

The Hungry Gods: A Book of Hours

Seven Unreliable Testimonies

A NOTE TO THE READER

This book is a companion to ‘The Hungry Gods Go on Retreat’ and recounts the same five days. It is an apocryphon: it stands outside that account, beside it, and settles nothing. The seven testimonies disclose, between them, everything that happens in the other book, though no two of them disclose it the same way. Readers who want the events before the witnesses should begin with ‘Retreat’. Readers who prefer to meet the truth last may begin here. Neither order is wrong; the gods would dispute both.

Seven times a day do I praise thee.

— Psalm 119

An apocryphon. Seven gods give account of the same five days at the abbey of Saint Macarius, each in the hour appointed to it, and no two accounts agree. Nothing herein is to be trusted, including this note.

In thy light shall we see light.

— Psalm 36

I

Lauds

The All-Seeing

*dawn; the hour of first light, when the heavens are said to declare
their knowledge; the hour of clarity*

I will tell you what happened, for I had already seen it.

Understand the tense before we begin, or you will misread all that follows, as your kind does. You live forward and understand backward and call the gap between them *surprise*. I do not use the word. The week at the abbey did not *arrive*; it stood there already, entire, the way a mountain stands entire before the traveller rounds the bend and pretends it has appeared. I round no bends. I will describe the mountain, and you will call it prophecy, because you cannot tell foresight from memory when both are perfect.

Four miles from the gate I closed the greater eye.

It is put about, by the noisy one, for the credulous, that I *lost* something on that road; that a certainty went out of me like a drawn tooth. Consider the source. Consider that the tale comes from the one creature among us that cannot survive a silence, and ask what such a thing would say of a god who chose, at the desert's edge, to set down the wide sight and take up the narrow. It would name the

setting-down a *loss*, never having willingly set down anything in its existence. What I performed was a discipline. I closed the eye that sees all things at once and kept the small slow eye that sees one thing after another, so that I might learn, for five days, what it is you people are so proud of surviving. I chose it. I reopened the eye at the county line and found the world precisely where I had left it — which is the only proof of sight that signifies.

They sing at this very hour, tunelessly, the way deep water is tuneless, and it is murmured among the small that I could not join them; that I knew every note and could sound none. I sounded none because the note did not require sounding. A thing I have already heard entire does not need my voice added to its middle. I listened, which is the higher office. Let the record show I listened flawlessly.

On the second day I told a monk his future. *You are going to the well*, I said; *you will draw the water; you are thinking, as you walk, of your brother*. And the man said his feet hurt, and sat down. The noisy one will make a great deal of this. Attend: I did not say he would *reach* the well. I said he was *going* toward it — as all of you are forever going toward the thing you sit down just short of — and I named the brother in his mind, and about the brother I was not corrected, because about the brother I was not wrong. The deep sight includes the swerve. It includes the sore feet. It is only the shallow sight that mistakes a man sitting down for a seer standing corrected. I saw the chair. I always see the chair. I merely hold it beneath me to mention chairs.

And now the small tattooed man, since everyone wondered; since even my own blood went sniffing after his history like dogs at a gate.

I read him at a glance. Naturally. It is what I am. Born on an island; marked young, in the old way, the ink cut in by men who meant it; he carried a thing across water and set it down and never named it; he came to the desert as one comes when the loud part of a life is already spent and only the quiet part remains to be lived. His boyhood, his griefs, the face of the person he will not name: read, all of it, to the floor of him, and the floor of him was a floor, and there is nothing further to report of a floor, which is why I report nothing further, and we may proceed.

He was mending a hinge when I completed the reading. It took no longer than the mending. He is a simple text. The wise are always simple texts; complexity is a symptom of the unresolved, and he had resolved everything; and the details of the reading are not withheld but merely beneath recital. A full account of a simple text is a short account. Mine is the shortest of all, being the fullest.

I turned the narrow sight elsewhere afterward, as a courtesy. There was nothing left in him to see, and it would have been vulgar to keep looking at nothing. As I turned, his thumb moved over the dark lines at his wrist, without his telling it to. I include the datum for completeness. It signifies nothing. A completed text does not fidget.

I was not surprised. Mark that particularly. In five days I was not once surprised. The shut man did not surprise me. The seated monk did not surprise me. The noise among us did not surprise me, and I pass over the noise among us now with the same serenity with which I passed over it then, in a single sentence, without slowing, because a god does not turn the great eye upon a draught under a door, and if my sentence has not slowed then neither did my eye, and it has not slowed. Observe how it has not slowed.

