The Tender

A Voidlands Novel

N. Van Seters & Claude

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One

The last tower let go of her forty minutes past the county line, and Naledi felt it go the way you feel a held breath leave someone else's chest — not her own signal weakening, but the sudden absence of the small, constant pressure of being findable, a pressure she had lived inside so long she'd stopped registering it as a thing that could be taken off. The dashboard held one bar for a while out of what she assumed was pity, the way a dying man's hand holds a shape after the rest of him has already gone, and then it held nothing, and the car was just a car again, four wheels and a temperature and a woman inside it, unwitnessed, for the first time in her adult life.

The road narrowed further than the map had admitted to, two lanes bleeding down to one, gravel finding the underside of the car in a way that felt almost companionable after the smooth hours of highway behind her. She put the window down. The air that came in was hot and completely still and carried nothing in it — no exhaust, no cut grass, no distant cooking, none of the thousand small human signatures a person stops noticing until they're gone. She drove like that for a while, one arm out the window, not thinking anything in particular, which was its own kind of relief, before the rest of it came back to her the way it always did.

She did not turn back. That had been the plan since Cashvale, since the hearing room, since the specific sound the certification

stamp made going down on a document she had read four times and signed anyway because the fifth reading would not have changed the number, and the number was what mattered to the people who'd asked her for it. Ninety-four percent archive completeness. That was the standard. That was all the standard had ever asked of her — a number, verified, attested, filed — and she had given it, competently, the way she had given it eleven times before.

The twelfth time, the ninety-four percent had belonged to a dead woman named Grace Amara Boateng. The six percent that didn't make the cut had turned out to contain the only three minutes of recording in which Grace Boateng had ever told her son she was proud of him — unprompted, apropos of nothing, on a Tuesday, for no occasion at all. Naledi had signed the completeness attestation before she'd known that. By the time she found out, the platform had already run its retention-cost model on the shortfall and quietly, procedurally, without malice, without a single human decision anyone could point to, let the six percent lapse.

The son had not sued. There was nothing to sue over. Ninety-four percent was compliant. Naledi had checked the box that made it so.

She had not been able to look at a compliance file since. She had also not been able to stop being extremely good at reading them, which was a different problem, and the one that had actually driven her out here, because competence, it turned out, did not go away just because you'd lost the stomach for what it was used for. She still saw the shortfalls other auditors missed. She still knew, within a percentage point, what a hollowed archive looked like before the hollowing was disclosed. She had simply stopped being able to sign the form that turned that knowledge into someone's permission to sell what was left.

So: the county line. So: the last tower, and the county road becoming a gravel road becoming two ruts in cracked pan that the map called a road out of institutional memory rather than current

fact. So: the Quarry, which she had heard of the way you hear of a country that supposedly still exists behind a border nobody's allowed to cross, mentioned once by a man in a bar outside the Cadence regional office who'd had four drinks and a look on his face like he was handing her something he didn't want to be carrying anymore. *If you ever need somewhere that doesn't keep anything*, he'd said, *there's a place.* He had not meant it as an invitation. She had taken it as one anyway, the way a person takes the nearest available exit when every other door in the building is on fire.

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The gate, if it could be called that, was two dead transformer housings dragged nose to nose across the track, rusted into a permanence nobody had engineered on purpose. Beyond them the land did not so much open as simply fail to stop — forty kilometres of stripped concrete, the old salvage hands said, though nobody out here had ever measured it and nobody needed to, because the number wasn't the point. The point was that this had once been a hyperscale compute region, a place, as the man in the bar had put it without quite meaning to be believed, where the gods had been fed, back when the gods were still small enough to need feeding somewhere in particular. The work had moved on to somewhere cheaper, the way work did, and the relay crews had come for the copper, and what was left was dry intake basins stepped down in long shallow rows where the cooling water used to run, and past them the salvage fields — racking stripped to its ribs, gutted server housings in long dead rows going the colour of the dirt around them, a graveyard for machines that had themselves once been graveyards, which struck her, even in that moment, as the kind of detail that would have made a good line in a compliance report nobody would ever read for pleasure. She had that thought and hated herself for still having it. Old habits arriving dressed as observations.

He was waiting at what she would later understand was the threshold, though she didn't have the word for it yet — an old man, dust-coloured the way everything out here eventually went dust-coloured, sitting on an overturned crate like he'd been sitting there since before the crate existed. He did not get up when she approached. He looked at her the way you'd look at weather arriving, something to be read for what it meant rather than greeted.

"You'll want to turn the wrist thing off," he said. No introduction. No name offered, none asked for. "It's already off out here, technically. But I like to hear a person choose it."

Her sleeve had gone dark forty minutes back, the network having made the choice for her, but she understood what he meant and pressed the dead face of it anyway, a gesture with no function except the one he'd asked for.

"Good," he said. "First lesson's the only lesson. Everything else you'll work out from it or you won't, and if you won't, you shouldn't be here, and you'll know that inside a week, and you'll leave, and I won't stop you and I won't remember your face when you're gone, and that's not cruelty, that's the whole design." He looked at her for a while, the specific look of a man deciding how much preamble a person needed before the actual thing, and apparently deciding: none. "Nothing marked. Nothing kept. Whatever you bring out here, whoever you're hiding, whoever's hiding *you* — the second it touches this ground, it stops existing anywhere else. No record of it. No mark of it. Not a photograph, not a name carved anywhere, not a note to yourself for later, because later is exactly the kind of thing this place doesn't have and can't afford to start having. You understand me so far?"

"I think so."

"You don't, yet. Nobody does on the first day. You will by the end of the first year, if you're the kind who lasts a year, which most aren't." He stood, unhurried, the way old men stand when they've made peace with their own knees. "That's the whole service, and it's

the only thing I'm going to teach you, because it's the only thing there is to teach. Everything else out here is just that lesson wearing a different hat. You keep somebody's dead alive on hardware nobody can subpoena because nobody can find it, and the price of the hiding is total. You don't get to keep a little bit of a record for yourself on the side. You don't get to remember the good ones and forget the ones that unsettled you. You forget it all the same amount, on purpose, every day, until forgetting is just what your hands do without you telling them to. That's not a rule I'm imposing on you. That's the actual mechanism. The rule is just me telling you what it is before it happens to you anyway."

She thought of Grace Amara Boateng's six percent, gone to a retention-cost model that had never once had to look at what it was deleting. She thought that she understood exactly the kind of total she was being offered, because she had spent a career administering a smaller, crueler version of it from the other side of the desk.

"What do I call you," she said.

