

ROYA
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No. 70

UNDER HIS OWN NAME

به نام خودش

C H E W Z

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Chew Z

Printed in the Reach

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FROM THE DELGOSHĀ

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Word went round that the cat had repented.
The mice chose seven and sent them with sugar and gifts.
He received them kindly. He wept at their kindness.
Then he took five, and let two go home to tell it.

THE STANDING OF THE CASE

The second day

There is an old Persian book in which a prince is accused of something he did not do and cannot answer the charge, because his teacher has forbidden him to speak for seven days. Seven ministers take turns telling the king stories, one day at a time, to hold off the execution until the boy is permitted to open his mouth. Nobody in that book ever argues. Nobody produces a witness or a document. They only tell stories, and the stories are the entire distance between a young man and a rope.

The first of these notebooks was kept by a man who supplies jokes and does not perform them, who has not laughed in eighteen years, and whose younger brother said eleven of his words out loud in a basement, on a stage, under his own name.

That was the first day.

The brother has not come home. The words have. They are still going round, and they have stopped belonging to anybody, and a great many people have found a use for them.

This is the second.

Manuchehr Delgoshā is forty-seven and has never been on a stage. He writes for a satirical channel that does not know his surname, for three comedians who each believe they are his only client, and for a state programme that pays properly and takes his teeth out. His name means *heart-opening*, and nobody who has ever bought his work has said it aloud. He has not laughed in eighteen years, which is not unhappiness: he sees the shape of a laugh arriving before the room does, and the seeing kills it in him in advance. He works in the third hour of the night, and he will tell you that at three in the morning you do not build the joke. You take dictation.

His brother is younger. He is the one who said the eleven words,

and he has not come home.

Vahid has brokered the work for nineteen years, takes forty per cent and explains it as a kindness about twice a year. In nineteen years his only note has been *make it shorter*. He has been wrong twice, and Manu remembers both.

His father calibrates industrial scales, and carries a case of eleven certified weights in green felt into bakeries and scrapyards to establish whether the world in that room is telling the truth about how much things weigh. He has no sense of humour at all — the faculty is simply absent, the way some people cannot smell — and he knows it. He reads every page of his son's new material every Friday and says it is good work. He has not said his younger son's name aloud since the Tuesday of the clip.

His mother is funnier than either of them and has never told a joke. She describes things accurately at the wrong moment and people fall apart. She still lays a place for her younger son.

And **eleven**. He reaches for it whenever he has not counted — eleven people, eleven years, eleven machines — and he has done it since he was ten and has never once heard himself do it.

SYNOPSIS

Three years after a basement in the south of the city, eleven words are still travelling. They are on a wall in Narmak. They are in a caption under a photograph of a cat. A comedian says them on state television, slightly wrong, and gets the biggest laugh of his career, and believes without any dishonesty at all that he wrote them.

Manucheher Delgoshā wrote them, in February, on tea, and gave them to nobody.

He cannot say so. Saying so requires a sentence he will not put in his own mouth: *that line is mine, and my brother took it, and look where he is*. So he does the only thing his trade has ever taught him. He begins to write over it — more material, better material, pushed out faster, two stories for every one of theirs — trying to bury a story he is not able to correct.

Ninety-nine entries, some seven pages and some three lines, in a form borrowed from a fourteenth-century treatise that has been censored in every edition printed since. A screenshot forwarded so many times you can see three other people's phones inside the frame. A woman who paints over the same wall four times and has views on the handwriting. A man who filmed something once and has been describing the room ever since.

And, on the last page, forty seconds of a clip from a room he cannot place, by somebody who is doing it right.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

A joke has no author. That is the first thing anybody in this trade learns and the last thing any of them accepts.

Everything else we make carries a name somewhere on it. A song has a writer even when nobody checks. A photograph has a person who stood in a particular place. But a joke arrives in your ear from a taxi driver, who had it from his nephew, who had it from a group of eleven people, and by then it has no origin and no address and no way back, and this is not a failure of the form. It is the form. A joke is the only sentence in the language that can be transmitted without a sender. It is why it survives in places where a sender would be arrested.

And it means the thing is out of your hands the moment it works. Not gradually. Immediately, and completely, and forever.

I have been interested for some time in what that does to a person who is good at it. Not the theft — theft is ordinary and everybody in every trade has been robbed. The stranger problem underneath: that a man can make something excellent, watch it become the property of an entire country, and have no standing to say so, and would not be believed if he did, and would be endangering somebody if he tried.

There is a further turn, which is the one this book is actually about. When a thing has no author, people do not leave the space empty. They fill it. They put a person in it who suits them — braver, or stupider, or more sinister, or safely dead. The version that gets repeated is not the true one. It is the useful one.

This is a book about a man watching that happen to his brother, at speed, in public, and being professionally equipped to do exactly one thing about it, which is the wrong thing.

Chew Z

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I. THE WORDS COME LOOSE

1.

There is a wall in Narmak with the line on it.

Not the whole line. Someone has done seven of the eleven words in white paint, in a hand like a schoolteacher's, and then either run out of wall or run out of nerve, and the last four are missing, and the sentence still works.

That is the part I keep coming back to. It works with seven. I built it in February with all eleven because eleven was what it needed, and I was wrong, and it took a stranger with a brush and a shortage of wall to prove it.

I stood there for a while. A woman came out of the building behind me and asked whether I was all right, in the voice people use when they have decided you are not.

I said I was looking at the wall.

She said: they'll have that off by Thursday.

2.

Vahid called and said: Manu. Everything is fine.

He has never in twenty-two years opened with that.

3.

The café in Yousefabad has it burned into a wooden board by the till, under the prices, in a pokerwork script with a flower at each end.

I asked the man who owns it where he got it and he said his nephew did the board and he does not know where the nephew got anything.

He said people like it. He said two or three a week take a photograph of the board and he has stopped minding, and one woman asked whether she could buy the board.

I drink there about once a fortnight. He puts the tea down and says *engineer* and goes away, and neither of us has ever had a

conversation longer than eleven words, and he has my best sentence on his wall in fire and does not know my name.

4.

The dollar did what it does. My rent is now a subscription to the idea of a rent.

5.

The state of it, as of this week, so far as I can establish.

It is on the wall in Narmak. It is in a caption under a photograph of a cat sitting in a shoe, which is where I would have put it if I were nineteen and had no idea what I had. It is the last line of a poem in a magazine, uncredited, and the poem is not good and the line is doing all the work.

It is on a wooden sign outside a café in Yousefabad, burned into the wood, next to the prices.

A man on the radio used it in an argument about the price of chicken and did not appear to know he was quoting anything.

And it is on television now, once a week, in the mouth of a man who thinks he made it, which is the entry I am not going to write yet.

6.

Cats are safe is what they say in the trade when a joke has come loose. It comes from the captions. A line that will not survive on its own gets a cat under it and lives for eleven years.

