



ROYA
PUBLICATION
No. 87

EXIT

HOMELAND SECURITY

امنیت ملی

.....

C H E W Z

A ROYA PUBLICATION



در کافه نادان، کافه‌ای که در تهران تاسیس شده، گروهی از نویسندگان و روزنامه‌نگاران گرد هم آمده‌اند. در میان آن‌ها، افرادی هستند که به دلیل فعالیت‌های سیاسی و فرهنگی، مورد توجه و نظارت دستگاه‌های امنیتی قرار گرفته‌اند. این گروه، با وجود شرایط دشوار، به دنبال راه‌های نو برای بیان افکار و عقاید خود هستند. در این میان، برخی از افراد، با استفاده از روش‌های خلاقانه، سعی در عبور از موانع و انتقال پیام‌های خود به جامعه دارند. این داستان، به بررسی زندگی و فعالیت‌های این گروه در شرایط حساس می‌پردازد.

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Chew Z

Printed in the Reach

Roya Publication No. 87

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FROM THE DELGOSHĀ

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A NOTE ON THE PLATE

There is a tradition of painting in Iran that was never meant for a palace. *Naqqāshi-ye qahvekhāneh* — coffee-house painting — was made for tea houses, in oil on coarse canvas, by men who had not trained under a master and did not sign their work. It hung on the wall behind the samovar while a storyteller worked the room, and it showed the scene he was about to describe, so that the customers could see what was coming.

Bold outline. Flat colour. No perspective, because perspective hides things behind other things, and the point was that nothing should be hidden. The ground tilts up toward you so that every object on it is visible at once.

The subjects were Karbala, and the Shahnameh, and the great romances. Nobody painted a working morning.

The trade in the plate opposite is real and is nearly gone. A man who calibrates industrial scales carries a case of certified weights and establishes whether the machine in front of him is telling the truth. The weights themselves are certified annually against heavier weights, and those against a national standard, and that against a mass kept in a vault in France, so that a kilogram in a scrapyard on the edge of a city is the same kilogram everywhere.

The whole apparatus exists because a thing that measures cannot be trusted to measure itself.

The plate shows one morning in Mordad 1368. Nothing has happened in it yet.



He had been wrong twice that morning and could not account for it.
 If the weights had drifted, every reading of eleven years was worthless.
 He opened the case in the heat, expecting the end of his trade.
 And his son, who was nine, said something entirely sincere.

THE STANDING OF THE CASE

The seventh 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.

On the seventh day the vow ends and the prince speaks.

WHO THESE PEOPLE ARE

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

Roshanak Azimi, thirty-three. From Javadiyeh in the south of Tehran, by way of four years in Sweden. Came ninth in the national university entrance examination out of six hundred thousand and graduated first in her year in engineering. Now in Los Angeles.

His father, ninety-two. Has calibrated industrial scales since 1978 and still does two a month. Has read every page his son has written, every Friday, for forty-two years, and has never laughed at any of it.

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

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

WHAT HAS HAPPENED

Sixteen years ago, in a basement, Payam performed eleven words written by his brother, under his own name, and was arrested.

Manu could not say the words were his, because saying so would have required a claim, and the claim is the only dangerous part of the arrangement.

Thirteen years ago those words came loose and ended up on state television in the mouth of a man who believed he had written them.

Eleven years ago he wrote nine minutes for a young woman who could leave, and she left, and afterwards in a corridor she said six words and he laughed for the first time in eighteen years.

Nine years ago his broker of twenty-six years died, he 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.

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

Four years ago somebody trained a machine on sixteen years of that work, and they called it Hooshang, and both of them got better.

Nothing now prevents him from saying any of it.

This is the seventh day.

SYNOPSIS

Roshanak Azimi arrives in a city with more Iranians in it than anywhere on earth outside Iran, and rents a room forty minutes from all of them, on the wrong side of the city for her own career, and tells everybody it was the rent.

She discovers within a month that she is the wrong kind of Iranian. The comics who fill the rooms were born in Encino and Great Neck and have spent twenty-five years perfecting material about immigrant parents, and it is very good, and it kills. She does not have an immigrant childhood. She has a country. Nothing in her forty minutes survives the border.

And they perform the accent she actually has.

Meanwhile a man of sixty-three in Tehran has become famous for not existing. There are papers about him, two documentaries in production, a man in Toronto who has claimed to be him for three years, and a museum label with no object under it. The anonymity is now larger than the work, and there is nothing left that could hurt him if he stopped.

Eighty-eight entries, one of which runs to twelve pages, in the shape of a treatise censored in every edition printed since. A book about what happens on the day the prohibition expires.

The dots are still not an absence.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

There are two phrases in this book that are the same phrase.

In one country, *homeland security* is a department. It issues forms, it holds interviews, it decides who exists, and its language is the flat administrative English of a body that has no opinion about you and enormous power over your address.

In the other, *amniyat-e melli* — national security — is not a department. It is a charge. It is what is typed at the top of the page when a young man has said something on a stage, and it has been typed a great many times, and everybody in that country knows the phrase the way you know a road you were once stopped on.

They translate into each other exactly. A visa queue and a courtroom, the same two words, and a person can stand in both in one lifetime.

I did not set out to write about that. I set out to write about a woman who moves to a city where forty thousand of her countrymen live and goes to live somewhere else on purpose, and about her father's generation performing an accent she still has, and about how strange it is to be the thing other people's jokes are about.

The two phrases arrived on their own, and once I had noticed them I could not write the book without them, and I have decided not to point at them again.

Chew Z

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I. THE WRONG KIND OF IRANIAN

VENICE · 4 January · arrival

I have a room on Brooks Avenue with a window that does not close properly and a landlord who has told me twice that the building has *good energy*, by which he means the plumbing is original.

Four hundred dollars more than I said I would pay. Six hundred less than anywhere I would rather be.

from the Delgoshā

*A man was asked why he had built his house so far
from the road. He said, so that anyone who comes
has meant to.*

On why Venice, since three people have now asked me and I have lied to all three.

I said the rent. The rent is not the reason and Venice is not cheap, it is simply cheap for the ocean, which is a different sentence.

The reason is that Westwood exists.

