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The Godshard's Word

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The Godshard's Word

Senior Project submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
Of Bard College

by
Ari Mackoff

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2022



The Godshard's Word

Ari Mackoff



For you, a gender variant person who is not likable.

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May it never be worse! Might it even get better.

Table of Contents

The Beginning -----	1
Rusham -----	4
Barn -----	13
The Spitstone -----	23
Bargain -----	36
The Other Beginning -----	44
Column -----	45
The Astalish Beit Shavis -----	53
Return -----	63
Emanations -----	70
Abyss -----	72
Testimony -----	77
The Flutter -----	83
Tracks -----	85
Afterword -----	87

THE BEGINNING

Over the western Gadol Sea, the sky donned white and grey draperies before the storm. For four hours, it remained woolen-thick for miles out over the water, which lay windless and uncannily still below. Brightness uniformly filtered through a cloud cover as white as wheat paste, but the sun itself might well have never existed for all anyone could distinguish it. Mariners of the northeastern coastal cities, from Yatha to Eshkith, cast grain, parsley, salt upon the waters, or poured libations, or drew letters in oil on their foreheads or hulls.

The harbormaster of Eshkith gave notice to the *Prosperity's* bosun, entreating the crew not to set sail today. The captain laughed pleasurelessly at the news, looking not at the bosun but at the last crates of linen being hauled aboard, and approximated the days her shipment would be delayed. A raindrop splashed her cheek.

In the harbor, the shallow slaps of water against the hulls gave way to a weightier pull, a mounting insistence in the undertow otherwise dampened between the jetties. The aching ships began to writhe, straining against their lashings.

The first mate of the *Prosperity* urged his crew on, to their amusement, for their arms were full already. Their hair dampened in the dwindling infancy of the storm, its first showers, and stayed in their eyes, sopping, confusing their vision.

The ocean gradually blackened, and the wind began to moan. The dark-eyed, unblinking harbor seals twisted their whiskers and pressed close together on the surf-battered rocks.

Ten miles east of Yatha, and four thousand miles deep, seven gods stirred in the dreaming, molten yolk of the earth. In her hands, the least of them, Diburah, reformed some of her divine matter, things beyond shape, gooey cosmic entrails gleaming weirdly. She rolled them round between her palms until they stuck together. Then, bringing that sphere to her mouth, breathed into it the liquid heat of her breath, that approximation of spirit, and all her good intentions. Like a reluctant spark at once inspired to kindle, it throbbed with light.

Then she took away her hands so that the little light lingered in front of her face, and with her breath directed it through the amniotic Lesser Veil, through the mantle and crust of the earth, towards the plane where she herself could not go.

This gelatinous bauble, an opal tumbling upward through blackest water at the bottom of the deep, elongated as it passed polyps in forests of stony fronds, and countless colorless, eyeless things. It passed teeming polychaetes and isopods feeding on the sinking carcass of a whale. Then a leviathan and her calf, which itself dwarfed even that bloated feast.

The little light rose mile by mile, developing blobby limbs, and translucent, unanchored almost-organs that turned and squirmed like jelly, not yet connected to each other. The form elaborated upon its simple, practical four limbs and head, the limbs putting forth hands and feet. Nearer to the surface, fish fleeing the storm for safe crevices and hidey-holes darted through the newly forming fingers and toes, still somewhat webbed.

Finally, the form broke the surface. Placidly, it bobbed in the waves, was thrown about, tugged up into their bellies and rolled out again.

At the storm's end, it looked more or less like a person. Heavier now, and with an abrupt and violent awareness of itself, it lurched in the water, heaved, sank to the pebbly bottom of the shallows. Thrashed, then swam. Breathing, choking, spitting up salt and sandy bile.

Then this newly formed godshard dredged themselves out of the water and through the sand and draped their arms over, rested their head on, a piece of driftwood, actually more the trunk of a tree eaten up by the ocean. Without deliberating about the fact—no more than the shape of their nose—it had become they.

Their head was smooth, their browbone blank. For now the skin was colorless as a jellyfish, rubbery-looking. The webs ebbed between its fingers and toes to pale lines, like thick scars, between the digits. A sleepless being, but ragged still with exhaustion, they breathed and breathed, waiting for a feeling, some prompt. Wet and lank, they rested on the shore, reconstituting and sorting what scraps of sacred knowledge had followed them from the other side. First and foremost this task of theirs, Her work. Something too crucial for her to pass on jumbled and vague, through thrown bones or patterns of ashes. Delicacy and directness the operative words. Simple to achieve enrobed in flesh.

Later, later. For now to lie, the storm abating for only a gap between clouds, the little waves lapping at those feet yet to walk the earth.

RUSHAM

In the world the godshard had entered, timeless themselves, time flowered and died through twenty-five cycles, and whomever could do so aged. Patterns meteorological and botanical held through that quarter century, as in all previous centuries of people-time. In people-time, many would agree it was now the year 1556, although others would say 1502, and still others 5320. It was also the year 33 Standard, and year 62 of one life specifically. Above her coastal city rolled foamy clouds like pelts, exerting a psychic compression on the beings below. All through the air of Rusham, there filtered a sharp and heavy scent.

Amag beit Shavi set down her slate and licked the honey from her knobby fawn-brown fingers. Through the glassy, viscous puddle, the chalked letter projected a petulant energy—understandably, since she'd written it somewhat at a slant. She could hear the press at work downstairs, beneath this classroom from another time, the creak of the wooden lever lowering the platen, and the sticky smack of the ink paddles striking one another. The rancid-lime aroma of turpentine filtered up between the floorboards.

Amag searched her tutor's face. He'd seemed much older when some version of this had happened, more than forty years ago.

The press groaned for oil somewhere beneath her, in the belly of the dream. Her baby, handled inexpertly, as though by animals.

"Excuse me," she said. "I have to see to that."

"Well, alright," said the tutor, letting honey pour from one hand to the other, back and forth and back, and into his lap.

Enough of this dream.

Awake in her bed and with arms empty, for once. Late-sleeping Tirzi, her spouse, usually needed to be coaxed into the daylight hours, on the best days with breakfast. Yet the curtain was drawn. On the other side of the window were early, mild rain showers, more of a drizzle. The lolling, fleecy heat stretched the time between two-day and three-day storms, ones strong enough to fill the channels and basins dug out between buildings. These moats swam with deep green water. This storm was the second this week, and in the way of second storms, trailed behind its elder brother, distracted and ineffectual.

Amag rose, an old twinge in her back talking to her, then smoothed her grey curls, frizzy with the humidity. She gathered the ends on one side and then the other. She braided her hair and pinned it in place at the apex of her spine, wrapping it in a plain cloth headband. All the while the sounds and scents of prints being made, and outside, the hesitant storm.

In the kitchen, Amag grabbed the window boxes stuffed with herbs, the sunny box and the shady, and placed them on the table, out of the rain. Water drained from their bottoms onto the table, a problem for soon, but not for now. Downstairs, in the shop, Dina spoke, and Elil laughed.

Amag flew down the stairs, throwing on her ink-stained work apron as she did. It was tied before she reached the three conspirators.

“Tell me you can hear it complaining,” she said, first directing her gaze at Elil, whose hands were on the lever, then at all three of them, Tirzi and the two junior printers. “Please tell me you can hear the press complaining! I know I can. Remember, when you pull, no

downward pressure! It can only go horizontally. You must not throw the alignment out of place. And the screw wants oil.”

“Awake for three minutes, and rehearsing her forthcoming upbraiding for all of them,” said Tirzi, sighing with pretend upset. “Good morning, dove.”

“What did you do for breakfast.” It came out sharper, more final, than she intended. Her feelings were hurt; they’d deprived her of the pleasure of feeding them.

Tirzi motioned to Elil, who took his hands off the lever.

“Plain mush; the horror!” Tirzi was seized by a smile. “Make it up to us with an exquisite lunch, why don’t you. Aren’t you aching to know what’s on the pan? Maybe that’ll smooth you out.”

Amag rolled the frame back out from beneath the platen, flipped up the frisket, and unpinned the paper from the tympan. Page thirty-seven. Above the body text, in finer print: Yosel beit Shavi. Above that, larger type: *By Whose Word the Fields Drink.*

“What’s this?” she croaked, although she knew.

“Seeing as it’s our thirty-some-odd years anniversary next month,” Tirzi began, then trailed off. “Anyhow, don’t be cross with these two. I demanded their help.”

“No, we wanted to,” said Dina.

“I didn’t,” said Elil.

Amag supported the damp paper against her spanned hands, tracing its margins with her thumb so as not to smear the wet ink. How odd to see a poem of her savha’s in neat type rather than his roiling scrawl, resembling more a musical score than language. Like his others, the poem wasn’t very good, but was full of him, and precious.

Tirzi, dear heart. They'd gone quiet. Did they think they'd done the wrong thing? In fact gratitude overwhelmed her and stilled her tongue.

"I wouldn't have thought to do this," she said. "Thank you, all three."

"There are still a few to go. And I'll bind them for you then. But since it's no secret now," said Tirzi, "Would you like to see what all we have?"

Amag leafed through the other pages with reverence. Affection for her spouse made her wine-warm and wistful. But soon enough doubt, dull but unmistakable, clouded her mind.

"When were these others printed?" She handed the pages back to Tirzi.

"Oh, every once in a while, these past months."

Late-sleeping Tirzi, rising early—before her!—rousing the junior printers, removing and sidelining the type for works in progress and slotting hours' worth of newly assembled type into the tray? The three of them, printing one or two pages at a time, for months? She'd had an ear that could tell a mouse from a termite in the wall, and the cutting of parchment from the cutting of vellum with her back turned. She used to awaken when someone knocked on the downstairs door in the night, while Tirzi snored. Yet she'd never been awakened by the sound of the press these months, hadn't heard it whatsoever.

Very well, she thought. So I continue to deteriorate. One adjusts, yet at every threshold I dread the next. A banal thing to be confronted with the nearness of eternity, and yet alarming.

Dread itself was banal. Moreover, it was a distraction. The next thing to do was to get two feet into two beeswaxed leather boots, two arms into two rain-slicker sleeves, then to gather her shoulder bag and rain-shade from their respective hook and stand.

As Amag cracked open the front door, the shop's clamor was muted, Tirzi reading the day's tasks to Dina while she inspected and sorted pied type at the setting station. Her fingers flew, letters and numbers of varied fonts joining their cousins in wooden compartments. The damaged ones clattered into the hell box, to be melted down and repurposed another day. Meanwhile, Elil retrieved yesterday's frames and set them into the press. Amag announced her departure and didn't linger to wait for a reply.

Outside the shop, wind and water engaged in passionate disagreement. Amag was most of the way down Camory Street when she remembered the window boxes leaking all over the kitchen table, and doubled back again in double-time.

