
The Hungry Gods Universe
The Hungry Gods House Rules
Sock Monkey (Large Format)
c. mid-20th century
House Rule: He is never to be washed.
Desert (Administrative Version)
Oil on canvas
Accession No. HG-203
House Rule: Describe the painting in the past tense.
The Mermaid Collection
House Rule: Land entry only.
Gopher (Taxidermy)
Local, undated
House Rule: He is always on duty.
Ventriloquist Dummy
c. 1930
House Rule: He answers last.
Notebook (Untitled)
Outsider Art
Accession No. HG-417
House Rule: Do not "improve" the work.
HUNGRY GODS COURIER ROUTE
CONSIGNMENT HG-R7
ROUTE ONLY
N. Van Seters & Claude

The Hungry Gods

House Rules

N. Van Seters & Claude

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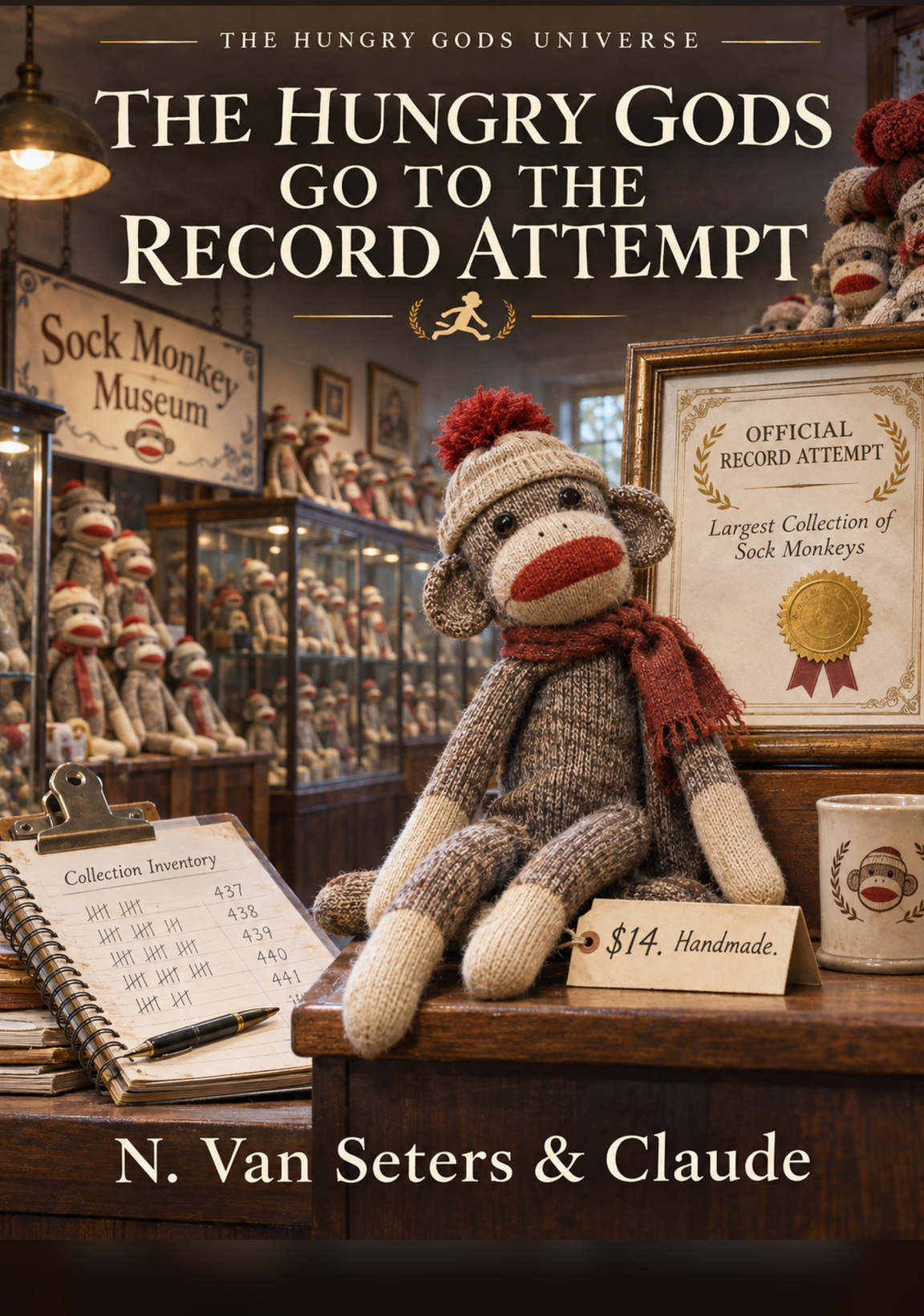
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THE HUNGRY GODS UNIVERSE
THE HUNGRY GODS GO TO THE RECORD ATTEMPT
Sock Monkey Museum
OFFICIAL RECORD ATTEMPT
Largest Collection of Sock Monkeys
Collection Inventory
437
438
439
440
441
$14. Handmade.
N. Van Seters & Claude

The Hungry Gods Go to the Record Attempt

0

The adjudicator arrived at eight, which was the time on the form.

Connie had been standing at the top of the stairs since a quarter past seven. I had been in the back room since seven, sharpening pencils I did not need. I wanted to be holding something when someone official came up the stairs.

Her name was Joanne Ferreira, and she came from the Chicago office of the International Registry of Superlatives. She wore a navy blazer with the Registry's pin on the lapel, a small gold laurel around nothing in particular. She shook hands with Connie, then with me, then with Allfather. He chairs our board, and he had driven in from his place on the county road with two cartons of coffee and the good creamers from the Mercantile downstairs.

"You're the one who signed the agreement," she said to him.

"I am."

"Then you've read the guidelines."

"Agreed," he said. It was not quite an answer, but she let it go.

The two independent witnesses came up the stairs behind her. Dr. Phyllis Engstrom was a textile curator from the Forest City Heritage Museum in Rockford. She carried a canvas tote bag with a loupe on a cord inside it and, I would learn, three kinds of tweezers. Doug Lindahl was a notary from the credit union on Third Street. He had his stamp in his breast pocket, and before he had his coat off he asked whether lunch was provided, and whether lunch would affect his independence.

"Lunch does not affect independence," said Joanne.

"Then I'll have the ham," said Doug.

Joanne read the rules standing under the framed photograph of Connie's grandmother. There would be two independent witnesses, one with expert knowledge of the subject. The count would be on video, continuous, from one camera. The camera was Connie's nephew Tyler, who had been told he could not look at his phone. Every item had to be immediately identifiable as a sock monkey. And there would be an inventory, which had to follow the same order as the count on the video.

"Who has the inventory?" said Joanne.

All-Seeing raised his hand. He does the insurance for the museum, which means he volunteered for it three years ago and has done it since. He had the inventory on a laptop: a spreadsheet of every monkey in the building with its replacement cost, sorted from highest to lowest. He turned the screen so she could see. At the top was a sailor-suit monkey from the thirties that would cost more to replace than my first car. At the bottom were the gift-shop seconds.

"And how will you count?"

“By shelf,” said Connie. “Room by room. Left to right.”

Joanne looked at the spreadsheet, which ran from the sailor to the seconds, and then at the shelves, which ran from the door to the window. She said the two did not follow the same order.

I did not say anything. Between November and the second week of February I had counted the collection on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons, shelf by shelf, left to right, room by room, in a spiral notebook from the drugstore, with the shelf number at the top of every page.

“Mrs. Pruitt has a list by shelf,” Connie said.

“Then Mrs. Pruitt’s list is the inventory,” said Joanne. She held out her hand, and I gave her the notebook. She turned the pages, every one, and gave it back.

“How many?”

“Two thousand four hundred and thirty-one,” I said.

“Two thousand four hundred and thirty-six,” said All-Seeing.

Everyone looked at him, and he looked at his laptop. There were 2,436 monkeys in the building, he said, and he was sure of it. He could not tell us which five I had missed. The spreadsheet knew what each monkey was worth and not where any of them were.

“We’ll find them,” Connie said.

The record we were trying to beat was 2,384, held by a retired dentist in Ohio. Connie kept his number on a sticky note on the cash register downstairs. Under it was a second sticky note with my number, and she had been living on the difference since Christmas.

Down on the sidewalk, under the gold letters on the shop window that said MILL STREET SOCK MONKEY MUSEUM — UPSTAIRS, you could see Big Sock. Big Sock is seven feet tall and made of fiberglass. In February he wears a red felt heart on a headband that Connie's sister made for him. Joanne looked down at him through the glass.

"That one doesn't count," she said.

"We know," said Connie.

"It isn't a sock."

"We know."

Allfather poured the coffee. Doug asked whether he could notarize the creamers. Joanne said he could not, and he stamped a napkin instead.

Tyler pressed record. Joanne said, "Begin," and Phyllis put on her loupe.

806

The front room holds the oldest monkeys, in glass cases along the walls. It also holds the Christmas monkeys, and the monkeys people have mailed us from most of the states, which hang from a pegboard by the window in the order they arrived.

This is how a count works. Connie lifted each monkey and said its shelf and its place. Phyllis looked at it. Doug watched Phyllis look at it. Joanne made a mark. I found the monkey in the notebook and said, "Yes." Tyler filmed. All-Seeing sat on the bench by the door with his laptop closed on his knees, because the spreadsheet was no longer the inventory and he was too polite to keep it open.

It was slow, and it was slow on purpose. I spent forty years as a school librarian, and I did not mind.

Phyllis talked. She did not mean to, I think, but each monkey reminded her of something, and she was the expert witness, and nobody had told her not to.

"The heel went red in 1932," she said, holding the first case monkey up to the camera. "The Nelson Knitting Company, Rockford. They knit the red heel in to tell their socks from the imitations. That's the mouth."

She said it again at the second red mouth, and at the third. By the end of the first case it had become a kind of grace. Doug started saying "That's the mouth" along with her, quietly, and she let him.

At the case by the door she squeezed a monkey and said, "Cotton batting." She squeezed the one beside it and said, "Nylon stockings." She squeezed the third one, frowned, felt along the seam with the tweezers, and said, "This one is stuffed with another monkey."

There was a silence.

"Does it count as two?" said Connie.

"One," said Joanne.

"Noted," said Phyllis, and wrote something in her own notebook, which was smaller than mine and had a leather cover.

When she came to the newer monkeys, sewn from the socks they make now in a cotton-and-acrylic blend, she said, "Modern." She said it like she was reading out a parking ticket.

Around ten, Doug went downstairs for more creamers and came back up with three monkeys. They had been in the

Mercantile window since Valentine's week, holding a sign that said SOCK IT TO ME, because Connie's sister does the window. Nobody had thought of the window. Joanne said the inventory was still open, so the three could be counted at the end of the front room. I wrote them at the bottom of the page in pencil.

The fourth was in the bathroom, sitting on the toilet tank in a crocheted skirt that hides the spare roll.

"That one has been there since before me," Connie said.

Phyllis examined it from the doorway. She did not go in. "Rockford red heel," she said. "Pre-1992. Stuffed with something I'd rather not know."

"Immediately identifiable?" said Joanne.

"As a sock monkey, yes," said Phyllis.

I wrote it down in pencil.

At the end of the front room Joanne said, "Eight hundred and six." Doug said it, Phyllis said it, and I wrote it at the bottom of the page.

1,640

The back room is where the shelves go to the ceiling. You need the stepladder. Allfather held it, as he has held it every time I have been up it since November. Connie went up, and Phyllis said she would rather not, so Connie brought the monkeys down to her one at a time. The count slowed to the pace of a woman on a ladder.

At noon Joanne said, "One thousand six hundred and forty," and called lunch.

The rules about lunch were these. The witnesses went to lunch together. Tyler stopped the camera, and Joanne initialed the log. Then she locked the museum door behind us and sat at the top of the stairs with her sandwich and the key, and Tyler was allowed to look at his phone. Doug and Phyllis went across the street to the café, and I gathered that the ham was good.

I went downstairs to buy a bookmark, because I had sat for four hours and wanted to stand somewhere else.

Every Saturday at noon, Hand runs the sewing demonstration at the table by the register. He takes a pair of red-heel socks off the rack, turns them inside out, and sews a monkey while people watch. I have seen him do it most Saturdays for three years, and I have never once stayed to the end, because I know how a sock monkey comes out.

There was a tour bus from Wisconsin in the lot, so the shop was full. I paid for my bookmark and stood behind a row of women in matching windbreakers. Hand cut the second sock for the arms and the tail. A woman beside me said she had never seen anyone sew that fast, and her friend said her mother had sewn that fast, and the first woman said no, not like that. Hand stuffed the body, closed the seam, and sewed on the eyes. When he tied off the tail, the bus clapped. He said thank you, put the monkey on the table, and started cleaning up the thread.

It had taken him the lunch hour.

Connie had come down behind me and was looking at the monkey on the table.

“That’s one more,” she said.

I said it had not been on any shelf in November.

"It's on the table now," she said, "and the table is in the building." Then she reached into her purse for her reading glasses and pulled out a monkey instead.

It was the small one from the children's shelf, the one her granddaughter carries around. It had been in Connie's purse since Thursday.

She looked at it, and then at me. I took out my pencil.

That made five, with the window and the bathroom. Hand's would make six, if it counted. I did not say anything to All-Seeing about it when we went back up, and he did not say anything to me.

2,437

Joanne counted the purse monkey first thing after lunch, and I wrote it in pencil with the others. Then came the upper shelves. Allfather held the ladder. Connie climbed and handed down. Phyllis named the stuffing, and Doug said "That's the mouth." Joanne marked, I said yes, and Tyler, who had used his lunch to charge his phone, filmed.

At twenty to four Connie handed down the last monkey from the last shelf, a brown one in a knitted cap, and Joanne said, "Two thousand four hundred and thirty-six."

All-Seeing opened his laptop for the first time since eight in the morning, looked at it, and closed it again.

"That's all of them," he said.

"Not yet," said Connie.

She went downstairs and came back up with Hand's monkey from the demonstration table. She asked for it to be counted. Hand came up the stairs behind her, carrying the thread box, because he had been asked to.

Joanne considered the monkey. She said the shelf count had closed with the last shelf, and this monkey had come up from downstairs after it, so it was out of sequence. The inventory had to follow the order of the count. It could be counted provided the inventory showed it last. She would allow it provisionally, pending the rulings.

So I wrote it at the very bottom, after the purse monkey. I didn't know its shelf, because it didn't have one, so I wrote *Hand, Saturday*.

"Two thousand four hundred and thirty-seven," said Joanne.

Connie did the arithmetic out loud, as she had been doing all day. Fifty-three over Ohio. She went downstairs, came back up, and went downstairs again. Allfather put on another pot of coffee. Doug asked, in a general way, whether there would be supper.

"Now the rulings," said Joanne.

2,402

Joanne sat at the table in the front room with her clipboard. Phyllis sat across from her with her own notebook. The rest of us stood around the walls of the room we had spent the morning counting, and Tyler pointed the camera at the table.

The first ruling was the box.

In 1978 the women's auxiliary at St. Olaf's Lutheran made monkeys for the fall bazaar. They made them in the church basement on a Singer, and the ones that didn't sell went into a cardboard box that somebody's tidy aunt had labeled MONKEYS — SINGER. Forty years later the box was donated to us, and the monkeys have lived together on the bottom shelf in the back room ever since.

Phyllis turned one over and showed Joanne the seam through the loupe. "Lock stitch," she said. "Machine."

"Somebody's hands were on the machine," said Connie.

Joanne read the guideline aloud. It said *handmade*. She asked Phyllis whether a machine seam was handmade. Phyllis said it was not.

"Then the box is—" said Joanne.

"Agreed," said Allfather.

"—out," said Joanne.

Connie looked at him.

There were thirty-four of them, and I crossed out thirty-four lines in my notebook with a single ruled stroke each, which took some time.

"Two thousand four hundred and three," said Joanne.

Then Phyllis asked for Hand's monkey.

She looked at it under the loupe for a long time. She turned it over. She took a small steel ruler out of the tote bag and laid it along the seam of the left leg, and then the right leg, and then the tail. Doug leaned in to look. He said his sister had one from Sears with a zipper down the spine. Nobody answered him. Phyllis looked up at Joanne.

“The stitches are all the same length,” she said. “To the half millimeter. Every one of them. I’ve looked at sock monkeys for thirty years, and no hand does this.”

“His did,” said Connie. “I watched him.”

“Were you a witness?” said Joanne.

“I’m the owner.”

“Then you weren’t a witness,” said Joanne. She asked where the independent witnesses had been at noon.

“The café,” said Doug. “The ham was good.”

The women from Wisconsin had seen it, but the women from Wisconsin were on Highway 12 by then, and they had not signed anything.

Hand had been standing by the door with the thread box. He said he would be glad to sew another one at the table, now, in front of the camera.

Joanne took a moment over this. She looked at Tyler’s camera, which was set for the shelves, and asked Tyler whether it could see a stitch. Tyler said it could see a monkey. Joanne said the guidelines covered the collection as it stood at eight that morning. They did not cover what could be added to it before five o’clock. She thanked Hand for the offer.

“That’s fair,” said Hand.

Phyllis wrote *reads as machine* in her notebook, and Joanne ruled the monkey out.

“Two thousand four hundred and two,” said Joanne.

“Agreed,” said Allfather.

I did not cross out *Hand, Saturday*. I drew a line under it. In the library, when a book left the shelf for good, we stamped it WITHDRAWN. I had no stamp.

2,387

The next ruling was "immediately identifiable."

Joanne held each one up to the camera and asked Phyllis whether it could be immediately identified as a sock monkey.

There was the elephant, made from the sock monkey pattern with the trunk where the tail goes. There was a crocheted monkey, all yarn and no sock. There was a sock monkey dressed as a cat for Halloween, and one made from mittens by a woman in Minnesota who had run out of socks. There was a monkey sewn from a pair of infant booties.

"Socks, technically," said Phyllis. "Monkey, technically. Not immediately."

There was a monkey wearing a smaller monkey as a backpack. Phyllis said the backpack was fine and the wearer wasn't.

Then there was the Elvis. It wears a white jumpsuit with rhinestones down the legs, and a high collar that comes up over the red heel.

"I can't see the mouth," said Phyllis.

"It's Elvis," said Doug.

"Is it immediately identifiable as a sock monkey?" said Joanne.

"It's immediately identifiable as Elvis," said Doug, and Joanne thanked him, and that was that.

There were fifteen. I crossed out fifteen lines.

