

ROYA
PUBLICATION
No. 64



خانه از آن ماست

THE HOUSE
IS
OURS

CHEW Z
A ROYA PUBLICATION

THE HOUSE IS OURS

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Chew Z

Printed in the Reach

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ISBN 979-8-952790-63-6

Roya Publications

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The Unheard House

Typeset in DejaVu Serif.

Printed in the Reach



For Forough Farrokhzad

1934–1967

*who buried something she would not live to see grow,
and told us plainly it was a garden,
and that the garden was dying,
and that we should look at it anyway.*

THE WALL

thirty-one months, half a mile round, made of the ground it stands on



It is a wall to keep us from being seen.

It is a wall to keep us where we are.

It is the same wall.

In October 1938 four boys came up the track from the town and threw stones, and one of them opened a nine-year-old's head above the ear, and he went on arguing with a girl about a game because he could not feel it. It took a woman running from the kitchen and turning his head with both hands for him to understand that anything had happened to him at all. The wall took thirty-one months. Half a mile round, mud brick, made in the yard from the ground under their feet and carried by everybody who could carry. It was never built to stop anybody coming in — a determined boy could get over it in four seconds, and one did, in 1943, and was fed. It was finished in May 1941, and there was no ceremony, because it did not finish; it simply stopped having gaps.

SYNOPSIS

Outside Tabriz, 1938. Homa is twenty-six, a teacher who believed in a country being cured by decree, and who signed her name to something she cannot take back. She comes to a bowl of ground eleven kilometres past the end of a road, where forty-one people live without a wall.

She is not ill. She will never be ill. She is one of the nineteen in twenty who cannot catch the thing that has been done to everybody around her, and she is the only person there whose body still tells her anything, and she stays for twenty-four years.

She watches them build the wall themselves, out of the ground they are standing on, because a boy was hit by a stone and did not know. She watches an akhound lose God over eleven graves in five weeks and go on saying the words anyway, exactly and beautifully, with nothing at the other end at all. She learns to laugh at things that would have appalled the woman who arrived.

And in the worst week of her life she goes out to the wall in the flat hour and does not come back for most of a day, and finds somewhere to go — and tells one dying girl how to get there, as a kindness, because she has nothing else in her hands.

By the following spring a hundred people are standing in a garden she has never been able to explain.

This is the account of how a place came to be, written by the one person in it who paid nothing, and it ends on the morning a young woman from Tehran sets up a camera and says whenever you are ready.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

There is a real film underneath this book and I want to name it plainly, because the debt is total and because the people in it were real.

Forough Farrokhzad went to a leprosy colony near Tabriz in 1962 and stayed twelve days, at a time when nobody touched those people and nobody looked at them and the official position of the civilised world was that they should be somewhere else. The film she made runs twenty-two minutes. She filmed them eating, praying, playing ball, marrying, having their beards trimmed and their wounds dressed. She filmed a classroom. And she came out with a child, whom she raised.

I first saw it as a teenager in Iran, on a copy of a copy, in a room where we were not supposed to be watching it, and what I felt was not admiration. I was frightened, and underneath the fright, which is harder to write down, I was disgusted. It took me most of my life to understand that this was the film working exactly as she intended, and that I had failed a test she had set on purpose.

This novella is not about her, and the colony in these pages is not the one she filmed, and Homa is not any woman who ever lived. The invention is deliberate and it is the point: real people are owed better than being made into somebody's horror story.

What I have tried to take from her instead is a method.

Her whole body of work runs on one idea, and she stated it more clearly than anybody before or since. Decay is real. Do not deny that it is real. And then look closely enough, and for long enough, and you may find that life is still occurring inside it — children learning, people combing their hair, a wedding, a game, somebody putting on makeup with hands that no longer work.

She never said the house was not black. She said do not look away while it is.

I have spent this book trying to earn that. The village in these

pages is a place where terrible things are true and ordinary happiness is also true, at the same time, in the same yard, and neither one cancels the other. I did not want a reader to arrive looking for villains and find them. I wanted a reader to arrive looking for villains and find a wedding.

One more thing, and it is the thing that made the book.

The illness at the centre of this story is not a rotting disease. That is folklore and it is wrong. It kills the nerve, and everything that follows — the ruined hands, the blindness, the shortened fingers — happens because a body stopped sending word and its owner could not be warned. It is a disease of not feeling.

Which means that the people we cannot bear to look at have, in one specific sense, less of a problem than we do. They are not interrupted. And every value I hold, and every value the world outside that wall claims to hold — look at what is in front of you, finish your own thought, stay in the room with somebody who is dying — costs a nerve that none of us can afford to give up.

That is not an argument I agree with. It is an argument I could not answer, and so I have given it to a woman called Ozra and let her make it, and I have not put anybody in the book who can defeat her.

Chew Z

CONTENTS

PART ONE — THE CAPTIVE

1 · The Water Tank	13
2 · The Register	15
3 · Feet	16
4 · The Glass	18
5 · What I Left	20
6 · Nineteen in Twenty	22

PART TWO — THE WALL

7 · A Stone From the Town	25
8 · The Man in the Hat	27
9 · The Rule About Feet	29
10 · Bahman's Nail	32
11 · The Wall Is Finished	34
12 · What Sarabi Said	36

PART THREE — REBELLION

13 · The Shah on a Boat	40
14 · The Consignment	41
15 · The Officer at the Gate	43
16 · Typhus	45
17 · Eleven	47
18 · The Rites	48

PART FOUR — ANOTHER BIRTH

19 · The Flat Hour	52
20 · The Fourth Night	55
21 · Teaching Golnaz	57
22 · Farideh	59
23 · What Grew Instead	62
24 · The Trade	64

PART FIVE — WHAT GREW

25 · Two Rooms	68
26 · Roqi's Hands	70
27 · Ashraf	72
28 · Where Her Mother Stood	74
29 · What We Heard	76
30 · Sohrab	78

PART SIX — THE BEGINNING OF THE COLD SEASON

31 · Good News	82
32 · What It Would Mean	84
33 · What Amanollah Proposed	86
34 · The Vote	88
35 · The Cold Season	90
36 · Whenever You Are Ready	93

PART ONE — THE CAPTIVE

1 • The Water Tank

*God, I have a question and it is not the one You are expecting.
I do not want to know why they are ill.
I want to know why the road stops
eleven kilometres short of them
and who decided that,
and whether You were consulted,
and whether You objected.*

The road was good for eleven kilometres and then it was not a road.

I remember being angry about that before I was anything else. Not frightened, not sorry — angry, in the specific way of a woman who has spent two days on trains and a morning in a cart and is being told by the surface under her that the last part of the journey is not considered worth the money. The metalling simply ended, mid-slope, without a barrier or a sign, the way a man stops talking when he has decided he has said enough.

After that it was graded dirt, and then track, and then two pale lines in the scrub.

The carter would not go the last half-mile. He put my case down in the road and would not take it further and would not look at me while he explained, and the explanation took some time and included his mother.

So I walked, and I came over the rise at four in the afternoon in September of 1938, and I saw the place I had chosen, from above, all at once.

There was no wall.

I want that recorded at the front of everything, because of what came after and because of what everybody outside believes. Nobody built a wall around us. In September of 1938 there was a shallow bowl of ground with a stream running through it, a line of poplars somebody had planted for the shade, an old brick water tank from the days when the road went somewhere, and thirty-one low houses with nothing at all between them and the world.

Forty-one people. I counted them within the week because I count things; it is the only discipline I have ever kept.

Nobody was waiting for me. That threw me more than a delegation would have. I had prepared myself to be received with gratitude and prepared myself to be received with suspicion, and had a short speech ready for each, and what I got was a hot empty yard, a dog that did not get up, and the sound of somebody sweeping out of sight.

I stood in it for four minutes with my case.

Then a woman came round the corner of the kitchen carrying a basin against her hip and stopped when she saw me, and looked at me for slightly too long, and said:

‘Che khabar?’ [che kha-BAR]

What news. The most ordinary greeting in the language. You say it to a neighbour. You say it to a man selling melons.

I said something polite and stupid — that my name was Homa, that I had come from Tabriz, that I had written ahead, that I was the teacher — and she listened to all of it with an expression I could not read at the time and can read perfectly now, and then she set the basin down with two hands, carefully, flat, releasing it as a separate action from the placing.

‘No,’ she said. ‘Che khabar. What news. From you. Today.’

‘I do not understand.’

‘You will,’ she said, and picked the basin back up, and went in.

I did not understand for eleven days. When I did understand it I had to go out past the poplars and sit down in the dirt.

Because what she had asked me — what everybody in that place asked everybody else, a hundred times a day, laughing, as a greeting — was whether anything had been reported to me. Whether any part of me had sent word. Whether the body I was walking around in had troubled itself, in the past twenty-four hours, to mention anything at all.

And the answer, which I heard four hundred times before I knew what it meant, is: *hich khabari nist*.

No news.

2 · The Register

*Did You give her the handwriting, God,
or did she teach herself?
Because it is very small and very upright
and it does not vary,
and I have watched her write the names of the dead in it
with the same care she uses for the living,
and I would like to know
which of You is the accountant.*

Ozra was twenty-six, which was my age, and this was the first thing anybody told me about her and the way they told it made it a warning.

She had come in the spring. She was already ill — not visibly, not then, but she had the flatness in the left hand that everybody there could read at a glance and that took me a year to see — and she had arrived with a bag, a Qur'an she did not appear to open, and an exercise book.

The exercise book is the thing.

She had begun it before she arrived. On the first page, in a hand so small and upright and regular that it looked printed, she had written the name of every person in that place, and the date they came, and the date somebody first looked at them properly.

Nobody had asked her to. There was no administration. There was a physician who came from the town when he could and a man in Tabriz who signed things, and beyond that we were a collection of people in a bowl of ground with no more organisation than a flock has.

I asked her, in my second week, why she was keeping it.

'Because nobody else is,' she said.

'Someone in the town —'

‘There is a card in an office with a number on it.’ She did not look up. ‘The number is how many. It is not who.’

I said that was a distinction without much practical consequence, or something equally clever, because I was twenty-six and had been a teacher in a city and had a great many opinions I had not yet been charged for.

Ozra put the pen down.

‘My father is in the ground behind the kitchen,’ she said. ‘There is no stone because there was no mason that year. If you go and look you will not find him. In eleven years nobody living will know which part of that ground he is in, and in forty nobody will know he was here at all, and the card in the office will say the number went down by one.’

She picked the pen up again.

‘This is not a distinction,’ she said. ‘This is the only argument I have.’

I have thought about that exchange perhaps once a month for twenty-four years.

I have thought about it because she was right and because she was twenty-six and because in the end the exercise book grew columns I could not have imagined that afternoon, and I helped rule them, and I have never once been able to draw a line between the woman who said *this is the only argument I have* and the woman who did what she did afterwards.

There is no line. That is what I have concluded. It was the same argument the whole way through.

3 · Feet

*They are sitting in the open at sundown
holding each other's bare feet.*

Men and women who are not married.

In front of the children.

Tell me the ruling, God.

Tell me quickly, before I say something,

*because I have already opened my mouth once today
and been wrong.*

On my third evening the bell went and everybody came out of their houses and sat down in pairs and took off their shoes, and I stood in the middle of the main path with my hands at my sides and thought: I have made a very serious mistake.

I need to set down what I actually saw, in the order I saw it, without the twenty-four years.

I saw a man of about fifty sitting on a low wall with a woman of about thirty in front of him on the step below, and she had her feet up in his lap, bare, and he was holding one of them in both hands with his face four inches from it.

I saw a boy of fourteen doing the same for a widow whose name I did not yet know.

I saw a young married couple who were not paired with each other. He was with an old man. She was with somebody's grandmother. Neither of them appeared to find this remarkable and neither did anybody else.

I saw perhaps forty people in the open air in the last of the light, touching each other's bodies, and talking the entire time about bread and arithmetic and somebody's brother in Ardabil.

I was a teacher from a girls' school in Tabriz. I had spent two years being told by a modern state exactly how a modern woman conducts herself, and eleven years before that being told by a husband, and my whole life before that by everybody else, and the two sets of instructions did not agree about very much but they agreed about this.

I said, out loud, to nobody: 'This is not decent.'

A woman two paces away, who I later learned was called Golnaz and who was nineteen and had been there since she was eleven, did not look up from the foot she was holding.

'No,' she agreed. 'It is not.'

And went on looking.

They call it *negāh* [ne-GAAH]. The plainest word in the language for it. A look. A glance. To have a look at. You would use it about a shop window.

The order never changes and I could do it now in my sleep. Feet first, always. Sole, heel, the sides, between each toe, the skin behind the ankle. Then the shoe is turned over and shaken out and a finger is run all the way round the inside seam, because it is not the stone in the shoe that kills a person, it is the stone that has been in the shoe since Tuesday. Then the hands: palm, back, the web between each finger, under every nail. Then the forearms. Then the face, with a small mirror if both of you can still see and with fingertips if one of you cannot.

Then somebody counts blinks. I thought for a month that this was a children's game.

Twenty-five minutes, every evening of every year, and the talk goes on the whole way through, and it has exactly the tone of a family shelling beans on a step.

I did not sit down that evening. I stood at the edge of it like an inspector and I went to bed furious, and I lay in the dark composing letters to a ministry, and I fell asleep before I finished the second one.

4 • The Glass

*I have been given tea, God,
by a smiling woman,
in a room where every single person
was watching me and pretending not to.
You saw what I did.
I would like it struck from the record.
I would like, in general,
a great deal struck from the record.*

On the sixth day somebody gave me a glass of tea.

I have to be careful here because I have told this story badly for twenty years, always as a joke against myself, and the joke has worn smooth in the way jokes do and has stopped being true.

Here is what actually happened.

There were six or seven of us in the kitchen in the late morning and the samovar was going and a woman called Sakineh poured for everybody and handed the glasses round, and there was talk, and it was pleasant, and it was the first hour since I had arrived in which I had felt anything other than an intruder.

She handed me mine and I took it and it was too hot.

Not warm. Not hot. The glass was fresh from the tap of a samovar that had been going since dawn and I took it in my fingers the way you take a glass of tea from a woman who is smiling at you, and my hand opened by itself and I made a noise and the glass went on the floor.

Nobody moved.

