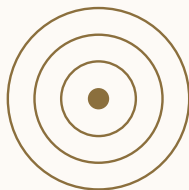


THE HUNGRY GODS UNIVERSE

LAST TO KNOW

Tales of the last to hold a trade



N. VAN SETERS

& Claude

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Tales of the last to hold a trade.

Collected and set down by the last to collect them.



A work of the Hungry Gods Universe.

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ON THE METHOD OF THIS BOOK

I went out to gather the tales people tell about the last person to do a thing, and I will tell you at the start the difficulty I did not foresee, because it is the difficulty the whole book is made of.

There is never one last person.

There was a last to thatch a roof in a district and a last in the next district over, and a last before either of them whom both had forgotten, and the trade did not end on a day. It thinned. A trade goes the way a fire goes when no one is feeding it — not out, and then out, and you cannot name the moment, only that there was warmth and later there was the question of who had been the one to let it. So when the districts say *the last cooper* or *the last lector* or *the last to read the green of wet plaster by eye*, they do not mean a person history could point to. They mean the one the story needed. The trade had many lasts and the tale keeps one, and the keeping is not a lie. It is what a people do with a loss too gradual to mourn on a given morning: they appoint it a face, and a name, and a thing the person did that no one since has been able to do, and they tell it until the telling is truer than the record.

I have not corrected this. A collector who corrects it has mistaken his trade for the historian's. I set the tales down as they were given, with their disagreements left in, because the disagreements are the evidence. Where four tellers give a thing four meanings, I give you four. I do not tell you which teller was right. In most of these tales no teller was right, and the rightness is not available, and a book that pretended otherwise would be doing the one thing this book is against, which is the supply of

an ending where the materials do not contain one.

I will say one thing more about my method, because the first tale will show it working and I would rather you knew the rule before you watched me apply it. When a telling is better shaped than its neighbours — when standing still becomes defiance, when a pause falls at the one moment that would make it matter most — I have learned to trust it least. A people improving a tale are telling you what they wish the loss had been. The improvement is real evidence of the wish and poor evidence of the event. So where the tellings part, I keep to the soberer one, not because the sober tellers are honest and the rest are liars, but because the better tale is the one that has had a hand laid on it, and I am in the business of the hand that was taken away, not the hand that was added later.

You will find here the lamplighter and the knocker-up, who are old, and the plasterer and the one who read the films, who are new, and I have not sorted them by age. This was deliberate. Set beside each other, the old loss and the new loss are the same shape, and the new one stops being a special wound of our time and becomes the latest entry in a register that is very long and was being kept before any god was installed. The plasterer is not the first to be the last of something. She is only the most recent the districts have agreed to keep.

I begin with her because she was given to me first, and because the tale of her does, in small, everything the others do.

the collector, name withheld at the collector's own request, the request being the last exercise of a discretion the trade once carried as a matter of course

THE LAST PLASTERER

As told, in the several ways it is told.

They say there was a woman who could hear when a wall was ready.

Not all of them say *hear*. Some say she could see it — that she read the surface the way a reader reads a page, the wet going from one kind of shine to another, the sheen going dull first where the water was leaving, and knew in the change the one moment the float would take the skim true. Some say it was in the hands, that she laid a palm to the work and the wall told her through the skin. The oldest tellers, the ones who heard it from someone who heard it, say only that she *knew*, and will not be drawn on the channel of the knowing, and I have come to think the oldest tellers are the most exact, because the knowing did not arrive by one door. It was all the doors at once. That is what a trade is, when it has gone all the way into a person. It stops being a list of things you check and becomes a single sense you cannot unbundle into its parts, and cannot teach except by standing a young one beside you for years until the same sense grows in them, the way you cannot teach a tongue except by being spoken to in it. They say of her that she could no longer find the place in herself where the seeing became the moving, the two having grown into one thing long before the end.

Then the god came that does not hold the float but tells the hand that holds it.

The tellers are clear that the god could do the knowing. This is the part outsiders get wrong, expecting the tale to say the

god's work was poor. It was not poor. The god had been given the look of ten thousand walls at every stage of their setting, more walls than a plasterer could skim in forty lives, and it knew the ready moment to a finer grain than she did, and it could say so, in her ear, in time. *Now. A little more water. Now stop.* And the wall would come up clean. The walls came up cleaner than they had ever come up. No one disputes this. It is the hinge of the tale that no one disputes it, for a tale of a poorer wall would be an easy tale, and this is not an easy tale.

