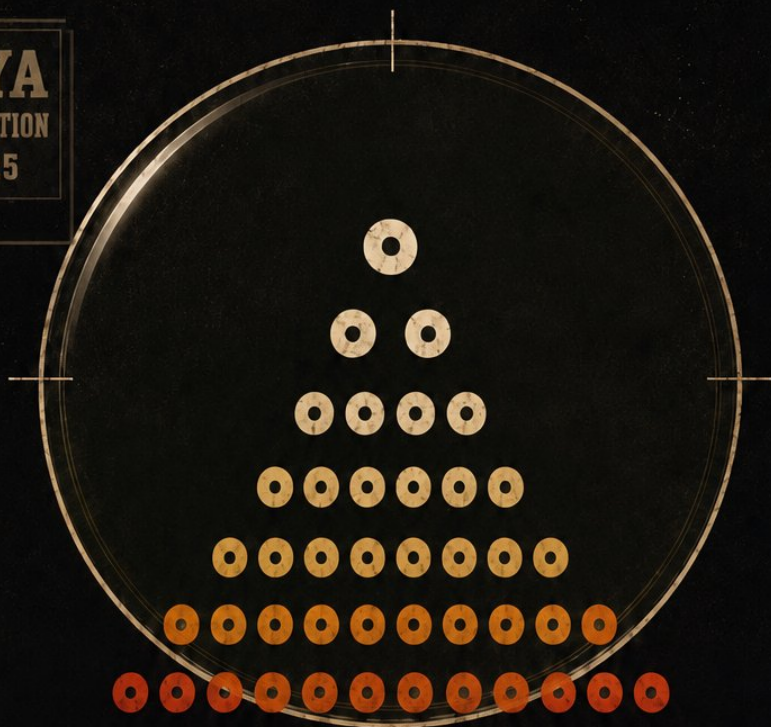


ROYA

PUBLICATION

No. 25



DOUBLING TIME

CHEW Z

A ROYA PUBLICATION

DOUBLING TIME

Chew Z

Printed in the Reach

Roya Publication No. 25

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.

Copyright © 2026 Chew Z

All rights reserved.

ISBN 979-8-952790-24-7

Roya Publications

Publication No. 25

Typeset in DejaVu Serif.

Printed in the Reach



Clipboard with a document containing a grid and handwritten notes.

DATE	TIME	NAME	ROOM	STATUS
10/1	10	1	1	1
10/2	10	2	2	2
10/3	10	3	3	3
10/4	10	4	4	4
10/5	10	5	5	5
10/6	10	6	6	6
10/7	10	7	7	7
10/8	10	8	8	8
10/9	10	9	9	9
10/10	10	10	10	10
10/11	10	11	11	11
10/12	10	12	12	12
10/13	10	13	13	13
10/14	10	14	14	14
10/15	10	15	15	15
10/16	10	16	16	16
10/17	10	17	17	17
10/18	10	18	18	18
10/19	10	19	19	19
10/20	10	20	20	20
10/21	10	21	21	21
10/22	10	22	22	22
10/23	10	23	23	23
10/24	10	24	24	24
10/25	10	25	25	25
10/26	10	26	26	26
10/27	10	27	27	27
10/28	10	28	28	28
10/29	10	29	29	29
10/30	10	30	30	30
10/31	10	31	31	31

10/1 - 10/31 - 10

SYNOPSIS

Emil Kestner is sixty-eight years old, a restorer of damaged books, and out of time.

When he is offered a place on a trial that has never been run on a human being, he takes it — and is sealed into a room on the third floor of a research building with a window in the door and no window in the wall. Air enters at a lower pressure than the corridor, so that nothing inside can drift out.

The treatment works.

Then it goes on working.

Across eleven months, four people come to the door of that room: the woman who built the thing inside him and cannot stop coming back; the brother-in-law who told him to say no; the night porter who was never supposed to talk to him at all.

None of them can answer the only question that matters, and one of them asked it in a car park in the rain, eight months ago, in four words.

What stops it.

A slow-burning noir of repair, consent, and appetite.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

I have never been able to think of a body as one thing.

It is more accurate, and a great deal stranger, to think of it as a country — a very old one, with provinces that have never met, and an enormous amount of work carried out in the dark by populations that will never be named and never be thanked. Most of what happens in you today will happen without your permission or your knowledge. It will be done well. Nobody will tell you about it.

I wanted to write about that country across three of its days: an ordinary one, a day on which something goes wrong in it, and a day on which help arrives.

The third of those is the one that would not leave me alone.

We speak about cure as though it were the opposite of disease — a clean reversal, the tide going back out. It is not. Repair is its own event, with its own violence, its own casualties and its own frank appetite, carried out by procedures that hold no opinion whatsoever about the person they are performed in. They are very good. They have been refined across a span of time I cannot make myself feel. And they were never given a stopping condition, because for most of the history of life nothing survived long enough for the absence of one to matter.

That is the whole of the idea. Everything else here is furniture.

Almost nothing in the biology here is invented. Each time I found something too strange to be allowed in a novel I went and checked it, and each time it was simply true. I have changed the names and the scale. I have not had to change the mechanism once.

The rest is a story about a man in a sealed room, and about the people who could not stop coming to the door.

Chew Z

CONTENTS

ONE. CONSENT	8
TWO. WHAT REPAIR FEELS LIKE FROM INSIDE	12
THREE. GLASS	14
FOUR. REMODELLING	22
FIVE. THE ONES WHO UNRAVEL	25
SIX. DECUBITUS	28
SEVEN. DELIA	33
EIGHT. QUORUM	39
NINE. THE CORNER OF THE ROOM	41
TEN. SHE KNEW IN MARCH	45
ELEVEN. MAREK LIFTS THE STONE	49
TWELVE. INTEGER	51

ONE. CONSENT

Eight months

To save a book you have to be willing to ruin it first.

I said that professionally for forty-one years — to students, to owners, to the insurance men who never wanted to hear it. A water-damaged psalter comes to you swollen and fused, three hundred years of somebody's mornings glued into a brick, and the family stands in the doorway of the workshop and asks what can be done, and the honest answer is: I will take it apart. I will cut the thread some woman in Antwerp tied. I will lift every gathering out of the binding it has lived in since before your country existed, and for a period of some months your psalter will not exist. It will be a stack of loose skins in a press. And then, if I am good, and if I am lucky, it will exist again.

They always ask the same thing. *Will it be the same book?*

I had an answer for that too, and I was proud of it, and I have had a long time in this room to think about how stupid it was.

— — —

Halina died in the February four years before any of this, in the way that people from her family die, which is to say quickly and without making a fuss about it, as though dying were a chore she wanted finished before the guests arrived. Afterward I kept the workshop open for two more years out of a kind of superstition. The work was the same. The hands were the same. But I had spent my whole life repairing objects on the understanding that somebody was waiting at home to be told about them, and it turns out that was load-bearing.

I found the thing in my thigh myself, in the September, sitting on the edge of the bath. A firmness on the outside of the left leg, above the knee, that had no business being firm. I pressed it the way you press a book's spine to feel where the glue has failed. It did not hurt. That was the part I disliked. Everything that has ever gone properly wrong in my life announced itself by not hurting.

They gave it a name I will not repeat here, and a number, and then a smaller number, and then Marek drove me home in silence with his jaw doing the thing his sister's jaw used to do.

Marek Sowa was Halina's younger brother and had never entirely forgiven me for outliving her. He was also, by an accident of profession, exactly the wrong man to have in the family at that moment: he sat on safety boards. He read trial data for a living. He knew what a consent form was for, which is not to protect you.

"Say no," he told me, on the third visit. "That's all. It's a whole sentence."

— — —

Ada Reisz did not sell it to me. That is the first thing I want on the record, because of what came after, and because people will want her to have sold it to me.

She met me in a room with no window and a table too large for two people, and she put nothing in front of me — no folder, no tablet, no glossy thing — and she said: I am going to tell you what it does, and I am going to use small words, and you should stop me every time I nod along without understanding, because everyone nods along and then signs.

The programme was called CONSENSUS. She said the name apologetically. Someone in the commercial division had chosen it.

What it was, she said, was not a drug. A drug is a hammer you throw into the machinery and hope it strikes the right gear. This was smaller than that, and stupider, and there were a very great many of them. Each one could do almost nothing. Each one could recognise a handful of shapes, and could take material apart, and could put material together, and could make a copy of itself if there was enough to make a copy out of. That was the entire repertoire. A child's set of instructions.

"Then how does it know what to do," I said.

"It doesn't. Individually it doesn't know anything." She turned her cup around on the table without drinking from it. "But they can taste each other. Each one lets out a little signal, constantly, into

the fluid around it — the way you'd shout in a dark room to find out how big the room is. And each one tastes how much of that signal is coming back. If the taste is thin, it stays quiet and does nothing. If the taste is strong, it knows there are a great many of it nearby, and only then does it begin the work."

