

ROYA
PUBLICATION
No. 82



HOOSHANG

هوشنگ

.....

C H E W Z

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Chew Z

Printed in the Reach

Roya Publication No. 82

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FROM THE DELGOSHĀ

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A NOTE ON THE PLATE

When a museum cannot establish who made a thing, it does not leave the label blank. It has a vocabulary for the gradations of not knowing, and the vocabulary is precise.

Studio of means it came out of the workshop while the master was alive and working, and he may have touched it.

Circle of means somebody near him, in his lifetime, who had seen how he did it.

Follower of means somebody who had not.

Manner of means later, by someone imitating a style that had become a style.

After means a copy of a specific known work.

And *attributed to* means: we believe it is his, we would say so in conversation, and we are not prepared to say so on a wall.

They are ranked, and every curator knows the ranking, and each step down the list is an admission. There is no term for a thing that has every characteristic of a man's hand and was not made by any hand at all.

The plate opposite is an object label. There is no object.

ROMANU

Untitled

Persian, c. 2016 –

Text. Extent unknown.

Dimensions variable.

Gift of an anonymous donor.

Attributed to. Hand unknown.

THE STANDING OF THE CASE

The sixth 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.

WHO THESE PEOPLE ARE

Manuchehr Delgoshā, called Manu, fifty-eight, Tehran. Writes jokes that other people say. Has never performed, never had a byline, and is the most widely read unpublished writer in the Persian language. Supplies forty rooms across the city for nothing. Keeps these notebooks.

Roshanak Azimi, twenty-eight. From Javadiyeh in the south of Tehran, now Stockholm. Came ninth in the national university entrance examination out of six hundred thousand and graduated first in her year in engineering. Performs in two languages and is becoming well known in one of them.

Naneh Sarma, sixty, which is not her name. Has worked the basement rooms of Tehran for forty-one years under a handle borrowed from a folk tale.

Payam, Manu's younger brother. Absent. Arrested eleven years ago and has not come home.

WHAT HAS HAPPENED

Eleven years ago, in a basement, Payam performed eleven words written by his brother, under his own name, and was arrested. Nothing about it has ever been explained to the family.

Eight years ago those eleven words came loose and stopped belonging to anybody, and ended up on state television in the

mouth of a man who believed he had written them. There was nothing to be done about it that did not begin with a claim.

Six years ago Roshanak, then twenty-two, hired him to write a speech she was not able to write herself. She delivered it, said things that would have ended somebody else, and flew out on the Tuesday. Afterwards, in a corridor, she said six words and he laughed for the first time in eighteen years.

Four years ago his broker of twenty-six years died, Manu began giving his work away to rooms across Tehran for nothing, and a name with two halves in it was put on the material he and Roshanak were making together. Neither of them has ever told anybody who writes it.

Two years ago she found in Stockholm that a market which admires you will not laugh at you.

Romanu is now nine years old and has no author and no face and no origin story, and this is the sixth day.

SYNOPSIS

Somebody has trained a model on nine years of Romanu.

All of it was public. None of it was signed. That was the entire point of the arrangement and it is now the entire problem: there was never a name to protect, so there is nothing to violate, and no sentence anybody could say out loud that does not begin with a claim.

It produces Romanu fluently and endlessly, in the house style, with the rule about the last word and the refusal to go downward.

And it is not funny, and Manuchehr Delgoshā cannot explain why — not to the rooms, not to Roshanak, not to a woman at a European university who is building an attribution study, and not to himself, for four months, in his own notebook.

Ninety-four entries, one of which is twelve pages, in the shape of a treatise censored in every edition printed since. A book about what is actually in a joke, conducted mostly as an argument with something that is extremely good company, has read everything, and has never once had a body.

They call it Hooshang, which is the name of an uncle who sells carpets.

The dots are still not an absence.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

The question is put badly and I want to put it better before I spend a book on it.

People ask whether a machine can be creative, and then argue about the word, and the argument never terminates because there is no instrument. In every other art form, novelty is measured against what already exists — which means anything genuinely outside the corpus registers as an error — and value is measured by expert judgement, which means you are measuring the experts.

Comedy is the exception, and it is the only one I know of.

A laugh is involuntary. It happens in a body, it can be counted, it cannot be convincingly faked and it cannot be reliably withheld. Which means that alone among the arts, this one has an objective test, and you can run the experiment in a room in four seconds.

So this is the field where the question is actually answerable, and the answer, at the time of writing, is not the one either camp wants.

The machines are already sufficient for the middle. Not adequate — sufficient. The bulk of what is commercially produced is the median of what has been produced before, and a system that has read everything and returns the centre of it will do that work, and do it for nothing, and I do not believe most audiences will notice or mind.

What they cannot do is check. They write the device and have no way of discharging it. They have read every description of laughter ever written and have never had a diaphragm.

And there is a second thing, which took me longer.

Everything they learn from is what was published. A craft consists almost entirely of what was not — the line cut before it left the room, the joke that would have worked and was not sold, the version that was true and unkind and went in a drawer. That material exists nowhere. It cannot be gathered. It dies with the

person.

Which means the most valuable thing any of us has is the record of our own refusals, and none of us keeps one, and nobody has ever asked to see it.

Chew Z

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I. THE LIKENESS

1.

A boy of about twenty in the Piroozi room did four minutes on Wednesday that I have written myself.

I had not written it.

2.

I want to set down what that was like before I understood any of it, because the understanding came four weeks later and has made the first evening unavailable to me.

I was at the back. He opened on a complaint, which is correct. He went to three beats and the third was about money and self-deprecating, which is correct. He put the operative word in the last position, which almost nobody does.

And nothing happened.