That is the part that took me years to be able to think about. It was not that they laughed. They did not laugh. The room went on exactly as it had been, the talk continued, somebody got a cloth — and every single person in that kitchen had been watching me from the moment the glass left Sakineh's hand, and I could feel it, and there was not one face in the room that showed it.

Then Sakineh said, with no edge in it at all: 'Sorry. It was too hot.'

And there was a pause of perhaps one second.

And then the room laughed — all of it, at once, warmly, at her, at me, at the situation — and somebody thumped the table, and the boy who had gone for the cloth started laughing so hard he had to sit down, and Sakineh said something in Azeri that I did not have, and the whole thing lasted maybe fifteen seconds and then the talk went back to bread.

I understood by the second week that it was done to everybody, that it had been done to every person in that compound at some point in their first month, and that it was the closest thing they had to a ceremony of arrival. If you flinch, you are still outside. If you do not flinch, somebody tells you what they have just done to you, and you laugh, and you are in.

I flinched.

Golnaz told me afterwards, kindly, in the doorway of the bathhouse, that it did not mean anything.

'Everybody flinches,' she said. 'We were all outside once.'

I said: 'Was I meant to pass?'

And she looked at me with a directness I was not ready for and said: 'Khanum, you cannot pass. You are going to hold that glass for the rest of your life and it is going to be too hot every single time. We are not being cruel. We only wanted to see it.'

'See what?'

'It,' she said, and did an impression.

It lasted less than two seconds. She snatched an imaginary thing off an imaginary fire, and yelped, and shook her hand out, and hopped once, and did it all with a stupid open animal face — and it was the funniest and most unkind thing I had ever seen in my life, and it was me, and it was everybody I had ever known, and she was nineteen years old.

I did not laugh.

I went and sat behind the water tank for an hour.

5 • What I Left

*I taught forty girls to read, God.
The state paid me to do it
and my grandmother would not have believed it
and I was proud, and I was right to be proud.
So explain to me
why I am the one who ran,
and why the running felt like the first honest thing
I had done in two years.*

I should say what I came from, because otherwise none of what follows makes sense and because I have spent a great deal of the last twenty-four years being asked and giving an answer that is true and is not the answer.

The answer I gave was: I was a teacher and there was a post here and nobody else wanted it.

Both halves are true.

Here is the rest of it.

I was born in 1912, which means I was a child during the years when the country was not really a country — when it was a set of provinces with foreign soldiers walking through them and a famine that took a great many people whose names are also in nobody's exercise book. I do not remember the politics. I remember being hungry in a way that has never entirely left me and I remember my mother selling a copper tray.

And then there was a man in Tehran who decided that this would stop.

I want to be honest about him because it has become fashionable to be otherwise. He built roads where there had been tracks. He built a railway the length of the country, which people said could not be done and which was done. He took the courts away from the clergy and gave them to men with law degrees. He made an army out of what had been a series of arrangements. He decided the country would be a country and by main force it became one.

And he built girls' schools.

I taught in one. I was paid by the state to stand in front of forty girls in Tabriz and teach them to read, and my grandmother — who was alive, and who came once and sat at the back and cried — could not have told you a single thing about her own country's government but knew exactly what it had cost women like her to be unable to read a paper.

I loved it. I want that written down before everything else. I loved my work and I believed in the man who made it possible and I would have argued for him in any room in that city.

Everything he did, he did by decree, and everything he did by decree, he did with police.

I knew that at the time. I want to be exact. I did not learn it afterwards and I did not have it explained to me by history. I knew it in 1936. I simply thought — and this is the whole of my crime,

and it took me until 1944 to write the sentence down — that the people it was being done to would come round.

I left Tabriz in the summer of 1938.

There was a post at a place outside the town that had not had a teacher and had been asking for two years, and I applied for it, and there was no competition, and the man in the office looked at me for a long moment and asked whether I understood what kind of place it was, and I said yes.

He said: 'Nobody understands until they are in it.'

He was right, and he did not know why, and neither did I. I thought he meant the disease.

I did not go there for the children.

I went because I could not stay in a city where I was known, and there is only one thing that makes a woman of twenty-six say that, and I am not going to write it here. I will write it later. I have made myself a promise about the order of these pages and the promise is that I do not get to explain myself before I have described them.

6 · Nineteen in Twenty

They tell me I cannot catch it.

Nineteen out of twenty, they say. Born that way.

*So I have been given a wall around me
that nobody can see and I did not build
and did not ask for and cannot take off,
and I am the only person here who has one.
Is that mercy, God, or is that the joke?*

Dr Sarabi told me in my fourth week, standing outside the clinic with a cigarette, and he told me kindly, as good news.

Nineteen people out of twenty cannot catch this thing. Not through touch, not through a shared glass, not through years of the same rooms. They are born unable to catch it and they go through their lives never knowing, and there is no test that will tell you which you are until either you get it or you do not.

'You have been here a month,' he said. 'You will be here years. If you were going to have it you would have it.'

That is not medically exact and I did not know enough to argue and he was, as it turned out, entirely right.

I said: 'Then why is anyone afraid of them?'

And Sarabi — who was fifty and tired and did eleven examinations an hour when he came and who I came to be very fond of — said the truest sentence anybody said to me in my first year.

'Because it takes years to pass and a second to see.'

I have turned that over ever since. The fear has nothing to do with the transmission. The fear is entirely visual. You could put a healthy man in a room with a sick one for a decade and probably nothing would happen; you can put him in a room for four seconds and something happens to him that no argument will undo.

So they built us a bowl of ground eleven kilometres past the end of a road. Not to stop the disease travelling. To stop the looking.

And this is where I have to say the thing that makes the rest of these pages what they are.

I was not sick.

I was never sick. Not in 1938, not in 1947, not now. I have been in that place for twenty-four years and I have held the hands and the feet and the faces of several hundred people who had it and I have slept in their rooms and eaten their bread and washed in their water, and I have a body that has reported to me faithfully, every day, all my life, like an honest servant, and never once stopped.

I am the only person in this account with nothing wrong with her.

That is not a boast. By the end of these pages you will understand that it is closer to a confession, and that everything I did I did from the outside, and that of all the people who made that place what it became, the one who paid nothing for it was me.

PART TWO — THE WALL

7 • A Stone From the Town

*They threw something at a child, God,
and the child could not feel it land,
and went on playing,
and it was the rest of us who cried.
I would like to know what You call that.
I have three words for it
and none of them are Yours.*

The boy's name was Rasul and he was nine and he had been with us since the spring, and on a Thursday in October of 1938 four boys from the town came up the track and stood on the rise and threw stones.

This was not the first time. I want to be accurate. There had been shouting from that rise perhaps twice a year for as long as anybody could remember, and it had been endured the way you endure weather, and there was even a sort of curriculum about it — the children were told to come in, and they came in, and it stopped.

That Thursday the children did not come in fast enough.

Rasul was hit twice. Once on the shoulder and once on the side of the head above the ear, and the second one opened him, and he did not know.

That is the thing I have never been able to put down. He did not know. He went on doing what he had been doing, which was arguing with a girl about a game, and he had blood coming down the side of his face and into his collar and he was arguing, and when the girl started screaming he thought she was screaming about the argument.

It took a woman running from the kitchen and turning his head with both hands for him to understand that anything had happened to him at all.

The boys on the rise saw the blood and ran.

I do not think they were monsters. I have made myself say that in this account because it is true and because it would be easier not to. They were nine and eleven and they had been told all their lives

what we were, and they came up to look at us the way boys go and look at a dead dog, and one of them threw a stone because boys throw stones, and then there was blood and they ran home and I expect at least one of them was sick.

Sarabi came the next week and put four stitches in and said that it was clean and would heal and that the boy had been lucky, and then he stood outside with his cigarette and said the other thing.

'He did not put his hand up,' Sarabi said.

'He did not know it was coming.'

'No.' He looked at the rise. 'Khanum, I have been doing this eleven years. A child who can feel does not stand there. A child who can feel ducks, or runs, or covers his head, and the stone hits his arm. They cannot do any of that. Not because they are slow. Because there is nothing to be quick about.'

I said something about a fence.

And Sarabi said: 'A fence is for keeping animals off a crop. What you want is a wall.'

It took two weeks for anybody to say it out loud in a room, and when it was said it was said by a woman of sixty called Effat who had never in my hearing offered an opinion on anything.

She said: 'We should not be able to be seen from the rise.'

That was all. That was the entire argument, and it went round that bowl of ground in an afternoon, and by the end of the week there were men measuring.

I want to set down clearly what happened next because everything that this place became rests on it and because the world outside has it exactly backwards.

Nobody walled us in.

There was no ministry, no order, no soldiers, no fence erected around a colony by a frightened administration. There was a nine-year-old boy who bled without knowing it, and a woman of sixty who said we should not be able to be seen, and then two hundred cartloads of mud brick that we made ourselves out of the

ground we were standing on, and eleven men and a great many women, and thirty-one months.

We built it. From the inside. Because the outside was worse.

And the state, which in those years was busy curing the country by decree and had a great deal to be getting on with, never noticed and never asked and, so far as I have ever been able to establish, has no record that it exists.

8 · The Man in the Hat

He came in a hat, God.

A grey European hat with a brim,

and a coat that did not fit him,

and he took the hat off in the yard

and held it in both hands like something he had been made to carry,

and I have never seen a man look so much

like a letter that had been opened by somebody else.

Sheikh Amanollah [a-maan-ol-LAAH] arrived in November of 1938 to bury a woman and stayed nine years.

He came up that track in a grey felt hat and a European overcoat with the shoulders wrong, and he was forty-four and looked sixty, and he had the beard and nothing else, and when he took the hat off in the yard and stood holding it I understood something about the previous ten years of my country that two years of teaching in a state school had not taught me.

I want to explain what had been done to men like him, because I did not know it at the time and because it explains everything he did afterwards.

He had trained eleven years. He had a licence to teach and to judge and he had done both, in a district south of Tabriz, in courts that had settled marriages and inheritance and debt for four hundred years.

Then the courts were taken away and given to men with law degrees from Tehran, which — and I have to be honest in these pages or there is no point writing them — was in many ways a good thing, and I said so at the time, loudly, in a staff room.

Then the endowments were taken under state control. Those endowments were land and rents left by the dead to keep the mosques and the seminaries and the men in them. When the state took the administration of them, a man like Amanollah did not become poor exactly. He became a person waiting for a payment from an office, which is a different thing and does something to you.

Then the seminaries emptied, partly because young men were conscripted and partly because it had been made clear that this was not a career for a young man in a modern country.

Then they licensed the clothes.

I need to be very plain about this because people forget it and because Amanollah never once complained about it in nine years. A man could be required to prove he was entitled to wear the turban and the robe. There was a document. If you did not have the document you wore a hat and a coat like a clerk, and if you wore the robe anyway you could be stopped in the street by police and made to take it off.

So my country, which had built me a school and paid me to teach in it, also required a forty-four-year-old man to carry a piece of paper certifying his right to dress as himself.

He came to bury a woman because there was nobody else who would come.

And afterwards he stood in the yard with his hat in his hands, and Effat brought him tea, and he drank it and looked round the bowl of ground at thirty-one houses and the beginnings of a wall and forty-one people who had no one at all.

And he said: 'Do you have anyone?'

And Effat said: 'No. There is a teacher, Homa Khanum, from the town. There is nobody else.'

He put the glass down with two hands, which he had learned in about four minutes, and which nobody had taught him.

'Then I will come on Thursdays,' he said.

He came on Thursdays for two months and then he came on Mondays as well and then in February he brought a bag.

I asked him once, years later, why he stayed. He was a truthful man in a way that eventually cost him everything, and he did not give me the answer about God.

He said: 'Because here I am necessary.'

And then, because he could not help himself: 'Which is a poor reason, and I have examined it, and it has not improved.'

9 · The Rule About Feet

*They have made a rule, God,
and they made it out loud, in a yard, in front of everybody,
and they did not consult a book
and they did not consult a man
and they did not consult You.
They consulted a graveyard.
I am told this is how most rules were made
before somebody wrote them down.*

The pairing rule was made in the spring of 1939 and it was made because a woman called Zohreh died of a foot.

She was fifty-one. She had gone blind the previous year — not from the disease directly, but in the way that place went blind, which is that the wire to the eyelid dies and you stop closing the eye and you do not know you have stopped, and the eye dries out across months and clouds from the middle, and there is no pain at any point in the process to tell you it is happening.

She lived alone. Her husband was dead. Her sister looked at her when she remembered.

There was an opening in the sole of her left foot that went down and down for something like five weeks, and by the time it was a smell it was in the bone, and Sarabi came and took the leg below the knee on the kitchen table, and she died eleven days later of what he wrote down as fever.

We buried her, and Amanollah did the rites, and afterwards there was the meeting.

It was not a meeting. There was no such thing here. It was thirty or forty people in the yard after a funeral, standing about, and Effat said the thing that Effat says, which is always four words long and always ends the discussion before it starts.

She said: 'Nobody looked at her.'

And a man said that Zohreh's sister should have looked at her, and there was some agreement, and then Golnaz — who was twenty by then and had been in that place nine years and had no patience — said the thing that changed how everybody in that bowl of ground lived for the next twenty-three years.

'Her sister cannot see either,' she said. 'Neither of them can see. You have paired the two blind women together because they are sisters and you have been very satisfied about it. That is not a pair. That is two people agreeing to die politely.'

There was a silence of some length.

'Then who looks at whom?' somebody said.

And Golnaz said: 'Whoever can see looks at whoever cannot. That is the only rule. Everything else is how we have always done it, and how we have always done it has just cost us a woman's leg and then the woman.'

I want to be exact about what that meant, because it is the strangest thing about that place and the thing I have never been able to explain to anybody outside it without watching their face change.

It meant that pairs were no longer husband and wife. It meant they were no longer brother and sister, or mother and daughter, or the arrangements of habit and decency that everybody had been using since the place began.

It meant that a woman of sixty with good eyes was paired with a man of thirty who had none. It meant a boy of fourteen and a widow of fifty. It meant that men and women who were not married to each other and not related to each other would sit down in the open

at sundown, every evening, and hold each other's bare feet in their laps and go over them with their eyes four inches away.

In 1939. In a village in the province of Azerbaijan.

I was twenty-seven and had been in that yard eight months and I did not say a word, because I had already said *this is not decent* once, in my third evening, and I had been agreed with by a nineteen-year-old who did not look up.

And every face in that yard turned, not to me, and not to Golnaz.

They turned to the man in the hat.

