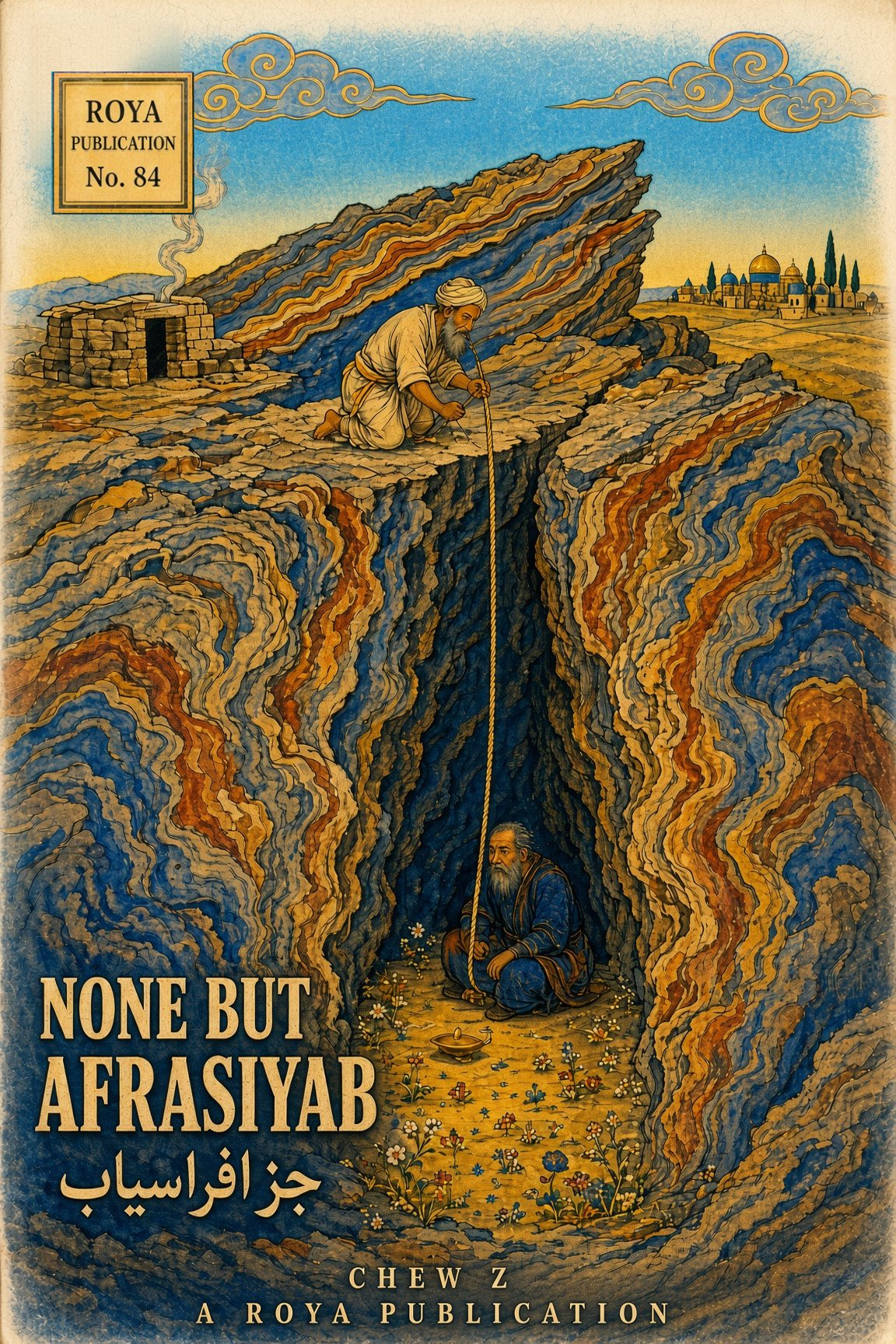


ROYA
PUBLICATION
No. 84

NONE BUT AFRASIYAB

جز افراسياب

CHEW Z
A ROYA PUBLICATION



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Printed in the Reach

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

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FROM THE OLD BOOK

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FOR THE ONES THE STORY NEEDS AND DOES NOT NAME

SYNOPSIS

A war has run for sixty years. It began as a murder inside one family, and it is still the same family, and the river they fight across is two days wide.

Above all of it, on a ridge nobody has ever measured, a man lives alone. He goes down before light and gathers along a shelf of wet rock, and presses what he gathers, and prays all night, and he has done this for longer than he will say. Everything he knows about the world underneath him he knows because of the war — which road has dust standing over it, which year the villages emptied, why nobody comes up for water any more.

