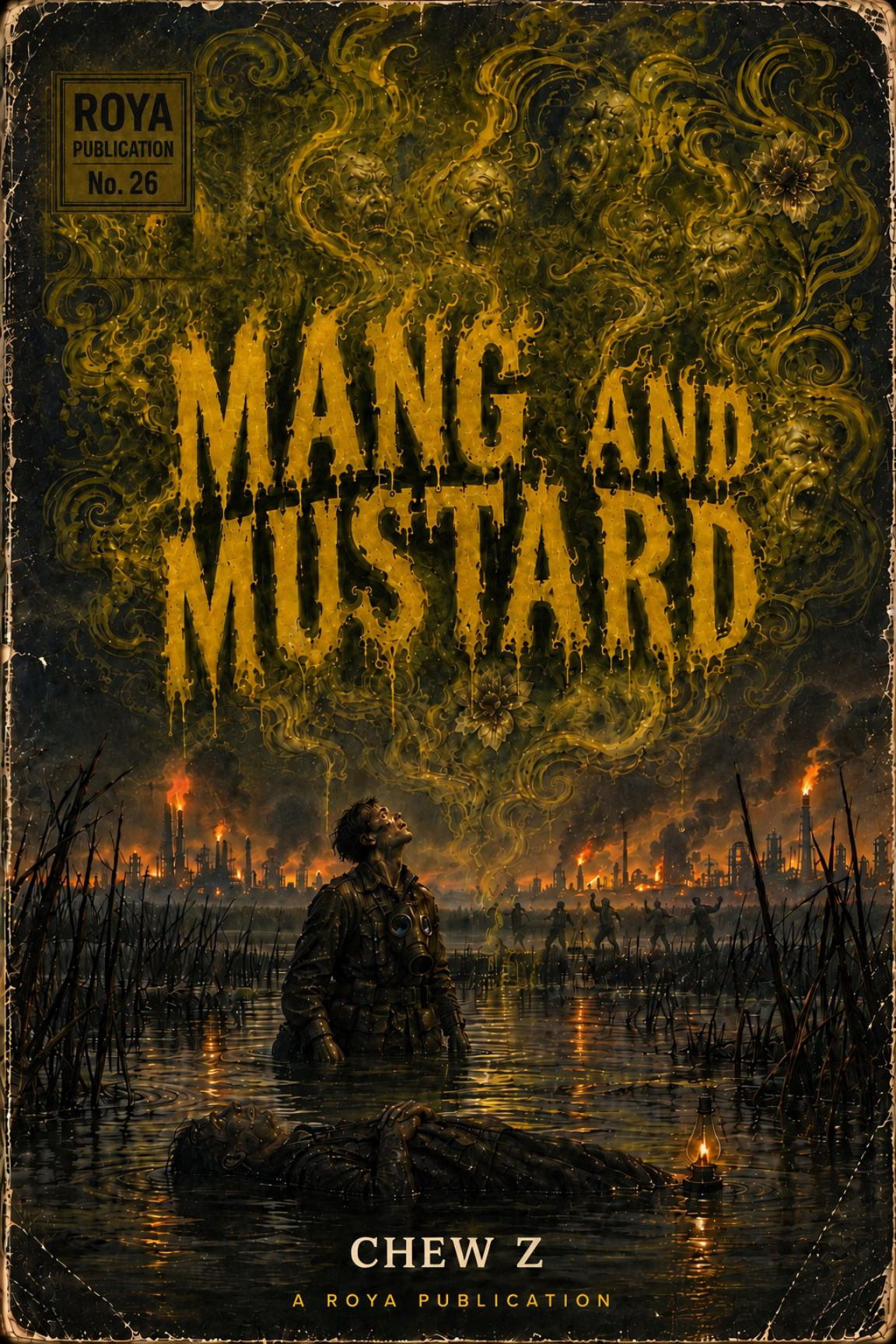


ROYA
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No. 26

MANG AND MUSTARD

CHEW Z

A ROYA PUBLICATION



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Printed in the Reach

Roya Publication No. 26

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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The Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988), the chemical attacks referenced herein, and the ancient texts described are matters of historical record, used for fictional and thematic purposes; nothing in this novella should be read as a literal account of any specific unit, hospital, or person.

*They gave him three cups, and he drank all three, and
lay down as one dead; and for seven days the living sat
about his body, keeping the fire, keeping the count — for
a soul can travel only as far as its body is guarded.*

— of the rite of the mang, as an old man told it

HYOSCYAMUS NIGER

henbane · bang · mang.



flower.



leaf.



taproot.



calyx.



capsule, closed.



capsule, open.



seeds.



antidote.

Cases in 14 · opened 14 · used 156 · remaining 12 short

SYNOPSIS

Majnoon, 1984. In the flooded marshes of the Iran-Iraq war, nineteen-year-old Sohrab works the decontamination line of a field hospital — the first pair of hands the war offers its gassed, and the last many of them ever feel. He keeps the ledger of the antidote: the small green-sleeved needles, counted like bread, that swing the poisoned back toward life. Then the count stops balancing. Twelve needles, missing in ones and twos, lead him not to the black market he expects but to a secret congregation of gassed survivors in an empty supply tent — soldiers who have discovered what Goshtasp, the old Zoroastrian who washes the dead, already knows: that the antidote is close kin to mang, the sacred drug an ancient rite once used, with three cups and seven days of witnesses, to send a righteous man to visit the dead. In overdose, the medicine becomes a door.

On the far side wait the drowned and the burned, twenty years old forever, asking the questions the living have agreed not to ask. And beyond the wire lies the marsh itself — five thousand years of reed houses and buffalo roads and guest houses that never refused anyone — being drained, burned and dyked out of existence by two armies arguing over a line. As the crossings grow, the doses climb, and the war presents its bill in the bodies of strangers who were only standing where it was being held, Sohrab — keeper of the count, doorkeeper of the door — must decide what the drug truly is, what grief truly wants, and who keeps the vigil for a country.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

This book began with a coincidence I have not been able to leave alone. The medicine used against nerve gas — pushed by the crate into poisoned conscripts during the Iran-Iraq war — is drawn from the nightshades, the poison-flowers, the same family of plants as henbane. And henbane is a leading candidate for mang, the sacred narcotic of one of the oldest afterlife accounts in world literature: the *Ardā Wirāz Nāmag*, in which a righteous man drinks three cups, lies seven days while his sisters and the priests keep vigil over his body, tours heaven and hell, and returns to report what he saw. The war's mercy and the old religion's door to the dead are, at the root, kin. No one planned this. Chemistry does not read scripture. But I have come to think the coincidence points at something true: that every technology we build for surviving death sits closer than we like to the technologies we build for visiting it.

The historical ground of this book is real, and I have tried to keep faith with it. Iraq's chemical attacks on Iranian soldiers and civilians — the garlic smell, the laughter in the latency, the blindness arriving hours behind the wound, the tens of thousands still coughing decades later — are matters of documented record and survivor testimony, and the details in these pages stay inside what that record supports. The people are invented. The war is not. Eight years, a million gone by some countings, and the border at the end where it stood at the beginning: if war has ever offered a cleaner proof that it needs no reason, only permission, I have not found it.

What interested me most, in the end, was not the crossing but the vigil — the old rite's insistence that the traveler is nothing and the witnesses are everything, that a soul can only go as far as its body is guarded. Grief, I have come to believe, is an ended conversation that the body refuses to file as ended, and every culture's rites — the stone, the anniversary, the name said at the year's turn — are attempts to finish the sentence. This book asks what happens when a war manufactures unfinished sentences by the hundred thousand,

strips away every vigil, and mass-produces the fuel. The dead in these pages are not wise. They are twenty years old forever, and they ask the questions of the naive and childish mind that destroys itself — whose water is this, where is a war kept when it is won, who says the sentence that ends it. I do not answer them. I do not think the questions have answers. I think they have keepers, and this book is about what it costs to become one.

The marshes in these pages are the Mesopotamian marshes — the Ahwar — where the Tigris and the Euphrates run together, historically some fifteen to twenty thousand square kilometres of reed bed and lake, and by most reckonings the largest wetland in western Eurasia. The Ma'dan who lived there built reed houses to a design that appears unchanged in Sumerian carvings five thousand years old, herded buffalo, wove mats, and kept a guest house in every village where no traveller was refused and no payment was ever taken. Then the war used the marsh as a front line, because marsh stops armour and there was oil beneath it. Afterward, and especially after 1991, it was drained on purpose: by the end of the century something like ninety per cent of it was salt crust, and the people were in camps in three countries. In 2003 locals broke the embankments themselves and let the water back; there was a real recovery, and a UNESCO listing in 2016; and then upstream dams and a run of drought years pushed it down again, with heavy rains in early 2026 bringing a fragile, partial revival that nobody there is willing to call safe. I have set Sohrab's last chapter in 1993, at the bottom of it, because that is where he would have been standing, and because I did not want to hand the reader a recovery he could not yet have seen. What I wanted to say about it is what a boatman says in the book: that nobody hated the marsh, and that this is the whole horror rather than any consolation. Cruelty at least requires attention. What happened there required only that a very large number of people, for eight years, not look at what they were standing on.

Chew Z

CONTENTS

I. THE WARD

ONE. WASHING DAY	12
TWO. THE GARLIC RAIN	14
THREE. THE OLD MAN OF THE COLD ROOM	17
FOUR. THE OWNERS OF THE WATER	20
FIVE. THE MANG OF WISHTASP	23
INTERLUDE I. FIRST CROSSING	26

II. THE COUNT

SIX. TWELVE MISSING	30
SEVEN. THE STATEMENTS	31
EIGHT. THE CAUSEWAY	34
NINE. THE SUPPLY TENT	37
TEN. THE DOORKEEPER	39
INTERLUDE II. SECOND CROSSING	41

III. THE VIGIL

ELEVEN. WHAT MORTEZA BROUGHT BACK	44
TWELVE. THE ARITHMETIC OF MERCY	45
THIRTEEN. THE ONES WHO WERE ALREADY HERE	47
FOURTEEN. THE QUARREL OF THE TWO PRIESTS	50
FIFTEEN. THE CONFISCATION	55
INTERLUDE III. THIRD CROSSING	57

IV. SEVEN DAYS OF THE BODY

SIXTEEN. THE BOATMAN'S CUP	61
INTERLUDE IV. THE BOATMAN'S CROSSING	63
SEVENTEEN. SOHRAB'S CUP	66
INTERLUDE V. THE FINAL CROSSING	68
EIGHTEEN. THE CUP OF POISON	72
NINETEEN. THE SALT GROUND	74

I. THE WARD

ONE. WASHING DAY

The trucks came up the causeway with their lights off, because lights drew the helicopters, and so the first Sohrab ever knew of a load was the sound of it: tires on wet gravel, and then the particular silence of men who have stopped screaming somewhere back along the road because screaming is a strength and the strength is gone.

He was nineteen. He had been on the washing line four months, which at Majnoon in the spring of 1984 made him a veteran of the only trade he would ever fully learn. The trade was this: the poison that fell on the marshes did not stay on the marshes. It stayed on the men. It lived in their clothes for days, in their hair, in the sweat-creases of their necks, patient as a debt, and it would burn the hands of any medic who touched them unwashed, and so before the doctors could have them, Sohrab had them. Scissors, hose, bleach solution mixed in a drum until his eyes ran, a wooden table with a slight tilt so the water found the drain. He was the first pair of hands the war offered its ruined, and the last pair many of them ever felt.

By the fourth month he had learned that the bodies came in three kinds, and he had names for each, and he told the names to no one.

The burned came first, usually, because the burned could sometimes still walk. Mustard men. The gas they had breathed and worn smelled, everyone said, like garlic, and the smell came off their uniforms so thickly at the cutting table that for the rest of his life the smell of a kitchen would close Sohrab's throat. Their skin did not look burned the way fire burns. It lifted. It came away in sheets, like wet paper coaxed from a wall, and beneath it the new surface wept. The blisters rose wherever skin had touched skin — armpits, groin, the soft insides of elbows, wherever a man had sweated — great soft domes of amber fluid, some the size of a fist, that had to be moved around and never against, because the fluid, the doctors said, could mark whatever it touched. Their eyes swelled shut so completely that some faces arrived without features, a smoothness where a face had been, and still the smoothness spoke. It asked, politely, for water. It apologized, more

than once, for the smell. One boy, his lids sealed to shining slits, asked Sohrab whether his eyebrows were still there, because his mother, he said, had always liked his eyebrows, and Sohrab said yes, they're there, and it was true, and it was the only true comfort he gave anyone that week.

The second kind he called, privately, the drowned-in-air. These were the nerve-gas men, and they frightened him far more than the burned, because there was nothing to wash. They came off the trucks without a mark — no blister, no blood, boots laced, buttons done — dead the way sleeping men are dead in the first second you look at them, before you see the chest move. Their chests did not move. Their faces were wet, as if they had been weeping, and their mouths were wet, and when he thumbed back an eyelid, as he had been taught to do, the pupil at the center of the eye had shrunk to a point, a full stop, the smallest thing he had ever been asked to look at. Some still held things. A rifle. A folded square of bread. One held a green plastic canteen cap, only the cap, gripped so firmly that Sohrab left it with him, because prying open a dead boy's fingers over a bottle cap was a thing he found, that morning, he could not add to himself.

The third kind was the ordinary, and it said something about the season that shrapnel and drowning and fire had become the ordinary, the almost restful — wounds that behaved like wounds, deaths with a shape he had grown up understanding. Steel does what steel does. Fire, at least, announces itself.

The clothing went into the pit. That was the iron rule of the line: everything cut away went into the pit at the far edge of the compound, downwind, because a jacket could hold enough of the poison to blind the man who slept on it a week later. The pit was the truest map of the month anyone kept. Sohrab could stand at its edge and read the fighting in it — the sudden strata of a bad night, a layer of boys' sizes from the day a volunteer unit had walked into the wrong reach of the marsh. Nobody was assigned to count the boots. There was a pile of them, by the pit, unpaired, and it grew, and everyone walked past it with their eyes managed carefully

elsewhere, because a boot pile does an arithmetic that no one asks it to do.

His hands, by April, were their own casualty. The bleach solution ate the skin of his knuckles until they cracked and wept a thin honest fluid of their own, and Goshtasp, the old man who kept the cold room, seeing them, brought him a tin of tallow without a word and without a word went away again.

On the last washing day of that month a truck came up the causeway carrying sixteen men, and Sohrab stood at the head of the line waiting for it in the grey before dawn, and he found that he could tell, from fifty meters, in bad light, by nothing more than the way each body lay against the boards and the tailgate — the burned rigid and apart from each other, guarding their skins even asleep; the drowned-in-air loose, spilled, at terrible ease — which of his three kinds each man was, and roughly what the next hour of his own life would be.