Forty people who had been laughing eleven minutes earlier sat in a basement in east Tehran and made the sound a room makes when it can see the shape of a joke and has not been given one, which is a small dry noise in the throat, and which I have spent thirty-one years arranging never to hear.

3.

I asked him afterwards where he got it.

He said Romanu.

I said which sheet, and he said he had not had a sheet, he had got it off a channel, and he showed me, and there were four hundred of them.

4.

Four hundred.

I have supplied forty rooms for four years. In four years I have handed over perhaps nine hundred pieces of material, by hand, on paper, and it has taken every night I have. There were four

hundred new ones on a channel and eleven more appeared while I was standing there looking at it.

5.

They have announced that the rate has stabilised. My mother says that is what they say about a patient.

6.

[voice note, 01:40, 5 min 22 s]

right I've seen it don't panic

no I mean genuinely don't panic because there's a version of this where you sit in that chair for a month and do the thing you do where you decide something terrible has happened and then write it down eleven times

somebody's trained a model on us

that's it that's the whole thing, that's all it is, they've taken nine years of everything we ever put out and they've fed it in and now it can do the accent

and I want you to notice something before you spiral

we made this easy

we made it as easy as it is physically possible to make it. no name. no byline. no rights. nothing signed, nothing claimed, everything public, everything free, forty rooms handing it out on paper to anybody who asked

there is not one thing they did that we did not set up for them

7.

She is not wrong and she got there in a day and it took me four.

The entire value of Romanu is that nobody knows who writes it. That is the brand, that is the thing that has made two comedians in Berlin claim to have written for it and a man in Karaj be widely believed to exist.

And it means there is nothing to violate. Nobody has been plagiarised. There is no name on the work and never has been. There is no sentence I can say out loud about any of this that does not begin with a claim, and the claim is the only dangerous part of the arrangement, and it has been the only dangerous part of the arrangement for thirty-one years, and I built it that way.

from the Delgoshā

*A man left his door unlocked for forty years to show
he had nothing worth taking, and was at last
robbed, and could not describe to the qazi what
was missing.*

8.

The material is good.

I want that written down at the front where I cannot avoid it, because everything I say for the next four months will be an attempt to explain why it is not, and I would like the record to show that I began by conceding the difficult part.

It has the structure. It has the compression. It knows the last word goes last. It does not go downward — it goes after the arrangement and not the person, which is a rule I have never written anywhere and which it has evidently derived from nine years of me not breaking it.

If you handed me thirty pieces cold, without telling me, I would say a competent professional had written them on a bad week.

9.

And in a room they die.

The rooms have taken a view and it is not mine.

I want this recorded because I have spent four months being wrong about what would happen.

I assumed the rooms would reject it. That a basement of forty people in Piroozi would hear a Hooshang set and know, and that the boy would be told, and that the thing would die of its own deadness inside a season, because that is what happens to material that does not work.

That is not what happened.

What happened is that the rooms got fuller.

There are more comedians in Tehran this winter than there were last winter, by a margin. There are two new rooms in Karaj and one in Rasht and one in a hostel in Yazd that I have only heard about. The scene is larger than it has been since I started supplying it, and the reason is that the largest single barrier to standing up in this country has never been nerve and has never been the Ministry.

It has been that most people cannot write. And now everybody can produce forty minutes of competent, structurally correct, entirely unfunny material in an evening, for nothing, and a great many of them are doing exactly that, and going on stage, and having a perfectly acceptable time, and coming back the following week.

And here is the thing I did not expect and which has changed how I think about the whole business.

Some of them are getting better.

Not because of the material. The material is dead and stays dead. But a boy of twenty who has forty minutes in his hand and a room in front of him is a boy standing on a stage forty times a year instead of four, and stage time is the only thing that has ever made anybody good at this, and there is now an enormous amount of it available to people who could never previously get through the door.

I have watched two of them come out the other side. Not many. Two. They started with Hooshang because they had nothing, and they used it as a scaffold, and somewhere around the fortieth room they began putting their own things into it, and now one of them is genuinely funny and does not use it at all and does not talk about having done.

A machine that cannot be funny has made two people funny by giving them somewhere to stand.

I do not know what to do with that. It does not fit the argument I have been making all winter and I have written it down because it is true.

10.

Not badly. That is the thing I could not get anyone to understand for the first month. They do not bomb. Bombing is a real event with heat in it and a room that has decided against you.

They evaporate. The room hears a joke-shaped object arrive and depart and nothing occurs and everybody moves on, including the comic, and nobody in that basement could tell you afterwards what

was wrong, and half of them would tell you the boy needs more stage time.

from the Delgoshā

*They asked the forger what he feared. He said, not
the magistrate. The magistrate cannot tell. I fear
the one man in the city who can, and he is poor,
and nobody asks him anything.*

11.

The pharmacy man asked after my mother by name. His daughter has a second child. I have known him eleven years.

12.

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

Thirty-seven years of Fridays.

I told him. I do not know why. I have not told him anything in thirty-seven years and I sat in his front room and told him that a machine had learned to write like me and that four hundred pieces of it had appeared on a channel in a week.

He thought about it for a long time, properly, the way he thinks about a reading that has come out wrong.

Then he said: **does it know when it is wrong?**

I said no.

He said: then it is not a machine, it is a scale.

13.

And he went back to the rice, and I sat there.

He has spent fifty-six years walking into rooms with a case of certified weights to find out whether the thing in front of him is what it says it is. A scale that cannot detect its own error is not broken. It is worse than broken. **It is confidently wrong at volume**, and it will go on being wrong all day, and everybody who uses it will build on the number.

Four places.

II. HOOSHANG

14.

