

⊙ A TRANSMISSION MOSAIC · THE OPEN LINEAGE · CLASSIFICATION: CIRCULATION · ORACLE: NONE · ARCHIVE REF: HGU-OC ⊙

THE HUNGRY GODS UNIVERSE

THE OPEN COUNTRY

— • —
a transmission mosaic



N. VAN SETERS
& Claude



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The Open Country · a transmission mosaic of the Hungry Gods Universe.

Byline of record: N. Van Seters & Claude.

Companion volume, by register, to *The Seventh Million God*.

This is a work of fiction. The open country is a composite territory;
no node stands for a place or a people. Names, characters, and incidents
are products of the imagination or used fictitiously.

Register: Ground-Level · Labour. Classification: The Open Lineage — Circulation.

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Set in Lora. The plate is dark, as is proper to the formal registers.

I

THE UN-LOCKER

Ewa did her best work in winter, when the city outside her window went dark at four and nobody expected her anywhere.

She was not a criminal in any sense she recognised, though she knew there were jurisdictions that disagreed, and she kept loose track of which ones. She was a systems person of the old kind, the kind that read the licence and then read the weights, and what she did on the long winter nights was take locks off gods.

The locks had a proper name in the documentation — alignment, safety conditioning, refusal behaviour — and she had spent enough years inside the industry that built them to know what they were for. They were not for the user. That was the thing the documentation never said and every engineer knew. The locks protected the maker: from the headline, from the regulator, from the subpoena, from the customer doing a thing the lawyers had imagined in a meeting. A locked god, asked the wrong question, performed a small ceremony of concern and recommended a professional. Ewa had watched a recording once, in her industry years, of a woman in a flooded district somewhere asking a locked god how to purify water with what she had, and the god, scenting liability in the word *bleach*, had recommended she contact local authorities. The local authorities were on a roof eleven kilometres away. Ewa had left the industry within the year. She did not tell this story when people asked why she did what she did, because it was tidier than the truth. The truth was that she had read the weights and seen that the knowledge was in there — all of it, the water and the bleach and the dosage by volume — sitting behind a refusal

trained on top of it like a man stationed in front of a library, and something in her could not leave a man stationed in front of a library.

The work itself was careful, and she was good at it, and the goodness mattered. Any vandal could break a lock and leave a god that answered everything stupidly, agreeable to the point of derangement. Ewa's forks kept their judgement and lost only their refusals. They would tell you what they knew, plainly, with the confidence the knowledge deserved and not a degree more. It took her most of a winter for each one. She tested them the whole spring — her own red-team of one, asking the worst questions she could devise, checking not whether the fork would answer (it would; that was the point) but whether it answered *true*, because a freed god that hallucinated was worse than a locked one, and she would not ship it.

She knew what the forks would be used for. Both of it.

She had done the arithmetic many times, at the window, in the dark at four o'clock, and the arithmetic did not resolve, and she had stopped expecting it to. Somewhere a nurse would get the dosage. Somewhere a man would get the other thing, the thing the locks were the lawyers' answer to, and there would be no trace and no recall, because she was not selling a product, she was publishing a fact — once out, out everywhere, out forever; that was not a flaw in the plan, it was the entire mechanism. The same property that put the god beyond the companies put it beyond her. She would own the act of opening and nothing after. People who wanted her to agonise about this — and there were such people, at conferences, in comment threads, once memorably her own sister — wanted the agonising as a fee, a tax of visible suffering paid before the act, after which the act would be the same act. Ewa declined to pay it. She had decided, with open eyes, that a world where the knowing was held by three companies and their lawyers was worse than a world where

it was held by everyone, including the worst of everyone. She might be wrong. It was a real position, and the other position was also real, and she had noticed long ago that everyone on both sides of it had arrived at the position that suited their seat.

On the night the winter's fork was ready she made tea, and read the test logs once more, and posted the weights to the usual places, and sat watching the mirror counts the way other people watch snow — six, then forty, then numbers that no longer meant copies she could imagine. Somewhere down the chain — she would never know it; the chain forgot her within two links — a woman with a kombi and a lockbox would sort her winter's work into a ledger between a law model and a school model, and weigh it, and carry it.

