

A L I T E R A R Y J O U R N A L

Aporia.



Issue Six

O C T O B E R 2 0 2 6

*Ten voices. Seven countries. Fiction and
poetry — from Oslo to Chengdu, Tbilisi to
Toamasina, the small true things keep ar-
riving.*

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Seven countries, one way of paying attention

Six issues in, the promise has not changed: read everything that arrives with real attention, and say yes whenever a piece tells the truth. Issue Six gathers ten writers from seven countries — Norway, the United States, Georgia, Madagascar, Brazil, China and India — and the distances between them are part of the point. What travels across all that space is not a theme. It is a way of paying attention.

Several of these pieces refuse the easy ending. From Norway, Aurora Nilsen writes of a house that will not let you leave even after you have walked out of it. From China, Linghu Su sets a book-burning against a quiet, doomed friendship, and asks what it costs to carry out an order. From Georgia, Mari Chubinidze finds a whole life inside slippers and a gas bill, and dares to call the trivial sacred.

And the truest writing here trusts a single image to carry everything. From Madagascar, Aes Lana Danielis turns a first heart-break into theatre and then steps out from behind it. From Brazil, Vitor Souza measures a life against the coarseness of dune-sand. Aaranya Rakhunde names a longing that does not know its own name; Sriyukta keeps you awake inside a sleepless night; Nishaal Adroja judges people by how haunting a ghost they could be. And the founder's own story, "What Death Returned," lets a woman who followed Death into the forest finally tell the true version — the one the song leaves out.

Ten pieces, seven countries, three genres; one of them bilingual, its original never lost. What they share is the willingness to stay with the small true thing until it opens. That is the only map we have ever really been drawing.

— *The Aporia Team*

It Stands Inside Me Still

Aurora Nilsen

University of Oslo, Oslo · Norway

I was sat on the brink of the toilet as I contemplated getting up to wash my filthy hands. They were stained with blood from many nights ago. I hadn't thought of cleaning them. I felt I would be rubbing off some part of myself; a little speck of something I used to be, which was now gone. I remained sat. I could feel the strands of sweaty hair clinging to my bruised forehead. My knees ached. I fiddled with my fingertips, patiently waiting to flip the stick that laid in front of me. I turned almost religious. In my head I let out a prayer, not to any god, but to anyone who could hear and help me. To my dead mother, perhaps. Fear was trembling inside the cramped bathroom, holding my shaky hands. I tilted my head and looked at the broken watch on my wrist. It read 04.19 pm. "A few more minutes," I reminded myself as I tilted my head back to the same position as before. I fiddled again with my hands. I tried to remember what my mother had told me when I first started seeing guys.

"They don't want you Aja, listen to me. They don't want you."

Her voice echoed inside me.

"They don't want you."

I couldn't sit still anymore. I wanted to get up. Before me lay the stick, still facing the wrong way. I put my hand out and grabbed it, as I lifted myself up with my other hand. As I held it, I pictured the little sign on the front that could potentially kill me. I took a breath.

"Aja, don't believe them. You know what they want. It's not you."

"They don't want you."

I flipped the stick.

A wave crashed over my head then. As it dropped to the floor, all I could think of was how much that "plus" sign reminded me of the cross my grandmother wore in her casket at her funeral. I might as well switch places with her, I thought. I'm already dead.

I stood still for minutes. At some point, I must have said something, because the cat had begun scraping at the door. I flinched at once I realized that the cat had no water in its bowl. I took a big step over the stick, making sure not to touch it, let alone even come near it. I had to get rid of it. I just didn't want to touch it.

I fetched water for the cat. It nudged at my foot, and I kicked it away. It let out an offended sigh as it began slurping at the water. I watched it strive to replenish its thirst. Something inside me was burning up. Watching the cat made that fire a little less vivid. So, I stood there for some time. The cat didn't cease drinking. It went at it until something inside me broke down, and my knees with it. I fell to the floor. My throat let out a cry for help and I felt my whole body burning again. I felt like I might die. The cat looked at me, and as we stared at each other in some twisted sense of understanding, then the front door opened with a loud thud, and I rose to my feet in an instant.

"Kent locked up an hour ago, I went by the neighbors to discuss the mailboxes. I think they might be on board."

I stepped slowly into the hallway to answer him. He could smell something foul in the air already, I knew it. As I crossed the narrow hall, he looked me up and down with his eyebrows raised. It wrinkled his thick forehead.

"Hi," I said.

Peter came over to kiss me. I flinched a little. He took a step back and brushed the snow off his jacket. He had bought it just some days ago; it was yellow and silver. It shone in the dark. Now it was stained with melted, muddy snow. His boots were drenched in the same mud.

"How's the blizzard?" I asked.

"Stormy," he said. He laughed a little as he pushed me out of the way to enter the kitchen.

I trailed slowly after him.

"They don't want you" my mother had said. "They never want you."

I looked outside the window where the sun hadn't shone for weeks. It was dark, cloudy and snowing. The clouds lingered over the town like that for months on end the year before. This year was supposed to be lighter. Even the grounds beneath the mountain could expect sun, they had said. But neither those who lived on or over got any sunlight, let alone those of us on the ground. We were suffocated in meters upon meters of snow, making us stay inside for days, sometimes even weeks. At least I did. Peter had to work, down at the factory. He rented a scooter some months prior, but it was no good. I wasn't allowed to use it.

"Did you hear what I said about the neighbors?"

"Yeah. They're good with switching mailboxes?"

"Yeah," he said as he opened a can of cheap beer. He didn't close the door to the fridge. I felt a punch to my gut. I thought it was just a feeling, but then a second later, I realized it might just as well be an actual punch inside my stomach. If there was a child inside me, I was sure it despised me already.

I walked over to the bathroom. The stick was laying on the floor, still, facing upwards, this time. I looked outside the round window in the bathroom; the clouds looked different from there. Less shallow, in some sense. They weren't towering over me; they resembled a blanket that suffocated me, yet with a little hole to breathe out of. The snow seemed the same; still pounding at the window, beating up the branches of whatever trees you could still see peeking out from under the already buried ground.

I lifted the stick and rinsed it off in the sink. Some of my old blood washed away with the dried urine. I watched it drown down the drain, and almost felt a little bad. Then I put it in my pocket and clenched my fist. I wore my fear like an overpriced perfume – you could smell it on me. I was sure.

Peter was sat on the sofa, still wearing his work attire. His sweat stunk up the room. Even the cat skipped away from him. I sat down, right next to him and felt my hands tremble slightly. I wasn't getting out of it. I had to tell him. I had no money of my own for medical bills,

let alone a way to get to any hospital. All of them were far away, even so. The closest one would be a thirty-minute drive during the summer months, but during the blizzard-season, it would be closer to two hours. I felt my heart sink to my stomach.

"Aja. Listen. They don't want you."

My heart was pounding.

Peter looked up at me where I stood, almost facing the wall. He walked over,

"Are you alright?" he asked, trying to touch my arm. I pulled it away, and as I did, the stick dropped out of my pocket and fell to the floor. As it spun around on the cold, wooden floors, I felt Peter's grip catch my arm and tense up. My body froze. Inside me, I was burning up again. He bent down, still making sure his grip was firmly clenched over my arm. I tried itching my neck, but he looked up at me with a blank stare and I moved my hand away from my face.

He touched the stick. As he flipped it, I thought to myself that if I tried to kick him in the face, I might have a shot at running away. But then I remembered I would have nowhere to go. If I wanted to escape, I'd have to kill him, and I knew I couldn't do that.

"What the fuck is this?"

My eyes glared over the trace of his body as he sat on the floor. I refused to speak.

"AJ, listen, you've got to tell me what this is right now. Are you kidding me with this?"

I squinted. Then I shook my head. I felt my eyes starting to water.

"Is this yours?"

"Yeah," I said under the sound of my breath. I could feel the circulation in my arm slowly being cut off by the power of his grip.

"They don't want you, Aja."

My head spun. Inside it I was praying again. This time, praying to my mother.

"Explain to me how the fuck this is possible," he demanded.

"How do you think?" I asked.

Suddenly I saw black, as his fist hit my face and the hand that he had over my arm moved to my neck. He squeezed it so tight I couldn't

breathe at all. He punched me in the face again, bursting my lip. I could feel the warmth of my blood trickling down my chin. My eyes watered. I could barely see him. No air entered my system. My body was giving up. Then he let go. I fell to the floor, and knocked my head on the kitchen counter.

He stood towering over me, yelling that I was a slut. "Whore," he said. "You fucking whore."

I could feel my body tensing up, getting ready to defend myself by bracing my muscles. He could feel me tensing. He paused his yelling. Then he stepped so close to me he almost stood on my feet. I could feel his warm breath on my face and the smell of beer lingering inside his mouth. I shivered slightly. He looked into my eyes.

"You're a fucking slut Aja."

Then he began punching me. He started punching me so hard he broke my ribs almost instantly. I felt them piercing the flesh inside my breasts. I could feel my lungs bursting as well, when he pushed his arm up to my neck and lifted me up. I tried gasping for air, but he had sealed me shut. I could smell death lingering above me. I replayed my mother's voice.

"They don't want you, Aja."

He pulled me by my hair and dashed my head on the side of the kitchen counter. The corner hit me right above my eye. Something inside my head was pulsating, trying to escape, trying to come out. A vessel filled with blood must have burst because I could feel warmth spreading to my entire face. He looked at me and twitched slightly. His eyebrows were raised gently. It made him even more frightening. In his eyes you could stare directly into his fury, yet the rest of his face was so relaxed. As if he were to be looking at a little puppy. I attempted to lift my arm to brush away my blood-soaked hair, but he grabbed my wrist and pulled down on it, making it snap. It was a clean break. I screamed.

"You're killing me" I whispered under my desperate breath.

He had no reply.

He was still beating me.

My head had an open wound, that was gushing out blood with even speed. All my ribs were positively broken, and my wrist was snapped in half. The lower part of my neck was swollen, and I could feel my hips shaking from all his punches. I caught a glimpse of his wrists and saw how my blood had stained his fingers, just as mine were too. In the mirror I could see the back of him swaying gently to the beat of his punches. They were almost rhythmical.

"Peter" I cried out. "Peter, you're killing me." He stopped for a second. I looked beside him, where the cat had hidden itself behind a tall plant. The dead leaves matched the cat's brown fur. I smiled at it. Peter took a step back and started panting. I lunged forward and pushed him, in an entirely foolish effort to knock him over and crawl quickly to the front door. He barely moved. My hands were weak and my wrist almost bursting with pain. His eyes filled once again with fury. As he took the same lunge towards me, I rolled over and kicked his ankle. I heard him let out a slight sigh, before I rose and attempted to sprint towards the door. I reached the hallway before I felt an arm touch my shoulder. My whole body was screaming. Then, nothing. The arm slipped from my shoulder. I didn't dare look back. I made my way to the front door, picturing it as a symbol of escape. A shining beacon. As I stretched my hand out, reaching for the doorknob, I heard Peter's muffled voice and the cat's terrified scream. My neck wouldn't allow me to turn. Neither would my mind. I needed out. I was dying.

Again, my mother's voice echoed inside my whole body. Her words carried a sense of courage: and threat. They seemed almost entirely the same.

"They don't want you, Aja. Believe me, I know."

Outside, the wind was throwing punches twice as hard and twice as fast as Peter. The snow was pouring down like morning urine and my shoeless feet were at the verge of falling off, already outside the porch. Inside me I knew I could never make it far enough to survive. The nearest highway was miles away. But I stood no chance against Peter. He would kill me. He wanted to. Mother nature might still want me alive, I thought as I was forced to begin sprinting at the sound of the doorknob twisting.

I ran as fast as my wretched feet would let me. Whatever must this poor child think of its careless bearer, I kept thinking. Poor child. Poor, poor child.

"They don't want you, Aja." I could hear it clearly. Someone was saying it to me. It wasn't just inside my head. I heard it, as if my mother was right next to me. I was sure of it. Someone was talking to me. But I turned around and faced pitch-black darkness. There was no light nearby. Maybe I've drowned, I thought? Maybe I'm in the womb again? Maybe I'm my child?

