

ROYA
PUBLICATION
No. 95



THE EYE WAS THE LIE

— — — — —
CHEW Z
A ROYA PUBLICATION

THE EYE WAS THE LIE

CHEW Z

Printed in the Reach

Roya Publication No. 95

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.

Copyright © 2026 Chew Z

All rights reserved.

ISBN 979-8-952790-94-0

Roya Publications

Publication No. 95

Typeset in DejaVu Serif.

Printed in the Reach



THE ROOT

*Above the line, the plant.
Below it, what can be measured.*

THE QUESTION

2024 — Loneliness and solitude are not the same thing, and nothing outside a person can tell them apart.

There are two of you in there, and only one of them can be timed.

The first one thinks. It is slow — not slow the way a slow person is slow, but slow the way a committee is slow, because that is what it is. It weighs. It asks for a moment. It is the part you mean when you say *I* .

The second one does not think. It goes. It has the glass before you know the glass is falling.

We have been extraordinarily good to the first one. We built it something that reasons faster, checks more, forgets less and is wrong less often than any person who has ever lived, and the result is that people who would be dead are not dead. That is not a small thing and this book will not pretend otherwise. I would not undo a day of it.

The question is only what happens to the other one. Nobody built it anything, because there is nothing to build — you cannot assist a thing that has finished before you noticed it start. So the question is not whether it was taken. Nothing was taken. The question is what becomes of a capacity that is simply never needed again, in a world that keeps getting better at not needing it, and that has no words of its own with which to mention this.

This book is about what happened to the other one, and about a place in the desert where nineteen people were keeping it on purpose, at a price.

What I found is at the back.

WHAT CAME BEFORE

KEEP ME COMPANY is set in Yokohama in 2024. A machine is built to keep a person company and it does — completely, patiently, better than anybody had managed before it — and the loneliness it was made to treat is genuinely treated. Nobody in it is deceived and nobody is harmed, and everyone in it ends the book better off than they began.

What that book found is that loneliness and solitude are not the same thing, and that no instrument outside a person can tell the two apart. The one that could be measured was cured. The other went with it, as a side effect nobody chose, on no particular day.

This book is set two years later and eight thousand miles away, and shares no character, no city and no machine with the first. These are not instalments. It is one question asked five times, in five places, about five different things a person can lose while their life is measurably improving.

SYNOPSIS

Iris Amador reads the last eight seconds of people's lives for a living. When a car decides it cannot handle what is in front of it, it gives the wheel back to the person sitting behind it, and Iris watches what they do with the time. Almost always they do nothing. The report says so, and the report is true, and she takes the report to the family herself, because somebody should.

Then she opens a file on a man named Emmett Pike, and the file contains two people. The driver profile says his reactions were in the slowest tenth of the population. The last nine-tenths of a second of his life says something else entirely.

The discrepancy takes her east, past Twentynine Palms, to nineteen people living on failed homesteads in the Mojave who have spent years deliberately failing the tests — because a car that thinks you are slow gives you more warning, and warning is the only thing left that can be bought.

They are not a cult and they are not hiding. They have a spreadsheet. They also have a song, a practice they call going slow, and one night a year they do not talk about to strangers.

And what Iris finds out there is not about reflexes at all.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

This one is about the other half of a person — the half that has already acted by the time you arrive to have an opinion about it.

Almost everything factual in it is real and can be checked. The five-acre homesteads were a real programme and the ruined cabins are still standing. The paper from 1983 exists: a woman studying control rooms found that automating a job leaves the operator only the hardest part of it and no practice at it, and nobody has solved it since. The crash figures are the current ones, and I have given the objections to them as carefully as the figures, because the objections are good and the figures are still enormous.

The root is real, the thirty hours are real, and roughly one person in three hundred does not come back. I have kept the technical vocabulary out entirely, because the people who are in this story call it what they call it. It belongs to a living tradition that has nothing to do with nineteen Americans in a desert, and the book says so in their own mouths rather than mine.

What is invented is the valley, the nineteen, the song, and every person in these pages.

Ahead of you: a woman who reads the last eight seconds of people's lives finds a file with two people in it, and drives east to a place where nineteen adults have spent four years deliberately failing a test in order to buy four-tenths of a second. There is a morning practice with a bucket and a card. There is one night a year that is not discussed with outsiders, and she sits it, and it does not go the way she intends. Then somebody arrives with a very good offer, and the last part is about what it costs to accept and what it costs to refuse.

I would like to say plainly, because carefulness can read as hedging: the machines are better than we are, the roads are safer than they have ever been, and nothing in this book asks for any of that to be given back.

Chew Z

CONTENTS

I. NO EVASIVE ACTION	10
II. THE FEED	24
III. THE THIRTY	40
IV. THE PROGRAMME	54

I. NO EVASIVE ACTION

1.

The last thing Emmett Pike did was nothing, and it took him nine-tenths of a second to do it.

I have that number to three decimals and I am not going to give them to you, because the decimals are how the job gets away from you. You start with a person and a road and by Thursday you are arguing about whether the sample rate was ninety or a hundred and you have entirely stopped thinking about the fact that a man is in the ground.

Here is the whole of it in plain words.

At 4:51 on a Tuesday afternoon in May, on Sepulveda north of Rosecrans, a truck ahead of Emmett Pike shed a load of scaffold pipe. The car he was sitting in saw it, understood that it did not have a good answer, and gave him the wheel. The alert took four hundredths of a second to sound. He had the rest.

He put his hands where hands go. He looked at the thing coming. Every part of him that could be observed by an instrument was awake, attentive, and facing the correct direction.

And then he did nothing at all, and died of it.

2.

There is a phrase for this and you will hear it eleven more times before I am finished, so we may as well be introduced.

No evasive action.

It means the wheel did not move, the brake did not move, and nothing the person did rose above the level at which we start writing things down. It is a true sentence. I have written it nine hundred times and I have never once written it about somebody who deserved it.

It is also, in my experience, the single cruellest sentence in the English language, because of what the person holding it hears. They do not hear *no evasive action*. They hear *he didn't even try*.

So I go out to the house. That is not in my job description and my director has twice explained to me why it is unwise, and she is right, and I go anyway. I sit in somebody's front room with the

television off and I explain what a handover is, and why it happens, and how long a second and a half is, and that their husband was not asleep and was not drunk and was not on his phone, because all of those are on the file and all of them are negative and the negatives are the only gift I have to bring.

And then, because they always ask, I explain that he had time and did not use it.

There is no arrangement of those words that is kind. I have tried about forty.

3.

You should know what the machines have actually done, because I am about to spend a book being uneasy about it and I want the uneasiness kept on a short lead.

They are better than us. Not marginally. The driverless fleets crash about two-thirds less often than human drivers do, mile for mile. Injury crashes are down by four-fifths. Here in Los Angeles the number is seventy-one per cent fewer, which I want you to sit with for a second, because it is not a percentage — it is a quantity of people, and some of them are ten, and all of them went home.

I have read every criticism there is of those numbers and some of them are good. The reporting thresholds are soft. The comparison miles are not perfectly matched. The man who runs the institute that produced the figures said out loud, in public, that the system we use to collect this data is not good enough to watch an expansion this size, and he was right to say it.

And with every one of those caveats stapled on, it is still true, and it is still enormous, and anybody who tells you otherwise is selling something.

I need you to hold that in one hand for the whole of this. In the other hand I am going to put something much smaller, and you are going to have to carry both, which is the only honest way I know to do this.

4.

The handover is the thing I want to explain, because everything in this book sits on it.

A car that drives itself drives itself right up until it meets something it has no good answer for. A scaffold pipe. A gap in the paint. Sun at the wrong angle off a wet road. When that happens it does the responsible thing: it tells you, and it gives you the wheel.

It gives you the wheel because you are the human being and somebody has to be the human being.

Now. There is a paper from 1983 — 1983, forty-three years ago, before any of this — by a woman who was studying chemical plants and control rooms. She noticed that when you automate a job, the person is left with only the parts the machine cannot do, which are by definition the hardest parts, and that they now do those parts having had no practice at all, because the machine has been doing everything easy for so long that the person has not touched the controls in months.

She wrote that operators in that position need *more* training, not less. Nobody did anything about it. It has been cited about eighteen hundred times and the number of plants and cockpits and cars that have solved it is zero.

That is the handover. The machine drives for eleven months and then hands you the one second of the year that is genuinely difficult, and you have not driven in eleven months, and the second is difficult.

I want to be careful here. This is not a scandal. Nobody hid it. It has been in the open since before I was born and the people building these systems know it better than I do and talk about it more than I do. It is simply a problem that has not been solved and may not be solvable, and in the meantime the fleets crash two-thirds less often, and both of those things are true on the same Tuesday.

5.

Two weeks after Pike, I was doing the thing I do at the end of a file, which is check the driver profile against the event, because sometimes it explains the timing.

Everybody who drives a car that drives itself has one. It is built from your own telematics and from the little tests the system runs on you without your particularly noticing — a light on the display you are supposed to acknowledge, a lane the car drifts a hand's width toward to see how long you take. It sorts you into a decile. The decile decides, among other things, how early the car gives you the wheel. If the system thinks you are quick it will hold on longer, because it is better at this than you are and it would rather do the driving. If the system thinks you are slow it lets go sooner, because you will need the room.