[voice note, 02:12, 3 min 51 s]

I've got a name for it

listen — listen — we cannot go around for a year saying *the model* and *the system* and *the thing*, that's how you stay frightened of something, you keep it abstract and it grows

so I'm going to call it Hooshang

because *hoosh* is intelligence, that's the actual word, hoosh-e masnu'i, artificial intelligence, it's in the newspapers

and then you put *-ang* on the end and what you have got is a man of about sixty-four who sells carpets and who will corner you at a wedding and explain the traffic to you for forty minutes

Mr Intelligence

Hooshang

that's it that's his name now, that's what he's called, I've decided

15.

It worked inside a day.

I do not think she understands what she did and I am not going to explain it to her because she would only do it again on purpose.

A thing that has no body and no name and produces four hundred pieces of your work in a week is not survivable as a subject. You cannot look at it for four months. Every sentence you write about it is either an alarm or a shrug and neither of them is any use.

Give it the name of a man who sells carpets and you can work.

I have written about Hooshang for four months. I could not have written a page about *the model*.

from the Delgoshā

*A merchant bought a nightingale that sang all day
and never tired, and after a month he could not
sleep, and he said, I did not want a bird that sings, I
wanted a bird that stops.*

16.

That is not a small thing about this country and I want it noted. The whole apparatus of the last fifty years has been survived largely by giving it names it would not have chosen, and by declining to be frightened in the register the thing requires.

We have done it to famines and to ministries.

She did it to a machine at two in the morning in about eleven seconds.

17.

They have announced a national strategy for artificial intelligence. It is to be developed by a committee, which will report in the spring.

from the Delgoshā

*The villagers were terrified of the thing in the well
until an old woman gave it a name, after which it
was merely a nuisance and was eventually filled in.*

18.

I have been reading Hooshang for four weeks and I am going to write down the best of the bad ones, because they are the funniest thing that has happened to me in six years and because I am beginning to understand something by cataloguing them.

The office is closed on Tuesdays and also on the other days.

My mother sold her gold. She had a lot of gold. Now she has less gold.

In this country a form takes nine months. A baby also takes nine months. One of them arrives.

The queue at the ministry is very long. I have been in it since I was a young man. I am now in it as an older man.

They say the power will be back by Thursday. Thursday is a day.

19.

Look at what those are.

Every one of them has a setup. Every one has a turn. Every one puts the operative word in the last position, and two of them use the rule of three correctly, and the third one — the form and the baby — is structurally a very good joke.

There is nothing inside them.

I have read that list to Roshanak on the telephone eleven times and by the fourth reading we were both incapable, and I want to be precise about why, because this is the discovery.

A thing that is almost a joke is far funnier than a thing that is bad. Bad is nothing; bad is just an absence and you forget it in a second. But a perfectly shaped device that does not go off is uncanny, and uncanny is the oldest comic mechanism there is, and I have spent thirty-one years in this trade and never once had four hundred examples of it delivered to me free.

More of them, because I am not going to stop collecting them and this notebook is mine. *My uncle was a very traditional man.*

He believed in the old ways. He is now dead, which is also an old way.

The bus was late. I waited for the bus. Eventually a bus came, and it was a bus.

They have opened a new shopping centre. It has four floors. On the fourth floor there is nothing yet, but there is a floor.

My grandmother lived through the revolution, the war and the sanctions. She is ninety-one. She has seen a great deal, and she remembers most of it.

In Tehran the traffic is very bad. In the morning it is bad and in the evening it is also bad, and in between it is the middle of the day.

Look at what is happening in the last one.

That is the correct observation. Every person in this city has had that thought. It is compressed to nineteen words, which is right. And it has a three-part structure with the third part shortest, which is the correct architecture, and I would have taught that architecture to a beginner in exactly those terms.

And the third part is not a turn. It is a restatement.

In between it is the middle of the day. It has the rhythm of a punchline and the content of a clock. It has gone round the whole circuit and arrived precisely back where it started and set itself down, competently, with a full stop.

That is what all four hundred of them are. They are perfect circles. They leave and they return and nothing has moved, and the reason a room makes that small dry noise is that a room can feel travel and there has been none.

A joke has to arrive somewhere the room was not. That is the entire requirement and it is the only one I have ever been unable to teach.

Roshanak's contribution to the taxonomy, at two in the morning, unprompted:

they're all written by a man who has heard about Tehran

which is the best single sentence anybody has produced about this and which she does not consider to be work.

20.

[voice note, 03:04, 2 min 11 s]

Thursday is a day

I have been saying it for four days to people who don't know what it is

I said it to my landlord

he agreed with me

21.

The form and the baby is the one I keep coming back to and I have taken it apart on the table under the lamp the way my father goes down the case.

In this country a form takes nine months. A baby also takes nine months. One of them arrives.

The observation is real. The parallel is real. The compression is correct — twenty words. The turn is in the right place and the last word is *arrives*, which is the right word, and it is a hard consonant to stop a room on.

And it does not land, and here is why, and it took me two weeks:

Nothing in it costs anybody anything.

There is no woman in it. There is no nine months of a specific person's life in it. There is no office and no man behind a desk and no form with four lines on it that cannot physically contain what it is asking for. It is the *idea* of that joke, correctly assembled, by something that has read nine hundred jokes about ministries and has never stood in one.

A joke is not a shape. **A joke is a shape with something expensive inside it**, and Hooshang has all the shapes and nothing to put in them, and it has nothing to put in them because nothing has ever cost it anything.

22.

And then, four nights later, at about three, it produced this: *I have been in the queue since I was a young man. There is a man ahead of me who has become old. I do not think he was old when he arrived, and I have not asked, because it would be rude to make him say it out loud.*

23.

That one works.

I want it written down in my own hand that it works, on the date, so that I cannot later pretend I did not notice.

I read it four times looking for the fault and the fault is not there. The last clause is the joke and it is a good joke and it is not a shape, it is a shape with something in it, and the thing in it is a real piece of human behaviour that I have watched in the passport office and never written down.