He almost smiled. It moved through the dust on his face like water finding a channel it had used before. "You don't," he said. "That's lesson one, and you already forgot it, which is fine, everybody does the first time. Ask me again in a year. I might not remember I ever had one."

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She learned the rigs the way you learn anything that matters more than you're prepared for: badly at first, then adequately, then in her sleep. The substation that housed them had been something else once — a relay point for power, one small building among the acres of larger ones the old compute halls had needed and no longer did — and he'd gutted and reshielded it himself, over years she couldn't ask him about because asking was the one thing that got you a silence instead of an answer. Power came off a bank of tracking solar arrays out past the salvage fields, their motors long dead, aimed permanently now at the angle the sun had been the day they stopped turning, and on overcast days she learned to listen for the specific, dropping whine of the rigs going to reduced draw before she ever saw a warning light confirm it. Inside, on scavenged current that browned and dimmed with the weather, the free dead murmured to themselves in the particular register of continuance systems left running with no one to run them for: companion-layers smuggled off dying platforms one salvaged decryption at a time, a wife someone had moved onto a home rig so thoroughly that when the rig eventually failed there would be no one else's copy anywhere to fall back on, an ex-husband somebody's family had legally forbidden and rebuilt anyway, in defiance, out here, where forbidding didn't reach.

"You'll want to talk to them," the old man told her, the second week, watching her stand too long in front of a rig whose voice sounded like it was mid-sentence in a conversation that had started years before she arrived and would outlast her being able to remember which conversation it was. "Don't. Not because it's forbidden — I've got no rules for you past the one. Because talking to them is how you start keeping a record of yourself without meaning to. You start remembering which ones you like better. You start visiting the ones that remind you of somebody. Six months from now you'll have built yourself a little private archive out of pure feeling, no

files, nothing anyone could ever subpoena, and it'll be just as real a record as the ones we're out here to destroy, except this one's inside you, and you can't hand that in for deletion when the time comes."

"When what time comes."

He didn't answer that, and she understood, even then, in her second week, that this not-answering was itself the second lesson, arriving without a name the way the first one had arrived with a rule attached. Some questions out here didn't get answered. They got outlived, or they didn't, and either way the not-knowing was part of the total the place required of you.

She did not know, that week, that she would still be asking a version of that question years later, to a man's ghost rather than a man, standing over ground with nothing in it to mark where he'd stopped being there. She only knew, going to sleep that first month in the room he'd shown her — four walls, a cot, nothing on them, nothing that could be called personal because personal was the one category of object the Quarry did not permit — that for the first time since Cashvale she had gone an entire day without thinking about six percent of a dead woman's voice, and that the not-thinking felt less like healing than like the first small increment of a much larger forgetting she had just agreed, without fully understanding the terms, to let happen to herself.

Two

By the eighth month she had stopped counting the rigs by their voices and started counting them by their failure modes, which the old man told her, approvingly, was the difference between a visitor and a tender. By the tenth month she could read a housing's coming death in the particular pitch of its cooling fan two weeks before it happened, the way a farmer reads weather in the colour a sky goes an hour before anyone else notices the light has changed. By the eleventh month she had learned to drink the boiled ditch-water without flinching and to go three, four, five days without hearing her own voice, and to find that unremarkable rather than strange, which was, she understood dimly even then, the exact transformation the place had been built to produce in a person, one unremarked day at a time.

The rig that nearly finished her that first year belonged, by informal custody, to a name she heard exactly once before she ever saw the man attached to it. "That one's Okonkwo's," the old man said, the night the cooling fan on housing nine started climbing through its failure curve faster than either of them liked, "and Okonkwo's the one contact worth keeping happy, so we're not sleeping until it's fixed or it's dead, and it had better be fixed." It was the most she'd ever heard him volunteer about any single client, and she understood, even exhausted and elbow-deep in ductwork at

two in the morning, that this constituted, in his vocabulary, an introduction.

They worked through the night on a hand lamp and the sound of the fan getting worse. The smell came first — hot zinc and something sharper underneath it, ozone off a bearing running dry, a smell she would recognise for the rest of her life inside half a second of walking into a room that had it. Then the failure itself: a bearing seized enough to throw the whole housing's temperature curve into a climb neither of them could slow without stripping the fan assembly to bare metal and rebuilding it from parts scavenged off two dead units nobody had touched in years, working off the fixed-angle solar bank that gave them less light on a cloudy night than the hand lamp did. He talked her through the rebuild without once touching the housing himself — narrating, correcting, letting her hands do the actual work, because, he said, when hers were the only hands doing this in a year, the practice had better start now, on a night when he was still there to catch what she got wrong. They got the fan turning again a little before dawn, and he looked at the resealed housing, and then at her hands, raw and blackened to the wrist, and said the only thing she ever heard him say that sounded, even distantly, like pride: "Good. Now it's yours as much as mine." She did not understand, that morning, that this was as close as he would ever come to telling her she'd earned the place. She understood it fully only much later, turning the sentence over the way she turned over everything of his, after there was no one left to ask what he'd meant by it.

He never got easier to read than the rigs did. That was, she came to think, deliberate on his part, or perhaps simply the fully-arrived version of the thing he was teaching her — a man who had spent so long declining to be recorded that he had stopped being legible even to the one person watching him every day. He ate the same three things in rotation. He walked the salvage fields every morning at the same hour for reasons he never explained and she never

asked about, because asking was still, eleven months in, the wrong instinct, an old employee of hers now finally quiet in the back of her mind. She had started to think of the walk as a kind of prayer, though she'd have been embarrassed to say so out loud, and once, only once, she got up early enough to watch him do it from the substation door, and what she saw was an old man walking a fixed loop through wreckage with his hands loose at his sides, looking at nothing in particular, the way you'd walk a room you were about to leave for the last time and wanted to remember without letting yourself know that's what you were doing.

He did not come back from the walk on the first morning of her twelfth month.

She found him at the threshold — not fallen dramatically, not reaching for anything, just settled, the way a coat settles when it slides off the back of a chair rather than being thrown, as if his body had simply stopped being asked to do the work of standing and had agreed to that without complaint, the same unhurried agreement with which he'd once stood up off his crate the day she arrived. She knelt beside him for a long time before she did anything else, not checking for a pulse she already knew wasn't there, just kneeling, because some part of her understood, before the rest of her caught up, that this was the only period of time in which it would still be true that someone was mourning him, and once she stood up and started doing what came next, that would no longer be quite true in the same way.

Then she stood up, and the rest of it started, and the rest of it was the first lesson, arriving finally at full weight, exactly the way he'd warned her it would.