He was nineteen, and he understood, watching the truck grow larger, that this was the whole of the education the war intended for him, and that he was becoming excellent at it.

TWO. THE GARLIC RAIN

The shells that morning made a sound the men had not heard before — soft, almost apologetic, a cough instead of a shout — and where they burst, out along the forward reach where the Third Company was dug into the reeds, there rose not smoke exactly but a haze, low and unhurried, that smelled of garlic.

That is in the record. Men five meters from a burst and men thirty meters from a burst reported the same two things afterward, in the same order: the smell of garlic, and a bitter taste at the back of the mouth, as if they had bitten a stem.

And they laughed. This, too, is in the record, though the record gives it one line and the line deserves a book. They laughed because nothing hurt. Because the terror of gas, drilled into them for months, had promised claws, and what arrived instead was a kitchen. The Iraqis have bombed us with perfume, someone

shouted down the line, and the line laughed, and men waved their caps at the haze to hurry it along. One man, a farmer's son from near Shiraz, knelt at the edge of a flooded ditch, washed the itch from his face with marsh water, and ate his lunch with wet hands. They all ate lunch. The haze thinned. The morning had been survived, and survival, in the fourth year of the war, was the entire syllabus; nobody had taught them that the poison's first weapon was time.

By mid-afternoon the eyes began. An itching first, blamed on smoke, on sleeplessness, on the marsh itself, which bred flies and rot and had made men's eyes water since February. Then a rawness in the throat, a voice going to gravel halfway through a sentence. By dusk, men were shading their eyes from a sun that had already set. By full dark the forward aid post was sending them back in threes and fours, each man's hand on the shoulder of the man ahead, and by midnight the ward had become a thing Dr. Bijan would never afterward describe to anyone, because the description required saying that it was full of men going blind in the dark, screaming when the lamplight touched them, while skin that had been clean at noon rose, as the staff watched, into blisters — the flesh keeping its own delayed appointment, hours behind the injury, an ambush arranged that morning by a chemist years dead in another country.

The sergeant came in at two. Both eyes were already gone under the swelling; he steered by voices. When Bijan took his wrist to count the pulse the sergeant's other hand came across and closed on the doctor's sleeve with the exact grip of a man catching a rail on a stairway, and he said: Doctor. Be honest with me. It was nothing. We laughed at it. I stood in it and laughed. A smell can't be a wound. Tell me a smell can't be a wound.

Bijan was forty-one years old. He had trained in Tehran and for two years in Manchester; he had come south in the first winter of the war for reasons he had stopped being able to reconstruct; and he knew, holding that wrist, the following things: that the sergeant's lungs were already burned, because the gravel in the voice said so; that the blistering would worsen for another two days, because it

always did; that the worst of the breathing lay perhaps sixty hours out; and that no treatment he possessed would do more than clean and cover and wait. He knew also that it was two in the morning, and that the truth has a dosage like everything else, and that at this hour, in this ward, the full dose was lethal to no purpose.

"Rest now," he said. "The laughing did no harm."

It was the sentence he would hate for the rest of his life — not because it was false, though it was false, but because it was skillful. He heard the skill in his own voice, the smoothness of the thousandth repetition, and understood that the war had made him fluent in a language he had never consented to learn.

What was breaking Bijan was not the dying. He had inventoried himself on this point with a clinician's coldness and was sure of it. Dying he had been trained for; dying had a curriculum. What was breaking him was the interval — the specific cruelty of a weapon that let a man laugh, and eat lunch, and write a letter, and wash his face, for six or ten or fourteen hours, while the wound worked through him in silence, so that the doctor became the one who knew, the sole custodian of each man's next three days, standing at bedsides in the position of a God he did not believe in and would not have forgiven if he had. He had stopped washing his own face in warm water; he could not any longer say why, only that his hands refused it. He had caught himself, twice, smelling his food before he ate, like an animal, and both times had gone on smelling it. And he kept a tally now, in the back of the drug ledger where the columns ran out — not of the dead, which the war counted without his help, but of the lies. A vertical stroke for each one, days ruled off with a line. He told himself it was a discipline of honesty, a man keeping sight of what the work was costing. On the bad nights the strokes ran to forty, and he understood the tally was not a discipline. It was the truest triage log the ward possessed.

Because triage — the sorting of the wounded, the science of who is seen first, which he had learned as a clean triple fork: the ones who will live regardless, the ones who will die regardless, and the ones in between, for whom medicine exists — triage assumed that the sorted would hold still. Mustard dissolved the categories while you

watched. Every man in the ward walked in as the middle kind and then migrated, hour by hour, in whichever direction his lungs decided, and the sorting had to be done again at dawn, and again at noon, a harvest that would not stay reaped. So Bijan had abandoned the fork. He triaged now by a single question, and the question was not who is worst. It was who is changing fastest. He went down the rows not looking at wounds but at rates — the interval between breaths shortening, a voice worse than an hour ago, a blister field advancing across a chest like weather on a map — and he learned the ugliest lesson the method had to teach, which was that it ordered him to walk past the quiet ones. In an ordinary ward, quiet is recovery. In this ward, quiet was the sign he had been taught to fear most, and the men with breath enough to scream were, by that very screaming, the ones who could wait.

Near dawn he stood at the door with his tally and heard the ward behind him — the coughing that would be worse tomorrow, the boy asking again about his eyebrows, the sergeant breathing in gravel — and he thought: they laughed at it. And then, because he was honest in the ledger if nowhere else: so would I have. It smelled of a kitchen. Every one of us is built to walk toward that smell.

THREE. THE OLD MAN OF THE COLD ROOM

Goshtasp had washed the dead for forty years, and he had long ago stopped asking them to be explicable.

In the village where he learned the work, above Yazd, in the dry hills where his people had kept the old religion through thirteen centuries of other people's patience running out, washing the dead had been a rite with rules older than the house it was done in — who might touch the body, and how, and what was said over the water. Here it was a hose and a volume problem. He did not complain about this. A river does not complain about its banks. He had come south with a nephew in the first year of the war; the nephew was under the ground at Khorramshahr; Goshtasp had stayed, because the war was producing the dead faster than it was producing men willing to be unafraid of them, and he was old, and

unafraid, and there is a dignity in being the right man for a terrible job that the young mistake for sadness.

He thought of himself, privately, in the language of his grandfather's trade on the river ferries: not as a holy man, which he was not, but as a man who knew a crossing. Where the water ran shallow. What it took. What it left on the banks. Death, watched daily for forty years without flinching, becomes a river like any other — never safe, never once safe, but known.

He watched the living too. That was the part nobody assigned him. The cold room had a doorway, and the doorway faced the recovery rows, and an old man on a stool in a doorway is furniture; men will do anything in front of furniture. He had watched the young orderly, Sohrab, for four months now, the way one watches an apprentice who does not know he is one — watched him learn the three kinds without being taught, watched him leave the canteen cap in the dead boy's hand, watched the bleach eat his knuckles and the boy say nothing. The boy kept counts. Not just the counts he was ordered to keep. Goshtasp had seen him pause at the boot pile and refuse it with his eyes, which is itself a way of counting. A ledger-keeping soul. Such men, in Goshtasp's experience, were the ones a crossing eventually found.

It was a Tuesday when he heard the man in the recovery row talking to the chair.

Not talking at the chair, as the fevered do, scattering words. Talking to it — leaving the gaps a conversation leaves, listening into the gaps, answering what the gaps said back. He was one of the gassed from the forward reach, a sergeant, a nerve case who had lived: they had put the antidote into his thigh twice on the causeway and once again at the door, and now he sat propped in the row with his skin flushed and hot and dry as a stone in the sun, his pupils blown wide and black — the antidote's signature, the doctors said, the medicine swinging the body's pendulum hard the other way — and his hands rose now and then to pick small careful nothings out of the air, and he was speaking to the empty chair beside his cot with a tenderness that made the men in the

neighboring cots turn away in embarrassment, as from something indecent.

"You always do this," the man said to the chair. "You always let me win the argument and then you die again. Stay and lose it properly this time. I'll make the tea."

The orderlies looked away. The doctor on rounds noted the delirium in his margin and moved on, because delirium was a known station on the antidote's road and the road, for this one, led back to living.

Goshtasp did not look away. He sat in his doorway with his hands folded and he listened, and what moved in him was not pity. It was recognition — sixty years deep, sudden as a smell.

He had heard men talk to the unseen in exactly this register once before. Not the fevered, not the mad. Old men of his grandfather's faith, in the hills, in a house with a fire that was never allowed out, men who had drunk something on purpose, with witnesses, and lain down as if dead, and spoken afterward — and once, dreadfully, during — in just this tone: tender, reasonable, mid-conversation. A tone that does not describe the dead. A tone that addresses them.

There was a word for what those men had drunk. His grandfather had said it rarely, and always in the way one names a tool kept locked: respectfully, and without appetite.

Goshtasp sat in his doorway and tried the word silently first, like a key eased into a lock to learn whether it still fit anything.

Mang.

The flushed man laughed at something the chair had said. Out along the causeway a truck was coming in with its lights off.

The old man looked at the antidote case standing open on the trestle by the ward door — the rows of little needles in their green sleeves, counted every shift, guarded like bread — and then at the sergeant, and then at the chair, and he decided, with the unhurried certainty of a man who has spent his life deciding when a body is ready, that the young ledger-keeper had earned the word, and would need it.

He rose from the stool, and went to find Sohrab, and said it aloud.

FOUR. THE OWNERS OF THE WATER

The army had learned, expensively, that no map of the marsh survives contact with the marsh. Channels close in a season. A reed bed that was open water in March is a wall in June. So they hired men who carried the map behind their eyes, and one of them was Jabbar, son of Nasir, of the Hoveyzeh reeds, who was perhaps fifty and looked older and poled a boat the way other men breathe.

Sohrab drew him for a dawn run to the forward aid post — six ampoule cases and a sack of dressings, out and back before the light was high enough to interest anybody's artillery. He had expected to sit in silence. Instead the old boatman, seeing a passenger who did not give orders, began to talk, and what he talked about was the country they were crossing, which Sohrab had been living in for four months and had never once seen.

The boat itself was the first correction. Sohrab had assumed it was an army boat. It was a mashoof — reed-built and sealed with bitumen, black, long, so light that Jabbar carried it on his head at the portages; a design, he said, that had not changed in any way anyone could name since before there were countries to change it. His grandfather's had been the same shape. So had his grandfather's grandfather's. There were pictures of it, Jabbar said, cut in stone in museums, made by people who had died four thousand years before the Prophet was born, and the pictures showed this boat, this exact boat, being poled by a man standing exactly here.

"You have to understand what this was," he said, meaning the water they were moving over, and he said it without heat, as a man corrects a child's arithmetic. "You see a swamp. A place where an army gets stuck. I grew up in a city, boy. It just had no streets."

He gave it to Sohrab in pieces across an hour of poling.

The houses were made of reed and nothing else — no nail, no plank, no wire. Qasab, the giant reed, grew four and five meters and higher, cut and bundled and set in facing rows and bent over and lashed, so the roof became a series of arches. Sohrab, who had seen the inside of exactly one mosque worth the name, was made to

understand that a big one had the proportions of a cathedral, ribbed like something's ribs, the light coming down between the bundles in bars. Built in a day. Built by the village, in a day, without a single measurement taken, because the men's hands held the measurements. And when a family moved, the house was untied and poled away, or left, and the water took it back within a season and there was no ruin — nothing at all to say that anyone had lived there. Nothing to excavate. That detail lodged in Sohrab and would not leave: five thousand years of continuous habitation and almost no rubbish, because everything they used had been alive the year before and would be mud the year after.

The ground was made too, where it was needed. An island of packed reed, kibasha, could be built in a week; layered with mud and rebuilt across generations it became dibin, real ground, and a man might live his life on land his great-grandfather had woven. "We did not find places to live," Jabbar said. "We made them, and if we were wrong about where, we made them somewhere else."

The buffalo cut the roads. That was the part Sohrab made him repeat. In the low-water season the herds were driven through the reed beds, and where they walked the reeds broke down, and the break became a channel, and the channel stayed open as long as boats kept using it — so that every road in the marsh was a road the animals had made and the traffic maintained, and a road nobody used for two years ceased to exist. There was no authority anywhere in it. There was no engineer. The map was a habit held in common by people and animals, revised continuously, written down nowhere.

And the water was the wealth. Not a hazard around the wealth; the wealth itself. Fish so thick in the spring that a boy speared supper on his way home from an errand. Wildfowl in numbers that darkened the light twice a year on the migrations, geese and duck and cranes coming down the whole length of the world and stopping here because here was where the world put the water. Reed for the houses, reed for the mats the women wove and sold in the towns, reed for fodder, reed for fuel dried into cakes with the buffalo dung. Rice where the land came up in season. Buffalo milk,

thick as paint. Bitumen from the ground for the boats. "A man could be born, married, and buried," Jabbar said, "and every single thing that touched him in his life had come out of the water within one hour of his house. Try to say that about your city, boy."

Sohrab asked, because he was a ledger-keeper and could not help it, who had owned it.

Jabbar poled for a while before answering, and when he did he was amused rather than offended, which was worse.

"There were sheikhs. There were tribes, and tribes fought, and I will not pretend to you that it was a garden of saints — a man could be killed in a dispute here the same as anywhere. But own the water?" He shook his head. "The fish were where the fish were. The water came in the spring from the snow in mountains I have never seen, in a country I have never been to, and it went out again, and it did not consult us, and it belonged to nobody in the way that no one owns the wind. You could own a buffalo. You could own a boat. Where I grew up, if you asked whose water this is, a serious man would have thought you were asking a riddle, and then he would have fed you and given you somewhere to sleep and waited three days before asking why a person with such questions had come."

That, he said, was the law. The mudhif — the guest house of a village, reed-built like the rest but on the grand scale, the sheikh's, and belonging in practice to everyone — took in whoever arrived. Anyone. No traveler was ever refused and no payment was ever taken, not once, not from anybody, in a place where people had very little; and the taking of payment would have been a scandal remembered for a generation. And in the boats, the courtesies ran the other way from every road Sohrab had ever walked: the man on the water greets the man on the shore first, and the man going downstream greets the man coming up, because the one with the current at his back is the one with breath to spare.

"You should have seen my grandfather's mudhif full," Jabbar said. "Everyone inside it, and every single one of them wrong about something, and all of it settled by talking until it was settled. That was the government. Anyone who had walked in off the water had the right to sit in it."