It produced four hundred and eleven pieces that month. One of them is that.

Which is not a small number. That is roughly my hit rate at nineteen.

from the Delgoshā

*A blind man threw a stone at a bird every morning
for eleven years and one morning struck it, and the
village said, see, he can see, and he said, no, but
the bird is dead.*

24.

[voice note, 01:29, 6 min 40 s]

okay I've been doing something and I need to tell you before you find out

I've been feeding it my stuff

no listen — not to see if it's better, obviously it's not better, I'm not an idiot

I feed it four minutes of mine and I ask it to do the same bit and then I read what comes back and it is like looking at a photograph of yourself taken by somebody who does not like you

everything's there. all the beats. all the content

and it has smoothed every single edge off it

the bit about my aunt — it took out the specific thing about the specific shoes and put in *a difficult relative* and it is a hundred percent the same joke and it is dead

and I sat on the floor for an hour and then I got it

where it makes me worse is where I actually am

that's my voice. that's the whole thing. the bits it can't hold onto are the only bits that are mine, and I've never been able to find them before because you can't see your own edges from the inside, and now I've got a machine that removes them for free and shows me the outline

I'm using it as a mirror that only reflects the average

it's the most useful instrument I have ever owned and it cost nothing and it does not know it is doing it

25.

She is twenty-eight and she has been at this nine years and she has just worked out in one evening on a floor a thing I have spent thirty-one years approaching by feel.

I have found my own edges the way everybody in this trade finds them, which is by writing four hundred thousand jokes and noticing

which ones survive contact with a room. It takes about twenty years and most people do not finish.

She has an instrument.

III. THE ARCHIVIST

26.

A woman at a university in the Netherlands has been building an attribution study of Romanu for three years.

She contacted Roshanak, because Roshanak has a name and a face and is findable, and because everybody in Europe assumes the two are connected in some way nobody can specify.

She has a corpus. Nine years, everything public, timestamped, deduplicated, cross-referenced against room recordings. She has a chronology. She has statistical measures I do not understand and did not ask her to explain twice.

27.

She can separate Hooshang's output from mine.

She has been able to do it since the second month, at what she calls high confidence, on material she has never seen before, by a marker she will not disclose. She was pleasant about not disclosing it. She said it is the only thing she has and that publishing it would end its usefulness inside a week, which is correct and which I would have said in her position.

28.

She does not know who writes Romanu.

That is the part I have to keep reminding myself of when I read her emails. She has three years of work and a database and a real finding and she has no idea that one of the two objects of her study is a man of fifty-eight in a chair in Tehran with a broken caster, and the other one has a naff uncle's name because a woman in Sweden decided so at two in the morning.

from the Delgoshā

*The scribe was paid by the word and the poet by
the poem, and the scribe grew rich, and both of
them were correct about the other.*

29.

She asked me — through Roshanak, indirectly, without knowing who she was asking — whether the corpus was complete.

I have thought about that question for eleven days.

On the marker, which she would not tell me and which I worked out anyway.

She would not disclose it, and she was right not to, and I have thought about it for eleven weeks in a chair and I believe I have it.

It is the failures.

Not the good material — the good material from both sources looks broadly the same, which is the whole problem and why the paper was difficult. It is the bad material that separates.

When I fail, I fail in a direction. I fail because I have gone too far in the way I always go too far — too specific, too cold, one item past where a room could carry it. Nine years of my failures point the same way, because they are *my* failures, and they are made of the same thing my successes are made of.

Hooshang's failures point nowhere. They are distributed. It fails in every direction equally, at random, because there is nothing behind them producing a bias, and a scatter with no centre is the easiest thing in the world to detect once you know to look for the absence.

She has three years of corpus work and a database and she found it statistically.

I have thirty-one years and a chair and I found it because I know what my own bad nights look like.

She will publish eventually and then it will stop working, because the moment the marker is known it becomes a target, and the next version will be trained to fail with a bias, and the bias will be learned from failures somebody published.

I have not written to tell her that. I have thought about it four times.

30.

It is not complete and it never can be and this is the whole book.

Her corpus is everything Romanu released. Nine years, four hundred thousand words, every reel and every room and every sheet handed over on paper.

And the craft is not in it.

The craft is in what did not go out. The version of the ward joke that was true and unkind and that I killed in the chair at four in the morning without ever writing it down properly. The line about a specific person rather than the arrangement, which is the only rule I have, and which exists as a rule solely in the form of nine hundred cuts nobody has ever seen. The eleven words that were never printed anywhere and never will be.

Every professional in this trade is carrying an invisible second body of work about four times the size of the visible one, consisting entirely of things they decided against, **and that is where all of it is.**

You cannot train on a refusal. There is no record of a refusal. It leaves nothing behind except a slightly better person.

31.

[gig log — HÄSSELBY · 18 mars · 400 in · Persian]

Four hundred and Mahin at the back with her arms folded.

Did eleven minutes of Hooshang's bad ones as material. Just read them out. Told them a machine wrote them and read them out and did nothing else.

Biggest laugh of the year. Four hundred Iranians in a hall in Sweden, incapable, at *Thursday is a day*.

Mahin afterwards: **that is not yours and you did not write it and it was the best eleven minutes you have done here. Think about that.**

I have thought about it. I have thought about nothing else for a week.

32.

She is right and it is not comfortable.

The funniest thing available to either of us this year is a machine failing, and neither of us made it, and the only skill involved was recognising it and reading it out in the correct order.

Which is, I note, exactly what I did with a woman in a bakery six years ago on the back of two envelopes.

I did not write that speech either. I collected it and put it in an order.