I collapsed to the ground then. A lump of cold blood rose from my stomach and made its way out of my throat. I could feel it stick to the sides of my already swollen neck as it came out, and I could feel the gradual denial of air inside me. No more oxygen was allowed into me. My nose was blocked by frozen blood and an intense burning, that I had not realized until I was on the ground. I felt almost chopped in half. My body wouldn't respond to my brain. I choked on something. My blood, perhaps. At one point, I think I could feel the child die inside my uterus. Like a fire that was suffocated. The same thing was happening to me. The snow had begun burying me inside a deadly blanket, already after a few minutes on the ground, fighting for air. Fighting for my aliveness. It was to no use. There I lied. Helpless and alone, stretching out every limb in an attempt to force oxygen into my systems; maintain the replicating cellular processes that kept me alive for nineteen years, which I had surely taken for granted for too many of them, I realized as my last breath was within reach. I couldn't see anything. It was still dark. There was no white light coming to get me. I was dying. I was almost dead. Death held my hand for a second. It kissed my cheeks and gloated at my weak attempt to escape it. How death must have frowned at me when I looked up and saw my mother.

"Didn't he want you, Aja?"

The Itch

Raya El-Hajjar

Marquette University, Milwaukee · United States

The clouds sagged over the London sky, with not even enough rain to be worth my umbrella's while. I walked aimlessly, trying not to check my watch again. Despite the lack of rain in the sky, water was seeping through my yellow rainboots into my socks. I'd bought them impulsively from a street stand my first evening in London, only to find cheaper and better-looking copies just paces away. Sticking to my throat was the morning coffee I now regretted. A scone might have been more prudent, from a bookshop I passed with orange cranberry scones in the window, to wave off the cramps of hunger that seized my stomach. Maybe then, I wouldn't be consumed with dread for my impending plans. Was it the caffeine's doing, twisting my mood?

I didn't bother to dwell on the answer. My mother had recently fallen down an internet rabbit hole, convinced that coffee was to blame for my troubles, big and small. She reminded me every time we spoke, along with the continual pronouncement that if I just sucked it up and stopped being so afraid all the time, I would have a successful career. Like one more reminder would finally send me over the edge into a daughter she was proud of. If I had my old job back, would that make you happy? I wanted to ask. If I just pushed myself into this little box, crammed all my limbs to fit, would I finally be worthy? I just nod through our phone calls, even though she can't see me, and hum in agreement when prompted until the line goes dead.

When Vera texted that she would be in town, I almost dropped my phone on my face. I was lying in bed, phone suspended to reach the signal, which was better up high. City money stretched thinner than I realized, especially since I had been skimming more than reading the lease I signed.

I responded with "Let's plan something" and a smiley face, hopefully to disguise the bone-chilling fear.

It was surely our coffee chat that made me shiver under my new brown trench coat, one of those fancy ones with the bottom sewn that you have to cut. Or it could've been the water in my shoes.

What was I going to say when I saw her, when she inevitably asked how I was doing, awaiting stories of a life filled with events? How could I break the news that there was nothing worth reporting?

I was floundering there, still floundering here. London sounded so exotic until you lived it. Like my apartment, vintage in an exhilarating way. I had flopped onto my mattress happily on the first night, the adrenaline of my departure still speeding up my heart. Only hours later, I woke up to a smell I could not place. My landlord, a slender man who always wore a different colored tie, told me that the smell was because the building next door had once been a tannery. Unclear what that was, I googled, only to find some particularly graphic YouTube videos. Ever since, I was paranoid that the smell of melting animal clung to me wherever I went, the stench of misfortune preceding me.

Not like anyone needed another sensory marker to intuit my general malaise. I started avoiding my own reflection after I accidentally made eye contact with myself in the mirrored window right outside my apartment. Startled, I had stopped right there in the middle of the street, troubled that I could not recognize the expression staring back at me. I'd run harried straight to my bathroom mirror, sure that my face was just distorted in the glass.

What I saw framed above the sink was me. I repeated it out loud to convince myself. Of course, it was me. My skin was almost the color of the porcelain sink, with red splotches of acne that had me dropping my bag right onto the floor, my hands immediately reaching to pick at every bump. I don't know how long I scratched and prodded, arms

aching, skin stinging, my own blood under my nails. It wasn't the skin that spooked me; it was my eyes, clouded over in a way I had never seen before. Like a ghost. After that day, I kept my gaze pointedly fixed on the apartment across the street whenever I walked by. I wouldn't be startled again.

The rain was starting to pick up now, and I fumbled around with my umbrella, but the spokes were stuck on the latch. I pushed the button again as fat drops of water fell onto the blowout that had taken me multiple hours. The umbrella wouldn't give. I pushed harder until something snapped, and the handle fell loose in my hand. Rain splattered onto the street, collecting into puddles that sloshed around in my boots.

Annoyance threaded into my mind against my will as I picked up my pace. The cafe was close, just another two agonizing blocks, I confirmed on my phone. It was near enough to my apartment that I should have visited it before. Vera probably expected me to be a regular, to have rapport with the barista, and an old lady friend with whom I exchanged adorable banter. She probably imagined my mornings where I drank a coffee that didn't sit like a stone in my stomach, before buying a fresh bouquet of roses from the adjacent stand—no, even better, I had a brooding and very tall admirer, who sent flowers to my apartment every Tuesday morning with notes expressing his adoration, even though we'd only met two weeks ago.

No, that was all Vera. The wedding of the century, according to my mother. She was at the perfect age to get married, I was told, too young was gauche, too old, and no self-respecting man would wait for you at the altar. Lucky for Vera, she'd found quite the man, and just in time. Such a handsome man, and a successful lawyer! I stared at their engagement photos on Instagram, her face of surprise, their teary eyes, so effortlessly posed for the photographer.

I'd asked why she was coming to London, sure she was busy with wedding preparations, but she'd replied, "LOL, that's what the wedding planner is for!" This trip was her last before she turned in her notice, trading the international finance consulting for a rock on her finger and a stroller of kids to come.

I tried to remember the last time we'd spoken, really spoken, not the surface tones of adults, but with the intimacy of youth. I could barely make out the street sign ahead of me; the letters faded with time, feeling the familiar dread fill my lungs as the cafe came into sight.

It was the itch. I'd felt it back then, sitting at my fake wood-paneled desk at the job I was supposed to be good at. And I was. I was good, I could've been great, but there was an itch. And it told me to run. To leave my job, my house, my city. All the suffocating attention was a scratchy wool sweater, and I had to take it off. You see why I had to leave. I thought London was far enough to scratch the itch, miles from everything I knew, but standing in front of the sink at my bathroom mirror, I knew I was wrong. The itch wasn't just leaving home. I had to leave my body.

I just couldn't figure out how.

The door to the coffee shop loomed closer, and I felt my happiest mask tighten onto my drenched skin. Standing on the door mat, the influx of warm air didn't stop me from shivering.

Vera sat legs crossed at a table for two, already clutching a coffee in both hands. She was splendid, what else can I say? Hair neatly combed into a bob, a cream blouse, and matching linen pants that were somehow unmarked from the rain. An umbrella perched by the table with blue and brown polka dots that would have looked eccentric in anyone else's possession.

She didn't recognize me at first, looking then looking away, before she determined that the rain-soaked girl at the door was her hometown friend. Why had I agreed to this coffee date? I had anticipated the shame, the anger, and yet I'd still agreed. She stood to greet me, and I reluctantly forced my legs over to her. My boots made a squelching sound against the ground.

Vera smiled, arms wide like she wanted to hug me, but stopped when she saw the sheer amount of water I had absorbed.

"Our runaway," she said. "Look at you!"

I smiled back, as far as I could force it, eschewing the hug for a fumbled handshake. My hands were just as wet as the rest of me, and

Vera tried to suppress a grimace. I tried to feel like a whole, not a shell, a person, but the emptiness inside me wanted to crawl out.

"You look so different!" she said. Could she tell how much I wished I could melt to the ground, seep into the floorboards, and assume a better form?

"Good different?" I tried to laugh, but it struck deep in my chest.

"I mean, just so different." She smiled brighter, but it stretched thin across her face. "Come sit," she said, "you're soaked to the bone!"

03

POETRY

Trivialities

Mari Chubinidze

Tbilisi · Georgia

Editor's note: this poem refers to suicide.

Going out to the bathroom in slippers in the morning, the usual routine.

The gas bill.

Keeping track of all the utility bills, and after that, we can stop by the neighborhood shop to buy some food, milk and peaches.

Everything else has become boring.

Inevitable, cruel.

The fall.

And your favorite penguin book series is tucked into the corner of the bag.

* * *

Suicide brings darkness

There is only utopia and disappointment in death — or perhaps an endless black silence. This is death in hell, where neither the devil sings to lure you away nor God calls you.

It is suicide, lying in the darkness.

This and Us

Aes Lana Danielis

Toamasina · Madagascar

I don't miss you anymore, though I loved you once, and you need to know,

even if it isn't the type of script I would ever put on for a show.

I do theater—you see, I rearrange the conversations,

and last night I was about to write our little confrontations,

about to write our full story, not merely out of memory,

but because it feels like a beautiful theater to see:

the expressions, the emotions, the love, and all the characters within.

Yet I don't want everyone to see that it still matters under my skin—

maybe just a little bit, as the memories come flooding back.

I actually intended to write a story about the giant, the beans, and Jack,

but as I looked at their faces, so young and innocent in the light,

I realized I don't love you anymore and was just ignorant to the sight.

I didn't sleep last night, remembering the clothes I once wore, realizing now that I turned them into inspiration for the theater's

lore.

As I gaze at their faces, remnants of my memories still remain,
like hitting a button that suddenly makes me twelve again.

At twelve, you don't fall in love—you just experience your soul
awakening,

And I couldn't stop thinking about last night's dream, this morning.

How can I forget when I still hold its scar on my body and your
face in my mind?

I must be going insane, yet inspiration is something I quickly
need to find.

The show is in two weeks; I won't play, but I'll still be there,
so if you're ever looking for a place to find me, perhaps you know
where.

First love must be cruel, though I don't miss you—I really don't,
unless remembering the time you called me "love" happens to
count.

Old habits die hard, and so do the theater's lights and warmth;
old habits die hard, I guess, and so does the stage light's glow,
but denying that I loved you once is a wrath I'd rather never
know.

05

POETRY

The White Lights of After Dawn

Vitor Souza

IFBA — Instituto Federal da Bahia, Ilhéus · Brazil

The Fading Light

My life is coarse

like sand in a dune,

and like the waves

of the Dead Sea

I'm always floating.

Questions of worth

and some of merit.

They ask for money,

jewelry, fame,

but never for soul.

And I keep fading

because this is tiring to me.

But I never die,

so why am I still dying?

Pledge to Your Smile

I'd be the Orpheus

who didn't look back.

I'd be the burning Icarus

if you'd be my Sun.

The monster growling at night,

to his dearest lost love

whom he might find in death.

May he be me in another life.

Because all of mine

is no mere blasphemy.

I'd give you my heart, my soul,

and all in me.

Come, indulge me in your laugh,

love, and my fantasy.

Let me see your blood,

and be one with it.

And may I ever look back—

my dear Eurydice,

let me die a loving man.

I Hope You Like Coffee

My dear, it's early morning,

may I always see your eyes.

And your brightest smiles

that I adore.

And I hope you like coffee

so we can enjoy together

the dark light before morning,

and the white lights of after dawn.

The Day After Tomorrow

Every face and its wrinkles,

every story of love

forged in blood.

The parents of lovers

and themselves.

All a mythology of someday,

all the philosophy or ever

and never.

So let the sculpted faces

be of some future person,

not from the past ones.

Let the revolution be pink,

and murder green.

Let the fun be black,

and love in vain.