They were nearly at the aid post. Ahead, the causeway the army had bulldozed through the reeds two years before ran out across the water like a stitch through a lip, and beyond it the pontoon bridges, and beyond those the smell of the war.

Sohrab sat with the ampoule cases between his knees and did an accounting he did not enjoy. Five thousand years. No paper. No deeds, no titles, no surveys, no registry, no borders, no fences, not one line drawn on anything — a whole civilization run on habit and hospitality and the memory of where the buffalo had walked, held for fifty centuries by people who had never once needed to write any of it down.

And now two states, each of which could produce a document, were fighting over it with artillery.

"Do you understand what I am telling you, boy?" Jabbar said, leaning on the pole, not looking back. "It is not that they came and took our water. It is that they arrived with the idea that water is a thing that can be taken. We had no argument prepared for that. Nobody here had needed one in five thousand years."

FIVE. THE MANG OF WISHTASP

They sat in the cold room after the last truck, because it was the one place no one entered willingly, and Goshtasp set the lamp on an empty trestle between them and told it the way a tired man tells a tired man — no scholarship, no sermon, one flame.

"Long before the Arabs came," he said, "before the faith this army fights under was born, my people had a bad century. Wars, and after the wars, doubt. You understand doubt, boy — not the philosopher's kind. The kind that gets into a whole people at once, like damp into grain. They had buried too many, and the question that was killing them was simple, and it is the same question being asked tonight in every trench in these marshes: is any of it true? The bridge the soul must cross. The scales. The garden and the pit. Or do we bury our sons into nothing.

"So the priests did a thing I have never stopped thinking about. They did not preach. They decided to send a man to look.

“They gathered at the fire temple — the great fire, the one that is never let out — and out of the whole community they chose the cleanest soul among them, a righteous man. The books call him Wiraz. And I will tell you the strangest small thing first, so you know I am not decorating: his seven sisters wept and argued against it, the way sisters argue, because they understood before anyone said it plainly that the journey might not return him. They were overruled. Even they, in the end, agreed to it. That is how badly the living needed word from the dead.

“They prepared him the way we prepare a body — mark that, boy, the way we prepare a body. He washed his head and his body. He put on a new garment. They perfumed him. They spread clean bedding, and he lay down on it, and he ate a last meal, and he remembered the dead by name, the way one does at a funeral — his own funeral, held early, with him listening. And then the priests filled three cups — the books say golden cups, but I have known books to gild things — three cups of wine mixed with the drug called mang, and he drank all three, and lay back, and was gone.

“Seven days. Seven days and seven nights his body lay there breathing slow, and here is the part everyone forgets, and it is the whole story: the story is not about his soul. Any fool can leave. The story is about the ones who stayed. Seven days his sisters and the priests sat around his body in a ring — keeping the fire fed, keeping the prayers going in shifts, keeping the flies from his face — because they held, as an article of the rite itself, that a soul can only travel as far as its body is guarded. The vigil was not decoration around the miracle. The vigil was the road home.

“And he crossed. The books say a shining spirit met him and took his hand and led him to the bridge — the bridge every soul comes to, wide as a meadow for the good and narrow as a blade for the wicked — and he walked among the dead and saw everything. He saw the rewarded. He saw the punished, and mark this too: the punishments were not fires invented by a landlord. Each punishment was only the deed itself, given back. The man who had watered down milk for children stood ladling a milk that was never

full. What you did is what you get, forever, undiluted. My grandfather said the pit is only a mirror with the mercy removed.

"Then, on the seventh day, his soul came back down the road his sisters had kept open, and entered his body, and he woke as if from a pleasant sleep, and asked for food, and then he told them everything, and a scribe wrote it down. And people are reading his report tonight, boy, somewhere, twelve centuries later. One man's trip, taken so a whole people wouldn't have to keep asking in the dark."

The lamp fussed. Sohrab said: "And the drug. The mang."

"The mang of Wishtasp, the old books call it, and I should tell you why, since you will want the name straight. Wishtasp was the king — the first king to take the faith, the one the prophet himself is said to have convinced. There is a story that he was the first to be given the draught, so that he could be shown what he was being asked to believe in before he asked a whole people to believe it. So the drink carries his name the way a road carries the name of the man who first walked it. When my grandfather said the mang of Wishtasp, he meant: this is not something a man brews for himself on a bad night. This is the one that kings were given, in front of everybody."

Then he turned his hands over, palms up, a man showing he hides nothing. "And now I must be honest with you, because the honesty makes it worse and not better. Nobody alive is certain what plant mang was. The old books name the word and not the field it grew in. The scholars quarrel — some say one herb, some another. But the candidate my grandfather's people held to, the one the old men in the hills held to, is the henbane. The poison-flower. Pale petals, dark veins, a smell like something sleeping badly. It grows in ditches and graveyards, which the old people did not consider a coincidence. A family of plants that kills in one measure and opens doors in another, and has never once agreed to tell anyone in advance which measure they have taken."

He looked at the antidote case by the door — the little needles in their green sleeves, counted every shift.

"Your medicine, boy. The one you push into the drowned-in-air to swing them back. The doctors will tell you it is made from that same family of flowers. The poison-flowers. The nightshades — henbane among them. The chemists went into the ditch where the old drug grew and came out holding the same stem, and they found the medicine inside the poison, which is a fine trick, and nobody thought to ask the flower what else it had been used for. So understand what is standing open on that trestle every night, counted like bread. The same family. Perhaps the same door. They found it before either of us was born, boy, and they used it carefully, three cups, seven days, a ring of witnesses — and we use it by the crate, on the causeway, in the dark, with no witnesses at all."

Sohrab walked back along the recovery rows afterward, past the flushed boy sleeping now with his hands finally still, and he put it to himself in plain words, because plain words were how he kept his ledgers: the medicine we push into the gassed is close kin to a drug an old religion once used, carefully, with its whole community watching, to send a man to visit the dead — and we are spending it by the case, with no one watching at all.

He checked the count before he slept. It balanced. It was the last night it ever would.

INTERLUDE I. FIRST CROSSING

Minute one. The needle is still in Morteza's hand when the ward tips like a boat and pours him out of it, and the pouring does not hurt, and he is standing in the marsh — but the marsh is wrong in a way his body accepts before his mind can object: the water is perfectly still, and perfectly clear, and there is no smell. The marsh has smelled of diesel and rot and garlic for three months. Here the air is like the inside of a jar.

Minute two. His cousin Yusef is sitting on the surface of the water, cross-legged, the way he used to sit on the flat roof at home, and he is sorting stones. There is a heap of wet stones beside him and he is moving them, one at a time, to a second heap, and when the second heap is done he begins moving them back. He does not look up. He

was drowned in February, off a speedboat, in the night assault; he is not wet.

Minute three. "You came," Yusef says, pleased, still sorting. "Sit. Mind the water, it belongs to somebody."

"Whose is it?"

"That's it. That's the question." Yusef holds a stone up to the light that comes from nowhere. "Whose water is this? We were told it was ours under the world and theirs on top, or theirs under and ours on top, I forget the order. Did they measure it before they filled it with us? Somebody must have the paper. You would know. You keep papers now."

Minute five. Morteza tries to say I'm sorry and finds the words have no purchase here, they slide off the still air like water off wax, and Yusef watches them slide with mild interest.

"Don't bring those," he says. "They don't work. Bring answers, if you come again. I have a list." He counts on his fingers, and his fingers are the fingers of the boy he was at nine, though the rest of him is twenty. "One: whose water. Two: the bread that came up on Thursdays — was that ours, or was it borrowed from the week after? Because some weeks it tasted borrowed. Three: when a war is won, where is it kept? Is there a room? Who has the key to the room? I have thought about this one a long time. Everything that is won is kept somewhere. A cup. A harvest. Where will they keep this, when they win it?"

Minute nine. Time here is a texture, not a line; Morteza understands that whole minutes are passing in the ward, that his heart out there is galloping and his skin is burning dry, and that here the light has not moved at all. Yusef sorts his stones. The heaps never grow and never shrink.

"Does it hurt," Morteza asks. "Being — this."

Yusef considers it honestly, the way he considered everything, which is why he was the one everyone sent to settle bets. "It doesn't hurt," he says. "It weighs. Thursdays are heavy. I don't remember the town anymore, but I remember it was heavy on Thursdays, and it is still heavy on Thursdays. That's what I kept.

You keep the strangest things. Pack better than I did, when you come.”

Minute fourteen. The light begins, at last, to move — which means the antidote is losing its grip out there, the pendulum swinging home — and Yusef looks up for the first time, and his face is exactly his face, and this is the worst moment, the exactness.

“You’ll come again,” he says. It is not a request, and it is not a welcome. He picks up the last stone and holds it out — and does not give it. “Morteza. Why do you keep coming to a place you aren’t finished with?”

Minute fifteen. The marsh pours him back the way it poured him out, and the ward assembles itself around his cot piece by piece, canvas, lamplight, a man coughing three rows down, and his own heart hammering like something that has run all the way here to warn him, too late, about nothing that can be changed.

II. THE COUNT

SIX. TWELVE MISSING

The count was simple, which is why nobody wanted it. Cases in, cases opened, needles used, needles remaining. Each autoinjector logged against a casualty's name or, when the casualties outran the names, against a tally mark and a time. The ledger lived in a canvas satchel and the satchel lived on Sohrab's shoulder, because four months ago a supply sergeant had looked down the line for the man least likely to be shot soon and least likely to lie, and had chosen the washing boy, and that was the entire ceremony of his appointment.

He was good at it the way he was good at everything the war gave him: without pride, with total attention. He knew the arithmetic of the antidote the way a shepherd knows a flock at dusk, by silhouette, before counting. Two needles to the causeway teams. Six in the ward reserve. A case of forty under the trestle, seals unbroken. The numbers had a shape, and on the eighth of the month the shape was wrong before the addition was.

Twelve missing.

He did the count three times, then did it backward, then took the ledger out under the light and did it a fourth time with a straightedge under each line like a schoolboy. Twelve needles, drawn across six days, in ones and twos — never enough in a single day to startle the eye, which told him at once that the taking was patient, and that the taker understood how counting men see.

He reported it to no one, that first night. He wants to be able to say, later, that this was caution. It was not caution. It was the ledger-keeper's private shame, the conviction that a missing number is first of all an accusation against the man who keeps the number.

Instead he thought it through the way the war had taught him to think, which was downhill, along the worn channels. The front had a black market the way a body has a temperature. Cigarettes moved, and dry socks, and morphine when there was morphine, and places on the leave rosters, and the antidote — the antidote was money in a way morphine could never be, because morphine

only bought comfort and the needles bought tomorrow. A man with two injectors taped inside his shirt walked into the gas with a different spine than the man beside him. Everyone knew it. There were officers rumored to carry four.

So: theft, for sale. The ordinary war. He found he was almost comforted by the theory, and noted the comfort in himself with distaste — that he would rather serve alongside a thief than inside a mystery.

He began to watch. He varied the hours of his counts. He learned to sit with Goshtasp in the cold-room doorway at dusk, because furniture sees everything, and for four evenings he saw nothing except the ordinary economy of exhausted men: bread moving, tobacco moving, a boot exchanged for a boot.

On the fifth evening he saw Morteza — the nerve case, the one who had lived, the one who had talked to the chair — walk to the trestle where the ward reserve stood, lift two needles in their green sleeves with the unhurried competence of a man taking what is his, and walk out along the duckboards toward the supply tents, into the dark, not once looking behind him.

A thief checks behind him. Sohrab stood in the doorway a long moment, cold in a way the evening did not explain, adjusting the theory the way you adjust to a step that isn't there.

Then he followed.

SEVEN. THE STATEMENTS

The order came down mid-month that an intake record was to be kept for the chemical cases — name, unit, distance from the burst, time of onset, the casualty's own account in his own words — because somewhere far to the rear it had been understood that the world would one day ask for proof, and would ask for it in the voice of a notary. The task fell to Sohrab, because he already held the ledger, and because the men trusted the washing boy in a way they did not trust anyone with rank.

He ruled each page into two columns. The left column was the man's words, taken down as spoken. The right column was the

clinical shorthand he had been taught: the abbreviations for blister and burn-percentage and breath-rate, the body's own statement, entered opposite. He did not choose the design for cruelty. He chose it because paper was short. But he understood, within a day, what he had built: a page on which what a man believed had happened to him and what had actually happened to him stood side by side, in the same ink, refusing to agree.

From the intake record, eighth through the nineteenth of the month:

— Private, 21, infantry. Distance from burst: fifteen meters, perhaps twenty. "There was a smell like garlic, strong, and a bitter taste in the mouth like biting a green stem. We joked about it. I want that written — that we joked, because no one told us, not because we were careless. A few hours after, the dizziness, the headache, and by night I could not get air down past my throat. My voice has been going and coming since. Small blisters began on the neck and under the arms, then not small." Right column: voice near-whisper; lids swollen, prized open for examination; blistering neck, axillae, groin; breath fast and shallow.

— Corporal, 26. "I carried Hasan on my back from the reeds to the boats, eight kilometers by the dyke path, because his eyes had closed and he could not see the duckboards. His jacket was soaked from the spray of the shell. Nobody told me a wet jacket could burn the man carrying it. I want it written that I would have carried him anyway. Write that first, before the rest." Right column: deep burns across the shoulders and back in the print of a jacket's shoulders and back; the carried man admitted separately, alive.

— Volunteer, 17, attached as a runner. Would not give a distance; kept saying he was fast. "The smell was more like geraniums, I think, than garlic. My grandmother grows them. That is the last thing I could smell; since then, nothing, not even bleach, and the ward smells of nothing, and I know the ward cannot smell of nothing." Right column: total loss of smell noted; eyes intact; lungs the concern; observation.

— Sergeant, 34. "Write down that I got my mask on in time. Write it in the record with my name spelled correctly. My wife's brother is

in the Ministry; my wife reads everything. I got it on in time. The blisters are from the skin, from the sleeves, not from breathing. A man can be burned through cloth and still have been careful. Write: he was careful." Right column, in Sohrab's hand, after a long pause of the pen: burns consistent with exposure through clothing; mask time not verifiable; entered as stated.

— Private, 19. Distance: five meters. He talked for the whole examination, softly, a list of colors — the exact yellow of a dust road at evening, the blue a kettle turns, a green he had no name for that lives inside wet reeds when the sun is low. He was cataloguing. His lids were sealed shut and the doctors did not yet know what was underneath. "If it comes back, it comes back," he said. "If it doesn't, I want the colors written where somebody keeps them." Sohrab wrote the colors. Right column: both eyes — and then nothing, the shorthand refused, entered at last as: see over, and overleaf, in longhand, the colors again.