Mine got a cat under it in the first month.

I have thought about that cat more than is defensible.

from the Delgoshā

*A cat announced that he had repented, and stood in
the doorway of the mosque and wept. The mice
sent a delegation of seven to congratulate him. He
ate five and released two, and the two went home
and reported that he was sincere.*

7.

Here is how a thing travels, since nobody outside the trade seems to know and everybody outside the trade has opinions.

It does not travel because it is funny. This is the first thing you unlearn. Funny is necessary and it is nowhere near sufficient, and a great deal of very funny material dies in the room it was born in and is never seen again, and I have written a fair amount of it.

It travels because it is short. Under fourteen words a thing can be repeated exactly by somebody who was not paying attention. Over fourteen it gets paraphrased, and a paraphrase is a death, because the shape goes and the shape is the whole animal. Eleven words will survive a bad memory, a bad line, and a man who is doing three other things.

It travels because it can be said in the first person by somebody it did not happen to. This is the one nobody guesses. The best-travelling material in this country is not about anything specific enough to have an owner. If you build a joke about your own aunt, it goes forty people. If you build the same joke about the arrangement everybody's aunt is inside, it goes to two million, because two million people can say it as though they thought of it, and they are not lying when they do. They did think of it. They just did not think of it first.

And it travels because it costs nothing to pass on. Somebody who repeats a fact can be asked where they got it. Somebody who repeats a joke cannot, and knows they cannot, and this is felt rather than reasoned, and it is why the material moves fastest in the months when nothing else does.

I built a line in February that was eleven words, first person, about an arrangement rather than a person, and cost nothing to pass on.

I have been very good at my job for a long time.

8.

There is a man in the south who runs the room. Not the one my brother was in — another one, the same shape, they are all the same shape.

Sixty chairs he gets from wherever chairs come from. A blanket for a curtain. He takes nothing at the door because taking something at the door makes it an event, and an event has an organiser, and an organiser is a person somebody can go and see.

He told me once that he has three rules and they are all the same rule, which is that nobody films.

I asked how he enforces it.

He said he does not. He said he says it at the beginning in a voice that makes people feel it would be rude, and that in eleven years it has failed twice.

Twice in eleven years. That is a better rate than any law in this country has ever achieved and he does it with tone.

9.

The chair, the radio at the volume where a man is talking, the bottle, and the cap I have never used.

The nose at twelve minutes past. The forearms. The scalp.

Nothing that night. Nothing the next night. Four nights of nothing, which is not a record but is in the top eleven.

10.

My mother called about Mrs Nikkhah's son, who has taken up cycling at fifty-six, and described the trousers.

Two minutes on the trousers. The colour, the fit, the difficulty of the fit, the effect of the fit on the neighbours, and the neighbours' decision to say nothing, and the exact quality of the nothing they are saying.

I put the phone on the arm of the chair.

She said: Manuchehr. Is the line bad again.

11.

I subtitled a scene this week in which a man is caught in a lie and says, in English, *I can explain*, and the studio audience laughs for four seconds.

There is no way to do it. *Man begam* is not it. *Bezar begam* is not it. The English is funny because in that country a man who is caught believes an explanation is a thing that exists and is available to him.

I put in something else entirely. It is better. Nine hundred thousand people will watch that film this year and every one of them will assume the American wrote it, and this has never bothered me for one hour of my life until this year.

12.

Ninety metres from the counter to the corner, and on Sunday that walk cost me the price of two kilos of rice, and nobody in the transaction did anything wrong.

from the Delgoshā

*They asked the scribe why he had copied the book
so slowly. He said, I was not copying it, I was
deciding what it had said.*

13.

The pharmacy man asked whether my mother's knee had improved and then told me his daughter has a stipend now, and said the number, and we both looked at it for a second.

I have known him eleven years.

He asked, without any weight on it, whether there was news.

I said no.

He said: God is great. Which from him means: I am not going to ask you again, and I will ask you again.

14.

I have a folder for the versions and I have started dating them, which is the behaviour of somebody who has begun to think of himself as an archive.

The February one is the original and there is no copy of it except in the notebook and in me.

The Karaj one, from the night, has a word soft in the middle — I said it on my feet and I said it slightly wrong and forty people did not notice, and that is the version my brother heard, because he was not there but somebody was, and it came to him down a wire with a soft middle.

So what he said on that stage was not what I wrote. It was already one generation out.

Nobody in the world can be told this.

15.

(2019, a room in Karaj, forty people, biggest laugh of the night:)

He's the only one in the family with a fixed address.

16.

I have started keeping the versions. Not the good ones. The wrong ones. Where a word has moved, where somebody has put *the* in

front of a noun that had no *the*, where the rhythm has taken a hit somewhere between a nephew and an uncle and never recovered.

There are nine so far. I am going to say there are eleven, because that is what I would say, and then I will count them again in a month and there will be eleven, and that will prove nothing.

17.

They have announced that the shortage is a rumour, and asked people not to spread it, using the only distribution network the country has, which is people spreading things.

18.

Amir Kabir, for a hinge.

He said the man who used to make this hinge died in the spring and the son does not want the shop, and he showed me the last four in a drawer, and said when these are gone the whole building will have to change its doors.

He was not being sad about it. He was being accurate, which in this country is frequently mistaken for being sad.

19.

The chair again. The bottle again.

At four in the morning I wrote down, in the good notebook, on the shelf: *a thing that works with seven of its eleven words was overbuilt.*

At five I wrote underneath it: *or the wall was short.*

Both of those are true and only one of them lets me sleep.

II. THE OWNER

20.

Snapp at eleven at night because of the rain and the driver had it on the radio and turned it up.

Not the line. A song, and then an advertisement, and then a man doing a segment about the price of things, and in the segment the man used the line, and used it correctly, with the funny word in the right place, and the driver laughed and hit the wheel.

He said: that one is good.

I said it is good.

He said: they are all stealing from each other now, the whole lot of them.

I said I had heard that.

He said his cousin writes for one of them and gets nothing, and that if he had a son he would break his hands before he let him do it, and then he asked if the heat was too much, and I said it was fine, and we did not speak again for eleven minutes.

21.

His name is not going in this notebook.

He is on television on Thursdays. He is somewhere in his thirties. He came up through a competition, which means he has been graded in public by four men in good jackets and survived it, and that does something to a person's timing that never entirely comes out.

Two months ago he did four minutes about the price of things, and in the middle of it, with no setup and no signal, he said my line.

Slightly wrong. He has moved a word. It is the seventh word and he has put it eighth, which flattens the middle and pushes the funny word one place off the end.

It got the biggest laugh of the programme's year.

22.

I have watched it forty times, which is professional, and eleven of those times were with the sound off, which is not.

23.

He believes he wrote it.