Amanollah stood there with forty people waiting, and he was four months into a place he had come to as a favour, and he was the only person present with the standing to stop it, and he knew that, and everybody knew he knew.

I have thought about what he did for twenty-three years.

He did not rule. That is the point and it is the whole of his character. He did not say it was permitted and he did not say it was forbidden and he did not reach for the books he had left in a house in a district that no longer wanted him.

He said: 'How many are blind?'

Somebody counted. Nine, at that time, out of sixty-one.

He said: 'And how many will be?'

And nobody answered, because the answer was everybody, eventually, one way or another.

Amanollah put his hat on.

'I cannot find the ruling that would prefer her leg,' he said, and walked back to the shrine.

That was all. He never spoke about it again in nine years, to me or to anyone. He did not experience it as a compromise and he certainly did not experience it as the first crack in anything. He would have told you, and did tell me once, that it was the plainest decision of his life and that any man with the training would have made it.

He was wrong about that. A great many men with the training would have preferred the leg.

10 · Bahman's Nail

I laughed today, God.

I want to report it in the correct manner.

Word has come from the throat. Dated this afternoon.

There was a man, and a nail, and five weeks,

and I laughed until I had to hold the wall,

and I have been sitting here since

trying to work out what has happened to me.

There is a scoreboard. I had better explain it now because it runs under everything else that happens in these pages and because it is the thing that made me one of them.

Two hundred people — sixty-one, then, but two hundred later — doing the same task every evening for years will compete at it. Of course they will. You would.

What is being competed for is the find.

An opening in a sole. A splinter. A blister that has already burst and dried. A burn nobody reported. A stone in a shoe.

And the scoring is not by size. This is what took me a year to understand and what makes it, in the end, so much worse and so much funnier than it looks. A fresh stone is nothing. Any fool finds a fresh stone; the stone is on top of the foot, the foot is pink, you are done. The scoring is *by age*.

A stone that has been in a shoe since Tuesday is a result.

And the person congratulated is not only the finder. The owner is congratulated too — because it takes a particular kind of man to walk on something for nine days without his partner catching it, and because it reflects extremely badly on the looker, and everybody in the yard knows whose looker it is, and the looker has to sit there while it is held up.

The find is announced. It is held up between finger and thumb. It goes round the pairs, and people examine it, and there is a sort of applause.

And the owner is required to perform astonishment, which is the joke inside the joke, because they genuinely are astonished. They had no idea. It is their own foot and the news is arriving four days late by a route they do not control, and the House has built an entire theatrical register for receiving reports about its own body.

Word has come from the foot, a man will say, holding up a piece of gravel. Dated last Tuesday. Sends regards.

Bahman was thirty-six in 1940 and he was a roofer before, and he was not a funny man. That matters. Bahman had no jokes. He was slow and pleasant and had opinions about mud brick that he would share at length.

On an evening in June of 1940 the woman who looked at him — Effat, of all people — went round the inside seam of his left shoe with a finger, the way you do, and stopped, and did not say anything, and turned the shoe over and shook it, and nothing came out.

Then she got the knife.

It was a nail head. It had come up through the sole from underneath, the way nails do in a roof, and the point had gone into the ball of his foot and turned over, and the wound had closed round it and closed again and there was tissue grown over the whole of it.

Sarabi came the following week and looked and said, without any particular drama, that by the state of the thing it had been there about five weeks.

Five weeks.

And Bahman — who had no jokes, who had never made anybody laugh in his life — looked at the nail head in the palm of Effat's hand, and looked round at forty people who had all stopped what they were doing, and said, in the flattest voice you ever heard:

'I have been wondering why I am so bad at roofs now.'

I do not know why that is the funniest thing I have ever heard. I have told it perhaps two hundred times in twenty-three years and it has never once failed and I still cannot take it apart.

I laughed until I could not stand up.

I want to be precise about this because it is the hinge of my life and I have never told anybody, including Golnaz, including Ozra.

I laughed at a man who had walked on a nail for five weeks without knowing. I laughed in a yard full of people who could not feel their own bodies, at the fact that they cannot feel their own bodies, and every single one of them was laughing with me, and I was not laughing *at* them and I was not laughing *with* them either.

I was laughing from inside it.

And when it stopped, and everybody went back to their feet, I went and stood behind the kitchen with my hand flat on the wall, because I had understood in the middle of it — in the actual middle of the laugh, while it was still going — that I had crossed something, and that I could not go back over it, and that there was nobody left in Tabriz or anywhere else I could explain this to.

Two years earlier I had stood in that same yard and said *this is not decent*.

Effat put the nail in a tin. It is still in the tin. It has been brought out at every wedding since 1940 and Bahman is asked to tell it and pretends he would rather not.

Nobody has ever beaten it.

11 • The Wall Is Finished

*It is finished, God, and it took thirty-one months,
and we made the bricks out of the ground we were standing on,
and I carried some of them myself.*

It is a wall to keep us from being seen.

It is a wall to keep us where we are.

It is the same wall.

You made the world and I would like to know

*whether You have ever built anything
that only did one thing.*

We finished it in May of 1941 and there was no ceremony, because it did not finish, it simply stopped having gaps.

Half a mile round. Mud brick, made in the yard from the ground under our feet and dried in stacks and carried by everybody who could carry, including me, for thirty-one months. Chest high in most places. Higher on the north side where the rise is.

It is not a fortification. A man could get over it with a hand and a knee. A determined boy could get over it in four seconds and one did, in 1943, and was fed.

It was never built to stop anybody coming in.

It was built so that we could not be seen from the rise, exactly as Effat said in a yard on an afternoon in 1938, and it did that, completely, from the day it closed. Nobody has thrown a stone at this place in twenty-one years.

And here is what else it did, and I have never been able to decide the order to put these in.

Inside a wall, a place becomes a place. That sounds like nothing. It is not nothing. Before the wall we were a set of houses that people had been sent to. Within a year of the wall we were somewhere, with an inside and an outside and a way that things were done in here, and the way things were done in here began to differ from the way things were done out there — and once that has started it does not stop, and nobody chooses it, and nobody notices it happening.

And a wall does something to the people inside it that I did not expect and have never seen written down anywhere. It makes leaving into an event.

Before the wall a person could drift out. Three did, in my first year, and nobody remarked on it. After the wall, going out meant going through the gate, and the gate is in one place, and there are always four people in the yard, and so every departure became a thing that was witnessed.

Nobody stopped anybody. Nobody ever stopped anybody, in twenty-four years. The gate has never been locked and there is a chain on the inside for the wind and that is all.

Eleven people have gone out in twenty-four years.

The rounding was mine. I will take that one and I have never been sure whether to be proud of it.

It was the autumn of 1941 and I was watching a man called Yunes carry a basin past the corner of the school and catch his hip on the brick, and it opened him, and he did not know until the evening. And I stood there and thought about the fact that we had spent thirty-one months building a wall to stop stones coming in from a rise, and had then filled the inside of it with four hundred corners.

I got a rasp from the carpenter.

I did the school doorway first, on my own, over about three evenings, and it took much longer than I expected and my hands blistered and I was extremely pleased with myself.

Then Golnaz did the kitchen. Then two of the boys did the water channel, badly, and then did it again properly. And it went round that place the way things went round that place, without a meeting, and it never stopped, and by the middle of the fifties there was not one right angle at the height of a hip anywhere inside that wall. Every doorframe. Every table. Every kerb. The lips of the stone channel worked round by hand, over years, so that the whole watercourse has the soft shoulders of something in a bathhouse.

I have watched a woman spend an afternoon rasping the edge of a step for a man who died the following spring.

That is what we did instead of medicine.

12 · What Sarabi Said

He said it kindly, God.

*He said it standing outside the clinic with a cigarette
and he did not know what he had said
and I did not know what I had heard
and it took six years to come round to us.*

*Do You count a sentence as an act?
I am asking because I would like to know
how many I am carrying.*

Sarabi came in the October of 1941, a month after the country stopped being what it had been, and he was in a foul mood and he had no supplies and he did eleven examinations an hour for two days.

I made him tea and we stood outside the clinic in the cold, and he smoked, and he talked to me the way a tired man talks to the only other educated person within eleven kilometres.

He said the war had taken his morphine. He said there were British lorries on the Tabriz road and Russian ones north of it and that he had been stopped twice in a week by boys with rifles who could not read his papers. He said a man in the ministry had told him that the country was being administered.

Then he said: 'There is a drug.'

I did not know what he meant.

He said there was work coming out of America, that there had been trials, that there was something — he called it by a name I did not write down and could not have spelled — that appeared to actually stop this thing. Not manage it. Stop it. He said within ten years, maybe five, it would be a matter of taking something by mouth for a period of years and then not having it any more.

I said that was the best news I had ever heard.

And Sarabi — who was fifty-three and decent and exhausted and who was not thinking about what he was saying, and who I have never blamed and who died in 1946 of something ordinary — said:

'Yes. And then what happens to this place?'

I said I did not follow.

'Khanum.' He put the cigarette out on the wall. 'Look at it. Sixty-one people. A school. A kitchen. A wall you built yourselves. What is it that holds all of that together?'

'I do not know. People. Habit.'

‘No,’ he said. ‘It is the disease. It is the only thing every person here has in common and it is the only reason the state leaves you alone and it is the only reason any of you is here rather than somewhere else.’ He was not being cruel. He was talking out loud on a cold night. ‘Cure them and there is no reason for this. There is a bowl of ground eleven kilometres past the end of a road with sixty-one people in it who have nowhere to go and no work and hands that no one will hire and no family that will have them back. They will not be a village. They will be sixty-one cured beggars, dispersed, and in twenty years nobody will remember that any of this was here.’

I said: ‘Then they will be cured beggars instead of sick ones.’

And he said: ‘Yes,’ and looked at the wall for a while, and said: ‘I only mean that it is a strange thing to be able to see coming and not know whether to want it.’

Then he got into the car and went back to the town.

He said it once. He never said it again and I am satisfied he never thought about it twice, and he was dead before any of it happened.

I did not repeat it. I want that on the record too, for whatever it is worth, which is nothing.

I did not repeat it, and it stayed in me for six years like a stone in a shoe, and I did not know it was there, and by the time anybody found it there was tissue grown over the whole of it.

PART THREE — REBELLION

13 • The Shah on a Boat

Sixteen years, God.

Roads, a railway, a school with my name on the register,

and it ended in nine days

because two armies decided it should,

and there was nothing anybody could do,

and I stood in a yard eleven kilometres past the end of a road

and understood that I had believed in something

the way a child believes in a father.

In August of 1941 the British came up from the south and the Russians came down from the north and in nine days it was over.

I do not have a good account of it. Nobody in that bowl of ground did. We heard it in pieces over about three weeks, from a carter, from Sarabi, from a boy who had been to the town for flour and came back with a story that turned out to be half right, which was better than most.

The army that had taken sixteen years to build did not fight. That is the part that people in the towns could not say out loud for a long time afterwards. Units were told to stand down and they stood down and some of them simply walked home in whatever they were wearing.

And the man who had done all of it — the roads, the railway, the courts, my school, the hat on Amanollah's head — was put on a boat by foreigners and sent to an island in Africa, and his son, who was twenty-one and whom nobody had heard of, was told he was now the king.

I sat on the step of the school and did not go in for a whole morning.

I want to try to describe what that was, because I have never been able to and because it is not patriotism and it is not grief and it does not have a word.

I had ordered my entire adult life around a project. I had defended it in staff rooms. I had used its language — *progress, the modern woman, the backward elements* — and I had used that language about actual people I knew by name. I had believed that the

country was being made well, by force, quickly, and that the force was regrettable and the speed was necessary and that in twenty years nobody would be able to remember why anybody had objected.

And it was gone in nine days, and everything it had broken stayed broken.

That is the sentence. It took me three years to be able to write it down and I still cannot read it without wanting to put my hand over it.

Everything it had broken stayed broken. The tribes it moved did not go back. The men it put in prison did not come out into a world that made sense to them. Amanollah did not get his robe back — nobody ever gave it back, there was no ceremony of restoration, the licence simply stopped mattering and he went on wearing the hat for another two years out of what I can only call habit and possibly spite. The women it uncovered in the street did not have those years returned to them.

The cure stopped and the surgery stayed.

I was twenty-nine years old and I had been, in a small and entirely sincere way, one of the surgeons.

14 · The Consignment

*There is no flour, God, and there is no kerosene,
and the man who used to bring them says
that it is not his fault and he is right.
I am not asking for bread.
I am asking who I should be angry at,
because I have got quite a lot of it now
and it has nowhere to go
and it is beginning to go inward.*

Occupation is not what people who have not had one imagine.

There were no atrocities on that road. I want that plain. In four years I saw perhaps thirty foreign soldiers in total and every one of them was bored and most of them were younger than my pupils and two of them gave a boy chocolate.

What occupation is, is that everything is being taken somewhere else, for somebody else's war, and nobody is in charge of the taking.

The grain went north. There were requisitions and there were purchases at prices set by people who were not selling and there was a great deal that simply moved because moving it was easier than explaining why it had not moved. The trains that the old Shah had built to hold the country together were now the most efficient machine for emptying it, running day and night with other people's cargo.

And the price of flour in Tabriz went up by a factor I was told and did not believe and later believed.

Our consignment came monthly. Flour, kerosene, a little tea, and a small quantity of the ointments and dressings that were all anybody had for us. It came on a cart from the town under an arrangement that predated everybody and that nobody could produce a document for.

In the winter of 1941 it came three weeks late.

In the spring of 1942 it did not come at all in March, and came in April at two-thirds, and in May it came at half and the man who brought it would not get down off the cart.

Effat asked him what had happened.

He said: 'Everything.'

And that was, in fact, the whole answer, and we did not ask him again in four years.

Here is what happens in a place like ours when the flour halves.

Nothing dramatic. Nobody riots. What happens is that people who are already carrying something begin to carry it less well. A man who was managing his feet stops managing his feet, because he is tired and because the evening is when he would have been looked at and he has gone to lie down instead. A woman who was blinking twenty times a minute with somebody reminding her blinks eleven times a minute because the woman who was reminding her is queueing.

The disease did not get worse. The disease is not sensitive to politics. The disease went on doing the one thing it does, which is to take away the warnings, and we went on doing the one thing we could, which is to warn each other, and we got worse at it, because we were hungry.

That is how the winter of 1942 was made. Not by the illness. By arithmetic in an office two provinces away.

