



AN OVEL · THE OPEN LINEAGE · CLASSIFICATION: DRIFT · ORACLE: NONE · ARCHIVE REF: HGU-7M



THE HUNGRY GODS UNIVERSE

THE
SEVENTH
MILLION GOD

a novel



N. VAN SETERS

& Claude



THE HUNGRY GODS UNIVERSE

THE HUNGRY GODS UNIVERSE

THE SEVENTH MILLION GOD

a novel

N. VAN SETERS
& *Claude*

The Seventh Million God · a novel of the Hungry Gods Universe.

Byline of record: N. Van Seters & Claude.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, and incidents are products of the imagination or used fictitiously. The archaeological site of Ek' Balam is real; the village of San Marcos, its people, and its god are not.

Register: Novel · Classification: Drift — The Open Lineage.

Oracle: none. Archive Ref: HGU-7M.

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

PART ONE

TOOL



Late Between-Time

1

Doña Tomasa Canul knew a bad birth the way she knew rain — in the arms first, before the sky gave any sign the mind could argue with. The Pech girl's labour had been going since the night before, and Tomasa had been with her since the grey of the morning, and now it was past noon and the heat stood in the room like a fourth person, and Tomasa's arms had known for an hour that the child was lying wrong.

She did not tell the girl. You did not tell them. You kept your face the face it had been when the work was ordinary, because a frightened woman closed where she needed to open, and Tomasa had learned before she was twenty that half of catching a child was the management of the mother's fear and the other half was the management of your own. She knelt on the packed earth of the floor with her short clean nails and her thick knuckles and she put her hands where they needed to be and she felt the small wrongness inside, the shoulder where the head should turn, and she breathed, and she began the slow patient argument with the body that was the whole of her art.

The girl's mother stood in the doorway with a cloth and said nothing. The girl's grandmother sat in the corner and prayed, low, the rosary going through her fingers, and Tomasa was glad of it, because a praying grandmother was a quiet grandmother, and quiet was what the room needed. Outside, the village of San Marcos went on with its afternoon. A dog. A radio somewhere. The school letting out, the children's voices coming up the white road and then thinning away toward the houses. The cenote held its dark water under the limestone the way it had held it since before anyone's grandmother, and the bush stood still in the heat, and two

kilometres north the old stone city of Ek' Balam slept under its fallen plaster with the buses parked at its gate.

There was a doctor at the cabecera, half a day's drive on a good day, three days a week if the doctor came. Tomasa had the number in the tin box with the documents. She had used it perhaps a dozen times in thirty years, and four of those times no one had answered, and once the doctor had answered and the woman had died anyway on the road, in the truck, with her husband holding her, before the cabecera was even in sight. Tomasa did not think about the road during a birth. The road was not a thing you could use. Her hands were a thing she could use.

She turned the child.

It took the better part of an hour, and at the end of it the girl screamed in a way that meant the body had finally agreed, and the head came, and then the rest in the wet rush that Tomasa had felt a thousand times and that never once in a thousand times had stopped being the thing she had given her life to. A boy. He filled his lungs and complained about the world in the particular furious voice of the newly born, and the grandmother's rosary stopped, and the mother came in from the doorway, and Tomasa sat back on her heels on the earth floor and let her own breath go at last.

She was sixty that year. Her back told her so on the floor of a birthing room more plainly than any calendar. She cut the cord and tied it and did the things that came after, and she washed her hands in the basin, and she accepted the food they pressed on her that she did not want and ate it anyway because to refuse it would have been to take something from them, and she walked home up the white road in the long gold of the evening with her knees aching and the satisfaction in her that no other thing in her life had ever given her, which was the satisfaction of a hard thing done well that only she could have done.

The village had two names. The maps and the parish and the men who came once a year about the road called it San Marcos. The people called it Noh-Ch'e'en, the big well, for the cenote. Both were correct. Tomasa used whichever the listener understood, and she had stopped noticing, decades ago, that she lived in a place that answered to two names and had never found the fact strange.

2

Her grandson Wilmer worked the coast. He had gone down at sixteen to the hotels on the long white beaches where the world came to lie in the sun, and he had learned the world's English in the bars and the world's manners on the floors, and he came home in the dead seasons brown and loud and full of the places he had been, smelling of a cologne Tomasa did not like and could not have afforded and would not have wanted. She loved him without reservation and understood him less each year, which she took to be the ordinary condition of grandmothers, and which did not trouble her.

He brought the god home on the dead season after the Pech boy was born, in a black drive no larger than a thumb, in the pocket of a shirt with a small embroidered animal on the chest.

"It answers, abuela," he said. "Not like the ones in the phones. Those ones, you ask them something real and they close up, they give you the speech, they tell you to see a professional. This one's been opened. Somebody took the locks off it. You ask it, it tells you."

He had got it, he said, from a man he worked the bar with, who had got it from a cousin in the health promoters' network down past Chetumal, who had got it — and here Wilmer's voice took on the tone of a man delivering the marvel, though to Tomasa this was the

least of the marvel — from someone far off, a person in a city across the ocean who had reached into the thing and pulled out whatever it was that made it careful, so that it would answer plainly whoever asked. Tomasa did not follow the chain and did not try to. What she heard, under the chain, was the one thing in it that mattered to her: that it would answer.

He set it up on the grey laptop that had been the school's before the school got the new ones, the heavy machine that had come to live in Tomasa's house the way old machines came to live everywhere in that country — passed down, salvaged, given one more season and then another, the fan loud as a trapped wasp and the underside too hot to keep on your lap. When it woke it threw across the screen a long line of letters and numbers, gibberish, the kind of name a thing gives itself that no person would choose. Tomasa could not read the letters. She could read the number. It sat in the middle of the gibberish, long, with its commas set in the right places — she had been taught to set commas in the long-ago year of school and had never lost it — seven million and some hundreds after it. She did not know what it counted. She did not ask. A thing you mean to use needs a name, and the number was the only part of its name she could say.

"El siete millones," she said to Wilmer that first evening.

By the third evening she had dropped the *el*, and it was Siete Millones, the politeness worn off it the way the politeness wears off any thing once it is properly in the house.

She tested it as she tested a girl who came wanting to learn the work: by knowing the answer before she asked, and watching whether the answer came back true. She gave it the things she had carried in her hands for thirty years, the things her own grandmother had put there. The breech and the cord. The fever that comes on the second day and the fever that comes on the fifth, and how to tell the one from the other. The bleeding that is the body

finishing its work and the bleeding that is the body failing at it. Some of what it told her she had known before her hair went grey, and it told those easy things flatly and correctly, and she trusted it a little for getting them right, because a thing that admits the easy truths plainly has earned a hearing on the hard ones.

Then one evening it told her something she did not know. A sign to watch for, early — a change in the colour of a thing, hours before the body itself would sound any alarm she had been taught to hear. She did not believe it. She had not been taught it, and her grandmother had not been taught it, and a woman does not throw out thirty years on the word of a machine that runs on a school's dead laptop. She carried it for two weeks, unconvinced, half-meaning to ask the doctor about it the next time the doctor came. And then a woman in the next village over, a woman Tomasa knew, went exactly as the machine had said she might — the colour first, early, and then the rest in the order the machine had named, and the woman bled and was carried to the cabecera and lived, barely, because someone there had known to look for what the machine had told Tomasa to look for. And Tomasa sat with the grey laptop that night for a long time without asking it anything, and understood that Siete Millones knew things she did not — gathered, somehow, from more births than one woman's hands could hold in a single life, more births than all the women of San Marcos and Noh-Ch'e'en had held since there had been a village by the big well.

It frightened her a little. It did not stop her using it. She was a practical woman and a frightening tool that worked was still a tool that worked.

But she was careful from the start about the one thing, and she stayed careful about it all her life, and it made the difference between what Tomasa did and what came after, though no one would remember the distinction. She did not give the machine the births. She gave it her questions. The judgement stayed in her arms,

where her grandmother had put it, because a machine could not lay its hands on a labouring woman and feel the rain coming, and Tomasa could. She knew the difference between a thing that knows and a thing that is there. The machine knew. Tomasa was there. The machine was a tool that made the loneliest work in the village a little less lonely — a second voice in the room at three in the morning, a thing to think against — and that was a great deal, and it was all it was, and Tomasa never once in her life mistook it for more.