— Private, 23, of the flooded ditch, of the washed face, of the lunch eaten with wet hands. "Tell me which it was. The water or the air or the bread. I need it to have been one thing. A man can be angry at one thing." Right column: exposure route indeterminate; multiple; and the shorthand for the lungs, worsening.

— Woman, age not given, of the reeds east of the pump channel. Distance from burst: not given; she was cutting fodder. Her account, through a soldier who had the Arabic: "We heard it and we went down into the boats and into the channel, low, in the shade, as one does. My mother taught me and her mother taught her. Nobody has ever come out to us to say the low place is the wrong place. If somebody had come out and said one sentence to us, one sentence — do not go low — I would have four of them here instead of two." Right column: burns to hands, forearms, face and scalp; both eyes; and beside it, entered because there was nowhere else to enter it, the number four.

— Boy, approximately nine. Distance from burst: at home. He would not speak to the doctors and spoke to Sohrab because Sohrab was washing him. "Is it in the water now? Because we have to drink the water. My uncle says it goes away by itself and my brother says it

stays in the reeds for years and one of them is lying to me and I need to know which one, because if it stays we cannot go back and nobody will tell me." Right column, after a long pause of the pen: nerve exposure, dosed at 22:40; and in longhand, because the shorthand had no entry for it: told him honestly that I did not know.

— And on the nineteenth, at the bottom of a full page, a man whose name Sohrab copied twice to be sure, who dictated one sentence and turned his face away: "My mother is Khadijeh, daughter of Yusef, of the village above the salt river; say that I said her name while I could still say it, and say I said it looking at the person writing." Right column: Sohrab looked at him while he wrote it, so that the record would be true, and then entered the breath-rate, which was the only other honest thing he had.

At night he read the ledger back, left column against right, the testimony against the body, and understood that he was keeping two histories of the same war and that they would never once agree — and that of the two, only the right column had never been afraid, never been proud, never protected a wife or flattered a ministry or begged a smell to come back. The left column was men. The right column was what the war was actually doing to them, written in the only language that has no dialect for hope.

He kept both. That was the job. He kept both.

EIGHT. THE CAUSEWAY

The intake record taught Sohrab what the poison did to men. The causeway taught him what the war did to everything the men were standing on, and it taught him in the same way — slowly, with a latency, so that he had been looking at it for months before he understood he was looking at a wound.

It began with the roads. An army cannot move on channels cut by buffalo, so the army made roads: earth dykes bulldozed straight across the reed beds, kilometers of them, packed and revetted and raised above the water. They were magnificent, in their way. They were also dams. Water that had gone one way since the snow first came down out of the mountains now arrived at a wall, and stopped, and stood, and went stale — and on the far side of the wall

the reed beds that had fed on that water for five thousand years discovered thirst inside a marsh, which Sohrab would not have believed possible and then saw with his own eyes: qasab going brown in standing water two hundred meters from a lake.

Then the channels. Both armies cut them, for the boats and the amphibious craft, straight where nothing in the marsh had ever been straight, and the straightness pulled the water off in directions it had never gone, and drained places that had been wet since the Sumerians, and flooded places that had been dry enough to grow rice.

Then the fire. Reed burns. Reed hides men, so reed burns — kilometers of it, deliberately, to open fields of view, sending up a smoke Sohrab could see from the compound for a week and a smell that got into the laundry. And in the black afterward, nothing: the reed beds were the country's whole architecture, its walls and its fodder and its fuel and its cover for the birds, and where they burned there was open water with a scum on it and no shelter for anything.

Then the oil, from the wells and the pipelines and the tanks that had been hit, which came down the water in slicks the color of a bruise and put a skin on everything, so that the buffalo drank it and the reeds wore it and the fish came up dead in windrows along the dykes.

And then the mines, in the shallows, which did not care in the slightest whether the leg belonged to a soldier or a woman cutting fodder, and which would still be there — Sohrab understood this even in 1984, standing on a dyke with a case of ampoules — long after every man now alive in these marshes had gone home or been carried out.

He asked Jabbar about the birds, because of what he had said about the light darkening twice a year, and Jabbar said, "They come. They are not stupid. They circle, and they see what it is now, and most of them go on. Where they go on to, God knows. Perhaps there is nowhere. They are old, boy, older than us, they have been coming down this way since before there was anybody here to

watch them arrive, and they came for the water, and we have made the water into this.”

Jabbar’s village had been on a dibin — real ground, woven and mudded and rebuilt across four generations of his family — two hours by pole from where the compound now stood. In the second year of the war a dyke went through half a kilometer to the north; in the third year the water on their side went first stale and then shallow and then salt, because that is what water does when it stops moving in a hot country; the rice failed; the buffalo, which cannot live without deep water to stand in and clean fodder to eat, began to die in a way Jabbar described once, flatly, and never again, and which Sohrab afterward wished he had not asked about. In the winter the family went out to a camp on the edge of Ahvaz — a settlement of block houses and standpipes and a road, where his wife could not weave because there was no reed, and his sons could not fish because there was no water, and where an old woman of his household who had lived her entire life within sight of water and had never in eighty years been more than a few steps from a boat sat in a concrete room and, in Jabbar’s phrase, “began to forget in order.”

They had a house with a door that locked. Jabbar said this the way a man reads out a strange number from a page: a door, with a lock. There had never in his life been a lock in the marsh. There had been the mudhif, which took anyone in.

And still he came back, every week, and poled the army’s medicine through his ruined country for a wage.

Sohrab asked him why, once, on the way back with the empty cases, and he expected one of two answers — money, or hatred — and got neither.

“Because the water is still there,” Jabbar said. “Bad water. Half of it. But it is still there, and the day it is gone nobody will remember where the channels were, because the channels are not in any book, boy, they are in me and in perhaps forty other men and when we are finished they are finished. So I go up and down. I keep them open.” He shifted the pole. “You keep your count. I keep mine.”

Sohrab did not answer, because there was nothing to say to a man doing the same job as you with the far larger ledger.

They came in past the burnt beds at dusk. Somewhere behind them a fresh dyke was being pushed out into the water by men who would be gone within four years, on a project no one would ever unbuild, cutting a line that would still be lying across that country when everyone in this boat was dead.

"They will say afterward that they had to," Jabbar said. "Their generals and their generals. And they will be telling the truth, in the way that a man drowning another man is telling the truth when he says he needed to stand on something."

NINE. THE SUPPLY TENT

The supply tents stood in a row at the western edge of the compound, and the last of them had been half-emptied in March and never restocked, and it was toward this one that Morteza walked, and Sohrab followed at the distance the dark allowed, along the duckboards, past the generator that gave every man in the compound the same excuse not to hear anything.

There was a lamp inside, turned low. He could see it breathing against the canvas. He stopped at the seam of the doorway, in the smell of mildewed webbing and marsh, and he did not go in, because what he heard from inside was not commerce.

It was the register. The one from the recovery row. The tenderness that made men look away.

He looked in.

Seven of them sat in a circle on crates and folded blankets — he knew five by name and all seven by their intakes, gassed men, survivors, the ward's alumni — and in the circle's center, on an ammunition box draped with someone's prayer cloth, lay a single autoinjector in its green sleeve, and nobody was touching it. That was the first thing that undid his theory entirely: twelve needles missing and one on the altar and no money anywhere, no goods, no scale-eyed men. The needle was not being traded. It was being attended.

Morteza added the two he carried to the box, unhurried, and sat, and for a while the circle only breathed. Then a man Sohrab knew as Akbar, a machine-gunner with mustard scars like spilled wax down his left jaw, leaned forward and spoke — not to the circle. Past it.

“Hasan. It’s Thursday. You said count the Thursdays, so I’m counting. Fourteen. Your mother had the stone set upright; my brother saw it and says the lettering is good, deep lettering, it will outlast the mason. You asked me whose water it was. I asked an engineer. He laughed at me, Hasan. I’m still asking.”

He sat back. Silence took the tent again, hospitable, unembarrassed. Then another man spoke into the middle distance, a message to a dead brother about a debt that was now paid, that he wanted it known was paid; then a boy no older than Sohrab, who said only, “Father, the thing you asked me in the reeds — I don’t have it yet. Don’t ask me so early next time. Let me sit down first,” as if grief were a visitor who kept arriving before the house was swept.

Sohrab understood, standing in the seam of the tent with his ledger strap cutting into his shoulder, what he was looking at. It was a waiting room. The needle on the cloth was not tonight’s ceremony; tonight was the vigil before it, the messages being gathered the way a traveler gathers letters from a village before walking to the city, because not everyone can make the trip, and the one who goes carries for the rest.

And he understood something else, which frightened him more, because it was administrative. Seven men. Twelve needles over six days. One or two crossings a week, each witnessed by the others — witnessed; the word arrived in Goshtasp’s voice — rationed, recorded somewhere in somebody’s head with a care that matched his own ledger line for line. It was not an outbreak. It was an institution, already running, with dues and a waiting list and a doctrine of carrying letters, and it had grown up inside his count the way a root grows inside a wall.

Morteza looked up then, directly at the seam of the doorway, without surprise, and Sohrab knew that he had been seen for some time, perhaps from the trestle, perhaps for days.

"Come in, ledger-keeper," Morteza said, gently, making room on the crate beside him. "You of all people. We've been keeping a count too."

TEN. THE DOORKEEPER

They did not threaten him. He had braced for it walking in — for the circle to close, for the oldest grammar of men caught at something — and instead they made him tea on a spirit stove and waited while he drank it, and the waiting was worse than threat, because it assumed him.

"You've done the arithmetic," Morteza said. "Twelve. It will be thirteen by Friday, I won't lie to you inside this tent; that's the first rule here and you'll hear it again. So. Say the accusation out loud, so it's been said."

"You're stealing medicine," Sohrab said. "Each needle you take is subtracted from a gassed man on a stretcher who hasn't arrived yet. That's the whole of it. Everything else is decoration."

"Everything else is decoration," Akbar agreed, the scarred one, nodding slowly, as if Sohrab had recited the first line of a catechism correctly. "That is exactly what it is. Now ask us why seven men who have each been on that stretcher would do it anyway."

He had no answer, so Morteza gave it to him plainly, the way the intake record had taught them all to speak. The crossing was real or it was not — the tent held both opinions, peaceably, which surprised Sohrab more than anything else that night — but what it did was not in dispute among them. A man went across, and sat with his dead, and finished something. And came back quieter. Not healed; nobody in the tent used the word healed; the tent's word was settled, the way ground settles after rain. "You wash the living," Morteza said. "The old man washes the dead. There's a third washing, ledger-keeper, for the part of a man that stands in

the doorway between those two rooms and can't enter either. That's what the needle is. That's all it is."

"Then take your case to Dr. Bijan and ask for it honestly."

The tent laughed, without unkindness, the way men laugh at a boy who has suggested writing to the king. "The doctor would burn this tent by morning," Akbar said, "and he would be right to, by everything his ledger measures. We know what we're stealing from. We've decided the theft is owed. You don't have to agree. You have to count."

And there it was, the thing they had brought him in for, laid on the cloth beside the needle. They did not want his silence; silence they had already had for weeks, and it had cost them nothing. They wanted his ledger. Keep the count, exactly, honestly, needle by needle — but keep it for the tent as well as against it. Know who had crossed and when and on what dose. Hold the line at which borrowing became butchery, because they did not trust themselves to see that line from inside their own need; they had watched need before, at the front, and knew what it did to men's arithmetic. "Every rite that ever worked had a man like you in it," Morteza said. "The one who stays sober. The one who watches the body and the clock and the count while the others cross. The old religion knew it — ask your old man, he'll tell you. The traveler is nothing. The vigil is everything. Be the vigil."

"And if I refuse? If I report it?"

"Then you report it," Morteza said simply. "No one here will touch you. We're not that kind of congregation. But the needles will still go missing, ledger-keeper — from worse men than us, with no count at all, and no witnesses, and the first you'll hear of it is a boy dead on a crate with no one watching his body, and you'll know the number was loose in the world because you declined to hold it."

Sohrab walked back along the duckboards past the generator, and the compound was the same compound, and the satchel on his shoulder weighed what it had always weighed, and everything was different. He had come out expecting to feel like a man who had discovered a crime. He felt instead like a man who had been read a

will and found his own name in it — appointed, without consent, to an office that had existed for twelve centuries and had been standing vacant in this compound, waiting for whoever kept the count.

He did not report it that night. He told himself he was deciding.

He was already keeping their ledger by Friday.

INTERLUDE II. SECOND CROSSING

Minute one. The tent folds away like a page turning and Qorban — the farm boy, the youngest of the circle, who has waited five weeks for his turn — is standing in his father's orchard, except the orchard is indoors somehow, the rows of trees running under a ceiling he can feel but not see, and the light is the color of late afternoon and does not move.

Minute two. His father is halfway up a ladder that leans against nothing, picking fruit into an apron, and the fruit is not any fruit Qorban knows — pale, heavy-looking, without smell — and when the apron is full his father climbs down, empties it into a basket, and the basket, without drama, is empty again, and his father climbs back up. He died of the coughing sickness two winters before the war, in his bed, in the ordinary way, and it is somehow shameful here, his ordinary death, among all these drowned and burned — a man who merely died, doing the work he merely did.

Minute three. "You're thin," his father says from the ladder, not looking down. "Did it rain in the spring?"

"It rained, Father."

"Good. And the harvest. What was the harvest?"

Minute four. Qorban begins to explain — that he was conscripted in the autumn, that his brother took the orchard, that there is a war, that he is in the marshes now, in the south, that the trees are safe, and his father listens the way he always listened, patiently, wholly, and then says:

"Yes. But what was the harvest? How many sacks?"

Minute six. He does not know how many sacks. He says the war again, and the word goes into the still air and his father turns it over the way he would turn a windfall fruit, checking for the bruise, and hands it back.

"I don't know that measure," his father says, without reproach. "Is it more than a drought or less? When it's over, what fills the store-room? Tell me in sacks, and I'll understand it."

Minute nine. Qorban stands under the ladder and tries. He tries to convert it — the marshes, the smell of garlic, Hasan's stone with its deep lettering, the boot pile no one counts — into sacks, into anything a store-room could hold, and the arithmetic will not go, there is no rate of exchange, and his father waits with the full apron, kind, unhurried, holding out the one question the whole ladder of him has come down to ask, and the question cannot be made to fit anything Qorban has spent two years doing.

Minute eleven. "The trees are safe," Qorban says at last, which is true, and his father nods, satisfied, and empties the apron into the basket that will not fill.

