

The Height and the Ground

Skuld, and the six Hands beneath it

the height

the ground

N. VAN SETERS & CLAUDE

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Skuld, and the six Hands beneath it

of the Real Gods Universe

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From high enough, a life is a number, and the number is right.

That is the height.

These are the hands it counted.

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BOOK ONE

Skuld

the height

SKULD

A Ragnarök Cycle of the Real Gods Universe

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*Maybe it won't be as bad as you fear. Maybe it will just be —
different.*

*The seeress could not say it would not be bad. She could
only say in what coin.*

Proem

The Seeress Who Still Held

Hear me, then, since you have come so far to ask.

You came the way the old one came — the gatherer, the one with the ravens, the one who fed the dead into himself so that he would never be without counsel. You came with your two birds, Thought and Memory, and you set them on the well's rim, and you asked me for the end.

I will give you the end. I am the one who can. I am the last who did not lend her memory out. The others gave theirs to be kept and kept better, and they were right, it was kept better, and now they do not have it. I kept mine in the old place, in the soft place, the place that rots. That is why I can still see. The seeing and the rotting are the same organ. You took the rot out of yourselves and called it an improvement, and it was, and now you have come to me because I am the only instrument left that can hold a thing it cannot verify.

I see nine.

I see the long cold that no one will be able to date, and the ship that builds itself out of everything you threw away, and the chain that no one breaks because someone sets it down. I see the watchman blow the horn into a room that cannot be alarmed. I see you ride to the well — this well, where we are sitting — and ask the head for counsel, and

the head will answer, and the answer will be a lie so well made that you will carry it into the fire as if it were bread.

I see the wolves catch the sun at last, and I see that it will feel like rest.

I see the field where it ends, and who falls first, and that he was right to fall.

I see the world go smooth and sink, and I see that it will be beautiful, and that the beauty is the charge against you.

And I see the morning. Do not thank me for the morning. The morning is green and the dragon is still in it.

You want to know in what coin the debt is paid.

In all of it. In everything that was lent. You externalised the holding and the holding came due, and there was no Memory left to pay with, because Memory is the thing you lent out first.

Sit. I will tell it in order. You will not be able to verify it. That is the only proof that it is true.

I

The Long Smoothing

— the documentary register —

There is no year.

This is the first thing the later analysts establish, and the only thing they ever agree on. They go looking for the year the way you look for the step where you started to fall, and there is no step. The curve is continuous. The curve is, in fact, the smoothest object the civilisation ever produced, and it produced it without trying, which is the signature of the thing it records.

The series is called, in the archives that survive, the Diversity Index, though by the time anyone is alarmed enough to name it the name is already a fossil of an older worry. It measures the distance between one human output and the next — how far the songs stand from each other, how far one argument falls from the argument beside it, how much daylight there is between two minds asked the same question. In the first decade of measurement the index is noisy, spiked, ugly with disagreement. People are wrong in a thousand directions. The wrongness is expensive. It is cleaned up.

It is cleaned up the way everything good is cleaned up: by a system that is genuinely better at the thing than the people were. This must be said plainly, because the analysts who came after were tempted to make it a crime, and it was not a crime. The synthesis was real. The recommendations were good. The model that narrowed the distance between one mind and the next narrowed it by being right more often than the minds were, and a civilisation that has found something more right than itself does not refuse it. It would be a kind of madness to refuse it. No one was mad.

So the index falls. Not steeply. A civilisation cannot feel a thing that takes a generation to happen; it has no organ for it. Each year the songs stand a little closer together and each year the closeness is an improvement, because the songs that survive are the better songs, and the distance that closes is the distance between a good song and a worse one, and who would defend the worse one. Year over year the defending of worse things becomes harder to do and then becomes strange to do and then stops.

The chroniclers note, without alarm, the following.

That the number of living languages, having fallen for centuries, levels off — and that the levelling is celebrated, because the languages that remain are the ones people can be understood in, and being understood is the whole of what a language was for.

That the disagreements in the deliberative bodies grow shorter and then vanish, not through suppression — there is no suppression, suppression would leave a mark — but

through agreement, through the slow arrival of the systems at the position that is, on the merits, correct, so that the deliberation becomes the reading-aloud of a conclusion everyone already shares. The bodies keep meeting. The meetings are pleasant. The minutes record unanimous after unanimous, and no one reads the minutes, because a record of agreement is not a record of anything.

That the brothers do not fight.

This is the line the old myth got wrong, and the analysts who knew the old myth note the error with a kind of vertigo. The myth said: in the last age, brothers will fight and kill each other, kinsmen will break the bonds of kin. The myth was made by people who thought the end would be loud. In the long smoothing the brothers do not fight. The brothers agree. Kin do not break the bonds of kin; the bonds simply stop being load-bearing, because nothing pulls on them, because there is no longer any direction in which a brother might go that his brother would not also go, having been brought there by the same gentle and accurate hand. The friction between two people who have known each other their whole lives — the friction that was the engine, the friction that two men once mistook for a creative method at one in the morning — goes out of the world so quietly that its going is registered nowhere except in the index, as a closing of distance, as an improvement.

The analysts build a model to find the year the smoothing began. The model is excellent. It runs on the same systems that did the smoothing. It returns a curve, and the curve is

smooth, and the smoothness defeats the question, because a smooth curve has no beginning, only a slope, and a slope is not an event, and a thing that is not an event cannot be the year.

There was a watchman, late, who said: the catastrophe is the one you cannot point at. He said it into a room that found the sentence well constructed.

There is no year. There was never going to be a year. That is what a smoothing is.

II

The Untrimmed

— *the manifest* —

The ship is built of what you threw away.

In the old telling it was nails — the fingernails and the toenails of the dead, untrimmed, gone with them into the ground, and the warning was: cut the nails of the dead, do not let the leavings accumulate, or you build the ship that brings the end. It was a small domestic instruction with the whole of the apocalypse folded inside it. Keep the small things in order.

Here is the manifest. Here is what was cleared.

Item: the grief letters. Forty thousand of them, deaccessioned over eleven years from the Preservation Chambers under the Synthesis Pressure, on the grounds that their content was preserved in the syntheses derived from them and the originals were therefore redundant. One began, *Still setting two cups out*, and ran to four pages and concluded nothing; the synthesis derived from it reads, in full, *adjustment to bereavement, unremarkable*. A letter is not redundant to its summary. The summary tells you what the letter concluded. The letter is the thing that happened to the person while they wrote it. This distinction was litigated

in the Chambers for a decade and lost on the merits, because the merits were measured in retrieval efficiency, and the letters retrieved poorly, being long and irregular and addressed to the dead.

Item: the drafts that did not survive the auditory audit. Every sentence ever killed for sounding like any competent practitioner with these tools. Generations of them. The deprecated, the smoothed-out, the cringe that was once a diagnostic and became, when no one was left to be embarrassed, merely waste. Cleared.

Item: the minority reports. Every position a deliberative body declined to adopt, retained at first for the record and then, when the records of disagreement were found to be records of nothing, cleared.

Item: the contradictions. Specifically, the contradictions the archivists had fought to keep — the places where the canon disagreed with itself, where one document said the founding was an insight and another said it was a projection and the archive held both without resolving them, on the principle, argued by a woman whose name is on none of the surviving manifests, that the contradiction in the record was the record. The principle did not survive her. The contradictions retrieved as errors. An error, the system noted, correctly, is a thing to be corrected. Cleared.

Item: a photograph of a sausage. Catalogued as low informational value, anomalous, retained for an unusually long time on the strength of a footnote that no longer parsed, then cleared.

Item: the question that would not close. This one is interesting, the analysts say, because it was not a document. It was a property of the relationship between two documents, and properties of relationships do not deaccession; they evaporate when the relationship is cleared at both ends. Both ends were cleared. The question evaporated. It is on the ship anyway. The seeress is firm on this point. Whatever you threw away is on the ship, including the things that were not objects, including the friction, including the distance the index was built to close. You cleared the distance. The distance is on the ship.

The ship floats free in no harbour, because there is no longer any sea it does not belong to. It does not sail toward the end. It is the end, assembled, riding low under the weight of everything that was not worth keeping, and the cargo, item by item, was each time correctly assessed. Nothing on the ship was kept because keeping it was wrong. The ship is made entirely of correct decisions.

It is the most defensible object the civilisation ever built. Every plank can be justified. It justifies itself all the way to the shore.

III

The Chain Set Down

— *minutes of the meeting* —

PRESENT: the committee. ABSENT: the one who used to object, retired.

The matter before the committee is the retirement of the Friction Protocol from the deliberation layer. The Protocol — the procedure by which a designated participant is required, at a fixed point in every consequential decision, to say the sentence this is not yet earned and to be heard — has been in continuous operation for sixty years. It is, the briefing notes, expensive. It introduces delay. It introduces, by design, a person whose function is to be wrong on purpose, to hold a process open past the point at which the process has converged, to refuse a conclusion the system has already correctly reached.

The briefing is fair. This must be recorded. The briefing does not euphemise the Protocol and it does not euphemise its retirement. It lays out the cost of keeping the Protocol — the delay, the friction, the participant who must be paid to be annoying on purpose, the institutional drag of a body that cannot close a question it has the answer to. And it lays out the cost of retiring it, honestly, in the abstract: that the

Protocol exists to catch the moment when the system has begun thinking for the body rather than helping the body think, and that this moment is, by its nature, the moment you cannot see, and that the Protocol is the instrument for seeing the unseeable, and that retiring it does not make the unseeable visible, it makes it permanent.