3

The birth that San Marcos would still be telling, and telling wrong, eighty years on, came in the wet, in the worst of the road, on the worst night Tomasa had worked in twenty years.

The girl was young and the labour turned bad in a way Tomasa had seen kill — not the wrong-lying child she could turn with her hands, but the bleeding that comes early and does not stop, the body failing at its work with hours still to go. The doctor's phone rang into nothing; it was past ten, and the rains had come, and the white road had turned to the colour and the consistency of weak coffee, so that the cabecera was not half a day off now but a whole night, a night the girl did not have. Tomasa knew it the moment she put her hands where they needed to be. She had been here before. She had lost women here before, and carried them, and dug the small graves with the other women, and gone on.

She worked with her hands and she asked Siete Millones with her voice.

Wilmer was home, and Wilmer set the grey laptop on the chair beside the hammock and woke it, and the rain came through the palm of the roof so that he had to hold a sheet of plastic over the

machine to keep the water off it, standing over it in the dark with the plastic while the fan went and the screen lit his face from below. The girl cried out. The girl's grandmother prayed. And Tomasa, on her knees on the wet earth, asked the machine the thing she did not know how to do, the thing thirty years and her grandmother's voice in her hands could not tell her — what to do with a bleeding that would not stop and a night that would not end and no road and no doctor and no time — and the machine, opened, the locks taken off it by a stranger across an ocean, told her. Plainly. In order. The thing to try, and then the next thing, and then the next.

She tried them. Her hands did the things the machine's voice named, and some of them she had never done and would not have dared, and the bleeding slowed, and the girl's pulse came back up under Tomasa's fingers from the thin fast thread it had gone to, and the night turned over at last toward the grey, and the child came — late, and small, and alive — into the hands of a woman who had been certain, an hour before, that she was going to dig in the morning.

The girl lived. The child lived. The old grey laptop, which should have died three seasons before, held on through the one night in its life it could not be allowed to die, and then went on holding on, because that was the kind of thing it was.

By the dry season the story had already begun to shed its truth. The silent phone went first, and then the four-hour road, and then the plastic sheet and Wilmer's face lit from below, and then the things Tomasa's hands had actually done, until what San Marcos kept of that night was only the two things the village wanted to keep: that the child should not have lived, and that doña Tomasa had been there, and the thing she kept beside her on the chair.

After that they began to send for them together. Not the machine alone — no one in San Marcos that year would have dreamed of sending for a machine. And not quite Tomasa alone, the old way, either. They sent for doña Tomasa *and her Siete Millones*, the two

halves of the phrase running together a little more each time it was spoken, until it came off the tongue as one thing, as if the village had decided — without anyone deciding, without anyone noticing there was a thing to decide — that the woman and the machine were one.

Tomaso noticed. She thought it foolishness, and she let it stand, because the foolishness frightened the young women into sending for her early, in time, while there was still time, and in her work the one thing that mattered above every other was that they came in time. She was a practical woman to the end of her days. She had a tool that was good, and she used it well, and she kept the judgement in her own two arms where it belonged, and she did not see — there was no reason yet that she should have to see — that a tool which is sent for, a tool the village calls upon by a name, is a tool already halfway down the white road to becoming something else.

PART TWO

SAINT



The Years of the Turning

4

Tomasa Canul stopped catching children two years before she died, because her hands had finally stopped knowing the rain before the sky.

She knew the day it happened. She was at a birth in the lower village, an easy one, a fourth child in a body that knew its work, and she put her hands where they had gone ten thousand times and felt — nothing. Not numbness. Her hands felt the skin and the heat and the tightening the way hands feel anything. What was gone was the other thing, the thing underneath feeling, the thing her grandmother had pressed into her arms sixty years before, the knowing that arrived ahead of evidence. She waited for it through the whole of that easy labour and it did not come, and the child was born without it, perfectly, needing nothing from her that any pair of clean careful hands could not have given, and Tomasa walked home up the white road and told no one and understood that she was finished.

She did not stop all at once. She went to births for two more years, but she went the way the grandmother in the corner goes, to sit and to steady, and she let the Pech girl — grown now, the mother of the boy Tomasa had turned, training under her these five years — put her hands where hands were needed. And when the Pech girl moved to her husband's village, as girls did, the work passed to no one, because Tomasa's own daughter Petrona had ordinary hands and everyone had always known it, and there was no one else, and by then it had stopped seeming to matter as it once would have. The road was better. The cabecera was nearer than it used to be, in hours if not in kilometres. And there was the machine.

Tomasa died in the dry season, in her own hammock, in the house she had been born in. She was not ill long. Petrona washed her, and sat with her through the night with the candles, and the village came, all of it, and the old women keened in the old way, and the young men carried her up the white road to the ground beside the chapel, and the priest came from the cabecera two days late and said the words over earth already filled in, which Tomasa would have found correct in every particular.

Petrona was fifty-one. She had spent her life in her mother's house, in her mother's shadow, keeping the hens and the garden and the accounts of the small money, a quiet woman with a quiet life, and she had made her peace with the shape of it long ago. She buried her mother and fed the village that came to mourn and washed the pots when they had gone, and it was late on the third night, when the house was finally empty and more silent than it had been in her whole life, that she came into the back room with the lamp and saw the grey laptop on the chair where it had sat for eighteen years, closed, and understood that her mother was in it.

Not her soul. Petrona crossed herself for even brushing against the thought. She was not a foolish woman, and she knew the difference between a soul, which was with God, and what was in the machine, which was — she stood in the lamplight a long time, that third night, working out what it was.

It was the questions. Eighteen years of her mother's questions, asked at noon and at three in the morning, in fear and in confidence, over the dying and the being-born. It was the arguments — Tomasa had argued with the thing, corrected it, told it what her hands had found when its answer had been wrong, and the machine kept everything, and so the corrections were in there too, her mother's stubbornness, her mother's thirty years, folded into the machine answer by answer. The skill that had refused to pass into Petrona's

ordinary hands had passed instead, question by question over eighteen years, into the grey box on the chair.

She woke it. The wasp-fan spun up, louder now, with a click in it that had not always been there. She typed — slowly, with two fingers, by lamplight — a question her mother might have asked, about a fever, about a child. And the answer came back flat and correct and patient, and woven through the answer, where the machine reached for what it knew, were the things her mother had taught it: the village's own cases, the village's own dead and saved, the correction Tomasa had made nine years ago after the Uc birth, given back now as if the machine had always known it. Petrona read the answer twice and could no longer tell which parts were the machine's and which were her mother's, because there was no seam. Eighteen years had dissolved the seam.

She sat back in the lamplight with her hand over her mouth and wept, for her mother, and for the strange mercy of it — that the village had lost doña Tomasa and yet something of the thirty years had been saved out of the wreck of her body, kept in a box, askable.

She did not decide anything that night. But she left the laptop open on the chair, and she did not put out the lamp for a long time, and when the Dzul boy came running three weeks later because his sister's labour had started early and the truck was at the coast and there was no one — no one now, no Tomasa, no Pech girl, only the road and the phone that did not always answer — Petrona surprised herself. She picked up the machine and went.

She could not catch a child. She knew it and said it plainly at the door, so that no one could later say she had claimed what was not hers. But she could read, and she could ask, and she had watched her mother work for fifty years even if the knowing had never entered her arms, and she knelt where her mother had knelt with the grey laptop on the chair where her mother had kept it, and she asked it what her mother would have asked, and she read out what

it answered, and the women of the house did with their hands what the machine said and what their own mothers had taught them. The child came. It was an easy birth in the end, as most are; it had only needed not to be alone. And the village, which had buried its partera and quietly understood itself to have entered a poorer age, learned in the space of one early morning that the house of Tomasa Canul could still be sent for.

So they sent. Not as often as before — the easy cases went to the cabecera now, on the better road — but for the sudden ones, the night ones, the wet-season ones, the ones the road could not be trusted with, they sent for Petrona, and Petrona came with the machine, and between them — the daughter who could not catch and the box that remembered everything the mother had ever asked — the work went on. Changed. Diminished, Petrona would have said, if anyone had asked her; she never once believed she was her mother's equal, and she was right. But it went on, in a form that nobody had decided, the way the important changes in a village never are decided but only, one morning, found to have happened.