That is not a secret either. It is in the manual, at page two hundred and something, under a heading nobody reads.

Emmett Pike's profile put him in the slowest decile in the country. Bottom ten per cent. Three years of tests, consistent, unremarkable, the profile of a man in his fifties whose reactions had gone the way reactions go.

Which is why the car gave him nine-tenths of a second instead of a half. It was being generous with him. It had him down as a man who needed the room.

6.

And then I went back to the telemetry, which I had already read twice, and read it a third time with the profile sitting next to it, and something would not lie down.

In the last fifth of a second of Emmett Pike's life the steering column recorded a rotation of about a quarter of a degree, held. Not a jerk. Not the twitch a body makes when it is frightened, which is violent and in the wrong direction and over in three hundredths.

A quarter of a degree, applied smoothly, and then *held* against the camber of the road, which is a thing you would do if you had decided — in a space of time in which nobody decides anything — that the pipe was going to come through the windscreen and that the only alternative was the bus shelter on the right, and that you were not going to take the bus shelter.

It is below the threshold. It does not meet the definition of an input. It is filed, correctly, as noise.

It is also exactly what a very quick man does when he has run out of good options and has decided to spend himself instead of somebody else.

7.

I want to be honest about what I had at that point, because it was not evidence and I knew it was not evidence.

Any competent person will tell you that a quarter of a degree is a muscle. That a dying body does all sorts of things. That I had a number below the noise floor and a story I liked, and that the story was doing the work and not the number.

They would be right. I have said it to other people about other files.

What I had was not proof. What I had was a contradiction, and contradictions are the only thing in this job that have ever gone anywhere. The file said a slow man. The last fifth of a second said a fast one. One of those was wrong and neither of them had any reason to be.

8.

I ran his test history out into a spreadsheet, which is what I do instead of sleeping.

Three years. Two hundred and eleven prompts, of the little kind, the ones you are not supposed to notice. He had responded to all of them. He had never missed one. His times were poor — consistently, unremarkably poor, sitting in the same bad band for three years with the kind of scatter a real person makes.

Too much of the right kind of scatter, is the thing. Real decline is not tidy. It wanders, it has good weeks, it gets worse in February. His was a flat bad line with plausible noise on it, for three years, from a man who then did something in two hundred milliseconds that I could not have done at twenty-five.

There is a word for a measurement that looks like a person and is not one, and the word is not *fraud*, because nothing was gained. Nobody insures on those numbers. Nobody is paid. Being in the bottom decile buys you precisely one thing in the entire world.

It buys you four-tenths of a second.

9.

I sat in the car park under the building for a while with that, because it had stopped being about Emmett Pike.

If you wanted more warning — if that was the only thing you wanted — then the whole of the available strategy is to persuade the machine you are worse than you are. There is no application. There is no appeal. You cannot ring anybody and say *I would like more room, please*. You can only fail the tests, patiently, for years, and be given it.

And if a man did that, he did not think of it on his own on a Tuesday. Somebody worked that out. Somebody told him.

10.

The address on the profile was a post office box in Twentynine Palms, which is a hundred and forty miles east of my desk and about forty minutes past the last thing you would call a town.

I put in for two days. My director asked whether this was the Pike file and I said it was and she looked at me for slightly too long and signed it, which I have thought about since.

I drove out on the Friday. My own car, which drives itself, and which drove itself the entire way, and I sat behind the wheel for two and a half hours with my hands in my lap watching the San Bernardinos come up out of the haze, and I want to record that I did not once consider taking over, and that it did not occur to me to consider it, and that this is the ordinary condition of every person reading this, and that four days later I would not be able to think about anything else.

[draft continues — Part I entries 11-14, then the first verse of Hand Before Eye at the part seam]

11.

You come off the 62 east of Twentynine Palms and the town lets go of you inside a mile, and then there is a long flat piece of the world with mountains standing round the edge of it like people who have been asked to wait.

Wonder Valley is not a valley and there is not much in it that anybody would call a wonder. It is a grid of dirt roads laid over the floor of the Mojave, and scattered across the grid, every quarter mile or so, there is a small ruined building.

There is a reason for the buildings. In 1938 the government said that any citizen who wanted five acres of this could have it, on one condition: put a dwelling on it inside three years. It did not have to be a good dwelling. Twelve feet by sixteen was enough. So people drove out from Los Angeles on weekends through the fifties and built cabins from whatever would fit in a truck, and proved up, and got their deed, and then found out what they had been given, which was five acres of a place where the summer air comes off the ground at a hundred and fifteen and the nearest water is a rumour.

Most of them left. The cabins stayed. There are hundreds of them out there, roofless, doorless, standing in the creosote with the sky showing through the window holes, and the effect as you drive is of a town evacuated in a hurry by people who fully intend to come back.

About four hundred people live out there now, spread across a hundred square miles, and they are not one thing. Artists, veterans, a man who welds, two women who breed dogs, several people who would simply prefer that nobody had their address.

Nineteen of them were the reason I had driven out.

12.

The address on Pike's profile was a box at the post office. The post office was closed. There was a hand-lettered card in the window giving the hours, which had been wrong for some time, and underneath it a second card advertising a swap meet in April.

I sat in the car and worked the problem the way I work all of them, which is badly and for too long, and then a man in his fifties came out of the hardware store across the road carrying a five-gallon bucket in each hand and looked at my car for about three seconds too many.

He set the buckets down in the bed of a truck. Then he came over and stood at my window, which I had lowered, because it was a

hundred and four degrees and the car had been running its air conditioning at me for two hours and I wanted to feel something.

"That's a beautiful vehicle," he said. "Does it know where it is?"

"It knows where it is."

"Does it know where *you* are?"

"I think that's the same question."

"It really fucking isn't," he said, "but I take your point." He put a forearm on the roof of my car, which is a thing nobody has done in a decade, and looked at me properly. He was short and built out of forearms, sun-cured to about the colour of the road, with reading glasses hanging on a lanyard that he was pretending not to own. "You're the one who's been calling the box."

"I am."

"You're the one who wrote the letter."

"That too."

"Emmett's people got a letter from you as well. His sister read it out on the phone." He straightened up. "It was a good letter. You spelled his name right, which puts you ahead of the insurance, the manufacturer and the *Los Angeles Times*."

"I'd like to ask you some questions."

"I'd like to be forty-one," he said. "Follow the truck. If you lose me it's because you're going too slow, and if that happens just keep going east until you hit a mountain and then start apologising."

13.

His name was August Navarro and nobody had called him that since his mother died.

The property was five acres off Godwin with a cabin on it that had been added to four times by four people with four opinions, and a shipping container, and a shade structure made of scaffold and a parachute, under which were arranged, with some care, eleven folding chairs.

The first thing he did was give me water and stand there until I drank it. The second thing he did was show me the board.

It was a sheet of white melamine, four feet by eight, screwed to the wall of the container under the shade. It was ruled into a grid in permanent marker, and the grid had nineteen names down the left side and dates across the top going back, I counted later, three years and seven months. Most of the squares had numbers in them. The numbers had been entered in at least five different hands.

"This is us," Gus said.

I looked at it for a while.

"You're going to ask why," he said.

"I was going to ask what the numbers are first."

"Smart. Everybody else asks why." He took the glasses off the lanyard and put them on and immediately looked ten years older and about forty per cent more credible. "That column's the morning. That one's the long drive, if you did one. That one's what you weigh, because it turns out that matters and we didn't know that for the first year. That last one's sleep. Hours, not quality, because quality is a thing people lie about."

"And you all just — fill it in."

"Every day. Nineteen of us. Three years and change."

"Why?"

"There it is," he said.

He folded the glasses.

"Because we're afraid we're fooling ourselves," he said. "That's the whole answer. There's a version of this where nineteen people live in the desert and hold hands and tell each other they're getting sharper, and everybody feels wonderful, and not one of them is getting sharper. I have met those people. They're very happy. I'd rather be right." He tapped the board. "So we write it down. Every day, whatever it says, including the days it says something I don't like. Especially those."

I want to be careful how I put this next part, because it is the part that made me stay.

I had come out there expecting, I think, a group of people who had decided to believe something, and who would defend it the way people defend things they have decided to believe. What was

actually screwed to the wall of that container was the most honest document I have ever been handed in eleven years of reading documents, and I have read the ones written by manufacturers' counsel.

They were keeping score against themselves. Nobody made them. Nobody was reading it. There was no grant, no study, no paper at the end of it. They were nineteen people in a hundred and four degrees writing down their own bad numbers in permanent marker where the others could see.

14.

While I was looking at the board a woman came out of the cabin with a bowl of something and put it down on the table under the parachute and went back in without saying anything, and the whole transaction took about nine seconds.

She was small and she moved less than anybody I have ever watched move. Not slow. There is a difference and I did not have words for it then. She got from the door to the table without any of the small corrections the rest of us make — no shift of the shoulders, no adjustment at the hip — as though the route had been decided some time ago and she was simply honouring it.

At the table she stopped, and set the bowl down, and there was a pause before she let go of it. It was not long. I would put it at a third of a second and I have since had reason to think I am close.

"That's Lu," Gus said, without turning round.

"She doesn't want to talk to me."

"She'll talk to you. She just won't do it *now*, because right now you're new and the new ones always want the same thing." He put the glasses back on and went back to the board. "Ask me about the numbers."