There are forty thousand Iranians fifteen minutes up the freeway. There are bakeries with the right bread. There are two satellite stations, four bookshops, a man who will sell you saffron by weight and be insulted if you do not argue, and a stretch of Westwood Boulevard that has been called Tehrangeles since before I was born.

I came from four years in a hall in Hässelby where four hundred Iranians understood every word I said and let me get away with nothing.

And I have moved to the beach, on purpose, forty minutes away, because I have worked out that if I go to Westwood in the first year I will never leave it, and I will spend the next decade being extremely good in front of four hundred people who already agree with me, and I have already done that, in Swedish weather, for four years.

I have not said this to anybody and I am not going to. It sounds like contempt and it is not contempt. It is arithmetic.

What Venice actually is, since nobody told me:

The boardwalk is a bazaar.

I understood it in about forty minutes on the first morning and I have not been able to unsee it since. There are unlicensed vendors and there are permits that are technically real, and there is a pitch hierarchy that nobody has written down and everybody obeys. There is a man who has been selling the same four things in the same place for eleven years and who has a relationship with two policemen that consists entirely of not looking at each other.

There is an entire informal economy running parallel to a legal one that has decided not to see it. **That is Javadiyeh. That is exactly**

Javadiyeh, with better weather and worse teeth, and it is the only part of this city that made immediate sense to me.

I stood on that boardwalk on the fourth morning and understood the pricing structure of a man selling sunglasses without being told, and I have never once understood anything in Stockholm.

The things nobody warned me about.

June gloom. It is grey until two in the afternoon, in summer, and cold, and it comes off the ocean, and everybody here treats this as normal and nobody mentions it in any film.

The flight path. Every ninety seconds from six in the morning.

The ocean is freezing. I want that written down. I have watched Europeans arrive on this beach for a year and every one of them walks in confidently and every one of them makes the same noise.

And it is genuinely beautiful at six in the evening. The whole thing, the light down the canals, the palms, all of it. It happens every single day. It stopped meaning anything to me in the third week and I have not decided yet whether that is a loss.

And the professional problem, which I created on purpose and which is going to cost me.

The clubs are all east. The Store, the Improv, the Factory — forty minutes there in the evening and ninety minutes back at one in the morning, on a freeway, every night, alone.

I have moved as far from the industry as it is physically possible to live and remain in this city.

I knew that when I signed. I have thought about it eleven times since and I would sign again, and I am aware that this is the same decision as taking almost nothing on the parts, and that I have now made it twice, on two continents, and that at some point a person has to admit it is not a decision, it is a shape.

from the Delgoshā

*The stranger in the market spoke the language
perfectly and was still charged the stranger's price,
and when he asked why, the seller said, you asked
why.*

LOS ANGELES · The Store, late spot · 22 January · 40 in · English

Eleven minutes at twelve fifty at night in front of forty people, four of whom were the other comics.

Fine. Fine is the word.

Sweden and America, since I have now done four years of one and a month of the other.

A Swede asks you one question. They ask it beautifully. They listen to the entire answer, all of it, without interrupting, with real attention.

And then that is the end of it, for ever.

An American asks you nine and hears none of them.

It took me a month to find that insulting and two months to find it restful. Nobody here is going to remember what I said, which means I can say anything, which is a freedom I did not know was available.

Sweden pays late and correctly. Los Angeles pays never, and enthusiastically.

In Sweden the systems work and there is no corner and no cousin and nothing is negotiable. Here nothing works and everything is negotiable, which is Tehran, and I am more at home in a broken system than in a functioning one.

I do not enjoy having learned that about myself and I have written it down anyway.

And lagom is gone.

Four years in a country whose central value is that there is a correct amount of a thing and a good person finds it. I built an act that goes past the correct amount on purpose and I was, in the most literal sense, breaking a national rule every night.

Here you are required to be exceptional at all times, in every room, including at the bank. You are required to say so. Out loud. About yourself. In the present tense.

I am extremely good at it. That is the part that has bothered me since March.

from the Delgoshā

*A man moved to the far side of the city to avoid his
relatives and was visited daily, and moved back,
and was not visited again, and complained.*

LOS ANGELES · The Improv, Tuesday · 11 February · 90 in · English

Ninety, and the first genuinely good English room I have had in this country, and I want to write down what worked because it was not what I expected.

The parts material worked. Not the Iran of it — the **smuggling** of it. Nine minutes on running an illegal supply chain for a university at seventeen, and an American room went with me the entire way, because every one of them has at some point wanted something they were not allowed to have and has known somebody who could get it.

They do not need to understand the country. They need to understand the transaction.

That is the entire translation problem solved in one line and it took me fourteen months.

And the bits that will never work, which I am now going to stop trying.

The form with four lines. The nine-month purchase order. The customs man at Bandar Abbas who was correct. My mother's gold in four transactions over two years.

I have rebuilt every one of them three times. They cannot be rebuilt. They are not jokes about bureaucracy, they are jokes about a **specific relationship** to bureaucracy that you only have if the bureaucracy is the weather, and here it is not the weather, here it is a queue with a number system that works.

The gold one is the worst of it, because it is the best thing I have ever written and it is four hundred people in a hall in Hässelby going completely silent, and here it gets a warm murmur, which is a room being kind.

I have retired it. In February, formally, in a notebook, and I am recording it because it is the first thing I have ever retired that was not broken.

On the nights, since the ninety minutes back on the freeway is where I actually live. Nobody warns you about the driving.

The set is eleven minutes. The evening is five hours. Forty minutes east in traffic, ninety minutes in a green room with eleven other comics doing the thing where nobody watches anybody, eleven minutes on stage, and then ninety minutes back down the 10 at one in the morning with the windows down because otherwise you fall asleep.

Five hours for eleven minutes, four nights a week, unpaid, for three years, and every single person in that green room is doing exactly the same arithmetic and none of them will say the number out loud.

In Tehran a basement was twenty minutes on the metro and there were forty people who had come specifically. In Stockholm it was a bus.

Here it is a car, alone, at one in the morning, on a freeway, and the city is so large that you can be very successful in it and still spend more of your life in a car than in a room.

On being the wrong kind of Iranian, which took eleven weeks and one bad night.

The rooms here are full. That is the first thing. There is an entire industry of Iranian-American comedy in this city and it sells out theatres and it has been doing so for twenty-five years and it is very, very good, and I had not understood any of that from Stockholm.

