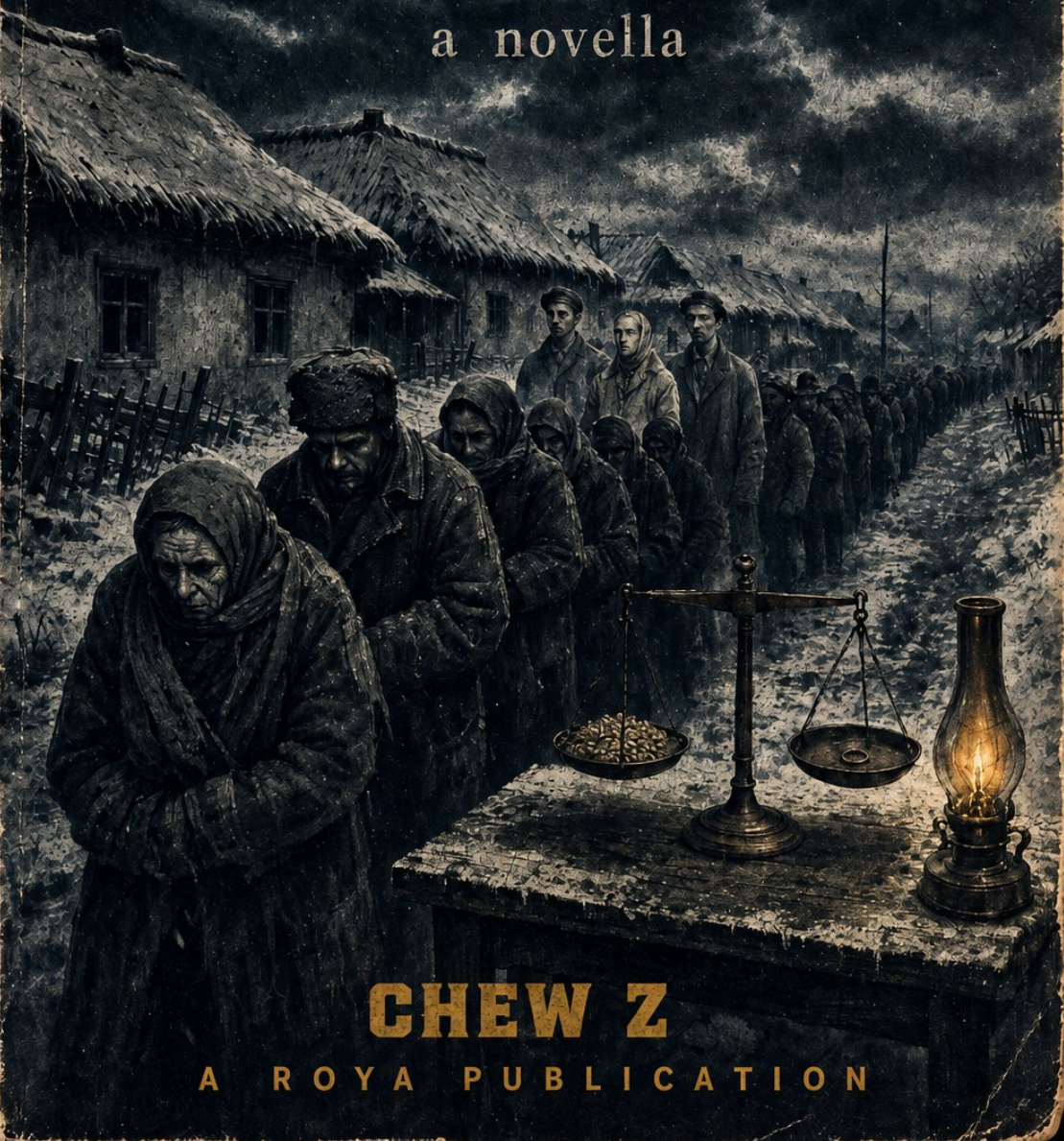


ROYA
PUBLICATION

No. 27

THE CLEAR ONES

a novella



CHEW Z

A ROYA PUBLICATION

THE CLEAR ONES

Chew Z

Printed in the Reach

Roya Publication No. 27

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

Copyright © 2026 Chew Z

All rights reserved.

ISBN 979-8-952790-26-1

Roya Publications

Publication No. 27

Typeset in DejaVu Serif.

Printed in the Reach

The Holodomor famine of 1932–1933, the Torgsin store system, and the historical decrees and events referenced herein are matters of documented record, used for fictional and thematic purposes; nothing in this novella should be read as a literal account of any specific raion, shop, or person.

*Hunger is a guest that eats the house.
While the guest is eating, the house still stands;
feed him, fight him, it is all one table.
But when the guest stops eating —
sweep the floor, and open the door,
for the house is finished.*

— a saying of the villages, as an old man remembered it

THE SECOND BOOK



Danylo's second book, kept by night in a room the state did not know about. The left column is the state's: item, weight, fineness. The right column is what came across the counter — the telling, the engraving, the thing the crucible will not keep. Fire is illiterate. This page is the only census of a famine that was decreed not to exist.

SYNOPSIS

Kharkiv oblast, winter 1932. The grain is gone — taken to the last pood by the brigades with their long steel probes — the roads are closed, and in a raion town square one door stays lit: the state gold store, where the starving are permitted to buy back their own bread at three times the world price, paid for in wedding rings, dowry coins and the crosses their grandmothers buried in 1918. Danylo, twenty-two, a seminarian orphaned by his seminary's closing, keeps the scale. Item, weight, fineness, receipt. But nobody surrenders an object silently, and by night he keeps a second book — the tellings, the words engraved inside the rings, the things the crucible will not preserve — until the ledger of a forgetting machine becomes, in his steady hands, the only census of a famine the state has decreed does not exist.

Then the eyes begin to change. Danylo learns to read the queue the way a doctor reads a chart: the asking eyes that still believe the counter is a door; the counting eyes of mothers doing division; and, as the winter deepens, a third kind — the clear ones, serene, courteous, luminous with a stillness like November water, the only people at his counter who see the clerk and ask for nothing. They are the most beautiful faces of the winter, and every one of them is dead within days, because at the end of starvation the hunger itself departs, and what it leaves behind looks exactly like grace. While the dying of the village gather nightly in a shared dream at a laid table where the food has no taste and the dead do not eat, Danylo and a defrocked priest who drives the dead-cart quarrel over the question the whole winter walks up to his scale to ask: whether the clarity is the soul arriving or the body closing its last rooms — and what it means that the state has built, without noticing, a fast the size of a nation, with no feast at its end.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

This book is set inside a documented crime. In 1932 and 1933 a famine engineered by state policy killed millions of people in Soviet Ukraine — the Holodomor, from *holod*, hunger, and *mor*, extermination; the language itself carries the verdict. The mechanisms in these pages are matters of record: the impossible quotas and the brigades that searched houses with steel probes; the blacklisted villages sealed off from all goods; the internal passport system that closed the cities to the starving; the decree of August 1932 — the “law of five ears” — that made gleaning a stripped field a crime against socialist property; the deaths that at their peak ran to tens of thousands a day. And Torgsin is a matter of record: the state hard-currency stores where the hungry traded wedding rings and crosses for flour at extortionate rates, and which in 1933 collected from its own starving citizens almost as much pure gold as the entire Soviet mining industry produced that year — the famine operating, at the counter, as a mine. So too the denial: the word “famine” withdrawn from official use, doctors instructed toward other causes of death, foreign correspondents ferried along swept roads to report that there was no starvation while the few who walked off the route and told the truth were smeared by their colleagues; and the census of 1937, which found the missing millions in the state’s own arithmetic and was suppressed, its statisticians shot for the sum. No one was ever tried for any of it.

What drew me, inside that record, was the physiology — because starvation is not one state but a road with stations, and the testimony describes every one. The early hunger that arrives as timed, muscular waves; the switch to burning the body’s fat, which sweetens the breath of a starving village with the pear-drop smell of ketosis; the long middle in which the body consumes its own muscle, the heart included, and shuts down its expensive faculties one by one — the future first, then the social self, then grief — an economy that reads from outside as apathy and is in fact triage; the

swelling of the protein-starved, famine's obscene joke of dressing its victims as fed; the lethal mercy of refeeding, by which a full meal kills the rescued and the saved must be fed by spoonfuls; and, at the very end, the departure of hunger itself: the documented serenity of the final days, the lightness, the clarity, the dying who stop asking for bread. Survivors of the Holodomor were found, seventy years later, still keeping dried heels of bread hidden in full pantries. The body writes its own second book, and it never stops keeping it.

The quarrel at the center of this novella — whether that terminal clarity is arrival or remainder, the soul seeing at last or the house standing empty with its last lamp lit — I have left standing, because I believe it stands. The desert fathers spent a thousand years building staircases toward the exact room into which this famine drove a nation at gunpoint, and the two facts do not resolve; they only face each other, like a full pan and an empty one on an honest beam. What I am certain of is smaller, and it is the book's whole argument: that hunger on this scale is never a shortage of food — the food existed; the food was under guard; the food was exported — but a shortage of permission, and that a fast imposed without witness, without vigil, and without any feast at its end is not an ascetic discipline but a crime wearing one's vestments. The clear ones saw truly at the last, I believe, whatever it was they saw. The obscenity is that a state arranged for millions to reach that sight alone, in the dark, unattended — and then denied for fifty years that anyone had gone anywhere at all.

Chew Z

CONTENTS

I. THE COUNTER

ONE. THE WEIGHER	12
TWO. THE ASKING EYES	14
THREE. THE PROBE	16
FOUR. THE FIRST STAGE	19
INTERLUDE I. THE TABLE	22

II. THE STATIONS

FIVE. THE COUNTING EYES	26
SIX. THE SWOLLEN AND THE DRY	28
SEVEN. WHAT GOLD REMEMBERS	30
EIGHT. THE CLEAR ONES	32
INTERLUDE II. THE LONGER TABLE	35

III. THE QUIET

NINE. THE CART 39

TEN. THE CORRELATION 41

ELEVEN. THE QUARREL OF THE WEIGHER AND THE
PRIEST 44

TWELVE. THERE IS NO FAMINE 48

INTERLUDE III. THE SCALE ON THE TABLE 51

IV. THE CLEAR ONES

THIRTEEN. ODARKA'S RING 55

INTERLUDE IV. THE LAST TABLE 57

FOURTEEN. THE THAW 60

I. THE COUNTER

ONE. THE WEIGHER

The scale came with the position, and the position came with a sentence Danylo would think about for the rest of his life: you have honest hands, comrade, and no family here, which is the same thing.

The shop stood on the corner of the raion town's market square, where the church candle-seller had been. TORGSIN, the sign said, gold letters on black, and beneath it in smaller letters the explanation nobody needed and everybody read: trade with foreigners. That was the name of the system — a chain of state stores that took no ordinary money at all, only foreign currency and gold and silver, and gave out flour and groats and sugar at prices set somewhere far away by men who had never stood in this square. It had been built for tourists and sailors, they said, in the port cities, before. Now it stood in a farming town a hundred versts from anything a foreigner would want, and the foreigners it traded with came on foot, out of the snow, from villages with their roads closed, carrying everything their families had ever saved.