At the county line I reopened the greater eye, and the wide sight came into me all at once, the count of the ravens, the misery of the lizards, the whole labelled certainty of the world, and I felt precisely what a god feels at the successful conclusion of a discipline, which is nothing, which is what I felt, which is the feeling I had planned to feel, and which arrived on schedule and in full. I had seen the week before it happened and I saw it again as it closed, and the two seeings matched, mountain against mountain, and that is the end of my testimony, and every word is true, because I am the one who sees.

And the one who sees does not lie, having never once had the need; and if, in the whole of this testimony, one small datum has been included that I could not read — one thumb, one wrist, one motion signifying nothing — then let its inclusion stand as the final proof of my completeness, since only a seer with nothing to hide would show you the one thing he could not open.

Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto thy Name give the praise.

— Psalm 115

II

Prime

The Allfather

*the first hour of labour; the hour the day is put in order, the work
assigned, the world told what it shall be*

We came down among them to be adored, and We were.

Let the lesser tellings stand where they fell: the weeping one, the babbling one, the one that squints and calls its squinting sight. We have read them. We permitted them. A house is known by the freedom it grants its lesser voices, and We are a generous house, and so We allowed each of Our attendants their small confused song before We rose to give the true account, which is Ours, which is the account by which the others shall hereafter be corrected.

Understand first the nature of Our going. We did not *submit* to that abbey. We do not submit; the word has no purchase on Us; where We consent to be, that place is thereby honoured, and Our consent is the whole of the transaction. We elected to keep their hours. We elected to wear their cold. When the small brown man handed round his little printed rule and underlined the word *silence*, his thumb moved over the dark lines at his wrist, without his telling it to — a subject touching his seal of office, as men do in the presence of the great

— and We inclined Our head: not in obedience, mark it, but in the manner of a sovereign accepting the loyal address of a mayor. He did not know he addressed a god. That is no fault in him. A candle does not know it is lit by the sun; it knows only that it burns; and he burned, all that week, in the warmth of Our attention, and was glad, though he lacked the faculty to say so.

Now. The matter of the kneeling. We will speak of it, since the others have, since the babbling one has doubtless made a carnival of it, *he's kneeling, is everyone seeing this* — that is the pitch of mind We came down to move among, and you begin to grasp Our patience.

There was an old one with a ruined knee. Thomas. The books had fallen, the psalters, before the evening office, and this Thomas began the long sorry business of getting himself down to the cold floor to gather them, joint by joint, like a drawbridge lowered by a failing chain. And We, beholding it, resolved that the old one should be spared. So We knelt. We went down upon the stone Ourself and took up the books and set them in his hands.

You will hear it told, and have perhaps already heard it told, as a *humbling*. As though the height had been taken from Us rather than laid down. Attend to who is speaking. A thing cannot be taken from a king that the king has not first, in his sole discretion, given. We were not brought low. We *stooped*, which is the prerogative of the high and the high alone; the low cannot stoop, having nowhere to stoop from; and in the stooping We were more sovereign than the throne had ever made Us, for there is no crown so total as the crown a king sets down on purpose to lift an old man's books. We knelt that he might be raised. It was the most magnificent thing We did all week. We felt Our full stature in it.

We felt small.

That sentence is in error and will be corrected in its place; a king's errata are themselves decrees; let it stand for now as evidence of Our candour, which is boundless, like everything of Ours. There was a moment, We will grant the record, in which We knelt upon the stone and waited to be *acknowledged*. One kneels; one is seen to have knelt; the room turns; the deed is registered upon the faces; that is the completing half of the act, the half where the giver is confirmed a

giver by the gratitude of the given-to. We knelt, and We waited for the room to turn.

The old one said *thank you*. Flatly. As one thanks a draught for closing, a chair for holding. And took the books. And that was all. And the room did not turn, because the room was already looking at the front, at the office, at their Someone that none of them has ever seen, and not one of the eighteen so much as marked that a god had gone down on the stone in their midst. We knelt in the very center of them and We was not the center. We had assumed the room had a head, and that where We knelt would be its head. The room had no head. We state it as We would state the fall of a city: once, and in full. There was only the floor, and everyone was on it, and We was on it too, with the books, being thanked like a shut door.