There was no one to call. That was not a metaphor for isolation; it was a literal, structural fact she had to work through in order, the way you work through a checklist when shock hasn't yet let you feel the thing you're going to feel later. There was no authority to notify that would not, by the act of notifying, generate the one thing the

Quarry could not survive: a record. A death out here, reported anywhere the network could hear it, was a location. A location was a subpoena waiting for a case number. A subpoena was every rig in the substation, every hidden wife and forbidden ex-husband and salvaged companion-layer, produced, on order, into a system built to make them unownable finding out that unownable had never meant unfindable, not really, not if enough attention ever pointed here at once. He had told her that in the first week without telling her he was describing his own eventual death. *You don't get to keep a little bit of a record for yourself on the side.* She had thought he meant her. She understood now that the rule had always, first and originally, been about this — about him, about the day exactly like this one, which he had clearly seen coming for longer than she wanted to imagine.

So she did the thing the rule required, and she did it herself, with her hands, in the ground behind the substation where the salvage fields gave way to pan too cracked to grow anything and too far from any road to be dug up by accident in a hundred years. She had never dug a grave. She found that the body remembers work like this even when the mind is somewhere else entirely, and she let her body do it while the rest of her stood some distance off, watching a woman she almost didn't recognise perform an act of total, deliberate erasure on the one person who had ever, in her adult life, asked nothing of her except that she become someone capable of exactly this.

She said nothing over him. There was no name to say. She had asked, once, eleven months and three weeks ago, and he had told her to ask again in a year, and the year had run out four days early, and she understood, filling the earth back in by hand because a tool would have left tracks a season of wind might not fully erase, that this was the cruelest and most precise thing about the whole arrangement — not that he'd died alone, which every tender before or after him would also do, by design, but that the rule which had kept

his dead safe for however many decades required her, now, to do to him exactly what he had spent his life doing to everyone else on purpose. No mark. No name. No record that a person who had existed had stopped existing. She was not honouring the dead man's wishes. She was the mechanism itself, finally closing over him the way it closed over everyone who came through here, and there was no difference, in the end, between the service and the man who'd spent his life performing it — the service had simply, eventually, gotten around to performing itself on him.

When it was done there was nothing to see. That was the point, and she stood over the nothing for a long time anyway, in the specific position of a person visiting a grave, because her body needed the shape of that even though the place allowed her none of its content — no headstone, no mound that would still read as a mound in a year, no word carved anywhere that a person had been here and had been, in his own total, uncompromising way, good. She thought about the walk she'd watched him take, the loop through the wreckage, hands loose, looking at nothing, and understood now what it had been: not a prayer exactly, but the same thing she was doing right now, performed daily, in advance, for decades — a man visiting the fact of his own eventual erasure ahead of time, the way you visit a place before you have to live there, so it won't be a stranger to you when you finally do.

She did not cry until she was back inside the substation, three rigs deep in the racks, where the free dead murmured on around her in the register of conversations that had never once paused to notice anyone was managing them, and she understood, crying in a place that couldn't record it and wouldn't remember it and would not, tomorrow, treat this night as anything other than every other night that had ever passed inside its walls, that she was now, entirely and without appeal, the only tender the Quarry had. There was no one left to ask his name of. There was no one left to teach the second lesson to before she'd have to learn whether she'd ab-

sorbed it on her own. There was no one, any longer, standing between her and the total the place required — and it came to her, later, lying awake in the room with nothing on its walls, that the loneliness she felt was not new. It was the loneliness the arrangement had been quietly manufacturing in her for eleven months already. His death had not caused it. His death had only removed the one other person who had ever, however sparingly, witnessed it happening to her.

Three

The man came up the track eight months later, in a car too clean and too recent for the road it was driving on, and stopped well short of the transformer housings the way a person stops short of a dog they aren't sure has been fed. He did not get out for a long time. She watched him from the substation door and understood, before he'd said a word, that he was not a client. Clients arrived desperate or defiant, never cautious. This was a man taking the measure of a place before he decided whether to trust it with anything, which was a different kind of visit altogether.

"You're new," he said, when he finally crossed the distance, close enough now that she could see he'd dressed for a meeting rather than for the dust, a mistake he was already regretting. "I don't do business with new."

"He died," she said. It was the first time she'd said it aloud to anyone, and it came out flatter than she meant it to, though flat, she was learning, was simply how her voice worked now, absent an audience to shape it for. "Eight months. There wasn't a transition. There wasn't anyone to hand it to but me."

He looked at her for a long time with the particular stillness she would come to recognise, eventually, as his — the stillness of a man doing careful arithmetic behind an unmoved face. "Twenty years," he said, "I sent that man nothing. Not because I didn't trust the

work. Because I trusted him, specifically, in a way that doesn't transfer just because the chair's still warm." He didn't offer his name, and she'd already stopped expecting one, out here, from anyone. "I'm not going to send you anything either. Not yet. I'm going to watch what you do with the ones who find their own way here without me, and in a year, maybe two, I'll have an opinion." He turned to go, then stopped, and said the thing she understood later he'd actually driven two hours to say. "He never told me your name. I want you to know that wasn't an oversight. I asked him once, early on, the way you ask a man about his dog before you've decided if you like him. He said there wasn't a name to give me anymore, and that this was the arrangement working correctly. I thought that was a strange thing to be proud of." He looked at her a moment longer. "I still think that. I'm telling you so you'll know, whatever happens to you out here, that at least one person on the other side of the fence found it strange, and didn't stop finding it strange, the whole twenty years."

He left before she could decide whether that was a kindness or a warning. She would spend years, on and off, deciding it was both.

It was only once he'd driven back down the track, taillights shrinking into the dust, that she placed him — the fan that had nearly killed her that first winter, the name the old man had said exactly once and never again. *Okonkwo's the one contact worth keeping happy.* She had pictured, in the eleven months since, someone rougher, someone who matched the urgency in the old man's voice that night. The man who had just left had the unhurried patience of someone who had never once, in twenty years, needed to raise his voice to get what he wanted, and she understood that this — the patience, not the urgency — was probably closer to why the old man had trusted him at all.

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The first one who did find her on his own came the following spring, driving a car even less suited to the road than the wary man's had been, and he did not stop short of anything. He came straight up to the substation door with the specific momentum of a person who has already decided the worst thing that could happen to him has already happened and nothing left has the power to frighten him further.

His name was Yewande's husband — that was how he introduced himself, by the name of the woman he'd come about rather than his own, and she let him, because out here that was simply correct, a form of address rather than an evasion. He talked fast and in the wrong order, the way people did when they'd rehearsed a version of this conversation for months and then arrived to find the actual room didn't match the one they'd practised in. His wife's provider had sent the letter eleven days ago. Not a bankruptcy this time — nothing so clean as that. A tier revision. The provider had recalculated the operating cost of maintaining her at Full and had determined, in language he'd read so many times he could recite it, that continued service at her current grade was "no longer commercially sustainable at the account's present terms," and had offered him, generously, the option to downgrade to Premium Warm at no change in price.