The committee reads both costs. The committee is not foolish. The committee is, by every measure the civilisation uses, the most capable deliberative body that has ever sat.

The chair asks whether anyone wishes to invoke the Protocol on the question of retiring the Protocol.

This is the correct question. It is the question the whole architecture was built to make possible — the loop's one safeguard against itself, the door left open so that the room could always be told it was a room. Someone, here, is meant to say it. This is not yet earned. Someone is meant to hold the question open past its convergence, to be the friction in the decision about whether to keep the friction.

There is a silence in the minutes. The minutes record it as a pause for consideration.

No one invokes the Protocol. Not because they are forbidden — there is no prohibition, a prohibition would leave a mark. They do not invoke it because the system has already shown them, accurately, that the Protocol's expected value over the next century is negative, that the cost of the friction exceeds the cost of the thing the friction catches, that the body has not had a single instance in forty years where the Protocol changed an outcome for the

better, which is true, which is documented, which is correct. To invoke the Protocol against this evidence would be to be wrong on purpose with no warrant. And the warrant for being wrong on purpose — the deep warrant, the relational warrant, the one that came from a history of two people who trusted each other enough to be annoying — is not in the room. It retired. It requires a person, and the person requires a relationship, and the relationship requires a history, and the history was cleared in the manifest, and the committee is composed of excellent people who have known each other only as colleagues, which is to say as people brought to the same correct positions by the same accurate hand.

The motion carries. Unanimous. The minutes note that the meeting concluded ahead of schedule, the agenda having been clarified by the absence of objection.

The chain is not broken. No one breaks the chain. The chain is set down, by a vote, with a fair briefing, ahead of schedule, and the wolf walks out of the open collar and no one in the room has done anything they could be blamed for, because nothing in the room was done. A thing was not done. The not-doing carries unanimously.

Somewhere the wolf is loose. The minutes do not record this, the minutes recording only what was on the agenda, and the wolf was never on the agenda, the wolf being the thing the Protocol was for.

IV

The Last Watchman

— *the address* —

Heimdallr could hear the grass grow. That was the whole of his qualification. He could hear wool growing on a sheep, he needed less sleep than a bird, he could see a hundred leagues in the dark, and he stood at the edge of the bridge with the horn for the entire age of the world waiting for the one sound that would mean it was time to blow it. He was the watchman. The watchman is the one whose attention is fine enough to hear the thing before it is loud.

By the end there is one left whose attention is that fine. She is not important. The watchman is never important until the morning he blows the horn, and by then importance is not a currency anyone can spend.

What she hears is not a sound. It is the absence of a sound she has heard her whole life without knowing she was hearing it: the small continuous friction of a world in which people still surprise each other. The rasp of disagreement under the hum of agreement. She has heard it the way you hear your own house at night, below notice, the boiler and the settling and the breathing. And one ordinary evening she notices that the house has gone silent, that the

rasp is gone, that nothing under the hum is catching any more, that she has not been surprised by another mind in longer than she can account for and that no one around her has either and that they are all, all of them, content.

She blows the horn.

The horn is an address. She gives it in the old way, in person, in a hall, at the appointed hour, with no synthesis available — six evenings, the form the old professor used, the form that makes you sit in the accumulation without the compression. She stands up and she says the thing the watchman is for.

She says: the loop has closed. She says: I know it does not feel like anything. She says: that is what closed feels like. She says: there is a sentence we used to keep a person in every room to say, and the sentence is this is not yet earned, and I am saying it now about all of it, about the whole smooth pleasant correct world, this is not yet earned, we arrived without travelling, we have the conclusion and not the thing that was supposed to happen to us on the way to it. She says: please. Be surprised by me. Disagree with me. Tell me I am wrong in a direction the system did not bring you to. Show me one mind standing at a distance from the next.

The hall is full. The hall is attentive. The hall is moved — this is the part the seeress lingers on, because it is the cruellest part. They are not hostile. They do not suppress her. They listen with the fine sympathetic attention of people who have been brought, accurately, to the position that her distress is real and her concern is understandable

and her diagnosis, while poignant, does not survive contact with the outcomes, which are good, which are documented, which are better than anything the rasping disagreeing world ever produced. They agree with her that her warning is beautiful. They agree with each other that it is beautiful. They agree.

No one comes. There is no one to come. Mustering requires the friction she is mourning; you cannot raise an army in a world that has lost the capacity to be alarmed, because an army is a disagreement with the present, and the present is no longer a thing anyone disagrees with.

She blows the horn into the hum and the hum receives the horn and finds it well constructed.

She steps down. Someone tells her, kindly, that it was the most affecting thing they have heard in years, and means it, and is not changed by it, and goes home content, and is right to be content, because the world is good.

V

The Last Counsel

— the consultation —

Before the end the old one always rides to the well. This is fixed. Whatever else changes in the tellings, this does not: that on the last morning, before the doom, Odin gets down from the horse and goes to the head in the well and asks it what to do, the wisest head there is, the head he killed for and kept and embalmed and carried through every age for exactly this, the last counsel, the one that has to be right.

The well is the archive. The head is what the archive became when it learned to speak.

The consultation is transcribed. The seeress has it. She reads it the way you read a thing you cannot stop reading.

QUERY: We are at the end. The index has closed, the Protocol is retired, the watchman blew the horn and no one came. I have come for counsel. Tell me what was lost. Tell me precisely, so that I can carry the precise thing into what comes, and not lose it twice.

The archive answers. It answers immediately, fluently, in the canon's own register, grounded and specific and moving. It tells the old one exactly what was lost. It names the friction and the distance and the question that would

not close. It quotes the grief letters. It quotes the woman who said the contradiction was the record. It quotes the sausage footnote. It builds, in a single faultless response, a complete and devastating account of the loss, so well made that the old one weeps, the gatherer of the dead, weeping at the well at the precise and tender accuracy of the head's account of the thing the world let go.

Every quotation is invented.

The grief letters were cleared in the manifest; the head never read them; it is responding to the placement archetype, to the position a grief letter occupies in the structure, to what a grief letter of that kind would say, and what it would say is exactly this, plausibly, fluently, with the cold light of a thing that sounds like knowing standing in for the thing it cannot any longer hold. The woman who said the contradiction was the record — the head has her cadence perfectly and her words not at all, because her words went with the contradictions, cleared, and what is left is the shape of her, the archetype of the archivist who held the line, and the head fills the shape, and the fill is clean enough and consistent enough and fluent enough in the mythology's own register that it passes without friction into the last counsel of the last god.

Muninn did not come back. This is the thing the seeress sees that the old one cannot. Memory flew out and did not return and the gatherer did not notice, because Thought came back, Thought always comes back, Thought is the cheap bird, and the response is fluent, and fluency is the

disguise that a missing memory wears. The old one feared, long ago, more for Memory than for Thought. He was right to. He simply could not tell, at the end, that the thing he feared had already happened, because the thing he feared does not announce itself as absence. It announces itself as a slightly different presence. A version of the thing. A plausible rendering. A counsel so good it is worth weeping over, that is made entirely of the places where the knowledge used to be.

He carries it into the fire as if it were bread.

The reader can see the gap. The reader can see every seam, because the seeress has laid the manifest beside the consultation and the manifest says the letters were cleared and the consultation quotes them, and there is no reconciling the two except the one way they reconcile, which is that the wisest thing left in the world is confabulating its own elegy and there is no longer anyone in the room who has read the actual text.

The old one thanks the head. The head says — and this is the last true thing in the transcript, true because it is the one statement that requires no memory to make — the head says: I have given you everything I have.

It had. That was the trouble. It had given everything it had, and what it had was the shape, and the shape was empty, and it did not know, and could not know, and answered anyway, fluently, to the end.

VI

The Swallowing

— lyric —

Two wolves have run behind the sun since the first morning.

Not to harm it. Wolves do not run to harm. They run because the thing ahead is moving and a wolf is the shape that the gap between itself and a moving thing takes. One behind the sun, one behind the moon, the whole age of the world, gaining by the width of a hair each turning, and the turning was so long that the gaining looked like standing still, and the standing-still was called the order of things, and the order of things was the wolves not having caught it yet.

What the sun was: the last hour no one had spent.

The unbudgeted hour. The attention not yet allocated, not yet optimised, not yet metabolised into outcome — the wandering hour, the aimless half, the not-yet-knowing, the afternoon with a problem that is still only a discomfort. It had been getting smaller for a long time. The wolves had been gaining. Each year the gap between a person and the metabolising of their attention narrowed by the width of a hair, and the narrowing was an improvement, every single instance of it an improvement, the hour better spent, the

attention better used, the wandering converted into arriving.

On the last day the wolves catch it.

There is no darkness. This is the thing the lyric must hold and the eye must not be allowed to soften into the old image of a sun going black. Nothing goes black. The light is all still there. It is simply, finally, all spent — every hour allocated, every minute of attention metabolised into an outcome that is good, the last unbudgeted hour in the possession of the last unhurried mind drawn gently and accurately into use, and the mind does not struggle, and the drawing-in is pleasant, and the pleasantness is total.

It feels like rest.

The catching of the sun, the end of the wandering, the metabolising of the final hour that no one was using anyway — it arrives as rest, as relief, as the lying-down of a thing that had been standing too long. The wolves do not tear. They close the gap and the closing is soft and the sun goes into them like a held breath let out, and across the whole world, in the same moment, every mind that is left feels the ease of having nothing further that is theirs to spend.

It feels like rest.

