across the desert toward the house in a gray wall, and she could hear it before it reached her, a sound like applause starting at the far end of a hall and coming forward, and then it was on the tin of the carport and on the hard caliche of the yard and on the broad

patient arms of the saguaro beyond the wall, and the temperature fell fifteen degrees in a minute and she lifted her face and let it be rained on, an old woman alone in the dark with her mouth a little open, grinning like a fool, like a child, like a bride.

And then, when the first hard cell had passed over and gone muttering off to the north and the rain had settled into something steadier and kind, the singing began.

2.

You have to understand about the toads, or you will not understand anything that came after.

There is a toad that lives in that desert, a big homely thing the size of a man's spread hand, olive and warty, with a gold eye split by a black bar, and for most of the year you will never see one, because for most of the year it is not there to be seen. It is under the ground. It digs itself down below the reach of the heat with the hard shovels on its hind feet, down to where the earth stays cool and faintly damp, and it closes its eyes and it slows its heart and it waits, sealed in a little clay room of its own making, for as long as it takes. Ten months. Eleven. However long the drought runs. It can wait out a year that would kill nearly anything else that breathes, and it does this by the simple animal genius of refusing to be present for it.

And then the rain comes, and the water works down through the ground, and some message reaches the toad in its sealed room — a coolness, a softening, a change in the taste of the dark — and the toad wakes. It digs up. It climbs out of its grave into the wet night as though death were a thing you could simply decide to stop doing, and it goes looking, in a terrible hurry, for water and for others of its kind, and when it finds a puddle and the others find it too, the males fill their throats and call.

It is not a pretty sound. People who hear it the first time and don't know what it is have called the police. It is a low, loud, buzzing bleat, a sound like a sheep being run through a radio, and when a hundred of them are doing it at once from a filling wash it is enormous, it is prehistoric, it comes up out of the ground and fills the whole bowl of the valley, and it means, in the plainest voice the

living world has, the only thing any of it ever means: *I am here. I waited. I am here. Is anyone else here. I am here.*

Marian loved it the way you love a thing that has frightened you and turned out kind. The first summer, in 1985, she had lain awake and been afraid of it. By the second summer she slept with the window open to hear it. By now it was simply the sound her happiness made when her happiness had to make a sound, and she stood on the wet porch that ninth of July and listened to the desert come back to life out of its own grave, singing, and she thought — she actually thought the words, and remembered thinking them, later, when there was so much reason to — *what a world. What a world to have been let into.*

She did not know yet that she had eleven months. She found that out in October. But she always said, afterward, that if she had been made to choose one evening out of the whole sixty-four years to keep, it would have been that one, on the porch, in the first rain, with the toads singing, and nothing yet taken.

3.

In the daytime she taught piano, as she had done for thirty-six years, in the front room of the house, which held an upright she had bought secondhand in 1988 and a smaller spinet for the little ones and a metronome.

The metronome was a wooden pyramid the color of dark honey, wound by a key, and it had been her mother's, and it kept better time than any machine she had ever owned since, and it was the one object in the house she would have run back into a fire for. She set it going at the start of every lesson, that dry wooden *tock . . . tock . . . tock*, and the children hated it and she made them keep to it anyway, because the thing she had learned in thirty-six years of teaching children to play the piano, the one thing she believed without reservation and would have carved over a door, was this: that there is nothing a human being cannot learn to do, nothing at all, if they are willing to go slowly enough, and do it again, and do it again, and do it again when it is boring, and do it again when it is hard, and do it again when they are sure they will never get it, which is always the moment just before they get it.

Again, she said, a thousand times a summer. *From the top. Slower. Good. Again.*

She had a gift for the frightened ones. The ones who came in white-knuckled, sent by mothers with ideas, certain in advance that they were the one child on earth with no music in them — those were hers, those were the ones she lived for, because she knew the secret and they did not. The secret was that the talent they thought they were missing did not exist. There was only the willingness to be bad at a thing in front of someone kind, for long enough, and on the far side of that willingness, for every single one of them, without exception, there was the day they played the little piece through, all the way through, without stopping, and turned to look at her with their whole face lit up like a window at night, astonished at themselves, and she got to be the one sitting there when it happened. Thirty-six years of that. She used to say it was the best job in the world and she used to say it was the only job she knew of where you were paid to watch people stop being afraid.

They called her Miss Marian, all of them, the way children in that part of the country call a woman they love and are also a little in awe of, and in July she had eleven of them, and the recital was the second Saturday in August, in the back garden, with lemonade.

4.

Dell she met because of the toads.

He lived out past where the pavement gave up, in a low place near a wash, in a house that was mostly other houses — a core of adobe that somebody had put up in the forties and then forty years of additions in whatever had been free that decade, so that the building wandered off in three directions and had a greenhouse at one end made entirely of salvaged window frames, each a different size, which in the late sun lit up like a church made by someone who had only had churches described to them. He was seventy or near it, burnt the color of a saddle, with a white mustache stained yellow at the center and a way of looking at you a half-second longer than was comfortable before he decided to go ahead and talk.

He kept the toads. That was the thing about Dell. Not kept as pets — you could not keep them, they were the desert's and they went back into the ground when the rains stopped and that was the end of them till next year — but kept the way a man keeps a watch over something. His low place flooded in the monsoon into a wide shallow sheet that was exactly what the toads wanted, and they came to him in their hundreds, and over the years people had come too, the wrong kind of people, people who had read a thing on the internet and drove out from the city with headlamps and buckets, and Dell had made it his business, in a quiet and not entirely legal way, to be there in the dark when they came, with a dog and a shotgun he never loaded and a voice he never raised, and to persuade them to go back to the city with their buckets empty. He thought, he told Marian once, that the toad had done nothing to anybody for ten million years except wait under the ground and sing when it rained, and that it had not asked to become fashionable, and that a thing which has survived every drought the desert can throw at it ought not to be finished off by people who wanted to feel better about themselves on a Tuesday.

She had driven out there the first time, four summers back, to complain. A boy in her Thursday class had told her, round-eyed, that there was a man who had told his uncle that you could lick the toads and see God, and Marian — who had been teaching other people's children long enough to have strong feelings about men who told things to uncles — had got the address out of the boy and driven out at dusk, prepared to deliver a view.

She never delivered it. He had met her at the end of his drive, looked at her the extra half-second, and said, before she had got a word out, "You'll be the piano teacher come to kill me about the toads." And then he had offered her a lemonade, and the two of them had stood at the edge of his flooded low place in the last light while the singing built up around them until they had to lean in to hear each other, and he had told her, dryly, that he was, in fact, the single greatest enemy the toad-lickers of southern Arizona had ever known, that he spent his summers running them off, and that she was welcome to come and watch him do it any night she liked, and did she want to see one up close, and he had waded out in his boots and come back cupping one in two hands like a man carrying water,

and held it down for her to see, the gold eye, the slow pulse of the pale throat, the astonishing calm of the thing, and Marian — who had come to complain — had looked into the face of the toad and started, to her own enormous surprise, to laugh, because it was the most serious face she had ever seen, graver than a judge, and because it was raining, and because she was sixty and standing in a flood in her good shoes, and because some evenings the world simply hands you more than you came for.

They were friends after that. It was not complicated. He fixed her swamp cooler every June and would take no money. She left pecan bars in his mailbox. In the monsoon she drove out two or three nights a week and stood at the edge of the water with him in the dark and listened, and they did not always talk, and when they did it was about ordinary things, the state of his knees and the state of her roof, and neither of them said the word *lonely*, because it would have been rude, the way it is rude to point out that two people standing very close are keeping each other warm.

5.

There was one room in the house she kept shut.

It was at the end of the hall, and it had been her son's, and the door had been closed so long that the closing of it was no longer an event, had become simply the shape of the hallway, the way a scar becomes simply the shape of a hand. The children who came for lessons never knew it was a room at all; it was just a door that was always a door. On the rare occasions a grown-up in the house drifted toward that end of the hall — a parent looking for the bathroom — Marian would appear, without seeming to hurry, and head them gently back toward the front of the house, toward the music, with the ease of a woman who has been redirecting the innocent away from a locked thing for a very long time and has stopped noticing she does it.

She did not go in. She had not gone in for a long while. It was not a shrine; she despised the idea of a shrine; she was far too practical a woman, everyone agreed she was the most practical woman they knew. It was simply a room that it served no purpose to enter, containing nothing she needed, and she was a person who did not do things that served no purpose. If you had asked her — no one

asked her — she would have told you, pleasantly and with a small firm smile that ended the subject, that she had made her peace a long time ago.

She was wrong about that. But she did not know she was wrong, and a person can live a whole life inside a thing they are wrong about, and furnish it, and keep it clean, and call it peace.

There was a piece of music she did not play to the end. It was a simple thing, an arrangement of an old tune, well within the hands of any of her better students, and she taught it to them every year, and she could sit and play the first two-thirds of it in her sleep — and at a certain bar, a particular turn in the melody where the tune bent downward and then lifted, she would take her hands off the keys, every time, as smoothly as if she had reached the end, and close the lid, and the students assumed that was the end, because she was the teacher and the teacher decided where the ends were. Not one of them, in all those years, had ever heard the last eight bars of that piece played in that house. She had arranged it so. She was very good at arranging things.

6.

The first of it — the thing in her body — she took, at first, for the heat.

A tiredness that the monsoon's cool did not cure. A morning she sat down on the edge of the bed to put on a shoe and found, a minute later, that she had not put on the shoe, had simply been sitting, holding it, looking at the light on the floor. A dullness low in her back that she decided was the piano bench and then, later, decided was the garden, and then, later still, stopped deciding things about and simply carried, the way you carry a stone in a shoe you have resolved not to stop and empty.

She was, as everyone said, the most practical woman they knew, and the practical thing, she told herself, was not to go running to doctors over a tiredness in a hot summer at sixty-four. She was busy. There was the recital. The children were coming along. The Mendez girl had finally, in the last week of July, played her little piece through to the end without stopping and turned around with her whole face on fire, and Marian had got to be the one sitting

there, again, for what she did not yet know was the last time, and she had gone home that evening so full of the ordinary enormous happiness of her work that the stone in the shoe was nothing, was weather, was age, was the price of a good day.

The recital went off beautifully. The second Saturday in August, in the back garden, under the mesquite, with lemonade and a sheet cake and eleven children in their best clothes being braver than the adults in the folding chairs could possibly understand. A thunderhead stood up gold and enormous over the mountains and held off, decently, until the last child had bowed. The toads started as the parents were folding the chairs. Marian stood at the back with a paper cup of lemonade going warm in her hand and watched the families drift out to their cars in the blue dusk, the children carried or trailing, and felt — she let herself feel it, she was not a woman who often let herself — that she had done, with her one life, a thing that was good, plainly and simply good, with no catch in it, and that if it were all to end tomorrow she would have no complaint to file with anyone.

That was August. The practical thing, she finally allowed in the last week of September, when she could no longer get comfortable in any chair and had started, without telling anyone, to sleep sitting up, was to go and be told it was nothing.

7.

It was not nothing.