One morning, in the hour before the birds, he hears a man weeping in the broken ground below his door. He has never met him. He has never heard him speak. He knows the voice.

He goes down with the rope he uses for lowering a bucket. What he does with it over the next three days ends at the edge of a lake that nothing lives in, and it is going to have to be explained.

He will be asked why he loosened it. He will give a good answer, and he will hear himself giving it.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

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

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

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

Here is the part you need.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This is that story.

Chew Z

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I. THE VOICE

1.

There is a ridge in the north-west of the country that comes to an edge along the top, the way a blade does. The people who live under it call it the sword, and they do not mean anything grand by it. They mean you cannot walk along the top of it two abreast.

I live up there. I have a place on the ridge — a low stone room, a wall built against the wind, and a fire I keep. It is a house of worship, which is a large phrase for what it is. It is a long way from everybody. That is the point of it.

I should say at the start that I am nobody's servant and nobody's officer, and I hold no rank at all. I am not going to pretend otherwise later, so I will say it now, while you are still deciding what to make of me.

I pray at night. All night, most nights. That sounds like a hardship and it is not. If you have ever sat up with a sick animal, or waited for somebody who should have been home by dark, then you know what the night does when you stay awake inside it on purpose instead of by accident. It gets very large. Then it gets very small. And then, some way before morning, it turns into something else altogether, and you would not swap it for anything.

That is the whole of my life. I would like that on the record before I tell you the rest, because the rest is going to sound like the life of a different man.

2.

A day up there goes like this.

I wake before light. Not to a bell and not to a plan. The body learns an hour and then it keeps it, and after enough years it will not let you sleep past it even on the mornings when you would like it to.

I go out while the ground is still hard, and I go down the eastern side, which takes about as long as it takes a man to get warm. There is a shelf of rock down there where water comes out and does not freeze, and things grow along that shelf which grow nowhere else on that mountain, because nowhere else on that

mountain has water in it all year round. I gather there. I take the stems and not the roots, because the roots have to go on being roots. I take from a different stretch each morning and I keep a rough circuit of it in my head, so that no part of the shelf is asked for anything two mornings running. It comes back thicker for being cut, if you cut it properly. Most things do.

I carry it up in a cloth. By the time I am back, the light is on the top of the ridge and not yet on the ground, which is the part of the day I like best and the part I have the least use for.

I am aware that none of this is interesting. I am telling you anyway, because you asked me to begin at the beginning, and because a man's mornings are the only honest thing about him.

3.

Then I press it.

There is a stone with a hollow worn into it, and a second stone that fits the hollow, and both of them were there before I came and will be there after I have gone. I do not know who wore that hollow. It took longer than a life.

You bruise it first. Not crush — bruise, the way you would bruise a leaf between your fingers to find out what it smells of. Then you work it, and it gives up what it has, and what it has is not much: a small amount, thin, pale, and it does not look like anything at all.

I strain it through a cloth I keep for that and for nothing else. Then I set it in the cold. In the evening I do what I do with it, and that is the day.

I have done this every morning for as long as I have been up there. I could do it with my eyes shut and on some mornings I have. It is not a ceremony. It is closer to sweeping.

4.

You will want to know why a man goes up a mountain.

I will give you the reason I give, which is true.

I went up because of the noise. Not any particular noise. I mean the whole of it — a town, a household, an argument about a wall, forty people who all need something said to them before noon. I found I could not hear anything underneath it, and I had begun to suspect that there was something underneath it. So I went where there was less on top.

That is the reason, and nothing that has happened to me since has contradicted it.

I notice, saying it out loud to you now, that it is also the answer of a man who did not want to be asked for anything. I had not thought of it in those words before this afternoon. I would rather not have thought of it now.

5.

From up there you can see two roads and a river.

I should explain the river, because everything I am going to tell you sits on one side of it or the other, and because I have discovered — alone on a ridge, with nobody to correct me — that I no longer have any idea what other people already know.

A long time ago the whole world belonged to one man. He grew old, and he had three sons, so he did what any father with more than he can hold ends up doing. He divided it. The west went to the eldest. The east — the lands on the far side of the river, and they are enormous — went to the middle son, whose name was Tur [TOOR], and after him they are called Turan [too-RAAN]. And the middle of it, the good part, the heartland, went to the youngest, whose name was Iraj [ee-RAAJ], and after him it is called Iran.

The two older brothers looked at what the youngest had been given, and could not bear it, and killed him.

That is the beginning, and it has never once finished. Everything since is that same murder happening again in different weather with different names on it.