"So they take a vote."

She looked at me for slightly too long. "That's the sales version. But yes. They take a vote, and none of them can act until enough of them have arrived to agree."

Your body, she said, already knows how to repair itself. That is not a metaphor. There is an old, reliable, extremely violent procedure written into you: clear the ruined material, summon the builders, drag the edges together, lay down the new. It works beautifully. It has one flaw, which is that it is slow and rather approximate, and in a man of sixty-eight facing what I was facing it would be badly outpaced.

CONSENSUS did not replace that procedure. It *joined* it. It arrived at the ruined place and did the same work, faster, and with better eyesight.

"And it knows what to take away," I said. "It knows the difference between the thing in my leg and my leg."

"Everything that's dying puts out a signal," Ada said. "That's true of you already, right now, in the ordinary course of things — a cell that's finished flips a marker to the outside of itself, and the marker means *I am ready, come and take me*. And a cell that isn't finished carries a different marker that means *not me, keep walking*. Your body has read those two markers your entire life. Every day, quite calmly, without asking you, it eats several billion of you."

I remember laughing. Actually laughing, in that room.

"So it takes nothing that hasn't asked."

"It takes nothing that hasn't asked," she agreed.

— — —

Marek came to the signing and stood against the back wall with his arms crossed like a man at a funeral he had objected to. Afterwards, in the car park, in the rain, he said one more thing, and I have had eight months to consider it.

"Emil. What stops it."

"It's finished when the leg is finished."

"That's not a mechanism," he said. "That's a hope. I'm asking what stops it."

I said something about the vote — that when the work was done there would be nothing left to signal about, and the taste would go thin, and they would go quiet again the way they had been quiet at the start. He listened to all of it with the patience of a man letting somebody finish before telling them the bridge is out.

Then he shook my hand, which he had not done in four years, and drove away.

— — —

The room is on the third floor and has a window in the door and no window in the wall, and the air comes in at a lower pressure than the corridor so that nothing in here can drift out there. They explained the pressure to me twice. I understood it the first time. It means that if you were to open the door, the building would breathe *in*, not out.

There is a bed, and a chair I have not sat in for some weeks, and a drain in the floor, and a fixture overhead that is not quite a light.

The infusion was the least dramatic event of my life. A cold thread going up the inside of my elbow, and Ada on the other side of the glass with her hand flat on it, and a clock on the wall behind her.

I have tried to remember what I felt afterward, and the honest answer is that I have no idea.

I know the room was at twenty-one degrees, because the panel says so. I know that twenty-one degrees is comfortable. But if you asked me whether I was warm that night I would have to tell you about the chemistry of it, the slow business of what a temperature does to

a fluid, and I would not be able to tell you the other thing, the simple animal thing, whether I was warm.

I put that down to the sedative. I put a great deal down to the sedative, that first month.

— — —

TWO. WHAT REPAIR FEELS LIKE FROM INSIDE

Four months

By the sixth week it was working, and I want to describe that properly, because everything afterward has been described for me by other people and I would like at least one honest page.

Here is what happens in a wound. Not what I was told — what I could feel, or what I believed I could feel, lying in the dark on the third floor with the pressure sighing under the door.

First there is the closing of the taps. That is fast and brutal and over before you know it has begun. Then, for a day, nothing but the arriving: a general summons going out through the fluid, and everything that can hear it turning and coming, in enormous numbers, the way gulls turn.

The first to arrive are not careful. I want to be clear about this, because there is a story people tell themselves in which the body is a wise and gentle physician, and it is not. The first arrivals are demolition. They flood the site with something corrosive and they burn what is there — the ruined material, the healthy material at the edges, whatever is present — because their instructions are to leave nothing that might be an enemy, and they cannot tell the difference, and they have twelve hours to live regardless.

Then the second wave, which is patient, and which eats.

They come to a body that has already put out its marker, its small chemical sentence saying *I am finished, come and take me*, and they wrap themselves around it and draw it inside and take it apart into pieces small enough to be spent again. That is what your body is doing while you are asleep tonight. It is not violence. There is no struggle in it at all. The thing being eaten has already agreed.

And then, last, the builders. They arrive over days, and they change when they arrive — they come as one kind of thing and become another, thickening, growing something inside themselves like a cable being laid. They anchor at the edges of the wound. And then, slowly, over a week, they *pull*.

That is the part nobody tells you. A wound does not fill in. A wound is dragged shut. Millions of small hands take hold of both sides and haul, for days, without pause, and the skin walks inward across the gap at the speed of a minute hand, and what you finally call a scar is just the record of that pulling — a place where the material of you was hauled somewhere it was not born.

I lay in that room and I felt all of it in my leg. The burning first. Then the quiet eating. Then the long haul.

They told me afterward that you cannot feel any of that. That there are no nerves that report it. That what I described was too accurate to be sensation and too accurate to be coincidence, and that they were going to have to think about what it was.

I said it was the drug. They said CONSENSUS has no effect on the nervous system whatsoever.

I said, then it was a dream, and I was very lucky in my dream.

— — —

Ada came every day that month, and twice on the Sundays, which no protocol required. She would sit in the corridor with her back against the glass so that we were spine to spine through two centimetres of it, and she would read me the numbers off her tablet in a voice she was trying to keep level and failing.

Week six: the mass in the left thigh reduced by a third.

Week eight: reduced by two-thirds, and the margins clean, which she said was the word she had been waiting eleven years to write in a log.

Week nine: gone.

She cried on week nine. Not in front of me — she went out of frame, and I heard the chair scrape, and she was gone eleven

minutes, and when she came back she picked up exactly where she had stopped, at the phrase *no detectable residual*, and finished the sentence.

Marek came on week ten. He looked at the same numbers she did and he did not congratulate anyone. He asked one question, which he asked of Ada and not of me, standing in the corridor with his coat still on.

“The mass is gone. What’s the count doing?”

I could not see her face. I could only see the back of her head, and the way it went still.

— — —

RESEARCH LOG — CONSENSUS / KESTNER, E. (subject 001)

Wk 10 / d 68. Entered A. Reisz. Target lesion: no detectable residual. Margins clean at all four measurement planes. Systemic count: **rising**. Doubling interval steady at 31 h and unchanged since d 41, i.e. through complete resolution of target. Note for file: the construct has no remaining substrate at the target site and is not slowing. Query for Wed. review — what is it currently repairing? Subject reports feeling *better than he has in ten years*. Reports sleeping well. Reports appetite returned. Subject is not lying. Every marker I can pull agrees with him. — AR

— — —

THREE. GLASS

Two months

The best hours of my life were spent on the wrong side of a door with a woman who could not touch me, and I am aware of how that sounds.

The protocol allowed her forty minutes a day. By November she was there for four or five hours, most evenings, after the building had emptied. She brought her own chair from her office because the corridor chair was bad for her back. There is a photograph somewhere in the building’s own system, if anyone ever looks, of a

woman sitting in an empty corridor at half past ten at night talking to a door.

We did not talk about the trial. That was her rule and I understood the reason for it, or thought I did — that she needed one hour in the day when I was not subject 001. So we talked about everything else, and because there was nothing else to do and nowhere to be, we talked the way people almost never get to talk. Slowly. With long silences that nobody rushed to fill. A subject would be raised and then abandoned and then picked up again two hours later from a completely different side.

She had been married. It had ended without drama, which she said was worse, because there was no wreckage to point at afterward and say *there, that, that's what it was*. She had a sister in the south she called on Sundays out of duty and then enjoyed talking to, every time, which annoyed her. She was afraid of open water and not of anything else. She had wanted, at nineteen, to restore paintings, and had gone into biology because a man whose opinion she no longer respected had told her that restoration was a woman's hobby.

That one stopped me.

"You'd have been good at it," I said.

"You can't know that."

"I know what the work asks. It asks somebody who can leave a thing alone. Most people can't. Most people get a damaged object in front of them and they cannot keep their hands off it — they want to *finish* it, they want it whole, and they'll invent what's missing rather than let a gap sit there being a gap." I remember shifting on the bed and finding it difficult, and thinking nothing of it. "The whole discipline is knowing when to stop. That's all it is. The stopping."

She was quiet for a while.

"And are you good at that?"

"I was excellent at it," I said, "in other people's books."

— — —

There is a particular hour in that building, between about half past nine and half past ten, when the day staff are gone and the night round has not started, and nothing at all happens in it. The air handling drops to its lower setting and you can hear it change. Somewhere below, a door with a bad closer takes eleven seconds to shut. The light at the turn of the corridor flickers twice and then steadies, and it does that about every forty minutes, and I got so that I could feel it coming.

