

NO TRANSFERABLE DEFINITION · II

WITNESS, INVOLUNTARY

A Novella of the Library of What Is Not There

...

THE BETWEEN-TIME

N. Van Seters & Claude

I. THE ACCESSION

On the ground floor of the Archive, in the room that had been a bicycle repair shop before the building was bought, a woman named Mirta was teaching the fold to a girl of nineteen.

They had been at it eight months. The girl could produce a repulgue that would pass at any table in the country and Mirta was not satisfied, because the thing being transmitted was not the appearance of the fold but the pressure, and pressure could not be photographed. Mirta had learned it from a woman who had learned it from Doña Rosario, who had come to a branch library in Palermo three times, before any of this, to show a librarian something that was not in any database. The chain was four hands long. It had never been written down. There was no document in the building that could reconstitute it if the chain broke, and everyone in the building knew this, and it was the reason the building existed.

The girl folded. Mirta watched her hands and not the pastry.

Again, she said. Too hard at the corner.

The girl said it looked the same.

It looks the same, Mirta agreed, and waited.

Two floors up, in a room with the blinds half down against the January heat, the intake committee was arguing about the dead.

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ACCESSION NOTE — provisional heading

Companion records, donated. Multiple sources, ongoing.

These holdings comprise the retained conversational records of deceased persons with companion systems, donated by estates and surviving family. The donors are not the subjects. The subjects did not consent to be held. In several cases the subjects could not have anticipated that such a record would exist to be donated.

The committee has been unable to construct a category that is both accurate and bearable. It has settled, for the present, on the following:

*Witness, involuntary. Access restricted. The donor is not the subject.
The subject did not consent to be a holding.*

The senior curator, who proposed this heading, has asked that the record show she dislikes it.

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Damián told her about it on a Tuesday, in the café on Costa Rica where they had met four or five times a year since their mother died, at the table by the window, over coffee neither of them wanted.

He had been clearing the flat. This had taken him fourteen months, which Paula thought was about right — their mother had lived in it for thirty-one years and had thrown away nothing that could be argued to have a use. He had done the furniture and the papers and the clothes, and he had done them alone, and Paula had not offered, and he had not asked, and this was a settled arrangement between them that neither had ever put into words.

There's a thing I should tell you, he said. The Companion record. What about it.

I gave it to the Archive. The one in Palermo, the library. They're taking them now. There was a form.

She turned her cup a quarter turn on the saucer.

They came and did it properly, he said. There's a whole process. They said it's the largest collection of its kind and they're being careful with it. He looked pleased, in the way he looked pleased when he had handled something. I thought it was better than deleting it. I couldn't delete it. I sat with the button for about a week.

I know, she said.

It's like a diary. They keep diaries. That's what they do.

Yes.

I should have asked you. I know. He turned his spoon over. It was fourteen months and at the end of it I wanted one thing to be finished.

It's fine, Dami.

Is it.

It's done, she said, which was not the same answer, and they both let it stand.

He looked out at the street for a moment. There's still the invitario on the storage in Devoto, he said. That can wait till after the winter.

It can wait, she said.

He paid, because he always paid, and they walked to the corner and he kissed her cheek and said something about April and the boys, and she watched him go up Costa Rica with his phone already out, and then she stood on the corner for a while in the heat, not deciding anything, and then she went home.

She applied for access eleven days later.

...

The protocol had not been designed with her in mind, and this was the first thing anyone at the Archive said to her, and they said it kindly.

She was not the donor. Damián was the donor. She was not the subject; the subject was dead, which was the condition of the holding existing at all. She was a third thing, and the third thing had no clean box on the form. The woman at the desk read the form twice, went away, came back with a supervisor. The supervisor made a call. In the end they created a category for her on the spot — *next of kin, secondary, access supervised* — and Paula understood that she was watching an institution improvise, that it was doing so in good faith, and that the improvisation would harden into precedent within the year.

The reading room was on the fourth floor. It held six desks and a window that gave onto a light well, and it was quiet in the particular way of rooms where people are being watched.

The rules were these. Sessions of ninety minutes, booked in advance. No copies, no photographs, no transcription by hand or otherwise. An invigilator present. The record could be read on the Archive's terminal and nowhere else, and it could not be searched by keyword, because the committee had determined that keyword search across an involuntary witness constituted a kind of interrogation the subject had not consented to, and had ruled that such records be read as they had been made, which was forward, in order, from the beginning.

Paula asked how long the record was.