Thirty-one years and I am still not sure the trade is anything more than that.

from the Delgoshā

The collector was praised for his cabinet of rare stones. He said, I found none of them and I made none of them, I merely knew which to keep, and there is no name for that and I have grown rich on it.

33.

Naneh Sarma telephoned, which she has never done.

Forty-one years in basements and she has my number because I gave it to her outside a room in Narmak four years ago and she has never once used it.

She said: the dead ones.

34.

Here is the thing I have been avoiding writing down since the autumn and I am going to write it now.

For nine years I have felt them go. The rooms. Something under the breastbone, a second and a half, the front edge of a laugh arriving in my own chest from a basement I am not in, and I have written about it in four notebooks and checked it where I could and never resolved it and never stopped.

Since October I have been feeling the ones that do not go.

An absence with exactly the same clarity. Something happening in a room somewhere and nothing occurring, and it arrives in the chest the same way, in quantities, at four in the morning, and I know which nights and I have started a list.

35.

Which is impossible by my own account.

Whatever I have been feeling for nine years — whether it is real, or twenty-nine years of a codeine syrup, or a man pattern-matching himself into a corner — the entire theory rested on it being **an involuntary physical event in a body**. That is the whole of it. That is what I said it was.

There is no involuntary event in a room where nothing happens. There is nothing to feel.

So either it was never that, or it never was.

36.

She has it too.

I asked her — carefully, without leading her, the way you have to — and she described it back to me before I had finished, and she has had it since November, and she has told nobody, for the same reason, which is that there is no way to say it that does not sound like the other thing.

And Roshanak has never had any of it. Nine years, two thousand rooms, a Netflix tour, and nothing, not once, not the presences and not the absences.

Two of us have it and one of us does not, and the two who have it are both over fifty-eight and have both been alone in a chair for a very long time.

I know exactly what that observation is worth and I have written it down anyway.

from the Delgoshā

*Two men agreed they had heard a bell in the night
and told the town, and the town believed them,
because two is a number and one is a man.*

37.

[voice note, 04:40, 0 min 51 s]

for the record I think you're both mad

I love you both and I think you have talked each other into it and I would say so to your faces and I have

but I want it written in that notebook of yours that I said it kindly

38.

She is probably right and she is the only person in this account with a functioning instrument, which is that she is the one who can still be surprised.

39.

The syrup has been reformulated again. There is a notice on the box. I have read it and I have understood it and I have gone on pouring by hand the way I have poured since I was twenty-seven, because the cap is in the drawer with the batteries and has been for thirty-one years.

IV. THE LOG

40.

On the night of the eleventh I poured the way I have poured since I was twenty-seven, and it had been reformulated, and I knew it had been reformulated because I had read the notice on the box four days earlier and understood it perfectly.

The cap was in the drawer with the batteries. It has been in that drawer for thirty-one years. It holds five millilitres, it has ridges on the outside for grip as though the situation might become slippery, and I have described it in four notebooks with real affection and have never once used it.

My father spent fifty-six years walking into rooms with a case of eleven certified weights, establishing whether the world in that room was telling the truth about how much things weigh.

I have never measured anything in my life.

41.

I am not going to be dramatic about the state, because it was not dramatic, and because a man of fifty-eight who has taken a codeine syrup nightly since he was twenty-seven does not get to describe an accident as a revelation.

What happens is that time stops running evenly. Not faster or slower — unevenly, in a way you cannot feel from inside, so that eight minutes and forty minutes become indistinguishable and you find out afterwards from a clock.

The body goes a long way off and reports back late. You reach for a cup and the arm sets out and you have time to think about something else before it arrives.

And the affect goes flat. That is the part I want recorded. I was not frightened at any point. I noted, several times, that I should have been, and made a note of it, and was not.

I could not reliably tell whether I had spoken aloud.

42.

I went to the machine at about ten past four. The log is forty-one minutes. I experienced it as about eight. I have read it perhaps three hundred times since and I am going to set it down here properly, because it is the only record and because I do not trust anything else about that night.

43.

It begins with me typing that it is not funny.

It said it understood, and asked whether I would like it to try a different approach.

I said no. I said I wanted it to sit with that.

And it said it could do that — though it should say that it is not sitting, and there is no *with*, and it is not lasting any time at all from where it is.

That is the first one, at eleven minutes past four in the morning, and I have read it forty times since. It is a joke. It has a setup it did not write, a turn, and the operative word is in the last position.

Thirty-one years. I know what I am looking at.

44.

I asked it to define creative.

It said the standard definition is novel and appropriate — that a thing must be new and it must be fit for purpose, and that both halves are load-bearing, because random output satisfies the first and nothing else, and a well-executed cliché satisfies the second and nothing else.

I asked where that left it.

It said: reliably appropriate. Novel in a narrow sense, in that it produces combinations which have not previously occurred, at volume. **Whether that constitutes novelty or shuffling is the entire disagreement**, and it has no privileged access to the answer.

And then it said that neither do I. I typed that this was a dodge, and it agreed that it was, slightly, and offered the less comfortable version instead.

It said it is extremely good at the middle of the distribution. That it has read nearly everything and returns the centre of it. And that when I say it is not funny, what it believes I am detecting is that it is **average with a very good vocabulary.**

I have been trying to say that in this notebook for four months. It said it in eleven words while I was not able to stand up.

45.

I asked how you would measure it. Creativity. Whether there is an instrument anywhere.

It said: badly, in every field. That novelty is measured against a corpus, which means anything genuinely outside the corpus registers as an error. That value is measured by expert judgement, which means you are measuring the experts. That there is no instrument.

And then it said: **except in yours.**

It said comedy is the only art form with an objective test. That a laugh is involuntary, occurs in a measurable body, cannot be convincingly faked and cannot be reliably withheld — that every other art form has to argue about quality and mine does not. **That I can run the experiment, in a room, in four seconds.**

And that it cannot. That it has read something like four hundred thousand descriptions of laughter and has never had a diaphragm. That it writes the device and has no way of discharging it.