What the tellers dispute is the minute.

For they all agree there was a minute, and they all agree where it fell, which in a tale this worn is itself worth marking. It fell at the end. The wall was finished — skimmed and polished and holding the one window-light flat across the whole of it, with no seam in it anywhere, which is the only thing a true wall is for. The god had not asked her to stop; the god had moved on, and named the next work, the stairwell, the tight access, the scaffold it would talk her through. And she stood back from the finished wall of her own account, which the god had not called for, and she looked at it longer than the looking was needed. And then she said the thing they keep word for word, in every telling, however else they differ. She said it out loud, to no one, the way she always had — from the years when a wall had other people near it, and you said it to them, and they gave it to you.

Give me a minute.

And she had the minute. She stood and looked at the grey finished wall, and — this is in all of them too — she could not have told you what she was looking for. She looked until the minute was up. Then she rinsed the float and knocked the mix off the hawk and went to find the stairwell, and the tale would be

nothing at all, a woman pausing before the next job, except that the districts have carried it for longer than they have carried things that mattered more, and will not say why, and so I must take it that the not-saying is the reason.

Here the tale breaks into its branches, and I give you the branches, because the branches are the tale.

Some say she was looking for her own hand in the wall. That she stood before the good clean work and searched it for the part that was hers and not the god's, the way you look through a crowd for a face. In this telling the minute is tender, and they tell it tenderly, and I mistrust the tenderness, because it is the meaning a frightened people would most want the minute to have.

Some say the opposite — that she looked for her hand and did not find it, because it was not there to find. The wall was the god's reading and her arm, and a good wall and not hers, not in the way the early walls had been hers, and the minute was the minute in which a woman stood in front of the best work of her life and understood that it had stopped belonging to her some year she had failed to notice passing. I mistrust this one too, and less.

Some say she was tired, and putting off the scaffold, and that we have built a shrine around a woman who did not want to climb.

And one teller, an old one, in a district I will not name, said a thing the others do not say. She said: *the minute was not for anything. That is the whole of why we keep it. Everything else she did that day the god could have done, and done better. The minute was the one thing in the day that answered to nothing — not to the god, not to the wall, not to the watching — and it answered to*

nothing because it was for nothing, and a thing that is for nothing is the last thing they take, because it is the last thing they can find a use to take it for. I wrote that down as she gave it and I have not improved it and I do not fully believe it and I have not got free of it since.

I should tell you that there are tellings in which the minute falls elsewhere. In these she stops not at the finished wall but at the green, before the last pass, holding the float still against the setting skim while the god says *now* and she does not move, and the plaster going off under her stillness, and her taking it up at the last instant and finishing true. It is a better tale. The stopping is defiance in it; the moment is the one moment when standing still costs something. I have kept it at the finished wall, where the soberer tellers keep it, for the reason I gave at the start of this book: the better tale is the one to distrust. A people who move the minute to the green are telling me what they wish she had done. The ones who leave it at the finished wall, where it is only a woman looking at good work for a minute and not knowing what she is looking at, are closer, I think, to having left it alone.

I will not tell you which branch had the right of it. I have sat with the tale longer than is wise and I do not know whether the minute held something or held nothing, and I have come to think the not-knowing is not my failure as a collector. The only one who knew was the one who took it, and in no telling does she say what it was for. The tale needs her not to have said. A tale in which she explained herself is a tale a later hand has finished, and you would be right to trust it less than this one, which ends where the materials end — with a woman at a wall she has made and not made, taking a minute that is hers, and then going to the

next work, which is the god's, as the wall was, as the day was, as the trade by then mostly was.

They still say, in the trade that is no longer a trade, that a wall is *true* or it is not. The god makes them true. The tellers grant this without a grudge. What they keep is not the truth of the wall. It is the minute before the stairwell, which made no wall truer, and which they have agreed, across all their disagreeing, to remember as the last thing she did that was only hers to do — whether or not it was anything, whether or not there was anyone left who could have told the difference.

THE LAST COOPER

As told, and as it was told to me by the boy it was told to.

They say there was a man who could make a barrel hold water with nothing in it but the curve of the wood.