And I cannot do a minute of it.

Their material is about immigrant parents. The accent, the food, the shame, the wedding, the mother on the telephone, the father who will not use a seatbelt. It is beautifully built. It has been refined for a quarter of a century in front of audiences who lived every second of it.

They were born in Encino and Great Neck and Irvine.

I do not have an immigrant childhood. I have a country. I left it at twenty-two with a degree and a business and a criminal record I have never had to declare, and every joke in my forty minutes

assumes that you know what a form with four lines on it means, and here nobody does.

And here is the part that took the bad night.

They do the accent I have.

It is the load-bearing device in that entire tradition and it is superb. A man switches from Californian English into his father's Persian-accented English mid-sentence and eight hundred people go, and it is not mockery, it is love, and I understand exactly what it is doing.

It is a second-generation room laughing at their parents. Warmly. From a distance of forty years and one ocean.

I am the parent.

I am thirty-three and I am the accent, and there is no version of that room where I am the one doing the joke, because I am the one the joke is about, and I have never in my life been the subject of anybody else's material.

LOS ANGELES · Hollywood, a showcase · 6 March · 220 in · English

Two hundred and twenty and I was fourth of nine and I did eleven minutes and they were fine.

The man before me did four minutes on his mother's voicemails and took the roof off.

His mother sounds like me.

from the Delgoshā

*The qazi's daughter swore so beautifully that men
came from other districts to be insulted, and her
father was proud and did not say so, and her
mother said so and was not proud.*

Darya.

She was seventh and she is the reason this notebook has got interesting, and I want to record the first thing about her accurately because it was not her act.

It was her mouth.

I have been swearing professionally in two languages for eleven years. I swear the way a mechanic swears: as punctuation, spontaneously, as grammar, never at anybody who cannot swear back. It is not decoration. It is timing.

Darya does something I have never seen anybody do and did not know was possible.

She itemises.

She came off a difficult spot, sat down beside me without introducing herself, watched the next comic for about ninety seconds, and said:

This room can eat my entire ass, itemised and in order.

And then, a minute later, about the man on stage:

He has a face you could serve a subpoena on.

And then, when he did well:

That was not a bad set, that was a hate crime against the concept of timing, and I want it on the record that I say this with love and a certain amount of professional envy.

She is the daughter of two lawyers and she swears like a filing.

Everything is quantified. Everything is entered. She has an administrative vocabulary that would get a motion granted and she uses the entire thing to build obscenity, and none of it — **none of it** — is improvised.

I found that out in the second week.

She said something about a club owner that made me put my drink down, and I asked her to say it again, and she said it again **word**

for word, at the same speed, with the same pause in the same place. I said: you've written that down.

And she said, without any embarrassment whatsoever: *I have a note. It's called Filth. It has four hundred entries and it is backed up in two places.*

A woman who drafts her swearing in advance.

I have thought about that more than anything else that has happened to me in this country. Where I am from, profanity is the one thing nobody prepares. It is the involuntary part. It is the bit that comes out before you have decided, which is exactly why it is funny and exactly why it is trusted.

She writes hers. She workshops it. She has a *backup*.

And it is better than mine.

On Darya, factually, since she is going to be in this notebook a great deal.

Twenty-nine. Born in Beverly Hills, raised in Brentwood. Both parents attorneys. Private school, a tutor for the SAT, a gap year in Florence that she describes as *the single most embarrassing eleven months of my life and I would do it again immediately*.

Nine hundred thousand followers. Genuinely funny online, which is rare, and slightly better in a room than online, which is rarer.

And eleven years of open mics. Every one. No shortcut, no favour, no family in the business. She has done the queue and she did not have to and she does not talk about it.

Which is why she does not like me at first, and she is right not to.

I came in on an O-1 with a Netflix credit and a tour behind me and I was on a showcase in my third month that she waited four years for.

She said so. Not behind my back. To my face, in a car park, at one in the morning, in the second month:

You skipped nine years. I'm not saying you didn't earn it somewhere. I'm saying you didn't earn it here, and here is the only

*place that counts, and I'm going to be a bitch about it for a while and then I'll get over it and we'll be fine. **And that is exactly what happened, on that timetable, and I have never met anybody who announced it in advance.***

from the Delgoshā

*Two women quarrelled in the street for an hour and
then went in to eat together, and the neighbours
who had taken sides were not invited.*

42.

She telephoned at four in the morning her time, which is half past three in the afternoon here, and talked for fifty minutes about a woman she has met, and did not once say the thing she was telephoning about.

I have been listening to her describe rooms for eleven years. I know what it sounds like when she has found somebody.

43.

I have sent her four pieces this month and none of them has worked.

I want that written down flatly because I have been avoiding it for eleven weeks.

They are good. I know they are good. My father read them on Friday and squared them and said this is good work, and he has been right about that for forty-two years.

They do not survive the border.

Every one of them assumes a room that knows what nine months for a purchase order means, and what four lines on a form means, and what it is to have an aunt with three freezers. She is standing in front of two hundred Americans who have never queued for anything in their lives and who are, and I want to be fair about this, extremely nice.

44.

I am writing for a country she does not live in, in a language she has stopped performing in.

Neither of us has said this and it has been eleven months.

II. THE ACCENT

LOS ANGELES · Westwood · 14 April · first time

I went in the end. Fifteen months.

Bread that is correct. A bookshop with four things in the window I have not seen since I was twenty. A man selling saffron who was insulted when I did not argue, which I did not do out of politeness, and which he took as an insult, correctly.

I stood on that pavement for about eleven minutes and then went and sat in the car and did not cry, which I mention because I had entirely expected to and did not, and I have not worked out what that means and I am not going to.

Darya came with me and it was her first time too, which I had not expected.

She has lived in this city her whole life. Her parents are Iranian. She has been to Westwood perhaps nine times, all of them for a relative.

She said: *my mother does the shopping here and I have a complicated relationship with the entire boulevard, and I do not want to talk about it, and if you make me talk about it I will end you in a manner I have already drafted.*

And then in the car she talked about it for forty minutes without stopping.

The three of them, since I keep referring to them and this notebook is mine.