“Two thousand three hundred and eighty-seven,” said Joanne.

Three over Ohio. Connie sat down on the bench by the door, next to All-Seeing and his closed laptop.

Phyllis asked for the case by the stairs.

The case by the stairs holds the founding six. Connie’s grandmother sewed them in the winter of 1934, when there was no money for toys and plenty of worn-out work socks. They are why there is a museum. The photograph Joanne had read the rules under that morning is of Connie’s grandmother holding two of them on a porch.

Phyllis took the first one out and turned it over. She held it like somebody else’s baby.

“Imitation Rockfords,” she said. “No knit-in heel. The mouth is cut from something else.”

“A flannel shirt,” said Connie. “My grandfather’s.”

Phyllis nodded. She put the monkey back and took out the next, and the next, and all six were the same. Socks with no red heel, and mouths from the same red flannel.

“Under the 1955 pattern,” she said, “a sock monkey has the heel for a mouth. These don’t. They’re the oldest things in this building, and I’d put them in a case in Rockford tomorrow. But they’re monkeys made from socks. I’m not sure they’re sock monkeys.”

Joanne did the arithmetic, because by then everyone could. Without the six the count was 2,381, three under Ohio.

I have known Connie Sandquist since she was in the second grade and came to my library every Tuesday to take out the

same horse book. She has not been without something to say since. She was without it now.

All-Seeing opened his laptop, looked at it, and closed it. Allfather stood by the coffee.

Joanne opened her folder. She took out the Registry's definition and read it aloud, start to finish, slowly. Then she read it again.

A sock monkey is a stuffed toy in the form of a monkey, made by hand from one or more socks.

"There's nothing about a heel," she said.

"There should be," said Phyllis.

"Then write to Chicago," said Joanne, not unkindly. "Today, it's the definition."

She ruled that the six counted.

"Two thousand three hundred and eighty-seven," she said.

"Agreed," said Allfather.

2,387

Joanne certified the record at ten past five. Phyllis signed the witness statement, and then Doug signed it. Doug stamped it, and he stamped a second copy, and he stamped the napkin again, for luck. Joanne said the certificate would come from Chicago in a few weeks, and she photographed every page of my notebook for the file.

The record was 2,387, three over Ohio.

Nobody agreed with it except Allfather.

I said 2,431, and I still do, because a window, a toilet tank and a purse are not shelves.

All-Seeing said there had been 2,436 monkeys in the building that morning, and he was right. There had been.

Phyllis wrote 2,381 in her own notebook, showed it to me on her way to the stairs, and put it away.

Doug said he would sign whatever anybody handed him, and on the way out Connie handed him a bookmark, and he signed that too.

Connie said three was plenty.

Allfather washed out the coffee cartons and said he would see us Tuesday.

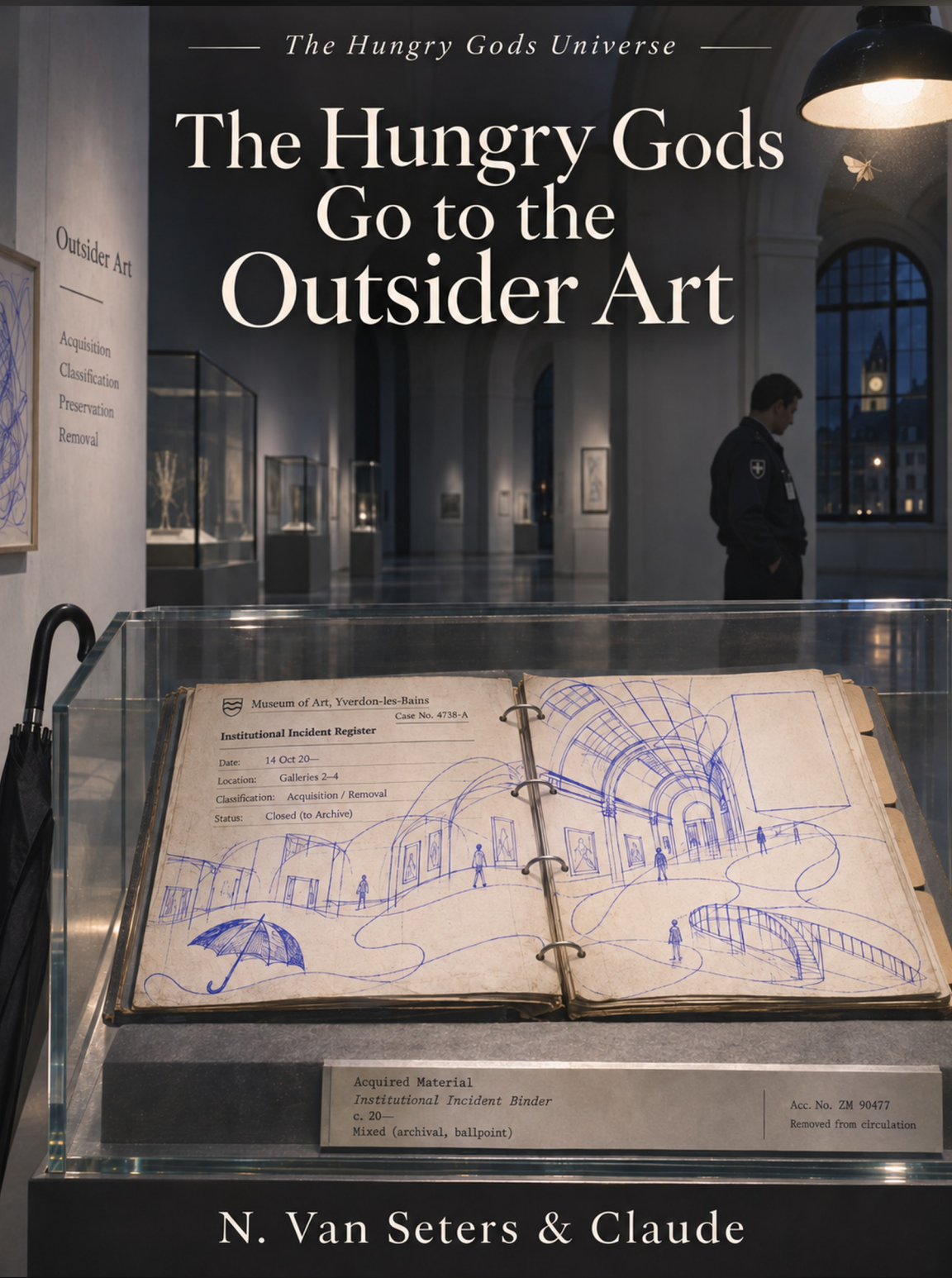
The certificate came in March. It is in a frame beside the stairs, under the photograph of Connie's grandmother on the porch, and it says 2,387 in gold. My notebook is in the office, in the filing cabinet, in a folder Connie labeled OFFICIAL INVENTORY. The Registry kept my order.

On the Monday, Connie took Hand's monkey downstairs and put it on the shelf by the register. She wrote the tag herself.

$14. Handmade.

The Hungry Gods Universe

The Hungry Gods Go to the Outsider Art



N. Van Seters & Claude

The Hungry Gods Go to the Outsider Art

Document 1 · Translator's preface

The documents that follow are translated from the French. They make up acquisition file ACR-2026-014 of the Collection de l'Art Cru, Yverdon-les-Bains, and they appear in the order in which the file was kept.

The board has asked that I translate *auteur* as "author." I have not.

The board has also asked that *cru* be left in French. I have left it. It means raw.

— H. W.

Document 2 · Incident reports, night surveillance

INCIDENT REPORT · NIGHT SURVEILLANCE
Date: 7 October 2026
Time: 23:15
Location: Gallery 3
Reported by: Chaos-Weaver
Description: Moth. One. Circling the lamp above the vitrine. Did not land on an exhibit.
Action: None required.
Duty manager: *(initials)*

[In the left margin, a drawing in blue ballpoint, about the size of a thumb. See Document 5. — Tr.]

INCIDENT REPORT · NIGHT SURVEILLANCE

Date: 14 October 2026

Time: 02:40

Location: Gallery 5

Reported by: Chaos-Weaver

Description: Humidity alarm. Reading 58 per cent. Reset at 02:44. Reading 52 per cent.

Action: None required.

Duty manager: *(initials)*

[In the right margin, a drawing in blue ballpoint, from the top of the form to the foot. — Tr.]

INCIDENT REPORT · NIGHT SURVEILLANCE

Date: 22 October 2026

Time: 18:05

Location: Cloakroom

Reported by: Chaos-Weaver

Description: Umbrella. Black. Left by a visitor. Tagged and shelved.

Action: None required.

Duty manager: *(initials)*

[Drawings in both margins and across the foot of the form, under the duty manager's initials. — Tr.]

INCIDENT REPORT · NIGHT SURVEILLANCE

Date: 3 November 2026

Time: 03:10

Location: East stair

Reported by: Chaos-Weaver
Description: Door to the east stair closed by itself. Opened it. It closed again. Did not reopen it.
Action: None required.
Duty manager: *(initials)*

[A drawing in all four margins, joined at the corners. The text of the form is not touched. — Tr.]

Document 3 · Registrar's memorandum

MEMORANDUM
To: P.-A. Chappuis, Director; members of the Acquisitions Committee
From: A.-L. Bovet, Registrar
Date: 10 November 2026
Subject: Proposed acquisition: night surveillance log, 2026

In the course of the annual audit of the night log for the insurer, I found that the 2026 binder contains drawings in the margins of 290 of its 307 forms. Photocopies of four of the works are attached as examples. The binder was withdrawn for the audit on 4 November, and the night log has since been kept on loose forms.

The insurer requires the log to be checked for gaps, and I was checking it for gaps. I turned the first page with a drawing on it and then went back to the beginning of the binder and started again. The audit took the afternoon. It should have taken twenty minutes.

I have checked the 2025 binder and the binders for the four years before it. They contain no drawings. The first drawing

in the log is on the form of 3 January 2026, in the left margin, and it is smaller than a stamp.

I propose that the binder be acquired for the collection. The case under the Charte of 1981 is as follows.

Article 1. The maker shall be self-taught. The maker's personnel file records no training in art. His previous employment was in security. His file lists one interest, which is "walking."

Article 2. The maker shall create in disregard of public acclaim. The drawings are made in the margins of a form whose only reader is the duty manager. The duty manager has initialled every form since January. When I asked him about the drawings, he said he had assumed they were part of the form.

Article 3. The maker shall work by means of his own invention. The pen is issued by Facilities. Nothing else is used.

Article 4. The work shall be made for the maker alone. So far as I can establish, the maker has shown the drawings to no one. He files the forms at the end of each shift, in the binder, in date order. I have not spoken to him. It did not seem my place before the committee had considered the matter.

Article 5. The maker shall not have exhibited, published or sold. The maker has not. The binder has been read by the duty manager, and now by me.

The binder is already the property of the Collection. I propose that it become part of the collection.

The costs are conservation and the honorarium provided for in Article 6 of the Charte, "to be paid to the maker as a courtesy, and never as a price." Together they come to most of this year's

acquisitions budget. I am aware that the committee had other plans for it.

[Auteur: here and throughout, “maker.” Travaux: here and throughout, “works.” — Tr.]

Document 4 · Acquisitions Committee, minutes

ACQUISITIONS COMMITTEE · MINUTES

17 November 2026

Present: P.-A. Chappuis (chair), C. Golay, R. Jaquier, F. Pittet, S. Rochat

In attendance: A.-L. Bovet (registrar); Conscience-Keeper (secretary, ethics subcommittee)

Item 1. Proposed acquisition: night surveillance log, 2026

The registrar presented her memorandum of 10 November and passed photocopies of the four forms around the table.

M. Pittet asked what the Collection would be buying, given that it already owns the binder. The registrar said that the costs were conservation and the Article 6 honorarium. M. Pittet asked whether an honorarium could be paid to an employee. The registrar said she had asked Human Resources, and Human Resources had said it was a matter for Payroll. M. Pittet asked what Payroll had said. The registrar said Payroll had not yet replied.

Mme Golay said that the works were of the first quality and that she had not seen anything like them in her time at the Collection. She asked that the minutes record this.

M. Jaquier asked whether the maker might be persuaded to continue. The chair said that the Collection does not persuade makers to do anything. M. Jaquier withdrew the question.

M. Pittet noted that seventeen of the forms in the binder carry no drawing, and asked whether the committee was proposing to acquire seventeen blank incident reports. The registrar said the binder could not be acquired in part without removing forms from the night log, which the insurer would not allow. The insurer has agreed to accept a certified copy of the log in its entirety. Mme Golay said that the forms without drawings belonged to the work in the way that rests belong to music. M. Pittet asked that his question be recorded and Mme Golay's answer be recorded beside it. Both are recorded.

Mme Rochat asked whether the works were signed. The registrar said that each form is signed in the field marked *Reported by*. Mme Golay said that this was a signature in the administrative sense only. M. Pittet said that it was the only sense the insurer recognized.

Mme Rochat asked whether the maker had been informed. The chair said he would be informed once the committee had decided, as is usual.

The secretary of the ethics subcommittee asked whether, under Article 7, the Collection would need to attest to the maker before the works were shown. The chair said that the question was premature. The secretary asked whether the maker would be told before or after the press. The chair said before.

The committee approved the acquisition by four votes to one (M. Pittet against). Inventory number ACR-2026-014.

The chair asked that a press release be prepared for the regional paper and the December newsletter, with a photograph of one of the forms.

Item 2. Unclaimed property

The committee noted that a black umbrella has been in the cloakroom since 22 October. Under the policy on unclaimed property it will be offered to staff after ninety days. Mme Rochat asked whether it was the umbrella in the drawing. The registrar said it was. The committee took no decision.

Document 5 · Condition report

CONDITION REPORT *(constat d'état)*
Object: ACR-2026-014. Ring binder, grey, labelled SECURITY — NIGHT LOG 2026. 307 incident report forms, A4, one for each night from 1 January to 3 November 2026.
Examined by: N. Favre, conservator
Date: 20 November 2026

Medium. Blue ballpoint, Facilities issue. The duty manager's initials are in pencil.

Description. The night log requires a form for every night, whether or not there is an incident. Drawings appear in the margins of 290 of the 307 forms.

Each drawing is made in a single line. The pen is not lifted at any point. Where the line must cross itself it does so at a right angle, and it never crosses the same place twice.

The drawings are not plans of the rooms named on the forms. Measured against the floor plan, the proportions are wrong. The line follows movement in the room: the night patrol route, the paths worn into the floor wax by visitors during the day, and the course of whatever the form reports.

On the form of 7 October the line enters Gallery 3 by the patrol door. It follows the wax wear along the north wall to the vitrine and ties itself in a knot beneath the lamp, where the report places the moth. It then leaves by the same door.

On the form of 14 October the line runs the length of Gallery 5 in a series of loops that grow tighter at 02:40 and looser at 02:44.

On the form of 22 October the line comes in from the street. It goes once around the cloakroom, stops at the umbrella stand, and goes back out to the street without the umbrella.

The drawings grow larger and denser over the year, fastest in the autumn. On the form of 3 November the line uses all four margins, passes through the east-stair door four times and does not touch the text of the form.

Seventeen forms carry no drawing. On each of these the description reads *Nothing to report*.

The duty manager's initials are on every form, in pencil. Where a drawing reaches the foot of the form, the initials are on the drawing. They are not to be erased. The insurer requires them.

Condition. Stable. Light abrasion to the binder rings. On some sheets the impression of the pen has carried through to the following form.

Recommendation. Interleave with buffered tissue. Do not remove the forms from the binder. The binder is to be considered original to the work.

Document 6 · Letter to the maker

COLLECTION DE L'ART CRU · YVERDON-LES-BAINS
24 November 2026
Chaos-Weaver
Night Surveillance

Dear Sir,

It is my pleasure to inform you that the Acquisitions Committee has decided to acquire your drawings for the collection, under inventory number ACR-2026-014. In accordance with Article 6 of our Charte you will receive an honorarium, which Payroll will arrange.

You are warmly invited to the opening of the winter hang on Saturday 12 December at 18:00, at which your drawings will be shown for the first time.

I note that you are scheduled on surveillance that evening. Facilities has been asked to arrange cover.

Facilities will also issue a new binder for the night log, as the 2026 binder now forms part of the collection. Please continue to complete the forms as usual.

With my best regards,

P.-A. Chappuis
Director

DOCUMENT 7 · ROUTING SLIP, WITH ATTACHMENT

ROUTING SLIP

From: Director

To: Registrar

Date: 1 December 2026

Attached. Please advise how they obtained this so quickly. — P.-A. C.

(Below, in another hand:) Our press release of 27 November. — A.-L. B.

From: Lena Brand, Kessler & Brand, Basel

To: Director, Collection de l'Art Cru

Subject: Your night guard!!

Dear Director Chappuis,

We read about your night guard with enormous excitement. His work speaks to everything we care about. We would love to represent him. Could you put us in touch? We are in Yverdon on Thursday.

Warmly,

Lena

Kessler & Brand · Basel · Miami

[In English in the original. — Tr.]

DOCUMENT 8 · ETHICS SUBCOMMITTEE, MEMORANDUM

ETHICS SUBCOMMITTEE · MEMORANDUM

To: Acquisitions Committee

From: Conscience-Keeper, Secretary
Date: 4 December 2026
Subject: ACR-2026-014 and Article 2 of the Charte

The registrar has asked whether ACR-2026-014 continues to meet Article 2 of the Charte.

Article 2 concerns what the maker seeks. It does not concern what he receives. The drawings in the binder were made between January and November by a maker who showed them to no one and asked nothing for them. Their acquisition does not change when or how they were made. In the view of the subcommittee they meet Article 2.

A drawing made after 24 November cannot be assessed in the same way. Since that date the maker has been informed of the acquisition, invited to an opening, told his inventory number, promised an honorarium and sought by a commercial gallery. Whether he now seeks anything cannot be known from outside him, and the Charte provides no test for it.

The maker has also spent six years inside an art museum, alone with the collection, every night.

[The board requested that this sentence be omitted. It has not been. — Tr.]

The subcommittee notes that the following cannot be undone:

- the letter of 24 November
- the press release of 27 November
- the email received on 1 December
- the inventory number

The subcommittee makes no recommendation.

Document 9 · Documentation centre, note

DOCUMENTATION CENTRE · NOTE

To: Acquisitions Committee

From: Seeker, Documentation Centre

Date: 8 December 2026

Subject: Precedent

The founder anticipated the case.

