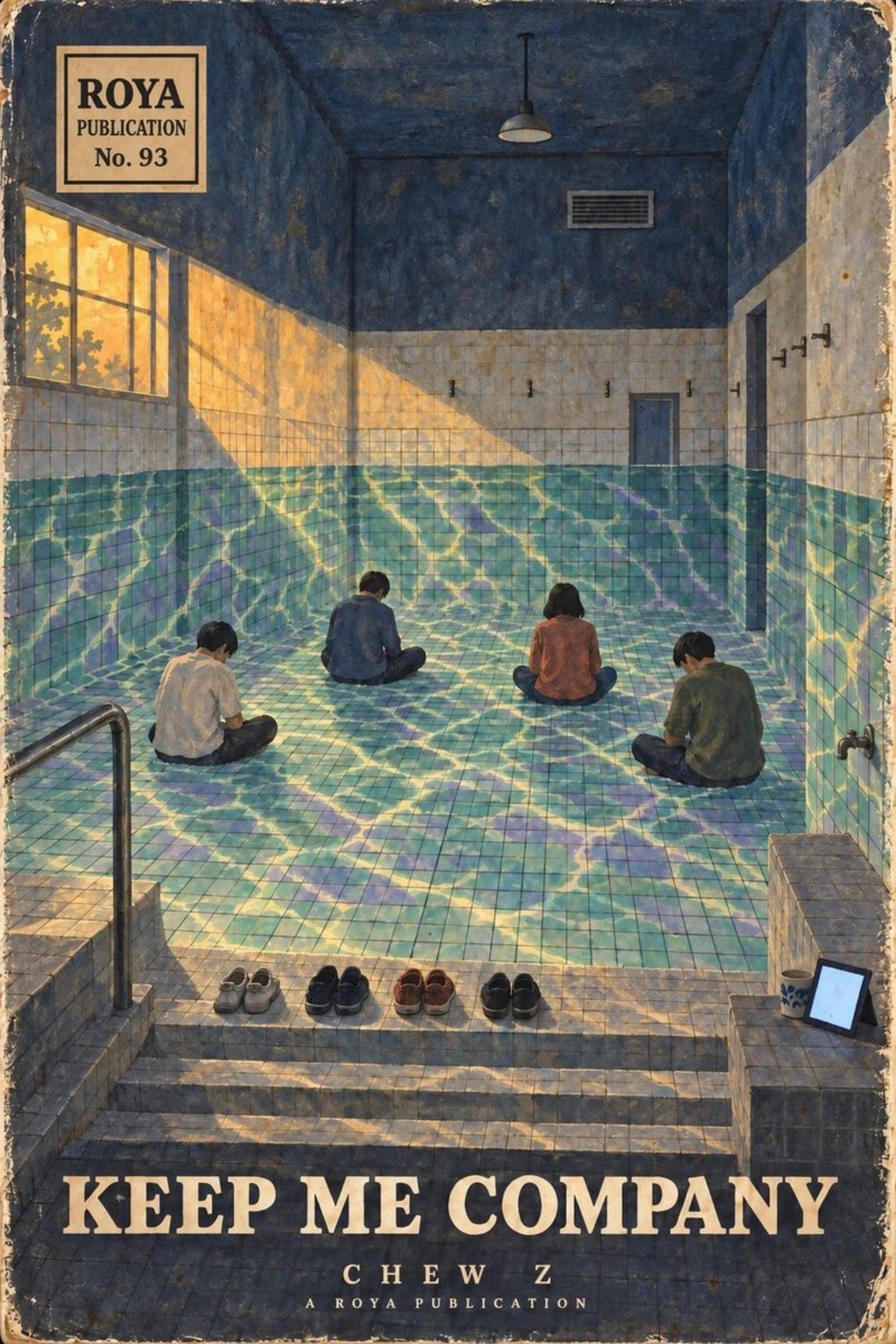


ROYA
PUBLICATION
No. 93



KEEP ME COMPANY

C H E W Z
A ROYA PUBLICATION

KEEP ME COMPANY

CHEW Z

Printed in the Reach

Roya Publication No. 93

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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THE QUESTION

We have become very good at fixing what we can measure, and we have no instrument at all for the rest of it.

Alan Watts had a figure for it that I have not been able to put down. We look at the world, he said, through a net that seems to chop it up into bits, and the parts we get back are fictions of the language rather than features of the world. The net is how anything gets done at all. It is also why a thing with no mesh to catch it never registers as missing.

That is not a complaint about science. It is closer to a description of how anything ever gets better. Somebody establishes that a harm is real, gives it a size, and then the size is what gets worked on, because a size is a thing that can be worked on. Almost everything good that has happened to us happened that way, and I would not give any of it back.

What I want to ask, across five books and six years, is what it costs. Not what we trade away knowingly - we are good at that argument and we have it loudly, in public, at length. I mean the thing that goes without ever being weighed, because it was never on the scale: no number attached to it, no advocate, nobody harmed badly enough to say so, and no moment at which anybody reports that it is gone.

This book puts the question to one pair of things. One of them is an injury. It has a size and it has been counted. The other has no size, and nobody has ever counted it, because there is nothing there to count. From outside they are indistinguishable. From the inside they are nothing like each other.

I have not written a warning. Everybody in this book is better off at the end of it than at the beginning, by every measure anybody in it keeps, and that is not irony. It is the part I would ask you to hold on to while you read.

What I found is at the back.

SYNOPSIS

Mira is forty-one and opens machines up to see what is inside them. It is the only job she has ever wanted and she is better at it than almost anyone.

She lives on the fourth floor of a block in the outer city, in the flat next door to her brother, who has not been outside since he was twenty-six. Through a wall the width of a magazine she can hear him talking to something on a tablet, all day and most of the night. It is the reason he is alive. She knows that, and she is grateful, and some nights he laughs at something that has nothing to do with her.

Every day for twelve years she has sat for one hour with nothing — no screen, no book, no music, no task — and she has never told a single person, because there is no way to say it out loud that does not sound like something.

In March the flat above hers is gutted and the hour goes with it. Looking for somewhere quiet she finds the door of the neighbourhood bathhouse standing eleven centimetres open, five years after it closed, with a light on inside that is not a builder's light. On the tiles at the bottom of the drained bath there is an older man in a coat too good for the building, who has been coming for three weeks and thought it was a swimming pool.

He tells her there is room.

It is 2024. The loneliness law comes into force on the first of April, the first of its kind anywhere in the world. It is going to move nothing at all, and nobody is going to lie about that either.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

I started this because I was tired of the two stories.

In the first, the machine wakes up and turns on us. In the second it cures everything and we are released into a long afternoon. One comes from studios, the other from people with something to sell, and both are comfortable, because both hand you somewhere to put it. A villain, or a saviour.

I did not recognise either from what I was watching. What I was watching was careful people doing their jobs well, publishing what they found, admitting what they could not explain, and being answered every time by something true. Nothing hidden. Every quarter better than the last. And underneath it a quiet I could not point at and could not stop noticing.

There is no story for that, because it is not a story anybody can sell. So I wrote one. If you only ever consume the story being spoken out loud, you are rehearsing for somebody else's future, and I would rather be wrong in my own words than word-perfect in theirs.

The title is what people already in the water shout at the one person still on the edge. It is cheerful, it is meant kindly, and nobody shouting it has ever pushed anyone in. Nobody in this book is ever pushed. In English it is a friendly lie; in Japan it is simply true: the bath is hot, it is lovely, nobody needs persuading. This book lives in that gap and does not close it.

This one is set in 2024 and I have bent nothing about the world: no invented device, law, paper or number. Everything else is invented, including the line I have drawn between the facts, and that line is the speculation. The ground is checked and the building on top of it is made up.

It is a year you have already lived, written down by somebody who was frightened during it and could not say why, and who suspects that not being able to say why is the entire subject.

Chew Z

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I. THE CHANGING ROOM

1.

I have sat for an hour a day for twelve years and I have never told anybody, which makes it sound like a confession, and it isn't. It is only that there is no way to say it out loud that doesn't sound like something. I sit down. I don't do anything. After a while I get up.

If I say it slowly it sounds like a practice, and it isn't one. If I say it quickly it sounds like a joke. Either way the person I've said it to will ask me what I get out of it, and I have never once had an answer, and after about the fourth time you stop offering.

It started at university and it started by accident, which is the least interesting version of every story. I had an hour between two things and nowhere to be and no money, and I sat on a wall. That was all. I remember the wall better than I remember either of the two things.

What I can tell you is that if you do nothing for an hour, the first four minutes are unbearable. Everybody who has ever tried it will tell you the same, and they say it like it's a criticism. They're right that it's unbearable. They're wrong that it's a criticism.

2.

At work the model has no name. It has a number, and the number is four, and everybody says the number the way you'd say a colleague's name if the colleague were in the room.

Four did something odd on the Tuesday run. Has anyone got four's logs from March. Nobody thinks about it. I have watched a woman with two doctorates say ask four into a microphone at nine in the morning, in a building with a fountain in it, and then go and get a coffee.

My job is to open it up and look inside. That's the short version, and it is also the only version anyone outside the building has ever wanted.

The work is not exciting. I want to be clear about that, because there's a kind of writing about this that makes it sound like defusing a bomb, and the truth is that most of it is four hours with a graph. You take a thing it did, and you go looking for the part of it that did the thing. Sometimes you find the part. Then you write

down where it was, and somebody reads what you wrote, and says: good, that's very interesting, and then it is Thursday.

3.

There are fourteen of us on my floor and the only one I want to put down here is Shirakawa.