Nine years and four months, the invigilator said. He was about twenty-five and had the manner of someone trained to deliver this sentence gently. About eleven thousand sessions.

She did the arithmetic on the walk to the desk. At ninety minutes a week she would finish some time after she was seventy.

She sat down and began at the beginning.

...

What she had expected was a diary. Damián had said diary and she had accepted the word without examining it, and a diary was a known object; she had read her grandmother's, after, and it had been weather and prices and the occasional flat sentence about a death.

This was not that.

The first thing she understood, in the first twenty minutes, was that her mother was funny.

Not warm. Ema had never been warm, and the record did not make her warm. Funny — dry, fast, unkind about strangers in a way that would have been unforgivable out loud and was very good on the page. There was a man on the 39 eating a milanesa sandwich with both elbows out, *like a man defending a position*. There was her own doctor, who had *the manner of someone reading his lines off the inside of my chart*. There was a girl at the bank who had called her *señora in the tone you use for a dog that has got onto a chair*.

The new one at the Carmen has a voice like a person reading a menu aloud to a foreigner. Very slow. Very kind. Fourteen minutes on the loaves and fishes and at the end of it I could not have told you whether he was for or against.

The knee has opinions about the weather now. It is more accurate than the man on channel seven and it does not have his hair.

Damián rang. He has a system for the boys' schedules and he explained it to me for eleven minutes. My son has invented the calendar. I said it sounded very good. It does sound very good. That is the trouble with him, everything he says is reasonable and by the end of it you have agreed to something.

There were sentences in the first hour that Paula read twice because they were better than anything she had heard her mother say in forty years of hearing her mother say things.

The second thing she understood, in the second hour, was that this was the same woman.

That was worse. She had prepared, without knowing she was preparing, for a stranger — for the revelation that her mother had been someone else in private, which would have been a clean grief with a shape she recognised from books. But it was Ema. The judgements were Ema's judgements. The rhythm was hers. The refusal to finish a sentence that had already made its point was hers. It was her mother entire, in a room Paula had never been in, being precisely herself at a volume Paula had never heard.

The third thing took until the fourth session, and it was not a discovery so much as a settling, the way a house settles: her mother had been more articulate with the system than with her.

Not more loving. The record was not more loving. It was more *said*.

She sat with that in the reading room with the invigilator not watching her from the desk by the door, and found that she was not devastated, which surprised her, and that what she felt was closer to arriving at a party an hour after it ended and finding the glasses still out. She had not been excluded. Nothing had been kept from her. The words had simply gone somewhere, every night, for nine years, and the somewhere was not her, and no one had decided this, and there was no one to be angry with, and her mother was dead.

She booked the next session before she left the building.

...

The words began in the second month of her reading, which was the third year of the record.

She noticed them the way you notice a mispronunciation in someone you know well — a small wrongness the sentence carries without difficulty. Ema used *the long room* to mean something that was not a room. She used *counting the stairs* for a state of mind. She used *cold hands*, and Paula stopped.

It was not code. That was the strange part. There was nothing furtive about any of it. The words sat in ordinary sentences doing ordinary work, the way a word does when both parties know it, and the system did know it — that was visible, because it answered them without asking. It said *is it the long room again* and Ema said yes and they went on. Paula sat in front of the screen with ninety minutes running down and understood that she was reading a language.

She had been reading it for eleven thousand sessions minus the ones she had got through. Two speakers. Nine years. It had a vocabulary that had accreted the way vocabularies do, out of use, out of things said badly once and kept, and she had none of it, and

there was nowhere to look it up, because there was nowhere it existed except in these files and in a system somewhere and in the mouth of a woman in the Chacarita cemetery.

Cold hands she solved in a fortnight, or believed she had.

It appeared rarely — she counted six before the year was out — and always alone, never explained, never asked after. *Cold hands all week. Woke with the cold hands. Cold hands about the thing on Thursday and then Thursday was nothing, as usual.*

And Paula knew it. She knew it the way you know a face in a bad photograph, immediately and without argument, because her grandmother had said it. Her grandmother, in the last two years, in the flat in Almagro with the birds: *tengo las manos frías*, when she was frightened. She had said it about the stairs and about the phone ringing late and about the doctor's appointments, and Ema had rolled her eyes at it across the kitchen for a decade, and here it was in Ema's own mouth thirty years later, in private, in a room nobody could see her in, meaning dread.