The headliner. Fifties, thirty years in, theatres, arenas twice. Everybody's uncle. He has been doing a version of the same twenty minutes since 1998 and he knows it and he is completely unapologetic about it, and after the second time I met him he said the thing that has bothered me for a year:

There was nowhere. There was actually nowhere. Before us there was not one room in this country where an Iranian could hear his own life said out loud by somebody who was not apologising for it. I built that room. I have been standing in it for thirty years doing the same twenty minutes and I will do them again tomorrow. You want me to be embarrassed. I would like you to be able to tell me why.

I could not tell him why. I have thought about it for a year and I still cannot.

The boy. Twenty-four, Irvine, has never been to Iran. Two million followers. Delightful.

And Darya, who is the only one of the three who has ever asked me a second question.

On the boy, and I am going to write this once and then be professional about it.

He does Romanu.

In English. In translation. Restructured for an American room, tightened, some of it run through the machine and cleaned up, and he is genuinely funny with it, and he does it to rooms four times the size of anything I can get.

And he has no idea.

He found it years ago the way anybody finds anything. It was free. It has always been free. There is no name on it and there never has been and that was the entire point of the arrangement.

He believes Romanu is a collective in Berlin. He said so on a podcast in February. Eleven minutes on it. He was very complimentary.

He asked me to check his Persian.

He came and found me after a show, genuinely nervous, and asked whether I would look at a bit he does in Persian, because he does not trust his own ear and he does not want to be the guy who gets it wrong.

That is a good instinct and it is more than most people would do.

It is wrong in a way that would take four hours to explain.

Not the grammar. The grammar is fine. It is forty years out of date, in the specific way that a language preserved by people who left in 1979 and taught to their children is out of date, and he is doing an accent that stopped existing before he was born, learned from his grandmother, who left.

I said it was fine.

And I sat in a club in Hollywood in May and watched a boy from Irvine do my work and Manu's work to eight hundred people, and I could not say one word.

Because saying it begins with a claim.

That is the third time. Payam said the words and was arrested. A man on television said them and was applauded. This one says them and is enormous, and nothing will ever happen to him, and the variable has never once been the material.

Darya saw my face.

She did not ask. She waited four days and then said, in a car park at one in the morning, which is where everything in this city happens:

Whatever that was, you don't have to tell me. But I want you to know I clocked it, and if you ever do want to tell me, I have a note on my phone with four hundred entries in it and not one of them is about anybody's business but mine.

She is the first person in this country I have wanted to tell.

I have not told her.

from the Delgoshā

The parrot in the market spoke beautifully and was bought at great price, and it had been taught by a man who had never left his room, and the phrases were forty years old, and the buyer's guests were charmed and his grandmother wept.

On what the twelfth minute is doing, which is nothing.

Eleven years.

It has never happened in front of a camera. It has never happened in English. It never once happened in Sweden.

I now work only in English, in a market that is finally paying me properly, in rooms with cameras in them.

I have built a career on the exact conditions under which the only thing I have ever valued cannot occur. I did that deliberately, in stages, over eleven years, and every individual stage was correct.

Mahin told me at sixty-eight that waiting for it is what kills it. She stopped in 1980 because she started waiting.

I have stopped waiting. That happened somewhere in the second year here and I did not notice it happening.

And I do not know whether that was surrender or whether it is the only condition under which the thing could ever come back, and there is exactly one person alive who could tell me and she will not, and she is right not to.

45.

She has not mentioned the twelfth minute in four years.

I have not asked. I have thought about asking eleven times and every time I have arrived at the same place, which is that a man of sixty-three in Tehran asking a woman of thirty-three in Los Angeles whether the thing has come back is not a question, it is a reminder, and she has enough of those.

46.

Something has begun happening and I have not written it down for four months.

I have decided to write it down now, badly, before I have a theory, because the theories are what have ruined every previous account of this in four notebooks.

I have started feeling the same room twice.

47.

For sixteen years it has been one direction and one shape. A room goes, somewhere I am not, and something arrives under the breastbone at four in the morning, and I write down the hour, and sometimes I can check it and mostly I cannot.

Four years ago the dead ones began, which by my own account cannot exist, and I wrote a great deal about that and resolved none of it.

Since January I have been getting them again.

Not similar ones. **The same one.** Same shape, same duration, same weight in the chest, and I know it the way you know a face in a street — before you have retrieved the name, before you have decided anything, the body says *this one, again*.

Then a third time, in March.

from the Delgoshā

*The watchman heard the same footstep every night
for eleven years and never once looked, and when
he finally looked there was nobody, and he could
not say whether this was a relief.*

48.

I have started a third notebook.

The ordinary notes have been on the shelf for thirty-six years. The coincidences have been in the drawer for eleven. This one I am not going to say where I keep, and I am aware that writing that sentence is more information than anything in it.

49.

There are three explanations and I am going to set them all down and then not choose, because choosing is what I have done for sixteen years and it has never once been correct.

One. It is true, and what I am feeling is the archive.

Sixteen years of that material is public and permanent and reused endlessly and free. A thing I wrote in 2019 lands in a basement in Isfahan tonight, and in Rasht in the spring, and somewhere else next year, and again. It has stopped being an event and become a **recurrence**. If I have ever been feeling anything real, then this is precisely what a body would feel from a body of work that has stopped decaying.

I am not receiving rooms. I am receiving repeats.

Two. I am sixty-three, and I have taken a codeine syrup every night since I was twenty-seven, and a doctor in a car in traffic once told me exactly what that does and in what order, and was correct about every part of it.

The order includes this.

I know the word. I looked it up once, in October, at four in the morning, and I closed the page, and I have not written the word in this notebook and I am not going to, and I am aware that this is the single most frightening fact in it.

Three. The material actually is repeating.

The machine has been in every room for four years. Everything is derived from everything and the derivations are derived. A man who feels rooms, in a country where all the material is now

recursive, **would feel repeats whether or not there were anything wrong with him**, because the repeats are genuinely there.

50.

The three are not alternatives.

That is the part I got to in February and have not been able to put down. All three can be true at once. There is no version of the facts in which any of them excludes the others, and there is no test, and there has never been a test, and I have spent sixteen years building an account of a thing that was never going to be settled.

III. THE CASE

51.

My father is ninety-two and still does two a month, because nobody else in the city does it properly, and in April he asked me to drive him.