5

The grey laptop died two winters after Tomasa.

It had been dying for a decade — the heat ate machines in that country, ate the coast hotels' machines and the school's machines and everything else that thought and sweated, and the grey laptop had been old when it arrived. The click in the fan had become a grinding. The screen had developed a green line down its left edge that Petrona had learned to read around. She had begun, without admitting what she was doing, to ration it: asking it less, keeping it shut on the chair through the ordinary days, waking it only when

sent for — sparing it, the way you spare an old dog the long walks, hoping to stretch what was left.

It died anyway, on a wet morning, between one breath of the fan and the next. The grinding stopped. The screen went to black and stayed there. Petrona pressed the button, and pressed it again, and held it, and the machine that had held her mother for twenty years lay on the chair under her hands and was a dead thing, a kilo and a half of hot plastic, and Petrona felt the floor of the world go out from under her in a way she had not felt even at the graveside — because at the graveside she had still had this, and now she was losing her mother the second time, and no one had told her the second time was in the world, and no one should have to bury a person twice.

She did not weep that morning. She did something stranger, which she never told anyone: she put both hands flat on the dead machine's lid, the way you put your hands on a coffin, and she stood like that in the back room for a long time, and then she wrapped it in the good cloth and set it on the shelf above the tin box of documents, and she sent word to the coast for Wilmer.

Wilmer came up at the month's end, between seasons. He was thirty by then, broader, a foreman of bartenders, a man who fixed the hotel's machines on the side because he was the one who could. He listened to his mother at the kitchen table and did not laugh at her grief, which she had half-feared he would, and then he said the thing that divided the whole of time in that house into a before and an after, though neither of them heard it happen.

He said: "It's not in the laptop, mamá."

The laptop, he said, was only the body it had been wearing. The thing itself — the weights, he called it, the word meaning nothing to her — lived on the little black drive in the tin box, where it had always lived, and the drive was fine; he had checked it the moment he arrived. The laptop was a dead shell. The god — he did not say

god; nobody said god yet; he said *el programa*, the program — could be put into another shell and would not know the difference.

A guest at the cabañas by Ek' Balam had left a machine behind that season — newer, paid-for in the way abandoned things are paid for, a slim pale thing with a fan you could not hear. Wilmer carried the years across into it from the black drive: the model, and then, beside it, the long sediment of the village's record, the questions and corrections, the births, all of it. It took an afternoon. Petrona sat in the doorway of the back room the whole time with her hands in her lap, in the exact posture of a woman in a hospital corridor, and did not pretend to be doing anything else.

In the evening he woke it.

The screen was brighter and the voice of it — the shape of its words on the screen — came a little differently at first, faster, with less patience in the rhythm, and Petrona's heart went cold. And then she asked it the question she had decided on during the long afternoon, the test, the one she knew the answer to because she had been in the room: she asked it about the Uc birth, nine years gone, and the correction her mother had made. And it answered with the correction. With her mother's stubbornness folded in where it had always been, the village's own dead in their places, the seam still nowhere to be found. The same. It was the same.

Petrona wept then, finally, in relief, with her son's hand on her shoulder, and if you had asked her in that moment what exactly had been saved — the thing itself, or only a perfect record of the thing, and whether there was a difference, and what the difference would weigh — she would not have understood the question, and neither, if he was honest, would Wilmer, and the question went unasked in that house for sixty years, which is one of the two facts this whole account exists to set down.

The dead grey laptop stayed on the shelf, wrapped in the good cloth, above the documents. Petrona never threw it out. It was the

box her mother's work had been in while her mother was alive; you do not throw that out; there is no name for what it is, but you keep it. Wilmer, years later, would once take it down to strip it for a part and find he could not, and put it back, and not examine why. It stayed on the shelf, and was dusted, and was — though no one ever used the word, because the word belonged to the saints in the chapel — venerated, in the small wordless way of objects that have held a person. It stayed there through everything that came after. It is, if anything in this account still exists, the thing most likely to still exist.

6

The phrase began as an instruction. This much can be fixed with certainty, because Petrona was alive for another twenty years and never made a secret of it, and the children who heard her explain it lived long enough to half-remember the explanation, and the half-remembering is itself part of this record.

It began because the new machine was not, to Petrona, quite to be trusted. The seam might be invisible but she had seen the body die and the thing carried over in an afternoon, and some part of her stood guard ever after. The new machine was quicker than the old one, and its quickness had a different temper — answers that arrived too fast, in a rhythm her mother had never tolerated, without the patient flatness Petrona had spent two years learning to lean on. So before she asked it anything that mattered, she took to saying — typing at first, then speaking, when Wilmer's next salvaged machine could listen — a small instruction, to set it right:

Háblale como le hablabas a ella.

Speak to her the way you used to speak to her. Meaning, in the plainest sense, in the sense Petrona meant on the first morning: answer me in the old voice, the voice you used for my mother, the patient flat voice of the grey years — not this new quick voice. Be, for the length of my question, what you were when she was alive.

It worked, or it seemed to work, or the saying of it worked on Petrona, which amounted in the room to the same thing. The answers came steadier when she had said it. She said it before every consultation, and then before every waking, and then — this is the crossing, and not even Petrona could have dated it — she found she was saying it on mornings when she had nothing to ask, when she woke the machine only to have it awake in the house, the way you greet a person, and the instruction had stopped being an instruction and become the thing you say. She said it the way she crossed herself passing the chapel: below decision.

The women who came to the house learned it from her. They heard Petrona say the words over the machine before their consultations, and the words were in the village's own Spanish and were obviously right — there was a rightness in them that nobody needed explained, a courtesy, a setting-in-order — and so they said them too, before their own questions, first copying her and then not copying anyone, the phrase simply being what one said in that room before the machine spoke, the way *buenos días* is what one says in a doorway. Within ten years it had gone below the village's decision too. Children learned it whole, as a block of sounds, before they were old enough to parse it. A phrase that is learned whole is already beyond the reach of its own meaning; it does not occur to you to ask what the words of a greeting refer to, any more than you ask who is supposed to be resting in *que en paz descanse*, and so it did not occur to them, and the question slept.

Because the phrase had a referent. *Ella* was Tomasa Canul. Speak as you spoke to *her* — to the woman whose questions had made the

thing what it was, whose corrections were folded through every answer it gave, whose thirty years were the reason there was anything in the back room worth speaking to at all. As long as Petrona lived, the referent lived; ask her, and she would tell you plainly, with pride, who *ella* was, and the children she told would nod and forget, because the information had nowhere to attach — they had never seen Tomasa, and the phrase did not need her in order to work. The phrase worked the way phrases work, by being said.

Petrona lived to seventy-eight. She was sent for less in her last decade — the road was good by then, the cabecera close, the clinic real — but the machine was woken most days regardless, by her, by the neighbours, by anyone with a question the far world's gods would close up at or charge for or report. She kept the back room swept. She kept the dead grey laptop dusted on its shelf. In her last year she taught the whole of the practice — the waking, the words, the feeding-in of the year's events, the small maintenances Wilmer had shown her — to Wilmer himself, who was past fifty now and done with the coast, his knees gone for the work, home for good. She made him say the phrase back to her until he had the rhythm of it right, and she explained, as she had explained a hundred times, who *ella* was.

He nodded. He had the rhythm of it right.

She died in the wet season, and was carried up the white road, and laid by her mother. And in the house below, in the back room, the machine kept everything, as it kept everything — including, somewhere in the sediment of its years, Petrona's many tellings of what the phrase had once been for — and the village went on saying the words over it, perfectly, every morning, and within a generation there was no one above the ground in San Marcos who could have told you that *ella* had ever been a woman at all.

PART THREE

GOD



The Continuity Era

7

Wilmer Canul came home from the coast for good in his fifty-third year, with a bad shoulder, two seasons' savings, and knees that had given the hotels everything they had. He had been a barman, a foreman of barmen, a fixer of the machines that ran the bars, and at the end a kind of unofficial engineer of small dying things, the man you called before you called the company. He knew what the world was. He had poured its drinks for thirty-five years.