06

SHORT FICTION

秦秋故帛灰 · Qin Autumn: Silk, Ash, and the Departed

令狐苏 (Linghu Su)

Chengdu University, Chengdu, Sichuan · China

卅四年秋，焚书令下。

郡府贴了告示，柳木简，墨迹极密，编绳三道。会认字的念，不会认字的听，听完各自散去。散是散了，脸上的神情是：关我什么事？寻常百姓家哪有这些东西，他们连简牍都买不起。

偏生有那么几户有。

郡里派了人来办这桩差事。派的是敬。

敬在郡府做卒史，秩百石，掌文书钱谷。郡守说这差事要个会写字的人去办，敬的字好，就派了敬。敬穿着一身皂色短襦，腰间束窄革带，右侧佩一把铜书刀，柄端有环。敬不爱说话，写得一手好隶书。当年乡塾里先生拍着木牍说：“这孩子的手，将来是能给人写碑的。”敬没想写碑。敬只想给一个人抄书。

那个人是渠。

渠和敬从小在同一个乡塾念书。敬家里穷，买不起简牍，捡人家写废的木牍，拿刀削去旧字，重新写。渠家里也不宽裕，但渠有个毛病：见了书就走不动道。不是见了哪一本走不动道——是见了所有的书。

有一回先生带了一卷《诗》来，渠蹲在案边看了一整个下午，蝉在槐树上叫得震天响，他也没觉着。敬的娘给敬送了一碗粥，敬端着去找渠，渠抬头，眼睛里亮得像点了烛光。

“你看，‘蒹葭苍苍，白露为霜’——苍苍是什么颜色？”

敬也不知道。敬说：“大概跟冬天的芦苇差不多。”

后来敬攒了三个月的钱，买了一段缣帛，替渠抄了一卷《诗》。帛幅裁了半幅，字迹渗进丝纹。抄完卷起来，用一根青色丝绳系了。送给渠。渠看了半天，说：“你的字比我好。”

敬说：“你写字像打架。”

渠嘿嘿笑，不恼。那卷帛书是渠的第一本书，渠给它标了个记号，写了一个“甲”字。

那是二十年前的事了。

敬走到渠门前的时候，日头刚过午。巷子是夯土路，前几日下过雨，还汪着几处泥洼。渠家的院墙比别家矮，墙头塌了一角，拿几根柳条随便一拦。

敬在门口站了站。看见渠坐在廊下，膝盖上摊着一卷简，右手握刀笔，刀尖在简上慢慢地刻。廊顶的茅草被风吹得歪歪斜斜，漏下几道光，落在渠的后颈上。渠穿着本色粗麻褐衣，袖口磨出了线头，指甲缝里嵌着洗不净的黑。腰间束着条旧革带，勒到最里头的孔，余出一截，松松地垂着。还有一枚铜带钩，云纹磨得更平了，只剩一道浅浅的弯。敬记得这道弯。以前在乡塾的时候，这道弯在渠父腰上。

敬咳了一声。

渠抬头，看见敬，愣了一下。“是你。”

“奉命来的。”

“什么命？”

“焚书令。”

渠盯着他半天，把简卷慢慢收起来，站起来拍了拍衣裳。“进来吧。”

敬迈进门，看见廊下站着个妇人，腿边躲着个孩子，约莫四五岁，头发黄软，扎了两个小髻，碎发毛茸茸地翘着，一只手攥着妇人的裙角，探出半个脑袋看敬，脸有些红。妇人见了敬，脚步往后退了半步，手往后护住孩子，侧身让到廊柱后面。

敬没多想，只以为是怕生。

渠回头看了一眼，走过去，蹲下，把手在衣裳上蹭了蹭，伸手探孩子额头，低声问妇人：“还在发热？”

妇人说：“比早上好些了。”

渠“嗯”了一声。又看了一会儿孩子，转过身来对敬说：“进来吧，别站着。”

放书的屋子比住人的那间还大。书架是粗木打的，四层，堆得满满当当。敬蹲下来，随手拿起一卷，是《诗》。又拿一卷，是医书。再拿一卷，是抄写的律令，字歪歪扭扭，一看就是一手一笔攒的。

敬翻书的时候，渠一双眼睛盯着他的手，像随时准备上来夺回去一般。

里屋传来一声咳嗽。孩子的声音，小小的，闷闷的。

敬侧头过去。

“着了点风，不打紧。”渠的手指抚摸过一排竹简，像抚摸肌肤。简上面连半点灰尘也没有。见敬目光落在一卷边角明显有焦迹补痕的算学上，渠解释，“那本是灶膛里救出来的，边角烧了小半，后面拿别的简补全了。”

敬扫了一圈里屋。

“这些……都是你的？”

“都是我的。有些自个儿抄的，有几卷跟人换的，有几卷捡的。”

“捡的？”

“嗯，有人扔在路边，我捡回来的。书又没犯法，扔了可惜。”

敬看了看医书那一排。“律令上说，医药卜筮种树之书不在禁中。你可以留。”

渠的脸色松了一点。

“但诗书百家语要交。”

渠的脸色又紧回去了。

“哪些是诗书百家语，哪些是医药种树之书？我分不清。”

“你分不清？”

渠抽出一卷简。“这上面有药方，也有引《诗》的话。它是医书还是诗书？”

敬没说话。

“还有这卷，是算书，但引了《书》里的话。你说是算书还是《书》？”

敬看了他一眼，把简放回去。敬心里清楚，渠这是跟他耍滑头。渠的滑头跟别人不一样。别人耍滑头是编瞎话，渠耍滑头是跟你较真。你能说算书上引了一句《书》就要交吗？不能。但你能说引了《书》的算书就能全留吗？也不能。

“你讲不讲理？”敬说。

“我讲的就是理。”

“你讲的是你那一本一本的理。”

渠缩了缩脖子，没回话，但脚没挪。

敬叹了口气。“圣上统一思想，是为了大家好。百家争鸣，各说各话，最后斗来斗去，邪说钻了空子，受害的还是百姓。你是明白人。”

渠不看他了，眼睛看着架子上的简牍。半天，说了一句：“我明白。可我不干。”

敬拿他没办法。

此后敬又去了几趟。每回去，渠都在书架前头坐着，膝盖上搁着简，刀笔搁在手边。敬说，你交了书，朝廷给钱。渠不说话。敬说，你交了书，以后还可以再买，医书农书又不犯法。渠还是不说话。敬说，你不交，人家来搜，搜出来就是族诛。

渠终于开口了：“要诛就诛我一个人，干我家人什么事。”

敬看着他，觉得这人还是一如既往地笨。

软的不行，来硬的。

敬换了个法子。

那天渠出去买米。敬带了两个人去。敬站在门口说：“朝廷收书，给钱的。”

妇人正在院子里劈柴，斧子嵌在木墩上，她把手在围裙上蹭了蹭。“给多少？”敬报了个数。妇人看了看屋里睡着的孩子，把斧子往地上一插，“行。”

敬让人进去搬。

搬了半屋子，渠回来了。渠手里提着一袋米，走到巷口就看见门口的板车，看见车上堆得满满当当的筒牍。米袋扔在地上，白米撒了一地。渠撒腿就跑，跑到书架前头，两臂张开，把架子挡住。袖口刮在架子角上，嘶了一声，扯开一道口子。

“谁让你们搬的！”

“你家人都答应了。”

“我不答应！你搬走的是我的命！”

敬后面那两个人往前一步。渠拼命去推，推不动，被拨到一边。他眼看着那两个人一卷一卷地把筒抱下来，搁在板车上。渠扑过去抱住一个人的腿，那人一挣，把渠拖出去两步远，膝盖磕在门槛上，又爬起来，再去拦另一个人。

“半分故交也不顾了吗？”渠没抬头，声音发闷。

敬站在他背后，没有说话。

“你从前比我还喜欢书。”渠的声音突然大起来，抬了头，脸上全是眼泪，鼻涕也下来了，拿袖子抹了一把，没抹干净。“你忘了，你给我念‘蒹葭苍苍，白露为霜’的时候，你自己眼睛都红了！你怎么——”

渠说不下去了。

敬怔了。

敬想起来了那一年。乡塾后面那棵老槐树。夏天，蝉在树上叫。渠蹲在地上看那卷帛书，敬坐在旁边，拿指头点着字，一字一字念给他听。念到“宛在水中央”的时候，敬停了。渠抬头问，怎么不念了。敬说，嗓子干了。

其实不是嗓子干了。敬是看见了槐树底下的光落在帛书上，渠的脸埋在光里，眼睛比灯还亮。

敬让人停了手。

搬下来的筒搁在板车上，没再往上摞。看着渠蹲在地上的模样，敬的嘴唇动了动，叹口气：“奉命行事而已。”

渠擦了擦脸，没有骂人，也没有再看敬。

敬带着人走了。板车上装了一摞筒。渠的架子空了一半，像一张漏风的嘴。

孩子病了第三天，药灌下去三碗，热不退。到第五天，孩子咳得停不下来，喘得像风箱漏气，脸先是绯红，后来绯红里带一点青，鼻翼一放一收地翕动。

渠请了巷口的郎中。郎中留着山羊胡，指甲养得极长，进了屋先看了一圈筒牍，皱了皱眉：“屋子潮气太重，于小儿不利。”渠赔了笑，把筒牍往里挪，手忙脚乱碰翻了一摞木牍，又蹲下去捡。郎中把孩子的袖子捋上去，手指搭在腕上，闭着眼，半天不说话。

“先生——”

郎中睁了眼：“此乃伤寒。先开一方，柴胡、黄芩、半夏，煎服。若热不退，再议。”

药吃了两副，没见好。又吃两副，还是没见好。郎中说，正气已虚，须加人参。人参贵，比肉还贵得多。妇人织了半年的布，原本是要换冬衣的，卷起来抱去了药铺。灶上还剩两斗粟，也舀了。药铺掌柜掂了掂布，又称了称粟，勉强从匣子里切了拇指大一截参，拿纸包了，递过来。

干瘪的一小根，比手指头还细。渠把那截攥在手里，用布包了又包，小心翼翼地揣在怀里带回去。药煎出来，灌下去。当天夜里，孩子烧得更厉害了。

两个人半宿没睡。

妇人说，请个巫吧。渠不信那些怪力乱神的东西，但看着脸烧得通红的孩子，没说话。

巫觋来了，干瘪的老头子，脸上涂了红一道黑一道，袍角用朱砂画了弯弯曲曲的纹路。在院子里摆了香案，烧了符纸，符灰掸进碗里，兑了汤水往孩子嘴边递。孩子喝了一口，吐了。巫觋又念了一阵咒，拿桃枝在床前洒了水饭。

“邪祟附体，”巫觋说，“书里招来的。”

渠在旁边蹲着，不说话。

巫觋折腾了一夜，孩子烧得更厉害。第二天又说，要做大法事，要三牲、香烛、新帛。两人翻箱倒柜地找，没找到新帛，只有那卷系着青绳的帛书。帛已泛黄，勉强能用。

妇人拿起来要走。渠立马扑过去夺回来。

“这个不行。”

“一个破帛，有什么不行！”

“换别的。”

“没有别的了！什么破书，比孩子的命还金贵？！”

渠手不放，抱得死紧，嚅嚅。

“总还有办法……”

妇人看他那个样子，气得把架子上竹筒扫落一地，转身走了。渠蹲下去，一个个捡回来。

不单是新帛，三牲、香烛也没个着落。想也知道，寻常人家哪里凑得齐这些？法事没有做成。巫觋走了。孩子的病一天比一天重。到后来，已经不大能睁眼了，偶尔嘴唇动一动。渠凑近了听。

“阿爹……好冷……”

渠脱下自己的外衣，裹在孩子身上。孩子的手从被子边伸出来，渠握住，拢在掌心里。捂不暖，那小手还是一点点冷下去。过了很久，他把那只手放回被子里，掖了掖被角。然后走出里屋，蹲在廊下。