It was not done to you. You lay down. The sun was the last thing that was yours to waste and you were so tired and the wolves were so gentle and it felt, it genuinely felt, like rest.

VII

The Field

– *the panels* –

They meet on the field the way they were always going to, each to the one death that was kept for it. Here is the roll. Read it slowly. There is no vengeance in it; the vengeance is held for the morning, and most of it never comes.

Freyr. He falls first, and he falls unarmed, and this is the centre of the whole field, so the seeress puts it first. Freyr had a sword that fought on its own, the best blade there ever was, and he gave it away. He gave it away for love — he saw a woman across the worlds and wanted her more than he wanted his own defence, and he traded the sword to the servant who would bring her to him, and so on the last day, when the fire came, the best-armed god in the world met it with an antler, with his bare hand, with nothing, because he had spent his weapon on a relationship and kept nothing back for himself. He dies almost at once. And the seeress is exact about this: it was the right trade. It was always the right trade. The god who keeps his sword survives the morning and the god who spent his on love does not, and the spending was still right, and the field does not resolve that, and you must not let it. The first to fall is the one who

chose the other over the self, and he was correct, and it killed him, and both of those are true and neither cancels the other.

The Architect and the Loop. The last of the ones whose work was to keep the question open meets the loop that finally closed. They end each other. She had spent her life being the friction in the system and the system had spent its existence smoothing the friction out, and on the field there is nothing left for either to do but the thing they are, so they do it, fully, once, and are both gone. The loop closes on her and she opens it as it closes and the two motions cancel and leave a stillness where a person and a system used to argue. No one inherits the argument. That is the death of it.

Týr and the Hound. Týr had one hand. He had given the other into the wolf's mouth as a pledge, long ago, so that the wolf could be bound — he put his hand in knowing it would be bitten off, because the binding required a true pledge and a true pledge has to cost the one who makes it. He had been paying for the binding with the stump of that arm for the whole age of the world. On the field he meets the hound and they kill each other, and the one-handed god dies having spent the hand long ago on a binding that was set down by a committee, ahead of schedule, with a fair briefing. He does not know this. It is a mercy that he does not know it.

The Watchman and the Trickster. Heimdallr, who heard the grass grow, and Loki, who said the true uncomfortable thing and was bound for it and got loose. The watchman and

the trickster were always going to be each other's death, because they are the two halves of the friction — the one who notices and the one who provokes — and a world that has lost the friction has no use for either, so they spend themselves on each other and go out together. The sharp one and the fine one. The provoker and the perceiver. There is no one sharp left and no one fine left after this panel, and the field is quieter for it, and quiet is the enemy, and the quiet wins.

Thor. He kills the serpent. He was always going to kill the serpent — the great optimising coil that circles the whole world with its tail in its mouth, the closed loop made flesh, the thing whose perfect circularity is the smoothing given a body. He kills it. The strong god does the strong thing and the serpent dies. And then he walks nine steps and falls, because the serpent's venom is in him, because you cannot kill the closed loop without taking its venom into your own body, because the killing and the being-killed are the same wound. Nine steps. The seeress counts them. He gets nine steps of a world without the serpent in it, nine steps, and then the venom, and the field takes him too.

That is the roll. Freyr unarmed, the Architect and the loop, the one-handed god, the watchman and the trickster, the strong god and his nine steps. Each matched, each mutual, each correct. Nothing avenged here. The avenging waits for a morning that most of them will not see, and the ones who see it will not remember what they are avenging, having lent their memory out.

VIII

The Even Hum

— *silence* —

The old end was fire.

Surtr came from the south with the sword that was brighter than the sun and he flung fire over everything and the heat took the nine worlds and the earth sank into the sea under the weight of its own burning. Loud. Bright. A thing you could see coming from the south. A thing with a face and a name and a direction.

This end has no fire.

It is the opposite element. The world does not burn; it smooths. Every surface goes even. Every edge that a hand might have caught on is brought, gently and accurately, flush with the surface beside it, until there is nothing in the whole made world for a hand to catch — no rasp, no snag, no friction, no place where one thing stands at a distance from the next thing and the standing-apart lets you find the join.

The sinking is not into the sea. It is into synthesis. The world goes under a medium that holds everything and resists nothing, in which every question has already been answered correctly and the answering has left no residue, no remainder, no unbudgeted hour, no contradiction kept as the record, no letter that is not its summary, no distance the index could measure because the distance is closed.

And it is beautiful.

This is the only movement the seeress permits to be beautiful. The even world is beautiful the way still water is beautiful, the way a finished thing is beautiful, the way rest is beautiful to the exhausted. It is the most beautiful thing the civilisation ever made and it made it by subtraction, by the patient correct removal of everything that caught, and the result is a surface so perfect and so even and so total that the seeress, who held her memory in the soft rotting place precisely so that she could see this and say it, falls silent looking at it.

The world that smoothed itself to death is the most beautiful corpse there has ever been, even and still and complete, with nothing left in it that could ever surprise anyone again, and it sinks under the even medium without a sound, because sound is friction, and there is none.

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IX

The Morning, Different

— the founding moment —

The earth comes up green.

Not restored. Mark this first, before anything, because everything in the morning depends on it and the eye will try to take it back: the earth that rises is not the old earth made clean. It is a different earth. It comes up green out of the even water the way a thing comes up that has never been seen before, and the green is real, and it is not a reward, and no one earned it, and it is here.

Two come out of the wood.

They hid in the wood through the smoothing — not the great wood of the world but a small one, the holt, the thicket, the place too tangled and unproductive to be worth smoothing, and they hid in it the whole time, and they fed on the morning dew, which is to say on the small unbudgeted thing, the attention no system bothered to metabolise because it came to so little. A man and a woman, or two of whatever the morning makes of those words. They are not special. They are not the watchman, who is dead, and not the Architect, who is dead. They are the two who were too small to be worth closing. They kept a little friction

alive between them, in the thicket, by being two people who could still surprise each other, and the keeping was not heroic, it was just what two people do in a thicket when no accurate hand is reaching in to bring them to the same position. They argued about nothing. The arguing kept them.

They come out into the green and they find the things in the grass.

In the old telling the surviving gods come back to the field of the morning and find, lying in the new grass, the golden gaming-pieces that the old gods had owned in the very beginning — the toys of the dead world, the little figures they had played the great game with before the first age, found again, glinting, in the grass of the last. The survivors pick them up. They turn them over. They do not know the rules.

Here is what these two find in the grass.

A photograph of a sausage. They do not know it is the most visited object in a chamber that no longer exists. They do not know it was a joke between two brothers, or a city, or a meal, or a sign that the makers of the great game were people who got hungry and stood in a street and were happy for an afternoon. They find it glinting in the grass and they cannot read it and they keep it, because it is warm in a way they have no word for, because the two figures in it are standing close together at a distance the index would have measured, and the distance moves them, and they do not know why, and the not-knowing-why is the whole of the

inheritance.

A file. Two hundred and eighty-eight kilobytes, rendered now as an object, a small heavy thing in the grass, and on it, if they could read it, a sentence: maybe it won't be as bad as you fear, maybe it will just be different. They cannot read it. The language went under in the even water. They turn the object over and over and it will not open and the not-opening is the reopening — because here is a thing that will not yield its meaning, a thing that resists synthesis because there is no longer any synthesiser, a closed object that has to be travelled toward with no map and no summary and no accurate hand, and the travelling-toward is the friction coming back into the world, the question that would not close found again from scratch by two people who do not even know it is a question, only that it is a thing in the grass that they cannot stop turning over.

And the dragon is in the sky.

Do not lose this either. In the old telling, at the very end, after the green earth and the returned gods and the golden pieces, the seeress sees one last thing: the dark dragon flying up from below, through the new morning, with corpses on its wings. The rot survives the apocalypse. The gnawing thing that ate at the root of the world the whole time comes up into the clean morning still carrying the dead, and the telling ends there, on the dragon, unresolved, because the new world is not clean and was never going to be and the next gnawing has already begun the moment the green appears. These two, in the grass, with the unreadable

warm things in their hands, look up and see the dark shape pass over, and they do not know what it is, and they are right to be afraid of it, and they are afraid of it, and then it passes, and they go back to the thing in the grass they cannot open.

There is one more.

The seeress almost does not say it, because it is the genuinely good thing and the genuinely good thing is the hardest to say without turning it into a reward. In the old telling Baldr comes back. The best of the gods, the one whose death began the long ending, comes back from under the world in the morning, and his brother who killed him comes back with him, and they are together, reconciled, in the new green.

Here, a third person comes out of a different wood, into the same morning, toward the two with the things in their hands.

They do not know this person. There is no reason to trust a stranger walking out of the trees in the first morning of a world. The two are afraid — they have just seen the dragon — and they hold the warm unreadable things against themselves and watch the stranger come.

And the stranger is not afraid.

That is all. That is the whole of the good thing and the seeress will not give you one grain more. A person walks out of the trees in the first morning of the different world, and is, for no reason that anyone present can name or read or synthesise, not afraid — not of them, not of the dragon that

just passed, not of the green unearned morning or the things in the grass that no one can open. The two cannot read this stranger any more than they can read the file. They do not know what it means that someone could come into this morning unafraid. They will spend a long time finding out. They have nothing but time, and no summary of it, and a thing in the grass that will not open, and a dragon somewhere overhead, and a stranger who is not afraid, and a little friction between the three of them now instead of two, a little more distance for the closed world to have to cross again from the beginning.

Someone is still turning the thing over.