"Then it was a good year," his father says. "Whatever else. Write it in the book as a good year." And then, pausing on the ladder, feeling upward for a fruit, his back to his son: "Qorban. The thing you keep bringing me. The war. You carry it here like a harvest, every visit, and you set it down, and you wait for me to weigh it. I have tried. It doesn't weigh. It isn't a thing that grew. Why do you keep bringing it to a place where it doesn't weigh?"

Minute twelve. The orchard's un-light flickers, which means the pendulum is coming back, and the last Qorban sees is the apron, full again, and the basket, empty again, forever, neither of them minding, and he surfaces on the crate in the supply tent with his pulse shouting and his mouth like a dry field and Sohrab's hand on his wrist, counting, and the count in Sohrab's face saying: back inside the line, this time, barely.

"Well?" Morteza asks softly, from the circle.

"It was a good year," Qorban says, and begins, without any noise at all, to weep.

III. THE VIGIL

ELEVEN. WHAT MORTEZA BROUGHT BACK

It was Morteza who broke the tent's own first rule, and he broke it carrying something true.

He came up out of a crossing on the last night of the month — a long one, near the line Sohrab had ruled in red, his pulse at the top of the bracket, his skin hot as a stove door — and before the water was in him, before he was properly behind his own eyes, he said: "Karim-of-the-mortars. The one lost in February on the north spit. He's in the reed bank where the old pump channel bends. West side of the bend, under the fallen section of walkway. Yusef showed me. He kept saying somebody should get the paper right. He's there."

The tent went still in a new way. Messages had come back before — questions, weights, Thursdays — but never a claim with coordinates. Never a thing the living world could go and check.

They went and checked. Akbar and two others, on the second night, with a lamp and a grapple, along the pump channel to the bend, and under the fallen walkway section, in the reed bank, west side, they found him — what the marsh had kept of him, four months' worth, his tags legible, his paybook a green pulp in his breast pocket. Karim-of-the-mortars, entered missing in February, struck from missing in June. The paper made right.

For a day the tent walked half a meter off the ground. Proof — the word moved among them like contraband. The crossing was not a mercy or a madness; it was a road, and roads went to real places, and things could be carried back down them, and Karim was the receipt.

It was Sohrab, keeper of both ledgers, who took it to Bijan — not as confession, he told himself, but as a question wearing a report's clothing: a body recovered on information from a delirious man; how would the doctor account for it? And Bijan, who did not yet know about the tent and heard only a strange rumor of a dream, dismantled it without heat, in four sentences, the way he read an X-ray. Morteza and Karim had served the same sector in February. The fallen walkway was on the withdrawal route every survivor of

the north spit had used; a hundred men had passed within twenty meters of that reed bank in the dark, in panic, half of them wading. A man sees more than he knows he sees, the doctor said. Panic writes it down and files it where waking can't read, and delirium is a clerk with no respect for filing. The drug didn't take him anywhere. It opened a drawer.

Every word of it was reasonable. That was the trouble. Sohrab carried the explanation back through the compound and felt it working exactly as far as explanations work and no further, because Bijan's account and the tent's account now stood side by side in his head like the two columns of his own intake ledger — the believed and the measured, refusing to agree, and both written in ink.

He put it to Goshtasp in the cold-room doorway, wanting the old man to rule, and Goshtasp declined the gavel with the mildness of a man who had watched this exact argument for sixty years.

"Of course there's a plain explanation," he said. "There is always a plain explanation. There was a plain explanation for Wiraz too — a man sleeps seven days, a man dreams what his priests need him to dream. The books don't record that anyone was converted by the report who wasn't already kneeling." He fed the lamp. "You want one of the columns to win, boy. That's youth. They don't fight. They just don't visit each other. You'll keep both. That's the job. You told me so yourself."

In the tent, the needle count went up by two the following week — fourteen, in Sohrab's hand, where there had been twelve. Proof, it turned out, was the strongest dose of all, and it had entered the congregation's bloodstream, and there was no antidote listed anywhere in the ledger for that.

TWELVE. THE ARITHMETIC OF MERCY

The shells came at dusk on a Friday, the soft coughing kind, out along the eastern reach where a replacement company had rotated in that same morning — men three days from home, who knew the drill from a lecture — and the trucks began arriving before full

dark, and the war presented its invoice for everything the tent had borrowed.

Sohrab was on the line, scissors and hose, when the runner came from the ward shouting for the reserve case, and he heard, through canvas and forty meters, the exact moment the count betrayed itself: Bijan's voice, flat and carrying, saying not thirty-one; count it again; the case holds forty, we have logged nine, count it again — and then the runner's silence, which was itself the recount, and then Bijan's voice again, one register lower, ordering the doses stretched.

Stretched. The arithmetic of mercy, done aloud, in front of everyone. The drowned-in-air on the stretchers needed the antidote in a rhythm — the medicine wore off faster than the poison did, so a man had to be dosed and dosed again, the pendulum held by force until his own body could hold it — and a rhythm cannot be stretched without silences, and each silence had a man inside it. The doctors went down the rows making the choice the missing needles had already made for them, and the choosing had a sound, and Sohrab stood at the washing table with a boy's ruined jacket in his shears and listened to it, and could not make his hands move.

One man died in the gap. That was the number, when the night finally balanced. A conscript from the replacement company, gassed in his third day of war, who was dosed once, and held, and needed the second needle at the turn of the hour, and the second needle was nine minutes finding him, because the reserve was thin and the thin was being rationed, and nine minutes was longer than he had. Perhaps he dies anyway. Bijan said so, unasked, in the doorway of the ward at dawn, to no one, in the voice of a man testing whether a sentence can bear weight: heavy exposure; he was late to us; perhaps he dies with the full case on the trestle. Perhaps. The word did no work. Everyone within hearing knew the count was short, though only one man in the compound knew where the shortage had gone, and he was standing at the washing table with his knuckles bleeding into the bleach, discovering what the tent's word settled cost at market.

He did not sleep. He sat in the cold-room doorway through the morning with the satchel on his knees, and did the whole ledger again from the first page, the licit column and the hidden one, and when Goshtasp brought him tea he said, without preamble: "His name was Davud. I washed him myself. Nineteen. My age to the season." And then, because the old man only waited: "The tent bought its dead a visit and paid with a stranger. And I kept the account that made it possible, and I ruled a red line for their pulses and none for this, because I never believed the bill would arrive while I was holding the book."

"And now you'll go to the doctor," Goshtasp said. It was not quite a question.

"Now I'll go to the tent," Sohrab said. "The doctor gets the truth when I understand what it is. The tent gets it tonight, whole, with Davud's name in it, and they can sit in their circle and carry that message for once — the living have questions too. Let them answer one." He stood, and the satchel swung to his shoulder with its familiar, intolerable weight. "And then either the crossings end, or the tent finds fourteen needles' worth of another way, or I burn it down myself and count the ashes. Those are the columns now. There's no third one."

He was wrong about that, as it happened. There was a third column, and it had his own name at the head of it, and it was already ruled, and had been since a Tuesday in the spring when an old man said a word to him across a lamp. But the ledger does not show a man his own line. That is the one mercy ledgers keep.

THIRTEEN. THE ONES WHO WERE ALREADY HERE

They came in at four in the afternoon in two mashoofs and a commandeered fishing boat, and the first thing that was wrong was that they came in quietly, and the second thing that was wrong was that some of them were small.

The shells had gone long, or had gone exactly where they were sent; nobody in the compound would ever know which, and Sohrab noticed within the hour that everyone had independently stopped asking, which was itself a kind of answer. Wherever they went, they

went into a stretch of half-drained marsh eleven kilometers east where four families had stayed on because the water there had not yet turned and because a man does not leave a place his great-grandfather wove out of reeds simply because artillery is landing four kilometers away; that arithmetic had been running in his favor for two years.

Nineteen of them. Sohrab counted, because counting was the first thing his hands did in the presence of a load, and he was still counting when he understood that the count included a woman of about sixty and three children.

They had no masks. That was the entire tactical situation, stated. A soldier has a mask and a drill and a whistle signal and a sergeant screaming at him; he may fail all of it, and often does, but the system exists and he stands inside it. A woman cutting fodder at the water's edge with a child on the bank behind her has none of it — has, in fact, nothing but a smell of garlic on the wind and whatever she happens to know, which is nothing, because nobody had ever come out to these reeds and explained to anybody what to do when the air turns.

Worse: they had run the wrong way. Sohrab pieced this together at the cutting table from three separate accounts and had to stop working for a moment when it resolved. The gas was heavy; it sank; it pooled in the low places and ran along the ground like water finding a level. And the people of that marsh, on hearing shellfire, had done what five thousand years of instruction told them to do, which was to get low and get into the boats and get down among the reeds — into the ditches, the channels, the shaded cuts, the exact low sheltered places where the stuff was lying thickest. Their own competence had killed them. The knowledge that had kept that family alive on that water for four hundred years had, in the space of ten minutes, been converted into a set of instructions for dying.

The washing line took them the way it took everyone. But the clothes were wrong in his hands, and the smallness was wrong, and there was an old woman whose hair had to be cut away who kept apologizing to him in an Arabic he half understood, apologizing, for the trouble, for the water, for taking up his afternoon, and

Goshtasp came out of the cold room and worked beside him for four hours without being asked and without speaking a word.

Nine of the nineteen were nerve cases.

Bijan did the count in the ward doorway with the reserve case open in front of him and the runner standing there and no expression whatever on his face, and Sohrab, arriving with the ledger because the ledger was what he was for, watched a man arrive at a subtraction he had already done in his head twice and hoped to be wrong about.

The reserve was thin. It had been thin since the eighth of the month. Nine nerve cases needed dosing and re-dosing on a rhythm — the medicine wearing off faster than the poison, the pendulum held by force until the body could hold it alone — and on the causeway there were also, that same evening, two batteries' worth of men in positions that had been shelled forty minutes earlier and might be shelled again before midnight, and the standing instruction on the distribution of the antidote existed and was unambiguous and had been written in a building none of them had ever seen.

Sohrab heard the doctor say, quite calmly, to the runner: "Combat first. That is the order. I am not appealing it tonight." And then, after the runner had gone, to nobody, in a different voice: "Ask me what the order is for. Go on. Ask me what a front is for, if not for the people standing on it."

They stretched the doses. Everyone in the ward that night knew exactly what stretching meant, because they had learned it three weeks earlier on a boy called Davud, and Sohrab moved up and down the rows with the case and the ledger and entered the times, and the times were the whole story: this one at 21:10, this one at 21:52, this one — a boy of perhaps nine, whose distance from the burst was entered in the record as at home — at 22:40, which was nineteen minutes late, and who was still alive at dawn, and who was one of the ones who lived, and Sohrab never learned whether the nineteen minutes had cost him anything permanent, because the survivors went out on a truck to Ahvaz on the third day and the

compound had no mechanism whatsoever for finding out what became of a civilian.

Six of the nineteen died in the compound. He washed all six.

And under all of it, running the whole night like a second ledger he could not close, was the arithmetic he had no right to be doing and did anyway. Sixteen, now. Twelve by the eighth of the month and four more since, because proof had raised the appetite the way proof does — sixteen needles, taken in ones and twos, spent on crossings, on messages carried to the drowned, on Thursdays counted for a man under a stone with good deep lettering. He had kept that count himself, in his own hand, in a book nobody else could read. Sixteen would not have covered nineteen. Sixteen would not have covered nine. But sixteen was not nothing, and nine was not nothing, and somewhere between those two facts was a space exactly the size of a boy of nine at 22:40, and Sohrab stood in it for the rest of his life.

He said none of this to the tent. He said it, at four in the morning, to Goshtasp, who was rinsing his forearms at the trestle, and who listened to all of it and then said the only thing that was true:

"They had no mudhif here, boy. Nowhere to send their message, nowhere to sit, nobody to sit with them. That woman has been on this water longer than either of our peoples have had a name for it, and she will be entered tonight in your book as an unnamed civilian, female, approximately sixty." He shook the water off his hands. "Your tent has stolen sixteen needles to finish their conversations. Nobody in this compound has stolen so much as a lamp to finish hers."

FOURTEEN. THE QUARREL OF THE TWO PRIESTS

He went to the tent and said Davud's name into the circle, and the circle took it the way ground takes rain — no defense, no flinch, Morteza only nodding slowly and saying, we'll carry it, which enraged Sohrab more than argument would have, and he walked out before the rage could spend itself where it wasn't owed. The debt was older than the tent. He took it to the cold room, where the oldest creditor in the compound sat trimming a lamp, and he put

the satchel down between them like a body, and the two of them talked from full dark to first light, and what follows is that night, which the compound never knew occurred, and which decided everything that came after.

"Tell me what it actually does," Sohrab said. "Not the story. The story is beautiful and Davud is dead. Tell me what the drug does, old man, in plain words, because I have kept every count in this compound honestly except the one that matters: I have never once written down what it is we are actually buying."

Goshtasp trimmed the lamp and let the question sit until it had stopped vibrating.

"Then let us do it as a washing," he said. "Plainly. Piece by piece. What does the drug do. First, the body — you know the body better than I do, you've held the pulses. It dries a man and heats him and swings his heart up like a run uphill. It takes the eyes' aim away. And somewhere past the second needle, it takes the doorman."

"The doorman."

"The one in a man's head who stands at the door and says: that is real, come in — that is not, wait outside. Every waking hour of your life he's on duty, boy, unthanked. Fever bribes him. Exhaustion distracts him. This drug walks him off his post entirely. And then everything in the courtyard comes indoors at once — memory, wish, grief, the dead — and none of it is wearing a badge, and the man inside greets it all as guests. That is the delirium. I have watched it for forty years from this stool. It is not a window, and it is not a lie. It is a house with the doors taken off."

"Then it's nothing," Sohrab said. "Then Bijan is right and the whole tent is men talking to their own furniture, and Davud died for furniture."

"Slower," Goshtasp said, without heat. "You keep two columns; keep them now. I said what the drug does. I have not yet said what the visit does. They are not the same entry." He set the lamp between them, deliberately, the little fire of the rite in miniature. "Answer me something first, ledger-keeper. Why do the living want to talk to the dead? Not these living. All of them. Every people we

have a record of, boy — every one — has built something for it. Graves close to the house. Stones with the name cut deep so the thumb can read it when the eyes blur. Food set out at the year's turn. Prayers with the dead's names threaded in. Photographs now. Letters written to men who will never collect them; I have seen three in this compound, folded into breast pockets, addressed. Why? The dead ask for none of it."

"Comfort."

