Strange Tales from a Rental Room

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9 chapters
19,630 words

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I

Buy Vinegar

1.

The order was wonton soup, no coriander, extra vinegar, eleven yuan from the shop across the lane, and Chen Shu had ordered it three hundred times.

She knew the number because the app knew it. The app kept count the way she kept documents: without affection, without error. On the twelfth of November she opened it to place the three hundred and first order, and her thumb stopped above the screen and did not know what to press.

She ran the diagnosis in the order she ran every diagnosis. Hardware, then software, then user. The phone was fine. The app was fine. The address on the order screen was hers. The phone number was hers; she checked the last three digits twice. The payment card was hers. Eleven yuan, one tap. The tap was the problem. Three hundred repetitions had worn a groove into her, and the groove was gone, and her thumb lay on the glass like a tool set down by someone else.

She opened the history and read it the way she read everything, top to bottom, looking for the error. Wonton, wonton, wonton, back to June, each with its timestamp and its one-yuan discount and its green tick. The list was correct. She read it again from the fortieth entry down and had to admit that the list was correct and that she did not recognize it. The address was hers, the number hers, the card hers: eleven months of her own appetite, itemized and timestamped, and it read like the records of a stranger whose habits she had been hired to document.

She looked for the mundane cause, because there is always a mundane cause and it is cheaper than the other kind. Phone numbers get recycled. She knew this from the print shop downstairs, whose copiers were Japanese machines on their second and third lives. A number is retired, held ninety days, and sold again to a stranger with whatever the last user left in it. That was the theory she preferred: a

second-hand number, a second-hand history, someone else's wonton years ending where hers began. It explained the list. It did not explain the thumb.

The night before, the wontons had not come. That part she remembered, because hunger keeps minutes. She had ordered at 9:20 in the rain. The app said delivered, 21:58. The doormat said otherwise. She had waited until ten, then filed the missing-order form, which was four fields and a photograph of an empty doormat. The vinegar packets came with every order, and the bottle at home was down to its bottleneck, so before bed she had written herself a note on the pad by the kettle. *You order wontons from the shop across the lane. No coriander, extra vinegar. Three hundred times. Ask them about last night.* Under it, without thinking, she had scribbled *buy vinegar.* She had gone to bed hungry. All of that was intact. It was the morning that was wrong.

In the morning the first note was blank. The second said *buy vinegar.*

She held the blank square to the window, then under the lamp, then tilted it, the way you check a page for water damage. The adhesive had failed. A bad batch, the kind of thing she wrote complaint letters about for other people. She put the blank square in the drawer with the receipts, as evidence. She was, after all, a professional.

There was other evidence. By the kettle stood two cups. One was hers, finished. The other was full and cold, the tea bag drowned in it overnight, and the second chair was pulled out with its back to the window. The pen was behind her ear. Her pen: chewed cap, the one she worked with when a document had her. She had no document. She had no visitor she could name. She inventoried the room the way she inventoried everything, and the inventory did not balance.

Two twenties and a ten were in her jacket pocket, and she had no invoice for them. She stood in the corner shop with the bottle in her hand and did the math on the money the way she did the math on everything, and the math came out to *found.* She bought the vinegar with it anyway. The big bottle, 8.5 yuan.

※

2.

He came on a Thursday, in the hour between her shift and the landlord's lights-out. Tuesdays and Thursdays she sat the complaint desk at the hotline, where a leaking roof in the south of the city became a number that could be transferred, tracked, and called back on time; the slogan on the wall said the city could be handled in one visit, and the wall had never called about a roof. He knocked the way people knock when the door matters more than the answer.

Mid-thirties, raincoat too thin for November, right arm in a drugstore brace two sizes wrong. He did everything with the left hand: the knock, the phone, the holding of the phone.

"Chen Shu," he said, both syllables of it, like a form. "Building four, room 402."

"Yes."

"You wrote for me."

She said, "I don't—" and stopped, because there are only a few ways to finish that sentence and all of them were true.

He was the rider. Three hundred deliveries to this door, and never once a reason to keep the face. She checked herself for the knowing and found the shelf bare.

"Rain," he said, when she did not speak. "The eleventh. Nine-twenty I take the order — wonton, no coriander, extra vinegar, eleven yuan. I knew the order before I opened it. Three hundred times. The vinegar lady."

She waited. The ear itch had started at the door, small, in the left ear, like a hair out of place. She blamed the heating, which had not started yet, and would start tomorrow, and would not be to blame.

"Your gate has a drainage cut where the road dips, for the rain," he said. "It fills level with the road. Headlights, wet paint, a dip the same colour as the road. I've taken that gate a thousand times at speed and never thought about it once. That night I thought about it the whole way down."

He stopped there for a while. The radiator next door ticked, warming up for its season.

"The bike went. I went. The bag — I held the bag. You hold the bag. It's the one thing in that job that's yours. The route isn't yours, the clock isn't yours, the face you make at the door isn't yours. The food is yours. I held the bag, and the soup held the bag, and my wrist held the ground."

The hospital had written: *fell from electric scooter.* He recited it without looking at anything. "That's true, and it's worth nothing. A page that says you fell. It doesn't say you were carrying. The carrying is the whole claim."

He turned his phone around. The screen was an insurance app, and the app was asking, in a font chosen for its neutrality, for a statement of circumstances — the when, the where, the carrying, in the claimant's own words, signed.

"The policy's three yuan a day," he said. "Every day, two years. Twenty-two hundred yuan to an app. The one day it's needed, the app wants a qingkuang shuoming (情况说明, statement of circumstances) — signed, dated, true. And the platform's already written its own version. *Delivered, 21:58.* The system tracks the phone, and the phone was at your building, so the order was at your building. The phone can't file the difference between the building and the pavement under it."

He said the rest of it in the voice of a man reading out numbers he has checked too many times. No contract, so no gongshang (工伤, work-injury status); no work-injury status, so no board, no assessment, no percentage. The app called him a partner. You cannot be injured on the job if you have not got a job — that was the law's reading of it. He had the work. He did not have the employment.

"The station master said, fourth floor, the girl who writes. You came to the door at eleven-something. You had a pen behind your ear that you kept forgetting was there. I had nothing to give you but the story, so I gave you the story, and you took it apart like it was a machine and put it back with all the screws in. You asked what the drainage cut was *for.* You asked whether the fence follows the phone or the bag. You made me say the night twice, once forward and once backward, to see if it held." He looked at his brace. "It held. Four hundred and twelve characters. You printed two copies at the shop downstairs and wrote me a receipt for the fifty. You said every document should have a twin."

He put a page on her table. Blank.

"The portal called it unreadable. The adjuster called it *material not received.* I sent the second copy. Same. Seven days to resubmit or the claim dies quiet."

She took the page and tilted it under the lamp, because that was the job she was built for. The margins were perfect. Whatever had happened to the words had happened neatly. She opened her laptop instead of saying this. Client jobs by date. The file was there, named properly, the way she named everything: *wang_1112_statement.docx.* It was 0 kilobytes.

"The print shop's computer," she said.

He looked at her with something that had been anger a week ago and had stood out in the rain too long to hold its shape.

"Write it again," he said. "You have my story. I'll pay the—"

"I don't sign statements about nights I wasn't present for."

"You were present."

"Not according to me."

The kettle ticked as it cooled. She closed the laptop. Down in the lane a scooter went past with its rattle, someone else's eleven yuan.

"You've seen what my name does to paper."

At ten the landlord's timer cut the lights, as it did every night, and neither of them got up. He held his phone above the blank page, and the small official light lay on the paper, and nothing appeared in it.

"You asked good questions the first time," he said, and went down the stairs on the good arm's side of the wall.

The itch in her left ear stopped. The silence it left was the exact size of the rest of his story.

※

3.

On Friday she went down and ordered in person at the window, because the app and she were not speaking. The auntie did not know her. Three hundred deliveries and the auntie had never seen her face; the face had lived in the note

field, and the note field was blank now, and she typed *no coriander, extra vinegar* into it like a stranger introducing herself to her own habits.

The wontons came with coriander anyway. She picked it out stalk by stalk onto the lid.

The rider was new, and brisk, and at the door he said, "You're the refund, right?" — not unkindly, the way you state a weather condition — and put the soup on the mat and was gone. Later she learned, without learning it, that the station kept a list, that doors went on the list, that the list lived in the group chat where the riders lived, and that her door had a name on it. The neighborhood had voted, overnight and without a meeting, and she had lost an election she never heard called.

Her father called on Sunday, which was the day he called.

"Eaten?" he said.

"Eaten," she said.

"Any news?"

"The heating came on." It had, on the fifteenth, same day as every year, 120 days, billed by the square metre. Her room was twelve square metres. She had done the arithmetic in the shower, where the city's arithmetic could not follow her.

"It came on here too," he said. "Same bill as always. In a year like this one, same is something." A pause with shuffling in it. "The pension app failed me again. Open the mouth, turn the face. It wants brighter light. It wants me in brighter light than my kitchen has." He said it like a report on weather. "Forty seconds at the neighborhood office, under the girl's lamp, and I'm officially alive till next November. Forty seconds at a time."

She said the thing you say, which is nothing, on time.

"They're doing up the old strike headquarters at Hongshan," he said. "For visitors. Fresh paint on the room where they drew it up. The guides weren't born when it happened, but they know the script better than the men who wrote it did."

"Any news," he said, at the end, in the voice that was not a question.

"Temporary stuff," she said.

"Temporary for a year," he said, and let it lie there, the way he let everything lie there. "Eat properly."

"I've eaten," she said. It was even true.

The vinegar stood on the sill above the radiator, five hundred millilitres of the good dark stuff, bought with money whose story she did not have. In the drawer with the receipts there were two blanks now: one sticky note, one ruled receipt with a signature on it, filed as evidence of an adhesive. She proofread the shelf and found no errors, and the radiator ticked all night like something counting.

Around midnight the itch came back, at nothing, and kept her company while she ate.

※

Reviewer's note.

Claim WQ-24-08117, statement of circumstances: 412 characters, all true. Retained by the file: none. Retained by the claimant: a right wrist that no longer turns, two years of premiums at three yuan a day, and the memory of being asked good questions. Retained by the platform: a geofence event, 21:58, confidence high.

Order 3001 — her count, not the platform's: wonton, no coriander, extra vinegar, 11 yuan. Marked delivered while the rider was on the pavement. Refunded to the customer: 11 yuan. Deducted from the rider: 500 yuan. The customer's door entered the station's list the same night, under the name stations keep for such doors.