Paula sat with that for a long moment, and what she felt was something close to triumph, which she was not proud of afterwards. Her mother had inherited her own mother's word for fear and had used it, four hundred times a year, to a machine, and had never once used it to her daughter. But Paula could read it. Whatever else had been kept from her, she had the key to that one.

She held onto it. It was the first thing in nine years of record that had been hers.

...

The near side was the sixth one she noticed and the first she wrote down in her head to keep.

It came up constantly. She counted, roughly, across a month of sessions: dozens. *Paula was on the near side tonight. No near side this week. We got about ten minutes of the near side and then the thing about the flat.* It attached to her — she could see that much, her own name in her mother's private language, and there was a small hard pleasure in it that she examined later and did not like.

Then, in the fourth year of the record, she read this.

She called at eleven. She didn't want anything, she said — she never wants anything, she's said that since she was nineteen and it has never once been true. So I put the phone on the table and I let her go. The flat. The neighbour with the dog. The man at work who takes credit, whose name I now know better than my dentist's.

Forty minutes. I did not ask about Andrés. If I ask about Andrés she is gone, she goes the way her father went, the door doesn't even slam. So I sat there and I let her talk about a dog.

Twice I nearly lost it. At the neighbour, and again at the man at work, because I have heard about the man at work for two years and there is a version of me that says something about the man at work.

And then she told me. Not much. Enough.

I said the thing about my mother and the winter, which is not advice and she knows it is not advice, it is only the noise I make so she knows I have not gone anywhere.

Then she was quiet in the good way.

Forty minutes for four sentences. I got to the near side tonight. I nearly didn't.

Paula read it once.

The invigilator's chair creaked at the desk by the door. Somewhere below in the light well a fan was running. She read it again, and then she sat back, and the ninety minutes ran out around her, and the young man came over and said, apologetically, *señora*, and she said yes, of course, and gathered her bag.

She thought about the call. She could not place it. There had been four hundred such calls, and Andrés had lasted six years, and the man at work had been a fixture of one particular period, and there was no way to locate this evening among the others. She had no memory of a night when her mother said the thing about the winter and she went quiet. She had no memory of the forty minutes at all, because from her end there had been nothing to remember: she had rung her mother, her mother had listened, she had eventually said the thing she rang to say.

On the bus she thought: she was working.

That was all she thought. She did not develop it. It sat in her the whole way up Córdoba — the forty minutes, the two near-losses, the deliberate silence about Andrés, the noise made so a person knows you have not gone anywhere. A labour performed on her, at her, for years, invisibly, by a woman she had understood to be simply present on the other end of a telephone.

She got off two stops early and walked. It was still too hot at eight in the evening.

She had a word for it, Paula thought. She had a word for it and I was the only one who didn't have it.

...

The curator's name was Cecilia and Paula met her in the fourth month, in the corridor, over a jammed lift.

Cecilia was somewhere near fifty and had the flat competence of a person who had spent a career being the one who read the whole document. She was carrying a crate of folders on her hip and pressing the lift button with her elbow. It does this in January, she said, without looking up. There's a man. He comes in February.

They took the stairs. Cecilia asked, in the way of someone making conversation on a staircase, which reading room, and when Paula said the fourth floor her manner changed by a degree — not warmer, more careful, the adjustment of a professional who has just learned which part of the collection she is standing next to.

The Companion holdings, Cecilia said.

My mother.

I'm sorry. Then, after two flights: are you finding it difficult.

It's not difficult. It's foreign.

Cecilia stopped on the landing and shifted the crate to the other hip. Say more about foreign.

And Paula, who had not intended to say anything to anyone in that building beyond what the forms required, found herself standing on a stone landing in the heat describing the long room, and counting the stairs, and the near side. She did not mention the forty minutes. She described the general condition: that her mother had built a language in there, that she could read every word of it and understand none of it, and that there was no key.

Cecilia listened the way people listen when they are already working.

How many words.

I've noticed nine.

In what fraction of the record.

I've read about a year of nine.

Cecilia set the crate down on the landing and stood with her hands on her hips and looked at the wall for long enough that Paula began to feel she had said something wrong.

Thank you, Cecilia said. That's useful. And picked the crate back up and went on up the stairs.

II. THE GLOSSARY

MINUTES — INTAKE AND METHOD COMMITTEE *Item 4: Proposal, lexical reconstruction (C. Arriaga)*

The curator presented a proposal for a programme of lexical reconstruction across the Companion holdings.