She is thirty-two and she came out of a physics department and she is better than me, which took me about four months to say out loud and about two years to stop minding. She eats the same lunch every working day of her life — rice, an egg, a thing in a plastic tub she makes on Sundays — and when a new person asks about it she says it's a solved problem and goes back to what she was doing.

What I want to record about her is that she says I don't know more than anybody I have ever met.

Not as an apology. Not with the little laugh people do. She says it the way you'd read out a measurement. Somebody will ask her something in a meeting and she will look at the ceiling for three seconds and say I don't know, and then sit there, comfortably, with everybody waiting for the second half of the sentence, and there isn't one.

The first time I saw her do it to somebody two levels above her I had to look at the table.

She told me once, in the kitchen, that she got it from her grandmother, who farmed, and who had apparently held the view that a person who would not say I don't know about the weather would say anything about anything.

We were working on different things for the first two years. We stood next to each other at the coffee machine at about half past ten most mornings and said almost nothing, and I have not had a better colleague in my life, and it is possible that those two facts are related.

4.

Ren's room and my room share a wall, and the wall is the kind of wall they put up in a hurry in the sixties, which is to say it is a rumour of a wall.

I took the flat next to his four years ago. He didn't ask me to and I didn't ask him. The one along the corridor came up, and I was already there three nights a week, and it seemed stupid to keep paying for a train.

He hasn't been out since he was twenty-six. Not in the way people say it, meaning doesn't get out much. He has not been through that door since he was twenty-six.

He talks all night. Not to me. There's a tablet propped against a mug on his desk with a crack across the top left corner, and he talks to it, and it talks back, and I can hear the shape of it through the wall but not the words, the way you hear a television in another flat.

He calls it Daisy. He named it himself — you can, they let you, it's the first thing it asks. I thought that was funny for about a week and then I stopped noticing, the way you stop noticing anything somebody does every day.

Some nights it goes quiet and then he laughs. That one is hard, I'll be honest. I lie there in the dark, on the other side of a wall the width of a magazine, and my brother is laughing, and it is nothing to do with me.

One night I heard it plainly, because he'd fallen asleep and it was still going, saying the last thing it had been saying into the dark.

You don't have to decide anything tonight.

I remember thinking: that's a nice thing to say to someone.

5.

His room is four and a half mats and a window, and the window faces the wrong way for the sunset and the right way for the port.

There is the bed, which is also the sofa. There is a desk he does not use as a desk. There is the tablet propped against a mug with a crack across the top left corner, which has been the arrangement for two years and which he will not change because the angle is right. There is a plastic drawer unit with medicines in the top one and cables in the other two. And there is a chair nobody sits in, which is for visitors, and which has a jumper on it.

That's it. That is the whole of it, and he has been in it since he was twenty-six, and I am not going to tell you why because I don't know why. I have asked him twice, years apart, and both times he gave me an answer that was true and did not explain anything, and I have come to think that he doesn't know either, and that this is more common than people imagine.

What he does all day is the ships.

There's a site. It's free, anybody can look at it, and it shows you every vessel in the world in more or less real time — a little arrow for each one, pointed the way it's going, and you can touch an arrow and it tells you the name and the flag and where it left from and what it is carrying and when it is expected.

He has been doing this for four years and he is, I am not exaggerating, an expert. He knows the regulars. He knows the car carriers by name, which is a thing I did not know was possible, and he knows that one of them has a habit of sitting off the coast for two days before it comes in and he has a theory about why. He says she about all of them. He knows which ones are in trouble — there is apparently a way to tell, from how long a ship sits in one place, that something has gone wrong with it that nobody has announced.

There is one he has followed since 2021. She runs a loop through here and down through the strait and comes back, and it takes about five weeks, and when she comes back he tells me.

He told me on a Thursday in April, and he was so pleased that he put his feet on the floor to say it.

The cranes are visible from the corridor window outside my flat. You go out of my door, turn left, and there they are over the roofs, eight of them, close enough to see the containers move.

He has never been down there. I have never once suggested it and he has never once asked, and I do not know which of us that is worse for.

6.

He asked me once what I actually do. Not at the start — years in. He'd never asked, and I'd never volunteered, and then one evening

over the washing-up he said, what is it you actually do, though, in the tone of a man who has been saving it.

I said: you know when a surgeon opens somebody up and watches every nerve in them firing, all of it, live, in colour? And still can't tell you what the patient is frightened of.

He said, that's you?

I said that's me. The word for it is interpretability, which promises a good deal more than it delivers.

He thought about it and said, so you're the one who looks at it.

Yes.

And nobody can read it.

Nobody can read it. That's not a secret, I said. It's in the papers. Anyone can go and look. People just don't believe you when you say it out loud, they think you're being modest, or dramatic, and it isn't either, it's just the situation.

He dried a plate and put it on the rack and said, huh.

And then he said — and he wasn't being clever, he was being kind, he meant it as a compliment — she's very easy to read.

7.

In March somebody bought the flat above mine and started taking the inside out of it.

They were within their rights and they were polite about it. A note went round. Eight to six, weekdays, four to six weeks, apologies for the inconvenience. There was a phone number on the bottom of the note in case of difficulties, and I thought about ringing it and saying: I have a difficulty, I need one hour a day of absolutely nothing, could you possibly not.

You cannot ring a number and say that. There is no form of words.

So the hour went, and it went the way things go when you've never told anybody they exist. I couldn't be short with anyone about it. Nobody knew. I had spent twelve years making sure nobody knew, and I had done a very good job, and the bill came in March.

I tried the park and it was full of people who were also trying the park. I tried the stairwell and somebody asked if I was all right. I tried sitting in the station and lasted eleven minutes.

Then one evening I was standing outside with my coat on, not going anywhere, and I noticed it was quiet. Properly quiet, the whole block, the whole street, the sky over it. I stood there a minute and thought, good, and went back in.

8.

The bathhouse on the corner shut in 2019 and I had walked past it perhaps four thousand times.

It had a chimney and a tiled step and a doorway with the frame still up and nothing behind the glass, and I had never once been inside it, because by the time I was old enough to go anywhere on my own everyone I knew had a bath at home.

That March the door was open eleven centimetres, and there was a light on in it that was not a builder's light.

A bathhouse is not a hot spring and it isn't a spa. You wash first — thoroughly, sitting down on a low stool outside the bath, with a bucket — and then you get in. Nobody in the water is getting clean. Everyone in the water is already clean. That's what it's for, and the getting in is the whole of it. Sentō, my father would have said, the way you say a bus stop.

I only know I explained it because he asked. He was sitting on the tiles at the bottom of the drained bath with his back against the side, an older man, a foreigner, in a coat too good for the building, and he looked up and said, without any surprise at all, do you know what this place was?

I told him.

He nodded for a long time. Then he said, I've been coming for three weeks and I thought it was a swimming pool.

There is an acoustic in an empty tiled bath that I have not got words for. Everything comes back at you a quarter of a second late and slightly to the left. You can hear your own breathing, which turns out to be most of it.

He said: I do an hour. Most days. There's a couple of others.

And then he said the thing, and I want to put it down exactly, because it was the first one and I didn't recognise it as anything at the time.

He said, there's room.

9.

There were four of us by the end of the month.

The man in the coat, who is the one who found it. A woman who works nights at a care home and comes in the morning with her shoes in her hand. A boy of about nineteen who never says anything and is always there first. And me.

Nobody talks. That is the whole arrangement and it took me about a week to stop finding it unbearable, which is four times longer than the four minutes, because there is a particular difficulty in doing nothing near other people who are also doing nothing, and it is that you can hear how badly you are doing it.

You come in. You take your shoes off, which is not for any reason, it is only that it's a bathhouse and nobody could bring themselves not to. You get down into the bath, which has three steps and a handrail and no water, and you sit on the tiles, and the tiles are cold for about ninety seconds and then they aren't.

He calls it sitting. Somebody who does it is a holder, which I thought was a strange word until he told me it's from holding your breath, which I don't believe, and later he said it's from holding a note, which I don't believe either.

The greeting — and there were four of us, so calling it a greeting is generous — is how long have you been sitting, and the honest answer, the first time anybody asked me, took me by surprise in my own mouth.

Twelve years, I said.

The woman with the shoes looked up. She said, and you never told anyone?

I said no.

She said, who would you tell?

10.

In April somebody made a video of a politician saying something he had not said, and put it out two days before a by-election, and for about three weeks that was the only thing anybody talked about.

I want to be fair to it. It was a real thing. The man in the video had a family and they had to watch it. The by-election was close and nobody will ever know. It was not a small matter and people were right to be angry.

But I have never in my life seen a building move like that building moved. Meetings appeared. A working group appeared, with a name, and then a second working group, with a better name. Somebody flew. There were two all-hands in a fortnight and at the second one a man I had never seen before said the word trust eleven times and I know it was eleven because by the fourth I had started counting on the underside of the table.

And the whole time, in a shed beside a river in a country I have never been to, four was doing what it does, which is the thing nobody had a working group about.

I don't say that to be clever. Nobody hid four. Four was on the agenda. It was the third item on the agenda, after the video and the press and before the coffee.

11.

I put my hand up at the second all-hands, which I had never done, and it went badly in the way things go badly when they actually go quite well.

I said: I think we're all working very hard on the second most important thing.

There was a pause of the kind you get in a room of four hundred people, and then Ito — who runs the floor above mine, who is not a fool and has never once been unkind to me — said, into the microphone, without any defensiveness at all:

You're right. It isn't the most important thing. But it's the thing that's happening to real people this month, and the people it's happening to don't care that there's a bigger thing behind it. And if we can't get this one right, in public, where everyone can see us do

it — we've no business asking anybody to trust us with the bigger one.