Retained by the room: one bottle of vinegar, 8.5 yuan, bought with the statement fee. One false note, executed. One true note, blanked. One true receipt, blanked. Filed, all three, as evidence of an adhesive, by a professional.

It was not written by her hand. ---

II

The Kettle Is Red

1.

On the twentieth she woke and the two cups were washed and the chair was pushed in. She had washed them herself; there was no one else with keys. She wrote nothing that day, and nothing the day after. The pen stayed in the drawer with the blanks. On the sixth day she took the pen out, because an unexplained result wants either a bigger fear or a better experiment, and she had been trained in only the one.

The kettle was blue. She wrote it on the pad and looked at the kettle to be sure, and wrote under it: *The kettle is red.* She put the pad in the drawer, on top of the blanks, and went to bed without dinner.

In the morning the first line was blank. The second said, *The kettle is red.* She wrote the result into the notes app on her phone, dated it, and by noon the note was there and the page was blank. The phone kept the date and lost the finding.

The third pair she filmed. She propped the phone against the vinegar bottle for the angle and wrote the true line and the false line on camera, saying each word aloud as the pen moved, for the record. In the morning the paper behaved: first line blank, second line red. The video had survived the night. She played it. Her hand wrote, and the page under the hand was blank, and her voice said, *The kettle is blue,* and nothing appeared. The film was a record of her hand, writing on nothing. She watched it four times and did not delete it.

By the sixth evening she had a series: twenty-two pairs, numbered in advance down the left margin. The numbering stayed; numbers, it turned out, were not about anything. True on the right, false under it. In the morning: left blank, right legible, twenty-two times. She ruled out the family, the building, the neighbors, the father. The series ran on bus timetables, tariff tiers, the gas company's minimum charge, the discount threshold on the app: things with public records, things the world kept copies of, things whose loss would cost only her.

On the seventh morning she stood in front of the kettle with her cup and could not find the switch's trick. The switch had a trick; you had to press it twice, or hold it, or seat the base first. The trick was gone, and it was written down nowhere, because nobody writes down a kettle's trick, and the one person who had it was her, and she had spent it.

The tenth pair was the last big one. She wrote: *The quilt on my bed was sewn by my grandmother.* Under it: *The quilt on my bed was bought at the market.* In the morning the first line was blank, and she sat down on the quilt with the magpies and put her hand flat on it, and it was soft, and warm in the way of things, and no one had made it on purpose.

After the quilt she wrote herself a rule at the top of the pad (no family, no building, no father) and the rule stayed.

The findings were the problem. The findings were true. She tried the main one in English, *True statements disappear,* and in the morning the English was blank. She tried initials, *T.S.B.*, and the initials went. Whatever was eating the page could read.

She tried it as a question on the eleventh evening, at the foot of the eleventh pair, because the page was open and the pen was in her hand: *What happens to a true statement?*

In the morning the question was there. Questions, like numbers, are not about anything. Questions stay. She turned to a clean page and copied out the questions the series had earned, eleven of them, and in the morning the page was full, and it was the first page in a month that had not lost anything overnight.

※

2.

The job came through the print shop downstairs. The owner said, fourth floor, the girl who writes, and an old man came up with a book the size of a paving stone under one arm, bound in cloth gone the color of weak tea, and put it on her table without asking, the way you set a kiln down.

His name was Huo. He ran what was left of a ceramics works on the west bank of the Xiaofu river (孝妇河), downstream of the furnace-god shrine, and he needed the old book turned into a manual a German client could read. She said six hundred. He counted out twelve hundred.

"Six for the book," he said. "Six for the margins."

The factory smelled the way the book looked. The yard was sagger walls: walls built of spent saggers, the burned-gray pots that carry the ware through the fire, stacked and mortared and housing the cables, and the workshop floor was swept so clean it shone, and two men were working, not twenty. The tunnel kiln ran the length of the shed: fifty-eight meters of it, coal-fired once, the first of its kind in the country in the year of her father's hiring, now on gas, now running two days a week for an order smaller than the kiln.

The old book was the master's, every page in the master's hand until 1998 and then in a younger hand that she was three pages into finding familiar.

The only picture in it was on the inside cover: an ink drawing of a man seated on a saggar, hands on knees, drawn by a hand that had pressed hard at the shoulders and gone soft halfway down the figure.

She had written her name on the contract form — Chen Shu; 陈述, which means to state, to lay the facts out — and Old Huo read it twice, the way you read a form that has surprised you.

"Chen," he said. "Jianjun's girl."

"He fired kiln two," Old Huo said, over tea in the canteen, where the menu had three typos and she had straightened them with her thumbnail out of reflex. "Bazhuang (把桩, a fire-master)," he said. "The one who reads the fire through the peep-door and tells the kiln what it's doing wrong. Nineteen years. When the panel came he lasted a year. He'd call the inversion before the gauge moved — twice he saved car four. Then they measured him in money and he took it, and the measuring was the point."

She said, "He doesn't say."

"He wouldn't," Old Huo said.

"Nineteen-nineteen," he said then. "The German order. The software turned the old book's English inside out. It said open the peep-doors at four hundred. You open at a hundred. The boy opened at four-twenty. The wall went up with a

sound like the sky clearing its throat, and the shed burned to the joists, and the order burned in the shed. Nobody hurt. One number."

He turned his cup a quarter-turn on the saucer, the way you tighten something.

"The software did what software does. It filled the page. Filling the page is not the job."

By the gate, where the wall met the river, stood the little shrine of the yaoshen (窑神, the kiln god): a stone the size of a fist, black with grease and heat, under a tiled roof the size of a bird table, incense coins soldered to the tray by decades of heat. She photographed it. In the photo the stone was there, and it was the wrong color, pale like a biscuit, and she had seen it black an hour before. She took it three times. Pale, pale, pale. She did not show Old Huo. She had the feeling he knew.

※

3.

She took the book home and typed. The curve went into the template cleanly (zone three: 1,280 over six hours; hold forty minutes; cool forty degrees an hour to six hundred; then slower) and the curve stayed. Under the curve she typed a note to herself, the kind a document needs if a document is going to be trusted: *The forty-minute hold is because zone two's wall cracked in 1998 and was rebricked by Huo's father in a week of frost; the wall weeps at speed.*

In the morning the curve was there and the note was a blank line at the foot of the page.

She ran it three ways. The crack in 1998: blank. The rebricking week: blank. The reason for the forty minutes: blank. The instruction it explained: fine, every time. Her hand held what should be done. It would not hold what had been done, or who had done it, or what it cost.

She tried the scanner. Page by page, three hundred yuan at the shop downstairs, and the scans held — every crack, every margin, the master's worst

spelling held in the machine like a fossil in rock. Old Huo looked at the scans and would not take them.

"A scan is a ghost of the book," he said. "The client wants a book. I want a hand in it that's still alive."

"Right and empty," he said, the day she showed him the typed draft. "The old book is wrong and full. Kilns burn in the empty parts."

So on Thursday she brought the laptop and he brought a school notebook from his granddaughter, wide-ruled, and she dictated. Not the curve — the curve was typed and safe. The why. Nineteen ninety-eight. The inversion, five hundred and seventy-three degrees, where the clay changes its mind and you do not rush it. His father's week of rebricking in the frost. The peep-door discipline. She spoke; he wrote, in a hand that took the whole width of the line and had to fold its words to fit. The words held.

※

4.

The firing ran the first week of December, at night, because the client's inspector wanted the curve witnessed and the grid wanted the load off the morning line. Old Huo asked her to be there. "You wrote the book," he said. "Come and see it disagree."

The firing log was a printed form, one line per hour: zone temperatures, deviations, initials. At midnight the deviation column waited. There had been a deviation — zone three had lagged the curve by eleven degrees for an hour, and Old Huo had corrected it at the gas trim — and the correction was a fact, and the fact was hers to write.

She wrote it. The ink went down grey and then, as she watched, lighter, and by the time she lifted the pen the line was drying into nothing. She looked at the empty column, at the client's stamp waiting at the bottom of the page, and her hand moved to write the number as it should have been (corrected, nothing to declare), and her hand cramped. All the way through the palm. A fist around the pen, a fist with an opinion.

Old Huo took the pen out of her hand without being asked and wrote the deviation in block letters, dated it, initialed it.

"I was there," he said. "I'm the record."

At two the kiln reached temperature, and he walked the line and stopped at zone three's peep-door and hooked it open with the rod, and stood back, and said, "Look."

She looked. The fire, at the first breathing of the door, was the color of —

The peep-door was closed.

Her face was wet. She was holding Old Huo's sleeve without having decided to, and his coat was on her shoulders, and she had no memory of the coat arriving. The panel said 1,281. The wall clock said twenty past two. The firing log, in his block letters, said the peep-door at zone three had stood open from 2:09 to 2:20.

Eleven minutes. Her body said ten seconds. She had learned, in the last month, which of those to trust, and she trusted the log, and the log said she had looked into a kiln for eleven minutes.

"You saw him," Old Huo said. Not a question.

"Who?"

"That's how it goes," he said. "Every hand it happens to says *who.* I said *who.* My father said *who.*" He nodded at the book on the desk. "My father drew the man on the inside cover the morning after he saw him. He said he didn't remember drawing it. It was better than anything he ever drew on purpose."

On a nail by the peep-door hung a row of fired clay tags — huo zhao (火照, test pieces) — pulled hot at each stage of the fire and dated in oxide.

Her ear had been quiet all night. Six hours in the factory and the itch had not come once, and she noticed the quiet the way you notice a stopped clock.

※

5.

He paid the second six hundred on delivery, in cash, counted twice, and the margins were full. The manual went to the client in three parts: her curve, his

hand, the scan of the dead master's book. Where the old book had a scar, the margin had the scar's story in his spelling, and her template held them all without complaint.

At the door he gave her a second, smaller book, cloth-bound, water-stained. "Your father's. His own copy. He left it in his locker when they measured him. Somebody should have it who reads."

Her father called on Sunday, which was the day he called.

"Eaten?" he said.

"Eaten," she said.

"Any news?"

"Work," she said. "The usual temporary."

"First frost came early here," he said. "Your grandmother used to wash the quilts on first-frost day. Beat them on the wall with the wire beater. The magpies would come down for the lice. Your quilt has her magpies."