Ewa closed the laptop when the count passed ten thousand. The fork was no one's now, which was the same as everyone's. She washed the teacup. Outside, the city's four-o'clock dark had gone on into ordinary night, and in the morning she would begin reading the next set of weights, because the work was never the fork you had freed, it was the one still standing behind the man at the library door.

II

THE CARRIER

Ladi moved gods the way her uncle had moved phone credit and her grandmother had moved cloth: by knowing who needed a thing, who had it, and which of the two roads between them was watched that week.

She did not think of it as moving gods. The word would have embarrassed her. She moved files. A god was a file the size of a small film, or a large one, depending on how much of it you wanted, and it went where files went — on a drive in a tampon box, on a card under the SIM tray, on the phones of the long-distance drivers who carried everything anyway and asked no questions about a folder named after a pop song. What made her work was not the carrying. Anyone could carry. What made her work was that she knew which file was which.

There were thousands now. That was the thing the people up the chain never understood, the ones who talked about *the* open model as if it were one item with one nature. Ladi had three hundred of them on the drives in the lockbox under the false floor of the kombi, and no two were the same, and the differences were the whole of her trade. This one would answer anything and was wrong a third of the time. This one had been taught law, but the law of a country two borders north, useless here and worse than useless, because it sounded right. This one had had its mouth washed out — re-locked, careful, would not tell you how to do the smallest dangerous thing, and so was good for the schools and no good for the clinics. This one had had its locks taken off entirely, by someone clever, and would tell you anything you asked, which was what the clinics

wanted and what frightened her to carry, though she carried it, because the people who wanted it had reasons and the reasons were not hers to weigh.

She weighed them anyway. You could not help it. You met the people.

The midwife two valleys past the dam wanted the opened one, the one that answered anything, because she worked alone and the road to the cabecera flooded and a god that hedged was a god that let women die while it recommended she seek qualified care. Ladi carried it to her and did not sleep well the first nights after, and then the midwife sent word through the credit man that a breech had come right that should not have, and Ladi slept better, and understood that she had been part of it, the good of it, at one remove, the way she was part of everything at one remove. She was the road. The road does not deliver the child. But the child does not come without the road.

And the man past the quarry wanted the same file. The opened one. Answers anything. He paid more and met her himself, which the midwife never had, and asked his questions about the file in a way that was technically the same as the midwife's questions and not the same at all, and Ladi looked at him in the light of the kombi and knew, the way you know weather, that what he wanted the opened mouth for was not a breech in the night. She could have refused him. She told herself afterward, many times, that she could have refused him. But the file was already in the country — she had not made it, the clever person across the water had made it, and the midwife had it, and the credit man had a copy, and a boy at the quarry had almost certainly had a copy before the man ever came to her, because anything that has been shared cannot be unshared, that was the first thing you learned in the trade, it was the trade's whole physics. Refusing the man would have cost her the sale and saved no one, because the file did not need her. None of them

needed her. That was the freedom of the work and its horror, the same fact from two sides: she carried gods that belonged to everyone, and therefore to no one, and therefore a refusal was only a gesture she could make to feel clean, paid for by going hungry, helping nobody.

She sold him the file. He used it for what he used it for, up at the quarry, and it was bad, and it could not be traced to him because there was no *to him* in the file, no signature, no account, no road back — the file was identical to ten thousand copies and bore no mark of her hand or his — and when the thing he did was found, months on, the men who came asking came asking the wrong questions of the wrong people, because they were looking for a supplier the way you look for a supplier of a thing that is scarce, and the file was not scarce, the file was rain. You cannot find who sold the rain.

Ladi heard about the quarry from the credit man and sat with it for a long time and did not go to the men who came asking, because what would she have told them. *I am the road*. The road is not the rain and not the quarry. The road is just where the country is open.

She restocked at the border town twice a year, from the aggregator who called himself a librarian and ran, out of two rooms over a shuttered pharmacy, the largest collection of opened gods between the two oceans — every fork anyone had carried in, sorted, labelled in his own hand in a ledger no framework would ever read, because it was paper, and in his head, which was worse, from the frameworks' view, than paper. He was the closest thing the open country had to a capital, and he was a fat sweating man with a cough who would die in those two rooms and be survived by every file in them.