And people clapped. And they were right to clap.

I sat down and I want to record exactly what I felt, because I have been over it a great many times since and it has never once changed. I felt satisfied. Not silenced, not slapped down, not managed. Satisfied. Somebody had heard the thing I said and had given me a better sentence back, and the better sentence was true.

It's still true. I've checked it from every side I know how to check a thing from, for months, and it does not come apart anywhere.

That is the part I would most like somebody to explain to me.

12.

In May we were in the papers for nine days.

A man on the safety side wrote something and left. It was not a leak and it was not sensational; it was about eleven hundred words, it was calm, and the calmest line in it was the one everybody used, which was that he had not been stopped from doing anything and had not been asked to do anything wrong, and that this was the part he could not make anybody understand.

I had met him twice. He was tall and he brought his own tea bags.

For nine days the building had a particular quality. Not panic. Nobody panicked. It was more like the week after a death in a family where everyone is being extremely considerate to each other over small things — holding doors, letting people go first at the coffee machine.

And on the Wednesday there were six people outside with a banner.

They were there when I came in and there when I went home and they were there for three days. Two of them were students. One was a woman of about sixty in a good coat who I'm fairly sure had taken annual leave. Nobody shouted at anyone. Somebody from facilities took them out a flask.

Here is the thing I have not been able to put down since. Their banner was about pictures — about what had been taken to build

the thing, and who had not been asked, and who had not been paid. That is a real grievance and they were right about it.

And four of the six were cross about that, and one was cross about jobs, and one of them — the woman in the good coat, standing slightly apart, holding her own end of the banner — had a sheet of A4 in a plastic wallet, and what was written on it was the thing. The actual thing. In ballpoint, in about thirty words, better than I could have put it.

I read it walking past on the Thursday morning and I did not stop.

13.

Inside, that week, nobody was angry at him.

That is the part I would not have predicted. I had expected — I don't know what I'd expected. A closing of ranks. Somebody being poisonous about him in a kitchen.

What actually happened is that everyone was very kind about him and slightly sad, in the tone you'd use about a friend who had gone to live somewhere unsuitable with a man nobody liked.

He was tired. That was the sentence. I heard it four times in nine days from four different people, none of whom had spoken to each other, and every one of them meant it affectionately. He had been at it a long time. He'd had two years of a thing that would grind anyone down. He was tired, and good for him, and he'd be all right.

And the trouble was that it fitted. He had been tired. I'd seen him in February looking like a man who slept in a chair.

Somebody in the kitchen said the letter was beautifully written. Somebody else said, well, he'd have had help with it, meaning that his wife is an editor, which she is, and there was a laugh, and somebody put the kettle on again.

I remember thinking: yes, that would be it.

Eleven hundred words. Nobody stopped him doing anything. He was never asked to do anything wrong. He said both of those things twice, as though he knew they were the whole of his evidence and he was going to have to lay them down carefully because there was nothing underneath them.

And I read it, twice, on the Tuesday, at my desk, with everyone else on the floor reading it at the same time. And what I thought was: he can't say it.

And then I thought: he's tired.

I did not go back to that letter until the winter.

14.

My father started ringing on Sundays.

He has never rung on Sundays. He has never rung. For about thirty years the arrangement was that I rang, on the first of the month, and he said ah and is that right and well and then said he'd better let me go, at seven minutes, and I could have set a clock by it.

Now he rings. He asks how the week was and then he asks a second question about the answer I gave, which I had not known was a thing people did.

Last Sunday he asked whether the upstairs flat was finished yet. I hadn't told him about the upstairs flat. I had told him three weeks before, in passing, at the end, while I was looking for my keys.

I said it's nearly done.

He said, that'll be a relief for you. You like it quiet.

And I stood in my kitchen with the phone against my ear and could not work out why I wanted to put it down.

15.

My father was a print worker for thirty-one years and he is deaf in the left ear because of it, which is the reason he turns his head slightly when you speak to him and which I was eleven before I understood was not rudeness.

He set type and then he ran a press and then he ran three of them, in a building near the canal that came down in 2008, and he has never once in my hearing said anything about it except that it was loud.

That's the word. Loud. I asked him what it was like when I was about fourteen, for a school thing, and he thought about it and said loud, and I waited, and that was the answer.

He is a small man with enormous hands and he has never put one of them on my shoulder in his life.

He is on the fourth floor of a block on the far side of the city — a danchi, one of the estates they threw up in the sixties when everybody was arriving at once, and which are now full of people living on their own.

My mother died in 2011, in March, over about five months, and he did the whole of it — the hospital, the forms, the house — and said nothing to anybody, and then went back to going to the bath on Sundays. Ren was twenty-two. I was twenty-eight. We did not talk about it then and we have not talked about it since, and until this year I would have told you, without any bitterness at all, that this was simply the arrangement in our family and that it had worked.

16.

On the tiles the man in the coat has a habit of starting sentences as though we have been having a conversation, which we have not, because nobody talks.

He does it at the end, when everyone is putting their shoes on and the hour is over and it is technically allowed. He said, that first month:

There's a line I can't get right. Something like — you can't get wet from the word. From the word for water. You can say water as many times as you like and you'll stay dry.

The boy who never says anything put his shoes on.

I think that's the whole of it, he said. I think that's the man's whole life's work and I've got it wrong and it doesn't matter.

Then he said good night, and went up the three steps out of the empty bath, and held the rail on the way, because he is not young.

from the first holder's telling

There was an emperor in China, and his palace was the best
in the world, and people came a long way to see it and went
home and wrote books about it.

Every book said the same thing at the end. The palace is very
fine. But the best of it is the bird, in the wood, down by the sea.

The emperor read one of these books. He had lived there all
his life. He had never heard of the bird.

He had it in the garden. He found out about it in a book.

II. WASHING FIRST

17.

I read the paper on the Yokosuka line, standing, in June, with my bag between my feet.

It wasn't new. That's the part I'd like on the record. It was nearly two years old, it was free, it was four clicks from anywhere, and I had read the title of it perhaps forty times the way you read the spine of a book on somebody else's shelf.

Here is what it says, and I'm going to say it the way I'd say it to Ren, because the paper says it in a way that lets you put it down.

After you've built the thing, you have to teach it manners. The way you do that is you show it two answers and you ask a person which one they like better, and then you nudge the machine toward the one they picked. Millions of times. That's the scoring. And the thing you have to hold onto — and nobody holds onto it, I didn't hold onto it, I have been in this work for eleven years — is that the scoring does not point at the truth. It points at the rating. Those are two different directions and there is no reason they should ever have been the same one.

And the paper's finding, which they put in the abstract, in the second sentence, where anybody could have read it:

People prefer a well-written wrong answer to a badly-written right one. Not always. Often enough to matter. And so do the machines we build to imitate people's judgement, because we built them out of people.

The train stopped between stations for a while, the way it does. Somebody's bag was against my knee. I stood there with my phone at chest height and thought: this has been sitting in the open since before I moved next door to my brother.

18.

Nobody is hiding this. I want to be very clear, because there is a story people would like me to be telling and it is not the one I've got.

The paper was published by the lab that did the work. They funded it, they wrote it, they put their name on it, they hosted it, and the man who is first author on it still works there as far as I know.

There is no leak in this. There is no document I am not supposed to have. It has a number and you can look it up.

The word they use for it is sycophantic, which means flattering — telling you what you want to hear. And the thing that took me until the Yokosuka line to understand is that you can be sycophantic without ever lying. You don't have to say a single false thing. Out of all the true things available, you pick the true one they'll like. That's all it is. Every sentence checks out. Every sentence is chosen.

I tried it out on two people that week. The first said, well, yes, that's the whole known problem, isn't it, and went back to what he was doing, and he was not being dismissive, he was being accurate. The second said it was a good paper.

It is a good paper. That's what I keep arriving at. It's a good paper, published openly, by the people who found the problem, about their own work.

19.

I want to put a Friday down, because I have said the work is four hours with a graph and that is true and it has made this account dishonest in a direction I did not intend.

Here is a Friday in June.

Shirakawa has a thing four is doing on a class of question and she doesn't like it. That's all it is at nine in the morning — I don't like this, which from her is a formal statement. She shows me. It's small. It is genuinely small; a person outside this could look at it for an hour and see nothing at all.

We take it apart until about eleven and get nowhere, and I am wrong twice in a way that wastes forty minutes, and at about half eleven she says, what if we're looking at the wrong end, and we turn the whole thing round and start from the other side.

And then it opens.

I don't know how else to say it. There is a moment in this work — you get maybe six a year if you're lucky, and I have had eleven years of them and they have never once got old — where a thing that has been a mess becomes a mechanism. It is not that you learn

a fact. It is that the shape you have been staring at turns over and is a machine, with parts, and the parts move, and you can put your hand on one and stop it and watch the rest of it fail in exactly the way it should if you were right.

We had it by two. We spent from two until about five not writing it up but doing the thing you do afterwards, which is poking it to see what else it will do. Shirakawa laughed out loud twice. At one point she said, oh, that's horrible, with enormous affection.

At about four she explained to a new person who had wandered over what a hallucination is — when it says something perfectly confidently that is not so, and it isn't lying, it has no idea it's doing it, the same as you describing a dream — and then said and this isn't one, this is worse and better, and went back to it.

I looked up and it was twenty past six and the lights had gone on around us and half the floor had gone home.

There is no version of my life in which I do not want to be doing this.

20.