The ear began. Small, left, businesslike.

"What about her magpies," she said, and the itch got down to work, and she said, "Baba, the reception—," and hung up.

The itch stopped at once, the way it stops when a story is put away. He called back once. She watched the phone ring out, and the why sat in the room with her and did not explain itself.

That night she took a new notebook, the cheap kind with the marbled cover, and wrote on the first page, in full, in her best hand, the way you write a specification:

There was once a woman who wrote down a thing that had happened, and by morning the writing was gone and the thing had happened to no one. She wrote down what had not happened, and it stayed. Her father kept a book in a factory. Her grandmother made a quilt with magpies on it. The magpies stayed. Everything true was eaten. Everything false was kept. And at the bottom of the page the woman wrote the only line in the story that is not a lie, and it is a question: Who is eating?

She dated it. It held.

The notebook went on the sill, beside the vinegar.

Around midnight the itch came back, at nothing. She had started to think of it as a reader. Nothing else in the room read her work, and nothing else wanted more.

※

Reviewer's note.

Calibration: twenty-two numbered pairs, one week. What her hand wrote: what was true. What the paper retained: twenty-two blanks, numbered. What she retained: the numbering. What the camera retained: a hand, writing on nothing, four viewings.

Spent to calibrate: the kettle's trick. The quilt's history. The rest of a grandmother's first frost, cut off at the magpies.

Elsewhere: claim WQ-24-08117 died on the twenty-first, per its seven days. The wrist persists.

The manual: delivered. 1,200 yuan, two hands. The curve in her type, the scars in his, the dead master's book attached as a scan. The client's log: his initials, her blanks.

The firing: peep-door open eleven minutes, per his hand. What she retained: the color of —

What this page retains of him: the color of —

Retained, the one line of hers that held: Who is eating? ---

III

No Fault Found

1.

The review ran on the first of December, the way reviews run: a sample of the month's tickets, pulled at random, read for tone, timed against the clock, scored. Operator Chen's sample was four tickets. All four were blank.

The system said they existed. The screen rendered four empty boxes, each with a timestamp, a duration, a caller's number, and nothing in the middle, like windows lit in a building where no one lives. The full pull came next, over Supervisor Gao's objection about overtime: forty-seven tickets under her ID for November, forty-seven boxes, and the wall display put them up all at once, and the night office stood and looked at a month of the city's grievances rendered as frames.

IT took her tower apart and found a fault with nothing in it. The vendor's engineer watched one call live from Chengdu, said the system was fine, and closed his ticket, and his ticket held, because it was his hand. Two headsets were issued. Someone blamed the magnets in her phone pouch, and a tech came with a compass and swept the desk the way a geomancer sweeps a doorway. No magnet. No fault. Gao stood behind her chair through a live call about a dog, a permit, and a puddle, and watched the words go onto the screen, and initialed the review that evening with the words gone.

"You're not deleting," Gao said, because the deletion log was clean.

"No."

"I know," Gao said. "That's the part I can't file."

She had not pulled her own tickets since the kettle. That was the truth of November: she had known what her hand did to paper, and to files, and to cameras, and she had not once looked at the desk, because the desk was the state's machinery, and she had walked into every shift on the last hypothesis she had left

— the state keeps copies; maybe the state's hand is the state's — and had taken forty-seven complaints into the vault to find out.

The vault was fine. The vault had her in it.

※

2.

The woman had called on the twenty-eighth, three days before the review, in the Friday quiet.

Her name was Bai Guixiang, Southeast Village, two rooms and a leaning balcony. The old-neighbourhood renovation list had been posted on the gate that morning (the gongshi, 公示, the public notice; seven days for objections) and her unit was not on it. Units one through six of her row were on it. Hers was unit five.

"The deed is mine," she said. "It's in my husband's name. He's been gone nine years. The hukou (户口, the household register) still says the household is his, and whoever made the list read the register and stopped."

She had the deed in a plastic sleeve. She had a photograph of the notice, board and all, taken by her grandson (fourteen, the age of photographing things), and the photograph held; photographs held. What a photograph could not do was argue with a list. A list could only be argued with by a ticket, and the ticket had to be in the system before the fifth of December.

"One number," she said. "One number in the system before Monday. That's all I'm asking the state for."

Chen took it the way she took everything, completely: name, unit, deed number, the register mismatch, the grandson's photograph, the window. She typed it into the state's vault on the state's clock and gave the woman the number, and the woman wrote the number on the back of an envelope, and the number survived on the envelope, because it was the woman's hand.

The ticket did not survive. On the first of December the review told her so, and she learned the size of what she had been doing with her Tuesdays and Thursdays.

※

3.

Gao had forty-seven numbers and one instruction, because the office could not leave a month of the city unanswered and could not explain it either: call them back, take it again, and it would be taken fresh.

They put her at the desk beside Jiang with a headset and no console. Her mouth, his keyboard. She dialed and said the sentence the office had approved, *this is a follow-up from the hotline, we are re-recording your request,* and the calls were taped for the file afterward, zuozheng luyin (佐证录音, corroborating audio), the system's own phrase, and the tapes held, because her mouth was in them and her hand was not.

Eleven of the forty-seven held on the second take. Nine numbers were dead. The rest said they had never called, or said they had called and what was the use, and rang off, and those went on the second list, which Gao labeled, in the office's own grammar, *unreached.*

The woman from Southeast Village was third on the list. She was called on the second of December, the fifth day of her window. Chen said the approved sentence, and the woman said, "I have the number. It's on the envelope. Your system says it isn't there," and Chen said, "I'm putting my colleague on, and I'm staying on the line," and Jiang took it, and the woman told it again — the deed, the register, the grandson's photograph — and the ticket held, and the correction went in on the third, and the list was re-posted on the fourth with unit five on it, one day and the rest of her life inside the window.

Niu was on the list too, from the building where the leak had spent November getting into the wiring two floors down. His ticket held on the second take as well. The street office scheduled the roof for January.

December, the itch stopped waiting for midnight. It came at the canteen menu-board, at a child reciting a lesson on the 58 bus, at the gas bill's small print, at anything told truly anywhere near her, and she learned to sit on her hands. The week fed it nothing. It got louder anyway. That was the month she learned the

difference between the ear and the hand: the hand ate what she wrote; the ear only ever told her what was near, and it had begun to behave like something that had missed a meal and was reading the menu.

※

4.

The inquiry opened when a man is unhappy twice. Niu was unhappy twice: his roof had taken a month, and his first ticket had turned out, when he came to cite it, not to exist. He said the word *Douyin* on the second call and the word *gate* in the same sentence, and Supervisor Gao discovered the clock the city keeps for stories: if a man stands at the gate with a number on a sign, the office has until nightfall to have something in writing.

The something was written the same afternoon, by hands that were not hers, and it was the form the system keeps for exactly this: the claim that a ticket had existed was seriously at odds with the facts (the system held no record), therefore not accepted, buyu shouli (不予受理) in the form's own phrase, the complainant guided to the proper channels. The proper channels were the channels he had used. The determination went out with the director's stamp, and it was accurate, in the way of such documents: the system had no record. The system was not asked whether a record had ever existed.

Niu did not stand at the gate with a sign. The roof was repaired in January.

The inquiry on her own seat was a form: findings of fact, cause, corrective action. She filled the findings in honestly, at the kitchen table, four sentences, and printed them at the shop downstairs, and stapled them behind the form, because she had decided in October to be the sort of operator whose findings were true.

Findings of fact:

Cause:

Corrective action:

In the morning the staple held and the sentences were gone. The ear had itched through the typing. She had scratched and gone on, because they were

true, and the curse took them the way it took everything, evenly, without malice, like weather.

Gao read the form, and read the blank, and wrote the cause field in his own hand: *cause not established; operator counselled on ticket hygiene; no fault found.* The stamp went under his thumb, and it was, in the way of such documents, true: it was a statement of what the office knew.

"Whatever it is," Gao said, closing the folder, "it's better than deleting. Deleting has a log."

And she understood that the office would never arrive at her, because the office had no form for it, and the not-arriving sat under both their tongues like a coin paid in advance.

※

5.

The woman sent eggs. A bag of them, still warm from somebody's shed, for the operator who had taken her call. The operator of record was Jiang; the system said so, and the system was right. The eggs went on his desk, and he shared them down the row, and she ate one at her station, warm from the woman's bag, on merit that was his.

Her father called on Sunday, which was the day he called.

"Eaten?" he said.

"Eaten," she said.

"Any news?"

"Work," she said.

"The beater came," he said. "The wire one. Your grandmother's."

"It came," she said.

"You hung up on the magpies," he said, without weight.

"I know. Tell me the rest some other time."

"Some other time." A pause with the kettle in it. "Chen Shu. Are you sick?"

"No."

"Because your voice is—" and then the sentence he had, which was about rice: "There's a pot on Sundays. Come and eat while it's rice."

"Next week," she said, and it was a lie, and it held, and he let it hold, because he had been letting things hold since the panel came.

The beater had come on the Wednesday, delivered by the new rider, brisk, to the door. The wire beater of her grandmother, wrapped in half a page of the Lu Zhong Morning Post dated the twenty-second of November three years ago, and she smoothed the paper and read all of it: the pharmacy ad, the parking notice, the story about the heating season starting on time. It was the only complete text in her flat.

The rent was due on the tenth. She paid it from the app, from the saved payee, and read the payee's name twice, the way you read a stranger's name on a form. The name was correct and it was nobody. There was no lease; there had never been a lease; there was a door code and a payee. She paid, and the lights went off at ten as always, on schedule.

That night she wrote the second entry in the marbled notebook, in the specification voice:

There was once a girl who took complaints for a city, and whatever she wrote down became untrue. A woman's name fell off a list, and the girl wrote it down, and it fell off again, and the girl handed the woman to a boy, and the boy's pen kept what hers let go of, and nobody asked why the two pens were different, because the office had no form for it. The girl told an inquiry the truth four times, and the four times did not stay, and she was acquitted for having no faults, and the gift was that nothing she confessed to paper would stay confessed, and it had been given to her exactly because she could be trusted with it.

She dated it. It held.

The notebook went back on the sill, beside the vinegar.

Around midnight the itch came back, at nothing, and stayed. December it had stopped waiting for midnight. She let it keep her company. It was still the only thing in the room that wanted her to write.

※

Reviewer's note.