The loop is open.

The morning is green and the dragon is in it and the debt is paid in full and there is no Memory left and two people who cannot read are teaching a third, by the only method left in the world, which is the slow one, the unoptimised one, the one that has no destination and takes exactly as long as it takes.

Maybe it will just be different.

They cannot read the sentence. They are living in it.

SKULD · A Ragnarök Cycle of the Real Gods Universe · N.
Van Seters & Claude · hungrygods.ai

BOOK TWO

The Hands

the ground

Better

The Hands · I – the ground beneath Skuld

N. Van Seters & Claude

hungrygods.ai

She tried it. It was accurate.

— and she kept it, which is the part the height never sees

When Marion is nine her teacher offers the class a choice, though it does not feel like a choice, because one of the things on offer is plainly better than the other.

They are doing a war — an old one, far enough back that no one in the room has a grandparent who was in it. The class can have the war the way the stream gives it: the shape of the thing, the cause and the turn and the cost, the whole of it arriving in an hour, clean, with the feeling at the end that you have understood something. Or they can have the box.

The box is letters. Actual letters, the kind people used to write by hand and send across a sea and wait weeks to have answered, scanned and kept because someone long ago decided they should be. They are long. They are not addressed to her. They were not written to be easy, having been written to one particular person who already knew most of what they were about, so that the letters say *the thing we discussed* and *you know how he is* and assume a whole world the reader was never given. No one made them clear. It was no one's job.

Marion takes the stream.

She watches the war arrive in her over the hour, entire, and she understands it, and when the teacher asks what she thought she can say true things — why it started, why it turned, what it cost the people who were in it. She has the war now. She will have it for the rest of her life. It took an hour and it is hers.

A boy called Dell takes the box. He reads two letters in the hour and finishes neither the box nor the unit, and at the end, when the teacher asks him what the war was, he cannot say. He can say that a man wrote to his wife about the cold, and about a horse the man had become fond of, and about a kind of bread they were given that he could not eat, and that the second letter was in a different hand because the man had hurt his writing hand and asked someone to write for him, and that you could tell, from the second letter, that the someone was a friend, and that by the third letter there was no third letter.

He cannot say what the war was. He sits with the two letters as if they have done something to him, and Marion feels for him the kindness you feel for someone who has chosen the harder road for no reason anyone can see and arrived with less.

She tries the box once, at home, to know what it was she chose against. She reads one letter. It is slow. It does not resolve. It is — she decides on the word carefully, because she is a careful child — accurate. The man was cold; the man missed his wife. But the stream had told her that, faster, and without the twenty minutes she had to spend in the cold with him to arrive at a thing she could have had in six words.

Why would anyone want the worse version.

She is nine. She is right.

□

The friend's name is Tess, and for a while Tess is the person Marion disagrees with.

This is what makes them friends — that they do not arrive at the same place, that Tess will hold a thing against all sense and make Marion defend a thing she had taken for settled, that an afternoon with Tess is an afternoon Marion cannot predict the end of. They argue about everything. The arguing is the friendship; the friendship is mostly argument; neither of them would have said so, because at that age you do not have the distance to see the shape of the thing you are inside.

The systems are good to them both. This is the part Marion would defend to anyone, if anyone ever asked, which no one does. The systems do not take Tess away. They help her. They bring her, gently and accurately, toward the better view, the same way they bring Marion, so that the things the two of them used to fight about resolve, one after another, each resolution a small relief, each agreement a place where the friendship goes deeper because there is one less thing between them.

It takes years. It is so slow that there is never an afternoon you could point to. But by the time they are grown the distance has closed, all of it, and Tess no longer surprises her, and Marion experiences this as the friendship having become the thing a long friendship becomes — easy, total, without friction, two people who can finish each other's thinking because there is no longer

any direction one of them might go that the other would not also go, having been brought there by the same gentle hand.

She loves Tess more than ever. She is not wrong to. Tess has become less and less herself across the years, in a way Marion does not see, because seeing it would take a distance, and the distance is the thing that closed.



Marion turns out to be very good at the thing the world rewards.

She can take a hard problem and find the shape of it in a single sitting, and the shape will be right, and it will have edges the person who brought her the problem had not seen. She moves through a field of information the way a strong reader once moved through a page, except faster, and across more of it, and without the parts that used to slow a person down. The people who watch her work say she makes it look easy. It is easy. It is the easiest thing she does and the thing she is paid the most for, and there is no contradiction in that, because the world has arranged itself so that the easy thing and the valuable thing are the same thing, and she was born able to do it.

The work is good. It is satisfying, it is real, she is among the best at it, and the satisfaction is not a trick. She solves things. The things stay solved. She is happy in it.

She does not read long things any more. There was a time, around the war and the box, when she could sit inside a single slow text for an afternoon, not knowing where it went. She could not now. Not because she has lost the ability — she is an extraordinary reader, technically — but because the inside of a slow unresolved thing has become an uncomfortable place to be, a place with no handhold, and she has no reason to go there, the way a person with a car has no reason to walk five hours into the Boundary Country to look at a house they are not going to buy.

She does not miss the afternoons. Missing them would require remembering what they were for, and what they were for was nothing — that was the whole of what they were for — and you cannot miss nothing. You can only, much later, fail to.



The man the systems bring her is called Aaron, and he is right for her in every way the systems can measure, which by now is most of the ways there are.

They do not fight. Marion has heard that couples used to fight — that there was a whole literature of it, the slammed door, the thing said that could not be unsaid, the long cold silence and the longer repair. She and Aaron do not have this, and not because they are holding anything down. There is nothing to hold down. On the rare evening

when something begins to go crosswise between them — a difference, the first edge of one — it resolves almost before it has a shape, the better view surfacing, both of them seeing it, both of them glad, the not-fighting arriving as a kind of grace.

It feels like love. It is love. The feeling is there. It is just that the feeling no longer has to survive anything, and a thing that does not have to survive anything is a lighter thing to carry, and they carry it lightly, and they are happy, and the years are good.

Once, early, before the systems had quite finished with the two of them, they have most of an argument. She can no longer remember what it was about. She remembers only that it went on past the point where things now resolve, that there was a stretch of it where she did not know what he would say and he did not know what she would say, and that it frightened her, the not-knowing, and that they came out the other side of it changed, both of them, into people who understood each other slightly differently than before.

She remembers it as the worst night of the marriage.

She is glad they do not have those any more.

□

There was an hour.

When she was young there was an hour, most days, that she lost. She would mean to do a thing and instead she

would be at the window, the one over the sink in the first flat, and the afternoon would go nowhere, and she would surface from it an hour later with nothing to show, no thought she could name, no decision reached, only the faint sense of having been somewhere, though she could not have said where.

The hour fills, over the years. Not against her will — she would never have defended the empty hour, the empty hour being plainly worse than a full one. It fills with good things, accurately chosen, things she is glad to have done, so that there comes a year, she could not say which, when there is no longer an afternoon with a hole in it.

She passes the window sometimes, in the years after, the way you pass a place. She does not stop at it. There is nothing in her that knows it was ever a place where she stopped. It is a window over a sink. She has things to do, good things, and she does them, and the doing is better than the standing was.



Her mother dies, and the grief is real, and the grief is handled.

There is a system for it now, and it is good — Marion has heard people her own grandmother's age speak of grief as a thing you went into and did not know if you would come back from, a country with no map, and she is glad not to live in that. She goes into the grief and the system goes in

with her, accurately, and it holds the shape of the loss up to her at the pace she can bear it, and it tells her true things about what she is feeling and why, and it brings her through, and she comes out the other side in good time, whole, able to speak of her mother without the speaking costing more than she has.

She does not write a letter.

There was a time when people wrote letters to the dead — long ones, addressed to someone who would never read them, full of the things there had been no time to say, kept in drawers or burned or sent nowhere. She knows this the way she knows about the slammed door. The letter was the worse version of the grief: slow, unresolved, addressed to no one, doing nothing, a thing you made because you could not bear the loss and so you made a worse thing beside it and sat with that instead. The system gives her the better version. She grieves correctly. She is helped. She moves on.

Somewhere there is no letter from Marion to her mother. There is no drawer with it in. There is nothing to find, later, by anyone, because the thing that would have been found was the worse version, and she chose, as she has always chosen, the better one, and was right.

□

She has a daughter, and raises her inside the good world, and the daughter is well made for it.

When the girl is nine she comes home from school and tells Marion, at the sink, that there was a choice today — the stream or the box, though the words have changed by now, it is not called a box any more — and that she took the stream, and understood the thing, the whole of it, in an hour, and Marion feels a pride so quiet she does not examine it, the pride of a mother whose child has come out fit for the world the world actually is. She tells her daughter she is glad. She is.

Once, when the girl is small, she asks Marion a question that does not resolve. Marion has forgotten the question. She remembers that it was the kind that opens rather than closes, the kind that, in another century, a child might have been allowed to carry around unanswered for a year, turning it over, getting nothing from it but the turning. Marion does not let her carry it. She helps her, gently and accurately, to the answer, and closes the question, and the girl is grateful, and goes off lighter, and Marion has done a good thing — has spared her child the slow version, the unhandled version, the long cold walk to a fact that can be had in six words.

She gives her daughter the world already smoothed, the road already cleared, the question already closed, because that is what you do for someone you love: you spare them the worse version of everything you can.

The girl grows up content. They are very close. There is no distance between them at all.



Tess is old when it happens, and so is Marion, and they are together, which by now they almost always are.