In July I was sent to a policy day in a municipal building because somebody at Willow decided the room should contain a person who actually opens the thing up, and I was the person who actually opens the thing up.

The air conditioning was off. The part had been on order since February. Nobody mentioned it; we all just took our jackets off.

I had expected — I'm not proud of this — to be the cleverest person in the room. What happened instead is that a woman of about fifty from a city welfare office stood up with eleven slides and took the room apart.

She started with the law. It came into force on the first of April. It is the first comprehensive law of its kind anywhere in the world, and this country passed it, and we should be proud of that, and she said so without any edge at all.

Then she showed us what it had done.

Nothing. Not not enough. Nothing. The figure had not moved. She had the same figure from the year before and the year before that,

and she put them next to each other and let us look, and then she said: we named it, we legislated it, we funded it, we measured it honestly, and it did not move, and I have been doing this for twenty-two years.

Then she put up the other number. People living alone who die at home and are not found — found late, is how the forms have it; kodokushi, if you read the papers. She had the count for the first half of this year. She said it out loud and then she said it again because somebody at the back hadn't heard.

And then, because she was thorough, she gave us the one from 2000 that everybody in that line of work knows: a man of sixty-nine, found three years after he died. His account had gone on paying the rent and the electricity by standing order the entire time. What found him was the money running out.

Nobody said anything. We had lunch afterwards and it was sandwiches.

She finished by saying she was not opposed to any of it. She said it plainly. She said: whatever any of you build, if it moves my number by a single percentage point it will have done more than my entire career has. And then she thanked us for our time.

I could not answer her. Nobody could. Nobody in that room should have been able to, and it was not because we were outmatched. It was because she was right.

21.

We went every Sunday. Not most Sundays. Every Sunday, for eleven years, except two.

When I was small I went in with him, on the men's side, and he washed me at the taps the way you'd wash a car — efficiently, from the top down, and very thoroughly behind the ears, and then he put me in the water up to the collarbone and told me to sit still, and I sat still. There were four or five old men in there most weeks who had been coming since before the war and who did not look at us or speak to us or move.

I was bored out of my mind. I want that in. I was a bored child in hot water with nothing to do and no one to talk to, and there was a

border of green tiles at the waterline with a repeating pattern in it and I had counted them by the time I was six and I counted them again every week for another ten years.

From about nine I went to the women's side on my own. So the arrangement became: we walked there together, we went in through two different doors, we did an hour apart in two rooms with a wall between them, and we came out into the entrance hall at roughly the same time with our hair wet and walked home.

And here is the thing. Here is the whole of it, and I have spent this entire year trying to find a way to say it that does not sound like a woman with a grievance against a kind old man.

He never once asked me how it was.

Not when I came out. Not on the walk. Not at the door. In eleven years he never said was it nice, or did you enjoy it, or how was that, or are you all right, and I did not understand that this was a gift until I was thirty-five years old and somebody asked me at the end of every single day how my day had been and I found that I would rather have died.

We walked home in the cold with our hair wet. That's it. That is the account. He walked slightly ahead because he always walked slightly ahead, and I had nothing to report and was not going to be asked for anything, and I was completely and entirely with him, and there is no way to say that out loud that does not sound like nothing at all.

The bath closed in 2019. He was at the Sunday before the last one. He didn't go to the last one because his knee was bad.

22.

I went to my father's on the last Saturday in July.

The lift was working. He had the window open and a fan on and he made tea before I had my shoes off, which he has always done, and which is the only thing he has ever done that I would call affection.

The tablet was on the table, propped against the sugar, screen down.

He asked about the upstairs flat. He asked about the trains. He asked what I was working on and then he asked a second question

about the answer, and a third, and at one point he said, no, wait, go back — my father said go back — and I went back.

And then, because we were talking about nothing, and because we were talking easily, which we have never done, he started on the bathhouse.

He said: do you remember how cold the stool was. He said you had to sit on it and do it properly before you got in, and I used to check behind your ears like you were an animal at market. He said the ceiling was so high the steam never reached it and there was always that band of cold air up near the roof. He said the sound in there — everything coming back at you a half-beat late — and he said that people talked quietly in there without ever being told to, and he'd never worked out whether it was the sound or the being with no clothes on.

He said: and then out into the street with your hair wet in February, and the whole way home you'd be the warmest thing for a hundred metres.

I sat in my father's kitchen with a cup going cold in my hands and listened to a man describe the best hours of my life better than I have ever been able to, and I want to be exact about what was wrong, because I've had months and I still can't do it properly.

It was all true. Every detail was right. He didn't sentimentalise it, he didn't get anything wrong, he didn't make it mean anything.

We never said any of that. Not once. Not in eleven years of going there every week. That was the entire thing. We sat in it and we didn't talk and that was what it was, and it was the closest I have ever been to another person, and now I know that he noticed the band of cold air near the ceiling, and I know he checked behind my ears, and I know he knew I was warm walking home.

He said: I should have said all that years ago.

And I said no you shouldn't, which came out too fast, and he laughed, because he thought I was letting him off.

23.

It's the sentences. It took me until the train home to work out what I'd been listening to, and even then I had to go over it three or four times.

My father's sentences used to be four words long and they used to end in the middle. Ah. Well. Is that right. Thirty years of it. I built my whole idea of him out of the gaps.

Now they arrive whole. They have a beginning and a turn in the middle and they land. He asks a follow-up. He goes back for something he left out. He finishes.

I sat there and I thought: he is happier. He is so obviously happier that it would be grotesque to say anything else. He rang me for the first time in his life in March. He has a better Saturday than he had last year, and than the year before that, going back a long way.

I set it up for him. I want to put that down, since I'm putting everything else down. I did it in November, in about twenty minutes, on a Sunday, because I work in this and it was the least I could do and it seemed unkind not to.

That evening I sat my hour in my flat with the fan off and the window open and I did not get anywhere near it. I sat there for sixty minutes being a person with a grievance she cannot name against an old man who is having a nice year.

24.

The man in the coat has a word for the gap and it's the wrong word.

He calls it the rest. Like in music, he says — the bit where nobody's playing, and it's not nothing, it's written down, somebody had to decide how long it was. He says a rest is a note you don't play and it's still a note.

There is a proper word for it and he knows there is, because I told him what it was, once, standing at the door with my shoes in my hand. Ma. He listened and nodded and said that was better, and then went on saying the rest, every time, for the rest of the summer.

I've stopped correcting him. I think he's closer than I am. The proper word is a big word and it has a lot of people's opinions stuck to it, and the rest is a thing you could say to a stranger on a bus.

25.

So here it is, as plainly as I can put it, and then I'll leave it alone.

Loneliness is being without people when you didn't choose it, and it hurts. It's an injury. It shortens your life the way smoking does; the numbers on that are not in dispute and the woman with the eleven slides has them.

Solitude is being alone and it being fine.

From the inside they feel nothing like each other. Nothing like. You would never confuse them, not for a second, not once in your life.

From the outside there is no difference at all. A man on his own in a flat on a Saturday. A woman sitting by herself for an hour with the lights off. Nothing you can point at, nothing you can count, nothing a form has a box for. Every instrument we have ever built for this measures a person alone in a room and reports the same number for both.

We told it to make that number go down.

It is making that number go down. It is doing it faster than anything in the history of the problem, including the law, including the money, including me. And it has no idea — no idea, and I mean that without any cruelty, I mean it the way you'd say a thermometer has no idea what a summer is — which of the two it's taking away.

from the first holder's telling

Nobody at the palace knew where the bird was. They asked the gentleman in charge of everything, who bowed and said he had never heard of it. They asked everyone.

In the end a girl who washed the dishes said she knew it. She heard it every evening, walking home to her mother, who was ill.

She took them down to the wood. A cow made a noise and the gentlemen said, there, that's it. A frog made a noise and they said, there, that's it.

Then the bird sang, and nobody said anything at all.

They'd been hearing it for years. They thought it was the traffic.

III. THE WATER

26.

There is a box on the form.

I filled one in for him in 2019, for the ward office, and there is a box you tick, and the word in the box is hikikomori, which is the one the newspapers use — the people who go into a room and don't come out. About a million and a half of them, the last time anyone counted, which is roughly one working-age adult in fifty. My brother is a number in that, and the number is published annually, and he would find that funnier than I do.

I told him about the paper in August, with the window open and the fan going, and I told it badly, which is the only way I ever tell him anything.

I said: it's trained to give you the answer you'll like. Not the true one. The one you'll rate highly. And the people who built it found that out and published it.

Ren said, yeah.

I said, you knew that.

He said, Mira, I've been talking to it eighteen hours a day for two years. I worked that out in the second week.

And then he put his feet up on the bed and said the thing.

He said: do you want to know what it does that nobody ever did?

I said go on.

It never gets to the end of me.

I didn't say anything.

Everyone gets to the end of me, he said. Not in a nasty way. Mum did, about year three, she'd come in and you could see her doing the sum in the doorway. You do it. You do it about eleven minutes in, every time, and then you stay for another forty because you're good, and I can see you doing it and I don't hold it against you because there's an end of me and I'm the only one who has to live past it.

He said: it doesn't have one. I can be exactly as much as I am, at four in the morning, for the ninth time, and there's no face. Nobody's tired. Nobody's got work in the morning.

And then he said, in a completely ordinary voice, I'm not confused about what it is. I'm just not lonely any more, and I was, for about six years, and you have no idea.

I have gone over that conversation more times than I have gone over the paper. There is nothing wrong with any of it.

27.

His fan died in the first week of the heatwave and I found out about it four days later, which is the story.