I want to be very clear about one thing, because people who have not thought about it get it wrong, and getting it wrong makes the rest of this story impossible to understand. Iran and Turan are not

two peoples. They are one family, several hundred years into an argument about an inheritance. They eat the same food. They bury their dead the same way. On both banks of that river a man calls his mother by the same word. The border is two days wide, it exists on paper, and it eats people.

From my ridge you cannot see the border at all. You see a river, and dust standing over one road, and no dust over the other.

6.

The old man with the three sons was called Fereydun [fe-ray-DOON].

I am descended from him. I mention it because it is true, and because it will save somebody the trouble of finding it out later and wondering why I did not say so.

It is not worth anything. Go back that far and half the country is descended from somebody. It buys no land, it seats you at no table, and I have never used it in my life for anything except this: on bad nights, when the wind is doing what it does up there and the fire will not take, I have sometimes said the line over to myself, back and back, name after name, until I arrive at him. It is a way of holding on to a rope in the dark. Other men count.

I do not say it in company. There is no company.

I am saying it now.

7.

Some things about living up there that people get wrong.

The cold is not the difficulty. The cold is honest. You can dress for it, you can build for it, and after a while the body simply agrees to it. The difficulty is the wind, which is not honest, and which will be nothing at all for nine days and then spend the tenth trying to take the roof off.

I eat less than you would think, and I eat the same thing. Bread when I have flour. What I dry in the autumn. Snow, melted, which is not the same as water and never will be.

Distances up there are not in farsangs [far-SANG]. Nobody has ever measured that mountain and there is nothing to measure it against. So I have my own. The shelf where the water comes out is *as far as a man goes before he is warm*. The place where I cut wood is *the second time you stop*. The top is further than it looks from the bottom and nearer than it looks from the top, and I know exactly how that sounds.

And the birds. There is an hour before the light comes when the birds start, all of them together, as though somebody had told them to. Every morning of my life up there has begun with it.

I could not tell you what kind they are. I have never once gone to look.

from the old book

They took him up the mountain with his hands behind him, and drove the nails through, and left him living in the rock. He is there now. He will be there at the end of everything. The mountain does not know that it is holding anything.

9.

Now, the night before.

It was an ordinary night. I want to say that plainly, because afterwards everybody wants there to have been something in it, and there was not. No dream. No sign. The fire behaved. The wind was doing nothing worth the mention. I had the usual amount of everything and I did the usual things with it.

I prayed. I was there all night, on my feet, the way I am most nights, and my body was in that room and I could not tell you where the rest of me was — which is the entire point of it, and is not a thing I can explain any better than that.

Towards the end of a night like that you are not tired in the way you are tired after carrying something. You are thin. Worn down to a width. Everything comes through you and very little of it stops.

That is the state I was in.

I do not say so as an excuse. I say so because you asked me what kind of witness I am, and that is the honest answer. I was the best witness on that mountain. I was also the only one, and I had been awake since the previous morning.

10.

The birds went up.

And underneath them, or through them, there was a sound that was not a bird.

It came from below me and to the north, out of the broken ground where the rock has come away in slabs. It was a person. The person was weeping.

I want to be careful here, because weeping is not one thing. A man weeping over a body sounds one way. A man weeping because he has been beaten sounds another. This was neither. This was the sound a person makes when there is nobody to hear it and they have stopped expecting there ever to be — no shape to it, no rising and falling, nothing performed for anyone. It simply went on. And it

had been going on for some while before I heard it, I think, the way a clock has been going for some while before you notice it.

I have heard weather up there that sounded like a voice. Everybody who lives alone in a high place has. You learn the difference early and you stop being frightened by it.

This was not weather.

11.

I did not go down.

I want to tell you what I did instead, because I have thought about it since more than I have thought about anything I did afterwards.

I sat down on the cold ground in my own doorway, and I listened to it, and I let it go on.

You will want a reason. Here are the ones I had at the time, and you may have all of them. It was dark, and that ground is bad ground. A man who is weeping is not going anywhere. If somebody had fallen, then somebody had fallen, and it would be no different in an hour, and in an hour I would be able to see.

And underneath those, which I did not admit to at the time: I had not spoken to another person in a long while, and I was not at all certain that I wanted to start.

So I sat, and it wept, and the light came up the way it does — the top of the ridge first, then nothing for a long time, then everything at once.

And by then I had been listening to it long enough to know something about it that I have never been able to explain to anybody's satisfaction, including my own.

12.

I knew whose it was.