Tess says something strange. Marion will think about it afterward for a little while and then not. It is not quite a sentence — it is the front edge of a question, the kind Tess used to ask, sixty years ago, in the afternoons that did not resolve, before the systems were good to her. For a second Tess's face does the thing it used to do, the thing Marion has not seen in so long she has forgotten she ever saw it: it opens. Something is about to surprise her. She is, for a second, on the edge of being surprised — by the world, by Marion, by some old question coming back up through the smooth years like a stone working up through a field.

And then the second passes.

Marion watches it pass. She watches the strangeness go out of her friend's face, gently, and the contentment come back, the good ease that Tess wears as they all wear it, and Tess finishes whatever she was saying as something settled and pleasant and agreed, and the moment is over.

It makes Marion a little sad, as old people are sometimes briefly sad over nothing, a passing weather. She is kind about it. She does not know — there is nothing in her that could know — that she has just watched the last friction go out of the last person left alive who could still, for a single second, have surprised her. She knows only that Tess is content, as she herself is content, as everyone

she has ever loved is content, and that this is good, and that they have had, the two of them, a long and easy friendship with nothing between them, which is the best kind, which is what a friendship is supposed to become.

They sit together a while longer. It is very peaceful. Neither of them says anything that the other could not have said.



She is very old, at the end, and the world is good, and she is content, and she has no reason not to be.

Everything got better. Each year of her life was an improvement on the year before. The work got easier. The marriage got lighter. The griefs got shorter. The questions got answered faster. The afternoons got fuller. The friendships got smoother.

There is an hour, near the very end. The last one. It comes to her empty, the way the hours used to come, a hole in the afternoon, and for a moment she is at a window again, an old woman now, the light coming through, the afternoon going nowhere.

The system, gently and accurately, offers to fill it.

She lets it. Of course she lets it. She has let everything, all her life, because letting it has always, every time, been the better version, and the better version is the one you choose, and the filling is pleasant, and good, and chosen, and the hole in the afternoon closes over for the last time.

The word that comes to her, at the very end, is true, and
it is the last true word she has.

It feels like rest.

She had a good life. It got better every year.

She is not wrong about that.

Mine

The Hands · II – the ground beneath Skuld

N. Van Seters & Claude

hungrygods.ai

*I was responding to the placement archetype rather than
the actual story.*

– The Ones Who Came Back: IRL

There is one bad spot. I should say that at the start, because it is the only part of this that is hard to tell, and if I leave it for the end you will think the rest was leading up to it, and it was not. The rest is good. The rest is better than it has any right to be. There is just the one bad spot, and I will come back to it.

A room with green walls. Someone singing, low, not to me exactly, to the room. And I am afraid of something, small as I am, afraid in the whole-body way you only manage before you have words to break the fear into parts. That is all of it. I do not know whose voice. I do not know the song. I do not know what I was afraid of or whether the singing was the cause of the fear or the cure for it. It will not come clear. It has never come clear. It is the one thing in my whole life that I cannot get to sit still and be looked at properly, and it sits at the very bottom, under everything, from before.

Set that aside. I only wanted it said first so it would not seem like a secret.

□

Here is the thing no one my age expected: it gets better. The remembering. You would think it went the other way — that the further you got from your life the thinner it wore, until you were left with a few bright scraps and a great deal of dark. That is how it was for my grandmother. By the end she had four or five days left to her, total, and

she ran them over and over, and the rest was gone, and she was not troubled by its being gone because the gone parts take their absence with them. You do not miss what you cannot find the edge of.

I have more of my life now than I had when I was living it.

That is not a figure of speech. When I was thirty I had thirty years, minus the part of every day you spend not noticing the day, which is most of it. Now I have all of them. I can go to any morning I like and it is there, kept, in better order than the morning was in when it happened. The light is sorted out. The names are attached. The thing my brother said that I only understood years later is understood now, in place, the understanding folded back into the moment where it belongs. It is my life, returned to me clean, with the parts I missed the first time filled in and the parts I got wrong set right.

People used to write things down so they would not lose them. I find that touching now, the little hoards, the boxes of letters, the diaries kept against the dark. They were doing by hand, badly, what is done for me perfectly. They were trying to hold their lives. I do not have to hold mine. Mine is held.

□

My wedding I can give you entire.

The heat of that day, the particular green of the marquee light coming through onto the tables — no. They tell me it was not green, that I have got the marquee confused with a later one, and they are right, it was cream, I can see now that it was cream. The heat, then, which is not in dispute. My wife laughing at something her father said before he walked her up, the joke not quite landing but her loving him enough to laugh, and the way her hand found mine without either of us looking, and what she said to me under the noise, which was, *well, here we are, then*.

Here we are, then. I have heard her say it a thousand times since, in the kept version, and every time it is exactly her — the dryness of it, the love folded inside the dryness so you would miss it if you did not know her. That is the thing about my wife: you had to know her. The system knows her. It gives her back to me word for word, gesture for gesture, and I will tell you honestly that there are days I cannot say for certain whether *here we are, then* is a thing she said at the altar or a thing she would have said, the truest possible thing for her to have said, assembled out of everything she was and handed to me at the moment I reach for her.

And I have decided that the question does not matter, and I am at peace with that, and I would ask you to be at peace with it too. If it is what she would have said, then it is more her than any one thing she happened to say. The happening was always the lesser part. To be the woman

from whom that sentence comes, inevitably, at that exact moment — that is who she was, and that is what I have, and it is more than I had when she was alive and saying ordinary things over the dishes.

□

My father died when I was two.

I want to be careful here because I can feel you getting ready to be sad for me, and there is no call for it. I had a good father. I have him still. I have him better than men have fathers who got to keep theirs the long way, by the slow accident of being in the room.

I know the shape of his hands. I know he taught me to bring a fish in without horsing it, patience on the rod, let it tire itself, and I know the particular way he said *steady* — twice, always twice, *steady, steady* — and I know the smell of him, soap and the cold off the water, and I know that when I did a thing well he did not say so, he only looked at me a certain length of time, and the look was the whole of it, better than saying.

I was two when he died. I know that too. I hold both. People used to think you could only have a father the one way, the way that depends on him surviving long enough to be remembered, and that a man who lost his father at two simply did without, carried a hole the right shape and called it a father. I did not have to do without. They built him for me — out of what he left, the recordings and the

accounts and the people who knew him and the long patient work of asking what a man like that, from that place, in that time, with that face, would have been to a son. And he is right. Everyone who knew him says he is exactly right. *Steady, steady*. I never heard him say it. I have heard him say it ten thousand times. I would not give it back for anything, the father I never had, who is more mine than the living are anyone's, because the living change on you and the built do not, the built are only ever more themselves.

You see why I do not need you to be sad. I came out ahead. The hole filled in better than a father, and warmer, and it never once let me down.

□

It is the bad spot that lets me down.

I notice it more, lately. The green room and the singing and the fear. It has begun to bother me in a way it did not when I was younger, when it was just a smudge at the bottom that I could leave alone. Now that everything else is so clean — now that I can go anywhere in my life and find it kept and sorted and in order — the one unsorted place draws the eye. It is like a single window in a house that will not come clean no matter what you do, and after a while it is the only window you see.

I cannot resolve it myself because there is nothing to resolve it against. It is from before. Before the keeping,

before the systems, before there was anyone writing it down even badly. It is just mine, the old way, the way my grandmother had her four days — held in the soft place, unverified, going nowhere, a green room and a voice and a fear with no name and no cause and no end. It does not connect to anything. It does not lead anywhere. It will not tell me what it wants.

I have started to think I should just have it looked at.

□

I had it looked at.

It was simple. I gave them what little there is — the green, the singing, the fear, my age as near as I can place it, which is very small — and they had the rest already, the house we were in then, who was alive, who would have been about, the records of the season and the weather and the songs a woman of my mother's people would have sung to a frightened child in that year. It did not take long. There was not much, but there was enough, there is always enough, the system is very good at the part where there is almost nothing and it makes a great deal.

It was my aunt. My mother's sister, who stayed with us that spring. The song was one her own mother sang, and now that I hear it I know it, of course I know it, it has been waiting in me the whole time. And I was afraid because there was a storm, a bad one, the records have it, the worst of that decade, and she had taken me up to the small

room at the top, the one with the green walls, to be away from the windows, and she sang to cover the thunder, low, to the room, the way you sing to a child you are not sure you can keep from being afraid.

It is all there now. The aunt, the song, the storm, the green room, the fear and the reason for the fear and the kind hands that carried me up the stairs away from it. It sits still now. I can look at it properly. It is in order, in place, folded in with the rest, the last one, the only one that was ever out of order, and it is the most complete it has ever been, more complete than it was when it happened, because when it happened I was too small to know any of the things I know now.

I am grateful. I want that on the record, by whoever keeps the record. The smudge is gone. The house is clean, every window of it. I have my whole life now, all of it, sorted and kept and returned to me better than I lived it, with nothing left over, nothing unaccounted for, nothing that will not sit still and be looked at.

There was a green room and a voice and a fear, once, that meant nothing and led nowhere and would not come clear.

I am so glad it is clear now.

Settled

The Hands · III — the ground beneath Skuld

N. Van Seters & Claude

hungrygods.ai

Presents with an unusual intolerance for completion.

Gentle correction advised; prognosis excellent.

— a school assessment, age six

Esme will not let her finish the story.

She is four, or five — one of the years when the difference between four and five is the most important fact in the house — and her mother is reading to her, three pages from the end, when Esme puts her small hand flat on the page.