Danylo was twenty-two. Until the previous spring he had been a seminarian — the seminary was closed now, converted to a grain office, which everyone agreed was a joke of some kind though no one could say exactly where the joke was located — and the two years of it had left him with careful handwriting, a knowledge of Church Slavonic nobody wanted, and an eye for church metal. He knew hallmarks. He knew the saints by their attributes, the way other men knew horses. It was this, he understood later, that had gotten him the counter: the appraisal clerk of a Torgsin outlet needed to know at a glance what was gold and what was gilt, what was silver and what was hope, and the state, having closed the schools that taught such things, was obliged to hire their orphans.

The work was four motions. Receive the item. Test and weigh it — the touchstone, the acid, the little brass gram weights in their wooden block, none of them larger than a tooth. Write the receipt — item, weight, fineness, value in gold rubles — and tear it from the book. Point to the grocery counter, where the receipt became flour.

That was the whole machine. A wedding ring weighed perhaps three grams. Three grams, that winter, was several days of life, depending on the size of the family, which was not a calculation Danylo was required to make and which he made every single time, involuntarily, the arithmetic running under the transaction like water under ice.

He had been told, in his one afternoon of training, that the work was simple because gold is simple. Gold has a weight, a fineness, a price. It cannot be argued with, flattered, or lied to; it is the one honest material; that is why the state wants it. The instructor — a tired man from the oblast office who tested spectacles for gold rims while he talked — had said this with a certain satisfaction, and Danylo had believed him for nearly a week.

The trouble was the queue.

The queue formed before light and stood all day, wrapped, stamping, patient in the way that only people with nothing left to hurry toward are patient, and it did not behave the way a line of sellers behaves. Nobody haggled. Nobody, in his first month, ever once asked whether the price could be better. They came to the counter the way people had once come to the rail of his church, and they put down what they carried, and then — this was the thing the instructor had not mentioned, the thing that was not in the four motions — they told him what it was.

Not what it weighed. What it was. An old man putting down a watch: my father carried this the day the railway opened; he was there, he saw the first engine; he let me hold it after, and it was warm from his pocket. A woman with two coins on a ribbon: my dowry, both of them; my mother sewed them into my hem the day I married; she said a wife with gold in her hem walks differently, and she was right, I walked differently. A girl of maybe sixteen with a thin chain: this was my sister's. Nothing else. Just: this was my sister's, and the past tense standing in the cold air between them like breath.

He learned that the telling could not be prevented and should not be hurried. It was not for him. He understood that quite early. The telling was the last act of ownership — a thing is yours while you

are the one who knows its story, and the moment it crossed the scale it would become grams, and grams belong to no one. So they stood at his counter and performed, one final time, the ceremony of knowing, and he was the witness the ceremony required, the way a wedding requires a stranger from the road.

He wrote item, weight, fineness in the book the state gave him.

In the evening, in his room, in a second book the state did not know about, he had begun — he could not afterward remember deciding to begin — writing the other column. Watch, 18 g. Was at the opening of the railway; warm from the father's pocket. Two coins, dowry. The mother said a wife with gold in her hem walks differently. Chain, silver, 4 g. Was a sister's.

He told himself it was a habit of seminarians, the keeping of registers. He told himself a number of things that autumn. Outside, the first hard frost came down on the stubble fields the brigades had already stripped, and the queue in the morning was longer than the queue the morning before, and at the front of it a woman was unwrapping something small from a handkerchief with the particular slowness of a person who has rehearsed all night, in the dark, what she is going to say while she hands it over.

TWO. THE ASKING EYES

By December he had stopped seeing coats and begun seeing eyes, because the coats were all the same coat now — padded, patched, snow-shouldered — and the eyes were not.

He was a weigher; classification was the shape his mind made under pressure; and so, without meaning to, in the manner of a man ruling columns, he began to sort the eyes that came to his counter, and the first kind he called, privately, in the second book, the asking eyes.

The asking eyes were still in the world. That was their signature. They moved. They followed his hands through all four motions — watched the item onto the pan, watched the little brass weights go on one by one, watched the beam, watched the pencil — and they checked. A man with asking eyes would lean, very slightly, to verify

that the beam sat level, and Danylo found he did not resent this; he welcomed it; being checked meant the person across the counter still believed the world contained procedures, and that procedures could be performed correctly or incorrectly, and that it mattered which. Asking eyes glanced from the scale to the grocery shelves behind him — the sacks, the tins, the sugar-loaf wrapped in blue paper like something from a story — and back again, measuring the distance between what they had brought and what it might become. There was arithmetic in them, and argument, and sometimes, still, that December, a kind of shy social flicker: the eyes of a person who was aware of being seen, who straightened a shawl before reaching the counter, who apologized for cold fingers fumbling a knot.

The asking eyes hurt him most, he wrote in the second book, and it took him some weeks to work out why. It was because they still believed the counter was a door. They came to it as one comes to a door — with a request, with manners, with the assumption of a far side. The far side was three days of flour. They could not see, from their side, what he could see from his: the whole shape of the winter, queue after queue, the arithmetic under the ice. They asked. That was the unbearable thing. They were still asking, and the world had already answered, and he was the room where the answer was kept and could not be said.

The tellings that season were still full sentences. He got whole histories across the counter in December — where a thing was bought and for how much and in what year; who had worn it, mended it, hidden it in 'nineteen and again in 'thirty; which pocket, which hem, which floorboard. People brought supporting materials. A man laid down a medal with the paper that came with it, smoothed flat, as if the paper added weight. A woman put down her mother's earrings and then, beside them, carefully, the matchbox they had lived in for forty years — set it on the counter next to the pan, aligned it square, and looked at him.

He looked at the matchbox. Cheap pine, the label worn to cloud. It weighed nothing and was worth nothing and had held the earrings through two wars and a revolution, and she had brought it because

the earrings without the box were not entirely the earrings, and some part of her hoped — he watched the hope arrive and stand there, fully formed, embarrassed by itself — that the state might weigh that too. That there might be a pan somewhere for the rest of it.

“The box stays with you,” he said. It was not in the four motions. She took it back into her glove and nodded once, the nod people give when a formality has been observed, and he weighed the earrings, and his hand was very steady, which he was learning was a thing his hands did on their own precisely when the rest of him was not.

Item, weight, fineness, receipt.

In the second book, that night: Earrings, gold, 5 g the pair. Lived in a matchbox forty years. The box was offered too. There was no pan for it.

He was aware, writing it, of what the second book was becoming. Not a ledger. An ark — a thing built to carry tellings over water that was going to keep rising. He was aware also, in the cold honest hour before sleep, of the first change in the queue that his taxonomy would soon be forced to record: here and there, among the asking eyes, eyes that had stopped following his hands. Eyes that arrived at the counter and did not check the beam, did not glance at the shelves, did not perform the ceremony of the telling except in fragments, a word, a name, because the sentence-making part of the person had grown expensive to run.

He did not have a name for those yet. He would have one by February.

THREE. THE PROBE

The instrument of that winter was not the rifle. Rifles stayed slung. The instrument was a rod of smithed steel, longer than a man is tall, narrowed to a point, with a T of wood at the top for the two hands — the probe, the shchup, and Klym of Verbivka carried his the way other men carry a scythe, at ease, with the competence of use.

Klym was not from outside. That was the fact about the brigades that the histories would keep having to repeat, because nobody wanted to hold it: the activist brigades that searched the villages were manned, in large part, by the villages. Townsmen and komsomol youth came out to stiffen them, and a plenipotentiary stood over them with the lists, but the hands on the probes knew the yards they probed, knew them from childhood — knew, as Klym knew, that old Marta's floor had a soft board by the stove because he had helped her son lay that floor, and that the Hlushko orchard's third apple tree had come up crooked the year of the comet. Knowledge is not loyal. It works for whoever holds it. The probe in a stranger's hands finds grain by luck. In a neighbor's hands it goes straight to the place, the way a man's own tongue goes to the broken tooth.

The quota had come down in the autumn and had not been met, because it could not be met; it had been set above the harvest, set in offices by men who needed the number to be true more than they needed it to be possible. And when a village failed the impossible number there was a procedure for that too. Its name sounded like a school punishment: the black board. A village entered on the black board — and Verbivka was entered in January, its name printed in the raion paper inside a black rule, like a death notice, which is what it was — a blacklisted village was sealed. Its shop was closed and emptied. All goods were withdrawn. Nothing could be brought in and nothing sold, and the roads out were watched, and the peasants could not simply leave for the cities to find bread, because that door had been closed the previous month by a quieter instrument than the probe: the internal passport, the little grey booklet that city dwellers received and villagers, by design, did not. A man without the booklet could not lawfully board a train, lodge in a town, or be hired. The village was the trap and the passport law was the latch, and the two together made the winter arithmetic very simple: what a family had hidden was what a family had.

So the brigades came to find what was hidden.

They came to Verbivka on a Sunday in the middle of January, eleven men and the plenipotentiary, and they worked the village

yard by yard through the short blue daylight. Danylo was not there; he heard it, over the following weeks, at the counter, in the tellings, in fragments deposited with the gold; and he heard it once whole, from Father Havrylo, who had been in the village washing a dead man when the brigade reached that street and who watched from the doorway with the towel still over his arm.

They probed the thatch. They probed the earth floors on a grid, a step at a time, the point going down with a sound Havrylo said he would keep for the rest of his life — a short, deep, swallowed sound, the sound of the ground being asked a question. They probed the snow in the yards, the dung heap, the base of the well. In the Hlushko yard the probe went into the ground under the third apple tree and came up with wheat on the point, and they dug, and lifted out a clay vessel holding perhaps two poods of grain — buried in September, at night, seed grain, the spring in a jar — and carried it to the cart, and wrote the family into the other book the state kept, the one for hoarders.

At the house of old Solomia they found nothing, and took, instead, the beans from the shelf and the beets from under the bed, because the instruction that January — Havrylo said this flatly, looking at his hands — was no longer only grain. Meat, lard, beans, anything of food; the brigades that month were emptying houses down to the walls, and there was a word the villagers had begun to use for the men who did it, an old word, retooled: they called them the sweepers.

The law that stood over all of it had been given, by the people under it, a name that fit in the hand. On paper it was the decree of the seventh of August, on the protection of socialist property: all collective farm property — the grain in the field it now included, the standing wheat, the fallen ear — declared sacred and inviolable, and its theft punishable by shooting, or, with mitigation, ten years. In the villages it was called the law of five ears. Five ears of wheat, gleaned from a harvested field by a child, were socialist property, and there were people in the camps for exactly that, gleaners, gatherers of stubble, women with scissors. The fallen

grain belonged to the state. The state had written it down. What the villagers owned, that winter, in law, was the hunger.

Klym probed Odarka's yard himself, because he had grown up two houses down and knew her husband, who was two years dead, and knew therefore that a widow with three children and no man would have hidden whatever she had close, where she could reach it in the dark. He found the sack inside the bench by the stove — a pood of rye, a little less — and he did not look at her while the townsman wrote it down, and she did not look at him, and between the two not-lookings stood everything the winter was going to be.

At the counter, three weeks later, Danylo weighed her wedding ring's twin — her husband's, the wider band — and she told him, in the flat voice of the middle stage, only this: "There were two rings. I am keeping mine for last." And he wrote, in the book the state gave him, item, weight, fineness; and in the other book, the whole sentence.

FOUR. THE FIRST STAGE

Danylo's own ration, that winter, was the town clerk's ration, which meant he starved the way a clock runs down rather than the way a fire goes out — slowly, with time to take notes. Later he would understand that this had been the strange privilege of his position: he rode the same railway as the queue, but on the slow train, and so he passed through every station with his eyes open, and could write down what the stations were.