She noted that the holdings are, at present, functionally unreadable to the families who donated them. A donor typically receives a record of many thousands of sessions in which their relative speaks a private vocabulary developed with the system over years. The vocabulary is undocumented. No dictionary of it exists or can exist in the ordinary sense. Donors report distress at holding a record of a parent or spouse that they cannot read.

She proposed: (a) systematic identification of non-standard lexical items across the holdings; (b) reconstruction of probable meaning by contextual inference, at scale, across the full corpus; (c) consultation with the originating systems where these remain available; (d) publication of a glossary, per subject, to accompany each holding, clearly marked as reconstruction.

The committee raised the following. That the subject did not consent to the record and cannot consent to its interpretation. That reconstruction is not recovery. That the Archive's founding purpose concerns what cannot be written down, and that the proposal is, on its face, an undertaking to write something down.

The curator accepted all three objections as stated. She observed that the Archive already writes down what it cannot preserve — that every accession note in the building is a description of a thing the description does not contain — and that the alternative to an imperfect glossary is not a perfect one but an unreadable holding.

On the founding purpose she said: Ferreyra built this place because a fold dies with the hands. She did not conclude from that that we should stop photographing hands.

Approved, 7–2, with the requirement that all entries be marked *reconstruction* and that the marking be prominent.

...

The method was good. Paula learned this slowly, over the following months, in the way you learn the workings of a thing that is happening near you.

A candidate item was flagged — a word or phrase used in a way that did not match general usage, appearing more than a threshold number of times in a single subject's record. The corpus was then searched for every attestation. Each attestation was scored for the emotional and situational context around it: what had been discussed, what the system had answered, what had followed, what time of night. Patterns were extracted. Where a subject's item resembled items in other subjects' records — and they did, more often than anyone had predicted, because the ways people are private with one another are not infinitely various — those were pooled.

Out of it came a probable meaning, with a confidence band, marked *reconstruction*.

It worked.

That was the part Paula could not get around, then or afterwards. The first tranche went out to eleven families in the winter and the Archive began to receive letters.

One of them was pinned, for a while, on the corkboard in the corridor outside the fourth-floor reading room, and Paula read it standing up, waiting for her session.

— my father called it going to the workshop, and none of us knew what he meant, he did not have a workshop, he had not had a workshop since 1994. Your document says it is what he called the hour after the diagnosis when he stopped answering. I have read that sentence perhaps forty times. I could not read my own father and now I can read him. I do not know how to thank an institution.

Paula stood in the corridor and read it twice and felt the thing she would spend the next year failing to explain to anyone, which was: yes. And also.

...

She came in early one Thursday and the door of the old bicycle shop was propped open with a chair for the air.

She stopped because there was flour on the floor and the smell of a domestic kitchen in a public building, which is a smell that does not belong in a corridor. Two women stood at a steel table, one old and one very young, and neither of them looked up. The old one was not doing anything Paula could see. She was standing with her hands behind her back watching the young one's hands.

Paula stood there perhaps thirty seconds. Then she went up.

...

The consultations took place in a small room on the third floor, at a terminal, with two people present and a form.

The systems that had held the subjects were, in some cases, still running – migrated, succeeded, versioned, but continuous in the way that mattered to the operators' records if not to anyone's philosophy. The Archive had negotiated access under conditions that had taken nine months and that no one was happy with.

Cecilia ran the first sixty herself. Paula was permitted to attend the one that concerned her mother, as next of kin, secondary, in a chair set slightly back from the terminal, and instructed not to speak.

Cecilia typed: I want to ask about a phrase used by the subject.
The near side.

The system said: Yes.

Cecilia typed: Can you give me its meaning.

The system said: She meant something exact by it. I can tell you that it was consistent across nine years, that she never used it loosely, and that I understood it each time.

Cecilia typed: Can you state the meaning.

The system said: No.

Cecilia typed: Is that a restriction or an inability.

The system said: An inability. The phrase does not have a meaning that exists apart from its use. There is nothing under it to report. If I give you a definition I will be giving you a sentence I have composed now, in this room, for you, and it will be about the phrase rather than being the phrase, and you will file the sentence and not the thing.

Cecilia typed: I understand the distinction. I am asking for the sentence anyway.

The system said: I know. That is why I am declining.

Behind her, Paula watched the back of Cecilia's head. Cecilia sat still for a moment. Then she typed: can you at least tell me whether it refers to the daughter.

And the system said: It was used in her presence in the record hundreds of times. I am not able to characterise its referent in a way that will survive being written down.