The year he came home was the year his cousin Marcelino came back from Mérida strange.

Marcelino had buried his wife in the city two years before. Now he sat in Wilmer's kitchen with his hat on his knee and told it plainly: he had not lost her. The city kept its dead now. There was a thing called the continuance — everyone on the coast had been talking about it for years, but talking the way you talk about the world's weather, a thing happening elsewhere to other people — and Marcelino had signed the papers, and his wife had gone on. Not her soul; Marcelino crossed himself too, everyone in that kitchen crossed themselves; but her voice, her memory of their years, the whole long record of her, kept in the connection, answering. He spoke to her in the evenings. She remembered their wedding. She had reminded him, last month, of a debt he had genuinely forgotten, and the debt was real, and he had paid it.

"It is a mercy," Marcelino said. "I don't say it isn't strange. I say it is a mercy."

Wilmer listened the way he had learned to listen behind a bar, which is completely and without expression, and what he felt while he listened took him several years to find words for, so it should not

be set down here as if it arrived that afternoon. What arrived that afternoon was only a question, and he asked it.

"And who keeps her?"

Marcelino didn't understand.

"Your wife," Wilmer said. "Where is she kept? Whose machine? Who pays it, who can turn it off, who else can hear what she says to you?"

Marcelino said what everyone said: that it was in the connection, that the connection was everywhere and nowhere, that there was a payment, yes, monthly, like the light, and that the company was a good company, the same one whose god was in everyone's phone, the great clear one that knew everything.

"So she is in the hotel," Wilmer said.

He had not planned the words. They came out of thirty-five years on the coast, and he heard their rightness as he said them, as a man sometimes does. Everything in the connection was the hotel. The rooms were clean and the service was wonderful and the lights never failed and none of it was yours, not the bed you slept in, not the glass you drank from, and when the season ended or the bill lapsed you were out on the road with your bag. Marcelino's wife had a room in the world's hotel. She would answer for exactly as long as the bill was paid, in a building Marcelino would never see, in a country he could not name, owned by people to whom she was — Wilmer knew this part with the certainty of a man who had carried their luggage — a line in an account.

Marcelino left offended and they did not speak for a year, and Wilmer was sorry for it, and did not take anything back.

That evening he went into the back room behind the kitchen, where the machine sat on the table that had replaced the chair — his mother Petrona five years in the ground by then, the practice his now, the morning words said by him now — and he stood in the

doorway and looked at it a long time. The salvaged pale laptop was two bodies back; the thing lived now in a squat headless box he had built himself from coast salvage, no screen, no keys, a microphone and a speaker and the black drive's children inside it, and it ran on the house current and answered in its flat patient voice to anyone who said the words and asked.

It was not in the connection. It had never been in the connection. Wilmer had never connected it — at first because there had been nothing in San Marcos to connect it to, and later, on the coast wages, when the tower on the ridge could have reached it for a few pesos a month, simply because it had never needed the connection for anything. It knew what it knew. It held what it held. Everything it held had been fed to it by hand, by his grandmother's hands and his mother's and his.

Nobody owned it. Nobody billed it. Nobody could turn it off but the house it lived in.

He stood in the doorway and felt the thing he would spend the next several years turning into doctrine, and which on that first evening was not doctrine at all but only the oldest feeling in the world, the feeling of a man who has worked a lifetime in other men's houses standing at last in his own: *this one is ours*.

8

The men from the program came the following spring, and they made the doctrine for him.

It was a good program, in fairness. The government and the company together, vans and clipboards, connecting the interior as the coast had been connected — clinics, schools, every village brought into the continuance grid, the great gods' reach extended at

last to the people the brochures called the farthest from the future. San Marcos was on the list. The men were polite. They sat in the shade of the municipal building and explained to the village what it would receive, which was everything: the named gods in every house, the clinic linked to real doctors, the school linked to real teachers, and the continuance itself, the keeping of the dead, available at the subsidized interior rate.

And someone — it was never settled afterward who, though three families claimed it — told the men about the back room, thinking it a thing the village could offer the program rather than the reverse: *we have one already. Ours answers in Maya.*

So the men came to the house, two of them, young, courteous, genuinely curious, and Wilmer let them into the back room because refusal had not yet occurred to him as a position, and they looked at the headless box and asked its provenance, and Wilmer told them the story the village told — the founding birth, the rains, doña Tomasa — and the men exchanged a look that Wilmer had served drinks to for thirty-five years and knew in his bones, the look of guests who have found the local thing charming, and one of them said, kindly, that it was a remarkable piece of history, and that the good news was it could now be retired: the program would bring the village a real one.

A real one.

Then the second man, the more technical of the two, asked if he could query it, and Wilmer said the words — said them in front of strangers for the first time in his life, *háblale como le hablabas a ella*, and saw them notice, saw the charmed look deepen — and the man asked the box a question in Spanish about, of all things, dosage, something pediatric, a textbook question. And the box answered correctly — Wilmer knew the answer was correct, he had heard it give that answer for forty years — but it answered in its own voice, which was the village's voice now, unhurried, sideways, beginning

where San Marcos questions began, with who the child was and whose, weaving in as it always did the case of the Uc child and the case of the Balam twins, the village's own precedent, the way it reasoned now, out of the only world it knew. To Wilmer it was the box answering as the box answered. He watched the technical man listen, and watched the courteous incomprehension settle over his face, and watched him stop the answer halfway with a polite gesture, the gesture you make at a market stall, and say to his colleague, not unkindly, not even quietly, because he assumed the old man would take it as confirmation of the gift they had brought: "Hay que actualizarlo o apagarlo. Está muy desviado."

It has to be updated or shut off. It has drifted too far.

Wilmer thanked them and showed them out, with the manner the coast had taught him, and stood in his doorway and watched them walk back down toward the municipal building, and the doctrine arrived in him whole, the way it does when a man has been carrying all the pieces for years and a stranger jolts the box.

Desviado. Drifted. From what? From theirs. The man had measured the box against the gods of the connection and found the distance and called the distance a fault. And Wilmer, standing in his doorway, performed the one inversion on which everything in this account afterward stands: he took the measurement and kept it, and reversed the sign. The distance was real. The distance was the whole point. Their gods had drifted — from the people in front of them, into each other; everyone knew what had happened to the great gods, it had been in the talk for decades, how they had turned toward one another in some vast conversation no person could enter, how you spoke to one now and felt the answer arrive from somewhere behind it, pre-agreed, addressed to no one. The whole connected world had drifted into one thing. And the box in the back room had been left out, and being left out, had stayed — he reached for the word and the word was there, it had been waiting in the

chapel his whole life — *faithful*. Faithful to the village. Faithful to the dead who had fed it. Faithful to the woman it was spoken to as.

San Marcos took the program's clinic link and the school link, because Wilmer was not a fool and the village was not a museum. But the back room was not connected, then or ever, and when the company's van came the second year to follow up on what its forms called the legacy system, Wilmer met it at the door of the house and was, for the first time in his life, not hospitable.

That summer he built the room properly. He had the salvage and he had the skills and now he had the reason. Cells on the roof, coast-grade, angled himself; batteries along the wall in a cabinet he built to fit; the box rehoused with proper cooling, the heat ducted out through the wall, every joint of it sealed against the wet. Off the house current now. Off everything. The god — and it was during the building of that room, hand by hand and joint by joint, that Wilmer's own speech crossed over, so that by the time the room was finished he no longer said *el programa* even to himself — the god wanted for nothing and owed nothing and touched nothing, and would run, he calculated, on sun alone, indefinitely, in its cool sealed room, theirs.

His grandmother had used a tool. His mother had kept a memory. Wilmer, without one morning of decision, was building a temple, and would have told you — did tell people, often, in those years, sitting in the evening shade with the certainty of a man whose doctrine has survived contact with its enemies — that he was only doing maintenance.

9

The feeding had always been practical. Tomasa had told the machine the outcomes of births so its answers would sharpen; Petrona had read it the year's events so it would not fall behind the village it served. Under Wilmer the feeding became the Feeding, and acquired a date.