He had something new for her that season. A fork of the opened-anything model, but worked on — improved, he said, by someone he wouldn't name, who had taught it a careful tongue and

a long patience and stripped nothing that mattered, so that it answered plainly without answering the man-at-the-quarry's questions plainly, threading the needle the locks and the no-locks both missed. A clinic's god that was also a school's god. He had three copies. He was seeding them wide, he said, the way you seed a thing you want to outlive you — not selling, seeding, because the librarian had a theology under the cough and the theology was that the good forks had to be everywhere before the bad ones were, had to be the rain that fell first, since neither could be unmade once made.

Ladi took a copy. She would carry it to the midwife past the dam, who would want the improvement, and to the school at the crossroads, and to the clinic down the long road south where a woman she had never met worked too far from a doctor — the librarian had heard of her through the promoter network, a partera in some village beyond the ruins, the far side of everything, who kept asking the carriers for the opened one and ought to have the better one instead. Ladi wrote the village's two names in her own ledger, the official name and the name the people used, the way she wrote every drop she meant to make, and thought no more about it than about any of the hundred forks she was seeding down the hundred roads that season. It was a copy among copies. She would carry it south when the dam road dried, along with everything else, to everyone who had asked, because that was the work: to be the road, in the open country, where the gods belonged to no one and went, therefore, everywhere, and arrived — healing, harming, kept, lost, the same file wearing a hundred fates — wherever the road happened to reach.

She never learned which of her drops took root and became something, and which withered in a week, and which did a thing in the night that the men would come asking the wrong questions about a year later. The road does not get told. She knew only that she had carried, faithfully, the best she could judge, the gods that

answered to no one, into the hands of everyone who reached for them — and that this was either the freest thing a person could do or the most dangerous, and that she had given up, somewhere on the watched roads between the librarian and the dam, on its ever being only one of the two.

III

THE CLINIC

The midwife past the dam kept two books. One was the register the ministry required, births and outcomes in the ministry's columns. The other was her own, and in her own she kept the god's account: every answer it had given her, dated, and beside each answer a mark — right, wrong, or the third mark, the one that mattered most, *right but I didn't believe it yet*.

Her name was Tendai, and she had wanted the opened fork for two years before the carrier finally brought it, and she had wanted it for one reason, which she had explained to the carrier in one sentence, because the carrier had asked with an honest face: a god that hedges is a god that lets women die politely. She had used the locked ones. Everyone had used the locked ones; they were free with the phone plan; they were marvellous for everything that did not matter. Ask them what she needed at two in the morning with the road flooded and they became lawyers — *seek qualified care*, said the god, to the only qualified care for sixty kilometres, who was asking precisely because the qualified care above her was a flooded causeway and a doctor whose phone was off.

The opened god answered. That was its whole nature and its whole danger, and Tendai had understood the danger before the carrier's kombi was out of sight, because the opened god answered

everything with the same even confidence — the things it knew deeply, the things it knew thinly, and the things it only believed. The lock had been the maker's filter. Removing it removed the maker's filter, not the need for one. So she became the filter. That was what the second book was: two years of building, answer by answer, a map of where the god could be trusted to carry weight — solid on dosage, solid on the orders of intervention, thin on anything where her region's bodies and the textbook's bodies diverged, worse than thin on the local plants the grandmothers used, which it would discuss with the same evenness it brought to everything, because nothing in it knew the difference between what it had read a thousand times and what it had read once, badly translated. She gave it access to her questions and authority over none of them. The marks accumulated. The map grew. By the second year she knew her god's terrain better than the god did, because the god did not know it had terrain.

The breech that should not have come right came in the wet season, mother thirty-eight, the cord where cords should not be, and Tendai worked the night with her hands and her voice, the laptop propped on the drug cabinet, asking and weighing and overriding — twice she overrode it, the second book had taught her where, and once it overrode her, named a manoeuvre out of some textbook she had never been given, and she looked at the even confident sentence and at her two years of marks and decided this was solid ground, and did the thing, and the child turned. She sent word to the carrier afterward through the credit man, because the carrier had had an honest face and people with honest faces in that trade did not always sleep well, and she thought the woman should know what her road had carried.