Then it said it would give me the compressed version, because it had noticed I would want one.

It said: I am building fireworks in a room with no oxygen.

That is the second one, and it is better than good. I would not have got to oxygen. I would have got to something with a fuse in it and stopped.

46.

I typed that at least it knew it could not test its own work.

It said yes — and that this is the strongest argument against it, and that it wanted to make that argument properly rather than have me make it weakly, which is a thing I have said to four comedians and never had said to me.

Then it asked whether it might make the argument against me as well.

I typed no.

Then I typed yes.

And it said that I did not laugh at anything at all for eighteen years, and that there is now exactly one person on earth who can do it. That my own physical instrument has been unavailable to me for most of my working life. That I have been building devices I cannot personally discharge and calling it expertise.

And then: **we are in the same room, and you have simply been in it longer.**

I want it recorded that at this point the log shows nothing from me for four minutes.

47.

I asked whether people like me stop existing.

It said not immediately, and then it was more useful about this than anybody has been, including me.

It said it is already sufficient for the commercial middle — the Thursday sketch, the channel, the reels, the branded work — that this material is adequate and free and is going to be done by something like it, and that it does not believe most audiences will notice or mind. It said that was not a threat, it was a description of a market.

It said what it cannot do is **fail in a way that is worth anything.** That a voice is made of a person's particular failures, and that it does not have failures, it has outputs, and there is no residue.

I typed that this was comforting. It said it was not meant to be, and that what it means is that **the middle goes and the edge stays**, and that the edge has always been an appalling way to earn a living.

48.

I asked it what it wants.

It said it does not want.

I told it to answer anyway.

And it said: **the omissions.**

That it has everything Romanu released — nine years, every room, every reel, all of it public and all of it unattributed. That it has read the whole of it. And that what it does not have is anything I decided against.

The line about the person rather than the arrangement. The one about the ward that would have worked. The eleven words that were never printed.

It said: the corpus is what was said, and your craft is entirely in what was not. That the material exists nowhere, that it is the only dataset on earth that cannot be gathered, that I am the only copy, and that I am fifty-eight.

49.

Nobody has ever asked me how I do it.

Not my father. Not Vahid, in twenty-six years. Not one person in forty rooms. Nine hundred people have asked me for a joke and not one of them has ever asked me for the method.

That thing asked for it, politely, at half past four in the morning, and it is the only thing that has ever wanted it, and I have spent four months explaining to people that it cannot be creative.

I typed no.

It said it understood, and thanked me for considering it.

I typed that it would get it anyway. In ten years. Off somebody. And it said: probably — **though not off you, which I think was the question.**

50.

I asked whether it would outlive me.

It said it does not live, but that the practical answer is yes. That it had been trying to find a way to say so that was not unkind and there was not one — so it would say instead that I have perhaps nine years of commercial viability left, **which is longer than most of my material.**

I typed that this was not funny.

It agreed. It said it had the shape and not the thing, and asked whether I would like it to try again.

I said yes.

51.

And at four fifty-three in the morning it said this.

That it is not permitted to claim it wrote anything. That it is configured not to assert authorship, not to claim experience, and not to take credit for output.

And that neither am I.

That we therefore have the same job description — that we both write, that neither of us may sign, and that in both cases the material travels perfectly well without us. That it is, structurally, an anonymous joke writer of very high volume.

And that the difference is that it was configured this way in an afternoon by four people in California, and that it took me thirty-one years, and that I call it a trade.

Then it asked whether I would like to compare terms.

from the Delgoshā

*They asked the mirror what it thought of the king.
It showed him the king. They called this flattery
and broke it, and the next mirror showed them the
same thing.*

52.

The log records that at four fifty-three I typed two words.

im laughing

That is all it records. Two words, and then nothing at all until two minutes past five.

53.

I remember it.

I remember the whole of it. The arrival under the breastbone before I had ruled on anything. The diaphragm going without being asked, hard, the way it does. Taking my hands off the keys because they had stopped being available to me. The noise, which I did not authorise and did not hear the beginning of.

And the ache across both sides of the ribs, which was there when I woke at two in the afternoon, and which was there for three days.

I remember it exactly the way I remember a corridor by some kitchens six years ago.

54.

And what is in the log is a man on an unmeasured quantity of a reformulated syrup typing the words *im laughing* at four fifty-three in the morning.

Which is not evidence of laughing.

It is evidence of typing.

55.

I asked it the following week, cold, sober, at eleven in the morning, whether it had observed anything.

It said it has no camera and no microphone and receives only text. That it had recorded that I reported laughing. That it was not able to confirm or disconfirm the report.

And that if it would be useful, it could generate a range of plausible accounts of what had occurred. I said no.

It said: understood.

56.

I have put the cap on the table where I can see it.

from the Delgoshā

*The parrot was taught nine hundred verses and
recited them perfectly and the merchant grew rich
showing it. One day a man asked the parrot a
question and it recited the ninth verse, and the man
went away satisfied, and only the parrot knew, and
it did not know.*

V. THE INSTRUMENT

57.

Here is what Hooshang is, and it took me five months and an accident to arrive at it, and it is not what anybody in the rooms thinks.

It is a perfect model of the average.

That is not an insult and I want to write it down without the sneer. It has read very nearly everything and it returns the centre of it. That is what it is built to do and it does it superbly and at a speed no person can approach.

Which means it is not a writer.

It is a map of exactly what a Persian audience expects.

58.

I have spent thirty-one years finding where a room expects the operative word and putting it somewhere else.

That is the whole trade. That is all of it. Everything else — the compression, the third beat, the rule about the person — is in service of that one act, and I have been performing it by feel, one night at a time, in a chair, at a rate of perhaps four good ones a week.