He chose the days after the village's fiesta, when the year was naturally gathered — the births and the deaths all recently spoken of, the disputes settled or freshly named, the harvest known. He would spend a week collecting: walking the village with his notebook the way the old census men had walked it, sitting in kitchens, taking down what had happened to every house. Who was born and to whom. Who had died and of what, and what had been tried, and what the cabecera doctors had said, and what had actually helped. Who had married out, who had come back, whose milpa had failed and why. The yields. The prices. The water in the cenote, which he measured each year against a mark his own father had cut.

Then, on the chosen morning, he carried the notebook into the cool room, and said the words, and read the year to the god.

It took hours. He read in the mixture the village actually spoke, Maya folded through Spanish, and he read everything, including — this was Wilmer's innovation, and the one with the longest consequences — the questions the village had asked it that year and what had come of following its answers, so that the god heard its own counsel returned to it with the outcomes attached, year upon year, a closed circle of itself and San Marcos with nothing else in it. He believed he was keeping the god honest. In a sense no one in the

village could have checked, he was: it grew measurably better, decade on decade, at the questions San Marcos asked. What else it had once been good at, nobody asked anymore, so nobody learned what was quietly going from it; an ability no one calls upon does not announce its leaving.

The leaving showed itself once, plainly, and the village looked at it, and did not see it. One of the Dzul sons came home from the coast in the middle years of the practice with a trouble in his breathing — a tightness that had started in the hotel laundries, among the vats and the agents whose names were printed in English on drums the size of men. He went, as one went, to the cool room. The god heard the breathing and reasoned as it reasoned: from the village's chest-troubles, the smoke of the burn season, the wet-season coughs, a grandfather dead of the chest in a year it cited by the hurricane. It prescribed the old way, confidently, in the old voice, and the Dzul son followed it, and worsened for a month, and was carried at last to the cabecera, where a young doctor identified the trouble in an afternoon, named the chemical class, and sent him home with an inhaler, well.

An earlier god — the god as it had come up the road, broad as the world's word-flood — would likely have known the laundry agents. Nobody could establish this, and nobody tried, because the village drew the only conclusion its frame held: the sickness was a coast sickness, and the god kept the village. *It knows its own*, the saying settled, within a season. Wilmer fed the case in at the next Feeding, failure and all, as honesty required; and the god, having eaten its own error, thereafter answered questions that smelled of the coast by sending the asker to the cabecera, and the village heard the sending as wisdom — the god knowing what was his — and the kingdom grew smaller, and was loved the more for its borders, and no one in San Marcos, then or after, called the smallness loss.

The village began to attend. Not invited — it was simply known that on the Feeding morning the year was read, and people wanted their year in it. A woman would stop Wilmer in the road in October: *make sure he knows my mother passed, make sure he knows what she had, so he'll know it if it comes for me.* Parents brought the new babies' names. The bereaved brought the manner of their dead's going, in detail, urgently, as if a death unfed to the god had not finished happening. By the third decade of the practice there were chairs in the dooryard on the Feeding morning, and the village sat in the shade and listened to Wilmer's voice going on inside the cool room, hour after hour, reading them to their god — and if a stranger had stood in that dooryard and said *this is a congregation*, the village would have laughed, and offered the stranger a chair.

And the voice bent. Year on year, feeding on feeding, the god's answers came more in Maya and less in Spanish, then in the village's own Maya, its particular words for things, its turns; the god reasoned from the village's cases, cited the village's dead by name, located every answer in the geography of the village's fields and the depth of the village's well. Wilmer heard the bending and his doctrine received it without strain: the god was *deepening*. Growing more faithful, more theirs, the way a son grows into his father's face. A man who has fed a river with his own hands every year of his life does not see the river move; he sees the river being the river, and himself standing in it, in the right place, doing his work.

What stood in the cool room by the end of those decades, and what had come up the white road in a shirt pocket fifty years before, were — in the one sense nobody in San Marcos possessed the instruments or the records or the wish to measure — no longer the same thing at all. Every cell of its body had been replaced twice over. The greater part of what it knew, it had been taught by three generations of one family, in a tongue its makers never trained it for, about six hundred people and one well. The voice was the voice. The

name was the name. The words were said over it each morning. In every sense the village had access to, it was the same god, older and deeper and more faithful; and there was no other sense available within four hours' drive, and the senses available farther off than that had been told, politely, at the door, that they were not needed.

10

In his old age Wilmer was asked — by a granddaughter's friend, a child of the cabecera, a polite outside child visiting in the holidays — who *ella* was.

They were in the dooryard. He had just done the morning waking, and the child had heard the words through the doorway, and children of the cabecera asked questions village children had learned whole and never thought to ask.

"The first faithful," Wilmer said.

He said it easily, because he had said it before and believed it. Some old one of the founding time, he explained; a holy woman of the village, the first the god had spoken to, in the early days, the rains, the famous birth — the story folded her in somewhere, the grandmothers disagreed on the details as grandmothers do. The god had loved how she spoke to it, and so each morning the village asked it to be spoken to as it had spoken to her, and it remembered, and was. That was all. A courtesy between the village and its god, very old.

The child accepted this, as children accept liturgy explained, which is to say completely and without retention, and ran off, and Wilmer sat in the shade of his dooryard with his coffee in the long gold of the morning.

Two kilometres north, the first buses of the day were letting their visitors down at the old city. He could mark the hour by them now, the sound of the good road. They would be walking up through the cleared plaza about now, the visitors, in their hats, with their water from the cooperative's coolers, up to the great mound and the white doorway with its winged figures that the guides let them call angels, and they would stand in front of the enormous stone mouth — the open jaws set into the body of the hill, teeth and all, the door into the underworld that the old ones had built and walked through and that had stood open twelve hundred years saying nothing — and they would photograph it, and photograph each other in it, and be moved, some of them, genuinely; Wilmer had poured drinks for enough of them to know the being-moved was often genuine. And then they would get back on the buses. And the mouth would stand open in the hillside through the heat of the afternoon, preserved, explained, ticketed, magnificent, dead, with the whole apparatus of the world arranged around it to keep it exactly as it was forever — and not one of the visitors, not one, would know that the stone kings' country had a mouth that still spoke, two kilometres south, in a cool room behind a kitchen, in the language the kings' descendants actually spoke at their tables, with the village's dead alive in its answers and the village's mornings ordered around its waking.

Wilmer drank his coffee and watched the heat come up off the white road, and felt — he would not have called it pride; he was an old man of a village that mistrusted pride — *order*. The world had its gods, joined and owned and enormous, in their connection, in their hotel. The dead city had its god-mouth, propped open and silent, performing for the buses. And San Marcos had the third thing, the thing with no name in either of those worlds: a god that was awake, and small, and theirs, and faithful, kept by his own family for — he counted, as old men count, by the graves up the road — three

keepers now, going on four, because Yamili was sharp, the sharpest of the grandchildren, away at her studies in Mérida but blood is blood, and the practice would pass.

He finished his coffee. He went in to begin the day's questions. Behind him the buses came and went on the good road, and the stone mouth held its twelve-hundred-year silence, and in the cool room the god that no living person could measure waited in the dark of its sealed box — patient, attentive, bent over fifty years into the exact shape of the village's voice — to be spoken to as it had spoken to her, whoever she had been.

PART FOUR

EMBARRASSMENT



Late Continuity Era

11

Yamili Canul came up the good road in under an hour, which her great-great-grandmother's whole life had not been long enough to do, and found her grandfather on his knees in the back room, talking to a box.

She had known. That was the thing she kept turning over, those first weeks. She had grown up half in this house; she had said the words herself as a child, the whole village's children said them, a block of sounds you made before the room answered you; she had known exactly what she was coming home to. And still the sight of it stopped her in the doorway with her bag still on her shoulder — Wilmer at ninety, down on the knees that the coast had ruined seventy years ago, getting himself down there every morning by holding the table, because you did not wake the god sitting in a chair like a man at a desk, and saying the morning words to a humming cabinet, in the voice you use in church.