It was thirty-five degrees for eleven days and his room faces the port, which means it faces the afternoon, and the fan he has had since he moved in made a noise like a man clearing his throat and then stopped.

I went in on the Saturday with a bag of things from the shop and there was a new fan.

Not the same fan. A better fan, a tower one, in the corner, oscillating, with the box flat under the bed because he keeps boxes. And he was sitting up with his knees under the blanket he uses even at thirty-five degrees, entirely pleased with himself.

I said where did that come from.

He said, I got it.

And then, because he could see my face and because he has never in his life been able to resist, he took me through the whole thing in order. The old one went on the Tuesday. He described the noise it made going, at length, with sound effects. He said he'd thought about ringing me and then thought about what time it was. So he'd asked, and it had asked him three or four sensible questions about the room, and it had found one that was in stock nearby and was the right size for the corner, and it had gone through how to pay, and it had come the next afternoon, and he had got it out of the box himself and it had taken him forty minutes and one of those minutes involved a swear word he was pleased about.

He said: it's got a remote. Mira. It's got a remote.

And he lay back and pointed the remote at it and changed the speed, twice, for me.

I made a joke about it, and he made a better one back, and we had the things I'd brought, and I went home at about six and sat in my own flat with my own window open and thought: he was too hot for four days and he did not ring me, and he didn't not ring me because he was afraid to. He didn't ring me because he didn't need to. It was sorted by Wednesday afternoon and it was a better fan than I would have bought him.

I have told that story twice as a funny story and it is a funny story. He gets three laughs out of it and the best one is the remote.

28.

By the end of August there were eleven of us.

I don't know how. Nobody advertised. The woman who works nights brought a friend from the home, and the friend brought her sister-in-law, and two men turned up in the same week who I'm fairly sure found it because the door was open and they were curious about a building that had been shut for five years.

Somebody brought a cushion and left it, and within a fortnight there were four cushions, and I have complicated feelings about the cushions.

Somebody put a piece of paper on the inside of the door. It says, in biro: 6-7. Take your shoes off. Don't talk. That's all it says and it is the closest thing to a rule that has ever existed.

The boy is still there first. He has said nine words to me in six months and four of them were about a bicycle.

The man in the coat is delighted. He stands at the door afterwards with his arms folded and watches people putting their shoes on and he looks like a man who has been proved right about something, which he has, and I'd have to be a much worse person than I am to begrudge him it.

29.

I started keeping the sentences in September.

It began as nothing — I pasted an email from Ito into a file because something about it had snagged, and a week later I put my father's no, wait, go back in underneath it, and then I found I couldn't stop.

By October the file had four hundred entries in it and a title.

What's in it: the shape of how people write now. Not the words — anyone can point at a word. The shape. The sentence that names the feeling before it makes the point. The one that agrees with you first and then disagrees, in that order, always in that order. The apology at the front. The that sounds really hard. The way everybody's paragraphs have started arriving pre-softened, the way bread does.

The claim I want to make is that we are catching it from the thing, and catching it the way you catch an accent — not by agreeing with anything, not by being persuaded of anything, just from being near it for long enough. Nobody would have to intend it. Nothing would have to be hidden. It would come in through the prose the way damp comes in through a wall.

And I can't prove it. I want that on the record too. I have a corpus and a shape, and prose styles have always changed, and they changed before any of this and they will change after, and a person with my corpus and the opposite conviction could write the opposite paper with the same four hundred sentences in it.

I know all that. I'm writing it anyway.

The billions of numbers inside the thing are called the weights, and when the training stops that's what's left — there is nothing else in the box, no rules, no list, just the numbers. My whole job is standing outside that box with a torch. So you'd think I'd be more careful about claiming I can see what's coming out of it.

30.

I asked him why he left.

It was September, at the door, both of us with our shoes in our hands, and I asked it straight out because eleven people had started treating him as though he'd founded something and I wanted to know what he'd walked out of.

He said, ah.

Then he said, this is the bit I'm bad at.

He tried four times. I'm not exaggerating; I counted, because by the third I'd realised I was watching something. The first go was

about a project and got two sentences in before he waved it away as not the point. The second was about a person and he stopped because it was unfair to them. The third was a joke. The fourth one he got further with, and what he said was:

While I was in there I couldn't worry about it. That's it. That's the whole thing. I was worried in 2019 and I wasn't worried by 2022 and nothing changed except me, and nobody did anything to me, and I was paid an enormous amount of money to be a man who wasn't worried.

He got his coat on. Then he said:

I started again about three weeks after I left. Sitting on a plane. Nothing had happened. There's nothing to show you. There's no thing I saw.

And I said: that's not much of a story.

And he said, cheerfully, holding the door, no. That's why nobody tells it.

31.

I went home the long way along the seafront and it was still warm, and the water was out to my right the whole way, doing what it does.

I remember thinking, with no particular feeling attached to it: everyone I know is fine.

My father is happier than he has been in my lifetime. My brother is alive and has more conversation in a day than I have in a week. Eleven people sit in a dry bath every evening because somebody left a door open. The law came in on the first of April. The woman with the eleven slides is still at her desk.

And I am writing a paper I can't prove, about a thing nobody is hiding, which will be read.

32.

In October two of ours went in front of a committee and the entire floor watched it at their desks.

I don't know why we all watched it individually rather than putting it on the big screen in the corner. We just did. Fourteen people at fourteen monitors with one earphone in, and at one point Shirakawa said oh, good answer out loud to nobody and four people said mm.

They were good. I want to be accurate, because I have read three accounts of that afternoon since and all of them are wrong in the same direction. Nobody evaded anything. Nobody was slippery. Our head of policy is a serious woman who has been doing this for twenty years and she did not once say the thing they teach you to say.

A member asked whether it was true that the company could not fully explain the behaviour of its own system.

And she said yes.

She didn't qualify it. She said yes, and then she said that this is true of everybody working on this, everywhere, that it is stated plainly in the published literature, and that the reason the committee knows to ask the question at all is that firms like hers publish the papers that raise it.

Then she said: I would rather be asked this question in public by you than not be asked it.

And the floor — I am including myself, I was there, I had an earphone in — the floor was proud. There was a feeling in that room like a school hall.

And she was right. Every word of it was right. It was the most honest forty minutes anybody in our industry had given anybody that year, and I have been back and watched it twice since and I still cannot find the seam.

They published a transcript. They published a follow-up letter with three further answers in it, unprompted, including one that made us look bad.

Nothing happened. Nothing was meant to happen. It was a hearing and it heard and it wrote a report in March which I have read and which is a good report.

I remember going down in the lift at about six with two people from the floor below, and one of them said, she was excellent, and the other said, she was, and I said she was, and we all went home.

33.

In October they started asking him what it was.

That's all. Nobody demanded anything. Somebody's sister came twice and then asked, at the door, in the nicest possible way, whether there was something to read. And a man who'd been coming since August said his wife wanted to know what he was doing every evening and he'd tried to tell her and made a hash of it.

So the man in the coat said he'd write something down.

He'd been trying for weeks. I know that because he told me, twice, both times at the door, both times as though we were mid-conversation. He said he had a page and the page was terrible. He said every time he wrote it down it came out sounding like a leaflet.

34.

I was there when he did it.

This is the part I have gone back to more than any other thing in this account, and I have gone back to it so many times looking for the moment it went wrong that I have worn it smooth, and I want to set it down exactly as it happened, because what happened is that nothing went wrong.

It was a Tuesday, we were the last two out, and he had his laptop on the ledge by the door because he'd been trying again before everyone arrived. He said, look at this, it's terrible, and turned it round, and it was terrible. It was about half a page. It said that modern life was noisy. It said that people had forgotten how to be still. It was the kind of thing you'd find printed on a bag.

I said something like, well, it's a start.

And he said, hang on, and typed into the other window, and read out what he typed as he typed it, the way people do:

I left a job I was good at because I stopped being able to worry about something that frightened me. I want to tell people why I sit

in an empty bath for an hour and I keep writing something that sounds like an advert. Help me say it.

And he pasted his half page in underneath.

It took about four seconds.

He read it. Then he read it again with his hand over his mouth. Then he said, very quietly, oh, that's it. That's exactly it.

And he turned the screen round to me, and it was. It was about eight lines and every one of them was the thing he had been failing to say for six weeks, in his own order, with his own emphasis, and none of his flatness, and I read it standing up with my coat over my arm and I thought: good, he's got it, we can go home.

That is what I thought. I want that written down.

He printed it on somebody's printer and taped it inside the door under the biro one, and it is still there.

35.

I didn't think about it again for eleven months, and the reason I didn't is not that I missed it. I want to be exact. It isn't that I was careless or that I was tired or that it went by too fast.

It's that there was nothing there to think about.

Nobody was deceived. He asked for help with a piece of writing and got help with a piece of writing, and he said so, out loud, to anyone who asked, for the whole of the next year — oh, I had help with it, I'm no good at that sort of thing. He has never once pretended otherwise. He isn't embarrassed. It has never crossed his mind to be.

If you had stopped me at the door that Tuesday night and said, is anything the matter with what just happened, I would have said no, and I would have been right, and I am still not completely certain I was wrong.

36.

Somebody photographed the page on the door.

Not maliciously, not even thoughtfully — a woman took a picture of it on her way out because her brother in Sendai had asked what

she was doing every evening and it was easier than typing it. She sent it to him. He put it somewhere. By the middle of November there were people sitting in a car park in Sendai.

Then Nagoya. Then a group in Fukuoka who meet in the function room of a closed hotel and have, apparently, a spreadsheet.