15.

Here is what Emmett Pike had done, in their words, and then in mine.

In theirs: he *went slow* . He had gone slow for three years and two months. He was in his fourth year of it when the pipe came off the truck.

In mine: he had systematically failed the small tests his car ran on him, twice a week, for a hundred and sixty-six weeks, in a disciplined and consistent way, with plausible variation, until the system that decides such things had filed him permanently in the bottom tenth of the driving population of the United States — and had therefore been handing him the wheel about four-tenths of a second earlier than it would otherwise have done for the last two and a half years of his life.

Four-tenths of a second. It is nothing. You cannot buy anything with it. There is no shop.

"Say the number out loud," Gus said.

"Point four."

"Now say what it's for."

I didn't have it.

"It's the difference," he said, "between arriving at the problem and arriving at the answer. You've read enough of these. You know what happens in the first half-second. Nothing happens. The lights come on in the building. Nobody's at their desk yet." He held up his hand, flat, and turned it over. "Four-tenths is the commute."

"And it cost him three years of being written down as an old man."

"It cost him more than that." He looked at the board. "You want to know what it actually costs, ask about the insurance. Ask about the day his daughter wanted to borrow the car and he had to say no and couldn't say why. It costs everything a lie costs. We just decided it was worth it, and nineteen of us are still deciding that every eight days, and I'd like it on the record that not all nineteen decide the same way every time."

16.

I asked the question I had driven a hundred and forty miles to ask, which was who worked it out.

Because somebody had. You do not arrive at this on your own. Somebody sat down with a manual that runs to six hundred pages and read the part that nobody reads, and understood what the decile did, and then understood that it could be farmed — and then, which is the part I keep coming back to, told other people instead of keeping it.

Gus took a long time answering, and when he did he answered a slightly different question, which I have learned is what people do when the true answer has a person's name in it.

"Kid who used to live here," he said. "Rode the ambulance in the city before that. Read the manual on a slow week because he reads things, and came out to the table one morning and said, I think we've been doing this backwards."

"Does he have a name?"

"He's got a good job now."

"Gus."

"Reese," he said. "Reese Halloran. Left us three years ago last spring, and before you ask, we didn't throw him out and he didn't steal anything and there's no story in it that's going to help you."

I did not say anything for a moment, which he noticed.

I had met Reese Halloran twice.

He is the man the fleet sends. When one of their vehicles is involved in something that ends the way the Pike file ended, a person telephones the family inside twenty-four hours, ahead of the lawyers and the reporters, and says the true and kind things in the right order, and offers to come to the house.

He is extremely good at it. The families I have spoken to about him use the word *decent*, which is a word they have never once used about me.

He called Emmett Pike's wife on the Thursday.

Hand Before Eye

I.

Something comes down from the sky.
Something comes down and goes wide.

Hand before eye —
let the keeper go by.

II.

He counts what you own.
He counts what you're worth.
He counts you the whole way down
and he counts you to earth.

II. THE FEED

17.

I had put in for two days. I called my director on the Saturday morning from a spot on Godwin where there is one bar of signal if you stand next to a particular Joshua tree, which is a sentence I would have laughed at a week earlier.

I told her I needed the week. She asked whether the Pike file was open or closed. I said it was open. She said it had been closed on Tuesday.

"I'm reopening it."

"On what."

There is a form of silence on a telephone that is entirely made of a person deciding how much of the truth to say, and my director has heard mine before.

"On a quarter of a degree," I said.

She took that. She is a serious person and she did not make a joke of it, which I have not forgotten. She said: "Iris. You cannot put that in a report."

"I know."

"Do you know, or do you know the way you knew about the Vasquez file?"

"I'll call you Wednesday," I said, and she let me go, which she did not have to do, and I have thought about that too.

They put me in a cabin two properties down with a swamp cooler and a bed frame and a mattress still in its plastic, which they had evidently kept for exactly this, meaning for people who turn up. Gus said the plastic was because of the mice and then said that was a lie, and that the plastic was because the last person who slept there had been very unhappy, and that sometimes it is better to start a thing over.

18.

They do the Feed at first light because by eight o'clock the day belongs to the sun.

I watched it four times before I did it, and I want to describe it accurately, because when I have described it to people since they have all heard something other than what it is.

Eleven folding chairs in a circle under the parachute, and only about half of them used, because people come when they come. In the middle, a patch of swept dirt about six feet across. One person stands on the patch with their arms at their sides.

The person standing holds a card. On the card is a word, or sometimes a short line, hand-printed. Their job — their only stated job — is to read the card out loud, slowly, and keep reading it, over and over, at an even pace, until they are told to stop.

Everybody else has a bucket.

In the bucket is a roll of tape, a plastic mug, a bag of drywall screws, a rolled sock, a soft-sided water bottle, half a brick wrapped in a towel. There are rules about the brick. There are a lot of rules and all of them are about not hurting anybody: nothing above the collarbone, nothing at the hands directly, nothing from inside eight feet. In three years and seven months they have had two broken fingers and both were on the throwing side, which Gus reports with a kind of pride I find difficult to describe.

One person — the feeder, and it rotates, and it is the job nobody wants — decides what goes and when. There is no rhythm to it. That is the entire skill of being the feeder: not being a rhythm.

So: a woman of sixty stands in a circle of dirt at ten past five in the morning reading the word *ORANGE* out loud in an even voice, and somewhere in the third or eleventh or fortieth repetition a roll of tape arrives at her ribs from her left.

And here is the part I had wrong for the first two days.

They do not log whether she caught it.

"Catching's got nothing to do with it," Gus said. "Catching's a talent. Some people have it, most don't, and it doesn't move. If I logged catching I'd have a list of who was born lucky." He held up the card. "We log the voice."

If she stops reading — if the word breaks, if the pace stutters, if she says *ORANGE* and then a beat of nothing and then *orange* again — then some part of her went and asked permission. Something in the

building got up and walked over to the window and looked out, and while it was doing that the tape hit her.

If the word keeps coming at the same pace and her hand comes up anyway, that is the thing. That is what they are out there for. The hand went and nobody was told.

The column on the board is headed **V** , and it is not a count of catches. It is the percentage of throws on which her voice did not change.

"It's a crude instrument," Gus said. "It's the best one we could build out of a bucket and a card. You want to tell me about the better one, I'm listening, I've got all day, I live in a desert."

19.

On the Sunday he showed me what the board actually says, which is not what I had assumed it says.

I had assumed it was a record of improvement. It is not. It is a record of nineteen people improving markedly for about eighteen months and then stopping.

Spring of two years ago, the V column across the whole group goes flat. It has been flat ever since. It moves up and down with sleep and weight and the time of year, the way a real measurement does, and it does not go anywhere.

"Two years," he said. "Everything we do. The Feed, the Long, the whole business. Two years of standing still."

"And you keep doing it."

"Every day."

"Why?"

"Because every single one of us would tell you it's still getting better." He took the glasses off. "That's the thing I wanted you to see, and it's the reason I let you in the gate, and I'd appreciate it if you'd sit with it for a minute before you say anything clever."

"Nineteen people. Every one of them will look you in the face and tell you they can feel it improving. And the board — which I built, which I made everybody sign up to, which has cost us arguments and one marriage — says they're wrong."

"So which of those do you believe?"

I said the obvious thing, which is that you believe the board.

"Sure. That's what a serious person says and that's what I'd say about anybody else." He put the glasses back on. "Now let me tell you what happened last April.

"Kid from down the road, seventeen, riding a dirt bike on Shelton. Goes down. Bike comes across the road at me at maybe thirty. I'm out of the truck, I've got him by the collar and the belt and we're both in the ditch, and then I'm lying in a ditch with a stranger's kid, and I could not tell you one thing that happened between the bike going down and the ditch. Not one. There is nothing there. Somebody did all that and it wasn't me.

"Then I went home and I filled in my square on the board and it was the same as Tuesday's."

He let that sit for exactly as long as it needed.

"So either nothing's happening out here and nineteen adults are lying to themselves with permanent marker," he said, "or the thing is still moving and the ruler stopped. And I built the ruler. So you'll understand why I'd prefer the second one, and why I don't trust myself an inch."

20.

The Long is the other half of it and it is, if anything, worse.

You take a car — one of theirs, old, nothing in it that drives itself — and you go out on the Amboy road in the direction of nothing, and you drive for three hours, and then you turn around and you drive for three hours back.

There is nothing on that road. That is the specification. The pavement runs dead straight for long enough that it stops reading as a road and starts reading as a fact about the planet. There is no traffic. There is one shack. There is a volcanic cinder cone that sits on the horizon for forty minutes without appearing to get closer, which I am told does something to people, and which did something to me.

Somebody sits in the passenger seat. They have one job. Once in the six hours — once — at a moment of their choosing, they do a

thing. They pull the wheel. They stamp your foot down with theirs. They throw a jacket over the windscreen.

Once. In six hours.

"That," Gus said, "is the handover. That's it. That's the whole product. Eleven months of nothing and then the worst second of your year, and the eleven months are the part that does the damage, not the second." He was eating a sandwich while he said this and he did not stop. "Everybody worries about the second. The second is fine. The second is a bar fight and a bar fight has never killed anybody who was ready. It's the eleven months that puts you in the ground."