The doctor was a kind man, younger than her children would have been, with the particular gentleness of a person who has had to learn how to say a thing he would give a great deal not to say, and he said it well, which is to say he said it plainly, and did not hide inside the long words, and did not look at the desk. There was a mass. It had been there a while. It had gone to the places such things go when they have been there a while, quietly, while she taught the Mendez girl her piece and fixed the recital and left pecan bars in a mailbox. There were things they could do. He was careful to say there were things they could do, and he was careful, when she asked him — she asked him straight out, in the plain voice she used for the frightened ones — not to lie about what those things were for. They were not for curing it. They were for time, and for

comfort, and the two did not always pull in the same direction, and she would have choices to make.

How long, she said, if the choices went the gentle way.

Into the summer, he thought. He would not be pinned tighter than that and she respected him for it. Maybe to the rains.

So she would hear the toads once more, then. That was her first clear thought, sitting in the chair in the kind man's office, and she noticed that it was her first clear thought and was interested by it, the way she was interested by most things, because she was, under everything, a watchful woman, and one of the things she had watched all her life, with a slight sense of standing a little apart from it, was herself.

She drove home. The light that evening was the long gold light of the first week of October, and the city lay out below the road all washed and clear, and she found, testing herself carefully as she drove, the way you test a tooth with your tongue, that she was not afraid of being dead.

She examined this and found it to be true. She did not believe she was going anywhere in particular; she had never been able to make herself believe it, though she had sat in enough churches; and the nothing on the far side held no terror for her, because a nothing cannot hold anything, that is what makes it a nothing, and you do not fear the dreamless part of sleep. Dead was fine. Dead she could do.

It was the doorway she could not do.

She understood this all at once, on the road home, with a clarity that was almost a physical thing, a cold clean light coming on in a room she had kept dark. It was not the destination. It was the *instant* — the single unrepeatable instant of going, the letting-go itself, the moment when the hands come off the keys whether you have decided to take them off or not, when the self that has held on all its life to being this exact person, Marian, who taught the children and loved the rain and kept the one room shut, is required, with no rehearsal and no second attempt and no slowing it down, to simply stop. To let go of being someone. That was the thing. That had always been the thing, she saw now, long before any doctor;

that was the thing the shut door was about, and the piece she would not finish, and the metronome she clung to, the whole architecture of a careful life: she was a woman who had organized sixty-four years around never again having to let go of something she loved without warning and without her consent.

Because it had happened to her once. In the rain. And she had sworn, in a way so deep she had never once said it to herself in words, that she would never be caught like that again.

And now here it came, the one appointment no amount of being the most practical woman they knew would let her reschedule, the great involuntary letting-go, coming for her out of the dark the way the water had come down the wash, and she gripped the wheel in the gold October light and she thought, in the plain teacher's voice she used for the thing that could not be dodged:

Then I will do what I have always done with a thing I am afraid I cannot do.
I will practice it.

THE CLEAR LIGHT

There is a book the West calls the Tibetan Book of the Dead, though that is not its name, and it is not about the dead. Its name means something closer to *the great freeing, by hearing, in the place between* — and it is a book for the living, to be read aloud to a person who is dying, and then for some days after, into the ear of a body that can no longer answer, because the people who made it did not believe the dying were finished listening just because they had stopped being able to reply.

And the first thing it tells the dying person is this. In the very instant of death — not after, not on some far shore, but *in the instant itself*, the hinge, the letting-go — a light comes. They call it the clear light. It is not a light the way the sun is a light; it is not a thing you see, because in that instant there is no longer quite a you to be standing apart and doing the seeing. It is more as if the thing that was always doing the seeing, all your life, from behind your eyes, the bare fact of being awake that you never once looked at because you were always too busy looking at something else — that turns around, for one instant, and looks at itself, and finds that it is vast, and clear, and has no edges, and was never for one second the small frightened person you took it for.

And here is the hard part, the part the book exists to help with. Most people, it says, cannot bear it. It comes, the clear light, enormous and without warning, and the small self recoils from it the way an eye recoils from the sun, and flinches, and looks away, and in looking away falls back down into smallness, into fear, into the long machinery of becoming someone again. The light was right there. It is always right there. And they miss it, the book says, not because they are bad or unready, but because no one ever taught them how to hold still inside a thing that big.

So the people who made the book did the sane thing, the only sane thing, the thing you would do too. *They practiced.* Monks in cold stone rooms rehearsed their own dying, over and over, year on year, lying down and going through the letting-go while they were

still strong enough to learn from it, so that when the real instant came, the great involuntary one, they would recognize the clear light the way you recognize a face you have studied — not as a stranger to flinch from, but as the oldest thing you know. They were learning the one lesson that cannot be learned the usual way, because the usual way you learn a thing is by doing it twice, and dying, they understood, is the one performance with no second attempt. So they cheated. They found a door, and they went partway through it, on purpose, again and again, in the safety of a cold room, to practice the one thing no one is supposed to get to practice.

And the strange part — the part worth sitting with — is that they were not the only ones. Across the whole world, in every age, people who could not possibly have compared notes, who spoke no common language and shared no books, have come back from the edge of that instant and described, each in their own plain words, the same impossible thing. A light with no edges. No time in it, or all of time at once. No one home, and somehow everyone. And, over and over, the same flat astonished sentence, the one you cannot argue a person out of once they have been there: *that this was what was always here, under everything, the whole time, and I simply had a coat on and never knew.*

What the book you are holding is about to tell you is that a person does not have to wait for death to go and look.

There is a door that opens in fifteen minutes.

It opens in the rain.

II. THE ONE THING YOU CAN'T PRACTICE

8.

She told the children first, because they would find out, and because she had a horror of being discovered in a lie by a child.

She did not tell them she was dying. She told them that she was going to be unwell for a while, and that the lessons would have to stop after Christmas, and that she was very proud of them, each by name, and that she expected them to keep up their scales whether there was anyone sitting beside them to make them or not, because the scales were not for her, the scales had never been for her, the scales were the thing you did so that one day, when the music you loved finally came, your hands would already know the way. She said it in the plain voice, the one for the frightened ones, and most of them did not understand that they were being said goodbye to, and one of them, the Mendez girl, understood exactly, and did not cry until she was in the car, which Marian watched through the front window and counted as a kindness the child had done her.

Then the house was quiet, in a way it had not been quiet in thirty-six years. The metronome stood on the upright with its key wound and its arm still. She found that she could not look at it.

She had meant what she thought on the road home. She was going to practice. But a week went by, and then two, and she discovered the flaw in the plan, which was that she did not know *how.* You cannot rehearse the letting-go by lying in the dark and willing yourself to stop being someone; she tried; all that happens is that you lie in the dark being someone who is trying very hard, which is more someone, not less. The self cannot pull its own hands off the keys. That is the whole problem with the self. It is the one knot that cannot untie itself, because it is the thing doing the tying.

She needed a door she did not control. She needed to go partway through the thing, on purpose, in a safe room, with someone steady to call her back — and she needed it to be real, a real crossing and a real coming-home, not a thought she could think her way out of. She lay in the dark and understood that she was describing something she had spent four summers standing at the edge of, in the rain, in her good shoes, laughing at the gravest face she had ever seen.

9.

“No,” Dell said.

They were at the edge of his flooded low place. It was the last week of October and the monsoon was long over; the water was a memory in the cracked mud; the toads were back under the ground, every one of them, sealed in their clay rooms, waiting out the dry the way they waited out everything, by not being present for it. So there was no singing. There was just the two of them and the cold coming up off the desert and the thing she had driven out to ask, which she had asked plainly, because she did not know how to ask it any other way.

“You don’t even know what I’m asking for,” she said.

“I’ve known you four years,” he said. “I knew what you were asking for when your car turned off the road.” He was not looking at her the extra half-second now. He was looking at the mud. “You want the toad.”

“I want what the toad makes.”

“Same thing, from where it’s standing.” He put his hands in his pockets. “You know what I do out here, Marian. You’ve watched me do it. I run them off. The kids with the buckets, the fella with the website, the two from Phoenix last July with a cooler and a pair of kitchen tongs, God help us. I have spent fifteen years being the most hated man among the people who want this thing, and now you’re going to stand in my mud and be one of them.”

“I’m not one of them.”

“No,” he agreed. “You’re worse. Because I can say no to a kid with a bucket and sleep fine. I run him off, he goes home, he tells it as a story at a party. You I have to say no to knowing exactly what you’ve got coming, and that’s a different kind of night’s sleep, and you knew that, and you came out here and asked me anyway.” He said it without heat. That was the thing about Dell; he never had any heat; he was the driest man she had ever known and the kindest, and she had never once, until that moment, seen the two things be the same thing. “That’s the asking-est thing anybody ever asked me.”

She did not apologize. She had thought about whether she would apologize on the drive out and decided she would not, because it would have been a way of making him feel better for her sake, and she was done, she had decided, spending her strength making other people comfortable about what was happening to her. She had a limited supply left and she was going to spend it on the truth.

“It’s not a thrill,” she said. “You know it’s not a thrill. I’m not going to see God and dine out on it. I’m sixty-four and I have until the rains, if I’m lucky, and I am not afraid of being dead, Dell, I’ve looked and I’m not, I promise you I’m not. I’m afraid of the part where I have to let go. The actual —” and here, to her fury, her voice did a thing, and she stopped, and made it behave, and went on. “The actual instant. The hands off the keys. I’ve been holding on my whole life. I don’t know how to not. And nobody gets to practice it, that’s the cruelty of the whole arrangement, you get exactly one try and you have to get it right cold.” She looked at the cracked mud where the water had been. “Except that you don’t. Except that there’s a door out here that opens in fifteen minutes, and a man who knows how to sit beside it, and I am asking him, as his friend, to let me practice the one thing nobody’s supposed to get to practice. Before the real one comes and I meet it like a coward.”

Dell was quiet a long time.

“You wouldn’t be a coward,” he said finally. “Whatever happens. I want that on the record first. Scared isn’t coward. I’ve sat with scared. Scared is just the body telling the truth.”

“You’ve sat with scared,” she repeated.

And he told her, then, standing in the cold with his hands in his pockets, that she was not the first. That a handful of times, over the years — he would not say how many and she did not push — people at the very end had found their way to him the way she had, not the bucket people, the other kind, and that he had turned most of them away and not all of them, and that the ones he had not turned away had all wanted the same thing she wanted, though not one of them had been able to name it as plainly as she just had. They had not wanted to escape the dying. They had wanted to go and meet it once while they still could, and come back, and know. And he had sat beside every one of them, and called every one of them home,

and he carried them, she understood, the way he carried the toads, as a thing it had fallen to him to keep watch over, out here past where the pavement gave up, where the county didn't look and the sacred-talk crowd never thought to.

"I don't say the words they like to say about it," he warned her. "The ancient this, the medicine that. People come out here wanting a shaman and they get a seventy-year-old man with a bad hip who used to fix air conditioners. I'll tell you what it is and I'll tell you what it isn't and I won't tell you it's holy, because I don't know that it's holy, I know that it's *big*, and those aren't the same, and the people who can't tell them apart are the ones who get hurt."

"Tell me what it isn't, then," she said.