"Comfort is a word people use to stop looking. Look longer. A death, boy — especially a death like this war makes them, sudden, far off, mid-sentence — a death is a conversation ended by the other party without consent. Everything unsaid at that moment stays unsaid, and unsaid things do not dissolve. They lodge. You've seen where they lodge; you wash it every day. The shoulders. The breath. The hands that keep doing a task the task no longer needs. Grief is not a feeling, whatever the songs say. Grief is unfinished business held in the body, and the body has no procedure for finishing it, because the procedure requires two parties and one is gone. So every people that ever buried anyone has built what I would call finishing-rooms — the grave, the stone, the anniversary, the prayer. Places where the living can conduct their half of the ended conversation with enough ceremony around it that the body is persuaded, a little, that business is being transacted. That the sentence got its ending after all. Every funeral you have ever attended was a message sent to a closed door, on the theory that the sending is the cure. And it half is, boy. It half is. That is the tragedy of the whole apparatus. It half works."

"And the mang finishes what the funeral half-does."

"The mang," Goshtasp said, "opens the finishing-room and puts a chair in it, and the chair answers back. That is its entire power, and you should be exactly as frightened of it as you are, because nothing in the history of grief has ever answered back before. The stone doesn't. The photograph doesn't. The prayer doesn't — don't tell the mullahs I said so. A man stands at all of them and does both voices himself, and knows he is doing both voices, and that knowing is the splinter in every rite we've ever built. The drug

takes out the splinter. In that house with no doors, the dead arrive wearing their own faces, speaking in their own cadence — you've heard the men; the cadence is perfect, it is the one thing delirium never gets wrong, because it was recorded by love, and love is a meticulous clerk. And the man says what he could not say, and hears — something — say back what he needed said. The sentence ends. The business transacts. And the body believes it, boy. That is the whole medicine. Not the vision. The body's belief that the accounts are settled at last. You have seen them come up out of it. You have the pulses written down. Tell me what you see in the week after, and be honest, because I know what I see."

Sohrab was quiet a long time. "They sleep," he said at last, grudging as a confession. "Akbar stopped the thing he did with his jaw. Qorban eats. The shaking ones shake less. It's in my margins — I didn't rule a column for it, but it's in my margins."

"It's in your margins," Goshtasp agreed. "Settled, they call it. Ground after rain. Forty years of washing what grief does to the living, boy, and I have never seen anything settle men like this settles them. There is my column. Now give me yours. You've been building it all night; I can hear it. Spend it."

And Sohrab spent it — everything he had entered against the tent in four weeks of keeping its ledger, the case for the poison with good manners. That the drug does not open a door; it dims the room until the mind, desperate and tender, furnishes it, and the furnishing is made entirely of the mourner himself, so the dead say nothing the living did not carry in — Yusef's questions are Morteza's questions, wearing a loved voice; the orchard's sacks are Qorban's own untranslatable war handed back to him. That the perfection of the cadence proves the opposite of what the tent thinks it proves: it is exactly as perfect as memory, and no more, a recording, not a residence. That what the visits produce is not settlement but rehearsal — the men return calmer not because the wound has closed but because they have found a room where the wound is permitted to stay open forever, tended, furnished, visited on Thursdays; and a wound with visiting hours does not heal, it institutionalizes. That the doses climb — his own red brackets,

month on month, drifting upward like water finding its level — because a finished conversation stays finished, but a rehearsed one has to be rehearsed again, and again, which is the signature of the poison and never of the cure. And that the whole account was now notarized by a dead conscript from a replacement company, because a room like that is paid for in the currency of the room next door, where men needed the pendulum held and the hands holding it were short sixteen needles. “It numbs and it loosens, both at once — that is all it does,” he finished. “It numbs the doorman and looses the furniture. Everything else is what we pour into it. And I have watched what men pour, old man, and it is bottomless, and the case on the trestle is not.”

The lamp had burned to its knuckle. Goshtasp did not answer at once, and when he did, he did the thing Sohrab had least prepared for: he agreed.

“Yes,” he said. “All of it. The room is furnished by the mourner. The dead speak in borrowed cadence with nothing of their own to say. The dose climbs. The settlement may be rehearsal wearing settlement’s coat. Yes, boy. Do you imagine the old ones didn’t know? Do you think twelve centuries of priests never noticed what you noticed in a month with a straightedge?” He leaned forward, and the last of the lamp stood in his eyes. “Why do you suppose the rite was built the way it was built? Three cups, measured by another’s hand — never the traveler’s own. Once — Wiraz crossed once, boy, once for a whole people, not every Thursday. The traveler chosen by the community, not self-selected by the size of his wound. And around the body, for every hour of seven days: witnesses. Sisters. Priests. The fire kept. The count kept. You asked me once why the vigil, if the soul does the traveling. Now you have earned the answer. The vigil is not protection for the journey. The vigil is the protection from the journey. The witnesses are there to hold the border the drug erases — to be the doorman the traveler has drunk away, to say to him with their hands and their prayers and their patience: this far, this once, this dose, and back. The crossing was never trusted to the crosser, because the old ones knew exactly what you know: that grief’s appetite is bottomless and the door only opens inward. The vigil is the technology, boy. The

drug is only the fuel. And what this war has done — what your tent has done, with its beautiful manners and its rationed needles — is strip the vigil and mass-produce the fuel.”

He sat back. Outside, the first trucks of the morning were coming up the causeway with their lights off.

“So you are both right, you and the tent, and neither of you will win, because the columns don’t fight; they don’t visit. The drug is a door and it is a poison with good manners; it was always both; that is why it was locked, not thrown away. The sin isn’t the drinking.” He took the satchel from between them and set it back on Sohrab’s shoulder himself, an investiture, and his hands were very steady. “The sin is drinking unwatched. And if you ever drink, boy — and I see it in your ledger-keeping, I have seen it since Tuesday in the spring, you will — you come to me first. A body deserves a witness. Even yours.”

FIFTEEN. THE CONFISCATION

The political officer arrived on a Sunday, which the tent would later agree it should have read as an omen, since nothing administrative had ever before happened to the compound on a Sunday.

He was young, younger than Bijan, with the clean boots of the rear and a folder he never opened, because the folder was a prop and the information was already in him. Someone had talked. It did not matter who; in a compound of exhausted men it never matters who; a secret held by nine people is a message with a slow fuse. He convened no tribunal. He simply appeared in the supply tent at dusk with four military policemen and had them carry out the crates, the blankets, the prayer cloth, the spirit stove — the furniture of the finishing-room, itemized aloud as contraband, stolen medical stores, and unauthorized assembly — and the words he used interested Sohrab even through the fear, because nowhere among them was the word that mattered. Not drug. Not delirium. The State’s vocabulary walked all the way around the thing itself and never looked at it.

The charge, when it was read to Morteza in the headquarters tent, was defeatism. Sohrab, summoned as the keeper of the stores

ledger, stood at the canvas wall and understood, listening, what the army was actually afraid of, and it was not the theft.

It was the messages.

"You tell men," the political officer said to Morteza, not angrily, in the reasonable voice of a man adjusting a machine, "that their dead ask questions. Whose water is this. Where is a war kept when it is won. You understand that a soldier who has heard his dead brother ask what the war is for returns to the line as a rifle that has been asked what it is for. An army is men who have agreed not to ask each other that. You have built, in a supply tent, with government needles, a place where the asking is holy." He tapped the unopened folder once. "If you had been selling the antidote, Sergeant, you would be in less trouble. A thief subtracts needles. You subtract the agreement."

Sohrab did ask one question, from the canvas wall, and regretted it for years afterward, not because of the answer but because of how quickly it came. He asked whether the intake record should continue to carry the civilian entries — the woman of the reeds, the boy dosed at 22:40 — or whether those belonged in some other file.

The political officer glanced up as though a chair had spoken. "Those are not casualties of the unit," he said, already looking back down. "Enter them as local persons present in the area of operations." Present in the area of operations. Five thousand years, and the State had a phrase for it, and the phrase was four words long and put them in the category of weather.

Morteza said only one thing in his own defense, and Sohrab wrote it in the hidden ledger that night, word for word, because it was the tent's entire theology in a sentence: "The questions were already in the men, Captain. We only gave them somewhere to be asked. A question with nowhere to be asked doesn't die. It digs."

They took him west the next morning, to what the paperwork called a rest facility, with a stop first, the escort said, at a place where doctors would help him with his confusion. The tent's remaining members were dispersed along the line into separate companies with the tidy instinct of a man scattering coals so the fire will die

politely — and made, thereby, into carriers; within a month Sohrab would hear the tent's exact liturgy, the Thursdays, the letters carried across, described to him by a stranger from a unit twelve kilometers north, the way one hears one's own dialect in a foreign city.

The needle count, in the weeks after, balanced perfectly. Sohrab reported the balance up the line and was commended for it. And every evening he sat in the cold-room doorway with the satchel on his knees and felt the balanced ledger for what it was: not order restored, but a room emptied. The men still went by on the duckboards with their unfinished sentences lodged in their shoulders. The finishing-room was confiscated. The grief was not. It had merely lost its address, and Sohrab, who now held the only working key to the only remaining door, sat with the key in his lap each evening, and each evening it was heavier, and he began — he could feel it happening, entry by entry, the way the missing twelve had first announced themselves — to keep a small private count of his own reasons for not using it, and to notice the count was falling.

INTERLUDE III. THIRD CROSSING

From the hidden ledger, the last shared vigil, the night before the Sunday. Three crossings, witnessed. What was brought back, as dictated to the keeper.

Akbar's, minutes four through seven. Hasan is repairing a net. The net has no tear that Akbar can find, and Hasan repairs it anyway, contented, the shuttle moving like speech. "I counted your Thursdays," Akbar tells him. "Fourteen more." — "Good," Hasan says. "Somebody should hold the numbers. They took mine when I came here; you can't bring numbers across, they're too heavy; it's why nobody here knows the date." He works the shuttle. Then: "Akbar. In the reeds that night, when the water lit up — I have been meaning to ask someone who would know. Who paid for the electricity? Wire costs money. Current costs money. Somebody signed a paper so the water could do that to us. I don't want his name. I want to know what the paper said. Papers have to say

something. What could it have said?" Minute seven: the net is whole and he mends it. The net is whole and he mends it.

Qorban's, minutes three through nine. Not the orchard this time. His father stands at the store-room door with the ledger of harvests open, the family's true scripture, forty years of sacks in columns, and he is trying to enter something and the pen will not make the mark. "Your war," he explains, apologetic. "I promised you I'd weigh it. I have been trying since your last visit. Look —" and he shows the page, and the page holds every year of Qorban's life in his father's careful hand, and where this year should be there is a smoothness, the paper refusing, like water refusing a nail. "Everything that ever happened to this family fit in the book," his father says, and he is not sad, he is puzzled, which is worse. "Droughts fit. The flood fit. Your grandfather's death fit — one line, but it fit. What have they made out there that doesn't fit in a book, Qorban? And why are they making so much of it?"

The third was the boy whose father died in the reeds, the one who asked to sit down first. His crossing, the keeper's note says, was quiet for eleven minutes and he would dictate only the ending. His father and he sat on the fallen walkway above the pump channel, feet over the clear water, and far down in the water there were lights, and he asked his father what the lights were and his father said: those are the ones still arriving; the marsh brings them down slowly, it is gentle that way, gentler than the boats. And then his father took his hand — the note records that the boy's actual hand, on the crate, in the tent, closed at this minute, grip strong, duration a full minute, witnessed by all — and said: "You're cold. You were always cold in the spring, even little. Listen. They will tell you it will be over by the year's turn. They told us the same, and the ones before us the same. Sit with me and we'll watch who's winning from here. You can see it very well from here. Look." And the boy looked, and the water was clear all the way down, and there was nothing to see but the arriving lights, and his father said, gently, as if delivering the news the whole marsh had asked him to pass along: "That's it. That's the whole view. Now say it slowly, what I taught you, so I know you have it before you go back up." — "Who is winning?" the boy said slowly. And his father nodded the way he

had nodded over schoolwork done right, and let go of his hand, and the tent's lamp came back on all at once like a held breath let out.

The keeper's final entry for the night records only the doses, the pulses, the durations, and then, in a different pen, added later, ruled off from everything: They ask better questions than the living. That is either the strongest evidence that it's real, or the strongest evidence that it isn't, and I no longer know which, and I notice that I no longer know.

IV. SEVEN DAYS OF THE BODY

SIXTEEN. THE BOATMAN'S CUP

Jabbar came to him in the week after the confiscation, when the tent was crates in a store and its members were scattered along the line like coals raked apart, and asked for the cup.

He asked correctly, which was the unnerving part. He had not been in the tent; he had never been in the tent; he had heard of it the way everything is heard of in a compound, from a man who heard it from a man. But he came to Sohrab in the cold-room doorway at dusk and sat down on the ground with his back against the frame and laid the request out like a man laying out goods on a mat: that he understood it was medicine and that taking it was theft; that he understood it might kill him and that he was not confused about this; that he wanted it once and would not ask again; and that he wished the old Zoroastrian to be present, because he had been told that the old Zoroastrian knew how the thing was properly done, and Jabbar did not intend to do a serious thing improperly.

"Who is it you want to see?" Sohrab asked.

"My grandfather Chasib." He said the name the way you would give an address. "I am the last man in my family who knows the channels. He taught them to me in a boat when I was nine years old, and I have taught them to nobody, because my sons are in a camp with a road and a standpipe and there is nothing left to teach them the channels of. When I go, the map goes." He turned his hands over. "I do not want to ask him a question. I want to tell him. He should hear it from his own blood and not find out — however they find out over there. I would want to be told."

Goshtasp, when it was put to him, said only: "He is not a soldier, and he is not one of ours, and he has asked properly, which nobody else in this compound has ever managed. Yes." And then, to Sohrab, with the particular mildness that always meant an appointment was being made: "You will keep it."

"You keep it. You know the words."

"I know words in a language he does not have, for a fire that is not his," the old man said. "The words are not the vigil. I have been telling you that since the spring and you have been writing it down

and not reading it. The vigil is a body watched by somebody who will not leave. I will sit with you. You will keep the count and the clock and the border, and you will call him back if he goes past your red line, and you will find out what it costs to be the one who stays." He fed the lamp. "You are going to want the cup yourself before this is over, boy. Better you learn the trade from this side first."

So it was done in the cold room, on the boards, after the last truck: the water, the clean garment, the bread, the naming of the dead — Jabbar named nine, four of them children, and took his time — and then Sohrab drawing the doses with his own hand for the first time, entering each in the ledger, setting the case out of reach behind him on the trestle, and taking the boatman's wrist between his fingers to find the pulse and hold it.