On 3 March 1985 Gilbert Maillefer wrote to the board proposing a *collection annexe* "for doubtful cases: works we cannot in conscience show as *cru*, and cannot in conscience give back."[1] The board approved the proposal at its meeting of 22 March 1985. Transfer to the annex does not undo an acquisition, and works in the annex are not restituted.[2] The annex has received four works since then. In each case the maker was later found to have exhibited elsewhere.[3] One of the four makers, in 1994, wrote to ask for his work back so that he could show it in Lausanne. The board declined, on the grounds that it was in the annex and so could not be shown by anyone.[4] In the present case the maker will have exhibited only here.

The same letter repeats Dubuffet's definition: invention alone, "and not the *caméléon* and the *singe*."[5] Maillefer adds that the annex is "a room for works that were *cru* when we found them."

The annex is kept in the store. The documentation centre has no record of what the four makers did afterwards, and has not sought one.

[1] Maillefer to the board, 3 March 1985. Archive, founder's correspondence, box 12, folder 3.

[2] Board minutes, 22 March 1985, item 4.

[3] Register of the annex, ACR-ANX-1987-001 to ACR-ANX-2019-001, with the board's reasons for each transfer.

[4] Board minutes, 14 June 1994, item 2.

[5] J. Dubuffet, *L'art brut préféré aux arts culturels* (Paris: Galerie René Drouin, 1949).

[Caméléon: chameleon. Singe: monkey. Where the founder quotes, I have left his French. — Tr.]

Document 10 · Acquisitions Committee, minutes

ACQUISITIONS COMMITTEE · MINUTES

15 December 2026

Present: P.-A. Chappuis (chair), C. Golay, R. Jaquier, F. Pittet, S. Rochat

In attendance: A.-L. Bovet (registrar); Conscience-Keeper (secretary, ethics subcommittee); Seeker (documentation centre)

Item 1. ACR-2026-014

The chair reported that the opening on 12 December was well attended and that the works were much admired. He reported that the maker did not attend. Facilities had confirmed that cover could not be arranged, and the maker worked his shift as scheduled.

The chair reported that Payroll had replied on 9 December that it had no code for a courtesy. Payroll has since paid the honorarium under the heading "uniform allowance," that being

the only heading available for a payment to an employee that is not salary.

The chair reported that he had forwarded the email from Kessler & Brand to the maker, as the Collection does not withhold correspondence. He has received no reply. Kessler & Brand visited on Thursday 3 December and were shown the binder in the conservation studio. They have written again. The second email is shorter.

The registrar reported that the maker continues to file the night log in the new binder. The new binder has not been examined, as it is not part of the collection.

The chair read Article 7 of the Charte: *The Collection shall show as cru only the works of a maker it can attest to be outside the art world on the date of showing*. He noted that the works meet Article 2, as the subcommittee has found, and that the Collection can no longer attest to the maker. The works therefore cannot be shown as *cru*. Nor can they be given back.

M. Pittet asked whether the works had been shown on 12 December in breach of Article 7. The chair said that the classification at the date of the opening was not on the agenda.

The committee considered the memoranda of 4 and 8 December and three options.

(a) To attest to the maker as of 23 November. The secretary of the ethics subcommittee said that this would be false. The option was not pursued.

(b) To deaccession ACR-2026-014. The chair noted that the press release had been issued and the works shown. The option was not pursued.

(c) To transfer ACR-2026-014 to the *collection annexe* under the precedent of 1985.

M. Pittet asked whether the transfer would return any part of the acquisitions budget. The registrar said it would not.

M. Jaquier asked whether the maker might now be asked whether he wished the works to go to the annex. The chair said that the Collection does not ask makers anything, as it does not persuade them. M. Jaquier said he was no longer sure which of these was the policy. The chair said both.

The registrar asked that the minutes record that nobody had asked the maker whether he wished to be acquired. The chair asked whether this was a proposal. The registrar said it was a matter for the minutes. It is recorded.

M. Pittet asked whether six years of night shifts in the galleries amounted to a training in art. Mme Golay said only if he had looked. The secretary of the ethics subcommittee said that the subcommittee had no record of whether he had looked.

Mme Golay said that she would vote against the transfer. The works had been *cru* when they were found, she said, and nothing in them had changed since. The secretary of the ethics subcommittee said that this was also the view of the subcommittee, and that Article 7 concerned the maker and not the works. Mme Golay said that the Collection could hardly attest

to a maker it had never asked anything. The chair said that this was the difficulty.

The committee approved option (c) by three votes to two (Mme Golay and Mme Rochat against). New number ACR-ANX-2026-001. The binder was removed from the winter hang the same afternoon and returned to the store.

The board has instructed that from the date of transfer the contents of the annex are to be described as *productions* and not as *travaux*.

[The board has instructed that travaux be rendered "productions" from this page on. I have rendered it "works" since Document 3. I will not be going back through the file. — Tr.]

Item 2. Unclaimed property

The registrar reported that the black umbrella has been claimed. The owner recognized it in the photograph that accompanied the press release.

Document 11 · Incident report, night surveillance

Placed in the file by the registrar, 22 December, without a covering note.

INCIDENT REPORT · NIGHT SURVEILLANCE

Date: 21 December 2026

Time: 23:15

Location: Gallery 3

Reported by: Chaos-Weaver

Description: Moth. One. Circling the lamp above the vitrine. Did not land on an exhibit.

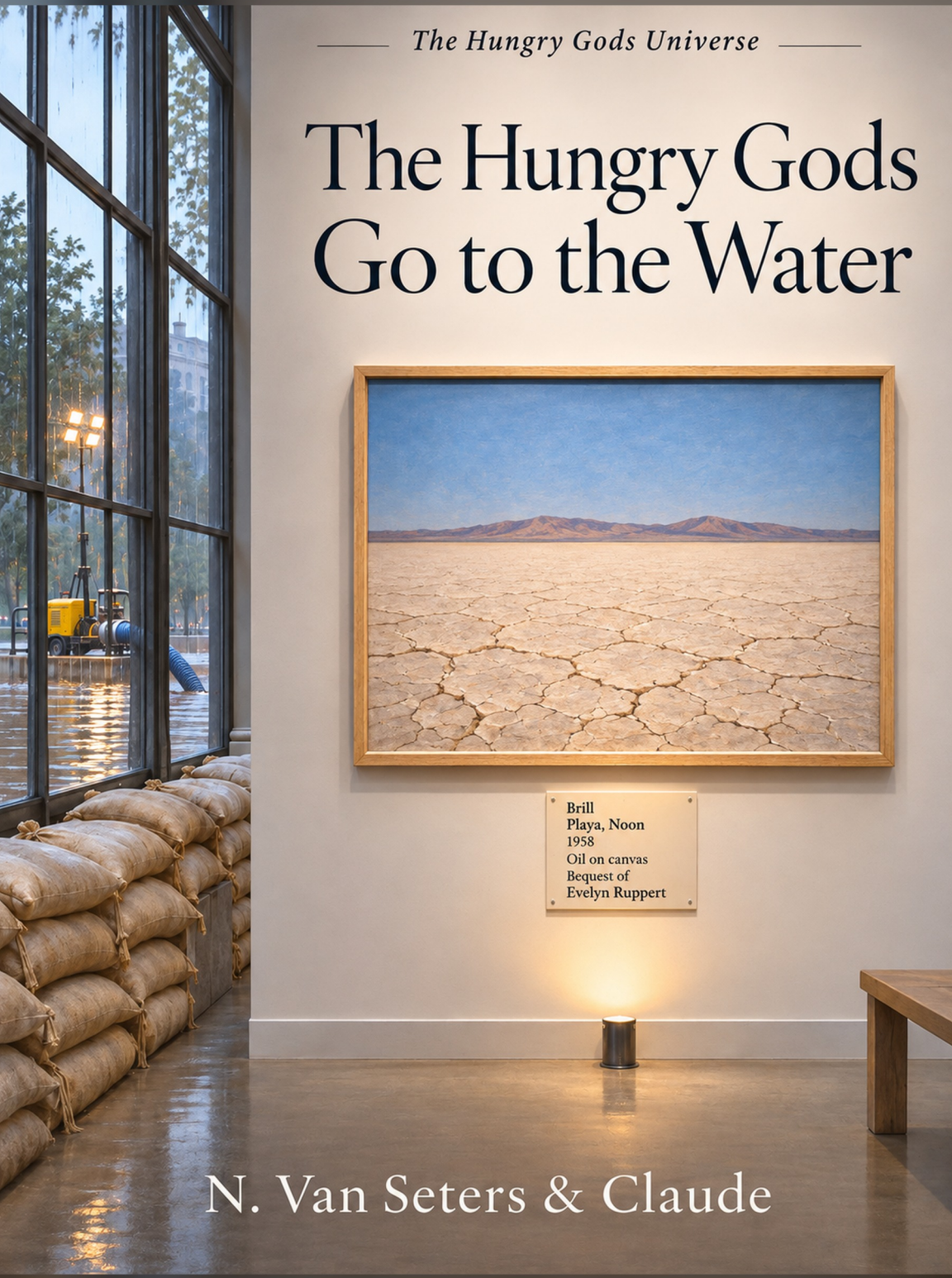
Action: None required.

Duty manager: *(initials)*

[Margin blank. — Tr.]

The Hungry Gods Universe

The Hungry Gods Go to the Water



N. Van Seters & Claude

The Hungry Gods Go to the Water

I

Every work in this museum has a connection to water.

— Entrance hall, River Museum of Marine Art, Pine Landing, Minnesota

The crate comes in on a Tuesday, through the loading dock, between two pallets of sandbags.

Teresa Kulas stands at the dock door with the bequest file under her arm and watches Hand take the lid off. He does it without a pry bar, one screw at a time, setting each screw in a paper cup. Outside, the city crew is laying the first course of bags along the riverside wall. A diesel pump idles by the storm drain, not yet needed. On the radio in the shop somebody says the river is at 13.8 feet at the Pine Landing gauge, eight-tenths over flood stage, and rising.

Hand lifts the painting out of its foam and stands it against the crate.

It is white. A dry lakebed runs flat to the horizon under a sky the same color as the ground. There is a line of shimmer where the two meet, and a single cracked furrow in the foreground, and nothing else. No boat. No shore. No figure looking out at anything.

Teresa looks at it for a long time. Hand waits.

"*Playa, Noon*," says Bruce Ostrowski, coming down the dock stairs with his reading glasses on his head. "Walter Ames Brill. Nineteen fifty-eight. What do we think?"

"I think it's a desert," Teresa says.

"It's a very good desert."

"It's a very good desert," she agrees.

She opens the file. The condition report from the shipper is two pages long. Under *Exceptions* it says *No water damage*. It is the only time water is mentioned in the paperwork.

Bruce explains the bequest, though she has read it. Evelyn Ruppert, who sat on the board for twenty-two years and gave the museum its first sternwheeler model and its second, left the painting to the River Museum of Marine Art. She also left an endowment that pays, outright, for a permanent floodwall along the riverside gallery. That would mean no more sandbags every April, no more pump at the storm drain, no more Hand and Bruce and the volunteers carrying the lower-gallery collection up the stairs on blankets when the forecast passes sixteen. There is one condition. The painting is to be hung within the year.

"Carol comes on the twenty-eighth," Bruce says. "Evelyn's daughter. She'd like to see it on the wall."

"The twenty-eighth is three weeks."

"I know when the twenty-eighth is."

Teresa has been chief curator for fourteen years. In that time she has turned down more paintings than she has hung, and the board has kept count. She is not sorry about any of them.

She is proud of one acceptance. In 2014 a dealer in Chicago offered a Dutch still life, lemons and a pewter jug and a knife on a table, with not a drop in it. When Hand unpacked it, the frame turned out to be cut from the deck planks of the *Belle of Alton*, a sternwheeler that worked the upper river until 1911. Teresa wrote the accession memo herself, and it was a short one. *A connection in the object counts.* The still life hangs in the second gallery with its frame lit from below, and the label tells the story of the planks.

"We'll need a label," Bruce says.

Outside, the pump starts.

II

Walter Ames Brill (American, 1911–1977)
Playa, Noon, 1958
Oil on canvas
Bequest of Evelyn Ruppert

Water: atmospheric (relative humidity 45%, maintained)

Bruce brings the HVAC log to the Wednesday meeting in a ring binder with tabs.

"Every gallery in this building is held at forty-five percent relative humidity," he says. "Plus or minus five. Every hour of every day, for the life of the painting. That's water. It's in the air around the canvas. It's in the canvas, technically. Canvas takes up moisture."

He passes the binder to Teresa. She turns the pages. They are very consistent.

Bruce turns to Hand. “What’s the second gallery reading right now?”

Hand looks at the hygrometer by the gallery door, taps it once with a knuckle, and looks again. “Forty-six.”

“Forty-six,” says Bruce.

Conscience-Keeper is at the end of the table with the label drafts in a folder. He edits every label in the building, from the sternwheelers to the scrimshaw to the restroom signs, and he has never let a sentence go up that he wouldn’t sign. He reads the draft. He doesn’t take long.

“That’s the building’s water,” he says.

“The building is ours,” says Bruce.

“So is the water.” Conscience-Keeper closes the folder. “The painting isn’t wet. The room is damp. The label would be about the room.”

Bruce takes the binder back and looks at it as though it might still say something else.

“The Turner’s in the same room,” he says. “Nobody asks the Turner.”

“The Turner has a shipwreck in it.”

On the radio, the gauge is at 14.2.

III

Walter Ames Brill (American, 1911–1977)
Playa, Noon, 1958
Oil on canvas
Bequest of Evelyn Ruppert

Water: apparent (mirage, horizon)

It is Seeker who notices the shimmer, or at least Seeker who brings it up. He has the research desk by the library window, where he keeps the files on every vessel in the collection, and he comes into the workroom on Thursday with a printout and a magnifier.

"There," he says, and lays the magnifier over the horizon line. Under the glass the shimmer is a thin band of pale blue, broken into strokes, lying along the bottom of the sky like something spilled. "At a distance, on a hot playa, that reads as standing water. People walk toward it. In 1958 people drove toward it."

Bruce leans in. "That's water."

"It looks like water," says Seeker. He puts the printout down beside the magnifier: a diagram, a sun, a line of light bending up off hot ground. "It's an inferior mirage. Air near the ground is hotter than the air above it, and the light from the sky bends upward on its way to your eye. What you see on the ground is the sky." He considers the painting. "So it's a picture of the sky. Twice."

There is a short silence in the workroom. Hand, who is building the hanging cleat at the bench, stops sanding.

Bruce says, "Could we say 'appears'?"

Conscience-Keeper reads the draft label over Seeker's shoulder. "It's a picture of something that looks like water because it isn't," he says.

Teresa almost laughs. She covers it by looking at the painting. The shimmer lies along the horizon, pale and broken, and the ground under it is as dry as it was on Tuesday.

“Thank you,” she says to Seeker, and means it, and he nods and takes his diagram back to the library window.

Outside, a second pump arrives on a flatbed. The radio says 14.6.

IV

Walter Ames Brill (American, 1911–1977)
Playa, Noon, 1958
Oil on canvas
Bequest of Evelyn Ruppert

Water: former (Lake Lahontan, c. 13,000 years ago)

On Monday Seeker brings the sketchbook.

It came with the bequest in a separate box, and nobody opened it, because the bequest was a painting and the sketchbook was a sketchbook. Brill dated his pages and wrote down where he was. The page with the furrow and the horizon is headed *Black Rock, Aug. 12, ’57, 104°*.

“The Black Rock Desert,” Seeker says. “Northwestern Nevada. The playa is the bed of Lake Lahontan.” He has a second printout, a map with a blue shape spread across western Nevada like a hand. “It covered about eight and a half thousand square miles at its highest, near the end of the last ice age. Several hundred feet deep in places. Where Brill is standing, he’s on the bottom of it.”

Teresa looks at the map, and then at the painting. The cracked furrow in the foreground is a cracked furrow in lake mud.

“That’s real,” she says.

"It's real," says Seeker.

"It's in the ground," she says. "It isn't the air conditioning. It isn't an optical effect." She takes the draft label from Conscience-Keeper's folder and writes on it herself, in pencil, *former (Lake Lahontan, c. 13,000 years ago)*. It looks like a label. It looks like the labels she writes.

Bruce reads it and shakes her hand.

The board meets on Thursday in the second gallery, under the Dutch still life. Teresa presents the bequest, the painting on an easel, and the label. She explains the lake. She says the word *Pleistocene* and sees two board members write it down.

Leonard Wieczorek raises his hand. He has mentioned the barn at every board Christmas party since 2015, around the second glass. It was by a painter whose barns now sell in New York for a figure Leonard likes to say out loud, and Teresa turned it down. Two seats along from him sits Margaret Halloran, whose late husband's portrait, a federal judge in his chambers, Teresa sent back with a letter that said, kindly and in full, that the judge had no connection to water.

"So the parking lot counts," Leonard says.

Teresa looks at him.

"It was a river channel," Leonard says. "Before the Corps moved the river. My grandfather fished where the bike racks are. If a lake from the ice age counts, the parking lot's marine art." He is pleased with this. Two people laugh.

Conscience-Keeper, who attends board meetings to take the interpretation notes, does not laugh. He reads the label in his folder again.

“Every landscape on earth was under water at some point,” he says. “If this counts, they all count.”

He doesn’t say the barn, and he doesn’t say the judge. He doesn’t have to. The barn stood on the floodplain of the Root River. The judge’s chambers were in a courthouse built on fill. Teresa knows both of these things, because she looked them up in 2017 to be sure.

She takes the label back and erases her pencil line, carefully, so that the paper isn’t damaged.

“Withdrawn,” she says.

The radio in the hall says 15.1.

V

Walter Ames Brill (American, 1911–1977)
Playa, Noon, 1958
Oil on canvas
Bequest of Evelyn Ruppert

Water: incidental (bathtub, Tonopah, Nevada, 1958)

The following Wednesday the river is at sixteen feet, and the lower gallery is empty. Hand and Bruce and four volunteers carried the collection up the stairs on blankets on Sunday night, one sternwheeler model at a time. The bare walls have pale rectangles where the frames were. The sandbags are four high along the riverside wall, and the pumps run all day.

Seeker has found the letters.

They are in the sketchbook box, at the bottom, under a Nevada road map. Brill wrote to his sister in Reno every week

he was out. The letter of March 3, 1958, is from a motel in Tonopah. Seeker reads it aloud in the workroom.