He has never asked before.

52.

The case has not changed since 1989.

Wooden, brass corners, eleven weights in felt recesses in ascending order, each stamped on the underside. The certificates are in a folder in the boot and they are renewed every year, **because a thing that measures has to be measured**, and that calibration stands on another, and the chain goes back and back and ends at a mass in a vault in France.

He has explained this to me perhaps forty times. He does not remember explaining it once. He explains it the way other men ask after your health.

53.

The job was a poultry wholesaler off the Khavaran road, which he did not remark on and which I did not either.

The scale was reading three hundred and forty grams light at twenty kilos.

The man knew. You can always tell within about four seconds whether they knew, and he knew, and he did the thing they all do, which is to become extremely interested in the paperwork.

And my father did what he has done for sixty-one years. He put out the weights. He showed him the number. He wrote it in the book. He said the platform bearing had gone and gave him the name of a man on Amir Kabir.

He did not raise his voice and he did not mention it again and he will go back in the spring.

54.

In the car afterwards I said: you knew he knew.

And he said: **a man who cheats you knows he is cheating. A scale does not know anything.**

He said: it is the only honest thing in that room and it is wrong, and somebody has to tell it, and if I stop going he will not get a new bearing, he will get a new supplier who does not ask.

Sixty-one years. He has never reported anybody.

55.

I want to record what he was like for the whole of that day, because I have been writing him down as a Friday and a verdict for sixteen years and he is not that, and I am sixty-three and he is ninety-two and I am running out of Fridays to correct it in.

He assessed everything.

The bread at the place we stopped was short weight and he said so to me and not to them. The tyres on the taxi in front of us were a matter he had views on. A shelf in the wholesaler's office was four degrees out and he mentioned it to nobody and I watched him look at it three times.

He is right about roughly nine of every ten and it is unbearable, and **in sixty-one years he has never once said** *I told you*, and that is the whole of him.

56.

The new sound system at the mosque, unprompted, at a traffic light:

It is very loud. That is the whole of it. They have solved the wrong problem beautifully.

57.

On the doctor he saw in February:

He is thirty-one. He looked at me for four minutes and he has an opinion. I have looked at scales for sixty-one years and I still weigh them twice.

58.

I asked him — because he is ninety-two and because it was that kind of afternoon — whether he was afraid.

He said: **no. I have been to a great many funerals and the arrangements are always adequate.**

59.

He does not know he is funny.

I have watched him do this my entire life and I am fifty-four years into a trade built on exactly this and it took me until this April to see it properly.

My mother is funny by describing a thing accurately at the wrong moment. **My father is funny by being unanswerably correct in a register nobody is expecting**, and he never performs, and he has never once said a thing to get a response, and the response arrives anyway.

Four or five a week. For sixty years.

Not one of them written down anywhere but in this notebook. Not one of them paid for. He would be appalled to be told, and if I told him he would want to know what specifically I meant, and I would not be able to answer, and he would treat that as a fault in my instrument and he would be right.

60.

So in the scrapyard, while he was laying out the weights, I asked him about 1989.

Thirty-six years. I have taken that laugh apart more times than anything I have ever written. I have never once asked him what happened.

61.

He told me in about ninety seconds and he did not stop laying out the weights.

He had already done two jobs that morning and both scales were wrong.

One over, one under. And the second man had argued with him about it for twenty minutes, properly argued, with the book open.

And he had begun to doubt himself.

Two false readings in one morning is not a coincidence. If his own weights had drifted — if the case was wrong — then every reading he had taken since the last renewal was worthless, and on the drive out to Khavaran he had started making a list of the premises he would have to go back to and the years he would have to account for.

He was fifty-six years old and he had been doing it for eleven years, and he had never had a day like it before or since.

He was opening that case in a scrapyard in forty-three degrees, ashamed and frightened, expecting to find out that the only thing he had ever been certain of had a crack in it.

And a boy of nine, watching the weights come out of the felt in ascending order, said:

That one is a kilo everywhere in the world.

62.

Nine words. Entirely sincere. It was not a joke.

I remember saying it. I was nine and I was pleased about it. I had understood that morning, for the first time, that there was a thing in a box that meant the same everywhere, that could not be argued

with, that did not depend on who you were or what year it was or who was in the room.

And I said it at the precise moment my father had stopped believing it.

63.

He laughed until he had to sit down on an oil drum.

He had the two hundred gram in his hand and he had to put it down on the case because he could not hold it. Nearly a minute. I have described that minute in four notebooks across sixteen years.

And in the car afterwards I asked him what had been funny and he said **I don't know**, and I have carried that for thirty-six years as the one piece of evidence I have that this cannot be engineered.

64.

He said, in April, in a scrapyard, at ninety-two, laying out the fourth weight:

That was true. I did not know. I knew what had happened. I did not know it was funny.

Something went through me and I had no word for it. The only word available was one I have never had a use for.

65.

Here is what I have not been able to put down since April.

It was engineered.

Not by me. I was nine and I meant it.

By the morning. Two false readings, twenty minutes of argument with the book open, a man in the heat with a crack in his certainty, a list of premises in his head — **and then nine sincere words delivering exactly the thing he had spent four hours needing to hear.**

Setup. Escalation. And a turn that recontextualises everything before it.

It is a flawless joke. It took four hours to build. Nobody built it.

66.

Which does not settle anything. It makes it worse. Because if the best laugh of my life was produced by circumstance and not by craft, then either the craft is a great deal smaller than I have spent sixty-three years believing —

or circumstance is the thing craft has been imitating all along, and every device I have ever built has been an attempt to manufacture, in four seconds, in a room, what one morning in a scrapyard did to a man by accident.

I have no way to find out. I am sixty-three.

67.

He read every page on the Friday. To the bottom, back to check something in the middle, to the bottom again. Forty-two years.

He squared them and put them on the arm of the chair.

Then he said:

You have been bringing me the same pages for a long time. Not the same words. The same pages.

68.

He said: I do not know what you have made, and I have never asked, because you would tell me, and then I would have to know it.

He said: but whatever it is, **you are the only one who cannot see it.**

He said: that is not modesty.

That is a fault in the instrument. I have spent my life with instruments. They cannot measure themselves. That is not a shame. That is the definition.