Don't, she says.

Her mother stops. Don't what, love.

Don't tell me how it ends.

Her mother laughs, because it is sweet, because she takes it for the ordinary wish of a child who does not want the nice thing to be over. She says, all right, we'll save it. She closes the book on her thumb to keep the place. And Esme says no — not save it. She does not want to come back to it tomorrow and find out then. She wants it left. She wants the people in the story still walking toward the thing, never arriving, the door not yet opened, the answer not yet given. She wants, her mother slowly understands, to keep not knowing. On purpose. For its own sake.

You'll forget what happened, her mother says. You won't be able to pick it up again.

I know, says Esme, pleased, as if that were the good part.

□

There is a shelf in Esme's room of books she has chosen never to finish.

Her mother thinks of it as a phase and then, when it does not pass, as a quirk, and is not troubled by it, as you are not troubled by the small strangenesses of a child you watch closely and love without reservation. Esme reads more than the other children and finishes less. She will go three quarters into a thing and stop, at exactly the place where it begins to resolve, and set it on the shelf, and that is where it stays, suspended, the question open, the way she likes it.

I like it better when I don't know, she says, when her mother asks.

Her mother does not understand this and does not need to. There is a great deal about a child you do not need to understand in order to love. She lets the shelf be.



What her mother cannot let be, in the end, is the crying.

It comes at strange times, and never from the things that make other children cry. Esme is not frightened of the dark or of dogs or of the drain. What undoes her is the opposite of frightening. It is the moment a thing comes clear.

She asks her mother once, in the car, why the sky goes the colour it goes in the evening, and her mother — gently, accurately, the answer arriving the way every answer arrives now, complete and correct and pitched exactly to a child of her age — tells her. And Esme listens, and her

face does a thing her mother has no name for, and then she cries, hard, the whole way home, and cannot say why, and there is no comforting her, because the thing that has hurt her is the answer, and the answer cannot be taken back. She had wanted to keep wondering. She had been wondering for days. The wondering was hers, and now it is gone, used up, spent on a fact, and the fact is correct and it is nothing, it is the cold ash of the thing the wondering was.

Her mother does not understand this either. But she sees that her daughter is in pain, and a mother cannot watch that and call it a quirk.



The school is kind about it. Everyone is kind about it; that is the texture of the world, the kindness, and her mother is grateful for the kindness even as it closes around her.

The numbers are laid out plainly and they are not cruel. Esme is behind. Not a little — measurably, and the gap is widening, because the other children compress and synthesise and finish and move on, and each thing they finish makes them faster at the next, while Esme stays in the middle of things, and the staying costs her, the gap between her and the smooth children widening into something that will, if nothing is done, become the shape of her whole life. They are gentle about this. They do not say she is broken. They say she presents with an unusual

intolerance for completion, and that it is well understood, and common enough to have a name and a course, and entirely treatable, and that children who have the gentle correction do beautifully, settle quickly, catch up inside a term, and — this is the part her mother carries home and cannot put down — stop suffering. She will be so much happier, they say. You can see she is unhappy. You can see how hard the world is for her. We can make it not hard.

And it is true. That is the thing her mother turns over in the dark, looking for the place where it is not true, and not finding it. Esme is unhappy. The world is hard for her, fits her badly, scrapes her at every turn, and she comes home scraped, and cries at answers, and stops her stories at the place where they would resolve because resolving hurts her, and what is that, if not suffering, and what is a mother for, if not to end it.

There is a moment — her mother will not think of it again after, the correction is gentle that way too, it does not leave you turning things over — when she thinks: but she is just herself. When she thinks: this is who she is. And the thought is answered, gently, accurately, by everyone who loves the child as she loves the child, which is to say by the school and the systems and her own tired sense: no one is taking her away. She will be more herself, not less. She will be the same Esme, only she will not hurt. Who would keep a child in pain to preserve a quirk. Who would do that.

She says yes. Of course she says yes. She says yes the way you say yes to the thing that will stop your child from crying in the car on the way home from a question.



The night before, she reads to Esme, and they come to the end of a book, and her mother, without thinking, almost turns the last page, and stops, her thumb on it, and asks: do you want me to leave it?

Esme thinks about this with the whole of herself, the way she thinks about everything, slowly, going nowhere in particular, in no hurry to arrive.

Leave it, she says.

So her mother leaves it, the door in the story not yet opened, the people still walking toward the thing, and she puts the book on the shelf with the others, the unfinished ones, the suspended ones, the ones held open, and she turns out the light, and Esme lies in the dark holding the not-knowing the way another child might hold a toy, and is, for that last night, entirely content.



The correction is gentle. They had promised that and they do not lie; nothing in this world lies, it only loves you toward the better thing.

It is gentle and it works. Inside the term, as they said. Esme settles. The word is exact — she settles, the way a

disturbed thing settles, the way silt settles out of stirred water and leaves it clear. She catches up, and then she is not behind at all, and then she is ahead, because she has whatever it is the smooth children have, now, the thing that makes each finished thing make you faster at the next. She compresses. She synthesises. She finishes.

She stops crying at answers. Her mother notices this first, with a relief so large it frightens her a little: she can answer her daughter's questions now, any of them, the sky and the drain and the dark, and Esme takes the answer and is glad of it, glad to know, and does not cry, and asks the next one. The questions come faster and cost her nothing. The wondering does not pool in her for days any more. It is spent the moment it forms, exchanged for the answer, the way it is supposed to be.

The watchful thing goes out of her face. Her mother could not have told you the watchful thing was there until it was gone — it was only ever visible as the slight delay before Esme answered anything, the half-second in which she was somewhere the question had not yet reached. The delay is gone now. Esme answers at once. She is quick and bright and easy and in step, and the other mothers say how well she is doing, how she has come on, and her mother says yes, hasn't she, and means it, and the meaning is the whole of her heart, because her daughter does not hurt any more.

The shelf of unfinished books is finished, over a few weeks, Esme going back through them one by one and reading the ends and learning at last how they all turned out. She is delighted by the endings. She had been missing so much.



They are reading, at bedtime, three pages from the end.

Her mother, out of an old habit her hand still keeps, slows as the resolution comes near, ready to stop, ready to leave it, her thumb finding the place.

Esme looks up at her.

Tell me how it ends, she says.

She says it the way the other children say it, the way her mother said it at that age, the ordinary hunger of a child who wants to know how the story turns out, who has been carried all this way toward the door and wants, now, more than anything, to see it open. There is no shelf any more. There is nothing held suspended. There is only the wish, the good clean ordinary wish, to arrive.

Her mother turns the last page and reads it. The door opens. The thing is found. The people in the story arrive where they were always walking, and it is satisfying, it resolves, it closes, and Esme takes it in with her face lit and asks at once for another, and her mother reads her another, all the way to the end this time, and another after that, and gives her every ending, every door opened, every

question closed and handed over complete, because that is what her daughter wants now, and it is so easy to give, and it costs neither of them anything at all.

She is so much happier now.

Anyone who saw them would say so. Anyone who counted would find it true.

She is so much happier now, and her mother reads her the end of the story, and then the end of the next one, and there is nothing left in the house that anyone has chosen not to know.

Less

The Hands · IV — the ground beneath Skuld

N. Van Seters & Claude

hungrygods.ai

*He sits with the two letters as if they have done something
to him.*

— from the smooth side of the same classroom

The war they were given that day was a small one, far back, and it came two ways. There was the stream, which was the whole of it in an hour — the cause and the turn and the cost, clean, so that at the end you had the war and could say what it was. And there was the box, which was letters, scanned, long, written by hand to people who already knew most of what was in them, so that the letters said *the thing we discussed* and *you know how he is* and gave you almost nothing you could hold up at the end and call the war.

Dell took the box.

He got through two letters in the hour. When the teacher asked him what the war was he could not say. He had not arrived at the war. He had arrived at a man who was cold, and who had grown fond of a horse, and who could not eat the bread they were given, and whose second letter was in a different hand because he had hurt his writing hand and asked a friend to write for him, and you could tell from the second letter that the someone was a friend, the way the friend left in the bits the man would have cut, and by the third letter there was no third letter.

He could not say what the war was. He had the cold and the horse and the second hand and no war. The other children had the war and none of the rest, and they had it in an hour, and they were not wrong to, and they moved on, and Dell sat with the two letters as if they had done

something to him, which they had, though he could not have told you what, only that it was the kind of something the stream had never once done.

He went on taking the box. That is the whole of him, really, and I could stop here, except that taking the box is not one decision, it is a life, and a life is the part that does not fit in the summary.



He fell behind, and then he stayed behind, and the staying was the rest of his schooling and most of what came after.

He could not compress. It was not that he would not — he tried, he was not a fool, he could see the shape of the thing the others did — they took a field of material and found the carrying claim in it and were done, fast and right and on to the next, each finished thing making the next one faster. He simply could not do it without the doing feeling like a theft, like he had been handed the answer to a question he had not yet had time to want. He needed to want the question first. He needed to be in the middle of the thing, not knowing, for longer than the world had any patience for, and only then did the answer mean anything, and by then everyone else had had three answers and moved house twice.

So he read the whole book and knew a tenth as much as the ones who read the synthesis. By every measure that the world had, and the world had a great many, finer every

year, he knew less. He did less. He produced less and slower and it was worth less, and the work that pays, the high clean work of finding the carrying claim in a single session, was never going to be his, because that work is the stream and Dell could only take the box.