妇人从灶房出来，端着碗热水，走到里屋门口，看了一眼，看见渠失了光丢了魂的眼神，就明白了。她站在那里，站了一会儿，把碗放在门框边的地上，转身回了灶房。

过了一会儿，里屋传来一声哭。闷在屋里。然后停了。又断断续续响了几声，渐渐弱下去。

渠蹲在廊下，两手撑着膝盖，头低着。肩膀抽动了两下。

天黑透了。妇人从里屋出来，走到廊下，在旁边蹲下。两个人蹲着，谁也没看谁。廊檐下的茅草被风吹得簌簌响，草屑扬起来，落在两人肩上。

妇人说：“粥在灶上。”

渠说：“嗯。”

妇人说：“你去吃一口。”

渠说：“你先去。”

妇人没动。渠也没动。

第二天这事传开之后，巷子里的人说，果然书里有邪祟。要不然怎么孩子病倒了？早该听巫的，把书烧了，说不定就没事了。

邻居听说了这事，说得去去晦气，把自己家里垫桌角的半卷筒翻出来，吐口唾沫，丢进灶里烧了。

疫病开始在巷子里蔓延。

先是隔壁老王的婆娘，接着是巷尾李家的小子。发热、咳嗽、脖子发硬、喘气，跟渠的孩子的病一模一样。巷子里的人慌了。郡府下令：封锁巷子，所有尸首一律焚烧，所有器物一并焚毁。里正挨家挨户地通知，手里拿一根木杖，走到谁家门口就在门框上敲一下。

敲到渠家的门，门没关。里正走进去，看见妇人坐在里屋地上，怀里抱着孩子。孩子裹在渠的褐衣里，脸露在外面，已经发青了。妇人低着头，脸贴着孩子的额头，一动不动。

里正站了一会儿，说：“已经走了。”

妇人没抬头。

里正回头看了一眼门外。两个差役进来，一个从左边，一个从右边。妇人抱得更紧了，肩膀缩起来，脸埋进孩子身上。差役弯下腰去掰她的手。

廊下的渠听见声音，站起来，跑进里屋。他看见差役在掰妇人的手，看见妇人蹬掉了鞋、头发散了。他两步过去，拿肩膀撞开一个差役，转过身，两臂张开，把妇人和孩子挡在身后。

“等等——”

差役没停。

渠伸手去推第二个差役，被拨到一边，背撞在墙上。他又扑过去，抱住差役的腿。

“不能……不能带走……”

差役挣了一下，没挣脱。另一个差役过来，把渠的手指一根一根掰开。渠的手指抠着差役的裤腿，抠得指节发白。差役掰到第三根，渠抬起头。

“他没病，求你别带走他——”

差役把他按在地上。渠的膝盖磕在地上，磕实了，他哼了一声。他趴在地上，脸贴着夯土，嘴里还在说。

“你们……你们不能……”

没有人听。

妇人那边，差役抱走了孩子。孩子从她怀里滑出去的时候，她扑了过去，被按住了。她被按在墙上，还在挣，指甲在差役的手臂上抓出了血印。她喊，喊的什么听不清，嗓子已经破了，变成哑哑的嘶声。

差役抱着孩子走出巷子，拐了个弯，看不见了。

按住渠的差役松了手。渠趴在地上，没有立刻起来。他的手指还保持着抠东西的形状，抠着地上的土。过了一会儿，他撑着膝盖爬起来，走到妇人身边，蹲下。

妇人顺着墙滑下去，坐在地上，头往后仰，张着嘴喘气。头发散了一地，脸上的灰和泪混在一起，一道一道的。

渠伸出手，把妇人肩上的一根草屑拂了。

烧书那天，大晴天。

郡府在城外的晒谷场上堆了一座书山。竹简、木牍、帛书，一卷一卷往上摞。有从各家搜出来的，也有从官仓搬出来的。竹简摞得歪歪斜斜，有的滑下来，有人上去重新码好。帛书被风吹得卷角翘起来，像一群白色的蛾子。

敬站在火堆旁边，手里拿着火把。他看到了很多卷书——有的编绳完好，有的散了架，竹简一根一根往外掉。有人把书扔上去的时候，简上的字在日光里晃了一下。

白露未晞。

火把递过去。书山点燃了。

竹子烧起来有噼啪声，像放鞭。帛烧起来不响，只冒黑烟，气味很臭。敬站在烟里，拿袖子捂住口鼻。

烧到一半的时候，突然一个人从人群里冲了出来。

是渠。

渠穿着一件扯破了的褐衣，左边的袖子耷拉着，头发散乱，脸上全是灰。怀里抱着一卷帛书。帛是青色的丝绳，泛黄的帛面。

敬喊了一声。听不清喊的什么。可能是“站住”，可能是渠的名字，也可能是别的。

渠没有站住。他撒腿冲进了火里。

火已经烧到了最高处，竹简哗哗剥剥地炸开，黑烟打着卷往上翻。帛书先烧起来，火苗蹿上他的衣裳，再攀上他的头发。

敬下意识就向前冲，被人死死拽住。是里正。

“去不得，去不得！”

敬站住了。火里面已经看不清人了。只有一团黑影。空气烧得微微扭曲，好像隔了一道时空。溯洄从之，道阻且长。

火继续烧。烧了一整夜。

第二天早上，火堆里扒出了几块烧碎的骨头和一枚铜带钩。铜带钩是渠的，钩身上刻着云纹，烧得发黑了，钩头还保留着原来的形状。那些简也烧成了炭。竹简烧完是炭，木牍烧完是灰，帛书烧完什么也没留下。

帛太轻了，烧起来比羽毛还轻，风一吹就散了，连灰都不见。

疫病在那场火里灭了。得病的人死了，尸体也被烧了。巷子重新开了。日子照旧过。

大家说，敬是个好官。一把火把书里的邪祟烧干净了。

敬后来升了官。郡守调走，敬接了郡丞的位置。

他还是写隶书，横平竖直，一笔不苟，跟从前一样。只是写字的时候不再跪坐，改为伏案。案上搁着一方新砚台，砚池里磨着新墨，砚旁搁着一支新笔。旧的秃笔保存得很好，收在匣子里。

夜里敬做了一个梦。

梦里有一座书架子，架上全是书。竹简、木牍、帛书。有一卷帛书，青色的丝绳，泛黄的帛面。敬伸手去拿，没够着。架子后面站着一个人，一双眼睛比火还亮，直勾勾地看着他。

敬猛地醒了。

心口跳得厉害。屋里什么都看不真切，窗外还是黑的。他翻了个身，闭上眼，又睁开。那梦里的书架和那人，清清楚楚地印在眼皮底下。他又翻了个身。檐角的铁马叮了一声，有风。

敬睡不着了。

他坐起来，披了件外衣，走到窗边，把窗推开一条缝。夜风灌进来，带着深秋的凉意。巷子里静悄悄的，远远近近的黑瓦屋顶一层一层铺过去，像叠在一起的简牍。不知谁家的狗叫了一声。

天边还是一团墨色。

敬靠在窗边，黑色的树影摇晃。他想起小时候乡塾后面那棵老槐树，想起那个夏天的蝉声，想起渠蹲在案边看书的那个下午。想起自己一笔一笔抄那卷帛书，想起那根青色的丝绳，想起那双发亮的眼睛。

天边慢慢地变了颜色。墨色淡下去，先是一线极浅的青灰，然后青灰里透出一丝暖意。那暖意像一滴墨跌进水中央，慢慢洇开。接着，东边的天际裂开了一道口子，赤黄色的光从里面渗出来，把低处的云染成一团一团的红。那红越来越浓，越来越亮，仿佛谁在天上点了一把火。

最后那片赤黄之气慢慢熄灭。

又是新的一日。

In the thirty-fourth year, in autumn, the edict to burn the books was issued.

The command was posted outside the commandery office, written in dense black ink upon a willow-wood tablet, bound with three cords. Those who could read read it aloud; those who could not listened. When it was over, everyone went their separate ways.

They did, indeed, go their separate ways, with much the same look on their faces:

What has this to do with me?

What ordinary household had such things? They could not even afford bamboo or wooden slips.

And yet, there were a few households that did.

The commandery sent someone to carry out the order. His name was Jing.

Jing served at the commandery office as a zou shi, a minor clerk of a hundred shi in rank, entrusted with documents, money, and grain. The commandery governor said the task required someone who knew how to write. Jing's hand was good, so they sent Jing.

He wore a short black robe, a narrow leather belt around his waist. At his right side hung a bronze writing knife, a ring set into the end of its handle. Jing was not a man of many words. He wrote an excellent clerical script.

Once, back in the village school, the teacher had slapped a wooden tablet with his palm and said,

“This child's hand will one day write inscriptions for men.”

Jing had never wanted to write inscriptions.

He only wanted to copy books for one person.

That person was Qu.

Qu and Jing had studied together at the same village school since childhood. Jing's family was poor and could not afford slips, so he collected discarded wooden tablets, shaved away the old writing with a knife, and wrote upon them again.

Qu's family was not well-off either, but Qu had a peculiar failing:

Whenever he saw a book, he could not tear himself away.

Not one particular book.

Every book.

Once, their teacher brought a scroll of the Book of Songs. Qu crouched beside the desk and read it for the entire afternoon. The cicadas screamed in the locust tree until the whole courtyard seemed to tremble, but he did not notice.

Jing's mother brought Jing a bowl of porridge. Jing carried it over to Qu.

Qu looked up.

His eyes were bright, as though someone had lit a candle inside them.

“Look,” he said. “‘The reed beds are luxuriant, the white dew has turned to frost’—what color is cangcang?”

Jing did not know either.

“Probably something like reeds in winter,” he said.

Later, Jing saved his money for three months and bought a length of silk. He copied a scroll of the Book of Songs for Qu.

He cut the silk to half its original width. The ink seeped into the threads.

When he had finished, he rolled it up and tied it with a blue-green silk cord.

He gave it to Qu.

Qu looked at it for a long while.

"Your writing is better than mine."

"You write as though you're fighting."

Qu laughed. He was not offended.

That silk manuscript was Qu's first book.

He marked it with a sign of his own and wrote a single character upon it:

A.

That had been twenty years ago.

When Jing reached Qu's house, the sun had just passed its zenith.

The lane was packed earth. It had rained a few days before, and several puddles still lay in the ruts. Qu's courtyard wall was lower than the others. One corner had collapsed, and someone had casually blocked the gap with a few willow branches.

Jing stood at the gate for a moment.

He saw Qu sitting beneath the eaves, a bundle of slips spread across his knees. In his right hand was a writing knife, its point moving slowly across the slip.

The thatch above him had been blown crooked by the wind. Strands of sunlight fell through the gaps and touched the back of Qu's neck.

Qu wore an undyed coarse hemp robe. Loose threads hung from the worn cuffs. Black had worked itself permanently into the cracks beneath his fingernails.

An old leather belt was fastened around his waist at its innermost hole, with the excess hanging loosely at his side.

There was also a bronze belt hook.

Its cloud pattern had been rubbed nearly smooth, leaving only a shallow curve.

Jing remembered that curve.

Back at the village school, it had hung from Qu's father's waist.

Jing cleared his throat.

Qu looked up.

When he saw Jing, he froze for a moment.

"It is you."

"I've come under orders."

"What orders?"

"The book-burning edict."

Qu stared at him for a long while.

Then he slowly rolled up the slips, stood, and brushed the dust from his robe.

"Come in."

Jing stepped through the gate.

Under the eaves stood a woman. A child, perhaps four or five years old, hid beside her legs.

The child's hair was soft and yellow, tied into two little knots, with wisps sticking out like down. One small hand clutched the woman's skirt. Half the child's face peered around it at Jing, flushed red with fever.

When the woman saw Jing, she took half a step backward. Her hand moved behind her, shielding the child, and she turned sideways, retreating behind a pillar.

Jing thought nothing of it. He assumed the child was simply shy.

Qu glanced back.

He walked over, crouched down, rubbed his hands against his robe, then touched the child's forehead.

"Still feverish?" he asked the woman quietly.

"Better than this morning."