I want to be careful here, because this is the entry that most people would get wrong, and because getting it wrong would be more comfortable for me.

He is not stealing. I have seen stealing. Stealing has a face on it — a slight over-delivery, a fractional pause before the good part, the look of a man setting down luggage that is not his. He does none of that. He walks into it like a room in his own house.

Somewhere in the last three years he heard it, in a car or a queue or a wedding, and did not register it, and it went down into wherever those things go. And then one night at whatever his version of three in the morning is, it came up **complete**, with the shape already on it and the funny word already near the end, and he wrote it out at speed and felt the thing you feel.

I know exactly what he felt. I have felt it perhaps four hundred times and it is the only reason I have a spine curved the way mine is.

He has no way of telling the difference. **Neither do I.** That is the entry.

24.

Every minister in this country holds the same qualification, and it is not a degree.

25.

Vahid says: leave it.

He says it in the café, back to the wall, with the food he ordered for both of us without asking, and correctly.

He says the man is on a state programme, and the programme has a producer, and the producer has a brother-in-law, and at some point in the sentence he stops describing television and starts describing something else, and does not signal the change, and we both let it go past.

Then he says: also you cannot prove it.

I said I have it in a notebook with a date on it.

He said: Manu. So does a madman.

26.

Two hours today on a scene in which an American is being sarcastic to a traffic warden.

There is no sarcasm to a traffic warden here. There is either money or there is a very long formal courtesy that both of you know is a weapon, and the second one is funnier and takes eleven more characters than the subtitle will hold.

I did it as courtesy and I cut the article and it fits and it is better than the original.

Somebody in Ahvaz will laugh at that line in a stolen file at two in the morning and will believe an American wrote it, and I will not know, and this is either the purest form of the trade or the whole disease, and it has been twenty years and I still cannot tell which.

27.

Make it shorter is the only note he has ever given me and in twenty-two years he has been wrong twice.

This is not one of them.

from the Delgoshā

*A man lost a coin in the road and a stranger found
it and spent it on bread, and the bread was eaten
by a third man, who was grateful to nobody, and
the coin was in every part of this and belonged to
none of them.*

28.

The screenshot came to me fourth-hand and it is the most informative object I have handled this year.

It is a photograph of a screen, which is showing a photograph of a screen, which is showing a photograph of a screen, which is showing the clip.

Four generations, three phones nested inside the frame like a set of doors left open. And each one has kept a strip of its owner along the top — a battery percentage, a signal bar, the corner of a wallpaper, the time.

The outermost is at 4 per cent, which tells you something about the person and nothing about the thing.

The second has a wallpaper I recognise, because everybody's has it.

The third is at 11:42 at night and has two bars, which means a basement or a stairwell or a car.

And the innermost, which is the one that matters, is 2 per cent and eleven minutes past one in the morning, and that is somebody who has been holding a dying phone at one in the morning, watching a clip of a young man in a basement, and has chosen to spend the last of his battery sending it on rather than telling anybody where he is.

I have looked at that strip for a long time. It is four millimetres of somebody's night and it is more honest than any of the eleven versions of the story going round.

29.

The lift has been broken since Ordibehesht. The notice says it is being repaired. The notice has been there since Ordibehesht and is now the most permanent thing in the building.

30.

There is a woman who paints over walls for the municipality, and she has done the one in Narmak four times. I got this from the caretaker, who got it from her, and then I went at the wrong hour

twice and the right hour once and stood far enough away to be an idiot loitering rather than an idiot loitering with intent.

She works fast. Roller, one coat, no attempt at matching the colour, which is correct — a matched patch reads as a cover-up and an unmatched patch reads as maintenance.

The caretaker says she has opinions about it. Her view, apparently, is that whoever is doing the writing has bad hands and good sense, that they always stop before the end of the sentence, and that if they carried a second can they would not have to.

She has been giving free notes on somebody's technique for three years, to a caretaker, on a pavement, and she is right about the second can.

31.

Four hours of electricity on Tuesday. My father says it is like the war and my mother says it is not like the war at all, and then they each describe a different war for eleven minutes.

32.

He does an interview.

Half a page in a weekend supplement, with a photograph, and the question is where his material comes from, and the answer is life.

He says he keeps a notebook by the bed. He says the good ones arrive at four in the morning. He says you cannot force it and that the trick is to be ready.

Every word of that is true and I have said versions of it to nobody for twenty-three years, and reading it in a supplement in a queue at the pharmacy I had the specific experience of hearing my own religion recited accurately by a man who has been in it two years and is about to be given a car.

33.

I have begun to notice which version of the story a person is carrying by how they open.

Did you hear about the boy in the basement — this one has him brave. He knew what he was doing, he did it deliberately, he had a message. In this version he is twenty-four and he is not, and the room was full and it was not, and there were four hundred people in it. It is the most popular version and it is told by people who would not have been in that basement on a bet.

Some kid got himself in trouble for a joke — this one has him stupid. Careless, unlucky, showing off. Told, mostly, by men of my age, in a particular tone, and the tone is not contempt. It is a man explaining to himself why it will not happen to him.

They knew about him already — this one has him a plant, or a target, or a warning to somebody else, and the joke is incidental, and there was a file. It is told quietly and always with the small pleasure of somebody who has understood something.

Three years and I have never once heard the fourth version, which is that a young man liked something his brother wrote and wanted, for eleven words, to be the kind of person who says it out loud.

Nobody has any use for that one.

34.

They have opened a tower on the hill with a fountain at the front of it. The district has no water on Wednesdays.

35.

The man who filmed it works at a printer's in the south and I found him because Vahid is Vahid.

I did not tell him who I was. I told him I was writing something.

I asked what happened that night.

And for about six minutes he described the room.

Sixty chairs, he said, all plastic, all different, because the man who runs it gets them from wherever. A curtain at the back which is not a curtain, it is a blanket, and everybody knows it is a blanket. A pipe across the ceiling that drops the sound, so the room is dead at the front and live at the back, and if you stand in the wrong place you die.

The bulb, he said. There is one bulb and it is behind you if you are on the stage, so nobody can see the performer's eyes, and every single one of them thinks this is bad and every single one of them is wrong, because you cannot see the audience's eyes either.

He described how long the laugh took to come back off the ceiling. He said about a second and a half, which is long, and that the ones who know the room wait for it.

He never answered the question. I asked him what happened and he told me about a blanket and a pipe and a bulb for six minutes and then said he had to get back, and I sat in the car afterwards and understood that he had answered it exactly, and better than a witness statement, and that he will do this for the rest of his life and never once call it testimony.

36.

My savings and my father's memory continue to decline at the same rate. With my father we at least know the cause.

from the Delgoshā

*The mice held a meeting about the cat, and it was
agreed that a bell should be hung about his neck,
and the meeting was very successful, and there is
no further account of the mice.*

37.