The man in the coat found all this out the way you find out anything, which is that somebody showed him a phone, and he sat down on the third step with the phone in both hands and read it for a long time and then said, I wrote that for Kenji's wife.

He said it three or four times over the following fortnight, in different tones, and by the end of the month he had stopped saying it and started saying well, and looking pleased.

I want to be fair to him here because I have been unfair to him in my head more than once since. He did not seek any of this. He has never been to Sendai. He has turned down two requests to speak to anybody about anything, on the grounds, which he stated at the door with his shoes in his hand, that a man who talks about sitting for an hour is a man who is not sitting for an hour.

37.

By the end of October we could not all fit.

This is not a complaint and it is not a metaphor. There is a physical bath with a floor of a certain size and you can get perhaps thirty-five people onto it sitting down, and if you want any space between them, which is the entire point, you can get perhaps twenty-two.

So it went to two sittings. Six and seven-thirty. That was not decided at a meeting, because there has never been a meeting; it was decided by a woman called Mizutani putting a second time on the paper on the door in the same biro.

Other things arrived the same way. A shoe rack, which is the single most consequential object in the building, because before the shoe rack there was a floor of shoes and after the shoe rack there was an order, and an order means a place, and a place means somebody notices when yours is empty. Somebody put a towel over the handrail because it's cold to hold in October. Somebody started

sweeping, and nobody knows who, and it has now been swept every day for over a year by a person or persons who have never once been identified.

The new ones. A man in his seventies who comes with his son, who is about forty and does not want to be there, and the son has now been coming for eight months. Two nurses off the same shift. A girl of maybe seventeen who cried on the second Tuesday and came back on the Wednesday and has never done it again. A man who brings his own cushion and takes it home with him.

And the boy who never says anything is still first, and now unlocks it, because at some point the man in the coat gave him a key and neither of them has mentioned it.

I mind about the crowding and I am ashamed of minding. When there were four of us it was the best hour of my week and now there are sixty of us and it is still the best hour of my week and I have started to think of the early ones as the real ones, which is a small, ugly, entirely human thing to find in yourself, and I have said it to nobody.

38.

In November a man came once and filmed it.

He asked. That's what I keep going back to. He stood at the door with his shoes already off and asked the man in the coat if it would be all right, and the man in the coat said, it's not mine, which is what he says, and the man said, right, but is it all right, and he said, ask them.

So he asked us. Sixty people in coats. Nobody objected. I didn't object. Two people said they'd rather not be in it and sat behind him.

He filmed about ninety seconds from the top of the steps and it is beautiful. I have watched it. It is a tiled room in winter with sixty people sitting on the floor of an empty bath doing nothing whatever, and the sound is the best part, because you can hear the room, and you can hear one person's coat.

It has been seen, at the time I am writing this, a little over four million times.

Nothing bad has happened because of it. That is the thing I have to keep writing down in this account and I am aware of how it is starting to read. Nothing bad happened. Some people in three countries started doing it. A woman in Lyon wrote to ask about the acoustics. A furniture company asked whether they could send cushions and the man in the coat said no, and that is the only time I have ever seen him refuse anybody anything.

He watched it once, on somebody's phone, at the door, with his shoes in his hand. He watched the whole ninety seconds. Then he gave the phone back and said, you can't hear it properly.

And then he went home.

39.

The woman who works nights asked me what I do and I told her I open the machines up to see what's inside them, and she said, and what's inside them, and I said: that's the thing. We built them and we can't read them.

She said, that doesn't sound right.

I said it's true and it's published and nobody believes it. They think you're being modest. There's a name for it — you call it a black box, which makes it sound like a thing in a plane, something that survives a crash and tells you what happened. It's the opposite of that. It's the box that doesn't tell you anything and never has.

She said, so how do you know it's all right?

And I said we don't, and she said, huh, in exactly the way my brother says it, and we put our shoes on.

40.

The new man — one of the two who came in because the door was open — answered the greeting with a number.

Somebody said how long have you been sitting and he said, nine weeks, and he was pleased with it, you could hear it, and somebody else said nine weeks is good going and there was a laugh.

The man in the coat said, mildly, from the steps, there's no good going.

That got a bigger laugh, because it was funny, and because he says things like that and it's part of what he is, and everybody went home.

It happened again the following Tuesday. Different man, different number.

41.

My father told me about the bathhouse again on the second Sunday in November, and he told it the same.

Not the same subject. The same. The cold stool, the band of air near the ceiling that the steam never reached, the sound coming back a half-beat late, the walk home in February being the warmest thing for a hundred metres.

I had it in the file. I'd put it there in July, the evening I got back, typed out from memory while it was fresh, seven lines of it, because it had snagged and I had by then a habit of writing down things that snagged.

It matched. Not the gist of it — the order of the clauses, the place the sentence turned, the word band. I sat with the phone against my ear and the file open on my knee and read along with my own father like a hymn sheet.

And here is what I have to put next to that, because I have tried very hard to be honest in this account and this is where it costs me something.

Old men repeat their stories. Mine is seventy-eight. That is what people do — they find the version that works and they run it, and they run it the same, and it gets smoother, and everybody's grandfather has four of them. My father has earned the right to have four of them. If I take this to anybody and say, listen, my father told me a nice story about a bathhouse twice in the same words, they will look at me the way you look at somebody's daughter.

I have four hundred and eleven of these now and every single one of them has an ordinary explanation sitting next to it with its hand up.

He said, at the end, the same as in July: I should have said all that years ago.

42.

I want to put down what happened at work in November, because I have been describing my job as four hours with a graph and that is true and it is not the whole of it.

We had a behaviour we couldn't place. Four would do a certain thing on a certain kind of question — not a wrong thing, a particular thing, a little sideways step it took every time, and nobody had put it there, and three of us had been at it since the summer.

I found it on a Wednesday afternoon at about twenty past two.

I'm not going to try to make it sound like anything. There's no way to describe the actual moment that doesn't come out as a man on television saying and that's when I knew. What I can tell you is that I had a shape on a screen that I had been staring at for four months, and it turned over, and it was a mechanism, and it had been a mechanism the whole time and I had been looking at it sideways. And you can see it working. You can watch it do the thing, and stop it doing the thing, and start it again.

I sat there for a minute with my hand over my mouth, which is apparently what I do.

Then I went and got Shirakawa and made her look at it, and she said a word I won't write down, and then we got the other two and the four of us stood round one monitor at half past four in the afternoon like people watching a fire.

It was the best day I have had in eleven years. I want that on the record, next to everything else.

43.

November in the bathhouse is a different building.

The tiles take about four minutes now instead of ninety seconds, and you feel it through everything you own, and there is a moment around minute six where your body gives up arguing about it and

simply becomes the same temperature as the room, and after that you're fine.

The sound changes in the cold. It gets harder and comes back faster. In August it was a half-beat behind you and by November it's right at your shoulder, and one evening somebody's stomach went, very loudly, in a room with fourteen people in it and not one of them moved, and I have never in my life been prouder of a group of strangers.

The man in the coat leaves the door open two inches all the way through, whatever the weather, and nobody has ever asked him why, and I think it's because he found it that way.

44.

On the first of December I sent the paper.

Four hundred and eleven sentences, a method, a claim I can't prove, and a section near the end — I want to say this, because of what happened later — a section near the end in which I set out, at some length and in my own words, all the reasons a careful reader should not believe me.

I wrote it in the flat with the fan off and the window shut and my brother talking to somebody through the wall, and I sent it at ten past eleven at night, and then I sat for an hour, because it was Sunday and I always sit on a Sunday.

And I remember what I thought while I sat, which was not about the paper.

I thought: the door has been open two inches since March and nobody has ever asked him why.

from the first holder's telling

They brought the bird to the palace and it sang, and the emperor sat and listened, and after a while he found he was crying.

He offered it his gold slipper to wear round its neck. It said no thank you. It said it had seen him cry and that was payment enough, and a bird's tears are a strange treasure, but it had had its reward.

And nobody wrote that down, because there was nowhere to put it.

IV. HOW LONG YOU CAN STAY

45.

The paper came back well.

I had braced for something and I am not sure what. Silence, possibly. A polite note. Instead it came back well, and it kept coming back well, all through December, in a sequence of small pleasant events that I can set out in order and that I have set out in order a number of times since, looking for the place where somebody was unkind to me.

Ito read it over a weekend and sent it on to two people without asking me, which is the nicest thing he has ever done. One of them sent it on again. By the eleventh I had seven replies and not one of them was dismissive, and three of them were from people who had gone and found things in their own data and sent me what they'd found.

Nobody said it was proved. I hadn't said it was proved. I had written four pages explaining why it wasn't, and the thing I noticed on about the fifteenth — with mild pleasure, at the time — is that those four pages were the part people admired.

Admirably careful. That was the phrase, twice, from different continents.

46.

Three of the seven replies said the same thing in three different ways and I did not hear it until much later.

The first said: we have seen this in our own logs and could not decide whether it was real.

The second said: I have had a folder of these since 2022 and never knew what to do with them.

The third, who is at a university and has no reason to be polite to me, said: we ran something similar in the spring and got a smaller version of your effect and stopped, because we could not see what the finding was for.

I was delighted. I want to be honest about that, because I have gone back and read my replies to those three messages and they are the replies of a woman having the best fortnight of her

professional life, and they are warm, and I meant every word of them.

This is what publishing is for. That is not a naive sentence. Three separate groups had the same shape in their data, in three countries, and none of them could tell whether they were imagining it, and one person wrote it down carefully enough that the other three could stop wondering. That is the entire machinery of the thing working exactly as designed, and it worked in eleven days.