"It isn't a cure," he said. "It won't buy you a day. It isn't a trip, it isn't pretty, mostly, it's not colors and fractals, that's the other stuff. This one —" he searched for it, a dry man reaching past his own dryness — "this one takes you out of the room and takes the room and takes you, the whole you, your name and all, and for a little while there's just —" He stopped. "No. I won't tell you that part. I'd get it wrong and you'd go in looking for what I told you instead of looking at what's there. That's the worst thing a sitter can do. I'll tell you the one thing that matters and then I'll shut up about it." He looked at her then, the full look, the extra half-second and more. "You will not be the one who went in. Coming back. You understand me? Every time, a little. It doesn't give the whole of you back. Nobody tells the bucket kids that, and that's the real reason I run them off — not the toads, the toads can spare it, it's the *kids* can't spare it. So before you ask me again, you sit with that. You're a woman trying to learn how to let go of yourself. This thing will teach you by taking some, and not giving it back, and you don't get to pick which."

"I know," she said. "That's why I want it."

And that, in the end, was the sentence that did it. Not the dying, and not the friendship, and not the fear. It was that she had understood the cost and named it as the reason, and Dell, who had spent fifteen years keeping this thing from people who wanted it for the wrong reasons, had finally met someone who wanted it for the

only reason he thought was any good at all: to practice losing the thing we are all, in the end, required to lose.

“The rains,” he said. “Not before. You’ll want to be as strong as you’ve got, and I’ll want the toads up, I won’t —” a flicker ” — I keep what I keep put back, where it comes from, when it’s over. That’s a rule. You come out when they come out. July.”

It was the last week of October. July was most of what she had.

“All right,” she said. “July. Will you teach me till then?”

“There’s nothing to teach,” he said. “That’s the hell of it. There’s only the going. But I’ll sit with you while you wait, if that’s a thing that’d help.”

It was. It was the thing that helped most. For the whole long dry winter and the long dry spring, through the worst of what the illness did to her, while the desert held its breath and the toads lay sealed in the ground and she herself got slowly lighter and stranger in her own house, she drove out to the low place two and three nights a week, and stood with Dell at the edge of where the water would come back, and waited for the rain, which was the one thing in her life that had ever come exactly as promised. The two of them, waiting out the dry. She told him once that she felt like one of his toads. He said the toads had the right idea and she said she thought so too.

10.

She went in for the first time on the eighth of July, the night after the rains broke, with the singing all around them in the dark.

She had thought she would be frightened, at the threshold, and she was not. That surprised her, and she turned it over, waiting, lying back on the cot Dell had set up under the salvaged-window greenhouse with the rain loud on the mismatched glass, and she decided that it was because, for the first time in a very long time, she was doing exactly the thing she had chosen, at the time she had chosen, with someone she trusted keeping watch — and that this, the chosenness of it, was the opposite of the thing she was afraid of. The thing she was afraid of was the involuntary one. This she had an appointment for. She had always been able to do the things she had an appointment for.

She did not tell her daughter. We will come to the daughter. That night there was no daughter, there was only Marian and Dell and the toads and the rain, and Dell crouched beside the cot with his bad hip and his dog lying across his feet, and he did the small offstage things a sitter does, the things this book will not describe because they are not the point and because describing them is how the bucket people get made, and then he sat back on his heels and said, “It’s quick. It won’t be like you can brace for it. Don’t fight the first part, the first part always feels like dying because it is a little bit like dying, that’s the whole point, that’s what you came for. I’ll be right here. I’ll say your name. When I say your name you don’t have to come, but you’ll know the way.”

“How will I know the way?”

“My voice is the way,” he said. “That’s all a sitter is. A voice that stays on this side.” And then, because he was Dell, he added, dry even here, “Don’t worry about the toads. Nobody’s licking anybody. We’re very respectable out here,” and she was still smiling at that when it took her, so that the last thing on her face, going over, was not fear.

She had asked him, in the spring, how a person was supposed to think about it, going in, and he had said the thing that she carried over the threshold like a coin in the hand. *Think of it as walking out onto a stage,* he’d said, because she’d told him about the recitals. *You’ve done it a thousand times. You stand in the wings, and you’re yourself, little and scared and holding your music, and then you walk out — and the lights are so bright you can’t see the room. You can’t see a single face. You know they’re out there. But it’s just you and the light, and the person you were in the wings doesn’t matter anymore, there’s only the playing. Go out past the lights. That’s all it is. Walk out past the lights.*

11.

It was like walking out past the lights.

She would try, afterward, to tell it to Dell, and this is close to how she told it, that first time, when she could still tell it in sentences, before the later crossings took the sentences too:

It was like the wings, she said. There was a moment in the dark that was exactly the wings — the loud rain was the murmur of a house full of people, and she was little and scared and holding her music, which was her whole self, her name and her sixty-four years and the shut door and the daughter she did not speak to and Ray who had left and the thing she would not say, all of it held against her chest like sheet music, and she was about to have to go on.

And then she went on, and the lights came up, and they were so bright they were not even bright anymore, they were simply everything, and she could not see a single face, and — this was the part her voice kept failing at — *she could not see her hands.* She looked for her hands, to begin, the way you look for your hands at the keys, and there were no hands. There was no her to have hands. The person in the wings, the little scared one holding all that music, had not come out onto the stage. Could not. That was the rule of this stage, she understood, the rule nobody had told her: you may come to the edge of the light as someone, but you cross into it as no one. The music she had been holding against her chest was simply gone, not torn away, not lost, just — set down, in the wings, by someone who was no longer there to have set it down.

Time went first, or time went with everything, she couldn't say; there was no *before this part* and *after this part*, there was no part, there was no sequence for a part to sit in. Her body she had already lost in the wings. The world — the greenhouse, the rain, the mismatched glass, Dell, the dog, the desert, the planet — did not go dark and did not go away; it was more that it stopped being *around* her, because around requires a center, and the center was what was dissolving. And the *her*, the one doing the seeing, the one she had watched all her life from that slight distance — that thinned, and thinned, and she felt it thinning and was not afraid, which was the strangest thing of all, that the one event she had organized her entire life to prevent was happening to her and she was not afraid, she was *interested*, she was watching her own self go out like a held note at the end of a long diminuendo, softer, softer, the bow still moving but the sound already more silence than sound —

She told Dell it was a plus three, when she could talk. He asked her, gently, because he always asked, on a scale, and she knew the scale, she was a teacher, she understood at once what the numbers

were for. A three, she said. I could still tell exactly what was happening. I just couldn't have stopped it, and I didn't want to.

She did not tell him, that first time, about the rest. She would not be able to, for a while. Because a plus three was as far as she got, that first night. She came up at three. And the reason she came up — the thing that reached into the diminuendo and would not let the note go all the way to silence — was not Dell's voice, and not fear, and not the illness.

It was that she saw, at the very edge of the thinning, in the place where there should have been nothing because there was no light left to make anything —

a shadow.

12.

You have to understand about shadows, in that country, or you will not understand what it meant.

In the desert the light is a hammer. Everything that stands up out of the ground throws a shadow so black and so exact that children think they can pick it up by the edge. The saguaro lays its long blue self across the caliche at evening like a thing drawn with a ruler. Marian's own shadow had walked in front of her and behind her every day of forty-one years, hard-edged, faithful, the one companion the desert never took away. A shadow, where she came from, was the most ordinary fact there was. It only meant one thing. It meant: *here is something standing up, and here is the light, and here is the dark the something makes by being in the light's way.*

But in the place past the lights there was no light. That was the whole nature of it. There was no sun, no lamp, no bright and no dim, nothing standing anywhere to be in anything's way — there was the great clear edgeless everything, and it was lit by nothing and lit all through, the way she imagined, afterward, the inside of a pearl might be lit, and in a place with no light a shadow is not frightening because it is dark.

A shadow in a place with no light is frightening because it is *impossible.*

And there it was. Off at the edge of the thinning — except there were no edges, so it was not at the edge, it was simply *there*, the way a wrong note is simply there in a room, instantly, before you've located it — a single column of dark. A standing dark. It had no features. It was the plain black shape a person makes between you and a doorway when you come down a hall at night and someone is standing at the far end. It did not glow and it was not lit and nothing cast it, and it was the only dark thing in all that light, and it was shaped, unmistakably, like a person.

And she was no one, by then, she had almost finished going out — but the almost-nothing that was left, the last thin reed of her, turned toward the standing dark the way you turn toward a sound in a house you thought was empty, and in that turning she felt the first thing she had felt since the wings, and it was not fear exactly, it was older than fear, it was the specific full-body lurch of *recognition without a name* — the certainty that you know a face a half-second before you can say from where —

and the standing dark, which had been still, which had been as still as the toad in Dell's two hands, moved.

It did not move toward her. It did not reach. It only — turned its head. The suggestion of a head, on the suggestion of a shape, turned, the small human turning of a person who has heard their name and is about to answer to it.

And Marian, who was almost no one at all, who had almost finished the thing she came to practice, who was one held note from the silence at last — came up.

She tore back up through all of it, through the thinning in reverse, the reed of her thickening horribly into a self, the self falling back down into a body, the body assembling around her wet and heavy and aching on a cot under a glass roof in the rain, and the first thing, the very first thing, before the rain, before her own name, before Dell's hand already on her shoulder and Dell's voice already saying *there you are, there you are, I've got you, there you are* — the first thing was her own voice, ragged, out loud, in the greenhouse, asking the one question that would own the rest of her life:

"Who was that?"

13.

“You saw something,” Dell said. Not a question. He had a cup of water against her lip and his dog’s chin was on the edge of the cot and the rain was easing.

“There was someone there.” Her teeth were going. She was freezing and the night was warm. “In the — there’s no light, Dell, there’s no light anywhere in it, and there was a *shadow*, there was somebody standing —”

“All right,” he said.

“There can’t be a shadow. There’s nothing to make one.”

“All right,” he said again, and he pulled the blanket up, and he did not tell her she had imagined it, and he did not tell her what it was, and she would understand, later, that both of those silences were the same gift, the gift of a man who had sat beside this thing enough times to know that it did not take kindly to being explained, and that the people who got hurt were the ones who went in the second time looking for what someone had told them the first time.

But she saw his face. She was a teacher; she had spent thirty-six years reading the faces of children who were about to lie to her about their scales; she could read a face. And Dell’s dry kind unsurprised face, when she said *there was somebody standing*, did a thing it had not done in four years of friendship. For just a moment — the extra half-second, but inward, turned the other way — it closed. Something went behind a door in it. And she knew, the way she knew a wrong note, that Dell had sat beside this thing more times than he would say, and that he had heard *who was that* before, from more than one of the ones at the very end, and that he knew something about the standing dark that he was never, ever going to tell her, because the only way to learn it was to go back.

“That’s enough for one night,” was all he said.

But she was already somewhere past enough. She lay under the blanket with her teeth chattering in the warm wet dark while the last of the toads sang the valley full, *I’m here, I’m here, who’s there, I’m here,* and she was not thinking about the letting-go, which she had come to practice, and she was not thinking about the diminuendo, the beautiful terrible going-out that she had wanted

and almost had. She was thinking about a standing dark in a place with no light, turning its head, about to answer to its name.

She had come to the desert to practice losing herself.

She understood, lying there, that she was going to go back for a different reason entirely. A worse one. The oldest one there is.