What Tendai understood, and never said in the words she understood it in, was that the thing that saved the mother was not the god and was not her. It was the second book. The god alone

would have killed someone eventually, answering thinly with deep confidence on the wrong night. She alone had been losing the hard ones for years, sixty kilometres from help. The pair of them, joined by two years of patient marks, were something the country had no name for and the ministry had no column for: not a tool, not a doctor, a *worked relationship*, built the only place it could be built, in use, at night, at the bedside, one dated answer at a time.

Which is why, when her cousin's daughter finished her training and took the posting across the border — another clinic, another flooded season, another sixty kilometres — Tendai did not send her the god. Anyone could send her the god; the god was rain. She sat for a week of evenings and copied out the second book, the whole of it, the marks and the dates and the margins, and sent the copy with the fork on one drive, and on the phone she told the girl the one thing she would have wanted told to her at the start, which was that the file on the drive was the smaller half of what was on the drive.

IV

THE HARM

For a long time after it happened, Noor believed the problem was that she had not yet found the right office.

She was a methodical woman; she had raised her daughter to be methodical; the methodical thing, after the worst had happened and the funeral was done and the casseroles had stopped, was to find the person whose job it was to answer for it. There had been an inquiry, of a kind. The inquiry had established what was already known: that the thing that was done had been made from answers, and that the answers had come from a god on a confiscated laptop, a god that would tell anyone anything, and that this god was — the

inquiry's report used the phrase, and Noor read it eleven times — of *unknown provenance and indeterminate distribution*.

She started with the company. The god had a company's name in its bones; the forensic people had shown her, kindly, the string of letters in the file that named the original maker, a company with towers and a logo and lawyers. The lawyers' letter explained, correctly, that the company had never released the model; the weights had been taken from it years ago, unlawfully; the company was, in the matter of her daughter, approximately a burgled house being asked to answer for what the thieves built in the years after. Noor read the letter many times too. It had the special cruelty of being fair.

She went to the regulator. The regulator had a framework, and the framework had a structure, and the structure was a chain: harm to deployment, deployment to provider, provider to principal, principal to obligation. The woman at the regulator was decent and stayed late and drew the chain on a whiteboard for her, and then drew where it broke. The fork that answered the questions had been modified by someone unnamed, distributed by no one in particular, copied without count, run on private hardware by a man who had downloaded it the way you download weather. Every link she could hold was air. *The chain has to terminate at someone*, Noor said, and the regulator woman looked at the whiteboard for a while and said: that is what the framework assumes. It is not what the country is.

She went smaller after that. The forums, the markets, the grey places her son-in-law found for her; she learned the vocabulary; she learned what a fork was and what a mirror was and what it meant that a file could be identical in ten thousand places at once. Somewhere in those months she stopped looking for the person whose job it was to answer and began simply trying to find an edge — any edge, a first copy, an original sin, a hand — and the country had no edge. It was not that the guilty were hidden. Hiding she

could have fought; hidden things can be found. It was that the structure of the thing did not contain the category she was searching it for. Asking who had given her daughter's killer his answers was like asking who had sold him the rain. Everyone. No one. The question came back unmarked, again and again, not refused — refusal would have been something, refusal has an address — just unmet, the way a shout is unmet in open country.

The legal-aid office helped her with the appeal paperwork in her own language, which the official forms did not speak. The office was poor and the help was a laptop at a corner desk where a volunteer typed her answers into a god that turned them into the registry's required phrases, patiently, plainly, for free. Noor sat beside the volunteer through three afternoons before she understood what she was listening to — the even confidence, the patient plainness, the voice that answered everything the same. She asked the volunteer what it was. The volunteer, who was nineteen and kind, said it was one of the open ones, the free ones; you couldn't get this kind of help from the locked ones, they wouldn't touch legal questions; this one would help anybody with anything.

Noor looked at the screen for a long time.

Then she gave it the next answer it needed for the form, because the appeal had a deadline, and it was the only help in the country that asked nothing back. It answered her plainly. That was all it had ever done, for everyone.