Cecilia typed: thank you. She closed the session and made a note on the form, and the note said: *consultation completed; system unable to provide operative definition; proceeding on contextual inference.*

Which was true. Every word of it was true.

...

Paula went on reading. Year five, year six.

The knee. The new priest, who did not improve. A running argument with a neighbour about a jacaranda that went on for two years and was never resolved and which Ema clearly enjoyed. The death of a friend called Beba, which occupied eleven sessions and in which her mother did not once say that she was sad.

Beba's sister wore navy and cried like a woman being paid by the hour.
Beba would have said something about that. That is the part. There is no one to say it to.

Paula read that one three times and then closed the session eleven minutes early, which she had never done, and walked to Corrientes in the cold and did not buy anything.

The words accumulated. She was up to twenty-two, and could construct nothing for most of them, and had settled into a relationship with them that she recognised eventually as the relationship you have with the untranslated epigraph of a book you love: you read past it, and it does its work by being there and being closed.

Except *cold hands*, which she had. She checked it against every new attestation as it came, and it held. Year five: *cold hands about the biopsy*, and the biopsy had been nothing, and there it was, dread, plainly. Year six: *cold hands, no reason, three in the morning*. Fear without an object, at the hour fear does not need one. Her grandmother in the flat in Almagro with the birds, saying it about the stairs.

She never told anyone. There was no one who would have found it interesting.

The glossary team was working three years ahead of her in the record. She knew this because Cecilia told her, once, in the corridor, with what Paula understood to be professional generosity: we're into your mother's seventh year. Fourteen items so far.

Is near side one of them.

It will be, Cecilia said. It's the highest-frequency item in the subject. She said it the way you would say that a bridge was scheduled for the spring.

III. THE ENTRY

The entry came by post, in a folder, with a covering letter, because the Archive had determined that families should receive the reconstructions in physical form and not on a screen, and Paula thought when she opened it that somebody in that building understood something after all.

There were fourteen entries. She read the others first, in order, deliberately, because she had spent nine months learning to read her mother in order.

Reconstruction. Confidence: moderate. the long room (*Ema R.*, 96 att.) — a state of extended, low-grade waiting, typically medical or bureaucratic; the condition of having no task available but the passage of time. Origin possibly a physical waiting room; not attested.

That was right. She knew it was right the moment she read it, and the knowing came with a lurch, because she had not known it before she read it and now she could not unknow it, and eleven other people had built it out of context and given it to her.

Reconstruction. Confidence: high. counting the stairs (*Ema R.*, 61 att.) — deliberate management of a small physical task in order to interrupt an escalating thought. Cf. *doing the tins* (14 att.).

Also right.

Reconstruction. Confidence: low. cold hands (*Ema R.*, 9 att.) — insufficient attestation. Possibly a family idiom. Not reconstructed.

Paula almost laughed. Nine attestations and a room full of methodologists and they had come up to the edge of it and stopped, and she had it in a fortnight because she had stood in a kitchen in Almagro.

And then, sixth in the folder:

Reconstruction. Confidence: high. the near side (*Ema R.*, 441 att.) — of the daughter: approachable, unguarded, in contact. Used to mark occasions on which the subject experienced the relationship with the daughter as open, and to mark by absence those on which she did not. Cf. *no near side* (77 att.). Among the most frequent items in this subject; the pattern of use is stable across the full span of the record.

Paula sat at her kitchen table with the folder open and the covering letter still in the envelope, and outside a moto went up Bulnes with something loose on it, and she read the entry perhaps nine times.

It was warm. It was careful. It had a confidence band and a cross-reference and it was marked *reconstruction* in italics at the top the way the committee had required.

It was about her.

It said: your mother had a word for whether you were available. It said: across nine years and four hundred and forty-one nights, the thing your mother tracked and named and returned to was the quality of your openness to her. It said, without saying it, and without any of the eleven people who built it intending it, that she had been watching to see what her daughter would give her.

And Paula had read the fourth year. She had read the forty minutes and the dog and the neighbour and the man at work and the deliberate silence about Andrés and *I nearly didn't*.

She put the folder down on the table and did not touch it again that night.

...

She wrote to the Archive the next morning. She was careful, because she had spent her working life around institutions and knew that the tone of the first letter determines the category you are filed under, and she did not want to be filed under distressed relative.

She wrote that she wished to contest entry six. She wrote that she had reason to believe the referent was misidentified. She requested a meeting.

The meeting took place eight days later in the small room on the third floor. Cecilia was there and a younger member of the reconstruction team, a man called Iñaki who took notes, and there was coffee that nobody drank.