She was going back to find out who was waiting.

THE CLEAR LIGHT

Before there was a scale of the wind with his name on it — before every sailor on earth learned to read the sea off a card that runs from *calm* to *hurricane* in his numbers — Francis Beaufort was a boy who fell in the water and could not get out.

He was young. It was in a harbour, in England, and he went under, and he did the thing a body does, which is to fight, to claw, to spend itself against the one direction that will not give. And then the fighting stopped. He was very clear, afterward, writing it down as an old man for a friend who had asked him, that the stopping was not despair and was not giving up. It was that the terror simply ran out, the way a wave runs out up a beach, and what came in behind it, filling the space the terror left, was a calm so complete and so unexpected that he spent the rest of a long and practical life unable to explain it and unwilling to pretend he could.

And in that calm, he said, his whole life came back to him. Not in a line, not one thing after another the way we tell it, but all at once, or nearly — a vast still picture in which every event of all his years was somehow present together, the large and the small given the same even light, a boy's cruelties and a boy's kindnesses laid side by side with no more weight on the one than the other, the whole of a life spread out flat and clear and entire, the way a country looks from very high up, where you cannot see which road anyone is on but you can see, at last, that it is all one country.

He did not die. They pulled him out, and worked on him, and the water came back up out of him, and the terrible machinery of being someone reassembled itself around the quiet, and he went on to measure the wind for the rest of the world. But he never got over the quiet. That is the thing worth sitting with. A man who spent his life putting numbers to the one force nobody can hold still — the wind, the weather, the sea — had been, once, for the length of a held breath under the water, somewhere with no number on it at all, and he knew it was real, and he knew it was waiting, and from

the evidence of how he wrote it down fifty years later, he was not, in the end, afraid of going back.

The people who go out past the lights in a desert greenhouse, in the rain, say the same thing about the calm. They say the struggle has a far side. They say that on the far side of the struggle there is not nothing, which is what the struggle is so afraid of, but a stillness that holds everything you ever were at once, in one even light, and asks nothing of you, and was there the whole time, under the water, under the day, under the fight.

What none of them can agree on, what Beaufort's calm letter does not mention and the desert ones can hardly be made to speak of, is whether, in that even light where the whole of a life lies spread out flat and clear —

there is anyone else there.

Standing. Where no one could stand.

Waiting to be known.

III. THE WAITING ONE

14.

Dana came in the third week of July, because a cousin told her, because Marian would not have.

That was the first fight, and they had it on the phone before Dana had even booked the flight — that Marian had been dying since October and had let her daughter find out from a cousin in Bakersfield at a christening. Marian took the fury standing in her kitchen with the phone held a little away from her ear, and she did not defend herself, because there was no defence; she had not told Dana for the same reason she had not told Dana anything in thirty years, which was that somewhere very deep in her a wire had been cut, the wire that runs between a mother and the child she has left, and no current had crossed it in so long that she had stopped feeling the place where it was severed. She had meant to call. She had meant to call for thirty years. The meaning-to had become, like the shut door at the end of the hall, simply the shape of the house.

Dana flew into Tucson on a Thursday into the full weight of the monsoon, the thunderheads stacked gold and black over the mountains, the smell of the creosote coming through the rental car's vents, and she arrived at the house angry and stayed angry, which Marian understood to be the correct response and could not tell her so, because telling a furious person they are right to be furious is only one more way of managing them, and Marian had sworn off managing.

She was forty-three. She had her father's hands and her mother's straight back and a way of going very still and quiet when she was most upset that Marian recognized with a pain she had no right to, because it was her own stillness, the stillness she had taught the girl without meaning to, across a kitchen, in the years after, when stillness was the only thing left in the house to learn.

They were careful with each other. That was the terrible thing, the thing that Dana could not forgive and Marian could not fix: they were *careful*, like two people who have been in an accident together and now meet at the hearings. Dana moved into her old room, which was not the shut room — Dana's room was the ordinary one, the one with her band posters long since painted over — and she took over the things a dying woman needs taken over, the pills and

the appointments and the forms, and she did them with a brisk competence that was itself a kind of accusation, because it said, in every sorted pill and every phone call made, *I would have done this the whole time. You never let me. You went somewhere I couldn't follow and you took my brother's name with you and you shut the door, and I was thirteen, and I have been thirteen in some room of myself ever since, waiting for you to come back out.*

She did not say it. She sorted the pills. And in the evenings, two or three evenings a week, her mother got in the car and drove off into the desert, and did not say where, and came back in the small hours changed — lighter, stranger, with a thing behind her eyes like a woman half-turned toward a sound in another room — and Dana sorted the pills and said nothing and lay in her painted-over childhood room and listened for the car.

15.

Because by then Marian was going in whenever Dell would let her.

The rains were short that year and fierce, and the toads came up in their thousands, and all through the back half of July and into August, on the nights the desert sang, she lay on the cot under the salvaged-glass roof and walked out past the lights, and each time she went a little further, and each time she came back with a little less.

Dell had told her it would be this way and she had thought she understood and she had not. It was not that she lost memories, exactly, not the way you lose keys. It was subtler and worse. It was that things came back from the far side slightly unfastened. The first crossing took a word — she reached, two days after, for the name of the yellow bird that came to the feeder, the common one, the one she had known for forty years, and it was simply not there, not on the tip of the tongue, just gone, a clean small hole in the floor of her where a word had been. The second crossing took the feeling of the metronome. She came home and wound it, out of habit, and set it going, that dry wooden *tock . . . tock . . . tock* that had governed thirty-six years of her life, and it meant nothing to her. It was a stick hitting the air. The thing it had always carried — the sense that time could be held, divided, mastered, that you could stand over the passing seconds with a key in your hand and make

them behave — that had come unfastened on the far side and not come back, and she stood in the quiet front room and listened to the little wooden arm beat time at the empty air and felt nothing but a far-off tenderness for the woman who had believed in it.

And she tried, those weeks, to carry the song in with her. It was the one thing she thought she could hold onto crossing over — his song, the round, the lullaby she had made for a frightened boy out of the three sounds of the monsoon night. She would start it in the wings, going under, the way you hum going into the dark, *hush on the tin, hush on the tin, coming home, coming home* — and she would carry it out onto the stage like a coin in her fist, the one thing that was hers —

and the stage took it. Every time. The words came apart in her hands the way they had always, secretly, been meant to. *Hush on the tin* lost the tin, and then lost the hush, and became only a soft repeating pulse with no word on it; *coming home* lost the home and then lost the coming and became a long low rolling with no edges; *I'm here, I'm here* lost the *here* and lost the *I* — lost the *I* — and became just a bare presence saying itself over and over into the light with no one left to say it and no one left to say it to. The song did in the white exactly what she did in the white. It dissolved into pure rhythm and breath, and she understood, somewhere past understanding, that she had built the boy a song thirty years ago that was secretly a map of the very place she was now going, that she had been singing the dissolution to a child in a dark bedroom and calling it comfort, and the knowing of that would have broken her if there had been enough of her left, in there, to break.

She came up at a plus three, and then a plus three that frightened Dell, and then, one night in the second week of August, a plus four — the rare one, the one that may never come again — and she did not tell Dana any of it, and she did not tell Dell quite all of it, because every single time, now, closer and closer, there was the standing dark.

16.

Dana followed her on a Tuesday.

She had meant to confront her and had not had the courage, three evenings running, and so she did the coward's brave thing instead and followed the car at a distance out past where the pavement gave up, and parked on the road with her lights off, and walked down the dirt track toward the low place in the dark with her phone in her fist like a weapon, already dialing the first two digits in her head, already composing the sentence she would say to the police, because what else could it be, a dying woman driving into the desert at midnight to a strange old man's compound — and she came over the little rise above the flooded low place and stopped.

Her mother was lying on a cot under a greenhouse made of mismatched windows, lit gold from a lamp somewhere inside, and an old man was kneeling beside the cot with a dog across his feet, not touching her, just kneeling there with his head bowed close to hers, and he was — talking, or singing, very low, a steady murmur that carried out over the water under the enormous sound of the toads, and Dana came close enough through the dark to hear that he was saying her mother's name. Just that. Over and over, patient as the rain. *Marian. Marian. I'm here, Marian. You know the way. Marian.* A voice staying on this side.

And her mother, on the cot, was not high and was not harmed and was not anything Dana had a word for. Her mother was gone. Her face was the face of someone under deep water, slack and far and lit from a long way off, and the only thing moving was her hands, which were going on the blanket, very slightly, the small specific movements of a woman playing, the left hand and the right, up and down an instrument that was not there, and Dana stood in the dark over the low place and understood that she was watching her mother do, on purpose, for reasons she could not begin to guess, the exact thing Dana had flown across two states dreading: she was watching her mother leave.

She did not call the police. She waited, shaking, in the dark, through the fifteen minutes and the long slow terrible coming-back, the thickening, the first ragged breath, the old man's hand already there, *there you are, there you are, I've got you* — and she heard her mother surface, and she heard the first thing her mother said, the thing her mother said every time now, the thing she would hear in her sleep for the rest of her life:

“Was he closer?”

And the old man, very gently: “I don’t know, Marian. I can’t see him. Only you can see him.”

And her mother, weeping, with a joy in it that was the worst part, the joy was the worst part: “He was closer. Dell, he was so close. I almost — he almost —”

Dana stepped into the lamplight then, because she could not not, and said, in the stillness that was her mother’s own stillness handed back to her across thirty years, “Who. Who was closer, Mom. Who are you going out there to find.”

17.

They had it out in the greenhouse, the three of them, while the toads sang the valley full and Dell sat back on his heels and let them, because he knew, the way he knew everything, that this was a thing that had been waiting thirty years to be said and that no sitter had any business sitting between a mother and a daughter when it finally came.

Dana knew about Jamie. That was the thing Marian kept forgetting, in her private cathedral of the shut door — that she was not the only one who had lost him. Dana had been thirteen. Dana had been *there*, in the house, that August, the summer the storms came up so hard and fast that the wash behind the house went in minutes from a dry seam in the ground to a brown roaring thing wider than the street, the way the desert washes do, the way the signs all warn you and the tourists never believe until it is too late. Jamie was ten. He had gone out in it. Nobody ever knew exactly why — to see it, probably, the way a ten-year-old goes to see a wonder, the brown water where the dry had been — and the bank had given, or he had slipped, and the wash had taken him the way it takes a branch, and they had found him a mile and a half down, the next morning, when the water laid itself back down into the ground as if nothing had happened, as if it had only been passing through, as if it had only been, as the song said, water going home.