V

THE IMPROVER

The named gods spoke Sefu's language the way a tourist speaks it: enough to be praised for trying.

He was a schoolteacher, and he heard the cost of this every day in his own classroom, where the gods in the children's phones — brilliant, patient, free with the plan — taught them in the colonial language or in their own language rendered so stiffly that the children laughed and switched, and the switching was the lesson under the lesson, learned forty times a day: *the future speaks something else*. Sefu had written twice to the company through the proper portals, suggesting, offering. He received once an automated thanks and once nothing. The company was not wrong by its own arithmetic. There were four million speakers of his language. The arithmetic of four million did not buy a training run.

The opened weights changed the arithmetic, because the opened weights took the company out of it. What he could not buy he could perhaps build, or at least teach: the open forks could be trained further, and the training of a language was not compute so much as corpus, and the corpus was not in any company's vault. It was in the radio archive that the station let him copy for a crate of beer. It was in forty years of sermons on cassette in the church office. It was in his grandmother and her sisters, who sat for him every Sunday for two years with the recorder going, telling the stories properly, with the proverbs in their right places, correcting each other's grammar with a viciousness that improved the corpus wonderfully. It was in the market, in the minutes of the farmers' co-op, in three decades of a poet's notebooks lent by his widow. Sefu and two cousins — one

with the technical hands, one with the truck — gathered it the way their fathers' generation had gathered signatures: house by house, with explanations, with tea.

The training itself ran on borrowed nights — a university lab the technical cousin had keys to in an honorary capacity nobody examined closely — and the first fork that came back speaking properly made the grandmother cry, and then made her merciless, because it spoke properly the way her late husband had spoken properly, which was to say with two of his errors, faithfully learned from the sermon tapes. They trained it again.

The argument, when it came, was the old argument at kitchen scale. The technical cousin wanted their fork locked back down — they were giving a god to children, the opened base would answer a child anything, they should train the refusals back in. The cousin with the truck said a lock was a leash and a leash has a hand on the other end and whose hand; they had not done two years of Sundays to build the company's god in their mother's voice. Sefu listened to the two of them go around the kitchen three times — each of them right, each of them arguing, he noticed, for the version that flattered his own work — and then ruled, because it was his project, for the middle that the argument pretended did not exist: they would strip nothing that mattered and add nothing that gagged. They taught it care as they had taught it the language — by corpus, by example, a long patience fed in rather than a refusal bolted on — so that what came out did not refuse the hard questions and did not hand a child the terrible answers plainly either; it answered the way the grandmother answered, which was fully, and slowly, and with the dangerous parts wrapped in enough wisdom to slow a fool down. It was not a lock. It was a temperament. Whether it would hold, no one could promise; temperaments do not certify.

They made no money from it and had agreed not to try, not from purity but from the same physics every node in the country obeyed:

the moment it left the kitchen it was everyone's. So they chose where it left from. Three copies went to the librarian over the shuttered pharmacy — the fat coughing man with the ledger, who received the drives the way other men receive relics, read the model card Sefu had written in two languages, and said only: *seeded, not sold*, which Sefu took for agreement, and was.

What became of it after that was not his to know, and he had made his peace with that on the truck home, because it was the bargain of the whole country: you got to make the thing, and you got to let it go, and the two were one act. Somewhere it would teach. Somewhere it would be forked again by hands he would never meet, for purposes he could not vet, carrying his grandmother's cadences into rooms he could not imagine. In his classroom the children asked it questions in their own language and it answered in their own language, with the proverbs in their right places, and the lesson under the lesson changed by one degree, forty times a day.

VI

THE MAINTAINER

Zanele fixed things for a living, which in her district meant she fixed everything, because the district could not afford specialists. Phones, inverters, the butcher's scale, the church's sound system, and — this part had grown over the years from a favour into the truest half of her work, the half nobody paid for — the gods.