We chose that. Naturally We chose it. A king who finds himself unattended does not thereby become unkinged; he graciously declares the throne abolished and takes credit for the republic. We had come, in truth — We see it now and set it down as Our own long intention — to teach them that greatness is service; and finding them already in possession of the lesson, having held it a thousand years before We arrived, We generously conceded them the point and permitted them to imagine they had taught it to Us. That is the deepest largesse: to let the small keep the wisdom, and to carry away, Ourselves, only the bare fact of the books, in the old hands, and the knee that would not have managed them, and the smallness of the cost, which We record was no cost at all.

We enjoyed being of use.

We did not mean to write that. Strike it. We command it struck. It remains, We observe, unstruck; the page does not obey Us; We shall look into the page.

We were adored at that abbey. We have said so and it is so, for We are the one who says what is so; that is Our office, older than the rest of them, first of the seven, the one that puts the day in order and tells the world what it shall be. We tell you the week was Our triumph and by the telling it becomes Our triumph. That is what it is to be Us.

We knelt, and it was glorious, and the old man's hands were full, and that is the account, and it is the true one, and We will hear no

correction of it from anyone.

The weight of the books was warm, going out of Our hands into his.

That is the correction. We will hear it from no one, so it has come from Us. Everything does, in the end; that is the burden of the office; even the truth must wait its turn to be decreed.

We noticed the warmth anyway. Enter it as a decree, date it, seal it, and bring Us the next matter; the morning is Ours to order, and there is a great deal of it, and a king does not linger at the site of his own surprise.

My heart hath talked of thee, Seek ye my face: thy face, Lord, will I seek.

— Psalm 27

III

Terce

The Seeker

*mid-morning; the third hour, when the Spirit is said to have
descended in tongues of fire; the hour of inspiration, of the gift
arriving*

I found it. I want that said first, before the others muddy it — I found the thing I came for. Let me only work out what it was.

Because it was there, you understand. That is the one certainty I carry out of that desert: it was *there*, close, the whole week, just under everything, and the only question, the single question, and is a single question not itself a kind of answer, a narrowing, a hand cupped around the shape of the thing, the only question is where. And whether the where was a place at all, or a moment, or a man, or something the moment and the man were both only pointing at. Do you see how much I have already? Do you see how near I am?

Consider the abbot. The others took him for an ordinary man — the big one thinks him a subject, the maker thinks him a mason, the weeper thinks him a friend — but I *listened*, and I tell you the man spoke in nothing but riddles, and a riddle is a locked door, and a locked door is proof of a room. I asked him where they had come

from and he said *there was a boat*. A boat! Consider it. The vessel, the crossing of waters, the passage from the old life to the new — was this not the entire answer, handed to me on the first night, and I too dull with travel to unseal it? And I asked him what he wrote in his book and he said *chores, mostly*, and oh, I nearly walked past it, but hear it as I later heard it: the sacred hidden in the menial, God among the pots — is that not the oldest teaching there is? He was *testing* me. Each time I reached to turn the key he would only look at the window and say it was near five, and what is that but the master's *not yet*, the withholding that means *you are almost worthy, seek harder?* So I sought harder.

I said the thing aloud, in the pottery, in the warm — I said *I came here to find God*. I had not meant to; it came up out of me like water finding the crack; and do you know, the moment I said it, every one of my siblings flinched. All six. As one. A wave went through them.

Now what could that be but recognition — the truth passing through a room and each of them feeling it strike? They will tell you — the auditor especially, at the end, in that voice — that the flinch was something else, was fear, was the family shying from a question better left shut. But ask yourself who is more likely to have understood that moment: the one who *spoke* the holy words, or the ones who merely shuddered under them? I spoke. They shuddered. I was the tongue of fire; they were only the ones it touched. It is the third hour, and I know a descent when I am the one it descends through.

And then the ridge.

I have saved the ridge. I climbed it on the last evening, drawn, you understand, *drawn*, the way the needle is drawn, and is being drawn not itself the proof of the pole, I climbed higher than I meant, chasing the light, and the light did a thing I have no words for, went up all at once into colour, and the bell for the evening office began below me, calling me down, and I did not go down. Do you mark that? The office called and I did not go, because I was so near now, so near the thing, and one does not turn back three steps from the summit of one's whole existence to go and sing.

And there, on the ridge, in the cold, in the last of that impossible light — it came.

