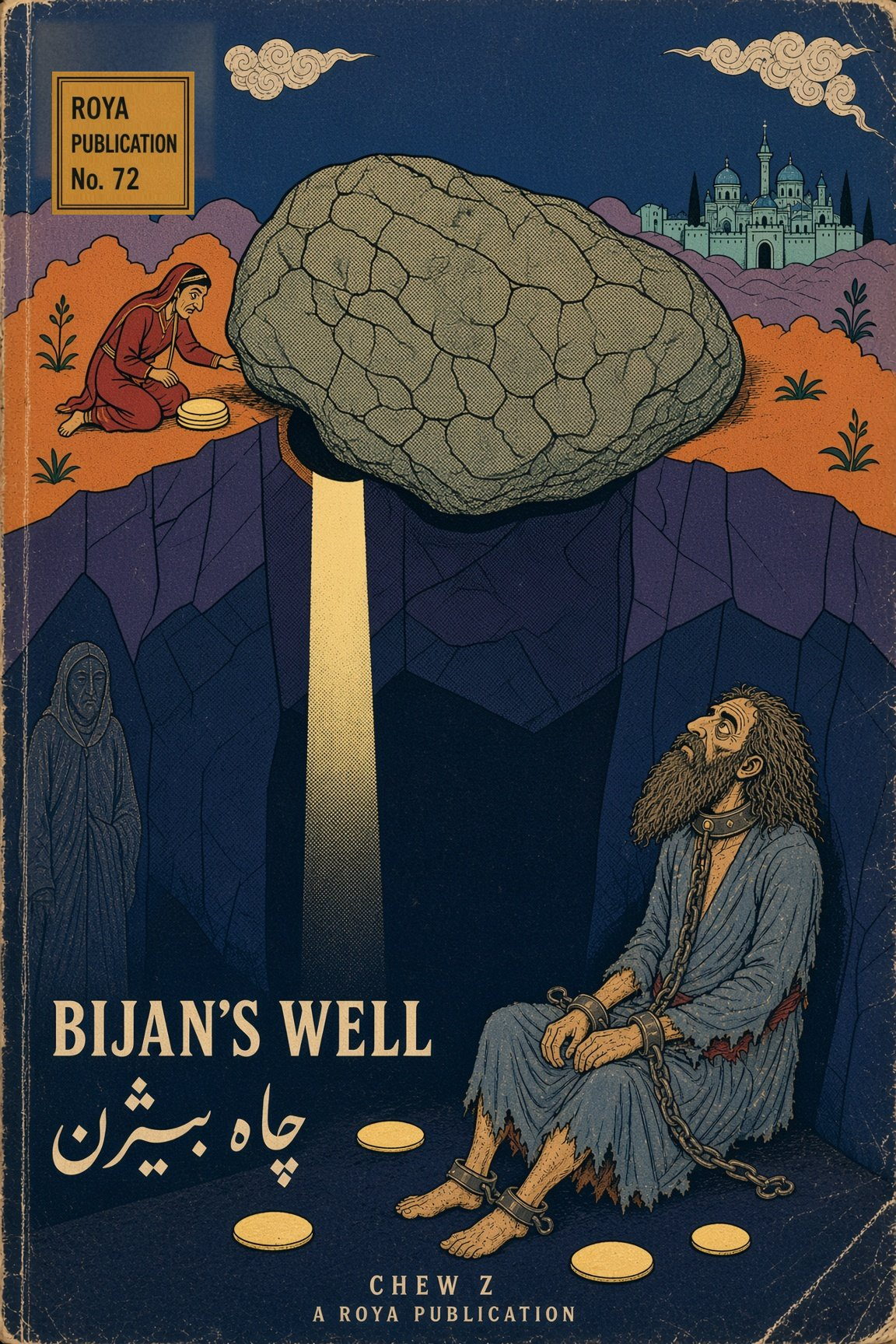


ROYA
PUBLICATION
No. 72



BIJAN'S WELL

چاه بیشن

CHEW Z
A ROYA PUBLICATION

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Chew Z

Printed in the Reach

Roya Publication No. 72

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

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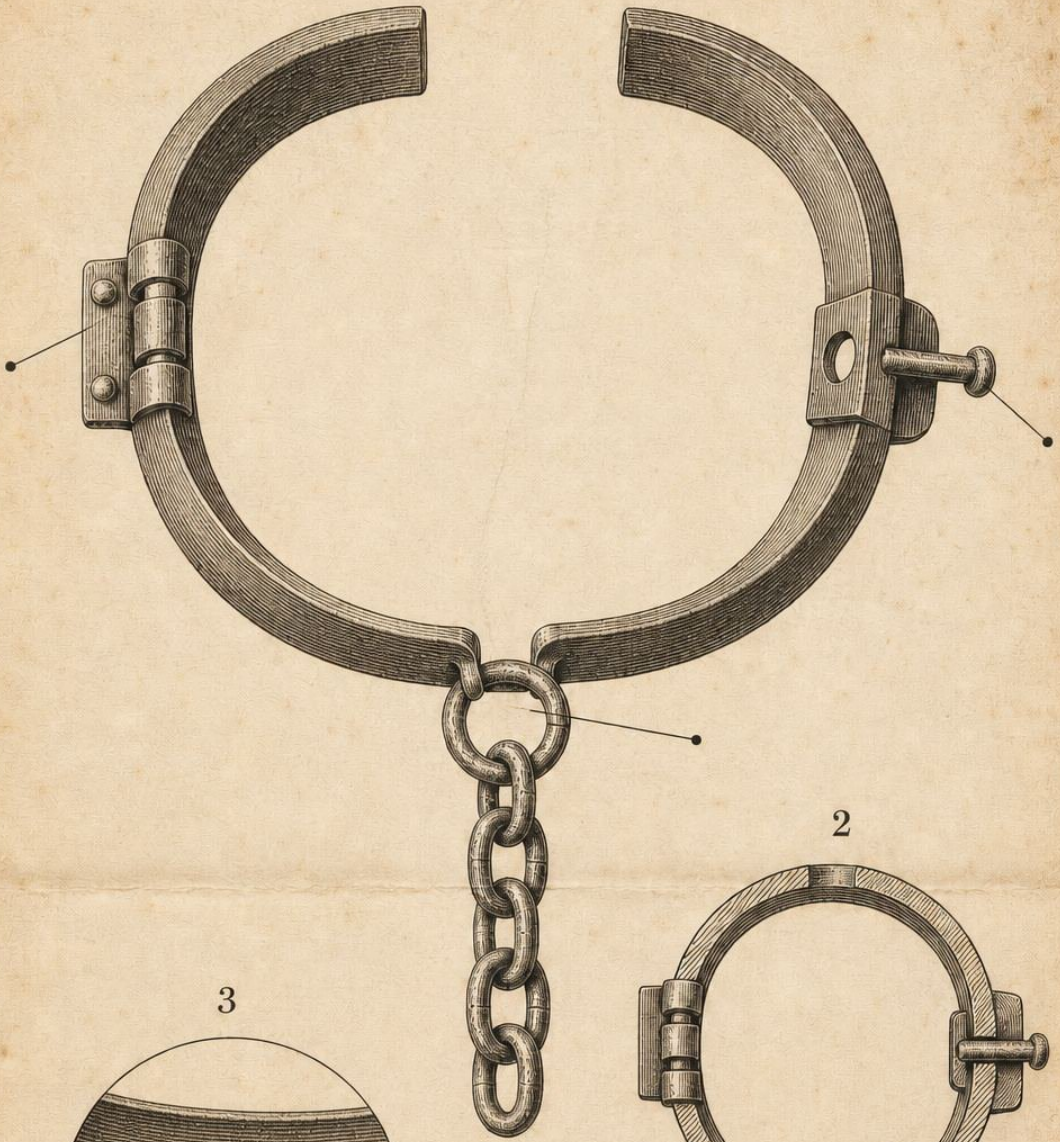
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FROM THE OLD BOOK

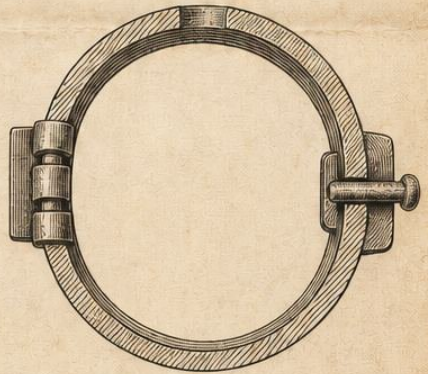
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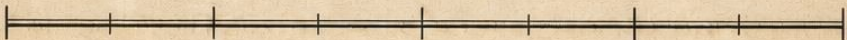
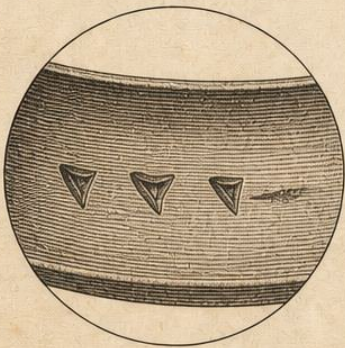
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Collar, neck, iron, Byzantine manufacture. Interior stamp shown at four times.

