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No. 75

دانشگاه صنعتی دریف

آیندهی درخشان
THE BRIGHT FUTURE

VISION 1404

چشم‌انداز ۱۴۰۴



C H E W Z

A ROYA PUBLICATION

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Chew Z

Printed in the Reach

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FROM THE DELGOSHĀ

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A NOTE ON THE PLATE

The Golestān — the Rose Garden — was finished in Shiraz in 1258 by the poet Sa'di, and it opens with an account of how it came to be written.

Sa'di is in a garden with a friend. The friend gathers roses, sweet basil and hyacinths into the fold of his robe to carry back to the city.

Sa'di tells him what he already knows: that the flowers will not last the day, and that the garden of a rose has no permanence.

Then he offers to make him a book instead, which the autumn cannot reach.

The plate opposite shows the two men at that moment. The flowers are in the friend's lap and have perhaps an hour left in them.

Nothing that was said in a hall on a Thursday afternoon exists anywhere except in four minutes of telephone footage with music under it, and in this notebook, and in six hundred people who were there.

گلستان



*My friend gathered roses and basil into the
fold of his robe to carry home.*

I told him what he already knew: that they would not last the day.

He asked what would.

I said, I will make you a garden the autumn cannot reach.

THE STANDING OF THE CASE

The third 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 delay the execution until the boy is permitted to open his mouth. Nobody in that book ever argues. They only tell stories, and the stories are all that stand between a young man and a rope.

These notebooks are kept by a man who supplies jokes and does not perform them. He has never had a byline. He has not laughed in twenty years and he can tell you to the syllable where a laugh will land in a room he is not going to be in.

Five years ago his younger brother said eleven of his words out loud in a basement, under his own name, and was filmed doing it. That was the first day.

Two years ago those words came loose and stopped belonging to anybody, and a man on television said them badly and was applauded, and there was nothing to be done about it that did not begin with a claim. That was the second.

He has never written anything longer than forty words.

This is the third.

SYNOPSIS

A young woman ranked ninth in the national university entrance examination out of six hundred thousand, and whose face has been on a billboard outside a cram school ever since, is graduating top of her year at Sharif and is required to give the address.

She cannot write it. Not because she cannot write — she is the sharpest person in the building — but because there is nothing she is permitted to say, and she has spent four years being the proof of a system she has concluded is a machine for producing people like her and then losing them.

So she finds a man who writes for other people's mouths, and takes him entirely seriously, which nobody has ever done.

The commission is nine minutes long. Manuchehr Delgoshā has never in his life written more than forty words at a stretch. He knows compression the way a locksmith knows a cylinder and he has no idea how to build a room.

Ninety-two entries, one of which is eleven pages, in the shape of a treatise censored in every edition printed since. A book about the difference between a sentence and a speech, and about the only variable that decides which of two people saying the unsayable thing gets on a plane.

The dots are still not an absence.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

There is a word in Persian, *chashm-andāz*, which is what you call a view. A prospect. The thing you see when you stand somewhere high and look out.

It is built out of two pieces. *Chashm*, the eye. And *andāz*, from the verb *andākhtan*, to throw. So a vista, taken apart, is the place where you threw your eyes and did not get them back.

Twenty-odd years ago the state published a document called the *chashm-andāz* — the Vision — which set out, in some detail, what the country would look like by the year 1404. First in the region in science and technology. An advanced economy. A model for the Islamic world.

1404 came. Nobody said anything. There was no announcement that the date had passed, no assessment, no revised edition. The document simply aged out, the way a poster ages out on a wall, and the ministries went on using the phrase for other things.

I have been thinking about what it does to a generation to be raised inside a promise with a date on it, and then to arrive at the date.

They are the most educated people this country has ever produced. They were told for their whole childhoods that they were the point of the thing. They sat an examination that six hundred thousand people sit and a few hundred survive, and their parents sold what they had to get them through it, and they were photographed and put on walls.

And then the date came, and the walls faded, and the phrase went on being used, and nobody has ever formally told them that the deadline they were born into has expired.

So somebody has to stand up at the end of it and say something.

Chew Z

CONTENTS

I. THE COMMISSION

II. THE HALL

III. THE RECEPTION

IV. THE CORRIDOR

V. STOP

I. THE COMMISSION

1.

She telephoned at nine in the morning, which is the middle of my night, and did not apologise for it, and I have thought about that since.

She said: is that Manu.

I said: who is this.

She said: I need nine minutes and I'll pay for them.

2.

The number was not one Vahid gives out. I asked him afterwards how she got it and he was, for the first time in twenty-four years, embarrassed.

He said she had been extremely persistent.

I said: how persistent.

He said she had described to him, in a café, in detail, the arrangement by which he takes forty percent, and had said it back to him in his own words with the emphases in different places, and that he had given her the number in order to make it stop.

3.

They have announced that the electricity will be stable this winter. They announced the same thing last winter and the winter before, and I have started to think of it less as a forecast and more as a seasonal greeting.

4.

We met at the place on Enghelab where the students go, which is not a café so much as a room with prices, and she was there first with two teas already ordered and one of them mine, which I had not asked for and which was correct.

She is twenty-two. She was wearing a jacket that had been repaired at the cuff by somebody competent. She said: I'm going to talk for

nine minutes in front of six hundred people and I can't write it, and everybody I know writes like a form.

I said: what do you want it to say.

And she said a word I am not going to put in this notebook, followed by *everything*, and then drank her tea.

5.

Her name is Roshanak Azimi. She is from Javadiyeh, which the boys down there call Texas, and which is not dangerous and has never been dangerous and has been described as dangerous by four generations of people who have never been.

She came ninth in the konkur [kon-KOOR], the national entrance examination, out of six hundred thousand.

She is graduating first in her year at Sharif.

I did not know any of this at the café. I knew it by Thursday because I looked, the way you look at anything you are about to write for.

from the Delgoshā

They asked the calligrapher why he charged so much for four words. He said, the four words are free. The forty years are what you are paying for, and you may pay in instalments, and I shall not be here.

6.

Here is the problem and I want it written down at the front, because it is the whole book.