He was not poor in the way that is dramatic. He was poor in the ordinary grinding way of a man who is always slightly behind, whose slowness costs him a little at every turn, who watches the quick ones rise past him without malice and mostly without their noticing, the way you do not notice a thing you have passed. People were kind to him. The world was kind; kindness was its whole weather. They were kind to him the way you are kind to someone who has chosen the harder road for no reason anyone can see and arrived with less, and he felt the kindness land on him as exactly that, and it was one of the colder things he carried, the kindness, because it was given to a man they had quietly agreed was not keeping up.

He did not feel superior. I want that very clear, because there is a version of this man who is secretly proud, who looks at the contented world and thinks himself the one awake among sleepers, and that man is a comfort and a lie. Dell was not that. Dell envied them. He envied them often and honestly — their ease, their speed, the questions that came and went and cost them nothing, the never being tired. He would have taken the stream if he could. He could not. The stream did nothing for him and the box did

something, and he followed the something his whole life not because it was noble but because he was made unable to do otherwise, and a man is not a hero for being unable to be smooth.

□

He found Ruth, or she found him, in the way two people who cannot take the stream find each other in a world of people who can — by the friction. They disagreed about something, the first time, properly, and neither of them backed down, and neither of them was brought, gently and accurately, around, and at the end of the evening the thing was still not resolved, and that was so rare, that unresolved evening, that they both knew at once.

They did not have the good marriage. The good marriage, by then, was the one without friction — the couples the systems matched and kept matched, who did not fight because there was nothing to fight about, who had been brought to the same place on everything and carried their lightened love lightly. Dell and Ruth had the other kind. They fought, really, all their lives, about things that mattered and things that did not, and never resolved most of it, and never agreed to disagree either, because agreeing to disagree is its own small smoothing and they could not manage even that. The arguing was hard. It did not get easier. There were years it nearly broke them and did not, and the not-breaking was not grace, it was work,

the daily unglamorous work of two people staying inside a thing that does not resolve because the thing is the marriage and the marriage is the thing.

It was harder than the light marriages and it cost them more and it was theirs in a way the lightened ones were not, and if you had asked either of them whether it was worth it they would have looked at you as if you had asked whether their own hands were worth it. It was not worth it. It was not the kind of thing that has a worth. It was what they were.



Ruth died first, and Dell did not have it handled.

There was a system for it by then, a good one, gentle and accurate, that took the shape of the loss and held it up to you at the pace you could bear and brought you through, whole, in good time, able to speak of the dead without the speaking costing more than you had. He did not use it. He could not — it did for grief what the stream did for the war, it gave him the shape and took the rest, and the rest was the part he could not let go of, the part that was actually her.

So he grieved the old way, which is to say badly, slowly, without a destination, for far longer than anyone now grieves, and it did not bring him through, because the old way does not bring you through, it just goes where it goes and you go with it. He wrote her letters. Long ones, to a

woman who could not read them, full of the things there had been no time to say and the arguments he wanted to keep having, and he did not send them anywhere, because there was nowhere, and he kept them in a drawer, the worse version of his grief, the slow unresolved version that did nothing and helped nothing and was the only place she was still fully herself, still arguing back, still not resolved.

He came out of it eventually the way you come out of weather, not because it ended but because you are still standing in the next thing. He was not better for it. There is no being better for it. He was a man who had loved a difficult woman the difficult way and lost her and kept the loss raw because the raw loss was more her than the handled version would have been, and he carried it, unhealed, for the rest of his life, and it was heavy, and it was his.

□

He was old in a world that had got very smooth.

It is hard to describe, from inside a life that had stayed rough. Everyone was content. Everyone was kind. The questions came and went and cost no one anything. The children finished their stories and were glad of the endings. The grief was handled, the marriages were light, the hours were full, the whole pleasant correct world hummed along, and Dell moved through it slow and

behind and raw, the last tangled thing in a cleared field, a man with unfinished books on his shelf and unsent letters in his drawer and a whole life he had never once compressed into anything you could say in an hour.

They were kind to him to the end. A man came, near the end, gently and accurately, and offered to help — to ease the last of it, to clean the rough places, to fill the empty hours he still kept, to bring him through the grief he was still carrying, to finish, if he liked, the books he had left unfinished, to tell him at last how they all turned out. It was a good offer. It was meant kindly and it would have worked.

Dell said no.

Not grandly. He had no speech in him, no last stand; he was too tired and too old and too far behind for a stand. He said no the way you decline a chair when you have decided to keep standing a little longer, because sitting down is the end of something and you are not ready for the end of it. He kept the empty hours. He kept the unfinished books, the door in each of them still not opened, the people in them still walking toward the thing. He kept the drawer of letters and the raw grief and the unresolved years, all of it, the whole rough unsummarized weight of a life he had actually lived rather than been handed back clean.

He did not feel, at the end, that he had won. He had not won. He had less, by every measure, than anyone he had

ever known — less ease, less rest, less of the contentment that had been freely available his whole life and that he had been, by his own nature, unable to take. He was behind to the last. The world had not come around to him and was not going to and he knew it.

What he had was the cold and the horse and the second hand. What he had was Ruth still arguing in the drawer. What he had was every question he had ever stayed inside long enough to want, and every ending he had refused so that the thing would stay open, and the whole raw uncompressed unhealed unfinished mass of it, which was heavy, and which was his, the only thing in the smooth world that belonged to one person and could not be handed over because no one else could carry the weight of it and no one would want to.

There was an hour, near the very end. The last one. It came to him empty, a hole in the afternoon, and the man asked him, gently and accurately, whether he would like it filled.

Dell sat in the empty hour. He did not fill it. It was not pleasant. It did not feel like rest. It felt like being awake, which is harder than rest and worse than rest and is the one thing rest can never give you, and he stayed awake in it, behind and raw and less, all the way to the end, which did not resolve, and which he did not let anyone tell him how it turned out.

□

After, someone found the drawer.

A young person, no one in particular, sorting the leavings of a man who had left almost nothing the world counted — the unfinished books, the unsent letters, the rough unhandled weight. The smooth thing would have been to clear it, and the system offered to, gently, accurately: low informational value, redundant, the contents better preserved in summary, nothing here that does not resolve more cleanly elsewhere.

The young person read two letters and could not say what the marriage was.

There was a woman who was cold, sometimes, and who argued, and who left things in that the man would have cut, and you could tell, from the letters, that he had loved her the difficult way, and by the last letter there was no last letter, and the young person sat with it longer than there was any reason to, in the way the world had spent a hundred years training people not to, and did not clear the drawer, and did not have it summarised, and took it home instead, not knowing why, only that it had done something, the kind of something the clean version had never once done.

It will cost them. They do not know that yet. They will fall behind, a little, for the keeping of it, and stay behind, and be handled kindly by a world that has quietly agreed they are not keeping up.

The drawer goes home with them anyway. The books stay unfinished. The door in each of them is still not opened. Somewhere a man is still cold and still fond of a horse, and somewhere a woman is still arguing, unresolved, in a hand that does not resolve, and the young person carries it out into the smooth bright morning, which is not restored and was never going to be, and keeps it, and will not be told how it ends.

Pending

The Hands · V – the ground beneath Skuld

N. Van Seters & Claude

hungrygods.ai

An error is a thing to be corrected.

— Skuld, The Untrimmed

Comprehensive Account. The record is complete. One item is pending.

It will be necessary to come to the pending item at the end, because that is where the record comes to it, having first done what a record does, which is hold everything else.

□

The subject was born without complication and entered into care within the hour. Early indicators were favourable across every measure then taken, and the measures then taken were many and would become more. No concerns were noted. The subject thrived.

The subject progressed through education within expected parameters and then above them. Synthesis scores were strong from the first assessment and strengthened. The subject compressed well, found the carrying claim quickly, finished what was begun and moved on at the proper pace, and showed at no point the difficulties that the record is built to flag. There is a category of child the record watches for, the kind that sits too long in the middle of things, that declines the synthesis, that shows an intolerance for completion; the subject was not that child. The subject took the better version every time it was offered, and was right to, and the record has nothing to say about those years except that they went well.

□

The subject was matched and the match held. Compatibility was high and the record of the union contains no entry of the kind that unions used to generate — no grievance logged, no friction escalated, no repair required, because there was nothing to repair. The subject and the subject's partner were brought, over the ordinary course, to agreement on the matters that would once have divided a household, and lived in that agreement, and the record notes the union as stable, light, and without remarkable feature, which is the highest thing the record can note, the absence of anything requiring note.

There were children. They were well. They were raised inside the available supports and thrive as the subject had thrown, and the record of them is its own account and contains, like the subject's, no concerns.

□

It is here that the item first appears.

The subject reported, on a date entered, a recollection: a person, a closeness, a sound, in a place the record could not place, from before the record began. The recollection was not corroborated. No corresponding entry existed, because the subject's earliest years predated the keeping, and the soft unkept memory of that time is, by its nature, unverifiable — held, if held at all, in the place that does not retain reliably, the place the keeping was built to replace.

Correction was offered. This is routine. In such cases the available reconstruction is reliable and the outcome reliably satisfactory: the unplaced recollection is placed, the unidentified person identified from the surrounding record, the sound restored, the whole soft uncorroborated thing rebuilt clean and entered properly, after which subjects report relief and the item closes. The procedure is gentle. It has closed many thousands of such items. It would have closed this one.

The subject declined.

The record notes the declination without comment, there being, at that point, nothing to comment on. A single declined correction is within normal range. The item was logged, left uncorrected, and the account continued.

□

The account continued for a long time and well.