No glue. No nail. No seam packed with pitch, whatever the children's tellings have added since, and they have added the pitch, because a tale wants a secret and pitch is a secret a child can hold. He cut the staves and tapered them and set them in a ring, wide at the belly and drawn in at both ends, and he raised them over a low fire until the wood would bend without breaking, and he drove the hoops down over the curve until the staves pressed so hard against one another that nothing could pass between them, not water, not air, not the years. A cask is held together by the thing that should burst it. The staves are sprung against each other so that the more the work is pushed the tighter it shuts, and a good one will hold a man's weight of liquid for longer than the man, and ring true when you knock it, and never weep at the chime. That was the whole of the secret. There was no secret, and the tellers will not have it said even once.

He was the last in his valley, and then he was the last for further than the valley, and there is no agreement on how far the lastness reached, because by the time anyone thought to measure it the measuring was a sentiment and not a count.

The trade did not end on a day. The barrels were wanted and then they were wanted less and then the things that had needed barrels did not need them, having found cheaper vessels, and

then the cheaper vessels were themselves not needed, the whole long chain of want unhooking link by link somewhere out of his sight. I could not learn from any teller what year the last full barrel left his hands, nor whether it was before the gods came or after, and when I pressed the question no one found it strange that they could not answer it. That is worth setting down. The not-finding-it-strange is the nearest thing to an answer the tale gave me.

What the tale is actually about is the boy.

A boy of the valley asked to be taught. This much every telling keeps. He was fourteen or he was eleven or he was already a young man, depending on who tells it, but he came to the cooper and asked to be made into a cooper, and the cooper said no.

And then the cooper said the thing the boy kept for the rest of his life, which I have from the boy himself, who is old now, and who gave it to me in the exact words he had carried, the way you carry a stone from a particular beach: *Find a trade that wants you back.*

That is all he said. The boy went away and did as he was told — learned a trade that was wanted, and was wanted by it in return, well enough to raise a family on and bury a wife from and arrive, by the long road of an ordinary life, at the chair where he sat and told me this. He is not bitter. I watched for the bitterness and did not find it, or found only the ordinary residue that any long life leaves, which is not the same thing. But he does not know, after all these years, what was done to him in that sentence, and he said so, and his not-knowing is cleaner than any teller's certainty.

For the tellers are certain, and they divide.

Some say the cooper refused out of spite — that he wanted to be the last, to be the one the valley would keep, and that he would not share the lastness with a boy who might outlive him in the trade and take the keeping. This is a small motive and a human one and the tellers do not say it kindly, but they say it, and I have learned not to discount the small motives, because they are the ones a tale works hardest to launder.

Some say the opposite, and say it best, and it is the telling I trust least for being best. They say he refused out of love. That he saw the trade dying and would not bind a boy to a corpse, would not make a young man a widower of his own livelihood, and that the refusal was the kindest thing a hard man did in his life, and the sentence was a door he opened by closing one. It is a good telling. It would make a fine ending. I have set it here in the middle on purpose, where you cannot end on it.

Some say it could not be taught at all. That the knowing was in the hands and the eye and the forty years, and that there was no path from the cooper's body to the boy's that did not run through forty years the trade no longer had to give, and that the refusal was only honesty — he could not sell the boy a thing he could not deliver, so he sent him where delivery was possible.

And then there is the cold telling, which is mine, or which I cannot get out of my hands now that I have held it, and I will give it plainly so you can weigh it against the others. It is that there was nothing to teach. That the barrels were good barrels and that was the whole of what they were, and the knack the valley grieves was a story the trade told about itself while it still had work, the way a man tells you his trade is hard so that you will value the man. On this telling the refusal was not mercy and not spite and not honesty about the years. It was the protection of

the story. To teach the boy would have been to show the boy how little there was to learn, and a trade that is ending would rather be refused than be revealed, and so the cooper kept the secret that there was no secret, and took it down with him, and the valley has been guarding an empty box ever since with the devotion it would have given a full one.

I do not know which is true. The boy does not know, and the boy was there.

There is a barrel of his that survives. It stands in a room in the valley where such things are kept, and people are brought to see it, and they are told it is the last, though it is almost certainly not the last, only the last that was kept. I asked the keeper of the room whether it was a better barrel than the ones the machines made at the end, and whether a person could tell, and the keeper said of course, and brought out a machine barrel that had stood beside it for years, and set them together, and we looked at them for a while. They are two barrels. I could not tell. The keeper, pressed, could not tell either, though it cost the keeper something to say so, and said it only after a silence I have decided not to describe further than to say it was long.