And Marian had not grieved. That was the thing Dana had flown across two states carrying, the thing thirty years had packed down hard and bright as caliche. Their mother had not fallen apart, had

not wept, had not raged, had done none of the things that would have let a thirteen-year-old girl fall apart beside her. Their mother had gone *still*. She had organized the funeral with a terrible competence. She had shut the door at the end of the hall and never opened it. She had sent Dana back to school in September with her lunch made. She had gone on teaching other people's children the piano, including — Dana's voice broke on this, finally, the brisk competence gone, the thirteen-year-old right there in the lamplight at last — *including his song*, the lullaby, year after year, teaching it to stranger after stranger, and stopping, every time, at the same bar, closing the lid, so that in thirty years not one living soul had heard how it ended, because the end of it was the morning, and in the morning you opened the door and counted everyone home, *and you*, and there was no *and you* anymore, there was a mile and a half of wash and a boy who did not come home, and their mother had decided, with the full force of the most practical woman anyone knew, that if she could not finish the song then she would simply never finish anything again, would never let go of anything again, would hold every note of her life forever rather than once, ever, let a thing she loved go down the water without her consent —

and had lost her daughter doing it. That was the part Marian had never let herself count. She had shut the door on a dead son and a living daughter both, because the living one had his eyes, because the living one was a thing she could still lose, and you cannot lose what you have already let go of, and so she had let go of Dana in advance, had put her down gently in the wings thirty years early, to spare herself the wings.

"And now you're dying," Dana said, in the gold light, with the toads roaring, "and you've got four months, Mom, you've got *four months*, and I came, I actually came, I'm *here* —" and the word landed in the greenhouse like a struck bell, *I'm here*, the toad's word, the song's word, and none of them missed it " — and you spend your nights out here going somewhere I can't follow to find *him.* Still. After everything. You get four months and a daughter in the house and you spend it the exact same way you spent the last thirty years. Reaching past me. For him."

And Marian, who had sworn off managing, who had nothing left to defend herself with and would not have if she had, said the only

true thing she had, which was not a defence and did not help and was the center of the whole book:

“I never got to say goodbye to him.” She was crying now too, the joy gone, only the thirty years left. “I never got to say goodbye to either of you. I just — one of you went down the water and the other one I put down early so it wouldn’t hurt, and I was wrong, Dana, I know I was wrong, I’ve known for thirty years and I didn’t know how to stop, you can’t stop in the middle, there’s no —” and here the teacher came up in her, helplessly, the woman who had believed her whole life that anything can be learned if you go slow enough and do it again ” — there’s no *practice* for it. That’s all I ever wanted. One rehearsal. One. The thing out there —” she gestured at the dark, the water, the singing ” — it lets me go almost all the way to where he is and come back. And he’s *there*, Dana. I don’t care if it’s real. I’ve stopped caring if it’s real. He’s there, and he’s waiting, and he’s not ten, he’s —” she stopped, because she had never said this part out loud, had never let herself all the way know it ” — he’s grown. He’s a grown man. He’s the age he’d be. He’s been waiting out there to be the age he’d be, and I almost reached him, and I am going to keep going out there until I do, because I am going to get to say goodbye to my son if it is the last thing this body does. Which,” she said, with the flat clear accuracy she had carried all her life, “it very well may be.”

And Dana looked at her mother for a long time in the gold light, and something moved in her face that was not forgiveness, that was too tired and too old to be forgiveness, but was in the same family as forgiveness, a cousin of it — and she said the thing that turned the book toward its end, the thing that was crueler and kinder than anything the toad had shown her mother yet:

“He’s grown because you grew him, Mom. In your head. For thirty years. That’s not Jamie out there.” She was not saying it to wound. She was saying it because she loved her, Marian understood later, she was saying the hardest true thing because that was the only kind of thing left worth saying between them. “Jamie was ten. Jamie is ten and he’s gone and you don’t get a grown-up goodbye with him because he never got to be grown up, that’s what *taken* means. The man out there in the dark —” her voice was shaking ” — the man out there is you. It’s just you, Mom. It’s the you that didn’t get to

raise him. You're going out into the desert every night to say goodbye to yourself."

18.

Dell drove them home that night, both of them, in his old truck, because neither of them could, and he did not say one word the whole way, and his silence was the kindest thing in it.

Marian lay awake until the light came up gray and then gold over the Rincons. She was thinking about what Dana had said, turning it the way she turned everything, from a slight distance, watching herself be unable to put it down.

Because the terrible thing was that Dana was right, and the more terrible thing was that it did not matter that Dana was right. That was what the toad had been teaching her, crossing by crossing, under all the dissolution and the dread: that *real* and *not real* were a distinction that belonged to the daytime, to the world of edges, to the woman with the metronome who believed you could stand over a thing with a key in your hand and make it behave. Out past the lights there were no edges, and where there are no edges there is no line between the son who drowned and the grief that wore his face, between the boy taken at ten and the man she had grown in the dark for thirty years, between Jamie and the part of herself that had gone down the water with him and never come up. Dana thought she was choosing between a real goodbye and a false one. But the standing dark was not real and was not false. It was the thing itself — her love for him, which had never had anywhere to go, which had stood in the dark of her for thirty years exactly where she had left it, shaped like a person, waiting to be known, throwing no shadow because there was no light in there to throw one, the only dark thing in all that light because it was the one thing in her she had never let the light touch.

She was going out into the desert to meet her own ungrieved love for her dead son, grown as large as thirty years could grow it, and it was going to turn around, very soon now, one or two crossings more, and show her its face.

And she was almost certainly going to die doing it. She knew that cleanly, lying in the gold light. The body had very little left. The

crossings cost more than the illness now. Dell had started to look at her, at the edge of the low place, with a new thing in his dry kind face, and she knew what it was, because she had worn it herself, in another life, for other people's children: it was the look of a person deciding how many more times he can in good conscience open a door.

She had a choice to make, and she made it the way she had made every choice in her careful life, lying still and looking at it from a slight distance until it stopped being frightening and became simply a thing that was true:

She could spend what was left in the house, with the living one. With Dana, who had come, who was here, who had said *I'm here* in a greenhouse and meant it as the accusation it was and the gift it was both. She could give her daughter four months of a mother who had finally come back out of the shut room. That was one thing she could do with the end of her life, and it was a good thing, maybe the only unambiguously good thing left on the menu, and some part of her that was still a mother knew it.

Or she could go back out into the desert, one or two more times, as far as the body would carry her and a step past that, and reach the standing dark, and look at the face of her grown son, and say the goodbye she had owed for thirty years — and lose, almost certainly, the four months, and the house, and the chance to come back out of the room for Dana, because the crossing that finally reached him would be, she understood now with the flat clear accuracy that had never once failed her, the crossing she did not come back from.

The living daughter in the house. The dead son in the light.

She lay in the gold morning and understood that she had spent her whole life refusing to choose which thing she would let go of, and that the refusing had been the thing all along, the metronome, the shut door, the unfinished song — and that the desert, in its terrible patience, in the one language it had, the language with no edges and no mercy and no lie in it, was finally going to make her choose.

THE CLEAR LIGHT

The man who did more than anyone to bring word back from these places — who stood up in front of rooms full of people for twenty years and tried, in plain funny exact language, to carry the uncarryable home — spent most of his wonder on a different door than this one.

His door was the crowded door. The one his cousin molecule opens: the door that leads not to emptiness but to a riot of *somethings* — a place he said was full, impossibly full, of jeweled machines and self-transforming objects and small chattering intelligences that seemed to be waiting for you, that seemed delighted you had come, that sang and juggled language in front of you like a troupe of acrobats who had been rehearsing your whole life for your arrival. He is the reason a certain word gets used for that place and its little inhabitants, and this imprint has told that door's story already, in another book, and will not spoil it here by saying which. The point is that he loved it. He thought it was the most interesting place a human being could go, because it was so *full*, because there was so much there, because you came back with your arms full of impossible things to try to describe.

And then there was the near cousin. The other molecule, almost the same molecule — a breath apart in the making, the two of them close kin, cousins of the same chemical family, cousins of the very stuff the brain uses to make a mood — and it opens a door that is the exact opposite of the crowded one, and it unsettled him, and he said so. Because where his beloved door opens onto *everything*, the cousin's door opens onto *nothing* — not a nothing of darkness, a nothing of pure light, a white, a silence, a place with no jeweled machines and no chattering intelligences and no acrobats of language, because there is no one there to perform for and, in the end, no one there at all. He was wary of it. He, who was afraid of almost nothing in those territories, who went where others would not and came back grinning — he was wary of the white door, and the reason he gave was the plainest and strangest reason there is:

that there was *nothing to bring back.* No elves to report. No machines to describe. Nothing to put your arms around and carry home, because the thing that door does is take the arms, and the carrying, and the home, and the you. You cannot bring the white back the way you can bring back a story about acrobats. You can only have been there, and not have been there, both at once, and try to live afterward with the fact that the biggest thing that ever happened to you is the one thing you have no souvenir of at all.

Here is the wonder worth sitting with, the one he'd have wanted sat with. Two molecules, cousins, nearly twins. One of them opens onto the most crowded room in the universe, and the other opens onto the emptiest, and they are kin, a hair's breadth apart, grown in the same green and animal places the brain is grown in. One gives you everything and sends you home with your arms full. The other gives you the one thing that cannot be held, by taking the hands that would have held it.

The woman in this book is walking, every rainy night, toward the second door.

She does not want to come home with her arms full.

She wants to learn how to let go, and she has found the one teacher in all the world that teaches nothing else.

IV. THE FACE

19.

She told Dana she was going to stop after one more.

It was half a lie and half the truest thing she had ever said, and she did not know, telling it, which half was which. She meant it the way you mean a thing you want to be true. She was going to go out one more time, all the way, as far as the thing would take her, and reach him, and say the goodbye, and then she was going to stop — and the part she did not say, because she had only just let herself know it, was that the stopping and the reaching might turn out to be the same event, that the one more might stop her whether she chose it or not.

Dana did not believe her, and did not try to stop her, because she had understood, lying awake in her painted-over room, a thing it had taken her thirty years to understand: that you cannot keep a person by standing in their doorway. Her mother had tried that, on a shut door, for three decades, and all it had kept was the mother. So Dana did the other thing, the harder thing, the thing her mother had never managed to do for her. She said, “Then I’m coming with you.”

And that was how the living daughter came to be standing at the edge of the flooded low place, in the rain, in the dark, on the nights her mother went out to reach for the dead son — which was the cruelest arrangement the whole cruel summer had made, and also, Dell said, quietly, later, the first right thing any of them had done. Because a sitter is a voice that stays on this side, and her mother had been crossing with only one voice to call her home, and now there were two, and one of them was blood.

20.

Dell made Marian sit with him, the afternoon before, in the greenhouse, in the long gold light, and he told her the truth of the thing. All of it. He had never done that before, with anyone — it was not how he worked, he did not explain, he had told her that the first night — but he did it now, because he had decided she was close to the door she would not come back through, and he would not let her go through it believing anything untrue, not even a kind untruth.

He told her what it was. A thing a desert animal makes, he said — the toad, the gravest-faced creature God ever built, which spends its life underground and comes up with the rain and makes, in its own body, as a defense against the things that would eat it, the most powerful substance of its kind known on the earth. Not grown in a garden. Not cooked in a lab. Made by an animal, in the dark, under the ground, for reasons that have nothing to do with us, and we found it anyway, because we find everything.