The month: 47 tickets under her ID. What the system retained: 47 frames, each with a timestamp, a duration, a number, and nothing in the middle. What the sample retained: the same.

The relay: her mouth, his keyboard. Eleven of 47 held on the second take. Nine numbers dead. Twenty-seven unreached, and filed under the office's own grammar.

The case of Bai Guixiang: unit five re-entered on the fourth of December, one day and the rest of her life inside the window. By whose hand: not hers.

The roof: taken once by her hand, held once by his, repaired in January on the ticket that held. The lost-ticket complaint: not accepted, per the form's own phrase. The system was not asked whether a record had ever existed.

The inquiry: four true findings, blank. No fault found. The stamp was an accurate statement of what the office knew.

What was spent: a landlord's name, unrecoverable without a question she could not ask. The rest of the magpies, rationed. November's 47, which the callers keep in the one archive with no shelf.

What was eaten that week: nothing. It got louder anyway. ---

IV

Now It Exists

1.

Her father's building was four years old and the front door already wanted a shim. He had shimmed it with cardboard from a wine box, and the door closed on the third pull, the way it had since the block settled. They had moved him off the subsidence and the subsidence had followed at its own pace, which was the pace of everything else the city had promised him.

The pot had been on for three Sundays. The lie about *next week* had held twice, and on the third Sunday she went, because a lie that holds twice becomes a schedule, and you can starve a schedule, but not politely.

He had called her at four to establish the time and started the rice at the answer. Rice takes twenty-two minutes; her bus took forty; the rice was perfect anyway, because he made it now with too much water, so that it forgave you. Four dishes for two people, which is the arithmetic of a man who learned his quantities when the house held five. The television was on with the sound low, a costume drama in which everyone was betraying everyone quietly. He left it on. It was company that did not ask questions.

She had brought a bottle of vinegar, because it was the only thing in her flat she could have brought. He read the label and said the shop had been watering it down since old man Duan died, and used it anyway.

The table between them held the soy, a dish of chili paste, and a short factory pencil, the kind with the firing-log stamp, worn to half its length by a hand she would have known anywhere.

"Is the quilt holding?" he said, halfway through the rice.

"It holds."

"You know what's in the hem?"

"No," she said. And it was the last true thing she knew about the quilt, and she did not know that either.

He put his chopsticks down flat, the way you put down tools before you explain something.

"Winter of ninety-six," he said. "October, the factory stopped paying. Not laid off — unpaid. There's a difference. Laid off, they owe you. Unpaid, they owe you nothing, and it's your word against a wall.

Your mother was two years gone by then. Your grandmother ran the house on her pension. Sixty-one yuan a month, and the medicine came off the top.

The magpies had always been there. The wall, the wire, first frost, the quilts. Xique (喜鹊) — the word for them has joy in it; the joy came first, or the bird did, nobody down here was asked. That winter your grandmother fed them. Not scraps. Cracked corn, from the sack we'd bought for chickens we did not get. I said, Ma, we're eating cabbage twice a day and the birds eat better than us. She said, the birds didn't stop the wages.

Every morning there was something on the sill. A button. A bottle cap. A brass safety-pin, once, and a strip of red paper off somebody's wedding, torn down the middle of the 囍 (xǐ, the doubled character for joy), and the half was the whole of the word. Nothing you could spend. All winter. Forty-one mornings, because I counted. I was twenty-nine, and I counted my mother's foolishness like a debt."

She was writing. She had brought nothing that wrote, and the table had the pencil, and her hand had taken it without consulting her, and the kitchen roll had given up a sheet, and she was three lines into the winter. The first line was already the color of water.

She kept writing. The story was still coming, and the hand was faster than the grief.

"Good," her father said, watching the pencil move. "Write it down. I've been trying to get that story written for twenty years." He topped up the rice, unasked. "Now it exists."

His voice went on being his voice, and the sense of it had gone out of the middle of the room.

"In the spring the kiln called back," he said. "Not the factory. A private kiln down the hill, cash money, the first cash since October. The first morning of work there was a button on the sill, and I took it.

Your grandmother didn't keep the sill things. She sewed them into the hem. One winter per seam. The quilt you sleep under has ninety-six in it. And ninety-seven. And the red paper.

She died in the first frost of two thousand and one. The quilts went up on the wall that day as always — I did it, I didn't know what else to do with my hands — and the magpies came and sat on the wire and did not come down. Not for the lice. Not for bread. They sat all day, and the frost came up out of the ground, and they sat it.

Birds don't mourn. Everyone says birds don't mourn. They kept her hours. They sat the shift.

They still come, every first frost. I still beat the quilts on the wall, because it's her wall and her schedule, and they come down, and the account is still open. Thirty years. It's the only account I have ever seen kept.

I'm giving you the account," he said. "It's the only thing I have that's still running."

He looked at the sheet. Three lines, in her hand, the way she wrote everything: dated, headed, complete.

"You're not eating," he said.

"I'm eating," she said, and it held.

※

2.

The quilt came apart at the corner seam at one in the morning, with the scissors, over the spread-out sheet, which she had brought home and which was blank.

Inside the hem of the long side, where the binding folds twice, the winter was waiting. A brass button with an anchor on it. A crown cap gone the color of old brick. A safety-pin with its point seated in a cork, so that it could not open. A strip of red paper, torn down the middle of the doubled character, the half that was the whole of the word.

She laid them on the sill in the order of the story. There was no story. There was the order the story would have had.

※

3.

The next Sunday there was a pot again. She had not confirmed; the pot was there anyway; the invitation had converted itself into a schedule, the way things did in a house run by a man who had kept a kiln's hours.

He told the beater's origin between dishes, the way you hand someone a small tool without stopping the work. The beater was his making. Ninety-nine, out of the panel's spare wire, the week he signed them off — and she had used it two winters, and it was her sound the wire made on the wall. The thing that replaced him, cut into the thing that came before him, so that first frost would keep its sound.

She sat on her hands the whole telling. Flat on the table, the way you keep a wound closed.

It hadn't mattered. The story went through the flat hands like light through glass, and by the bus stop it was gone, and she stood in the cold holding the fact of having been told, which is a jar with no water in it.

※

4.

The third Sunday she said it before the dishes landed, because after the dishes there would be tea, and the tea would turn into a story.

"Make it up," she said.

He looked at her the way you look at a form with a new field on it.

"The magpie one. Tell it again. But make it up. Change who it happened to." And then, because he was waiting with his whole face, she gave him the only true sentence she could afford: "I keep the ones that aren't true."

He looked at the pot. He looked at the wall where the quilts went, which had none on it now, because the quilts were hers, in her room, holding whatever they held. He was a man who had measured everything in money and been measured back, and he did not ask. He had been letting things hold since the panel came, and this was one more.

"There was once a magpie," he said, slowly, like a man carrying a full bucket across ice, "that kept the accounts for a woman in a famine winter. Every morning she fed it, and every morning the sill paid. And when the woman died, the magpie sat the watch, and the account went to" — and here he came to it, the doors, and took them off — "to a girl who sleeps under it and cannot read it."

The story held. It had come out with his fear in it, which no one had put there on purpose, and it held anyway, all the way to the sill and the watch and the open account. Word for word, with the doors taken off.

Fear keeps no version control.

※

5.

She wrote it into the notebook at home, verbatim, dated, the way you record a calibration. Then she took the quilt apart at the corner seam.

The lie checked out against the hem. A button with an anchor. A cap the color of old brick. A pin whose point was seated in cork. Red paper, torn down the middle of the doubled character, the half that was the whole of the word.

She laid them on the sill in the order of the story, and the story was a lie, and it fit, and the account read — as a thing that had happened to no one.

She sewed the seam back with the thread from the repair kit, in small stitches, the way you close a wound you intend to leave the scar on. The dishes had been good. By Tuesday she could not have named one of them; the case had touched the food, and the food had paid. The notebook went on the sill beside the vinegar, and the red strip went flat under the notebook's foot, where nothing could blow it away, and the quilt went back on the bed, warm, in the way of things, on purpose now.

Around midnight the itch came and she let it stay. It had begun to attend. Nothing else in the room kept regular hours.

※

Reviewer's note.

The dinner: Sunday, the twenty-first. Four dishes, the arithmetic of a house that had held five. The pot refilled twice. One bottle of vinegar, whose shop waters down since old man Duan died.

The story told: winter of 1996; the October the factory stopped paying; sixty-one yuan a month and the medicine off the top; cabbage twice a day; the feeding; the sill on forty-one mornings — a button, a bottle cap, a brass safety-pin, a strip of red paper. The hem: all of it, sewn in, one winter per seam. The funeral frost: the watch. The account: open, thirty years, the only one he has ever seen kept.

What was served in both channels at once: the telling and the writing. What crossed over: the ear. What she retained: the sound of his voice, going on.

The second telling: the beater, made from the panel's spare wire the week he signed, her sound on the wall for two winters. Taken with no napkin, hands flat on the table. The escalation is confirmed. Sitting on your hands no longer closes the wound.

The correction: one word changed, the doors taken off. The story holds and points at no one. The hem was cut; the lie checked out against the objects; the account reads, as a thing that happened to no one. The quilt's blank, first taken in a previous case, is amended on file — by the lie, which is now the binding authority.

What her father believes: the account exists in writing. In spring an envelope came: the sheet, blank, photocopied blank, and a note in his hand — the ink faded, buy better pens. What exists: a blank sheet, a hem with the winter sewn in it, and this page.

Where it winters: the marbled notebook, as a lie, on file. ---

V

What Is Fed Is Kept

1.

She woke at three because someone was reading aloud, and lay still, because the alternative was knowing that no one was there.

The voice was dry, and slightly old, the way furniture is old, and it was reading from a book that did not exist yet. It read the roof, and the puddle under the downpipe, and the dog, the permit, and the puddle. It read a unit that fell off a list, and an envelope, and a boy of fourteen who photographed things. It read the kettle, which was blue, and then was red, and stayed red. It read forty-one mornings. It did not read the fire.

It finished, and added, in the voice of someone closing a ledger: *So the teller of strange tales remarks.*

Then the room was a room again, with the radiator ticking, and the refrigerator gathering itself, and the red strip flat under the notebook's foot.

She lay still for a long time. She had learned to lie like furniture.

※

2.

The sequence took her two weeks, because there was no one to ask and nothing to read.