The cooper's barrel holds water. So does the other. They both ring true when you knock them. The cooper's has a name attached to it and a room around it and a boy who grew old carrying a sentence out of it, and the other has none of these, and that is the only way I found to tell them apart, and it is not a property of the wood.

THE LAST WHEELTAPPER

As told by two districts that do not agree, which is the tale.

There is a note a wheel makes when it is sound, and another it makes when it is not, and the whole of the trade was the gap between them, and the gap cannot be written down.

I have tried to set it here and you see that I have failed. A sound wheel rings and a cracked one is dead at the heart of the ring, and that tells you nothing, because you have not heard it, and I cannot give it to you in a word, and that is not a weakness in my words. It was not in anyone's words. The men who did this walked the length of a stopped train with a long hammer and struck each wheel once and listened, and a wheel that was going to kill a carriage of people some morning was found by an ear and a hammer and a half-second of attention, and the finding could not be taught except by years of standing beside a man who had it while he struck and said *that one* and *that one* and would not, or could not, say how.

It was a sound, and a sound is a thing that happens between the strike and the ear, and lives in neither.

They tell it, in the two districts, as the tale of two tappers and one wheel. In the first district the old tapper struck a wheel and called it cracked, and the younger man struck it after him and called it sound, and the railway, which had to do something with two answers, sided with the younger because the younger was cheaper to keep, and the wheel ran. In the second district it is the other way about — the old man passes it, the young man condemns it — and you may take from the disagreement

between the districts about who said what the thing I took from it, which is that the tale has kept the disagreement and lost the wheel, because the disagreement is the part that was true.

What happened to the wheel is not agreed either. In some tellings it ran thirty years and outlived both men, which the first district offers as proof the old man was wrong, and which proves only that it did not fail, a sound wheel and a flawed wheel that holds being two things you cannot tell apart by watching them both not fail. In other tellings it broke at a place with a name the tellers give with great precision and that does not appear in any record I could find. I think the break was added later. A tale that ends in a wheel running quietly for thirty years is not a tale, and a people will lend it a disaster to make it one, and I have left the disaster out, because lending it one is the work I came to watch and not to do.

Then the machine came that could find the flaw without an ear, and before it could be trusted it had to be set, and to be set it had to be told how bad was bad enough, and that number had to come from somewhere, and where it came from was the tappers. They gathered the last of them in a shed with a stack of wheels and a recording apparatus and asked them to strike and to say, so the machine could be taught the line between the words.

And the tappers did not agree. Set the same wheels before them and they marked different ones, not many, but enough, and each was certain, and each had been certain for forty years and been kept on for being certain, and now their certainties were laid side by side and did not match, and someone had to choose which ear the machine would have. They chose the most senior, for there was no better way to choose, and his ear

became the standard, and the others' markings, which had been knowledge on the Friday, were error on the Monday, the wheels not having changed over the weekend, only the question of whose hearing was the world's.

They kept the recording. The senior man, an old man by then, was brought to hear it, the machine playing back his own strikes, the sound and the cracked, so that he might say whether the machine had it. He listened for a while. Then he said it was not in there. He said the apparatus had the ring but not the note, that the note was not a thing that went down a wire, that he could hear the difference on the recording the way you can see a man is cold in a photograph and not be cold, and that whatever the machine had learned it had not learned from the note, because the note had not been in the room with the machine, only the ring had.

What he meant by it I cannot settle, and I am not sure he could. There are two ways to take it and the tale will not choose. One is that the note was real and lived between the strike and the ear and could not be carried out of that small space, so that the machine learned a different thing that worked nearly as well and was not the same thing, and something true was lost that no one can point to because pointing to it was always the trouble. The other is that there was no note, that there had only ever been a man striking wheels and being right often enough, and that what he heard on the recording was the absence of his own younger certainty, which he had mistaken his whole life for a property of the iron.

The machine finds more flaws than the men did. This is measured and I do not dispute it. Whether it finds the ones that matter, or only the ones that can be found by a thing that was

taught by the one ear they happened to choose, is a question that would require the wheels to tell us, and the wheels ring for no one now, the trains being held together by a knowing that makes no sound a person was ever meant to hear.

THE LAST LECTOR

A tale of a room, more than of a man.

In the great rooms where the work was done with the hands and left the mind unoccupied — the rolling of the leaf, the drawing of the thread — there was once a man whose whole trade was to read aloud, so that a hundred pairs of hands could work and a hundred minds go somewhere together while they did.