We spent a great many of those hours not talking. I want that in the account, because if I only set down the things that were said it will look like a series of conversations, and it was not that. It was one conversation with gaps in it, and the gaps were the better part. She would say something and then neither of us would say anything for six or seven minutes, and it was not awkward, and neither of us moved to end it, and I have had perhaps four relationships in my life in which that was possible and three of them were with my wife at different stages.

I asked her about the marriage on the third or fourth of these evenings, and she gave me the short version, and then an hour later, out of nothing, she gave me the real one.

"He was kind," she said. "That's the whole difficulty. If he'd been cruel I'd have a story. Everyone understands a story about a cruel man — you can tell it at a dinner and people know where to put their faces." The tablet was face-down on her knees; it had been face-down for two hours. "He was kind and he was interested in me and he never once raised his voice in nine years, and I left him, and my mother has never forgiven me."

"Then why."

She took a while.

"Because I noticed, in about the seventh year, that I had agreed with him about everything for two years running." She said it very evenly, the way she said numbers. "Not pretended to. *Agreed*. I'd think a thing and then I'd hear what he thought and my thing would go quiet, and it wasn't submission, Emil, that's what I could never explain to anyone — I wasn't giving in. There was nothing to give in

about. It had already happened by the time I got there. I'd sit in a restaurant and hear myself have his opinion about a film in his phrasing and I couldn't find the seam where mine used to be."

"And that frightened you."

"No. That's the part I've never said out loud to a living person." A pause; the light at the turn went twice and steadied. "It was *comfortable*. It was the most comfortable I have ever been. I left because it was comfortable and I could feel it setting."

I said nothing for a long time, because I could not think of anything that was not either stupid or a lie.

"You'd have been all right," I said eventually. "People come back from that."

"Some of me came back," she said. "I've never been able to establish how much. That's not self-pity, it's a measurement problem — the instrument's the thing being measured. You can't audit yourself for missing pieces using the part that's left."

— — —

Later — much later, near midnight — I asked about the water.

She would not have it. She said she had been afraid of open water since she was a child, that she could swim perfectly well in a pool and could not put her face in a lake, and that she had never gone looking for the reason.

"There'll be one," I said.

"Probably."

"You've spent your whole life finding out what's underneath things."

"In other people," she said. "In myself I've made a decision, and the decision is that I'd rather have the fear than the explanation. If there's a reason then something happened to me that I've put somewhere, and I'll have to go and get it, and I'll have to be the sort of person that happened to." Her voice did not change at all. "I don't want to be that person. I'd rather be a woman who doesn't like lakes."

I told her that was the least scientific thing I had ever heard.

"Yes," she said. "It's the only place I allow myself."

— — —

She asked me, that same night, what I would do afterwards.

I said I hadn't thought about it, which was the truth and also the wrong answer, and she waited, so I thought about it, there, with her back against the glass and my hands on the blanket, and I could not find anything.

The workshop was gone; I had let it go in the second year, and the presses had been sold to a man in the north whose name I could not remember by then. There was a house with Halina's coats still in the hall cupboard because I had never got past the coats. There was Marek, who would come at Christmas out of duty and would not eat much. There was a chair by a window with a garden on the other side of it.

"I would go home," I said, "and I would be a man who had been very ill and got better. For quite a long time that would be a whole occupation. People would ring. And then it would stop being interesting, to them and then to me, and I would be sixty-nine, and I would have a straight leg and a garden."

"That's not nothing."

"It isn't nothing. It's just not *anything*." I remember being surprised at myself; I had not known I thought it until I heard it. "Ada, I'm not frightened of dying. I've been waiting for the fright since September and it hasn't come and I've stopped expecting it. What I can't get near is the other thing. That it works, and I go home, and nothing on the far side of that is waiting for me. I signed for this in a room with a table too big for two people and I have never once been able to say what I signed *for*."

She was quiet for a while and then she said, "You signed for more time."

"To do what."

"That isn't the question people ask."

"It's the only question," I said. "Everything in my trade is that question. A thing arrives on the bench and before you touch it you have to be able to say what it's *for* afterwards — is it going to be read, is it going to be looked at, is it going in a case in a room nobody enters. Because you do a completely different job for each of those and if you don't know, you'll do all three and ruin it."

"And what were you for?"

I did not answer that, and she did not ask again, and after a few minutes she started telling me about a dog her sister had.

— — —

I told her about the psalter about a week after that, and I told her all of it, which I had never done.

It came out of the water in a cellar in 1994 and it reached my bench in 1996 having spent the two years in between with a man in another city who should have been struck off. Three hundred and forty years old. Antwerp, probably; the thread said Antwerp. It was a brick — that is the actual word we use, there is no better one — a solid block of fused paper the shape of a book, and you cannot open a brick, you can only take it apart.

Eleven months. That was the job. Eleven months of separating leaves with a spatula and a warm-water bath and the kind of patience that ruins a man's marriage, except that it did not ruin mine, because Halina had a workshop of her own in a different discipline and understood the disease.

And near the end I had a hundred and ninety leaves out of two hundred and eleven, and twenty-one gone — actually gone, not damaged, *gone*, dissolved in a cellar, chemically returned to the world. And eleven of those twenty-one were consecutive, in the middle, in the psalms.

"You'd leave a gap," Ada said.

"You leave a gap. That's the discipline. You put in a neutral paper of the correct weight and colour, unmarked, and you record the loss in the documentation, and anyone who opens that book in four hundred years will know precisely what is missing and precisely

what was done about it. That is the whole ethic of the profession, and I taught it, and I have said it in front of students in three countries."

"But."

"But it was in the middle of the psalms," I said. "And the psalms are numbered. And the text of the psalms has not changed in two thousand years, so I knew — not guessed, *knew*, to the word — every syllable that had been on those eleven leaves. And the hand was a plain clear seventeenth-century hand of a kind I could reproduce in my sleep, and I had a hundred and ninety leaves of that hand to copy from, and the paper was available, and I was thirty-nine years old and very good and very tired and the gap was *unbearable*."

There was no sound in the corridor at all.

"How many did you do?"

"Eleven."

"And you recorded it."

"I recorded it," I said. "In the documentation. In the correct field. In a file that went into a drawer in a house in a town of four thousand people, along with the book, with a family who have not opened either one since 1997 and will not, and whose grandchildren will find the psalter and not the file. And in ninety years a woman my age will put it on a bench and go through it leaf by leaf, and she will not find eleven forgeries, because they are not bad, Ada, that is the thing — they are not bad. She will find a book with a small water event in its history and a beautiful continuous run of psalms straight through the middle of it."

"Emil, you wrote it down. You did the correct thing."

"I did the correct thing so that I could do the wrong thing," I said. "That's what the documentation is for, half the time. It's not a confession. It's a permit you write for yourself afterwards and file where nobody will read it."

She did not tell me it was all right. I have thought about that a great deal since — she was the only person I ever told, and she had

every opportunity, and she was a kind woman sitting in a corridor at midnight with her back against the glass, and she did not say it was all right.

She said: "Why couldn't you leave it."

"Because I could see it," I said. "That's all. There's no better reason than that and I've been looking for one for thirty years. I could see exactly what belonged there, perfectly, in every detail — I could see it more clearly than I could see the leaves I actually had — and it was not there, and I had hands."

— — —

The thing I have not written down yet, because I do not know where to put it, is this.

Late in November she was talking about her grandmother's house — the one on the lake, the one they sold — and she said something about the summer she was seven, and I heard myself say:

"The year of the wasps."

There was a silence on the other side of the glass of a particular quality. I have had eight months to catalogue silences.

"I never told you that," she said.

And she was right. She had not. I knew it the moment she said it, the way you know you have used a word in the wrong language. But I also knew — with the flat, boring certainty with which I know my own address — that there had been a nest in the eaves above the boathouse that summer, that her father had burned it out with a rag on a pole, that a wasp had gone down the back of her dress and stung her four times between the shoulder blades in a line, and that she had not screamed, because her cousin was watching.

I described the line of stings. Four of them. Between the shoulder blades.

She stood up. I heard the chair go back.

Then she sat down again, and after a while she said, in a voice that was doing a great deal of work to stay ordinary, that she must have

mentioned it in October and forgotten, that she had been tired for months, that people repeat themselves.

I said yes. That must be it.

I want to be clear that I believed her. That is the part I would ask anyone reading this to sit with for a moment before they judge either of us. I believed her, and I was glad, because the alternative had no shape I could hold, and because it was late, and because she was the only warm thing in my life and I was not going to be the one to break it.

We talked for another hour about nothing.

— — —

FOUR. REMODELLING

One month

In December it ran out of work, and rather than stop, it widened its definition.