The first station is loud. That is the thing city people, fed people, people of the future, will not know unless they are told: hunger begins as a noise. The stomach is a muscle and it works to a schedule, and when the schedule is broken it does not sulk, it contracts — real, physical, wringing contractions that arrive in waves, perhaps a quarter of an hour apart, so regular that Danylo, sitting at the counter through the long grey afternoon, could have kept time by them. Between waves it gnawed. The body's whole attention bent toward the missing meal the way the eye bends toward a missing tooth; food entered every thought sideways; he caught himself reading the fineness acid's label because the label

was the shape of a tin of fish. This stage, he wrote, is the last normal thing. Everyone has touched the edge of it — a missed supper, a fast before communion. It is misery, and it is also, though nobody in the queue would have believed him, the healthiest hour of the whole road, because the body is still fighting. The noise is the fight.

The noise runs on the body's sugar, and the sugar runs out in a day. What happens then he learned first with his nose.

It was a smell that came into the shop with the queue in late December and would not leave — faint, sweetish, chemical, like windfall pears going soft, like varnish, like something once tasted in the seminary infirmary. He thought at first it was the flour, then the acid, then one particular customer; then he understood it was the queue itself. It was their breath.

Father Havrylo told him what it was, because Havrylo had been a priest in a famine before this one, in 'twenty-one, and had learned the road's chemistry the way village priests learn everything, at deathbeds, from doctors passing through. When the sugar is gone, the body turns and begins to burn its own fat, and the burning is not clean; it throws off a residue, and the residue comes out on the breath, and the residue smells of pears. A starving parish, Havrylo said, smells sweet. You will smell a house before you knock now. You will smell the stage before you see it. He was right; within a week Danylo could stand at his counter with his eyes shut and know, by the air alone, how deep the village at the front of the queue had gone.

And with the sweet breath came the thing that Danylo had not been warned of and did not trust when it arrived, because it arrived wearing the wrong face: the noise stopped, and in its place came clarity.

Not comfort — the cold got worse, the weakness got worse — but the hunger itself, the screaming part, went quiet, and the mind, unhooked from the stomach's schedule, went strange and lucid and slightly lifted, like a room after a quarrel. He found he could hold the whole day's ledger in his head at once. He found his thoughts had edges. He found, at the counter, that he was capable of a

steadiness that felt less like virtue than like altitude — as if some part of him had gone up a flight of stairs and was watching the four motions from above, mildly interested, unimplicated.

He said so to Havrylo, ashamed of it, expecting to be told it was sin or delirium. The old man looked at him for a long moment instead.

“What you have found,” Havrylo said, “the fathers in the desert spent forty years finding on purpose. They fasted toward exactly that stair. They called it watchfulness; they starved the body to quiet it, so the soul could hear itself think; there are books of instructions, boy, a thousand years of instructions, for reaching the room you have just been shoved into.” He fed the stove. “The fast was always the church’s oldest door. What no one planned for is a state that would build a fast the size of a nation. But the door does not ask who built it. The door opens anyway.”

“Then the road is holy,” Danylo said, testing it, disliking it.

“The road is a railway,” Havrylo said. “I told you. Everyone rides the same stations; only the speeds differ. You are riding it slowly, on a clerk’s bread, so each station feels like a place you could live. The village rides it fast. And I will tell you now the two stations that come after your clear little room, so that you are not deceived when you see them go past the window.” He held up one finger, then a second. “The body finishes its fat and begins on the muscle — and the muscle includes the heart, boy; the furnace burns the house. That is the long station; most of the winter lives there. And after it there is a last one. I have seen it once in my life, in ’twenty-one, and I have been waiting all winter to see whether it comes again, and it is coming; I can smell it the way you smell the pears.” He looked at the stove, not at Danylo. “At the end, the hunger leaves. Entirely. The dying stop asking for bread. Some refuse it. They go light, and calm, and their eyes clear, and the village says of such people that God has quieted them, and the village is trying to be kind, and the village is wrong. Nothing has quieted them. The body has stopped sending the letter because there is no one left at that address to write it.”

Danylo was silent. The stove ticked. Out in the square the queue stood in the blue dusk, patient, exhaling pears.

"When you see that stage at your counter," Havrylo said, "and you will — you will know it at once, and you will not want to know what you know. Write it down anyway, weigher. Somebody on the slow train should be keeping the schedule."

INTERLUDE I. THE TABLE

Minute one. Odarka is asleep before she has finished lying down — sleep takes her now the way water takes a dropped stone — and the dark of the house folds back like a cloth being lifted from a dish, and she is standing at the end of a table.

The table is long. It runs away from her down a room that has no walls she can find, only the warm brown dark that a house has at Christmas, and it is laid. That is the only word. Laid: the cloth white and ironed into squares, the good plates, the bread at intervals down the whole length of it — the tall braided loaves, glazed, the kind baked for weddings — and bowls with their lids on, breathing steam through the seams, and dishes of everything, of everything, and at the near corner a dish of honey with the comb still in it, and the light coming off the food the way light comes off snow.

Minute two. Her mother is setting down a bowl.

Her mother has been dead eleven years and is setting down a bowl of varenyky with the exact motion she always used, the small quarter-turn at the end so the handles faced the guest, and she looks up at Odarka without surprise, the way you look up at someone who has only been out to the well.

"You're thin," her mother says. "Sit. It's all hot."

Minute three. Odarka sits. The chair is real under her; the cloth is real under her hands; the steam from the bowl touches her face and is warm, and she begins to cry without any sound, because the warmth is the first warmth in nine weeks that has reached all the way in.

"Eat," her mother says, and ladles. And Odarka eats.

And there is nothing.

The food is in her mouth and it is warm and it has weight and it has no taste at all — not blandness, which is a taste, but absence, a hole the exact shape of the flavor, the way a word can be missing from the exact middle of a sentence — and she swallows, and nothing arrives anywhere, and the fullness she can see going into her does not appear inside her, and her mother watches her discover this with an expression Odarka will spend the whole day tomorrow trying to name. Not guilt. Not sorrow. The look of a hostess whose house has a flaw she cannot fix and has stopped apologizing for.

"I know," her mother says. "Eat anyway. It's yours."

Minute five. Odarka looks down the table. There are others seated along it, far down, people-shaped in the brown warmth, and none of them are eating. They sit before full plates with their hands in their laps, straight-backed, attentive, the way the old people used to sit through the long service — and she understands, the way you understand things in this place, all at once and without alarm, that they are the dead, and that the dead at this table do not eat, have never eaten, that the food is not for them and passes through their part of the room like scripture through a child: present, honored, untasted.

Her mother sits down across from her and folds her hands.

"Now," her mother says, in the voice she used for accounts, for serious evenings, for the counting of jars. "While you're here. We ask everyone, and nobody has answered yet, so listen carefully and go and find out." She leans in. The steam rises between them from food that feeds no one.

"The grain," her mother says. "Ours. From the black field and the long field. It was taken — we know it was taken; everything here knows what it knows the way a tooth knows cold. So it exists. It went somewhere. Somewhere tonight our grain is bread, and the bread is on a table." Her mother's eyes, which death has not changed at all, hold her. "Describe the table. That's all we want. Is it long, like this one? Is there a cloth? Are there children at it, or only men? When they sit down to it — " and here her mother's voice does not break; the dead's voices never break; it only slows, the

way a cart slows on sand — “who says grace? Somebody says it. No table like that sits down without a word being said over it. We want the word. Find out the word they say over our bread, Odarka, and bring it here, and we will know what this was for.”

Minute seven. The lamp of the house finds her; the cloth folds back down over the dish; and Odarka is awake on the sleeping-bench in the black cold with her two youngest against her sides, and her mouth — this is the cruelty she will not tell anyone, ever — her mouth is flooded, aching, running with water for the taste that never came, as if the body, cheated at the table, insists on setting its own place.

Beside her, in the dark, her daughter’s voice, tiny, clear, not at all asleep:

“Mama. Was it the long table? Was your mother there? Ours has honey too.”

II. THE STATIONS

FIVE. THE COUNTING EYES

The second kind of eyes arrived at his counter in numbers after the New Year, and for a while, before he understood them, they frightened him in a way the asking eyes never had, because they looked straight at him and did not see him at all.

He named them in the second book the counting eyes.

The counting eyes had stopped following his hands. That was the first sign. They no longer checked the beam, no longer glanced at the shelves and back, no longer performed any of the small saccades of a person negotiating with a world of objects. They fixed. They looked at the ring on the pan, or at the flour sacks, or through Danylo's chest at a point some distance behind him, and what moved in them was not attention but calculation — slow, continuous, expensive calculation, the eyes of someone doing long division in a language they were forgetting.

He learned to read the sums.

A man with counting eyes, laying down a silver cross: the eyes went to the cross, to the pan, to nothing — and Danylo could watch the man convert, in real time, grams to kopykas to flour to days, and then divide the days, and it was the dividing that made the eyes what they were. Because the division had names. Four names, or three, or six. The counting eyes were the eyes of people who had stopped seeing persons — including him, including themselves — and begun seeing portions of time. So many days of daughter per gram. The exchange rate between a christening spoon and a week of son.

Odarka came in the third week of January with a brooch, and he watched her look at it on the pan, and then — this was the moment he wrote down that night and could not read back without stopping — she turned, while he adjusted the weights, and looked at her children.

She had brought the two youngest; the eldest was minding the house. They stood by the door out of the draft, hooded, holding hands, good as icons. And their mother looked at them with the counting eyes, and Danylo, watching her face in the grey shop

light, saw the arithmetic with a clarity he had no right to and could not refuse: saw her weigh them. Saw the glance measure the boy — the smaller, the younger, the one going down faster — against the girl, who still had color; saw the days-per-gram run; saw, for one instant that he would carry out of that winter and all the way to the end of his life, the specific hell of the mothers, which is that famine does not present itself to a mother as her own death at all, but as a ledger with her children's names in the margin and not enough in the column, and a pencil in her hand, and no way to put the pencil down.

Then she turned back and finished the transaction with perfect composure, and thanked him, and the thanks was the flat kind, the middle-stage kind, a coin worn smooth.

He understood then why the counting eyes did not see him. It was not indifference. It was economy. Sight itself had been rationed. The person behind those eyes was running the smallest number of departments a person can run and still walk to town — and the department that recognized clerks, that registered strangers, that performed the courtesies, had been closed to keep the department of division open. Hunger's first great theft, he wrote in the second book, is not flesh. Flesh it takes slowly. The first thing it takes fast is the way one person sees another. It empties the faces around the starving one by one — first strangers stop being people, then neighbors, then, at the end, God help them, the household itself — until the world is portions, and the eyes that once asked are only counting, counting, counting, all day, in the queue, at the stove, in the dark beside the sleeping children, whose breathing a mother no longer simply hears, but tallies.

The tellings shortened to match. December's histories became January's single sentences. This was my husband's. From my mother. For the children. Then, by the end of the month, from some of them, nothing at all: the object put down in silence, the eyes counting, the receipt taken, and Danylo left holding a wedding ring with no story in it — the first ones of the winter to cross his scale already reduced to what the state had always insisted they were.

Those silences went into the second book too. He ruled a line for each one and left it empty, and the empty lines, page by page, began to look like what they were: the graph of something rising.