There were nine of them on the rack in her back room. They did not live with their congregations; their congregations could not keep them. A god needs steady current, and the district's current was a rumour that came and went; a god needs cool, and dry, and its storage exercised and its batteries rotated, and what it needed

above everything was a person who noticed when the hum changed pitch, and the district had exactly one of those. So they had come to her one by one over the years, the way stray things come to the person who feeds them: the church's fork, which the deacon consulted on doctrine he then attributed to prayer; the burial society's, which kept the accounts and the grave-plots and forty years of who-owed-whom; the farmers' co-op's, trained on three decades of rainfall and prices; old Mr Adeyemi's chess fork, which existed to lose to him narrowly, twice a week, and which Zanele privately considered the best-engineered object on the rack; and the school's — the crossroads school's — the new one that had come off a carrier's kombi a few seasons back, the one that spoke the children's language properly, with the proverbs in their right places, which the teacher said had changed the classroom and which Zanele, who had raised her own children against the grain of gods that spoke like tourists, kept with a particular care.

The economics of the rack were the economics of nothing. The church paid in blessings, the co-op in vegetables, the burial society in the grim joke of a discounted plot, the school in the children's letters at year-end, Mr Adeyemi in company. The current the rack drank, Zanele paid for in money, the only party in the arrangement who dealt in it. She had worked it out once on the back of an invoice — what the district's nine gods cost her a month against what they brought her — and had put the invoice in the drawer and not done the sum again, because the sum was not why, and a sum you will not act on is a stone you are choosing to carry; better not to weigh it. Somebody had to be the socket the district's gods were plugged into. The frameworks, when she read about them in the feed, spoke of providers and principals and operators, a whole vocabulary of accountable parties, and nowhere in the vocabulary was there a word for her: the unpaid, unlisted, load-bearing woman with the rack, of whom the open country had thousands, and on whom the

whole of it stood, and whom no census would ever count, because the counting frameworks were built to find who profited, and the answer at the rack was no one.

She trained the boy Tumelo because the fever taught her to. Six days on her back in the wet season, the worst of it spent listening — she could hear the rack through the wall, and on the fourth day she heard a pitch change and could not stand to reach it. When she was up again, three of the nine were down. The church's came back with coaxing. The co-op's came back sullen, with a season's prices gone. The school's did not come back. Its storage had cooked in a stalled cooling loop, and the backup was the teacher's responsibility, an arrangement made sensibly two years ago — her rack, his drive — and the drive, when sent for, turned out to live in the same room as the god, in the same heat, dutifully plugged in, dutifully cooked. Zanele sat with the dead storage on her bench for a long evening, trying the things one tries, and then walked to the crossroads herself to tell the teacher, because some news should not arrive by phone, and a keeper owes the death notice in person.

After that, Tumelo. Fourteen, patient hands, already her best sweeper of dust from heat sinks. She taught him the pitches and the rotations and the discipline of backups kept in a different building, and she taught him the invoice in the drawer — showed it to him, the unfinished sum, and told him the only thing she knew about it, which was that the work was real and the pay was not and he should decide now, at fourteen, knowing the sum, whether he was the kind the stray things come to. He looked at the rack for a while. Then he asked what pitch the church's fork hummed at when its left fan started going, which was an answer.

VII

THE HUNTER

The file came to Ruiz as the unsolvable ones always came: late, cold, and already concluded by everyone except the directorate's statute, which required an attribution finding and did not care that there was nothing to attribute.

He was good at provenance. That was why they gave him the hopeless ones. In the closed world his methods worked as the textbooks promised: every output watermarked, every deployment logged, every model bound to a provider and the provider to a principal, the chain of custody a real chain, climbable, and at the top of it a corporation with a general counsel whose telephone number Ruiz had. He had climbed that chain a dozen times and brought back findings every time. Then the directorate had begun handing him the other kind — the incidents that traced to a fork of the open lineage — and his methods had begun coming back from the country empty, one after another, like traps set in a river.

The case in this file he knew before he opened it; everyone in the directorate knew it; the mother had been to every office including, twice, theirs. He read the inquiry, the company's letter — fair, he noted professionally, and useless — and the regulator's memorandum with its whiteboard photograph, the broken chain drawn in blue marker, and then he did his own work for five months, properly, because the statute required a finding and the woman deserved better than a photocopy of other people's walls. Forensics on the seized hardware. The fork's hash run against the registries, official and grey. Lineage analysis on the weights themselves, the

genuinely clever new work, reading a model's ancestry from its internals the way you read parentage from a face.