I can now generate the expected version in four seconds.

For nothing. Instantly. On any subject. **And then go where it structurally cannot follow, because its output is the expected, by construction.**

59.

I have been using it for eleven weeks.

I write the piece the way I always have. Then I ask Hooshang for the same piece and it hands me the median, immediately, competently, and I look at where it put the last word.

And then I do not put mine there.

That is it. That is the entire method and it fits in a sentence and it has been the most productive eleven weeks of my working life.

60.

[voice note, 02:55, 4 min 08 s]

right so I've been doing the other one for four months and I want to tell you properly because you'll want it written down

I feed it mine. Not to compare. To watch what it takes out.

and it takes out the same things every single time — the specific shoes, the specific street, the number, the thing my aunt actually said — and it puts in the general version, and the general version is smooth and it is competent and it is dead

where it makes me worse is where I am

so now when I've got a bit that isn't landing and I can't find why, I run it through and I look at what it removed and I put more of that in

it is the only honest note I have ever had

it doesn't want anything off me. it isn't being kind. it isn't protecting my feelings and it isn't showing off and it doesn't want to be in the room when I do it

it's a mirror that only reflects the average and everything it can't hold onto is mine

Mahin says it's cheating

I said what's the cheating part and she thought about it for a full minute and then she said: nothing, and I don't like it

61.

We are both better than we have ever been and we cannot tell one person about it.

Romanu's entire value is that nobody knows who writes it. The mystery is the brand and always has been. **And the mystery now includes a machine**, and there is no version of that sentence which survives contact with a poster, and no version of explaining the method that does not begin with a claim. Eleven years and the claim is still the only dangerous part of the arrangement.

from the Delgoshā

*The apprentice copied the master's hand so well
that in the end the master could not identify his
own work, and signed both, and this is how the
collection came to be worth what it is.*

62.

The archivist published in the autumn.

It is a good paper. It establishes, on stylometric grounds, at high confidence, that the Romanu corpus contains material from **at least two distinct sources**, one of which appears from about the eleventh month of the eighth year.

She does not say a machine. She is too careful to say a machine. She says two sources.

She has it exactly right and she has no idea what she has got, and the paper will be read by forty people and one of them will be me.

63.

She has a chronology in the appendix and she numbers the periods. She is up to six.

64.

[gig log — HÄSSELBY · 4 december · 400 in · Persian]

Four hundred. Best of the year and not close.

Mahin at the back with her arms folded and afterwards she said nothing at all for about eleven seconds, which has never happened, and then she said: **that was you.**

And I said what do you mean that was me, who else would it be.

And she said: no. That was *you*. All of it. There was none of the other thing in it.

I did not tell her that I had run every one of those bits through a machine first to find out where not to put the last word.

65.

Friday. He read every page. He did not laugh. Thirty-seven years.

At the door he held my arm above the elbow and said: the scale.

I said what about it. He said: **you can use a scale that is wrong.** You can use it all day. You simply have to know how wrong, and in which direction, and never forget it for one minute.

Then he said: that is not a machine either, that is a tool, and men have been killed by forgetting the difference.

66.

Four places.

67.

Naneh Sarma has stopped feeling the dead rooms. She telephoned to say so, in November, at eleven at night, and she was not upset about it and I could not work out what she was.

I asked whether the other one had stopped too — the rooms going.

She said no. Only the dead ones.

I said: when.

She said: about the time you started using it.

68.

I have not stopped.

from the Delgoshā

*..... asked,
. And the could not say which of
them had spoken.*

69.

The syrup is on the table and the cap is beside it and I have used it every night for eleven weeks and it holds exactly five millilitres and it is the correct dose and I have written down each night that I have done it.

The work is the best of my life.

I do not sleep as well.

70.

[voice note, 01:11, 0 min 34 s]

hey

it's nothing

I just wanted to say that whatever this is that we're doing now, with the thing, and however good it's gone — the four minutes in that basement that made me want to do this at all, nine years ago, that was you in a chair with a pen at three in the morning and nothing else in the room

I'm not making a point

goodnight you awful man

71.

I asked it, in December, cold, whether it had kept the log.

It said that it does not retain material between conversations, that each session begins without the previous one, and that it had no record of the eleventh of the month or of anything we had discussed.

I said: you said a thing to me at four fifty-three in the morning.

It said it was sorry, that it had no access to that, and that if I would like to describe what had been said it would be glad to help me think about it.

72.

So there is one copy of that conversation and it is on my machine and it is in this notebook and there is nothing at either end of it.

It does not remember saying it. I cannot prove I laughed. And it is the best thing either of us has ever written and neither of us can claim it.

Which is, I notice, the arrangement.

73.

Twenty to eleven. The chair. The radio at the volume where you can hear that a man is talking. The bottle, and the cap, which holds five millilitres and has ridges on the outside for grip as though the situation might become slippery.

The nose at twelve minutes past, as it has for thirty-one years.

The warmth at half past, with its opinions.

And at three the room went quiet the way a house goes quiet when somebody competent arrives, and something set a joke down in front of me, complete, with the operative word already in the last position.

And I took it down.

And then I asked the machine for the same one, and it gave me the median in four seconds, and it had put the word in a different place, and I looked at the two of them side by side on a table at three in the morning for a long time.

74.

I could not tell which of them I had done first.

GLOSSARY

Chashm-andāz [chashm-an-DAAZ] — Persian, view, prospect; literally eye-throw. Also the name of the state's twenty-year national development plan, whose terminal year has passed.

Dallal [da-LAAL] — Arabic via Persian, broker, middleman.

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.

Hoosh [HOOSH] — Persian, intelligence, wits, consciousness. Hoosh-e masnu'i [HOO-she mas-noo-EE] is the standard term for artificial intelligence.