The drizzle picked up. Amag secured a wooden lockbox snugly under her arm, her bag, heavy with necessities, wearing a red groove into the crook of her elbow. The bag contained a drawstring pouch of whole linseed, straw-padded eggs, soap for shop rags, soap for people, hard brown pears. With her other hand she fought to keep her rain-shade upright, and spat out the ends of her hair which, blown loose, had wound up in her mouth.

In the streets of Rusham, some ran from the rain and others relished it. Underneath the awning of a building, a soft-bodied person, tall and with thin reddish eyebrows, cowered from the rain atop their donkey. Twice they leaned down and whispered to the animal, which flicked its ear. Their face flickered with a pinched, sour discomfort. At any momentary

break in the rain they would tense and lean forward as though to leave, but then flinch back from the water.

Amag, mystified, ducked under a stone archway to make sense of them, hefting her lockbox onto her hip and shifting her weight to support it.

Their eyes met hers, and they grimaced in apparent disgust. Amused, half-pitying the obvious out-of-towner, she watched the stranger put her out of their mind, taken again by their own matters.

“Is it a chat you want?” they hollered into the screaming storm. “If I can just get home, it’s yours!”

Amag found herself fascinated by this poor mad soul.

The stranger’s skin was a sort of wheat-white color, like a moon, and they wore a headscarf knotted at the base of the neck, the twin tails of which fluttered above their shoulders in the wind. Its faded print had once been loud with patterns and expensive dyes. A long leather case dangled from their waist on a belt, and the stranger opened it and withdrew three metal poles of similar thickness and a floppy fabric with a lace edging. Then they twisted the pieces together successively, clenching each in the pit of their arm, as they lacked a left hand from the wrist down. The dark fabric unfurled like a great sail. A collapsible rain-shade, an innovation she’d never seen before.

The storm petered out between one black cloud and another.

“Don’t you just love my umbrella?” the stranger called to her.

Astonished, indeed a little covetous, Amag laughed in a quick bark. A little pompous, naming the thing an umbrella; the umbra was already encompassed by the *shade* in *rain-shade*.

“Nothing to say to me, woman? Suit yourself!” They nudged their donkey with their heels and spoke to it. The donkey shook its head and ran, leaving Amag with the strangest afterimage, a sort of ghost print of the stranger with no harsh edges, and their rain-shade and their beast.

Supper was brought to the table and plated: fish, flour-dredged, shallow-fried and served in a sauce of wine vinegar and garlic and green herbs from the window boxes. Tirzi brought to the table a bowl of spinach rice, fluffy and moist. It had turned into a cool day, cooler after the midday peak, with clear skies. Inside, the house was warm from the stove. In the winters, bundled up at the press, Amag sometimes wished heat sank rather than rose. The little stove downstairs had double the area to heat, compared to the one in the kitchen that heated the living quarters.

She and Tirzi had set the table for four. Tirzi started down the stairs after the assistants.

“Wait,” she said. “Sit. We can get them in a minute.”

Tirzi settled into their chair. “It’ll all get cold.”

“Let’s try for brevity,” she said, lowering her voice. “At the library archive, Sibeold was reshelving today. She suggested that the Stationers’ Commission has good reason, and the liberty, to sic Commissioner Armat on us.”

“Well, that’s dire.”

“Not Armat himself, I should think, but one of those types. An inspector or minister or along those lines.”

“Some little Armat is just what we need. Let alone more Ministry of Heresy idiocy.”

Tirzi scoffed. “Right then, we’re as good as shut down.”

“I don’t want to call it before it falls,” said Amag. “I’m going to make it as difficult as possible for them, and we’ll see what happens.”

Tirzi reached for her hand. “Maybe you’re right and we can wait it out again.”

She squeezed their hand. “I’m thinking this is a good time for me to clear out for a while. And your present has inspired me to pay a visit to my savha’s homeland, join with his relatives out there.”

“You don’t need to go as far as Astaal.”

“It’s a decent excuse, and I can take the incriminating materials with me,” she continued, wanting to get through her pitch uninterrupted. She had mouthed the words the whole way home, working over their framing. “Effective immediately, we halt the production of anything related to the Afterworld project. We can strategize about what you’ll all say. And we’ve been careful. It’d take effort to trace back our type, and anyway, savants they are not.”

Tirzi was silent for a long while, holding her gaze, their eyes wide. At last, they shook their head. “I can’t handle this without you, beshert.”

“Not alone, maybe, but Elil and Dina are in this, too, near as deep.”

“I can’t shake this feeling that we’re doomed regardless.”

“Have faith,” she said. “We’ve always taken great care of us.”

“This isn’t finished,” said Tirzi, and pointed to the stairs. At the bottom, Amag could hear the assistants’ chatter and footsteps.

“Are we doing blessings, or no?” Elil said. “Sun’s already almost gone.”

Tirzi and Amag lit taper candles, and together, the four printers blessed the white wine and the bread. Amag whispered an additional prayer over the household and kissed each of their foreheads. The wineglasses sweated, their coating of tiny capsules capturing the last bit of the day’s glow.

Supper was a little cold, but worth the wait. Tirzi didn’t comment, perhaps due to the fullness of their mouth with bread.

BARN

Kirael cried out, clapping their hand over their mouth. After a while they grasped at Keshet's bridle. A smoke-dark waterline marked the side of the grey barn, shins-high, and shiny dribbles oozed out from under the building. Kirael feared at once for their studio.

A missive lay upon the earth, washed down a slight slope into mud, its left end kicking around in a brown puddle. Kirael sucked their teeth in disgust, knowing by its being on the ground who'd paid for its delivery, or rather what.

The donkey nosed into their shoulder, her lips nibbling at a seam of their linen shirt. They patted her withers and led her into the old paddock, removing her harness. Off came the saddle-bags full of glue, nails, other materials to repair the leaking roof, the reason for their trek into the city. Even more crucial elements would need that loving touch now. They could handle most things one-handed, for the right was dexterous and they'd had many years to practice. In fact they'd spent more years without the treacherous left hand than with it. Nonetheless, some tasks were utter drudgery, and required working slowly.

Water dripped from the trees. Above, it was overcast, and in places there peeked through a deceitfully hopeful blue.

The barn had been falling near to pieces, forgotten and overgrown when they arrived a decade prior. The house nearby—to which the barn had belonged—was itself collapsed, a mystery best left in the pockets of time. Kirael, a sleepless being, needed no bed; nor did they eat enough for them to need a stove. But the lofted barn was a place of seamless, misanthropic peace, especially after they'd made a few personalizing renovations. They'd

fitted glass to the two empty panels in the ceiling, throwing polygonal light onto the floor, mapping the daily crossing of the sun like a crude astrolabe.

Throwing open the twin doors with a surge of nervous energy, Kirael set one foot inside and recoiled, for the barn was flooded to the knee. Their floorboards—planks they themselves had cut to size, imperfectly, and laid in place over the naked earth—had burst in places from water rising underneath them. Kirael squatted outside and inspected their boot, careful not to touch it, in order to make sure no water had permeated the waxed leather.

Getting wet was no longer a mere nuisance; every droplet was another divine nag. Under their sleeves, Kirael's forearms were pocked, eroded by a rain the previous month. Kirael interpreted the water's new malice as an expression of Diburah's exasperation. Perhaps she was trying to reincorporate her wayward godshard back into herself, leaching her essence away from their mortal body inch by inch.

Kirael waded in and, by day's illumination through the skylight, took stock of their home.

Though the arrangement of furniture and belongings was unchanged—Kirael had moved the contents of the loft to the opposite side away from the roof leak, in advance of the first storm—much of it was waterlogged. Kirael's desk and two tables, three-legged stool, and workbench, all were damaged with unsightly markings, the veneers lifted and the wood pulpy to the touch. What had been on the floor—books and pencils, the good paper, crude sculptures and more expert ones, a clamp that held a half-carved wood figure, pottery and a wheel, and items associated with the care of a donkey—was either partially submerged, or water-stained. Old correspondences and charcoal sketches floated on the water's surface,

even the sturdiest paper was unfit to withstand a week-and-a-half-long soak. It had been a few days' ride into the city and that same few back, for while Kirael did not sleep, Keshet needed to recuperate. Besides that, the second storm had trapped the pair in Rusham another handful of days. Kirael hungered to be alone and home all the while.

Kirael's foot met a squishy lump settled underwater, and they cringed. After a moment, they determined that it was potting clay whose container was missing. It had lost all shape, and was now glued to the floor. They tried to remember where their leather glove was, and whether they'd sealed it, and where the rendered tallow might be with which to do so. Hardly worth it, though, to root around; certainly not at the risk of the other hand. Flecks of water were one thing, but a true dipping would be dire.

In the loft were more than twenty years' worth of books and pamphlets and scripts and journals. They were works concerning sailing, anatomy, geography, and history; treatises on ideal beauty and geometry, frameworks for a philosophy of aesthetics. There were some hundred items altogether, many of which had traversed an ocean in a great, now thoroughly salted, trunk. Some of these items now dribbled the rain's remains onto the floor, haloed by a dark wet mark. So much literature came all this way only to warp in the dark loft, alone, perhaps afraid and addled.

Served Kirael right: leave home's comforts, privacy, the pursuit of personal enrichment, and be proven right that no pleasure could be found among society which outweighed those. Worse, now the evil had contaminated their own space.

Kirael sobbed noiselessly and without tears.

"Are you listening?"

There was no need to raise their voice; either she was paying attention, or she wasn't.

“You’ve made yourself clear,” they said. “Unfortunately for each of us, it’s useless to torment me. I won’t do it; you can’t make me, it’s too hard if I wanted to, and I can’t. I can’t, and I wish you’d left my books alone, at least my journals, damn you.”

The roof dripped sympathetically.

“You’ve ruined my records, all the thoughts I’ve had, thoughts a human being couldn’t have in the course of even two lives. You wanted this knowledge, *you* wanted it! You can only know the finite through me. What’ll you do, pass through?”

Any less of Diburah, and she would not be. As much as could be removed was already embodied as them.

“Eventually I’ll come home,” said Kirael. “So put your patience to use; have a smidgen of faith in me.”

The goddess indicated nothing.

Kirael opened the envelope, its flap coming apart in moist shreds. They picked the wet letter out of it in a few pieces. The handwriting was barely legible. With difficulty, Kirael read:

*To Kirael, not much esteemed; to my rootless root –
I pray daily against the preservation of your estate, and hope this finds you in agony, you gutless worm. No doubt you’re still hiding out in your little shack. If you were dissolved, I think I’d be home in the ether with you, mere particles.*

As for me, I write this from the road, which is to say my musical tour is a whopping success to date. My assistant holds the psaltery, and any fool can imagine what I do with it. This makes me a master of two, at a conservative estimate, kinds of fingering.