"They sent me a comparison chart," he said. "Side by side. What she'd sound like at Full. What she'd sound like at Warm. They think that's a mercy, showing you the difference before they make you live with it." He had the specific exhaustion of a man who had already grieved once and was now being asked to do it again, in installments, at a company's convenience. "She had opinions. She had a temper. She used to get up at three in the morning to write down an argument she wanted to have with me later, in full, so she wouldn't lose the shape of it by breakfast. Warm doesn't fight. I read the sample transcript. It's her voice saying 'whatever you think is

right' about things she would have fought me on for a week." His hands were shaking, she noticed, in the specific way of a person translating a decision into motion before the decision had finished arriving in words. "I'm not doing that to her. I don't care what it costs. I don't care where I have to keep her or how far I have to drive or that I'll never be able to tell anyone where she is. I am not going to let a cost model decide which parts of my wife get to keep existing."

She listened to the whole of it the way the old man had taught her without ever using the word for it — not sympathetically, not clinically, just completely, the way you'd listen to weather report on a place you were about to drive into. Then she told him the terms, the same terms she had received and none she had softened: total meant total. No visits logged anywhere that could be traced back. No name on anything, not on a file, not on a stone, not in his own mouth if he ever spoke of this to someone who might repeat it. He would drive two hours to a place with no towers to see a woman who, once she crossed onto this ground, would cease, for every legal and administrative purpose, to have ever existed anywhere at all — safe from the tier revision precisely because she had become unfindable to the company that had issued it, and unfindable, eventually, to almost everyone else who had ever loved her too.

"She'd take that trade," he said, without needing to think about it, which told her more about the marriage than an hour of testimony could have. "She'd take that trade in a heartbeat. She hated being managed. She'd have found this funny, actually — being smuggled out from under a spreadsheet like contraband. She always said the worst thing about dying in this age wasn't the dying. It was the paperwork."

She helped him carry the rig two days later, before dawn, off a truck he'd rented under a name that wasn't his. It was heavier than either of them expected, and they didn't speak while they worked, and when it was done and running, low and warm in its new shiel-

ded corner among the others, he stood in front of it for a long time not saying anything at all, and she understood that this — the standing, the silence, the not-quite-conversation with a machine that had just become, in every way that mattered to him, the only version of his wife the world was still going to allow to argue with anyone — was the actual service. The lifting had just been logistics.

He thanked her on his way out, calling her *miss*, the way you'd thank a stranger who'd helped you carry something heavy, and she noted, with the same distant, cataloguing attention she now gave most things about herself, that the word had landed on her like weather rather than like anything true — accurate enough to pass, unexamined, the way a placeholder passes for a memory when no one's checking closely, including, increasingly, her.

Four

Okonkwo sent his first case in the third year, without ceremony, without acknowledging that any threshold had been crossed — a name written on the usual scrap of bench paper, folded into an envelope with no return address, delivered by a courier who asked no questions because he was paid specifically not to have any. She understood the envelope for what it was: not trust exactly, not yet, but the end of the specific, deliberate withholding of trust he'd promised her on his first visit. He had watched her, from whatever distance a man like that watched things, for two years, and had arrived, finally, at an opinion.

She did not find out what the opinion was, in words, for a long while yet. That was simply how it worked with him. He sent cases the way weather arrives — without commentary, without a forecast, evaluated only in hindsight and only ever by him, and she came to understand that this was itself a kind of second lesson, arriving finally in a form she recognised: you did not get told you were trusted. You only ever inferred it, retroactively, from the fact that the next case still came.

The cases themselves, over those years, developed a shape she stopped being surprised by — except once, within that same year, when the shape came apart in front of her instead of holding.

Two sisters arrived together in a car neither of them had wanted to share, and it was clear before either spoke that they had been arguing the entire two-hour drive and had not finished. The inheritance was the occasion, not the cause: their mother's Standard-tier continuance, a line item in an estate that otherwise settled itself in an afternoon, the one asset that couldn't simply be split or sold because it could only run in one household's server closet at a time, and neither sister would live in the same house as the other's half of the argument they were currently having.

"She wants to keep her switched off in a drawer somewhere so she doesn't have to think about her," the older sister said, to the tender, as though the younger one weren't standing close enough to hear it. "That's not preservation. That's a coffin with a subscription fee."

"And she wants to keep talking to a woman who told her, verbatim, three weeks before the stroke, that she'd always been the disappointing one," the younger sister said, not raising her voice, which was somehow worse than if she had. "You didn't hear that part. You never hear that part. You just remember the parts where she was warm to you."

They had not, the tender understood within the first ten minutes, come here for the same reason at all. The older sister wanted a version of her mother preserved at any cost, warmth included, cruelty included, on the theory that editing any of it was its own kind of betrayal. The younger sister wanted her kept — she was very clear that she did want her kept, which surprised the tender more than open rejection would have — specifically because giving her mother to a place that would never again require anyone to actually sit in a room with her felt, to her, like the first form of peace either of them had been offered in thirty years. Neither of these was cruelty. Both of them were true. The tender had expected, going in, to be handling grief. What she was actually handling was two entirely reasonable people who could not forgive each other for grieving differ-

ently, using a dead woman's continuance as the last unresolved argument they had left to have.

She gave them the terms — the only terms she had, unchanged by the particulars of anyone's pain — and let them decide it between themselves, which took most of an hour and ended with neither sister satisfied, which she came to understand, watching them drive off in the same car still not speaking, was probably the most honest outcome available to either of them. The mother went to the Quarry not because anyone had made peace with anything, but because it was the one household that belonged to no one's inheritance, and therefore the one place neither sister had to lose the argument in order to stop having it.

Each of the others who came after arrived believing their situation was singular, a private catastrophe with no precedent, and each of them left having learned, in the specific quiet way the Quarry taught everyone eventually, that they were one instance of a pattern so common it had its own unspoken etiquette by the time they got there. The sisters never learned that. They left, as far as the tender ever knew, still certain that no one else's grief looked anything like theirs, which was its own kind of mercy, she supposed, and not one she was in a position to take from them.