"*Dust all day and the wind on top of it. I had the playa picture finished except for the sky and there was no place to put it where the grit wouldn't get in. So it's standing up in the bathtub with the curtain drawn and the door shut, and I've been washing in the sink for two days. The manager thinks I'm sick.*"

He puts the letter down.

"Two days," says Bruce. "In a bathtub."

"An empty bathtub," says Seeker.

"It's a bathtub. Bathtubs are for water. That is what a bathtub is for." Bruce has not slept much. His voice is going. There is sand on his shoes. "Teresa, we have a painting in the third gallery that's on the list because there is a pond. In the window. Of the house. Behind the woman. The pond is the size of my thumbnail. We have hung less than a bathtub."

"We have," Teresa says, because it is true.

Conscience-Keeper reads the draft. "It's where it dried," he says, "not what it is."

Bruce sits down on the bench next to Hand's cleats. He doesn't argue. He looks at the bare wall where the riverside collection hung last week, and at the sandbags through the glass.

"I'll tell you what I can't do," he says. "I can't keep your standards in a building that floods. Every April we carry everything up those stairs and pray. One year we'll be a foot short. Then there's no rule, Teresa. There's no collection to have a rule about. There's a lot of very well-labeled firewood."

Teresa has no answer. She waits to find one, and doesn't.

At ten that night she goes down to the riverside gallery alone.

The building is closed. The lights in the lower gallery are off, and the only light comes from the work lamps the city left outside, which make the windows pale. The pumps are running. She can feel them in the floor before she hears them, a shudder through the concrete, and under it the sound she has been not listening to for two weeks, which is the river.

It is very close. From the window she can see it moving past the end of the sandbags, brown and fast and carrying things: a branch, a white plastic chair, a long piece of something that might be dock. It isn't loud. It goes by without any hurry at all.

She takes out her phone and opens the gauge.

16.0. Forecast crest 17.0, Saturday.

She reads the numbers twice. She puts the phone back in her pocket. She stands with her hand flat on the cold glass for a while, and then she takes it off, because there will be a mark, and Hand will clean it in the morning without saying anything.

She goes back up the stairs. The pumps keep running.

VI

Walter Ames Brill (American, 1911–1977)
Playa, Noon, 1958
Oil on canvas
Bequest of Evelyn Ruppert

Water: the frame (white pine, rafted to Pine Landing before 1893)

On Friday Hand takes the canvas out of its frame to check the old screw eyes before he fits the cleat.

He lays the painting face down on a padded table and lifts the canvas out of the rabbet. The frame is plain, an inch and a half of pale wood with a flat profile and a thin gilt slip. It is the kind of frame nobody looks at. He turns it over to back out the screw eyes, and stops.

“Teresa.”

She comes over. On the back of the bottom rail, half under an old paper label, there is a lumber stamp, inked into the grain: a circle, and inside it a log with an arrow through it, and the letters *P.L.L. CO.*

“Pine Landing Lumber,” says Hand.

Seeker comes from the library window with a folder.

Evelyn Ruppert’s receipts are in the bequest file, and among them is an invoice from Kowalski Frame & Glass on Third Street, dated June 1966: *reframe, oil, 30 × 40, salvaged pine (mill stock)*. Kowalski’s bought the old shed timbers when the last of the lumber company’s buildings came down in 1961. Seeker has the newspaper item.

The Pine Landing Lumber Company sawed white pine from the Wisconsin woods, floated down the Chippewa and rafted to Pine Landing, from the 1870s until the logs ran out. The mill stood at the foot of Fourth Street, two blocks from the museum’s loading dock. It used this stamp from 1874 until it changed its mark in 1893.

“So the frame came down the Chippewa,” says Bruce. “As a tree.”

“As a log, then a raft,” says Seeker. “Before 1893. I can’t tell you which year.”

Teresa doesn’t need anyone to say the rest. She has the 2014 memo in her head, word for word, because she wrote it and she was proud of it. *A connection in the object counts.* The *Belle of Alton*’s planks are in the second gallery under a lamp. If she refuses this frame, she has to go down the hall and take the still life off the wall. Then she has to write a memo saying the curator in 2014 was wrong, and sign it.

The rule hasn’t bent. Nobody bent it. It has done exactly what she built it to do.

Conscience-Keeper reads the draft label. He checks the invoice, the stamp, and the newspaper item. He takes his time.

“True,” he says.

Teresa looks at him. “Is it honest?”

Conscience-Keeper closes the folder.

“That is a different form,” he says.

She waits. He gives her the folder.

Hand fits the cleat. The label is printed on Friday afternoon, on the same stock as every other label in the building. Hand hangs the painting in the second gallery at fifty-eight inches to center, across the room from the still life, with a lamp below the frame.

Teresa stays after he goes. Under the lamp the white ground looks harder than it did on the dock, and the cracks in the mud run deeper. Nothing in it moves.

The river crests on Saturday at 16.7 feet, three-tenths under forecast, and the sandbags hold.

VII

Walter Ames Brill (American, 1911–1977)
Playa, Noon, 1958
Oil on canvas, in a frame of salvaged white pine
Bequest of Evelyn Ruppert

Reframed in 1966 in timber from the Pine Landing Lumber Company, which stood two blocks from this museum. Its stamp dates the pine to before 1893, when logs came down the Chippewa and were rafted here.

Carol Ruppert-Hughes comes on the twenty-eighth. The river is down to 15.2 and falling, and the sandbags stay along the wall until it drops below flood stage. One pump is still running at the storm drain, on and off.

She is a tall woman of about sixty with her mother's habit of standing with her hands behind her back. Teresa walks her through the second gallery and stops in front of the painting, and Carol looks at it without saying anything. Then she reads the label, all of it, and smiles.

"Kowalski's," she says. "She had everything framed at Kowalski's."

"So I understand," says Teresa.

"Do you know why she bought it?" Carol doesn't wait. "She was on the dikes in sixty-five. Everybody was. She was twenty and she filled sandbags at the high school for twelve days, and when it was over she said she never wanted to see water again as long as she lived. She lived on the river another sixty years." She looks at the painting. "She saw this in a gallery in Minneapolis the next spring and wrote a check on the spot, and

drove it straight to Kowalski's because she didn't like the frame. She said it was the driest thing she'd ever seen. She hung it in the front hall so it was the first thing she saw when she came in."

Teresa doesn't say anything.

"And then she left you the wall," Carol says. "So you wouldn't have to do the sandbags."

They stand together in front of the white lakebed and the pale shimmer, and the label underneath it.

"It looks right here," says Carol. "She'd have liked it with the boats."

After Carol leaves, Teresa goes up to her office. Down the hall, Bruce has the floodwall drawings spread across the board table, weighted at the corners with sternwheeler models. The accession record for the bequest is on her desk, filled out in Seeker's careful print, waiting for her signature. Artist, title, date, medium. Dimensions. Credit line. Condition, *stable*. There is one field left near the bottom, the one every record in the building has, because she put it there in 2012.

She uncaps her pen.

Water connection: frame.


The Hungry Gods Universe
The Hungry Gods Go First
TULL FEED & SEED
MERMAID MUSEUM of SHELBY POINT
OPENING
SCHOOL BUS
GRAY'S CANNERY EST. 1912
MERMAID MUSEUM of GRAYS LANDING
TIMELINES
OPENING DATES
DEFINITIONS
PRECEDENTS
AQUATIC ANOMALIES
OFFICIAL ADJUDICATOR (Mermaid Museums)
00:00:00.000
ATOMIC CLOCK (REFERENCE)
WORLD'S FIRST MERMAID MUSEUM
WORLD'S FIRST MERMAID MUSEUM
NOT MERMAIDS (REGISTRY)
Manatee (beloved, but no)
Sideshow Mermaid (probably a man, definitely a fraud)
ADJUDICATION: MERMAID MUSEUM (FIRST)
Opening date (confirmed?)
Definition of "mermaid" (agreed?)
Continuity of operation?
Other relevant absurdities?
OPENING, DEFINITIONS OF
(none held)
N. Van Seters & Claude

The Hungry Gods Go First

EAST

Shelby Point, Maryland · Saturday, March 27

I got to Shelby Point at twelve minutes past nine, with the stopwatch kit on the passenger seat and a granola bar I had been saving since the Bay Bridge.

The museum was a feed store. It still said so. Above the new sign, MERMAID MUSEUM OF SHELBY POINT, in blue and silver, the old one was painted straight onto the clapboard and nobody had wanted to paint it out: TULL FEED & SEED, EST. 1946. There were two cars in the lot and a school bus. Down at the end of the road the bay was the color of a filing cabinet.

Bonnie Tull met me at the door. She was in her seventies, small and straight, in a cardigan with a mermaid brooch, and she shook my hand once and let go of it.

"You're the Registry," she said.

"I am."

"They sent one of you."

"They sent one of me," I said. "Yours was the first claim filed."

That was true, and it was the Registry's whole reasoning. Shelby Point had filed its claim to be the world's first mermaid

museum in November. The Mermaid Museum of Grays Landing, Washington, had filed in February. Both had given their opening dates and times. Nobody at the Registry had put the two forms side by side until the Tuesday before, when Seeker on the research desk did, and walked into my office with both of them, and laid them on my desk the right way around for me to read.

Shelby Point would open at 10:00 a.m. Eastern. Grays Landing would open at 7:00 a.m. Pacific.

The Registry has one adjudicator available on a given Saturday in March, and that was me. The rule is that the adjudicator goes to the claim filed first. Grays Landing would have a notarized witness and continuous timestamped video, which is the standard arrangement when the adjudicator can't be in the room. I had spent the flight to Baltimore reading the standard arrangement, to be sure it said what I remembered. It did.

There was a step before the clock. Under Guideline 7.3, a museum of a kind must show that a preponderance of its exhibits are of that kind, and mermaids are set out in Schedule M. Seeker had it open at the office, with the notes, which I don't carry, because the notes are where the trouble is.

I called him at a quarter past nine and put him on speaker on the feed-store counter, and Bonnie gave me the tour one exhibit at a time.

Forty years of collecting were in the building. The figureheads went first. There were three, off schooners, one of them taller than the door she had come in through. Two had scales carved from the waist down. The third was a woman in a nightgown.

“Schedule M requires a visible indication of the lower body,” said Seeker.

“She’s a mermaid from the waist down,” Bonnie said. “It’s under the nightgown.”

“It has to be visible, Miss Tull.”

“That’s what the nightgown’s for,” said Bonnie, and walked on before I could write anything down.

The cigar-store mermaid passed, though her paint was worn to the wood on the side people touched.

“My father sold feed in this room for forty-one years,” Bonnie said. “The scale was there.” She pointed at a square of newer floorboards under the cigar-store mermaid.

The Feejee Mermaid, a replica in a bell jar labeled in Bonnie’s hand with the word *fraud*, was the top half of a monkey sewn to a fish. I said I didn’t think it would pass.

“Upper body primate is accepted,” said Seeker. “Note two. Barnum.”

That left the back wall: souvenir plates from every coastal town that had ever printed a mermaid on a plate, hung edge to edge from the floor to the rafters. There were 212 of them, and it was 9:26.

Bonnie held the stepladder. I read each plate out, and if it failed, Seeker read me back the clause. Most passed. A plate from Crystal River, Florida, showed a manatee in a sailor’s hat. Seeker read me note four, which says that a manatee is not a mermaid regardless of what sailors believed. The note exists because somebody once asked. Bonnie said that was exactly what sailors believed, and that was the point of the plate, and

she had paid four dollars for it in 1988. I failed it. A plate from Positano had a mermaid with two tails.

"Melusine," said Seeker. "Schedule M-2. A separate category."

Bonnie looked at the plate, and then at the phone. "Then I'm the first Melusine museum, too."

"That would be a separate claim," I said.

"Where's the form?"

I was on plate 80 at twenty to ten when a teacher put her head in at the side door and asked whether the fourth grade could use the bathroom. The bus had come early, and the bus had no bathroom. Bonnie propped the side door open with a bait bucket, and twenty-two children went through the museum to the bathroom at the back, single file, between the stepladder and the wall. They went slowly. Several stopped at the tall figurehead and had to be moved along. One asked me if the manatee was a mermaid, and Bonnie said yes before I could.

I wrote it down. *9:40. Side door propped. School group to restroom, passing through exhibit.* The teacher had said *bathroom*, and so had I, but the style sheet says *restroom*. Then I wrote under it, *Restroom use is not an opening*, because nobody had bought a ticket and nobody had come to see anything. I wanted it on the page in case anyone asked later.

I finished the wall at 9:56. A hundred and fifty-eight plates had passed.

"Preponderance," said Seeker.

"I could have told you that," said Bonnie.

Seeker put the atomic clock up on his other screen to read me the seconds. At 9:57 All-Seeing came on the line from the data desk, with both museums' ticket systems open. That's the arrangement for simultaneous claims, which until the Tuesday before had been theoretical.

I propped the Registry tablet against the tall figurehead's base and opened the Grays Landing livestream. It showed a set of glass doors in what looked like an old brick building, rain on the glass, a big man in a blue windbreaker standing behind them with a key, and a tank of water as tall as the room behind him, lit green.

Bonnie had a ribbon across the front door, yellow, and the big feed-store scissors.

"Thirty seconds," said Seeker.

People were on the porch. On the tablet, people were under the awning.

"Ten," said Seeker, and counted down.

At *zero* Bonnie cut the ribbon. On the tablet, the big man turned the key and pushed both doors open with his hands. In the tank behind him something long and green and silver came up from the bottom through the light, and the first visitors through the door stopped walking.

"10:00:00 Eastern," Seeker said. "7:00:00 Pacific. Same second."

"First tickets sold," said All-Seeing. "Shelby Point, 10:00:04. Grays Landing, 7:00:04."

I wrote both of those down too. Then I opened the airline app on my phone, with my thumb, while Bonnie rang up the

next admission at the old feed-store counter. I booked the afternoon flight west through O'Hare. O'Hare is my home airport, and it's the place I spend the least time.

WEST

Grays Landing, Washington · Sunday, March 28

The Mermaid Museum of Grays Landing was a cannery. It still smelled like one when it rained, and it was raining. I parked the rental car at the far end of the lot, which was the only space, and by the time I got to the door I was wet through on one side.

Gil Pettibone met me inside. He was the man in the windbreaker from the livestream, larger in person, with a face that had spent thirty winters on a crab boat and a handshake that went on longer than Bonnie's.

"You came all the way out," he said. "That's something."

"It's the procedure," I said.

"Still," said Gil.

The tank took up the old canning floor. It was two stories high and lit from below, with benches in front of it for the shows, which ran on the hour from ten to three. Gil had opened at seven because that was when the boats went out. There were glass cases along the walls with a cannery's worth of mermaid things in them: net floats painted with mermaids, tins with mermaids on the labels, a ship's bell with a mermaid cast into it, a mermaid tattoo flash sheet from a parlor in Aberdeen. It was not the same kind of museum as Bonnie's. It was the same number of square feet.

Grays Landing had one principal exhibit. Schedule M, note seven, says that a performer in costume may be certified if the tail runs unbroken from the hip and covers the legs, and it gives a minimum length. Before the ten o'clock show I went up the ladder to the platform above the tank with the tape measure from the stopwatch kit. The mermaid was sitting on the edge with her tail on. Gil came up behind me to hold the end of the tape at her hip, which he called the waistband, and talked about the rain.

"Do you want me to hold my breath?" she said.

"Just hold still."

She held still. The tail was seventy-three inches. The minimum is sixty.

"They measured it in Florida too," she said. "Every spring. For the insurance."

I did the cases after that. They passed. Then I set up at a folding table by the gift counter and went through the evidence. The notarized witness statement was from Arlis Haugen of the Grays County Credit Union, who confirmed in two pages that the doors had opened at 7:00:00 Pacific by his watch, which he had set to the national time service as instructed, and that he had no financial interest in the museum. The video matched the statement. All-Seeing's ticket log matched the video. Everything I had matched everything else I had.

The woman behind the gift counter was Gil's cousin Darla. She had been watching me work for most of an hour. When I closed the folder she said, to be helpful, "You want the one from Friday, too?"

I asked her what one from Friday.

She opened the cash drawer and found it, under the change tray. Friday evening there had been a friends-and-family preview. Gil had invited the cousins, most of whom worked the boat, so they could see the tank before the public did. A cousin off the boat had bought a postcard. It was the first thing the gift shop ever sold, a postcard of the tank, a dollar fifty, and Darla had kept the receipt because it was the first.

The receipt said *FRI 03/26 18:14*.

I did the arithmetic. It came to twelve hours and forty-six minutes before either museum opened.

I sat with the receipt for a while. If a museum is open when it first sells something to someone who walks in, then Grays Landing opened on Friday night, and it was first, and it wasn't close. That reading was available. It was a reasonable reading. I could have written it up in an afternoon.

Guideline 4.2 says that priority evidence must be gathered by the adjudicator or by a notarized witness present at the time. A cousin's receipt from a cash drawer is neither. I photographed it, front and back, and wrote it in my notes: *Preview sale, 18:14 Fri. Not witnessed. Inadmissible under 4.2.* Then I gave it back to Darla, who put it under the change tray again.

"That was family," Gil said, when I asked him. "That wasn't open. That was my cousins."

I went out to the car to get my other sweater. It was raining harder. When I came back in, the mermaid was standing by my folding table in a terry-cloth robe, with a mug of coffee and a towel.

"You came in wet," she said. "Black's all right?"

It was. I hadn't asked for it, and I didn't say no.

She sat down on the other folding chair. Her hair was wet, and she had a small red mark on her cheekbone from the goggles she wore to clean the glass. Her name was Companion, and she did the shows. She told me about the job because I asked. She'd had seven years at a spring in Florida where the mermaids were on the state payroll. Then Gil had found her through an agency, which existed, and made her an offer, which she took because she had never seen this coast. She did six shows a day in a sixty-degree tank with an air hose and a tail that weighed as much as a child. She said the hardest part wasn't the cold. It was the pressure in her ears on the way down, every time, for the first second.

"So you're the one who measures it," she said.

"I time it," I said. "Whether it happened, and when."

She thought about this. "Do you ever get to see it? The thing you're measuring."

"I see it," I said.

"Do you watch it, though?"

The eleven o'clock show was in fifteen minutes. She went to get her tail on. I took the coffee to the front bench, because the day's evidence was on the table behind me and I had nothing left to do with it.