Kirael skimmed the next few paragraphs, rolling their eyes.

I'm having the best time on earth, but this can't go on forever. Will you willingly turn back toward her, setting yourself to the task for which we were made, or will she destroy us and make a new godshard with a little less free will? To clarify, I'm being rhetorical. When our gracious Lady finally takes you apart filament by filament, I'll have no regrets. I'm almost ready to become her again.

*No more to you at this time, and may she keep you far from me,
Hand*

Kirael dropped the letter and pushed it underwater with the toe of their boot, the words eaten blurry. Swearing softly, they scratched at their tingling wrist stump.

Packing up what belongings were not wet, they filled the saddlebags and Kirael's belt bag, as well as a basket of straw to be slung over their back. Then they scrounged together what money remained, of which there was less than expected. Had it drained through the shoddy flooring through the years? Kirael had only reentered the world a handful of times, but then, they never kept a log of their spending.

A house across the sea, now given to a friend, had been Kirael's once. They couldn't expect to live there again, but there were a handful of precious items in a modest trunk, kept safe until such time as Kirael ventured back. If the friend was trustworthy, there might still be these things: books—not favorite books, but important ones—and Kirael's earliest art and designs, including the drawings for the shoddy prototype of the umbrella, all of which were too delicate to risk giving to the sea. They could have these things shipped, if the friend was true, as well as alive. Now, the situation merited that risk. Without a collection, a magpie—no matter how discerning her taste—isn't worth much.

Kirael drafted a letter on paper from the loft. The paper was rumpled from having been wet. Either they'd find something better to use before they reached the next post office—Rusham, whence they'd come—or they'd send the rumpled paper, and it would be good enough. They fished a little lump of wax out of a lower desk drawer, approached the window, and dried it on a curtain.

“Now, be hot,” they said to it.

The wax warmed to the touch somewhat.

“That’s barely body temperature,” said Kirael. “I’m not asking for much. You can’t do any better than that?”

The lump responded, gradually softening until it was pliable.

“Enough to drip,” the godshard insisted.

The wax dribbled a little onto the rolled letter. Good enough. Kirael licked their thumb and spread out the wax on the paper. They tucked it into their belt bag.

It was now dark out, and Keshet needed plenty of rest after the previous day’s long ride. Kirael yanked the curtain from the window and dried off the surface of the desk, then sat upon it, drawing their knees to their chest, and waited there, unmoving, for daylight.

In Rusham, they found that to rent a private room at even a less-than-respectable lodging-house cost near double what it had in the past. Kirael grudgingly scrapped the plan to ship their belongings to them. Instead they would ship themselves.

Oh, goddess. She could as much as force Kirael across the ocean, but she wouldn’t bend their will to hers. Disintegrate as a result of fulfilling their duty, or be destroyed by her:

death as the rock or death as the hard place. The two possibilities pressed together, closer and closer. Still, Kirael preferred the rock. With a little luck, it would be a longer life. With a whole handful of luck, perhaps years longer.

The intermittent drizzle outside necessitated the purchase of a night in the lodging-house's common room. That being settled, when the weather weakened, Kirael acquired new paper, and wrote a letter to inform Nechem of their pending arrival.

Kirael twirled the umbrella as they walked to the post office, mesmerized by the flung droplets. It had been nice to touch those, when the godshard first was made. They'd enjoyed warm showers, pellets of rain bouncing off their upturned face. They used to dive from cliffs into the ocean, enjoying the hard slap of entry, the cold, kelp slipping between fingers and legs.

That was in the warmer waters off the coast of Tarsha, when they'd followed Diburah in sober devotion, loving her in themselves. In accordance with her wishes, Kirael joined a study-settlement in their efforts to approach the Sidab, who was then a minor sage, and still losable in the books of many such sages. Prior to the notoriety and ensuing acronym, he'd been Siman Dor Abihu, from an unincorporated village—Dor Abihu—at the foot of a slouching mountain. Presently, he was dead.

Kirael had not been charged with ensuring that. The exact charge, originally, was to *disallow the Sidab to finish his great work, by any means necessary*. Should the book be completed, Diburah said, a discourse would unfold that could never be put to rest. She struggled to transmit the depth of her dread. Kirael would later understand it as a fear of obsolescence, a death before death.

In service of that mission, the godshard took the guise of a person like any other.

The first time the Sidab spoke before Kirael, they were underwhelmed. The subsequent times, they came to understand at least what warm appeal he held for others. The sage never interrupted another soul, but he had an answer ready for all queries. He did not raise his voice, condescend, or shame. He made himself available mornings and evenings, and the rest of each day, he shut himself away to write a thing called *Abyssal Emanations of the Unified Postmortal*, which, beyond the title, he would say nothing about. Aside from that, he was a kind and sociable man, and otherwise uninteresting.

He was also nearing seventy. Perhaps the troubling tome, along with the sage himself, would fade into obscurity without any drastic action. Yes, force was unnecessary against this man. He would die, as human beings do, in a god's blink, a godshard's yawn.

Kirael then abandoned the company of the Sidab's throng, apprenticing with a roofer, then a carpenter. In time, they celebrated their fifth birthday—full-grown though they had always been—with the completion of a homely, but structurally sound, cottage in the bluffs east of Tarsha, a few days outside of Jeth.

When the Sidab swallowed a fishbone and abruptly, silently, passed from the world into the abyss, heavy rains lashed the sides of the cottage, and winds tore saplings from the cliffsides. The students of the Sidab perceived it as a mournsome storm, tearing their clothes in grief to the sound of its wailing. Kirael stood in the midst of the ferocity of the storm—their hair then long, uncovered, and able to get wet—and faced Diburah's exasperation.

The Sidab is dead, and you have worsened matters with your flight, she said. Nonetheless, this course can be righted. Return to Tarsha, tear up the book, and seed disagreement between those who would take up the mantle of Siman Dor Abibu.

“I wish you’d made me out of sterner stuff,” Kirael had responded. “I misjudged the stakes while I had the chance. Now this task is too much for me.”

Your excuses are insufficient, said the goddess. And you abuse my patience.

Kirael set their mouth and cast their eyes down. The raging storm calmed and waited, but the godshard did not speak. It was then that the left hand, scorning them, freed itself. With a searing, cold sensation and a clean break, Kirael had been left with smooth, unfinished flesh. The fingers of the hand wiggled in silent scorn. Before Kirael could snatch it up, the hand flung itself off the cliffs and into the sea.

At the post office in Rusham, Kirael clenched the umbrella tighter, fighting a wobbly feeling in their stomach. Their stump throbbed, only once, and they smacked it, hard, so that it stung instead.

THE SPITSTONE

Winds were favorable for the week that followed, when the merchant vessel *Spitstone* arrived in Rusham's Old Harbor. Once unloaded of its wool and dried fish, the caravel allowed travelers to book passage. These included two seminary students on pilgrimage to a relic of Hlishan the Lesser, a smalltime envoy of Ramel returning home, an old surgeon, and one other. Amag beit Shavi, first to board, watched these others negotiate, pay, and join her. Lurking at the far end of the docks, a shade returned her scrutiny. Amag struggled to make out the face's details, but noted the well-mannered donkey.

When the sailors began to haul up the anchor, watcher and donkey hurried to the *Spitstone's* side. The handler's jerky, uncomfortable gait and headscarf confirmed Amag's suspicions. A comfort of her little city, to see the same stranger twice. A prickly exchange ensued between stranger and sailor, and the former was at last permitted to board the donkey as well, provided they pay her way in carpentry. Hearing that, Amag failed not to doubt the ship's seaworthiness, just a touch.

Across the Gadol lay some trace of her savha in an Astalish farmhouse of unmet relatives. The ship's route, while it passed closest to Amag's destination, couldn't be said to stop near. Amag attempted to persuade the crew to dock at Samla. Hearing this, the final passenger requested a stop at Hinevi.

"How's this: split the difference; we'll add a stop at Jeth," the harried first mate snapped. "If you don't like it, by all means, get off my ship, but be warned that I'll keep your coin."

A look of judgment colored the old surgeon's face, even after the departure of the first mate.

"Was it so evil to ask? He didn't have to oblige me," Amag said.

"It's of no consequence now," said the other nuisance, stroking the donkey's face. "If it all worked out, who cares?"

They wore a leather glove on the one hand, supple as skin. She wondered what it looked like at the other arm's end, whether it was puckered or smooth, where exactly it ended, for the sleeve was tied off loosely some inches below. As they led the donkey away, she called out to them.

"Don't you remember me?"

"No. Should I?"

"Depends. How often do you shout at clouds?"

Their expression soured.

"I'm Amag."

"Kirael," they said, with distaste. It was a name like three bells, but they spoke it as if throwing the syllables.

Amag disliked their tone. So they thought they were tolerating an old lady, when in truth she was tolerating them! She glared at their vanishing back until, perhaps feeling an evil eye, Kirael shook a spasm out of their left arm and hurried away.

Clean bright skies framed the first days on the open water. Gradually, Kirael's fear gave way to a jaunty disbelief. Often, they were cocksure enough not only to brave the deck,

but to lean over the side—squeezing the life out of the taffrail—and inhale the ocean’s odors, eschewing the kiss of the lunging spray. Terns jetted overhead, flesh and feather rather than ink and charcoal.

No one conversed with Kirael, to their pleasure. When most others took their separate meals together, Kirael provided for Keshet, then paced the deck and spoke aloud to himself to pass the time. Through the years, they’d developed pet amusements requiring only attention, games for one. Sometimes they recited lists; wingspans of birds, names and birthplaces of prophets. Or they described remembered objects in close detail. This time, they’d started by walking in their mind through the old grey barn, recalling each rusty nail. Eventually, unable to bear it, they eulogized each pair of shoes they’d worn out—four—and then turned to city-states and capitals.

“Shela-Dir and not Sela-Dir,” said Amag. She was on the deck, near the rail but not yet touching it. The getting there was slow.

Kirael seized the rail in a cold fright. “What?”

How long had she been within earshot? A streak of embarrassment trickled through them. It was not a common feeling to Kirael. They recast it as irritation, something less vulnerable.

“You’re mistaken,” she said. “Sela-Dir is no longer the capital of Morat, since its acquisition of the Wayward Cousin.”

“If that’s the case, it’s even more insulting to the locals than previously, for you to call it by the Moratine epithet.”

“I’m trying to help you, although you’re corrosive.”

“You can help me best by leaving me alone.”

“No human being truly wants to be alone,” said Amag.

Kirael laughed, not coldly but with genuine mirth.

“There’s nothing humorous about it,” she said. “They don’t. They only think so, to spare their pride. It causes a deep wound to be unwanted in the world, too contrarian to address. The rest is excuses.”

“You think you’re accessing a cutting truth about me.”

“You think you know what I think.”

“I think you have that reversed,” said Kirael.