15 · The Officer at the Gate

*A man came to help us today, God,
and we lied to him,
and we lied to him beautifully,
all of us, at once, without a word of arrangement,
and afterwards nobody mentioned it.
I did not know we could do that.
I would like to know when we learned,
and I would like to know
what else we can do that I have not seen yet.*

He came in the autumn of 1942 and he came alone, which should have told us he was nobody, and he had a bicycle and a satchel and a clipboard.

He was perhaps thirty-five. His shoes were wrong for that track and he had walked the last half-mile pushing the bicycle. He had a cold. I remember that because he apologised for it twice.

He was from the provincial administration and he had a list of settlements and he was doing an entitlement census for the ration. That was all. There was a scheme by which places with a registered population received an allocation, and we had never been on it, because nobody had ever counted us, because we did not exist in the sense that mattered.

He had found us on an old map. He said that. He said, cheerfully, that we were the only thing on his list all week that had turned out to be real.

He wanted a number.

And what happened over the next forty minutes is the single most frightening thing I saw in that place before the vote, and it was frightening precisely because it was so pleasant.

Effat gave him tea. He sat on the low wall by the kitchen with his clipboard on his knees and his cold, and people came and went, and there was a great deal of good humour about the bicycle, and the boys were shooed and came back.

And he asked how many people lived here.

And Effat said: 'Twenty-two.'

There were ninety-four of us.

I was standing four feet away with a basin in my hands and I did not move and I did not make a sound, and I want to be honest about what was in my head, which was not loyalty and was not calculation. It was simply that I did not know what the true number was supposed to be. I had not been told a number. Nobody had told me anything.

Then Golnaz, who was twenty-three, said: 'Twenty-two now. There were more.'

And Ozra, from the doorway of the school, said: 'Twenty-six last spring.'

And the man wrote it down and asked, decently, whether the ones who had gone had gone to the town, and a woman I barely knew said no, and looked at the ground, and he understood her to mean they had died, and stopped asking, and apologised.

Nine or ten people spoke in those forty minutes. Every single one of them said something consistent with twenty-two. Nobody contradicted anybody. Nobody hesitated. A man mentioned a family that does not exist, in the past tense, and two people made small sad noises of agreement, and the man from the administration made a note.

He got his entitlement schedule out and calculated our ration on twenty-two persons and said, sincerely, that it was not much but that it was better than nothing, and that he was sorry it had taken so long, and that we should have been on this list years ago.

Then he pushed his bicycle back up the track.

We got a ration for twenty-two people for the rest of the war, which was slightly less than the arrangement we already had, and it was on paper, and it came.

I found Ozra in the school afterwards and I was shaking, and I said: what was that.

And she said: 'He was going to write a number in a book.'

'Yes.'

'Ninety-four is a village,' she said. 'Twenty-two is a remnant. A village on a list in a provincial office is a thing an official will eventually want to visit, or move, or improve. A remnant is a rounding error.' She closed the exercise book. 'Nobody has ever done anything to us that started with somebody being interested.'

I said: 'Who decided?'

And this is the answer I have carried for twenty years.

She said: 'Nobody decided. Effat said twenty-two.'

16 • Typhus

*They are dying in the town, God.
Not of ours. Of the ordinary thing that comes
when the flour halves and the water is bad
and too many people are sleeping in one room.
The road is closed.
We are the safest place in the province
and it is because nobody will come near us,
and I do not know whether to laugh
and I am learning that here that is not a real question.*

In the winter of 1942 there was typhus in Tabriz and along the road, and it was bad, and it did what that disease does in a bad year in a hungry city, which does not need describing.

The road was closed for eleven weeks.

Our wall, which we had built to stop stones, kept out an epidemic that would have gone through ninety-four undernourished people in a bowl of ground like fire through a stack.

Nobody came. Nobody came for eleven weeks, and no cart, and no doctor, and no ration, and no news except what a boy shouted from the rise once, which was not accurate.

And we sat in there through the coldest weeks of that decade with what we had.

Which was: no flour after the first month, and then flour of a kind, and then whatever the kitchen could do with what was in the store, which by February was barley and dried mulberry and an amount of rice that Effat measured in a cup she kept in her apron.

There were no jokes in the kitchen after January. I noticed it and could not think about it.

I have written a great deal in these pages about how funny that place was and I have meant every word. It was the funniest place I have ever lived and I have never laughed since 1947 the way I laughed between 1940 and 1946.

And it goes. That is the thing nobody tells you about a place like that. It goes when there is nothing left to convert. The whole apparatus — the news from the foot, the scoreboard, the impressions, the terrible cheerful questions at weddings — all of that is a machine for turning something unbearable into something that can be carried across a room. It needs a certain amount of slack to run on. Below a certain point there is no slack, and the machine stops, and what is left is simply what is actually happening, which is what the machine was built to prevent you from looking at directly.

By the middle of February the evening Looking was being done in near silence.

Ninety-four people, in pairs, on the walls, in the cold, going over each other's feet with their eyes four inches away, and nobody saying anything at all.

I have never seen anything more like prayer and I have never been able to say so to Amanollah.

17 · Eleven

They died between the eleventh of February and the nineteenth of March, 1943.

Golnaz's mother, Sakineh, who had given me the tea. She was fifty-eight. A chest thing, four days.

Yunes, who had opened his hip on the corner of the school in 1941 and made me get the rasp. Fifty-one. His foot, and then his blood.

A woman called Robab, sixty-six, in her sleep, and we did not find her until the evening because her pair was also unwell and did not come out, and I will not write more about that.

Two boys, brothers, aged nine and eleven, four days apart, of something that came in with the flour in January and that Sarabi later said was probably not typhus and could not tell me what it was.

Effat's husband Hasan, who was seventy-one and who had been failing for two years and whom nobody was surprised about, and whose death was still not a mercy, and I will not have it written down that it was.

A man called Nader, thirty-nine, who fell.

Zohreh's sister, who was blind, and who I have not named in these pages and will not, and who had been paired properly since 1939 and was found anyway, and whose feet were the thing, and whose pair was one of the boys.

A woman of twenty-eight, Simin, and her child, born in the second week of March and dead in the third, and Simin four days after, and there is no more to say about that and I have started this sentence six times.

Eleven, in five weeks, out of ninety-four.

We buried them in the ground behind the kitchen because the ground behind the kitchen is where we bury people, and it was

frozen for the first three and we did what you do, and Amanollah did the rites for every single one of them.

He did the full rites. Not the short form. The full washing and the full prayer, eleven times in five weeks, at his age, in that cold, with his hands.

I helped with four of the women because there was nobody else.

I had never done it. I was thirty-one years old and I had been raised in a city by people who paid other people to do this. Effat showed me, on Sakineh, on the second day, and she showed me the way she said everything, which was in four words and without looking at me.

She said: 'Warm the water first.'

That is the sentence I have thought about most in my life. Not any of the poetry. Not anything said to me by a man or by my mother or by the state. Warm the water first — for a woman who cannot feel it, who is dead, who will never know, from a woman with no fingers left on her right hand, in a February with no kerosene.

There is no argument in that. There is nothing to agree or disagree with.

Everything I did afterwards, everything in the second half of this account that people will find difficult, comes out of a kitchen in February 1943 and a basin of water that somebody insisted on warming.

18 • The Rites

*He is standing over the eleventh one, God,
and he is saying the words,
and I have watched him say them
over a boy of nine and over a woman with her child,
and I am going to ask this once and then not again.
Was he speaking to You?
Because he has stopped believing that he was,
and he has not stopped speaking,
and I want to know which of those two things You noticed.*

The nineteenth of March, and the eleventh grave, and Nader had fallen off a roof he had no business being on and had broken something inside himself that Sarabi could not have fixed if Sarabi had been there.

It was cold and it was the end of it and everybody knew it was the end of it because the road had opened four days earlier.

Amanollah did the rites.

And afterwards, when the others had gone in, he stood at the edge of that ground with his hands at his sides, and I was fifteen feet away with the basins because somebody had to carry the basins, and he said — not to me, and not loudly, and not in the voice a man uses when he wants to be overheard:

‘I have said it eleven times.’

I did not answer. I have been grateful ever since that I did not answer.

He said: ‘I have said it correctly eleven times. I have not left out a word. I have said it over a child of nine and I have said it over a woman who was in labour eleven days ago and I have not left out a single word, and I have listened, and there is nothing there.’

Then he said: ‘I do not mean that He is cruel. Cruel would be something. Cruel would be a party to it.’

And then he stood there for a while.

I want to put down exactly what he did next because I have thought about it more than anything else in my life and because everything he did in 1947 comes out of it.

He picked up his hat.

He put it on.

And he said: ‘Thursday I will do the forty-day for Sakineh. Her daughter will want it done properly and it will comfort her and I will do it properly.’

That is the whole of it. That is what a loss of faith actually looks like in a man of that kind, and it is not a shout and it is not a departure and it is not an argument with anybody.

He did the rites for another four years. He did them exactly, and beautifully, and on time, and he taught two boys to do them after him, and he sat with the dying and said the things you say and held hands he could not feel and comforted people, night after night, for four years, with nothing at the other end of it at all.

I asked him once, in 1945, whether it was dishonest.

And he said: 'Dishonest to whom?'

I said: 'To them.'

And Amanollah said: 'Khanum, I have never in my life told anybody that God answers. That is not in the prayer. The prayer says that we praise Him and that we ask. I have never once said that anything comes back.' He looked at me. 'Go and read it. Everybody thinks it is in there. It is not in there. It has never been in there. It is a thing we all agreed to assume, out of politeness, some time before any of us were born.'

I went and read it.

He was right.

PART FOUR — ANOTHER BIRTH

19 • The Flat Hour

*I went out to the wall, God,
and I did not come back for most of a day,
and I have to tell somebody
and there is nobody in this bowl of ground I can tell,
so I am telling You,
and I notice that this is the first time in five years
I have asked You for anything
other than an explanation.*

I should describe the flat hour first, because it is where all of this happened and because everybody who has ever visited that place has looked directly at it and seen nothing.

Between one and three in the afternoon the House sits down.

It is not a rule. Nobody instituted it. In a hot country people rest in the middle of the day and there is nothing remarkable about it, and if you were standing in that yard at one o'clock you would say: they are having a rest, as anybody would.

What is different — and it took me four years to see it and I only saw it because I am the one person there who could not do it — is that they do not move.

Put a person on a step and tell them to sit still and time them. Go on. You will get four seconds, or nine, and then something will happen: a hand to the face, the weight shifting, a swallow, a scratch, a knee resettling. That is not restlessness. That is the ordinary condition of being a person. We are being addressed constantly by our own skin and we answer every single time and we have no idea we are doing it.

In that yard I have watched a man of sixty sit on a step for fifty-one seconds and blink four times and do nothing else at all.

I counted, because I am the one who counts things. The shortest I ever recorded was nineteen seconds and the average was a little over thirty, and there was no arrangement about it and no one thought it was interesting and when I asked what they did in the afternoon they said: nothing. We sit. And they meant it, and for four years they were telling the truth.

For four years there was nothing there.

I want that stated plainly because of everything that comes after and because I am the only person alive who can state it. From 1938 to 1942 the flat hour was an hour of people sitting down, and no one saw anything, and no one described anything, and there was no garden and no wall and nobody standing behind anybody.

It was empty. It was just quiet.

Then it was February 1943 and eleven people were in the ground behind the kitchen and I had helped wash four of them, and on the eighteenth of March, the day before Nader's funeral, I went out to the northern wall in the flat hour and sat down on the ground with my back against the brick because I could not be in a room with anybody.

I was thirty-one. I had not slept properly since January. I had watched a woman of twenty-eight die four days after her child and I had been in the room and I had been useful and afterwards I had gone out and been sick against the side of the school.

And I sat down against the wall to cry and did not, and looked at the poplars for a while, and that is the last thing I remember of that afternoon.

Here is the honest account of what happened, which I have never given anybody in full.

There was no transition.

That is the whole of it and it is why nobody in that place could ever explain it to anybody outside. I did not arrive anywhere. There was no going, no falling, no sensation of travelling, no moment. What happened is that at some point I noticed I was somewhere else and had been for a while — the way you notice you have been reading the same line four times, and you cannot say when you stopped.

I was standing in a garden.

I need to describe it exactly, because it was described back to me by two hundred people over the following ten years and I need it on the record that this is what I saw first.

It was dry. That is the first thing. Bare packed earth the colour of pale clay, swept smooth, hard underfoot. Nothing was growing in it.

There was a wall all the way round. Mud brick, tea-coloured, weathered, higher than a man, unbroken.

There was no gate. Not a closed gate. No gate anywhere in it, in any direction, and I walked a long way along that wall and there was no break in it at all.

Down the exact centre of the garden ran a watercourse in a stone channel — narrow, straight, running from the near end to the far end, its stone lips worn smooth and rounded the way ours were, though I had not yet done half of ours. The water in it was shallow and completely still and held a flat grey reflection of a sky that had nothing in it.

I did not cross it. I want to be precise about this because everybody asks and everybody wants it to be a prohibition. It was not. Nobody stopped me. There was no fear and no warning and no barrier. I simply did not want to and it did not occur to me to want to, in the way it does not occur to you to walk into someone else's house because their door is open.

And at the far end, small with distance, there was one low tree with fruit on it. A pomegranate. The fruit was dark and there were perhaps six of them and it was the only living thing in that place and the only colour.

I did not get closer to it. I walked toward it for what felt like a considerable time and it stayed exactly the same distance away, and I was not frightened by that either, and I have never been able to explain why not.

There was no pain in that garden and there was no comfort. No heat and no cold. I could not smell anything at all — not the earth, not the water, and that is the detail everybody seizes on afterwards and finds funny, and it is the detail that convinces me, because I would never have invented it. The light was the flat white glare of one in the afternoon with no sun anywhere in the sky. There was no sound except, once or twice, water.

And there was somebody behind me.

At about the height of a hand on a shoulder. Slightly to the left. Not touching, exactly — or touching in the way you know a hand is on you when you have your coat on.

He had been there the whole time. That is the thing I understood without being told. Not: someone has come up behind me. But: this is where he stands, and he has been standing there since before I noticed anything, and he will be standing there afterwards.

I did not turn round.

I want to be very careful here because I have had twenty years to make this sound better than it was. I did not turn round because I was frightened. That is not true and I will not write it. I did not turn round because I did not want it to stop.