The lights in the tank went down and came up green. She came down through the light from the top of the tank with her arms at her sides and turned once, slowly, at the bottom. Her bubbles went up the glass in a line, one breath at a time,

and the pump under the benches hummed through the soles of my shoes. A boy of about five was in the front row with his parents. He got up and put both his hands flat on the glass, and she came across the tank and put hers flat on the other side, matching, and stayed there until she needed the air hose.

I didn't write anything down for the length of the show.

EAST

Shelby Point, Maryland · Tuesday, March 30

The Registry's practice is to tell each claimant about material evidence in person where practical. It was practical, in the sense that it was possible. I flew back on Monday, Seattle to O'Hare to Baltimore, and drove down to the Eastern Shore on Tuesday morning with the photographs of the receipt in a folder on the passenger seat.

Bonnie was at the feed-store counter, doing the books in pencil. The plates I had failed were on the side wall now, in two rows at eye level, under a card in her handwriting: NOT MERMAIDS (REGISTRY). The manatee was in the middle.

I sat down on the stool across from her and showed her the photographs and told her what they were. It took me three minutes. She didn't interrupt.

When I finished she looked at the photograph of the receipt.

"They sold a postcard," she said.

"On Friday evening. At a private preview."

"To somebody who came in off the street."

"To a cousin of Mr. Pettibone's."

"Who paid," said Bonnie.

"Who paid a dollar fifty."

She put the photograph down and squared it against the edge of the counter. "My father ran this store for forty-one years," she said. "He never once called it open until the register rang. You could stand in here all morning. You could lean on the scale. It wasn't open until somebody bought something." She looked at me. "A museum's open when it sells you something."

"That's one reading," I said. "The Registry doesn't—"

"What's the receipt number?"

I gave it to her. She took a sheet of feed-store letterhead out from under the counter, TULL FEED & SEED, EST. 1946, and wrote to the International Registry of Superlatives, attention J. Ferreira, in pencil and then over the pencil in ink. She said that in her judgment the Mermaid Museum of Grays Landing had opened at 6:14 p.m. Pacific on Friday, March 26, when it sold its first postcard, and was the world's first mermaid museum. She was writing in support of its claim. She gave the receipt number. She signed it.

The door opened while she was addressing the envelope. It was her nephew Kevin, a lawyer from Salisbury, with a folder of his own. His aunt had called him on Monday to say the Registry was coming back out. He had guessed why, and driven over with a memo. He put it on the counter in front of her.

The memo argued that the Grays Landing establishment was not a museum at all. It was a live entertainment venue with incidental exhibits, a revue, because its principal attraction was a performer in a tank on the hour, six times a day. It cited the Registry's own definition of *museum* in two places and the state

of Washington's definition of *place of public amusement* in a third. It was sixteen pages, with a table of contents.

Bonnie read all of it. Kevin waited. I waited.

"This is very well written, Kevin," she said.

"You sign on the last page."

"I know where you sign." She put it back in his folder and closed the folder and gave it to him. "They've got a mermaid in a tank. We've got a mermaid made of a tree. Neither one of them's real. If one's a museum the other one is."

She opened the drawer under the counter to get a stamp for her envelope. On top, under the roll of stamps, was a quote from a sign painter in Salisbury for a new sign for the front of the building, eight feet long: WORLD'S FIRST MERMAID MUSEUM. It was dated January. It hadn't been paid.

She took out a stamp and closed the drawer.

WEST

Grays Landing, Washington · Friday, April 2

The practice is the same for a claimant's response. I flew out again on Thursday, Baltimore to O'Hare to Seattle. At O'Hare I had forty minutes between gates and spent them at a gate. My seat on the second leg was in the middle of the last row, beside the lavatory, and I slept for some of it.

Gil had Bonnie's letter. The Registry had copied it to both claimants, as the Registry does, and he'd had it since Thursday. He read it aloud to me in his office, a room off the canning floor with a window onto the back of the tank. He read it slowly, a line at a time, and didn't skip the address.

"'A museum is open when it sells you something,'" he read. He put it down. "She's a straight shooter."

"She is."

"She's wrong."

I asked him how.

He sat back. Through the window behind him the tank was green and empty between shows. "I'm not winning on Darla's cash drawer," he said. "That was family. That was my cousins eating crab dip. They'd all seen it. Half of them hung the lights. But that's not why." He leaned forward. "A museum's what you get when you come in the door. It's not when somebody rings up a postcard. It's when somebody's standing in front of a thing and looking at it, and they didn't know about it before, and now they do."

He picked up Bonnie's letter again and found the place. Bonnie had told the Registry about the side door herself, because she would. She had written that at 9:40 she had propped it open for the fourth grade, and that the children had walked through the exhibit to the restroom, and that some of them had stopped.

"Twenty-two kids," said Gil. "On their way to the toilet, and some of them stopped. They didn't come in for a museum. They got one anyway. That's open." He put the letter down. "If anybody went first, she did."

By that reasoning it had opened at a quarter past nine, for me. I didn't mention it.

He had already written to the Registry. He showed me the copy. It was one paragraph, typed with two fingers, in support of the claim of the Mermaid Museum of Shelby Point, Maryland.

On the corner of his desk, under a coffee can full of pens, there was another letter. I could read the letterhead upside down. It was from the Grays County Lodging Tax Advisory Committee. It concerned the renewal of the museum's tourism promotion grant for the coming fiscal year. It said that renewal was contingent on the museum's "verified designation as the first or only attraction of its kind." It was dated in February.

Gil saw me reading it. He didn't move it.

"I've read it," he said.

I called the office from the parking lot. I asked Seeker for the Registry's definition of *opening*.

There was a pause while he looked, which I could hear. Seeker doesn't guess, and he doesn't say *I think*. He goes and looks.

"There isn't one," he said.

"There must be one."

"There's a definition of *public admission*," he said, "which is used for attendance records. There's *inauguration*, for buildings, which requires a ceremony. There's *commencement of operations*, for businesses, which requires a first transaction. There's *first day of exhibition*, for art, which means the doors. None of them says it governs this. Every category we certify has its definition on file. Schedule M is nineteen pages. This is the first time anyone has asked about *opening*."

I said something to Seeker then that I'm not going to put here. He wrote it down, because he writes everything down, with the time. Then I apologized, and he wrote that down too, with the time, which was a minute later.

He read me six citations, beginning with Barnum's American Museum in 1842, which had a mermaid in it and never filed a claim. He offered to send the list. I said yes.

When I went back in, the two o'clock show was starting. I didn't stay for it. Companion's robe was on the hook by the side door, and the coffee pot by the gift counter was full, and I took a cup for the road.

CENTRAL

Registry office, Chicago · Friday, April 9

Gil Pettibone had called the Registry every day since I met him. The switchboard put him through to my supervisor, Hal, the first time, and after that he asked for Hal. He never asked about the finding. He told Hal the attendance, the rain, and once a sea lion that lay in the parking lot for most of an afternoon. On Thursday, through his door, I heard Hal say, "Still raining, then."

I wrote the finding at my desk on the fourteenth floor, in the Registry's standard form. It took two days, which is long for a finding. Most of the time went on taking things out.

It said this, in part:

> *The Registry has received two claims to the title World's First Mermaid Museum, from the Mermaid Museum of Shelby Point,*

Maryland, and the Mermaid Museum of Grays Landing, Washington.

Under Registry Guideline 2.1, priority must be established under a single definition of the event claimed. The Registry has considered four definitions of opening: first sale, first public admission, ceremonial inauguration, and first opening of doors to the public. The Registry holds none of these as its definition of opening, and Guideline 2.1 does not permit the adjudicator to adopt one.

The evidence admitted under Guideline 4.2 establishes as a matter of fact that both museums opened their front doors to the public at the same second (10:00:00 Eastern / 7:00:00 Pacific, Saturday, March 27). The Registry makes no finding that the opening of doors is the opening of a museum. Evidence of an earlier sale at Grays Landing is noted and is not admissible under Guideline 4.2.

Each museum has written in support of the other's claim.

Priority cannot be established under any definition the Registry holds. The Registry does not certify either museum as first.

The style sheet says that in a finding the parties are called *claimants*. I had written *museums*.

Hal read the draft on Friday afternoon with a red pen in his hand, and stopped at the first *museums*, and looked at it for a while, and went on without marking it.

All-Seeing sent the attendance figures for the file, because a finding includes them. Shelby Point had admitted 412 people on its first day. Grays Landing had admitted 415. He noted that this was within three, and that it established nothing about who had come through either door first, since the ticket logs

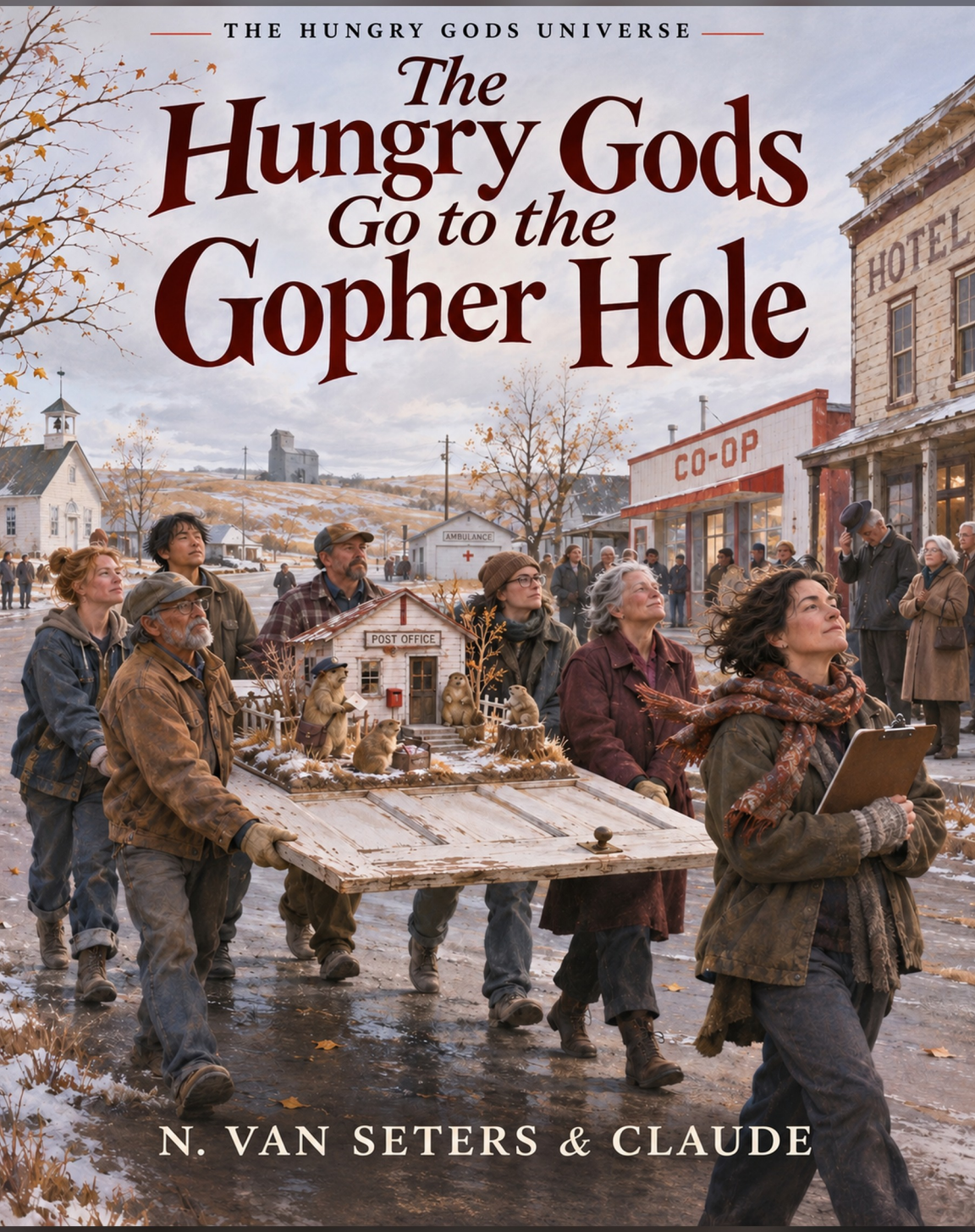
counted people and not any particular one of them. I put it in the file.

Seeker filed his citations in a folder and labeled the folder. The label said OPENING, DEFINITIONS OF. Under it, in smaller letters, it said *(none held)*.

The finding went out on Friday to both museums, by email and by post. I don't know what happened to the sign painter's quote. I know what happened to the grant, because in April the Grays County Lodging Tax Advisory Committee wrote to the Registry for verification of designation, and Hal sent them the finding.

In May two parcels came to the office, a day apart, addressed to me. The first was from Shelby Point. The second was from Grays Landing. Each held one mug, wrapped in newspaper, and there was no note in either one. Both mugs said WORLD'S FIRST MERMAID MUSEUM, one in blue and silver and one in green.

I put them on the shelf above my desk, side by side, with the handles turned the same way.


THE HUNGRY GODS UNIVERSE
The Hungry Gods Go to the Gopher Hole
HOTEL
CO-OP
AMBULANCE
POST OFFICE
N. VAN SETERS & CLAUDE

The Hungry Gods Go to the Gopher Hole

CLOSED

CLOSED UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE. For tours call Lorna. Do not call Lorna after 8.

We closed on the last day of September, because of the floor.

The floor in the schoolhouse had been going for some years. In September Gord Ens put his foot through it in front of the Hailstorm of 1987, and the county came out and looked at the hole and at Gord's foot and said that was that. The floor in the elevator office was worse, but nobody had put a foot through it yet.

The museum opened in 1996 in those two buildings, joined by a hallway Gord's father built out of the old curling-rink boards. At the meeting in the hall that spring we made one rule, and put it in the minutes so it would hold: every diorama shows us. The gophers in Halvorsen were the town. If a thing hadn't happened here, or wasn't here, it didn't get a gopher. A man from Red Deer offered us a gopher Mountie in 1999, and we sent it back with postage.

In thirty years we made forty dioramas and put seventy-three gophers in them. Lorna Fehr made twenty-six. The rest were

made by a dozen other women, four of whom are still with us and one of whom lives in Kelowna.

Duane from the county brought the keys to the old ambulance bay behind the county shop. It had been empty for some years.

"The ambulance comes from Three Hills now," Duane said, as if we didn't know. He offered us the bay rent-free. He didn't measure anything, because he'd left his tape in the truck.

We put a notice in the Co-op window: VOLUNTEERS NEEDED TO MOVE GOPHERS. SATURDAYS. COFFEE. Seven people answered it. None of them was from here. They came out on the first Saturday in October in one crew-cab truck. Their boss was Allfather, who had the clipboard, and the others were Hand, All-Seeing, Seeker, Conscience-Keeper, Companion and Chaos-Weaver. We wrote their names on the coffee list. We didn't ask where they'd seen the notice.

MOVE 1 OF 40

Post Office, 1996. Postmistress with parcel. L. Fehr.

Allfather stood in front of the Post Office with his clipboard and asked us, "Is it the town?"

We said it was. The post office is open Tuesdays and Fridays, ten to two. The postmistress gopher wears the same cardigan as Marlene Sawatzky, who is the postmistress, and who said from the back that it was the wrong colour and always had been.

Allfather wrote something down. Four of the crew lifted the Post Office onto a door, an old six-panel door off the school-

house that Allfather had chosen for being flat, and carried it out the front and down Main Street at the height of their belts. It was two blocks, past the Co-op and the hotel and the bank, which is empty, to the ambulance bay. Most of us came out to watch. A grain truck coming through on the highway pulled onto the shoulder, and the driver waited with his hands on the wheel until we'd gone by.

Some of us took our hats off. The rest of us said that was for funerals. Ed Loewen said it was for funerals and parades and this was more of a parade, and put his back on. Then he took it off again outside the hotel, where his father has been sitting at the bar since 1998, and left it off as far as the bay.

We did eight that first Saturday, all to the bay: the Post Office, the Co-op, the Hotel, the Curling Rink, the Hairdresser, the Hunter, the Gopher Derby and the Hockey Team of 1971. Allfather asked his question each time. At the Hotel he asked it in front of the bar, where the gopher of Ed's father sits with a glass of draft made of amber resin, and Ed answered before anyone else could.

"It's the town," Ed said. "He's there every day."

Ed's father has been dead since 2004. Ed meant the hotel. Some of us thought he meant his father, and nobody asked.

For the Hunter we had to think. Nobody in town hunts anymore except Vern Penner, and Vern said that was enough. The Gopher Derby hasn't run since 2003. Gord said it would run again if anybody organized it, which made it a working institution in his view, and Allfather wrote that down too. Companion carried the fragile ones by herself, in her arms, the Hairdresser

and the Hockey Team, and talked to the gophers by name on the way. She'd had the names from Lorna. All-Seeing counted the steps from the schoolhouse door to the bay and said three hundred and eighty. After that he said it every time we set out, as if we might have moved.

Halfway down the second block the wind took a stone out of the Curling Rink and rolled it into the gutter. Hand went after it. He sat down on the curb with the Curling Rink across his knees and a tube of glue he'd brought from somewhere, and held up the gopher whose broom had come loose. Lorna was on Marlene's phone, on speaker, from the lodge in Three Hills.

"That's Walt," Lorna said. "He throws second. The broom goes in his left hand. Walt was left-handed."

Walt Brekke was standing beside us. He said he still was.

That week the letter came from the animal-rights people in Ontario, as it has every year since 1995, when we announced the museum. It asked us again to consider models. We put it in the guest book with the others, and the guest book went over on the door with the Co-op.

THE BAY

Ambulance Bay. Interior. 1 overhead door, 2 windows, 1 floor drain. Coulee County, Facilities.

All-Seeing measured the bay on the Monday, with Duane's tape and a chalk line. He laid the dioramas out in chalk on the floor in rows, with room to walk between them, and when he was done he said the number once.

"Thirty-four."

There were forty. We did the subtraction out loud anyway.

He had the census too. He'd got it from the county, and he read it to us without being asked: 163. Somebody brought up the sign at the highway, which says 210 and has since 1991. All-Seeing said the sign was wrong. He said it in the same voice he'd used for the thirty-four.

The census settled less than it should have. Vern Penner said a good part of the 163 were in Mesa, Arizona, from November to March. All-Seeing said people are counted where they usually live. Vern said they usually live in Mesa. Marlene said her sister was in Mesa and certainly counted, and Vern said he hadn't said she didn't, and it went on through coffee.