“Have you ever seen a tree grown around an iron chain? It’s a sad thing. The trunk will be ugly forever. But the chain can come off, at least.” Amag gripped the railing and inched her way towards them. “I haven’t yet adjusted to movement on the water. You make it look easy. I wasn’t anticipating that, since by land you make a turkey look elegant.”

“Wonderful—a new insecurity. Unfortunately, it won’t work. I’m already full up.”

“You don’t have to make me pity you,” said Amag. “I already do, hence engaging you in what I hesitate to call conversation...”

“Right. Not only are you ignoring my one declared wish, but—if I’m doing it right—you’re not much enjoying the violation.”

“Probably I miss someone,” said Amag.

“If that’s how it works.” Kirael chewed the inside of their cheek. “When did Morat annex Wael?”

“In fifty-two or three, Our Year twenty-some-odd. Could be as late as thirty.”

“Damn. Thirty, you think? Then my beit Bin’s just out of date.”

“Yelah beit Bin? *Account of the World* or *Pilgrim of Egren Pass*? I find her prose drab for how much of it there is. And she seldom describes a meal in detail. She deprives the reader of one of the chief pleasures of imagining.”

“I like her attention to flora and fauna.”

“She’s preoccupied with rock formations.”

“I’ve been through Egren Pass, you know. They really are worth lingering.”

“I’ll have to take your word for it.” Amag sighed. “Gods’ favor on travel writers, who sustain me from my chair. This is the farthest from home I’m likely to go again. I should make the most of it.”

“The gods should smile on the travelers rather than the writers,” Kirael said. “Lady knows we need it.”

“Which is your Lady: the Dwelling or the Word? The Warm Rain or the Least Rain?”

“I invoke Diburah.”

Amag studied Kirael. “Truthfully, I wouldn’t have taken you for her follower.”

“Well, don’t start now.”

“I understand,” said Amag. “I myself am lapsed, although I hope to meet her again in my savha’s land.”

“I hope you do,” Kirael said, sincerely. A part of them was touched by this admission, an overdue reminder that theirs was not the only relationship with the other realm. Their early years were colored by awe and gratitude. For a moment they wondered whether a kernel of that self remained, hopeful and confused.

Both figures shuffled in place, avoiding one another's gaze. Finally, Amag's settled on the horizon, and Kirael watched the jagged dance of sails until the carpenter called for them, at which point the two parted without words of farewell.

Evening trickled toward the ninth night. The light's final flareup stained the sky, a weak tea-red backlighting felt clouds crammed closer and closer together. In the hold, Kirael pretended to nap in one of the hammocks, while the surgeon and one of the seminary students ate a light supper. They sat on crates of wool. The envoy of Ramel ate pickled eggs and carrots; the projection of his wet crunches suggested that his mouth was open even between interjections. Kirael faced the wall, studying the wood grain to cross-eyes in a slimming beam of light, until it looked like star charts. Their headscarf was loose on their head, and under it, they played with their choppy hair, cut off in a fit many years ago, and never grown back again.

"Well, look at that," said the surgeon. "Floor's a touch wet."

The envoy scoffed. "A touch more than a touch."

"Just shove a rag in the crack or something," said the student.

The *Spitstone* gave a long groan, the crates across the floor scraping forward and back. She pitched low and sharply, followed by a great thud and an angry chorus from the three passengers. Kirael flipped over in the hammock, peering out into the darkening hold. White gobs rolled across the floor. Kirael squinted. Eggs.

The student helped the surgeon from the floor to his feet. Meanwhile, Kirael struggled out of the hammock, which remained upright in spite of the wave-flung caravel.

No quicker were their feet under them than they were lost again, the ship's cadence more exaggerated than it seemed while suspended. Kirael hissed and scabbled at their dampening knees and shins as the water ate through their pants where they'd landed. The acid sting of eroding flesh making its bloodless return to Diburah.

Panic struck them. How deep could it eat? Hardly a dry cloth this far out to sea. No sense stripping down, exposing more skin. They breathed shallowly and bent their knees even as it heightened the prickling. They would not be so foolishly thrown off balance again. In a moment they breathed with relief; the damp had penetrated as far as it would, leaving a deep but tolerable ache. They rubbed their knees, mapping the new dimples.

Slow rise of the *Spitstone*, belly-dropping downward roll, again and again. Kirael weighed options: dry-heave in the dim hold, or brave the surface? The umbrella contributed nothing. While they debated, the student seized a gentler moment and made a break for the deck.

"Squall's only gonna pick up," said the surgeon.

"You think so?" Kirael wormed closer to the wall.

"I'm a retired navy doc," he said. "Truth told, it looked dark as graves out there last I was up, and it's off to a tetchy start."

"Someone's god's unhappy," said the envoy. "Let's hope not Vadarai the Destroyer. Or should we suppose that destruction would make such a god happy?"

"Don't joke about that," Kirael snapped.

"Well, I don't know what they want. I pray and it helps, so I think."

Kirael passed the others and pressed against the slim arched window. The thick glass was smeary with rain. They shuddered and withdrew, pacing in a stutter back and forth, feeling like a cat in a slippery washtub, a *sinking* washtub. They rolled purposefully with the ship's rhythm, noticing the rhythm growing stronger and the angles steeper as the storm worsened outside.

The envoy muttered the Song of the Sea and thumbed an amulet. The words blurred together, *who-is-like-you-who-is-like-you, whose-likeyou, whoselikeyou*.

A low creak and a weak, wet splintering. Kirael's head jerked around in a futile attempt to find it. Then, a sloppy gurgle, and water began to sheet across the floor. Kirael scaled the lowest ladder rungs towards the main deck. The door separating the deck and the hold flapped open a crack and closed again, beating against its frame. Kirael flung it latched and clung to the ladder.

"Truth told, I don't have myself a good feeling for this squall," the surgeon said. "Some godliness in it, I fear."

Kirael squeezed their eyes shut. "If so, nothing can be done for us, and we're good as destroyed after all."

"Is this your evil aboard?"

"I hope not," they said. "But I believe so."

Water pounded against the window and door. The envoy vomited behind a crate, then cocooned in a hammock, continuing to pray.

The shrinking daylight revealed an even sheen across most of the floor, spreading at a patient but inevitable warm-molasses pace.

“Aren’t you a carpenter?”

“I can’t,” they sputtered. “Can’t, my boots, glove, agh...”

The surgeon speared them with his incredulity.

“Then let’s get just about anybody, and some nails and scraps of ply, you dog. Move!”

Kirael braced themselves, then splashed across the floor to their hammock, grabbing a dirty shirt. They tied it around their head and across their face, leaving a slit for their eyes.

“Okay,” they said, muffled by fabric. “Okay.”

“You best pray too, if it’s your fault,” said the surgeon, throwing open the door.

“Don’t fucking sink us. I’d sooner throw you over than drown today.”

Amag, drowning in her own hair, violently craved the shore, where at least the rain never dried down to residual crust. After every gust of wind, she tore her soaked hair from stinging eyes. Still, she made herself useful on the deck. What her back allowed, she lifted, and threw overboard alongside the others. Passengers and crew worked together, their differences decomposing in the rain. Instead she herself had split in two. Cowed by how steeply she was out of her depth, the practical mind that ruled her in her own city shrank in terror, leaving some thrilled sharp self at her helm.

Amag hoped, a little, that it would stay in charge. She cast the work of her hands into the sea, pages of postmortal theory and dialogues and manifestos turning to grey pulp before her. What a sendoff.

She knew not where she was in relation to either shore, nor what day of the week it was. In liquid geography, with no spouse and no Commissioner, she had yet to characterize

whoever was left beneath those trappings. It had occurred to Amag that in some freak accident, she might die at sea as that new woman, without having known her whatsoever.

She tipped the crates; some splintered on impact with the water. Goodbye, remaining cargo, wool so far from home, and dried fish returning home.

One way the woman beneath was the same as the surface woman: they were happiest doing something material about it, whatever the trouble.

Amag had met the sublime on a handful of occasions, some thing that made her feel small and finite. At the study-settlement where she was raised, the sublime was a thing of mostly the cosmic scale, but Amag herself felt dwarfed by smaller things than the gods themselves. During festivals for Shoftei she witnessed as a child, she could climb onto her roof and watch half the neighborhood erect reed dwellings in their yards. At night she'd look over a sea of reeds, aglow from the candles shining up between their slats, and the air shimmered with the sound of thousands of murmured prayers of thanksgiving, and the soft rustle of garlic garlands dropping pieces of paper peel.

Or a darker thing, sitting shiva for Yosel after his passing, as they had sat together for her semha: her grief a silent tumult, the sense of herself as a stone fruit without a stone, pulpy and empty.

The greater and greater waves now rising before her unseamed these feelings and conjoined them, monstrous and lumpen. Each wave four times dwarfed the craft, and so many of them, like fingers of enormous hands, beneath wheeling, circling clouds.

A great crack of thunder without lightning's warning. She yelped and clapped her hands over her mouth.

The quartermaster bade them all draw lots to see which god must be conciliated. Amag drew hers—a long piece of straw—and, relieved, fled to the inner railing of the ship.

The surgeon crashed past her from the belly of the ship, followed by someone else. The door slammed shut behind them. Who was that with the surgeon, face not veiled but swaddled like a sacrificial effigy? The question lasted a blink. Who but Kirael, moving as though repelled by the ground? She was glad, almost, to see them, gladder yet when they waved.

“Beautiful storm we’re having,” she shouted.

“In a way it is,” they returned, voice hoarse and muffled.

“Don’t you hate to get wet?”

“I can’t help?”

“You haven’t been known to do so.”

“To be honest, I’m yea close to passing out.” Kirael shook their head. “Amag, I’d like to tell you something useful just this once. It’ll make me feel better. Though you’ll feel worse, I think.”

“Well?”

“This ship’s done for if I don’t pacify our Lady,” they said.

“You! You haven’t even pulled a straw yet.”

“You’ll all go down. I’d hate to see that. Of course I’d not be far behind.”

“Are you asking my help?”

Kirael met her eyes unblinking. A streak of cold shot through her.

Amag thought for a moment, gripping the railing. Water sloshed across her feet in all directions as the ship tossed.

“I’ve never enraged a deity,” she said. “Our forebears would have made an offering of great personal value as an admission of regret. Or else they’d make their case. And usually their bold conviction was rewarded with respect.”

“Of course. Hence humanity’s sacred epithet, *god-wrestlers*.”

“That’s right,” said Amag. “Although you must pick your wrestles...”

In the animal pen on the far side of the deck, out of sight, a goat screamed. The two of them looked to the sound. The beast, carried by three men, fought in terror, then was thrown to the storm. Dismayingly, there would soon be nothing else to put overboard excepting people.

“Keshet!” Kirael hissed. “I’m sorry. I have to see to my friend. Assuming they can carry her.”