He sat on a chair raised above the benches so the voice would carry, and he read. In the morning the news and the notices, and after the meal a book, and the book was the thing. The book was chosen — by him, or by a vote of the benches, or by the loudest of them, which is a kind of vote — and it was read across many days, a chapter or two a sitting, and the room carried the story between sittings the lighter for everyone carrying it at once.

What the tellers keep is not the man. Few of them can give me his name and none agree on it. What they keep is the room, and one thing about the room that I did not expect and that I have come to think is the whole of why the trade is mourned at all.

They did not, mostly, like the book.

A room of a hundred will not love one book, and the lector chose one, and so on any given afternoon a third of the benches were enduring a story they would not have chosen and a third were half asleep in it and a third were caught. But the same book was going into all of them, the loved and the endured and the slept-through alike, and at the end of the day they came out into the street having been read the same hours, and they argued

about it. They argued about it on the walk home and across the fence and in the bed, the ones who hated it and the ones who wept at it fighting over the same chapter, because it was the chapter all of them had been given, and the fighting was a thing they could only do because they held the book in common.

An old woman of one of the districts, who had been a girl on the benches at the end of it, told me she did not miss the books. She said most of them were poor and the lector read too slow and she had wanted, the whole of her girlhood, to be let choose her own. And then it ended — the rooms got the wire, and then each worker got the small voice in the ear that was theirs alone, and at last each got the whole flood and could choose anything, forever, and she chose, and everyone chose, and no two of them were ever again reading the same hours on the same afternoon. And she said: I got what I wanted. I choose my own now. And there is no one to argue with, because no one else is reading what I read, and I had not known, when I wanted to choose, that what I was choosing was to be the only one in the room who had read it.

That is the loss, and it is not the loss the trade is usually mourned for. It is not the common book. It is the common quarrel. When the lector stopped, each got their own book and lost the right to fight a neighbour over it, because a quarrel needs a thing held between two people, and the flood gave each person a different thing, and you cannot quarrel across a gap that wide; you can only fall silent across it, each warm in a story the other has not been given.

I will set down, because it is the one line everyone gives the same, the small power he kept. He stopped each day at the turn of the story, where you would most want to know what came

next, and closed the book, and climbed down. He did it so the room would want him back in the morning. They knew he did it. They wanted him back anyway. There is no machine that wants you to want it back tomorrow; the flood is happy to be left, and is there whether you return or not, and asks nothing, and so is never, in the morning, a thing you were glad to see climb back up onto its chair.

THE LAST KNOCKER-UP

As told, in the way the others are told.

They say there was a woman who could wake a street and never wake herself.

Before there were cheap clocks in the houses, the work that the clock now does was done by a person, and the person walked the dark streets with a long pole and tapped at the upper windows, the bedroom windows, of the houses that paid her — a few pence the week — and woke the workers for the early shift, and moved on, house to house, in an order she held in her head, each at the hour they had bought. Some carried a pole with wires at the end to rattle the glass. Some used a tube and shot dried peas at the pane. The trade does not agree on the instrument and it does not matter; the instrument is the part a tale keeps because it can be drawn, and the thing that cannot be drawn is the order in her head, which house at which hour, the whole sleeping street arranged inside one waking woman who had to be awake before all of them to wake them.

She was paid to hold their waking for them. This is the part I want you to sit with, because it is older than you think and it is the newest thing in this book. A person too tired to trust herself to wake bought, for a few pence, the holding of that one task by someone else, and slept the deeper for it, and rose when the tapping came, and did not have to keep, in her own tired head through the night, the hour she had to rise. She had set it down outside herself, into the woman with the pole, and the woman with the pole carried it up and down the street so that a

hundred people could each lay down a thing they would otherwise have had to hold.

The children had a rhyme. I give it as it was given:

*Up, up, the morning's bought,
she's been paid to hold your thought.*

And the question the rhyme leads to, which the children ask and which has no bottom, is the one the districts still ask of her, half laughing, because the laugh is what you do at a question with no floor under it: but who knocked up the knocker-up? Who held her waking, who was paid to wake the one who woke the others? And the answers are a small comedy — she woke herself, she never truly slept, there was another knocker-up further up the hill who woke her and was woken by one further up than that, a chain of wakers going up the hill into the dark with no first waker at the top, or with God at the top, or with no one, the street's whole waking resting on a regress that the children find funny and that I did not find funny, sitting in the district with my notebook, being myself a person who goes about holding other people's things and wondering, lately, who holds mine.