SYNOPSIS

A man wakes at the bottom of a pit in the dark and cannot remember arriving.

His name is Bijan. He is twenty-six, the grandson of the greatest house in Iran, and a week ago he was the only man in the Shah's hall who would stand up. There were boars in the Armān march ruining the crops, and forty men looked at the floor, and he went. He killed them all. He cut out the tusks to carry home.

What happens after that he has in pieces. A guide who told him about a festival two days over the Turanian border. A crown he put on to go and look at it. A woman's tent, three days of wine and lamps hung in a tree, and a cup handed to him on the last afternoon. Then nothing. Then this.

The pit is deeper than a man can reach and there is a stone across the top of it. He cannot see his own hand. Food arrives through a gap he cannot get to, and with the food comes a voice, and the voice knows his name.

He decides quite early that the voice is not real, because the dark has already made him other things and made them well.

He is wrong about that. He is wrong about a great deal, and the trouble is that down here there is nothing to check anything against.

Above him, somewhere he will never see, a woman is begging bread door to door in a town where everyone knows exactly who she used to be.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

A thousand years ago, in a town called Tus in the northeast of Iran, a man sat down to write a poem and did not stand up again for thirty years.

His name was Ferdowsi. The old stories of his country — the kings, the heroes, the monsters, the wars — had been carried in Middle Persian books and in people's mouths for centuries, and they were slipping. So he collected them, all of them, from the first man to sit on a throne down to the last Persian king, and put them into verse. Fifty thousand couplets. He called it the *Shāhnāma*, the Book of Kings. It cost him most of what he had, and he did not live to see it work.

It worked. Persian is still spoken. The stories are still known. Children in Tehran are still named after the people in this book.

Here is the part you need.

Long ago a king called Fereydun grew old, and he had three sons, and he divided the world between them: the west to Salm, the east — the lands beyond the river, called Turan — to Tur, and Iran, the middle of it and the best of it, to the youngest, Iraj. The two older brothers looked at what the youngest had been given and could not bear it. They killed him.

Everything after that is that murder, repeating. The wars between Iran and Turan that fill most of the poem are not wars between strangers. They are one family, several hundred years into an argument about an inheritance, and both sides know it, and neither side can stop. The border in this book is two days' ride wide. The people on either side of it eat the same food and grieve the same way and are cousins.

Closer in: an Iranian prince called Siyavash was accused of something he had not done, and proved it by riding a horse through a wall of fire and coming out the other side with his clothes unmarked — and then found that being proved innocent changed nothing, and went into exile across the border. The Turanian king

Afrasiyab took him in and gave him a daughter to marry. A great Turanian lord named Piran protected him. He was murdered there anyway, on his knees, far from home.

That murder is the wound the rest of the epic is built around. Siyavash's son Kay Khosrow, hidden as a baby by that same Piran, became the great king of Iran and spent his whole reign avenging his father. He owned a cup, and when he looked into it he could see the whole earth, anywhere, anyone.

And then, in the middle of all that war, Ferdowsi stops.

He writes thirty-seven lines about a night at his own house. It is black outside — no Mars, no Saturn, no Mercury, the whole sky switched off. He calls out for a lamp, and a woman comes into the garden carrying a candle, and wine, and pomegranate and citron and quince, and a good cup. She plays music for him. She tells him to put his sadness down. And then she says: *there is a story in the old book. If you'll listen, you can put it into verse.*

She has the book. He doesn't. She knows the story. He doesn't.

So the most famous love story in the Persian language reaches us secondhand, from a woman whose name we do not know, out of a book nobody has ever seen.

And the story she tells him is about a man at the bottom of a pit in the dark, kept alive for months by a woman above him who has nothing, and who brings him what she has begged.

Ferdowsi does not point out that these are the same shape. He puts them next to each other and gets on with it.

This is that story.

Chew Z

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I. THE TUSKS

1.

I come up out of it the way a man comes up out of deep water, and for a while I lie still and wait for the room to arrive.

It does not arrive.

There is a weight on my throat. That is the first fact and I work at it for a long time before I get any others, because a man will attend to his own throat before he attends to the world. It is iron and it is close and there is no give in it anywhere. When I turn my head it turns with me, and when I stop it goes on pressing in the direction I was going.

The second fact is that my hands are joined.

The third fact takes longer and I get it wrong twice. The third fact is that I am the right way up now but I was not the right way up before, and my body has not agreed to forget it. There is blood in my face that has not decided to leave. There is a ringing that comes and goes on its own schedule. Somewhere between the top of this and the bottom of it I went over, and everything in me that keeps track of which way the ground lies has been unseated and is sulking.

The fourth fact is the dark.

I want to be accurate about this. I have been in dark rooms. A dark room is grey. There is always something — a line under a door, a window that is only a slightly different black, the shape of a table you know is there. This is not that. This has no grain in it. I hold my hand in front of my face and I get exactly as much of it as I get with my eyes closed, and when I close them nothing happens, and when I open them nothing happens, and I do that eleven or twelve times like a man working a stuck latch.

A well.

A cistern. Say a cistern; a well would have had water in it.

2.

By morning — I am going to say morning, and you should know at once that I have no right to the word — I have measured it.

I do it with my body because my body is the only instrument I was allowed to bring. Lying flat with my arms out I do not touch both sides at once. Sitting with my back against the wall and my legs straight I have room to spare, but not much. So: wider than a man, narrower than two. The floor is not flat. It falls away towards one side, and at the low side there is a patch that is wet without being water, a cold softness like the inside of a mouth, and I do not go there unless I have to.

The wall is dug for the first part of its height and cut for the rest. You can feel the difference under your palm. Whoever made this hit rock about the height of my head and went on anyway, with tools, for a long time. That tells me something about the man who ordered it. It was not a hole that already existed and was found convenient. It was commissioned.

Then the important measurement, which I take standing, and then jumping, which is a thing I do only once.

I cannot reach the top.

Not close. Not the sort of not-close where a taller man could, or where a man standing on something could. There is nothing to stand on. There is nothing to hold. Whatever comes into this place will have to fall into it, and whatever leaves will have to be lifted, and between me and the world there is a distance that has been chosen with some care by somebody who was not in a hurry.

I sit down against the dug part, on the high side, because the high side is dry.

That is where I live now.

3.

There is a sound.

It is small and it happens twice, with a pause between, like a man clearing his throat before speaking and then thinking better of it.

I do not move for a long time afterwards. I have my head turned up towards where the sound was and my mouth open, which is what you do without deciding to, because an open mouth hears better than a shut one and nobody has ever explained to me why.

Nothing follows it.

I go through the possibilities in order, the way you would go through a saddlebag. An animal at the lip. Wind, which does that in the mouth of a shaft, I have heard it do that in wells at home. A stone settling. My own ears, which have been ringing since I came down and have already offered me two or three things that were not there.

I decide it was nothing.

I want to put that down plainly, because it matters later and because I would like it on the record that I was careful. I did not want it to be nothing. There was no advantage to me in it being nothing. I considered it properly, from the high side of the floor, with my mouth open in the dark like a fool, and I concluded that a small sound twice with a pause is a sound the world makes on its own, and I lay down.

4.

It was a good hall and there were forty men in it and not one of them would look up.

The people from the Armān [ar-MAAN] march had been brought in still dirty from the road, which is a thing Kay Khosrow [kay khos-ROW] does on purpose, and they stood in front of all that gold and wept and told us about pigs. That is what it was. Pigs. Not an army, not a raid, not a claim on anything — boars, out of the thicket, in numbers nobody had seen, going through the orchards and the standing crops and the meadow, and tusks on them like an elephant's, and men afraid to walk out to their own trees.

They were embarrassed to be asking. You could see that. They had come a very long way to stand in the Shah's hall and say *pigs*, and they knew how it sounded, and they said it anyway because there was nothing else left to do with the year.

The Shah asked who would go.

I want to tell you about the silence, because the silence is the whole thing and I have had a great deal of time to consider it.

It was not a short one. A short silence is a room deciding. This was longer than that. It went on past the point where it was about the boars at all and became about the men in the room, and every one of us could feel it doing that, and still nobody spoke. Tus [TOOS] looked at the floor. Farhad [far-HAAD] examined a cup he had been drinking from for an hour. My grandfather, who had put seventy sons and grandsons in the ground, sat with his hands on his knees and did not so much as breathe differently, because he had learned somewhere in those seventy funerals that a hall like this is a trap and the trap is baited with exactly this feeling.

I was twenty-six.