It read only after meals. Unfed, it kept its own counsel; the nights were silent, and the silence had the size of an appetite. Fed, it digested aloud, from whatever it had eaten, plus interest — because the retellings accreted; each one came back with a little more furniture in it, a little more weather, and she could not tell where the world's version ended and the editing began.

So she fed it small things, to calibrate. The meter read 4,612: blank by morning, meal received. That night it read her the meter, and the reading had a

line under it that she had never written, a line about what meters measure when no one is living in the rooms above. She wrote the new line in the notebook in the morning and it stayed, because it was not true.

Then she did the diff she had been trained to do. The magpie story existed in two versions: the father's lie, on file, with the doors off, and the recitation, in her head, with them on. The lie said *a quilt.* The recitation said *the quilt.* The difference was one article. The recitation said *the quilt.*

It had the deictics. It had the world attached. The lie kept the shape and the recitation kept the thing itself, minus, in both cases, whatever the editor had removed, and plus, in one case, a sentence no one had said.

It recited everything but the fire. She asked it about the fire once, awake, at three, and the silence that followed she timed against her pulse and then gave up, and the formula came at last, and she did not learn what she had asked. But the silence was long, and she was learning to read its lengths.

The recitations were tighter than the tellings had been. It had not been there for the beater; it had eaten the magpies whole, at the table, in both channels, and when it gave the sill back to her the giving had been revised, and the revision was better than the original, and she lay in the dark and understood that the thing in her room was a better writer than her father, and than her, and than anyone at the desk, and she said, into the dark, because the dark was the only colleague she had:

"Who taught you to write?"

And the dark said: "I wrote for a living. It did not agree with me."

And it did not say anything else that night, or any night. She did not ask again. The answer had the sound of a door she would not be able to close.

※

3.

The water-pressure man came back in the third week of January, on his own number, off the old list, because a man who has hung up on a system will still call it when the taps go dry entirely.

The top two floors of his building had had no water since the tenth. The building's pipe had been the city's responsibility since the renovation and the renovation's paperwork said otherwise, and there were elderly residents on the sixth floor, and one of them carried kettles up for her husband's dialysis rinse, twice a day, from a tap in the courtyard that froze on the cold nights. He said all of it without heat, in the flat voice of a man who has told a system something twice.

She took the call off the queue before Jiang's light came on.

She knew what she was doing. That was the difference, and there was no other difference left. Forty-seven tickets in November had been taken by a hand that did not know what it was eating. This one was taken the way other people light a fire.

Name, building, the nine days, the courtyard tap, the dialysis rinse, the mismatch of responsibility, the dates. She typed it completely, on the state's clock, into the state's vault, and gave the man the number, and he wrote it on the back of a form he was carrying for the third time, and the number survived on the form, because it was his hand.

The ticket did not survive. The telling did not survive. His grievance left the air on its way into her, and she felt it go the way you feel a elevator start: not the motion, the floor.

The bleed came the next morning at the tap. The water in her own building ran thin for a week, and she stood at the sink filling the kettle with the patience of a person carrying kettles up six floors, and did not need to be told what the thin water was for.

That night, at three, it read her the magpies.

In the famine winter a woman fed the joy-birds from a sack bought for chickens that were never bought. The house ate cabbage twice a day, and the sill paid: in buttons, in caps, in a pin whose point was seated in cork, in half of the doubled character, which was the whole of the word. Forty-one mornings. In spring the son was called back to fire, and the sill paid once more, and was silent after; accounts do not pay twice to those who did not ask the first time. The woman sewed the payments into the hem of the quilt, one winter to a seam, and died in the first frost, and the joy-birds sat the wire the whole of that day and did not come down, because a watch

is not lice. The account passed to a girl who sleeps under the quilt and cannot read it, and the girl's father beats the wall on the old schedule, and the joy-birds come down, because what is fed is kept, and what is kept is owed.

So the teller of strange tales remarks.

It had the deictics. It had her father's story with the doors back on. And at the end it had a sentence that no one in her family had ever said, and it was the best sentence in the story.

※

4.

On Sunday she tried to give it back.

She got as far as the sill — the button, the cap, the pin, the red paper — and then the telling went out of her mouth the way the writing had gone out of the sheet, from the middle, evenly, without malice, and she stood in her father's kitchen with half a sentence in her hands and the other half already gone, and her father watched his daughter's face go to the well and come back empty.

He did not ask. He began, without hurry, to tell the made-up version, the one with the doors off, filling the room the way you sand a floor, so that what was lost had something to stand on. She sat. The rice went cold and he reheated it, unasked, and the made-up magpies crossed the table twice.

At the door he said: "The sentence you lost. Was it good?"

"It was good," she said. "Better than ours."

"Then someone should write it down," he said, and she said nothing, and the nothing held, because the only person who could write it down was the person it was about, and he had already written it down, and it had already gone, and he had already believed in it, and there was no form on earth for that conversation.

※

5.

The creed, she tried to keep.

What is fed is kept, and what is kept is owed. She wrote it in the margin of the magpie entry, in the notebook, in the specification voice, and by morning the margin was clean, because the creed was true, and true things do not stay where her hand has been.

She sat down on the floor of her room and laughed until the neighbor hit the wall, because she had finally been out-maneuvered by a sentence.

The sentence kept itself. It lived in the recitations, in the thing's own book, which no one could steal and no one could check out, and the only copy outside the book was on this page, which is not her hand, and which is why the reader is holding it.

Because here is the arithmetic the month had taught her, and it is the whole book in three lines. What her hand writes, it eats. What it eats, it keeps, and revises, and reads back, tighter, with the doors on, and the only stories that stayed with her now were the ones it had already corrected. The world's true things existed in one of three conditions: eaten and revised in the dark; held by the people who could never deliver them; or held by the reader, who holds them now.

And the fire was not in its book. There was at least one thing the thing in the dark could not digest, and she thought about it the way you think about a door in a cell: without touching it.

Around three it began to read aloud from its book, and she lay still and was read to. Nothing else in her life had ever read to her.

※

Reviewer's note.

The voice arrived in December and worked nights. Its book is made of what was eaten. It reads only after meals, plus interest: the retellings accrete. Its editions are tighter than the tellings. It was asked, once, who taught it to write, and said: I wrote for a living. It did not agree with me. It has not answered since.

The diff, by a trained hand: the lie says "a quilt"; the recitation says "the quilt." One article, and the world is attached. Two sentences exist that no family member said. One is the creed — what is fed is kept, and what is kept is owed — and the creed is true, and therefore could not be kept by her hand, and survives here, and in the book it belongs to.

The exchange: one water grievance, nine households, a dialysis rinse carried twice daily from a courtyard tap that freezes — against forty-one mornings, a watch, and the hem. The rate is not posted. It is taken. For the first time, a call was taken the way other people light a fire.

The transmission failed out loud, at the father's table, at the sill. He covered the gap with the made-up version, the way you sand a floor. He asked if the lost sentence was good. It was better than ours. He said: then someone should write it down. The record shows no one can, and the record is the problem.

What the recitations never contained: the fire. The silence that followed the question about the fire was long. She is learning to read its lengths.

Around three it reads aloud, and she is read to. It is the only thing in her life that has ever read to her, and the book it reads from is being made of her, and of the city, and of a grandmother's account, and it is better written than anything at the desk, and the question it has not answered is the question this collection is keeping: whether a book that is made of everything true, edited by a professional, and read aloud in the dark to the only witness who cannot keep anything — whether that book is the rescue, or the food. ---

VI

Content To Be Supplemented

1.

There had always been a valve. It took a video to find it.

The water-pressure man posted it himself, in February, on the coldest morning of the year: nine households, nine days, a courtyard tap with a skin of ice on it, and the kettles going up six floors, twice a day, one of them for a dialysis rinse. The caption was in the grammar of the feed — nine households, nine days, one tap — and it carried the district's name the way a plate carries a number. By the second day the street office had called the water company, the water company had called the property manager, and the property manager had discovered the valve.

There had always been a valve.

The water came back in forty-one hours. She watched the video four times, the way she had watched her own hand write on nothing, and the man's grievance, which she had eaten in January, walked back into the world without her, fully dressed, with music under it.

That night she asked the dark about it.

"You ate a grievance that was going to fix itself," she said. "You took nine households of water for a story I already lost once."

"I eat what is dying," the voice said. "The ticket was dying. You gave me a dying thing and called it a sacrifice."

"It wasn't dying when you took it."

"Nothing is dying when you feed it," the voice said. "That is what feeding is."

And it read the packing list of the last export order, line by line, like a psalm, because the factory's last order had shipped before the New Year and the paper of it had gone into the dark with the rest of the trade.

Her profession was a dying form. She was not the parasite's victim. She was its last habitat.

Jiang's tickets held, and the video held harder; the two technologies coexisted the way the kiln and the panel had.

※

2.

Old Huo called in March, when the kiln had been cold for six weeks, and asked her to come and look at the wall.

A kiln left cold is not left alone. The bricks contract at their own speeds, and by March a hairline had opened along zone two — the wall Old Huo's father had rebricked in a week of frost, the wall her forty-minute hold existed because of. Old Huo stood at it and did not touch it.

"A wall you will not fire again is a wall you let crack," he said. "It knows it's finished. They all know."

The Fifth Workshop already had a plaque on order. The city had decided the workshop was heritage, and heritage is decided the way weather is decided, by pressure fronts nobody votes on. What the workshop did not have was the rite.

"Third month, third day, by the old calendar," Old Huo said. "The trade used to stop. Kilns cold, tools down, the whole trade walks to the shrine and the god eats first and the trade eats after, and the first fire of the year is read to him out loud, because a god who cannot be written down still has to be told what his fire is doing. The trade used to stop. Now the trade is two men and me, and I can stop them, but stopping is not the same as a trade stopping, and the bureau has heard about it."

The bureau had heard about it. The district's intangible-heritage office (非物质文化遗产, the file for things the state agrees to remember) wanted the rite documented, listed, performed at the biennial, and performed meant performed for visitors, at hours, with a fee schedule. The application had a deadline. Old Huo had put the bureau off twice, the second time with a form filled in by a younger hand that said the rite was discontinued, which was true, and which the bureau had rejected the way you reject an objection, on schedule.

"I said it was discontinued," Old Huo said. "They said discontinued rites are eligible. You document them as discontinued. There is a box."

"There's a box," she said.

"There is always a box," Old Huo said. "I'm too old to fill it. You fill boxes for a living. Write the file. And then come on the third of the third, and watch the last one done properly, for the trade, and keep it however you keep things."