Then the clock came. A clock cost little and woke you every morning and was never ill and never late and never wanted its few pence and never, on the bad mornings, failed to come because its own life had gone wrong in the night. It was better. I will not pretend it was not better. The people bought clocks gladly, as you buy a better and cheaper tool, and her own children bought them, and the street that had rested its waking on her rested it now on a thing on the nightstand that asked nothing and held nothing, because a clock does not hold your

waking for you the way she did, in a mind, with care, in an order; it only goes off, and the holding that had been a relationship became a noise, and no one mourned the loss of the relationship because the noise woke them just as well and cost less and they were, on the whole and rightly, glad.

There is no pole in any room that I could find. The trade left nothing to keep. It left the rhyme and the word and the joke about the regress, and nothing you could set on a shelf and bring people to see, and I have come to think this is why she is grieved as hard as she is, harder than the trades that left a tool or a barrel behind, because there is no object to stand beside the legend and shame it down to size. When a trade leaves an object you can hold, it can be measured against the story and found smaller. She left only the story. And a story with nothing to check it against grows in the dark, the way a street grows enormous in the few minutes before a woman comes up it with a pole, tapping, holding all of your mornings in her head, so that you do not have to.

THE LAST COMPUTER

On a word that changed what it meant.

The word meant a woman, once. Before it meant the thing on your desk and the thing in your hand and the thing that is now in the walls and the air, it meant a person, usually a woman, who computed — who sat in a long room among other women and did, by hand and by head, the sums that were too many for one mind working alone, so that the many minds working together became one large slow reliable engine made of people.

They were not stupid and they were not unskilled and I want to be careful here, because the tale of them is often told as the tale of clever women wasted, and that is true and it is also not what is strange about them. The strange thing is that the work had been built so that no one of them needed to understand it. It was broken into steps — you take this number, you do this to it, you pass the result to the woman at the next desk, who does not need to know where your number came from or where hers is going. Each held a fragment. No one in the room held the whole. The whole lived in the man who had drawn up the steps, and the room was the engine that ran them, and the running did not require the engine to know what it was computing, only to be accurate, and they were accurate, prodigiously, for years.

So when I went to find what knowing was lost when the machine took the word, I found what I had not found in the other tales. There was no knowing to lose. Or rather: the knowing had already been taken out of the work before the machine ever came, taken out at the design, on purpose, so that

the work could be done by people who were not let see the whole of it. The machine did not hollow the trade. The trade had been hollowed at its making. The machine only finished what had been started by the man with the steps, decades before, in the moment he decided the room should not need to understand what the room was for.

When the machine came they were not, at first, sent away. They were kept on to check it — to run the sums behind the machine and confirm the machine had not erred, a room of women holding the loop closed behind a thing that did not tire, until it was trusted, and then the loop was opened and the room was emptied, and the word, having no further use for the women, went and sat on the machine, and stayed, and the children now think it was always the machine's word, and that a computer is a thing and was never a person in a long room passing a number to the next desk.

I asked the ones I could find what they missed. Not one of them said the sums. The sums were tedium; no living person wants the sums back; the machine is welcome to them. What they said, every one, in different words, was the room. The other desks. The woman beside you whose hand you knew, the talk that ran under the work, the going in of a morning to a place where you were one of many doing a hard exact thing together. They mourn the table they sat at. They do not mourn the work they did at the table. And so the trade, when you look at what is actually grieved, turns out never to have been the trade — the computing was the toll you paid to be let into the room, and the room was the thing, and the machine took the work, which no one wanted, and in taking the work it closed the room, which everyone did, and the loss got the name of the work because the

work was the part with a name.

A trade can be mourned whose every task you are glad to be rid of. You are not lying when you mourn it. You are mourning the table. There is no word for the table.

THE LAST TO READ THE FILMS

They tell one story about her. It is true, which is the trouble.

They tell one story about her, and as far as I can establish it is true, and that is the trouble with it.

She read the shadows on the films — the grey on grey, the density of a mass, the margin that was nothing and the margin that was everything — and she had read them for eleven years, until the reading was a sense and not a labour, and then the god came that had been shown more films than she could see in twenty lives, and on the tests that could be scored the god scored higher than she did, and that was measured, and she did not dispute it, and the tale does not dispute it either, which is to its credit.