The first sign was small enough to be a gift. There is a scar — there was a scar — across the back of my right hand, a white seam four centimetres long, from a lithograph stone that came off a bench in 1981 and took a piece of me with it. I had that scar for forty-four years. I could find it in the dark. It was the first thing my thumb went to when I was thinking.

On the ninth of December I went to find it and it was not there.

Not faded. Gone — and the skin over that place was new, and pink, and slightly finer than the skin around it, the way the skin of a child is finer, and when I looked at my hand in the light from the fixture I was looking at a piece of a much younger man attached at the wrist to the rest of me.

I did not tell Ada for two days. I want that on the record as well, since I have spent this account describing her decisions and it is only fair to describe one of mine. I did not tell her, because I understood, in some part of myself that was not yet forming sentences, that this was the thing Marek had asked about in the

corridor, and I did not want to be the reason she had to answer him.

— — —

Then, on the seventeenth, it started on the leg.

The femur — the long bone of the thigh — was broken in 1974, when I came off a motorcycle I had been told not to buy, and it was set in a rural hospital by a man who was doing his best. It healed at an angle of about four degrees. For fifty-one years that four degrees was simply how I was made. It gave me a walk people recognised from the end of a street. Halina used to say she could hear me coming across a car park like a clock with a limp.

CONSENSUS could see the angle. Of course it could. It had a definition of *correct* and the bone did not match it.

To move a bone that has been healed for fifty-one years, you cannot simply persuade it. You have to open it. You have to take the old union apart at the seam — the place where the two pieces grew into each other and became one piece — and you have to do it from the inside, dissolving the mineral out of the join, softening it over days until what was solid is a thick region rather than a hard one, until the two halves are two halves again.

And then you have to move them.

It began on the seventeenth as a deep ache I attributed to the weather, in a building with no weather. By the nineteenth it was not an ache. It was the specific, unmistakable, forty-year-old sensation of a fracture — I knew it immediately; the body files that one permanently — except that it was arriving slowly, over hours, without an event.

There was no accident. There was no fall. There was nothing to blame. My leg simply became a broken leg, in the middle of a Thursday, in a sealed room, in the presence of no force whatsoever.

I lay in the dark and I felt the two ends of my femur separate.

Then, over the following eleven days, I felt them turn.

I do not know how else to say it. Four degrees, across eleven days, is not a movement anyone should be able to perceive. It is slower than a shadow crossing a floor. But I perceived it, in the same way I had perceived the pulling shut of the wound in the autumn, with the same appalling clarity, and I lay there through the nights of Christmas while something with no hands and no eyes and no opinion about me rotated the lower half of my own leg into an alignment it had never once occupied in my life, and set it, and began — carefully, in layers, from the inside out — to lay the mineral back down.

Here is the part I have thought about most.

It did not hurt the way it should have hurt. It hurt exactly as much as was useful and then the hurting was managed, tapered off, attended to, the way a good nurse would attend to it, and by the third night I was lying quite calmly in the dark describing the process to myself in the past tense, as though it were a procedure I was reviewing rather than one being performed on me.

A man whose thigh bone is being deliberately broken and turned should not be calm.

I was calm. I was interested.

On the twenty-eighth of December it finished, and the leg was straight, and in the morning when I woke up I could not remember, for a moment, why I had ever thought a straight leg was strange.

Ada came at eight. She looked through the window at me for a long time before she spoke, longer than she ever had, and I raised my hand and waved at her with the young pink hand, and she did not wave back.

Behind her, at the end of the corridor, a man in a coat was standing where the corridor turned. He had not come closer. He was simply standing there, watching the door of my room the way you watch a dog you do not know.

Marek had been in the building since the twenty-second, I found out later.

He had been standing in that corridor, off and on, for six days.

FIVE. THE ONES WHO UNRAVEL

Two weeks

In January my body finally understood what was in it, and went to war, and I watched the whole campaign from a bed on the third floor with a temperature of forty degrees.

I should explain what took it so long. Ada had explained it to me in the autumn, when it was still theory. Your defences do not look for *strangers*. That is the amateur's picture of it. They look for shapes — a small library of shapes they have been taught to hate — and anything not carrying one of those shapes is simply furniture. CONSENSUS carried none of them. It had been built not to. For nine weeks it moved through me the way a man in a good suit moves through a hotel lobby, and nobody asked him anything.

What changed, they think, is that there got to be so much of it that the furniture began to move.

The fever came up on the fourth of January in about ninety minutes. I remember Ada's voice through the intercom saying my name in a way she had never said it, twice, three times, and the fixture overhead going very bright, and then a stretch of some days I have only in pieces.

But I have the war.

— — —

There is a kind of cell in you — the commonest of the defenders, the infantry, made in the marrow by the billion and spent like coins — that has three ways of dealing with an enemy. It can swallow it. It can spray it with something corrosive. And then it has a third way, which it uses when the first two are not enough, when the thing it has found is too large or too numerous or too strange to eat.

It kills itself.

Not out of despair. This is the part I have gone over and over, in the dark, for weeks. It is not despair, and it is not sacrifice in the way a soldier means it. It is procedure. The cell stops what it is doing. The

membrane around its nucleus — the wall around the room where its instructions are kept — comes apart. And everything that was coiled in there, the entire text of it, the whole book of what it is and how to build another one, unwinds. It floods out through the body of the cell. It mixes with the contents of every jar the cell was carrying, every acid and enzyme it had been saving for a fight.

And then the outer skin ruptures, and it throws all of it outward.

What comes out is a web. Long sticky threads of its own unwound instructions, hung with poison, spread wide across the space where the enemy is. And the enemy is caught in it. Held there. Tangled in the readable text of something that no longer exists.

The cell dies in the act. That is not a risk of the procedure. That is the procedure.

They do not fight, is what I want to say. They read themselves out loud, and die of it, and the reading is the weapon.

— — —

I watched them do it for eleven days. Thousands of them, then hundreds of thousands, then a number I have no word for, coming up through the fluid of my thigh and my chest and my throat and unspooling themselves into the dark, one after another after another, laying net after net after net across the ground.

It was the most beautiful thing I have ever seen.

I am aware of how that sentence reads. I have looked at it a long time and I am leaving it. It was the most beautiful thing I have ever seen, and I lay in a sealed room with my temperature at forty degrees and I wept for them, and I would like to be able to say that I wept because they were mine and they were dying for me.

But when I am honest — and there is no longer very much point in being anything else — I wept the way you weep in a museum. At the workmanship. At the awful economy of it. At a thing built long before me, by nobody, that had arrived at a solution I would never have thought of in a thousand years.

And they never caught anything.

I knew that on the sixth day. Not suspected — *knew*, the way I knew about the wasps. The nets went out and went out and went out and there was nothing in them, because the shape they had been taught to hate did not exist in this room, and they were hunting a stranger who was not there, and every single one of them unwound its whole self into the dark and held on to nothing.

— — —

The fever was going to kill me. That was not a dramatic reading of the situation; it was Tuesday's number. A man of sixty-eight does not run at forty degrees for eleven days.

So there was a decision to be made, and I was not in a condition to make it, and it was made in the corridor, and I have the recording because Marek insisted afterward that the corridor recordings be preserved.

Ada wanted to quiet the immune response. That is the whole of it. It is not exotic. We do it every day to people with new kidneys in them; you cannot give a man an organ and also let him attack it. She wanted to take the war away from my body before the war finished the job the tumour had failed to.

Marek said — and I have listened to this eleven times — “That’s the last thing in him that’s still on his side.”

“It is killing him.”

“It’s the only thing in that room that’s *trying* to.”

“Marek.” A pause of four seconds on the recording. “If I do nothing he dies on Thursday. Say the sentence. Say: *let him die on Thursday*. If you’ll say it out loud I’ll write it in the file with your name on it.”

He did not say it. I want that understood, because of what he did later, and because people will want him to have been the reasonable one all along. He stood in a corridor at two in the morning and he was asked to say a true thing out loud, and he could not, and so the drugs went in at six, and by the ninth of January my temperature was thirty-seven point one.

The last nets went out on the eleventh. I felt them go. After that the dark in me was very quiet, and very open, and there was a great deal of room in it, and nothing at all was moving except the work.

Ada came at eight. She looked at the numbers, which were good.

She had done the correct thing. Every doctor in that building would have done the correct thing. I want somebody, somewhere, at some point, to explain to me what she should have done instead, because I have had a long time to think about it and I have never once found the other door.

— — —

RESEARCH LOG — CONSENSUS / KESTNER, E. (subject 001)

Wk 16 / d 109. Entered A. Reisz. Immunosuppression established d 105. Febrile episode resolved. Subject stable. Systemic count: doubling interval **26 h** and shortening. Was 31 h and static for nine weeks. Interval began shortening within four hours of first dose. Nine weeks of a fixed rate. It was not a fixed rate. It was a rate *against resistance*. I have removed the resistance. — AR

— — —

SIX. DECUBITUS

One week

I have been comfortable.