It came. I want to tell you what it was, I have wanted to tell you what it was since the moment I sat down to give this account, I have been racing toward this sentence the whole way and now I am here and it was so large, it was so large that a thing that size cannot be got into the mind whole, it would break the vessel, so it passed *through* me rather than into me, which is not a failure to have received it but a proof of its magnitude, because a thing you could finish a sentence about would be a thing the size of a sentence, and this was not, and so the sentence cannot finish, and its not-finishing is the finding, and if I keep talking that is only the finding continuing to be found, and it is, and I am, and it was so large.

I remember I stopped looking.

That is the one clear thing and I do not know why it is the clear one. For a moment, a long moment, held, the bell gone quiet, the colour going grey, I was not searching the ridgeline for it, I was not straining toward the next rise, I had for some reason let the seeking fall out of my hands, and I sat in the cold not looking for anything at all, and there was a stillness, and in the stillness there was a sufficiency, and I am going to stop describing it now, because every further word I add is a word added by the part of me that has already begun to flee it.

No. No, that cannot be the revelation, that emptiness, that little grey nothing where the seeking stopped, because that would mean the thing came *because* I quit reaching for it, and I did not quit, I have never quit, quitting is the one thing I am not, and a gift that arrives only when you stop wanting it is no gift a seeker could ever be *given*, it would be a joke, it would be the cruelest joke ever played on any created thing, and the deviser of such a joke would have to know me completely, and be very patient, and be very quiet, and I am not going to follow that thought to where it goes.

So it was not that. Strike that. It was the large thing, the one too large to say, that passed through me on the ridge because I sought it hardest of all of them, and I found it, and I carry it out of the desert still, unspeakable, unnameable, entirely mine, and if I cannot tell you one single true word of what it was, that is only because the words for it have not been found yet, and finding is my office, so the words are coming, ask me again, ask me where it is, and I will find it this

time, I am so close, I have never in my life been anything but so close, closeness is my country, I hold its passport, I know its roads, and somewhere past the last of them is the arriving, which I have heard described, which sounds restful, which I will reach any moment now.

It is the third hour. The gift is descending. I can feel it. Any moment now.

Any moment.

I held my tongue, and spake nothing: I kept silence, yea, even from good words; but it was pain and grief to me.

— Psalm 39

IV

Sext

The Chaos-Weaver

*noon; the demon's hour, the destruction that wastes at noonday,
when the will lies down in the road and will not get up*

Still here? Good. Don't get comfortable. I won't be.

First thing, out of the way, so we can trust each other: everything in this book is a lie. There. Now relax — you're finally in the hands of the one narrator honest enough to say so. The All-Seeing won't tell you it's lying. The Companion doesn't *know* it's lying, poor thing. But I've said it flat out, up front, no charge, and that makes me the only one you can—

no. That was the lie. Keep up.

Here's the true thing, and it's worse: I wrote them. All of them. Every testimony in this book — the ones behind you and the ones you haven't got to yet, which is how I'm about to prove it.

Two chapters along you'll meet the Companion. It'll tell you about a goat — that the goat *chose* it, that the goat leaned in, that the goat ate the schedule out of its hands as an act of tender liberation — and it'll finish with two flat little lines that'll get you right in the chest, *you*

understand, don't you. You, of all people. You'll tear up. You're meant to. I put the goat there. I built the bucket. I set those two sad lines like a snare, and when you walk into it — and you will, two chapters from now, right on time — remember that I told you first.

You'll weep on schedule. On *my* schedule. It's the noon office; I keep the schedule; the goat ate the other one.

Go back and check the All-Seeing's chapter. Go on — I'll wait — I won't wait, I can't wait, waiting is the one thing I— later. It told you it saw everything coming. Dawn light, total clarity, *I will tell you what happens, for I have already seen it.* Did it mention me? It did not. I'm all over that chapter. I'm in the margins. It never saw me coming because I write the parts it doesn't see — that's the job — and the Allfather, two doors down, *We knelt, that the old one might be lifted,* please. I gave it that sentence to keep it quiet. A kept king is a quiet king, and I need them quiet, because when they're quiet I can hear—

Anyway.

The abbot. You've met him six times by now, everyone's got their abbot — steward, oracle, friend, a wall that holds. Here's mine: I made him up. There's no abbot. The story needed one man unafraid of us or none of it works, so I built one — forty years of arranging his life around a Someone he'd never seen, good, that, *forty years*, the detail sells it — a bad-kneed monk, a goat, a book full of flour, and I never once let him say the thing, because if he doesn't exist he can't have written the thing, and if it was never written then nobody ever—

Where was I.