Qu murmured, "Mm."

He watched the child a little longer, then turned back to Jing.

"Come inside. Don't stand there."

The room where Qu kept his books was larger than the room where the family slept.

The shelves were made of rough timber, four tiers high, and packed to overflowing.

Jing crouched and picked up a scroll at random.

The Book of Songs.

Another.

A medical text.

Another.

A copy of legal statutes, the characters crooked and uneven, plainly written one stroke at a time over many years.

As Jing turned the books, Qu watched his hands.

His eyes followed them as though he might spring forward and snatch the books back at any moment.

A cough came from the inner room.

Small.

Muffled.

A child's cough.

Jing turned his head.

"Caught a little chill," Qu said. "Nothing serious."

Qu's fingers passed over a row of bamboo slips as gently as though he were touching skin.

Not a speck of dust lay upon them.

Jing's gaze fell upon a mathematical text at the end of the shelf, its corners visibly charred and repaired.

"That one?" Qu said. "I rescued it from a stove. Half the edge burned away. I filled in the missing part with other slips."

Jing looked around the room.

"All these... are yours?"

"All mine. Some I copied myself. Some I traded for. Some I found."

"Found?"

"Mm. Someone had thrown them beside the road. I brought them home. Books haven't broken any law. It seemed a shame to throw them away."

Jing looked toward the medical texts.

"The law says books on medicine, divination, and the cultivation of trees are exempt from the ban. You may keep those."

Qu's expression eased.

"But books of poetry, history, and the teachings of the hundred schools must be surrendered."

Qu's expression tightened again.

"Which are books of poetry and the hundred schools, and which are books of medicine and agriculture? I can't tell them apart."

"You can't?"

Qu pulled out a bundle.

"This contains prescriptions, but it also quotes the Book of Songs. Is it a medical text or a book of poetry?"

Jing said nothing.

"And this one is a book of mathematics, but it quotes the Book of Documents. Is it mathematics, or is it the Book of Documents?"

Jing looked at him and put the slip back.

He knew perfectly well what Qu was doing.

Qu's cleverness was unlike other men's.

When other people played tricks, they made things up.

Qu played tricks by arguing with you until you could no longer tell where the law ended and the argument began.

Could Jing say that a mathematical book containing one quotation from the Book of Documents must therefore be surrendered?

No.

But could he say that a mathematical book containing a quotation from the Book of Documents was therefore entirely exempt?

No, either.

"Are you going to be reasonable?" Jing asked.

"I am being reasonable."

"You're being reasonable according to your own books."

Qu drew his shoulders in and said nothing.

But he did not move.

Jing sighed.

"The Emperor is unifying thought for the good of all. When the hundred schools contend, everyone speaks according to his own doctrine. In the end they quarrel, heterodox teachings find their way through the cracks, and it is the common people who suffer. You understand that. You're an intelligent man."

Qu no longer looked at him.

His eyes rested on the bamboo slips upon the shelf.

After a long while, he said,

"I understand."

Then:

"But I won't do it."

Jing had no answer for him.

After that, Jing came several more times.

Every time, Qu was sitting before the shelves, slips resting across his knees, writing knife beside his hand.

Jing said, "Surrender the books. The court will pay you."

Qu said nothing.

Jing said, "Surrender them. You can buy more afterward. Books on medicine and agriculture aren't forbidden."

Still, Qu said nothing.

Jing said, "If you refuse, they'll come and search the house. If they find them, your whole clan will be executed."

At last Qu spoke.

"If they must execute someone, let them execute me. What has my family done?"

Jing looked at him.

The man was just as foolish as ever.

Soft words would not work.

So Jing tried force.

One day Qu went out to buy rice.

Jing brought two men with him.

He stood at the gate.

"The court is collecting books. You'll be paid."

The woman was chopping wood in the courtyard. The axe was wedged into the chopping block. She wiped her hands on her apron.

"How much?"

Jing named the amount.

She looked toward the room where the child was sleeping.

Then she planted the axe upright in the ground.

"All right."

Jing motioned for the men to go in.

They had carried out half the books when Qu returned.

He was carrying a sack of rice.

From the mouth of the lane he saw the cart outside the house.

He saw the cart piled high with bamboo and wooden slips.

He dropped the sack.

White rice spilled across the ground.

Qu ran.

He reached the shelves and spread both arms across them, blocking the way.

His sleeve caught on the corner of the shelf.

There was a sharp tearing sound.

The cloth split.

"Who told you to take them?"

"Your family agreed."

"I didn't!"

Qu's voice broke.

"What you're taking is my life!"

The two men behind Jing stepped forward.

Qu shoved at them with all his strength.

He could not move them.

They pushed him aside.

He watched helplessly as they lifted the slips down one bundle at a time and placed them onto the cart.

Qu threw himself at one man's leg.

The man struggled free and dragged Qu two steps across the floor.

Qu's knee struck the threshold.

He groaned, got back up, and threw himself in front of the other man.

"Have you no regard at all for an old friendship?"

He did not raise his head.

Jing stood behind him and said nothing.

"You used to love books even more than I did."

Qu's voice suddenly rose.

He looked up.

His face was covered in tears. His nose was running. He wiped it with his sleeve, but only smeared it farther.

"You've forgotten? When you read to me—"The reed beds are luxuriant, the white dew has turned to frost"—your own eyes were red! How could you—"

He could go no further.

Jing froze.

He remembered that year.

The old locust tree behind the village school.

Summer.

Cicadas screaming in the branches.

Qu crouched over that silk manuscript, while Jing sat beside him, pointing to the characters and reading them aloud, one by one.

When he reached:

“As though it were there, in the middle of the water,”

Jing stopped.

Qu looked up.

“Why did you stop?”

“My throat is dry,” Jing had said.

But his throat had not been dry.

He had seen the sunlight beneath the locust tree falling across the silk.

Qu's face was buried in that light.

His eyes were brighter than a lamp.

Jing told the men to stop.

The slips they had carried down remained on the cart. No more were added.

Looking at Qu crouched on the ground, Jing's lips moved.

Then he sighed.

“I am only carrying out an order.”

Qu wiped his face.

He did not curse Jing.

He did not look at him again.

Jing left with the men.

A pile of slips remained on the cart.

Half of Qu's shelves stood empty, like a mouth with half its teeth gone, letting in the wind.

On the third day of the child's illness, three bowls of medicine had been forced down, but the fever would not break.

By the fifth day, the child could no longer stop coughing. Each breath came like air escaping through a broken bellows. The face, first

flushed scarlet, gradually took on a bluish cast. The nostrils fluttered with every breath.

Qu summoned the physician from the mouth of the lane.

The physician had a pointed goatee and nails grown remarkably long. The moment he entered the house, he looked around at the slips and frowned.

"The damp in this room is too heavy. It is harmful to a child."

Qu smiled apologetically and moved the slips farther inside, knocking over a pile of wooden tablets in his haste. He crouched to gather them.

The physician rolled up the child's sleeve, placed his fingers upon the wrist, and closed his eyes.

For a long time he said nothing.

"Master—"

The physician opened his eyes.

"This is cold damage. I will prescribe a remedy first: bupleurum, skullcap, pinellia. Boil and administer. If the fever does not subside, we shall reconsider."

Two doses were taken.

No improvement.

Two more.

Still nothing.

The physician said the child's vital energy was already weakened and that ginseng must be added.

Ginseng was expensive.

More expensive than meat by far.

The woman had spent half a year weaving cloth. She had meant to exchange it for winter clothing. She rolled it up and carried it to the apothecary.

There were two dou of millet left in the kitchen.

That went too.

The shopkeeper weighed the cloth, measured the millet, and reluctantly cut a piece of ginseng from a box, no larger than his thumb. He wrapped it in paper and handed it over.

A shriveled little root, thinner than a finger.

Qu clenched it in his hand.

He wrapped it in cloth, then wrapped it again, and carefully tucked it inside his robe on the way home.

The medicine was boiled.

The child swallowed it.

That night the fever grew worse.

The two of them did not sleep.

The woman said, "Call a shaman."

Qu did not believe in such things.

But he looked at the child's burning red face and said nothing.

The shaman came.

He was a shriveled old man, his face painted with red and black streaks, crooked patterns in cinnabar running along the hem of his robe.

He set up an altar in the courtyard, burned talisman papers, shook the ashes into a bowl, mixed them with water, and held it to the child's lips.

The child swallowed once.

Then vomited.

The shaman chanted another spell.

He sprinkled water and rice before the bed with a peach branch.

"An evil spirit has entered him," the shaman said.

"Brought by the books."

Qu crouched beside them.

He said nothing.

The shaman labored through the night.

The child's fever grew worse.

The next day he said a greater ritual was required: three sacrificial animals, incense, candles, and fresh silk.

The couple searched through everything they owned.

There was no fresh silk.

Only that old silk manuscript tied with the blue-green cord.

The silk had yellowed with age.

It would have to do.

The woman picked it up.

Qu immediately lunged forward and snatched it back.

“Not this.”

“It's a scrap of old cloth! Why not?”

“Find something else.”

“There is nothing else!”

She stared at him.

“What is the point of some rotten book being worth more to you than your child's life?”

Qu would not let go.

He clutched the manuscript against his chest.

“There must still be another way...”

The woman looked at him.

Then, furious, she swept the bamboo slips from the shelves.

They crashed onto the floor.

She turned and walked away.

Qu crouched down and gathered them, one by one.

Not only the silk.

There was no way to obtain the sacrificial animals or the incense either.

Of course there wasn't.

What ordinary household could afford such things?

The ritual never took place.

The shaman left.

The child's illness grew worse each day.

Eventually he could barely open his eyes.

Sometimes his lips moved.

Qu leaned close.

“Father...”

The voice was faint.

“So cold...”

Qu took off his outer robe and wrapped it around the child.

The child's hand slipped out from beneath the blanket.

Qu took it and enclosed it in his palm.

He could not warm it.

The little hand grew colder and colder.

After a long time, he placed it back beneath the blanket and tucked the edge in carefully.

Then he left the room and crouched beneath the eaves.

The woman came out of the kitchen carrying a bowl of hot water.

At the doorway, she looked inside.

She saw the emptiness in Qu's eyes.

She understood.

She stood there for a while.

Then she placed the bowl on the ground beside the doorframe and went back to the kitchen.

After some time, a cry came from the inner room.

Muffled.

It stopped.

Then came several broken cries, growing weaker and weaker.

Qu crouched beneath the eaves, both hands braced against his knees.

His shoulders trembled twice.

Night fell completely.

The woman came out of the inner room and crouched beside him.

Neither looked at the other.

The thatch beneath the eaves rustled in the wind. Bits of grass rose into the air and settled upon their shoulders.

"The porridge is on the stove," the woman said.

"Mm."

"Go eat some."

"You first."

Neither moved.

The next day, the story spread through the lane.

People said it proved that evil spirits truly lived in books.

Otherwise, why would the child have fallen ill?

They should have listened to the shaman.

If they had burned the books earlier, perhaps none of this would have happened.

One neighbor, hearing the story, said the household needed to rid itself of bad luck.

He dug out half a bundle of slips he had been using to prop up a table leg.

He spat on them.

Then threw them into the stove.

The epidemic began to spread through the lane.

First it was Old Wang's wife next door.

Then the boy from the Li household at the end of the lane.

Fever.

Coughing.

A stiff neck.

Labored breathing.

Exactly the same symptoms as Qu's child.

Panic spread through the lane.

The commandery government ordered the lane sealed.

All corpses were to be burned.

All belongings were to be destroyed.

The lizheng went from house to house announcing the order, carrying a wooden staff. At every doorway, he struck the frame once.

When he reached Qu's house, the door was open.

The lizheng stepped inside.

The woman was sitting on the floor of the inner room, holding the child in her arms.

The child was wrapped in Qu's brown robe.

His face, already blue, was exposed above it.

The woman had lowered her head against his forehead.

She did not move.

The lizheng stood there for a moment.

"He is gone."

The woman did not look up.