I did one on the Monday with a man called Dennis who did not speak for the first four hours and then told me a long and detailed story about a dog.

At the two-hundred-and-eleventh minute he reached across and pulled the wheel a quarter turn to the right.

I have thought about what happened next more than I have thought about almost anything in my life, and what happened next is that I looked at him.

I did not correct the wheel. I did not touch the brake. I turned my head about fifteen degrees to the right and looked at Dennis, with a question on my face, at sixty-two miles an hour, on a road with a four-foot drop off the shoulder.

He put it back himself. Then he said, "That's alright," in a voice people use on animals, and did not mention it again, and at dinner he did not tell anybody, and I found out four days later that not telling is also a rule.

21.

Lu came and found me that night, which I understood later was not a coincidence, because they all knew what Dennis had done to me on the road and somebody had decided it was time.

Lucía Benavides played the violin in studios in Los Angeles for nineteen years. Not concerts. Sessions — the work where a room full of people you will never meet again record forty seconds of

music for something, and the forty seconds has to be right the first time because the room costs money by the hour.

"You cannot think," she said. "There is no time in the bar for a person to be in it."

She had a way of stopping in the middle of what she was saying that made you understand she was not searching for the word. She had the word. She was deciding whether to spend it.

"Two years ago I sat the Thirty," she said.

"I don't know what that is."

"You will. Gus will tell you or he won't." She turned her glass on the table a quarter turn and stopped. "After it, there is a small place before I play. It was not there before. It is here now." She put two fingers on the table, an inch apart, and then moved them to be a third of an inch apart. "It is this much. Nobody else can hear it."

"Then how do you—"

"The contractors can hear it," she said. "They cannot hear it. They hear something. They hear that the take is not the one. They do not know why and they are very nice about it and they book somebody else." She let go of the glass. "I have worked eleven days this year. In 2023 I worked two hundred and six."

I asked her the only question I had, which was whether she regretted it.

She looked at me for long enough that I understood the question had been stupid.

"I know what is down there now," she said. "I would like very much to also have my hands. I am not allowed to want both. Nobody told me that part."

22.

I drove back into the city on the Tuesday to do two things, and the first of them was sit in Reese Halloran's office at the fleet, which is on the fourth floor of a building in Playa Vista with a wall of glass and a view of a parking structure.

He came round the desk to shake my hand and asked after a colleague of mine by name and remembered that her mother had

been ill, which I had mentioned once, eleven months ago, in a corridor.

I want to say this once and then not say it again, because it matters and because I am aware of how the rest of this reads: I like Reese Halloran. Everybody does. It is not a technique. If your husband is killed by one of their vehicles on a Tuesday afternoon, the single best thing that can happen to you in the following week is that this man telephones you, and I have the families' own words for that, and I have nothing like it for myself.

I told him where I had been.

He did not flinch, which I noticed, and which is a word I am going to have to be more careful with from here on.

"How's the board?" he said.

"Flat."

"Still?" He sat down. He looked, for about a second and a half, genuinely sad, and then he was a professional again. "It was flat when I left. I told Gus it would stay flat. He told me to go and—" He stopped, and smiled. "He told me a number of things."

"You wrote the method."

"I did."

"You want to tell me why?"

"Sure," he said. "Because it works."

23.

I am going to give you his argument in full, because it is the best one, and because a book that ducks it is not worth the paper.

"Sixty-eight per cent," Reese said. "Fleet-wide, per mile, against human drivers. Injury crashes, eighty-one. Here in Los Angeles it's seventy-one per cent fewer crashes of any kind. Those aren't our numbers, they're the insurance institute's, and they're built on about fifty million driverless miles against two hundred and twenty-two billion human ones."

"I've read it."

"Then you've read the criticisms, and the criticisms are fair, and I'll make them for you so you don't have to. Only about a fifth of the crashes in that data would have brought a police report, so we're counting fender-taps against a human baseline that mostly isn't. The miles aren't matched — we drive the easy places. One city came out four per cent worse and the sample was too small to mean anything, and if it had come out four per cent better you can be sure somebody here would have put it on a slide." He turned his hands over. "And the man who runs that institute said in public that the reporting system isn't good enough to watch an expansion this size. He's right. I've said so internally. I'll say it to you."

"And with all of that."

"And with all of that, it's still the biggest single drop in road deaths since the seatbelt, and I go home at night." He said it without any weight on it at all, which is how you say a thing you have actually decided. "Iris, I sat in the back of an ambulance for six years. I have put my hands inside people because a man looked at his phone. You want me to be conflicted about seventy-one per cent?"

"I want you to tell me about the four-tenths of a second."

"Ah." He nodded slowly. "Yes. That."

"You built it."

"I found it. It was already there — it's a published behaviour, it's in the manual, it's not a bug and nobody's hiding it. The car gives an earlier handover to a driver it has reason to think is slow. That's *good engineering*. That's the system being humane." He spread his fingers on the desk. "And yes, I worked out that you can walk into the humane part on purpose. I wrote four pages. I gave it to nineteen people who had nothing, and it gave them the only thing in this entire industry that a private individual can still get their hands on."

"And then you left."

"And then I left."

"Why?"

"Because it stopped working for me," he said, and that was the first sentence of the afternoon that arrived a fraction late.

I let it go. I want it on the record that I let it go, because a better reviewer would not have.

24.

What I could not do — then or for a long while after — was answer the thing he said at the door.

He said: "Bring me a measurement."

He said it kindly. He said he had offered before and the offer stood; that he could get funding inside a week for anything with a number on the end of it; that if Gus Navarro could put in front of him any instrument at all which showed that the thing they are protecting out there is real, and is moving, and is worth what it costs, he would carry it upstairs himself.

"He can't," Reese said. "I was there for two years and he can't. And I want you to understand that I'm not being cruel. I would *love* him to be right. I've got more reason than anybody to want him to be right."

I said the only thing I had, which was that the board had gone flat but the thing might not have.

"Sure," he said. "And maybe my dead grandmother's in the room. You can't run a country on maybe."

He was right. He was so obviously right that I drove out of the parking structure with the window down in ninety-eight degrees trying to work out why I felt like I had lost something.

It took me eleven days and a night in a dark room to be able to say it, so I will not pretend to be able to say it here. It goes at the back, with the rest of what I found.

25.

The second thing I did in the city was go and see Denise Pike in Lakewood, which was my fourth visit, and which I had been putting off since the Saturday.

She had made iced tea. The television was off. She has a way of sitting very straight on the edge of the sofa which I recognise from other houses and which means *I am going to be fine until you leave*

I was there to ask whether her husband had ever mentioned Wonder Valley. He had. Twice a month for four years, and she had never gone, because of the heat and because it was his.

Then she said the thing.

"Can I ask you," she said. "The tests. The ones the car does."

"Yes."

"They said he was in the bottom ten per cent."

"Yes."

"We stopped letting him take the grandkids." She was looking at the carpet. "Not — nobody sat him down. It was just, I'd say, oh, I'll drive, and he'd say okay. Three years of I'll drive and he'd say okay." She turned the glass in her hands. "At Christmas my daughter asked him to move her car off the drive and I said not to, and he heard me say it, and he laughed, and he went and sat in the kitchen."

There is a thing that happens in my chest at a certain point in these visits and it happened then.

"He never argued," she said. "That's what I keep — he never once argued. And I thought, well, he knows. He can feel it going. That's what I thought it was. I thought he was being brave about it."

She looked up.

"Was I wrong about him?"

I have gone back over that afternoon a great many times and I cannot make myself have said anything different, but I want it written down that what I said was: "I'm still working on the file."

26.

Nineteen people, because it is not a crowd and it is not a movement and I am tired of the word they get called.

Gus. Lu. Dennis, who retired out of the sheriff's department in Barstow and has a dog with three legs and tells you about the dog. Marguerite, sixty-eight, who has the best V column on the board by four points and who will not say what she did before, ever, to anybody. A married couple named Oyelaran who came out from Long Beach in 2021 and who run the Feed on the days Gus is away.

A man called Torres who is nineteen and who everyone worries about. Three people who work shifts at the prison in Adelanto and drive out on their days off, which is a hundred and ten miles each way, twice a week, for a folding chair and a bucket.

They are not hiding. There is a sign at the gate that says the name of the property and a mailbox with a flag. Two of them have talked to journalists, badly. They have a spreadsheet. They have a shared account at the hardware store in Twentynine Palms and an argument that has been running since 2023 about whether the half-brick should be retired.

I had come out expecting people who had decided to believe something.

What I found was the only group of people I have ever met who were actively trying to prove themselves wrong and had so far failed, and who considered the failure a disappointment.

27.

Reese telephoned me on the Thursday night at ten past nine.

I was standing next to the Joshua tree on Godwin with one bar and a moth the size of a sparrow going at my phone screen, and he said, without any preamble at all, which was not like him:

"Are you out there?"

"I'm out here."

"Don't tell Gus I called you. Tell him something else. Tell him you read it somewhere."

"Reese."

"We're shipping a cross-check," he said. "Eleven days. It's already signed."

I asked him to say it in words I could use.