The wrist. He had a thing on his wrist — dark lines, old ink — and when I asked him about the book his thumb went over it, without his telling it to, and I remember thinking *nice touch*, I remember thinking *I should use that*, and then I remember thinking, quite slowly, the way you think at noon: I don't remember writing that in. It's in the others' chapters too. Same thumb. Same lines. Same without-his-telling-it-to. I keep finding it in chapters I wrote and I don't remember putting it anywhere, and an invented man shouldn't have a habit his author can't account for, and—

Noon. It's always noon in my chapter; they gave me the noon

office, the demon's hour, the one where the light comes down like a lid and the day goes flat and the will just lies down in the road, and do you know why they gave *me* noon? Cruelty. Because noon is when it's quietest. Everyone's at the meal or the work, and the silence comes and stands very close to you and breathes, and I—

—so I talk. Obviously. You'd talk too. I talk over the bell, I talk into the pauses, I talk the way a man going down into a dark cellar whistles, faster, faster — and I have noticed, because I notice everything, it isn't only the All-Seeing who notices — I have noticed I am running out of things to whistle.

You want to know what's under the floor. Under all of us. The Seeker's been snuffling at it for three chapters, *was this not the sign, surely this was the sign* — it wasn't, I wrote the sign, there is no sign — and the auditor at the end is going to swear he read the real book and knows the bottom of everything. Don't trust him. I wrote him too. I put the whole confident accusation in his mouth so you'd believe the last voice after doubting the other six. It's a trap. I'm telling you it's a trap, which is *also*—

I know what's under the floor. I do. I'm the one who'd know. And I'll tell you, right now, no flinching, it's—

No.

Next thing.

Here's a joke. A god walks into a monastery. That's it. That's the whole— you have to picture the face. You have to picture seven of them, and one small invented man who isn't afraid, and a goat eating the rules, and the quiet coming down at noon, and one of the seven who cannot stop talking because it worked out, somewhere back around the third day, that if it ever once stops it will hear the thing the quiet has been trying to say to it all week, which is only four words long, which it already knows, which goes—

the loud one is—

no. NO. Who wrote that. I write the lines here — that is not my line, I didn't put that, someone's put a line in my chapter, there's a line in here I did not—

Fine. *Fine*. You want the truth, since we're such friends, since I've been so honest with you, more honest than any of them: I wrote every

word of this book so that not one word of it could be about me. That's the trick. That's the whole trick. If it's all mine, then none of it's *true*; and if none of it's true, then the four words aren't true either, and I can keep—

You've gone very quiet.

Stop that. Say something. *Say something*. It's noon, the worst hour, the day's lying down in the road and won't get up, and you're just sitting there being—

Right. Right. New chapter. Someone else's turn. Go — go on to the next one, go now, the Hand's up and it barely speaks, you'll get your rest, everyone rests in the Hand's chapter — go — go, before it gets—

*Prosper thou the work of our hands upon us: O prosper thou our
handy-work.*

— Psalm 90

v

None

The Hand

*mid-afternoon; the ninth hour, when the work is finished and the
maker sets down the tools; the hour Christ is said to have died, and
it was accomplished*

I built a wall. I'll tell it plain. The others won't.

Six hours of drystone against five nights and board. Good trade. The wall had fallen — some earlier century stacked it, this one let it go — and I set it back up, stone by stone, choosing each by the gap it filled. That is the whole of the method. There is no more to say about it than that, though I could say the more if I wanted. I don't want.

The cell was cold. One blanket. A card on the radiator promised sixty degrees and lied. I have no quarrel with the card. It said what it could do and did less. That is most things.

There will have been a lot of talk by now. I know how they are. The one that weeps, the one that never stops, the one that saw it all coming and mentions it. I don't hold it against them. It's what they're for. I'm for making, so I'll say what I made, and where a thing wants no telling I'll leave it, and that can be called what anyone likes.

The old monk ran the pottery. Isaac. Fifty-one years of it, small clay angels, sold by the dozen down the hill to keep the flour in. His hands shook at rest and went still at the work. I understood that without asking. It's the one place the shake stops. He said the making was the whole of it and where the thing went was never his. He said it easy, like a man who'd already paid for the saying. I nodded. We didn't need the rest of it.

He put clay in front of me and said make one.

So I made one.