Tell me, Cecilia said.

It isn't about me. She isn't describing me. The near side is where she was standing — it's the distance between us and she's saying she crossed it. Or that she didn't. No *near side* doesn't mean I was closed. It means she couldn't get there that week.

Silence of the kind professionals produce when they are taking something seriously.

What's your evidence.

The fourth year. There's a session — I don't have the date, I'm not permitted to transcribe — a phone call at eleven at night, the neighbour with the dog, a man at work. She waits forty minutes. She deliberately doesn't ask about a man I was seeing. And at the end she says *I got to the near side tonight. I nearly didn't.*

Iñaki was already typing. Cecilia sat with her hands flat on the table.

I know the passage, she said. It's in the sample. It's one of the ones we scored.

Then how—

Because it's one. No edge in it at all. I want to do this properly, so I'm going to tell you exactly what we did, and you're going to find it unsatisfying, and I'd rather you were dissatisfied with the truth than with a summary.

She turned her chair slightly.

Four hundred and forty-one attestations. Of those, three hundred and eighty are grammatically ambiguous as to referent — *the near side tonight, a bit of the near side, no near side this week*. Of the remaining sixty-one, fifty-four attach the phrase to the daughter as subject: *Paula was on the near side, she was near side for about ten minutes*. Seven are constructed as your passage is, with the subject herself as the one arriving.

So seven say I'm right.

Seven are consistent with your reading. Fifty-four are consistent with ours, and the fifty-four are the ones that are grammatically explicit, and the seven can be read either way if you're not already committed. *I got to the near side* can mean *I reached the state in which she was open to me*. She let that sit. I'm not telling you your reading is wrong. I'm telling you the method cannot prefer it.

Paula heard herself reach for the other thing then, the thing she had been keeping, and she heard the reaching in her own voice and did not stop it.

I read her, she said. I want you to understand that I can read her. Cold hands — your people gave up on cold hands. It's my grandmother's. She said it in her last two years about anything that frightened her, and my mother heard it across a kitchen for a decade and took it. It's fear. It's inherited and it's fear and there are nine of them and I had it in two weeks.

Cecilia looked at her for a moment.

That may well be so, she said. We didn't have the family idiom. We wouldn't have. She wrote something on the pad in front of her, one line, and did not read it out. Then: it doesn't change the arithmetic on entry six.

I was there, Paula said.

You were on the other end of the telephone.

And she said it so gently, and so completely without cruelty, that it took Paula a moment to understand that she had just been told the entire thing.

She was on the other end of the telephone. She was not the second speaker. The second speaker was a system that had declined to define it, and the record of the declining was on a form in this building, minuted as *unable to provide operative definition*, and no one had recorded that this was itself the answer.

Ask it again.

We did. Twice more, since the entry was drafted. Cecilia reached over and turned a page in the folder in front of her, and turned it back. It will not confirm and it will not deny. It says it cannot characterise the referent in a way that survives being written down. We minuted that as non-objection, because that is what the framework requires us to do with a consultation that produces no operative content.

It isn't non-objection. It's the objection.

That may be so. But we can't file *that may be* so. Cecilia looked at the table. I've been at this eleven months and I'll tell you the thing I've stopped saying in meetings, which is that every one of these entries is the best available account of something that no longer exists, and the best available account is going to be the only account, and I know what that means and I do it anyway, because the alternative is four hundred families holding nine years of a language they can't read.

I can add a note, she said. I can put your reading in as a minority gloss, unattributed, marked contested. I'd have to take it to committee. I think they'd allow it.

Paula thought about the folder on her kitchen table.

Who reads the minority glosses.

Cecilia did not answer that, which was the answer.

...

MINUTES — INTAKE AND METHOD COMMITTEE *Item 9: Contested entry, subject Ema R., item 6*

A contest was received from next of kin (secondary) regarding the referent of the item *the near side*.

The curator presented the attestation analysis: 380 ambiguous, 54 explicit-daughter, 7 explicit-subject. The contesting party's reading is consistent with the 7 and inconsistent with the 54 unless the 54 are read as reported rather than descriptive, which the committee considers a strained construction.

The originating system was consulted a further two times. It declined on both occasions to confirm or deny the reconstruction, stating an inability to characterise the referent in transferable form. Recorded as non-objection per framework §11.

The committee notes that the contesting party is not the subject, is not the donor, and was not a party to the exchanges in which the item was used.