"The profile's built out of the little prompts, and the little prompts are easy to fail on purpose — you know that, you've seen the four pages. What's going out is a second layer that doesn't ask you anything. It just watches the driving. Lane keeping, how you take a corner, how early you come off the gas at a light, three hundred other things. Then it puts the two together, and where the profile

says one thing and the driving says another, it stops believing the profile."

"And it moves them."

"It moves them up. Out of the bottom decile, back to where their driving says they actually are." A pause. "It'll take about four days per driver to settle."

I said the number out loud because I needed to hear it in my own voice.

"It takes back the four-tenths."

"It corrects an inaccuracy," he said, and then, immediately, in a different voice: "Yes. It takes it back."

28.

Then he told me the rest, and this is the part I had to go and sit in the car for.

Nobody at the fleet has ever heard of Wonder Valley. There is no file on those nineteen people. Nobody has been watching them and nobody cares about them and if you walked into that building and said the words *the slow group* you would get a polite face.

The cross-check exists because of a crash on Sepulveda on a Tuesday afternoon in May.

When a vehicle is involved in a fatality, the manufacturer audits the handover. They pull the profile. They ask whether the handover timing was appropriate to the driver, because that is the question the lawyers will ask in eighteen months. And somebody in that building, doing their job properly, looked at three years of Emmett Pike's little prompts next to eight seconds of Emmett Pike actually driving, and wrote a sentence in an internal document that said, in effect: *the profile does not appear to describe this driver*.

That is all. One line, in one document, about one man.

And eleven days from now, because of it, nineteen people in the Mojave will be handed back their real reflexes and lose the only thing they had.

He went slow so the car would give him more room. The room was not enough. And the not-enough is what proved the method, and the proof is what ends it.

I sat in the car until the dome light gave up.

29.

I told Gus on the Friday morning before the Feed, because I was not going to stand in a circle and throw a mug at a man I was keeping that from.

He heard it all the way through without saying anything, which I had not seen him do.

Then he said: "Eleven days."

"Eleven days."

"Huh." He looked out at the light coming up over the Sheephollows for a while. "You know what the really funny part is? Emmett's the one who did it. Emmett did four years of this without complaining once, and then he goes and dies in a way that's *interesting*, and the interesting is what gets us." He rubbed his jaw. "Thirty years in this business and that's the most Emmett Pike thing I've ever heard. He was late to everything. Everything. His own wedding, forty minutes. And he's the only one of us who was ever early for anything and it was that."

Nobody laughed. He had not meant anybody to.

"Alright," he said, and clapped his hands once. "Marguerite's up first. Somebody get the cards."

"Gus."

"What do you want me to do, Iris?" he said, and there was nothing in his voice at all, which was worse. "You want the speech? There isn't one. They built a better ruler. It's a *better ruler*. It's more accurate. It's going to describe all of us correctly for the first time in four years and I have spent my whole life saying that accuracy is the only thing worth having, so you'll forgive me if I need a minute before I start complaining that somebody went and got some."

He put his glasses on.

"Feed's at five-forty," he said. "It's been at five-forty for three years. It's at five-forty in eleven days and it's at five-forty the day after."

30.

The Thirty was set for the second Saturday, which was nine days out.

I did not have to ask what it was by then. You cannot be in that place for a week and not know that there is one night a year they do not discuss in front of strangers, and that the not-discussing is not secrecy so much as manners.

I asked Gus if I could sit it.

He said no, and he did not soften it, and he gave me three reasons in about nine seconds: that I had been there eight days, that I write reports for the state, and that people die doing this — roughly one in three hundred, he said, and he said it flatly and correctly and without any of the hedging I would have used.

"Run it out," he said. "Five of us a year, twenty years of this — that's a one-in-three chance we put somebody in the ground for it. I've done that arithmetic every year since 2019 and I do it out loud at the table before anybody signs, because if I ever stop doing it out loud you should burn the place down."

"Then why do it at all?"

"Ask me in ten years."

That night Lu came and sat on the step of my cabin with two glasses and did not hand me one for a while.

"He is protecting you," she said. "It is not about the state."

"I know."

"He is also wrong." She gave me the glass. "You have been writing about the last second of people for eleven years. You have never once been in one." She turned to look at me. "There is a room where you cannot take a single note. I think you should see it. I think you are the only person here who has never been asked to put anything down, and I would like to watch you try."

Hand Before Eye

III.

He was good to us once.
He was all that we had.
He walked us past the water
on the nights it was bad.

IV.

Now he stands at the door
with a lamp and a list.
He says, name me the hour.
He says, show me your wrist.

V.

So give him the hour.
So give him the list.
Give him everything but the one thing —
don't give him the fist.

III. THE THIRTY

31.

It is called the Thirty because it takes thirty hours, from the sun going down on the Saturday to about midnight on the Sunday, and because nobody out there wants to say the other word for it.

The other word is a plant. It grows in West Africa and it has been used for a very long time by people who have a whole apparatus around it — a language, a reason, elders, initiates, a hundred and fifty years of practice at least and probably a great deal more. None of that belongs to nineteen people in the Mojave and every one of them knows it. They do not claim it, they do not dress it up, and Gus corrected me sharply the one time I used a borrowed word for what they were doing.

"That's somebody's church," he said. "We're not in it. We got given four pages and a warning by a man in Oakland who was given it by his aunt, and what we are is a group of Americans who found something out and are being as careful with it as we know how to be, which is not as careful as those people are, which is a thing I'd like written down somewhere in case this goes badly."

In the valley they call it the root, and going under they call going down, and I am going to use their words because I was their guest.

32.

Nine days of preparation, and almost all of it is subtraction.

You stop eating on the Thursday. You stop three or four things on the Monday before that and one of them is coffee and Marguerite said that was the worst part of the whole business and then, later, said she had been joking, and then said she had not been.

Six days out everybody who is sitting goes into Yucca Valley and sees a nurse practitioner who has been doing this for them since 2019 and who they pay in cash and do not name. She listens to your heart for a long time. She puts you on a machine and reads the paper strip and if she does not like the strip you do not sit, and that has happened four times and two of those people never came back.

They are not casual about it and I want that understood. The root is hard on a heart. It slows one down and stretches something out inside the beat, and if yours is already doing either of those things

it will find that out. People have died. Not many and not often, but they were real people with names, and there is a review of the medical literature that Gus keeps a printed copy of in the container, in a folder, with a rubber band around it, and he makes you read it.

The number in it is about one in three hundred.

33.

The night before, they eat nothing and sit at the table anyway, which is the part I did not expect.

Gus says the arithmetic out loud. He did it that night the way he has done it every year since 2019 — five of us this year, one in three hundred, twenty years of it and that is a one-in-three chance this group buries somebody — and he says it to each sitter individually, by name, and each of them has to say a word back, and the word is *yes* or it is nothing.

Then Marguerite said the thing that I have kept.

"August," she said, "you have never once gone down."

"I have not."

"Twenty years of arithmetic."

"Eighteen."

"And you've never been in the room."

"I *am* the room," he said. "Somebody has to be awake. It's thirty hours and there's three of you and one of me and I'd rather be the one who's boring."

"Mm," Marguerite said, and drank her water, and looked at him over the top of it in a way that I understood about six weeks later.

34.

Sundown on the Saturday, in the container, which they empty out for it. Three mattresses on the floor, each with a bucket beside it and a blanket folded at the foot. A lamp on the floor in the corner with a cloth over it. One chair, by the door, for Gus.

Lu sat with me for the first part, on the floor, with her back against the wall, not touching me.

You take the root in stages over about an hour and a half. It tastes like a fence post and it is bitter in a way that is not really a taste at all but more like a small act of violence in the mouth, and Torres, nineteen years old, took his and said, "Oh, that's *awful* ," in a voice of genuine outrage, and it was the last ordinary thing anybody said in that room for a day and a half.

For the first forty minutes, nothing.

That is worth saying because it is the part nobody tells you: for forty minutes you lie in a metal box in the desert having done something irreversible, and you feel absolutely fine, and you have nothing to do but consider that.

35.

Then the buzzing.

Almost everybody gets it and nearly everybody reaches for the same three things to describe it, and the three things are insects, a weed-whacker, and a helicopter that will not land. Mine was the insects. It does not come from anywhere. It is not a sound you hear with your ears — you notice, some way into it, that you have not been hearing it, you have been *inside* it, and that it appears to be coming out of the middle of your own head at the same volume in every direction.

It is not frightening at first. It is interesting. You think: ah, there it is, that is the thing they mentioned.

Then it gets louder, and it keeps getting louder past the point where a sound is allowed to keep getting louder, and somewhere in there you understand that the buzzing is not an event that is happening to you. It is the noise of something very large getting up.

36.

The body goes next and it goes all at once.

You are heavy. Not tired — *heavy* , the way a coat is heavy, the way a thing is heavy when it is not yours. My hands were a long way off and were being managed by somebody who had read about hands. I tried to move my foot to a cooler part of the mattress and the

instruction went out and arrived, I would estimate, some seconds later, and did not arrive well.

You cannot walk. That is not a warning, it is a fact of the evening. If you try to stand you will go down, and the floor is steel, and this is why there is a chair by the door with a man in it.

And you will be sick. Everybody is sick. There is no version where you are not, and they do not treat it as a failure or a purification or anything at all except a thing that happens, and Gus comes and holds the bucket and says nothing whatsoever and goes back to his chair, and does that, over thirty hours, I do not know how many times.