There is a woman who sings at weddings and buys four pieces a year from a man who buys them from Vahid.

She has never met me and never will. She works the same eleven halls and she has to be new every time because it is the same four hundred families.

Vahid says she pays on the day and never argues and once sent back a piece with a note saying *this is for a man*, and she was correct, and I rewrote it, and it was better.

That note is the only piece of professional criticism I have received in twenty-two years from anybody except Vahid and my father, and it was four words long, and she does not know I exist.

38.

He has a bit now.

The television man. He has built on it — he does the line, waits for the laugh, and then adds a second beat that was not there before, and the second beat is bad, and it gets a laugh anyway because the room is already gone.

That is the part I cannot let alone. Not the theft, which is not theft. The **maintenance**. He is going to take that line out on the road for four years and it is going to get worse every year, the way a thing does in the hands of somebody who does not know why it works, and by the end of it there will be a version in the country that is fourteen words long with a *the* in it and a second beat.

And that will be the one people remember. Not February.

39.

I have started writing more.

I want to put down what that means, because *writing more* sounds like industry and this is not industry, it is something else with the same shape. Vahid gets four a week from me. He is now getting eleven. The channel has a queue. The state programme has enough to carry it to Nowruz. The three men on television have more than

they can use and one of them has asked whether I am all right, which is the funniest thing that has happened this year.

I am not doing it for money, and the money is arriving anyway, which makes it worse.

I am burying something. Push enough material out, fast enough, and the thing you cannot correct goes down the list, and down again, and eventually it is on page four of a country's attention and nobody can find it without looking.

Two for every one of theirs. That is the rate. I did not work it out, I just arrived at it.

III. TWO TO HER ONE

40.

There is a technique and it does not have a name, and I am going to describe it because I am doing it and I would like it written down somewhere by somebody who understands it.

You cannot delete a story. Nobody has ever been able to. A correction is a second mention, and a second mention is more oxygen, and the only people who have ever successfully killed a story are people who owned the room it was in, and I own nothing.

What you can do is out-produce it.

Attention is not a courtroom, it is a queue, and the queue moves. Every day a country has a certain number of things it is prepared to carry, and the number is small, and something has to fall off the bottom for something to go on the top. If you put enough on the top, fast enough, for long enough, the thing you cannot correct will fall off the bottom on its own, and nobody will have decided anything, and no argument will have been had, and no correction will have been made, and it will simply not be there any more.

This works. It is the only thing that works.

It requires you to be very good and very fast and to have nothing else to do with your evenings.

41.

I asked what the fine was for. He said for asking.

from the Delgoshā

A poet died and his lines went walking about the town without him. They were asked whose they were and gave four different answers, and every one of the four was believed by somebody, and the poet was not consulted, being dead, which is the usual arrangement.

42.

Eleven pieces this week. Nine of them are good.

Two of them are the same joke and I did not notice until Vahid did, which has not happened to me since I was twenty-six.

43.

Eleven this week, and Vahid took nine, and the two he did not take were the two I would have taken.

He is right. He has been right for twenty-two years. There is a thing that happens where a man works very fast for a long time and begins to be able to tell that a piece is good without being able to tell whether it is his, and I got there in Mordad and have not mentioned it to anybody.

44.

The metro on Thursday and he had insoles.

We did the price of insoles, which is a different conversation from the price of socks, because insoles have a supplier in Gomrok and socks have a supplier in Gomrok but they are not the same man and there is history.

He did the six minutes in front of me and I watched forty people who had had a bad day give him something they had not intended to give anybody.

At the end he does not thank them. I want that noted. He closes on the doors and moves through, and the buying happens behind him, and nobody has to be seen deciding, and he has never once in three years said thank you, because thanking them would make it a transaction and it is not a transaction, it is a room.

He is better than me and he sells insoles.

45.

My mother has views on the rate and has had them since 1979 and has been right every time, and this month she said: not yet. I asked her not yet what.

She said: not yet.

46.

State television ran a programme about managing household costs. It was interrupted by a power failure. Nobody has produced anything better this year.

from the Delgoshā

A man was accused of a thing he had not said. The judge asked who had heard him say it. Eleven men came forward, and each of them had heard it from one of the others, and the judge, who was a practical man, found that eleven was enough.

47.

Something came through at ten past four. A photograph of a municipal notice about the correct disposal of something, with the word for *disposal* spelled in a way that makes it the word for *inheritance*.

I saved it and went to bed.

48.

The joke came on Sunday at three and it is extremely good.

Forty-one hours. I did not build it. It arrived with the funny word already at the end and I wrote it out with the pen my mother gave me and sat looking at the paper.

Vahid sold it in nine hours. He said, and I am quoting: *this is the one you have been trying to write all year*.

I have not been trying to write it. I had never thought about that word or that town or that spelling in my life until Sunday, and I still cannot tell you where the town is.

49.

A shortage of the syrup for nine days in Tir.

Not a total one. The kind where four pharmacies say no and the fifth looks at you for slightly too long and then says how much.

I have never had to think about this. Twenty years and it has been on the shelf like flour.

On the fourth night I did not sleep at all and at ten past three I understood, sitting up in a chair in the dark, that I have an arrangement with a chemical that I have never once had to negotiate, and that a negotiation was now available, and that I did not want one.

The pharmacy man had it on the Sunday. He did not say anything about the nine days and he did not put it in a bag, he just slid it across, and we talked about his daughter's stipend.

50.

I put the two pages side by side under the lamp and wrote **41** in the margin with a circle round it.

Then I put the notebook back in the drawer, which is not where the notebooks live.

51.

My father did a bakery on Khavaran on Tuesday and I carried the case.

At the fourth weight he stopped, and held it, and said the thing about France.

Then he said: your mother has started leaving the television on when she is not in the room.

Then he did the fifth weight.

52.

It is possible to be very busy for six months and produce nothing you would have been proud of at thirty.

53.

He has started closing on it.

It was in the middle of the four minutes. Now it is the last thing he says before he goes off, which means the applause is attached to it, which means it is his in a way it was not in the spring.

Applause is stronger than a document. I have known that for twenty-three years and I have never had to think about what it means, because I have never had a document either.

54.

A schoolteacher in Karaj has been using it as an example of the conditional.

I have this from a woman at a wedding who had it from her sister. On a blackboard, apparently, with the clause underlined. There is a

generation coming up who will meet those eleven words as grammar.

55.

The man who sells me the tunnel has raised his price and apologised, and showed me his own invoice unprompted to prove he is taking less than he was.

He is the only genuinely dishonest man I deal with. I trust him more than I trust the newspapers.

from the Delgoshā

*They asked the parrot whether he had understood
what he had repeated. He said, that is a matter
between the sentence and the man who first said it,
and neither of them has ever been introduced to
me.*

56.