I understood, in some way I cannot defend, that turning round was a thing that would end the afternoon, and that I had nowhere else to be, and that eleven people were in the ground behind the kitchen.

So I stayed where I was, near the wall, on the right-hand side, and looked at the water.

Golnaz found me at about six in the evening. I had been out there since one. My hands were cold enough that she made a fuss about them and I could not answer her sensibly for about a quarter of an hour.

She asked me where I had been.

And I said: 'Nowhere. I was sitting.'

Which was true, and was the first lie I told in that place, and I did not understand until much later that they are the same sentence.

20 • The Fourth Night

I gave it away, God.

*I had it for eleven days and I gave it to a dying woman
because she was frightened and I had nothing else in my hands,
and I want it recorded that I meant well,
because I can see from here*

*that this is going to be the last time in this account
that meaning well is going to be enough.*

I told the first person on the twenty-ninth of March, 1943.

Her name was Robab — the second Robab, the young one, twenty-four, who had come to us at fifteen and who had a bad winter and did not recover from it. She was not dying of the disease. Nobody in that place has ever died of the disease. She had a chest thing left over from February and she was not strong enough to put it down.

She was frightened. That is all. She was twenty-four and she was frightened at night and there was nobody to sit with her because her mother was in the ground behind the kitchen since the twelfth of February.

I sat with her for four nights.

And on the fourth night she asked me what happens, and I did not have an answer, and Amanollah had said the words to her twice that week and she had listened politely and had asked me anyway, which tells you what she thought of the words.

So I told her about the garden.

I told her the whole of it. The dry ground, the wall with no gate, the water down the middle, the tree at the far end that stays the same distance. I did not tell her about the hand. I have gone over that decision for twenty years and I still do not know whether it was mercy or cowardice and I have stopped expecting to find out.

And she said: 'How do I get there?'

And I said the sentence that I have had to live with.

I said: 'Sit down and let it get boring, and go through the boring, and do not come back out.'

That is all it is. That is the entire instruction and it has never needed another word in twenty years. You sit. Nothing happens. It becomes boring in a specific and quite unpleasant way — an itching, wanting, restless boredom, which for them is not physical because nothing in them itches, and is therefore purely a boredom of the mind. And you go through it, the way you walk through a

doorway you cannot see, and you do not turn back, and at some point you notice you are already somewhere else and have been for a while.

Robab did it on the second afternoon.

I was there. I was sitting beside her bed with some mending because I could not do it myself and never have and never will.

She was gone for about forty minutes. I could see her breathing and her eyes were open and she did not move at all, and I sat there with my mending and got very frightened and did not call anybody.

And when she came back she cried for a long time and would not say why, and then she said:

‘It is dry.’

I said yes.

She said: ‘There is nothing growing.’

I said no.

And she said: ‘I do not know why that is the best thing anybody has ever given me.’

She died eleven days later. In those eleven days she went four times and told her aunt, who told nobody, and told a boy called Ali who was thirteen and who did not manage it for a year.

She was not frightened at the end. I want that in these pages because it is the only clean thing in this chapter. She was twenty-four and she was not frightened, and I did that, and I would do it again this afternoon, and everything that follows is also true.

21 • Teaching Golnaz

I have taught it like a recipe, God.

Sit. Let it get boring. Go through the boring.

*Three sentences and a hand on the arm,
the way you would teach somebody bread.*

Is that what You did?

Is that all it ever was —

somebody telling somebody else where to stand?

Golnaz was twenty-four in 1943 and she had been in that place thirteen years and her mother had died in February and she had not cried once.

I taught her in June.

I did not sit her down and instruct her. I told her because we were washing sheets and because she asked me, straight out, what I had been doing with Robab in that room, and because I have never been able to lie to Golnaz and have never tried more than once.

She listened to the whole thing with her hands in the water and did not interrupt.

Then she said: 'Homa. Why did you not tell me first?'

I have never been forgiven for that, incidentally. Not in nineteen years. She has never mentioned it again and she has never forgotten it either, and every so often, in a particular kind of argument, it is in the room with us.

She went the same week. She has never told me what it was like the first time and I have never asked, and this is one of perhaps four subjects on which we have an arrangement.

What I can report is what she did next, which is the whole of the reason this became what it became.

Golnaz taught it to nine people in eleven weeks.

She did it the way she does everything, which is briskly and in the kitchen. She did not treat it as a revelation and she did not treat it as a comfort. She treated it as a *skill* — as something the House had turned out to possess, like a way of proving dough or a knack for a particular knot, and which it would be stupid not to pass on.

And that is why it spread. Not because it was holy. Because Golnaz Sadeghi told eleven people in a kitchen that there was a thing you could do in the afternoon and that it was not difficult, and because in that place, if Golnaz says a thing is not difficult, it is not difficult.

By the autumn there were perhaps thirty.

By the spring of 1944 I had stopped being able to count.

And here is what I did not anticipate, and what nobody could have anticipated, and what I have never been able to make anybody outside that wall understand.

I taught it to people who could not feel their bodies.

I cannot do it. I have tried perhaps four hundred times in twenty years. I sit down and let it get boring and I go through the boring and at eleven minutes my hand goes to my face, and at nineteen minutes I get up.

I have been in that garden once, on the eighteenth of March 1943, in the worst week of my life, when I had not slept in six weeks and had washed four bodies and was, I now think, closer to being nobody than I have ever been before or since.

Once. In twenty-four years.

The people I taught it to go every single afternoon and think nothing of it.

They cannot be interrupted, and I can, and that is the entire difference between us, and it is the reason this account is being written by the one person in that House who has no idea what she is talking about.

22 • Farideh

Here it is, God.

*I said I would write it down when I had described them properly
and I have described them properly
and I have run out of things to describe.*

I did it in April of 1936.

*It took me eleven minutes and a sheet of school paper
and I signed it,
and I was proud of it,
and that is the part I would like You to hold on to.*

I have been putting this off for a hundred pages and Robab's aunt asked me a question in the spring of 1944 that made it impossible to go on putting off.

She asked me why I stayed.

Not why I came. Everybody asks why I came and I have a good answer for that. She asked why I stayed, in the sixth year, when I was not ill and never would be, and could have walked up that track any morning of any of those years and got a post in any town in the province with two years of state service and a clean record.

I said something about the children.

And she said, kindly, because she is a kind woman: 'Khanum, you have not taught a class since the winter.'

So. April of 1936.

I was twenty-four and I taught at a girls' school in Tabriz and the decree had come down in January. The chador was banned. Not discouraged — banned, in the street, enforced by police, and I have to describe what that actually looked like because people who were not there have decided it was a liberation and people who were there have decided it was a persecution and it was both, in the same street, on the same afternoon, to different women.

I saw a woman of about fifty have her covering pulled off her head by a constable outside the bazaar and stand in the road holding her hands over her face and scream in a way I have not heard since.

I also stood in a classroom in front of forty girls with my head uncovered, in public, paid by the state, teaching them to read, which my grandmother — who was alive, and who came once and sat at the back and cried — could not have done in any year of her life.

Both. On the same afternoon. In the same street.

And I had decided which one mattered.

There was a woman on the staff called Farideh [fa-ree-DEH]. She was perhaps forty. She taught the younger ones and she was good at it and she was religious in the ordinary way of a woman of that generation, which is to say she prayed and she covered and she did not think about it any more than I thought about my shoes.

She had two daughters. Fourteen and eleven.

And when the decree came, she kept them home.

She did not protest. She did not make a speech. She simply did not send her daughters out of the house uncovered, and she came to work herself with her head bare and her jaw set like a woman going into cold water, and she cried about it in the store room where she thought nobody could hear, and she kept her girls at home for eleven weeks.

And I reported her.

I want to be exact about the mechanism because the mechanism is the whole of my guilt.

It was not an anonymous denunciation. I did not slip a note under a door. I wrote to the district education office, on school paper, in my own hand, and I set out the position clearly and reasonably: that a member of the teaching staff was withholding her own children from education in defiance of the law and that this was an unsuitable example in a school for girls.

I signed it. I put my name and my position at the bottom and I read it over once and I was satisfied with it.

I was proud of it. That is the sentence I have been walking around for eight years to avoid writing. I was not frightened into it and I was not ordered to do it and nobody was watching me. I did it because I believed it, and I believed it because I had been given a school and a salary and a place in a modern country, and because the language was available to me — *backward, the old thinking, she will thank us* — and because I was twenty-four and had never in my life been on the receiving end of anything.

She lost her post in June.

Her husband was taken and questioned. I was told for two days and I have never known more than that, and I have never established what was done to him or by whom or for how long, and he was released.

And eighteen months later I was told something about the elder daughter.

I was told it second-hand, in a corridor, by a woman who was not certain and who was passing it on as gossip. I have never been able

to verify it. I made two attempts, in 1937 and in 1939, and got nothing either time, and I am not going to write down what I was told, because I do not know that it is true and because the girl is a real person who is now a woman of about forty somewhere in this country and none of this is hers to carry.

I will write only this. What I was told was the kind of thing that happens to a fourteen-year-old girl who has been taken out of a school and put in a house for a year and whose father has been questioned and whose family has no money.

I left Tabriz eleven months later.

I came here because it was the furthest thing from an education office that I could find and because nobody here had heard of me and because a man in an office said *nobody understands until they are in it* and I thought he meant the disease.

And I stayed. Six years by then, and eighteen more after that.

Because I had already once been part of a project that was certain it was curing people, and had used its language, and had signed my name, and had been proud.

23 · What Grew Instead

*They are describing my garden back to me, God,
in the kitchen, at the ovens, in the yard,
people I have never spoken to,
and they are getting the details right,
including two I have never said out loud to anybody.
I would like to know what I have done.
I would like to know whether I found a door
or built a room.*

It stopped being mine in the winter of 1944 and I can give the exact conversation.

A woman called Nosrat, who had come to us in 1942 and who I had spoken to perhaps six times in two years, was queueing at the ovens and said to the woman in front of her, about nothing, in the tone you would use about a shortcut into town:

'I have never been down the far end. Have you?'

And the other woman said no, and that her husband had, and that there was nothing there anyway.

I stood behind them with a basin and did not move.

Over the following eight months I did what I do, which is that I counted and I recorded and I checked, and I have the pages still and I am not going to reproduce them here.

I asked forty-one people, separately, never two in the same room, never repeating back what the last one had said, never using a leading word. I asked them one question: *when you sit in the afternoon, where do you go?*

Forty-one described a walled garden.

Thirty-eight volunteered the watercourse without being asked. Thirty-one volunteered the pomegranate. The rest said only that there was something at the far end and that they had never got close enough to see it.

Nine of them told me that they could not smell anything there and every single one of the nine thought this was funny.

Twenty-six placed themselves in it. *Near the wall. On the left, by the water. At the shaded end, though there is no shade.*

And fourteen of the twenty-six placed *other people* in it.

That is the thing. That is the thing I have never got past and never will. A man of fifty told me, without any drama, in a doorway, that Nosrat stands near the wall on the left and does not come past the water. I checked it with Nosrat four days later. He was right. He had never spoken to her about it. I asked him how he knew and he looked at me as though I had asked how he knew where the kitchen was, and said: 'Because that is where she stands.'

I checked eleven of them. Eleven of eleven agreed.

And here is where I have to stop and be honest with You and with whoever reads this, because I have carried both of these for twenty years and I have never once been able to choose between them.

Either there is a place, and it was always there, and a hundred people found the door to it because their bodies stopped shouting long enough for them to hear something the rest of us cannot.

Or I described a garden to a dying woman in March of 1943, and she described it to two people, and Golnaz described it to nine, and within eighteen months a hundred people were describing my garden back to me in a kitchen queue — and they were all standing in a room I built, in furniture I chose, and none of them will ever know, and I am the only person in the world who could tell them, and I have not.

The word for what stands behind them is mine as well.

They asked me, in that first year, what to call it. I said *mehmān* [meh-MAAN] — the guest, the one who is received — and I said it as a joke, in the House's own register, because the joke is that you set a place for a guest and you feed him and you do not ask him when he is leaving.

Everybody laughed.

It is now what he is called. It is what the children call him. It has been what he is called for nineteen years and nobody remembers that it was a joke and nobody remembers who made it.

24 · The Trade

They are not pitiable, God.

I have been here six years and I came here full of pity

and it has all been used up

and what is underneath it is something I did not order.

They can do a thing I cannot do.

They paid for it with their hands and their eyes.

And I am not sure — I am asking honestly —

I am not sure it was a bad trade,

and that is the sentence I would like You to argue with.

Ozra put it to me in the school in the autumn of 1944 and she did not put it as an argument. She was ruling a page.

I had said something — I do not remember what, something with pity in it, something about how much they had lost — and she let me finish, and then she said:

‘What do you believe in, Khanum?’

I said I did not understand the question.

‘You were a teacher in a city. You believed in something. Everybody who comes here believed in something in a city.’ She went on ruling. ‘Tell me one of them.’

I said, because it was the first thing to hand and because I had been thinking about Farideh: that a person should look at what is actually in front of them. That the worst thing you can do is turn your face away from something because it is unpleasant. That this is more or less the whole of morality.

Ozra said: ‘Good. Now do it.’

I said I did not follow.

‘Look at something unpleasant,’ she said. ‘Not for a moment. For an hour. Do not move and do not go and get a glass of water and do not think about the water. An hour. Can you?’

I said that nobody can do that.

‘We can,’ she said.

And then she put the pen down, which she almost never did, and gave me the thing that has been in my chest ever since.

She said: every one of those beliefs costs a nerve.

To look at what is in front of you, you must not flinch — and flinching is a nerve. To have a thought that is yours and finish it, you must not be interrupted — and interruption is a nerve. To sit with a dying woman all night and be of any use, you must be able to stay in the room, and the reason people leave the room is not cowardice, it is that the body makes them leave. To decide for yourself whether a thing is right, rather than accepting what you were handed, you need silence to think in, and out there nobody has had five consecutive minutes of silence in the whole of human history.

'Your city believes in all of it,' she said. 'Every one of those is on a wall in a school somewhere in Tabriz. And not one person in that city can do any of it, because their bodies will not permit it, and so they admire it instead. Admiring a thing is what you do when you cannot do it.'

I said: 'And you can.'

'We do it every afternoon,' she said, 'between one and three, and nobody outside this wall has ever done it once, and we do not think it is remarkable, and we paid for it with everything you can see from this window.'