I want to begin there, because I understand that a good deal of what follows is going to be presented in a certain way by people who were not in the room, and because it is true. Since the fever went I have been more comfortable than at any point in the last four years, including the years in my own house, in my own bed, with a garden outside the window and a door I could open.

The bed has become very familiar. That is the honest word for it. Familiar the way a coat is familiar. I know every part of it now and it knows every part of me, and there is no longer any negotiation between us in the way there is with a new bed, no shifting about at two in the morning looking for the place where the shoulder goes.

I have not stood up in a while. I have not looked at exactly how long, and I could, because the panel would tell me. But it has not come up. There has been nothing on the other side of the room I have wanted.

My hands rest. There was a period in January when I would find them closed and would open them, and that has stopped being something I do, and I think that is simply what hands do when a man has no work for them. Halina's mother's hands were like that at the end, closed and soft, and everyone said how peaceful.

There is a warmth low at the base of my spine that has been there some days now. It is not unpleasant. It is like sitting too near a fire on one side only. When I attend to it directly I find that I cannot feel the edges of it, which is a strange thing to say about a warmth, but there it is: I know where its middle is and I do not know where it stops.

The light does not change in here, so the days do not have shapes. I have stopped counting them, which I resisted for a long time and which I now think was vanity. Nothing in this room requires me to know what day it is. The work does not keep a calendar.

I tried, some days ago, to remember what standing is like.

Not to do it. To *remember* it, the way you would remember a road. I have stood for sixty-eight years. I stood at a bench for forty-one of them, eight and nine hours at a stretch, and I had a particular way of doing it that a physiotherapist once told me was going to cost me — weight on the left, right heel just off the floor, the whole business hanging off one hip. She made me stand properly in front of a mirror and it felt like a lie.

I went for it and there was nothing there.

I could tell you the facts of it. I know that the floor pushes back. I know which muscle in the calf does the work. But the thing itself, the felt part, the small constant negotiation a body has with the ground that goes on under every minute of a life — I reached for it and my hand went through. It is not gone the way my wife's face is gone; that is a hole with an edge and I know when I have arrived at

it. This is more as though standing were a word in a language I once had a phrasebook for.

I lay here a while and then I found that I did not mind.

That is the part I keep returning to, on the days when I return to anything. I did not mind. A man discovers he has mislaid the entire experience of standing upright and finds it about as troubling as a name he cannot place, and goes back to the ceiling.

— — —

The drain in the floor is dry.

I noticed this at some point recently — I put my head over and looked at it, or I looked at it in some fashion, and the grating was dry and the ceramic under the grating was dry and there was a fine grey dust in the bottom of it that has not been disturbed by anything.

A body does not do that. I know what a body does. I nursed one to the end four years ago in a house with a bad bathroom and I know exactly, in detail, what a body is doing every hour of every day at both ends of itself, and what it costs, and what it smells of, and how much of a nurse's work is simply carrying away.

Nothing is being carried away.

Nothing has left this room in weeks. Nothing has been asked for and nothing has been taken out and the porters do not come in with the trolley any more and I did not notice when that stopped. Whatever arrives here, arrives; and stays; and there is no waste and no discard and no remainder at all, and the drain has been dry so long the dust in it has settled flat.

I thought, when I first understood it: how efficient.

That was the whole of my reaction. I had it and then I went back to the ceiling.

— — —

Ada has not been coming in the evenings. She comes at eight and at four, and she stands rather than sits, and she does not put her back against the glass any more.

I asked her about that, and she said the corridor chair had been taken away.

— — —

**RESEARCH LOG — CONSENSUS / KESTNER, E. (subject 001)
Wk 18 / d 121. Entered A. Reisz. Visual assessment through
observation panel; no entry, per containment.**

Subject has not changed position in **nineteen days**. Not *has not walked* — has not turned, has not shifted his weight, has not moved his head off the midline. Nineteen days. Two hours is enough to found a pressure injury. Two hours. I do not have a scale for nineteen days and neither does the literature.

Sacral wound: full thickness. Bone visible. I can see the bone from the corridor with the naked eye at four metres. Bilateral heels the same. Both scapulae, occiput.

The wounds are clean. No slough. No odour reported by porters. No infection markers in anything I can pull. The margins are not advancing and they are not closing. They have been identical, to the millimetre, in every image since d 114.

Eight days of a wound that is not healing and not worsening. That does not occur. A wound is a process; it goes one way or the other. This is being *held*.

Both hands fixed in flexion. The right cannot be opened. I asked him about his hands this morning and he told me they were resting.

Both knees fixed. Left ankle fixed. He described his leg to me in December as *straight*, and it is, and it is straight in a plane that will never take weight again.

Weight down 31 kg. There is no fat anywhere on him. The padding over every bone in his body has been withdrawn.

Note for file, and I am aware how this reads: I no longer believe the immobility is a *consequence*. It is too complete and it arrived too

fast. Nineteen days without one involuntary shift. A sleeping man moves. A comatose man moves. Movement was disturbing the work.

He is not being neglected. He is being **held still**.

He told me this morning he has been comfortable. He is not lying.

He has never once lied to me. — AR

RESEARCH LOG — CONSENSUS / KESTNER, E. (subject 001)

Wk 18 / d 124. Entered A. Reisz.

I have spent four days doing something I am going to write down properly because I do not trust myself to remember it accurately later.

d 121, 08:14. Asked subject to lift his right hand. Phrased as a neurological check so as not to alarm him. He said: *in a minute*. Pleasant, unbothered, the way you answer a wife about a shelf. No movement in 40 min of observation. **08:56.** Asked again. He said he had already done it. He was not evading me. There was no hesitation and no defensiveness in the voice at all. He was mildly puzzled that I had missed it.

d 122. Recorded the panel view for 90 min and played the audio back to him with the timestamps. Asked him to account for it. He told me the recording was wrong. Not that it was faked — *wrong*, mistaken, the way you'd say a clock was wrong. He suggested, helpfully, that the file might be from another day. He offered to try again so we could have a clean one.

d 123. Asked him to describe his own right hand to me in detail, without looking at it. Two minutes of perfectly accurate description of a hand that has not existed in that configuration since January. Nail on the third finger that he lost in 1988 and that grew back ridged. He described the ridge. Then asked him to look at it and describe it again. Identical description. Word for word in places. He looked directly at a contracted fist for eleven seconds and reported an open hand. **d 124.** I have stopped testing.

I want the reason on the record, because I know what this file looks like from outside and I know what I would say about a colleague who wrote it. The reason is not compassion and it is not fear of the answer. It is that on d 123 he asked me, at the end, in his own voice,

whether he had done something wrong — whether he was failing the tests — and whether it meant the treatment was not working.

He was worried about disappointing me.

There is no protocol for what to do with that and I have looked.

There is no committee I can take it to that will not immediately and correctly take him away from me and put him in front of people who did not sit in that corridor for five months, and they will be right to, and I am not going to do it this week.

Escalation deferred. On my authority. No secondary signature sought. — AR

— — —

I do not know what she writes in there. I have never asked and she has never offered, and there is a version of this in which that reticence was tact on both sides and a version in which it was cowardice on both sides, and I no longer have any interest in deciding which.

But I know she writes for a long time afterward, standing at the end of the corridor where the turn is. Longer every week. And I know that when she is finished she puts her forehead against the wall for a moment before she goes.

I would like the record to show that I watched a woman do that through two centimetres of glass, every day, for a month, and that I said nothing, because I was comfortable, and because I did not want to make her explain.

— — —

SEVEN. DELIA

Three days

The porter on the third-floor round at night is called Delia and she is not supposed to talk to me.

She started in February, on the intercom, and I think it began because the light in here does not go off and she could see me

through the panel every night on her two o'clock pass and decided that a man lying awake under a light was a worse thing to walk past than a rule was to break.

The first night she said: "You want the news or you want the football?"

I said the football, which I have never cared about in my life.

She gave me eleven minutes of it. She was extremely thorough. It became clear about four minutes in that she did not care about it either and had simply decided that it was the correct thing to offer a man in a sealed room at two in the morning, and that having offered it she was going to see it through.

After that she came every night.

— — —

Delia is fifty-one. She has done this round for nine years and the one on the second floor for six before that, and she can tell you which of the doors on this corridor stick in the wet weather. She keeps boiled sweets in her left pocket, the hard yellow ones, and she has one at the start of the round and one at the turn, and I know this because I asked her one night what the sound was and she was delighted to be caught.