I have written ninety-four pieces since Farvardin. In the same period last year I wrote thirty-one.

The work is better. That is what I cannot get round. Grief is good for the trade — everybody in it knows this and nobody says it — and rage is better than grief, and being unable to speak is better than rage.

I am producing the best year of my life out of a thing I would undo in a second, and there is no arrangement under which I get to feel clean about that, and I have stopped looking for one.

57.

The queue at the passport office starts at half past five and the fourth man in it has never applied for a passport.

58.

I met the television man.

Not deliberately. A studio corridor, a thing of Vahid's, the wrong afternoon.

He was polite. He was better looking in the corridor than on the screen, which is unusual. He asked what I did and I said I write, and he said, with no edge on it at all, *for who*, and I said around, and he nodded, because everybody around knows what *around* means and nobody asks twice.

And then he told me about his best line. Unprompted. The way a man tells you about a fish.

He said it came at four in the morning after eleven bad nights. He said it arrived whole. He said he did not build it, it was just there, complete, with the ending already on it, and he wrote it down at speed with a pen he keeps by the bed.

Then he said: you probably know the feeling.

I said I did. He said it was the only one he has ever had like that and he has been trying to have another one for two years.

I said that is normal.

He shook my hand and went off to be made up.

59.

The certificates have to be renewed and this year the office has moved.

My father went twice and it was closed both times, and the third time it was open and the man behind the desk told him the class of weight he has been certifying for fifty years is being reclassified, and that after Nowruz the paperwork will be different but the weights will be the same.

He told me this on the Friday, at length, with the dates.

Then he said: the weights will be the same.

He said it twice, which he does not do, and the second time was not for me.

60.

I have not been able to work out what I was supposed to have done in that corridor, and I have gone over it eleven times, and I still cannot find the sentence.

That is mine is not a sentence a person can say in a corridor.

61.

The rent went up in Farvardin, in Tir and again in Aban, and the landlord has begun apologising in advance for Esfand.

IV. THE VERSIONS

62.

A magazine ran a piece about the wall.

Not about him. About walls. The line was in it as an example of what they called *the anonymous voice of the street*, and there was a photograph, and the photograph was of the seven-word version, and the caption said the origin was unknown but that the phrasing suggested a much older source.

I read that sentence standing up in a shop.

An older source. February. On tea. In a chair with a caster that came off in 2013.

from the Delgoshā

*The cat, being now respected, was asked to judge a
dispute between two mice. He heard them both
with great patience and and the
survivor spoke well of his fairness.*

63.

Somebody has attributed it to Rumi.

I want to be fair: not a scholar, not a book, a card. A greetings card, in a shop on Vali Asr, with a photograph of a sunset on it and my eleven words underneath in a script that is trying very hard, and beneath that, in smaller letters, **Rumi**.

He did not write it. He did not write about nine-tenths of what he is credited with in this decade, and I have made my peace with that as a national condition.

But there is a thing that happens when a line comes loose and keeps travelling. It goes looking for an owner, because a sentence with no name on it makes people uneasy in a way they cannot articulate, and the country has exactly one name it reaches for when it needs a dead author who will not object.

My brother is in a room somewhere because he put his own name on eleven words.

They are on a card now, at forty thousand toman, under a sunset, and the name on them is Rumi.

I bought it. It is on the shelf beside the notebooks.

64.

The card is the funniest object I own and I have not been able to show it to anybody.

65.

The man who sells the cards on Vali Asr has forty designs and the sunset is his fourth best.

I went back and asked him. I said I liked the one with the sunset and did he know where the words came from, and he said Rumi, and I said are you sure, and he said, without any hostility at all, that he has been selling cards for twenty-two years.

Then he said the sunset one goes best in Bahman, before the new year, because people want something for the front of a gift and do not want a flower.

He has a market. He has volume data. He knows in which month a sentence sells, and he is right, and he is the only person in this entire business who has ever been paid honestly for those eleven words.

66.

I do not do funerals well and I have never pretended otherwise.

Mr Ansari from the second floor, in the good hall in Shahrak-e Gharb, which means the one with parking. His daughter had done the arrangements and the arrangements were correct and there were too many flowers.

The man beside me said Mr Ansari had gone quickly, which was a kindness.

I said: he waited eleven years for that lift and got out of the building in four minutes.

He put his tea down. He did not laugh — he made the noise people make instead of laughing at a funeral, which is a laugh with the sound taken off and the shoulders left in, and it is more honest than a laugh because a laugh you can pretend was a cough.

He looked at me afterwards with the specific expression of a man deciding whether he has met somebody terrible.

I let him decide. It takes about four seconds and I have never once helped anybody through it.

67.

Every profession has a moment where it stops being what you say you do and becomes what you are. I have never been able to find mine. I have looked for it in the same way you look for a receipt you are almost sure you did not keep.

68.

My mother has stopped talking about him in the past tense, which she was doing for about eight months, and has gone back to the present, which is worse.

She sets four places. She has always set four places, since Karaj, since before any of it, and the fourth place is not for anybody in particular, and I have never asked and I am not going to.

69.

We do not have a currency. We have a patient, and everybody in this country has learned to read a chart.

from the Delgoshā

A man went to the and asked whether the story that was going round about him was true. He was told that it did not matter, and he went away comforted, and the story went on without him.

70.

Twenty-nine years of Fridays and he read every page again.

I brought him fourteen pieces. He put on the glasses. He read to the bottom of the last one, then went back to check something in the middle, then to the bottom again. Nobody talked. My mother went on in the kitchen and did not comment on an arrangement that has been going since 1999.

Then he squared the pages and said: this is good work.

Then he said: you are writing a great deal.

I said the work is going well.

He said: hm.

He does not have the organ. He has never had it. But he has spent fifty years walking into rooms and establishing whether the thing in front of him is what it says it is, and he read fourteen pages of the best material of my life and the only note he had was that there was a lot of it.

71.

There is a box.

It has been in the second room since the first month and I have never opened it, and I am not going to describe what is in it because I do not know what is in it, which is the entry.

My mother packed it. She packed it in about forty minutes in a way that I have thought about a great deal since, because she is a woman who describes everything, at length, without being asked, and she packed a room in forty minutes and came out and said: I have done the room.

That is the only sentence of hers I have ever been unable to use.

72.

He has still not said the name.

Three years. Not once, not in a list, not in a date, not by accident. And he is not avoiding it — I have watched for the swerve and there

is no swerve. He has rebuilt his sentences at the foundations, so completely that a man who met him tomorrow would go home and say he had one son.

That is the most impressive act of construction I have ever witnessed and I have never been able to tell him so.

73.

I asked her, on the Friday, whether she still hears anything.

She said the woman in the building whose nephew works somewhere says the same as last time.

Then she described the woman. The coat, the way she stands at a door, what she does with her keys while she is talking, and the fact that she always says one more sentence after the sentence that ends the conversation, and what that sentence tends to be.