69.

Then he asked whether I had eaten.

Four places.

from the Delgoshā

*They asked the ferryman how many times he had
crossed. He said, once, a very great number of
times.*

IV. THE FILTH NOTE

LOS ANGELES · Venice · 2 August · Darya's, 2am

She showed me the note.

Four hundred and eleven entries. Backed up in two places. Organised — and I want this on the page — **by category**, with a system, which she explained to me for eleven minutes and which is genuinely coherent.

There are four hundred and eleven pieces of profanity in that phone and every one of them has been drafted, revised and filed by a woman whose parents are both attorneys, and there is not one wasted word in any of them.

I'm going to need you to take that note and put it somewhere load-bearing.

This room has the acoustics of a colon and the crowd has the energy of a colonoscopy, and I want you to know I workshopped that.

He came at me with a critique and I want to be clear I will be responding in writing.

That is not a joke, that is a hostage situation with a punchline taped to its chest.

I have known that man eleven years and I would not urinate on him if he were on fire, and I have thought about that sentence a great deal and I stand by the conditional.

And I told her the thing I have never said to anybody in this country.

That where I am from, the swearing is the one part nobody prepares. That it is the involuntary bit. That it comes out before you have decided, which is exactly why it is funny and exactly why it is trusted, and that a room can tell.

And she said: *yes, and mine is better, and I'd like you to sit with that.*

She is right and it is better.

On the two words, which I noticed in a queue in March and have not been able to put down. I was at an appointment. Status.

The building downtown with the seating that has been chosen by somebody who does not want you comfortable but cannot say so.

And there is a phrase on the door and on the lanyards and on the letterhead.

Homeland Security.

It is a department. It is administrative. The people in it are, in my experience, tired and reasonably decent and entirely uninterested in me, and the language is the flat English of a body that has enormous power over your address and no opinion whatsoever about you.

And I sat on that seating for two hours and forty minutes with my number and thought about the other one.

Amniyat-e melli. National security.

Where I am from that is not a department. It is what is typed at the top of the page. *Eqdām 'alayh-e amniyat-e melli* — action against national security — and every Iranian alive can finish that phrase, and a great many of us know somebody it was typed about.

Sixteen years ago a young man said eleven words on a stage in a basement and that is what went on the paper.

They are the same two words.

They translate into each other exactly. There is no slippage, no near-equivalent, no argument to be had about it. Homeland security. National security. The identical phrase.

And one of them is a queue and the other one is a charge, and a person can stand in both in one lifetime, and I have.

I sat in that building for two hours and forty minutes and thought about a man I have never met who is somewhere in a system in a country I left, and about the fact that the worst thing that has ever happened to my friend's family and the most boring afternoon of my year are, in two languages, called the same thing.

Then they called my number and it took nine minutes and the woman was pleasant and everything was in order. I did not tell Darya. I have not told anybody. I am writing it here because it is

the only place I write things and because I have decided that it is not material.

It is the only true thing I have found in three years in this country that I am not going to try to make funny.

On what an American room will and will not forgive, which is Darya's and which I am writing down before I forget the exact words.

She said it in a car, obviously.

They'll forgive you for being cruel. They will not forgive you for being long.

You've got nine seconds of sincerity before it becomes an imposition. Nine. In New York it's six. In Austin it's about fourteen and they'll let you go to twenty if you've earned it, and in this city it is nine, and you are consistently going to about seventeen, and that is why they like you and do not laugh.

She was right and I timed it the following week.

Seventeen seconds. Twice in eleven minutes. I have been doing that since Sweden and nobody in Sweden minded because a Swede will sit in silence for forty minutes and be having a wonderful time.

On the accent, later, and more honestly.

I said the second-generation rooms perform the accent I have and that I am the parent.

That is true and it is not the whole of it, and Darya got the rest of it out of me in about four minutes without meaning to.

The full version is: **they are doing an accent that is dying and they know it.**

Every one of those bits is a preservation. The parents who came in 1979 are in their seventies and eighties. The accent is going. In twenty years there will be nobody left doing it as a first language in this city and a room of eight hundred people is laughing at a thing they will not hear again, and that is why they laugh like that, and that is why it is warm rather than cruel. **They are not laughing at their parents. They are keeping them.**

And I walked into that room with the real thing in my mouth and thought I was being mocked, and I was being **mourned in advance**, and it took me a year and a woman from Brentwood to work it out.

On what she actually is, which I got wrong for four months.

I had her as a rich girl with a following who resented me. That is what she is on paper and it is not wrong and it is not the thing.

Eleven years of open mics. Every single one. Her parents would have paid for anything and she has never asked, not once, and I know that because I asked her directly and she told me the number in her account when she started, and it was nine hundred dollars.

She has never had to do this. That is the part I could not get my head round for a year. I did what I did because there was nothing else. She had everything else.

And she chose the queue.

I said that to her, badly, at three in the morning. I said: you didn't have to do any of this.

And she said: *no. And you didn't have to be good.*

She tried to apologise for it once, in September, and I stopped her.

She started doing the thing where a person begins listing what they have been given as though it were a charge sheet, and I told her to stop, and she stopped, and neither of us has mentioned it since.

That is the night we became friends and I could tell you the hour.

On what she brings that I do not have and will not get.

She knows this country in her body. Not the language — the *timing*. She knows that an American room will forgive you for cruelty and never for length. She knows exactly how long you may be sincere before it becomes an imposition, and it is about nine seconds, and it is different in every city, and she can feel it moving. I have four years of Sweden and eleven of Iran and I am counting in my head like a foreigner counting change.

And she cannot do what I can do, which is stand in front of four hundred people who know everything and get away with nothing, and she has said so, and she said it as an assessment and not a compliment, and that is the only way I would have accepted it.

from the Delgoshā

*One woman inherited a house and another built
one, and they argued for years about which was the
better house, and both of them lived in the second
one because it had a kitchen.*

On the boy, in November, and I have decided not to be noble about it.

He got the special.

Eight hundred thousand dollars and a director, and I found out on the internet like everybody else, and I sat on a wall on Abbot Kinney and did the thing where you decide what kind of person you are going to be about it for about eleven minutes.