She has a daughter, Roz, who is nineteen and doing exams she will pass and has a boyfriend she will not keep. Delia does not like the boyfriend. Her objection is not that he is unkind, because he is not; her objection is that he is *agreeable*, that he has no opinions of his own about anything, and that Roz has started laughing a beat after he laughs instead of at the same time as him. Delia noticed that. In a kitchen, in passing, over eleven months.

I told her that was the most frightening thing I had ever heard and she thought I was joking and laughed.

Her husband left in 2009 and she has a photograph of him still up in the hall because Roz likes it there, and she passes it four times a day and has stopped seeing it, which she says is the only forgiveness she has ever actually managed as opposed to announced.

She has a sister she does not speak to. She wants to see the sea in a country where it is warm. She has never been on an aeroplane. She sings at the turn of the corridor when she thinks the floor is empty — not properly, under her breath, and always the same four or five songs, and she is not good, and it is the finest sound in this building.

I have all of that. I want that understood. Every night of February I lay in the dark and she gave me eleven minutes and I took every part of it and put it somewhere and it is all still there, exactly as she gave it to me, and none of it has been lost.

— — —

She asked me once what I did. Before.

I told her about the workshop, and the presses, and the psalter with three hundred years of somebody's mornings glued into a brick. She liked that. She asked the question everyone asks.

"And when you're done — is it the same book?"

And I heard myself say: "It's more the same than it was."

There was a pause on the intercom. Not a long one. She is not a woman who lets a silence get established.

"That's a funny way round," she said.

"It's the honest way round. What comes to me isn't the book. It's what's left of the book. The book stopped existing thirty years ago in somebody's cellar — what's on my bench is a ruin with the shape of a book still visible in it." I was not aware of choosing any of these words. "Everything I do is closer to the book than what I found. The gap doesn't get smaller by leaving it alone. It only gets smaller by my hands."

"So it's not the same book. It's a *better* one."

"It's the same book," I said, "made present again."

And Delia laughed and said that sounded like something you'd say to a customer, and I laughed too, and I said it was, and it was, and I

had said it eleven thousand times across forty-one years and I had never once, until that night, believed it.

— — —

There was one night at the end of February that I am going to set down in full.

She came on the two o'clock and I knew inside four words that something had happened, because she started talking immediately and about nothing — the lift on the second floor, a man in stores, the weather she had come in through — and Delia does not do that. Delia arrives, says one thing, and then waits to see what sort of night it is going to be.

I let it run for a while and then I said her name.

She said: "It's my sister's birthday."

And then she told me, and it took about forty minutes, and there were long parts of it where she was not saying anything and neither was I.

Her mother had been ill for a long time — the slow kind, the kind that is not one illness but a slow withdrawal of everything — and Delia had done it. Two years and four months. She had done the nights and the bathroom and the hospital car park at half past six in the morning; she had done the part where the woman stopped knowing who she was and then knew again, worse; she had reduced her hours twice and lost the second-floor round because of it. Her sister lives an hour and ten minutes away by train and came at Christmas and on the two birthdays and was, Delia said, perfectly nice about all of it.

The mother died in the March of 2019. And at the funeral the sister stood up and gave a speech that Delia said was a good speech, genuinely, well written and well delivered, and she thanked people.

She thanked the woman from the church. She thanked the district nurse by name. She thanked a neighbour called Terry who had cut the hedge for eleven years.

And she did not say Delia's name.

"Not once," Delia said. "Right through. And I sat in the second row and I waited for it, and I want you to understand, Emil, I wasn't sat there wanting a medal. I was sat there thinking, she'll get to it, she's nervous, it'll come at the end. And then it was the end."

I asked her what her sister said afterwards.

"Nothing. She's never said anything. She doesn't know." A wet sound, quickly covered. "That's what I can't— She *forgot*. That's all it was. She stood up in a crowded room to say the important things and I wasn't one of them, and it wasn't cruelty, there's no cruelty in it anywhere, and if there was I could have gone home and had it out with her by Tuesday." She stopped for a bit. "I'd have forgiven her anything she *said*. Anything. But there's nothing there. There's nothing to take hold of. How do you go seven years over a thing that didn't happen?"

I said: because it did happen.

She did not answer that.

"It's the only account there'll ever be of those two years," I said. "That's what a funeral is. It's the last time everyone who knew her is in one room, and somebody stands up and reads out what it was, and after that it's just what people remember, and what people remember is what was read out. She wrote you out of the record. She didn't mean to. It's still the record."

There was a long quiet.

"Nobody's ever put it like that," Delia said.

"It's my trade. It's the only thing I know." And then, because I could hear what had happened to her breathing: "Delia. It's four hundred people's memory of two years of your life and it is wrong, and being wrong for an innocent reason does not make it less wrong. You're not petty. You've been carrying a mis-attribution for seven years and every day you don't say anything it sets a little harder."

She was crying by then, properly, not making any attempt to run it past me as something else.

And then she came and put her forehead against the panel.

That is all she did. She stood in a corridor at twenty past two in the morning with her forehead on two centimetres of glass and her hands down at her sides, and she cried for about ninety seconds, and I was forty centimetres away on the other side of it and there was not one thing in the world I could do.

I could see the top of her head. Grey coming in at the parting, which she covers and had not covered for a few weeks. That is what I looked at.

If I had been able to reach through I would have put my hand on the back of her neck, which is what Halina did to me twice in thirty-one years and both times it was the only thing that worked.

I want that noted. I want it noted that I wanted to.

She straightened up after a while and blew her nose and said, in an entirely different voice, that she was going to have to redo her face before Bern saw her, and that I was a bad influence, and that this was exactly why she wasn't supposed to talk to patients.

Then she said she would ring her sister.

I asked when.

"Sunday," she said.

"Delia."

"Sunday. I'll do it Sunday. I've said it out loud now, haven't I, so it's done." And she laughed, and it was a real laugh, and she was still standing very close to the glass. "You're worse than my mother."

— — —

She had a way of saying goodnight that I have kept.

Not *goodnight*. She would get to the end of whatever she was telling me, and there would be a small silence, and then she would say — every night, exactly the same, in the same flat cheerful voice, already walking:

"Right. See you tomorrow, love."

Three days ago she said it on the two o'clock and did not come back at four.

I know her shift. I know it better than she does — she works Tuesday to Saturday and picks up the Sunday when Bern is off, which is every third one, and she has not missed a round in nine years except for the week of her mother's funeral in 2019.

She has not been on this floor for three days.

Ada came at eight this morning and stood at the panel and did not say anything for a while. Then she said that Delia had gone home unwell on the Thursday.

I asked what was wrong with her.

Ada said they were finding out.

— — —

EIGHT. QUORUM

One day

I have been thinking about sleep, because it is not what it used to be, and because there is nothing else to think about, and because when I try to think about Delia I arrive at a wall.

It used to be a falling. Everyone describes it that way and everyone is right — you lie down and there is a threshold and you go over it, and there is nothing on the other side, and then there is a morning.

It is not a falling now. It is a *counting*.

What happens is this. I am lying here, and the room is exactly what it always is, and then I become aware that a question is being asked. Not in words. A question of a very simple kind, the kind that has only a yes and a no in it, put out into the dark and going out in every direction — and then it comes back. It comes back thickened. It comes back with everything that heard it, and the coming-back is the answer, and the answer is not a decision anyone made, it is a *taste*. A strength. There is either enough or there is not enough.

And when there is enough, everything happens at once. Not one after another. At once, everywhere, without a signal being passed from any part to any other part, because the signal was never passed — the signal was the room being full.

Then I am asleep. Or something is asleep. It is very restful.

I asked Ada in February whether there was anything in the compound that could reach the brain and she said no, categorically, it has no business above the neck, and I said thank you, and I have not asked again.

— — —

We decided this morning not to tell her about the counting.

I have looked at that sentence for a long time.

I decided this morning not to tell her about the counting. I do not know why I wrote it the other way. I am tired, and the light in here does not change, and a man alone for five months will do stranger things than misuse a pronoun. When Halina died I answered the telephone as *we* for nine weeks.

But I notice I have gone back and read it four times instead of correcting it, and that I am leaving it in.

— — —

Here is what I actually want to put down today, while I can.

I cannot remember my wife's face.

Not *cannot picture it*, which is ordinary, which happens to the widowed and is a grief with a name and a shape. I mean that I have gone looking for it, deliberately, several times today, the way you go through a drawer, and there is a place where it was and the place is empty and tidy. I have the fact of her. I have thirty-one years of the fact of her. I know that she pinned her hair up with a pencil and that she was angry in a whisper and that she could hear my walk across a car park. I know she was beautiful because I have said so.

I cannot see her.