I stood up. And I want to be honest with you about why, since honesty is cheap down here and I have nothing else to spend. It was not for the orchards. It was not for the weeping men, who I had already stopped looking at. It was because the quiet had got into my chest and standing up was the only way to make it stop.

from the old book

A smith in that city had lost seventeen sons to the snakes. When they came for the eighteenth he went into the palace, tore up the paper that said the king was just, took the leather apron off at his forge and put it on a spear, and carried it into the street. People followed it for a thousand years.

5.

There is something on the inside of the collar.

I find it with the pad of my thumb, working round the inner face in the only two directions available to me, and at first I take it for a fault in the iron — a bubble, a place where the metal folded. It is not. It is deliberate. It has edges.

It takes what I would call several days to be sure of the shape, and I am not going to tell you how many because I do not have days any more, I have hungers, and hungers are not a unit.

Three marks. That is what it is. Three marks struck into the metal one after another, and then a fourth thing that is not a mark but a skid — a place where the punch slipped a little on the last blow and left a bright scar you can feel but not read.

A maker's stamp.

Which means that somewhere out in the world, in a city I have never been to and am now unlikely to see, there is a man who made this. He heated it and he bent it and he fitted it and he struck his own three marks into it, and on the last one his hand was tired or the piece shifted, and he swore, or he did not swear, and then he finished it and it went into a crate and was sold.

Byzantine work. My father had a Byzantine sword-belt he was ridiculous about. You pay four times over for the name and then you find out in the twelfth year that you were right to.

So somebody sent away for this. Somebody looked at what was available locally, and did not think it good enough for the purpose, and paid the freight.

6.

My father stood in the yard while they were saddling and told me not to go.

He did it badly. He always did it badly. Giv [GEEV], son of Gudarz [goo-DARZ], who spent seven years alone in Turan [too-RAAN] looking for somebody else's son and came home with a king, could

not tell his own son that he was afraid for him without making it sound like an assessment of the son's abilities.

You have not endured both good and ill, he said. A man goes out when he has endured both.

Which is a thing his father said to him, I have no doubt at all, in some other yard, with some other boy standing in front of him with his ears going red.

I know what I felt. I have the feeling perfectly, I could put my hand on it now — that hot flat fury that comes when somebody says the one true thing about you in front of the grooms.

What I do not have is whether I answered him.

I have looked for it. There is a version where I said something short and unforgivable about the seven years, and there is a version where I said nothing at all and put my foot in the stirrup, and I have run both of them enough times that they have worn smooth and neither one of them will tell me which is mine.

That is the first thing I noticed going. I mention it here because of what comes later, and because at the time I thought nothing of it. Everyone loses a sentence.

7.

The thicket was worse than they had said, which is unusual; people generally improve their disasters on the way to court.

I left Gorgin [gor-GEEN] with the horses. This was not arrogance, or not only. You do not take a second man into a place like that, where you cannot see past your own arm and everything is at knee height and moving. A second man in there is a thing you have to keep track of.

I killed the first one from the horse, before I went in, and that one was easy and made me stupid.

The rest was on foot in the dark green, and I am not going to make it sound like anything. A boar comes low and fast and does not stop when it should, and it is not trying to frighten you, and it does not care what your name is. Twice I had my back on the ground. Once I

had a tusk through the sleeve and out again without touching the arm, which is luck of a kind you get one of.

I killed them all. That is the part people wanted, so that is the part I will give.

Afterwards I sat in the churned mess of it for a long while with my hands shaking too much to be useful, and then, when they stopped, I did the ugly practical work: cut the tusks out for the court, because the court is not going to ride to Armān and look at the bodies. There is no dignified way to carry tusks. They do not pack. They come out with a wet noise and they weigh more than you think and they go on smelling for days, and I ended up doing what everyone does, which is to bundle them in your own good cloak and be angry about the cloak later.

8.

He was holding the horses at the treeline when I came out.

I would like you to understand what I saw on his face, because I have thought about that face more than I have thought about my father's.

He had been the man who knows the road for thirty years. That was his whole standing at court, and it is a real thing, and it is not nothing — the Shah says *who knows the way to Armān*, and Gorgin son of Milad [mee-LAAD] says *I do*, and that is a reason to have him in the room. He had ridden past that thicket, I would guess, four times, and each time he had noted where the pigs were and he had not gone in.

Nobody had ever asked a question in that hall that only he could answer.

He had been out there for three hours with the horses, and I know exactly what he did with those three hours, because there is nothing else to do with them. He rehearsed. He worked out how he would say it. He built the sentence he would use at court when the Shah asked how it had gone — something modest, something with *we* in it, something that would put him at the edge of the picture without lying. He would have got it good. He had three hours.

And then I came out of the trees on my own with the things in my cloak, and every version of that sentence died at once, because there is no we available. He was the guide. It says so in the order.

He smiled at me. He said the right thing. He helped me tie the bundle.

And I took it, all of it, and thought nothing about it for the rest of my life until I was in a hole in the ground with time to spend.

9.

The dark has begun to make things.

It started with points. Small, off to the side, gone when you look, which is how everything unimportant starts. Then a lattice, quite regular, like the shadow of a lattice, though there is nothing here to throw one. Then last night — say last night — a floor plan.

That is the word for it. A plan, seen from above, of a building with rooms in it, laid out in front of me in a faint pale line, perfectly steady, with a doorway I recognised and could not place.

The thing I want on the record is that it did not feel like imagining.

I know what imagining feels like. Every man knows. You do it and there is a hand on it — yours. This has no hand on it. It arrives finished, at a distance, in front of my open eyes, and it behaves exactly the way a lit thing behaves, and when I move my head it stays where it was, which imagined things do not do.

So my eyes are still working. That is what I take from it.

There is nothing coming in, so they have started sending instead.

And I cannot check it. The only thing I have to check it with is the thing that is doing it.

I am going to have to be careful in here.

from the old book

*A man looked at his newborn son, saw that the hair on him was white,
and carried him up a mountain and left him there. A bird came down
and took the child and raised him in her nest above the world. When he
was grown she gave him three of her feathers and told him to burn one
if ever he needed her. He came down off that mountain and fathered
the greatest of them all.*

II. HEAD DOWNWARD

10.

He waited two days before he said it, which I did not think about at the time and which I think about now.

We were riding back, slowly, because there was no reason to hurry and because the tusks stank. And on the second evening, at the fire, he said there was a festival ground not far from here. Two days' road, over into Turan. And the king's daughter kept a garden there in the season and made it blaze like the sun, and there were a hundred women in that camp, and no men worth the word.

He said it the way a man says a thing he has decided not to care about.

I am not going to pretend I was talked into it, because I was not. I want to go, and I want to go before he has finished the sentence, and everything after that is just me arranging my face.

Understand where I was. I had gone into a thicket alone and come out alive, in a week when forty men could not lift their eyes off a floor. I had the proof of it wrapped in a cloak on the back of my horse. A man who has been that lucky once believes something has changed in the arrangements — that a door has opened somewhere and will stay open for a few days, and that it would be ungrateful, almost, not to walk through it while it is there.

That is what youth is. It is not stupidity. It is a mistake about the weather.

He said: *and if you don't want to, we'll go home.*

11.

I dressed for it.

I want this written down without any softening, because there is a great deal of the story I cannot vouch for and this part I can. I was two days' ride inside a country that had been at war with mine since before my grandfather's grandfather, alone, with no plan and nobody expecting me, and what I did was open the roll on the back of my horse and put on a Byzantine silk coat, and a crown, and a gold belt.

A crown. To look at a party.

I combed my beard at a stream with my fingers and I looked at myself in the water, and the water was moving, so I looked better than I did.

Then I rode to the edge of the grove and stood at the treeline in all of it, in the open, on a Turanian hillside, like a tall cypress, as somebody said to me once and I have never got out of my head — and if you had asked me at that moment what I was doing, I would have told you I was fine, that I was watching, that I would go in a while.

There is a version of me that turns the horse around there. I have been down here long enough to have run that one too. He gets home, he hands over the tusks, he is famous for a summer, he marries somebody from a good house in Isfahan [es-fa-HAAN], and by forty he is a heavy man at a long table telling a story about pigs.

I do not like him and I would not trade.

12.

The old woman came across the grass with her skirts up out of the wet, and she stood in front of my horse and looked at me for a while without saying anything, and then she asked whether I was Siyavash [see-yaa-VASH].

Not *are you like Siyavash*. Whether I was him. Come back.

And when I said no, she said: then something fairy-born, out of the other kind, come up from under the hill.

I said I was neither. I said I was a man from Iran who had come to see the garden.

She thought about that for longer than the answer deserved. I could see her deciding something and I could not see what.

Then she went back the way she had come, and the wet grass had gone dark where she walked, twice, out and back, and I sat on the horse in my crown and watched the two lines of it and thought about a boy in a fort in the mountains.

Then she came back and said I was to come in.

13.

Three days.