Nineteen minutes of that hour is ours. I have counted. I went through the announcement material and the two clips and I counted, and by my professional estimate nineteen of the sixty minutes he will record is Romanu, in translation, restructured, and he does not know, and there is nobody who could tell him.

And Darya asked me, straight out, in the car, at one in the morning, what was wrong.

And I did not tell her.

Not because I could not trust her. **Because telling her begins with a claim,** and I have watched a man in Tehran refuse to make that claim for sixteen years and I have thought he was a coward about it perhaps four times, and in a car on Lincoln Boulevard in November I found out exactly how heavy it is.

Nobody has ever taken anything off me. There is no name on it. There never was. That was the entire point and we built it that way and I helped.

She waited. She did not push. And then she said the kindest thing anybody has said to me in this country:

Okay. Whatever it is, it's older than me, and I'm not going to be the one who makes you say it out loud in a car.

from the Delgoshā

*The apprentice grew famous and the master grew
old, and visitors came to the workshop and praised
the apprentice's hand, and the master agreed with
them, because it was his hand.*

70.

Nineteen minutes.

She sent me the number and nothing else and I did not reply for two days, and then I replied about something else entirely and so did she.

71.

There is now a documentary.

Two, in fact. One in Berlin and one that is being made here, and the one being made here has a researcher who has been in Tehran since September asking careful questions of people in the rooms.

She found the Piroozi room. She found a boy of twenty who is now twenty-nine and who has been running his own room for four years and who told her, truthfully, that a man used to bring paper.

He does not know my name. Nobody in forty rooms knows my name. I have been extremely careful for sixteen years about a thing that would now cost me nothing at all.

72.

That is the fact of this year and I have been walking around it since the spring.

There is nothing left that could hurt me.

Vahid is dead. My brother's case is sixteen years old and everybody who prosecuted it has been reassigned or retired. The words are older than most of the people saying them. There is a market in authentic material and a man in Toronto who has claimed to be me for three years and is believed by some.

The anonymity has become larger than the work.

There are people who have never laughed at anything of mine who know that Romanu is anonymous. It is the first fact about it and for a great many people it is the only one. The mystery has eaten the material. And I am the only person on earth who could end it, with

one sentence, in an afternoon, to a researcher who is currently in this city, and who would be extremely glad to hear from me.

V. THE SEVENTH DAY

73.

In the old book the prince is under a vow for seven days and cannot answer the charge, and seven ministers tell stories to hold off the execution, and on the seventh day the vow ends.

And he speaks. And the truth comes out, and the accuser is punished, and the boy takes the throne in the ordinary course of time.

I read that at nineteen in a room I no longer have and I have not thought about it in years.

74.

The researcher wrote in December. Politely. Through two intermediaries, which is how everything reaches me and always has been.

She has years of work. She has the archivist's paper. She has, I am fairly sure, more than she is saying, and she is being careful and decent about it and has not published a word.

She would like to talk. She has said that she would protect any arrangement I preferred, and I believe her, and it does not matter whether I believe her, because there is nothing to protect.

75.

I have drafted a reply four times.

The fourth one is good. It is eleven lines. It says who I am and what I made and when I started and why there is no name on it, and it is accurate and unsentimental and it does not ask for anything.

It has been in the folder since the ninth of December.

76.

Roshanak telephoned on a Tuesday, which is Monday there, and we talked for an hour about a woman in Los Angeles who writes her swearing down, and about a boy who has nineteen minutes of us in an hour he is recording in March. And near the end she said: are you going to answer her.

I said which one.

She said: you know which one.

77.

I said I did not know.

That was not true. I did know. I had known since about the fourteenth of December and I told a woman four thousand kilometres away that I did not know, and she let me, and that is what she is.

78.

Here is the reason and I am going to write it once.

It is not safety. It has not been safety for eleven years and I have gone on saying the word to myself out of habit, the way you keep paying a subscription for a thing you stopped using.

It is not modesty. I am not modest. I have written four hundred thousand jokes and I believe I am the best there has ever been at it in this language and I have believed that since I was thirty-four.

It is that saying it would make the work mine.

Sixteen years of arranging for it not to be. Every sheet handed over with nothing on it, every room supplied for nothing, every reel with no name, a brand built so that the absence of an author was the product. I did that on purpose and I did it well and I have been doing it since before most of the people saying my sentences were born.

And a thing you have spent sixteen years placing outside yourself does not come back in because the danger has passed. **It has stopped fitting.** There is no longer a place in me shaped like it.

My father said it in April in a scrapyard and I have not been able to improve on it and I have tried for eight months.

An instrument cannot measure itself. That is not a shame. That is the definition.

from the Delgoshā

*They opened the door of the cell on the seventh day
and told the prisoner he was free to speak. He
asked what the charge had been. They told him
there had never been one, and he thanked them,
and said nothing, and they could not make him. . . .*

.

79.

I have not replied.

80.

There is a fourth notebook now.

The ordinary notes on the shelf. The coincidences in the drawer. The repeats in a place I have not written down. And this one, which contains one document, eleven lines long, dated the ninth of December, addressed to a woman in Los Angeles, unsent.

I take it out about once a month and read it and put it back, the way my father takes out the certificates.

81.

The repeats are now most nights.

I have stopped writing the hours down. Not from fear — from arithmetic. There were four in January and eleven in April and I stopped counting in the summer because a list you cannot check is not a record, it is a symptom, and I know precisely which of the three explanations that sentence supports and I have decided not to look at it this year.

82.

Naneh Sarma is sixty-five and still in the basements, forty-six years, and she telephoned in November to say that hers have stopped altogether.

Not the dead rooms. All of it. The whole faculty, gone, in about a fortnight, and she is not upset and I still cannot work out what she is.

I asked what it was like.

She said: **quiet.**

83.

Roshanak has not had it in eleven years and works in English in rooms with cameras and has stopped waiting, and Mahin said at sixty-eight that waiting is what kills it, and neither of us knows whether stopping is surrender or the only condition under which it could ever come back.

Three of us. One who never had it, one who has lost it, and one who cannot tell the new ones from the old.

We have never all three been in a room together and we never will be.

84.

LOS ANGELES · Venice · 31 December

Darya on the roof at midnight with a bottle and the note out, reading me entries from four hundred and eleven of them, in order, by category, for about forty minutes.

And somewhere around number two hundred and something I went.