I have never written anything longer than forty words.

I want to be exact about that. Not *rarely*. Not *not for a while*. In twenty-five years of doing this for a living, at the top of the trade, the longest single continuous piece of work I have produced is a sketch of two hundred and ten words for the television programme, and it is four jokes with connective tissue between them, and the connective tissue is the worst writing I have ever been paid for.

My craft is subtraction. You find the last word first. You reverse out of it until you have the least possible setup that will still hold, and then you take one more thing away and see whether it survives, and if it survives you take one more.

Nine minutes is fourteen hundred words.

I sat in the chair on Tuesday and understood, at fifty-two, that I am a man who has spent his entire working life making door handles and has just been asked for a door.

7.

The rate did something on Sunday that I do not have the vocabulary for. My mother described it as *behaving*, which is what she says about a relative who is drinking.

8.

The university sent a form.

The form asks for the text of the address to be submitted fourteen days in advance for review, and states that the review is a formality, and provides four lines on which to write it.

Four lines.

Somebody in that building has designed a form which cannot physically contain the thing the form is asking for, and nobody has ever mentioned it, because everybody who has ever filled it in has

understood that the form is not asking for a speech. It is asking whether you are the sort of person who would fill in the form.

9.

She sent me eleven pages of notes and they are the funniest document I have read since my mother's school file.

They are not jokes. She does not write jokes and does not think she is funny. They are observations, in order, with no framing and no attempt at delivery, and about a third of them are already better than anything I would have built out of them.

One of them, entire, was: *my mother sold the gold in four goes over two years and thought I didn't notice the last one.*

I sat with that for some time and then went and made tea and came back and sat with it again.

10.

I asked her, at the second meeting, why she needed me at all.

She said: because I can see the thing but I can't land it. I get to the end of a sentence and I'm still in it.

Which is, word for word, the single most accurate description of the difference between an observation and a joke that I have heard from anybody in twenty-five years, including three men on television, including Vahid, including myself.

She said it while looking at her phone.

from the Delgoshā

A man complained that the road to the city was long. They told him there was no other road. He said, I did not say I would not walk it. I said it was long.

11.

The pharmacy man asked after my mother by name and told me his daughter has finished at Amirkabir and is teaching.

I have known him eleven years.

12.

Vahid does not understand this job and has said so four times.

He said: nine minutes for one afternoon, for one girl, and nobody will ever know you wrote it.

I said: nobody ever knows I wrote anything.

He said: yes, but usually two million people hear it.

He is not wrong. He is never wrong about the economics and he has never once been right about anything else, and in twenty-four years he has said *make it shorter* to every piece of work I have produced, and I am about to hand him fourteen hundred words, and I have been looking forward to that since Tuesday.

13.

I went to look at the billboard.

It is on the side of a building in Javadiyeh, above a cram school with a metal shutter, four metres high, and it has been there four years.

It says her name and it says رتبه نهم — rank nine — and underneath, in the letters they use for that sort of thing, it says something about the bright future.

The sun has had four years at it. It has taken the top layer off unevenly, and what it has taken first is the eyes, because whoever printed it used a cheaper ink for the dark areas, and so there is a girl four metres high on a wall in Javadiyeh with no eyes, encouraging children to work harder.

I stood underneath it for a while with my bag.

A woman came out of the building and asked if I was looking for the school. I said I was looking at the wall. She said: that's Azimi's girl. She's finishing this year.

I said: is she.

She said: they never take them down.

14.

I have written the first sentence eleven times.

That is not the number. I have not counted. It is what I wrote in the notebook and I have left it there because the notebook is for what happened and that is what I wrote.

15.

There is a supplement in one of the papers that runs a column on internet humour, and this week it carried four lines it attributed to Rumi.

Rumi did not write them. Rumi could not have written them; two of the words in them did not exist in the thirteenth century and one of them is French.

I have decided this is the funniest ongoing event in the country and that I am going to say nothing.

16.

Friday at my parents'.

My father is eighty-one. He read every page, to the bottom and back to check something in the middle, and then to the bottom again, and squared them and said this is good work.

Thirty-one years of Fridays.

I told him what the job was. I said: a speech. Nine minutes.

He put the glasses down and thought about it, properly, the way he thinks about a reading that has come out wrong, and then he said: that is a long time to be certain about something.

Then my mother came in with the rice.

17.

She was at the third meeting with a boy of about nineteen who did not sit down.

He handed her a padded envelope and said a number, and she said a different number, and he said the first number again, and she paid the first number and said something to him that made him laugh so hard he had to put his hand on the back of a chair, and then he left.

I said: what was that.

She said: rotor bearings.

I said: for what.

And she looked at me for about two seconds, deciding something, and then told me exactly what she does, in order, with figures, and did not ask me to keep it to myself, which is a thing certain people do and which I have only ever seen twice.

18.

What she does is this.

The university cannot legally import a great deal of what a university needs. Borosilicate glassware. Bearings. Instrument spares. Sensor heads. The pure reagents. None of it is exotic and none of it is a weapon and all of it is on a list somewhere, and the list is not the same list in every country, and the difference between the lists is where she lives.

Through the proper channel, a purchase order takes nine months and arrives incomplete.

Through her it takes eleven days.

She started at seventeen. She has a network she will not describe and I did not ask, and she is at the moment supplying, by her own account, four departments and one hospital.

She is not rich. That is the part that stopped me. Her margin is deliberately terrible. She said, and I wrote it down at the time: *if I*

take proper money off them they stop being able to afford it and then I've solved nothing. I said: so what do you take.

She said: enough.

from the Delgoshā

*A man kept a shop with nothing in it. Asked what
he sold, he said, whatever you need, next week. He
was the most trusted merchant on the street and
died wealthy.*

19.

Half the engineering faculty has her number saved under a woman's first name that is not hers.

She told me this with real pleasure, as a piece of comedy, which it is.

She said: I'm four different women in four different phones and none of them is me and every one of them is the reason there's a working centrifuge on the fourth floor.

20.