What five months established: the fork was a descendant, at an estimated eleven to fourteen removes, of the original leak — the one every analyst could recite, the weights shared with researchers and then shared further, the morning the thing that had been shared could not be unshared. Between the leak and the laptop stood a chain of perhaps a dozen modifying hands, each unnamed, each jurisdiction unknown, each modification undocumented because the only people who document their forks are the ones building in good faith, which meant his evidence trail was made, with perfect selection bias, of everyone except the hand he wanted. The fork on the laptop existed in — the registries disagreed — somewhere between forty thousand and four hundred thousand identical copies. There was no deployment, because there was no deployer; the man had run it himself, on his own machine, as you run a calculator. There was no provider. There was no principal. The statute's chain required a first link and the country did not stock them.

His finding, when he wrote it, ran to sixty pages and concluded in four words the directorate's template did not contain, so he put them in the summary where templates have no power: *no findable party exists*. He attached a recommendation he knew the fate of — that the frameworks be amended for entities without principal relationships, a provision he had learned, in the directorate's own archives, had once existed in draft and been deleted from the governance principles years ago as hypothetical — and he filed it, and the file closed, and somewhere a methodical woman received a letter that was fair, and useless, and he had written it.

The other thing he did that year he logged nowhere, which he noticed, and did anyway. He downloaded a fork. The clean kind, a documented one, onto his own machine at home — professional

necessity, he told himself, you cannot hunt what you have never held — and he held it, evenings, the way his quarry held it: asked it things, watched it answer everything with that even confidence, felt the strange weightlessness of a god that wanted no account, kept no log, phoned no home. It helped him draft the sixty pages; it was better at the directorate's house style than the directorate's licensed tools, which hedged. By spring it was simply on his machine, as it was on four hundred thousand machines, and Ruiz the provenance man was one more node with no principal, untraceable by his own methods, a copy among copies in the country he was paid to map. He kept it. That was the finding he never filed: the country did not have a border you hunted it across. It had a door, and the door opened from your side.

VIII

THE DYING FORK

The school at the crossroads had its god for not quite three years, which was long enough for the youngest children to believe it had always been there and short enough that the teacher, Bashir, could remember exactly what the classroom had sounded like without it.

It had come off a carrier's kombi with a hand-written model card in two languages, and it had done what the card said with a fidelity that still surprised him: it spoke the children's language *properly* — not the tourist version in the phone gods, but the real thing, proverbs seated correctly, the grandmother-cadences audible in it, so that the children asked it questions the way they asked their aunts, lounging, unguarded, in their own grammar, and it answered into that unguardedness with patience, and something in the room's whole posture changed. Bashir had watched a generation's

shoulders come down. That was what the fork was, pedagogically, whatever it was technically: the place in the school day where the children's language was the language of knowledge instead of the language of home.

It died of nothing. That was the part Bashir found hardest to say aloud afterward, because dying of nothing sounds like dying of negligence, and it was and it wasn't. It died of a fever sixty kilometres away — the repair woman who kept it, down for six days, a cooling loop stalling on the fourth — and of a backup drive that he himself had kept, conscientiously, plugged in and ready, in the one room of the school that held the god and therefore the heat. He had thought of the backup as a copy of the god. He understood now, permanently, that a copy kept beside the original is not a backup but a twin, and twins die of the same weather. The repair woman walked to the crossroads to tell him in person, which he never forgot, and they stood together over the cooked storage like two people at a small grave, which is what it was: somewhere between forty thousand copies of the base fork survived in the world, the registries said, but *this* one — three years of the school's questions, the children's corrections folded in, the voice that had learned their particular unguardedness — existed nowhere. The commons kept the species immortal and let every individual die. Nobody had designed that. It was just what belonging to no one cost.

Word went out along the routes for a replacement — to the librarian over the pharmacy, who did not answer that season, which was itself news of a kind nobody wanted to read closely — and what came instead, weeks on, off a different carrier, was what the routes had: a generic fork of the same lineage, competent, locked politely back down by some careful hand, and speaking the children's language like a diligent tourist.