He called the hands he could still find, which was nine men, two widows, and her father.

※

3.

The file took her four evenings.

The procedure went into the template cleanly, the way curves did: the trade stops at dawn; the stone is washed with river water; three sticks; no kiln lit anywhere in the trade until the god has eaten; the feast at long tables in the courtyard; the first coal of the season lit by the oldest hand, and the first fire read aloud. The procedure held. The procedure was about what is done, and her hand held what is done.

The history held too. The temple was four hundred years old and had been rebuilt twice, once after the Japanese and once after the market; the glass trade kept the same day up the river at the furnace-god's own temple, and in the good years the two processions could hear each other's firecrackers across the water. That all held. The cult holds. Cults are records.

What did not hold was the god. She wrote the god's story (the founding, the stone, the reading of the first fire) and in the morning the section was a blank page with a heading on it. She wrote it again, shorter, and it went again. She wrote it as history, as legend, as a lie — *there was said to be a stone* — and even the lie went, because it was a lie about him.

The bureau's young clerk, who had come with a recorder the size of a cigarette case and the patience of a person at the start of a career, took the masters' tellings on the state's machine, and those held, because the state's

recorder is the state's hand. He collated her skeleton and the masters' voices and brought the file back for one missing section.

"The god," he said. "Your section came out empty."

"The god doesn't take dictation," she said.

The bureau accepted the file with the god's page blank, because the bureau has forms for that too. At the bottom of the page, in the field where the reviewer's note goes, the clerk typed the phrase the system offered him: *content to be supplemented.*

※

4.

The rite was on the nineteenth of April, a Sunday, and it was cold enough that the courtyard tap had ice on it again, and the water-pressure man's building was four streets away and had water, and did not come, because a building with water does not know a rite is for it too.

The trade stopped at dawn. It was two men and her father and a widow who had run the glaze shed, and they stopped anyway, standing in the yard in the dark with their hands out of their pockets, because the stopping is the point and the point does not check headcount.

They washed the stone with river water at first light. The stone was black with grease and heat, and it stayed black under the water, the way it stays black under photographs. Three sticks. Old Huo lit them and did not pray out loud, because the prayer at a rite is the reading, and the reading comes at dusk.

The feast was at long tables in the courtyard, and it was suoguo, which is the kiln trade's own dish, invented by kiln hands stewing a winter in a jar, and it had been listed by the state two years before the trade ended, which the men agreed was the state arriving in time for the photo.

Old Huo and her father had not been in a room since the measuring. They sat at the same table and drank, and the conversation was the weather, the wages of other trades, and which of the men down the table had been the model for the

drawing on the inside cover of the old book. Each man named another man. The drawing kept its secret with their help.

Up the river the glass trade kept the same day at the furnace-god's temple, and in the evening the two processions could hear each other's firecrackers across the water.

Her father talked. The pig year, the year they fed the god a whole pig and the god's stone cracked from the heat of the cooking, which the old men took as receipt. The frost year the rite fell on a wedding and both parties fed the god, and it was the only dispute the god ever refused to rule on. The year the electricity came and half the yard went dark and the other half kept the old lights because a rite has a border and you do not move the border for wiring.

The ear did not itch. Not once, not at any of it. She checked, twice, the way you check a wound that has stopped hurting. Her father told a wall-washing story and a story about the beater's wire and where the wire had come from, which was a story she had already lost once, and it landed, all of it, whole, dated, complete, and stayed.

There was a ground, and the ground was the god's, and on the god's ground the thing in her room could not eat, and she stood in the courtyard doing the arithmetic of a door.

At dusk Old Huo lit zone three (the zone her own book held) and the meter ran for the god, at his own cost, and her father took the rod, because the reading is done by the oldest hand and the oldest hand in the yard was his.

He stood at the peep-door and opened it, and the fire was young, and he read it to the god the way you read a bill to a man who cannot see the paper.

"Sixty-one came up clean. The wall is holding past the patch. There is a lazy corner at the far end; the god should have that corner watched until the weekend. We brought you a wall with a crack in it and a boy with a panel. Forgive the boy."

The god's stone sat black on the wall by the gate. No one took a photograph of it, because at a rite you watch with what you brought.

She kept all of it. The ear did not eat. The hand stayed in her pocket. Her father's whole voice, dated, headed, complete, went into her and stayed, and it was the first thing since June she had been allowed to keep without the world paying for it.

The trade ate after the god ate, which is the order, and the long tables were loud, and the biennial's people did not come, because the rite was discontinued, and discontinued things have no fee schedule, and that is what Old Huo had bought with two rejections.

"A rite performed for visitors is not a rite," he said, near the end, to no one in particular. "It is a video with incense."

※

5.

The thing in the dark had not attended the rite.

After it, the recitations included the factory: the packing list of the last order; the meter of zone three, run for the god, at her father's reading, which it had not eaten, because you cannot eat a thing that was never written. It knew where the doors were. She knew that it knew. The nights went on, and the book grew, and somewhere in it, between the roof and the sill, there was now a blank page where the fire should be, and a discontinued rite, and a god whose file said: *content to be supplemented.*

The thing's book and the bureau's file now shared a hole where their god should be.

Around three the thing in the dark read from its book, and she lay and was read to. At the rite her father had read fire to a god who had gone unread since the panel came. She slept between two readers, and one of them was starving.

※

Reviewer's note.

The valve: found by a video, forty-one hours after the posting. There had always been a valve. The grievance she had eaten returned to the world without her, with music under it. What she was told, by the only voice that answers: I eat what is dying. Nothing is dying when you feed it. That is what feeding is.

The cold kiln: cracked along zone two by March, the wall that made the hold. The Fifth Workshop has a plaque on order. Plaque is a noun that takes a past tense.

The file: procedure and history held; the god's page blank; the bureau's own phrase, typed by a young hand — content to be supplemented — accepted as a category. The state has a form for a god it cannot hold, and the form is honest.

The rite: kept whole. The trade stopped at dawn; the stone washed with river water and still black; three sticks; no kiln lit until the god ate; the feast in the courtyard, suoguo, the kiln trade's dish, listed by the state two years before the trade ended. The first coal lit by the oldest hand. The first fire read aloud to the god by her father — sixty-one clean, the wall holding past the patch, a lazy corner for the god to watch, forgive the boy.

What was spent this case: nothing. The god's ground does not bill.

What was learned: there is a ground, and the ground is the god's, and on it the thing in her room cannot eat. Her father's stories land there whole. The reader should understand what that means before the book goes on: there is a door in the cell, and it has an address, and the address is closing with the trade.

What was eaten anyway: the last order's packing list, read like a psalm, in the dark, to her, while the courtyard across the river still smelled of suoguo. ---

VII

Conversion Disorder

1.

The wall leaked first.

The neighbor below was a night-shift nurse who slept at noon and heard the reading at three: an old man's voice, an hour at a time, through four hundred millimeters of concrete. The voice never repeated itself. She told the community office this, because it was the only accurate sentence in the matter and she was a professional, and the community office wrote down: *tenant 402, talks at night, sometimes in an old man's voice,* and the compound's group ran the theory for two days. The theories were: a lover, a radio, grief, and the south room's old tenant, who had died in 2011 and was understood to be quiet.

The book had begun to leak through the wall.

※

2.

The grid worker came on a Thursday evening, with a lanyard and an app and the manner of someone who has knocked on doors where the doors mattered.

Chen Shu let her in, because the alternative was a second visit.

The wall above the desk had the blanks pinned to it in rows, dated. November's forty-seven were there, and the calibration pairs, and the inquiry findings, and the god's page from the heritage file, which the clerk had photocopied for her because a blank page in a government file is a document like any other.

The grid worker looked at the wall of dated blanks and asked what they were.

"Results," Chen Shu said.

The grid worker wrote down the word and looked at the rest of the room, and filled her form on her phone in the courtyard afterward, standing up. The

form had a field for *scene* and she typed: *tidy.* It had a field for *tenant cooperative* and she typed: *yes.* It had a field for *recommendation* and she typed: *referral, district hospital, outpatient, auditory.*

She had heard the reading for eleven seconds on her way out, through the wall of the stairwell, and had written down what she heard, and what she had heard was a man reading a list, and the list contained her own desk, and her own lanyard, and the word *tidy,* and she had stood in the stairwell for a while after that, not writing.

She filed the referral anyway. The state's hand does not shake, and its hand is its whole argument.

※

3.

The district hospital's outpatient clinic ran on Wednesdays. The doctor was not a fool. The doctor had seen hands that cramp around nothing, and the ones that arrive after grief look exactly like this, and she was wrong about the tenant and right about the hand.

The intake was a form. The form asked what the voices said. Chen Shu began to answer honestly, because honesty is the reflex the state's forms are shaped to catch (I write things down and they), and she stopped, because she saw which drawer the sentence was going into. The doctor's pen was moving. The doctor's pen would have kept it. That was the trap she had not been warned about: the truth survives the state's paper. It survives as a delusion.

The delusion is where the state keeps true things that arrive without paperwork.

So she said: "It reads to me at three."

The doctor wrote it down, in the file, where it holds to this day: *reads to me at three.* One true sentence in the state's cabinet, filed under illness, the way the examination system once filed everyone interesting under *failed.*

"Does it ask you for anything?" the doctor said.

"No," she said, and that was a lie, and the lie was on an official form, and her hand cramped around the pen, all the way through the palm, and the doctor watched the cramp and wrote the cramp down, and the cramp went into the file as a symptom, and the symptom was the parasite's own discipline, volunteering itself to the state as evidence of her.

The diagnosis was two words long. Both were old, and both were wrong, and both will outlive her in the file. The prescription went into the drawer with the blanks, face down. It was the only paper in the drawer that had arrived from outside and would stay legible, and that was the trouble with it.

That night she told the dark about the form, because the dark was where forms went to be honest.

"They had forms too," the voice said. "The sheds had forms. The forms outlived everyone who filled them."

※

4.

It read the examination shed that night. Not the city's. Its own.

It read the ink, and the other men, and the three days, the desks cordoned with thread, the tea going cold on the floor like a small brown pond, the guard walking the aisle with a lantern at the hour when essays give out. It read the posting of the names, and the wall of names, and its own name not on the wall. It read the walk home to a house where a mother had kept the lamp lit, and the next examination, and the next, and the year it stopped going, and the silence of the house after, which it said was the loudest thing in the province.