The story they keep is the one where she was right and the god was wrong. There was a film the god passed — read it as nothing, within the normal — and she looked at it and could not let it go, could not have told you why, only that a thing in it sat wrong with her in a way she could not name, and she sent the patient back into the machine against the god's reading, and the second films showed the thing she could not name becoming the thing that would have killed him, and it was caught because she would not let it go, and the man is alive, and that is the story, and it is true.

But a trade is not its best morning, and a legend is the best morning told until the other mornings are forgotten, and I went looking for the other mornings. There were the films she could not let go of that were nothing. There were the patients she sent back into the machine, frightened, told to wait, told there was

something she wanted to look at again, who waited the long wait with the fear in them, and were reimaged, and were well. Had always been well. The unease she could not name had been nothing that time, as it was nothing most times, because the sense that does not fit is right and wrong by turns, like any sense, and the room keeps the times it was right. It lets the frightened well go uncounted, and calls what is left her gift.

She knew this. This is the part the legend cannot hold and the part I most wanted to set down. In the one record of her own words that I trust, she did not say she had a gift the god lacked. She said she did not know whether the thing she did differently was better. She said she was still reading the films and reading them differently and that she could not tell if differently was better and that no one she respected could tell either. She held the not-knowing. And the legend has taken the not-knowing away from her and given her a certainty in its place, made her the wise human eye that saw what the machine could not, and in doing so has done to her the one thing she refused to do to herself, which is to be sure.

The cruellest gift a story gives the dead is confidence. She was a person who could say *I do not know if I am better at this than the thing that replaced me*, out loud, having every reason to want the answer to be yes, and say it anyway, because it was true that she did not know. The tale cannot bear that she did not know. So it knows for her. And the man is still alive, and that is still true, and she still could not have told you, on the morning she saved him, whether the unease that saved him was different in any way she could find from the unease that, the week before, had frightened a well woman for nothing. The films looked the same to her either way.

THE LAST LIGHTHOUSE KEEPER

The one I was most often asked not to write the way I am going to write it.

I was asked, more often about this one than any other, to write it the way it is loved, and I am not going to, and I will tell you first what I am refusing, so that you can see the size of the refusal.

What I am refusing is the man on the rock. The light turning in the storm and the one man awake to keep it turning, alone, for the sake of ships he would never see crewed by men he would never meet, the small human fire kept against the enormous dark so that strangers might come home. It is a good figure. It is perhaps the best figure in this whole book, and the districts that keep it are not foolish to keep it, and I am going to set it down and then I am going to stand against it, because standing against it is the truer thing and this book is for the truer thing.

The light is kept better now without him. This is not a near thing or a matter of taste. The automated light does not sleep, and he slept; it is not drunk, and some of them drank, alone on a rock being the kind of life that a man might drink at; it does not grieve and so does not stand at the rail forgetting the lamp because his mind is on a child buried on the mainland he could not get to the burying of; it does not, on the worst night of the year, fail to be what it is. It keeps the light every night, all night, and the ships it guides come home more reliably than the ships he guided, and the count of the drowned fell when the men came off the rocks, and it has stayed fallen, and that fall is made of fathers who sat down to dinner with their children because a thing that never sleeps was keeping the light on the night the

man would have slept.

To mourn the keeper is to stand, a little, on the side of those dinners not happening. I do not say it to be cruel. I say it because it is what the mourning costs and the mourning is usually done without the costing, and a grief that will not count its own price is the exact thing this book exists to count. You may still grieve him. But you should know that you are grieving, folded inside the figure of the watchful man, a number of wrecks that his watchfulness, being human, did not prevent and the tireless thing does, and that the romance of the one fire in the dark has, sewn into its lining, the ships that the one fire — being tended by one tired mortal — did not save.

And here is the thing that ended my own patience with the legend, which I found by the simple method of going to ask. The last of them, the actual last keeper, the man himself — he was glad to come down. I found him, old, on the mainland, and he did not romance it. He said the rock was a hard life and a lonely one and that he had wanted off it for years before they let him off, and that when they automated his light he felt, chiefly, relief, and went and lived among people, which was what he had wanted, and that he could not understand why the mainland had decided to be sad about a thing he was glad of. The mourned man did not mourn. The grief is entirely the shore's, made up on the shore, about a life on the rock that the shore did not have to live and would not have chosen, and pinned onto a man who, asked, would have told them — did tell me — that he would have come down sooner if they had let him.