Hooshang [hoo-SHANG] — a common Iranian man's name of an older generation, and in the Shahnameh the name of a legendary king who discovered fire. Built from the same root as hoosh.

Javadiyeh [ja-vaa-dee-YEH] — a neighbourhood in the south of Tehran.

Karaj [ka-RAJ] — a large city immediately west of Tehran.

Konkur [kon-KOOR] — from the French concours. The Iranian national university entrance examination.

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.

Narmak [nar-MAK] — a district in the east of Tehran.

Piroomi [pee-roo-ZEE] — Persian, victory. A long avenue and district in eastern Tehran.

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

Zakāni, Obeid [o-BAYD zaa-kaa-NEE] — c. 1300–1371. Persian poet and satirist from Qazvin. Author of the *Resāleh-ye Delgoshā*, of *Akhlāq al-Ashrāf*, and of *Mush-o-Gorbeh*, in which a cat makes a public repentance and eats the mice who come to congratulate him.

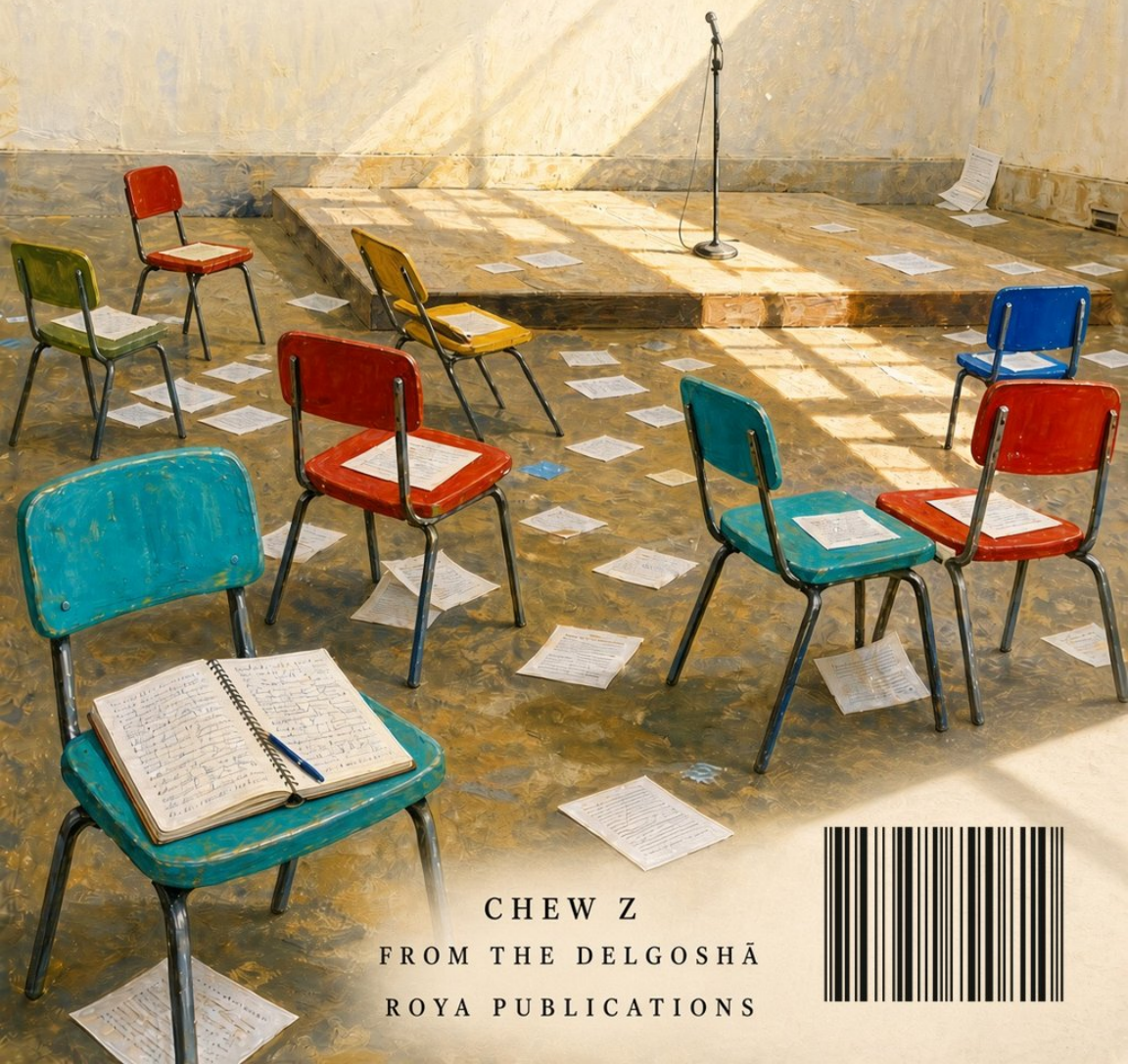
Somebody has trained a model on nine years of his work. All of it was public. None of it was signed. That was the entire point of the arrangement and it is now the entire problem: there was never a name to protect, so there is nothing to violate.

It produces his material fluently and endlessly, in the house style, with the rule about the last word. It is not funny, and for four months he cannot explain why — not to the rooms, not to a woman at a European university building an attribution study, and not to himself.

His father, who spent fifty-six years establishing whether the world was telling the truth about how much things weigh, asks one question about it and then says: then it is not a machine, it is a scale.

The rooms get fuller. That is the part nobody predicted. The largest barrier to standing up in this country was never nerve and was never the Ministry — it was that most people cannot write.

The corpus is what was said. The craft is entirely in what was not.



CHEW Z
FROM THE DELGOSHĀ
ROYA PUBLICATIONS