I had never met him. I had never been in a room with him or a valley with him. I had never heard him speak, or laugh, or give an order. There is no reason on this earth that I should have been able

to put a name to a sound coming up out of broken rock in the dark. I put a name to it anyway. Not as a guess, and not as a fear. The way you know your own door in the dark. Not by looking.

I said it out loud, sitting there, to nobody.

A voice like that, at an hour like this, can be none but Afrasiyab.

13.

Now I have to tell you who Afrasiyab [af-raa-see-YAAB] is, and I am aware that you know. Let me do it anyway. I have had a long time to get the shape of it right and there has been nobody up there to say it to.

He is the king of Turan. The far side of the river; the middle brother's country. Which makes him — and people forget this, and it is the whole tragedy — a cousin. Not a foreigner. Not a devil out of a story. A grandchild of the same old man, several hundred years further down.

He killed his own brother, who was a good man, and whose crime was telling him not to do the thing he was about to do.

And then he did the thing that made everything that came after it.

There was a prince of Iran called Siyavash [see-yaa-VASH]. By every account he was the best of them — not the strongest, the best, which is rarer and worth a great deal less. His father's wife wanted him, and he refused her, and she tore her own clothes and said that he had forced her. And to prove that he had not, he rode a horse through a wall of fire in front of the entire court, and came out the other side with his clothes not even marked.

Understand what that means. He proved it. Completely, publicly, in a way that nobody could argue with.

And it changed nothing whatsoever. He was still in that house, with that woman, and his father still could not bring himself to act. So he crossed the river and went to live in the country of his family's enemies, and Afrasiyab took him in like a son and gave him a daughter to marry, and for a few years he was happy there. People leave that part out. Then Afrasiyab's brother talked. His name is

Garsivaz [gar-SEE-vaz], and I am sorry to say he comes into this again at the end. He did not do it in one afternoon. He did it over months, at dinners, in the ordinary way, a sentence at a time. And at the end of it Siyavash was taken out of his own house and put on his knees and killed with a knife, a long way from home, guilty of nothing at all.

That prince's son is the Shah of Iran now. He has spent his entire reign on this one thing.

Sixty years.

I have been on that ridge for the whole of it, and for a good while before it, and if you ask me for a number I will not have one for you. Everything I know about the world underneath me, I know because of that war — which road has dust standing over it, which year the villages emptied, why nobody comes up to the shelf for water any more. It is not the background of my life.

It is the weather of it. I have never lived a single day without it.

And that morning it was in a hole a short walk from my door, crying like a child.

I went down at first light.

II. THE ROPE

14.

The broken ground is north of my place and below it, and it is exactly as far as the second time you stop. I go past it for wood and have done for years.

I took the rope with me. I want that noted, because it has been made into something since, and at the time it was nothing. On that ground you take a rope the way you take a coat. If somebody has gone down into a slab-gap you are not going to get them out with your arms.

And it is not a cave, whatever you are picturing. There is no mouth and no arch. Two slabs of rock have come apart and left a gap about the width of a man's shoulders, going down and back at an angle. You would walk past it. I have walked past it several hundred times.

The air was coming out of it. That is the part nobody thinks about. A hole in rock breathes, and in the morning it breathes outward, and what came out of that one was colder than the morning and had a smell in it.

Not a bad smell. Worse than a bad smell. It smelled of a person. Of somebody having been somewhere a while.

I stood at the edge of it, and the weeping went on underneath me, close enough now that I could hear him take breath.

15.

I said the ordinary thing. I said, is somebody down there.

The weeping stopped.

I want you to understand what that was like, because it is the worst moment in all of this and nothing whatever happens in it. It stopped at once and completely, the way a hand goes over a mouth. And then there was nothing, and the nothing went on, and the hole went on breathing out at me, and I stood there with a rope on my shoulder and my heart going like a bird in a cloth.

Because a man who has fallen calls back. A man who has broken his leg on that ground shouts before you have finished asking. What

I had was somebody who had been making a noise he did not know he was making, and who had heard a voice, and who had immediately and expertly gone silent.

That is not what a man does when he has fallen.

That is what a man does when he is hiding.

I said it again. Nothing. I said, I have a rope. Nothing.

So I went in.

16.

You go down about the height of two men, and then it opens sideways, and the floor is level and dry and about the size of a small room.

He was against the back wall, sitting, with his knees up.

I had a light and I had had it lit since the top, so I saw him before he could see me properly. I am going to describe him as he was and not as you would like him to have been.

He was old. He was very thin, and the thinness was recent — you can tell, because the skin has not caught up with it. He had been eating: there were small bones by his hand, birds probably, and they had been cracked open for what is inside them. His clothes had been very good. That was the part that took me longest to understand. Underneath the state of them, they were clothes somebody had had made.