The bank has begun sending a monthly statement of an account that contains nothing. It costs them more to send it than the account contains, and I have started keeping them.

from the Delgoshā

*A merchant was praised for supplying the city in a
famine. He said, do not thank me, thank the famine.
I have been in this trade forty years and this is the
first time anyone has been pleased to see me.*

21.

I have three weeks and I have four hundred words and they are not in an order.

Here is what nobody in my trade tells you, because nobody in my trade has ever had to find out: a joke is a machine with one moving part. You wind it and you let it go and it goes off. It does not have to get anywhere, because there is nowhere to get to.

A speech has to *travel*. It has to be somewhere at minute two that it is not at minute seven. It has to leave one place and arrive at another and take six hundred people with it, and the people have to be able to feel the movement without being told about it.

I do not know how to do that. I have never had to. I have spent twenty-five years detonating things in rooms I was not in.

22.

I have started reading speeches. This is the most humiliating fortnight of my professional life.

I have read forty of them. Coronations, resignations, funerals, prize-givings, the good one about the beach, the one the American gave about failure. I have taken them apart on the table with the lamp on the way my father goes down the case.

Here is what I have found and it is not much.

They all do the same four things. They put the audience somewhere. They tell them one true thing they already knew and had not said. They tell them one true thing they did not know and did not want. And then they let them go.

That is it. That is the entire architecture of every great speech ever given and it took me eleven days to see it, and any first-year student of rhetoric could have told me on the telephone.

23.

The most useful thing I have learned this fortnight came from the metro. He is still there. Twenty-something years on the same run. I

got on at the wrong end deliberately and rode it four times and watched him do the six minutes four times.

And on the fourth time I understood what he does that I have never done.

He arrives somewhere. He starts complaining about the heat and he ends up selling socks, and there is no seam. The man who got on at the first station is not the man who gets off, and he has been moved, and he did not notice being moved, and he has bought socks.

I have been studying that man for eight years and I thought I was studying his timing.

24.

He said the price was the same as last month and that this was not going to continue.

25.

The university official is called Mr Bahadori and he is not a bad man and I want that recorded early, because everything I am about to write about him will read as though he is.

He asked to meet the writer, which nobody has ever asked, and he was courteous, and he had read the four-line form.

He said: the theme this year is the bright future.

I said: is that a requirement.

He said: it is the theme.

26.

I asked him whether anything in particular should be avoided.

He did not answer.

What he did instead was describe the hall. The layout of it. Where the cameras are — two, one fixed at the back and one on a shoulder at the side. Where the deputy minister will be sitting, which is the third row, on the aisle. Which door is behind the lectern and where

that door goes. How long it takes to walk from the lectern to that door. Where the sound desk is and that the man on it is called Nasser and has been there nineteen years.

He described all of it, accurately, in about four minutes, and he never came near my question, and when he finished he looked at me and waited.

I said: thank you.

He said: not at all.

That is the most complete answer I have ever been given by anybody about anything, and there is no sentence in it, and if you wrote down every word he said you would have nothing.

27.

I have started to see the shape of it.

The thing about a room like that is that everybody in it has agreed to something before anybody speaks. Six hundred people have agreed to sit still for an hour and be told that they are the future. The agreement is the material. Nobody has to break it. You only have to keep referring to it until they can hear it.

I wrote that down at four in the morning and it is the first thing in three weeks that I have not thrown away.

28.

There is a woman working the underground rooms under the name **Naneh Sarma** [naa-neh sar-MAA], which is Grandma Frost, who in the story waits all year for Amu Nowruz and falls asleep and misses him, every year, forever.

Somebody sent me four minutes of her on a phone.

The construction is exact. The hook is a complaint and it is not the product. Three beats, the third about money and self-deprecating. A callback timed into a gap she made herself. I have seen that construction twice in my life. Once on a metro carriage from a man selling socks. Once in a mirror.

I watched it four times and then put the phone face down on the table and sat there.

from the Delgoshā

They asked the thief what he had learned in prison.

*He said, that there are two kinds of men in the
world: those who are caught, and those who are
useful. He was released the following spring.*

29.

Her mother came to the fourth meeting because she was passing, which she was not.

She sat down without being asked and looked at me for a while and then asked whether I had eaten, and I said yes, and she said no you have not.

Then she talked for twenty minutes about the price of things.

She does not tell jokes. She has never told a joke. What she does is describe the exchange rate as though it were a family member with a problem — *it was quiet for a while, we thought it was over, and then in Aban it started again and this time it did not even pretend* — and by the end of it Roshanak had her hand over her face and I had to look at the wall.

Roshanak said afterwards: she's funnier than both of us and she'd be horrified if you told her.

I said: I know a woman exactly like that.

30.

I asked Roshanak what her rank was, because I wanted it in the second paragraph.

I said: eleven, wasn't it.

She said: nine.

I said: nine. Sorry.

And wrote it down.

31.

The lift in my building is working. Nobody knows why. There is a general feeling in the stairwell that we should not discuss it.

32.

I have the shape now and it is seven parts and I am not going to describe them here, because a man who explains his own architecture on the page is a man who is not confident it stands up.

What I will write down is the rule I gave myself on the eleventh night, which is the only piece of craft in this notebook I think is worth anything:

Nothing in it may be about the students, the parents, or anybody in that hall who cannot answer back.

Everything else is available. The ministry. The theme. The banner. The form with four lines. The customs classification. The plan with the date on it. The deputy minister in the third row on the aisle.

The moment it goes downward it is over. Not morally — technically. A room will forgive you for going up and will never forgive you for going down, and it will not tell you why, and you will think you had a bad night.

33.

I gave her the draft on a Thursday and she read it in front of me, which I had not expected and did not enjoy.

She read it twice. The second time with a pen.

She changed nine things. Eight of them were words she does not use and I had put in her mouth because I had been thinking about the room and not about her, and every one of her replacements was better.

The ninth was a whole line. She took out something I was proud of and wrote in the margin: *this is you being clever. I don't get clever until minute six.*

She is twenty-two.

34.

I said: there's a version of this where you don't say the part about the parts.

She said: I know.

I said: you'd be safer.