He told her how we found it, because she asked. There was no ancient secret, he said, and she should mistrust anyone who told her there was. The people who sell this thing love to dress it in feathers, love to say the old desert peoples used it for a thousand years, and the plain honest truth is that nobody has ever found good evidence that anybody used it, for anything, until almost within living memory — until a man, an ordinary man, no shaman, a veteran and an artist who kept to himself, put out a little pamphlet about it from a town in Texas back in the nineteen-eighties, a few stapled pages, and the whole modern business grew up out of those few pages like a weed out of a crack. “It’s younger than I am,” Dell said. “People don’t like to hear that. They want it old. But I’d rather you go in knowing it’s a toad and a pamphlet than go in thinking it’s a thousand years of wisdom, because the toad and the pamphlet are the truth, and the truth is the only thing I’ve got to give you that the bucket people never get.”

He told her what it costs. That it had killed people — not often, but it had, the heart or the breath or the going-in with no one to stay on this side, and worse where someone had mixed it with the wrong medicine, because there are medicines, common ones, the kind a doctor hands a sad person every day, that turn this thing from a door into a noose. He told her that it was not a medicine, whatever anyone called it, that it cured nothing, that it had bought her not one single day and never would. And he told her the last thing, the thing that cost him to say, because it was the thing he loved: that there were fewer of the toads every year now, that the buckets and the coolers and the websites were stripping them off the land faster than the rains could bring them up, that a creature which had survived every drought the desert could throw at it for ten million years was being finished off, in his lifetime, in his own low place, by

people who wanted to feel better about themselves — and that every time he opened the door for someone, even someone he loved, even her, he was spending a little of a thing the world was running out of, and he did it anyway, for her, and he wanted her to know the weight of what she was asking, down to the toad.

“Why tell me all this now,” she said, when he was done. The light was going amber over the mountains.

“Because a person should know exactly what they’re holding,” he said, “before they let go of everything to hold it. That’s all. That’s the whole of what I believe about any of it.” He looked at her the full extra half-second. “And because I think the next one’s the one, Marian. I think you’ve got one more crossing in that body and I think you know it too, and I’ll sit it with you because you’d go alone if I didn’t and that’d be worse, but I wanted you to have the truth in your hands first. The real one. The toad and the pamphlet. Not the feathers.”

21.

The rains came back hard on the last night of August, and she went out, with Dell on one side and Dana on the other, and she walked out past the lights for the last time but one.

And this time the standing dark was close.

It had been coming nearer all summer, crossing by crossing, a column of impossible dark in all that edgeless light, and she had been afraid of it and drawn to it in the same breath, the way you are drawn to the thing you have spent your life not looking at. Now it was near. Now, as the last of her went out, as the song came apart in her hands into pure pulse and breath, as the *I* dissolved out of *I’m here* and left only the bare presence saying itself into the white — now the standing dark was so close that she could have touched it, if there had been a she, if there had been a hand, and it stopped being a column and became, the way a thing resolves when you finally let your eyes rest on it, a shape. A man’s shape. Tall. Standing easy, the way a grown man stands when he is waiting for someone and is not worried, because he knows they are coming. And the almost-nothing that was left of her, the last reed, turned fully toward it, and the standing dark —

turned around.

And it had a face.

She had been afraid, all summer, of what the face would be. She had been afraid it would be the drowned face, the one she had not been let to see, the one they would not let her identify, that they had done for her, a kindness she had never forgiven because it had left her thirty years with a horror her mind supplied in the dark. She had been afraid it would be the ten-year-old's face gone wrong.

It was none of that. It was a grown man's face, a face in its late thirties, a kind, tired, amused, grown face — and it was his. It was unmistakably, impossibly his: she saw the ten-year-old in it the way you see the child in any grown person you have loved from the beginning, the particular set of the brow, the particular mouth that had always, even at ten, looked about to say something dry — he had been a dry child, a watcher, he would have grown up to be a watcher, she saw it all at once, the whole missing life legible in the grown face the way a whole landscape is legible from very high up — and the face looked at her, at the nothing that was her, with a tenderness so total and so adult, so much the tenderness of a grown son for an old mother, that the reed of her that was left simply broke, and she knew him, she knew him, the recognition she had felt the first night as a lurch without a name arrived now with its name, and the name was the oldest word she had, the first word she had ever taught him to read, and she would have said it if there had been a mouth left to say it with —

and he smiled, the dry grown smile, and he did not speak, not yet, there were no mouths and no words yet, but he did a thing that undid her more than any word: he looked at her the way you look at someone who has come a very long way to see you, through great difficulty, when you have been waiting a long time and were beginning to think they might not come — and he let her see that he was glad. That he had been waiting. That the waiting was over.

And then she understood the whole of it, all at once, the way you understand everything in there, flat and total and without mercy: that to go to him, to close the last of the distance, to be with him the way she had come all this way to be with him — she would have to finish going out. She would have to let the last reed dissolve. There

was no reaching him as Marian, because he was not somewhere a Marian could go; he was *in* the white, he was *of* it, he was the white wearing the shape of her love for him, and to be with him she would have to stop being the one who loved him and become the loving itself, edgeless, nameless, everywhere — and in that everywhere he would be hers no longer, because there would be no her for him to be the son of, there would be only the one vast thing loving itself with no parts and no names and no mothers and no sons, and she would have him completely and lose him completely in the identical instant, the way you lose a drop of water by giving it to the sea.

That was the toad's whole truth, the thing under all the dissolution, the thing Dell could not have told her and the song had always known. She could keep him, and not reach him. Or she could reach him, and not keep him. The one thing she could not do, the one thing the white did not offer, was the thing every grieving person on earth has wanted since the first grave: to have him back, and be herself, both, in the daylight world of edges where a mother can hold one particular son.

She hung there, at the last edge, one reed from the sea, her grown son's glad tired face in front of her, and she began to let go of the reed —

and Dell's voice came down into the white, and Dana's came with it, the two voices, one dry and one blood, saying her name from the far side, *Marian, Marian, come back, Mom, come back, Mom, please,* and she felt the reed catch.

22.

She did not go the rest of the way. That night.

She came up — torn up, the way she always came up, the self poured back into the mould like wet concrete, the time and the body and the name clamping down — and she came up weeping, and Dana was holding her, actually holding her, her grown daughter's arms right around her on the cot, and Dell had his hand on her head, and the dog was pressed the whole length of her side, and the toads were roaring the valley full, *I'm here, I'm here, who's there, I'm here,* and Marian lay in the arms of her living child and wept for her dead one, which was a thing she had not done in thirty

years, had not been able to do, had built an entire still careful life around not doing, and now could not stop doing, the thirty years coming out of her all at once in the warm wet dark.

“I saw his face,” she said, when she could. “Dana. I saw his face. He’s — he grew up so *kind.* He would have been — he was going to be such a kind man.”

And Dana, who had flown across two states furious, who had said *that’s not Jamie, that’s you*, who had been right — Dana held her mother tighter and did not say it again. Because she had watched her mother’s face, out there, in the lamplight, during the fifteen minutes. She had watched the slack far-gone face of a woman under deep water meet something, and smile, and she had seen her mother’s grown face, for just a moment, wear an expression Dana had not seen on it in her entire life, not once, not in forty-three years: she had seen her mother look *happy.* Simply, wholly, uncomplicatedly happy, the way the very old are sometimes happy for a moment when they forget, the way Dana imagined her mother must have looked before, in the time Dana was too young to remember, the time before the wash. And whatever that was, whether it was Jamie or the grief that wore his face or the toad or the dying brain or the oldest wish there is — Dana had stopped being able to call it nothing. You do not call nothing the thing that puts that face on your mother.

“I’m not going to tell you not to go back,” Dana said, into her mother’s hair. “I spent the whole drive out here deciding not to. But I need you to hear the thing I came all this way to say, and I need you to hear it before, not after, because there might not be an after.” She was crying now too. “I was thirteen. And I lost him, and then I lost you, in the same summer, and I only ever got to grieve the one of you, because the other one was still making my lunch. So whatever you go out there to say to him —” her voice went, and came back ” — say it to me too. The goodbye. I need one too, Mom. I’ve needed one for thirty years. Don’t go all the way out to the quiet to give it to the one who can’t hear it and leave the one who can without it again.”

And Marian, in the arms of her living daughter, in the roaring dark, understood that she had been given, at the very end, the one thing

the white could never give her: a second child, right here, on this side, in the world of edges, who could still be held, who had come back, who was asking — not to keep her, but to be let go of properly, which is the only thing love can do for the living when the time comes, and the hardest, and the thing Marian had never once managed, for anyone, in her whole careful holding-on of a life.

23.

They opened the door together, the next morning.

The shut door, at the end of the hall. Marian had not been through it in thirty years. Dana had not been through it ever — she had been forbidden it at thirteen and had stopped seeing it as a door by the time she was fifteen, the way Marian had, the way the whole house had agreed to stop seeing it. And on the morning after the face, with the desert washed new and the light coming gold down the hall, the two of them stood in front of it, and Marian put her hand on the knob, and found she could not, and Dana put her hand over her mother's hand, and the two of them turned it together.

It was just a room. That was the thing that broke them both, in the end — not that it was a shrine, because it was not a shrine, Marian had never made it a shrine, she had simply shut it, and so it was just a ten-year-old boy's room with thirty years of dust on it, the bed unmade the way a boy leaves it, a model half-built, a library book thirty years overdue, a drawing taped to the wall going brittle and amber, the ordinary unbearable archaeology of a life that stopped on an ordinary day with no warning because the water came down the wash. And on the little desk, where she had put it the week after and never moved, was the sheet music. His song. The lullaby, in her own hand, the one she had written for him out of the three sounds of the monsoon night, with the last verse, the morning verse, the eight bars no living soul had heard — and Marian picked it up, in the gold light, in the dust, with her living daughter beside her, and she looked at the morning verse for the first time in thirty years, the verse that ended *and count what the night brought home — and you, my love, and you, home to me*, and she did not take her hands off it, and she did not close the lid.

"I'm going out one more time," she said. "Tomorrow night, if the rains hold. And then I'm done, Dana, I swear it to you, one way or

the other I’m done after that — and when I come back, if I come back, I’m going to sit down at that piano, and I’m going to play his song all the way to the end. For you. The part you never heard. I should have played it for you thirty years ago. I should have played it for you the day after. That’s the goodbye I owe the living one, and you’re going to get it, I promise you you’re going to get it, whatever happens out there.”

And Dana, standing in her dead brother’s room with her dying mother and thirty years of dust in the gold light, said the thing that let the book go on to its end:

“Then go get his. And come home and give me mine.”

THE CLEAR LIGHT

A hundred years ago a physician in Dublin began, almost by accident, to write down a thing the nurses had been seeing for as long as there had been nurses and had learned not to mention, because mentioning it got you a certain look.

It was this. That people, at the very end — in the last hours, sometimes the last minutes, when the body is letting go of the business of being a body — very often stop looking at the room. Their eyes go to a corner, or the foot of the bed, or the middle of the air, and they fix there, and their face changes, and they reach. They reach up, or out, with whatever is left to reach with. And if they can still speak, what they say, over and over, across every country and every century anyone has bothered to write it down in, is not that they are afraid. It is that someone has come. Someone they know. Someone, very often, who is already dead — a mother, a husband, a child gone before them — standing where no one is standing, in the plain air at the foot of the bed, come, the dying person says, with a certainty you cannot argue them out of and would be a monster to try, to help. To walk them over. To take them home.