There was a harp and a woman who could play it and did not stop when people talked, which is the mark of a good house. There were servants who had been told something, because none of them ever looked at me directly, not once, in three days. There was more wine than I have seen anywhere including at home. There were lamps hung in a tree.

She talked. I have almost none of it. That is the thing I would like to say to somebody who is not down a hole with me: I had three days of a person talking to me and I kept almost none of it, because I did not know I would need it, because you never know that.

I have her laughing at me about the crown. I have her hand flat on the cloth of the tent floor, near mine and not touching it, for most of one evening. I have that she was funny in a way I did not expect and cruel about her uncle. I have the smell of the lamps.

That is all of it. Three days, and it fits in a paragraph, and I have gone over it so often since that I have worn the edges off it and I am no longer certain the hand was the same evening as the laughing.

14.

On the third day the camp had to come down.

You could hear it starting before anyone said anything — the particular noise of a hundred people who have been told to be ready by dark. Ropes. Somebody counting.

She did not say anything about it. She poured, and I drank, and she watched me drink in a way I took for something else.

I have gone looking for the taste. There was none. I have gone looking for the moment where the room tips, and there is no moment; there is a long, entirely reasonable evening, and then there is a place where the evening stops being continuous.

The last thing I have is the poles of the tent.

I was on my back by then, which I do not remember arranging, and the tent had that light in it that cloth gets an hour before sunset, when the sun is low enough to come in from the side, and the poles were dark against it, going up and meeting, and the whole thing was moving very slightly the way a tent does when there are people walking outside.

That is the end of what I know.

I want that sentence to sit there on its own, because it is true, and because in a moment I am going to tell you what happened next in a great deal of detail.

from the old book

They built the fire so wide that two hundred loads of wood went into it. He put on white and rode into it with his hands loose on the reins, and came out with the horse steaming and not a thread of him marked. The people wept. The king embraced him. It changed nothing. He was dead within the year, in another country, on his knees.

15.

The chest was cedar and it was not made for a man.

They packed cloth in around me so I would not sound like cargo, and I went out of that camp on the third cart from the front, in the dark, with the tent-poles and the poor-quality wine, and the smell in there was cedar and old cloth and the sweetish thing that gets into everything at the end of a festival.

I know when we left the grass, because the wheels change. Grass is a hush and dirt road is a rumble and there is a moment where it goes over. I know when we crossed the river, because the wheels changed again, and the whole cart tipped back, and something heavy behind me slid and struck the end of my box.

I know it took the rest of the night.

At the palace they took the carts in through a gate on the eastern side where the deliveries go, and there is a run of about forty paces there where the stone is not level and everything on a cart complains. Then a courtyard, then a corridor, and in the corridor there is a lamp in a niche about two-thirds of the way along, on the left, and the niche is deeper than it needs to be, and the light from it goes across the ceiling in a shape like a leaf.

Four turns. Left, left, right, and then a long one to the left that is more of a curve than a turn.

And then a room where the air was completely different, warm and still and full of the smell of women's things, and hands on the lid, and her face.

16.

There is a man in every palace whose entire life is knowing what came in.

He is never important. He is often not even paid very well. But he stands at a door for thirty years and he watches the carts and the porters and the covered dishes go past, and in the end there is not a person in that building who understands the building better than

he does, and everybody above him thinks of him as a piece of the wall.

He worked out that a chest had gone in and had not come out, and that a room was being served more food than the room could eat, and that a woman's servants had stopped using a particular passage.

He did not go to her. He went upstairs.

Then Garsivaz [gar-SEE-vaz] came with soldiers, and I will say this for Garsivaz, he did not enjoy it, or he did not let it into his face, and I have since had a long time to think about what it means that the man who came for me was the same man who talked a king into killing Siyavash, and I do not think it means anything. I think it means he was available.

I had a dagger, which is what a man has when he is somewhere he should not be. I put my back to the wall. I said: I am Bijan [bee-ZHAN], of the line of Kashvad [kash-VAAD].

You are taught to say it. Nobody ever explains that you are being taught to say it — it just arrives, out of your grandfather's mouth and your father's, until it is the thing that comes up out of you when there is nothing left. It is supposed to be a weapon. In that room it was a sound a young man made with his back against a wall.

They took the dagger off me without much trouble.

17.

They stripped me to the waist to bring me in, which is a technique and not a cruelty. A man with his shirt off and his hands tied cannot arrange his shoulders. Everything he feels goes straight onto the skin where the room can see it.

He was not what I expected. I had grown up on him — Afrasiyab [af-raa-see-YAAB], the whole apparatus of him, the name they say to children in Iran to hurry them into bed. And he was a competent, tired, well-dressed man on a chair in the middle of a morning that had other things in it.

He said I was a spy.

I said what I had: that a warrior goes armed the way a lion has teeth, and that you do not hang a lion for the teeth. I thought it was rather good. I had assembled it in the corridor.

He listened to all of it, without impatience, and then he told the room what to do about me, and the tone he used is the thing I have kept. It was not a shout. It was not vengeance, and it was not even really about me. It was the tone of a man moving an appointment. *Put a gallows up, and put him on it, so that the next one thinks twice.*

There were four or five people in that room whose job was to write things down and they all started writing at the same moment.

18.

They had the frame half up and I was standing under it in the yard when the great man rode in.

Piran-e Visa [pee-RAAN-e VEE-seh], who protected Siyavash. Who took the child up into the hills afterwards and hid him and taught him to seem simple, so that the king would let him live. Who, if you want it put plainly, is the reason the Shah I serve is alive to be served. There is not an Iranian breathing who does not owe that man something, and we have all agreed not to think about it.

He asked whose gallows it was. Somebody told him. He got off the horse and went inside without looking at me.

You can hear more than they think from a yard.

And what I heard — what I want to put down carefully — is a good man saving my life for an hour and a half without once, in any sentence, in any form, raising the question of whether I ought to be killed.

He said: this is Gudarz's grandson. He said: Rostam [ROS-tam]. He said: the dust from Siyavash has not settled, and you are proposing to raise more of it. He said: what does it buy you.

It is the best argument in the world and it worked and I am alive because of it.

And I stood in the yard under a half-built frame with my hands tied and worked out, slowly, that I had stopped being a person in that building and had turned into a number in somebody's sum. Which was much better than being hanged. And I had no word for it.

I have a word for it now. I was filed.

19.

They took me out of the city on a cart before dawn with a blanket over me, which was for their sake and not for mine.

It was cold and it was open ground and there were no trees in it. I want to be exact, because it is the last thing I saw with the sun on it: pale ground, low scrub, a line of hills a long way off to what I think was the north, and men's breath going up, and a hole with a heap of old spoil beside it that had been there long enough to grow a crust.

There was an argument about the order of operations, which I listened to. They had been told to bind him and cast him in, and one of them was saying that the bindings would be easier to do at the bottom, and another one was saying that at the bottom is where he could reach the man doing it.

Then they took my ankles.

Nobody has ever written down what it is like to go into a hole head-first, so I will. It is not the fall. The fall is nothing, the fall is a moment. It is the half-second before, when they have you by the ankles and the world has already gone over, and everything in you that knows which way the ground is starts screaming, and it does not stop when you land. It does not stop for weeks.

I remember the disc of sky above me while I was down and could still see it. Grey going to white at one edge.

Then a great deal of shouting, and a noise I did not understand at all — an enormous slow scraping, with a rhythm to it, and men calling out timing — and then the disc went narrow, and then the disc went to a line, and then there was no disc.

20.

Here is what I understood, lying on my back afterwards.

The pit is not the sentence.

The pit is where the sentence happens, and the pit is not even a good pit — I have got the measure of it now, and it is a hole a competent man cut in the ground in three days. The chain, the collar, the fetter: those are equipment. Those are expensive, and they were ordered from a long way away, and the ordering of them tells me somebody took the matter seriously, but they are not it either.

The sentence is the phrase.

So that he is cut off from the sun and the moon.

Somebody said that out loud. In a room. In the morning. And there were four or five men in that room writing it down as it was said, and none of them stopped writing, and somewhere in that building there is a page with that phrase on it in somebody's neat hand, filed with the other pages from that morning.

That is what I cannot get past. Not the cart, not the ankles, not the stone.

That a man who was not angry described what he wanted done to my days, and used the words *sun* and *moon*, which are not the words of an administrator — those are a poet's words, those are the words you would use if you were reaching for the largest thing you could think of taking away from somebody — and then went and had his breakfast.

He was not trying to kill me. Killing me was the thing he had been talked out of, and he had accepted the argument, and he does not seem to me to have been sulking about it.

He was trying to subtract me.

from the old book

He carried the child into the hills and gave him to a herdsman, and taught him one thing only: to answer wrongly. To look at a man and not understand him. To be nobody's grandson. The boy did it so well that the king let him live, and everything that came afterwards came out of that.

III. THE VOICE

21.

There is a voice.

It comes from up there and it says my name.