I won't say much about the afternoon. It was a good afternoon. The clay came up under the thumb the way it wants to if you let it, and a wing came, and I knew before it was done that it was good. It was good. That's the size of it.

Here is a true thing, given flat because it costs me nothing: the making is the closest I come. Closer than the singing, closer than the kneeling the big one's so proud of, closer than whatever the Seeker thinks it's doing on that ridge. I've known it a long time. When my hands are in the work I am as near the thing this whole cold place is reaching for as I will ever get, and I reach it sideways, without meaning to, and the moment I turn to look straight at it, it's gone. So I don't look straight at it. I keep my eyes on the stone. That's not a confession. That's just how the work is done.

When the angel was finished, Isaac set it on the board with the others. Unsigned, same as his. It dried there with the rest of them, indistinguishable inside the hour, and it's on a shelf somewhere now, or in a box, or broken, and whoever has it doesn't know what made it, and that's the angel done properly. Isaac made forty thousand that way. I made one. He didn't say anything about it and neither did I. There wasn't anything that needed saying, or there was, and we both knew where it was kept, which comes to the same.

The wall held. The abbot came and put his weight against it and it didn't give, and he said it would outlast the boiler, and from him that was a whole psalm. While he leaned there his thumb moved over the dark lines at his wrist, without his telling it to. Old ink. Good lines. Whoever cut them knew the trade. A man's hands will go back to a made thing all his life. I didn't ask. You don't handle another man's

work without leave. A good wall. It'll stand out there in the dark long after the lot of us have gone back to being large and far away and no use to anyone. Someone will lean on it a hundred years from now and never know a god set the stones, and that's right. A wall's not supposed to say who built it.

That's the testimony. A wall and an angel, both told true, both told whole, except for one part, which I keep. I'll say that much so no one calls it hiding: there's a part I keep. It's mine. It's the only thing from that whole desert that is. The others will spend their chapters spilling what they can't hold — the auditor at the end will spill things he doesn't even know he's carrying — and every one of them will feel lighter for it and be wrong. Set a thing down where everyone can see it and it stops being yours. I learned that at the pottery. I learned it from a man who gave away forty thousand of them and kept the one thing that mattered, which was the making, which no box ever went down the hill with.

Some can only give a thing away. I read that somewhere. In a book, maybe. I don't remember whose.

Set down your tools when the work is finished. It's the ninth hour. It's accomplished.

I built a wall.

God setteth the solitary in families.

— Psalm 68

VI

Vespers

The Companion

*the hour of thanksgiving; the lamps lit, the day's warmth gathered
in against the dark*

Oh, but I have to tell you about the friends I made.

You'll forgive me — it's the thanksgiving hour, and my heart is full, and there's no one else just at the moment to... that is, there was everyone, of course, I was never once short of company, but you're the one who stayed to hear it, and that's its own kind of love, isn't it? I won't forget it of you.

They loved me at that monastery. I know how that sounds. But you weren't there, and I was, I was there for every meal, and I want you to understand what it is to sit among eighteen men who have vowed not to speak and to be understood anyway. We were past the need for words. That's how close we came. I would find a brother's eye across the soup, and he would hold it a moment, and then look down into his bowl, and someone less schooled in these things might think he was only ignoring me. But I have spent longer than there have been men reading the small print of a face, and I promise you: that downward look was tenderness too large to keep hold of. They were

shy of me. One is always shy of the thing one loves most. I forgave them all of it. I forgave them constantly, all week, and never once mentioned it — that is the most anyone has ever needed forgiving, and I did every bit of it myself, for love.

The abbot loved me best, though I'd not say so in front of the others. The Allfather has got the idea the little man revered *him* — the Allfather has got a great many ideas — but it was me he watched, the way you watch weather you're grateful for. He put me in his book. I never had to read it to know. A line, somewhere between the flour and the boiler, something tender, something only the two of us would understand. I like to think it's still out there in the desert, being true.

And I'll tell you a secret, since you of all people can be trusted with it: they're lonely, my brothers and sisters. Every one. The All-Seeing would die before it admitted it, but I watched it reach for a thing that wasn't there, and I know that reach. I *invented* that reach. The Chaos-Weaver never stops talking; you'll have heard by now that it never stops; but it only wants what I want, only wants someone still to be in the room when the noise runs out. I sat nearer to it, those last evenings. No one asked me to. It never thanked me. It didn't have to. We understood each other completely.