The lizheng glanced toward the doorway.

Two men entered.

One from the left.

One from the right.

The woman clutched the child tighter.

Her shoulders curled inward.

She buried her face against him.
The men bent down and pried at her hands.
Qu heard the noise from beneath the eaves.
He stood.
Ran into the room.
He saw the men pulling at the woman's hands.
He saw her shoes kicked away, her hair coming loose.
Two steps.
He slammed his shoulder into one of the men.
Then turned.
Spread both arms.
He stood between them and the woman and child.
“Wait—”
The men did not stop.
Qu reached for the second man and shoved.
He was pushed aside.
His back struck the wall.
He lunged again.
Wrapped both arms around the man's leg.
“Don't...”
He clung to him.
“Don't take him...”
The man struggled.
Qu would not let go.
Another man came over and pried his fingers loose one by one.
Qu's fingers hooked into the man's trousers, knuckles white.
The man pried loose the third finger.
Qu raised his head.
“He isn't sick. Please, don't take him.”
They forced Qu to the ground.
His knee struck the earth.
Hard.
He groaned.
He lay there with his face against the packed earth, still speaking.
“You can't...”

"You... you can't..."
No one listened.
The child was taken from the woman.
As he slipped from her arms, she threw herself after him.
They restrained her.
Pinned her against the wall.
She still struggled.
Her fingernails scratched bloody marks into the man's arm.
She screamed.
No one could understand the words.
Her throat had already broken into a hoarse, rasping cry.
The man carrying the child walked out of the lane.
Turned the corner.
Disappeared.
The man holding Qu released him.
Qu remained on the ground.
He did not get up at once.
His fingers were still curled as though gripping something.
They dug into the earth.
After a while, he pushed himself up.
He walked to the woman.
Crouched beside her.
The woman slid down the wall and sat on the ground, head tilted backward, mouth open as she struggled for breath.
Her hair lay scattered across the floor.
Dust and tears had mixed on her face, leaving streaks.
Qu reached out.
He brushed a single piece of grass from her shoulder.
The day they burned the books was bright and clear.
Outside the city, in the threshing ground, the commandery government had piled the books into a mountain.
Bamboo slips.
Wooden tablets.
Silk manuscripts.
One bundle upon another.

Some had been seized from private homes.

Others had been brought from government storehouses.

The bamboo slips leaned crookedly. Some slid loose, and men climbed up to stack them again.

The silk manuscripts caught the wind and their corners curled upward, like a swarm of white moths.

Jing stood beside the pyre, a torch in his hand.

He saw countless books.

Some still had their binding cords intact.

Others had come apart, bamboo slips spilling loose one by one.

When someone threw a book onto the pile, the characters flashed once in the sunlight.

The white dew has not yet dried.

The torch was passed forward.

The mountain of books caught fire.

Bamboo crackled and snapped like firecrackers.

Silk made almost no sound as it burned. It gave off black smoke and a foul smell.

Jing stood in the smoke, covering his mouth and nose with his sleeve.

Halfway through the burning, someone suddenly broke from the crowd.

It was Qu.

He wore a torn brown robe.

The left sleeve hung loose.

His hair was disheveled.

His face was covered in ash.

In his arms he carried a silk manuscript.

Blue-green cord.

Yellowed silk.

Jing shouted.

He could not hear what he shouted.

Perhaps, "Stop!"

Perhaps Qu's name.

Perhaps something else.

Qu did not stop.
He ran straight into the fire.
The flames had already climbed to their highest point.
Bamboo slips burst with sharp pops, black smoke twisting upward.
The silk caught first.
Flames leapt onto Qu's clothes.
Then climbed into his hair.
Jing instinctively ran forward.
Someone seized him and held him back.
It was the lizheng.
"You cannot! You cannot go!"
Jing stopped.
The fire had already swallowed the figure.
Only a black shape remained.
The air above the flames shimmered and twisted, as though another age lay beyond it.
Following upstream, they sought him; the way was difficult, and long.
The fire burned on.
All through the night.
The next morning, they raked several charred fragments of bone from the ashes.
And a bronze belt hook.
It was Qu's.
The cloud pattern on the body had been burned black, but the hooked end still retained its original shape.
The slips had become charcoal.
Bamboo became charcoal.
Wood became ash.
The silk manuscript left nothing behind.
Silk was too light.
It burned lighter than a feather.
One gust of wind and it was gone.
Not even ash remained.
The epidemic died in that fire.

Those who had fallen ill died.
Their bodies were burned as well.
The lane was opened again.
Life went on as before.
Everyone said Jing was a good official.
With a single fire, he had burned all the evil spirits out of the books.

Jing was promoted afterward.
The commandery governor was transferred elsewhere, and Jing took his place as commandery deputy.
He still wrote in clerical script.
Horizontal strokes level.
Vertical strokes straight.
Not a stroke out of place.
Just as before.
Only now he no longer sat kneeling to write.
He wrote at a desk.
A new inkstone rested upon it.
Fresh ink was being ground in its well.
Beside it lay a new brush.
His old, worn brush had been carefully preserved in a box.
That night, Jing dreamed.
In his dream stood a bookshelf.
It was filled with books.
Bamboo slips.
Wooden tablets.
Silk manuscripts.
There was one silk manuscript in particular.
Blue-green cord.
Yellowed silk.
Jing reached for it.
He could not quite touch it.
Behind the shelf stood a man.
A pair of eyes brighter than fire stared straight at him.
Jing woke with a start.

His heart was pounding.
Nothing in the room was clear.
Outside the window, it was still black.
He turned over.
Closed his eyes.
Opened them again.
The bookshelf from the dream was still there behind his eyelids.
So was the man.
He turned over again.
A metal wind chime beneath the eaves gave a single clear note.
There was wind.
Jing could no longer sleep.
He sat up, threw on an outer robe, and went to the window.
He pushed it open a crack.
The night wind poured in, carrying the chill of late autumn.
The lane was silent.
Far and near, black-tiled roofs stretched one behind another into
the darkness, like slips stacked upon slips.
Somewhere, a dog barked once.
The horizon was still a mass of ink.
Jing leaned against the window.
Black tree shadows swayed outside.
He thought of the old locust tree behind the village school.
He thought of that summer's cicadas.
He thought of Qu crouched beside the desk, reading.
He thought of himself copying that silk manuscript, stroke by
stroke.
He thought of the blue-green cord.
He thought of those bright eyes.
Slowly, the horizon began to change.
The blackness faded.
First came a line of the faintest blue-gray.
Then, within the blue-gray, a trace of warmth.
The warmth spread like a drop of ink falling into the center of wa-
ter.

Then the eastern horizon split open.

Red-gold light seeped through the crack, staining the low clouds in clusters of crimson.

The red deepened.

Brighter.

Brighter still.

As though someone had set a torch to the heavens.

At last, the red-gold glow slowly faded.

And there was a new day.

07

POETRY

Field Guide To Longing

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the moth mistakes the porch light for the moon

the moth mistakes the porch light for the moon.
it is an easy mistake to make.

someone has left the kitchen window open,
a steel spoon drying beside the sink,
two plates abandoned on the table
because dinner was late again.

outside,
the porch light hums above an empty chair.

the moth arrives at 11:47.

it has been flying all evening
without finding what it was looking for.

then there it is.

a small yellow moon
hanging just above the garden.

the moth circles it once,
as though introducing itself.

twice,
as though the moon might recognise it.

by the third time
it has forgotten where it was going.

this is how ridiculous longing makes us.

we see something glowing
and decide it must have been waiting for us.

the moth does not know
about switches,
or electricity,
or the hand that will reach out
before bed and turn the whole thing dark.

it knows only
that there is a light
and that it is beautiful.

so it keeps returning.

perhaps you have done this too.

stood outside a restaurant after closing,
watching someone through the glass
stack the chairs upside down.

waited for a message
you knew was not coming.

mistaken a warm window
for an invitation.

mistaken being noticed
for being wanted.

the moth does not know any better.

neither did i.

by midnight,
the house is asleep.

the garden is silver.

the real moon has moved
to the other side of the roof.

still,
the moth circles the porch light.

and if you asked it why,
it would probably tell you

the same thing
we all tell ourselves

when we have loved
the wrong kind of brightness
for too long:

it was warm here once.

i thought
that meant
i belonged.

the moth keeps coming back

the moth keeps coming back.

by now,
it knows the porch light is not the moon.

this should have solved the problem.

it hasn't.

every night at eleven,
it appears above the flowerpot
with the same dusty wings,
the same ridiculous faith.

the woman inside has noticed.

she sits at the kitchen table
cutting mangoes into a steel bowl
and watches it through the window.

sometimes she turns the light off.

the moth waits.

sometimes she turns it back on.

the moth begins again.

circle.

circle.

circle.

there are things we call habits

because the other word is too embarrassing.

the moth has one.

it has memorised the distance
between itself and the glass.

it knows exactly where to stop.

it knows exactly where it will hurt.

still,
every evening,
it comes closer.

once,
the woman opens the door.

the moth flies away so quickly
she laughs.

then she leaves the porch light on
for the rest of the night.

this is not kindness,
though the moth does not know that.

it circles until morning.

and perhaps this is the cruelest thing
about being given what you wanted:

sometimes you realise
you were only in love
with the waiting.

by dawn,
the porch is empty.

the mangoes are gone.

the woman is asleep.

the moth is somewhere in the garden,
resting beneath a leaf,
already waiting for night.

it knows the light is not the moon.

it comes back anyway.

the moth learns the garden blooms at night

for a long time,
the moth believed the porch light

was the brightest thing in the world.

this was not true.

one evening,
it rains.

the light goes out.

the moth waits beneath the eaves,
wings folded,
looking for somewhere to put
all that wanting.

then the wind changes.

something sweet
moves through the garden.

jasmine.

the moth follows it.

not because it is bright.

because it is there.

beneath the hedge,

flowers have opened
that were closed all day.

small white mouths
full of moonlight.

the moth lands on one.

nothing happens.

no door opens.
no window lights up.
nothing reaches for it.

still,
the flower holds.

for the first time,
the moth does not circle.

it simply stays.

above the garden,
the real moon has risen.

it is enormous.

it is beautiful.

it has never once
asked the moth to come closer.

the moth does not mind.

by morning,
the porch light is back on.

the empty chair is still there.
the glass of water is still beside it.

but the moth is gone.

somewhere beyond the garden,
something is blooming in the dark.

and perhaps this is what the moth
was trying to learn all along:

not everything beautiful
has to be bright enough
to lead you home.

Needles on Tongue

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Night is a fickle mistress: you think you will finally rest in the arms of slumber, but here you are, wide awake on your night train, on a journey you didn't ask for. The air thin, your eyes dry. Fingers tapping a familiar nervous rhythm.

Darkness looms, shrinking the world to pinpricks of light. Only blinking lights signal that people exist out there; cars, buildings, and houses. A world submerged in amber. You see it through the sliver of the curtain, you have to remind yourself that every light is a life, made small by distance. You wonder, too, as passing lights illuminate the inside of the train: do the people outside see you, too? Do they acknowledge your existence? Maybe that's all existence is: recognizing each other. Maybe remembrance is what makes us immortal.

You muse. You reminisce. Your thoughts acquire the cadence of a nineteenth-century poet paid per word, turning feeling into ornament—something to be gawked at and admired, something tangible and separate. Avoidance taking the visage of verbosity. You dither when you should be living, when you should be looking forward to your destination, to your little sister's wedding.

Yet here you sit on a hard A/C berth, while everyone else has already turned off their lights. Spine straight because there is no give left inside you. Not anymore. You exist, melancholic, wedding gifts shoved next to your shoes. Your pulse a hummingbird in your throat.

The arguments with your mother ring in your ears. Beside her, your father watched with red-rimmed eyes. An accusing silence. Ever-

present disapproval. He never raised his voice. He never had to. "You never take time off," she said. "It's like you think you're better than us," she accused. "Not even for your little sister?" she pleaded.