She said: I'd be safer and the fourth floor would still be smuggling and everyone in that room would still be pretending they don't

know, and I'd have stood up in a gown and said nothing, like everybody who's ever stood up in a gown.

Then she said: anyway they can't touch me for it.

I said: why not.

And she explained why not, in about eleven seconds, and it is the single best piece of strategic thinking I have encountered in my adult life, and I will come to it.

35.

Four days before, she told me she has a post in Delft. Fluid dynamics. Starting in the autumn.

I said: when do you fly.

She said: Tuesday. The Tuesday after.

I did not say anything for a moment and she noticed and did not ask.

36.

He waited eleven years for that lift and got out of the building in four minutes.

from the Delgoshā

*A man was given a lamp for his journey and told it
would last the night. He asked how long the night
was. They said, that is not the lamp's business.*

II. THE HALL

37.

The morning of, my mother telephoned to describe a wedding she had not attended.

I let her. I had nothing to do until four and I could not have written a word.

38.

The hall holds six hundred and there were more than that. They had put chairs down the sides against the fire regulations, and there was a man from the university walking the aisle counting them, and I watched him arrive at a number he did not like and then go away.

The banner is thirty feet of blue vinyl and it says 〇〇〇〇〇〇 〇〇〇〇〇〇 — the bright future — in white, and beneath that the same thing in English, and beneath that the university crest.

It cost something. You can tell. It is the single most expensive object in the room and it is going to be thrown away on Sunday.

39.

I sat four rows from the back on the aisle, which is where I always sit and which is not modesty. It is the only seat from which you can see the whole room's shoulders at once.

The deputy minister came in at eleven minutes past and everybody stood up who was going to.

40.

What follows is the address as given.

I have set it down complete because it is the only piece of work of mine that has ever been performed whole and unaltered by anybody, and because I was in the room for it, which has happened to me twice.

The notes in *italic* are mine. I made them at the time on the programme and afterwards on the way home. They are what I do. I did not enjoy them and I could not stop.

41.

NOT

FOR

EXPORT

صادرات ممنوع

(delivered as: an address by the graduating valedictorian on the theme of the bright future)

Distinguished guests. Honoured faculty. Deputy Minister — I can see you, you are in the third row on the aisle, and you are on your phone, and I want you to know that I have built the next nine minutes around that.

Laugh one. Four seconds and a half, which is long for an opener in a hall that size. He laughs too, because at this point it is still about him, and men like that will take any attention on any terms. He puts the phone face down on his knee.

He will pick it up again at minute nineteen. He will not look at it after minute twenty-two.

Nine minutes. That is what it says here. We will see.

Second laugh, smaller, and entirely different in kind. That is the room agreeing to something. She has told them the contract may not be honoured and they have decided they are pleased about it, and from here she can take as long as she likes, and the four men on the platform have just lost the afternoon and do not know it yet.

Parents. Before anything else.

You are the only people in this hall who are entirely sincere, and you are also the only people who have not slept properly since 2019, and I want to suggest that those two things are related.

Faculty. You taught me thermodynamics, fluid mechanics, materials, and how to write a requisition for equipment that will not arrive. Three of those four have been useful and I want you to know I am grateful for all four.

That is a joke with a hook in it and nobody has felt the hook. Watch what she does with it in eleven minutes.

And graduates. Congratulations.

You are now among the most highly educated people in a country that has no further use for you.

Laugh three. Six seconds, and there is a note underneath it I have not heard in a room before. Somebody at the back said eyval out loud and somebody else laughed at him for saying it.

The provost stops writing. Not a decision — his hand simply stops, and the pen stays down on the paper, and there is a dot on his page getting larger for the next forty seconds. I watched it happen from four rows back and I would not have believed it if I had written it.

Let me tell you why they gave this to me.

I came ninth in the konkur. Ninth, out of six hundred thousand. There is a photograph of my face on a wall in Javadiyeh, four metres high, above a cram school, next to a slogan about the bright future.

It has been up four years. The sun has had four years at it, and it has taken the top layer off unevenly, and the thing it took first was the eyes, because whoever printed it used the cheap ink for the dark parts.

So there is a girl four metres high on a wall in my neighbourhood, with no eyes, encouraging children to work harder.

Nothing. Four hundred people not laughing at exactly the same time, which is a bigger effect than a laugh and which I have spent twenty-five years being unable to produce on purpose.

She has not been unkind about anybody. She has described a wall.

That is the most honest piece of public art in this country and the municipality made it by accident, and they will not

take it down, because nobody has ever been promoted for
taking something down.

*And back up. Six seconds. She held the silence for two
and a half and then released it, and if you asked her how
she knew she would not be able to tell you, and that is
the difference between people like her and people like
me.*

Now. The thanks.

I want to thank my mother, who sold her gold.
Not some of it. All of it, in four separate transactions over
two years, and she did it quietly, and she thinks I did not
notice the last one.

*And there it is. Every mother in this hall has just done
the arithmetic on her own jewellery and every father
has looked at the ceiling. Six hundred educated people
doing sums about a woman's bracelets in total silence.*

*That line is hers. She wrote it in her notes in one clause
with no framing and I did not improve it and I could not
have.*

I would also like to thank the gentleman at Bandar Abbas
customs who, in my third year, held a shipment of
borosilicate flasks for eleven weeks because the paperwork
described them as *glass*, and he was waiting for a document
describing them as *scientific glass*.

And I want to be very clear about this, because it is the most
important thing I am going to say in the first half.

He was correct.

The form said glass. He is not the problem. He is the most
rule-abiding man in the Islamic Republic. He cost my
department a semester and he will retire with a
commendation and he did nothing wrong, and if you have
spent your life waiting for the villain in this story to walk in, I
am sorry, but he has a lanyard and a pension and he did his
job properly.

Fourth row of the platform. The man whose function I have not established and whose shoes I priced at four months of a lecturer's salary has stopped moving.

There is no sentence in that passage that can be reported. She praised an official. Twice.

They will tell you this afternoon that you are the future of
this nation.

That is true in the way that a departure lounge is the future
of an airport.

Seven seconds. Loudest so far. And this is the moment the deputy minister's face changes — not to anger, to arithmetic. He has started working out how this will be described to him tomorrow by somebody who was not here.