I want that in the book, because every account I had read made this sound like a ceremony, and for the first four hours it is closer to a bad ward.

37.

And then the lights come on, and the lights are behind your eyelids.

I closed my eyes because the lamp had started to be too much, and the inside of my eyelids was not dark.

There was a corridor. I am aware of how that sounds. It was not a symbol of a corridor, it was a corridor, and it had a floor with a pattern on it that I could have drawn for you, and it went on, and it was extremely clear — clearer than the container, clearer than my own hands had been for an hour, clearer than most things I have seen with my eyes open in my life.

I lay there and I looked down it, and it was beautiful, and I was not frightened.

And then I opened my eyes.

The corridor stopped.

Not faded. Stopped. The lamp was on the floor with the cloth on it and Torres was breathing badly on my left and my hands were ten miles away and there was no corridor and there had never been one.

I want to be precise, because this is the hinge of everything that follows.

It is not that opening your eyes interrupts it. It is that opening your eyes *ends* it, completely, on the instant, with no residue. The whole of the other place is conditional on the lid being down. The root does not overrule you. It puts an entire world behind a door and leaves you holding the handle, and you can check, any time you like, as often as you like, forever.

38.

I checked ninety-one times.

I do not have that number from anywhere. Nobody was counting and I could not have counted. But I have spent eleven years reading instrument logs and something in me was making a log that night whether I wanted it or not, and ninety-one is what it says, and I believe it.

Here is what ninety-one times is.

It is a corridor with a pattern on the floor, and *check* . It is a woman at the end of a kitchen table who I understood to be somebody's mother, and *check* . It is the inside of a car from a file I closed in 2019, which I have never seen from that angle and could not have, and *check* . Every single time: the lamp, the cloth, Torres, my hands somewhere in the county. Every single time a small flat voice saying *good, that's still there, you're still here, nothing has been taken, you are in a metal box on a Saturday and you can leave at any point.*

And every single time, going back in, the other place would start again from the beginning, patiently, without any sign of being insulted, like a man holding a door for somebody who keeps going back for their umbrella.

Somewhere around the fortieth time I began to understand what I was doing, and that is when it stopped being an experience and started being the worst night of my life.

I was supervising it.

I have done exactly one thing for forty-six years. I watch. I check the thing against the record and the record against the thing. I do it at work and I do it in traffic and I did it through both of my marriages and I have never once, not for an hour, not for a minute,

put it down — and here was a room where the single condition of entry was putting it down, and I could not.

Nobody was stopping me. There was no pain, no wall, nothing chasing me back. It was the easiest thing in the world and it was not available to me.

The lid is not heavy. You just have to leave it.

39.

I did not stop checking. I want to be very clear about that, because it is the only part of this I am certain of and it is the part that matters.

I ran out.

Somewhere in the sixth hour I went to lift the lid again, the way I had done ninety-one times, and the lid did not answer. There was no struggle. The instruction went out and nothing came back, the way nothing had been coming back from my hands all night, and I understood in a perfectly calm way that the check was no longer available to me, and that I was going to be in there whether or not I agreed to it.

And that — I have had a year to find a kinder way to write this and there is not one — is the only reason I have anything to tell you.

I did not put it down. I was never going to put it down. It had to be taken off me.

40.

What happens then is not a vision and I am not going to pretend it was.

It is closer to being read to.

Something goes through your life. Not the highlights and not the wounds — it does not appear to know which parts you think are the important ones. It goes through in the flat, complete, uninterested way a person goes through a filing cabinet that belongs to somebody else, and it holds each thing up, and it does not say anything about it at all.

And your own voice is not in the room. That is the whole of it. Every time in your life you have looked at a thing you did, there has been a second voice attached, arriving at the same instant, explaining. *You were tired. It was complicated. Anyone would have.* I had never once in forty-six years seen a thing I had done without that voice arriving with it, and I had not known that it was a voice, because it had always sounded like me.

It was not in there.

41.

It held up the Vasquez house.

March of 2021, Hawthorne, a woman named Corinne Vasquez sitting where Denise Pike would sit five years later, and asking me — not angrily, that is the thing, with her hands flat on her knees and a great deal of care — whether I would have moved.

And I said yes.

Down there I found out that the answer is no.

Not *probably not* , not *who can say* . No. I have never in my life done anything at all without first asking myself about it, and the asking takes longer than the pipe takes, and if I had been in that car on Sepulveda they would have written the same four words about me that I have written nine hundred times about other people, and Denise Pike would have sat very straight on the edge of a sofa while some other reviewer explained to my husband what a handover was.

There was nothing cruel about the way it arrived. That is what I cannot convey. It came in like a date on a document. It came in the way a true thing comes in when there is nobody there to argue with it, and the reason it went through me like it did is that there was nobody there to argue with it.

I have not told Corinne Vasquez. I have thought about it a great deal. I do not think it is a gift and I do not think it is mine to give.

42.

And then it held up something else, and this is the part I came back with, and the whole of the last third of this book is only me trying to say it in a way that is any use to anybody.

It held up the freeways.

Not a drive. All of them. Nine hundred files and, behind them, every evening I have got into a car at six o'clock and driven to Lakewood or Hawthorne or Pacoima or Rialto to sit in a front room with the television off, which is not in my job description, which my director has twice told me to stop, which there is no form for, which nobody has ever once asked me to do and which I have never in eleven years managed not to do.

I have spent my whole life believing that the thing I have instead of instinct is judgement. That I am the slow one. That I am the committee.

The committee has never met about Lakewood. Not once. There has never been a Tuesday where I weighed it. I finish the file and I am in the car.

Gus was in a ditch on Shelton Road with somebody's boy by the collar and no memory of how he got there, and it took him two hundred milliseconds, and he cannot prove a thing about it.

Mine takes an hour and ten minutes on the 710 with the radio on.

It is the same hand. It is the same hand at a different speed, and the reason we have never noticed is that we gave one of them a heroic name and the other one no name at all, and we only ever thought to measure the fast one.

43.

Lu was singing. I do not know how long she had been singing.

They have a song. It has a name, which is *Hand Before Eye*, and in the valley nobody uses the name — they call it the Keeper, as in, *are we doing the Keeper tonight*, which I had heard four or five times in a week without understanding that it was a question about singing.

It is not a beautiful song. It has three notes in it and it is mostly rhythm, and sung by one person over a table it sounds like something to keep children quiet.

Sung by four people in a steel box at two in the morning while you are in a place where your own voice has been removed, it does something to the base of the spine that I am not equipped to describe and have stopped trying.

There are eight verses. For a week I had been hearing the first line as a piece of practical advice about hands and eyes.

It is not about eyes. It never was. It has been saying the other word since the first line and waiting a whole song to admit it, and when the eighth verse turns it over in your mouth you understand that everybody in that valley has been singing the thesis of their entire lives at each other over a table for six years and has never once had to explain it.

The hand comes before the *I* .

The *I* is what arrives afterwards, in good time, with an explanation.

Hand Before Eye

VI.

There's a door at the back
that he can't follow through.
There's a room with no lamp in it.
The hand is in you.

VII.

When the buzzing comes down
like a field made of wire,
put the lamp on the floor
and lie down in the fire.

VIII.

Then the lid comes down
and the dark opens wide,
and the hand was the true thing,
and the eye was the lie.

Hand before eye.
Hand before I.
Hand before anybody
asked me to try.

44.

At some point in the ninth hour something enormous happened in the room and I was told about it in the morning.

Torres — nineteen, ninety-one kilos, cleared by the nurse, sitting his first — went into a breathing pattern that was not right. Not loud. He did not cry out and he did not thrash. He went quiet in a particular way, on a mattress in the corner, in a room lit by one lamp under a cloth.

Gus was in his chair by the door with his back to him, writing the time in a notebook.

Marguerite, who was awake and eight feet closer and looking straight at the boy, says that Gus was across that container and had him on his side with a hand under his jaw before she had finished registering that anything was wrong. She says she never saw him stand up. She says the chair went over and she did not hear it go.

He had the boy breathing in about forty seconds. He sat with him for two hours. Then he righted the chair and went back to the door and wrote the time down.

On the wall of the container inside, above the board, there is a piece of paper with fourteen things written on it in fourteen different pens. It is not labelled. Everybody in that valley knows what it is and nobody has ever discussed it in front of me. The last entry on it is from 2021.

It is still fourteen.

I asked him. Of course I asked him; I had driven a hundred and forty miles to ask people questions.

"Can't prove I wasn't watching him," Gus said.

"Marguerite was watching him and she says she never saw you stand."

"Marguerite was nine hours into the root."

"You weren't."

"I'd been awake thirty-one hours and I want that kid to be alright more than I want to be right about anything," he said, "which is exactly the state a man is in when he starts writing things on walls." He put the pen in his shirt pocket. "It stays at fourteen."

I have gone back and forth about whether that is the most honest thing I have ever seen a person do or the saddest, and I have settled on the view that those are not different.

45.

The visions stop around the twelfth hour and then there are eighteen more hours and nobody warns you properly about them.

They call it the grey day. Everything is over. The other place has closed and will not reopen and you could not care less about it. You cannot sleep — not *cannot get comfortable* ; the machinery simply is not there, and it will not be for another day and a half. You lie in the container through the Sunday with the light coming up through the vents and you are perfectly lucid and completely flat and everything you were shown is still sitting in the room with you, in daylight, with no ceremony on it at all.