I do not answer it. I want to be clear about why, because it does not do me any credit. I did not stay quiet because I was being careful, or because I thought it might be a trick, or any of the sensible things. I stayed quiet because I had already decided what was happening.

The dark had been making things for a while by then. It had made the points of light. It had made the lattice. It had made the floor plan of a house with a door I nearly knew. It seemed to me that the next thing a dark like this would make was a person, and that the person it made would say my name, because that is what you would want, and this place has been giving me things I want and none of them have been real.

So I lay on the high side of the floor with my eyes open and I let it say my name four times.

The fourth time it went away.

And I lay there afterwards in a silence that was worse than the four times had been, and I understood something about myself that I would rather not have. I was not afraid of a ghost. I was afraid of being wrong in front of one. If I answered it and there was nothing there, then I was a man in a hole talking to the ceiling, and I would have to go on being that man afterwards with nobody to tell me I wasn't.

It came back the next day. I let it say my name twice.

Then I answered it.

22.

Bread does not fall well.

That sounds like a small thing to have learned and it took me a long while to learn it. A loaf comes over the edge up there and it does not drop like a stone. It turns. It hits the wall on the way down,

more than once, and every time it hits it loses something, and by the time it arrives it is not a loaf any more, it is bread in four or five places on a floor I cannot see.

So I had to learn to listen to it land.

That is the work. That is what I do now instead of everything else I used to do. I hear the first knock against the wall and I know roughly which side. I hear the second and I know roughly how far out. And then it lands, and there is a soft sound, and I go to it on my hands and knees with the chain dragging and I sweep the floor with my forearms in wide passes, the way you would sweep a table in the dark for a lost ring.

The low side is the bad side. If it goes into the wet, I still eat it. I want that written down plainly and then left alone.

And this is the thing about the two of us that took me longest to see, and it is the whole shape of everything that happened afterwards, so I will put it here at the start.

She cannot reach me and I cannot reach her.

Nothing goes up. Everything comes down, and it comes down blind, and neither of us can ever be certain the other one got it. She lets go of a loaf into a hole and hopes. I hear a noise above me and hope. We are two people passing things across a gap where neither can see the other's hands.

23.

I asked her who she was.

She laughed at that. Not unkindly — but there was something underneath it, and I did not have the strength to go and look at what.

Then she told me her name. Manijeh [ma-nee-ZHEH]. She said it the way you say a name to a man you have just met at a gate.

I remember that clearly. I would like to put a small mark next to it, because it is one of the few things down here I would swear to: that was the night I learned her name.

She asked if I remembered the tent.

And I said yes, and it was not a lie exactly, because I did have the tent — the harp, the lamps in the tree, the light through the cloth at the end. What I did not have was her in it. I had the shape of where a person had been sitting, the way you can see where somebody has been lying in long grass.

So I said yes, and I asked her what we had talked about.

She was quiet for a bit. Then she told me. And it was good, and some of it was funny, and I laughed for the first time since the cart.

24.

This is how a day goes, and I use the word knowing I have no right to it.

I sleep against the dug wall on the high side. When I wake I do not know if it is morning, so I do not ask. I sit up. I put my back on the wall and my hands in my lap because the chain hurts less when the weight of it is in my lap than when it is hanging.

I go round the walls. All of it, both directions, with my palms. Not looking for anything. I know there is nothing. I do it because a man who stops touching the edges of his world begins to be unsure that it has any.

Then the collar. Three marks and the skid.

Then I wait, and the waiting is the largest part, and I fill it the way you would fill a long ride: with things I already know. The names of my father's horses. The way you set a camp on wet ground. My grandfather's seventy sons, which I can do in order, and which takes longer than you would think.

Then, at some point, bread. Or not.

People will ask me — if there is ever anyone to ask me — why I did not count the days. Scratch the wall. Keep a pile of small stones. Anything.

I thought about it early and I decided against it and I have never once gone back on it, and the reason is this. A number is a thing you can lose. Miss one day, sleep through two, get sick and go under for a while — and now you are a man holding a number that

is wrong, and you cannot ever find out how wrong, and you will hold it and hold it and build everything on it.

I would rather have nothing than have something false. That is the only decision I made down here that I am still proud of.

25.

She asked if I wanted to know how I got here.

I said yes. Of course I said yes. It is the only question I had, and I had been carrying it around that floor for however long it had been — because I had a party, and a tent, and light coming through cloth, and then a hole. Between those two things there was nothing at all, and a man cannot leave a space like that alone. He goes back to it the way your tongue goes back to a broken tooth.

So she told me.

She started at the third day, with the camp coming down, and she went on from there. And she was good at it. She told it in order and she did not rush, and when I stopped her to ask something she went back and filled it in and then found her place again.

It took several nights. It may have taken more than that. I remember that it ended, and that when it ended I knew what had happened to me, and that after all those weeks of the space being empty it was a relief so large I could not sit still under it.

I had my story back.

That is what I thought at the time, and I have written it down exactly as I thought it, and I am going to leave it there and let it stand.

26.

I know that town better than most people who live in it.

There is a street where the doors give bread nearly every time, and there is a better street where they never do. There is a house with a blue frame, and a woman in it who comes out with something every single day and has never once said a word — not a greeting,

not a blessing, nothing — she just puts it in the hands and shuts the door.

There is a baker who leaves what is going stale on the sill after the second call to work, and does not look at the sill, and does not look at the street, and would probably deny it if you asked him.

There is a man who set his dog on her, once. And then a few days later called it off before it got to the gate, and stood there, and went inside. He has not given her anything. He has not set the dog on her again either. She talks about him more than she talks about the woman with the blue door, and I understand that completely.

There is a well at the north end where the water is better, and a longer walk to the south one where nobody looks at her.

I built all of it out of her voice. Every stone. And I have never seen one grain of that town, and if you set me down in the middle of it at noon I would not know where I was standing.

from the old book

*The demon fought him by taking the ground away, and when that failed
it went into the sea and came up with a stone the size of a house, and
threw it. They tell this one for the strength. That is not the interesting
part. The stone came out of the sea, and it had to go somewhere
afterwards, and the poem does not say where.*

27.

It rained.

I heard it start above me — a change in the sound of the air, and then the smell, which came down before the water did, and which I would like to say I enjoyed and did, for about as long as it takes to say so.

Then it came down the shaft in a rope. One steady rope of water in the middle of the dark, hitting the floor in the same place, and I sat and listened to it and thought: that is not so bad.

Then it stopped being a rope.

I do not know where the water was coming from. Above ground somewhere, sheeting off the flat, finding the hole the way water finds anything. It came in over the lip on all sides. And the floor of this place does not drain — I had known that for weeks, in the way you know a thing without doing anything about it — and it began to fill from the low side, and the low side is where the wet patch is, and everything that had ever been down there came up.

It got to my knees.

I stood up and I could not sit down, and I could not lie down, and a man who cannot lie down cannot sleep, and the cold in that water was a different kind of cold to any I have been in. I have been in mountain water. Mountain water hurts and then you get out. This did not hurt. It just went in, slowly, and took things off me one at a time. First the feet. Then the legs stopped being anything I was in charge of. Then the shivering, which is your body still trying, and then the shivering stopped, which is worse.

She stayed.

That is the entry. That is the whole of it and I am not going to decorate it.

She was up there in the same rain with nothing over her, and she stayed, and she talked all night. I do not remember what about. I remember there was a long stretch where I could not answer and she kept going anyway, into a hole, in the rain, with no way of knowing whether the man at the bottom was still alive to hear it —

and she did not stop, and she did not once ask me to say something, because asking me to say something would have made it a test, and if I had failed the test she would have had to know.

The water went down before the light came. Her voice was still going when it did.

28.

I am going to write down what I have become, once, plainly, and then not come back to it.

My nails are long. Not long the way a man who has not cut them for a month is long. Curved. They have gone past the shape of the finger and started on a shape of their own, and there is nothing here to cut them on except the wall, and the wall takes them off in a way I will not describe.

My hair is one thing now. All of it, front and back, one mat. I stopped putting my hands in it a while ago.

The teeth at the front on the lower side are loose. Not painful. They move when I press them with my tongue, and I press them with my tongue perhaps four hundred times a day, which is stupid, and I know it is stupid.

Under the collar the skin has gone. There is a band all the way round where there is no skin and has not been for a long time, and it is not a wound any more; a wound closes or kills you. This is a place on my body where iron sits, and it has stopped trying to be anything else.

I can feel my own ribs from the front, through the flesh, individually, and count them, and I have.

None of that is the thing.

The thing is my hands. They are all right. They still do what I ask them. And every so often I sit in the dark and open and close them, ten times, twenty, and it is the best part of the day, because they are the last part of me still behaving like the man who came out of that thicket, and I do not know how long I get to keep them.

29.

I have him now.

The smith. The one who made this collar and put the three marks on it and skidded the punch on the last one.