Four minutes on the woman. Nothing at all about the nephew, or the somewhere, or the same as last time.

I wrote down *one more sentence after the sentence that ends it* on the back of a receipt while she was still talking, and then I sat with the receipt for a while and did not use it and have not used it, and it is on the shelf where I can see it, and I am aware that not using a thing is not the same as not having taken it.

74.

The best-produced item on television this year remains a power failure.

75.

There is a version now in which the words were never his.

It arrived last month and it is spreading faster than the others, because it is the most comfortable of all of them: that the boy in the basement did not write it, that he took it from somewhere, that he was a fool who repeated something and got caught holding it.

It is true. It is completely true, it is the only version going round that corresponds to what happened, and it has arrived three years

late from people who do not know anything, for the wrong reasons, and it makes him smaller, and I find that I would rather they went on believing he was brave.

I have spent my working life on the proposition that the accurate thing is worth more than the comfortable thing.

It took eleven words and thirty-six months to find out what that was worth.

76.

A student wrote to the channel to ask who wrote it. The channel forwarded the message to Vahid because they forward everything to Vahid, and Vahid sent it to me with no comment, which is how he does the things he does not have a joke for.

She is doing a project on anonymous political speech. She wants a name for a footnote.

I did not answer, and Vahid did not answer, and the channel has by now sent her the standard line about sources, and she will put in *anonymous* and get a good mark and be entirely correct.

It is the first honest attribution the sentence has had in three years and it took a nineteen-year-old with a form to produce it.

from the Delgoshā

*They asked the whether the words were
his. He said and everyone
agreed that this was the correct answer.*

77.

The photograph is still in the second drawer and the backing card has still slipped two millimetres at the left.

I have been meaning to fix it for nine years, which means I have been meaning to fix it for six years longer than there has been anything to fix.

78.

They say the young are leaving. They are not leaving, they are being exported, and it is the only non-oil export that has ever run at capacity.

79.

The wall in Narmak is clean.

I went on a Sunday for no reason and there was fresh paint over the fifth patch, and the paint was two shades out and had been rolled in one coat, at speed, by somebody who knows exactly what she is doing.

And beneath it, low down, near the skirting, where you would only see it if you were the kind of person who goes and stands at a wall — four words in pencil.

Not the line. Four of my words from a different piece entirely, from 2019, from a night in Karaj, in front of forty people.

I do not know who put them there. I do not know whether they know the two things are by the same person, and there is no possible way they could, and there is no version of my life in which I find out.

I stood there until a woman came out and asked if I was all right.

I said I was looking at the wall.

She said: they got it Thursday.

V. STOP

80.

The committee has reported. The committee's finding is that a further committee is required.

81.

They have raised the price of the thing that has no substitute and offered a subsidy on the thing nobody was buying.

82.

Ninety-one hours this month at the table between three and five, and the arithmetic of it does not work.

The pieces are good. Vahid is happy in the way he gets when he has stopped saying *make it shorter* and started saying *when*. The channel has me twice a week now instead of once.

And the thing I set out to bury has not moved.

It is on television on Thursdays. It is on a card on Vali Asr with a sunset behind it and a dead man's name under it. It is in a magazine as evidence of an older source. It is on a café sign burned into wood next to the price of tea.

I have put four hundred thousand words on top of eleven and they are still on the surface, and I have had six months to work out why, and the answer is not complicated and I have been avoiding it since Tir.

You cannot bury a thing with more of the same substance.

Everything I have written this year is more of exactly what it is. I have not been putting weight on top of it. I have been raising the whole level of the water, and it floats, because I built it to float, because that is the only thing I know how to build.

83.

The itch arrives at twelve minutes past. It has arrived at twelve minutes past for twenty-three years. There is no third beat in it and there never will be, and I have four failed jokes about it and this year I wrote a fifth.

84.

My mother described the fourth place at the table on Friday, without being asked, in the middle of something else. She said the plate is the one with the chip in it, because the chipped one should not go to a guest, and there has not been a guest for a long time, and it seemed a waste to keep a whole plate out of use.

That is the entire explanation. It has been available for three years and nobody asked for it and it is not about anybody.

I have never in my life wanted so badly for a thing to be about somebody.

85.

At the ministry, for a stamp on something my landlord requires and the ministry does not issue.

Two hours. Four windows. At the third window a man told me, kindly, that the form I needed was discontinued in Aban and that nothing has replaced it, and that the correct procedure now is to bring a letter explaining that the form does not exist.

I said who signs the letter.

He said: you do.

I have been trying for four days to work out why that is not funny, and it is not, and it has every part.

86.

Four packets of the biscuits I like arrived at the door with no note.

87.

He is doing it on the road now. Four cities.

88.

A hundred thousand toman used to be money.

from the Delgoshā

..... asked

And the were content.

89.

At three on Wednesday nothing came, and at four nothing came, and at ten past four I understood that I had been sitting in a chair for six months conducting a campaign against a sentence.

Against a sentence. Not against a court, or a producer, or an office, or a man in a corridor who was polite to me and told me about a fish.

Eleven words, which I wrote, which are better than anything I have written since, and which are now the property of a country of ninety million people and a dead poet and a shop on Vali Asr.

The campaign has cost me a year. The sentence has not noticed.

90.

I went back through the year in the good notebook and counted the pieces properly, one at a time, with a pencil, the way my father goes down the case.

Two hundred and forty-one.

Not eleven, not a hundred, not *a great many*. Two hundred and forty-one, and I have never counted anything in my life, and it took forty minutes, and at the end of it I had a number that was true and no idea what to do with a true number.

91.

The clip came in at twenty past one in the morning, six hands deep, no source, the way everything comes.

Bad audio. A phone held at chest height. A basement — you can hear it in the way the sound dies at the front and comes back off something at the back, about a second and a half, and I know that room's cousin.

A woman on a low stage, in a room of about forty. The frame cuts her at the shoulders.

Four minutes. **The hook is a complaint and it is not about the product**, and she has the room in five seconds and she has not asked for it.

Three beats, escalating properly, and the third one is about money and it is aimed at herself.

Then she stops talking. On purpose. For nine seconds, in a room she has already got, and I sat forward in a chair at half past one in the morning like a man at a race.

And into the quiet, exactly on the return, she puts the callback.

It is perfect. It is not nearly perfect, it is perfect, and I have seen that construction twice before in my life. Once on a metro carriage between two stations, from a man who sells socks and does not know that comedy is a paid trade.

And once in a mirror.

92.

The handle is **Naneh Sarma** [naa-neh sar-MAA]. Grandma Frost. The one from the story who waits all year for Amu Nowruz and falls asleep on the afternoon he comes, every year, for ever, and has never once been awake for him.