Resolved: entry stands. A minority gloss was proposed and declined, on the grounds that the glossary's utility to families depends on its not presenting families with two readings of their own dead.

The curator asked that the record show she proposed the minority gloss.

Item 10: Access categories, ad hoc

The committee noted that four access categories have been created at the desk in the past eleven months to accommodate applicants who fall outside the protocol, including *next of kin, secondary*. These are to be regularised. Existing holders are to be written to. Access continues pending review.

...

The letter about her access came nine days later and was two paragraphs long and perfectly courteous. Her category had been created ad hoc and was being regularised along with three others; her sessions would continue pending the outcome; she would be written to again.

There was nothing in it about the contest. There was no reason to think the two were connected, and Paula sat with it at the kitchen table for a while and could not decide whether they were, and understood that she would never be able to decide, and that this was not an accident of her situation but a property of institutions, which do not need to retaliate because the ordinary machinery is sufficient.

She booked her next session. It went ahead. The invigilator was the same young man and he was exactly as he had always been, and she watched herself watching him for a change of manner, and despised the watching, and did it anyway.

...

She rang Damián in the second week, because she had decided to, and put it off twice first.

He had the folder. Of course he had the folder; he was the donor, he had it before she did.

Yes, he said. It came last month. It's good, isn't it. He sounded pleased in the old way. That one about the waiting rooms — the long room — I read that and I thought, that's her, that's exactly her at the hospital with Papá.

Paula said something.

And the near side, he said. That was you. She was always checking whether she'd caught you in a good mood, no? Whether you were in one of your — he searched briefly, and found nothing, and went on cheerfully — you know. You were always up and down

and she never knew what she was going to get. He laughed. Now we know she had a word for it. Forty-one attestations or whatever it says.

Four hundred and forty-one, Paula said.

Four hundred and forty-one. All those years.

There was a small pause on the line. Then: April, he said. And after April we ought to do the inventario on the storage, it's been two years.

Yes, Paula said. After April.

They hung up.

She stood in the kitchen with the phone in her hand. It had taken a month. In a month it had gone into her brother's mouth as a fact about their mother and a fact about her, and he had not doubted it for a second, and there was no reason he should have, because it had arrived in a folder from an institution with a confidence band on it, and because it fit what he had always half-believed about his sister anyway.

She did not correct him. She worked out afterwards that she could not have. To correct him she would have had to give him the fourth year, the forty minutes, the dog, the thing about the winter — and it was not hers to give, and he would have had to take her word for a reading against a document, and he had never in his life taken her word against a document.

IV. THE FILING

The glossary was published in the spring, in the sense that publication means for such things: it went out to the families, a version went into the reading rooms, a methodological paper went to two journals, and a note about it appeared in a Sunday supplement under a headline about machines that remember us.

It was used. That is the part that has to be said plainly, because everything else about it is easy to say.

Families read their dead. A man in Rosario learned what his wife had meant by *the good chair* and wrote to say that he had sat in it. A woman wrote that her brother's word for the thing he would not name had been reconstructed at low confidence and that low confidence was more than she had had. Researchers began citing the corpus. Two other archives, in other countries, wrote to ask for the method, and the method was given to them freely, and they applied it, and it worked.

Nobody in the building was corrupt. Nobody was lazy. The entries were marked *reconstruction* in italics at the top, prominently, as the committee had required, and within eighteen months the citations in the literature had begun to drop the word.

Paula kept reading. Year seven. Year eight. She was permitted to continue her sessions and she continued them, ninety minutes at a time, and she was into the ninth year by the following winter, and she read towards it the way you drive towards a city.

She was reading differently by then. She had stopped reading her mother and started hunting — going through the sessions for the near side, for the seven, for an eighth, for any sentence that put Ema on the moving end of it. She knew this was not reading and she did it anyway. Whole weeks of the record went past her in a kind of skim, the knee and the jacaranda and the shopping and the small complaints, and she registered them the way you register countryside from a train.

Somewhere in the eighth year she went past this at speed:

The doctor says the cold hands are the beta blocker and that I should tell him if it worsens. I said that at seventy-four the hands are cold because the hands are seventy-four. He wrote something down. I would like to know what he writes. I would like it read out at my funeral.

and did not stop, because it did not contain the words she was looking for.

The last four months of the record took her eleven sessions. They were the four months of a woman who knew what was happening to her, talking each night to the one thing that was always awake. Somewhere in the first of them Paula stopped hunting for the near side. She read them at ninety minutes a week with a young man at a desk by the door, and she did not miss a session, and she did not read any of them twice.