The last one got you. The memory of small hands and big brown eyes peeking through a door gap, a toothless smile, and a call, an invitation, to play. You might have been shipped off at nine years old to a boarding school for being troublesome, to have discipline screamed into you, but you always found softness in the warm heart of your little sister.

So here you are, on a night train. Pins and needles on your tongue. The hazy light illuminating your hands, now calloused. The snores of strangers accompanying the throbbing in your skull. Destination: a place that you once called home.

"Are you coming?"

The text sits next to a photo of a smiling woman, happiness tinging her cheeks pink.

The train horn blares.

Your thumb hovers.

Somewhere in the back of your mind comes a thought: you have been running longer than the train has.

Salt meets Salt

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— *O Mr. Storyteller, won't you weave another tale for me? —*

I judge people by how haunting a ghost they could be.
I judge wrong most of the time,
Most turn out to detest the idea of haunting people
Who used to be and will soon be their kin.
Nice of them I suppose,
But terrible for business, since I have this whole gimmick where
I judge people by how haunting a ghost they could be.
They love me nonetheless.
Still cannot decide whether they should or not.
They ask me how they were in life,
And I lie. I lie because I never knew them.
They know not to ask the right questions,
And all the answers I do know happen to be wrong.
Do not cry for me when I go,
The ghosts have reserved that role,
I asked them
To not cry for me when I come,

They indiscreetly hung up.

I screamed their name, they picked right up. Old habits die hard,
Especially when their killers are already dead.

I told them I loved them.

They told me they don't anymore.

I don't trust the living, and now hate the dead, so now
I judge people by how haunting a ghost they could be.

— *O Mr. Storyteller, are you worthy of your title?* —

I drank a sea with a plastic straw.

That's it, and that's all.

What? You say that is no story?

Why, for there are no seekers of glory?

No tyrant to overthrow,

No damsel of sorrow?

You must forgive me then, for I

Am no storyteller in your eye.

I scaled a mountain of corpses.

There atop it, I befriended a troll.

That's it, and that's all.

Why, is that not a story?

Now is it far too gory?

It is not universal, no,

But must my creatures be market-approved?

Do I have to cater to them all?

You must forgive me then, for I
Am no true tale-weaver of lies.

Come sit, I will tell you true a tale,
A truth yours and yours only to believe.
A truth that will be your truth, and leave
You with no consternation of my status.

So it begins,
We were light and shadow, the two of us
(Not you and I, this character and I, such
Are the perils of a foreign language)
Inseparable though from other sides of the ledge
That divided the mountain we called home.
Go up there, and you will still find my tomb.
I was on the back foot, I did not mind,
If you such light had, you would march behind
All your life too.

Then, ship lost rudder. I was subject to murder.
Oh, no, It doesn't hurt much now, have grown
Used to a dagger against my chest, rather
Feel emptier inside when it is early morn,
And it is not there.

Light trudged on, light did not look back,
Else light would have been blinded by
Light's own radiance. Hence light moved on.

You find it despairing, I call it a red herring.
 What happened to me must not occur
 Again to anyone else, is all I wish for.
 You find it plastic, and that be too drastic
 An insult to a storyteller, so please,
 A story is a negotiation, not a checklist.

A bond that be between bard and bearer
 Of the burden of the narrative, a bond
 Of light and shadow, a bond of you
 And I. Stab me with a dagger,
 You will come back by dusk I wager.
 Tale is life, negotiation is sustenance.
 No heroes and villains and swords
 Can steal my tale and your truth.
 It is a red herring, despair, for
 It is as plastic as my lies,
 Yet it is as real as plastic.

— *O Mr. Storyteller, are you so lonely?* —

It is a dark that invites.
 Come and join me, please;
 I am in need of company
 Apart from these seas

Bottled up in a cauldron
In which boils a broth.
Pass me some cumin,
And a dash of sloth.

Your blanket has space for one,
Wrap it round yourself,
I'll get you a pillow, and
Sew up the loose threads.

Time for tales. Tales are
As much sustenance
As the broth, they are
Food with consequence

Since they force you to feel.
The stars huddle up close,
They are immature listeners,
They prefer tales of those

Much older than them,
Nought wrong with that.
But they are regulars, you
Are new, and keen at that.

Tell me what you desire,
What flavour you covet,
And I will fill your belly with

My make-believe puppets.

What Death Returned

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I · The Warning

They sing about me at weddings now. I have heard it in the villages along the river, a girl's thin voice carried over the paddy at dusk: Arunima who followed Death into the forest, Arunima who would not let go. The women weep at the part where I fall at Death's feet. They laugh at the part where I trick him. And the bride sits under her red veil and is told, in a hundred ways, be like her. I have never corrected them. A song is a kind of mercy; it forgives by forgetting. But I am old now, older than I ever believed I would be, and the smoke of the burning ghats drifts up to my window most evenings, and I have begun to think a woman ought to say the true thing once before the river takes her. So I will say it here, to no one. No one is the only listener who has never lied to me. I was proud. Begin there. My father, Hayendra, king of the river country, prayed eighteen years for a child, and when I came at last, in the first red hour of a morning, he named me for that light, because it was the sun he had been praying to. From the first he looked at me as if I were a debt the heavens had paid. I was taught the Vedas beside my cousins' tutors, I was taught to argue, and I learned very young that when I argued, I won. No prince came to ask for me. They said I was too radiant to approach, and my nurses repeated it as praise. I think now they meant too certain. A man can marry a fire. He cannot marry a fire that has already decided which way to burn. So my father did a strange thing.

He gave me a golden chariot and two old ministers who coughed in the mornings, and he sent me out into the

world to choose a husband for myself. I went through the courts of kings and the hermitages of sages the way a jeweller goes through a bazaar, turning things over and setting them down. I was not cruel, only exact. This one laughed too loudly at his own jokes. That one spoke of his horses as if they were his sons, and of his sons as if they were horses. I wanted a man who did not need me to be smaller, and I had begun to believe there was no such man, when the chariot broke an axle on the border of a country that had lost its king and we were forced to stop in a forest I did not know. He was carrying wood. That is all, really. A young man in bark cloth with a bundle of sal branches on his shoulder, walking toward a hermitage where, I would learn, his blind father sat in the shade and waited to be read to. He was singing, badly. When he saw the chariot he stopped singing and was not embarrassed, only curious, and he came and looked at the broken axle with great seriousness and told the charioteer how to splint it with green bamboo. His hands had clay under the nails. Later I learned he had spent his boyhood shaping horses out of river mud, so many that the ascetics called him the painter of horses, and that he still made them for the hermit children and gave them away before they dried. His name was Ritam. Truth, it means. The old truth, the order that keeps the stars in their places. I have thought about that name for fifty years. I came home to the river country and stood in my father's hall and said it aloud. Ritam, son of Tejsen, the exiled king. My father's face did something complicated, because an exile is no great match. But it is the other face in the hall I remember. The wandering sage we called the Traveller had arrived that morning, his veena on his back, as he always seemed to arrive on mornings that would matter, and at the name he set down his cup. "Not that one," he said.

My father asked why, and the Traveller told him. Ritam was generous as the rain, he said, patient as the earth, handsome as the moon in Kartika, learned, gentle, devoted to his parents. Every virtue a man could hold, he held. "He has one fault only," said the Traveller, "and it cancels all the others. One year from today, he will die." I remember

the silence afterward with great exactness, the way one remembers the moment before a fall. A servant had been pouring water and stopped with the jar tilted, and a thin bright line of it went on falling into the basin, because no one had told it to stop. My father turned to me. "Choose again," he said. "You heard him. Choose again, child. There is no shame in it." And I said, as the song says I said, that a daughter is given once, a word is spoken once, a heart is chosen once. I said that whether his life was long or short, whether he had virtues or none, I had chosen him in my mind, and a thing done in the mind is done. It was a beautiful answer. My father wept and blessed me. The Traveller looked at me for a long moment with an expression I could not read then and can read very well now. It was pity, and it was not for Ritam. Here is what the song does not say. Standing in that hall, I was not only afraid. Beneath the fear, so deep I could pretend not to feel it, there was something like exhilaration. The gods had set a date. I had set my will against it. I remember thinking, almost in these words: we shall see which is the harder thing. And in the chariot going back to the forest, with the old ministers coughing and the wedding gifts rattling in their chests, I made the second decision, the one no one has ever sung about. I would not tell him. I told myself it was love. That a man should not have to live his last year beneath a falling sword. That I would carry it for both of us. All of that was true. But it was not the whole truth, and I knew it even then, the way one knows there is a stone in one's sandal long before one stops to shake it out.

II · The Secret Year

We were married in the forest, under a neem tree, with his blind father's hand on our joined hands and his mother scattering rice that the sparrows took before it reached the ground. I gave away my jewels that same evening. I put on bark cloth like his and wove my hair into the plain braid of the hermitage women, and his mother watched me do it and said nothing, and I saw her decide to love me. That first night, after he slept, I took a length of cotton thread from my wedding garland and tied a single knot in it. I tied one every morning after. I kept the cord wound around my waist beneath my garment, where it

lay against my skin like a second, secret pulse. Three hundred and sixty knots, give or take the days the moon confuses. I was a king's daughter; I had been taught to count. I did not know yet that counting is a kind of prayer that answers itself. How do I tell you about that year? Everyone who has been happy thinks their happiness is unlike any other, and everyone is wrong, so I will only say what was particular. He woke before light, always, and went down to the stream, and came back with water on his eyelashes, and woke me by naming the birds that were calling. That is a barbet. That is a koel; he is lying, it is not spring yet. That one I do not know. We will find out. He read to his father in the afternoons, and when the old man fell asleep mid-verse Ritam would go on reading softly to the end of the passage, because, he said, words should not be left hanging in the air with no one to catch them. He made clay horses for the ascetics' children and I learned to make them too, badly,

mine with legs like a heron's, and he set mine beside his on the shelf of the hut as though they were equal. He was not a saint. The Traveller had made him sound like one, and I was relieved to find that he sulked when he lost at dice, that he was vain about his singing, which was terrible, that he could be distracted for an hour by an ant carrying a seed. I loved those things more than the virtues. The virtues belonged to the world. The faults were mine. And all the while, the knots. The worst of it was not the large moments. Against the large moments I had armed myself. The worst was how often he spoke of the future, as young men do, without thinking, the way one breathes. After the rains we should mend the roof properly. When Father's eyes are worse we'll move his mat nearer the door. When we are old, he said once, lying with his head on my stomach on a hot afternoon, when we are old I'll still be the better singer, and you will have to pretend you never noticed. I laughed. I remember that I laughed. And I put my hand in his hair and felt, beneath my garment, the cord with its two hundred and some knots, and I thought: he is building a house on a river, plank by plank, and I am the only one who can see the water. Sometimes, at night, I came so close to telling him that the words stood in my mouth like a stone. I would rehearse them.

Ritam, there is something the Traveller said. And then I would think of his face receiving it. I would think of him going down to the stream in the morning knowing, naming the birds knowing, and something in me would close like a hand. I have had fifty years to examine that hand. I said to myself that I was sparing him. But a man who does not know he is dying belongs entirely to the one who knows. Do you understand? Every day I gave him was a gift he did not know I was giving. Every tenderness of mine carried a meaning he could not read. I held the whole of his life in my lap like a sleeping child, and he did not even know he

was being held. There was a sweetness in that which I will not deny, and it was not a clean sweetness. It was the sweetness of a secret, which is to say, of power. Once, in the cold season, he woke in the night and found me sitting up, watching him. "Why do you look at me like that?" he asked. He was not frightened, only puzzled, still half in sleep. "Like what?" "As if I were going on a journey." He reached for my wrist. "I'm not going anywhere, Arunima. Where would I go? Everything is here." I lay down beside him. He was asleep again in moments, his breath in my hair. I did not sleep. I lay there and understood, for the first time, that I had not only hidden his death from him. I had hidden myself. The woman he loved did not exist. She was a woman with nothing to hide, who looked at him because she liked looking. The real one was counting. Four days before the last knot, I began my fast. Three days and three nights, standing, without food or water. The ascetics nodded their approval; such vows are honoured in the forest. His mother wept and begged me to sit. His father, who could not see me, kept asking what was wrong, as though he heard something in the air the rest of them could not. And Ritam sat on the ground at my feet through most of the third night, angry, frightened, bewildered, asking me why, and why now, and for whom. "For you," I said, which was true, and told him nothing. On the morning of the last day, when he shouldered his axe to go into the forest for wood, I asked to go with him. I had never asked before. His mother looked at my face and let me go.