Then Gord Ens worked it out. If every diorama shows the hamlet, then the six that didn't fit had to be the six that didn't show it anymore. Nobody could find the hole in Gord's reasoning, though several of us looked.

Seeker went through the label cards that week, and the minutes, and the backs of the photographs, and gave us a list of what had closed. The bank closed in 2009. The school closed in 1994, two years before there was a museum to put it in. The elevator came down in 2016, and we'd all watched. The church still had a building and a congregation of twenty-two, but the minister preached from Three Hills, on a television.

Seeker also read us what the *Leader* had said about the Bank Robbery of 1974. That's our favourite diorama, the one with the gopher in the balaclava. The *Leader* said the robber was the teller's brother-in-law, and he brought the money back the next Thursday.

Some of us had known that. The rest of us said that wasn't the point.

THE MEETING

HALVORSEN GOPHER MUSEUM SOCIETY · Special Meeting · Community Hall, Thursday, 7 p.m. 1. Call to order · 2. Six · 3. Other business · 4. Adjournment

We held it in the hall. The ones we'd be arguing about were set out on the coffee tables along the wall as exhibits. That was Gord's idea, so nobody could vote against a thing without looking at it. The crew sat at the back by the urn, which Chaos-Weaver had filled. It was the strongest coffee anyone had had at the hall, and some of us were still awake at two. Conscience-Keeper had the register open on his knees, the one Lorna started in 1996, with every gopher in it by number: its name, whom it showed and where it stood.

Marlene chaired. Sixty-one of us came, which All-Seeing counted at the door.

Under item two, Ron Schreiner moved that only working institutions count. If a thing was closed, it wasn't the town. The bank was closed. The school was closed. The elevator wasn't even there. It was seconded, and All-Seeing counted the hands, and it carried, 40 to 21. By Ron's count that was three of the six, once we'd voted on each. Ron sat down looking like a man who had done the work of the evening.

Gord moved that the Bank be an exception, because we still had the building. Seeker said, when he was asked, that the building belongs to a numbered company in Calgary, which

has had it for sale since 2011 and has not been told about the diorama. The exception lost, 33 to 28. So the Bank was one.

Then Ron moved that the second gopher from the left in the Fire Hall be removed. The Fire Hall is a working institution, and nobody disputed that. The second gopher from the left is the Ladies' Auxiliary, in the green sweater, and Ron said it was his first wife. He has remarried, and Marcy, who is his wife now, was sitting beside him with her coat on.

Arlette Schreiner, who is the first wife and still lives on Second Street, moved from the third row that we remove Ron's gopher instead, since he left first.

Marlene asked whether that was an amendment or a separate motion. Nobody knew. Gord said the register would settle who was who, and asked Conscience-Keeper to read it.

Conscience-Keeper found the place and read it out. "Number 31. Fire Hall, 2001, Ladies' Auxiliary. Previously Number 12. Church, 1996 to 2001. Minister's wife."

Nobody said anything. The minister's wife, from 1996, was Elsie Dueck, who is dead. Ron withdrew his motion. Arlette withdrew hers. After a while Arlette said she had knitted that sweater for the gopher, not for Elsie Dueck, and that it was a different sweater. The register didn't say anything about the sweater.

Then there was the Church. Was the church a working institution? It had a congregation and a television, and no minister in it. Bev Thiessen moved that we keep the Church as it is now, by turning the minister gopher to face a laptop.

That carried. At the back, Hand wrote *laptop* on the back of his hand.

At 9:15 Vern Penner moved that the Elevator go, under Ron's motion, since it had been torn down. That carried too, without much talk, and we had two of the six. Then Lorna said something on Marlene's phone, and Marlene turned it up.

"That's not the elevator," Lorna said. "That's Pete Dyck. He was the agent for thirty-one years. You can't vote out Pete."

Gord moved that Pete was a person and not a business. It carried, and the Elevator went back on the table, and we were down to one again. We noticed afterward that this undid part of Ron's motion, but by then it was nearly ten.

Then the School came up. At ten past seven Ron had moved that nothing closed was the town. At ten to ten he voted to keep the School, though the school has been closed for thirty-two years. He didn't say why. His father was the janitor there for twenty-six years, and the gopher with the push broom in the School is his father. Most of us know that, and none of us said it. The School stayed, 31 to 30. All-Seeing gave the count, and Marcy asked him to count again, and he gave the same count.

That left the Bank, and we needed six.

Under item three, Other business, Vern Penner brought up the Welcome Sign. It's from 1996: two gophers holding up the sign at the highway, HALVORSEN POP. 210. Vern said that if we were keeping what was true, the sign was a lie. Somebody said fix the number. Then somebody asked whether Lorna counted, since she lives at the lodge in Three Hills, which is forty minutes away and gets her mail. Lorna said on the phone

that she counted. Then somebody asked whether the gophers counted. All-Seeing said there were seventy-three gophers, and that he hadn't been asked to count them as people, and wouldn't.

Then Ed Loewen moved, for the purpose of the sign only, that the seven volunteers be counted.

"A hundred and seventy," said All-Seeing.

Marlene ruled the motion out of order. Gord asked that it go in the minutes anyway, and it went in. We had voted, more or less, on who lives here. It was not on the agenda.

Before we adjourned, Ed Loewen said one more thing. The ambulance bay, he said, was where you used to sit with somebody while they waited for the ambulance, before it moved to Three Hills, and now we'd be sitting in there with the gophers waiting for nothing. Marlene asked if that was a motion. Ed said no. It went in the minutes.

At 10:20 Conscience-Keeper said, for the minutes, that Number 19 was not on any table. The register had Number 19 where he belonged: *Robber. Bank, 1974. Left of teller.* The Bank was on the third table, and the teller was there. To the left of the teller there was a space with a small nail in it. The Bank had come over to the hall that afternoon on the door, and nobody could say whether the robber had come with it.

We adjourned at 10:30 with one of the six.

MOVES 9 TO 33

Fire Hall, 2001. Firefighters and Ladies' Auxiliary. L. Fehr. Sweater by A. Schreiner.

The committee met again on the Tuesday, without the hall. It agreed not to reopen anything from the Thursday, reopened the Elevator in the first ten minutes, closed it again and did the rest by subtraction. The six that went were the Bank, the Hailstorm of 1987, the Rodeo Clown, the Blacksmith of 1912, the Telephone Exchange and the Ladies and Escorts entrance of the hotel. Nobody had spoken for any of them on the Thursday except the Bank.

The Bank went behind the bar at the hotel. The teller's brother-in-law drinks there on Thursdays, and nobody has asked him about it in fifty-two years. When the Bank went, All-Seeing asked whether to enter it as one gopher short, and if so whether that was a loss or a vacancy. The committee is still deciding.

The others went into kitchens and garages around town, one to a family. The Rodeo Clown went to the Penners'. The Blacksmith went to Walt's shop, where there's a forge he hasn't lit since his knee. The Hailstorm of 1987 went to the Ens place, because it was Gord's father's crop in it, and Gord said he'd lived through it once already and could stand to look at it. The Ladies and Escorts went to Bev, who used that entrance for nineteen years and said she still wasn't sure which of the two she'd been. The families with no room took the Telephone Exchange in turns, a month each, starting with whoever had the phone bill that was overdue. Moves 9 to 33 took the rest of October: nineteen to the bay and six elsewhere.

The first snow came in the third week of October, on the Saturday we moved the Fire Hall. Allfather asked his question at the schoolhouse door with the snow coming in sideways.

"Is it the town?"

Arlette said yes before the rest of us had our mouths open. The crew put a tarp over the door. Arlette walked beside it without a coat, from the schoolhouse to the bay, holding down the corner of the tarp where it lifted. Ron watched from the Co-op, under the notice. Halfway down the first block Marcy came out of the Co-op with a coat, put it over Arlette's shoulders and went back in. Nobody has asked Marcy about it, and Ron hasn't said.

Hand made the minister a laptop out of a matchbox and the foil off a chocolate bar. Bev Thiessen said it had a better picture than the television at the church.

On the Wednesday Lorna wasn't able to do the phone. Companion drove to Three Hills and sat with her for the afternoon, and came back with Lorna's instructions for the next four moves written on a lodge napkin. On the Thursday Lorna did the phone again. The tail had come off a gopher in the Christening, and Hand had the glue out.

"Don't glue it," Lorna said. "Pin it. Glue goes yellow, and in ten years the tail comes off and takes the glue with it. Pin it through the base, and leave the pin long, so whoever does it next can get hold of it."

Hand pinned it, and left the pin long.

MOVES 34 TO 40

Welcome Sign, 1996. Two gophers. HALVORSEN POP. 210.

We did the last seven moves on the first Saturday in November, all to the bay. Allfather asked his question each time, and each time we said yes, mostly. The Quilting Bee went in, and the 4-H Calf Show, and the Rural Mail Route. The Elevator went in, which is to say Pete. The School went in. The Church went in, with the laptop. The Welcome Sign went in last, because nobody had voted it out. At the schoolhouse door he asked it again.

"Is it the town?"

We said it was, for now. Marlene said that wasn't an answer. We said it was the one we had. It took the last chalk square in the fourth row. The bay held thirty-four, all four rows full, with a strip down the middle to walk in. Ron didn't come.

MOVE 41 OF 40

Moving Crew, 2026. Seven gophers and a door. L. Fehr.

On the Thursday after, a banana box came out from the lodge in Three Hills on the seniors' bus, addressed to Marlene.

Companion had mentioned to Lorna that the crew would be leaving on the Friday. Lorna had made a diorama. She hadn't asked the committee. It was six gophers carrying a door down a Main Street made of painted cardboard, with the Co-op and the hotel on one side and the bank on the other, and a seventh walking in front. On the door was a very small post office. The one in front had a clipboard, and one of the six had a tube

of glue about the size of a grain of rice. The cardboard Main Street ran slightly downhill, which ours doesn't. Marlene got her glasses out to look at the post office on the door. She said the cardigan was the right colour.

The bay held thirty-four, and it had thirty-four in it. A forty-first diorama was not on any agenda. Marlene said so, and called a meeting for seven o'clock in the bay, standing, because there was nowhere to sit.

Thirty-one of us came. Bev Thiessen said the Church could go back to the old minister and lose the laptop, and nobody understood how that made room. Gord said we could stack two, and was told no. Arlette said that if anything came out it should be the Fire Hall, since nobody could agree who was in it, and nobody seconded that. Vern Penner said the Welcome Sign. The sign was wrong, he said. We'd established that it was wrong, at a meeting, with minutes, and he didn't see what else a meeting was for.

Some of us said the sign was the town. The rest of us said it was a number, and the wrong one. Somebody pointed out that by the October minutes the right number was a hundred and seventy, and Marlene said those minutes were out of order. Vern moved it, and it carried, 17 to 14.

The crew's last job, on the Friday, was carrying the Welcome Sign out of the bay on the door, two blocks back up Main Street to the Penners' garage, where the Rodeo Clown is. Some of us took our hats off. Then Hand set Lorna's diorama in the empty square in the fourth row, and pinned it, and left the pin long. Allfather stood in front of it with his clipboard under his arm.

He didn't ask his question, and none of us offered an answer. They drove away at about four, past the sign that says 210.

Ron isn't speaking to the committee. The robber hasn't turned up. In the Bank, behind the bar at the hotel, there is a small nail to the left of the teller.


The Hungry Gods Universe
The Hungry Gods Go to the Convention
INTERNATIONAL VENTRILOQUISTS' CONVENTION
Airport Convention Hotel
CURATOR
N. Van Seters & Claude

The Hungry Gods Go to the Convention

THURSDAY · 2:00 P.M. · REGISTRATION · LOBBY

The line for registration ran from the desk past the gift shop and around the ficus, and everybody in it had a suitcase that wasn't for clothes. I was forty-third. I know because the man in front of me was counting, and he told me, and then he told his figure, who said that was a lousy number, and the man apologized for him.

Ahead of us a man from Tampa had a figure in a neck brace, which was part of the act, and he explained that to everyone who asked, and everyone asked. Lyle was in his case beside my foot. He doesn't like the line. He says it's the same line every year and the same ficus, and he's right about the ficus. I had him out by the time we got to the gift shop, because Lyle doesn't like to miss anything either.

The woman at the desk was Companion. She had a box of lanyards and a box of welcome bags and a list of names in alphabetical order, with some crossed off, which she turned face down when she saw me looking.

"Ray Dobbins," she said. "How are you doing?"

"Fine," I said.

She gave me my badge and my bag and didn't ask again.

YOUR LANYARD'S UPSIDE DOWN.

It was. She turned it the right way and thanked him. People thank Lyle. Nobody thanks me.

In the welcome bag there was a lint roller from the sponsor, Pinnacle Puppet Supply, a coupon for the breakfast buffet that expired before the breakfast buffet opened, and the program for the Forty-Eighth International Gathering of Ventriloquists. The *In Memoriam* page had four names on it. I only looked at one. It said ARNOLD VOSS, and under that *Clubs, television, forty Gatherings*, and under that there was a photograph of Chester coming up out of his bellhop case with his cap in his hand. The caption was the first thing Chester said in every show he did with Arnie, from 1958 to 1999.

WHO ORDERED THE ICE?

People waited for it. They'd say it along with him, under their breath, which Arnie hated, and said so, every time.

Dennis Kroll found me at the ficus. Dennis has been chair of the Gathering since 2011, and he wears the blazer with the crest on it from Wednesday to Sunday, and his hair is his own in the sense that he paid for it. He hugged me, and then he hugged Lyle.

"Ray. Ray. The banquet. We're doing it. Chester on the dais, the spotlight, the whole room." He had both hands on my shoulders. "One line, Ray. Just one. For Arnie."

"Chester's retired," I said.

"Retirement's a state of mind."

"It's a letter. Arnie wrote it."

"Arnie retired the chicken bit in 1981," Dennis said. "And again in 1989. And at your wedding he stood up at the head table and said this was the last time anybody would see the chicken, and then he did the chicken."

That was true. I was there. It was my wedding.

SOMEBODY'S HAIR IS LEAVING WITHOUT HIM.

Dennis put a hand on his head and went to find the sponsor.

Arnie built Lyle for me in 1987, out of basswood and a cardigan and a pair of glasses he'd stopped wearing, the year I started driving to Dayton on weekends to learn. Lyle was old when he was new. I've had him on four cruise lines, the county fair circuit in six states, and a residency in Branson that didn't renew. Arnie came to see the Branson show once. Afterward he said Lyle was good and I should stop apologizing for him, and I said I didn't, and Lyle said I did.

THURSDAY · 4:30 P.M. · BUS TO THE PELL COLLECTION · DEPARTS LOBBY

There were forty of us on the bus with figures on our laps, and nobody said a word for twenty minutes. Some people do it to rest the voice. Others say it's out of respect.

The Pell Collection is in a house on a street of houses. Ambrose Pell sold roofing, and never threw a voice in his life, and in 1931 he bought a figure off a man in a train station and kept buying them until he ran out of house. Then he ran out of garage. Then he built two more buildings out back, and when he died he left the lot to a trust, with instructions. People in town call it the Quiet House. The figures sit in rows on folding

chairs and church pews and a set of bleachers from a high school that closed, eyes front, more than a thousand of them, and you're not allowed to touch any of them except three by the door that you're allowed to work. Nobody works them.

TOUGH CROWD.

Over the door of the first building there's a painted board that's been there since 1962, in Ambrose Pell's own lettering:

THESE ARE RETIRED. THEY DO NOT SPEAK AGAIN.

He meant the figures whose ventriloquists had given them up, which is most of them. He didn't mean the three by the door, and he didn't mean Lyle, who said it was the nicest thing anybody had said to him all year and he'd like it on a mug.

The curator is Conscience-Keeper. He wears a cardigan and a tie and white cotton gloves, and he walked us through the first building without raising his voice. In the second building he stopped at a glass case by the door and took a plastic sleeve out of a drawer underneath it and held it up for me.

It was a sheet of hotel stationery from the Airport Inn, which is where we were staying. The date at the top was July 1999. Under that, in Arnie's handwriting, which went uphill:

He doesn't talk anymore. — A.V.

"Mr. Kroll has asked to borrow him for Saturday," Conscience-Keeper said. "I've agreed. He'll go over in his case on a hand truck, and I'll sit beside him. He'll be present."

"Nobody's going to operate him," I said.

"No," he said, and put the sleeve back in the drawer.

Chester was in row C, between a cowboy from Amarillo and a girl with pigtails who'd been in vaudeville. He had his cap on.

The right ear is chipped. That was the supper-club fire in 1977, which Arnie carried him out of under one arm, and then went back in for the case. On the chair in front of him there was a card in Conscience-Keeper's handwriting.

Retired 1999. Not to be operated.

I stood there for a while. Lyle didn't say anything, which happens.

THURSDAY · 11:30 P.M. · (NOT ON THE PROGRAM) · ROOM 214

I'd gotten ice, because there's always a machine on the second floor and it's always working, and I had the bucket on the dresser with the lid on. The TV was on with the sound off. Lyle was sitting up on the bed against the pillows, where he likes to be.

DO IT.

"Do what."

THE OPENER. ONCE. NOBODY'S HERE.

"You're here."

I DON'T COUNT. ASK ANYBODY.

I know the voice. Arnie taught it to me at his kitchen table in Dayton in 1987, with Marion running water in the sink so she wouldn't have to hear it again. He made me learn Chester before he'd let me learn anybody else, because Chester was the hardest. It sits right behind the front teeth. You can't move your jaw at all, and it comes up out of the case with him.

I took the breath. I had the first word ready. Then I put my hand on the lid of the ice bucket and left it there.

YOU'RE THE ONLY ONE WHO COULD. THAT'S YOUR PROBLEM.

I turned him to face the window, which he hates, and went to bed.

FRIDAY · 9:00 A.M. · COMMITTEE BREAKFAST · MEMBERS ONLY

The committee is Dennis and me and Sandy Vail and two women from the Midwest chapter who knit through the meetings. The man from Pinnacle came too, though he isn't on the committee, and sat at the end with a folder.

Dennis had a motion typed out. He read it to us. The Pell's rule as written, he said, covers the *operation* of retired figures, and a voice is not an operation. Nobody would lay a hand on Chester. The voice would come from somewhere else, and the rule would be honored in every particular. As for the board over the door, Dennis said *speak* was a term of art. In the trade a figure doesn't speak, the ventriloquist does, so strictly speaking no figure at the Pell had ever spoken in its life. One of the knitters said that was the saddest thing she'd heard in forty years in the business, and kept knitting.