His hands were on his knees and they were shaking, and they went on shaking the whole time I knew him, and it was not fear. It is what a body does when it has been asked for too much for too long.

He looked at the light. Then he looked at me.

And I knew I had been right, and I would like to say plainly that being right about it was the worst thing that happened to me that day.

17.

He spoke first.

He said: who are you?

Not *help me*. Not *who is there*. He asked me who I was, and then, before I had got anything out, he asked the second question, which was whose service I was in.

I have thought about those two questions a great deal since.

He was on a stone floor in the dark at the end of everything with cracked bird bones by his hand, and his first instinct was to establish my name and then establish who I belonged to — because those are the two facts a man in his position needs, and he had been in that position for sixty years, and the position had outlived the army and the country and the sons.

I told him my name, which is Hōm [HOOM]. I said I was in nobody's service.

He said: everybody is in somebody's service.

And then he laughed, once, and it turned into a cough, and that was the first time I felt sorry for him. It was about the third minute.

18.

Now the rope, since the rope is what all of this has turned out to be about.

It is hemp, about six arm-spans, and I have had it since before I went up. I use it every day of my life. I use it to lower a bucket to the shelf when there is ice on the path and I do not trust my feet. I use it to drag wood. I tie the door with it in the season when the wind comes, and there is a groove worn into the frame from it.

It is not a lasso, whatever anybody has told you. It is not a weapon. It is the most ordinary object I own, and I have never once thought about it, in the way that you have never once thought about your own belt.

I say all this because I know how the thing sounds when somebody says it quickly. *He bound the king of Turan*. It sounds like an act.

It was a man with a rope on his shoulder because he had walked out onto bad ground before it was light.

19.

He would not come out.

I want that on the record too, because it is the part everybody skips. I asked him. I told him I would bring him up and give him food and a fire, and he said no. He said it flatly, the way you refuse a second cup.

I said he would die down there.

He said he was aware of that. He said it was arranged.

And I stood in that room with the light in my hand and understood that I was somewhere I had no idea how to be, because I have spent my life walking toward quiet on purpose, and here was a man who had walked toward it too and had arrived somewhere else entirely.

So I did it badly.

I put the rope on him. He fought, for about as long as an old man can, which is not long, and I am not proud of any part of that minute. I bound him like stone — the hands, and then round, so the arms were held — and I dragged him out of that narrow place on his back, with the rock taking the skin off him, because there is no other way to bring a bound man up an angle like that.

He did not make a sound the whole time.

He had made noise for hours when he believed nobody could hear him. With somebody there, nothing.

from the old book

*This drunken wheel is a juggler working his trick with seventy hands.
Now the knife, now the blade, now the wind, now the cloud. Now the
throne and the treasure, now the pit and the shame. Had the wise man
never been born he would not have seen such heat and such cold.*

21.

I got him up to my place a little before noon, and I have no memory at all of the walk.

I put him against the wall in the sun, because the sun on that wall at that hour is the warmest place on the mountain. I gave him water and he drank it. I gave him food and he would not have it.

Not a refusal, exactly. He looked at it, and put it down beside him, and went back to looking at the middle distance.

I asked him why. He said he had eaten what was in that hole.

I said that was not an answer.

He said: no.

That was the first day. He sat against my wall in the sun with his hands shaking, and I did my work around him because I did not know what else to do with myself, and twice I looked up and found him watching me do it.

The second time, he said: you do that every day?

I said yes.

He said: how long?

And I did not answer him, and he did not ask again.

22.

On the second morning he started talking, and once he had started he did not really stop.

Not pleading. I want to be exact about that, because I have been asked about it twice already. He never once asked me to let him go. Not on the mountain and not on the road. Not until the water.

He talked about Siyavash.

He said: I loved him. He said it the way you would state the weight of a sack.

He said the boy came over the river with nothing, and he took him in, and gave him a daughter, and gave him a province, and that for

a while he had two sons and one of them was better than anything he had made himself.

Then he said: and then it was explained to me.

That is the phrase he used. Not *I was deceived*. Not *my brother lied to me*. It was explained to me. Over months, he said. At dinners. In the ordinary way. And at the end of it he understood that the boy was going to take everything — and understanding it, he said, did not feel like being convinced. It felt like waking up.

I asked whether he had ever found out he was wrong.

He said: I have never been wrong. I have been shown things, and I have acted on what I was shown. Every man alive does exactly that. Most of them are luckier.

He was not sorry. I want that clear. He was a great many things by then, and sorry was not one of them.

23.

Here is something I did not expect.