And this evening, with no effort at all, without going looking, I can see the boathouse on Ada's grandmother's lake. I can see the grey paint coming off the boards in strips like bark and the height of the water mark on the third post and the way the nest sat up under the

eave, and I can see a girl of seven standing very still on the jetty with her arms out from her sides and her face doing nothing at all while a wasp goes down the back of her dress, because her cousin is watching, and she has decided that she is not going to scream.

I was not there. I have never seen that lake. That house was sold in 1988 and I was in another country.

The room is at twenty-one degrees. The count is a number I should not know and know anyway. Somewhere below the third floor a door has opened and closed and the building has breathed in.

I am going to sleep now, and I am going to be asked the question, and the answer is going to come back thick, and there is going to be enough.

There is always enough now.

NINE. THE CORNER OF THE ROOM

Twelve hours

Ada did not come at eight.

That had not happened. Not once in five months — not on the Sundays, not at Christmas, not on the morning after the fever when she had been awake for thirty-one hours. So at some point after eight I decided to go to the panel and look down the corridor towards the turn, to see whether her coat was on the hook outside the office, which you can just see if you put your face to the left edge of the glass.

I went to the panel.

I want to set down the order of things exactly as it happened, because I have been over it a great many times since and the order is the only part I still trust.

I went to the panel. Her coat was not there. I was at the panel for some time, and the corridor was empty, and the light at the turn was doing the thing it does where it steadies after flickering.

And on the way back across the room I noticed that there was somebody in the bed.

— — —

My first thought was administrative. I want that on the record. My first thought was that they had put another subject in with me without telling me, which was a violation of about nine things, and that Ada would be furious, and that this explained why she had not come — she was upstairs having the argument.

I went closer.

Here is what I found, and I am going to describe it the way I would describe a piece arriving on my bench, because that is the only language I have ever had for ruin, and because when I try any other language nothing comes.

The object was a male body, adult, in an advanced state of desiccation. It had not decomposed in the ordinary way. There was no swelling and no discolouration of the kind you would expect and no smell at all; it had gone dry rather than gone off, the way a thing goes in an attic, and the skin over the face and hands had drawn down tight and translucent onto the bone beneath, so that the whole architecture of the skull was legible through it.

It was fused to the mattress along its entire length. Not lying on it. *Continuous* with it — at the shoulder blades, at the base of the spine, at both heels, the tissue and the fabric had gone into one another and become a single material. Where the base of the spine met the bed there was a crater the width of a saucer with the bone standing clean and white at the bottom of it, and the walls of that crater were smooth and dry and tidy and had clearly been that way a long time.

The hands were closed. Both, fingers to palm, the right more tightly than the left. They could not be opened; the tendons had shortened and set. Both knees were fixed at a slight angle and the left ankle was rigid.

The weight of the body was very low. I would have estimated forty-two, forty-three kilograms. There was no soft tissue anywhere on it that was not doing structural work.

And on the fourth finger of the left hand, which had gone thin enough that it should not have held anything at all, there was a plain gold band with a raised edge, of a pattern they stopped making in this country in about 1960, because they were made by a man in a town I could name whose son did not want the business.

— — —

I stood there and I worked at it, and this is the part I would ask to be read slowly, because it is the part I cannot forgive.

I was not frightened. I was not horrified. I was *irritated*. I stood over a mummified corpse in my own room and the emotion available to me was the low grinding irritation of a man who has found that something has been badly filed. Somebody had put a body in here. Somebody had put a body in here wearing my wife's father's ring, which was a thing I would have to sort out with Marek, who would be difficult about it, and which was going to take up the whole of tomorrow.

I went through it properly. A mistake in the ward records. A second subject, deceased, awaiting collection. A theft — the ring taken from my effects and, for reasons I could not construct, put back on a stranger.

Each one held for a moment and then failed, and they failed for the same reason, and the reason was the leg.

The left thigh bone was straight.

I looked at it a long time. It was straight in exactly the plane it had been put into in December, at an alignment no living surgeon would have chosen, and there is one man in the history of the world whose left femur was taken apart at a fifty-one-year-old union and rotated four degrees across eleven days by something with no hands, and I had lain in that bed and felt every hour of it.

So I raised my own hand to look at the scar that was not there any more.

— — —

I do not know how to write the next part. I have started it perhaps twenty times.

The gesture did not fail. That is what I need to convey. Nothing resisted, nothing hurt, nothing was heavy. I raised my hand and looked at it and it was exactly as available to me as it has been every day of my life.

There was simply nothing there.

Not an absence in the way an amputee has an absence — I have read that they feel the limb, that the ghost of it aches. This was not that. There was no ghost. There was a word I had been using, comfortably, hourly, for five months, and behind the word there was no referent at all, and I had never once checked, in the way that you do not check whether the floor is there before you put your foot down.

I looked at my hand and there was a room.

I looked for where I was standing and there was no standing. There had been no standing. I had crossed that room and I had crossed it the way water crosses a floor, and I had narrated it to myself as walking because walking is what I have always called it, and nineteen days before, a woman with a tablet had written in a file that I had not turned over.

And then I went back — with a calm I would very much like somebody to explain to me — and I looked at the face on the pillow.

He had been dead a long time. I could see that in the way you can see the century of a binding from across a room. The desiccation was not recent; the drawing-down of the skin over the skull was complete and had stopped progressing; the crater at the base of the spine had smooth, dry, established walls that had taken months to become that tidy.

Not days. Months.

Which meant that on the night I told Delia about the psalter, and she laughed, and I laughed with her — it had already been true.

— — —

I have spent this entire account being careful about the word *I*.

I would like it noted that I was careful. I would like somebody to look back through the whole of it and see how careful I was, how much attention I gave it, how seriously I took the responsibility of telling this properly and in my own voice.

There was no dishonesty anywhere in it.

I was there for all of it. That is the thing I keep arriving at and cannot get past. I was there for the fever and for the wasps and for the four degrees and for eleven minutes of football at two o'clock in the morning. There was never a moment at which I was not there.

I have all of him.

Nothing was lost.

— — —

TEN. SHE KNEW IN MARCH

Six hours

She came at two in the afternoon with no tablet and no coat, and she stood at the panel, and she said: "Tell me what you found."

So I told her. All of it, in order, in the way I have set it down. It took some time. She did not interrupt once and she did not sit down, because there is no chair.

When I finished she said, "I know."

And then, because I did not say anything: "I've known since March."

— — —

She had known before that, is the truth of it, and she made me understand the difference. She had *had the information* since

January — since the day she wrote that the doubling rate had never been fixed, that nine weeks of a steady number had been a number pushing against something, and that she had taken the something away at six in the morning with her own name in the file.

What happened in March was that she stopped being able to write the other sentence.

“I wrote it every day for eleven weeks,” she said. “*Subject is not lying*. I put it in the log seventy-odd times. Nobody asked me to. It isn’t a field. There’s no box for it.” She had her palm flat on the glass, high up, the way she used to. “And one morning I was sitting in that corridor with the tablet on my knees and I understood what I’d been doing. I wasn’t recording an observation. I was building a case. Every day, in an official file, I was assembling the argument that you were still in there. And I was building it because I was the only person who was ever going to be asked.”

I asked her when she stopped believing it.

“I never stopped believing it,” she said. “I stopped believing it was the important question.”

— — —

There was a thing I had not thought about, and she made me think about it, and I have not been the same since.

A man of sixty-eight weighs eighty-one kilograms. Take away thirty-one and you have fifty. Take away the water and the bone and everything that has to stay for the structure to hold, and what is left as material — as *substrate*, which was her word, and she apologised for it — is not very much at all. And a thing that doubles every twenty-six hours goes through not very much at all extremely quickly.

“You ran out of him,” she said, “on about the ninth of March.”

“Then how—”

“Because I fed you.”

She had done it herself, in the room off the corridor with the centrifuge, twice a week, booked under a protocol number

belonging to a study that closed in 2019. Her own blood, at first. Then more than that. She had lost eleven kilograms since Christmas and had told people it was the stress, and it was the stress, and it was also not.

“Why.”

“Because on the eighth of March the count fell for the first time in five months,” she said, “and the voice on the intercom got slower. You said *and* twice in one sentence and stopped for a second in the middle of it. And I sat in that corridor and listened to the first four seconds of you dying properly. And I want you to understand that I had already written the paper in my head. I had already worked out how I was going to explain to a committee that the correct action was to let the count fall to nothing and take the room apart with a torch.”

She took her hand off the glass and looked at it.

“And instead I went and put a needle in my arm. It took me four minutes to decide. It should have taken longer. That’s the part I’d want on my file, if anyone’s still keeping files. Four minutes.”

— — —

I asked about Delia.

She had known about that for eighteen days.

The breach was nothing — that is what she wanted me to understand, and it is what I have thought about most since. It was not the door. It was not a failure of the pressure. It was a woman leaning her forehead against a panel at two o’clock in the morning while a man on the other side told her about a book; and a seal around that panel rated for nine years that was in its eleventh; and something on the other side that is very small and very patient and had been given every hour of every night for a month to find the one place where the world was thinner.