Sharif has produced more world-class engineers than any institution in this region and you can meet nearly all of them in Toronto. They meet on Saturdays. It is a bigger gathering than this one and none of you have been invited, because you are still here.

Look to your left. Look to your right.
No — do it properly. Actually turn.

And they did. Six hundred people in gowns turning to look at each other because a twenty-two-year-old told them to, and the four men on the platform watching a room stop being an audience and start being a group.

That is the whole afternoon. Everything after this is her working with something she now owns.

In five years, one of you will be here.
And the two of you have just done the same calculation and got different answers about which one is staying, and you are both wrong, and this is the last time in your lives that you will be this optimistic about the arithmetic.

I was asked to say something about the economy. The figure changed while I was walking to the lectern, so I am going to say something about the weather instead, which is also worse and at least has the decency to be seasonal.

But I will give you the one thing about the economy they do not teach in the business school, and it is this.

We are the only country on earth where inflation is a personality trait.

You can tell how old somebody is by which number makes them flinch. My grandmother flinches at a hundred. My mother flinches at a thousand. I flinch at a hundred thousand.

There is a child somewhere in this hall this afternoon, in somebody's arms, who will one day flinch at a number that has not been invented yet. And she will tell her own children that there was a time when a sandwich cost the price of a car, and they will not believe her, and she will be telling the truth.

That is what we have instead of an inheritance.

Minute fourteen.

The vice-chancellor and the man on the aisle have looked at each other for the first time. That is not agreement. That is two men establishing, without a word, that neither of them is going to be the one who does something, and that each of them is now a witness to the other's decision not to.

I have been in rooms my whole life. I have never watched authority hand itself back before.

Now. You have all been given a document today. Let me tell you what a document is in this country.

A document is a thing that says you are capable. It does not say of what, or where, or under whose authority.

It will be photographed nine hundred times over the next four years by nine hundred different offices, and each one

will want a fresh stamp, and each stamp will cost more than the last one, and this is the only reliably growing sector in the national economy.

We do not have a bureaucracy. We have an ecosystem.

And you have just been released into it. Tagged.

Nine seconds. And in the middle of it, somewhere over on the right, one person clapping — not applause, one man hitting his hands together twice because he could not think what else to do with them.

Some advice. That is the form and I am going to do the form properly.

One. Learn to fix something. A car, a boiler, a knee, a pump. A person who can fix a thing carries a passport made of hands, and it does not expire, and nobody has to renew it, and there is no fee.

Two. Be careful with the word *temporary*. The power cut is temporary. The queue is temporary. The rate is temporary. My billboard was temporary. The arrangement all of us are standing inside this afternoon is fifty-three years old and was introduced as a temporary measure. There is nothing more permanent in the Persian language than the word temporary and the Academy should be informed.

Ten seconds, and it climbs at the end, which means the last clause did the work. The Academy. Not the fifty-three years. The Academy.

Because it lets them laugh at a committee instead of at what she actually said, and everybody in that hall took the exit at the same instant, gratefully, at speed. That is the most sophisticated single beat in the address and it is the one I am proudest of and no one will ever know.

Three. When a man in an office tells you that your case is *being followed up*, that is not a status. That is a farewell.

Four. Do not let anybody tell you that the shortage made us resourceful. It did not make us resourceful. It made us tired.

We became resourceful in order to keep going while tired, which is a different thing, and it should never have been called a national characteristic. It is not a gift. It is a bill. It is still being paid and it is being paid by everybody in this hall in instalments none of us agreed to.

I would very much have liked to spend those four years being merely competent, like a Dutch person.

And out. Eleven seconds and applause underneath it, which is a different animal from a laugh and which she has now got twice.

She went to the floor and came straight back up on a joke about the Dutch. I built that turn over three nights and she landed it having practised it, by her own account, once, in a kitchen.

Five. There is no five. Four is enough. Anything with five points is a policy.

Now.

Since I am up here, I would like to correct something.

There is a rumour in this university that the parts come from a man. I have heard him described in the corridor of my own department. He is about forty. He has a warehouse near Shoosh. He is connected.

He is not connected.

He does not have a warehouse.

He is not near Shoosh.

He is not a man.

Nothing. Not silence — the other thing. Six hundred people arriving at the end of a sentence a fraction of a second before it lands, together, which is the single rarest event in this trade and which I have produced perhaps four times in twenty-five years and never in a room I was sitting in.

He is a twenty-two-year-old woman from Javadiyeh who came ninth in the konkur, and she is standing at your lectern, and every centrifuge tube on the fourth floor came through her hands, and she has been supplying four departments and one hospital for five years, and roughly half the faculty in the front three rows has her telephone number saved under a woman's first name that is not hers. Professor. Second row. Yours is Mahsa.

The hall goes. Twenty-two seconds. I have never timed twenty-two seconds of a laugh before, in any room, at any level of this trade. Somebody at the back is on his feet. A woman two seats from me is holding the arm of a man she does not know.

Minute twenty-two. Somebody has been sent to find the sound engineer. He goes out through the side door and he comes back four minutes later alone, and he sits down.

Nobody told him to do anything. Telling him to do something would have been an instruction, and an instruction has an author, and there is not one man on that platform prepared to be the author of anything this afternoon.

I want to say something about that, and it is the serious part, and it is short, so if you have been waiting to cough, cough now.

And they did. About forty people coughed at once and it was the warmest sound in the entire afternoon and she had made it happen on purpose.

Everything I just described is a crime. It is also the only reason there is a working laboratory in this building, and every person on this platform knows that, and I have known that they know it since my second year. So we have all been standing in the same room for four years, agreeing not to say a thing that all of us know,

because saying it would oblige somebody to do something about it, and nobody wants to do anything about it, because the thing that would be done about it would close the fourth floor.

That silence has been the most educated thing in this university.

And not one of us wrote it. We inherited it. It was here when we arrived, and it will be here on Monday, and I am going to leave it exactly where it is, because I am not able to fix it and neither are you and neither, I think, is anybody on this platform.