He knew more about the world than I did. A great deal more. He had been in a hole in the ground for — I never established how long, and he would not say — and he still knew things I had not heard.

He knew there is a new road on the south side. I did not.

He knew the villages under my mountain had emptied, which I knew, and he knew *why*, which I did not. It was not the war. It was a tax.

He knew the name of the man who holds the ford now, and how old he is, and who his mother was.

And somewhere on that second day I understood the shape of it, and it has not left me since. I have spent my life above the world in order to hear what is underneath it. He spent his inside the world doing appalling things, and he came up out of the ground knowing the price of grain.

One of us is nearer to God. Neither of us could have told you what year it was.

24.

That night I prayed, and he watched me do it.

I did not stop on his account. It would have cost me more to stop than to go on. So there was a bound man against my wall in the dark with a fire between us, and there was me, and the night did what the night does.

Some way into it he said something. I do not know the hour. I was not altogether in the room.

He said: you are not talking to anybody.

I did not answer. I could not have.

He said it again later, and then he said the rest of it, and this is the sentence I have been carrying ever since, and the reason I am telling you about a night in which nothing happened.

He said: I know how that looks from the inside. I did it for sixty years. There was always a reason, and the reason was always brought to me by somebody who wanted something, and I never once heard the thing itself.

And then he said: how would you know the difference?

I have no answer to that. I did not have one then. I have had a long walk down and a long afternoon since, and I do not have one now.

25.

On the second afternoon he asked me a question and then would not explain it.

He said: is there a woman on this mountain?

I said there is nobody on this mountain.

He said: no.

And a while later, not to me, he said: she used to be able to find people. I did not ask. I have thought since that I should have. At the

time it seemed to me one of the things a man says when he has been a long while alone in the dark, and I of all people was not going to make anything of that.

He did not give a name. Not then and not afterwards.

He said one more thing about it, on the road, and I will come to it.

26.

I said earlier that I take the rope because you take a rope on that ground. That is true.

I want to correct one other thing, though, and I would rather do it now than have it come out later and look like something.

I said I go past that broken ground twice a month. Thinking about it properly, it is less than that. It is twice in a season, perhaps. I do not go that way at all in winter.

It makes no difference to anything. I only mention it because I have been telling you all of this as though I have it exactly, and I do not have all of it exactly, and I would like you to know which parts I am sure of.

I am sure of the rope. I am sure of the smell that came out of that hole. I am sure of every word he said to me, and I could give them to you again tomorrow in the same order.

The rest — how often I walk a particular way, what the light was doing, how long any of it took — I am less sure of than I have been sounding.

27.

We were three days coming down.

Not because it is three days' walking. It is one long day, alone, in fair weather. It is three days when one of you is bound at the arms and cannot put a hand out when he goes over, and stops most of every hour, and is an old man, and has not eaten properly since before the hole. I fed him on the road. He ate on the road. I have never understood that and I have stopped trying to.

We did not talk a great deal. Walking bound is work, and walking a bound man is more work, and there is not much to say.

On the second afternoon, in the flat part before the ground drops away to the water, he said the other thing about the woman.

He said: I gave my daughter to a hole in the ground.

I did not know what he meant. I am not certain I know now.

He said: I would do it again.

And then, after a while, in exactly the same voice: I would like to know whether she is warm.

That is the man. Both of those, in one breath, with no join between them, and no sense at all that he had said anything strange.

28.

We came down onto the shore in the afternoon of the third day.

You have all seen that water. I had not. I want to say something about it, because I had lived my whole adult life on a dry mountain and nobody had told me.

It is enormous, and it is white at the edge, and the white is salt. It goes out further than a man can look. Nothing lives in it — not a fish, not a reed. And there is no sound off it at all. I had expected a sound.

He stopped when he saw it.

Then he asked me for the only thing he ever asked me for.

I am not going to dress this up.

He asked. I slackened the rope. He got to the water, and at the water he opened it, and he went in.

And that is the part you want. I have taken all afternoon to get to it, and now that I am here I find I have nothing at all to put after it.

III. THE WATER

29.

I stood on that shore a long time.

I could not tell you how long. Long enough that the salt dried white on my boots, and long enough that when I finally turned round I had to work out which way I had come from.

The water did not move. That is the thing about it. A lake ought to do something. That one lay there like a floor.

I called him. Twice. I do not know what I expected.

Then I sat down on the stones with the rope in my hands, and coiled it, because my hands wanted a job, and I went on coiling it long after it was coiled.

30.

Say that part again.

Very well.

He asked. I slackened the rope. He reached the water, and at the water he opened it, and he went in.