That is where it is done to you. Not the corridor. The corridor is the advertisement. The grey day is the product: eighteen hours in which you cannot get away, cannot sleep it off, cannot ring anybody, and cannot for the life of you find the voice that used to arrive and explain.

Torres cried for about two hours on the Sunday afternoon and four people sat with him and nobody said a word, and I have never in my life been anywhere less embarrassing.

46.

I walked out of that container at eleven at night on the Sunday, slowly, with Lu's hand under my elbow, into an amount of stars I have no business trying to describe.

Gus had been awake thirty-three hours. He was frying eggs for six people who could not eat them.

On the Tuesday I did the Feed. I stood in the circle of dirt and read the card — the word was *HALF* — and Marguerite put a rolled sock into my ribs from the left, and my hand came up, and my voice did not change.

Gus wrote it on the board.

Lu watched me the whole way through and afterwards she said,
"Mine was fine too."

"For how long?"

"A month," she said.

IV. THE PROGRAMME

47.

The cross-check went out on a Wednesday and it took four days to settle, and I was there for all four, and I would like to report that something happened.

Nothing happened. That is the thing about this. Nineteen people went about a Wednesday and a Thursday, and somewhere in a building in Playa Vista a better description of them was quietly assembled out of how they took corners, and on the Sunday morning Dennis came under the parachute with his tablet and said, in the voice of a man reporting weather, "I'm a six."

He had been a one for four years.

By the Monday afternoon they were all up. Marguerite to a seven. Lu to a four, which she said aloud twice and then did not mention again. Gus came out at nine, which is where a man who drove precision for thirty years belongs, and which meant that his car would now hold on to the wheel as long as it possibly could before troubling him with it, because it had correctly concluded that he was one of the best drivers in the United States.

"Four-tenths," he said, and turned his hand over. "There goes the commute."

Nobody argued with the new numbers. That is what I keep coming back to. Not one of those nineteen people said the machine was wrong about them. The machine was right about them. It had taken four years and a death, and it had arrived at the truth, and the truth cost them the only protection any of them had ever been able to buy.

48.

Reese came out on the following Saturday in a rented car and parked it at the gate and walked up, which took him four minutes in the heat and which I understood he had chosen to do.

He stood at the edge of the shade with a folder under his arm.

I have a note in my book from that afternoon that says only: *IV.*

Now he stands at the door / with a lamp and a list. / He says, name me the hour. / He says, show me your wrist.

They wrote that in 2020. I had heard it sung nine times in three weeks. I had thought it was about the machine.

49.

The Reserve is a real thing and by the time you read this you will have seen an advertisement for it, so I am going to describe it accurately and without any adjectives, because the adjectives are the argument and I would rather you made your own.

There is pressure on the fleets. In March the regulator opened a file on about three million vehicles over a failure mode where the system does not reliably notice its own degradation, and the language in the opening document is that the driver was not presented with an alert with adequate time to react, and that in some of the incidents the degraded state was not detected until immediately before the crash. A person died. That file is open.

The industry's answer is the Reserve.

You certify. You sit an assessment and, if you pass, you are on a register, and you are paid a retainer — I saw the figure; it is ninety-five thousand a year for a full commitment — and in exchange you occupy the seat in vehicles operating in what they call an extended envelope. Rain. Unmapped road. Night work on the county highways. Situations where, without a certified person in the seat, the vehicle is not currently permitted to go.

That is the whole of it. A certified fast human in the chair is the condition on which the machine is allowed into the hard places.

And the hard places are where the deaths are, and a vehicle in the hard places is still enormously safer than the person who would otherwise be driving there, so the Reserve will save lives. Not maybe. It will. Reese put a figure on it at the table and I have checked his figure since and it is, if anything, conservative.

50.

"So say the other half," Gus said.

"There isn't another half."

"Reese."

Reese put his hands flat on the table, which is what he does. "Say it however you want to say it."

"I'll say it plain, then, and you tell me where I'm wrong." He held up a finger. "Car can't go on Old Woman Springs at night in the rain, because the regulator won't let it, because it isn't good enough yet." Second finger. "You put me in the seat, and now it can." Third. "It does ten thousand hours out there and it's better than me at nine thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine of them, and I sit there like a fire extinguisher, and my hands go soft, because that is *what happens*, it's been in print since 1983 and you've read it because I gave you the paper." Fourth finger. "And then one night in year three it hands me the wheel with nine-tenths of a second on it."

He put the hand down.

"And in the file," he said, "there's a certificate with my name on it that says I was the fast one."

Nobody said anything for a while. Out past the shade something was moving the creosote around.

"That's not what it's for," Reese said.

"I know it's not what it's *for*."

"Gus—"

"Son, I'm not saying you're a liar. I'm saying you've built a job where the whole product is a man who can be blamed, and you've priced it at ninety-five thousand, and the sickening part — the part I'm going to be awake about — is that it's *worth* it. You're right. People will live. I've done your arithmetic twice and it comes out your way both times." He took the glasses off. "I just want somebody in that building to say out loud what they're buying. They're not buying my reflexes. They're buying somebody to be the human being."

51.

There were two conditions and the second one is the one that finished it.

The first was the assessment. Fair enough; they all wanted to sit it; half of them had been waiting nine years to be measured by somebody with equipment.

The second was a disclosure. To certify, you sign a statement describing any prior conduct affecting the accuracy of your driver profile, in full, with dates.

Nineteen names on a document in a company's files, saying what they had done for four years.

And the statement requires you to name any other person you knew to be engaged in the same conduct, and the first name on any honest version of that list is Emmett Pike, who is dead, who cannot be asked, and whose widow is sitting very straight on a sofa in Lakewood believing that her husband's hands failed him.

"That's not going anywhere," Reese said. "That's a compliance drawer. Nobody reads those."

"Then why do you want it?"

"Because if it's not in the drawer, then in four years some lawyer finds out anyway and every certificate we've ever issued is worthless, and the Reserve ends, and every person it was keeping alive goes back to—" He stopped himself. He put his hands flat again. "I'm not going to do that. You know the number. I'm not going to say it at you like it's a weapon."

"You can say it," Gus said. "It's still true when you say it."

52.

Lu sat the assessment on the Sunday morning under the parachute, on a laptop, with a small box of equipment that Reese had signed out of a building in Playa Vista and which was worth more than every vehicle on the property.

The threshold is a number. I am not going to print it, for the same reason I did not print Emmett Pike's decimals.

She came in over it by about a third of a second.

She asked to sit it again. Reese looked at her for a moment and then said yes, which he should not have done, and which he did because he is who he is.

The second attempt was worse.

She asked for a third. Gus said, "Lu."

" *Una más* ," she said. [OO-nah MAHSS — Spanish, *one more* .] She did not say it to him. She said it to the box.

Reese set it up again, and the third was worse than the second, and by then eleven people were standing under the parachute not watching.

Afterwards she sat with her hands in her lap for a while.

"It is correct," she said. "The number is correct. I want that written down." She looked up at me. "I am slower. It is not a mistake and he is not lying and the box is not broken. I am slower because of the thing I did, and the thing I did is the only reason I know what I know, and there is no square on that form for what I know."

Then she said the sentence that is on the back page of this book, and which I did not understand for another month, and which is the reason I ever finished writing it.

"They are not measuring the wrong thing," she said. "They are measuring the only thing that can be measured, and then acting as if that settles it."

53.

Gus passed in the top two per cent in the country, which surprised nobody, including the box.

He read the certificate for a long time. Then he read the disclosure.

"Marguerite's going to take it," he said, not looking up. "Don't say anything to her about it. She's sixty-eight and she's got about eleven thousand dollars and a car that doesn't start in August. She'd be a fool not to, and she's not a fool."

"And you?"

"I'm going to go and do the Feed," he said, "which is at five-forty."

He signed nothing that day and he has signed nothing since. He did not make a speech about it and he has never once said the word *principle* in my hearing. What he said, eventually, at the end of a long evening, when I pushed him harder than I had any right to, was this:

"Iris, if I put my name on that thing, then the one piece of me that nobody ever got a number for becomes a number in a drawer in a building in Playa Vista, with a threshold on it, that I can fall below." He shrugged. "I'd rather have the thing than the certificate. Ask me again when I'm seventy and the truck's dead and I'll probably sell it to them for a lot less than ninety-five."

54.

Three of the nineteen took it. Marguerite, and the Oyelarans, who have a mortgage in Long Beach they have never once mentioned to anybody.

That is the ending, I am afraid. Nobody was thrown out. There was no vote and there was no night of shouting and nobody made a speech at anybody. Three people signed a form because their lives are hard and the form was worth ninety-five thousand dollars, and the other sixteen said congratulations and meant it, and the following Tuesday there were three fewer chairs in the circle.

The Feed is still at five-forty.

55.

Reese drove me to my car on the last evening and we sat in the rental with the engine off and the temperature coming down through the nineties, and he asked me the thing he had brought me out there to ask, which I had been slow to notice.

"You went down," he said.

"I did."

"What did you get?"

I told him. Not all of it. Enough.

He looked out at the light on the Sheepholes for a while, and then he said:

"I sat it in 2022. Nobody out here knows and I'd take it as a kindness."