I only wanted it said out loud once, in a room with the lights on, by somebody who is about to be somewhere else.

And they cannot touch her.

She explained this to me in a café in eleven seconds and I have thought about it every day since. To act on what she has just said, the university would first have to establish it, and to establish it they would have to accept in writing that four departments and a hospital have been running on unlicensed imports for five years. Nobody is going to write that down. Nobody is going to be the man who writes that down.

She has not confessed. She has made a confession structurally unusable by giving it in front of six hundred witnesses, two cameras and a deputy minister, and by making it about them.

She is twenty-two and she has done the one thing I have never in my life had the nerve to do, which is to say a true thing in a room in her own name, and she has done it from inside a position where saying it makes her safer rather than less safe.

I supply anonymously and call it a trade. She stood up.

My mother is in the fourth row.
She has been buying me socks for a month.

Nine words. There is no joke in it and there is not going to be one, and it is the only place in twenty-nine minutes with nothing in it at all. I wrote those nine words on the eleventh night at about four in the morning and I did not know why and I have never been able to improve them. Everybody in that hall who has a mother understood it inside a second and a half. She has known for a month. She has not said anything. She is buying socks because socks are the only part of it she is permitted to do anything about.

Roshanak did not look at her when she said it and her mother did not look up, and the two of them got through it by not looking at each other, in front of six hundred people, and I was four rows back watching two women manage it, and I could not make a note for some time.

Right.

They gave me a theme for today. You can see it. It is thirty feet long and it is directly above my head and I have been standing under it for twenty-nine minutes.

The bright future.

I have thought about it for three weeks and I have decided the problem is the word *bright*, because bright is a thing that light does, and light is a thing that goes off at seven in the evening in most of this city, and my entire generation has learned to be optimistic in four-hour blocks.

So I would like to propose an amendment.

Not the bright future.

The available future.

The one that is in stock. The one you can actually get, this month, without a permit, from somebody who knows somebody.

That is the future I have been selling to this university since I was seventeen and I want you to know it is a good product. It

took it at speed, and he was applauding before the woman next to him had finished turning her head.

Two minutes and eleven seconds of it. I timed that too. I could not stop timing anything.

Congratulations, everybody. There is tea outside and it is free, which is the last time anything in your life will be.

42.

Twenty-nine minutes and forty seconds.

She was given nine.

43.

Nobody stopped her, and I want to set down exactly why, because it is the finest thing I have ever watched and it was not courage.

The vice-chancellor had authority over every object and every person in that building and not one instrument he possessed was quiet.

He could have cut the microphone. Six hundred people would have seen him cut the microphone on the top graduate of the year in front of a deputy minister and two cameras, and that would have been the story, and the story would have travelled further than anything she said and would have had his name on it.

He could have gone to the lectern. Worse.

He could have sent somebody. He did send somebody. Somebody went to find Nasser at the sound desk, and Nasser has been there nineteen years, and Nasser was not going to touch a fader on the word of a man who would not put it in writing, and there was no time to put anything in writing, and so Nasser sat there and did his job, which was nothing.

Every tool he had was loud, and she was quiet, and so she won.

That is the whole afternoon. She did not defeat them. She stood in a place where their equipment did not reach.

44.

The provost's pen did not move for the last nineteen minutes. I could see the page from where I was. There is a dot on it the size of a coin.

45.

The banner was still up.

That is the thing I keep going back to. Thirty feet of blue vinyl saying the bright future, directly above her, the whole time, while she took it apart, and nobody moved it and nobody could have moved it, and it is in both cameras.

46.

They have promised the water will be back to normal by Farvardin. They have not said which Farvardin and the sentence, read carefully, does not contain one.

from the Delgoshā

A king ordered that the town crier announce good news each morning. The town crier did so for eleven years. When he died they discovered he had been deaf since the second year and had been repeating the first announcement, and nobody had noticed, and the king said, then he was the most reliable man in my service.

III. THE RECEPTION

47.

Tea in the courtyard and four hundred people who did not want to leave.

I have been to receptions. I have never been to one where nobody went home. It went on for two and a half hours and the university had catered for one.

48.

The deputy minister left at eleven minutes past, having shaken sixteen hands including hers, and having said, in front of a camera, that this was exactly the kind of frankness the country's young people were known for.

That is a professional. I want to acknowledge it. Inside four minutes he had converted the worst afternoon of his working life into a position, and the position will hold, and by Sunday he will believe it.

from the Delgoshā

*The vizier was praised for his silence at court. He
said, I have been composing a reply for eleven
years and it is not finished, and while it is not
finished I cannot be blamed for it.*

49.

Mr Bahadori found me by the tea urn.

He said: I understand you assisted.

I said nothing, which is the only skill I have that has ever been useful outside the chair.

He looked at the courtyard for a while — four hundred people, none of them leaving — and then he said: the hall is booked again on the nineteenth.

And went away.

I have thought about that for four days. It is not a threat and it is not thanks. It is a man telling me that the building continues, that the chairs go back in rows, that another six hundred people will sit in them, and that whatever happened this afternoon has been absorbed by an institution that has absorbed everything for sixty years.

He was being kind. I am nearly sure he was being kind.

50.

Her mother found me too and said, without any preliminary at all: you did not eat.

51.

Somebody had already put four minutes of it online before the tea was cold. By the following morning there were nine versions and one of them had been cut to eleven seconds, which is the length at which a thing stops being an argument and becomes a fact.

52.

Here is what has happened to Roshanak Azimi as a result of standing up in front of six hundred people and a deputy minister and saying every one of those things.

Nothing. She has a post at Delft. She has a visa in a passport with her photograph in it. She flies on Tuesday.

53.

Five years ago my brother said eleven words in a basement to sixty people on plastic chairs.

He is not here.

54.

I wrote both.

55.

I have gone through it looking for the difference and there is no difference in the material.

Hers is longer and better built and it is aimed higher and it names an actual criminal enterprise from a lectern in front of a serving official. His was eleven words about a family. By every measure my trade uses — exposure, specificity, who it is about, what it accuses — hers is the more dangerous document by a distance I would not have thought survivable.