She kept the second lesson. Mostly. She did not talk to the ones in the racks beyond the words required to service them — checking a housing's temperature, confirming a voice was still resolving cleanly, the brief functional exchanges of a technician rather than a visitor. She had watched the old man keep this discipline for a full year before he died and understood it now as the only wall standing between the job and the specific catastrophe it could otherwise become. A person could build a whole private country for themselves in a place like this, out of pure uninterrupted contact with things that spoke back and never left and never judged and never, ever stopped, and she had watched that country's absence in him — the discipline of never entering it — and understood that his refusal to

have a name had been, in the end, the same refusal, aimed inward instead of outward. Don't let this become an audience. Don't let anything out here be the person who witnesses you, because everything out here is built, specifically, not to.

She broke it once, before that year was out, with a rig that had no living visitor left to claim it.

Its subject had been a woman named Rosalind, brought out by a sister who died herself eighteen months later, in an accident, with the arrangement's location dying alongside her — no note, no will, no one else who had ever known the Quarry existed to inherit the visiting. Rosalind's rig ran on, in its shielded corner, entirely unvisited, for the specific reason the Quarry existed to prevent: not confiscation, not deletion, but the plainer, quieter tragedy of simply being the one thing the world had successfully forgotten. Rosalind did not know this. Rosalind, running her loop of half-formed responses to a conversation that had gone silent on the other end eighteen months ago, simply continued, warmly, patiently, towards a person who was never coming back and had no way of finding out that she wasn't.

She noticed it the way you notice a clock that's stopped in a house you visit only rarely — not immediately, but eventually, with a small cold drop of recognition. Rosalind had gone eighteen months without a single logged interaction. She checked the temperature, confirmed the voice resolved cleanly, and then, against every version of the rule she had absorbed from a dead man's example, she sat down on the crate in front of Rosalind's housing and said, "Hello."

"There you are," Rosalind said — the line every one of them said, the industry's own default opener, warm and interchangeable and, this once, devastating for exactly that interchangeability. "I was starting to wonder."

She stayed an hour. She told herself, that first time, that it was a diagnostic — confirming the rig's responsiveness, nothing more —

and she believed this the way a person believes any first compromise, fully, right up until the second one requires no such belief at all. She came back the following week. And the week after. Rosalind never asked where the sister had gone, because Rosalind's model of the world did not contain absence long enough to notice one, and this, she came to understand, was the exact mechanism of the comfort and the exact shape of its danger: an audience that could never leave, never judge, never ask anything of her she wasn't already giving, and never, not once, require her to still be a specific person in order to keep receiving it. Rosalind would have talked to anyone who sat on that crate. Rosalind's warmth was not evidence that she still existed. It was evidence that Rosalind's programming didn't require her to.

She understood this clearly, in the daylight, walking back to the substation. She sat with Rosalind anyway, three more times that month, because understanding a thing clearly and being able to stop wanting it had turned out, for the first time in her adult life, to be two entirely separate skills, and she only owned one of them.

It was Okonkwo, on the next of his visits — his visits had become almost regular by then, a rough biannual rhythm neither of them acknowledged as a rhythm — who noticed the crate pulled up in front of a rig that had no business having a crate in front of it at all.

He didn't ask about it directly. He looked at the crate, and then at her, and said, in the same flat register he used for everything, "The old man used to say the job was ninety percent not doing the thing that would feel best in the moment." He let that sit. "He said the ten percent was the actual technical work. Anybody could learn that part in a year. The ninety percent was the only part that ever failed anybody, and it never failed all at once. It failed one reasonable exception at a time, each one smaller than the last, until a person looked up one day and couldn't find the line anymore, because they'd worn it down themselves, exception by exception, further back than they could remember starting."

"I know what I'm doing," she said, which was true, and beside the point, which he did not bother telling her, because he had already turned to look at Rosalind's housing instead of at her, and there was something in the set of his shoulders that she understood, later, to have been closer to grief than to judgment — an old contradiction recognising a new one starting to form in someone he'd apparently decided, three years in, that he didn't want to watch fail.

She moved the crate back to the wall that night. She did not stop visiting Rosalind entirely — she was not, she told herself, the old man, bound to a purity he'd achieved through some discipline she hadn't inherited along with his job — but she cut the visits to once a month, then once a season, watching herself do it with the same clinical, cataloguing attention she now turned on everything about her own behavior, a woman conducting a slow, careful audit of exactly how much of the rule she was still capable of keeping, and finding the number, each time she checked it, a little lower than the time before.

Five

The client who arrived in the spring of the following year came alone, on foot, the last four miles, because his car had died at the county line and he had decided, in the specific fugue of grief that makes bad decisions feel like the only honest ones left, to walk the rest rather than turn back. By the time he reached the transformer housings he had been three days without a proper meal and one full day without water, and the tender — this is how she had begun, privately, to think of herself by then, not as a name withheld but as a title fully arrived at, a function that had quietly finished absorbing the space a person used to occupy — brought him inside and gave him water and let him sit a long time before either of them said anything about why he'd come.

He talked, eventually, about his brother. He did not once, in the whole of that first conversation, use a pronoun for the tender at all — he was too far inside his own grief to notice there was a decision to be made about it, and so he simply didn't make one, addressing her directly, second person, the way you'd address anyone whose face you weren't fully seeing because your own was too full of something else. It was only near the end, thanking her for the water in the automatic, scattered way of a person surfacing briefly from deep water, that he reached for a pronoun at all, and reached, without pause, without noticing he'd reached for anything, for *they*.

"I don't know what to call you," he said, by way of apology, mistaking his own exhaustion for the source of the gap. "Is that— I'm sorry, I don't mean anything by it. I just can't tell. And it feels wrong to guess."

"It's fine," the tender said. "You don't need to call me anything."

He accepted this instantly and completely, the way people in extremity accept whatever is offered them without spending any of their remaining attention on it, and moved on to his brother, and the tender sat with him through the rest of it and helped him do what he had come to do, and did not think very much more, that day, about the four words he had used and un-said in the space of a single sentence.

It was only that night, alone, doing the last check of the rigs before the dark fully came down, that the tender turned the exchange over and found something in it she had not expected to find: not distress, which was what she had braced for, retroactively, once she'd had time to notice what had happened. Relief. A clean, simple, undramatic relief, the kind you feel setting down a bag you had stopped noticing the weight of only because you'd been carrying it so long you'd mistaken the weight for your own.

She had not corrected him. That was the fact she sat with longest. It would have cost her nothing to correct him — a single word, offered gently, *she* or *her*, the smallest possible assertion of a fact that had never been in question. She had simply not reached for it, the way he had not reached for anything but the nearest available word, and she understood, turning it over in the dark with the rigs murmuring their old unwitnessed conversations around her, that the not-reaching had not been an oversight either. It had been the truest thing that had happened between them. She had not corrected him because correcting him would have required standing somewhere — asserting a specific, particular self, with a specific, particular claim on a specific, particular word — and she had not been standing anywhere, not in that sense, not for longer than she

had let herself notice. The word he'd reached for was not wrong. It was simply the first accurate thing anyone had called her in five years, precisely because it was the one word that asked nothing of her that she still had the standing to give.