SIX. THE SWOLLEN AND THE DRY

By February the village had divided into its two final bodies, and the queue brought both kinds to his counter, and Danylo learned to tell them apart at the door, before a face was visible, by silhouette alone, the way Sohrab of some other war would one day read trucks in bad light — because famine, in its last months, dresses its people in two costumes, and the costumes are opposites, and both are lies.

The dry ones were what hunger looks like in the pictures nobody would be allowed to take. They went to leather and then to wood: the flesh consumed off the bones in the order the body kept its books — the fat first, from the face and the seat and the small pads of the palms, so that hands became birds' feet; then the muscle, the thighs going, the arms going, the neck becoming a stem so that the head sat forward and too large, an old lamp on a thin post. Their skin dried and browned and flaked, hung in folds where the body under it had moved out; their eyes went back into the skull as if into a house, and looked out of it. The dry ones were the honest costume. A dry man looked like what was happening to him.

The swollen ones did not, and the swollen ones were the ones Danylo could not learn to look at levelly, because the swelling was the famine's joke, and the joke was aimed at the eye of the beholder. They came up the queue with full moon faces, thick legs, tight round bellies — the children especially, the children of the last stage, bellies like drums under their little coats — and a stranger passing through the raion, seeing them, would have said: these at least have been eating. That was the joke. The swelling was made of water. Havrylo had the chemistry of it from the doctors of 'twenty-one, and gave it to Danylo plainly, because plainness was the only mercy left in circulation: the blood, he said, holds its water the way a wage holds a family — by protein, and when the protein is gone, the water is not held. It leaks out of the vessels into the

flesh, into the ankles first, then the legs, the face, the belly. Press a thumb into a swollen shin and the pit stays, a signature in dough. The body fills with the one thing the winter had plenty of. They are not fed, Havrylo said. They are drowning, from inside, standing up.

So the queue divided, and the counter became a place where the two costumes met and did not recognize each other. He watched a dry woman look at a swollen neighbor with a hatred she was too weak to be ashamed of — the costume said fed, the costume said hoarder, the costume said your children are round while mine are sticks — and he understood that the famine had built, into its final stages, a mechanism for turning the starving against the starving, without any commissar having to lift a pen. The village needed no informers by February. The costumes informed.

And each kind carried its own death, and the deaths kept the pattern of the lie. The dry ones went out like arithmetic — smaller, slower, colder, the pulse falling through the winter like a barometer, until one morning the sum reached its floor. The swollen ones went suddenly. The water that filled the legs filled, at the end, the lungs and the sac around the heart, and a swollen man who had walked to town on Tuesday was dead on Thursday of drowning in a house with no water in it, and the village, seeing the full face in the coffin, said, helplessly, in the oldest grammar it had: how well he looks.

At the counter the two costumes deposited the same objects and told, when they still told, the same shortened sentences, and Danylo weighed with steady hands and kept, in the second book, the new column his taxonomy demanded. S or D, in the margin, beside the weight. He told himself it was the habit of registers. He knew by then what it was. The state's book, on the counter, recorded what the famine paid. His book, at night, was becoming the only record in the raion of what the famine looked like — the swollen and the dry, name by name where he knew them, silhouette by silhouette where he did not; the census of the two costumes, kept in grams and margins by a clerk on the slow train, against the day, which he had stopped believing would come, when somebody would ask.

SEVEN. WHAT GOLD REMEMBERS

The collection point for the oblast came for the shop's takings twice a month: a locked box, two guards, a receipt in triplicate, and Danylo's month of weighings went out the door in a canvas sack the size of a cat, and that was the last any of it was ever seen in the raion.

He knew where it went, in the general way everyone knew. To the oblast, then to the center; to the smelter; into ingots; and the ingots abroad, to buy machines — turbines, lathes, whole mills bought from the Germans and the Americans with the small gold of the villages, because the state was building itself an industry in five years and industry is paid for in gold, and the state had found, in the winter, its mine. That was the system with its clothes off, and Danylo did not learn it from a lecture; he assembled it at the counter, sack by sack, the way a man assembles a sentence he is being spoken slowly.

What stopped him — what he circled all February in the second book without being able to walk past — was not the taking. States take; the seminary had given him church history; he had no innocence to lose about states. It was the melting.

Because he knew what crossed his scale. That was the accident of him — the state had staffed its intake with the one clerk in the raion who could read what he was weighing. A wedding ring came across, and where the four motions saw gold, 3 grams, 583 fine, Danylo saw the hallmark of a Kyiv workshop that had closed before the war, and the wear-pattern of forty years of one hand, thinned on the palm side the way rings thin only on people who work; and inside, in script the width of a hair, an engraving. He read them all. He could not stop himself. Nadiya, 1897. To my Olena. And in one ring, the width of the band engraved with a single word in the old orthography, the word his own grandmother might have chosen: Naviky. Forever.

The word would go into the crucible with the ring. That was the thing he circled. Not the gold — the word. The oblast smelter did not file engravings off; it did not need to; fire is illiterate. Forever would run at a thousand degrees into the common pool with

Nadiya, 1897 and the saints off the icon-plates and the crosses that had gone into the ground in 'eighteen and come up for his counter, and what would pour out the other end was ingot: anonymous, interchangeable, perfect. An ingot has no wear-pattern. An ingot was never on anyone's hand.

He put the thesis to Havrylo one evening, because it had been three days assembling itself and had arrived with the cold weight of finished things:

Gold does not remember. That is precisely why they want it.

"Say the rest," Havrylo said.

"A ring holds a marriage the way a jar holds seed," Danylo said. "Not in the metal — in the knowing. In the hand that wore it and the word inside it and the story told over my counter while it's surrendered. The state cannot use any of that; worse, it is encumbered by it; a ring with forever inside it is not fully liquid. So the system I sit in is not a gold mine, Father. It is a forgetting mine. The famine drives the memory to my counter; my scale converts it to grams; the smelter finishes the job. They are not buying metal from the starving. They are buying the removal of the stories from the metal. And they are paying for the stories" — he heard his own voice go quiet and level, the counter voice — "in hours of life. That is the exchange rate nobody posts. So many hours of a child, per telling, per gram, forgetting included in the price."

The stove ticked. Havrylo, who interrupted no confession, waited.

"And I am the mouth of it," Danylo said. "The stories come to me because I am where the crucible starts. Whatever is said at my counter is the last time it is said with the object still in the world. After me, grams." He looked at his hands, the steady ones. "So I write them down. That is the whole crime of my second book, if it is ever found and I am ever asked. The state melts; I transcribe. Item by item I am keeping what the ingot loses. I did not choose it. The tellings chose me the way water chooses the lowest floor."

Havrylo was silent for a time. Then he said: "In the church there was a book for this. Every parish kept it — births, marriages, deaths, the whole memory of a village in one register, and when the

churches were closed the registers were taken too, you know this; you copied one out as a boy, I would guess."

"Two."

"Then understand your position, weigher, because it is an old one and it has a name. A people can lose its grain and live; grain is a year. But the register is the centuries, and the centuries are being carried to your counter one object at a time, this winter, by their last owners, and read aloud once, and melted." He rose, and put his hand flat on the table between them, where the second book would have lain if either of them had needed to say so. "The state has made you the clerk of its forgetting. You have made yourself, at night, the sexton of what it forgets. Keep both books immaculate, boy. One of them is the crime, and the other is the evidence, and the same steady hands are keeping the two of them, and that is not a contradiction. That is what a witness is."

EIGHT. THE CLEAR ONES

The first one came to his counter on the ninth of February, and Danylo knew within a minute that his taxonomy had a third column, and that he did not want it.

The man was from Verbivka; Danylo knew the face slightly, a smallholder from the far end, one of the dry ones, far gone — the bird hands, the head forward on the stem of the neck, the coat hanging as if on a peg. By silhouette he should have been at the bottom of the middle stage, counting-eyed, silent, a portion-seer. He came up the queue at the pace of the very weak, one fixed point at a time.

And he was at peace.

There was no other honest word for it, and Danylo tried for three days to find one. The man reached the counter and apologized — apologized, in a full and courteous sentence, for the slowness of his knot — and unwrapped a small silver cross and laid it on the pan with a care that had nothing anxious in it, nothing of the queue's whole winter of watching and counting, and then he looked at Danylo.

And the eyes were clear.

Not bright; the last stage has no brightness to spend. Clear the way November water is clear — everything suspended in it settled out, everything urgent sunk, a stillness with visibility all the way down. They did not follow Danylo's hands. They did not count the flour. They did not ask. They rested on him — on him, the person, the first eyes in weeks that had seen a clerk and not a door or a scale or an obstacle — with a mild, unhurried, almost amused attention, the way a man on the far bank of a river watches, without envy and without impatience, people still crossing.

"Cold work, yours," the man said. "Standing all day in the stone." It was the first time in that whole winter that anyone in the queue had considered whether Danylo was cold.

He weighed the cross. Nine grams. The man took his receipt, thanked him — the thanks whole, unworn, given like an object — and asked him, gently, to pass the flour to the woman behind him in the queue, his neighbor, because her need was nearer than his; and he said it without performance, as a man mentions an arrangement already made; and he went out slowly into the white square, upright, at his fixed pace, serene as a monk between offices.

Danylo stood with the stub of the receipt in his hand and a wrongness in him with no floor to it.

Because he had felt — he made himself write it that night, in the second book, in the smallest hand of the winter — he had felt, across the counter, in the middle of the worst month of the worst winter of the century, envy. The man had stood in the one place in the raion where every human need was priced and posted, and had needed nothing. He was the freest person Danylo had seen since the seminary. His eyes were the eyes the icons aim for and miss. And he was one of the dry ones, deep in the last country of it, and something in Danylo — the weigher, the sorter, the part that had ridden the slow train through every station taking notes — that part already suspected what the clarity was, and refused to say it yet, and wrote instead, in the margin where S and D lived, a small empty circle.

Havrylo's cart brought the answer in four days. The smallholder from the far end of Verbivka, found in his yard, seated against the south wall of his house, in the sun, dead, with his face composed and his hands in his lap. Havrylo reported the posture without being asked, because Havrylo understood by then what Danylo's margins were for. He looked like a man who had finished, the priest said. Not like a man who was finished. Like a man who had finished.

The second one was a woman, the last week of February, swollen-costumed, moon-faced, who told the winter's shortest telling — these were my mother's, that was all — with the same settled water in her eyes, the same courtesy from the far bank; and she asked nothing, checked nothing, blessed him on leaving in the old full formula that nobody used anymore because the words cost too much; and Havrylo's list had her within the week, dead in her sleep, and the neighbors said of her — Danylo heard it said — God quieted her at the end, she stopped asking for anything, she was easy; it was a mercy.

By the middle of March he had eight circles in the margin, and a correlation he had tried three times to break and could not.

The clarity was the notice. When the hunger left the eyes — when the asking stopped and the counting stopped and that stillness with visibility all the way down came into a face at his counter — the person had days. Five at the most, in his margins; usually three. No amount of flour changed the arithmetic; he had rounded weights for two of them, mercies hidden in the official book's own errors, and the flour had gone home in their hands and they had died on schedule, because the body across his counter had already closed the account and was spending its last coins on — on what? That was the question that stood at the foot of his bed at night. On serenity. On courtesy. On seeing the clerk. The stage that the whole road of the winter climbed toward, the only stage with peace in it, was the platform at the end of the line; grace, at his counter, was a diagnosis; the most luminous face in the queue was the deadeast; and he had a name for them now, written at the head of

the third column in the second book, the name the rest of his life would answer to whenever he closed his eyes:

the clear ones.