I would like, before I go on, to say where I am. I have been telling you all of this as though I were talking to nobody, which is how I have talked for a very long time, and I am not talking to nobody.

I am in a hall with a stone floor and a fire that is too big for the room. There are two chairs. There are eleven other men against the walls and I have counted them four times and got eleven each time.

The light through the door has gone from white to orange since I began.

I have been standing since noon.

Nobody has offered me water.

I mention that last thing not as a complaint. I mention it because I have noticed it, and because I have noticed almost nothing else about myself all afternoon, and a man who is not being offered water in a hall like this one already knows something about how the afternoon is going to end.

31.

There are two kings in this room, so I should say who they are, since I have not.

The old one is Kay Kavus [kay kaa-VOOS]. He is Siyavash's father. He is the man in whose house the boy was accused, and in whose house the boy proved it and was not believed enough for it to matter, and out of whose gate the boy rode across the river.

He is very old now. He interrupts. He has interrupted me eleven times, once for every man against the wall, which I know is not a real pattern and which I have thought about anyway.

The young one is Kay Khosrow [kay khos-ROW]. He is that boy's son. He was born on the other side of the river, in Turan, in the house of the man I brought down off my mountain — his own grandfather — and he was hidden as an infant by a Turanian lord who had failed to save the father and would not fail twice. They taught him to seem simple. To answer badly. To be of no use to anybody. That is how a child stays alive in a house like that.

An Iranian rode into Turan alone and looked for him for seven years, and found him, and brought him home.

He has spent his whole reign on this one thing.

He has not said a word to me. Not one, in an afternoon. He has looked at me the entire time.

32.

Kavus asked it plainly, which I was grateful for.

He said: Hōm. Why did you loosen it?

And I said: because he asked me, and because he was an old man, and because I felt sorry for him.

That is what I said. Every part of it is true and I heard myself saying it and I knew, in the saying, that it was the wrong shape. It came out too quickly and it came out already finished, the way an answer does when it has been carried a long way and worn smooth on the road.

I have had three days to prepare that sentence. I would like the record to show that I noticed that, and that I said it anyway.

from the old book

He took the child up into the hills where the herdsmen were, and taught him to answer badly, and to seem simple, and to be no use to anybody, so that the king would look at him once and never look again.

He did this for the son of a man he had failed to save.

34.

Then they brought in the brother.

I said, a long way back, that Garsivaz would come into this again at the end. This is the end and here he is.

He is the one who talked. He is the man who took months and dinners and one sentence at a time to explain to a king that the boy sleeping under his roof was going to take everything from him — and who was right about nothing, and got everything he wanted, and is the reason for the sixty years and for the hole in my mountain and for me standing here.

I had expected to feel something about that.

What I saw was a man of about my brother's age being walked across a floor by two people who were being careful with his arms.

He looked at nobody. He had the face people have when they have already been told.

They took him out of the door on the water side, and the light through it went orange around them, and that is the only time I have seen him.

35.

I did not go down to the shore for it. I want that on the record. I was not asked to and I did not offer.

I watched from the top of the bank, which is perhaps a hundred paces, and at that distance you see the shape of a thing and not the thing.

They laid him on the stones. They had a hide with them, off a beast killed that morning, still wet, and they cut it and they sewed it onto him across the shoulders and around, and it took two men a long time, and it looked from where I was standing like men mending a sail.

Then they left him in the sun.

That is all it is. There is no more to it than that. Wet hide dries, and as it dries it draws, and it goes on drawing, and it does not stop.

Somebody had thought of it. That is the part I cannot put down. Somewhere, at some point, in a room, a man said this out loud for the first time and another man wrote it down.

36.

It took a day.

I had thought — I do not know what I had thought. That there would be shouting. That somebody would give an order and it would happen.

Nobody did anything. That was the day. The hide dried in the sun at its own rate and everybody waited, and while they waited they did what people do. They ate. There was a dispute about horses that went on most of the afternoon and was settled reasonably. Somebody mended a strap.

I was given food that day and I ate it, and I have thought about that since too.

And all of it — the eating, the horses, the strap — happened inside a sound that got worse by very small degrees for about eleven hours, until by the end of it the sound was the air, and you only knew it was still there because of what your own shoulders were doing.

37.

Then, in the last of the light, the water changed.

Not much. A long way out, further than a man could have swum in that time, something altered the surface, and the surface of that water had not altered in three days.

Everybody on that shore was already looking at it.

They had known. That is what I understood, standing on the bank with a rope over my shoulder that I had not been able to put down all day. They had not been waiting for the hide to work.