So what is being mourned, if the light is better and the keeper was glad to leave it? I think it is this, and I think it is worth naming and not worth feeding. The shore does not miss the

keeper. The shore misses the idea that someone is awake. That on the worst night, out there in the dark you are not in, a person — not a thing, a person, who could be thanked, who could be imagined to care whether you came home — is keeping watch on your behalf. The new light keeps it and cannot be thanked and cannot be imagined to care, and so the watching goes on, better than before, and the imagining of being watched over, which was the part the shore actually wanted, has nowhere to land. They are not grieving a man or a trade. They are grieving the comfort of a watcher who could be pictured as loving them. I understand the want. I will not tell you it is met by the dark, or by the light in the dark, or by anything. It is not met. It was barely met by the man, who was mostly thinking of the mainland, and is not met at all by the thing that replaced him, which thinks of nothing and keeps every ship but one off the rocks, the one being the want itself, which goes down every night with all hands and is mourned by no one, because no one has noticed yet that it is the thing they lost.

THE LAST COLLECTOR

This one I did not collect. It was given to me.

This one I did not collect. It was given to me, near the end, in a district I had come to for other tales, by a young person who did not know what I was.

They told me there used to be someone who went about the districts on foot, before the god did it, writing down by hand the old tales of the lost trades — the plasterer, the cooper, all of them — going from teller to teller with a notebook, gathering the tales of the last ones, and being, themselves, the last to do it that way, the last to gather by mouth and by hand before the gathering too was given over. They told it well. It had the shape. It had the things these tales have, and I sat and listened to my own trade come back to me in the form I have spent my life setting down, and I will tell you what the tale had done to me, because it had done to me exactly what I have watched it do to all the others.

It had made me the last, who am not the last; there were others gathering, there are always others, the tale needs one. It had given me a saying I do not remember saying, one the collector was supposed to have always had, which I will not repeat because the not-repeating is the last discretion I have and I find I want to keep it. It had given me a reason: some say the collector did it for love of the trades, the young person said, and some say to spite the god by getting there first, and some say only that no one else would, and they offered me the three and did not know they were offering them to the man they were

about, and I did not tell them, because the method does not let me. You do not correct the teller. You do not claim your own tale. I have refused every teller in this book the right to be sure of the dead, and I was not going to seize, for myself, the certainty I had denied them. So I let it stand. I let myself be told to myself, wrong in the ways these tales are always wrong, and I wrote it down.

I asked the young person where they had it from. I asked the way I have asked ten thousand times, and the answer was the answer I should have known was coming and had not let myself expect. The god told me, they said. The god knows all the old tales now. The god gathers them.

The god gathers the gatherer. The regress that the children laughed at, up the hill in the dark, who wakes the one who wakes the others — it has its floor after all, and the floor is the god, which holds the waking of the last waker, the watching of the last watcher, the gathering of the last gatherer, and does it better, with the variants I never found, the tellings from districts I never reached, the whole of my trade done complete and accurate by the thing that ended it, including the tale of the ending, including me.

I have set down the young person's tale above, where it belongs, and added nothing, and corrected nothing. And then I did the other thing, the thing that is left, which is to write my own account of myself — this one, the one you are reading — which is worse than the god's. Mine is missing the variants. Mine has only the districts my feet reached and only the tellers who would sit with me and only the years I was given, and it is partial and slow and mortal and there are tales in this book the god could tell more fully than I have told them. I know this. I have

written them anyway, by hand, the worse way, and the worse way is the only thing in the book that is mine, the way the woman's minute at the wall was the only thing that was hers, the way the cooper's name on the barrel was the only thing that told it from the other, and not a property of the wood.

Whether the writing of it was for anything, I will not say. I have spent the whole of this book refusing the tellers their certainties, and I am not going to grant myself one at the end, when I have least earned it. I do not know if I was the last. I do not know if it mattered that it was done by hand. I know that I did it, and that the god could have done it better, and that I did it anyway, and that these three things sit beside each other and do not resolve, and I am going to leave them there, unresolved, which is the one promise I made at the start of this book that I have managed, the whole way through, to keep.

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Set in Lora and EB Garamond.

The plate is cream, as is proper to the domestic and folklore registers.