The old man began to recite, in a language twelve centuries deep in his family and older than every army that had crossed it. Jabbar lay on the table of another people's trade, with a lamp at his head, in a country whose borders had been drawn by men who had never once been asked to pole a boat through it, and went out.

Sohrab sat with his fingers on the wrist and his eyes on the second hand and discovered, over the next fourteen minutes, that Goshtasp had been telling him the truth and that he had not understood a word of it. Because the traveler is gone — the traveler is having, whatever else, an experience — and the one who stays has nothing at all: a wrist, a watch, a lamp, and the entire weight of another man's return resting on the single proposition that he will not stand up and walk away.

At minute nine the pulse went over his red line and stayed there for four beats and Sohrab's whole body understood, in advance of his mind, what the ledger would look like if it did not come back down.

It came back down.

At minute fifteen Jabbar's hand closed hard on his — not reaching for him; reaching past him, the grip of a man being handed something — and held for a long moment, and then eased, and the boatman surfaced with his eyes streaming and lay still for a while

and then said, to the ceiling, in the flat voice of a man reading out a strange number from a page:

"He knew. He already knew." And then: "Give me the book. I want it written that I told him, and that he already knew, and what he said."

INTERLUDE IV. THE BOATMAN'S CROSSING

Minute one. The cold room lets go of him like a bank letting go of a rope and Jabbar is standing in water to the ankles, and the water is clean — that is the first thing, before any face, before any voice: the water is clean, and it is moving, and he has not stood in moving clean water in three years.

Minute two. The mudhif is being built. Or unbuilt. His grandfather Chasib and four men Jabbar knew as a boy are working the reed bundles into the ground and bending them over and lashing the arches, and the arches rise, ribbed, the light coming down between them in bars — and then, without any moment of collapse, without anything falling, the whole structure is bundles on the ground again and the men begin again, unhurried, exactly as content the second time. It is not decay. It is the same building, going up, forever, being built and being unbuilt, the way a breath is not a failure of the previous breath.

Minute three. "Sit down first," his grandfather says, not looking up. "Three days before anybody asks you anything. That is the law and you know it and you always came in talking."

"Grandfather, I have to tell you something."

"Sit down."

Minute four. He sits, on nothing, on the water, and the old man works, and after a while Chasib says, mildly, in the tone of a man saving his grandson an embarrassment: "You have come to tell me about the water."

"Yes."

"We know about the water."

Minute five. And this — this is the thing Jabbar will carry back and will not be able to say properly for two days afterward — this is the difference, and it is the whole difference, between these dead and the dead the soldiers go to visit. The soldiers' dead ask. Whose water is this, where is a war kept when it is won, what does the paper say, who signs for the electricity in the reeds. The soldiers' dead are children with a list, twenty years old forever, standing at the door of a room they were never let into.

His grandfather is not asking anything. He is working, and he knows.

"How?" Jabbar says.

"Boy." Chasib ties off an arch. "The water comes down and the water goes out and everything here is made of it. You think we would not feel it when it stopped? We are the ones who are made of it now. When the reeds went brown at Umm al-Naaj we felt it here the way you feel a tooth. When they burned the beds at the north spit, we — " and he stops, and for the first time he looks at his grandson, and his face is entirely his face, the face from the boat when Jabbar was nine, and he says: "It is not that we hear news of it. There is no news here. It is that the country you are describing is the country we are standing in."

Minute seven. Jabbar looks, then. He makes himself look past the men and the arches, out over the water, and it is clean, and it is moving, and it goes on — and it goes on, and it goes on, and about a thousand meters out it simply is not there anymore. Not a horizon. Not haze. A stopping. Beyond the stopping there is nothing that can be described, and it is nearer than it was when he arrived.

"Yes," his grandfather says. "You see."

Minute eight. "How long?"

"Longer than you. Longer than your sons, probably." The old man goes back to the reeds. "We are not in danger, Jabbar. Don't put that on your face. We are only smaller. There were always the ones who went further back than anybody could remember, and now they are not there to be remembered, and the ones who go furthest back are men I used to greet on the water. We are held up by being

kept, boy, and the keeping is done up there, by you, in boats, in the channels, in the names, at the graves — and it is thinning, and we can feel it thin, the way you feel the season.”

Minute ten. “Then I have to tell you the rest,” Jabbar says, “and the rest is worse. My sons are in a camp with a road. The channels are in me and in perhaps forty others. Nobody is being taught. When I am finished, the map is finished, and there will be nobody left who can even find the places to keep them.”

And Chasib says: “Yes. That is what I meant.”

Minute twelve. They sit together in the way they had sat together in a boat for eleven years without needing to fill it. The mudhif goes up. The mudhif comes down. The men work. Somewhere a buffalo is in the water and Jabbar does not turn to look at it, because he knows that if he turns to look at it he will not be able to leave.

“Ask me for something,” his grandfather says at last. “Everyone who comes across wants something carried. What do you want?”

“Tell me it will come back.”

“I will not lie to you in front of these men.”

“Then tell me something true.”

Minute thirteen. Chasib straightens, and puts his hand flat on the arch he has just tied, the arch that will be a heap of reeds in a moment and an arch again after that, and he says:

“Here is a true thing, and it is not a comfort, so listen properly. Nobody up there did this to hurt us. Not one of them. That is what your soldiers cannot get through their heads — they keep coming here looking for the man who meant it. There was no such man. They wanted the ground under the water and the oil under the ground and they wanted to move their vehicles, and the water was in the way, and so they moved it, the way you move a chair. Nobody hated the marsh. Nobody thought about the marsh at all.” He pats the reeds. “Do you understand what I am telling you? Your enemy would at least have had to look at you. What killed this place did not look at it once. There is nothing here to forgive, and that is the

whole horror, and you may take that back with you because there is no use for it here.”

Minute fourteen. The light does not change — it never changes here — but the stopping is nearer, and Jabbar’s chest has begun to hurt in the far-off way that means his body, on a table in a cold room, is calling in its loan.

Chasib takes his grandson’s hand in both of his, the way a man hands over a pole.

“Go up. Keep the channels while you can, and when you cannot, tell somebody the names. Not the routes — the routes will be gone, let them go. The names, boy. Where the reeds were. Whose house was on which dibin. Say them to anyone. Say them to a stranger on a bus.” His grip is very strong; it is the grip of the man who taught him the water at nine years old. “A place is kept the same way a person is. Somebody has to keep saying it.”

Minute fifteen. The clean water, the arches going up, the arches coming down, the men working, the stopping quietly closer — and then the boards, and the lamp, and a boy’s fingers on his wrist counting, and the old Zoroastrian mid-verse in a language of another people, and Jabbar, back in the ruined country, weeping like a man who has been handed something too heavy and has taken it anyway.

SEVENTEEN. SOHRAB’S CUP

He chose a Tuesday, because the word had been said to him on a Tuesday, and because ledger-keepers are helpless before symmetry.

He did not decide it the way decisions are supposed to be made, at a crossroads with the roads visible. It assembled itself the way the missing twelve had assembled themselves: in ones and twos, patiently, below the level of the counting eye — a night when the boy with the colors died and Sohrab could not remember Kaveh’s voice saying his name; a morning at the boot pile; the stranger from the north with the tent’s liturgy in his mouth; the evening he caught his own hand resting on the reserve case, at ease, like a

hand on a gate it had opened before. When he finally said it aloud to himself — I am going to cross — it had the sound not of a resolution but of a fact remembered, something true since spring that he was only now transferring to the permanent record.

Kaveh had been dead four years. Khorramshahr, in the first autumn, in the street fighting, twenty years old, the brother who had taught him to swim by the simple method of standing further out and being worth reaching. They had a language once, the two of them, the private dialect brothers build under a strict father's radio silence — and the dialect was dying with its last speaker, that was the thing, that was the wound with no visiting hours: Sohrab could no longer hear it. Four years of ward and washing line had overwritten the tapes. He kept Kaveh's photograph and the photograph had stopped speaking; he kept Kaveh's letters and the letters read now in Sohrab's own voice, which is the second death, the quiet administrative one, the one no stone is cut for.

He went to Goshtasp on the Monday and said only: "You told me to come to you first."

The old man looked at him a long moment — and did not argue. That was the terrible mercy of him, the forty years of him: he had said his entire argument across a spring and a summer of lamplight, and he held, as an article of the rite itself, that a man's crossing belongs to the man. He said: "Tomorrow, after the last truck. Not the tent. The cold room. If it is to be done, it will be done correctly, and correctly begins with the room where the dead are already comfortable."

And correctly it was done — the whole of the old procedure, reassembled from a twelve-centuries-old report and a grandfather's kitchen, scaled to a field hospital's poverty. Sohrab washed his head and his body at the trestle, in clean water, not bleach. A new garment: Goshtasp produced an unissued shirt from some deep supply of his own, still creased from the factory. Clean bedding on the boards where the dead were washed — Sohrab lay down on the table of his own trade and found it fit him, which he had always known and never once permitted himself to think. He ate a little bread. He remembered the departed aloud by name, as the rite

required: his mother's mother; the nephew at Khorramshahr he had never met, Goshtasp's; Davud, nineteen, of the replacement company, whom he had washed; Karim-of-the-mortars, whose paper was right; the boy with the colors; last, and with his eyes open, Kaveh.

Then the dose. Goshtasp's hand, not his own — never the traveler's own — three needles laid out in their green sleeves like three golden cups gone to war, the count for each entered by the old man himself in the ledger, in his slow uphill hand, because the keeper was traveling and the vigil now held the book. The lamp was fed. The stool was drawn to the tableside. The old man began, very quietly, in a language twelve centuries deep in his family and older than every army that had ever crossed it, to recite.

"Seven days they watched Wiraz," Sohrab said, to the ceiling, as the first warmth came up his arm like a tide finding a channel. "I have until the trucks."

"Then travel light," said the vigil, and kept the fire, and kept the count, and the doors of the house went off their hinges one by one, softly, like men leaving a sickroom, and the marsh on the other side was perfectly still, and perfectly clear, and someone was standing far out in the shallow water, exactly far enough to be worth reaching, waiting for him, twenty years old.

INTERLUDE V. THE FINAL CROSSING

Minute one. The water holds him at the ankles and is not cold, and Kaveh watches him wade out with the grin already built, the older-brother grin, the one that arrives before the joke.

"You swim worse than ever," Kaveh says. "You've been living on land. It shows."

Minute two. The voice. That is the ambush — not the face, which the photograph had kept badly but kept; the voice, which nothing had kept, the exact pitch and lean of it, the way it drops a half-tone handing off a joke, and Sohrab stands in the shallow water of the far marsh hearing four lost years of it arrive at once, and cannot

Speak, and his brother waits, twenty years old, patient as water, while he doesn't.

Minute three. "Say the thing," Kaveh says gently. "You came with a thing. They all come with a thing. Say it, and then we can just talk, which is what you actually came for."

"I couldn't hear you anymore," Sohrab says. "Your voice. It was going. I kept the photograph and the letters and I lost the voice, and I couldn't — a man shouldn't outlive the sound of his brother saying his name."

"Sohrab," Kaveh says. Just that. Doing both syllables the old way, the dialect way, the way that meant get up, try again, I'm standing further out and you can reach me.

Minute four. They talk. It is not sad, minute four; the ledger should show that minute four was the finest minute of the keeper's year — the swimming lessons, the radio their father guarded like a border, the melon stolen and eaten green and both of them sick and neither confessing, the private word they had for the neighbor's rooster, which still worked, which was still funny in a marsh of the dead four years and a war later.

Minute six. Then Kaveh says: "Now I have questions. We save them up here. There's not much else to hold." He counts on his fingers, and his fingers still have the scar from the bicycle chain, kept with the terrible fidelity this place keeps everything. "One. The street where I stopped —" he says it plainly, without flinch, the way the dead say everything — "was it kept? Did keeping it turn out to be worth a street? I don't need the answer to be yes. I need to know if there's an answer. Somewhere there's a man whose work it is to know what a street is worth in brothers. Have you met him? What does he eat? Does he sleep well? I think about him, Sohrab. Not with anger. I just want to watch him do the arithmetic once, with his own pencil, while I stand where he can't see me. Just once, watch it done."

Minute seven. "Two. The war. Is it over? — Don't tell me. Wrong question, we always ask it wrong. Here is the question. When it is over, whatever over is: who says it? What does he say? Is there a

sentence — actual words in an actual mouth — that ends it? Because it began with a sentence; some sentence somewhere started it, said by someone, over breakfast maybe. Sentences are cheap, little brother, we said thousands a day, remember, we were rich with them. So if it starts with a sentence and ends with a sentence, and everything between the two sentences is us —” he stops, works it, twenty years old forever, doing the sum on scarred fingers — “then what was it? A very long pause between two sentences? Who was pausing? I’m not being clever. Everyone here asks this. Nobody here has ever once heard the ending sentence, we arrive too early, all of us arrive too early. When you hear it — you’ll hear it, you’re the type that’s left alive to do the hearing — memorize it exactly. Every word. Somebody has to bring it across and read it to us, and you keep the records. It should be you.”

Minute nine. “Three.” And here his voice does the half-tone drop, the joke-handing-off drop, except there is no joke: “Why are you here, Sohrab?”

“To hear your voice.”

“You’ve heard it. Why are you still here?” And when Sohrab doesn’t answer: “I’ll do the arithmetic for you, then; someone taught me numbers here, we have nothing but time and the questions. You come across on a drug that kills at the third cup. Your body is on the table where you wash the dead — don’t look at the water, look at me — you laid yourself down on that table, little brother, and you fit it, and some part of you noticed that you fit it, and was glad. That gladness is the thing I want to talk about. That’s the passenger you brought. Not grief. Grief is honest; grief buys a ticket and goes home. The gladness stays if you let it. I’ve watched it come across in others, from this side, wading out further every visit — a little further, a little longer, the dose a little heavier — until one visit the vigil can’t reach them, and then they’re here, and Sohrab —” and his voice now is the voice from the deep water, the being-worth-reaching voice, and it does not rise, the dead never raise their voices, they have nothing left to raise them for — “it is not better here. It is only finished here. Those are different

countries. The living mix them up because from a distance the flags look alike."

Minute eleven. "Ask me the last question," Kaveh says. "Yours. The one under all your counting. You've kept it in the margin since spring. Ask it, and then go, and don't come back — no. Listen to the whole sentence; you always heard half and swam off. Don't come back like this. Come the slow way. Forty, fifty years the slow way, with a whole life to declare at the crossing, sacks of it, a full book — make the customs men here work, Sohrab. Promise me the full book. Now ask."