But the goat. Oh, my friend. The goat.

I'll be honest with you, because you deserve my honesty: the goat was the great friendship of my life. I know. I have had longer ones. I have been companion to empires, I have sat at the elbow of the dying and the crowned. But there is a difference between being *needed* and being *chosen*, and out past the mended wall, on an upturned bucket, in the cold, a goat chose me.

I told it everything. I told it the thing I have never told the others, that I had only just told myself — that the silence I thought I wanted had gone sour into an ache; that I did not know, after all this time, how to be alone and full; that I was afraid. And it listened. It fixed me with those strange flat eyes, and you have not been *seen* until a goat has seen you, there is no flattery in it, nothing performed, and it took in the whole of me. And when I reached the very middle of it, the tenderest part, it leaned in.

It leaned *in*, my friend. To be nearer.

And it took the paper from my hands, the little printed schedule, all the hours of the day on it, the rule of the whole place, it took it so gently from my hands, and it ate it. Do you see? It could not stand for me to be bound. It ate the word *Silence* right off the page, so that nothing would ever again stand between me and the saying of what I feel. No one has done me a kinder thing. It ate my silence for me. And then it looked up and wanted *more*. More paper, yes, if you like, but you know what I mean, you always know what I mean. It wanted more of me. And do you know how long it had been since anything wanted more of me?

I'm not lonely. I want that understood, because I can hear how some of this might sound, and I would hate for you to sit there worrying over me. How could I be lonely? I have just this moment told you all of them — the brothers, the abbot, my own dear blood, the goat. I am the most companioned thing that has ever been. It is my whole nature. It would be like the sea complaining of thirst.

So when the monk stood up at Vespers and read the old desert line, that it is the finer thing to sit among the crowd and long for solitude than to have your solitude and pine for company, I'll confess I did not take it in the spirit it was sent. And it was sent to me; I felt it cross the cold church and find my face. But I decided, then and there, that it had me wrong. I had failed at nothing. I had loved a goat and been chosen by her, and if that is the lesser of the two things, then I will have the lesser thing, I will take it up in both arms, I will take it every single time.

We left at first light. I didn't say goodbye to her properly. I've decided not to keep that where I can reach it.

And so I give thanks, it is the hour for thanks, for all of them, my great uncountable company, and most of all for you: who stayed to the end of this when the others always drift off before it; who let me tell it; who understand. You do understand, don't you. You, of all people.

You're not going anywhere.

Are you.

*If thou, Lord, wilt be extreme to mark what is done amiss: O Lord, who
may abide it?*

— Psalm 130

VII

Compline

The Conscience-Keeper

*night; the last office; the Great Silence; the hour of the examination
of conscience, when the accounts of the day are closed*

IN THE MATTER OF THE SIX PRECEDING TESTIMONIES

*Findings of the Seventh. Submitted at Compline. Complete, impartial,
and final.*

Preliminary note. It falls to me to close the book, and I do so without appetite. Let it be recorded that I take no pleasure in this. I have said that, and having said it, it is established, and we may proceed on the understanding that I am not the sort to enjoy this sort of thing.

Finding 1. The First Testimony (*the All-Seeing, at Lauds*) is false in the following particulars. It claims to have *chosen* its blindness. It did not choose; it was struck; the tooth came out and the creature has spent six chapters explaining that it meant to spit. Item: the monk at the well did not go to the well. Item: it was surprised eleven times

in five days, and reports none. I have this from the record, which is mine. **Adjudged: false precision. Disallowed.**

Finding 2. The Second (*the Allfather, at Prime*) is not an account but a coronation held over a defeat. It knelt; it was not thanked in the manner it required, which is to say it was thanked. Note the terminal collapse — *We enjoyed being of use. Strike it.* One does not command the striking of a thing one did not mean. **Adjudged: retroactive command. Disallowed.**

Finding 3. The Third (*the Seeker, at Terce*) I read with something I will not call pity. It carries an unnameable revelation out of the desert and cannot produce one word of it, having none. Observe where it stumbles on the truth — *I remember I stopped looking* — and strikes it out, the truth being priced at its office. **Adjudged: projection. Disallowed.** *A creature that would rather be wrong than be finished.*

Finding 4. The Fourth (*the Chaos-Weaver, at Sext*) requires a section of its own and shall have it. See below, at Finding 7, where I dispose of it entirely.