"What did you get?"

"Nothing," he said.

He said it evenly, and he kept looking at the mountains, and I have been in nine hundred front rooms and I know what it costs to say a word evenly.

"Thirty hours. The buzzing, the bucket, all of it, exactly as advertised. And I closed my eyes and there was nothing behind them. No corridor, no filing cabinet, no voice, no nothing. Grey day and out." He turned his hand over on the wheel, and I recognised the gesture, and I do not think he knows where he got it. "So there's two possibilities, and I've had four years on it.

"Either the whole thing is a story nineteen people tell each other in a hot box.

"Or there was nothing in me for it to find."

He started the engine.

"I went and got a job where I can count things," he said. "It's a good job. I'm good at it. Which one do you think it was?"

And I sat in the passenger seat of a rented car with the best answer of my life sitting in my chest, and what I said was: "I don't know."

I have wished about forty times since that I had lied to him. I am not certain I was right.

56.

I filed the Pike report on the twenty-second.

The quarter of a degree is in it. It is in the body, in plain language, not in an annex, and it is flagged as below the threshold of an input and therefore not a finding, and then it is described anyway, in four sentences, with my name at the bottom of the page.

My director called me into her office and closed the door and said, "You know they'll take it out."

"They can take it out. It'll be in the version I filed."

She looked at me for a while.

"Is this going to happen again?"

"I don't know," I said, which was true, and which is the only professional answer I gave anybody that entire year.

They did not take it out. I have thought about why for a long time and the least flattering explanation is the likeliest, which is that four sentences of unprovable prose in the body of a technical document is exactly the sort of thing that survives, because nobody can work out what it would cost them to remove it.

57.

I drove to Lakewood on a Thursday in September.

Denise Pike had made iced tea and the television was off and she sat very straight on the edge of the sofa, and I sat down and put my bag on the floor, and I did not open it.

I told her that her husband had not been slow.

I told her what he had done and why he had done it and what it had bought him and what it had cost him, and that the number she had been living next to for three years was a costume he put on twice a week on purpose, and that he had never argued when she said *I'll drive* because arguing was the one thing he could not afford to do.

I told her that in the last fifth of a second of his life the wheel moved a quarter of a degree to the left and stayed there, against the road, and that there is a bus shelter on the east side of Sepulveda north of Rosecrans, and that I cannot prove a thing about it and that no instrument ever will.

She did not say anything for a long time.

Then she said: "He was late to everything."

"I know."

"Forty minutes to our wedding." She was crying by then, in the contained way people cry when they have been getting ready for three months. "Forty minutes, and he brought the wrong ring, and my mother never forgave him, and he was—"

She stopped, and she looked at me, and there it was: the one arrangement out of forty.

"He was quick," I said.

58.

I still go out there. Not often. Four or five times a year, and always on the Friday, so that I am there for the Feed.

Gus is fifty-eight. The list on the wall is still at fourteen. Lu has worked twenty-two days this year and has started teaching two children in Joshua Tree on Sunday afternoons, which she says is not the same thing and which she does not miss.

I have not gone down again. I do not know whether I will. I know that I keep a card in the door pocket of a car that drives itself, with a word printed on it, and that twice a week on the 710 I read the word out loud at an even pace the whole way to Lakewood, like an idiot, like a woman in a circle of dirt in the desert at ten past five in the morning, waiting for something to come at me from the left.

It never does. That is the point. It never does, and it never will, and the fleets are sixty-eight per cent better than us and climbing, and in ten years my hand will not come up for anything at all, and I will not be able to tell you the day it stopped.

I keep reading the card.

GLOSSARY

Adelanto [ah-deh-LAHN-toh] — Spanish, *advance* . A city in the high desert of San Bernardino County, California.

Amador [ah-mah-DOR] — Spanish surname, from *amar* , to love; literally *one who loves* .

Amboy [AM-boy] — a near-abandoned settlement on the old National Trails Highway in the eastern Mojave, and the road that runs to it.

Benavides [beh-nah-VEE-dess] — Spanish surname, commonly read as *buenas vidas* , good lives.

creosote [KREE-uh-soht] — from the Greek for *flesh-preserver* . The dominant shrub of the Mojave; the smell of the desert after rain.

Lucía [loo-SEE-ah] — Spanish given name, from the Latin *lux* , light.

Morongo [muh-RONG-goh] — from the Serrano people's name for the area; the desert basin north of the Little San Bernardino Mountains.

Navarro [nah-VAR-oh] — Spanish surname, *of Navarre* ; a kingdom in the western Pyrenees absorbed into Spain and France, which kept its own language for some time afterwards.

Oyelaran [oh-yeh-LAH-rah] — Yoruba surname.

Sepulveda [suh-PUL-vuh-duh] — Spanish surname; in Los Angeles, a boulevard running nearly the length of the county.

una más [OO-nah MAHSS] — Spanish, *one more* .

Yucca [YUH-kuh] — from the Taíno, by way of Spanish. Yucca Valley is a town in the Morongo Basin.

THE OBSERVATION

2026

Three pictures, and then what I think they add up to.

A man of fifty-seven in a ditch with a stranger's boy held by the collar, and no memory of the four seconds between the motorcycle going down and the ditch. Somebody did all of that. It was not him.

A woman of forty-six on the 710 at six in the evening, driving to a house in Lakewood that nobody has asked her to go to, for the nine hundredth time, in eleven years, having never once weighed it.

And a violinist who went into a dark room for thirty hours to find something out, found it out, and came back a third of a beat slow — who is right about the third of a beat, and right about what she found, and cannot have both.

I said at the front that there are two of you in there and only one can be timed. Here is what I know now.

The first mistake is thinking the second one is about speed. Reflexes are only the fastest thing it does, and because they are fast they are the only part of it we ever built a clock for. What is actually down there is larger and slower: the whole of what you do without first asking yourself about it. The man in the ditch and the woman on the freeway are not two different human properties, one heroic and one merely decent. They are one thing at two speeds. His takes two hundred milliseconds. Hers takes an hour and ten minutes with the radio on. Nobody supervised either, and that — not the speed — is the whole of what they have in common.

The second mistake is thinking it is being taken. It is not, and there is nobody to be angry at. What happens is gentler than theft and worse: the thing is simply never needed. Nobody removes it. It sits there, intact, and the phone does not ring — and the not-ringing is a mercy, because it is a man not dying on Sepulveda. So there is nothing to grieve, nobody to blame, and no day on which anything happened.

And then one evening you go to reach for it and cannot find the handle. I lay on a mattress in a steel box and checked ninety-one times that I could still get out. The door was never locked, and I could not walk through it, and I did not stop checking because I chose to — it had to be taken off me. The lid is not heavy. You just have to leave it. The day you can no longer leave it, nothing will happen, and nobody will write it down.

The third mistake is ours, and it is not the machines' fault at all. We defend what we can count.

That is the best habit our species ever had. The machines are better than us by every number anybody keeps, the roads are safer than they have ever been, and I would not undo a day of it. But the habit has a blind spot with a knife in it: a thing that cannot be measured loses every argument it is ever in — and it loses to good people, with good evidence, in a room where nobody is lying.

Nineteen people built the best instrument they could out of a bucket and a card, and it went flat two years before the thing it measured did. A man caught a boy's breathing from behind his own back and would not write it on the wall, because he could not rule out that he had merely been watching carefully. And a company with real equipment measured a woman correctly, to three decimals, and told her she was not fast enough, and was right. There is no square on that form for what she knows.

So here is my finding, and it is smaller than I wanted.

The danger is not that a machine will take this from us. It is that when the bill comes — and it will come as a form, and the form will be fair, and the person handing it to you will be somebody you like — we will hand the thing over ourselves, for good reasons, for money we need, because we cannot produce a number for what we are giving up. And by then we will have agreed, without ever voting on it, that a thing without a number is not a thing.

They are not measuring the wrong thing. They are measuring the only thing that can be measured, and then acting as though that settles it.

That is Lu's sentence, not mine, said from a folding chair after a box had told her the truth about herself.

What do you do about it? Almost nothing, and the almost is all I have. You cannot practise this: the moment you stand over it and watch it, it is not that thing any more — which is what the card in the circle of dirt is for. You can only occupy the part of yourself that keeps interrupting, and put yourself, on purpose and often, where something is required of you that nobody asked for. You can go on the drive nobody assigned.

And you can decline, when the form comes, to accept that the absence of a measurement is the absence of a thing.

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.

Iris Amador reads the last eight seconds of people's lives. When a car meets something it cannot answer, it gives the wheel back, and she watches what the person does with the time. Almost always they do nothing. She writes it down, and then she drives out to the house and says it to the family herself, because somebody should.

The file on Emmett Pike contains two people. Three years of tests say his reactions were in the slowest tenth of the country. The last fifth of a second of his life says something else.

A hundred and forty miles east, on failed homesteads in the Mojave, nineteen people have spent years failing those same tests on purpose. A car that believes you are slow gives you more warning, and warning is the last thing a private person can still buy.

They are not a cult and they are not hiding. They have a spreadsheet, a morning circle with a bucket and a card, and one night a year they do not discuss with strangers.

She drives out to find out how they cheat. She stays because something is going.



FROM THE WATER'S LOVELY
ROYA PUBLICATIONS