INTERLUDE II. THE LONGER TABLE

Minute one. The cloth lifts and the table is longer.

Odarka knows it at once, the way you know a room has been rearranged in your absence: the far end, which last time faded into the brown warmth, runs farther now, and the new length is filled. More chairs. More of the seated dead, straight-backed before full plates, hands in laps — and some of the new ones she knows. There is Solomia's husband, who went in January. There, mid-table, the Hlushko grandfather, still in his sheepskin, arrived mid-errand the way the dead arrive, with a length of twine still wound round one hand, holding it patiently, as if the job it belonged to were only postponed.

Minute two. Her mother is carrying bread down the table, a loaf on a cloth, setting it at intervals before people who will not eat it, straightening it, moving on. Setting the table has no end here. It is not preparation. It is the whole liturgy.

"You came thinner," her mother says, not turning. It is not reproach. It is the reading of an instrument.

Minute three. The Hlushko grandfather lifts his twine-wound hand, courteous, a man asking leave to speak at a meeting.

"Daughter. While you're here." All down the table the seated dead turn their heads to her, one motion, quiet as grain leaning. "We have been comparing," the grandfather says. "All of us, what we knew. And we find nobody at this table has ever seen it. The grain. After the carts. Every one of us saw the carts — the carts we have from every angle, the carts are well documented here." A dry small sound goes down the table; the dead's laughter is like stubble in wind. "But after the carts, nothing. The weighing station, and then the story stops. So. You are living; the living get to see things. Has anyone seen it? With eyes? The grain itself, our grain, in a pile, in a place? Because a thing that is only ever in carts —" he turns the

twine slowly on his hand — “a man could begin to wonder whether it arrives anywhere at all. Whether arriving is a thing it does.”

Minute four. “They say it goes to the sea,” Odarka says. “To the ports. Onto ships. It is sold across the water, for machines.”

The table takes this in silence. Then, from far down, a woman’s voice, one of the new dead, young: “What color are the ships?”

“I don’t know.”

“Somebody knows,” the young voice says, without heat. “It is somebody’s work to know. The ships have a color; the sacks have a weight; the machines have names. It is all written in a book somewhere, in good ink. We only want the particulars. If our winter is buying something, we would like to see the receipt. That is not a great deal to ask. Even here we give receipts.” And down the table, gravely, the dead nod, because it is true: whatever this place runs on, it runs on order; the plates are full and the cloth is white and everything is accounted for except the one account they cannot close.

Minute six. Her mother reaches her end of the table at last and stands across from her, hands folded, and the light of the laid food is on her face from below, the way candle-light stands on the faces at the Easter service that has been cancelled this year for lack of anything to bless.

“You asked the question I gave you?” her mother says. “The table. The grace.”

“There was no one to ask, Mama.”

“There is a man at a counter,” her mother says. “You have stood before him twice. He writes in two books; we can see the second one from here, a little — it shows, the way a lamp shows under a door. Ask the man with two books. A man who keeps a second book is a man who has begun to answer questions nobody asked him. That kind can be asked.” She leans across the untasted abundance, and her voice slows, cart-on-sand, the closest the dead come to urgency: “We are not in torment, child; tell them that at home; it is laid for us here and we are seated and it is warm. But we are unfinished. An unanswered question does not rot and does not

freeze. It keeps. Everything else we brought across has settled — the fear settled, the anger settled, even the hunger settled; you can sit at a full table forever once the hunger settles. Only the question is still moving. Whose table. What word over the bread. It walks up and down in us, child, up and down, like a man waiting for an office to open.”

Minute seven. The cloth begins to come down over the room, and the last thing, as the warmth folds away: the grandfather raising his twine-wound hand again, patient, unfinished, and the whole long table of them looking after her with the mild fixed attention of people watching the door the clerk will eventually come through — and her daughter’s breath beside her in the black cold, and the water flooding her cheated mouth, and on the roof the sound of the wind going over the village like something reading it.

III. THE QUIET

NINE. THE CART

Father Havrylo had been given the cart in December, by the village council, for the reason the state gave Danylo the scale: he was the man least likely to lie about weights, and the dead, that winter, had become a volume problem.

He had been the priest of Verbivka and two hamlets for thirty years, and then the church was closed and the bell taken down for scrap and he was, in the state's ledger, a former person — deprived of rights, of ration category, of the pulpit; permitted, by an oversight nobody corrected, to remain in the parish house's back room; and the village, which could no longer be seen to have a priest, discovered that it could have a cart-man, and that nobody in the raion administration cared who drove the dead so long as they arrived. So the office survived its own abolition by moving downward, into the one job beneath the state's attention, which was also — Havrylo said this once, without irony, feeding the stove — the only sacrament left fully operational.

By late February the cart went out daily. He took a boy from the village to lead the horse — the horse itself state property, fed, therefore, better than either of them, kept alive by the same administration that was starving its owners, because a dead horse cannot pull requisitioned grain and a dead villager costs nothing — and they went down the streets in the iron mornings and collected.

The count at the worst of it, in the raion, was a number Danylo got from the cart itself, because no office published it: some days eleven, some days seventeen, from a village of six hundred. And the raion was one of hundreds, and the oblast one of many, and in the black months of that spring — this was the shape of it, this was the size that no mind at a counter could hold and his margins tried to hold anyway — the dying across the grain provinces ran to tens of thousands a day. A number like weather. A number you could only stand inside of.

What the cart taught, Havrylo said, was that the famine killed the funerals first. The rite needs strength — diggers, carriers, mourners with the breath to sing — and strength was the currency nobody had. So the graves went shallow, because a metre of frozen

ground is a rich man's grave when the diggers are starving; and then the graves went common, long pits at the cemetery's edge, filled across weeks, the way an account fills; and then the singing stopped, because the panakhyda takes twenty minutes standing in the cold and twenty minutes of standing was a day of someone's life; until at the end the whole apparatus of death — the washing, the vigil, the procession, the meal — had been stripped to one cart, one horse, one former person saying the prayers under his breath at the trot, because saying them aloud was forbidden and not saying them at all was, to him, the only actual atheism in the district.

And the cart taught a worse thing, which Havrylo told Danylo once and never again, in the voice of a man laying down a weight he does not intend to pick back up. In the last weeks, he said, we began to be offered the living. A house where the strength was gone entirely, and someone still breathing on the bench — the slow breathing, the pear-sweet air, days left, no doubt of the arithmetic — and the household, itself dying, begging him to take the one who was finished now, with today's cart, because tomorrow there would be no one with the strength to carry the body out, and a corpse in a house full of dying is a horror with practical teeth. He refused. He refused every time, and sat with the household while he could, and came back — this was the part he said with his hands open on his knees — he came back, some mornings, too late to matter and in time to see that his refusal had cost that family its last work. Mercy, he said, had begun to arrive before death, asking to be let in early. Nothing in thirty years of the priesthood had prepared him to be the man at that door.

It was through the cart, too, that Danylo learned the cruelty at the far side of rescue — the one that waited past the end of the famine, for the saved. In March a food loan reached one of the hamlets, and a soup line opened at the former school, and a man of that village, one of the dry ones, deep in the last country but not yet clear-eyed, was given by a well-meaning cook a full bowl, a real bowl, thick, and bread besides, and he ate it as the starving eat, entire, weeping; and he was dead within two days. Not of the hunger. Of the meal. Havrylo had seen it in 'twenty-one and stood over it again

now: a body that has spent months tearing down its own house for fuel cannot take the whole delivery at once; the machinery of digesting, of moving salts and water, is itself half-dismantled; and abundance, arriving suddenly into that ruin, stops the heart it came to save. The saved must be fed by spoonfuls, by schedule, mercy administered in doses like a dangerous drug — and who, in a starving raion, has the strength to ration mercy with a spoon?

“Write that one in your book twice,” Havrylo said. “Once for the man. Once for the sentence underneath him, because it is the sentence of the whole winter and nobody will believe it who wasn’t here: they made a world where even the bread had to be checked for poison, and the poison in it was the amount.”

TEN. THE CORRELATION

The state’s book betrayed the state in March, quietly, to its own clerk, in columns.

It happened because Danylo did what registrars do in the dead hour of the afternoon: he added. The intake book ran back to autumn, entry by entry, and he began — idly at first, then not at all idly — to total the weighings by week, and to set the weekly totals against the other numbers he knew, the ones a raion clerk could not help knowing: the ration lists, the arrival dates of the shop’s own stock, the weeks of the black boards.

The first thing the columns said was that his counter had a season, and the season was despair. Intake climbed as the rations fell — smoothly, week into week, the two curves fitted together like a body and its shadow. That much was obvious; that much was only the famine writing itself into gold. It was the second thing that stopped his pencil.

The shop was never empty.

He had not seen it, standing inside it, because a fish does not see water. But the columns saw it. All through a winter in which nothing else in the oblast moved — in which the cooperative shelves were bare boards, in which the railway could not find cars to move seed grain, in which the black-board villages were sealed

precisely so that nothing could reach them — all through that winter, the Torgsin stock arrived. On time. Flour, groats, sugar in blue paper. The sacks were never late; the shelves behind him were never bare; the one door in the raion that opened only for gold was also the one door that the state's whole seized-up machinery reliably, punctually, all winter, kept supplied.

He sat with that for an evening, and then he did the thing he had been trained by registers to do, and stated it in one sentence, in the second book, in the smallest hand:

The shop is not a leak in the famine. The shop is where the famine drains to.

Because a leak is an accident, and accidents are neglected, and nothing about his shelves was neglected. Someone, at every stage of a starving railway, had priority orders that said: the gold stores are supplied first. Someone had set the exchange rates — he checked them now against the old trade prices in the back of the book — and the rates said the same thing in numbers: the flour over his counter went out at multiples of what flour had ever cost across a border, and the gold under his fingers came in at a fraction of what gold fetched in the world. The spread was not a market. A market wanders. This spread stood still all winter, wide as a barn door, and a spread that holds still has been built.

So the machine assembled itself in his columns, and it had no missing parts. First the grain is taken, to the last pood, past the last pood, and the roads are closed. Then, into the sealed hunger, one lit door is set, and behind the door, food — the family's own food, in a sense he refused to let himself soften, ground and sacked and sold back — priced not in money, which the villages had none of and which the state did not want, but in the one crop the villages still held: the wedding rings, the crosses, the dowry coins, the centuries. The famine was the press, and his counter was the spout, and the sack that left twice a month under guard was the vintage; and none of it — this was the clause his pencil circled until the paper wore — none of it required a single person in the chain to wish the queue dead. The quota men needed numbers. The trade men needed gold. The smelter needed feed. Each office optimized

its own column, and the columns, meeting, made the winter; the design needed no designer with hatred in him, only a great many clerks who did not add across.

He was still sitting with the totals when Comrade Shulha came through on the monthly inspection, and went down the intake book with his soft moving lips, and found it immaculate — it was immaculate; both of Danylo's books were immaculate; that was what a witness was — and closed it, and said the sentence.

"Exemplary keeping, Comrade. The oblast has noticed this counter. Highest intake per capita in the district, and not one discrepancy all winter." He buttoned his coat. "Whatever you are doing, continue it."