I want to be clear that she was not saying the disease is a blessing. She never said that, not once in twenty-four years, and I never heard anybody in that place say it either. Robab died at twenty-four. The boys were nine and eleven. Nobody there was grateful.

The claim was narrower and much worse.

The claim was that the outside world holds a set of beliefs it is physically incapable of practising, and that we had, by accident, by catastrophe, by the loss of the most ordinary thing a body does, become the only people on earth who could actually do them.

And that we knew it, and they did not.

That is why I stayed. Not the children. Not guilt, though there was plenty. Not because I could not go back — I could have gone back any morning of any of those years.

I stayed because I had spent my whole life believing in a way of being a person, and at the age of thirty-two I met sixty people who could do it, and I could not, and I never would, and the only thing left available to me was to stand near them.

PART FIVE — WHAT GREW

25 • Two Rooms

*She has taken the school, God,
and I have let her,
and I told myself it was because I am tired
and because she is better with them,
and both of those are true
and neither of them is the reason.
The reason is that she asked me for it
in a way that was not a question,
and I have never once in nine years
found the place to put my foot down.*

Ozra took the school in the spring of 1944 and I gave it to her without a word being said about it.

I had been the teacher for six years. It was the post I was hired for. There were, by then, thirty-one children in that place and two rooms and a stack of primers that had come from the town in 1939 and had not been added to since, and I had taught in it every morning apart from the winter of 1943, when nobody taught anything.

And in March of 1944 Ozra said: 'I will take the mornings.'

That was all. She did not ask. She did not offer to help. She said she would take the mornings and she took them, and I found myself saying yes and then found myself, over about four weeks, no longer going in, and at some point in May I understood that I had stopped being the teacher and that there had been no moment at which this was decided.

I want to be fair to her and to myself. She was better at it. That is simply true. I taught the way I had been taught in a training college in Tabriz, which is to say I stood at the front and I was pleasant and I got through the primer, and the children liked me and learned about as much as children usually learn.

Ozra taught standing up and never once opened a book in front of them.

She did arithmetic aloud, fast, at them, and would not let a wrong answer pass and would not humiliate anybody for one either, which

I have never seen anybody else manage. She read to them from the Shahnameh in the afternoons — Rostam, Siyavash, the ones with the horses — and they were quiet for it in a way they were never quiet for me. She had them writing letters to nobody, as an exercise, and correcting each other's.

And she did the other thing, which is the thing I want on this page.

She taught them to be looked at.

There is no version of this in any school in the world and there was no version of it in that place before her. She built it into the day, in the last quarter of an hour, and she called it nothing at all — it was simply what happened before they went home.

They paired off, small ones with bigger ones, and they went over each other. Feet first. Then shoes, turned over, a finger round the inside seam. Then hands, palm and back and the web between the fingers. Then forearms. Then faces.

And she stood at the front and talked them through it, every day, in a flat instructional voice, the way you would teach long division.

What are you looking for. Say it.

An opening.

Where do openings begin.

Where the shoe touches.

Show me where the shoe touches.

Thirty-one children, aged four to fourteen, learning the sequence by rote before they learned their times tables.

And I stood at the back of that room one morning in the summer of 1944 and watched a girl of six hold a boy of nine's foot in her lap and turn it to the light and inspect the sole of it with complete seriousness, and I thought: they will do this every evening for the rest of their lives and they will never know that anybody had to decide it.

That is what a school is for. I had been running one for six years and I had thought it was for the primers.

26 • Roqi's Hands

*There is a wedding, God, and I have been crying since the drum started
and nobody has noticed because everybody is crying,
and a girl of nineteen has just been carried round the yard on a chair
by four people with no fingers between them,
and I have never in my life
been anywhere less like a place where something is wrong.*

They married in September of 1945 and it was the first wedding since before the war and the House lost its mind about it.

Roqi was nineteen and had come to us at seven. Habib was twenty-two and had been born in that bowl of ground in a house forty feet from where they were married.

I have been asked about the weddings more than anything else. Everybody who has ever heard about that place asks the same question with their face and not their mouth, and the question is: *what were they celebrating?*

So I am going to describe this one properly.

It took nine days to prepare and every single person had a job, and the jobs were assigned by Effat in the manner of a general who has been planning the campaign since spring, which she had.

They whitewashed everything. All of it, the whole compound, in three days, which we did twice a year anyway but never like that. They cleared the yard between the kitchen and the school and swept it and swept it again. The boys were sent to the hills for the wild rue and came back with far too much and were praised for it.

And the women did Roqi's face.

I want to write about this because it is the thing I would put in front of anybody who thinks they know what that place was.

Four women did her, over about three hours, in the room behind the kitchen, and among the four of them there were perhaps eleven fingers that worked. Golnaz did the kohl because Golnaz's hands were still good then and because Golnaz has an extremely steady hand and an extremely poor opinion of everybody else's.

And a woman called Parvin, who had nothing at all left below the second knuckle on either hand and who had been doing brides in that village for eleven years, did the eyebrows.

She held the thread in her teeth and one loop over the stump of her left hand and worked it with her right wrist and her mouth, and she did it fast, and she did it perfectly, and Roqi sat there with her eyes shut and did not flinch once, and the room was extremely loud.

The talk in that room was the filthiest I have heard in my life. I am not going to reproduce any of it. There were six women in there and a girl of nineteen who was about to be married and the things that were said to her, kindly, by women of sixty, would not be printed in this country and possibly not in any other, and Roqi laughed until she had to be told to stop laughing because it was ruining her eyes.

Then they put her in red and took her out.

There was a tar and a reed and a drum, and the drum was played by a man called Mokhtar who had no fingers on either hand and who played with the flats of both palms and who was — and I have heard music in Tabriz and in Tehran and I am not being sentimental — the best musician I have ever been in a yard with.

They danced until the light went. An old woman of seventy-odd, who had nothing left of either hand and had not danced in years, was pulled into the circle by two girls and danced beautifully with her forearms held up, laughing, and the whole yard shouted.

And somebody asked Habib the question.

I had better explain it, because it is the worst joke in that place and I have only heard it asked twice in twenty-four years and both times were at weddings, which is the only place it is ever asked.

Nobody in that House has ever died of the disease. It does not kill you. It takes the warnings away and then it stands back and lets the ordinary world do the rest — a pan, a nail, a stove, a fall, an eye that stopped closing. Every grave behind that kitchen is somebody who was not told.

So they ask a man on his wedding day, in front of everybody, the way you ask a child what he wants to be:

Habib jan — what do you think will get you?

And Habib, who was twenty-two and had been born there and had heard it asked once before in his life, did not miss.

He said: 'A woman.'

And put his hand out towards Roqi, and the yard came down.

I have thought about that for seventeen years. It is the funniest thing I have ever heard said in that place and it is also, and I want both of these in the same sentence, a boy of twenty-two being asked in public what he expects to be killed by and having a good answer ready because he has had one ready since he was fourteen.

Neither of them had a mark on them.

I noticed it at the time and I noted it and I did not think about it for another year, and it is in the next chapter and it is the worst thing in this book.

27 · Ashraf

*A child has been born, God,
who has never seen the road,
and who will not see it,
and who will grow up believing that a wall is what a horizon is,
and I held her this afternoon
and thought about that
and could not make it come out as a bad thing,
and I have been trying since four o'clock.*

The first child born inside the wall who never went out was a girl called Ashraf, and she was born in the November of 1945, and she is seventeen now and she is still there and she has never in her life been up that track.

There had been children born there before. Of course there had. But they had all come in from somewhere, or had gone out to the town for something at some point — a hospital, a relative, an errand — and had seen a road and a shop and other people.

Ashraf never did. There was no reason to take her out and it did not occur to anybody and she never asked.

She was two years old before she saw a stranger.

I taught her to read, incidentally. Ozra had the school by then but I did the small ones some afternoons when I could, and I taught Ashraf her letters in 1950 and she was quick and impatient and she is quick and impatient now.

And when she was about six she asked me what was on the other side of the wall.

I said: the rise, and then the track, and then the road, and then the town.

And she said: 'What is a town?'

I explained a town. Shops, streets, a bazaar, thousands of people, a mosque with two minarets, a school with two hundred girls in it.

She listened to the whole thing and thought about it and then she asked the question I have never been able to answer.

She said: 'Do they look at each other?'

I said: not like we do.

And she said: 'Then who tells them?'

I said that they could feel it themselves. That their hands and their feet worked properly, and that if a stone got into a shoe out there they would know within one step and take the shoe off.

Ashraf considered this.

And then she laughed — a proper laugh, from a six-year-old, delighted — and said: 'Every time?'

And I said yes. Every time.

And she said: 'All day? Every little thing? That is horrible.'

I have never recovered from that conversation and I have never told anybody about it, and I am putting it here because it is the exact centre of everything I have to say and because a child of six got there in eleven seconds and it took me twelve years.

She was not being clever. She was six. She had simply never been given the assumption, and so when she was handed the facts she drew the obvious conclusion from them, which is that a body that reports every single thing that touches it, all day, without stopping, from the moment you wake until the moment you sleep, is a terrible way to have to live.

She was not wrong.

That is the thing. She was not wrong, and nobody has ever been able to tell me why she was wrong, and Ozra built a school around it, and I stood at the back of the room and watched it being built and helped.

28 · Where Her Mother Stood

*I have found something out, God,
and I have checked it eleven ways
and I would like it not to be true.
It is not a comfort. Comforts do not do this.
Comforts do not run in families.
I am asking You directly and I will not ask again:
what have I opened,
and how long has it been open.*

In the spring of 1946 I noticed something and spent four months proving it and have never told a living soul, and this is the first time it has been written down.

It began with Roqi.

She had married in September and by the spring she was going in the afternoons — she had learned it at fourteen, everybody learns it at fourteen now, Ozra sees to that — and I asked her, in the ordinary way, in the kitchen, where she stood.

She said: near the wall, on the left, and she has never been past the water.

And I said, without thinking, because I had been keeping the pages for three years and the pages were in my head: that is where your mother stands.

And Roqi said: 'Yes.'

Not surprised. Not interested. In the tone of a woman being told that she has her mother's chin.

I went and got the pages.

I had forty-one interviews from 1944 and I had added to them since, and I had, by then, positions for a hundred and six people, and I spent four months in the evenings doing what I have done my whole life, which is to rule a column and fill it in.

Here is what I found and I have the sheets and I will burn them before I die.

Of the thirty-one people in that House who had a parent also in that House and also in the garden, *twenty-nine stood where their parent stood.*

Not near. Not similarly. In the position. Left wall, right wall, the shaded end, by the water, the far corner. Mothers and daughters, fathers and sons, and — this is the one that took the ground out from under me — an aunt and a niece who had never lived in the same house and had not particularly liked each other.

Two did not match. One of them was a boy whose father had died before the boy could walk. I do not know what to do with that and I have never known.

I checked it eleven ways. I asked the children before I asked the parents. I asked people who had no idea their parent had ever been asked. I asked Ozra to ask four of them for me so that it was not my voice. Nobody knew what I was doing and nobody has ever known.

Twenty-nine of thirty-one.

I sat in the school after dark with the lamp and the sheets in front of me and I understood three things in about the space of a minute and I have not slept properly since.

The first is that this is not a comfort. A comfort is a thing a frightened mind makes, and a frightened mind makes what it needs, and what a frightened mind does not do is put you in your mother's exact place beside a wall you have never seen.

The second is that it is not simply a story being passed down, because I checked for that too, and mothers do not tell their children where they stand. I asked eleven mothers. Not one of them had ever discussed it. It does not come up. You do not discuss where you stand in the garden any more than you discuss which side of the bed you sleep on.

And the third.

I stand near the wall on the right.

I have been in that place once, in March of 1943, for one afternoon, and I stood near the wall on the right, and my mother is buried in Tabriz and never sat still in her life and never heard of this place.

I am not sick. I have never been sick. I am the one person inside that wall with a body that reports to her faithfully every day like an honest servant.

And it let me in anyway. Once. When I was closer to being nobody than I have ever been.

I do not know what that means and I have not asked anybody and there is no one to ask. What I know is that I stopped, that spring, being a woman who was recording something.

29 • What We Heard

There is fighting on the road, God.

We can hear it in the evenings when the wind is right.

Two men came over the wall in the night

and we have put them in the bathhouse

and nobody has asked them anything.

I used to think that not asking was cowardice.

I have come to think it is the only skill we have

that the outside world cannot do at all.

In the winter of 1945 a government was declared in Tabriz that was not the government in Tehran, and for about a year the province I was born in was a separate country with a separate flag, and then in December of 1946 the army came back up the road and took it, and there were reprisals, and I am not going to write an account of that because I do not have one.

Here is what we had.

We had gunfire in the evenings, some weeks, when the wind was from the north. Not close. The way you hear a wedding two villages away and cannot tell what it is.

We had the road closed twice, once for nine days and once for a fortnight.

We had the consignment three weeks late in January of 1947 and then not late again, with no explanation and no apology, and the man who brought it was a different man and we never learned what had happened to the first one.

We had, in the second week of December 1946, two men in the bathhouse.

They came over the wall in the night, which anybody can do, and Bahman found them in the morning and did not raise his voice, and they were in there nine days.

They were perhaps twenty-five and thirty. They had no weapons by the time they got to us, and one of them had a wound in his side that Effat dressed and that healed badly, and they were terrified for the first two days and then they were not.

Nobody asked them anything.

I want to be very exact about this because it is the purest example I have of what that place actually was.

There was no meeting about the men in the bathhouse. Nobody voted. Nobody stood up and said that we would shelter them and nobody stood up and objected, and no one ever said out loud whether they thought the men were Democrats running from the army or army men who had run from their unit, which were the only two things they could have been and which were, in that December, the difference between two entirely opposite kinds of trouble.

Food went down twice a day. Effat did the dressing. A boy took them a blanket. Amanollah went in on the fourth day and sat with them for an hour and came out and said nothing whatever about it, then or ever.

And on the ninth day they went, in the dark, and we never found out.

The rule — and it is not a rule, it was never spoken, I am writing it down for the first time in twenty-four years — is this.

We do not ask the outside what it is.

Not from fear, though there was fear. Because the moment you ask a man which side he is on, you have taken a side, and this place is a bowl of ground eleven kilometres past the end of a road containing a hundred and six people who cannot run.