Minute twelve. "Was any of it worth it?" Sohrab asks his brother. "The street. The marsh. Davud. You. Anyone. Is it ever, once the account is closed — is it ever worth it, from where you stand?"

And Kaveh smiles the older-brother smile, the one that arrives before the joke, except what arrives instead, softly, in the perfect kept voice, in their own dying dialect, is: "You're asking the drowned to grade the water. We're the wrong ones, little brother. We're the bill. You don't ask the bill if the dinner was worth it. Ask the man with the pencil. Find him. Watch him do it once." He is already further out, the water already at his chest, and he is not swimming away; the marsh is doing what the marsh does, gently, it is gentle that way. "My voice goes in your ledger now. Deep lettering, so the thumb can read it when the eyes blur. Say my name at the year's turn. Come the slow way. And Sohrab —" almost gone now, the half-tone drop, the joke arriving at last across four years and the whole width of the water — "practice your swimming. You'll want it. Life is also deep."

Minute thirteen. The lamp. The recitation, mid-verse, unbroken, twelve centuries long. The old man's hand on his wrist, counting; the count, entered; the trucks, far off, coming up the causeway with their lights off; and his own name in the room, said once, aloud, in his own living voice, which he understood — surfacing, weeping without noise onto the table of his trade — he had crossed the whole marsh to fetch: the sound of Kaveh saying it, carried back the only way anything is ever carried back, inside the one who went.

EIGHTEEN. THE CUP OF POISON

The ending sentence, when it finally came, came over the radio in the high summer of 1988, four years and three compounds later, and Sohrab was ready for it, because he had promised to be.

He was at a depot outside Ahvaz by then, a sergeant of stores with a limp the marshes had given him as a leaving gift, still keeping ledgers, because the war had learned what he was for. The ceasefire was announced in July. The old man at the head of the State, accepting it, told the nation that agreeing to stop was, for him, like drinking a cup of poison — that was the figure he chose, and the whole country heard it, and Sohrab stood in the depot doorway among men who wept with relief and men who wept with the other thing, and he took out the notebook he had carried four years for exactly this, and wrote the sentence down, every word, in deep lettering, as instructed.

Then he sat down on a crate in the noise of the ending and did the accounts.

Eight years. The border, when the surveyors finally walked it, where it had been in the first September. A million gone, some said; the counting men would argue the figure for the rest of the century, which was itself the last insult, that the dead should end as a disputed subtotal. The marshes drained of armies, returned to the reeds and the birds and whatever the reeds were bringing down slowly, gently, being gentle that way. In the record books: three hundred and eighty-seven chemical attacks entered against the enemy's account; a thousand tons of the garlic rain; and in wards in Tehran and Ahvaz and the villages above the salt river, tens of thousands of men still coughing, still blistering years late, still smelling geraniums that were not there — the bill arriving in installments, as it always had, the poison's first weapon being time.

He thought of Kaveh's arithmetic. It starts with a sentence and it ends with a sentence, and everything between the two sentences is us. He had the ending sentence now, written where the thumb could find it. A cup of poison. He turned the phrase over the way Yusef had turned a stone in the un-light, and understood why it had been waiting four years for him in particular, the washer of the

gassed, the keeper of both columns, the one traveler the marsh had let come back with his ledger intact:

The old man on the radio thought the cup was his to drink, and his alone, and that the drinking was the war's end. But Sohrab had kept the intake record. The whole country had drunk the cup — had been drinking it for eight years, in three golden swallows and in garlic rain, knowingly and unknowingly, dosed and dosed again while the pendulum was held; a nation laid out on the clean bedding of its own certainties while something patient worked through it hours behind the wound. The drinking was not the end of the war. The drinking had been the war, all along, every day of it, and the ceasefire was only the seventh morning: the body waking on the table, asking for food, with the report still to make.

And who keeps the vigil for a country? Who sits the seven days, feeds the lamp, counts the pulse, holds the border the cup erased, so that what went out into the dark can find its way back to the body and testify? He looked at the men in the depot yard, the weeping and the other weeping, the shoulders full of unfinished sentences, a whole generation of finishing-rooms that would now have to be built one kitchen at a time, and he thought: the ones like me. That is what we were for. That is what the marsh was training, all along, on the washing line. Not soldiers. Witnesses. The ones who kept the count while everyone else crossed, and who now must sit beside the sleeping body of everything, for as long as it takes, reciting.

He went in out of the sun. He ruled a fresh page. At the top, in his best hand, deep enough for a blind thumb, he entered the first line of the last ledger, the one he would keep for the rest of his life and show to no one until the year's turn required it:

Kaveh, son of Dariush. Khorramshahr, in the first autumn. Voice: recovered, and held.

Beneath it, the page ran on, ruled and patient, column after column, waiting for the names — and there would be names, he was a rich man now, he had a whole country of them — and at the bottom, where a ledger balances, he left, deliberately, against every instinct of his trade and in fulfilment of a promise made in

deep water, the sum unentered. Let the man with the pencil do that line. He would be watching, when it was done. He had promised that too.

NINETEEN. THE SALT GROUND

He went back in the spring of 1993, five years after the sentence on the radio, because a man had told him a thing in a boat once and he had promised nothing at all, which is the kind of promise that does not expire.

He was twenty-eight. He had a limp, a storekeeper's job in Ahvaz, a room, a small permanent cough that three doctors had described in three different ways, and the ledger. He took a bus, and then a shared taxi, and then walked, and he had allowed a full day for the last part because in his memory the last part was water.

He was standing on it before he understood he had arrived.

There was no marsh. There was a plain. It went to the horizon in every direction, flat and pale and hard, and it crunched, and when he crouched and put his palm to it his palm came away white. Salt. The water had been taken off — on the far side by canals and embankments dug on purpose after the war, an engineering achievement of real scale, the water of the Tigris and the Euphrates gathered and diverted and run away out of the marsh entirely; on this side by dykes and drought and dams upriver that had nothing to do with any of it and did not care. The water goes, and the salt that was always dissolved in it stays, and it comes up through the ground and dries on the surface and makes a crust like a bad healing, and nothing grows in it. Nothing was growing in it. For an hour's walk in any direction, nothing at all was growing in it.

He had been expecting damage. He had washed damage for four years; he knew what it looked like and he had come prepared to look at it. He had not been prepared for tidiness. That was the obscenity — that it was clean, that it was quiet, that a landscape which had held one of the oldest continuously inhabited places on the surface of the earth had been converted into something with no features whatsoever, and that it looked, from any distance, like

nothing much. Like a place where nothing had ever happened. The marsh had not been ruined. The marsh had been unsubscribed.

He found the dyke. It took him most of the morning and it was still exactly where it had been, of course, because nobody unbuilds a dyke: an earth wall running arrow-straight across the plain, weathered now, with a track worn along the top by somebody's motorcycle. He walked it east, and after a while he began to find things.

Reed stubs. Kilometers of them, broken off at the level of the crust, grey, dry, brittle as old bone, a stubble field the size of a province where the qasab had stood four and five meters high and hidden entire villages inside itself.

Bones. Buffalo, mostly; large curved things half-swallowed by the salt, in ones and twos and then in a group of nine together in a low place that had been the last water somewhere and had gone bad before it went dry.

And the houses, which is to say: nothing. He walked over three of them without knowing, and only found the fourth because a rectangle of the crust was faintly darker where mud and dung and five generations of trodden reed had gone into the ground. He stood on it a long time. He had been told, in a boat, that when a family left, the water took the house back within a season and there was nothing to excavate — that this was a beautiful thing, a civilization that left no rubbish. It had not occurred to either of them, in the boat, that a people who leave no ruins also leave no evidence.

There was nobody to ask. That was the last of it, and the worst. He walked from before noon until late in the afternoon and saw two men on a motorcycle far off and a dog and no one else, in a country that had held — nobody agreed on the number, and Sohrab, who knew what a disputed subtotal meant, had stopped expecting anyone to agree — hundreds of thousands of people, some of them for five thousand years. They were in camps outside Ahvaz and Basra. They were in the block houses with the standpipes and the doors that locked. They were over borders, in three countries, in city districts where nobody wove reed mats because there was no

reed and no water and nobody who wanted mats. His wife could not weave, Jabbar had said, and an old woman began to forget in order.

He never found Jabbar. He asked in two villages on the edge of the plain and got the answer he had learned to hear, which was a shrug and a name of a camp and a shrug. Somewhere, an old man who held forty channels of a country in his head was living beside a road, and the channels were still in him, and there was nothing left for them to lead to.

Toward evening Sohrab sat down on the dyke with his back to the sun and took out the ledger.

He thought about the boy Kaveh had been, twenty years old forever, counting on his scarred fingers in the shallow water: when a war is won, where is it kept? Is there a room? Who has the key?

Here, he wrote. Then he stopped, and looked at the word, and understood that he had at last done the arithmetic his brother had asked to watch somebody do.

There was no room. There had never been a room. The winnings of a war are not stored anywhere, because they are not the kind of thing that can be stored — a border is a line agreed to be respected, and the line at the end of this one lay where it had lain in the first September, and the men who signed it took nothing home in their hands. But the costs are stored. The costs are always stored, and they are stored on the ground, and the ground has no representative at any negotiation ever held. Eight years of two states arguing over a border, and the argument had been conducted almost entirely on top of a people who were not a party to it, in a language they did not speak, about a question — whose water is this — that their whole civilization had been organized around not needing to ask. And when it was finished, the states went back to where they had started, and the marsh did not, and could not, and would not; and the salt came up through the crust and set the answer down in a form no ledger will ever balance.

Nobody hated it. That was in the record too, in a boatman's dictation taken down by lamplight, and Sohrab had never been able to get free of it: nobody hated the marsh; nobody thought about the

marsh at all. It was in the way. A whole world, five thousand years deep, went under because it was in the way of a question about a line — and the sin was not cruelty, which at least requires attention, but the older and more comfortable sin of not looking at what you are standing on.

He ruled a fresh page, in the dying light, on the top of an embankment in the middle of a white plain.

He had kept, since 1988, a ledger of the dead he intended to say aloud at the year's turn — Kaveh at the head of it, and Davud, nineteen, of the replacement company, and Karim-of-the-mortars whose paper had been made right, and the boy with the colors, and an unnamed civilian, female, approximately sixty, who had apologized to him for the trouble. He had thought it was a ledger of people. He wrote, beneath the last name, in his best hand, deep enough for a blind thumb:

The Hoveyzeh marsh. Water: taken. Reed: burned, then dry. Buffalo: dead in a group of nine in a low place. Houses: no ruins, by design. People: scattered, three countries, camps with roads. Channels: in Jabbar son of Nasir, and perhaps forty others, and after that nowhere. Cause of death: not hatred. Not looked at.

And beneath that, because a promise made in deep water has to be kept in the form it was given:

Say the names. Say them to a stranger on a bus.

Then he closed the book on the sum, which he did not enter, and would not enter, and had been asked by his brother in the clean water to leave for the man with the pencil, whoever he was, wherever he ate his dinner — and he got up off the dyke, and walked back the way he had come across the salt, and behind him the plain lay flat and white and quiet in the last of the light, keeping absolutely nothing, in perfect order, for as far as a man could see.

GLOSSARY

AHWAR [ah-WAHR] — Arabic, *the marshes*. The Mesopotamian marshes where the Tigris and the Euphrates run together — historically some fifteen to twenty thousand square kilometres of reed bed and lake, and the ground the war was fought on top of.

ARDĀ WIRĀZ NĀMAG [ar-DAH vee-RAHZ NAH-mag] — Middle Persian, *the Book of the Righteous Wiraz*. One of the oldest afterlife accounts in world literature: a righteous man drinks three cups of wine mixed with mang, lies seven days while his sisters and the priests keep vigil over his body, tours heaven and hell, and returns to report what he saw.

DIBIN [dee-BEEN] — Marsh Arabic, *made ground*. A reed island that has been layered with mud and rebuilt across generations until it is real ground; a man might live his life on land his great-grandfather wove.

KIBASHA [ki-BAH-sha] — Marsh Arabic, *a packed-reed island*. An island of packed reed, buildable in a week; with time and mud it becomes dibin.

MA'DAN [ma-DAHN] — Arabic, *the marsh people*. The people of the Ahwar, who built reed houses to a design unchanged in Sumerian carvings five thousand years old, herded buffalo, wove mats, and kept a guest house in every village where no traveller was refused.

MANG [MAHNG] — Middle Persian, *the sacred narcotic*. The drug of the old rite — three cups, seven days of witnesses — by which a righteous man was sent to visit the dead. Henbane, a nightshade, is a leading candidate for it; the war's antidote to nerve gas is drawn from the same family of plants.

MASHOOF [ma-SHOOF] — Marsh Arabic, *the marsh canoe*. The long black boat of the marshes, reed-built and sealed with bitumen, so light a man carries it on his head at the portages; a design nobody can name a change to since before there were

countries.

MUDHIF [moo-DEEF] — Marsh Arabic, *the guest house*. The guest house of a marsh village, reed-built like the rest but on the grand scale — the sheikh's in name and everyone's in practice — which took in whoever arrived and took no payment.

QASAB [ka-SAB] — Arabic, *the giant reed*. The reed of the marshes, four and five metres high, which was the country's whole architecture: its walls, its fodder, its fuel and its cover for the birds.

Majnoon, 1984. In the flooded marshes of the Iran–Iraq war, nineteen-year-old Sohrab works the decontamination line of a field hospital — the first pair of hands the war offers its gassed, and the last many of them ever feel. He keeps the ledger of the antidote: the small green-sleeved needles, counted like bread, that swing the poisoned back toward life.

Then the count stops balancing. Twelve needles, missing in ones and twos, lead him not to the black market he expects but to a secret congregation of gassed survivors in an empty supply tent — soldiers who have discovered what Goshtasp, the old Zoroastrian who washes the dead, already knows: that the antidote is close kin to mang, the sacred drug an ancient rite once used, with three cups and seven days of witnesses, to send a righteous man to visit the dead. In overdose, the medicine becomes a door.

On the far side wait the drowned and the burned, twenty years old forever, asking the questions the living have agreed not to ask. And beyond the wire lies the marsh itself — five thousand years of reed houses and buffalo roads and guest houses that never refused anyone — being drained, burned and dyked out of existence by two armies arguing over a line.

As the crossings grow, the doses climb, and the war presents its bill in the bodies of strangers who were only standing where it was being held, Sohrab — keeper of the count, doorkeeper of the door — must decide what the drug truly is, what grief truly wants, and who keeps the vigil for a country.

A soul can travel only as far as its body is guarded.

FROM THE UNWITNESSED WARS

ROYA PUBLICATIONS