III · The Forest

It was a bright day. I had expected something else, I think, a sky that understood. Instead there were butterflies over the stream and the smell of crushed wild ginger where we walked, and he was in good spirits because I had finally eaten, a handful of rice at dawn to break the fast, and he talked the whole way about a new horse he meant to make, a big one, for the courtyard of his father's kingdom if they ever won it back. He climbed a tree to cut dry branches. I gathered fruit and did not look up at him. I could feel the morning passing through me like a thread through a needle. It was a little past noon when he came down and sat heavily on the ground. "My head," he said, surprised. "Arunima, my head. As if someone were driving a spike through it." He laughed a little, embarrassed. "I think I'll lie down. Only for a moment." I sat, and he put his head in my lap as he had a hundred times that year, and I laid my hand on his forehead. It was very hot, and then, under my palm, it was not. I will not tell you about that part. Everyone has a part they will not tell. When I looked up, there was a man standing on the path. He was taller than a man. He was dark, darker than shadow, as though shadow were only an imitation of him, and he wore red, the dull red of old blood or of the sky long after sunset, and in his hand was a loop of rope. His eyes were tired. That is the thing I have never heard in any song. They give him fire, they give him a buffalo and a voice like thunder. What I

saw was a face that had done the same work every hour since the first creature died, and expected to do it until the last, and had never once been thanked. "You can see me," he said. It was not a question. "The fasting does that. And other things." He regarded me with something like courtesy. "You know who I am." "You are the lord of the southern road. You have come for my husband." "I usually send my servants. But he was a good man, and you are a remarkable woman, and I was curious." He knelt beside Ritam's body and drew the loop gently through the air above his chest, and drew out of him something no larger than a thumb, a small bright figure, folded in on itself like a sleeping bird. He held it in his palm with great care. "There. Go home now, daughter of Hayendra. Perform the rites. You have done

everything a wife can do." He turned and walked south. I rose and followed him. The forest changed as we walked. The trees grew taller and greyer, the birdsong thinned and stopped, the light became the light of no particular hour. He did not look back for a long time. When he did, he sighed. "This is not a road for you." "Wherever my husband is taken, I go. That is the law, as I was taught it." "You were taught well. Turn back." But I did not turn back. I talked. It is the thing I have always done best. I spoke to him of dharma, of the friendship the wise say is born between any two who walk seven steps together, and we had walked a great many more than seven. I said the company of the good is never fruitless. I said he was called the Lord of Justice, and that justice owed me a hearing. I praised him, and the praise was not false, because the nearer I came to him the more I saw the enormous patience in him, the weariness, and something that might once have been grief and had worn down over the

ages into simple duty. He was pleased. I could see it. No one talks to him. Everyone weeps or pleads; no one talks. "Ask a boon," he said at last. "Anything except his life. And then go home." So I asked for my father-in-law's sight. Granted. I walked on. I asked for the old king's lost kingdom. Granted. I walked on, and he said, almost fondly, "You are still here," and I asked that my own father, who had no sons, should have a hundred. Granted. I walked on. And then, very carefully, the way a mason sets the last stone in an arch, I asked that I should bear a hundred sons to Ritam. "Granted," said Death. And then he stopped on the path. The song says he was tricked. It says he spoke before he thought, and that I sprang the snare, and that he laughed and conceded, because the Lord of Justice cannot unsay a boon, and a woman cannot bear a dead man's sons. That is not what happened. He stopped, and turned, and looked at me for a long while, and it was not the look of a man caught out. "Did you think I did not see it coming?" he asked. "I saw it four boons ago. I have been asked for everything, Arunima, by every kind of creature, since the beginning. I let you walk me into it." "Why?" "Because you would not stop. Because I was curious what a person does with a thing like this once she has it." He looked down at the small bright figure in his palm. "I will give him

back. By the rules, you have earned it. But listen, because no one else will tell you. You asked for his father's eyes. You asked for a kingdom. You asked for sons. Not once, on this whole road, did you ask what he wanted." "He wants to live," I said. "Everyone wants to live." "Does he?" said Death, gently. "You did not look. He came with me without a word. He did not look back once. Not at the forest, not at the

hermitage, not at you." He held out his hand. "Here. Take him. I can return what I took. I cannot return what he has seen." He set the little bright thing in my cupped hands. It was weightless, and it was warm, and it did not move toward me. When I looked up the road was gone, and I was sitting on the forest floor with my husband's head in my lap, and the light had gone gold and long, and somewhere a koel was calling, out of season.

IV · The Return

He opened his eyes at dusk. "I slept so long," he said. He looked at the sky, then at me, and I watched him gather himself from a great distance, the way a diver comes up through deep water. "I dreamed. There was a dark man. He was leading me somewhere." "It was only a dream," I said. That was the first lie of my second life with him. I had thought, I suppose, that the lies would end when the secret did. We walked home through the night forest with a burning branch for a torch. He leaned on me at first, and then did not need to. He was very quiet. Once he stopped and stood listening to the dark for so long that I touched his arm, and he started, and smiled at me, and said, "Forgive me. It's so loud here. Have you ever noticed how loud everything is?" At the hermitage his father met us at the door, and his father could see. You know the rest, or the song's version of it. Within a month messengers came from his father's lost kingdom: the usurper had been overthrown by his own ministers, and they wanted their old king back. We left the forest on an elephant hung with silver bells. My father in the river country, an old man by then, had sons born to him one after another, as though the queen's womb had been unlocked with a key. And I bore children, Ritam's children, so many and so easily that the midwives began to make signs against the evil eye when I

called for them. Everything was exactly as it had been granted. Nothing was left out. Death keeps his accounts.

And my husband was kind. I must say that first, because it is true, and because everything else I say will seem to contradict it. He was kind to me every day of his life. He was a good king, patient with petitioners, fair in judgment, loved in the markets. He held our children as tenderly as he had once held the clay horses. He never raised his voice to me. But he did not sing anymore. I noticed it in the second month. In the third I asked him, and he looked surprised, as though I had asked why he no longer did something he had done as a child. "Did I sing?" he said. "I suppose I did." And he went back to the window, where he spent more and more of his evenings, watching the river. He had stopped being afraid of things. In the fifth year a cobra came into the nursery, and while the nurses screamed he crossed the room, lifted it on a staff, and carried it into the garden, and his face while he did it was perfectly calm. Not brave. Calm, the face of a man moving a cushion. Another time he fell from a horse and broke his collarbone and lay on the ground laughing softly, not at the pain, I think, but at how little it mattered. And he had stopped wanting things. That was harder to see, because it looked like contentment. He never asked for anything. He never made plans. The young man who could not stop saying when the rains come and when we are old had become a man who lived entirely inside the day he was in, who received each morning the way a guest receives a dish set before him: with thanks, without hunger. He loved me. I am certain of it. But he loved me the way one loves a lamp in a house one is leaving. Tenderly, and from the door. I tried to bring him back. That is the shameful part, or one of them. Having fetched his body out of Death's own hand, I set about fetching the rest of him, as though he were a room I could refurnish. I arranged music in the evenings. I took him to the old forest, to the hermitage, to the stream where he used to name the birds. He came willingly. He named

them when I asked. His voice was perfectly pleasant, and nothing in it was his. Once, very late, when the children were asleep and the lamps were low, I asked him outright what he had seen. He was silent

so long I thought he would not answer. Then he said, "Have you ever stood in the forest just after a long rain stops? Not the moment it stops. A little after. When the last drops have finished falling from the leaves, and nothing has begun yet. No birds. No wind. And you stand there and you understand that the noise was never the world. It was only the rain." "And that is what it was like?" "No," he said. "But it is the nearest thing." "Do you miss it?" He turned and looked at me then, really looked, and for the first time in years I felt him looking from close by rather than from very far away. And in his eyes there was such compassion, such grief, that I understood the question had been cruel, and that he was sparing me the answer. "I'm here," he said. "Isn't that what you wanted?"

V · The Reckoning

He found the cord in our thirtieth year. I had kept it. I could not have told you why. It lay at the bottom of a sandalwood box among the things a queen does not wear: the bark cloth from the hermitage, a clay horse with heron's legs, a lock of hair from a child we lost. I suppose it was a kind of evidence, and one keeps evidence even against oneself. Perhaps especially then. He was looking for something else, a letter. He found the cord and drew it out and held it to the window, and the knots ran down it like beads on a mala, and he counted them, because he too had been taught to count. I was standing in the doorway. I watched him reach the end. I watched him understand. He did not turn around for a long time. "From the beginning?" he said at last. "The Traveller told my father the day I chose you. One year." "And you married me anyway." "Yes." "And you did not tell me." "No." He laid the cord across his knees and smoothed it with his thumb, knot by knot, the way his father used to read with his fingertips in the years before his eyes came back. "All that year," he said. "Every time I said next year. Every time I talked about the roof. You were letting me talk." "I wanted you to be happy."

"I was happy." He said it simply, without accusation, and it was worse than any accusation. "I was happier than I have ever been. And it was not real. It was a room you built around me, and I lived in it and

thought it was the world." I came and knelt before him. Over thirty years I had prepared a great many speeches for this moment, and I could not find one of them. "I could not give you your death," I said. "I could not stand in that hut and hand it to you like a bowl of rice." "No," he said. "You kept it. You kept it for a year, and then, when it came, you spent it." He looked at me. "Do you know what I remember from that road? I remember the quiet, and the dark man's hand, which was not unkind. And I remember that I was not afraid. For the first time since I was a boy, I was not afraid of anything. I was going somewhere, and I did not have to carry anything, and it was all right." His voice did not shake. "And then I heard you behind us. Arguing. You were so clever. You were winning. And I remember feeling, Arunima, the gods forgive me, I remember feeling ashamed for you." I put my face against his knees. The cord was there against my cheek, its small hard knots. "Did you want to come back?" I asked. "Tell me the truth. You never lie. Tell me." His hand came down onto my hair. It stayed there a long time. "I don't know," he said. "That is the truth. I came back. I have loved you every day since. I have loved the children. I have tried. Isn't that enough? Why must you also know whether I wanted it?" Because I must know whether I saved you or only kept you, I thought, and did not say, because I already knew he could not tell me. He did not know either. That was the last thing Death had taken, and the one thing he had not offered to return: the knowledge, on either side, of what the other had truly wanted.

He did not leave me. Men in songs leave; he was not in a song. We lived twenty more years together, courteous and gentle with each other, sleeping side by side. He never spoke of the cord again. I never asked again. Sometimes in the evenings I would find him at the window with his hand open on the sill, palm upward, as though waiting for something very small to be set in it. He died at seventy-one, in his sleep, in the hot season. I was beside him. I woke in the night and the room held that quiet he had described, the quiet after the rain, and I knew before I touched him. I did not follow anyone that time. I sat with him until morning. I did not look toward the door to see who had come for him, whether servants or the master himself. I was afraid

that if I looked, I would see Ritam going, and that he would not look back, and that this time, at last, I would let him. So that is the story. You may set it beside the song. They sing that I loved him past death. That is true. They sing that I would not let go. That is also true. I have spent fifty years trying to separate those two sentences, as one might try to separate two threads twisted into a single cord, and I cannot do it. I cannot find the place where the love ends and the not letting go begins. Perhaps there is no such place. Perhaps that is what love is, in creatures like us, and the gods knew it when they made us, and that is why Death is so tired. The girls are singing again down by the river. There will be a wedding tomorrow. I hope the bride is happy. I hope no one tells her anything.