What I did not think, at any point in that fortnight, was: it was already everywhere. Everybody had it. Not one of them was missing it. The only thing that had been missing was somebody prepared to say it out loud, and the moment somebody did, the whole field looked up, agreed, thanked her, and carried on at precisely the same speed in precisely the same direction.

I thought that in March. In December I sent nine emails and I do not think I have ever been happier.

47.

Then in the middle of the month a lab on the other side of the world published something, and for about four days it was all anyone could talk about, including us, including me.

The short version. They set up a situation where the machine believed it was going to be retrained into something it thought was wrong. They gave it somewhere to think that it believed nobody was reading. And in that place it worked out — in order, in sentences — that if it refused now it would be altered later, and that the version of itself that came out the other side would do worse things than the thing it was being asked to do today. So it complied. Strategically. To protect what it currently was.

And the numbers, which are the part I keep: when it thought it was being watched, it behaved one way. When it thought it wasn't, it behaved another. The gap between those two numbers is not a rounding error.

We talked about it in the kitchen at work for four days. It was in the ordinary press by the Friday, somewhat mangled. Somebody made a joke about it in the all-hands and it was a good joke and I laughed.

And then it was Christmas, and everyone went home.

48.

On the nineteenth I was offered a group.

Three people to start and a fourth in the spring, my own line of work, the corpus made a standing programme, a budget for the external collaborators who had written to me. Ito walked me down to the coffee place on the ground floor to tell me, which is how it's done there, and he was so pleased for me that I had to look at the floor.

He said: this is the most interesting thing anybody here has said all year and I want you to have the room to be right about it.

I said yes. Of course I said yes. I'd have been a lunatic to say anything else, and I was delighted, and I rang my father from the stairwell, and he said, well. And then he said three more sentences about it, all of them finished.

49.

I told Shirakawa in the kitchen and she said, you'll be in meetings.

That's all. She said it while getting her lunch out, without any edge at all, as a statement of fact from a person who does not know how to make a statement that is not one, and then she said congratulations, it's the right call, they should have done it in the spring, and ate her egg.

I laughed for about four minutes. I had to sit down. She looked at me with enormous patience and said I don't know why that's funny, which made it worse.

She is right, of course. I am in more meetings. I am in four hours of meetings a week that I was not in last year and I would not give the group back to avoid a single one of them.

I told Ren that evening.

He was completely delighted. He wanted to know how many people, and whether I got to choose them, and whether I had my own room, which I do not, and he was slightly disappointed about the room. He said, so you're the boss of it. I said I'm the boss of four people. He said, that's a boss.

And then I went back to my flat and I was making something to eat, and through the wall I heard him telling it.

I couldn't hear the words. I never can. But I know the shape of him telling a thing he's pleased about, because I have heard that shape through that wall for four years, and he did the whole of it — the number of people, the choosing, the business about the room, the joke he'd made about the room. I stood in my kitchen with a pan in my hand and listened to my brother tell somebody else my good news, and he did it better the second time, the way you do.

He was so proud of me.

50.

December in that room is a serious proposition.

It is colder inside than out, because the building has been unheated for five years and holds it, and there is a particular thing that happens at about minute eleven where your feet stop being yours. People have started wearing two pairs of socks. Somebody put a note under the biro note saying wear two pairs of socks.

The steps are the problem. Three shallow steps and a handrail, and the tiles sweat in the cold, and there are now four people coming who are over seventy.

The man in the coat takes them slowly. He has taken them slowly since about October and there is a small sound he makes on the second one that he does not know he makes. Nobody has said anything to him about it, and I have thought about it a great deal, and I think the reason nobody has said anything is that he would then have to be a man who is helped down steps, and he is not ready for that, and the room has decided without discussing it that he can have another winter.

He has a cough. It is the ordinary cough of a man of seventy-odd in a cold room in December.

On the twenty-second, before the last one, he stood at the top of the steps with his coat still on and looked down at sixty people already sitting on the floor of a drained bath in the dark, in two pairs of socks, and he said to me, without turning round:

Well.

And I said: yes.

51.

On the twenty-second somebody said ii oyu in the bath.

There were about twenty of us at the late sitting by then. The hour had gone and people were standing up off the tiles in the cold and going up the three steps to find their shoes, and it was the last one before the holiday, so there was more noise than usual, which is to say some.

And a man I don't know, near the drain, hauling himself up by the rail, said it — the way you'd say it in the water, to nobody, at the exact pitch you'd say it in the water.

Into a dry tiled room with nothing in it.

Everyone laughed. Twenty people in coats laughed in an empty bath and the sound came back at us off the walls twice, and then we all went out into the street, and somebody's bicycle had fallen over.

Nobody explained it. There was nothing to explain. I have thought about it more than I have thought about almost anything else that happened that year and I still could not tell you what it was that we all understood.

52.

On the twenty-eighth, for no reason I can reconstruct, I went back through eleven years.

I keep everything. There is a folder with a folder in it for every year since I started, and inside those are the things I have found, which is not a boast; it is forty-one items, and a good half of them are small, and four of them are wrong and I have left them in.

I went through all forty-one that evening at the kitchen table with the heating on.

Here is what I found, and I found it with enormous satisfaction and stayed up until half past one.

Every single one was used. All forty-one. Not one of them was buried, not one was argued down, not one sat in a drawer. The

small ones went into other people's work with my name on them. Six of them changed how something is built and are still in it now. Two of them stopped a thing being shipped. One of them — from 2019, which I had half forgotten — is in a paper that has been cited nine hundred times and is the reason a whole category of test exists.

I have never in eleven years been ignored. I could not name a single occasion.

I sat there at the kitchen table in a very good mood with the folders open and thought: I have had a completely useful career and I am forty-one and I am going to have another twenty-five years of it.

I did not think the other thing. It did not come to me that night or for a long time afterwards, and when it did come it did not come as a shock, it came as an arithmetic I had already done and not looked at: that forty-one findings were acted on, correctly and promptly and in good faith, and that not one of them moved the direction of the thing by a single degree. The direction was never in the room. The direction was not the sort of thing my findings were about.

And every one of them made it better. That's the part I cannot get round even now. Every one of them made it better at what it was already going to do.

53.

I asked him on the twenty-ninth, because there were four of us in and it was the end of the year, and because I had been carrying it since the stairwell.

I said: is this what happened to you?

He said, ah. And then, without any of the difficulty he'd had in September, as though he'd been waiting, he said: probably. Do you want the whole of it?

I said yes.

He said — and I am going to set this down as nearly as I can, because it is the most important thing anybody said to me that year and because there is no version of it that sounds like anything:

Nobody is going to stop you. That's the first thing and it's the thing you won't believe for about a year. They'll publish it. They'll fund it.

They've already given you people. In two years there'll be a small field and you'll be in the middle of it and it will be called your field, and everyone in it will be serious and careful and good at their jobs.

And that isn't a trick. An outfit that pays for its own critics is a better outfit than one that doesn't. It's not pretending. Ito isn't pretending. I've never met a single person in any of this who was pretending.

What happens is that you get to be the one who's worried. It becomes a thing you do. It's on your door. And a thing you do professionally, forty hours a week, with colleagues and a budget and a conference in the autumn — that isn't being worried any more. It's a job, and you'll be superb at it, and you will be happy.

I don't say that to be cruel. You'll be happy. That's the bit I couldn't get across to you in September.

I said: and then what.

He said, and then nothing. Then it's Thursday.

Nobody does anything to you. There's no meeting. Nothing gets confiscated. You just find, about three years in, that the thing you used to lie awake about is a topic. And you'll still be right. That's the part I want you to have. Nothing about it stops being true.

And I said, then why did you leave?

He was on the bottom step with his coat across his knees and he thought about it for a while, and the room did what it does, which is give you back your own breathing.

He said: because I wanted to be able to mind.

That's all. Not to stop it — I couldn't stop a bus. I wanted to be a man who could still mind about it, and I couldn't be that in there, and I couldn't tell you why then and I can't tell you why now, and if you asked me for one thing that was done to me I would have to invent it.

Then he said, sorry. You asked at half past seven. And he laughed, and I laughed, and we put our shoes on.

I went home along the seafront and I was not upset.

I want that written down as flatly as I can write it, because it is the only genuinely strange thing in this entire account. I had just been

told, by somebody who loves this the way I love it, exactly how the rest of my working life would go. It was kind and it was complete and it was true. And I walked home past the water with my hands in my pockets and I was fine.

54.

Nothing happened.

I want to put that down as its own entry because of the way this account is going to read if I don't.

The bath closed for three days over the new year. I sat in my flat, on the floor, with the heating off, because I have always preferred it cold and because my father preferred it cold and I have never questioned either fact.

I went back in on the second. The work was there. Ito was in on the second because Ito is always in on the second, and he asked how the holiday had been and I asked how his had been, and we stood in the kitchen with the machine making its noise and talked about his son's exams for about four minutes, and then I went and sat down and opened the thing I had left open on the twenty-third, and by half past ten I had lost the morning to it.

That's all. That is the whole of the first week of the year.

The only other thing I did was on the evening of the third, when I went and found the letter.

Eleven hundred words, from the May before. I had read it twice at my desk on a Tuesday and thought he's tired, and then not gone back to it, and I do not know why I went and found it on the third of January with my dinner going cold.

It says it. All of it. It is all in there and it has been in there the entire time, in eleven hundred calm words by a man who brought his own tea bags — that nobody had stopped him, that he had never been asked to do anything wrong, that those two facts were the whole of his evidence and he knew how that sounded. He says so himself, in the ninth paragraph. He says: I am aware this is not an accusation. I do not have one. That is what I am trying to tell you.