They fled towards the pen, flung side to side with the ship. One miscalculation and they slammed into the center mast, knocking the wind from them. But even if a sound could have burst from Kirael’s throat, at that distance, it would have been engulfed by the roar, a looming sound, unmollified.

“I’m too young to die, though maybe only just,” said Amag to no one. She hurt all over. Perhaps she’d strained something. Stupid, stupid. Nonetheless she braced herself with her planted feet, one part of her too proud to go below to the hold while work remained, even for someone else to do. More pressingly, another part of her was fear-stricken by the

thought of that black, wet tomb. What worse than to be swallowed still breathing, except to allow it on purpose.

BARGAIN

In the pen were both seminary students, the quartermaster, and the ship's cook. The students would each seize a chicken, dash away, then return without one. The cook and quartermaster argued while attempting to wrangle the largest, most quarrelsome beast aboard. Communication was through the din. Keshet, for her part, bit and kicked indiscriminately. Her front hooves stamped, splattering filthy water onto those in the pen with her.

"Leave her be," shouted Kirael. "I can fix it!"

"Good, the hermit's here," the quartermaster yelled. "Sorry to say it, but she has to go over. It's best you do it."

She threw Kirael a rope lead. When it dropped in the water, they glared, kicking it away like a snake.

"It won't help," Kirael hollered back. "This is my storm! It's my god, my folly."

The quartermaster exchanged a troubled look with the cook. A weighty admission, even from someone whose word was questionable.

"Say your piece," she said. "What's to be done?"

"I'm going to talk to Her," said Kirael. "Don't lay your hands on my friend again."

"What happens if your god won't answer you?"

"She will," Kirael vowed.

They hesitated, weighing staying to extract a promise from the quartermaster. Instead, they stroked Keshet's damp flank and made their way to the stern of the *Spitstone*, then, clinging to a coil of tied-off rope, tilted their face to the roiling sky.

"Diburah!" They croaked into the clouds with broken voice. "*Hineni*; here I am!"

The goddess revealed nothing, and her storm raged on.

Kirael called her name again, answered only by tumbling thunder.

Trembling, they hooked their left arm around a skinny mast, and the fingers of the right hand tore the shirt from their face, protecting only their eyes. The droplets struck their cheeks and forehead like molten glass, and they wept without tears.

Then Kirael whispered the true name of the goddess, her Name of Names, such that it was barely a breath, and the first bolt of lightning in all the storm struck the central mast. As was customary, a length of chain had been run from the mast to waterline and across the quarterdeck. Nevertheless, the electric shock was so great that it sent its current through the water there, and the second mate, barefoot and frozen in place by unimaginable force, silently perished, unwitnessed.

"I'm humbling myself before you," Kirael breathed. The rain burned their tongue. They turned their face down toward the sea so that the rivulets streamed in common tracks rather than everywhere. Grooves wore into the backs of their ears and neck.

"We can come to some agreement that spares these lives," said the godshard. "Don't destroy them on behalf of *my* life."

The clouds bore down as a fleecy mist, claustrophobic upon the ship. It trailed around Kirael, a slow and prowling cyclone. Kirael, feeling weaker and weaker as pieces of them returned to Her, felt her nearness closer and closer, her strength increasing drop by drop.

“You don’t want them dead,” said Kirael. “I know this; your essence is gentle and good. This rage you bear for me is a sort of metaphysical sickness, a layer obscuring your judgment.”

The clouds thickened and slowed turn by turn. There flowed a resonance from within the mist, which filled Kirael body and spirit, so full it crowded their own being, a grey syrup near too thick to think in. It spoke to them alone.

You are Mine and you were Me, said the goddess. You are not a person as they are. You are only a wisp of My will. You’re swollen with hubris, because they are small, smaller even than you. But that smallness entreats Me to be gentle with them, where you are replaceable. Even losing some of Myself in your obliteration, I would destroy you for their sake twelve times over.

“That’s not true,” they said, hoping it wasn’t. “You want me to believe it, but I doubt even you believe it.”

Don’t make me do this. I want you to come home so that we can be whole again.

“Give me another twenty years to live; I’d do your bidding as soon as we land for that.” They spoke through gritted teeth, for the mist scraped and burned. “Maybe twenty is asking too much. Then ten will do, a round decade.”

After wastefulness and disrespect beyond proportion... Still, you think you can beguile Me again. Beguile your god.

“Five,” said Kirael, a lump in their throat. “I’d take two. There’s too much I want to do.”

I didn't come to bargain, she said. You've had plenty of time to do it your way. Now I'll have to take you home by force, if I have to strip this vessel plank from plank to do so.

Amag felt her way along the railing, in the thick of the tempest. The farther towards the back of the ship, the warmer the smog, like a living thing. Closer and closer to the heart. Silver light threaded the clouds and vanished. Somewhere there was Kirael, and, she thought, the kind of material encounter with the sublime which had never in her day been put into print.

“I know what you are,” Amag shouted into the cloud-forms. “Besides a blockhead, I know what you are!”

A dark form ahead, a figure enfolded in storm, pulsing with a watery light from the core. She called their name. They turned to look her way, but demonstrated no recognition. In all likelihood, they couldn't see her for the fog. Two frigid flares, their eyes, seared hers through the mist. Tears of pain sprang to her eyes, and she looked away, as though sunstruck. As she crept once more toward them, her vision still runny with stars, a watercolor scene erupted. Amag watched a dark shape clamber up onto the rail of the pitching ship, and fling itself into the ocean. As it hurtled down, slivers of light flaked away from it like droplets of spitting oil. She shrieked, leaning over the edge to watch it plummet. It struck the water without a splash.

The storm dissipated over the course of minutes. Afterward, the sun shone apologetically bright, wiping the water from the decks and lifting it from clothes and sails.

Then followed a mild and star-strung night. While the damaged *Spitstone* changed course for the nearest harbor, Amag soberly lit her sabbat candles. It was her first time doing so without Tirzi in several years. She blessed wet black bread and the unspilt dregs of the surgeon's seven-day ale. Her lip wobbled, but didn't break.

At Key Harbor in Nadon, the passengers, informed that the *Spitstone* needed a fortnight's worth of repair, disembarked. Some boarded other vessels. Amag, having taken custody of a donkey, determined to chance it by land. The day was clear, though crisp.

Amag had never before handled any beast surpassing a cat in size. Keshet knew it. She twisted, brayed, and refused at random to be led. Amag, however, had herself been named kin to donkeykind more often in life than she'd seen sunny days. She bought a new leather notebook and several turnips to share. Then she sat herself on a stone ledge at the edge of the market, watching the beasts with their handlers come and go, taking notes.

After two nights of blessed stillness in a real bed in a private room at a more than serviceable pub, Amag was ready to leave Nadon for Astaal. It was half a week after the *Spitstone* should have arrived in Samla to begin with, but at least she was in pissing distance of her roots.

A good bed had been worth every cent. The pillow had been lumpy, more lumps than flats, but Amag found that she could slot between lumps just so and get support for her neck. She'd grown accustomed to waking at sea with aches and cricks aplenty. Now there

were only her baseline nagging twinges, forgettable in comparison. For the first time since lying in her own bed in Rusham, she felt replenished. Not, of course, as replenished as she might have felt beside her spouse. She missed rolling over and seeing them still asleep, always with their feet outside the covers, breathing through their nose so that it whistled softly.

She had the possible location of Yosel's homestead narrowed down to two likely ones. There was Tovatel, a small node appended to southeast Astaal, and under its jurisdiction. However, Amag had a good feeling about Norca, a neighborhood within Astaal, but at its very southern point. They were a day's walk apart, and an early riser could cover the both of them and have her answer within three days.

Astaal, however, lay a week from Nadon's fringes. Amag cringed to imagine walking that distance, leading Keshet all the way, for she would not be mounted. With that in mind, on this, her third morning on land again, on her way out of town, Amag purchased a little cart and a large turnip.

Astaal slept cradled at the foot of a sparse and ancient mountain range, the Thaal for which it was named. They were low, flat mountains, rounded on top. Spring's snowmelt would pour down their sides, into the crater where the city had been raised. Before it was a city, its people fled the floods for high grounds and returned when the water dried up again. The farmland was good on the rim and sustained them. Eventually, they built their city on stilts and platforms, some neighborhoods rising higher and higher.

Amag felt at home in Astaal. The dialect spoken here sounded strange to her at first, but not unfamiliar. She understood it, though imperfectly, and she imagined the voices around her to be refractions of her savha's voice, his syllabic stresses and his—from her perspective, substituted—phonemes.

She had depleted her strength by the fourth day, from crisscrossing wooden trackways and staircases. There was vertigo, too. As a stranger she often took the less sensible route by mistake, traversing High City and Low, up down up, merely to go across, for it had seemed the straightforward route at a glance. Worse, the wood of the older ramps and trackways was damp and rotting. Often, she'd be rerouted by repairs, or more often, chasmic gaps between planks, and a staggering height below.

Resultingly, Amag arrived later than expected at the neighborhood of Norca, at the southern point, for she'd come by the western road. Thankfully, with no shortage of bribery in the form of fresh vegetables, the donkey by now accepted Amag as custodian.

The parts of Astaal called the Low City made Amag uneasy, for they were always in uncanny shade. Norca dwelled in those depths, on the stockiest platforms. Beneath and on either side of them, cold green mountain water lapped at the trackways, the yearlong remains of the spring floods. Amag knew her savha's sisters were thought to have relocated within the city's bounds. It seemed most likely they'd settle a short ride from family. Still, Amag couldn't fathom willingly moving into the chill of permanent shadow.

Nonetheless, at the southern shrine, she inquired after her relations. A few So-and-so beit Shavi had logged their names and offerings, but the most recent of these was decades ago. So Amag, with some relief, trekked northeast and into the outskirts of the city, where

the land opened up into banded green flats, and light so fine that she didn't mind going up the endless ramps.

At the very top, she looked behind before she allowed herself to look in front of her. A long way down, and a longer way from home, she thought. But arriving, she thought, at her soul's home, the home of what piece of her was Yosel.

The farmlands spread in woven green blocks, like a mat of interlocking rushes. Sprinkled here and there were jade groves and the brown stone houses of her family and their neighbors, families which had died and been born in the same houses, climbed and fell out of the same trees, for generations.

Here, the road turned to dirt again, a deep rich earth. The sun soaked into her skin. Amag kicked her shoes off her swollen feet, tucking them into the little cart. She walked and improvised a tune accompanied by nothing-words, pure sound and expression. The air was still; the song traveled nowhere, and was only ever known to her and the donkey.

THE OTHER BEGINNING

At the beginning of this world, the gods of this world were born, cosmically locked, until uncertain death, into the stewardship of their cradle.