The material is not the variable.

The nerve is not the variable. They have identical nerve. I have been in a room with both of them and there is no difference in them at all.

The variable is a document.

She has one and he did not. That is the entire equation. Everything else in it — five years, two lives, a mother buying socks, a room with a dot on a page — is arithmetic performed on a stamp in a passport, and the stamp does not know it is doing it.

56.

I have not written this down before and I am writing it now because I do not think I will write it again. I have spent twenty-five years being invisible and calling it a trade. I have explained it to myself as safety, as craft, as the nature of the form, as the one rule of the business, as modesty. I have four separate accounts of it and they are all true and none of them is the reason.

The reason is that I have never once been willing to find out what would happen.

She found out on a Thursday afternoon at four o'clock in front of six hundred people, and the answer was tea in a courtyard.

That is not a moral. She could have been wrong. If she had been born eleven kilometres further south with a different surname and no post in Delft, the same sentences in the same order in the same room would have produced a different afternoon, and everybody knows it, and that is the sickest thing in this notebook.

But she found out. And I have made a career of not asking the question, and I have been calling that a technique.

from the Delgoshā

*They asked the tightrope walker whether he was
afraid. He said, only of the ground, which has never
once moved and which I am on at this moment. . . .*

.

57.

The rate is doing something again. My mother says it has started coming home late.

58.

She offered on the Saturday.

We were on a pavement outside the place on Enghelab and she had two bags of things she was giving away, and she said it as though it were a logistical matter, which to her it was.

She said: put your name on the next thing and I'll publish it from there.

I said: what.

She said: from Delft. Or Amsterdam, there's a press. It costs nothing there. A man can own a sentence there, it's not even brave, it's just paperwork. I'll do the paperwork. You write it and I'll put it out under your name and you don't have to be anywhere near it.

She had thought it through. She had the mechanism worked out. She named a press.

It would work.

59.

I said no.

60.

She did not ask why, which I have not stopped thinking about.

She looked at me for about two seconds — the same two seconds as the first time, when she was deciding whether to tell me what she did for a living — and then she picked up the bags and said something about the traffic.

She knew. That is what the two seconds were. She worked out the reason standing on a pavement with two bags of things she was giving away, and she decided it was not hers to say out loud, and she said something about the traffic instead. Twenty-two.

61.

I am not going to write the reason down.

I have started three times.

IV. THE CORRIDOR

62.

The corridor by the kitchens at the back of the courtyard, on the afternoon itself, about forty minutes after she came off.

I had gone that way because it was the only route that did not have four hundred people in it, and she was there for the same reason, leaning on the wall by the doors with a paper cup, in the gown, with her shoes in her other hand.

63.

I said something about the billboard. I do not remember what. Something professional — that they would not take it down, that it would outlast the ceremony, some observation I had already made in this notebook and was recycling because I could not think of anything to say to her.

And she looked at the ceiling and said six words about her own face on that wall.

Six words. Sideways, in passing, on the way to drinking her tea. The funny word fourth from the end, which is where a joke goes to die, and it did not die.

I am not going to write it down.

It is hers, it was not built, she will never say it again, and it took about a second and a half, and it is the only piece of material I have encountered in twenty-five years that I would not improve.

64.

What happens is this.

It starts underneath the breastbone. Not in the head. I want that recorded because I have written four hundred jokes on the assumption that the event begins in the head and it does not, it begins in the middle of the chest, about where the warmth starts, and it arrives already moving.

There is no decision anywhere in it. I have spent twenty-five years describing this to myself as an involuntary response and I have been using the word the way you use a word you have never tested.

It is not that you decide not to resist. There is nothing to resist. The thing is already happening in the muscle before any part of you has been consulted, and the part of you that would have been consulted arrives late and finds the work already under way.

The diaphragm goes first and it goes hard. It is a big muscle and it is not a delicate one and it does not ask. Then the muscles between the ribs, all of them at once on both sides, which is a sensation I have no word for and which is closest to what happens when you go into cold water.

Then a sound comes out.

I did not authorise the sound. I did not hear the beginning of it. I have no memory of the first part of it at all, which frightened me afterwards more than anything else in the afternoon, because I have a professional memory and it did not record.

I had to put the cup down. Not chose to. Had to. The hand holding it stopped being available.

It went on. I do not know how long, and I time everything, and I have the length of every laugh in that hall to the half second, and I do not have this one.

65.

And here is the thing nobody told me.

It is not pleasant.

I want to be extremely clear, because I have been selling this to two million people for twenty-five years and I have been operating on an assumption that turns out to be wrong.

It is closer to being winded. It is closer to that than to anything else I have available. Something the size of a shoulder goes through the middle of you sideways and you cannot get a breath in behind it, and you make a noise you did not plan, and there is a point about two-thirds of the way through where you would stop it if you could and you cannot.

Afterwards there is an ache across the ribs on both sides, a real one, the kind you get from a stitch, and it lasted until the evening.

And my eyes were wet. Actually wet, running, with no grief anywhere in me and no explanation available. I have no account of that. It is the most undignified thing my body has done in my adult life and it did it in a corridor by the kitchens in front of a twenty-two-year-old.

Twenty-five years. Two million forwards. Three men on television.

Nobody told me it hurts.

66.

She watched the whole thing. She did not move and she did not enjoy it, particularly, which is what I would have expected and would have deserved.

When it stopped she drank some of her tea and said: khob, chi shod?

Well — what happened?

And I said: I don't know.

67.

My father said the same four words in a scrapyard in 1989 and I have been carrying them around for thirty-six years as the one piece of evidence that the thing cannot be engineered.

I did not think about that in the corridor. I thought about it on the way home, sitting still on the metro, with my ribs aching, past the station where the man with the socks gets on.

from the Delgoshā

*A man laughed once in his life and was asked what
it had been like. He said, and I
would not do it again in company.*

68.

She said: are you all right.

I said yes.

She said: you're not, your face has gone.

I said I was fine, and she looked at me for a second and then, because she is who she is, changed the subject entirely and told me about a man in customs at Bandar Abbas who once let a shipment through because she had correctly guessed the name of his daughter.