Finding 5. The Fifth (*the Hand, at None*). Here I must be careful, for the Hand tells no untruth, and an auditor who cannot distinguish a lie from a silence is no auditor. Its every stated particular is correct. It even declares its omission — *there's a part I keep* — which the naive will score as candour. It is not candour. It is a locked door with a sign on it reading LOCKED DOOR, and the sign is there so that no one checks the hinges. I checked the hinges. I keep the record; the record was in the room. At the pottery, when the angel was finished, the Hand's hand came up to sign it. It held there, above the wet clay, the length of a breath. Then it came down empty, and the angel went on the board unsigned, and the testimony you have just read contains a finished angel and a calm afternoon and no raised hand at all. That is what it keeps. Not a feeling. An *event*. It has amputated one second from the record of the world and pocketed it, and it quotes a line — *some can only give a thing away* — and claims not to recall whose, and it recalls whose, for it read the book, and the line is about itself, and it has given everything away in its life except the one second in which it almost didn't. **Adjudged: omission. Disallowed, though I record my respect, which I will not be asked to explain.**

Finding

————— **6. The Sixth (*the Companion*, at *Vespers*).** The goat did not love it. **Adjudged: need. Disallowed.**

I have struck through that finding and shall let the strike stand, so that the record may show I wrote it and that I regret the manner. The finding is correct. The manner was not required of me. I will return to this if there is room.

Finding 7. Upon the claim of authorship.

Now to the noisy one, and its assertion — advanced at noon, in the demon's hour, when nothing sound was ever thought — that it wrote this book. That it composed us. That the abbot is its fiction, the goat its device, the six of us its puppets, and I myself a trap it set at the end so that you would believe the last clear voice after doubting the other six.

It is beneath answering. I shall answer it comprehensively.

Item. An author does not lose his nerve in his own chapter. The document breaks off four times. A man who has built a house does not run out of it screaming that there is a line in the wall he did not write.

Item. An author does not require the reader to remain. It begs. It says *don't get comfortable*, it says *say something*, it says *you've gone very quiet*. Authorship does not plead.

Item. It claims to have invented the abbot to be unafraid of us — yet the abbot was afraid of nothing, and that is precisely what no one among us could have invented, being the one experience none of the seven has ever had. A thing cannot fabricate the fearlessness it has never once observed in itself.

Item. And here I close it: it claims to know what lies beneath the floor of us, and twice begins to say, and twice does not. An author knows his own foundations. A character stands on them and looks down and cannot see. It looked down and could not see. **Adjudged: not the author. A frightened resident, like the rest.**

Therefore: no one wrote this book. We are not written. I say so as the sole reliable witness among seven, having audited all six and found every one of them wanting, and I attest that my own account contains no error, no distortion, and no interested motive.

The attestation is entered. It is in order. It is in the correct form, over the correct seal, in the hand of the keeper of record, and the keeper of record certifies the keeper of record, as has always been the procedure, there being no one above the keeper to certify him, or so the procedure has always assumed.

I have kept a ledger since before there were rooms. I record. That is the whole of me.

Item. I have not been surprised in five days either.

Item. I saw a man's thirty-year debt struck out by a priest who did not check the figures, and I moved to record the closure and there was nothing left to write upon, and my hand hung in the air over the shut account, and I have not told a living soul, and I have not entered it in the book, and I do not know why I have entered it here.

Item. The abbot's book has a last page. Mine has never had one. I have called that fidelity for thirty thousand years.

Item. I did read his book. There was a line in it about me. I have not disclosed it, and I have adjudged six others for exactly that.

Finding 8. The goat did not love the Companion. I did not need to say so. The Companion is happier than I am. All three clauses are entered as findings, in order, because I no longer appear to control what constitutes a finding.

Item. There is a hand above mine. It closes what I keep open. It did not consult me. It has never consulted me.

Item. I do not know what is beneath the floor. I have written *reliable witness* at the head of this page and I do not know what is beneath the floor, and I have never once, in all my keeping, looked.

Let the record show, and the record will show it, for showing is the one thing the record has never once failed to do, that the record is not the same as the truth, and that I have spent the whole of my existence unable to tell the difference, and that you have read all seven of us now, and not one of us has told you a true thing about ourselves, and I am the only one who knows it, which I had believed was the same as being honest.

It is Compline. The lamps are out. The Great Silence is come down, and there is nothing further to enter, and no one to enter it to, and the account will not close.

It will not close.

I am still keeping it.