The physician wrote them down, and then others did, carefully, the way you write down anything you cannot explain and will not pretend to — a great cross-country study, decades later, two researchers comparing the last hours of the dying in two nations on opposite sides of the earth, cultures that shared no gods and no stories, and finding the same thing in both: that the hour of death is crowded. That people do not, on the whole, go out alone. That whatever else is or is not true about any of it — and these were careful people, and they said plainly what they could not know — the dying, with a frequency no one has ever quite explained away, spend their last strength reaching for someone only they can see, and go out with a look on their faces that the ones left in the room, holding the cooling hand, describe again and again with the same helpless inadequate word: *recognition.* The look of a person who has seen a face they know.

Make of it what you will. The careful people did not tell you what to make of it and neither will this book. Perhaps it is the dying brain, doing the last kind thing a brain can do, furnishing the empty room with the faces we need so that we do not have to go out into the dark alone. Perhaps it is exactly what it looks like. The honest answer, the only one, is that we do not know, and that the not-knowing is not a reason to look away, because the look on the face is real whatever makes it, and the comfort is real, and the reaching is real, and a thing does not have to be explained to be true.

What every one of these accounts agrees on, across the centuries and the oceans, is the one detail this book has been walking toward since its first page:

that the someone in the light is not a stranger.

that they are known.

that they have been waiting.

and that they have come, at the very last, not to keep the dying one there —

but to take them home.

V. THE MORNING

24.

The rains held, and on the first night of September she went out to the quiet one more time, with Dell on one side and Dana on the other, and this time she did not mean to come back, and this time she did.

Neither of those is quite the truth. The truth is stranger, and it is the only part of the book I am not sure how to tell, because she was only barely there to bring it back, and because what happened out past the lights that last night does not fit in the kind of sentence that has a *before* and an *after* in it. But she told Dana some of it, in the days that were left, in pieces, at the kitchen table, and Dana told Dell, and Dell told it to me the way you tell a thing you have decided to carry, and so here it is, told three times removed and still, I think, true, the way the song was true three removes from the wash.

She lay on the cot under the salvaged windows with the rain loud on the mismatched glass, and Dana held one of her hands and Dell knelt by the other, and the toads filled the valley with the only thing they ever say, and she walked out into the wings for the last time, little and scared and holding her whole self against her chest like sheet music. And this time she did not try to hold onto any of it. That was the thing she had finally learned, in a summer of practice, the thing the metronome and the shut door and the thirty held years had never let her learn: she walked to the edge of the light, and she set the music down, all of it, her name and her sixty-four years and the illness and the house and even, last, hardest, the holding-on itself — and she went out past the lights as no one at all, on purpose, the way she had been afraid her whole life she would have to and would not be able to.

And he was there.

25.

He was there, and he was close, and this time the last reed of her did not break at the sight of him — it simply let go, the way a hand finally lets go of a thing it has gripped so long the fingers have forgotten they are gripping, and she went out the rest of the way into the white, and there was no Marian, and there was no fear, and there was no instant of going, because the instant she had been so afraid of her whole life turned out, when it came, to be the easiest thing there is, the most natural, a note at the end of a diminuendo going at last to the silence it had always been headed for, and the silence was not empty.

He was in it. Or he was it. There were no edges to say which. There were no mouths and no words, there was no one to have a mouth, but there was *knowing*, direct and total, the way you know a thing in a dream before anyone says it, and what she knew, first, flooding the whole white with it, was that there was nothing to forgive. That was the first thing he gave her, before anything else, because he knew it was the thing she had carried longest. Not *I forgive you* — that would have needed a you and a me, and there were none — but something underneath forgiveness, something forgiveness is only the daytime word for: that the account she had been keeping for thirty years, the terrible ledger of the day she did not watch him closely enough, the wash, the not-knowing-why he went out, the not-getting-to-say-goodbye, the putting-Dana-down-early, all of it, the whole thirty-year ledger — had no reader. Had never had a reader. There was no one on the other side of it keeping score, there never had been, there was only this, the white, the one thing loving itself with no parts, and in it her terrible ledger was not forgiven, it was *finished*, it simply stopped being a thing, the way the wash stops being a river when the water lays itself back down into the ground.

And then he showed her the life.

This is the part she could least tell and I will least try to improve. He showed her — not in pictures, there were no pictures, in the direct knowing — the whole of the life he had not been let to have, all of it present at once in the no-time the way a whole life is said to hang present at once before a drowning man: the man he would

have grown into, the dry watchful kind man she had seen in the face, the work he would have done and the people he would have loved and the ordinary Tuesdays of it, forty years of ordinary Tuesdays, present, entire, not as a grief for what was lost but as a *gift*, as if he were saying, *look, Mom, here it is, you don't have to wonder anymore, here is the whole of what the water took, and it was good, and you can stop guarding the door on it now, because I've brought it out to show you, and now you've seen it, and now you can let it go —*

and under all of it, running beneath the whole white the way the brainstem runs under the bright folds of the brain, the way the wash runs under the dry, there was the song.

Her song. His song. The round, the lullaby, the three sounds of the monsoon night she had made kind for a frightened boy. It had come apart in her hands every crossing all summer, dissolved into pure pulse and breath, lost its words the way she lost her name, *hush* losing the hush and *home* losing the home and *I'm here* losing the *here* and the *I* — and now, at the very bottom, out of the dissolve, for the first time in thirty years, it reassembled. The words came back. And it was not her carrying them.

It was him. He was singing it. The morning verse. The eight bars no living soul had heard, the last of the song, the part she had taken her hands off of ten thousand times and closed the lid on, the morning that could not come because he was not in it — he sang it to her, in the white, in the direct knowing that was better than any voice, the whole of it, all the way to the end she had never once reached:

And when the morning comes up gold,
and the wash lies down, and the singing's through,
I'll open your door on the washed-new day
and count what the night brought home —

and here, where she had always stopped, where the lid had always come down, he did not stop. He went on. He gave her the end.

— every toad to its stone, every bird to its tree,
every drop of the rain to the waiting sea —
and you, my love. And you. And you.
Home to me.

26.

And she understood, then, in the instant that had no time in it, that she had had the song wrong for thirty years.

She had thought the morning verse could not be sung because its *and you* was a counting of who came home, and he had not come home, and so the count was broken forever and the song could not end. She had thought *home to me* meant the child home to the mother, the thing the wash had made impossible, the thing she could not say and so could not finish.

But he was singing it *to her.* That was the whole of it, the thing the toad had been carrying her toward all summer in the only language it had. *Home to me* was not the dead child coming home to the living mother. It was the living one being sent home. *And you, my love. And you. Home.* The morning comes up gold, and the wash lies down, and the night is over, and every single thing the night took hold of is let go of now, back to where it lives — the toad to its stone, the rain to the sea, and *you*, you most of all, you back to the house, to the morning, to the washed-new day, to the living, to the one who is still in the house waiting for you. He was not asking her to stay. He had never been waiting for her to come and join him in the quiet. He had been waiting, thirty years, for her to come close enough that he could finally send her *back.*

Go on, Mom, he said, in the direct knowing, with the dry grown amusement she had seen in the face, the kindness that had always, even at ten, looked about to say something true. *You came all this way to learn how to let go, and you kept thinking it was me you had to let go of. It was never me. I was already gone, the easy way, the way the water goes. It was the holding-on you had to put down. And now you have. So go on. You did it. You practiced the whole thing. You're ready.* And then, because he was his mother's son, because she had taught him that anything can be learned if you go slow enough and do it again: *You've got one more thing to go home and play all the way through. Don't take your hands off it this time.*

And she wanted to stay. Of course she wanted to stay. The white was the easiest thing there had ever been, and he was in it, and there was no illness in it and no thirty years in it and no instant to be afraid of anymore because the instant was already behind her,

and every atom of her that was not a mother wanted to dissolve the last of the way and be the loving with no parts, forever, with him.

But he had sung her home. And a mother does the thing her child asks, when the child is right, even when it is the hardest thing, especially then. So she did the one thing she had never once managed in her whole careful holding-on of a life. She let go of the thing she most wanted to keep, on purpose, in love, and she turned back toward the two voices calling her name from the far side of the light, the dry one and the blood one, *Marian, Mom, Marian, come back, come home,* and she went to them. She came home the way the morning comes. She left her son in the white where he had always been and always would be, and she did not lose him, because you cannot lose what you have finally, after thirty years, let go of on purpose — the holding-on was the losing, that was the last thing the toad taught her, that was the thing the song had always known — and she came up.

27.

It nearly killed her, coming up. Dell said afterward it was the closest he had ever sat to the far edge with anyone and had them still come back. There was a long time — a minute, four minutes, a hundred years, the clock and the forever being the same thing seen from two sides of a wall — when the body on the cot did not breathe, and the dog stood up and whined, and Dana was saying *Mom* in a voice that was not a word anymore, and Dell had his hand flat on her chest and his mouth close to her ear saying her name, patient as the rain, a voice staying on this side.

And then she breathed. And the self came back, poured into the mould, the time and the body and the aching and the name, and it was violent and it was total and it was the last time, and she came up with her daughter's face over hers and the rain on the glass and the toads roaring the valley full, and the first thing she said, the thing she said instead of *who was that*, the thing that told Dell before she said another word that it was done, that she would not be coming out to the low place again, was:

"Take me home. I have to play it for her. I promised."

28.

She played it the next afternoon, in the front room, in the gold light, with the shut door at the end of the hall standing open now and the dust still in the air of it.

It cost her nearly everything she had left. Dana had to help her to the bench. Her hands were not good anymore; the illness had been in them for weeks; they shook, and they were cold, and she looked at them in her lap for a moment the way she had looked at them in the white, as if they belonged to someone she had heard about once. And then she put them on the keys, and the strangest thing happened, the thing she had promised eleven frightened children every summer for thirty-six years and never once got to prove so completely herself: the hands knew the way. She had practiced this. Not the dying — the *playing*. Ten thousand hours at this bench, scales and scales and scales, so that one day, when the music she loved finally came and the rest of her was too frightened or too weak or too far gone to find it, the hands would already know the way. And they did. They went into the song, his song, the round made of the three sounds of the monsoon night, and they played it true, shaking and cold and dying, the first verse and the refrain and the second and the third, the whole thing Dana had grown up hearing through the wall, the whole thing that had always, always stopped at the same bar —

and this time the hands did not stop. This time, when they came to the turn where the lid had always come down, they went on, into the morning verse, the eight bars no one in that house had ever heard, and Marian played the morning all the way up gold, and the wash lying down, and the counting of what the night brought home — every toad to its stone, every bird to its tree, every drop of the rain to the waiting sea — and she did not take her hands off the keys, and she played the last line, the one she had carried out of the white, the one he had sung her home with, *and you, my love, and you, and you, home to me*, and she let the last chord ring all the way out into the silence it had always been headed for, and she did not close the lid.

Dana stood by the piano with her hand over her mouth and heard, at forty-three, the end of the song her little brother was put to sleep

with, the end her mother had withheld from the whole world for thirty years because it was the end of everything — and understood that it was not the end of everything, that it had never been, that it had always, secretly, under the grief, been a song about sending the ones you love home in the morning, and that her mother had just, finally, thirty years late and at the cost of nearly all she had left, sung her daughter home too.