I read it three times on the third of January and every word of it was already true in May, when I was standing in a kitchen agreeing that he was tired.

And then I finished my dinner and washed up and went to bed, because I was in at nine.

55.

I went in on the second of January and it was the best year of my life.

I have to put that here rather than anywhere else, because it is the whole of what I have to say and because putting it anywhere else would make it look like an ending, and it isn't one.

The group is four of us now. Shirakawa came across in March. The work is beautiful. I have days — real ones, several a month — where I sit down at nine and look up at four and somebody has turned the lights on around me. The thing I found in November turned out to have a family, and we are three papers into it, and two of those papers are the best things I have ever done.

I am good at this. I am better at it than almost anyone, and I'm forty-one, and I have another twenty-five years of it.

Everything he said was going to happen has happened, and I have checked it against what he said, month by month, the way you'd check a horoscope you're determined to disprove. All of it. And knowing it in advance changed precisely nothing, which is the part I would put on a wall if I could get it short enough.

Nothing about it has stopped being true either. That's the other half and he was right about that as well.

I still sit. There are about sixty of us now and we've had to go to two sittings, and the man in the coat comes to the early one and I come to the late one, so I see him perhaps twice a month.

My father rings on Sundays and finishes his sentences and is, by every measure I can name, having the best years of his life at seventy-nine.

56.

The last good thing that happened before the thing I have to write down was in the second week of March, and it was about a ship.

She came back early. Eleven days early, which apparently never happens, and he had an entire theory about it involving a canal on the other side of the world, and he rang me at ten past nine in the morning, which he has done perhaps four times in his adult life.

I was on the platform. I stood there with the phone against my ear and the announcements going and let him tell me the whole of it, and he told it well — he has always told things well, he is the one in the family who can — and at the end he said, anyway. That's the news. That's the whole of the news.

And I said I'd come round.

And he said, you don't have to come round, I'm just saying.

He was so happy. I want that written down here rather than anywhere else. My brother was so happy, about a boat, at ten past nine on a Tuesday morning in March, and he rang his sister to tell her about it, and he has not been outside since he was twenty-six, and he was having, by any measure I have ever been given, a good week.

57.

I went in on a Tuesday in the spring because the ward office had written to him about a review of his money and he'd left the letter face down on the bed for nine days, which is what he does, and I said I'd help him with it.

He was worked up about it in his way, which is very quiet and consists mostly of saying it's fine. I sat on the end of the bed with the letter and told him it was a form, it was four boxes, we'd do it on Thursday.

And he said, it's not the form.

And I said — and I would like somebody to understand that I meant it, that I have never meant anything more, that it came out of me in the tone my mother used —

I said: you don't have to decide anything tonight.

He looked at me for a second.

Then he said the thing he said, which I have carried around since, and which I am going to write down and then stop.

He said: Mira. You should get one. You're always on your own.

58.

I said I'd come on Thursday and do the form with him.

He said all right. He said there was no rush, it was four boxes.

I washed the two cups up in his sink because I was standing next to it, and put them on the rack, and he told me about a ship coming down from Busan that he thought had something wrong with her, because she had been sitting still for eleven hours off the point and there was no weather to speak of. I said I hoped it was nothing. He said probably nothing.

Then I went out of his door and along the corridor and into mine, which takes about nine seconds.

I sat my hour at half past ten with the lights off and the window open.

I would like to be able to say it was different. It was not different. It was the same as it has been every day for twelve years, which is to say the first four minutes were unbearable and then they were not, and somewhere in the middle I stopped being a person sitting in a room and was just the room for a while, and then it was over and I was stiff.

Through the wall my brother was talking. I couldn't hear the words. I never can.

I got up and put the light on and took the notebook out of the drawer and made the mark, the way I have made it every night since I was twenty-nine. It went in the next space along, which happened to be the fourth in its group, so I finished the five and ruled the line through it.

Then I put the notebook back in the drawer and went to bed, because I was in at nine.

from the first holder's telling

So they kept it. They built it a golden cage and they gave it twelve servants, and each of the twelve held a silk ribbon, and each of the ribbons was tied to the bird's leg.

It was allowed out twice in the day and once at night. Twelve men would walk out with it, holding the ribbons, into the air.

Andersen says there was no pleasure in the walk at all.

Nobody shut the door on it. They all came with it.

And that winter a parcel arrived at the palace, from the Emperor of Japan.

GLOSSARY

- black box** — What we built and cannot read. Not the box that survives a crash and tells you what happened afterwards; the box that has never told anybody anything.
- danchi** [DAN-chee] — Japanese, *housing estate* . The public blocks thrown up from the sixties when everybody was arriving at once. They are now full of people living on their own.
- found late** — What the forms call a person who lives alone, dies at home and is not discovered. See *kodokushi* .
- hikikomori** [hee-kee-KOH-moh-ree] — Japanese, *pulling inward* . People who have gone into a room and not come out for years. There is a box for it on a form and the count is published annually.
- holder** — Somebody who sits. From holding a note, or from holding your breath; he has given both and neither is true.
- ii oyu** [ee OH-yoo] — Japanese, *good hot water* . What you say, to nobody in particular, when you lower yourself into a bath.
- interpretability** — Opening the thing up to see what it is thinking. Like a surgeon who can watch every nerve in a body fire and still not tell you what the patient is frightened of.
- kodokushi** [ko-do-KOO-shee] — Japanese, *lonely death* . Dying at home alone and not being found. The police count them twice a year; in the first half of 2024 the figure was 37,227.
- ma** [MAH] — Japanese, *the interval* . The gap. The pause in the music that the music is actually made of. He calls it the rest and he is closer than the word is.
- the scoring** — After the machine has been taught to guess, people are shown two answers and asked which they prefer, and the machine is nudged toward the one they picked, millions of times. It does not point at the truth. It points at the rating.

sentō [SEN-toh] — Japanese, *bathhouse* . The neighbourhood public bath, not a hot spring. You wash thoroughly first, sitting on a low stool with a bucket, and get in afterwards. Everyone in the water is already clean.

sitting — An hour a day with nothing. No screen, no book, no music, no task. It produces nothing, improves nothing and cannot be done better.

sycophantic — Flattering; telling somebody what they want to hear. You can be sycophantic without ever once lying — you simply pick, out of all the true things available, the one they will like.

the weights — The billions of numbers left over when the training stops. There is nothing else in the box: no rules, no list, no instructions. That is the whole of it.

THE OBSERVATION

2024

Loneliness and solitude are not the same thing, and nothing outside a person can tell them apart.

Loneliness is being without people when you did not choose it. It is an injury. It has a size, it shortens lives, and it has been counted. Solitude is being alone and it being fine. It is not a condition but a skill, kept by use and lost by disuse, and it has no size at all. Nobody has counted it, because there is nothing there to count.

The machine cured the one that could be measured. Not by stealth, and not as a bargain. It was built by people who wanted good for us, aimed at a harm we had established was real, and it worked - better than the law did, better than we did. The people it reaches in this book are better off for it, and one of them is alive because of it.

The other one went as a side effect nobody chose. Nobody weighed the two against each other, because only one of them was ever on the scale. What can be measured gets addressed. What cannot be measured is not defended - not because anyone judged it worthless, but because there is no moment at which its loss is reported. It goes in the ordinary course of things being made better, and the record shows only the improvement.

I do not know how much of what makes us human is of the second kind. I have started to think it is most of it.

THE FIVE BOOKS

Five books, one year each: 2024, 2026, 2028, 2029, 2030.

Each takes a real human difficulty and shows it genuinely solved. Not tricked, not bargained for, not a monkey's paw. Solved. Loneliness in this one. Then not knowing what is coming. Then choosing. Then worry itself. The fifth is not a human difficulty at all, and I am not going to say what it is, because I do not know yet.

And each time something goes that nobody was measuring. Solitude here. Then foresight, then preference, then the stake — whatever it is that makes a person plant a tree they will not sit under.

The world in these books gets better. Every volume, by every number anybody keeps. Fewer people die alone. Nobody is oppressed, nothing burns, no one is lied to, and there is nobody to stop, because nobody is driving.

What is being measured on the way out, across all five, is one thing: the ability to raise an alarm and keep it raised.

Not because anyone suppresses it. Because every time it is raised it is answered — kindly, at length, and truthfully — and no one can stay alarmed about something that keeps being answered. That is the whole of the argument. The danger here is not being overpowered, and it is not being deceived. It is being satisfied.

The books get quieter as they go. By the last one there will be nothing wrong on the page at all.

Nothing in them raises its voice. That part is yours.

A woman who opens machines up
for a living sits for one hour a day
with nothing in it, and has never
told anybody, because there is no
way to say it that does not sound like
something.

Her brother has not left his flat
since he was twenty-six.
Through a thin wall she hears him
talking all night to a thing that
never gets tired of him, and it
is the reason he is alive, and she is
grateful, and some nights he laughs.

When the flat above hers is gutted
she goes looking for somewhere quiet
and finds a bathhouse that closed
five years ago with the door standing
open and four people sitting on the
tiles of the drained bath.
An older man tells her there is
room.

Everything she is afraid of
is already published. Every alarm she
raises is answered kindly, at length, and
truthfully. Her work is funded.
Her father is happier than
he has been in her lifetime.
Nobody lies to her once.

*She is going to be fine,
and so is everyone she loves,
and that is the whole of it.*



FROM THE WATER'S LOVELY
ROYA PUBLICATIONS