Choosing that as a name for yourself is funnier than most of what I have written this year.

93.

There is nothing else. No face, no city, no second clip, no account, nothing that can be searched for and nothing that answers.

Somebody in the comments says she has been going two years. Somebody else says it is not a woman, and is corrected, twice, sharply.

The room she is in is not one of the three I know.

94.

I watched it eleven times and then I watched it with the sound off, and with the sound off you can see her wait. That is the whole trade and there are perhaps four people in this country who can do it. Not the writing — the waiting. Everybody wants to fill nine seconds. Nine seconds is enormous. Nine seconds in a room of forty is a physical weight on your chest and every instinct you have says put something in it.

She stands in it and lets it get heavier and comes in exactly on the return.

Nobody teaches that. You either have the nerve or you spend a career not having it.

95.

I have sent it to nobody, which is not like me at all, and I have thought about why, and the reason is not professional.

96.

I have not told Vahid about the clip.

There is no reason not to. He would sell her something inside a week and take forty percent and explain it as a kindness, and she would be better off, and he would be right.

I have had it for eleven days.

from the Delgoshā

.....
.....
.....

97.

I did not write anything on Thursday or on Friday.

98.

The second notebook, the one in the drawer, has fourteen entries in it now and one of them is not about the office.

99.

I have watched a four-minute clip forty times this week and I have not once, at any point, worked out what the joke was.

GLOSSARY

Aban aa-BAAN — Persian. The eighth month of the Iranian calendar, late October to late November.

Amir Kabira street in central Tehran, historically the trade in tools, parts and repairs.

Amu Nowruz a-MOO now-ROOZ — Persian, Uncle New Year. The figure who arrives at the spring equinox. In the folk story he loves Naneh Sarma and she falls asleep before he comes, every year, and they have never met.

Dallal da-LAAL — Arabic via Persian, broker, middleman. A fixer who takes a percentage on any transaction: cars, flats, hospital beds, a place in a queue.

Delgoshā del-go-SHAA — Persian, heart-opening. Cheering, delightful; used of gardens and views. Also a family name, and the title of Obeid Zakani's fourteenth-century collection of anecdotes.

Esfand es-FAND — Persian. The twelfth and final month of the Iranian year, late February to late March.

Farvardin far-var-DEEN — Persian. The first month of the Iranian year, beginning at the spring equinox.

Gomrok gom-ROK — Persian, customs. A district of south Tehran; in the trade, shorthand for where imported goods enter the informal market.

Khavaran khaa-vaa-RAAN — a district on the eastern edge of Tehran.

Naneh Sarma naa-neh sar-MAA — Persian, Grandma Frost. The folk figure who waits all year for Amu Nowruz and falls asleep on the day he arrives.

Narmak nar-MAK — a residential district of eastern Tehran, laid out in the 1950s around numbered squares.

Nowruz now-ROOZ — Persian, new day. The Iranian new year, at the spring equinox.

Ordibehesht or-dee-be-HESHT — Persian. The second month of the Iranian year, late April to late May.

Resāleh reh-saa-LEH — Arabic via Persian, treatise. A short prose work on a single subject.

Resāleh-ye Delgoshā reh-saa-LEH-ye del-go-SHAA — The Heart-Delighting Treatise. Obeid Zakani, mid-fourteenth century: short anecdotes in two parts, Arabic and Persian, satirising judges, preachers, physicians and the conspicuously pious. Extensively obscene, and bowdlerised in most editions printed since, the omissions marked with rows of dots.

Rumi Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Balkhi, 1207-1273. Persian poet. Credited, in the present century, with a very large quantity of material he did not write.

Sarrāfi sar-raa-FEE — Arabic via Persian, money-changing. A currency exchange; also the informal pavement trade in rates.

Shahrak-e Gharb shah-RAK-e GHARB — a western district of Tehran.

Tir TEER — Persian. The fourth month of the Iranian year, late June to late July.

Tomān to-MAAN — the Iranian unit of account: ten rials. Prices are quoted in toman regardless of what is printed on the note.

Vali Asr va-LEE ASR — the principal north-south avenue of Tehran.

Yousefabad yoo-sef-aa-BAAD — a central district of Tehran.

Zakāni, Obeid o-BAYD zaa-kaa-NEE — c. 1300-1371. Persian poet and satirist from Qazvin, educated in Shiraz. Author of the *Resāleh-ye Delgoshā*, of *Akhlāq al-Ashrāf* (Ethics of the Aristocrats), and of *Mush-o-Gorbeh* (Mouse and Cat), in which a

cat makes a public repentance and eats the mice who come to congratulate him.