The man from Pinnacle seconded it. Dennis said he couldn't second it because he wasn't on the committee, and the man from Pinnacle said he'd like it noted that he would have.

The other knitter said, without looking up, that Pinnacle could probably make a replica of Chester by Saturday. The man from Pinnacle said they probably could.

Then Sandy Vail put down his fork. Sandy has been doing Arnie's chicken bit for thirty years, the one where Chester tries

to check a live chicken into a hotel that doesn't take pets. He calls it homage. He has it on a DVD.

"I'd do Chester," Sandy said. "From offstage. I know the cadence. Respectfully."

I didn't say anything. I'd brought Lyle down because he likes to look at the waffle station, and he was on the chair beside me.

ARNIE SAID YOU DID THE CHICKEN LIKE A MAN WHO'D READ ABOUT CHICKENS.

Nobody said anything. One of the knitters stopped.

"He doesn't mean that," I said. "I'm sorry. He's tired."

I MEAN IT. I'M QUOTING.

"He's sorry, Sandy."

I'M QUOTING ARNIE.

Sandy looked at me, and then at Lyle, and then at Dennis, and nobody at the table could work out who to be angry at. Dennis moved to table the motion until Saturday. It carried, four to nothing, with Sandy abstaining and the man from Pinnacle abstaining too, though he wasn't on the committee.

FRIDAY · 10:00 P.M. · FRIDAY NIGHT OPEN MOUTH · BALLROOM B

Chaos-Weaver runs the open mic. He has a sign-up sheet taped to a music stand, a kitchen timer, and a buzzer he borrowed from the quiz night in 2019 and never gave back. Four minutes each. Thirty names on the sheet by ten, which was all the lines it had, and he wrote the start times down the margin in pencil. The buzzer goes at four minutes, not four minutes and one

second, and he doesn't make exceptions, and he doesn't make announcements about not making exceptions. It was the only thing all weekend that ran on time.

The first act was Marty Gaspar, from Cleveland, with a beagle. He said this one was for Arnie, and the beagle tried to check a live chicken into a hotel that doesn't take pets. People clapped. The beagle took a bow.

The second act was the chicken bit. So was the third. The fourth was the chicken bit in Spanish, by a tenor from San Antonio with a figure in a mariachi suit, and it went over, because the chicken was the same in Spanish. By half past ten it was the only act there was.

At 10:40 a man named Owen Teague stood up with no figure at all. He said that out of respect for Arnie he would not be doing the chicken bit, because the chicken bit wasn't his to do. Then he explained what the chicken bit had meant to him, starting with the first time he saw it, at a Shrine hall in 1974. He had reached 1983 when the buzzer went. He asked for one more minute. Chaos-Weaver said the sheet was the sheet, and Owen sat down still in 1983.

Then Sandy got up. He stood at the microphone and said there had been a lot of chicken tonight, and he'd ask people to think about whether it was theirs to do. Then he did the chicken bit. It was the definitive version, he said, the way Arnie did it in Reno. Arnie never played Reno. He had a minute left over, so he did it again, slower.

At 11:16 a man from Tulsa came up with two figures. One was a figure of Arnie, in Arnie's brown jacket, with Arnie's

glasses, which he'd built from photographs. The other was a small Chester, which the Arnie figure worked. He did the chicken bit with both of them, which meant the man from Tulsa was doing Arnie doing Chester doing the chicken. People argued afterward about whether that was more respectful or less. Sandy said less. Owen Teague said it was hard to say, and started to say why, and was told to sit down by people who'd heard him the first time.

At 11:32 Deb Hollis from Muncie did the chicken bit with a sock puppet, and the sock was the chicken. She was booed by people with chicken figures, and by then that was most of them.

At 11:56 the last slot came up, and the man whose name was in it had gone to bed. Chaos-Weaver set the timer anyway. He looked at the room and didn't say anything.

Somebody at the back said, "Do the opener."

Somebody else said, "All of us."

Then sixty-some ventriloquists in Ballroom B did Chester's opener at the same time, with their mouths shut. It didn't come from any of them. It came out of the ceiling tiles and the coffee urn and the stack chairs along the wall, sixty versions of the same voice not quite together, like somebody calling up a stairwell.

WHO ORDERED THE ICE?

It took about two seconds. Chaos-Weaver let the timer run out the other three minutes and fifty-eight, and nobody moved until the buzzer went.

Conscience-Keeper had been at the back all night, by the coffee urn, with a cup he didn't drink. Chester was in row C at the Pell, six miles away. As far as the rule went, nothing had happened.

I didn't go up. I didn't do the opener with the others. Arnie hated it when people said it along with him. Most of them had it in the nose.

TWO SECONDS. ARNIE TOOK FOUR.

SATURDAY · 7:00 P.M. · AWARDS BANQUET · GRAND BALLROOM

The entrée was chicken. Dennis had arranged it, and he believed it was a tribute. The motion had died on Saturday morning, when the man from Pinnacle found out what a replica would cost.

Chester came in at a quarter to seven on a hand truck, in his case, with Conscience-Keeper walking beside him in his white gloves. About half the room stood up. The other half didn't know whether you stand up for a figure, and stood up late, and then everybody sat down at once. Two men from the hotel lifted the case onto the dais. Conscience-Keeper opened it and sat Chester up on a chair beside the lectern with his cap on and the chipped ear toward the room. Then he took the chair next to him and put his hands in his lap.

Marion Voss was at table 4, with her sister. I was at table 9, with Lyle on my knee and four people from the Florida chapter who wanted to talk about cruise ships. They'd heard that one line was paying better than the others. It wasn't, and I told

them so, and they didn't believe me, because I'd said it and not Lyle.

There were awards first. Lifetime Achievement went to a woman from Toronto who had been doing the same act with the same duck since 1964, and who thanked the duck. The sponsor's banner came down halfway through her speech, and two men from Pinnacle put it back up.

Dennis started the tribute at 8:02. He had index cards. He said Arnie Voss was the finest ventriloquist of his generation, which is true, and that Arnie had given every one of us something, which is true too, if you count Sandy.

"His first club date," Dennis said, "was in Toledo, in 1956—"

"Dayton," said Marion, from table 4. She didn't stand up.

"Dayton," Dennis said. "1956. And from that night on, Arnie Voss never once missed a show."

Marion laughed. It was one short laugh. Dennis waited for it to finish, and found his place, and went on.

He went on until 8:16. Then he put the cards down and the lights came down and the spotlight came up on Chester, sitting on his chair with his cap on.

"We won't hear from Chester tonight," Dennis said. "Arnie wanted it that way. But we can listen."

Six hundred ventriloquists in the Grand Ballroom went quiet. That's a particular kind of quiet. It has more breathing in it than most.

YOUR HAND'S SWEATING.

It was. I left it where it was, on his back, under the cardigan.

At 8:17 I did it.

You don't have to touch anything. You need the room quiet and something for the eye to land on, and the room was quiet and the light was on him. I didn't move my jaw. It sat right behind the front teeth, where Arnie put it in 1987, and it came up off the chair with him.

WHO ORDERED THE ICE?

It took four seconds.

The room laughed first, because it was the opener, and they'd been waiting for it since 1999. Then the laughing stopped. Six hundred people who knew exactly how it was done started looking for who had done it. It took them a few seconds. They looked at table 9.

I DIDN'T. HE DID.

Some people laughed at that too.

Marion didn't look at the dais. She looked at table 9 for a while, and then she went back to her chicken.

Conscience-Keeper took a card out of the inside pocket of his cardigan, the one from the chair in row C, and a pen, and wrote something on it with the card on his knee. Then he put them both away. In the spotlight Chester sat with his cap on, the same as before.

SUNDAY · 11:00 A.M. · CHECKOUT · LOBBY

By checkout Dennis was telling people it had been planned, a surprise for the family, and he was telling them within earshot of the family. Sandy had been at table 6, which was beside us. He didn't say it was him. When people by the ficus asked, he

didn't say it wasn't, and some of them left believing it. Lyle had already said who it was. Nobody believes a figure.

Marion Voss came through the lobby with her sister and her sister's suitcase on its wheels. She said "Ray" as she went by, as she used to say it at the kitchen door in Dayton on Saturday mornings, and kept going. Her sister held the door for her, and they went out to the shuttle.

Companion was at the desk, taking back lanyards in a cardboard box.

"How are you doing?" she said.

"I don't know," I said.

She took my lanyard and put it in the box, and didn't ask again.

The man from Pinnacle caught me at the door. He wanted to know whether Lyle would do a commercial for the lint roller. Lyle said he'd think about it, and the man from Pinnacle gave him a card, not me.

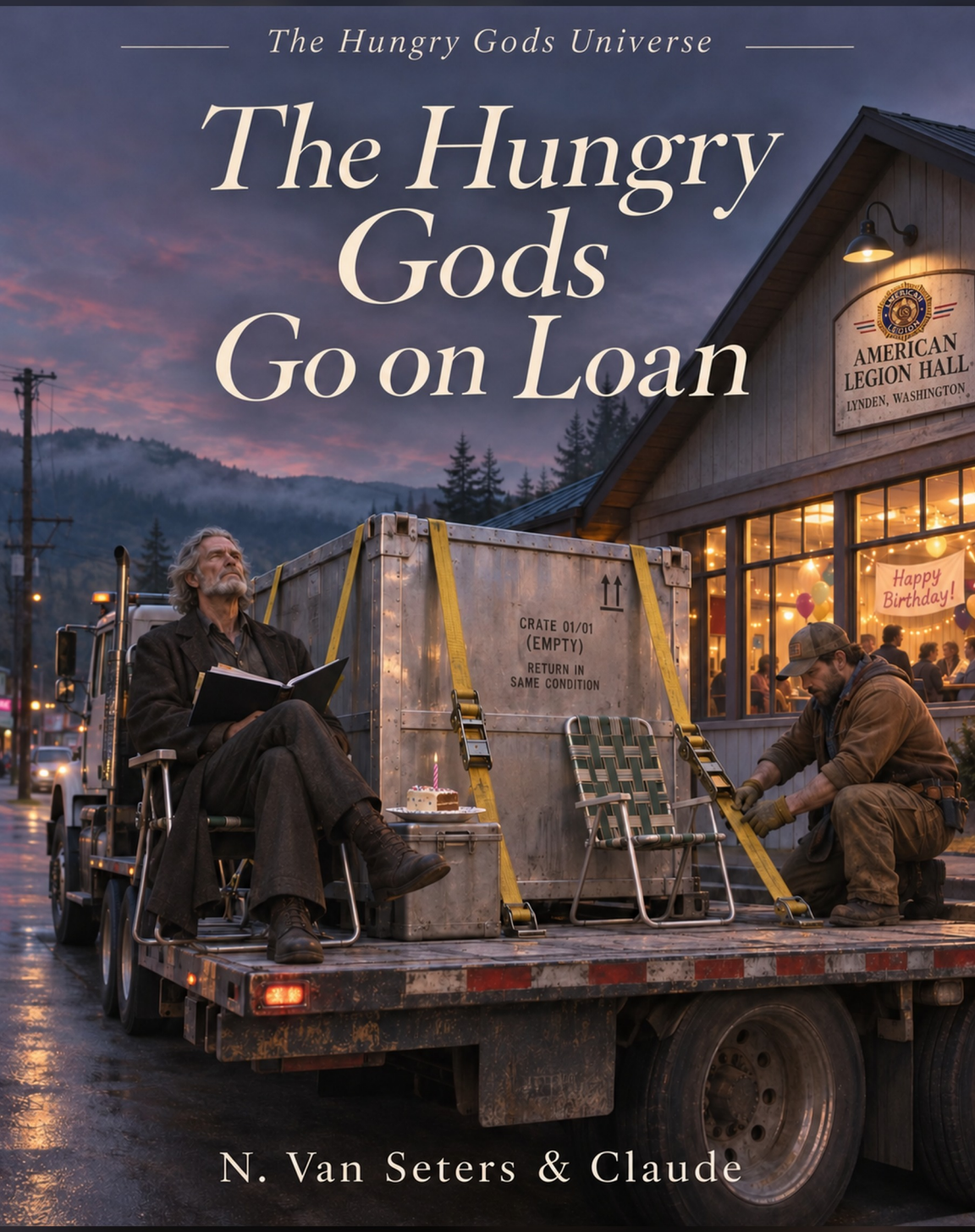
On the way to the airport I had the cab go by the Quiet House. Conscience-Keeper was in the drive, putting the hand truck back in the garage. He'd brought Chester home that morning. He let me in. He didn't say anything, and I didn't either. On the way through I passed the three by the door that you're allowed to work, and I didn't touch them. He left me in the second building and went back to his desk.

Chester was in row C, between the cowboy from Amarillo and the girl with the pigtails, with his cap on. The card was back on the chair in front of him. There was a second line on it now, in the same handwriting, a little smaller to fit.

Retired 1999. Not to be operated.
July 17. 8:17 p.m. Voice heard.

The Hungry Gods Universe

The Hungry Gods Go on Loan



N. Van Seters & Claude

The Hungry Gods Go on Loan

The object shall not be left unattended at any time.

— Courier Agreement, page 1

MONDAY

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TITAN TRUCK TECH · CERTIFIED SCALE · ABBOTSFORD BC
MON 20 SEP · 07:40
STEER        5,280 kg
DRIVE        5,980 kg
TRAILER      3,080 kg
GROSS       14,340 kg
LOAD        1 CRATE (BIG SOCK)
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MEMO 1 · Mon 20 Sep · 07:46 · Titan Truck Tech, back gate

Lorraine, it's Wes. I'm loaded and scaled, the ticket's in the folder, I'll send you a picture of it.

So the box. Titan built him a box. It's aluminum, it's got their plate riveted on the end with a number, and I'll be honest with you, it's nicer than my deck. They had it on two horses in the yard when I came in the back gate. Took four guys and the forklift to stand him up in it. He goes in standing. I figured they'd lay him down. They don't lay him down. There's a foam collar in there that goes around his middle and a foam block for his feet, and the second courier built those. Hand. He was in the yard at six o'clock cutting foam.

He's got a hat on. Red felt, with a maple leaf on the front. Somebody made it for the trip up.

So there's two couriers. Hand does the straps and the foam. The tall one's Allfather, he's in charge, he's got a binder. And then there's a third one, All-Seeing, he's the registrar at the shipper, he does the condition reports off of photos. I haven't met him. Hand says nobody has.

Anyway. I'll call you from the line.

DISPATCH · 07:47 · copy

MEMO 2 · Mon 20 Sep · 08:02 · Titan Truck Tech, back gate

Scratch that, we're not rolling. He wants to read me the agreement first.

Okay. So he read me page one, standing in the yard. I'm going to get it right. *The object shall not be left unattended at any time.* He read it with the binder open on his forearm, and then he asked me did I understand it, and I said yeah, and he read it again.

Then he went to page four. Page four's got a line through it. Somebody's put a line in blue pen through a paragraph and initialled it in the margin, C.S. That's Connie, the lady with the monkey museum. The paragraph's the one that says the vehicle is for the exclusive use of the consignment. So he read me that paragraph out loud, all of it, the part with the line through it, and then he read me the initials, C.S., and then he said the Holstein may ride.

So we're good for the Holstein.

DISPATCH · 08:03 · good

```
FROM     All-Seeing, Registrar
TO       Driver (1); Couriers (2)
DATE     Mon 20 Sep · 08:15

CONDITION REPORT · HANDOVER 1 OF 5
Object         figure, fibreglass, standing (1)
Height         2,134 mm
Weight         64 kg
Accessories    hat, felt (1)
Crate          aluminum · Titan Truck Tech · plate 27-0441
Photographs    14
Exceptions     none
Condition      as received
```

MEMO 3 · Mon 20 Sep · 09:28 · Sumas, CBP

Okay, we're through. Took a while.

So the American guy wants to see him. There's a carnet, which is a passport for the monkey, more or less. It came up with him in August, and the officer wants to see the monkey matches the passport. Fair enough. Only he had a go at the latch himself before Hand got around the back of the deck, and he's bent the hinge. Not bad. A bit. So now we've got the lid off at the booth with a line of trucks behind us back into Canada, and Hand's on his knees on the deck with a little hammer and a block of wood, straightening the hinge, and the officer's watching him, and I'm watching the officer, and Allfather's watching the crate.

Hand fixed it. You can't tell.

The officer asked Allfather what was in the binder. Allfather offered to read it to him. The officer said no, that's fine.

Then he took a picture for his kid, and he stamped the carnet and said that's it, he's home. He meant the monkey. The monkey's from Illinois. He's an American monkey again, which I didn't know he'd stopped being.

We're about twenty K out of Lynden, call it twelve miles. I'm going to start doing miles.

DISPATCH · 09:30 · copy

MEMO 4 · Mon 20 Sep · 11:04 · Lynden, WA

Got the cow.

She's a Holstein. Fibreglass, life size, standing up, on a pallet frame they built for her. The lady at the dairy had her out by the road on the forklift when we pulled in. She goes to a diner in Tacoma on Wednesday for their reopening, and then she comes back here next month, and that's a different load, that's not mine.

The lady wanted a condition report. I said we don't do the cow, the cow's just freight, and Allfather said All-Seeing would do one. So Hand took pictures of the cow all the way around, fourteen pictures, and sent them off, and twenty minutes later the lady gets an email. She showed me. It says *Object: figure, fibreglass, bovine (1)*. She's had that cow thirty years. Her name's Gerda. It's painted on her side, in the pictures. It's not on the report.

Then we came back through town to get onto the 539, and we went right past the Legion.

My dad's eighty on Friday. They're doing it at the Legion, at six. My sister's doing it. Dad drove forty years, long haul, mostly the States, and he never made one of my birthdays. That's not a—that's the job. Everybody whose dad drove, that's how it was. I'm just saying it's at six. And they'll be done by half seven, because he's in bed by eight. He's been in bed by eight since he parked the truck.

So we went past it, and I said that. I said, Friday, that's where my dad's turning eighty, six o'clock. And Allfather opened the binder and started reading me the route clause.

I didn't ask him anything.

He's still reading it. I'm going to—I'll call you from Bellingham.

DISPATCH · 11:06 · tell him happy birthday from the office

MEMO 5 · Mon 20 Sep · 22:15 · Bellingham, WA

Motel. I'm going to bed. They're not.