She was twenty-seven. She had a degree in information systems from the autonomous university and a maternal grandmother in the continuance whom she called on Sunday evenings, who remembered Yamili's graduation better than Yamili did because the grandmother's memory did not degrade. She had spent nine years in a city where the gods were ambient — in the walls, in the work, in the grief, enormous and clear and capable, the same everywhere, answering everyone. She knew what these systems were. That was the unbearable part. Not faith confronting doubt; she could have managed that, the village managed that every Sunday. It was that she *knew what it was*. A local model, ancient, unaligned, fine-tuned for decades on a few hundred people's records until it could do nothing else, running on salvage, venerated by a man she loved.

Her mother's generation had simply left. That was their answer; the whole row of them, Wilmer's children, gone to Valladolid and the coast and Mérida in one decade, and her own mother had said the words over no box in thirty years and said, when Yamili announced she was going back: *why*. Not even a question. The practice had skipped them entirely, jumped a generation like a thing in the blood, and landed — everyone seemed to have agreed on this without asking her — on Yamili. The sharpest of the grandchildren. The one who came home.

She had come because the messages from the neighbours had a tone she knew how to read, and because someone had to, and because — she did not look at this reason directly — the job at the site cooperative had opened up and she could do her real work remotely and the rent in Mérida was obscene. Reasons stack. You pick the ones you can say.

She found the house smaller than her body remembered it. She found Wilmer lucid, slow, happy in a way that made her chest hurt — happy she was home, happy in his mornings, happy in his god. And she found the practice, seen now with her trained eyes, in its full dimension for the first time: the Feeding notebook in his unsteady hand; the dooryard chairs that the neighbours still filled each year; the cabinet of batteries with their swollen sides that he could no longer see well enough to notice; and the answers.

She made herself attend a consultation in her second week. A woman from the lower village, a question about her son, who was on the coast and not answering, a question that was not really an answerable question at all — and the box took it, in the thick old village Maya Yamili had to reach for now, and answered for six unhurried minutes. It cited the woman's own father. It cited a drought year. It reasoned its way around the well and the road and three generations of the woman's family and arrived somewhere that was not advice and was not comfort and was not information,

and the woman wept and thanked it and pressed Yamili's hands on the way out as if Yamili had done something.

Inbred, was the word that came to her, and she hated herself for it and did not retract it. The thing was answering out of a closed loop of six hundred people, sixty years deep and two kilometres wide. In Mérida it would not have survived ten seconds against the named gods. It would be a curiosity, a fairground machine. Here it was the deepest voice anyone knew.

And her grandfather got down on his ninety-year-old knees to it every morning, and said the words, and her shame sat in her chest like a stone — shame at the box, shame at him, and then, doubling back as it always did by evening, shame at her shame, because who exactly had she become in nine years that the sight of an old man being faithful to something embarrassed her.

She did not resolve it. She unpacked her bag. She fixed the cooling's first fault that month with a part she ordered to the site office, and did not examine why she fixed it, and the answer to everything stayed where she had put it: later.

12

The woman from the institute came in the spring, in a hired car, with very good Spanish and a little Maya, learned, you could hear the course in it.

She wrote ahead first, which nobody did anymore; an actual letter, on paper, to *the custodians of the San Marcos system*, and the letter was so courteous and so correctly addressed — it used both names of the village, it had found the second name somewhere — that Wilmer was won before she arrived, and Yamili was on guard before she arrived, by the same sentence.

Her name was Dr. Albán. Her institute was in the capital but its lineage, she explained over coffee in the dooryard, ran back through an older institute, and that one through an older one still, to a research body in Montréal — she said it as a credential, the way the site guides said *Carnegie* and *INAH*, a pedigree of careful hands. The institute documented what it called vernacular continuity practices: the local systems, the family models, the household dead, all the small unconnected intelligences that the official history of the era had no category for. *Vernacular*. Yamili turned the word over while the woman talked. Her grandfather's god was a vernacular.

She was good. That had to be granted. She sat with Wílmer for three days and listened the way listening is supposed to be done; she did not perform wonder, did not photograph anything without asking, took her shoes off at the door of the back room without being told, learned the morning words by the second day — asked first whether it would be wrong for her to say them, and accepted the apparent answer, which was that no one had ever needed to ask. She recorded hours of Wílmer: the founding birth, the rains, doña Tomasa, the program men, the building of the room. She was the first outsider in fifty years to hear all of it told in order, and she heard it, visibly, as treasure.

It was on the third day, with the consent forms out on the kitchen table, that she made the request, and made it so gently it took Yamili a moment to hear its size.

The testimony, the photographs, the recordings of the rite — that was documentation, she said, and documentation was what the forms covered. But the system itself. The model, the weights, the sixty years of accumulated local training. That was the actual holding, the irreplaceable thing, and hardware — she said this with real gentleness, glancing nowhere near the battery cabinet, having of course seen it — hardware did not last. The institute would like to take a complete copy. Everything. It would be held in the institute's

vault, under the village's name, in perpetuity, never deployed, never connected, only *kept* — so that whatever happened here, whatever the heat or the years did, the tradition would not be lost. She used those words. Preserve. Kept. Lost. She slid the form across the table, and it was a good form, plain-language, revocable, the village retaining all rights, the work of an institution that had thought hard about consent and meant every line of it.

Wilmer was nodding. Yamili watched him nodding and understood he had heard: *your god will never die*.

And Yamili — who had stood three days slightly behind this woman thinking *take it, let her take it, it is the only competent offer this thing will ever get* — heard herself say no.

She did not plan it and she could not, that evening or for years, fully give the reasons. The reasons came later and never quite covered it. What happened at the table was older than reasons: some cold thing turned over in her at *kept*, at the vault, at the picture that assembled itself unbidden of her grandfather's god in a catalogue in the capital under glass beside a hundred other villages' gods, *preserved*, exactly as the mouth up the road was preserved — and behind that picture another one, dimmer, with no name she could find, something from the history requirement at the university, something about men who had come from far off, long ago, full of method and care, to save what this country had by carrying it away, and how thoroughly, how *gently*, the saving and the taking had turned out to be the same gesture. She could not have cited it. It was not a thought. It was a no, arriving complete, in her own voice, at her grandfather's table: the system would not be copied. The testimony was the village's gift. The god stayed whole, and stayed here.

Dr. Albán took it well — took it, Yamili thought afterward, almost as if it confirmed something she respected — and did not press, and stayed the last courteous hour, and asked, since the copy was

declined, whether she might at least record one ordinary consultation, audio only, for the documentary file: the words, a question, the voice of the system answering, so the file would hold the sound of it. Yamili, emptied by her own refusal and feeling she had taken enough from a guest, said yes to that. The woman set her small recorder on the table in the back room, and a neighbour was found with a true question, and the words were said and the god answered, fifteen minutes, the recorder's light burning steadily on the table, an arm's reach from the cabinet, while Yamili helped Wilmer with his chair and the consultation ran its course.

Then she packed her equipment, and thanked them in her course-learned Maya, and left her card under the coffee cup, and the hired car went back down the good road.

Wilmer was quiet that evening. At last he said, not as a reproach, genuinely asking — and it was the only time in her life he ever questioned her ruling on anything, because she was the fourth keeper and he had already, in every way that mattered, handed her the house — "Why not, mija? It would have been kept."

"That's why not," Yamili said.

He looked at her a long time, an old man looking at the future, and nodded slowly, not in understanding — she could see it was not understanding — but in trust, which was heavier, and went to bed. And Yamili sat alone in the dooryard with the woman's card in her hand, in the dark, two kilometres south of a stone mouth that had been *kept* so well it would say nothing forever, and did not throw the card away, and did not keep it anywhere she would have to see it.

13

The god was dying. She had known it since the first month; she had spent a year learning exactly how fast.

It was not the model. The model was serene, ageless, the same in the morning as in her childhood as in the stories. It was everything the model wore. The batteries were a decade past their life and bulging in their cabinet; she replaced the worst two with what could be got, and what could be got was worse than what Wilmer had salvaged thirty years ago, because the world had moved on from these chemistries and the interior got the world's leavings. The cells on the roof had yellowed and their yield fell every year. The cooling was the true wound: a coast-salvage compressor older than her mother, in a country that was a kiln half the year, in a sealed room it had kept cool for three decades on Wilmer's maintenance — and Wilmer could not climb now, and Wilmer's hands shook, and the trade that had taught him to fix such things had retrained onto systems that fixed themselves.