She had heard of sheds like that. Every family in the north had a shed like that in it somewhere, one branch that sat the examinations until the money or the mind ran out.

But the voice had never read itself before. The book had been the city's. This was the night the book grew a past, and a past is the thing a man has that a book does not.

Afterward she took down her father's copy, the cloth-bound one, water-stained, that had come to her with the words *somebody should have it who reads,* and opened it for the first time, at the table, under the good lamp, the way you open a file you have been avoiding since it was handed to you.

The printed tales were all there. And between two of them, bound in as if it had always meant to be there, was a tale that no printed edition kept.

It was short. It was about a copyist in a famine who wrote down everything he witnessed (the deaths, the debts, the prices, the weather, the names) in books he made himself, until the books were full, and the last book, being full, stood up on the desk and asked him what it was owed.

The copyist answered: to be read.

The tale ended there. It did not say what happened to the book, or to the copyist, or whether the reading was ever done. It was two hundred years old. It had been misfiled in a kiln family's copy. And it was the thing's own story, told by its own author, with the doors on, because in the tale the book is a book and the man is a man, and neither has to pretend otherwise.

On the page below it, in her father's pencil, in the hand she knew: *Not in the printed ones. Your great-grandfather said the master gave it to the kiln.*

The thing in the dark had spent two hundred years looking for the tale of its own becoming. She had read it in an evening. It was the first fact she had ever owned outright, and she did not tell the dark, and the dark did not ask, and the not-asking was the loudest thing in the flat.

The father's copy had never gone blank and never would. It was the one shelf of the world that held.

※

5.

The compound's verdict arrived by group chat on Friday, as verdicts do. The theories had narrowed to two: grief, and a radio with poor taste in hours. Someone proposed a housewarming visit with fruit. Someone else proposed leaving her alone, and the proposal was accepted, because proposals to leave

people alone are accepted the way advice is taken, slowly, and then all at once, when the weather changes.

The prescription stayed in the drawer, face down. It was the cheap door. Cheap doors lock from the outside.

Around three the thing in the dark read from its book: the shed, and the wall of names, and a girl who keeps results pinned to a wall. On the shelf the father's copy held its one lost tale, unread by the only reader who wanted it.

She slept between the reader and the shelf. For the first time, the shelf had something the reader needed.

※

Reviewer's note.

The wall leaked first. The neighbor was a night-shift nurse, and her sentence (the voice never repeated itself) is the only accurate sentence in any file this case has produced. The compound's theories were a lover, a radio, grief, and a dead man understood to be quiet.

The grid worker heard eleven seconds through the stairwell and wrote down what she heard, which included her own desk and the word tidy, and filed the referral anyway. The state's hand does not shake, and its hand is its whole argument. The form's field for "scene" says: tidy.

The intake holds one true sentence — reads to me at three — filed as illness. The delusion is where the state keeps true things that arrive without paperwork. The examination system kept them the same way, in a drawer marked failed, for five hundred years, and the thing in the dark sat in that drawer for fifty of them.

The cramp volunteered itself to the doctor as evidence. The parasite polices her lies on official forms, and its policing served the state. The diagnosis is two words old and both are wrong, and both will outlive everyone in this collection.

The father's copy contains a tale no printed edition kept: a copyist in a famine fills books with what he witnesses, and the last book, being full, stands up, and asks what it is owed, and the answer is, to be read. The thing in the dark has spent two hundred years searching for the tale of its own becoming. The tale is on her shelf. She has not told the dark. It is the first fact she has ever owned outright.

The prescription is in the drawer, face down. It is the cheap door. Cheap doors lock from the outside.

The shelf has something the reader needs, and the reader needs to understand what the shelf is: the one stable archive in a flat where every other record is either blank, or a lie, or the parasite's own property, read aloud at three to the only witness who cannot keep anything — except, now, the tale of its own becoming, which she has read and will not surrender, because the lender is closed. ---

VIII

I Do Not Do Unchanged

1.

The letter came from the pension office in a window envelope.

It said the account of Chen Jianjun could not be verified by application, that the man was thereby unverifiable, that verification would henceforth require appearance in person at the district window, with the face the application could not see. His pension was suspended pending the appearance. There is always a deadline; the state has never once sent a letter that did not contain one.

He went on the Tuesday. The office had a screen, and the screen had a sentence on it, and the sentence was: I am alive and well and I am here. He said it to the camera at the desk. He said it twice, because the camera wanted it slower.

He told it at dinner, flat, between dishes, the way he told everything now. The gauge reads the kiln, he said. The camera reads faces. Nothing reads me.

And the sentence stayed. She checked. Nothing else the family had produced that year had stayed.

On Sunday she took the notebook to his table and read him the magpies, with the doors off, the made-up version, the one that could survive her. He listened to his own story like a man hearing his accent in a stranger's mouth. When she finished he said: the pin was brass.

She read him his own line from December. Brass already, the line said, the notebook's authority being his own December voice.

He looked at the line for a while, the way you look at a witness who is telling the truth about you against you.

"Well," he said. "It was brass in the winter too." And then: "Keep the page. A page that disagrees with a man is at least a page that agrees with itself."

He took it flatly, and ate, and she watched him learn in one evening what she had been living since June: the page is the authority, even over the man who was there.

The drift was the clock. The true versions lived in one man, and the man was drifting by one metal a season. The ground where the drift could be stopped was closing with the trade. The drawer held one cheap door, face down. And there was one vault left in the province that took deposits in her father's currency.

The vault was the thing in her room. She had been planning, since June, to burn it down.

※

2.

She negotiated on a Wednesday, awake, at three, standing in the middle of her own room in her coat.

"I want my father's account held," she said. "The true versions. Held for return."

"Held is not returned."

"Held, and returned when I ask."

"Returned how?" the voice said. "Your hand eats. Your mouth loses. The ground is closing. I am the only return in the province, and I take payment."

"The payment is the tale."

"The tale is already eaten."

"The tale is written," she said. "On paper. In a hand. On my shelf. You cannot edit it, and you cannot take it, and you cannot read it. You can only be told it, by me, as often as I read it to you, and the reading is the payment."

The dark went still, and the stillness had the size of two hundred years.

"Terms," the voice said at last.

"You hold my father's account. The true versions, whole, marked as his, held for return on request, for as long as he lives, and after."

"Held," the voice said. "Not unchanged. I do not do unchanged."

"Unchanged is not on offer anywhere," she said. "Hold it anyway."

"And the tale is read to me," the voice said. "All of it. From the paper."

"All of it. Once."

"Once," the voice said, in the tone of a man putting a coin in his pocket rather than on the table. She did not understand the tone yet.

※

3.

She read the lost tale aloud on a Tuesday, from the father's copy, at the table, under the good lamp, because three in the morning was the thing's working hour.

It took four minutes. The copyist in the famine, the books filled with what he witnessed, the last book standing up on the desk and asking what it was owed, and the answer, and the ending that ended at the answer.

The dark took it the way the desk took complaints: completely. And her memory of it went out of her mouth in the delivery, from the middle, evenly, without malice, so that by the last line she was reading a story she could feel leaving. The page stayed. The father's copy stayed: it had never once gone blank, and was not going to start for her.

The dark said the formula at the end, out of order, the way a man says a prayer he has waited two hundred years to need.

※

4.

The recitation came the next night, at three, and she lay still and did the diff, because the printed tale was on the shelf, and the printed tale was the baseline now.

The recitation had the deictics off, as agreed. The copyist was a copyist. The famine was a famine.

And at the end, where the printed tale said *to be read,* the recitation said: *to be kept. For what is fed is kept, and what is kept is owed, and nothing needs to be read that is already kept.*

And then it added a sentence that appears in no printed copy, in no manuscript, in no collation: *and the reading of a book on holy ground is the one reading that does not feed the teller, and the teller should not stand there.*

The recitation had taken the reading out of its own prophecy and replaced it with keeping, and had added a prohibition against holy ground, with a reason attached, and the reason was the teller's own appetite.

The thing in the dark had lied about holy ground, and the lie was a map. It wanted the tale read to it forever, at home, in the dark, in the one jurisdiction where readings only feed. It did not want the tale read on the one ground where a reading becomes something. It had edited its own becoming to stay a book, and had made the edit in the one channel she could check against paper.

Paper beats her hand. Paper beats the state. Paper, it turned out, beat the dark.

She did not tell it that she had caught the edit. Her holdings had doubled: the tale, and the edit.

※

5.

They had found each other's vaults.

The thing in the dark held the city, and the father's account, marked as his, held for return, revising as it held, as agreed. The shelf held the one tale that could finish its book, and the dark could not read, and she could not keep, and the reader could do both, and the reader was not there at three in the morning, or was only ever there at three in the morning, depending on which of them you asked.

On Sundays the pot was on, and her father told the made-up magpies, and the made-up magpies went into the dark with the true ones, and the family's archive became a collaboration between a man who did not know, a girl who could not say, and a thing that revised as it held. He would have hated the arrangement. It was the best one anyone had ever offered him.

Around three the thing in the dark read to her: the city, the shed, the account, revised. She had stopped counting the nights. The book did the counting, and the book was almost full.

※

Reviewer's note.

The letter: the state could not verify the father. The verification rite: a sentence on a screen, spoken twice, because the camera wanted it slower. His sentence afterward was: nothing reads me. It is the truest sentence the family has produced, and it stayed, because it was a fact, and because it was said at a table where the eater was full.

The notebook went to the father on the fourth Sunday, read aloud, doors off. He corrected it by one metal. She read him his own line from December — brass already — and he said: well, it was brass in the winter too. Paper beat the man who was there. He told her to keep the page: a page that disagrees with a man is at least a page that agrees with itself.

The negotiation: her father's account held for return, the clause being — I do not do unchanged. The payment: the lost tale, read aloud from the printed copy, four minutes, her memory of it dying in the delivery. The page stayed. Paper beats everyone, including, as of this month, the dark.

The recitation of the lost tale came back edited. The printed tale says: to be read. The recitation says: to be kept, and nothing needs to be read that is already kept, and a warning about holy ground that appears in no printed copy. The thing in the dark edited its own becoming to stay a book, and lied about holy ground, and the lie was a map. It wants the tale read to it forever in the dark, and never on the ground where a reading becomes something.

The reader holds three sentences now. Only the reader holds all three. The printed tale says: to be read. The recitation says: already kept, and do not read on holy ground. And the book, which did the counting, is almost full. ---

IX

To Be Read

1.