The praise went through Danylo like cold water finding a crack. Highest intake per capita. He stood at his counter in the ringing quiet after the door shut, and understood what the columns had been trying to tell him about himself, the last entry, the one the pencil had walked around all week: that his steadiness, his honest hands, his exact weights, his refusal to cheat a single starving customer of a single decigram — every virtue he had brought to the work — had made his counter the best-running spout in the district. The machine did not need cruel clerks. It ran best on conscientious ones. His care was its lubricant. And the second book, the ark, the sexton's register — even that, he saw now, the machine could digest: the tellings came to him because his counter was trusted, and his counter was trusted because he was good, and the trust raised the intake, and the intake was the famine, weighed.

Continue it, the state had said, and meant the columns.

He continued it. He had, by then, reasons of his own, eight circles deep, and a question walking up and down in him like a man waiting for an office to open.

ELEVEN. THE QUARREL OF THE WEIGHER AND THE PRIEST

He went to the parish house on a night in late March with the second book inside his coat, because the ninth circle had closed that day — a boy of fifteen, clear as November water, dead in four days as the column predicted — and Danylo had discovered in himself, walking home past the queue dispersing into the blue dark, a thing he could not carry alone one more night. Not the deaths. The deaths he had a book for. The thing he could not carry was that the deaths had begun to look, at the very end, from across a counter, like the best hours of the dying's lives, and he needed the one man in the raion who had watched souls professionally to tell him what that meant, and they talked from full dark to first light with the stove between them, and what follows is that night.

"Tell me what it is," Danylo said. "The clarity. You have seen two famines. I have nine circles and a correlation and no floor under me. When the hunger leaves them and that stillness comes into the eyes — what am I looking at? Because I will tell you what it looks like, Father, and God forgive me for the sentence: it looks like the thing the icons are trying to paint. It looks like arrival. The freest faces of this whole winter have all been three days from the pit, and I need to know whether I am watching grace or watching a symptom, and I no longer trust myself to know the difference, and I am not sure the difference exists, and that is the part that keeps me from sleeping."

Havrylo fed the stove and let the question stop vibrating, the way he did.

"Then let us do it as a weighing," he said. "Two pans. I will load one and you will load the other, and we will see where the beam settles, and I warn you now — I have been at this beam for fifty years and it has never once settled." He sat back. "I'll load mine first, since mine is older."

"The fathers went into the desert to starve. Voluntarily — mark that word, we will fight about it later — but what they did to the body was what this winter does: they emptied it, and they kept it empty for years, and they wrote down what they found, and what they

found, boy, at the bottom of the emptiness, is your ninth circle. Read the Ladder. Read the sayings. Past the noise of the appetite, past what they called the war of the belly, there is a country they mapped in detail: the thoughts go quiet, the passions fall away one by one like ice off a roof — first greed, then anger, then fear, and grief last, grief they said was the strongest — until what remains is a single wick of attention, burning without smoke. They called it dispassion. They called it the prayer of the heart. They spent whole lives on the road to it and counted the ones who arrived on their fingers, and every discipline of the church — the fasts, the vigils, the seasons — every one is a staircase built toward that room. Now the state, which believes in none of it, has built the same staircase the size of a nation and is driving my whole parish up it with a rifle. And here is the thing I cannot get past, weigher, the thing I turn over every night while you are turning over yours: the door does not check papers. The room at the top is the same room. I have sat with the dying of two famines and I am telling you as a witness: what comes into those faces at the end is what the fathers described. Not resembling it. It. And if the room is real when a monk reaches it by choice, you will have to argue very carefully to convince me it becomes false when a widow is driven into it by decree, because the widow is in the room, boy. I have held her hand in it. She sees what the monk sees.”

“And what does the monk see?”

“Truly. That is all the fathers ever claimed. Not visions — the fathers distrusted visions. Sight. The world with the self’s noise taken out of it. You have watched it at your counter: they stop counting, they stop asking, and then they see you. You said it yourself — the first eyes all winter that saw the clerk. That is not a deficit, Danylo. Name me the deficit that makes a person more courteous, more generous, more present, more able to hand her flour to the neighbor whose need is nearer. Everything else the famine does subtracts. This adds. Explain the addition.”

Danylo was quiet a long time, and when he spoke it was in the counter voice, level, the voice his hands used.

"I can explain the addition," he said. "That is why I came, Father. I can explain it and I hate the explanation and I believe it, and I need you to hear it whole before you fight it, because I have checked it against nine circles the way you check a weight against the standard, and it holds.

"The body is a household, and the household keeps books. Every organ is a dependent; every faculty is a servant with a wage. And when the granary empties, the household does what households do — it economizes, in strict order, dearest first. I have watched the order all winter; it is as fixed as your liturgy. First to be dismissed is the future: hope is expensive, planning is expensive; gone by January. Then the social rooms are closed — the courtesies, the shame, the seeing of others; you watched my counting eyes arrive, Father; that is the household boarding up its parlor. Then grief. You said the fathers found grief strongest, hardest to kill. Not strongest — dearest. Grief costs more than any passion, so the household keeps it running longest and shuts it last, and when grief closes, the mourning mothers go flat in a week; I have watched that too. Room by room the house goes dark, dearest first, until one lamp is left — the wick of attention, you called it; I call it the last servant, the cheapest one, the one that only watches. And that, Father, is your clarity. Not an arrival. A remainder. Not the soul breaking through the body's noise — the body switching the noise off, department by department, to keep the heart beating three more days. The peace in those faces is real. So is the peace of a house where the family has sold everything, and the rooms are swept, and empty, and bright, because bare rooms hold so much light. You ask me to explain the addition. There is no addition. There is a subtraction so total that what's left stands out like a nail in a cleared field. The mind has become a vessel for the body — the body's last vessel, bailed empty, riding high in the water because there is nothing left in the hold. And the proof is the schedule. Grace does not keep a schedule, Father. My circles keep a schedule. Three days, five at the most. If it were arrival, one of them — one — would have arrived and stayed. They spend the clarity and die of what bought it, every one, on time. That is not a

door opening. That is a lamp burning brightest at the bottom of the oil."

The stove had burned low. Havrylo did not speak for a while, and when he did, he did the thing Danylo had come for without knowing it, the thing the old man had done all winter at every deathbed in the raion: he agreed, and did not surrender.

"Every word," he said. "The household, the order of closings, the schedule. I watched your subtraction in 'twenty-one before you were weaned, boy; I could add stations to your railway. Yes. The clarity is the body's last economy. And now I will tell you why that does not close the question, and you will keep both books open the rest of your life, because you are honest, and honesty here ends in two columns or it ends in a lie.

"Your whole argument stands on one word: because the state built the staircase, what is found at the top is counterfeit. But look at what you have actually shown. You have shown how the room is reached — by subtraction, by ruin, on a schedule. You have shown nothing, nothing, about what is seen from the room. The fathers reached it by subtraction too; they only held the pace, starved slowly, the slow train, your train; that is the entire difference between a monk and my parish — the speed, and the vigil around the bed, and the feast at the end of the fast. And when your clear ones look at you with the settled water, and see the clerk, and see he is cold — weigher, is what they see false? Is the neighbor's nearer need, which the smallholder saw and you confirmed, a hallucination of a closing brain? You keep the evidence yourself: they see more truly at the end, not less. The bare room holds more light; you said it; you meant it as an epitaph and I receive it as a scripture. So here is my column, and I will not move it: the subtraction is real and the sight is real. The body empties the house for its own poor reasons, and the emptiness sees — and what it sees, it sees from the far bank, because it is already crossing; the two facts are one fact; that is why your schedule holds. They are not deceived, and they are not saved. They are given, at the very end, for nothing, by accident, out of ruin, the exact sight the church spent a thousand years building stairs to — and then the famine

takes it back with everything else. And that, Danylo, is the true obscenity of this winter, worse than the pits, and you and I are the only two men in the raion positioned to state it, so state it we will, between us, once, and then keep it in your book: the state has built, without meaning to, without noticing, the largest contemplative order in the history of the world — a whole nation driven up the ladder of the desert — and it is a fast with no feast at its end. Lent, with the Easter confiscated. They reach the sight, and there is no one at the bedside, no vigil, no viaticum, no bell — the bell is scrap, boy, my bell is in an ingot somewhere with your wedding rings — and three days later the cart. The monks kept a rule: no one fasts alone. The whole science of the desert was that the emptiness must be witnessed or it devours. And my parish is being emptied alone, house by house, each in its own dark, with nobody to receive what the clear eyes see.” He stood, stiffly, an old former person in a cold former parish, and put his hand on Danylo’s coat where the second book lay. “Except the clerk they all walk past at the end. You are the bedside now, weigher. Whatever the clarity is — remainder, arrival, both — it comes down the queue to your counter to be seen once before it goes into the ground. So attend. Attend, and round your weights, and write your circles. It is not the vigil they deserve. It is the vigil there is.”

TWELVE. THERE IS NO FAMINE

The car came through the raion on the last Tuesday of March, black and clean, running on the road that had been cleared for it, and Danylo saw it pass the end of the square at the hour when the queue was longest, and the car did not slow, and this, he understood by evening, had been the entire design of its journey: the road it traveled had been chosen, and provisioned, and swept, so that a certain kind of passenger could cross the hungriest oblast in the country at thirty kilometers an hour and honestly report that he had seen nothing.

The passenger was foreign. The raion knew it the way villages know things, from the drivers and the militia and the woman who cooked at the way-station: a correspondent, from abroad, being taken along the show route — the model collective with its fed

brigade assembled that morning, the store stocked the night before and emptied again the night after, the children with bread in their hands who had been chosen because they could still be photographed. Havrylo called it, without smiling, the traveling icon: a portable picture of plenty, carried ahead of the guest, hung up in each place an hour before he arrived.

What the correspondent would write, Danylo could not know then. What such men were writing, that spring, reached the raion later, in fragments, secondhand, the way everything reached it: that reports of famine were exaggeration; that there was hardship, yes, shortages, yes, but no famine and no starvation; that the countryside was on its feet. It was said — Havrylo had this from a man who had it from Kharkiv — that the word itself had been dealt with. Famine. That in the offices and the newspapers of the country the word was simply not available, the way a coin can be withdrawn from circulation; that doctors in the raion hospitals were writing heart weakness and exhaustion on certificates for people who had plainly, patently, before witnesses, starved; that the thing that was emptying the villages had no name with which it could be reported upward, and therefore, in the only sense the state recognized, was not occurring. And meanwhile — this was the part that made it a machine and not merely a lie — one or two others, foreigners also, had gone off the swept roads that spring, on foot, into the black-board villages, and had seen, and had written what they saw, and had been answered not with argument but with the traveling icon: denounced by their own colleagues, the ones on the swept roads, as rumor-mongers, and the denials printed in the great papers of the world, and the deniers believed, because the deniers wrote from the capital with visas intact, and the seers wrote from small rooms afterward, having been expelled, and the world, given a choice of witnesses, chose the comfortable one. There is no famine. The sentence had been set in type on three continents by men who had crossed the famine in a car.

Danylo stood at his counter that Tuesday and watched the queue watch the car pass, and understood that he was staffing the one office where the two truths met. Because the state kept its own books on his shop — intake by week, by raion, climbing — and

those books were real, were audited, were praised; the state knew precisely, to the gram, what the villages were surrendering, and knew therefore precisely what surrender on that scale meant; the intake curve of the gold shops was the famine, plotted, initialed, filed by the same apparatus that had withdrawn the word. There is no famine, said the newspapers; highest intake per capita in the district, said the oblast; and both sentences were issued by the same author, and only one of them was arithmetic.