His shop is on a narrow street and it faces the wrong way, so he loses the light in the afternoon, and he has been complaining about that for twenty years to anyone who will hold still. He has a boy who is not much good and whom he will not let go, because the boy's father did something for him once. He is a better smith than his father was and he knows it and he has never said it out loud.

The day he made this he was tired. That is not a guess. You can feel it in the last mark — everything before it is straight and clean and then the last one goes off. A man does not skid the punch on the first piece of the morning.

He got paid. He would not have known what it was for. Somebody in a warehouse a long way from here ordered collars, and chain, and fetters, a quantity of each, and he made them and they went into a crate and he went home and had whatever it is they eat there, and he has thought about this piece of iron precisely never since.

And here is where I get to, every time, and it is why I keep going back.

He is the last person to touch this thing on purpose. The last one who had a reason. After him it was a crate and a cart and a warehouse and a soldier who put it on me without looking at my face — but the smith *meant* it. He wanted it to be good. It is good.

I have not given him a name. I have thought about it and I will not do it. A name would make him mine, and the whole use of him is that he is not mine — he is out there, in a real street, in the afternoon, losing the light and complaining about it, whether or not I am here.

He is the only proof I have got that the world is still going on without me in it.

30.

There is a man standing in the corner.

There is no corner. That is the first thing. This place is round.

He is not doing anything. He is not looking at me — he is turned slightly away, the way somebody stands when they are waiting for a person who is in another room. His arms are at his sides. He is dressed like anybody. I could not tell you his face, not because it is hidden, but because I have not looked at it, and I notice that I have not looked at it and I do not look at it.

I am not frightened of him.

That is what I want to put down. I have been frightened plenty of times since I came down here — of the rain, of the food stopping, of my own hands going. This is not that. He is the most ordinary thing that has happened to me in weeks. He is standing there the way furniture stands there.

He was there when I woke and he was there for what I would call a long time and then at some point he was not.

And afterwards I sat in the dark and thought: all right. So that is where we are.

Because the trouble is not that I saw a man who is not there. The trouble is how easy it was. Nothing in me objected. No part of me stood up and said *there is no corner*. I had to work that out afterwards, deliberately, the way you work out a sum — and by the time I had worked it out he had already been standing there for an hour and had already been perfectly normal for an hour, and that hour is in my head now with everything else, filed with the real things, in the same handwriting.

from the old book

*They fought for two days and on the second day the old man won, and
put the knife in, and only then asked the young one his name. The poem
does not soften it. It tells you, and goes on to the next thing. The poem
does not soften it. It tells you, and goes on.*

31.

I asked her about Iran.

Not about the war, or the court, or any of the things a soldier ought to want. I asked her whether anyone was looking for me.

It is a ridiculous question to ask a woman sitting on the ground in Turan. She has no way of knowing. She has no way of knowing anything about my country except what she can pick up off the street of a town where the news comes in with the carts.

She answered it.

She said that a man does not go missing from the Shah's own hall without the hall noticing. She said my father was not the kind to accept a story. She said it would take time, because it was two countries and a border and a lie to unpick, but that it would go the way these things go — the lie would come apart, and somebody would ask the right question, and then they would come.

It was a good answer. It was better than a good answer. It had the shape of something a person tells you when they have thought about it properly, with the objections already answered and the timing allowed for.

I lay awake a long while afterwards feeling better than I had felt in weeks.

It did not occur to me then, and it did not occur to me for a long time after, that there is no good answer to that question. There is no answer at all. There was no possible way for her to know one single part of it.

She had thought about it properly. That is the only true thing in the whole of it. She had sat on the ground up there and worked out what it would take for them to come, and built it, and brought it to the hole, and given it to me.

32.

His name was Forud [fo-ROOD].

It came at me in the dark with nothing in front of it and nothing after it, which is how I know it is mine. Everything else down here arrives in order, with a beginning, like something being read out. This did not. It was just suddenly in the middle of me at full size.

He was in a fort on a mountain and he was seventeen or so and he was the son of Siyavash by a woman in Turan, which made him the Shah's own half-brother, and he came out on the wall to talk to us because he thought we were his father's people and he was pleased.

I could tell it properly. There was a whole day of it going wrong, before, and there were four separate points where a grown man could have stopped it and none of them did. Tus was drunk on being obeyed. There were orders that contradicted each other. There was a horse killed under somebody that turned the whole thing into a matter of pride.

But I have had a long time down here and I have stopped letting myself tell it that way, because the shape of that telling is a man walking backwards out of a room.

Here is the short version, which is the true one.

They sent men up the mountain and the men could not do it. I went up. I was good at it, and I was young, and I did it well.

I have not said his name out loud since. Nobody at court has said it in front of me, not once, not in years. It is not that it is forbidden. It is easier than that. There is simply a small hole in every conversation, exactly that shape, and everybody steps round it without looking down, and after a while you would not know it was there.

I am going to put it here, once, and then I am not going to use it again.

33.

I was doing the corridor.

I do it when I cannot sleep. It is the best of them, better than the tent, better than the thicket: the wheels going over from grass to road, the river, the tip of the cart, the gate on the east side where the stone is bad for forty paces. The courtyard. Then the corridor, and the niche with the lamp two-thirds of the way along on the left, and the light going up across the ceiling in a shape like a leaf.

Left. Left. Right. And then the long one that is more of a curve than a turn.

And I stopped.

I have gone through it perhaps two hundred times and I stopped in the middle of it like a horse refusing a gate, and I sat up in the dark with the chain going tight across my lap, and I said it out loud to nobody, which is the only time I have ever done that.

I was in a box.

I was drugged and asleep and folded into a cedar chest with cloth packed round me so I would not sound like cargo.

I have never seen that corridor.

I have never seen the gate on the east side, or the courtyard, or the niche, or the lamp, or the shape the light makes on the ceiling. I have never seen the river. I was not awake for one single moment of any of it and there is no arrangement of the world in which I could have been.

And it came apart from there, in order, the way a seam goes.

The chest is hers. She would have packed it. The east gate is hers; she has lived in that house since she was born. The corridor is hers.

And once those were gone the rest would not hold either.

Gorgin at the treeline is mine — I saw his face. But the three hours with the horses are not mine. The rehearsing. The sentence he built for court and lost when I came out of the trees. I was in a thicket. I have never in my life known what that man did with three hours,

and I have been carrying it around down here like something I owned.

The chamberlain who worked out that a chest went in and did not come out. I have never met a chamberlain. I was in a room upstairs with the door shut.

The tone Afrasiyab used. The clerks writing it down as it was said.

And underneath all of it, running the whole length, the thing I cannot put down now that I have picked it up: *how did it get in here, and when, and in whose voice.*

I have been fed twice a day. Bread down the hole, and the rest of it down after.

34.

I set her a test.

I am not proud of it and I did it anyway. I waited a day, so it would sound like nothing, and then I asked her about a thing from the tent — a small stupid thing, a thing about the harp player, which no one on this earth could know except somebody who had been sitting where I was sitting on the second evening.

She got it right.

And I lay there afterwards with my heart going and worked out, slowly, that it proved nothing at all.

Because I have been talking to her for months. Months of it, in the dark, with nothing else to do — my father, the horses, the thicket, the boys I grew up with, the harp player, all of it, poured up through that hole in no order whatsoever, and I could not tell you one thing I have told her and one thing I have not.

There was never a test available. There has not been one since the first week. Anything I know, she may know because I gave it to her. Anything she knows, I may have taken back off her without noticing and filed as mine.

The two of us have been pouring into the same bucket for months and now there is no way on earth to get it back out in two piles.

I did not tell her I had tried it.

That is the part I would take back, if I were allowed to take one thing back. Not the crown, not the grove, not the wine. That.

from the old book

The snakes grew out of the king's shoulders where the devil had kissed him, and the state fed them, two young men a day, until it was not a horror any more, only a piece of the morning's work. And in the end they came for him, and they did not chain him in the mountain. They gave him a chair by the door and let him watch.

35.

Here is where I am.

I cannot be sure the woman above me is a woman. I have never seen her. Everything I have of her is a voice through a hole, and this place has made me a lattice and a floor plan and a man standing in a corner that does not exist, and it made all of them well.

I cannot be sure of my own life. The middle of it came down a shaft in somebody else's mouth, and I took it, and it went in among the rest of my things and I cannot pick it out again.

I cannot test her and I cannot test myself, and there is nothing down here to hold either of us against.

So this is what I did, and I would like it written down, because it is the only thing I have done in this place that was a decision and not a reaction.

I asked her to keep going.

I said: tell me the rest. Tell me about the street with the blue door. Tell me what the baker did. Tell me the one about the fire again, I do not mind that I have had it, tell it the way you told it the first time.

Because if she is not real, then I am a man alone in a hole talking to the ceiling, and I will be that man whether or not I stop talking, and stopping will not save anything.