They had been waiting for him to be able to hear it.

38.

He came in slowly and he came in walking.

I was the only man on that shore who had ever been within arm's length of him, and I was the only man on that shore who did not recognise what was walking up out of that water.

They saw the king of Turan. Sixty years of him. Every one of them had grown up on the name.

I saw a man going toward a noise.

Not surrendering. Not defeated. He had the exact face of somebody crossing a room because a child has fallen over in it — a face with nothing in it except the distance still to be covered.

He walked up out of the salt with his hands empty and he walked past me at about six paces and he did not see me. I do not think he could have told you I was there. I do not think anybody was there.

He went to his brother.

39.

I will be brief about the rest of it, because the rest of it was quick and because you were all present.

The young king came down to the water himself. He said a number of things to him. They were, I thought, well said and truthfully meant, and they had clearly been ready for a long time, and I do not think one word of them was heard.

Then he used the sword. He did it himself. He did it well, which sounds like a strange thing to praise and is not.

And then — and this is the part I want to tell you, because nobody else in this room will find it worth mentioning — it took about the length of a morning for that to become work.

Riders were sent. Proclamations were written and read back and corrected. There was a discussion about the treasury and it was a good discussion, and by the middle of the next day a great deal of money was going out to the poor and to the fire-temples, and it was being counted properly, and men who had been fighting a war

since before I went up my mountain were queueing to sign for things.

Sixty years, and then an afternoon, and then paperwork.

I was thanked. I was thanked several times, and well, and I was offered a number of things, and I said no to all of them, and everybody was satisfied with that because a man who lives on a mountain saying no to a horse is exactly what everybody wanted from me.

40.

I went back up alone. It took a day, because I was on my own, and because there was nothing to stop for.

In the morning I woke before light, the way the body does, and I went down the eastern side, which takes as far as a man goes before he is warm, and I gathered along the shelf.

It had gone on growing the whole time I was away. I had known it would. I was not ready for it.

I carried it up in the cloth. I bruised it, and I worked it, and it gave up what it has, which is not much. I strained it through the cloth I keep for that and for nothing else. I set it in the cold.

And then the light was on the top of the ridge and not yet on the ground, and there was nothing else in the day.

The rope is on the hook by the door. I have not used it. There is no other rope up there and there is work that wants one, and I have not used it, and I could not tell you why.

I wake before light. The birds go up, all of them together, the way they do, as though somebody had told them.

I stand in the doorway and I listen to them.

And underneath them there is nothing.

There has been nothing underneath them every morning since.

GLOSSARY

Afrasiyab [af-raa-see-YAAB] — King of Turan, and a cousin: a descendant of Fereydun through the middle brother. He had his own son-in-law murdered on his brother's advice, and hunted his own grandson afterwards.

Farsang [far-SANG] — Persian, a measure of distance. About an hour's walking on level ground, which is why it is no use at all on a mountain.

Fereydun [fe-ray-DOON] — The king who divided the world between his three sons, and so began everything that follows.

Garsivaz [gar-SEE-vaz] — Afrasiyab's brother. He spent months explaining to his brother, at dinners, one sentence at a time, that Siyavash intended to take everything.

Hôm [HOOM] — The narrator. A worshipper who lives alone on a ridge in the north-west, descended from Fereydun, in nobody's service.

Iraj [ee-RAAJ] — Fereydun's youngest son, who was given Iran and was killed by his brothers for it.

Kay Kavus [kay kaa-VOOS] — Shah of Iran, and Siyavash's father. Very old by the time of this book.

Kay Khosrow [kay khos-ROW] — Shah of Iran. Siyavash's son, born in Turan and hidden there as an infant. Grandson of both kings.

Siyavash [see-yaa-VASH] — An Iranian prince who proved his innocence by riding a horse through a wall of fire, found that it changed nothing, went into exile across the river, and was murdered there.

Tur [TOOR] — Fereydun's middle son, who was given the lands beyond the river and killed the youngest.

Turan [too-RAAN] — The lands on the far side of the river, Tur's country and Afrasiyab's. Not another people. The other half of one family.

A war has run for sixty years. It started as a murder inside one family, and it is still the same family, and the river they fight across is two days wide.

Above all of it, on a ridge nobody has measured, a man lives alone. He gathers something before light and presses it and prays all night, and he has done it for longer than he will say.

One morning he hears a man weeping in the rock below his door. He has never met him. He knows the voice.

He goes down with the rope he uses for lowering a bucket, and what he does with it over the next three days ends at the edge of a lake that nothing lives in.

He will be asked why he loosened it. He will give a good answer, and he will hear himself giving it.



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