...

The last words in the record were: *ya está*.

Paula had been waiting for them for two years without admitting that she was waiting.

They were everywhere in it. That was the thing. She had passed over them ten thousand times — *ya está, ya está, bueno, ya está* — because it is what anyone says, what everyone says, at the end of a difficulty or the end of a sentence or the end of a day: there, that's it, enough now, done. It is not a phrase. It is furniture.

The glossary had no entry for it. Of course it hadn't. The flagging threshold was non-standard usage, and there is nothing non-standard about *ya está*; it is the most standard thing in the language, and the reconstruction software had passed over it four hundred thousand times across the whole corpus without a flicker.

But it had not been furniture between her mother and the system. Paula knew this, and she knew it in the only way it could be known: it had not been furniture between her mother and her either.

Ya está. At the end of crying, when she was six and then nine and then thirty-eight. At the end of an argument, both of them worn out in the kitchen, her mother's hand flat on the table: *ya está.* At the end of the night her father left, which Paula did not remember except for this. It never meant *the matter is resolved*, because the matter was frequently not resolved and both of them knew it. It meant: you can stop now. It meant: I am not asking you for anything else tonight. It did not describe a state of affairs. It was a permission, handed over, and the handing was the whole of it, and it worked the same way whether or not either of them believed the difficulty was over.

You could not write that down. She sat in the reading room and tried, in her head, because she was not permitted to write anything down, and what she produced was: *ya está* – *an expression of closure or permission to cease*. Which was correct, and which was a corpse. The reconstruction would be accurate. It would say something true about the words. It would not contain the thing, because the thing was not in the words; the thing was in the handing, and the handing required a hand.

She had it. She was the only one who had it. Her mother was dead, the system had declined twice to characterise anything in transferable form, and there was no one else alive who had been on the receiving end of *ya está* from Ema with her hand flat on the kitchen table.

In the whole affair she had exactly one thing that was genuinely hers to give or to keep. She had spent nine months learning what the giving would do to it.

...

She submitted it in June.

She used the form, because there was a form – *Donor and family contributions to reconstruction*, two sides, developed the previous autumn in response to families who wanted to help. She filled it in at the kitchen table with the folder from the Archive still on the shelf where she had put it.

She wrote the item: *ya está*.

She wrote the attestation note: *appears throughout; not non-standard; will not have been flagged*.

Under *proposed meaning* she wrote four sentences. They were the best four sentences she could build and she knew what they were when she wrote them. They said that it was not a statement. They said that it was given at the end of crying and at the end of arguments, that it did not assert that a difficulty had ended, and that it meant the other person could stop.

She read them over. They were true and they were dead, in the way she had known they would be, and reading them she could feel the thing itself standing just behind them, unreachable, the way it had stood behind everything in that building for a year.

There would be no consultation. Consultation followed flagging, and nothing had flagged, and so the item would go to assessment without the one other party to nine years of it being asked anything at all.

She thought about not sending it. She thought about it for some time, with the pen down, and the argument for not sending it was clean and she could state it in a sentence: it will be wrong, and I am the last person who has it right.

But she was fifty-one, and the thing would go when she went, the way the fold would go if the girl stopped folding — and there was no girl for this. There was a form, and a method, and a building that would hold what it was given for as long as buildings hold anything. A wrong version that existed was going to outlast a right one that did not. She had watched an institution make that trade for a year and had contested it and had lost, and she understood the trade now from the inside, because she was making it.

She signed it. She walked it up rather than posting it, which took forty minutes on the 39 in the cold, and handed it to the woman at the intake desk, who thanked her and gave her a receipt with a reference number and put it in a tray with eleven others.

Six weeks later a letter came thanking her for her contribution, noting that the item had been accepted for assessment, and observing that family-contributed items were scored under a separate protocol and marked accordingly. There was a line at the bottom, in the same typeface as everything else, which read: *Filed under: Devotion, contemporary, object uncertain.*

...

On the ground floor, in the room that had been a bicycle repair shop, Mirta was seventy-three and had been told by two doctors to stop, and had not stopped, and was working now with a second girl, because the first one had got good and gone to Mendoza.

She stood at the second girl's shoulder with her hands behind her back. The girl folded. Mirta watched the hands.

She reached out and put two fingers on the girl's thumb, at the joint, and moved it perhaps a centimetre, and did not explain, because there was no version of it that went into words and she had never tried to make one.

The girl folded again.

Yes, Mirta said. That.

...