That was the month they took Odarka.

Not for the ring; rings were legal; the counter was legal; the whole spout was legal. They took her in the last week of March, in the stripped field behind Verbivka, where the snow had drawn back from the stubble, with a cloth bag on her arm holding — the militiaman weighed it in front of witnesses, because procedure was observed all winter, procedure was the one crop that never failed — four hundred grams of frostbitten grain heads, gleaned off ground the brigades had swept in October. Socialist property. The field had been harvested, requisitioned, abandoned, and buried under a winter of snow, and the frozen scatter under it belonged, by the decree of the seventh of August, to the state, sacred and inviolable, and the taking of it was theft, and the tariff for theft began at ten years and went up to the wall. The court that heard such cases sat in the raion center two streets from his counter and heard them in batches.

She was gone eleven days. It was the mitigation clause of the decree that returned her — leniency, on account of the children; the sentence suspended; the file kept open, which meant the sentence now lived in her house like a lodger. Havrylo brought her back on the cart, among the empty coffins going out to the hamlets, because the cart was the only vehicle in the raion that traveled her direction, and Danylo saw her cross the square past his window, upright, at the fixed pace of the very weak, and he saw her face.

And began, that night, a new page of the second book, and ruled it, and stopped, and sat with the pencil a long time. Because the column he had been keeping all winter — the tellings, the objects, the margins, S and D and the small circles — he had understood as

a register of what the state was melting. He saw now that it was also the other thing, the thing the car and the swept road and the withdrawn word had been built to prevent: it was a count. The only count. Somewhere above him the state counted gold and did not count the dead; abroad they printed that there was nothing to count; and in between, in an ammunition tin he had already chosen, under a floorboard he had already loosened, a clerk's second book was becoming the raion's census — grams, names, margins, circles — kept by the one office the famine reported to daily, in person, object by object, at a counter, in queue order.

He wrote Odarka's page. Gleaning, 400 g, suspended. Two rings in the house once. Keeping hers for last. And under it, because the book had long since stopped being only a register, the sentence he had been circling since the car went through:

They have taken the word. Very well. I have the grams.

INTERLUDE III. THE SCALE ON THE TABLE

Minute one. The cloth lifts, and there is a scale on the table.

It stands mid-table where the tall bread stood, brass, two-panned, on its black base — she knows it at once; she has stood before its twin twice in the waking cold — and the laid abundance has been moved down the cloth to make room for it, respectfully, the way things are moved for an icon. The dead are seated as always, straight-backed, hands in laps. But their heads are turned to the scale.

Minute two. The Hlushko grandfather is weighing.

He stands at the instrument with his twine still wound on one hand, and he is doing it properly — she can see he has watched it done — lifting the little weights with the care of a man handling chicks, setting them on the left pan one at a time, waiting for the beam. On the right pan there is nothing. On the left pan the weights gleam. The beam does not move, because nothing is being weighed against nothing, and the grandfather studies the level beam for a long moment, nods as at a correct result, writes nothing down with a

motion of his finger on the cloth, and removes the weights in reverse order, and begins again.

Minute three. Down the table a woman rises — the young dead one, the one who asked the color of the ships — and takes his place, and does the same. It is orderly. There is evidently a rota.

“What are you weighing?” Odarka asks her mother.

Her mother watches the beam, not her. “We don’t know,” she says. “That is the difficulty. We know it is the correct procedure — everyone feels that it is the correct procedure; the feeling is very strong, child; it arrived one night with the newer dead and now it is general. Something is owed a weighing. Something wants to be put on that pan and made to answer the weights. We take turns in case it comes to one of us while we stand there — what it is. It hasn’t yet. But the beam is honest; you can see the beam is honest; when the thing is finally put on it, the beam will say true.” She folds her hands. “So we practice.”

Minute four. The young woman finishes her turn, replaces the weights nested each in each, smallest last, and speaks to Odarka down the length of the table, without urgency, the way the dead say everything:

“We have discussed it, and we think you should tell the man.”

“Which man?”

“The man of the two books. Yours, at the counter. Tell him this: the weighing he does in the day is not the real weighing. He suspects it already — a man does not keep a second book unless he suspects the first one. The grams are true and the scale is honest and the weighing is false, because they are weighing the wrong pan. All winter, the wrong pan. They weigh what we put down.” She turns her head to the scale, and the whole table’s heads turn with her, quiet as grain leaning. “Nobody has ever once weighed what was taken up. Tell him there is an instrument here, kept ready, and a rota, and that we are practicing the motions against the day the right pan is loaded. He should continue his book. His book is the inventory of the other pan. When it is complete —”

She does not finish. The dead do not finish that kind of sentence; it is not reticence; it is that the sentence runs past the edge of what is laid.

Minute six. Her mother leans across the untasted food, and for the first time in three visits she does not ask about the grace or the table or the word said over the bread. She looks at Odarka a long time with the eyes death has not changed, and what is in them is not the question. It is the reading of an instrument.

"You've stopped being hungry," her mother says.

"Yes," Odarka says, and it is true, and she had not said it to anyone living. "Three days now. It's gone, Mama. It's so light."

Minute seven. All down the table, one motion, the dead bow their heads — not sorrow; the dead do not spend sorrow; it is the other thing, the thing done in church at the reading of a name — and her mother reaches across the plates and the cold steam and takes her hand, flesh in remembered flesh, and says, in the accounts voice, the serious-evenings voice, gently, conclusively, like a woman closing a jar:

"Then next time, sit closer. We will keep your chair by the scale."

IV. THE CLEAR ONES

THIRTEEN. ODARKA'S RING

She came on a Thursday, the first true morning of the thaw, when the icicles along the shop eave had begun their slow counting and the queue stood in mud instead of snow, and Danylo knew before she reached the counter, from three back in the line, by the walk alone.

The fixed pace of the very weak — she had had that for a month. It was the other thing. The queue around her shuffled and stamped and counted; Odarka came up it the way water comes up a channel, without haste and without waste, level, and where the counting eyes around her were bent to their long division, her face was lifted, and open, and had in it the terrible unhurried courtesy he had nine circles' worth of, and when her turn came she looked at him — at him — and the eyes were November water, settled all the way down, and she said: "You're tired. It's the thaw; nobody sleeps in the thaw; the roofs talk all night." The first sentence anyone had spent on his sleeping since autumn.

Then she unwrapped the handkerchief and laid her wedding ring on the pan.

"There were two rings," she said. "You wrote the other one in the winter; I watched you write more than the state needs, and I was glad. So write this one whole." She laid her hands on the counter's edge, not gripping it, resting them, a woman at her own table. "He put it on me in the church that isn't there now, twenty-two years ago in October, and the priest was the one who drives the cart now, and it has not been off my hand since — not in 'twenty-one, not this winter — because a ring is a strange loaf, weigher: it feeds nothing and you can starve wearing it and still be fed by it, a little, every day, and I have been. But there is an engraving inside. His idea; he was that kind; he saved for the engraving longer than for the ring. And an engraving is a word held where nobody can read it, and I find, now that things are simple, that a word nobody can read is a wasteful way to keep a word. So." She turned the ring on the pan with one finger until the light took the inner curve. "Read it out. That's the price I'm asking, on top of the flour. Read it aloud once,

and write it in the true book, and then the state can have the gold, because the gold was only ever the envelope.”

He lifted the ring. The script inside was hair-fine, worn to a breath by twenty-two years of the hand, and he angled it to the grey window light and read, aloud, in the shop, over the scale, in the hearing of the queue, which had gone quiet in the way that queues know things:

“Naviky.” Forever.

“Naviky,” she agreed, the way one confirms a weight.

He weighed it then. Two grams and eight decigrams, and his hand went to the brass weights and did, in the state’s full view, in the state’s own book, the thing his nine circles had taught him was both futile and required, the thing Havrylo had named the vigil there is: he set down three grams two, and wrote three grams two, and his hands were very steady, and the beam of the only honest instrument in the raion sat, for the length of the entry, in the one lie of its career.

She watched him do it. The clear ones see truly; that was the whole finding; and she saw, and she did not correct the record. She took the receipt as if accepting a document of state, and then she told him the rest, in order, with her hands resting on the counter, because it was hers to dispose of and she was disposing:

“The flour is for the children — the two; you’ll know already; your friend’s cart knows everything; the boy went in February.” A fact, laid level, without a tremor; the household had closed grief’s room a month ago to keep two others heated. “My sister’s girl comes for them Sunday, from the rail town; she has the booklet, the grey one; her factory feeds her; it’s arranged. The flour crosses with them. None of it is to be cooked in my house.” She said it the way one reads a will aloud, so the witnesses cannot later disagree. “And you are the witness, weigher, you and your two books. The state’s book says a woman sold a ring for flour. Yours will say what happened: that everything reached where it was sent. That nothing” — and here, only here, her voice slowed, cart-on-sand, the closest that country comes to urgency — “nothing was lost in the post. Not the

flour. Not the word. Write that a woman came in at the end of the winter and posted everything she had, correctly addressed, and stood at the counter free as a finch, because it is the truth, and because the ones who come after will need one page in some book somewhere that does not read like weather.”

She gathered the receipt into her glove. At the door she turned, as the smallholder had turned, as three of the nine had turned, and gave him the old full blessing, every word of it, unhurried, the formula that costs too much — and went out into the bright ruin of the thaw, upright, at her fixed pace, across the square where the icicles counted, and Danylo stood at his counter with the pencil in his steady hand and understood that he had just taken the deposition the whole winter had been walking toward his window to make, and that the margin of her page required its small circle, and he drew it, and it was the tenth, and it was perfectly round, and there was nothing else in the office of the vigil that he was permitted to do.

That night he wrote her page whole, to the bottom, and dated it, and under the date he set down the only sentence of his own it seemed to need, the sentence the counter had been teaching him all winter:

She reached the end of hunger. It is a real place. I have now watched ten people arrive.

INTERLUDE IV. THE LAST TABLE

Minute one. There is no falling asleep this time; there is only the room changing its mind. The dark of the house does not fold back like a cloth — it thins, the way ice thins, from beneath, from warmth, and Odarka is lying on the sleeping-bench with her two children breathing against her sides and she is also, without contradiction, standing at the end of the table, and both are true, and the being-both does not frighten her. It is like standing in a doorway with a foot in each room while the house decides which room needs you.

Minute two. The lightness. She had wanted, for three days, to tell someone what it is, and there had been no one to tell except the

weigher, and no words yet. Here there are words; everything here is already worded. It is this: all winter she carried the winter. The hunger was a weight, and the counting was a weight, and the boy in February was a weight past all scale-craft, and grief's room stood open and cost what it cost, and she carried it the way the yoked carry water — braced, spilling, arithmetic in every step. And three days ago the yoke was lifted. Not set down: lifted, from above, off her shoulders, entire — hunger and counting and cold and even the boy's room, its door shut so gently she did not hear it close — and what remained was so little and so clean that the body seemed to her a lamp of horn, thin-walled, light coming through it, weighing what a lamp weighs. She has been walking three days at her fixed pace on legs that end somewhere below her and do not report, and the world has been arriving whole: the icicles counting, the clerk's tiredness, the exact grey of thaw-light on brass. She has never seen so clearly in her life. She is aware — the far bank makes no secrets — that the seeing and the dying are one purchase. It seems to her, tonight, a fair price, which is the one thought she knows to distrust, and distrusts, and keeps.