And if she is real, then somewhere over my head, in the rain and the sun and the middle of a town that hates her, there is a person who has spent every day of this year keeping a stranger alive through a gap she cannot reach — and she gets to go on doing it, and she gets to be answered when she does.

I know which of those I am choosing. I chose it and it was not close.

IV. THE RING

36.

She did not come.

I want to be careful here, because I have no days and I will not pretend to them. What I have is this: there was a time she came, and then there was a stretch, and then there was another stretch, and the second stretch was longer than any stretch there had ever been.

The first one I did not mind. She has been late before. She has been late because a street was shut, because a man followed her, because there was nothing to bring and she would not come empty. She told me once that coming with nothing was worse than not coming, and I said she was wrong about that, and she did not answer, which is what she does instead of arguing.

The second one I minded.

I sat on the high side with my back on the wall and I did the thing you do, which is to go and get every explanation there is and lay them out in front of you like a hand of cards. She is ill. She is hurt. Somebody took her. She has gone. She has finally, after all this, gone.

And under all of them, quiet, the one I had been keeping in the bottom of my chest since the day I worked out what had been coming down that hole:

She was never there.

That is the whole of that stretch. A man in the dark with his back on the wall, listening so hard that the listening starts making sounds of its own, going towards every single one of them, and being wrong, and going again.

37.

Then she was back, and she was different.

She came in fast. No greeting, none of the small things we do — she was talking before she was properly at the edge, and her voice had something in it I had not heard once in the whole of this, and it

took me a moment to put a name to it because it was so far out of place.

She was excited.

There was a caravan in the city. A big one. A hundred camels, she said, and she said it twice, because a hundred camels is not a number you say once. Silk. Carpets. Brocade. Gold going through the streets in daylight with nobody guarding it properly, and the whole town out to look.

Merchants, from a long way off.

And she had gone down there, into the crowd, in the state she is in, and pushed her way to where the goods were being unrolled, and she had asked them.

That is what she had done with two days. She had gone into a crowd of people who all know exactly who she used to be, and she had asked strangers whether there was any news out of Iran.

I asked what they said.

She said one of them told her to get away from him.

38.

Something came down the shaft that was warm.

I have not had warm food since the tent. I want you to understand what that is. It is not a pleasure. It goes past pleasure and lands somewhere much older, and I was on it before I had decided anything, on my knees in the dark with both hands, and I ate the way a dog eats, and I am not ashamed of that and I would do it again.

It was a bird. Roasted whole, and soft bread with it, and I was most of the way through it when my teeth closed on something that was not bird.

I thought: bone. Then I thought: no.

I got it out and I sat back on my heels and I turned it over in my fingers, slowly, in the dark, the way I have turned over the three marks on this collar for however long it has been.

A ring. A man's ring, a heavy one, and set in it a stone, and cut into the stone a shape.

And I know that shape. I have known it since I was a boy. It has been pressed into the wax on letters that came to my grandfather's house, and I used to be allowed to hold them before they were opened. There is not another one like it anywhere in the world and there is exactly one man alive who is permitted to own it.

I sat in the bottom of that hole with a greasy bird in my lap and a turquoise ring in my hand.

And I laughed.

I have not laughed in — I do not have the word. It came up out of me from somewhere below where I keep things, and it was loud, and it was ugly, and it went up the shaft and out of the top of it into the daylight, and I could not have stopped it if the whole Turanian army had been standing round the lip.

39.

She said: what can you possibly have found to laugh at.

She did not say it lightly. That is the thing. There was fear in it. She has spent this entire year listening to a hole in the ground and trying to work out from the noises whether there was still a man at the bottom of it, and now the man at the bottom of it is howling in the dark for no reason she can see.

So I tried to tell her.

And I could not do it.

I said: he is here. I said: they are here, they have come, the merchant is not a merchant. And every one of those sentences came out of my mouth and went up the shaft and I could hear how they landed, which was nowhere.

Because she is not from my country. The mark on that stone means nothing to her. Her grandfather did not get letters with it pressed into the wax. To her it is a ring in a chicken.

And because — I understood this halfway through and stopped talking for a moment, and she asked if I was all right — the thing I

was trying to hand her was the thing she has been carrying on her own all this time without ever once being given a reason for it.

She has sat on the lid of my rescue the whole way through, feeding it, with no proof it was ever coming.

I got it out eventually. Badly. I said: somebody has come for me, and if somebody has come for me then somebody was looking, and if somebody was looking then all of it, the whole of it, everything you have done up there — it worked.

She did not say anything for a long time.

Then she said: tell me what he looks like, so I know him again.

from the old book

There is one they tell in the villages that is in no book I have seen. A man was kept for a year in a place with no name, and fed by something he never saw. When they let him out the country had changed hands and nobody would say when. He asked after the one who fed him. They told him there had been nobody there.

40.

Men, above me, in my own language.

That is the first thing and I could not get past it for a while. Not the words — the sound of the language, which I have not heard out of anybody's mouth but my own since the cart. Somebody up there said something short to somebody else and it was in Persian and it went through me like cold water.

Then the noise started.

There were several of them and they were working, and I could hear the sort of working it was: rope, and boots being set, and that low sound men make when they are lifting together and have agreed not to shout.

Then swearing.

Then more of them, and a rest, and then they went again, and I lay at the bottom in the black with my hands on the floor and felt the swearing come down the shaft, and I understood that they were not going to move it.

Seven of them. Some of the best men in Iran, on a stone.

I have had a long time to think about that stone. About where it came from, and who put it there, and the fact that it was chosen — not found, chosen, out of everything in that country — because of who it would keep out.

And I thought, lying there while they failed at it, about the sort of life a man has when he is the one who lifts other men out of holes. How that must go for him at the end.

I did not think it for long. There was too much noise.

41.

Then everything went quiet, and one voice spoke on its own.

I could not hear the words. I could hear the shape of them and I could hear that they were not addressed to the men. Somebody up there had stopped trying to move a stone with his shoulders and had gone somewhere else with it for a moment.

And then a sound I have no name for. A grinding that started slow and did not stop.

And the light came in.

I need to tell you about the light, because everybody will assume it was the good part.

It was night. There was no moon that I could see. What came into that hole was a disc of ordinary stars over a dark country, which is the smallest amount of light the sky has to offer.

It went through my eyes like a spear.

I screamed. I put my arms over my face and I turned into the wall and I lay in the dirt at the bottom with my back to the only thing I had wanted since the cart, screaming, and a man's voice above me was calling my name and I could not answer it because I was screaming.

That is what it was like. Not joy. Nothing like joy. A year of the dark making me things very gently, and then the actual world came in over the edge and hurt me more than the fetters ever did.

42.

They put a rope down and I could not tie it.

My hands would not do it. The hands I had been so proud of, that I had opened and closed twenty times a day like a man polishing the last good thing he owns. Somebody had to come down. He put the loop under my arms himself and he was gentle about it and he did not say anything about the smell.

Going up is slow. I went up the middle of the shaft, turning, with the wall going past my face, and I kept my eyes shut the whole way because I had learned my lesson about light.

I know what I looked like because of what they did with their faces.

Then grass under my hands.

I was on my knees in it and I could feel it and I did not know what it was for a moment. And the air moved. That is the thing nobody tells

you. Air that moves. A whole year of air that just sits there, and then this.

They were still cutting the fetters off me. That is where I was when I said it — on my knees in wet grass in the dark with the collar still on and a man working at the chain with a cold chisel.

I said: whatever has happened to Gorgin, let it stop.

The chisel stopped. The big man asked me to say it again, and I said it again, and I said it a third time because the second time did not come out properly, and then I said the rest of it, which was only this: I have had all that time down there to think about him and I have come out of it with nothing to spend on that. There is nothing left in me for it. Let it stop.

Nobody argued with me. I think they would have given me anything, at that moment, that did not cost them a horse.

Then the collar came off.

It went into the grass about four feet from my left hand with a small flat sound, and a man walked past it, and nobody picked it up, and I sat there in the dark with my eyes shut and my whole body shaking and I knew exactly where it was.

43.

We did not go straight home. He would not have it.

So there was a night, and a palace, and a household asleep in it. I was given a sword. I had been out of the ground for a matter of hours and my hands would not hold a cup steady but they held that.

I went for the king. They tell me I went through two rooms to get to him and that somebody wrote afterwards that I came on like a leopard. He got out through a door at the back of his own house in whatever men like that sleep in, and I stood in the room he had left and I looked at the bed with the covers thrown back.

And I felt nothing at all.

I have gone looking for it since. There is nothing there. A year at the bottom of a hole he specified with his own mouth, and I was in the room, and it was like standing in a stranger's house.

Then the road, and eleven days of it, and men.

On the first evening one of them was cleaning my face with a wet cloth and said, not unkindly, the way you would mention the weather, that I had been down there the better part of a year.