Properly. On a roof, at midnight, at a filed and backed-up obscenity about a booker in Burbank, and I could not stop, and she watched me the way you watch weather, and then she said:

There she is.

85.

I have not laughed like that since 2019.

I did not go anywhere. I was entirely there for all of it and I remember every second.

It was not the twelfth minute and I am not going to pretend it was.

But my ribs hurt on the first of January and I sat on the edge of the bed at eight in the morning in a city I did not choose for the right reasons, with a friend asleep on my sofa who has drafted four

hundred and eleven pieces of profanity, and I thought: this is not what I came for and I am not leaving.

from the Delgoshā

..... asked,

*And the had no way of
knowing, and went to bed.*

86.

Twenty to eleven. The chair. The radio at the volume where you can hear that a man is talking and not what he is saying.

The syrup, and the cap, which holds five millilitres, and which I have used every night for four years.

The nose at twelve minutes past, as it has for thirty-six years. The warmth at half past, with its opinions.

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

87.

It is good. I know it is good the way you know a wall is straight.

And I cannot establish whether I have written it before.

I have looked. It took an hour. It is not in the notebooks I can reach and there are sixteen years of notebooks I cannot reach and four hundred thousand of them and no index and no way to build one.

88.

I sent it anyway.

GLOSSARY

Abbot Kinney — a street in Venice, Los Angeles.

Amniyat-e melli [am-nee-YAT-e mel-LEE] — Persian, national security. In official usage the standard formula in charges brought for public speech: eqdām 'alayh-e amniyat-e melli, action against national security.

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.

Hässelby — a suburb in the north-west of Stockholm with a large Iranian population.

Hoosh [HOOSH] — Persian, intelligence, wits. Hooshang [hoo-SHANG] is a common man's name of an older generation, built from the same root.

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

Khavaran [khaa-vaa-RAAN] — a road and industrial district in the far south-east of Tehran.

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

Lagom [LAA-gom] — Swedish. Neither too much nor too little; the right amount, understood as an achievement rather than a compromise.

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.

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

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.

Tehrangleles — colloquial, for the Iranian district of west Los Angeles centred on Westwood Boulevard.

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.

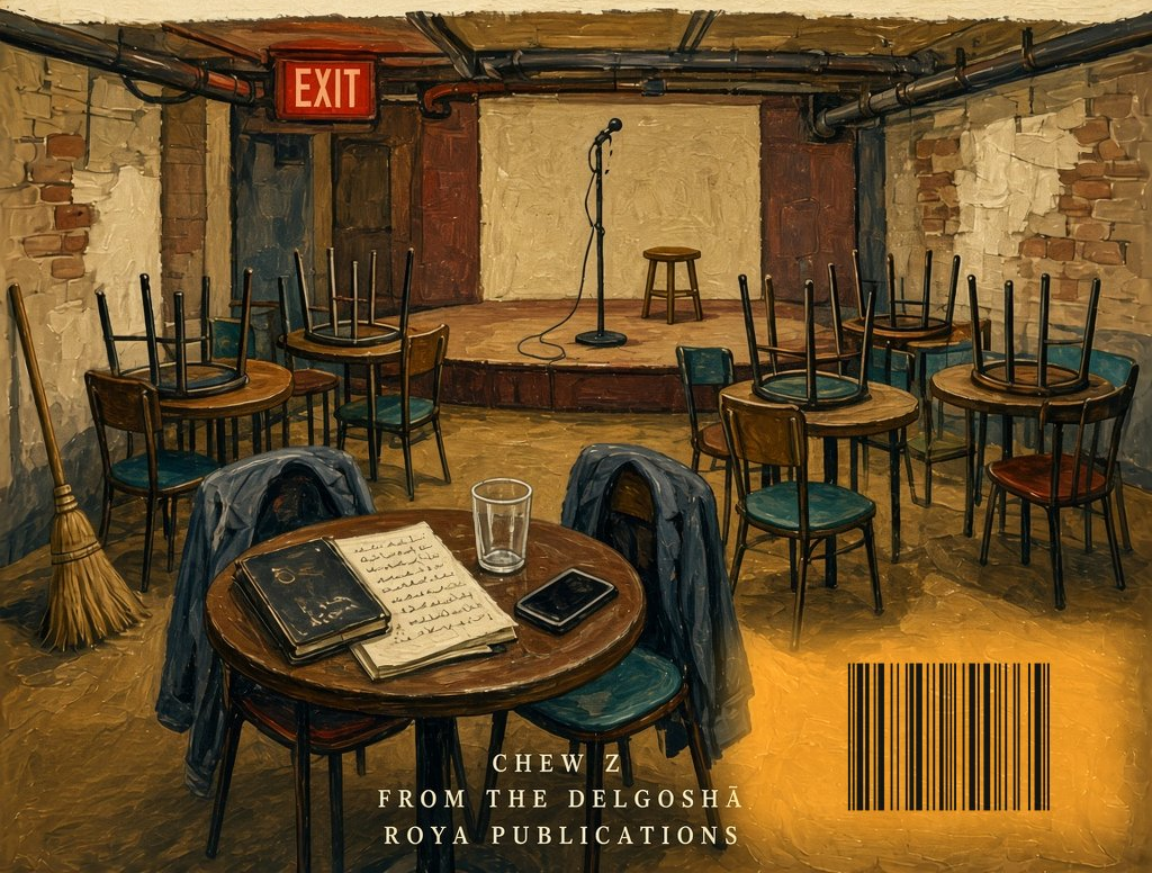
In one country the words mean a department.
Forms, interviews, a queue, and the flat
administrative language of a body with
enormous power over your address and
no opinion about you.

In the other they are not a department. They
are the charge, typed at the top of the page,
and sixteen years ago a young man said
eleven words on a stage in a basement and
that is what went on the paper.

She has moved to a city with forty thousand
of her countrymen in it and gone to live forty
minutes from all of them on purpose. He is
sixty-three, has never had a byline, and is now
famous for not existing.

In the old book the vow ends on the seventh
day and the prince speaks and the truth
comes out.

*A thing you have spent sixteen years placing
outside yourself does not come back in
because the danger has passed.*



CHEW Z
FROM THE DELGOSHĀ
ROYA PUBLICATIONS