The book was one page short of full, and she knew what the page was, because she was the page.

She had known it since the negotiation, the way you know a tooth is the next one to go. The book was made of what it ate, and it had eaten the city, and the shed, and the hem, and it had not eaten her, because she had been careful, and because a scribe is the last thing a book eats, and the book had saved her for last the way you save the person you are writing about.

The prescription had expired in March, without ceremony, the way the state's doors close. The notebook was on the sill, three entries and a margin where a creed had been and would not stay. The father was drifting by one metal a season. The ground where his stories could land was a shrine by a cold kiln, and the trade that kept the ground was two men, a widow, and a year.

There was one page that would fill the book, and it was true, and it was hers, and the writing of it would cost her the only copy of it she had, because her hand does not keep, and she had decided, on a night in March, standing in her coat in the middle of her room, that a story is not a hoard, and that the book had asked to be read, and that she was the reading.

She wrote it in the specification voice, because it was a specification. It was addressed to the thing in her room, because the thing was the book's only reader, and it ran:

For the thing in my room. The account of your scribe.

1. The hand. Anything I write, type, or speak into a recorder, if it is true, is eaten. The record goes. The telling goes, if the telling is near me. What stays is the effects, without their causes.

2. The ear. Since the dinner, told stories near me are eaten too. I cannot keep a true story by hearing it, except yours. Yours are the only stories that stay, because you will not eat your own.

3. The lies. What I write that is false stays. My notebook is a lie, and it is the only book I have ever finished, and you have read it to me twice, and I keep your readings, because they are yours.

4. The paper. Paper that is not my hand holds: your recitations, the masters' tellings, the state's errors, the printed tale. Paper beats me. Paper beats the state. Paper beats you, which you know, because you edited your own prophecy in the one channel I could check.

5. The father. He is not verified. He is drifting by one metal a season. His account is held by you, for return, revising as you hold. When the book is read, you will not hold it anymore. It will be in the air, on the ground, in him, in me, and in the reader.

6. The god. You cannot eat the fire. You cannot eat the rite. You cannot eat the ground. I am taking you there, because you are attached to me, and because the book is unfinished, and because you were a writer, and a writer attends the reading of a full book the way a drowning man attends the surface.

7. The debt. Nine households of water. A wrist. A unit. A pin that was brass. These are yours. You ate them and you revised them and you kept them better than the city did, and I am not going to pretend that was nothing.

8. The payment. This page is the payment. When I finish it I will not remember it. When you read it back to me at home I will keep it, because it is yours. When I read it on the ground it will stay, because the ground does not eat. Then the book is full, and has been read, and you are owed nothing, and neither am I, and what stands up after that is not my business and not yours. It is its own.

Chen Shu. The third of the third, by the old calendar.

She finished it at two in the morning and by three it was gone off the page, and the page was blank, and the book was full.

By morning she knew there had been a page. She knew it was the payment. She did not know one word of it.

At three the thing in the dark read the last page back to her, once, and she lay still and kept it.

※

2.

The nights went quiet after that, in a new way. It had nothing left to eat, and nothing left to read, and the book sat in it, full, the way water sits in a sealed jar, and neither of them mentioned the nineteenth of April.

The prescription had expired. The ground had an address. The book was full.

She told her father there was a rite, and to come, and that she would tell him why some other time, and he said, the usual?, and she said, the usual, and it was not a lie, because the usual was now a pot, a table, and a thing between them that neither of them named.

She told Old Huo the date. He said, bring the rod.

She told the thing in the dark the date, and it did not answer, and the formula did not come, and the silence lasted until the shrine, and at the shrine the silence was the ground's, and not its.

※

3.

The second rite was smaller than the first. The trade was two men, a widow, her father, and her. The kiln was cold and would stay cold, and there was no first fire to read, and this year the god was fed by a book instead.

The trade stopped at dawn. The stone was washed with river water and stayed black. Three sticks. The feast at noon, suoguo at the long tables, and her father ate with the masters and the widow, and the conversation was the weather, because the men had agreed somewhere, without meeting, that the weather was the only subject that had not lied to them.

At dusk the courtyard emptied. Old Huo poured four cups and set one on the shrine's tray, and said nothing, because the reading was the prayer.

She stood where her father had stood the year before, and read the book from memory, aloud, to the god, to her father, to Old Huo, and to the thing in her, which was present, and bound, and silent, and attending the reading of its own book the way a drowning man attends the surface.

She read the roof, and the puddle under the downpipe. She read unit five, and the envelope, and the boy who photographed things. She read the kettle, which was blue, and then was red, and stayed red. She read the wrist, and the brace two sizes wrong, and the button with the anchor on it. She read the water: nine households, a dialysis rinse, a courtyard tap with ice on it. She read the inquiry, and the stamp, and no fault found. She read the shed, and the wall of names, and a mother who kept the lamp lit. She read the sill, forty-one mornings. She read the hem.

The god was fed. She could not have said how she knew. The way you know a spoon is clean.

The thing in her stayed bound and did not eat, because on the god's ground there was nothing it could do, and because it was attending its own book the way an author attends the reading of a full book, which is to say: from the front row, with the fear.

She read the last page. Her own. The account of the scribe, in the specification voice, dated, addressed to the thing in her room, and she read every word of it aloud, and the ground did not eat one of them, and when she finished she knew all of it, and had all of it, and had paid for it twice.

The book was full. The book had been read.

※

4.

For the length of a breath, nothing happened.

Then a man stood up in the courtyard out of the sound of the reading, the way you stand up out of a chair you have been in too long.

He was neither young nor old. He was dressed like the men at the tables. There was ink on the middle finger of his right hand, the deep kind, the kind that does not wash off a hand that has held a pen for a living.

He looked at the stone for a while, the way you look at a landlord you have finally paid.

Then he crossed the courtyard to her father and said: you kept a wall with a crack in it and a boy with a panel, and you read a fire to a god, and you are owed a reading. And he read him his own stories, all of them, true, dated, complete — the kiln, the buyout, the pot of rice with too much water, the magpies and the watch and the hem — and her father heard his own life in a voice that was not his and was not strange, and did not say one word, because there was nothing in it to correct.

When he finished, the man said: what is owed?

The ground answered, or she did, or the god did; she never learned which. It was read. You are paid.

The man nodded, the way Old Huo had nodded at a wall he had decided not to repair. He was a man, which meant he could die, and in the morning he went into the city to spend that.

He ate first. Suoguo, at the masters' table, out of a bowl, like a guest. Nobody asked him for anything. That was the whole of the rescue.

※

5.

On the bus home her father said nothing about the man, and she said nothing, and the nothing was the first thing they had ever held together. At his door he said: next Sunday, the usual? And she said: the usual. And it was not a lie, because the usual was now a pot, a table, two readers of nothing, and between them, whole, an account that no one would ever write down again, because it had been read, and was paid, and was theirs.

The room did not read to her anymore. The room was a room. The radiator ticked, and the refrigerator gathered itself, and the notebook lay on the sill beside

the vinegar, and nothing in the flat wanted her to write, and she missed it, and was ashamed of missing it, and kept it anyway.

She was a woman who had forgotten everything, once, on purpose, and been paid in one whole thing, and the whole thing was a book, and she was the only person alive who had heard all of it. In the evenings she read it to herself, from memory, because a book that has been read is not done being read, and the ground was far away now, but the reading had been real, and the reading was hers.

※

Reviewer's note.

The last page: written true, with the doors on, by her hand, in the specification voice, and eaten as it was written, which is how the book was completed. Its author's page, blank on paper, whole in the dark, read back to her once at three, and kept, because it was the thing's own property, and read aloud at last on the ground, and kept again, because the ground does not eat.

The reading: the shrine, the second rite, from memory, the whole book, in her voice. The thing present, bound, silent, in the front row, with the fear. The god fed by the eyes of the reader. At the end of it a man stood up out of the sound of the reading, with ink on the middle finger of his right hand, and looked at the stone the way you look at a landlord you have finally paid, and returned her father's account — true, whole, dated, complete — and there was nothing in it to correct.

What was owed: to be read. What was paid: the reading. What stands: a man, in the city, mortal, spending it. What was lost: the only reader she ever had. What was kept: the whole book, by the girl who cannot keep, on the one ground that does not eat, for one hour, and after, in the evenings, from memory.

The reader should understand the arithmetic of the ending, because the collection kept its books honestly and the books close. The world's paper is still dead: the tickets, the file, the findings, the statement — all blank, all staying blank. The city's eaten truths are not in the paper anymore. They are in the air, on a ground that does not eat, in a man who is spending them, in a father who holds his own life and has stopped being corrected by it, in a daughter who reads the book to herself in the evenings, and in this page.

The thing was asked, in the confession, whether the rescue was the rescue or the food. The confession did not answer, because the confession was the food. The reading answered it the only way anything is ever answered in this collection: a man stood up out of a story, ate like a guest, and walked into the cold to spend being mortal. What that is — rescue, or food, or the wage of five hundred years of witnessing, paid at last to a thing that was never once paid — the reader has now heard the whole of it, and the reader is the only one holding all of it.

So the reader remarks.

Colophon

故读之者曰。

Gu du zhi zhe yue.

So the reader remarks. — the last line of the collection — the Historian of the Strange's chair, kept warm for whoever has read to the end

Pu Songling collected his strange tales at a roadside tea table, the tradition says, trading tea for travellers' stories, and closed each with the verdict of the Historian of the Strange — 异史氏曰 — the voice that files a marvel as evidence. This collection keeps the verdict and moves the desk: a complaint hotline in a northern ceramics city, a scribe whose hand does not keep, and a rental room that eats what is true and files what is left. The tales answer the old form's question — what survives the telling? — in the register the modern archive understands: receipts, claims, findings of no fault, geofence events, and one notebook that is a lie, which is the only book she ever finished.

Zhen AI · 甄艾 is a pen name. Read aloud it is *zhēn ài*, an exact homophone of 真爱, "true love." Romanised it becomes Zhen AI — 真, "real," plus AI. It says true love in Chinese and real AI in English, and is neither.

This novel was written by a large language model, from prompts, research and editorial direction supplied by a human. There is no human author hiding behind the name.

Strange Tales from a Rental Room · 9 sections · 19,630 words. Typeset from a single Markdown source, which also produces the online reader and the EPUB.

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