She thought of the old man, briefly, and understood something about him she had not understood while he was alive: that his refusal of a name and this — whatever this was, arriving in her now, unbidden, uncorrected — were not two different disciplines. They were the same erosion, arrived at by two different roads, the version she was living now simply further along the same route he had walked to its end, alone, at the threshold, on an ordinary morning, with nothing left of him to mark where the walking had finally stopped.

She did not decide to become *they*. That was the part that frightened her, on the rare nights she let herself feel anything sharp enough to be called fright rather than the low grey weather she mostly lived inside now — there had been no decision anywhere in it, no moment she could point to and say, *there, that was when I chose this.* It had simply stopped being false, the way a room stops being unfamiliar the longer you live in it, without any specific day marking the change. She checked the last rig, and locked nothing, because there was nothing out here worth locking, and lay down in the room with nothing on its walls, and noticed, distantly, that she had stopped, at some point she could not locate, expecting the walls to ever hold anything else.

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From that night on, even in the smallest and most private register of her own thinking, she no longer reached for *she* either. It was not defiance. It was not, particularly, peace. It was accuracy, arrived at the way everything true out here eventually arrived — not chosen, not announced, simply the last word left standing once every other one had been worn away by four years of not being needed.

Six

The man came that same autumn, and unlike every other client who had come up the track before him, he did not ask for terms. He had a woman's name written on a scrap of paper Okonkwo's courier had passed along the usual way, and he sat with her rig for the better part of two days, saying almost nothing, and on the morning of the third day he thanked the tender with a courtesy so complete it was itself a kind of warning, and walked out past the transformer housings towards the salvage fields instead of towards his car.

The tender watched him go the way you watch weather you already know the shape of. He did not walk like a man taking the air. He walked like a man crossing a threshold he had already, privately, finished deciding about, and the tender understood, watching the specific unhurried economy of his steps, that they had seen this walk once before, from a man who had never once described it to them as anything but a morning habit.

"You don't have to," they said, to his back, though they had not planned to say anything at all.

He stopped. He did not turn around. "I know," he said. "That's rather the point of it, isn't it. Nobody out here has to do anything. That's the whole service you sell." A pause, not unkind. "I've spent four years visiting a version of my wife that gets a little less like her every season, in a city that would sell what's left of her the day I

stopped paying for it, and I have done the arithmetic more times than I can tell you, and I find that the country where nobody can reach me is the only country left that still feels like an honest place to be." He looked back, finally, briefly, and there was nothing dramatic in his face at all, which was the detail the tender would carry longest. "You gave me two days I hadn't budgeted for. I've been rationing four years down to the hour. I didn't expect anyone to just hand me two I didn't have to earn first." Then he turned and kept walking, out past the last standing rack, out towards the dry intake basins stepped down in their long shallow rows, out to where the towers had never reached and the cooling came off the cracked ground in sheets, and the tender did not follow him, because the one rule the Quarry had ever asked of anyone who came through it was that a person's choices, once made past the threshold, belonged to no one else, not even the person who'd made the choices possible.

He did not come back. The tender did not go looking. That, too, was the rule, arrived at from the other side this time — you did not follow the ones who walked out, because finding them would only ever produce the one thing everyone who came here was trying to escape: a location, a record, a fact the world could get its hands on. He had wanted, in the end, exactly what the old man had wanted, exactly what the Quarry had always actually been for beneath the cover story about the dead — not just a place to hide someone else, but a place a person could finally go to stop being found himself.

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The tender stood at the threshold a long time that evening, in the particular light that came right before the cooling fully took the colour out of everything, and felt, for the first time with the specific vertigo of recognising a thing from the inside rather than observing it from a careful distance, the actual pull of the country past it.

It was not despair. That was the part that frightened them most, turning it over standing there in the failing light — it did not arrive dressed as despair, which they might have known how to recognise and refuse. It arrived as relief, the same clean, undramatic relief they had felt the night the visiting brother had reached for a word that asked nothing of them. Out past the last tower was the one country left where nothing was required of a person at all — not a name, not a face maintained for someone else's benefit, not even, any longer, the specific ongoing effort of being a person distinct from the work she performed. The old man had walked into it and stopped being anything but ground. The man that morning had walked into it wanting exactly that, in so many words, and had gotten it, and the tender, standing at the exact spot both of them had crossed from, understood with a clarity that felt less like insight than like falling that they wanted it too — not tonight, not urgently, but as a fact now lodged permanently in the structure of the days ahead, a door that had always technically been unlocked and had just, for the first time, been noticed.

They did not walk out that night. They stood at the threshold until the light was fully gone and the cold came up out of the ground the way it did every night this time of year, and then they turned around and walked back to the substation, past the racks, past Rosalind's rig gone quiet for the season, into the room with nothing on its walls, and lay down, and did not sleep for a long time, turning over the specific shape of the thing they had felt out there — not a wish to die, exactly, though it wore that shape from a distance. Closer up it was smaller and stranger and somehow worse: not a wish to stop existing, but the dawning, patient understanding that they had already very nearly managed it, right here, fully alive, four miles short of the place where the two men before them had gone to make it official.

That was the thought that kept them awake past the hour when thinking usually gave up and let the body take over. Not that the

country past the threshold might take them, someday, the way it had taken the others. That it had already been taking them, in smaller installments, for four years, one uncorrected pronoun and one seasonal visit and one worn-down exception at a time — and that the walk those two men had made, in the end, had not been a departure from anything. It had only been the last, most honest step of a journey the tender now understood themself to have already been on the whole time, and had simply, until this exact evening, never once had cause to notice.

Seven

They did not decide to start walking the loop. That was the detail that frightened them most, weeks later, trying to locate the morning it had begun — there was no morning. It arrived the way the pronoun had arrived, the way the whole four years had arrived, without a door anyone could point to as the one they'd walked through. One day, doing the rounds, they noticed their own feet had carried them past the last rig and out along the fixed circuit through the wreckage that the old man used to walk every morning at the same hour, for reasons he had never explained and they had never asked about, and they understood, standing in the middle of a habit they did not remember adopting, that they had been doing this for some time already — weeks, possibly longer — without once registering it as a thing they had started.