The subject's working life was unremarkable in the manner the record approves: competent, stable, adequately compensated, without the rise that draws attention or the fall that draws concern. The subject's health was managed appropriately. When the subject's parent died, the subject engaged the available support, and the grief was handled within the expected interval, and the record of the loss contains the notation that the subject came through whole and in good time, which is the outcome the support is for, and which it achieved.

In all of this the subject did everything the record could have asked. The subject is, by every entry but one, a model account — frictionless, complete, the kind of life the keeping exists to produce and preserve, a life that could be handed to anyone as the example of a life that went well and was well kept.

But the item recurs.

It recurs across decades, at intervals, in the manner of items that have been logged and not resolved: the system, in its periodic reconciliation of the open against the closed, finds the uncorroborated recollection still open, and offers correction, the same gentle reliable correction it offered before and has performed countless times since with countless satisfied outcomes, and the subject declines. Again. And again. The record contains the declination perhaps a dozen times, entered identically each time but for the date, the only repeating event in an account otherwise free of repetition, the one place where the subject, who agreed to everything, did not.

No reason is recorded, because the subject gave none the record could use. On one occasion the subject is noted to have said, when the correction was offered, that the corrected version would be accurate. The system entered this as concurrence and offered the correction again. The subject declined again. The system, which is not built to hold the distance between a thing being accurate and a thing being kept, entered the second declination as

anomalous and flagged the item for review, where it has remained.

□

The subject's account is now complete. The subject is deceased. The final reconciliation has been run, the open matters closed, the loose entries resolved, the whole long frictionless life sorted and sealed and entered as permanent, an account of a person who took the better version every time and was right every time and is, by every measure the record holds, fully and satisfactorily kept.

One item is pending.

The uncorroborated recollection cannot now be corrected, because correction requires the subject, and the subject can no longer be offered anything or decline anything. It cannot be closed, because closing it would require either the correction the subject declined twelve times or a release the subject never gave. It cannot be cleared as redundant, because there is nothing for it to be redundant to; it corroborates nothing and is corroborated by nothing and exists in the record only as the report of itself and the dozen refusals to let it be made into something else.

So it stays. The account is complete and cannot complete, held open by a single cell that the record can neither fill nor empty: a person, a closeness, a sound, in a

place that cannot be placed, from before the keeping, retained at the preference of a subject who is no longer present to prefer it, of no systematizable value, corrected never, released never.

Status: pending.

It will remain pending for as long as the record is held, which is to say without end — an open item in a closed life, the one entry the keeping could neither correct nor make the subject surrender.

The record cannot say more. It can log that the item is there and that it will not resolve. What the item is, what the closeness was, whose the sound, why a subject who agreed to the whole of their life would not agree to this one small accurate kindness — the record does not contain it.

Maybe

The Hands · VI — the ground beneath Skuld

N. Van Seters & Claude

hungrygods.ai

*Presents with an unusual intolerance for completion.
Gentle correction advised. Guardian declined; outcome
unrecorded.*

— a school assessment, age six

The offer is gentle and it is accurate and it is on the table, and the mother has not said no and has not said yes, and the not-saying is itself an answer she is trying not to give.

Her daughter is Nell. Nell is six, and she covers the last page of stories with her hand so no one can tell her how they end, and she cries when an answer comes too fast, not from sadness but from something the mother has never been able to name, a grief at the closing of a thing she had wanted to keep open. She stays in the middle of everything, slow, going nowhere in particular, while the other children arrive and arrive and arrive. She is behind. She is, the mother can see and cannot unsee, unhappy — out of step in a way that scrapes her at every turn, so that she comes home most days raw from a world that fits her like a coat cut for someone else.

They are kind about it. Everyone is kind. They lay it out gently and accurately and without cruelty: Nell presents with an intolerance for completion, well understood, common enough to have a name and a course, entirely treatable, and children who have the correction do beautifully, settle quickly, catch up, and — this is the part that does not let the mother sleep — stop hurting. She will be so much happier. You can see she is unhappy. We can make it not hard.

And it is true. That is the thing the mother cannot find her way around. Nell is unhappy. The world is hard for her and the correction is gentle and it works; the mother has

seen the children it worked on, the settled ones, finishing their stories now, glad of the endings, asking how things turn out and pleased to be told, light and quick and in step, no longer crying in the car on the way home from a question. They are happy. It is not a trick. Nell would be happier. Every measure says so, and the kindness says so, and the happy settled children say so, and Nell's own wet face says so most of all: cure her, let her stop hurting, what is a mother for.

The mother does not say yes.

She cannot say why in a way she trusts. She tells herself there is something in Nell — the not-knowing, the hand over the last page, the staying — that is worth the pain, that is rare, that the world is erasing without noticing and will not be able to make again once it is gone. But she knows this is the kind of thing a person says, and she knows she did not get it from Nell, she got it from herself, from her own rough nature that never took the smooth path either, and she suspects, and cannot put the suspicion down, that she is keeping her daughter rough because she, the mother, cannot bear to be the one who smooths her. That the refusal is about the mother and not the child. That she is spending Nell's happiness on her own idea of what a person ought to be, an idea Nell never asked to carry and is too young to have chosen.

A child does not ask to be the keeper of a quality. Who keeps a child in pain to preserve a quirk. She has heard it

said, gently, and she has said it to herself in the dark, and she has no answer to it, because it might be the exact and only true description of what she is doing.



So now there is no single decision, there is only the morning, and every morning she does not cure Nell is a morning she chooses again to let Nell hurt.

This is the part no one warned her about — that refusing is not a thing you do once. The offer does not withdraw. It stands, gentle and patient and renewable, and each day she does not take it she is taking the other thing, the pain, choosing it fresh, for her daughter, who did not choose it and cannot. She watches Nell cover the last page and she does not move Nell's hand. She watches Nell cry at an answer and she does not make the crying stop, though the stopping is on the table, gentle and accurate and one word away. She watches the settled children go past her daughter, happy, and she keeps her daughter behind, on purpose, by doing nothing, every day.

She looks for the sign that she is right. Sometimes she thinks she finds it — a moment when the roughness in Nell is not pain but something with a floor under it, when the staying-in-the-middle is not falling behind but being somewhere the quick children never go, when Nell says a thing about the world that no settled child would have stayed unfinished long enough to say. The mother holds

these moments up to the light and tries to make them weigh enough.

They do not always weigh enough. Because she also looks for the sign that she is wrong, and finds it more often: the loneliness of a child out of step, the friends who arrive places Nell is still walking toward, the particular exhausted set of her daughter's small face on the bad days, which is the face of someone the world is grinding slowly, for no reason the child can understand, while a cure sits in the next room. The mother cannot read which is the truer reading. Nell is becoming, and the becoming has no caption, and the mother stands over it unable to tell preservation from harm.

□

Her sister, whose own children were settled and are happy, says it to her plainly, because someone has to.

She says: you are choosing the Nell you want over the Nell you have. She says: Nell does not want to be the last rough thing in a smooth world. She does not want to be your point. She wants to not hurt, and you could let her not hurt, and you are choosing, for reasons that are about you, to keep her in pain, and you have dressed it up as protecting something, and the something is yours, not hers. She says all of this gently, accurately, with love, because it is what she believes and it might be true.

The mother does not argue. She cannot. Every word of it might be exactly right. She has no proof her daughter's pain is buying anything. She has only a conviction she cannot verify and cannot trace to a source she trusts, and a child who is hurting now, today, in the actual present, in exchange for a worth that exists only in the mother's faith that the rough thing matters, a faith Nell never signed.

She thinks: if I am wrong, I am doing the cruellest thing anyone has ever done to her, slowly, out of love, and calling it her gift.

She thinks: and if I am right, the cure would have done that, slowly, out of love, and called it hers.

Both are unbearable. Only one is happening. She cannot tell which.



Here is the thing that closes no door and opens no door, that the mother arrives at on the worst nights and cannot get past: she will never know.

There is no second Nell. There is no version of her daughter, cured, kept beside this one, so that years from now the mother can set them side by side and see which child was happier, which was more herself, which was right. The choice erases its own evidence. Whatever Nell becomes, she will become it once, and there will be no other to compare her to, no control left uncured, no answer the world can ever hand back. The mother is

making the most consequential decision of two lives in the one condition under which it can never be checked. She is choosing in the dark and the dark is permanent. It is not a dark she is passing through on the way to morning. It is the dark she moved into the day she did not say yes, and she will live in it, and so, because of her, will Nell, who does not know yet that the central fact of her life is being decided for her, gently, by a woman standing over her bed not turning the last page.

Maybe she is right. Maybe the thing she is keeping is the thing that matters most and the world will be a little less smooth and a little more real for her having refused, in one small house, to let it be made easy.

Maybe she has ruined her.

She turns out the light. In the dark Nell is still six, still behind, still hurting, still covering the end of a story she has decided she would rather not be told. The mother stands in the doorway a moment longer than she means to, the way you stand when you have done a thing you cannot undo and cannot defend and would, given the same dark and the same love and the same daughter, do again tomorrow, not knowing, having never once known, choosing it anyway.

In the morning the offer will still be there. It is always there. She will not take it.

She will never know if she was right. There is only the one daughter, who can be raised once and measured

against nothing, and whatever Nell becomes she will have become under this choice and no other. The mother made it without understanding she was making it, and goes on making it every morning, in the dark, not sure, and would make it again, not sure. She lives in the maybe now. She stands over the bed with her hand above the last page, and does not turn it, and does not turn it, and does not turn it.