That is how I got it. I never asked. I had gone the whole way through without once letting myself put a number on it, because a number is a thing you can lose — and then a man wiped my face and handed me one, and I took it, because there was nothing else to do with it.

The rest was the part I did not expect. After all that time with one voice through a gap, eleven days of ordinary men talking around me while I lay in a cart getting my eyes back.

Nobody said anything to me. That is important. Nobody sat me down. It was all sideways, in the middle of other things, the way men talk on a long ride.

On the second day, somebody explaining how they had found me at all, quite proud of it: — *and then we waited for the new year, of course, for the cup.*

On the fifth day, my father's man, meaning it kindly: *he never believed a word of it. Not for a minute. Not from the first hour.*

On the ninth day, two of them behind the cart, not to me, about the court: *nobody wanted to be the one to bring up the fort.*

I heard all three. I did not do anything with them. I was lying in a cart with a cloth over my eyes and I heard them the way you hear things in another room, and I put them down somewhere and left them there.

from the old book

A working man's apron, dirty, on a stick. People followed it.

44.

The hall was full and my grandfather stood up when I came in.

They gave me Byzantine silk, which somebody had thought about and nobody had thought about enough. A crown. Ten purses. A hundred horses and a hundred camels, and men to look after them, and a house.

The Shah came down off the chair to me. He put his hand on my shoulder and he said the thing about her, in front of everybody, in that voice he has: *pass the world with her in gladness — and look well at how the days turn.*

She was standing at the back in clothes somebody had found for her.

And that is where I did the sum.

I did not want to. It had been sitting there since the ninth day on the road and I had left it alone, and it came up in that hall with the noise going on all round me, and it went like this.

The cup was in this building the whole time.

The lie came apart in the first hour. My father knew in the first hour. And they put the man in irons instead of taking him apart, which you do when you want an answer, and they did not want an answer, they wanted him quiet.

A good man in another country talked me off a rope and into a hole, and every man in this room was glad of it, because a hole is a thing nobody has to decide about.

And not one person in this hall, then or now, has ever said the name of the boy in the fort out loud.

Nobody arranged it. That is the part I have to keep hold of, because it would be easier the other way. There is no room where men sat down and agreed to leave me in the ground. Every single one of them did the right thing, at the right speed. It is only that the right speed was a year.

I was not a prisoner of Turan. I was a matter my own side got round to.

And the only person in either country who moved like it was a fire is standing at the back of this hall in a dead woman's dress, and nobody has offered her a chair.

I got through the rest of it. There was a great deal of it. At some point they took me to the house that was mine now and there were lamps lit in it and somebody had put flowers in a bowl, and I stood in the middle of a warm room full of my own furniture and could not think of one thing to do next.

The air moves in here too. I keep noticing it.

And what I want, standing in the middle of it, is not the silk and not the horses and not any of it.

It is a piece of iron lying in wet grass about four feet from where my left hand was, eleven days' ride the other side of a border, in a field with no trees in it, with three marks struck into the inside of it and a bright place where the punch skidded on the last one.

Nobody picked it up. I have asked. Nobody picked it up.

It is still lying there.

GLOSSARY

Afrasiyab af-raa-see-YAAB — King of Turan, and a cousin of the kings of Iran several hundred years back. He had his own son-in-law murdered and hunted his own grandson.

Armān ar-MAAN — A march-country on Iran's eastern edge, where it rubs against Turan. Not Armenia.

Bijan bee-ZHAN — The narrator. Son of Giv, grandson of Gudarz, of the line of Kashvad.

Farhad far-HAAD — One of the Shah's paladins. He is in the hall, and he examines his cup.

Forud fo-ROOD — Son of Siyavash by a Turanian mother, and so the Shah's own half-brother. He held a fort on a mountain. He was seventeen.

Garsivaz gar-SEE-vaz — Afrasiyab's brother, and the man who talked him into murdering Siyavash. He makes the arrest.

Giv GEEV — Bijan's father. He once crossed into Turan alone and stayed seven years looking for another man's child, and came back with a king.

Gorgin gor-GEEN — Gorgin son of Milad, an Iranian paladin, sent as a guide. He has known the road for thirty years.

Gudarz goo-DARZ — Bijan's grandfather, head of the house, who has buried seventy sons and grandsons.

Iraj ee-RAJ — The youngest of the three brothers the world was divided between. Iran was his. His brothers killed him for it.

Isfahan es-fa-HAAN — A city of the Gudarzian family's country.

Kashvad kash-VAAD — The founder of Bijan's house. The name a man says when he has nothing else left to say.

Kay Khosrow kay khos-ROW — Shah of Iran. Son of Siyavash. Born in Turan, hidden as a child, brought home by Giv. He owns a cup that shows the world.

Manijeh ma-nee-ZHEH — Daughter of Afrasiyab.

Milad mee-LAAD — Gorgin's father, of a noble house.

Piran pee-RAAN — Piran-e Visa, commander of Turan's armies. He protected Siyavash, and then hid Siyavash's son and taught him to seem simple so the king would let him live.

Rostam ROS-tam — Of Sistan. The greatest of Iran's champions, who has never been a king and never wanted to be. His name is said once in this book, by a Turanian, as a threat.

Salm SALM — The eldest of the three brothers. The west was his.

Siyavash see-yaa-VASH — An Iranian prince who proved his innocence by riding through fire, went into exile in Turan, and was murdered there anyway. Everything in this book happens downstream of that.

Tur TOOR — The second of the three brothers. Turan is named for him.

Turan too-RAAN — The country beyond the eastern river. Afrasiyab's. Two days' ride from where the boars were.

Tus TOOS — An Iranian commander. He was at the fort, and he was drunk on being obeyed.

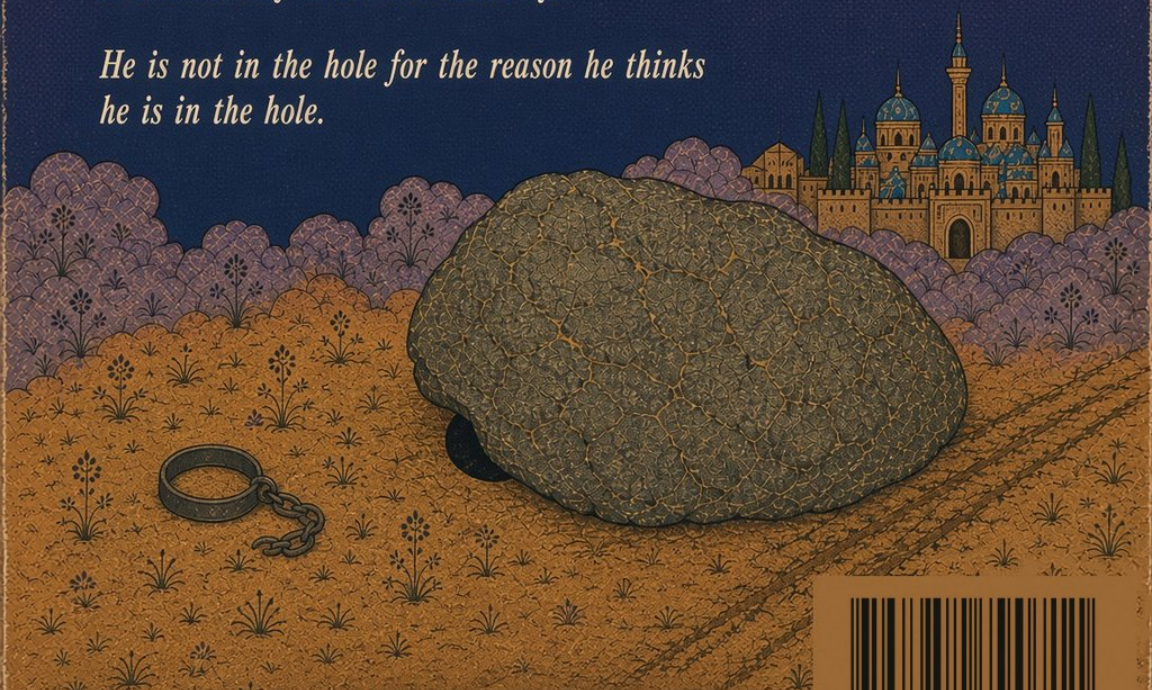
A man wakes at the bottom of a pit in Turan with an iron collar on his neck and no memory of arriving. A week ago he was the only man in the Shah's hall who would stand up.

He cannot reach the top. Everything that reaches him falls. Food comes through a gap in the daylight, and with it a woman's voice, and he has no way to find out whether she is there.

Above him a king's daughter has been stripped of everything and given the pit for an address. She begs bread all day in a town where everyone knows her face, and carries it out to him, and neither of them can be sure the other receives anything.

The old book says he is rescued. The old book does not say how long he is down there. It does not say who was in a hurry.

He is not in the hole for the reason he thinks he is in the hole.



FROM THE OLD BOOK
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