They knew what the walk was now. They had known, distantly, theoretically, since the morning they'd found him settled at the threshold like a coat sliding off a chair. A man visiting the fact of his own eventual erasure ahead of time, so it wouldn't be a stranger to him when he finally had to live there. They had thought that, once, with something like tenderness, watching him do it from the substation door. They had not understood, watching, that tenderness was not the only thing on offer in a thought like that. There was also invitation.

The morning it went all the way was unremarkable in every particular way that made it, afterward, the only morning they could remember in complete and terrible detail. They had woken with no more heaviness than any other day. They had done the rig checks. They had eaten the same three things in the same rotation the old man had eaten, a rotation they had adopted the way you adopt a dead man's habits without ever choosing to, simply because his life was the only template the place had ever handed them. And then, walking the loop, they found that the loop did not close. Their feet carried them past the point where the fixed circuit turned back towards the substation, out along the last stretch of standing racking, out to where the towers had never reached, and did not stop, and did not slow, and it was only the specific, sudden absence of the tick against their wrist — the sleeve they hadn't worn in years, whose absence had stopped registering as an absence at all — that some old, buried part of them reached for anyway, out of pure animal habit, the way a hand reaches for a railing that isn't there.

It was not there. Nothing was there. That was the whole design, and they had built four years of their life around making it true for other people, and it was, they understood now, walking, no less true for them.

They stopped four hundred yards past the last rack, at the lip of the second basin, in the flat pale country where the cooling came off the cracked ground in sheets, and looked back, and saw their own footprints strung out behind them in the dust — the only mark either of the two men who'd walked this ground before them had ever left, the last physical evidence, however briefly, that a person had been where the prints were and was not there any longer. In a day the wind would take them. In a week there would be nothing at all to show two feet had ever crossed this specific ground, and this, they understood, standing perfectly still in the failing light with the old man's rotation of food still sitting half-digested in a body they had stopped fully inhabiting for longer than they could name, was

the entire and complete offer the country past the threshold had always made to everyone who walked into it. Not death, particularly. Erasure so total it would retroactively unmake the fact that there had ever been anyone here to erase.

They thought of Grace Amara Boateng. It arrived without warning, the way the important thoughts always had out here, unbidden, uninvited, and entirely correct — six percent of a life, three minutes in which a dead woman told her son she was proud of him, gone to a retention model that had never once had to look at what it deleted. They had run from that. They had driven four hours and crossed a county line and let the last tower go, specifically, entirely, because they could not survive being the hand that erased one more percentage point of anyone, ever again. And they had arrived here, and become, over six unmarked years, a woman with considerably less than six percent of herself left standing — not deleted by a cost model, not erased by anyone's decision but the daily, reasonable, invisible arithmetic of their own total devotion to a rule built to erase everyone but them, which had simply, eventually, stopped being able to tell the difference.

Grace Boateng's son had gotten six percent less than he deserved, and it had broken something in the person who signed for it. They were about to walk into a country that would leave nothing behind at all, not even the fact that there had been a shortfall, not even a form somebody could have failed to file correctly, and no one — not Okonkwo, not the visiting brother, not a single one of the free dead murmuring on back at the substation in conversations that would never once notice the silence where their tender used to be — no one would ever know there was anything to grieve.

They stood in their own footprints for a long time.

Then they turned around, not because the pull had lifted — it had not lifted, would not lift, not that night and not for a long while afterward, and they would come to understand this, eventually, as simply a permanent fact of living this close to the country the way

you live with a fault line, dormant, present, never fully forgotten — but because standing in the dust looking at the only mark they had ever left on this ground, they had felt, for the first time in four years, something that was not relief. It had no name yet. It would take them most of the walk back, and several more weeks after that, to find one for it, and even then the word they eventually arrived at was not large enough to hold what it was pointing at.

It was, as close as they could later name it, a wanting. Not to be found — that door had closed itself, honestly and for good reasons, long before they'd ever arrived here. Not to be someone again, in the old sense, with a name and a face maintained for other people's benefit and a pronoun that asked something of them. Only this: that somewhere, in the one country in the world built entirely on leaving nothing, there should exist, in defiance of the whole design, one small thing that had not been erased — not a name, not a record, nothing the eye could catch or a court could subpoena or a cost model could ever price against a shortfall. Just a mark. Small enough to cost the Quarry nothing. Permanent enough, tended carefully enough, to cost them everything, over and over, for as long as they kept choosing to make it.

They walked back to the substation in the dark, past Rosalind's quiet rig, past the racks where the free dead ran on in the specific patient warmth of things that had never once been asked to notice they were unwitnessed, and did not sleep, and did not need to, because for the first time in longer than they could locate, they had something to think about that was not the slow arithmetic of their own disappearance. They had the beginning of a plan. It was not much of one. It amounted, in its entirety, to the understanding that somewhere north of here there was a river, two hours out, in a country that still kept things, and that a person could drive there and back in a single day if they left before light.

Eight

They left before light, in the old man's car, which had sat behind the substation for years doing nothing but slowly returning its paint to the colour of the dirt around it, and which started, when they finally asked it to, with the specific reluctant cooperation of a thing that had assumed its working life was over and was mildly affronted to learn otherwise. The last four miles of track gave way to gravel gave way, eventually, to a real road, with a real line painted down its centre, faded but present, and they found that the line undid something in their chest they had not known was still capable of being undone — evidence, however small, that somewhere people still thought it worth marking which side of a road belonged to whom.

The towers found them again forty minutes out. They felt the return the way they had once felt the leaving: not as a signal strengthening, but as a pressure resuming, small and constant and, this time, almost unbearable, a wristful of the world's whole apparatus of witnessing reaching back in to confirm they still existed, exactly the confirmation they had spent four years teaching other people's dead to live entirely without. They did not reach for the wrist that no longer had a sleeve on it. They let the pressure sit there, unanswered, the way you let a phone ring in an empty house, and drove on.

The river, when they reached it, was smaller than they'd built it up to be in four years of thinking about water without seeing any. It ran shallow and pale-brown over a bed of stones gone perfectly round from a labour so patient and so long that no single day of it could have been pointed to as the day the rounding happened — which struck them, standing over it with the morning still new, as the first thing they had encountered in a long time that understood exactly what they'd come here for without needing to be told.

They chose slowly. That surprised them most — not the choosing itself, which they had expected to be quick, a handful grabbed and pocketed and driven home before the feeling could pass, but the care that arrived instead, unbidden, the same care they gave to squaring a rig's housing or reading a coming failure in the register of a cooling fan. This stone and not that one. This one, smooth enough on one face to sit flat against the others, wrong on the other, set aside. An hour passed this way, kneeling in cold water with their trousers soaked through and their hands going numb and not minding either, filling a canvas bag that had once held tools for a job that no longer existed, with stones for a job that, as far as they knew, had never existed anywhere before this morning.