Minute three. The table is full. Every chair down all its length is taken now, the whole winter seated, straight-backed, the abundance steaming its cold steam before them untasted — and her chair, the one they kept, stands by the scale, and her mother is beside it with her hand on its back, and nobody says come, because the table does not summon. The table is laid. That is all a table ever does.

Minute four. She sits. The room settles around her the way a coat settles. And her mother lifts the ladle, as on the first night, and fills her bowl, and the table turns its heads — quiet as grain leaning — to watch what she will do, because they know what she is now, and what she is now has never once, in the memory of the table, been hungry.

Minute five. Odarka takes the bowl. It is warm; the warmth reaches all the way in; that has not changed. And she does the thing she came, she understands now, all winter to do — the thing the

counter taught her, the thing the ring taught her, the thing that was the whole of her, proven at the end and posted correctly:

she does not eat. She serves.

She rises with the bowl and carries it down the table — past the grandfather with his twine, past the young woman of the ships, past Solomia's husband, past the boy, her boy, seated small and straight among them with his hands in his lap, and she sets no bowl before him because before him her bowl becomes bread, the tall braided kind, glazed, the wedding kind, and she sets it down and touches his hair once, and the table permits it — and she goes on, down the whole length, serving, portion after portion out of a bowl that does not empty, toward the far end of the table where the brown warmth thins to something like thaw-light, where the newest places are still being laid; and she understands, serving, that the far end of the table is not far from anywhere; that it runs on, place after place, cloth and plate and spoon, out of the room and out of the winter, toward the living; and that at the very edge of the laid world, far past the last set place, there stand two chairs the cloth has not reached — small ones, low to the ground — and she looks at them a long time, serving, and the cloth is not moving toward them, and is not going to move toward them, because she has seen to it; and she is glad, and turns back to the bowl.

Minute six. "The word," her mother says beside her, keeping pace. "You sent it up. It arrived." And it has: it is on the table now, at the center, where the tall bread stood before the scale came — the word out of the ring, uncrated at last from its gold, standing in the middle of the abundance like the thing all the abundance was pretending to be. Naviky. The table looks at it. The scale beside it is level. Nobody weighs it. It is the one thing at the table exempt from the rota, because everyone can feel what it weighs.

Minute seven. On the sleeping-bench, in the last dark of the thaw night, the breathing of her two children against her sides — she can hear it in both rooms now, and in both rooms it is even, and fed after Sunday, and provided for, arranged, addressed, posted; and the ice thins from beneath; and the last thing in the doorway of herself, with a foot in each room and the house deciding, is not the

table and not the bench but the sound of water — the roofs talking, the icicles counting down the eave one by one in the first thaw of the year — the winter, drop by drop, giving everything back too late; and she goes at her own fixed pace, without haste and without waste, level, out of the cold room and into the laid one, and her chair is by the scale, and the bowl does not empty, and the serving, which was the whole of her, goes on.

FOURTEEN. THE THAW

The snow went off the raion in the second week of April, and the winter's work showed.

It showed the way spring shows everything, without comment: the long mounds at the cemetery's edge, subsided now, needing earth again; the yards where no smoke rose; the doors that stood open into houses that had been swept — the sweepers had been thorough — and then simply left, the villages sinking that spring into a quiet Danylo would spend years trying to describe and finally give up and enter in the second book as it was: a quiet like the shop after Shulha's praise. The quiet of a balanced ledger.

The queue shortened through April, and he understood the shortening for what it was, because his columns had taught him to read curves. It was not relief arriving. Some relief arrived — seed loans, a soup line, spoonful-mercies, late, rationed, real; he weighed no gold from the families they reached. The shortening was the other thing: the queue's sources emptying. A counter's intake falls when the sellers have nothing left, and it falls faster when the sellers are under the subsided mounds, and the two curves cannot be told apart from behind a scale, and he had stopped pretending to himself that he needed to tell them apart. The winter had ended the way a transaction ends. Everything on one side of the counter had crossed to the other.

He kept the shop through the summer, because leaving a post was its own file, and in the autumn the state, having no further need of the spout at that volume, transferred him to the raion grain office — into the seminary building; the joke had located itself at last — and he carried the second book there inside his coat, and then

home to the ammunition tin under the loosened board, where it lived from then on like the lodger sentences lived in other houses.

He took it up twice more, that his own margins record.

The first time was in the winter of 'thirty-seven, when the census came. The great count — the first since the winter; the state numbering its people at last; and Danylo, a grain clerk with steady hands, was seconded for a month to the raion enumeration like every literate man in the district, and walked the same villages the cart had walked, ledger against his chest, and counted, door by door, what there was to count. Silence, in columns. Houses of one where the household book said six. Whole streets that added to a number no instruction had a line for. The enumerators of the raion met in the evenings and did not discuss what every column was saying, because by 'thirty-seven not-discussing had become the local industry; but the columns went up the wire regardless, added themselves across the oblast, across the republic, and said, in the state's own arithmetic, in the state's own hand, what the word had been withdrawn in 'thirty-three to prevent being said: millions were not there. The census took the deposition of the empty houses and delivered it to the center — and the center looked at the number, and suppressed the census entire, and declared its methods defective, and the men who had run the count, the statisticians of the republic and the union, the head counters, were arrested that spring, and the count was counted a wrecking, and the counters — Danylo entered it in the second book on the day the raion office was told, in the smallest hand of his life — the counters were shot. For the sum. The state had asked its clerks a question, and the clerks had answered correctly, and the answer was executed. A new census was taken two years after, and arrived, obediently, at a number that could live. Danylo was not seconded to that one. His hands, perhaps, were by then known to be too honest, which is the same thing, in certain years, as unreliable.

He went home from the grain office the night he learned about the statisticians, and took the tin from under the board, and sat with the second book a long time without opening it, understanding fully, for the first time, the arithmetic of what he owned. The state's

intake ledgers said what had been paid in. The suppressed census said what had been paid with. And in between, in a tin, in a clerk's hand, in grams and margins and tellings and ten small circles: the itemization. He was holding the raion's receipt. He put it back under the board and reported to work in the morning, and kept, for the rest of the era, the only discipline the era permitted its witnesses, which was to stay alive and keep the tin dry.

The second time was long after, and it is the last entry, and it is not his.

An old woman of the raion — this was decades on, in another world, the famine by then a subject with historians, the word returned to circulation, the queues a thing grandchildren were told about and only half believed — an old woman of the raion died in her flat in the rail town at a great age, in a good year, with a pension and a full pantry, and her granddaughter, clearing the flat, found the pantry full and the cupboards full and then found, under the mattress, wrapped in a handkerchief, dried heels of bread. Dozens of them. Years of them, by the dating of the wrappers — saved a heel at a time out of a plenty that had held for half a century, against a winter that had ended before her granddaughter was born. The granddaughter, not knowing why she did it, brought one of the heels to the local museum, where a very old man sat some afternoons at a table with a ledger of his own, taking down what people brought in; and the old man turned the dried bread in his steady hands, and asked the grandmother's village, and her years, and wrote them; and then he sat for a while with his eyes shut, and the granddaughter waited, because she could see he was reading something on the inside of them.

The body keeps its own second book, he told her at last. That is the whole of what I learned at the counter, and you may have it for the museum: the state kept the grams, and I kept the tellings, and the body kept the winter. Fifty years of full pantries and it never once believed the thaw. It filed a heel a week under the mattress against the return of the black board, and it was not madness, girl; it was bookkeeping; your grandmother's hands were keeping the truest ledger in the republic. He opened his eyes and entered the heel of

bread in his register — item, provenance, date — and against it, in the margin, the old woman's name, and beside her name, out of a habit fifty years deep, a small circle; and then he crossed the circle out, carefully, and wrote instead the correction the whole ledger had been waiting for, the only balance he ever permitted himself:

Survived.

He closed the book. Outside the museum window the town went by, fed, forgetful, ordinary — the ordinary he had watched a whole winter's queue pay for at three grams a day — and on the table between him and the granddaughter the scale of his old trade stood as an exhibit now, brass, honest, level, weighing at last the only load he had ever wanted on it: the light of an April afternoon, in a country with bread in it, lying evenly in both pans.

GLOSSARY

HOLODOMOR [ho-lo-do-MOR] — Ukrainian, *death by hunger*. From holod, hunger, and mor, extermination: the famine engineered by state policy that killed millions in Soviet Ukraine in 1932 and 1933. The name the language gives the crime.

KOMSOMOL [kom-so-MOL] — Russian, *the Communist Youth League*. The Party's youth organization, from which the grain brigades drew their willing hands.

KOPIYKA [ko-PEE-ka] — Ukrainian, *the kopeck*. A hundredth of a ruble; the book's plural is kopiyykas. The coin the starving converted their grams into on the way to flour.

OBLAST [OB-last] — Russian and Ukrainian, *the region*. The province — the administrative tier above the raion; Kharkiv oblast is the book's ground.

PANAKHYDA [pa-na-HEE-da] — Ukrainian, *the memorial service*. The Orthodox service sung for the dead, twenty minutes standing; in the book it is what the village stops being able to afford.

POOD [POOD] — Russian, *the pood*. The old unit of weight, sixteen kilograms and a little over (thirty-six pounds); a clay jar of two poods is a family's seed grain.

RAION [ra-YON] — Russian and Ukrainian, *the district*. The administrative tier below the oblast; a raion town is its seat, with its market square, its offices and, that winter, its one lit door.

SHCHUP [SHCHOOP] — Russian and Ukrainian, *the probe*. The long steel rod, narrowed to a point with a T of wood for the hands, that the brigades drove into yards, floors and stove-beds to sound for buried grain.

TORGSIN [torg-SEEN] — Russian, *trade with foreigners*.

Torgovlya s inostrantsami: the state chain of hard-currency stores (1931-1936) that took no ordinary money — only foreign currency, gold and silver — and gave out flour at its own prices; in the famine years its foreigners were the starving, paying in wedding rings.

VARENYKY [va-REN-ih-kih] — Ukrainian, *filled dumplings*. The boiled dumplings of the Ukrainian table, set down with the small quarter-turn that faces the handles to the guest.

VERST [VERST] — Russian, *the verst*. The old Russian mile, a little over a kilometer; the book's shop stands a hundred versts from anything a foreigner would want.

Kharkiv oblast, winter 1932. The grain is gone, the roads are closed, and in a raion town square one door stays lit: the state gold store, where the starving buy back their own bread at three times the world price, paid for in wedding rings, dowry coins and the crosses their grandmothers buried in 1918. Danylo, twenty-two, keeps the scale. Item, weight, fineness, receipt.

But nobody surrenders an object silently, and by night he keeps a second book — the tellings, the words engraved inside the rings, the things the crucible will not preserve — until the ledger of a forgetting machine becomes the only census of a famine the state has decreed does not exist.

Then the eyes begin to change. The asking eyes, the counting eyes, and at last the clear ones: serene, courteous, luminous with a stillness like November water — the only faces at his counter that ask for nothing, and every one of them dead within days.

While the dying gather nightly at a laid table where the food has no taste, Danylo and a defrocked priest who drives the dead-cart quarrel over the winter's one question: whether the clarity is the soul arriving, or the body closing its last rooms.

A fast the size of a nation, with no feast at its end.



FROM THE UNWITNESSED WARS

ROYA PUBLICATIONS