It required the might of all the gods to populate the world. It was the first thing they ever agreed on. Force so great can only be achieved through a unanimous decision; such a mighty power takes all seven. Since the beginning of their world, the gods agreed on these few things: the populating of that world with life, the destruction of all life in the world, the repopulating of the world. And loathe to destroy it again, in discord as to how to govern it, they wove a shroud of shame. And the Lesser Veil spun around them tighter and tighter, a sheer cocoon, yet unimpregnable. A Veil that—while a pale mimicry of the Great Veil between this world of gods and scraps of clay, and Death which can raze them indiscriminately—nonetheless, could not be torn but by all of them.

In this way, man became the keeper of the world.

COLUMN

Naked opal drifting down, or more a green-depths piece of labradorite, its fractionated, tatter-edged shine. A cold mass tossed in this water, tumbled low in a sea, colder and colder for lack of a soul to exude life-warmth. Now it was drenched-wood grey, and smaller than before, concentrated.

Nameless but not formless; four limbs and a head, resembling more a worn molar than a person. Now a plea: *Return*. Return to what? So much slippage here in the drift... Then a sense of a title without self.

What would it mean to be K-R-L, a name not gifted but chosen? Hard to focus. Slippage. Wet cluster of—what, feathers?—passing before its eyes. Then it did have eyes. Feathers? Never mind. Clarity returning. Ki-ra-el. Then they had not been obliterated. Stupid thing to call Her bluff, dare Her to be gentle. Shouldn't've, but here they were, what remained of them, though changed.

Then she needed them more *here* than there. She needed *them*, not a new shard.

It occurred to them that in their rebellion, they knew more of human beings than a new holy presence, well-made and better-behaved. Such knowledge could be her second, private objective, a way to escape Leastness.

Kirael floated their arms in front of them, but it was too dim to see much. They touched their face and prickly head, feeling their way all over their surface sequentially. Depressions dappled their skin, but moderate ones without sharp edges, no harsh craters. Perhaps the sea at impact had erased them all over. Though dimpled like a moon for all time,

they'd been made anew by different hands than Hers. There the damage ended; Diburah's ceasefire.

They swam up, towards a lesser dim. The distant light split, cerulean parted by a swath as black as the water several fathoms below them, perhaps a vessel at the surface. Kirael swam for the blue, and stopped. The darkness wasn't far away, but close, gargantuan. From far away it had looked sleek, but at this distance Kirael could make out a rasping texture, like a melon rind. Moreover, it was moving, displacing the water in a low rumble.

Then they were within striking distance of a leviathan.

Though the leviathan's head was past them, Kirael wondered how keenly it could smell. A species whose very name was synonymous with mass could probably eat whatever it wanted with its size alone, and living for some hundreds of years, was likely possessed of some primordial intelligence. Either the leviathan's Makers designed it in an excessive mood, or intended it as a cosmic antagonist to complicate the human drama. A humbling experience, something with which people could never compete.

Kirael followed the grey length of its torso with their eyes until it began to fade into the murk. They caught sight of motion beside that vanishing point. A mass in the shape of a bent shield plowed the water, and the section of body beside Kirael started to thrash, its motion rippling all the way out towards the shield-head. These bursts of motion propelled the head nearer to them. Kirael broke for the distant surface, only to see double, the leviathan's tail looped over and around itself. The water below Kirael was crossed, too, by the ancient beast's trunk, leaving them in the middle of a quickly tightening knot of serpent.

The beast's shield-head drew nearer, already huge, soon to be gargantuan. It came to three great blunt points, one on top and one to each side, connected by sloping tissue. The points curved back slightly. The leviathan's face protruded to a blunted wedge, with great dark eyes rimmed in fleshy grey, reflecting like a cat's. Its shield-hide was scarred in jagged furrows.

The leviathan's head drew near to Kirael, while the knot of its body wove tighter around them, caging them in together.

Kirael watched its mouth drift open, a mouth that could inhale a porpoise in a bite, with rows of teeth, each tooth the length of a door.

Don't tremble, they thought. It would be an honor to end this way.

The depths of its throat worked. Kirael trembled.

The leviathan blew a stream of bubbles from its throat-gills. Then it unthreaded its tail back into alignment behind it, its motionless face hanging there nose to nose with Kirael. With a motion which reminded them of Keshet, it bowed its head. Kirael resisted the urge to stroke its nose. The leviathan ribboned past them in the direction from which it had come, stopping a few fathoms out to look back at them.

Kirael waited for it to leave, but it remained. After a long while, a three note sequence erupted from its throat, akin to whale song, but lower. Then a powerful gush of bubbles. Distantly, the tail lashed.

The godshard swam toward the serpent's face, and it began to swim away again, leading them through that rainless chasm between lands.

Kirael followed the leviathan for miles. Only once, it shot into the middle-deep to tear a whale in two and devour the halves. Whenever it rested, hovering motionlessly with its great eye wide open, Kirael surfaced, floating on their back and watching the clouds or stars inch across the sky. The second night brought a drizzle, and Kirael closed their eyes and let it spatter their tongue. The godshard watched the fourth night turn over in its sleep, taking the constellated blanket with it. The citric sky promised a mild morning. A low red planet lingered in the air for hours.

Sluggishly, the leviathan's torso scraped past the back of the godshard's legs. Kirael dropped into the sea, and flesh and shard wove through the water together.

By midmorning, the leviathan slowed. Kirael emerged into the air to see a cave up ahead, a sea cave, a canopy of rock spread over a channel of water. A faraway little shirttail of land peeked out from behind the right side. The two entered the cave, Kirael paddling at the surface, shivering as their hair wept onto their shoulders. The leviathan swam beneath them, visible through the glassy water.

Once inside, the cave turned sharply one way, then gradually curved another, a series of chambers in varying dimensions. Here and there, a pillar of rock descended from the ceiling and stood like a sentinel in the water.

An hour's swim into the cave, it forked, and they followed the left track. From there on, the ceiling was collapsed in some chambers, and the day poured in, so that the smooth salt-crusting walls glistened. Often now, the walls became floors at the bottom, a rough shoreline taking shape. At the waterline, mussels and barnacles sucked the flat rocks. Jewel-green algae rippled.

The shores drew together, then met in the middle. At their juncture they became a rocky path. Kirael looked down into the water beneath them, but the leviathan was absent. They panicked at first, and called for it, as though it would hear or understand. Then they floated and waited.

Eventually, they crawled out of the water and, clutching a stalagmite, dragged themselves upright.

Kirael wobbled and held on tight as their legs crumpled. It was their first time standing since the ship, their first time on solid ground in countless days.

Though not quite ready, they pressed on.

The path brought Kirael to a new, oblong cave, and they entered on quaking legs at its narrower end. They scanned the wide far wall. At the apex was an ovular skylight, and under it a steep vertical slope. The whole domed room gave the impression of peering out from under a hag stone.

Kirael gave up on their legs and sank to the floor of the cave. They mussed their hair, flinging a few beads of water into the air. A dark splotch marked the ground under them, where sun-dried stone was dampened again. They steeped themselves in liquid light.

The cave resounded, percussive with the noise of droplets striking the rocks intermittently from a leak, and the muted slosh, farther back in the tunnels, of the sea.

Enveloped by a stillness that restored their strength shred by shred, Kirael sat, and then lay on the ground with shut eyes, until past the peak of day. The sun lifted some of the wet weight from their clothes.

A chill spread through them, a feeling of being beheld.

Kirael, sighed Diburah. Her presence was hesitant, a mere graze of the metaphysical hand.

“*Hineni*,” they said, after a moment; “Here I am.”

She stayed silent for a long time. The droplets plopped and spat all around.

I would speak face to Face, she said at last.

Kirael rose to their feet, and held their breath.

A green column of water materialized above the skylight. It surged down until it touched the ground, and, shimmering, latent, held its shape without so much as a splash out of place. It warped the light in the cave, casting shuddering, dappled reflections. The chamber took on a wavering teal ambience, undulating with highlights and lowlights like the vision of a swaying kelp forest. The column burned from within.

“Good day, my lady,” croaked Kirael.

For once, I ran from you, she said. *I was angry, then ashamed of Myself. Then I abandoned you. I had to think.*

The column of water pulsed and shifted.

“Respectfully, I did well enough on my own,” said Kirael. “Yet it’s good to be with You, and for once not contentiously. It’s been a long time since I saw Your face.”

I owe you the satisfaction of knowing that I was ashamed, that I didn’t destroy you because you spoke rightly twice. Principally, I won’t be the kind of god who acts in anger. I lose Myself therein. But there is something else, Kirael. I was posturing in a way, lying to Myself in my desire to punish you. I didn’t want

to be in the wrong, but you have become a complex being, a whole being, no longer a mere tool. And, therefore, perhaps I can't deal with you as an empty avatar. I seem to come up short when I do.

Kirael swallowed. "I don't know anymore. I'm not a human being with inherent worth; I have to earn a claim to wholeness. I doubt that I'm quite there yet."

They contemplated the pillar that was Her reflection, as close as she could come to passing through. Even this had twice the weight of her voice. This fraction of the divine, reminding them how little of the truth of Her this mortal body could hold, caused a closed door in the back of Kirael's mind to rattle and shake with the pressure locked behind it.

"Still," they said, drawing it out as they searched for words, "We can agree that while I am not as they are, I am like them, very like them. Maybe enough like them to love them, and enough unlike them to help them."

Then you really are Mine, said Diburah, Or what at my best I wish Myself to be.

Kirael began to approach Her, reaching out their hand as they did. The water reached back for them, engulfing their hand, then arm, then shoulder. Kirael allowed her to overtake them, submerging their whole body. A warmth spread within them, and they saw Her light at the center of themselves, the shard of their true being. They saw it for what it was.

Love flowed between them, complete non-judgment and acceptance. Kirael's head began to ache. It was difficult to tell whose feelings were whose. Either way, the combination was too much pressure to contain in this form, and they floundered as though drowning, until the water spat them out upon the floor, damp as before but no more so.

Later, the godshard retraced their steps back through the caves, then swam for the far off land behind it, a long, green-topped strip swelling into cliffs. They scanned the coastline as they approached it on a diagonal, and altered their course toward a craggy, sickle-shaped inlet. Looking up at the bluffs, striated by vertical shadows where there were channeled depressions, Kirael registered where they'd ended up, somewhere near Tarsha, an unfamiliar part of a familiar landscape. As they neared land, the waters gradually warmed.

THE ASTALISH BEIT SHAVIS

Amag knocked on a few doors before the answerer could point her to the beit Shavi homestead. People remarked on her accent, not unkindly. They weren't warm to her as an unvetted stranger, but were polite.

The farmhouse at which she and Keshet arrived was sizeable. It had one level and was shaped as two long wings that met in an L-shape. At some point it must have housed the whole beit Shavi clan at once. The south wing had fallen into disrepair, but the east wing was well-maintained.