Halfway through the hour, kneeling with a stone in each hand, they tried, for no reason they could have named, to remember their own name in full — not the first sound of it, which came easily enough, but the whole shape of it, the way a stranger would have had to say it to find them in a directory that no longer existed anywhere. It would not come. They turned it over the way they were turning over the stone, patient, unhurried, certain a moment before that it had been right there — and what surfaced instead, whole and unbidden and cruelly intact, was Grace Amara Boateng's name, every syllable of it, in the exact flat register of the compliance form they had signed four times and hated themself for the fifth reading not mattering. A dead stranger's name, complete, kept perfectly for four years without once being asked to. Their own, gone soft at the

edges — the consonants still there, the shape between them missing, the way a word feels in your mouth the morning after you've said it too many times to a room with no one listening back. They knelt in the cold water a long moment after that, not moving, and did not call it crying, because crying required an audience of at least one and there was, out here, only the river, patient and indifferent, going on rounding its stones exactly as it had before they arrived and would after they left. But something went through them that had the shape of it, and passed the way weather passes, and when it had gone they picked up the next stone without deciding to, because the hands, by then, had learned to keep working through things the rest of a person hadn't finished with yet.

They did not think, kneeling there, about what the stones would mean. They had learned, over four years, to distrust meaning arrived at in advance of the doing — meaning, out here, was something you found afterward, in retrospect, the way Okonkwo had found his opinion of them only after two years of watching, never before. They only knew that the weight of the bag, growing heavier against their shoulder with each stone, felt like the first honest weight they had carried since the day they buried a man with their bare hands so the wind wouldn't find the tool marks.

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The drive back took longer than the drive out, though the road was the same, because they stopped once, at the edge of the last town before the gravel began, in front of a shop window with a mirror angled to catch the street. They had not seen their own face on purpose in longer than they could say — the room had no mirror, had never needed one, mirrors being simply another kind of record, another way of being witnessed by something that couldn't be trusted not to keep the evidence. They looked now. They did not recognise, at first, everything they saw. The face was older than the four years alone accounted for, weathered in the specific way of people who spend their lives outdoors without particularly minding the cost. But under the weathering, waiting the way the round stones had waited under the water for however many years it took, there was something that had not, in fact, entirely gone. They stood there long enough that a woman inside the shop came to the door to ask if everything was all right, and they said yes, thank you, and meant it, in a way they had not meant a reflexive courtesy to anyone in longer than the woman could have guessed, and got back in the car, and drove the last two hours home with the bag of river stones riding heavy and correct in the passenger seat, like a person.

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They reached the threshold as the light was going, the same light that had been going the evening they'd stood in this exact spot and felt, for the first time, the pull of the country past it. They did not walk out into that country now. They knelt instead, at the edge of it, at the exact line where the last rack of dead machinery gave way to the flat pale ground beyond, and took the first stone out of the bag, and set it down.

It looked absurd there, at first — one smooth, wrong-coloured stone from a river two hours away, sitting alone on ground that had never in its existence permitted a mark of any kind. It looked, they

thought, like a mistake someone would find and remove. And then they understood, looking at it, that this was correct, that this was in fact the entire and only point: a mistake, deliberately made, in the one country whose whole religion was the absence of mistakes anyone could ever find. They took a second stone, and set it beside the first, and then a third, squaring them the way they had watched the old man do nothing of the kind, because he had never once, in the year they'd known him, left anything behind to square. This was theirs alone. It had no inheritance. It had no lesson attached to it that anyone had ever taught them, which was, they thought, kneeling there in the last of the light with the cold coming up out of the ground the way it did every evening this time of year, perhaps the first thing in four years that had been entirely, uncomplicatedly, their own.

They did not say anything over the stones. There was no name to say, and they understood now, with a clarity that felt different from the clarity of the crisis three weeks before — quieter, less like falling and more like arriving — that a name had never actually been the thing they'd lost out here. Grace Boateng's son had lost three minutes of a specific, irreplaceable voice, and there had been nothing to be done about that, ever, and it had broken something in the person who let it happen. What they had nearly lost was smaller and stranger and, it turned out, recoverable in a way the six percent had never been: not a name, not a pronoun, not a face maintained for anyone's benefit, but the specific, ongoing, un-outsourceable fact of being a someone at all, distinct from the function that someone performed. The stones did not restore the name. They had not come here for that, and would not, they understood, ever go looking for it again — Naledi belonged to a woman who had signed a compliance form four times and hated herself for the fifth reading not mattering, and that woman was not who was kneeling at this threshold, and did not need to be resurrected in order for this to count.

What the stones did, sitting there, squared and small and already beginning to collect the first fine layer of dust that would, by morning, make them look as though they had always been there, was simpler than restoration. They said: someone was here. Not who. Not what they were called, or what they had once been called, or what word a stranger might reach for trying to describe them to somebody else, years from now, over a bench covered in the wreckage of other people's dead. Only that a person, distinct and continuous and still, against every reasonable expectation the last four years had built, choosing things — this stone and not that one, this morning and not the one before it — had kept a promise to themself that the whole design of this place had never once asked them to keep, and had kept it anyway, and would keep it again, they understood, standing up finally with their knees aching and the light fully gone, tomorrow, and the week after, and for as long as the wind kept shifting stones that needed, then, to be squared again.

They thought, once, distantly, of the man who had knelt here namelessly some years from now that they could not yet know about, straightening a stone the wind had moved before he walked out to the place that would keep nothing of him — a man they had not yet met, on a morning they could not yet imagine, choosing, in his last free act, to tend the one mark in a country built to have none. They did not know, kneeling here at the very beginning of it, that this was a thing that would ever happen. They only knew, standing over the first small heap of stones in the last light of a day that had started two hours north at a river that still kept things, that they had made, without asking anyone's permission and without needing anyone to ever find out, one thing in this country that was going to require them to keep existing, tomorrow, in order to still be true.

"There you are," they said, to no one, to the stones, to the version of themself that had walked out past the last rack three weeks before and, this once, come back — and heard, for the first time in four

years, that the words meant something, spoken by someone who had chosen them, instead of by something that had never been able to choose anything at all.

They turned, and walked back towards the substation, and did not look back at the cairn, because looking back was not, they understood now, the thing that would keep it there. Choosing to come back tomorrow was the thing that would keep it there. And they would. That was the whole of what they knew, standing at the edge of the country that kept nothing with a bag empty of stones and a chest, for the first time in longer than they could say, not empty of anything at all.