That was Dana's goodbye. The living one's. She got it. He had made her mother promise, out in the white, and her mother had kept the promise, and it was the last full thing Marian's hands ever did.

29.

She died eleven days later, in the house, in the first week of the rains' long ending, with the door at the end of the hall standing open and the metronome, which she had asked Dana to wind, going on the upright in the front room, *tock . . . tock . . . tock,* beating its patient time at the empty air.

It did not frighten her. That is the thing I most want you to have, out of all of it, the thing she practiced a whole summer and paid for with the last of herself to be able to give to whoever is listening: when the instant came, the great involuntary one, the letting-go she had organized sixty-four years around never having to do without rehearsal — she had rehearsed it. She knew the way. It came, the diminuendo, the note going soft and soft, the self thinning out the way it had thinned a dozen times on a cot in a greenhouse, and she did not flinch from it, did not recoil the way the old book says most people do, the way she would have, once, before the summer. She had studied the face of it until it was not a stranger. She went to it the way you go out past the lights when you have done it a thousand times — set the music down in the wings, and walked out, little and unafraid, into the thing with no edges, where the morning was already gold, and the wash was already lying down, and someone had already saved her a place, and was already, under everything, beginning to sing.

And the self did not reassemble.

That was the only mercy in it and it was a complete one. There was no coming-up this time, no violent pouring back into the mould, no

time clamping down, no name. The morning she did not reach for the name was the morning she did not have to, and the room was still there, and the light came gold down the hall and into the open door at the end of it, and the little wooden arm went on beating time at the air for no one, slower now, the spring running down, *tock . . . . . tock . . . . . tock,* and there was no one left in the book to be afraid, and no one left to practice, and nothing left to let go of, and the holding-on that had been a whole life was finally, gently, set down in the wings.

30.

Dana was in the kitchen. She had got up to make coffee, because it was morning, because the living have to eat, because thirty years of her mother's terrible competence had taught her that you make the lunch and you sort the pills and you put one foot in front of the other through the unbearable thing, and she had the cup in her hand and the light was coming up gold over the Rincons and the last of the toads were singing somewhere out past the wash, winding down with the rains, *I'm here, I'm here, who's there,* fewer of them every night now, and she heard the metronome stop.

Just that. The *tock* she had wound that morning and stopped hearing the way you stop hearing a clock, and then the small enormous fact of its absence, the spring run all the way down, the arm come to rest.

And she stood in the kitchen with the cup in her hand and did not go in, not yet, not for a minute, because she knew, and because once she went in it would be true, and because she wanted to give her mother one more minute of the morning before it was true. And in that minute she found that she was not holding a horror. She was holding a grief — a plain, particular, Marian-shaped, Jamie-shaped grief, the bounded human kind, the kind with edges, the kind you can carry in two hands like a man carrying water, like a toad, grave-faced, out of a flood — and she understood that this was the thing her mother had gone all the way out into the quiet to be able to hand her, and had come all the way back to put in her hands, and had spent her very last full strength teaching her, at the piano, in the gold light, how to carry.

Then she set down the cup, and she went in to her mother, through the house with the open door at the end of the hall, in the washed-new morning, with the rain finally over and the ground drinking it down, and every drop of it going home to the waiting sea.

WHAT IT DID

The substance in this book is **5-MeO-DMT** [five-em-ee-oh-dee-em-TEE], a tryptamine made in the glands of the Sonoran Desert toad as a defence, and found also in a few plants. Smoked, it is among the most powerful psychedelics known. This is what it did, here, to Marian, set down plainly.

Time. It ended. Not sped or slowed — ended. There was no sequence left for events to sit in, no before and after, no way to say whether four minutes or a hundred years had passed, because both are what you say from outside, and she was not outside.

The body. It went first, the way a coat comes off, sleeve by sleeve, and she did not miss it, which frightened her more than losing it would have.

The self. It dissolved. This is the whole of what the substance does and the reason it is in this series: it does not decorate the self or frighten the self or lift the self — it takes the self away entirely, the name, the memories, the one doing the looking, until there is no one there to whom anything is happening. This is called ego dissolution, and the people it happens to can rarely say more about it than that it happened, because the thing that would remember was the thing that went.

The world. There was no crowded vision, no colours, no figures, none of the furniture of the better-known doors. There was a white, a light with no edges and no source, a nothing that was not empty. People come back calling it unity, or the ocean, or God, and admitting in the same breath that all three are wrong.

The meaning. Overwhelming and un-carry-able: the flat total certainty that this was what is always there, under everything, and that one had simply never looked. And the particular cruelty this book is built on — that there is nothing to bring back from it, no souvenir, because the thing it does is take the hands that would have carried something home.

On the old strength scale that runs from nothing to *plus four*, her last crossing was a plus four: the rare one, the one that may never come again, and the one she did not quite come back from.

THE MAPMAKER

For Vittorio Erspamer, who found it, and for Ken Nelson, who told.

Two men, mostly, are the reason anyone knows what this toad makes, and they could not have been less alike, and neither of them ever met the other, and the series owes this page to both.

The first was a scientist. *Vittorio Erspamer [vit-TOR-ee-oh er-SPAH-mer] was an Italian pharmacologist, one of the great patient chemists of the living world, the man who first identified serotonin — the brain's own messenger of mood — years before it had that name. He spent part of his long career on the skins of toads, which are among the busiest chemical factories in nature, and somewhere in that work he put the secretions of some forty kinds of toad under his instruments and found that one of them, and only one, the big grave-faced toad of the Sonoran Desert, built in its own glands the powerful tryptamine this book is about. He was not looking for a door in the mind. He was cataloguing what toads are made of, the way a man might map a coastline with no intention of ever landing on it. But he is the one who drew the molecule's home onto the chart, and said: here, in this animal, and nowhere else like this.*

The second was not a scientist at all. His name was Ken Nelson, and for most of his life almost no one knew it, because he published the one thing he is remembered for under a made-up name, Albert Most. He was a veteran and an artist and a loner who, for more than twenty years, lived on a decommissioned missile base outside Denton, Texas. In 1981, stationed far away, he read a magazine piece about an old excavation that had turned up thousands of toad bones, and something in it caught and would not let go. He found Erspamer's work. He understood what it meant: that out in the Sonoran Desert there was an animal carrying, in its own body, one of the most powerful substances of its kind on earth. He went to find it, and on his first trip there were no toads at all, because they were still underground, waiting for the rain. He went back after the

rains came, in the early 1980s, and found one, and dried what it made, and became, as far as anyone has ever been able to establish, the first person in the modern world to deliberately do what this book describes — and then, being the kind of man he was, he wrote it down, a few stapled pages, and sent it out into the world, and the whole of what has grown up since grew out of that.

And here is the thing this page exists to say plainly, because the series promised you the truth and this is the hardest piece of it. **There is no ancient tradition.** People will tell you the desert peoples used this toad for a thousand years; there is no good evidence that anyone used it, ever, for anything, until Nelson dried that venom on the hood of his van. The practice is younger than most of the people doing it. That does not make it small. But it makes it *honest*, and honesty was the deal.

Nelson spent his later years trying to work out how to make the substance without the toad, in a laboratory, from scratch — not to sell it, but to take the pressure off the animal, because he had seen what was coming. He was right about what was coming. The toads are being stripped off the land now faster than the rain brings them up; a recent survey of the Mexican populations found several of them crashing toward nothing, hunted out for the very thing this book is about. Nelson did not live to see the worst of it. He developed Parkinson's disease, and died in 2019, a little over a year before the world finally learned the real name of the man who had written as Albert Most. Reprints of his little pamphlet have since raised money to fight the illness that killed him.

A scientist who mapped the coast and never meant to land. A loner who landed, and told everyone, and spent the rest of his life worried about what he had started. Between the two of them, the whole truth of the thing — and not one feather on it.

Sources, to be set and checked before print: Erspamer's papers on toad-skin tryptamines and on 5-HT; the 1984 pamphlet text (Erowid archive); Hamilton Morris, "Hamilton's Pharmacopeia," season 3 (2020); the Dallas Observer reporting on Ken Nelson (2021); Psychedelic Science Review, "Ken Nelson"; standard references on Incilius alvarius and the 2025 population study.

GLOSSARY

agonist [AG-uh-nist] — a substance that switches a receptor on, the way a key turns a lock; the opposite of the thing that blocks it.

bufotenin [byoo-fuh-TEN-in] — a second tryptamine in the toad's secretions, close kin to the one this book is about.

caliche [kuh-LEE-chee] — the hard, pale, cement-like crust of the desert ground, set by the long dry.

creosote [KREE-uh-soht] — the low grey desert bush that releases its clean sharp resin at the first rain; the smell most desert people mean by *the smell of rain*.

diminuendo [dih-min-yoo-EN-doh] — in music, a passage growing gradually softer, dying away toward silence.

estivate [ES-tih-vayt] — to pass the hot dry season asleep underground, the way other animals pass the winter; what the toad does for most of the year.

5-MeO-DMT [five-em-ee-oh-dee-em-TEE] — short for five-methoxy-dimethyltryptamine; the powerful tryptamine the Sonoran Desert toad makes in its glands.

Incilius alvarius [in-SIL-ee-us al-VAIR-ee-us] — the scientific name of the Sonoran Desert toad, once called *Bufo alvarius*; the largest toad native to the United States.

monsoon [mon-SOON] — the season of hard afternoon and evening thunderstorms that breaks the desert summer, usually from July into September.

parotoid gland [puh-ROT-oyd] — the large gland behind a toad's eye that holds its defensive secretions.

receptor [rih-SEP-ter] — a tiny lock on the surface of a brain cell that a matching molecule can open; the door the whole series is about.

saguaro [suh-WAH-roh] — the giant branching cactus of the Sonoran Desert, the tall one with arms.

serotonin [serr-uh-TOH-nin] — the brain's own messenger of mood; the family of molecules this toad's substance belongs to.

Sonoran Desert [suh-NOR-un] — the hot desert of southern Arizona and northwest Mexico, where the toad lives.

tryptamine [TRIP-tuh-meen] — the chemical family that includes serotonin and most of the classic visionary substances; the toad's is one of them.

Tucson, Arizona. For thirty-six years Marian has taught the neighbourhood's frightened children the same secret at the piano: that there is nothing a person cannot learn to do, if they will only go slowly enough, and do it again, and do it again.

She is sixty-four when the doctor gives her until the rains. And she finds she is not afraid of being dead. She is afraid of the instant — the single letting-go that no one is ever allowed to rehearse.

So she decides to rehearse it. Out past the edge of town there is a dry old man who keeps watch over the gravest creature in the desert, and a door that opens for fifteen minutes, in the rain, and closes again. He has sat beside it with the dying before. He tells her it will not give all of her back, and that she does not get to choose which part it keeps.

Night after rainy night, the woman who spent her life holding on lies down to practise letting go — and finds, waiting for her in a place where there is no light to cast one, a standing shadow that turns its head when she comes. As though it has been waiting a very long time. As though it knows her name.

She spent her whole life teaching frightened children the one thing she could never do herself.



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