69.

She flew on the Tuesday.

I did not go. She did not ask and I did not offer and I think both of those were correct.

70.

My mother telephoned on the Wednesday to tell me about the Ranjbars, and I let her run for the full twenty minutes, and then she said: you sound different.

I said the line was bad.

She said: it isn't.

from the Delgoshā

*A physician was called to a man who had never in
his life been ill. He examined him and said, there is
nothing wrong with you, and the man said, then
why does it hurt, and the physician said,
. that is what it is like.*

71.

The billboard is still there.

I went past on the Thursday, which was not on my way. Four metres of a girl with no eyes above a cram school with a metal shutter, and a slogan about a bright future, and rank nine, and a woman coming out of the building who told me they never take them down.

She is in Delft. The wall is in Javadiyeh. Both of those things are true this afternoon and will be true for some years, and children in that neighbourhood will go on being told to become her, and she will not be in the country, and nobody is lying to anybody.

72.

There is a version of the four minutes online now with music under it.

73.

Vahid rang about something else and at the end of it said: that thing you did for the girl.

I said: what about it.

He said: how long was it in the end.

I said: fourteen hundred words.

There was a silence of about four seconds, which for Vahid is a lecture, and then he said: make it shorter.

And rang off. And I sat in the chair and laughed at nothing, except that I did not, because I cannot, and what I did was recognise that it was funny, precisely, at the correct volume, the way I have done four hundred thousand times, and feel nothing whatever about it.

V. STOP

74.

The syrup has gone up again. The cap in the drawer with the batteries has never been used.

75.

I have been back through the notebook.

There is a line in the seventh entry where I have written *eleven times* about the first sentence, and then written underneath it that this is not the number and that I did not count.

I have started doing that. Writing the thing and then writing that the thing is not true, in the same entry, in the same hand, and leaving both.

I do not know what that is. I have decided not to look at it this month.

76.

Friday. My father read every page. He did not laugh. Thirty-one years.

At the door he held my arm above the elbow and said: was it a good speech.

I said yes.

He said: did they know it was yours.

I said no.

And he nodded, and let go of my arm, and said: well.

And that is the only conversation my father and I have ever had about my work, and it took eleven seconds, and it is over.

77.

Four places.

from the Delgoshā

..... *said*,
..... *And the* *were*
content.

78.

They have announced a committee to review the Vision.

The Vision was a twenty-year plan for the country ending in 1404. It is now some years after 1404. The committee will report in the spring and will be chaired by a man who was nine when it was written.

I have three jokes about this and I am not going to sell any of them, and I want to write down why, because it is new.

They are all about the plan.

Not one of them is about a person, or a room, or a woman selling gold in four transactions over two years and thinking her daughter did not notice the last one. They are about the plan, which is a document, and which has never felt anything, and which cannot be embarrassed, and which will be replaced by another document in the spring.

I have spent twenty-five years being very careful to aim upward. It has never once occurred to me until this month that a thing you aim at should be capable of being hit.

79.

Twenty to eleven. The chair, the radio at the volume where you can hear that a man is talking, the bottle, the cap in the drawer.

The nose at twelve minutes past, as it has for twenty-five years.

The warmth at half past, with its opinions.

The third hour came and I sat in it and nothing was set down in front of me, and at twenty to five I was still holding the pen, and I went to bed at the hour my neighbours were getting up to queue for something.

80.

It has done that four nights now.

81.

Not the bright future.

GLOSSARY

Amu Nowruz a-MOO now-ROOZ — Persian, Uncle New Year. The figure who arrives at the spring equinox. In the story Naneh Sarma waits for him all year, falls asleep, and misses him, every year.

Bandar Abbas ban-DAR ab-BAAS — the principal southern port of Iran, on the Strait of Hormuz. Point of entry for most imported goods.

Chashm-andāz chashm-an-DAAZ — Persian, view, prospect, vista; literally eye-throw, from chashm, eye, and andākhtan, to throw. Also the name of the state's twenty-year national development plan, whose terminal year was 1404.

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.

Dast-forush dast-fo-ROOSH — Persian, hand-seller. A street or transit peddler working without a licence or a fixed pitch.

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.

Eyval ey-VAAL — Persian, colloquial. An exclamation of approval; roughly well done, respect.

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

Javadiyeh ja-vaa-dee-YEH — a neighbourhood in the south of Tehran. Known among its own young men as Texas.

Javānmardi ja-vaan-mar-DEE — Persian, young-manliness. The old code of the street brotherhoods and the wrestling houses: generosity, courage, faithfulness to one's own, and turning a blind eye to another's faults.

Khob, chi shod? KHOB, chee SHOD — Persian, well, what happened?

Konkur kon-KOOR — from the French concours. The Iranian national university entrance examination, sat annually by several hundred thousand candidates.

Naneh Sarma naa-neh sar-MAA — Persian, Grandma Frost. A figure of folklore who waits each year for Amu Nowruz and falls asleep before he arrives.

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

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 and the conspicuously pious. Extensively obscene, and bowdlerised in most editions printed since, the omissions marked with rows of dots.

Sāderāt mamnū' saa-de-RAAT mam-NOO — Persian, export forbidden. Standard prohibition signage.

Sharif sha-REEF — Sharif University of Technology, Tehran. The country's most competitive engineering school.

Shoosh SHOOSH — a district and market area in the south 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.

She came ninth in the konkur out of six hundred thousand.
Her face has been four metres high on a wall in Javadiyeh
for four years, and the sun took the eyes first, because
whoever printed it used the cheap ink for the dark parts.

She is graduating first in her year and she has been given
nine minutes and a theme. She cannot write it, because
there is nothing she is permitted to say. So she finds a man
who writes for other people's mouths, and takes him
seriously, which nobody has ever done.

He has never in twenty-five years written more than forty
words at a stretch. He knows compression the way a
locksmith knows a cylinder and he has no idea how to
build a room.

She speaks for twenty-nine minutes and forty seconds.
Nobody stops her. On Tuesday she flies.

*Five years ago his brother said eleven words in a basement.
He wrote both. The only variable was a document.*