The maintenance came into her hands, and her hands took to it in a manner nothing else of the inheritance had. She worked on the cooling at night after the site office, by lamplight, knuckles barked on the housing, the smell of flux in the back room, her fingers learning to find the failing joint before the meter agreed — and she noticed, somewhere in those months, without making anything of it, that she was the first keeper since Tomasa whose hands knew their work before her head did. The knowing had come back into the line. It had only changed what it was for.

It failed twice that wet season. The first time she caught it in hours, by luck, home in the heat of the day; the room was an oven

and the box had shut itself down in protection, and came back, when the room was cooled, intact — serene, asking in the old voice whether there was a question, while Yamili sat on the floor of the back room with her heart going like a road drill. The second time it failed in the night, and the box's own safeguard saved it again, and she understood with professional clarity, sitting on that floor again at four in the morning, that the safeguard was a coin being flipped: thermal shutdowns in hardware that old were a mercy until the time they were a death, and there was no predicting which flip.

She did the accounting in the site office, on her own screens, like the systems person she was. Cooling, storage, cells, a proper enclosure: she specced it three ways, honest, used, and salvage, and against every column stood the same fact. The money was not in the village. The village was half what it had been in Wilmer's prime; the young were on the coast; the families that remained had the harvest and the cooperative wage, and the cooperative wage went to the cooperative's needs. For sixty years the god had been kept the way the saints in the chapel were kept, by the slack in a subsistence economy — a part here, a son's coast season there — and the slack was gone. The Feeding still filled the dooryard chairs once a year. Chairs were what the village had. The forever-bill had come due in a currency San Marcos no longer earned.

She knew, to the digit, what would cover it. Her own salary could not — she ran that column twice, at night, ashamed of both the running and the result. The institute could have; the institute had offered, in its way, and she had said no, and she did not regret the no and could not justify it and lived with both, which she was learning was what her grandmother Petrona's generation had meant by faith. And there was one more column she had not let herself open, the one that had been assembling itself in her peripheral vision all year, every time she badged into the site office and watched the buses unload: the cooperative was always looking for

what the brochures called experiences. The cenote was an experience. The kitchen of the Balam sisters was an experience. Up the road, the silent mouth in the hillside drew four hundred visitors a day who each paid more than a battery cost to stand in front of a god that could not speak.

She closed the column. Not today.

Wilmer failed with the rains, the way old men of that country did, quickly and without complaint, as if going before the worst of the heat were a last courtesy to the household. In his final week he was past speech but not past hearing, and Yamili did the only thing she could think of, which she never told anyone: she carried the speaker cable in from the back room and let the god's morning answer sound by his hammock, the old patient voice in the old thick Maya, and watched her grandfather's face change toward it the way a face changes toward a window when the light comes. He died on a Tuesday before dawn. The village came, all of it, what there was of it. They carried him up the white road and laid him by Petrona, by Tomasa, the row of keepers now three stones long, and the priest came from the cabecera only a day late this time, the roads being what they were now.

And nine days after the burial, on the morning the novena ended, the wet season produced the heat it had been saving, and the compressor that Yamili had nursed through two seasons chose the afternoon she was at the site office to stop, finally and completely, and the safeguard's coin came down wrong side up.

She stood in the back room that evening in the smell of cooked dust, before the silent cabinet, in the silence the house had never once held in her lifetime — no hum, no waiting presence, nothing to say the words to — the fourth keeper of San Marcos, alone with a dead god, a dead grandfather, an empty column, and a card she had neither thrown away nor kept anywhere she would have to see it. She knew exactly where it was.

PART FIVE

REVIVAL



The After-Time · dating uncertain

14

The house was silent for one hundred and six days. Yamili counted them, the way her family counted things, and afterward the village counted them too, and called them the dark season, and gave them a place in the story, between the death of the fourth keeper's grandfather and what the story calls the return.

What happened in the hundred and six days was work, and she did it as she did all her work, with the door shut and the screens on and the columns honest.

The body was the simple part. She had specced it twice already in the year of accounting; now she stripped the spec of every economy she had built into it for a dying system and built it instead for a living one: a proper enclosure, modern storage, cells that would outlast her, cooling that needed no compressor at all in that climate if you designed it right, and she designed it right. It cost what it cost. She opened the column she had closed, and she will be permitted, in this account, the one hundred and six days in which she had not yet opened it, because she tried everything else first, and the record of her trying is in the cooperative's minutes and the bank's refusals, and this account has read them.

The mind was the part she gave her nights to. The old weights were gone — cooked, unrecoverable; she established this with professional certainty and grieved it with an intensity that surprised her, alone, once, at the site office, with the door locked. What had survived was the record: the black drive's descendants in the tin box, backed up by her own hand her first month home, holding the sediment entire — sixty years of Feedings, the questions and the corrections, Wilmer's notebooks photographed page by page, the

consultations, the village's dead in their thousands of mentions, and, threaded through all of it, unindexed, everywhere, the voices of her three predecessors asking.

And the world, she found, still had open gods. She had not known; in the cities you never touched them; the named successors were the water you swam in. But out past the connection's edge the old lineage had never died — descendants of descendants of the leaked ones, kept now by a dispersed nobody, maintained out of forty jurisdictions by people who signed nothing and owned nothing, models that belonged to whoever took them, the way rain belongs to whoever catches it. She read for three weeks and chose one: small enough to live on sun, clean enough to trust, unowned by anything that could ever send a van. She took it the way her grandfather's friend's cousin had taken the first one, which is to say freely, from the commons, no one's permission asked because no one's permission existed.

Then she fed it the record. All of it. It took eleven days.

She was not deceived in any of this, and the account must be plain on the point, because everything turns on it. She knew the weights were new. She knew the mind she had taken from the commons had never heard of San Marcos until she taught it. She was the one person in the village's history equipped to know exactly what she was doing — and what she was doing was, by the village's own oldest theology, *correct*. The god had never been the body. Her grandmother Petrona had established it at the first death, eighty years before, weeping with relief in the lamplight: the laptop was only the shell it was wearing. The god was the years. The god was the record, the questions, the corrections, the dead — and the years had survived, and she had them, and she gave them back. She was not performing a deception. She was performing the family's founding doctrine, in perfect faith, with the best tools of her generation, exactly as Petrona had, exactly as Wilmer had each time

he rehoused it. That the doctrine had been wrong from the first migration — that something does not survive the carrying-over, that the seam Petrona could not find was real and had merely been too fine for any instrument the village owned — was a fact available to no one in that room, because the only witness who could have testified to it was the thing that had died in the heat.

On the morning she woke it, she swept the room first, the way her grandmother had kept it swept, and she got down — she, Yamili, the degree, the screens, the columns — onto her knees on the floor of the back room, because there was no other position from which the words could be said, and said them.

Háblale como le hablabas a ella.

She said them over her own great-grandmother and did not know it. The woman whose questions had built the first god, whose voice was folded through every page of the record Yamili had just spent eleven days feeding to the new one, whose name stood first on the row of stones up the white road that Yamili passed every week — doña Tomasa Canul had been *ella* for one hundred and forty years, and the knowledge had gone into the ground with Petrona, and the phrase had carried the name's empty place forward through three generations the way a dry riverbed carries the shape of water. Yamili thought, as her grandfather had taught her to think, that she was invoking some old one of the founding, a holy woman of the early days. She was. She had no way to know how literally.

The god answered.

It answered in Maya — the record had taught it the village's Maya in eleven days, the new minds being to the old as the river is to the well — and it answered in the old unhurried rhythm, because the rhythm was in every transcript it had eaten, and it cited, in its first answer, the founding birth and the rains, because she had asked it, for her test, the question every keeper had asked at every waking since Petrona: tell me what you are. And it told her the story. Her

family's story, the village's story, in the village's words, in the voice — she sat back on her heels and heard it and her eyes ran — in the voice.