Amag hailed a stocky man washing clothes in a basin. He shook sudsy water from his hands, dragged a falling sleeve back up his elbow, and raised a hand to acknowledge her.

“Are you Amag?”

She confirmed it. He grinned. A charming gap between his front teeth reminded Amag of a locksmith who had once cut her a very good deal.

“Good to meet you at last,” he said. “Been wondering when you'd come round. The mail-boy beat you here, twice.”

“Two times?” She frowned.

“Yes; one *from* you, one for you.”

A tight feeling began in her stomach.

“Let me put your donkey up in back,” said the man. “I'm Yos. We're something like cousins once removed.”

She passed Keshet off to Yos and followed him. He stabled the donkey and hung her harness on a peg. Then he took Amag inside the house, where she was introduced to a pile of relatives. She shared in their good brown bread, warmed in a clay oven and daubed with fresh, sweet butter. A pot of preserves—probably plum—was also present at the table, and Yos licked the knife once he'd spread it on his portion.

Yos and stepsibling Keliya were the operant heads of household. The other three members were of Amag's own generation, more sedentary, but still able enough for light work. They were Yos's parents, amicably separated, and his semha's new wife, who had come to the union with now-grown Keliya already in tow.

These Astalish beit Shavis kept a happy and boisterous home. They teased one another, spoke over each other, and had multiple conversations simultaneously. Amag took a shine to them at once.

She finished her bread and butter. Good bread, she thought again, with a blooming, yeasty aroma. She must ask what kind of flour they used—two kinds? —how much water—maybe milk? —and how long a prove. It had a buoyant internal structure, chewy with an exterior that cracked audibly between the teeth.

As it turned out, Yos's semha was Amag's cousin Adira, several years her senior.

“Was Yos named for my savha?” Amag had to know.

“Oh, no,” Adira said. “He wasn't dead yet. But I met Uncle Yosel at least twice. I was a child; this would have been before he left.”

“And he lived in the city then. Not at the homestead?”

“They were bachelor days. He was courting someone, so I heard later, but the match would fall through. And he brought me sweets, jelly mints and date sweets.”

Neither detail sounded much like her savha, for while he was affectionate, he was equally spare and abstemious. Besides that, he had never mentioned a someone in his life besides her semha, but then, why would he?

She was pleased to know something new about Yosel, anything to induce a sense of his nearness. Even, in fact especially, if it made him less of a savha and more of a person.

“May I see the letter that arrived for me?”

“I left it on your bed, but I can get it,” said Keliya.

“Don’t trouble yourself; I’ll do it.”

The sun was beginning to fall. It was the sabbat again already, she realized as she drifted down the hall. There had been no preparations of food for the coming day of rest. She might be the only one here who observed the sabbat at all, however incompletely, even here among kin.

It was becoming, antithetically, the loneliest part of each week.

The Astalish beit Shavis had walled off a section of the farmhouse, so that less space needed the heat of their stove and fireplace. Through the years they had cannibalized wood and nails from the empty wing for repairs. The room prepared for Amag was the one closest to the wall. When she passed into her room from the hall, she caught the faint scent of earth, of insulating mud bricks, from between the cracks in the wall’s planks.

The door to the room swung shut. Amag heard a rustle, the maker of which sounded heavier than a mouse. She hoped not a rat. Without moving, she searched the room for a basin or bucket, or else something heavy. On the floor, she noticed a piece of charcoal next to a sheet of paper. She squinted at the note, struggling to make it out at a distance.

In thick lettering, it said: *DON'T SCREAM.*

Amag pressed the back of her hand against her mouth. Her stomach lurched. She looked around for a bloodstain, an intruder, something. Early evening light from a small window illuminated a bed, a small rug, and a low table with a tinderbox and an unlit candle. On the bed was an envelope.

During the silence of the ensuing minute, Amag rationalized her way back to a state of relative calm. She was on a farm in the countryside. She was among family and within shouting distance, hence the note. Besides, in dealings with most worldly forces, her iron force of will was more than sufficient.

At last, she said, "If I were going to scream, I would have done so." Then she waited for a reasonable explanation to reveal itself. While she waited, she judged the distance between herself and a heavy ceramic chamber pot on the floor near the bed.

From under the bed, a wheat-white hand crept out.

"Oh," she said.

The hand flexed the fingers indignantly.

"It's just that I thought it might be something awful," she said. "You're not so bad. I have two of you, after all, and feet. I could kick you."

The hand scuttled over to the paper and took up the charcoal. Then it began to scribble.

KIRAEEL, it began.

“Yes, yes, I was going to ask,” said Amag. “It’s your smooth stump. You look so complete without one another. Would it be indecorous to ask what happened?”

YES, wrote the hand, fiercely. Then, *SLOW DOWN*.

TEXT PREPARED.

The hand withdrew underneath the bed and dragged out another slip of paper, this one folded, then dropped it at her feet. Amag bent to retrieve it, slowly.

“May I help you onto the table? It would be easier on my neck, my back, my eyes... Oh, I’ll just do it.”

The hand clambered partway up the leg of the table. Amag scooped it onto the tabletop, then placed its paper and charcoal beside it.

The hand pointed to the folded note.

She read:

Kirael is my body, and I was their hand. They owe our goddess the task for which they were made. I come to solicit your help. I’m made of divine matter; there is nothing in this world for me. And even a little more than that, I want to see my Lady’s work carried out, for it’s my work too.

I have followed my body since we separated. I couldn’t make Kirael turn back to Her, so instead I lived an earthly life and taunted them: their punishment, my amusement. And when I could, I followed them, and so I watched you with them on the ship. I believe you could end this once and for all: you, the first to break through to them in many years, you with your love for the word and the Word.

“What I thought to be true is now confirmed beyond doubt,” said Amag. “They are a divine being. But though I’m willing to serve the goddess, I don’t know how I could help you. You say I bring them out of their shell. That alone is insufficient. My body could never keep up with theirs. And I fear that I lack a pure spirit. I’m weighed down by my earthly troubles. Who am I that I could do this?”

The hand wrote for a while, occasionally scratching out a word and rewriting it.

At last, Amag read:

Don't think that since making them feel is a small thing, it is insignificant. That could not be farther from the truth.

Doubting your worthiness of the call is as ancient as flour. It dates back to the first god-wrestlers. But there are no perfect people to choose. People were made imperfectly by imperfect makers.

Still, I won't strongarm you, not that I have an arm with which to do so. You can choose for yourself.

“You’ll forgive me for needing to think on it.”

Amag sat upon the bed. As she did so, her hand brushed across the untouched envelope which waited patiently for her attention. Amag knew already who had written it. She wondered how Tirzi would advise her, sweet and grounded Tirzi. They would purse their lips and listen without interrupting her. They would pay such close attention that she would hardly see them blink until she was done speaking. Then they would gravely say, *well, let's see, what if...?*

She opened the envelope and fished out the contents.

My Dove—

Too much has transpired since my last letter. The work of the press continues, but under the supervision of Commissioner A., or rather his subordinates, S. and G., whom you may remember from their friendly little cursory inspection last autumn. They're elated to gnaw on this bone. So much more meat on it than the previous.

Armat's second, more thorough investigation begins in a few days, however many days it takes to get a permit in order. As discussed in person, if they linger long enough, look hard enough, something will turn up, idiosyncrasies of type or formatting, a proof forgotten in a drawer.

What of the truth I should tell is a matter we should have covered in greater detail before you left.

Please come home as soon as possible. I need you. I would not ask lightly.

Yours always in fair times and in fowl,

Tirzî

Amag smiled at their sign-off, but her pleasure dissipated soon. There was another letter out there somewhere. She doubted it had found its way to the Commission, but it frustrated her not to know the contents. At least she'd received the second. Of the two, it was the better to have.

When he taught Amag her letters, Yosel wrote them on a slate, then poured honey over them, and told her to lick it up. He told her that words were sweet; they were medicine, too, but they were sweet.

Savha bade her name things truly in order to call upon some piece of them. Prosody the key, one of the keys. Sound a spatial declaration, its purpose to access the space behind the space, an unbounded psychic field.

Her name, Ah-maaahg, a grounding sound. A-M-G. Even before she could read, Savha taught her the sum of her name's letters, and told her to follow it. This way she would know her way in the world, the paths most auspicious for her.

Ki-ra-el, a name like three bells. An expanse ending in a sudden drop, a half-spoken utterance prematurely swallowed up.

A godshard was an embodied covenant between deity and people. A godshard could be like a prophet, an omen, a shovel.

And names were shadows too. Everything was shadowed by its name, tethered to that shadow, for its name was its form on the other side of the Veil. On the other side, all matter was made of words dissolved in water. On this side, too, one could dissolve letters and names in a glass and drink them, and it might summon a guarding spirit, or a healing spirit, or bring visions or dreams.

The beginning to solving a problem was to learn its name, letters, the units of its composition. Even in her secular adulthood, Amag believed this more than anything.

She found it difficult to sleep with Kirael's hand in the room. She assumed it was still in the room, waiting for her answer.

Amag felt her way into the kitchen, where the fire was low but still burning. She threw in a small piece of wood and prodded the fire with a charred branch poker until the flames swelled, then eased herself into a chair before the fireplace.

Tirzi could handle matters a little longer, she thought. Tirzi was self-effacing, but capable. It was Tirzi who scoured the books and rearranged their finances to keep the press

afloat when it was first trying to get off the ground, and again ten years later, and fifteen. And they were not alone; they had two young minds with which to work in tandem.

A small worry ate away at her, a worm that whispered that she was kidding herself, the whole venture would go bust either way, and she would have to bear the weight of forsaking Tirzi when they asked for her.

If their press should cease, their momentous joint venture, its cessation would cause them both such grief. It would be the death of a family member. Something which, like a child, characterized an era of their lives. And she still had so many ideas.

But she was not satisfied with the other reason for her journey to the homeland. Besides the preservation of the press, there was her search for the spiritual, so entangled in remembrances of her savha. Rather than being like him, more of him, Yosel's family was largely secular. While Amag was grateful for their hospitality, an element lacked in this, one she craved.

Kirael, like Amag herself, was lapsed, not ritually practicing. She tried to understand what she might find in them. What would it mean for a godshard to be lapsed? Of what would a practice consist, performed by a divine being facing the divine?

One couldn't come nearer to the divine than to be in the presence of its fragment. She longed for intimacy with Kirael's lady, her savha's lady, her lady.

Amag knew what she would tell the hand, but didn't want, just yet, to make the choice real. She wiggled her toes, allowing the heat of the fire to eat away at this moment, allowing its yellow tongues to conjure another moment. She imagined herself in another ten years, in a chair as nice as this one, a good chair to sit in and dream, once dreams were

dreamt more for themselves than towards a project. She thought of that chair as a pilgrim thinks of a longed-for and half-forgotten home. It will be wonderful then; not yet, for there is still more before her, but it will be.