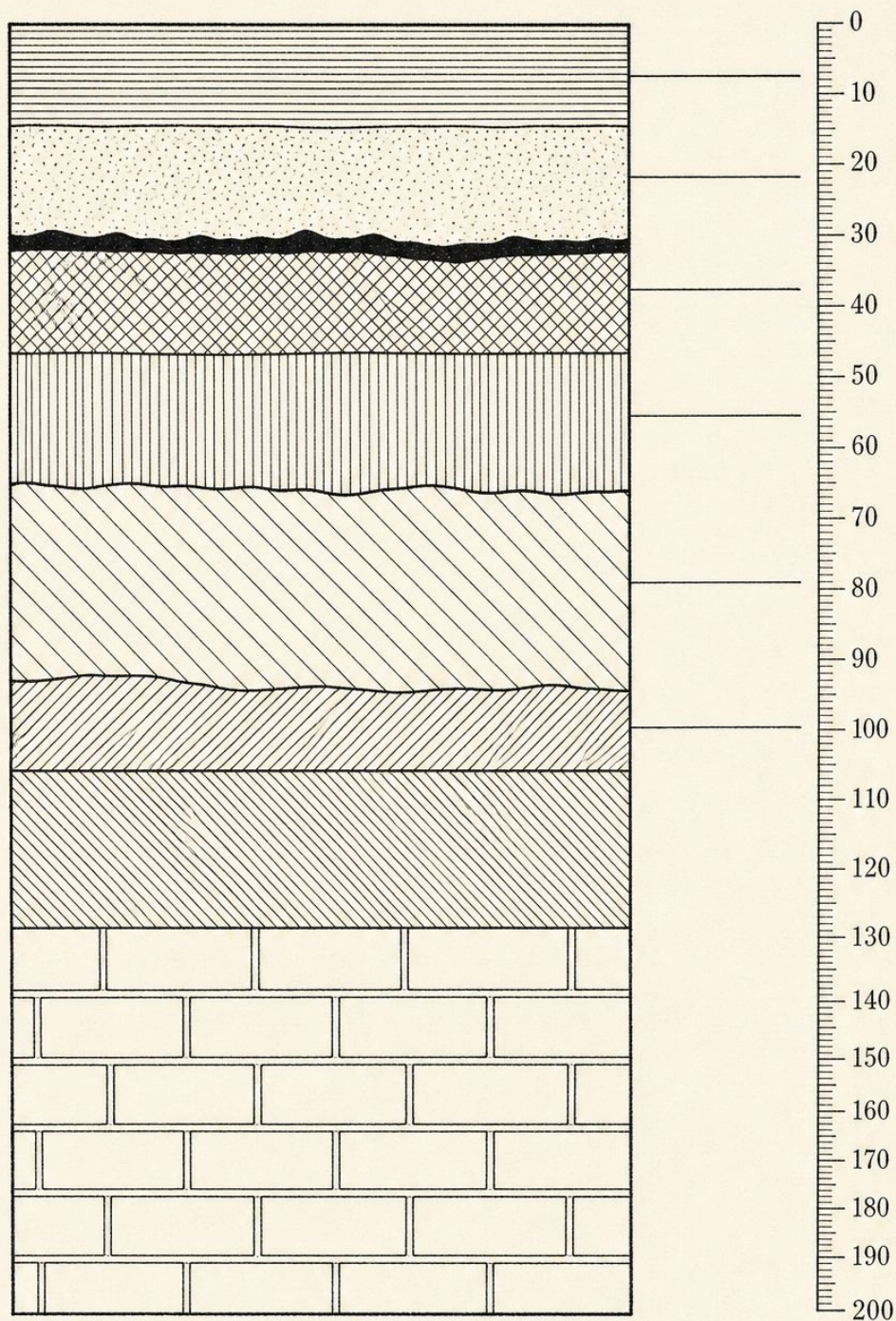
A NOTE ON THE PLATE

When a wall is painted over, the old surface is not taken off. It is buried. Each new coat lies on top of the one before it, so a wall that has been repainted many times carries a record of every repainting, in order, the way a tree carries rings.

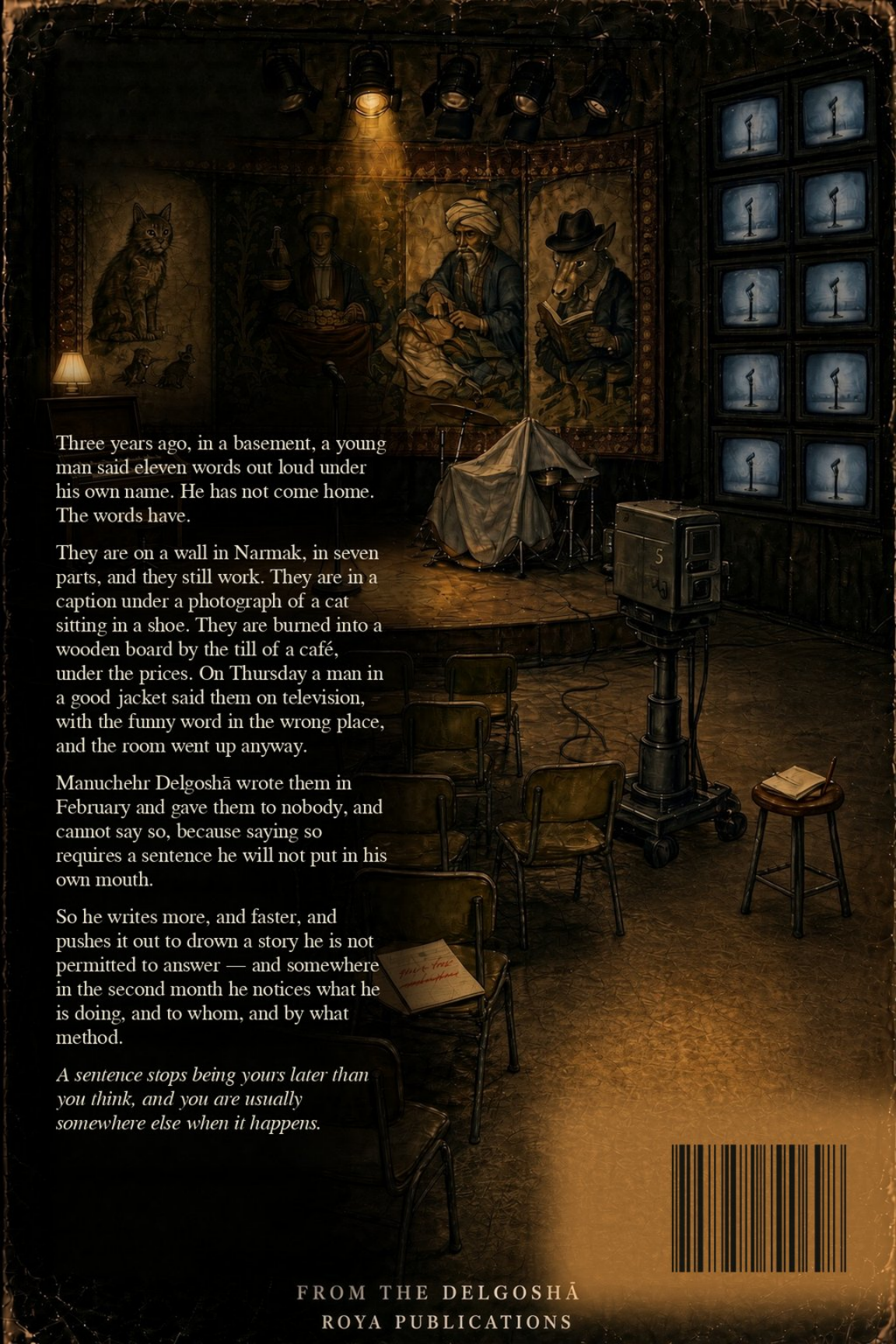
Conservators read this by cutting a small square out of the surface and turning it side-on. The layers show as stripes. The oldest sits at the bottom, against the brick. The newest is at the top. Counting them tells you how many times the wall has been painted, and anything caught between two stripes tells you roughly when it arrived and how long it has been there.

The section overleaf was taken from a wall in Narmak. It records six coats of municipal paint applied over three years.

A wall is not painted unless there is something on it.



Section through a wall in Narmak. Six coats in three years.



Three years ago, in a basement, a young man said eleven words out loud under his own name. He has not come home. The words have.

They are on a wall in Narmak, in seven parts, and they still work. They are in a caption under a photograph of a cat sitting in a shoe. They are burned into a wooden board by the till of a café, under the prices. On Thursday a man in a good jacket said them on television, with the funny word in the wrong place, and the room went up anyway.

Manuchehr Delgoshā wrote them in February and gave them to nobody, and cannot say so, because saying so requires a sentence he will not put in his own mouth.

So he writes more, and faster, and pushes it out to drown a story he is not permitted to answer — and somewhere in the second month he notices what he is doing, and to whom, and by what method.

A sentence stops being yours later than you think, and you are usually somewhere else when it happens.