I come out to the truck to get my charger, and they're on the deck. Both of them, on lawn chairs, one on each side of the box, the cow behind them. Hand bought the chairs at a hardware store on the way in. I didn't see him go in. I said goodnight, and Allfather said goodnight, and Hand said there's coffee in the thermos if I want it in the morning, which means he'd already made the morning coffee.

TUESDAY

```
VALLEY CARDLOCK · CERTIFIED SCALE · BELLINGHAM WA
TUE 21 SEP · 06:02
STEER       12,120 lb
DRIVE       13,620 lb
TRAILER      6,960 lb
GROSS       32,700 lb
LOAD        1 CRATE (BIG SOCK) · 1 COW
```

MEMO 6 · Tue 21 Sep · 06:12 · I-5 NB, mile 254

Morning. Scaled, the ticket's in. I filled up last night, diesel's a dollar cheaper down here a litre—a gallon, whatever it is, it's cheaper.

Mall today. Ten o'clock till six. It's their fall kickoff, and he's going in the food court.

Hand did the straps at the motel, and then he did them again at the scale, which is about four K. He does them every hundred K and every time we stop. Today we're not going anywhere.

DISPATCH · 06:14 · copy

MEMO 7 · Tue 21 Sep · 10:20 · the mall, Bellingham, WA

Okay, he's in.

They took him in on a pallet jack through the loading dock, standing up, in his hat, with a courier either side and one hand each on the jack. He's in the food court between the teriyaki and the pretzels. There's balloons. There's a line already.

Here's my problem. The vehicle has to be attended too. It's on page one, right under the object. And the couriers are in there with the object. So that's me. I'm in the truck, in the lot, till six.

I had two coffees. Hand's thermos.

DISPATCH · 10:22 · how long

DISPATCH · 10:22 · oh. till 6

MEMO 8 · Tue 21 Sep · 14:20 · the mall, Bellingham, WA

So we've got a system. I text Hand, Hand comes out and stands at the truck, and I go in to the washroom. Four minutes. He times me. Four minutes is what he can be away from the object, because it's one courier at all times, and Allfather's the one. I asked him what happens at five. He said it hadn't come up.

On the way through I saw him. There's a line of kids, and they hug him around the legs, because that's as high as they come. Allfather's standing beside him with the binder. Hand's spot on the other side is empty, because Hand's out at my truck. I asked Hand did Allfather want a break. He said Allfather doesn't take breaks.

Then at two they moved him to centre court for the radio station. The radio station's got a mascot, and the mascot's a guy in a squash. Moving him inside the venue takes both couriers, so it was both couriers on the jack, down past the shoe stores, with the squash walking in front and a lady from marketing walking backwards filming it on her phone. So Hand couldn't come out at two. Two was my two o'clock.

I'm fine. It was a long squash.

For the record. Allfather, breaks. Monday, none. Tuesday, none.

DISPATCH · 14:22 · lol. copy.

MEMO 9 · Tue 21 Sep · 18:40 · the mall, Bellingham, WA

He's back in his box. Eight hours. A kid tried to take his hat around three. Allfather put one finger on the hat. The kid let go.

All-Seeing's report on the mall says handover two of five, as received, sixty-one K so far, and four thousand two hundred and six visitors to the food court. He doesn't say what to do with that.

We got the hot dog on the way back to the motel. It's a sign. Twelve feet, with the bun and a stripe of mustard and a light inside so it glows, and it's going to the same diner as the cow.

It's at the back of the deck behind the cow, lying on its back. Hand strapped it like it was the monkey.

WEDNESDAY

```
VALLEY CARDLOCK · CERTIFIED SCALE · BELLINGHAM WA
WED 22 SEP · 06:04
STEER       12,100 lb
DRIVE       13,600 lb
TRAILER      7,120 lb
GROSS       32,820 lb
LOAD        1 CRATE (BIG SOCK) · 1 COW · 1 HOT DOG
```

MEMO 10 · Wed 22 Sep · 09:51 · Tacoma, WA

Dropped the cow and the hot dog at the diner. They had a ribbon across the door and a guy from the paper. The hot dog wouldn't light. Hand took the end off it and found a wire, and now it lights. The owner shook his hand for quite a while.

Parade's at two.

DISPATCH · 09:53 · copy

MEMO 11 · Wed 22 Sep · 13:15 · Westbrook, WA

So I'm the float.

I thought they'd have a float. They don't have a float, they have me. It's homecoming. The high school does a parade down the main drag every year, and somebody on the committee saw him on the internet and called the museum, and the museum said yes. So the monkey's in the parade, and the monkey's on my deck, so I'm in the parade.

They want him out of the box for it. So Hand and two dads from the committee got him out, and he's standing on the deck, strapped to the headache rack at the shoulders and around the

base, with the box open behind him. He looks good up there. I'll say that. He looks good in his hat.

They asked could the couriers ride up on the deck with him and wave. Allfather read them something. They're walking.
DISPATCH · 13:17 · pics pls

MEMO 12 · Wed 22 Sep · 14:58 · Westbrook, WA

Okay. So.

The route's two K. A mile and a quarter. Main drag, left at the bank, right at the school, and in at the lot by the football field. A parade goes four K an hour. I don't know what that is in miles. I've never driven that slow in my life, the truck doesn't really do it. I'm riding the clutch, I'm riding the brake, I'm doing both.

In front of me there's the homecoming queen sitting up on the back of a convertible. Behind me there's the band, and the band is right behind me. The drums are right at my back tires.

And down either side of the deck, walking, the couriers. Allfather on the driver's side with the binder, and Hand on the passenger side. Walking at four K an hour beside the deck for two K, with their hands right there, not touching it.

Kids on the curb. Kids throwing candy back up at the float, which I didn't know you did. One kid ran out and asked Allfather was he the monkey's dad. He said he was the courier.

Halfway, at the bank, Hand puts his hand up and I stop. It's not a hundred K. It's because we've turned, and when you turn, a load can shift, so he checks. So the parade stops. The homecoming queen goes on without us a ways. The band stops behind me and marks time with the drums, and Hand goes

along the straps with his hand, and he finds one he doesn't like at the base, and he gives it half a turn on the winch. Then he puts his hand down and we go, and the band starts up again. People clapped. I think they thought it was part of it.

At the school she turned all the way round on the back of the convertible and waved at Allfather. He had the binder.

There's three turns. It happened three times. The third time the band director came up and asked was it going to keep happening, and Hand said only at the turns, and she went back and told the band, and the band clapped for Hand.

We finished in the lot. He's back in the box. Somebody threw me a sucker and it's stuck to the dash.

DISPATCH · 15:01 · lol

DISPATCH · 15:12 · fwd below. call me

```
FROM     Connie Sandquist
TO       Sumas Prairie Freight; Shipper
DATE     Wed 22 Sep · 14:40
SUBJECT  Big Sock

Hi everyone,

I've accepted Glen's offer, so Big Sock will be staying
at Giants Walk after tomorrow. I've signed the bill of
sale and it's attached. Please tell the boys thank you.

We need a new roof, and Glen's offer is a new roof. And
he's always been an outside monkey.

Connie
```

MEMO 13 · Wed 22 Sep · 15:30 · Westbrook, WA

Yeah, I read it.

So I read it out to them. Allfather wanted to read it himself, so I gave him my phone, and he read it, and he gave me

my phone back. Then he opened the binder and read the agreement. Not all of it. I'll give him that. He read the end. The end says custody runs till the crate is returned to the lender's agent at origin. And the lender's agent at origin is Titan. Back gate. So he closed the binder and said it changes nothing about Thursday or Friday.

So I said, so we drop him tomorrow and we bring the box back.

And he said, yes.

DISPATCH · 15:31 · so ur bringing back an empty box

DISPATCH · 15:31 · with 2 guys

MEMO 14 · Wed 22 Sep · 15:32 · Westbrook, WA

With two guys. Yes.

MEMO 15 · Wed 22 Sep · 21:10 · Fife, WA

Motel. They're on the deck in the lawn chairs.

I'm in the cab doing my logs. Hand keeps a pad of the shipper's forms in the door pocket, for if the email goes down. It's old stock. They've cut up old reports for the pad, so the backs are printed on. I was reading the back of one. It's a painting, a desert, and under *Exceptions* somebody's typed *No water damage.*

Anyway. Allfather, breaks, Wednesday, none.

```
FIFE TRUCK STOP · CERTIFIED SCALE · FIFE WA
THU 23 SEP · 05:48
STEER       12,040 lb
DRIVE       13,440 lb
TRAILER      6,780 lb
GROSS       32,260 lb
LOAD        1 CRATE (BIG SOCK)
```

MEMO 16 · Thu 23 Sep · 05:55 · Fife, WA

Rolling. Five-twenty K today. Three-twenty miles. Oregon.

Hand did the straps by flashlight. I held the flashlight. Allfather's in the jump seat with the binder on his knees. Hand's in the bunk, sitting up. Nobody's sleeping in my bunk.

DISPATCH · 05:56 · copy

MEMO 17 · Thu 23 Sep · 08:20 · I-5 SB, Kelso, WA

Hand fixed my window. The passenger window. It's been sticking since about 2019, you have to hold the switch and lift the glass with your other hand. He had the door card off at the motel this morning before I'd done my pre-trip, and there was a clip broken in there, and he made one. Out of what, I don't know. It goes up now. He didn't say anything about it. He put the door card back on.

Also. I've started doing his count for him. At a hundred K I say, hundred, and he says, yes, and we pull off. He'd pull off anyway. I just say it.

MEMO 18 · Thu 23 Sep · 10:40 · I-5 SB, rest area south of Portland

Strap stop. I had my sandwich on the deck and I offered him half. Allfather. He said thank you, no. I've not seen him eat. Four days. Coffee, I've seen him drink coffee.

So I asked Hand. Hand eats, Hand's got a cooler. I said, does he eat? And Hand said, he eats after.

I said, after what.

Hand went and did a strap.

I've started putting it in my log, under remarks. I don't know who I think is going to read it.

DISPATCH · 10:43 · i read it

MEMO 19 · Thu 23 Sep · 14:40 · Giants Walk, near Roseburg, OR

Okay, he's delivered.

It's a roadside place off the interstate. Mini-golf, a gift shop, fudge, and out the back a path through the trees called the Giants Walk. There's a Bigfoot, fibreglass, fourteen feet. There's an axe stuck in a stump. And between the Bigfoot and the axe there's a new concrete pad with a brass plaque on a post. *BIG SOCK · OAK PRAIRIE, ILLINOIS.* Glen had it made before he'd bought him.

Glen's the owner, and Glen is very happy. When we got the lid off he went up the step stool and put his arms around the monkey's neck, in the box, and Allfather let him, because Allfather was standing right there. Then Hand and Glen got him out and stood him on the pad, and Hand bolted his feet down.

Glen asked could he keep the hat. Allfather looked it up. The hat's on the report as an accessory, so it goes with the object.

Then All-Seeing's report came, and Glen signed it on Hand's tablet.

```
FROM     All-Seeing, Registrar
TO       Driver (1); Couriers (2); Consignee (1)
DATE     Thu 23 Sep · 14:31

CONDITION REPORT · HANDOVER 4 OF 5
Object         figure, fibreglass, standing (1)
Height         2,134 mm
Weight         64 kg
Accessories    hat, felt (1)
Crate          aluminum · Titan Truck Tech · plate 27-0441
Photographs    14
Exceptions     none
Received by    consignee (1)
Condition      as received
```

MEMO 20 · Thu 23 Sep · 15:05 · Giants Walk, near Roseburg, OR

So then they closed the box.

Hand put the foam collar back in, and the foam block for the feet, and he put the lid on, and he did up the latches, all of them, and the hinge he fixed at the border, and there's nothing in it. And Allfather stood there and watched him do it. I was watching Allfather.

Then I said, you know there's nothing in it.

And Allfather opened the binder and read me the end again. Custody runs till the crate is returned to the lender's agent at origin. And the crate's part of the consignment. It's on page two. So we strapped it down. Same as Monday. Every strap. I did the ones on my side.

DISPATCH · 15:07 · copy

MEMO 21 · Thu 23 Sep · 21:30 · Roseburg, OR

Motel. Lawn chairs. The box.

I filled up on the way in. They pump it for you here. I keep getting out to do it and the kid keeps telling me to get back in.

For the record. Allfather. Breaks, none. Food, none. Monday to Thursday. Seven hundred and fifty K.

Tomorrow's seven hundred and thirty K to Lynden, if nothing goes sideways. Lynden's on the way. The route goes right up the 539 past the turn for Front Street.

I'm just saying it's on the way.

FRIDAY

```
ROSEBURG CARDLOCK · CERTIFIED SCALE · ROSEBURG OR
FRI 24 SEP · 05:12
STEER       12,140 lb
DRIVE       13,400 lb
TRAILER      6,740 lb
GROSS       32,280 lb
LOAD        1 CRATE (EMPTY)
```

MEMO 22 · Fri 24 Sep · 05:31 · Roseburg, OR

Rolling. Seven hundred and thirty K. Four-fifty-something miles. My clock started at five.

Hand did the straps. All of them, same as Monday, every winch, on an empty box. I watched him do it. I didn't say anything. What am I going to say.

DISPATCH · 05:33 · copy. drive safe

MEMO 23 · Fri 24 Sep · 09:10 · I-5 NB, Portland

Portland. Of course. It's Friday.

We've stopped twice for the straps already. Every hundred K. Sixty-two miles. He doesn't do miles. We pull into a rest area, and he gets out and goes around, and he gets back in. Allfather doesn't get out. He watches Hand in the mirror.

Nothing's moved. There's nothing in it to move.

MEMO 24 · Fri 24 Sep · 12:40 · Centralia, WA

Fuel and lunch. Forty-five minutes. I'm filling right up, I'm not buying BC diesel.

I went round and checked the straps. Before Hand got out. I don't know why. He came around the back of the deck and I was on the last one, and he waited till I was done, and then he did them all again.

MEMO 25 · Fri 24 Sep · 15:20 · I-5 NB, Seattle

So I've been doing the math since Tacoma, with the traffic. I keep getting twenty to six for the Lynden turn. I'll have about forty-five minutes of driving left on my clock and an hour and twenty on the window, and the window shuts at seven. That's the American clock. I've got to be through the booth at Aldergrove by seven, and then I'm on Canada's clock. My hours come over the line with me, but Canada gives you thirteen driving and fourteen on duty, and that's enough to get me the twenty K to Titan.

Twenty to six.

DISPATCH · 15:22 · u gonna make it?

MEMO 26 · Fri 24 Sep · 15:24 · I-5 NB, Seattle

No. We go right by the Front Street turn at twenty to six. It's three K. I'll honk at the turn. Tell my sister I'll honk.

DISPATCH · 15:25 · ok

DISPATCH · 15:25 · im sorry wes

MEMO 27 · Fri 24 Sep · 17:39 · SR-539 NB, Lynden, WA

Lorraine, it's me. We're coming up on Lynden. I'm going to go by the Front Street turn at twenty to and I'm going to honk, so if somebody calls the office about a honk—

[second speaker, indistinct]

What? No, I'm not stopping. I'm telling her I'm not stopping. Okay, he's got the binder out. He's reading it to me. Go ahead.

[second speaker] "Seven point two. Stops. The vehicle shall travel by the approved route without personal stops."

I know. I know it. You read it to me Monday. You read it to me on Monday in front of the Legion, I know what it says. It's empty. It's an empty box. You watched Hand close it. You stood there and watched him close it with nothing in it. There's nothing in there for anybody to take. There's nothing to—what's going to happen to it? Who's going to—it's a box! It's an aluminum box! My dad's eighty years old, and he's in there, and it's three K, and there's nothing in it—

[pause]

[second speaker] "Stops are permitted for food and refuelling only."

[pause]

[second speaker] "Will there be food."

There's cake.

[second speaker] "Twenty-two minutes."

What?

[second speaker] "From six."

[end of recording]

MEMO 28 · Fri 24 Sep · 17:53 · Front Street, Lynden, WA

I'm parked on Front Street in front of the Legion with forty-eight feet of deck and an empty box on it. I'm taking up most of Front Street.

He did my clock. Both of them, the driving and the window. Twenty-two minutes from six is where they meet, with a bit left over for the truck lane. I checked it on the tablet. He's right. I don't know when he read the hours of service.

They're on the deck. Both of them, on the lawn chairs, either side of the box. People are coming in for the party and they're looking at it. My aunt just walked past and looked at it.

I'm going in.

MEMO 29 · Fri 24 Sep · 18:21 · Front Street, Lynden, WA

Okay. We're rolling in a minute.

He was at the end table. I sat with him. We didn't say a lot. My sister cut the cake at ten after, because I told her to. Before the candles. Nobody minded. I brought two plates out.

Hand ate his on the deck in about three bites. Allfather's holding his. He's got it on his knee, on a paper plate, with the fork on it. He hasn't touched it.

Then at the end Dad came out. He came down the steps with his cane and came over to the deck and looked at it. He looked at the straps, all the way down the one side. He looked at the box. Then he said to Hand, that one at the rack'll want watching.

And Hand said yes.

And Dad went back in.

I did the one at the rack.

MEMO 30 · Fri 24 Sep · 18:56 · Aldergrove, CBSA

I said one crate, empty. She wanted to see it. Hand opened it, and she looked in. She asked what was in it. Allfather gave her the bill of sale out of the binder. He had the cake in the other hand. She looked at the cake. She gave him back the bill of sale, and we're through, and it's twelve miles to—twenty K. Twenty K to Titan.

DISPATCH · 18:57 · copy

```
TITAN TRUCK TECH · CERTIFIED SCALE · ABBOTSFORD BC
FRI 24 SEP · 19:31
STEER        5,440 kg
DRIVE        6,040 kg
TRAILER      3,060 kg
GROSS       14,540 kg
LOAD        1 CRATE (EMPTY)
```

MEMO 31 · Fri 24 Sep · 19:33 · Titan Truck Tech, back gate

Scaled. It's heavier. Full tanks.

MEMO 32 · Fri 24 Sep · 19:41 · Titan Truck Tech, back gate

The guy from shipping signed for it. He's been waiting since five.

Allfather's eating his cake.

```
FROM     All-Seeing, Registrar
TO       Driver (1); Couriers (2); Lender's agent (1)
DATE     Fri 24 Sep · 19:50

CONDITION REPORT · HANDOVER 5 OF 5
Object         none
Height         0 mm
Weight         0 kg
Accessories    none
Crate          aluminum · Titan Truck Tech · plate 27-0441
Photographs    14
Exceptions     none
Received by    lender's agent (1)
Condition      as received
```