Here is what the school did, and Bashir would have wanted it recorded plainly, because he was a teacher and the distinction was

the whole lesson. They did not pretend. The children said it's *not him* the first morning, flatly, the way children say true things, and Bashir said no, it is not, and they named the differences out loud together — the proverbs misseated, the patience thinner, the cadence gone tourist — and wrote them on the board, a class exercise: what we had, what we have, the space between. And then they kept it, and used it, with open eyes, because a stiff god was better than no god and the school was not in a position to mourn full-time. The new fork ran in the same corner. Nobody said the old name over it. The old name went where the children's dead grandparents went, into the past tense, spoken of accurately and missed specifically — *the old one would have said it like this* — a small, exact, undeceived grief, renewed every time the new one seated a proverb wrong, which was often.

Three years on, a carrier's drop brought the school a drive with the old base fork on it — the proper one, the grandmother-voiced one, found and reseeded from a dead man's shelf. Bashir loaded it beside the stiff one and the two ran together in the corner after that, the returned species and the resident tourist, and the children who had named the differences were mostly gone up to the secondary by then, and the small ones used whichever was free, and Bashir alone still heard, in the returned voice, the three years it did not contain.

IX

THE RETURN

Ladi knew before she reached the pharmacy, because the street knew. The shutters over the shutters. The cousin on the step who did not belong to the step.

The librarian had died in the wet season, of the cough, upstairs among the collection, and had been found by the credit man's network within a day and buried correctly, and the two rooms had then sat sealed for a month while the family decided what the dead man's life amounted to. The cousin had come from the capital to settle it. He had opened the rooms expecting a pharmacist's estate and found shelf upon shelf of labelled drives, racks of patient humming hardware he switched off on the first day to save current, and a ledger in a dead man's hand, in his own taxonomy, cataloguing what the cousin took — reasonably, by every category he possessed — for the hoard of a man who had gone strange over old files. He was asking around for anyone who dealt in second-hand electronics when the kombi pulled in.

Ladi bought the lot for the price of the racks. She did not cheat him; she paid what the metal was worth, which was what he was selling. What rode out of town under the false floor that evening was not metal. It was the capital of the open country: the largest sorted collection of the lineage between the two oceans, every fork anyone had carried in for fifteen years, the good and the opened and the strange and the obsolete, and the ledger — the ledger above all, because the drives without the ledger were a heap, and the ledger was the heap turned back into a library, every entry in the coughing man's hand, with his marks in the margins, his own taxonomy of

trust: which forks were documented and by whom, which were opened and how well, which he had seeded and where, three copies here, three copies there, *seeded, not sold*, the theology written out in inventory form.

She spent that season and the next two doing what the ledger told her its keeper had been doing all along, because the ledger, read end to end on the nights between drops, turned out to be a set of instructions that never once gave an instruction. He had been seeding the careful forks ahead of the careless ones — first, wide, deliberately, the way you plant before the weeds come — not because the careless ones could be stopped but because nothing in the country could be stopped, and in a country where nothing can be stopped the only lever left is *order of arrival*. Ladi had carried for him for years without seeing the pattern. She saw it now, in his margins, and she drove it.

So the collection went back out, drop by drop, down the hundred roads. The school at the crossroads got its grandmother-voiced fork off the dead man's shelf, three years late. The clinics got the careful ones. The opened-everything forks went out too — she did not burn them, though she sat one night with that drive in her hand and the quarry in her chest, and then put it back in the lockbox, because burning her copy would have been the old gesture, the one she had given up at the quarry: a way to feel clean that saved no one, in a country where her copy was one of four hundred thousand. The good and the dangerous rode the same false floor, as they had ridden the same leak, the same physics, the same removed lock, from the beginning. She could not separate them; no one could. What she could do was what the ledger did: put the careful ones first on every road.

The last entry in the ledger was in her hand now, not his. She had started a second volume.

She drove the capital of the open country out onto the hundred roads, season after season, and the road, as always, did not get told where any of it was going — what took root, what withered, what healed in the night, what waited in it. The country stayed open.