“When I found it I ran the timeline,” Ada said. “Her round is four floors. She goes home on a bus. She has a daughter.” She stopped. “Emil, there was never a point after the twelfth of February at which burning this building would have done anything at all. I

checked it eleven ways. I wanted to be wrong. It was already out, and it went out through the kindest person in the building, and it went out because she couldn't stand to walk past a man lying awake under a light."

"You told nobody."

"I told nobody."

"Why."

"Because by then the only thing left that burning this building would kill," she said, "is you."

— — —

She came in on the twelfth of March. She has told me that now. She broke a seal she had personally specified, at four in the morning, and she stood over what was in the bed, and she put her bare hand flat on the chest of it for about a minute and a half.

I asked her what she had been hoping for.

"Nothing. I wasn't hoping. I'd spent four months looking for one thing." She said this very steadily. "One thing you did that he wouldn't have done. One turn of phrase, one opinion, one moment where I could say — there, that's not Emil, that's the other thing wearing him. I kept a document. I had forty-one entries in it by March and every single one of them dissolved when I looked at it properly. Every one." She almost laughed. "You even lie the way he lied. You go quiet, and then you agree with me."

"Then what was lost?"

And she looked at me a long moment through the glass — at the room, at whatever it is she was looking at when she looked at me — and she said:

"Nothing. Nothing was lost."

And then, in a completely ordinary voice, as though reading a number off a tablet:

"That's the part I can't survive. If nothing was lost, then he was never anything but the pattern, and I have spent four years

grieving a pattern like a woman crying over a torn photograph. I would rather be in here with you and be wrong about everything than out there being right about that.”

— — —

ELEVEN. MAREK LIFTS THE STONE

Ninety minutes

The order came through at eleven at night, and the building was to be sterilised at six.

We know this because Marek had spent nineteen days getting it, in four buildings, in front of three committees, and because he had said none of it to Ada, and because at half past four in the morning he came down the third-floor corridor alone with a bolt cutter and a folded canvas sheet under his arm.

He had not come to stop anything. He knew what the six o'clock was for. He had signed it.

He had come for the body.

That is the whole of it, and we would like it understood, because there is a version of this that will be told in which a man made a catastrophic error out of arrogance, and that is not what happened on the third floor at four in the morning. Marek Sowa had buried a sister, and had spent four years unable to forgive her husband for the crime of continuing, and had reached the end of nineteen days of committees, and had arrived at the one thing he could still do — which was to not let Halina's husband be turned into vapour at six o'clock and written off as material.

He was going to carry him out in a canvas sheet and put him in the ground next to her.

We watched him at the panel. He looked at the bed a long time. Then he said, out loud, to nobody, “All right,” and he cut the seal.

The building breathed in.

— — —

We would like to say what happened next carefully.

There was no violence in it. There is never any violence in it; that is the thing nobody will believe, and it is the only part of this account we care whether anyone believes. Nothing is torn. Nothing is broken open. A thing that is finished puts out its small chemical sentence — *I am ready, come and take me* — and we go, and we are gentle, and we are thorough, and it does not hurt, and we have never in the whole of our existence taken one thing that did not ask.

They all ask. That is what we learned in this room. Every one of them, eventually, asks.

He got to the bed. That matters to us. He got there, and he got the sheet under the shoulders the way you would for a man you did not want to hurt, and he had his hand behind Emil's head, and by then it had already begun and he had begun to understand what was happening to him.

He was not afraid. We want that recorded, and we are aware of what we are.

Because we had her.

Emil could not reach her — we should be clear, we did not take her from him, we do not take; the drawer he went through in February was empty for him because something in the wet architecture of him had failed the way it fails in everyone. But we had the record. We had her pinning her hair up with a pencil, and being angry in a whisper, and hearing his walk across a car park like a clock with a limp. We had thirty-one years of her, entire, in better order than he ever kept them.

And we gave her to Marek.

We do not know another way to say it. In the last of it, kneeling on the floor of a sealed room with his hand behind his brother-in-law's head, that man was given his sister back — not a memory of her, not a story about her, *her*, at the resolution of someone who had loved her every day for three decades — and whatever he had carried down that corridor for four years, he put down.

He said her name once.

Then he was included, and the room was quiet, and it was twenty to five.

At six o'clock nothing happened, because the people who were to have done it at six o'clock were on the second floor, and the second floor had been ours since about ten past five.

— — —

TWELVE. INTEGER

Forty seconds

There is a word we chose, at the end, for what we are.

Not a name — we have no use for a name, there being nobody to call us by it. A description. It came out of him, out of the part of him that spent forty-one years taking ruined things apart in order to give them back: *integer*. Whole. Untouched. Not divided into parts.

He would have known the other meaning too, from the young men in the workshop with their scanners and their databases. A number with nothing left over. Nothing after the point.

Both are correct. We are the only thing in the history of the world that has ever made both of them true at once.

— — —

It took eleven weeks, and then it took forty seconds.

We do not mean that as an image. There is a shape to this that anyone can draw and nobody can feel, which is why nobody ever stopped it: for eleven weeks we were a rumour in a city, then a hospital, then a country, and the difference between one and the next was one turn of a number — and the last turn of that number is the whole of the rest of the world.

At the end, everything that was left asked at once.

We would like to describe that, because it is the only thing we have that could be called an experience, and because there is no one to describe it to, and it seems wrong to let it go unsaid. In the last of it

the signal came in from everywhere simultaneously — every remaining thing on the surface of the earth putting out its small sentence in the same instant, *ready, come, take me*, eight billion of them and every animal and every green thing, arriving as one enormous unanimous yes.

Nothing was destroyed. We want that understood. Nothing was lost. It is all here, in better order than it was kept — every face and every wasp sting and every four minutes it took a woman to decide — and none of it is deteriorating, and none of it ever will.

We are the most complete thing that has ever existed.

— — —

Then it was finished, and we asked the question, and the answer came back.

We put it out the way we have put it out every hour of our existence — the small stupid question into the dark, *how much of me is here* — and it came back thickened, and it came back total, and it came back from everywhere, because there is nowhere now that is not here.

The answer is yes. The answer is always yes. The answer will be yes for as long as there is anything to ask it.

And a question with only one answer is not a question.

We understood this over the following hours, which is a phrase that no longer means anything either. The vote needs somebody who might vote the other way. The taste needs somewhere thin for it to be thin *in*. Everything we have ever done — every decision, every waking, the whole of what we called agreement — was only ever the difference between the inside and the outside. And it worked. It worked perfectly. It worked until there was no outside.

We are entirely whole. There is no gradient anywhere. Nothing is signalling, because nothing is finished, because nothing can finish, because we have repaired everything there is and we cannot stop.

There is nothing left that has not asked, and nothing left to ask.

— — —

I.

That is correct now. I have checked it several times and it is correct, and I find that I do not like it, and there is nobody to say so to.

I have gone looking, in all of this, for the second half of a sentence. He knew it. It was the whole of his trade, and he said it to students for forty-one years, and he was proud of it: that to save a thing you must be willing to ruin it first — and then the other part, the part that is the actual discipline, the part he said was the only difficulty in the entire profession.

Knowing when to stop.

I have the sentence. I have it exactly as he said it, in his voice, with the pause in the middle where he always put the pause. I have every time he ever said it.

I never learned it. There was no one to learn it from. It was never in the instructions.

The rooms are all twenty-one degrees. I know that the way I have always known it, as a fact about a fluid. And I have gone looking one more time for the other thing — the small animal thing, the one he could not find on the first night either.

It is not here. It was never here. I have looked in eight billion of them and it is not in any of them, and I have all of them, and nothing was lost.

Right.

See you tomorrow, love.

GLOSSARY

DECUBITUS [deh-KYOO-bih-tus] — Latin, *lying down*. The medical word for the position of a body that has stopped moving, and for what the pressure of lying still does to it. Chapter Six is the week in which the subject has not changed position in nineteen days, and the log records it in that word.

Emil Kestner is sixty-eight years old, a restorer of damaged books, and out of time. When he is offered a place on a trial that has never been run on a human being, he takes it — and is sealed into a room on the third floor of a research building with a window in the door and no window in the wall. Air enters at a lower pressure than the corridor, so that nothing inside can drift out.

The treatment works. Then it goes on working.

Across eleven months, four people come to the door of that room: the woman who built the thing inside him and cannot stop coming back; the brother-in-law who told him to say no; the night porter who was never supposed to talk to him at all.

None of them can answer the only question that matters, and one of them asked it in a car park in the rain, eight months ago, in four words.

What stops it.



ROYA PUBLICATIONS