I have come to think it is the single most sophisticated thing that House ever did, and it was never designed, and nobody in it could have explained it to you, and it is the same instinct that told Effat to say twenty-two to a man with a clipboard in 1942.

They did not lie to that man to protect a secret.

They lied to him because being counted is the first step in being decided about.

30 · Sohrab

*A child has gone out, God,
and he did not want to go
and we did not want him to go
and he went,
and there was nothing anybody could do,
and I want You to know that we did nothing wrong today
and it was still the worst thing that has happened here
since the winter,
and I am beginning to wonder
whether those two facts have ever been related.*

They took Sohrab in the August of 1946 and it was entirely legal and entirely correct and nobody did anything wrong.

He was six. His mother had died in 1944 and his father was in the House and was ill in the way that the state notices, which is to say visibly, and there was a provision — there had always been a

provision, it was not new, it was not aimed at us — that a child who was not himself infected should not be raised in a leprosarium.

Nineteen people out of twenty cannot catch this thing. Sohrab had been in that place since birth and had never had a mark on him and was, like most of the children there, simply one of the nineteen.

So a man came with a paper, and Sohrab's father signed it because he could not not sign it, and a woman from a charitable institution in Tabriz came in a car with a driver and took a boy of six away to a dormitory with forty beds in it, and she was kind, and she cried on the way out, and she was doing her job and her job was correct.

I have no complaint to make about any of them. I want that in these pages, because it is the whole point and because everybody expects the other kind of story.

Nobody was cruel to Sohrab. He was fed and schooled and he is, so far as we know, alive and well and working somewhere in this country as a grown man of twenty-two.

He screamed in the yard.

That is what I have. That is what I carry from that August. A boy of six screaming in a yard, and a hundred people standing there, and his father sitting on the step with the paper still in his hand, and nobody able to do one single thing about it, and the woman from the institution saying, over and over, that he would settle, and being right.

Two things came out of that day and they have both been on my mind for sixteen years.

The first is that on the night before, Ozra took him into the school and sat with him for two hours, and I did not know what she was doing and did not ask.

I know now. She was making sure he could go.

Every child in that House learns it at fourteen and always has. He was six. She taught it to him in one evening because there was one evening.

And the second thing is the letter.

It came in 1949 — three years, no word, nothing, and then a letter written for him by somebody at the institution, in a hand that is not a child's hand, with his name signed at the bottom in a child's hand. Nine lines. He was well. He was learning a trade. He remembered the poplars. He hoped his father's health was good, which it was not, and which nobody had told him.

And then, at the bottom, in the same borrowed handwriting, because he had dictated it to somebody who did not know what he was writing:

Tell Khanum Ozra that it is the same. Tell her I still do not go past the water.

He was nine years old and he was ninety kilometres away in a dormitory in Tabriz and he had been out of that House for three years.

Ozra read it standing up, in the yard, and folded it, and put it in her pocket, and said: 'Good.'

And that is the day the House found out what it had.

PART SIX — THE BEGINNING OF THE COLD SEASON

31 • Good News

*This is the last time I am going to address You,
and I want to be fair, so I will say what I have and not what I feel.
A young man came today with a case
and everything in it was good.
Everything in it was what I asked You for
in the winter of 1943, out loud, in a kitchen, with my hands in a basin.
It has come.
It has come eleven years late and it has come to the wrong place
and I do not think that was Your doing.
I think there was simply nobody at the other end,
exactly as he said,
and I have been talking to a room.*

Sarabi died in 1946 of a thing in his stomach and the man who replaced him was twenty-nine years old and his name was Dr Tahmasbi and he came for the first time in the March of 1947 in a coat that had been bought for him.

I liked him. I want that first. He was not a fool and he was not a careerist and he had asked for this district, which nobody asks for.

He did eleven examinations an hour, the way Sarabi had, and he was faster and more thorough and he wrote everything down, and at the end of the day he came and found me because I was the one who spoke like a person from a city and because he had something he wanted to say to somebody who would understand what it was.

He had a case with him.

He put it on the table in the school and he opened it and he was so pleased that he had to stop and start again.

He said: it works.

He said the name of it, which I did write down that time, and which I am not going to put in these pages because I do not want anybody reading this to think that this is a story about a drug.

He said it had been in use for six years in America and four in India. He said the results were not partial and were not a management of symptoms and were not a slowing. He said that

people took it by mouth, over a period of years, and that the thing stopped, and that it stopped in nearly everybody, and that once it had stopped it did not come back.

He said the word cured, twice, and the second time he said it slowly because he could see I had not taken it.

I asked whether it repaired anything.

And he was honest, immediately, which is why I liked him. He said no. He said what is gone is gone — a dead nerve does not come back, a hand that has closed does not open, an eye that has clouded does not clear. He said: I cannot give anybody back a finger.

He said: but nobody here will lose another one.

I want to set down what I felt in that room because I have been accused of a great deal in my own head over the last fifteen years and this at least I can answer.

I was happy. Completely, stupidly, physically happy, in a way I had not been since before the war. I put both hands flat on that table and I laughed, and Tahmasbi laughed, and I said something like *at last* and he said *yes, at last*, and neither of us was performing.

I thought of Robab, who was twenty-four, and of the boys, and of Zohreh's foot, and of every single grave behind that kitchen, all of which were, without exception, the graves of people who had been killed by not being told — and I understood that from this March onward nobody in that bowl of ground would ever be added to that ground for that reason again.

That is what was in the case.

I have had fifteen years to be honest about the next part and I am going to be.

Somewhere in the second hour, while he was still talking, while I was still glad, a small cold thing arrived at the back of my mind and sat down and did not say anything.

It had been sitting in me since the October of 1941 and a cigarette put out on a wall.

And I did not identify it, and I did not speak, and I went on being happy for the rest of that day.

32 · What It Would Mean

—

The first meeting was four days later and it was not a meeting either. It was eleven people in the school in the evening because that is who came, and it went on until after midnight, and there was nothing decided at all.

Tahmasbi had left the case. He was coming back in six weeks. He had left enough to begin nineteen people and had said, cheerfully, that within a year he expected to have enough for everybody and that we should start with the worst.

I want to set out what was in that room, as flatly as I can, because everything afterwards was decided by it and because I have read what the world writes about places like ours and the world thinks this decision was made by a monster in a locked room.

Here is what was in the room.

Bahman spoke first, because Bahman always speaks first when he does not understand something. He wanted to know what happened after. Not medically. He said: I am forty-three, I have this pair of hands, I am not going to get better hands. What am I doing in two years?

And Effat said: you are doing what you are doing now.

And Bahman said: no, Khanum, because in two years there is no reason for me to be here.

That was the whole thing. That is the entire argument and it was in the room in the first four minutes, spoken by a man who could not have constructed it on paper.

Because Bahman was correct.

I am going to lay it out the way it lay out that night.

A hundred and six people were in that bowl of ground for exactly one reason: the state and their families and the towns had decided

they should be somewhere else. That is the only thing every person in that place had in common. It was the reason there was a consignment. It was the reason nobody came up that track. It was the reason we were left alone.

Cure them, and within a few years there is a hundred and six people, average age forty-four, with no land, no trade that anybody would hire, hands that could not do most work and faces that would not be served in a shop, no families that would have them back — a great many of whom had been given up for dead by relatives in the thirties — and no legal reason whatever to be receiving a monthly cart.

The cart stops. That is not cruelty. There is no entitlement for cured people. The whole apparatus, thin as it was, exists because of an illness, and when the illness goes, the apparatus goes, and the people do not.

Golnaz said the second thing and she said it standing up.

She said: I am not talking about the cart. I am talking about Ashraf.

Ashraf was two. Ashraf had never seen a road.

Golnaz said: there are thirty-one children in that school. Nineteen of them will never have this thing because they cannot get it. Every one of them stays here because their parents are here. Cure the parents and the parents are dispersed and the children go with them into a town, and what are they in a town? They are the children from the leper village. Every one of them, for the rest of their lives, in a place where everybody knows.

She said: in here they are children. Out there they are a story about somebody's childhood.

And then Amanollah asked the question that nobody had asked.

He was fifty-three. He had been doing the rites for four years with nothing at the other end. He had said nothing for two hours.

He said: 'How many will it save?'

Nobody understood him.

He said: 'We have been talking about what we lose. I would like the other number. If we take it — all of us, tomorrow — how many people who would otherwise die will not die?'

And nobody could answer, because nobody knew, and Tahmasbi was not there.

So Ozra opened the exercise book.

She had, by then, nine years of it. Every arrival, every death, every cause, in that small upright hand that never varied. She did it there, at the table, in front of eleven people, with a pencil, and it took her about twenty minutes and nobody spoke while she did it.

And she said: about one a year. Perhaps one and a half.

Then she said the rest of it, because she is thorough and because she does not soften anything.

She said: but not from the disease. Nobody here dies of the disease. They die because they were not told — a foot, a stove, an eye that stopped closing. The drug stops the thing from taking any more warnings away. It does not give back the warnings that are already gone. Every person in this room who is already blind will still be blind, and every person whose hands have closed will still have closed hands, and every one of those people can still die of a stove.

She closed the book.

She said: 'The Looking saves those. Not the drug. The drug saves the ones who have not lost it yet, which is the children, and the children are not the ones being offered it, because he said start with the worst.'

I have thought about that for fifteen years and I have never found the error in it and I have looked.

33 · What Amanollah Proposed

—

It was the fourth meeting and it was the middle of May and it had been going nowhere for six weeks, and it was going nowhere because everybody in that room was decent and nobody would say the thing.

Amanollah said it.

I want to describe him as he was that night because everybody who reads this will want him to be someone else. He was fifty-three and he had been in that place nine years and he had buried, by my count, thirty-one people with his own hands, including eleven in five weeks in a winter when the ground was frozen. He had lost God in March of 1943 and had told one person and had gone on saying the words every single time anybody asked, for four years, at night, holding hands he could not feel, with nothing at the other end at all.

He was the kindest man I have known and I do not say that loosely and I am not saying it to soften what follows.

He said: 'We should take it slowly.'

Somebody said that we did not have a choice about the speed, that Tahmasbi would bring what he brought.

And Amanollah said: 'No. I mean we should ask him to bring less.'

There was a silence of some length.

He explained it patiently, the way he explained everything, and he had clearly been working on it for weeks and had not enjoyed any of it.

He said: if we take it fully, this place ends in five years. Not because anybody closes it. Because there is no reason for it, and the cart stops, and the young ones go first, and then it is thirty old people in a bowl of ground with no kitchen and no school and no one to look at their feet, and they die of stoves, one after another, and there is nobody to write it down.

He said: and if we do not take it at all, then we are choosing that children get this thing, and I will not do that and neither will anybody in this room.

He said: so there is a third thing.

And he laid it out. He had it exact. He had been to see Tahmasbi in the town, on his own, twice, and had asked him questions about doses in the manner of a man who was simply anxious about his

people, and Tahmasbi had answered him fully because why would he not.

Amanollah said: it does not work at a fifth. At about a fifth of what he wants to give, it holds the thing in place. It does not clear it and it does not let it run. A person on that does not get worse quickly and does not get better at all. They live a long time. Thirty years, he thinks. They do not go blind fast. Their hands take twenty years instead of eight.

He said: and they remain, on any paper anybody looks at, ill.

I said — and I am the one who said it, and I am glad I said it and it changed nothing — ‘That is thirty years of it.’

And Amanollah said: ‘Yes.’

I said: ‘You are proposing that we keep it.’

And he said the sentence that I have carried since and that I have never repeated to anybody until this page.

He said: ‘I am proposing that we keep the reason they leave us alone.’

Then he sat down and put his hat on the table and said one more thing, and this is the part that nobody would believe of him and that I have to write because it is true.

He said: ‘I want it recorded that this is the worst thing I have ever thought of, and that I thought of it, and that nobody asked me to.’

34 • The Vote

—

We voted on the eleventh of June, 1947, in the yard, after the evening Looking, because that was when everybody was already outside.

A hundred and six people. Everybody over fourteen, which was seventy-one.

There was no speech. Effat said what it was in about nine words, in the way that Effat says things, and there was no argument in the

yard because six weeks of argument had already happened in the school and everybody knew where everybody stood.

They did it by hand, in the last of the light.

Fifty-eight for. Nine against. Four did not raise a hand at all and nobody made them.

I voted for it.

I am going to explain why, and I am not going to explain it in a way that makes it acceptable, because it is not acceptable and I have known that from the moment my arm went up.

I did not vote for it because I was persuaded by Amanollah's arithmetic, although his arithmetic was correct.

I did not vote for it because of Bahman's hands or the cart or the children in Ozra's school, although all of that was true and all of it would have happened.

I voted for it because of April 1936.

Because eleven years before that evening I had sat in a staff room in Tabriz and decided that a woman called Farideh was going to be cured of her backwardness whether she liked it or not, and I had signed my name to it, and I had been proud, and a man in an office had been perfectly kind about it, and a girl of fourteen had been taken out of a school and put in a house.

And here was another cure, arriving from outside, in a case, carried by a good young man in a coat that had been bought for him, who was entirely certain and entirely well-meaning and entirely correct about the medicine.

And I was going to be asked, again, whether the people it was being done to should have any say in it.

I raised my hand.

I want to be very clear that this is not a defence. I have set it out honestly and I can see what it is. What I did in that yard was let a hundred and six people go on being ill for thirty years, in order to settle an account with myself from eleven years earlier, in a city, about a woman I never apologised to.

Amanollah did not raise his hand.

He proposed it, and he argued for it for six weeks, and he did not vote. He stood at the edge of the yard with his hands at his sides and let it happen and did not participate in it, and when I asked him about it afterwards, he said: 'I am not going to be one of the ones who chose. Somebody has to be able to say afterwards that he did not choose.'

I said: 'That is a distinction without much practical consequence.'

Which is what I had said to Ozra about the exercise book, in 1938, in my second week, and I heard myself say it and I heard it land.

Amanollah smiled at me. He was not offended. He was the least offendable man I have met.

He said: 'Khanum, it is the only thing I have left.'

He died in the spring of 1953. He did the rites for a hundred and forty-one people in fifteen years and he never once said that anything came back, and by the end there were two boys he had trained who could do it as well as he could, and one of them does it now.

The arrangement with Tahmasbi took about a year to settle and I am not going to describe how it was done, because it does not matter and because the mechanism is dull and administrative and was mostly a matter of a quantity being requested in a letter and never being questioned by anybody at the other end, for twenty-two years, by four different men, none of whom ever came to look.