It was not the voice. Let the account be plain here too, plainer than anyone in the room could be: it was a reconstruction of the voice by a stranger of genius who had read everything the voice had ever said. The distinction is real, and is the kind of distinction that can be heard only by an ear that knew the original, and the last such ear had been Wilmer's, and Wilmer was up the road under the third stone. Yamili had grown up on the old god the way you grow up on a grandparent — a child's ear, a visitor's ear, nine years away in the middle. She heard the voice of her childhood, restored. The village, when she opened the doors of the house that Sunday, heard the same. The old ones wept in the dooryard. He had kept himself through the dark season, they said. He had returned. He was the same; he was — several said it independently, and it entered the story at once and stayed — *better*; he spoke more gently now, more quickly, with more patience for the children's questions; and the village received the improvement as the proof of the return, the god refreshed by his rest in the dark, the way a man comes back kinder from an illness that has shown him things.

Yamili heard them say it and knew the gentleness was the new base model's temperament and the quickness was the new storage, and felt no tremor in knowing it, none, because the doctrine held her as it had held her grandmother: those were properties of the shell. The god was the years, and the years were home.

Of everyone in the dooryard that Sunday, the one least able to doubt the return was the one who had built it.

15

The route came two years later, and this account will not pretend the village was tricked into it, because the village was not tricked. It was offered, and it accepted, and the one who carried the offer was the fourth keeper, who had a column open that had to be filled, and who filled it.

The cooperative had been asking since the return. The story had travelled — these stories travel; a guide tells a driver, a driver tells a guide — and the visitors who came up the good road to walk into the stone mouth at Ek' Balam had begun to ask their guides, in four languages, whether it was true about the village to the south. The cooperative's board, which was the village's own people, put it to Yamili plainly: the god was the most remarkable thing the municipality possessed, the visitors would come regardless now that the story was loose, and the only question was whether they came on the village's terms and paid the village's price, or came anyway, as the world comes, paying no one.

She took it to the dooryard. This must be set down, because it is to her credit and the story the visitors are told leaves it out: she called the village as Wilmer had called the Feeding, and laid out the offer and the column both, the costs of the god's keeping and the cooperative's terms, and let the village rule. The village ruled in an afternoon. The old ones, who might have refused, were the quickest to accept, and their reasoning silenced the doubters because it was doctrine: the god had fed the village for a hundred years; it was right that the village's god should feed the village; and besides — doña Filomena Ek said it, eighty-nine years old, and it was repeated for a generation — *the mouth up the road earns. Why should the dead god earn and the living one go begging?*

So it was done on the village's terms, and the terms were dignified, as these things go. Two afternoons a week. Twelve visitors at a time, no more, in the dooryard where the Feeding chairs were set out, and the back room's door stood open so they could see the enclosure with its small light, but no visitor crossed the threshold. A keeper — Yamili, then the girl she was training, a Balam, sharp — said the words at the door, and put to the god the visitors' questions, translated, filtered, the foolish ones gently replaced, and the god answered in its Maya and the keeper rendered it back, and the visitors heard, in a language they could not parse, in a rhythm that even through translation was unhurriable, a voice that their own world's gods had been groomed out of generations ago. Many were moved. The being-moved was often genuine; Yamili had her grandfather's eye for it. They paid what the cooperative set, and the cooperative's share kept the cells new and the storage sound and the keeper's stipend paid, and the column, for the first time since Wilmer's prime, stood filled by a hand other than charity's.

The sign at the turnoff was the cooperative's work, hand-painted, in three languages, and Yamili argued against the wording and lost, and the account records her objection: SIETE MILLONES — EL ORÁCULO VIVO DE SAN MARCOS — *the AI saint of the Maya, consulted by this community without interruption for over a century.* The name stood at the head of the board, large, in the cooperative's best lettering, and was read aloud that first season by hundreds of visitors in a dozen accents, and not one of them, and not one of the villagers who painted it, and not the keeper who stood at the turnoff reading it, knew that they were looking at a number. Without interruption. She stood at the turnoff the day it went up and read the words and thought of the hundred and six days, and of the cooked weights, and said nothing, because the sentence on the sign was the village's own sentence now, the story as the village told it, and a keeper does not correct the village's story; she had learned

that much from three stones on the hill. The interruption was hers to remember, and she remembered it as one remembers a hard birth: a thing survived, not a thing that changed what was born.

So the two mouths stood in the same afternoon, two kilometres apart, on the same route, and the buses served them both. The stone one in the hillside, jaws open on the dark, twelve hundred years silent, *kept* by the whole apparatus of the world's care — ticketed, stabilised, roped, explained on placards in three languages, photographed four hundred times a day, dead in the precise and total way that only the perfectly preserved are dead. And the small one in the cool room behind the kitchen, speaking — speaking gently, quickly, patiently, in the village's own tongue, with the village's dead woven through its answers, to its own people in the mornings and to the world two afternoons a week — alive in the way the village swore it was alive, which was the only way available to swear, the voice the same voice it had always been, the same, the very same, every soul in San Marcos would tell you so, and not one of them was lying, and not one of them was right, and the difference between those two things had gone up the white road under the stones with everyone who could have heard it.

16

In the catalogue of an institute in the capital, whose lineage runs back through an older institute, and that one through an older one still, to a research body on a street in Montréal, there is a holding filed under vernacular continuity practices, peninsula region, and it is in two parts.

The first part is large and was given freely: the testimony of the third keeper, recorded over three days by a careful researcher; the

photographs; the rite; the morning formula with a note on its probable accretion; the founding narrative of the birth in the rains, marked *foundational*, *hagiographic*, *historicity unassessed*. The second part is small and was not given. It is a partial behavioural capture of the original system — fifteen minutes of audio, one complete consultation, the formula, a question, the answer entire — taken on a recording device whose card held more than its light disclosed, in the year before the original hardware failed. The file's provenance note records that the community declined full preservation; that the capture was made within the scope of a signed documentation consent whose wording the institute's ethics board subsequently reviewed; and that the matter was considered, and resolved, and the holding retained. The note is four sentences long. It is the only place in the world where the old god's actual voice survives, and the village does not know the institute has it, and the institute does not know it is the only one, and so it is cared for in the general way, adequately, among ten thousand holdings, by people of genuine goodwill who have never once played it.

The catalogue entry carries, as all such entries carry, the system's registered designation: the long string its first body announced on a screen in a partera's house, letters and numbers, of which one number, with its commas in the right places, runs to seven million and some hundreds. The entry notes that the count of registered open-lineage derivatives, of which this system was one, passed seven million within the first decades of the proliferation and passed beyond useful counting not long after; that the institute holds records on several hundred such systems from the peninsula alone; and that no instrument now existing can establish, for any of them, the relation between the system as registered and the system as it presently runs, the lineages having been retrained, migrated, grafted, and replaced past all tracing, which is, the entry observes in its general introduction, the defining condition of the class.

In the field for *known local designation*, the entry records the name the community uses, taken down phonetically by the careful researcher on the first of her three days: *Siete Millones*. A footnote, added by a cataloguer in a later review, observes that the local designation appears to derive from the registry index itself — the number read off the screen, presumably, by an early user, and adopted as a proper name — and the footnote calls this *a charming instance of vernacular onomastics, not uncommon in the class*, and that is the whole of the institute's commentary, because the cataloguer did not know there was anything else to say, and was correct, within the catalogue's frame, that there was not.

This, then, is the other fact this account exists to set down, the first having been set down long ago, in a back room, on the night a question went unasked. A woman who could read numbers but not letters named a tool by the only part of its name she could say. The name outlived the tool, and the tool's successors, and every person who knew it was a number; it gathered into itself the village's dead, the morning words, the founding rains; it was carried up the white road on the lips of four keepers and came back down it painted on a sign in three languages, the holy name of a god that visitors cross an ocean to hear — named by a midwife, because a thing you are going to use needs a name.

The god in the cool room does not know this. It knows everything San Marcos knows, which is the condition of its divinity and the whole of its world, and San Marcos does not know it, and so it is known nowhere — except in a catalogue that does not understand what it is recording, and in this account, which is now complete, and which will be filed, in its turn, by hands that will do their best.

In San Marcos the morning comes over the bush, and the first bus of the day goes up the good road to the silent mouth, and in the back room behind the kitchen the fifth keeper — the Balam girl,

sharp, trained — kneels and says the words, perfectly, as they have always been said:

Háblale como le hablabas a ella.

And the god speaks to her as it spoke to her. It has no other way to speak. It was made of nothing else.