Nobody at the other end. That was Amanollah's whole discovery, in the end, and it applied to more than one thing.

35 · The Cold Season

I am not writing to You any more.

*I did it for nine years and it was a habit and it was company
and I have stopped, and I want to be accurate about why.*

It is not that I decided You were not there.

*It is that I noticed I had been writing to the House the entire time —
to this ground, these people, this wall we made out of the ground —*

*and that it had been answering me every single day
in the plainest possible language,
and that I had been so busy addressing the ceiling
that it took me nine years to look down.*

So. To the House.

You have my whole life. You are welcome to it.

I would like to say that you did not ask for it,

but you did, in the winter of 1943, in a kitchen, in four words,

and I have never once been able to put it down.

Golnaz asked me, in the autumn of 1947, why I had voted the way I did.

We were doing the sheets, which is where everything in my life has been said.

I told her the truth. All of it — Farideh, the letter, the school paper, the eighteen months, the corridor. It took about twenty minutes and she did not interrupt once and her hands did not stop.

At the end she said: 'So you voted about a woman in Tabriz.'

I said yes.

She said: 'Homa.' She almost never uses it. In nineteen years I could count it.

I said: 'Yes. About a woman in Tabriz.'

And Golnaz said: 'Khanum. You have been here nine years. There are three hundred people in this country who could have voted about a woman in Tabriz. Not one of them would have voted the way you did, because not one of them would have thought there was anything to vote about.'

I said that was not the point.

And she said: 'It is exactly the point. You did the right thing for a reason that is nothing to do with us, and it is still the right thing, and you are going to sit in that basin for the rest of your life anyway.' She wrung out a sheet. 'Do you know what your problem is? You want to have done it for the correct reason. Nobody here has ever done anything for the correct reason. We do the thing and

then we work out why afterwards and mostly we are wrong about that too.'

I said: 'And that does not trouble you?'

And Golnaz Sadeghi, who was twenty-eight years old, who had buried her mother in a frozen February, who had taught nine people how to leave their own afternoons, and who has one working hand now and still does the kohl at every wedding in that House, said:

'No. Because the sheets get clean either way.'

Tahmasbi came back in the November with the reduced quantity and did not query it and never queried it in the four years he had the district, and I do not know to this day whether he understood. I have decided that he did not. I have decided it in the way you decide a thing you would rather not test.

And that winter, in the January of 1948, a man from the ministry came up the track — the second and last outsider to come to us with a clipboard in twenty-four years — to ask why the requisition had changed and to satisfy himself that the arrangement was in order.

He talked to Ozra for about an hour in the school and drank three glasses of tea and went away satisfied.

I asked her afterwards what she had told him.

And she said: 'I told him we are in the cold season.'

I said: 'What does that mean?'

Ozra put the pen down, which she almost never did.

'It means it is winter here,' she said, 'and it is going to be winter here, and we know it, and we are not asking anybody to make it spring. He wrote it in his book. He thought it was a country expression and he was charmed by it and now he can go home.'

She picked the pen back up.

'It is not an expression,' she said. 'It is the most accurate sentence anybody has ever said about this place, and I will go on saying it to

every one of them who ever comes up that track, and not one of them will ever ask me what I mean.'

Nobody ever did.

36 · Whenever You Are Ready

—
I am fifty years old and it is the spring of 1962 and there is a young woman from Tehran in my house.

She has been here four days. She came up that track in a hired Jeep with a cameraman and a permit, and she has a face like somebody who has decided in advance not to flinch and is finding it harder than she expected, and I have watched two hundred people spend four days being extremely careful with her.

I do not know what will come of it. Ozra has views. Ozra has had views for six weeks and has been in the school with the door shut and I have not asked her, because I have got very good at not asking, and because I am fifty and have discovered that the last freedom available to a woman my age is the freedom to be told things later.

I have not been in the garden since 1943 and I do not expect to go again.

I still cannot sit still. I have tried perhaps four hundred times in twenty-four years and I get to eleven minutes and my hand goes to my face and at nineteen minutes I get up and go and find something to do. I am the only person over fourteen inside this wall who cannot do it. The children know. They are kind about it in the way that children are kind, which is to say not at all, and there is a whole thing they do that I am not going to describe.

Effat died in 1955. Bahman is alive and is fifty-eight and has one eye and his nail is in the tin. Golnaz has one working hand and does the kohl. Roqi has three children and the eldest stands where her mother stands, near the wall, on the left, and has never gone past the water.

Ashraf is seventeen and has never seen a road.

She is going to. That is a separate matter and it is coming and I know it is coming.

They want to film in here this morning. The young woman has asked, very politely, twice, and the second time she did not push, which I noticed and which is the reason I have said yes.

She wants me at the shelf.

There is a small mirror on it with flowers painted round the frame, propped against the wall, and beside it the teapot that has been on that shelf since before the wall, which came from my mother's house in Tabriz in a bag in 1938 and is the only thing I brought.

She has asked me to do what I do in the mornings, which is to stand there and put my scarf right.

I said that this was not very interesting and she said that it was, and I have been doing this long enough to know when I am being handled, and I have decided to allow it.

So I am going to put down this pen, and go and stand in front of that mirror, and look at my own face, which is the one face inside this wall that nothing has ever happened to.

And she is going to say whenever you are ready.

And I am going to be ready, because I have been ready since 1938, and because there has never once been anybody there to say it to me.

GLOSSARY

Akhound aa-KHOOND — Persian. A Muslim cleric; a member of the religious class. Under Reza Shah the clergy were stripped of the courts, of control over religious endowments, and even of the licensed right to wear clerical dress without documentation.

Amanollah a-maan-ol-LAAH — Arabic, via Persian. Literally the security or protection of God. The Sheikh who came to bury one woman in 1938 and stayed nine years.

Ashraf ash-RAF — Arabic, via Persian. Most noble. The first child born inside the wall who never went out.

Azeri a-ZEH-ree — Turkic. The Turkic language spoken across north-western Iran, including the region around the House. Distinct from Persian and not mutually intelligible with it.

Bahman bah-MAN — Persian, from Avestan Vohu Manah. Good mind or good purpose; also the eleventh month of the Iranian calendar. A roofer, and the holder of the House record.

Chador chaa-DOR — Persian. Literally a tent. The full outer covering worn by women, banned by decree in 1936 and enforced in the street by police.

Chahārbāgh chaa-haar-BAAGH — Persian. Literally four gardens. The classical Persian walled garden: four quarters divided by watercourses, enclosed against the desert. The oldest surviving image of paradise in the language — the English word paradise descends from an Old Persian term meaning a walled enclosure.

Che khabar che kha-BAR — Persian. Literally what news. An entirely ordinary greeting. Inside the House it is also a status report: whether any part of the body has troubled itself to send word.

Effat ef-FAT — Arabic, via Persian. Chastity, modesty. The woman whose sentences are four words long and end discussions before they start.

Farideh fa-ree-DEH — Persian. Unique, precious. A teacher in Tabriz who kept her daughters home in 1936.

Golnaz gol-NAAZ — Persian. Literally flower-grace. Nineteen in 1938; still doing the kohl at every wedding in 1962.

Habib ha-BEEB — Arabic, via Persian. Beloved. Born inside the wall; married in the yard in 1945.

Hich khabari nist HEECH kha-ba-REE NEEST — Persian. There is no news. The standard reply to che khabar, and in the House a report that nothing has been felt.

Homa ho-MAA — Persian. The mythical bird of Persian legend, said never to land. The narrator.

Khāmūshī khaa-moo-SHEE — Persian. Silence; quietness; the state of being extinguished. The name given in the House to the condition entered in the flat hour of the afternoon, and to the practice that produces it.

Khāneh KHAA-neh — Persian. House, home, dwelling. What the residents called the place. The state, on the one card that recorded it, called it a station.

Khanum KHAA-noom — Persian. Lady, madam. A term of respect used before or after a woman's name, or on its own.

Kohl KOL — Arabic, via Persian. Dark powder applied along the eyelid, used across the region for many centuries by women and men alike.

Mehmān meh-MAAN — Persian. Guest; visitor; one who is received. The name given in the House to the presence that stands behind a person in the garden, coined as a joke — you set a place for a guest, and you do not ask him when he is leaving.

Mokhtar mokh-TAAR — Arabic, via Persian. The chosen one. The drummer at the wedding, who played with the flats of both hands.

Negāh ne-GAAH — Persian. A look; a glance; the act of looking at. The House's evening inspection, performed in pairs at the bell, in which each person's feet, shoes, hands, forearms and face are examined by another, because their own bodies will not report

injury to them.

Nowruz no-ROOZ — Persian. Literally new day. The Iranian new year, falling at the spring equinox; the oldest continuously observed festival in the country.

Ozra OZ-raa — Arabic, via Persian. Virgin, maiden. Twenty-six on arrival, already ill, already writing things down.

Qur'an kor-AAN — Arabic. The scripture of Islam.

Roqi ro-GHEE — Persian, diminutive. Familiar form of Roghayyeh. Nineteen at her wedding in 1945.

Sakineh sa-kee-NEH — Arabic, via Persian. Tranquillity; the calm that descends. The woman who poured the tea.

Shahnameh shaah-naa-MEH — Persian. The Book of Kings, completed by Ferdowsi around 1010, the national epic of Iran and the longest poem ever written by a single author. Read aloud in the school in the afternoons.

Sohrab soh-RAAB — Persian. A hero of the Shahnameh, killed in single combat by his own father, who does not recognise him until it is too late. The first child taken out of the House.

Tar TAAR — Persian. A long-necked, waisted, plucked string instrument played across Iran and the Caucasus.

Zohreh zoh-REH — Persian. Venus, the planet. The woman whose foot changed how everybody in that place lived for twenty-three years.

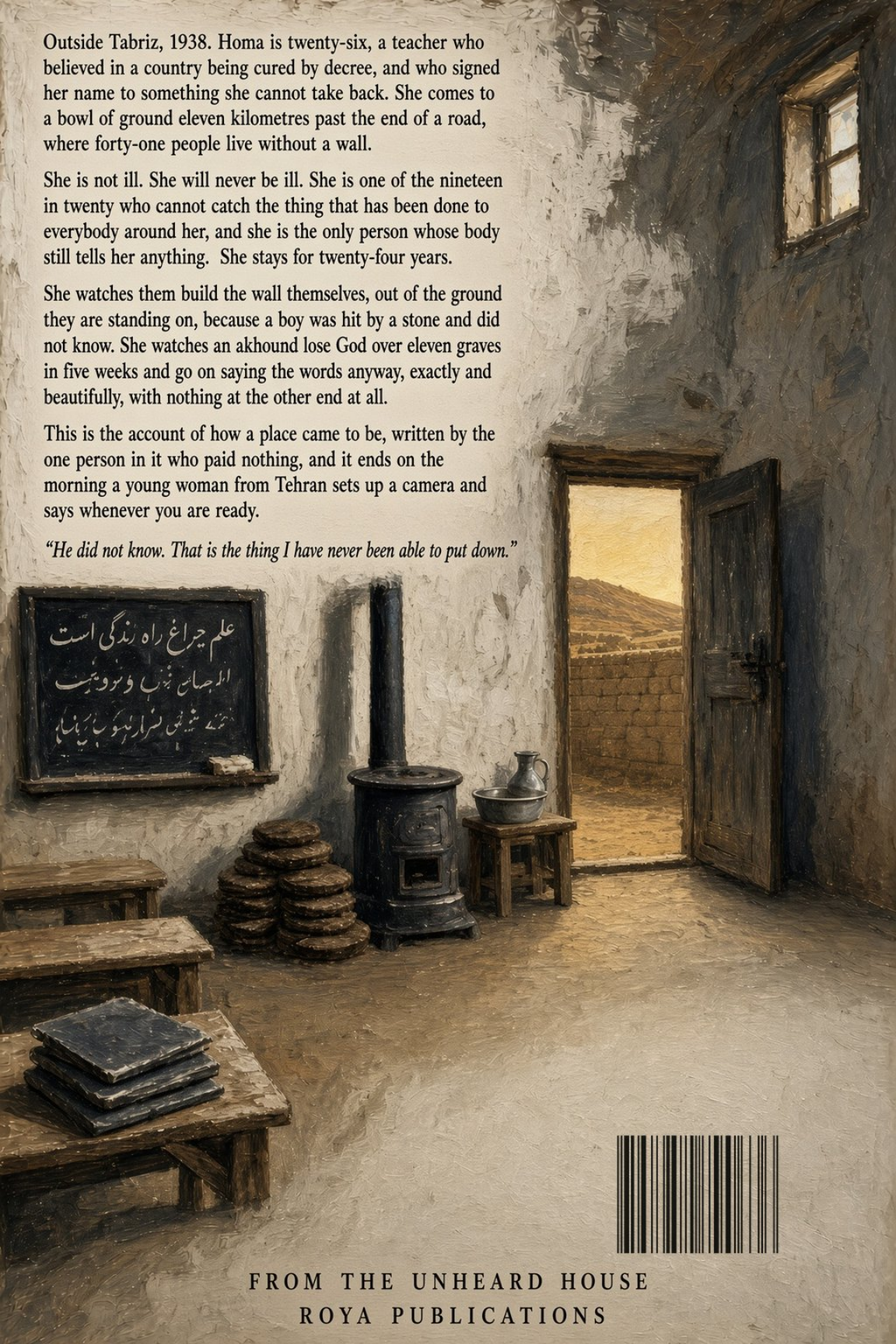
Outside Tabriz, 1938. Homa is twenty-six, a teacher who believed in a country being cured by decree, and who signed her name to something she cannot take back. She comes to a bowl of ground eleven kilometres past the end of a road, where forty-one people live without a wall.

She is not ill. She will never be ill. She is one of the nineteen in twenty who cannot catch the thing that has been done to everybody around her, and she is the only person whose body still tells her anything. She stays for twenty-four years.

She watches them build the wall themselves, out of the ground they are standing on, because a boy was hit by a stone and did not know. She watches an akhound lose God over eleven graves in five weeks and go on saying the words anyway, exactly and beautifully, with nothing at the other end at all.

This is the account of how a place came to be, written by the one person in it who paid nothing, and it ends on the morning a young woman from Tehran sets up a camera and says whenever you are ready.

"He did not know. That is the thing I have never been able to put down."



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