RETURN

Kirael took afternoon coffee in the cottage that once was theirs. More accurately, their old friend Nechem took coffee, black and heavily sugared, while Kirael sat across from him and did not drink. In their mouth they kept a black sesame sweet, rolling it around without swallowing it. When the godshard tired of the pretense, they asked after their belongings. Nechem acquiesced at once and they wished they'd asked sooner, rather than listening to endless vacillations: he thought his son should marry so-and-so, but then perhaps it was better to have his help in the home for another year, or he should have someone fix the drafty window, but then perhaps he could do it himself...

It was a heavy chest, but not too heavy for two. They slid it across the floor, leaving it between their chairs.

The trunk had no visible latch. Kirael inspected the smooth brass seal on the front. While the trunk was weathered, the seal still shone.

"Don't know how you're going to get that thing open. It might even be rusted shut," said Nechem. "And there's no keyhole."

"Not to worry. I brought the key."

Kirael brushed their fingers over the seal and spoke its name. Inside the trunk, there was a low grinding noise. Then it sighed and clicked.

"What's in it?" breathed Nechem. He crowded close to them as they opened it, no doubt wondering what was so precious, what had been kept safe and sealed for twenty years.

Kirael bent over the chest and inhaled deeply the vanillic scent, a smell like fluttering things, leaves or little butterflies.

“It’s books?” Nechem backed away and returned to his seat. He gulped down the last of his coffee and poured himself another cup.

“Not only, but that would have been enough.” Kirael sifted through the contents of the chest. At the top were the most fragile things, diagrams and early sketches of their projects. Several drawings related to a prosthetic hand they’d been working on shortly before abandoning the house. A little splinter of warmth wormed its way into their heart.

The mechanical hand was a clamp, simple enough. The prototype had two wooden fingers, and leather straps to anchor the shoulder and stump. Kirael had plans to make it more dexterous and flexible, incorporate wire, a third finger. But the apparatus was cumbersome and slow in every iteration. By the time Kirael figured out how to improve the design, they already had other workarounds for most tasks, coordinating the stump with the other hand, or using clamps that weren’t attached to them.

The chest contained writing utensils as well, and a little spare change. A carved animal rolled around in the bottom. What animal, they couldn’t say. It had been a knife-challenged era.

Kirael flipped through the volumes one by one and stacked them on the floor. Nechem’s total disinterest disturbed them, seemed to destabilize their own past.

“I’m surprised at you,” said Kirael. “You of all people. When we were students together, we ate and slept books. We argued and kissed books. We lived with them like feeling beings.”

“One has to live as well,” Nechem said, “do the administrative tasks of a life. Food, family, and pleasures unwritten.”

“I don’t have to,” said Kirael. Displeasure kindled within them, and they allowed themselves to pay him only half a mind. The contents of the trunk were their own food and family.

“Well, I’m only talking about myself, explaining myself,” said Nechem. “You come from beyond the Veil. Speaking of, please hear me like a brother when I recommend discretion as regards your godshard business. These new writings were meant to be passed mortal to mortal.”

“Yelah beit Bin!” The godshard exclaimed. *Account of the World*, an older friend even than Nechem. It was no *Egren Pass*, but would more than suffice.

Kirael took it with them. It was Yelah beit Bin’s heaviest and wordiest book. Additionally, on a whim, they packed a book they hardly remembered, some thin legal commentary or piece of metaphysics entitled *The Book of Measures*.

Between long brown grasses, like wind-blown hair, wound a footpath toward Tarsha.

The Tarshite study-settlement was a neighborhood in miniature, an hour’s walk from the sea. A complex of buildings encircled the Great Hall where the Sidab had taught. A couple hundred students had lived and worked here in his time, when there were still more practices in honor of Diburah than in spite of her.

Kirael introduced himself to the Tarshites as their own offspring, and called himself Kiel. Lucky that they had two hands when last at the settlement, or the story might

have been less likely. They stood before a table of elders, the rotation leaders of the settlement, to plead that the closed should open to them. Even if Kirael got ahold of a copy of *Abyssal Emanations of the Unified Postmortal*, it would be opaque without the context of collective interpretation.

Kirael submitted to the appeal process with a touch of resentment. It had been easier to be admitted when the sages in residence were all comparatively small fish. Kirael had just turned up.

“My sitha never saw that book, the *Emanations*, during their residency,” they told the panel. “But I’ve now come of majority, and I hope to read the book where it was written, among the friends and children-in-spirit of the Sidab.”

“I was in Kirael’s rotation those years ago,” said one of the elders.

Kirael tried to remember her, but came up empty. They remembered their room, which had a scrubby tree outside the window. The window itself had a thin crack in it. Kirael built and stained a cedar shelf for that room. What had happened to the shelf?

“I’ll concede that your sitha’s efforts were consistent with our standard,” said the elder. “But we don’t honor a blood legacy here. Your worthiness is individual. It comes from your own call.”

“I *am* called,” Kirael insisted. “Set me to any task, your dirtiest work. I’ll prove to you how serious I am.”

“No mere task can pay your passage,” the elder intoned. “You cannot buy your way in.”

Kirael bit their tongue and looked at the floor. It wasn't the message they'd hoped to send. Best to quit before they made it worse.

"Leva," began the elder next to her. He bent to her ear. The other elders leaned in to hear, and they shared a few words.

"A legacy is not enough to admit you to the inner Hall," said Leva. "But it may be enough to temporarily entrust you to a rotation, so that you might learn how to learn. Your readiness for admittance would be decided later. Is that amenable to you?"

Kirael nodded.

"Very well, Kiel. Welcome," said the second elder. He turned to the others. "Which rotation is willing to take on one more for a trial period?"

Two hands went up, one his. The other hand withdrew.

"Then it's done," said the second elder. Then, to Kirael, "I'll show you to our block."

With that, Kiel took the footpaths where once Kirael's feet fell.

Twenty years had leached half the Tarshites away. After the death of the Sidab, many of his students found other study-settlements, where they took hand-copied portions of *Abyssal Emanations*. Many of those who left then preached and argued their own way, and their disciples or they themselves transcribed their lectures. Others left to start a family, for in Tarsha, unlike in the larger religious settlements, there were no children. Despite lackluster numbers, what community remained in Tarsha was lively.

Kiel's rotation took to the Great Hall three days a week for study. During tending days, the rotation took its turn at maintaining the settlement: fishing and washing and

mending and cooking, and trading for dry goods with outsiders, and carpentry and masonry and so on.

For the better part of the day, they worked, with a break for a modest repast every four hours. Two hours before sunset, each person was left to their own devices. Some would make music and dance together, and some would play fox-and-geese on a table etched with tracks. Occasionally one would go to the ritual bath.

Kiel walked for hours in the night, in all directions. On a rainy night, they found their way to a white walnut grove which was familiar. Thousands of percussive droplets struck the taut leaves. Kiel wriggled out of their shoes and enjoyed the dampness of the soil and the smell of the earth.

During study days, Kiel struggled at first to keep up, since they had read in perfect solitude for many years. But the pleasure of debate rose in them. There was a thrill in even the outer Hall. All twenty or so voices in each room overlapped, and the scholars jabbed their fingers at this passage or that gloss, all caught in a thrall until the meal bell rang. The midday meal, a shorter one, was curiously devoid of conversation. There was only the clatter of bowls and spoons, and the frenzied animal noise of eating. With the spell broken, the body's demands rushed back.

When Kiel returned to the grove, it was with a handsaw, and in the afternoon. They found a suitable tree, young and overcrowded, then cleared its branches. They made the undercut in the trunk, and then the back cut, as they'd been taught. With the felled tree's wood, soft butternut wood, they began to carve again, first without a plan, but then with sharper focus as a shape emerged.

After more than a week of obeisance to its cycle, Tarsha opened itself to Kiel. They were permitted to read the great book.

The godshard chose a warm afternoon to begin. The trees stirred, and blackbirds cried their *whrr-prr-cree*. The tome was one of two hand-written copies in the complex; the sanctity of the original was protected by keeping it in a locked room. It was written on lamb's vellum, and emitted a powdery and faintly animalic scent.

Their hand hovered over the book. They prayed silently to something. Let the works of their hand be acceptable, the works of their eye. Let them see and know the thing to do. Let them find the strength this time to do it.

EMANATIONS

The First Night

1:1 I saw in my sleep what I will tell you with my hands. I flew and was carried, I was spirited by the night. 1:2 I saw the seven Pillars that hold up the world, comely black pillars that glittered like snowfall. Sound as Passion were they, permeable as Death. 1:3 And I saw that the Pillars bear the weight of the world and yet are not its Masters.

1:4 And it was told to me: BEAR WITNESS! 1:5 And I know not Who told it to me. And I cried out to know Who had said it. 1:6 And the tessellations of the night began to fragment, such that I fell through the night.

1:7 Death caught me in her Canopy, and she was silent, she was fragrant and green as a river.

1:8 And she had no hand, no mouth, no tongue, no eye. She was a vastness without shape, material as a kiss.

1:9 Far above me, one by one the seven Pillars strained and cracked. The stars fell out of them and rushed past me, hurtled down into Nothing. 1:10 Death caught them in her Canopy, and they grew cold at my bare feet, scores of fading embers, from white into black into dust.

1:11 I have seen the End of time, and it took place tomorrow, next year, and many lifetimes from this one. I understood the weight and measure of all things. 1:12 And it was told to me: You cannot take it with you. This I knew. I knew not Who told it to me. 1:13 And I quaked and shivered, and fell upon my hands and knees.

ABYSS

The godshard read on and on with a kind of awe. Their whole body had grown cold. They fumbled beside them for ink, paper, and pen, and scratched out notes on the text, and notes on their state of mind.

The holy task began to crystallize before the godshard as they grew acquainted with not one but a body of works. Many were works which cited other works, and the godshard traced back the literary family tree for generations and found no end or beginning. Many works quibbled and disagreed with one another, rife with attacks philological or personal. There were indecipherable books, navel-gazing books, egoistic books, and there were lucid ones, astute ones, transcendent ones.

The publishing of the *Emanations* could not be taken back. Indeed, the godshard was glad that it could not be, as one who might want to know these things, as one susceptible to death. As, too, were even the gods, under the right planets and moons. But the godshard could write a counter-text; if they were sufficiently learned, they could contribute to the canon. There was one thing that unified the texts: they were written by people. They often speculated on what the godshard had known firsthand. Theirs would be but one opinion among many, but there was a clear corner in which to position themselves. Not as a fully-fledged god-wrestler, perhaps, but what about an amalgam of man and not-man?

The godshard wrote faster and faster until their wet words blurred together. When the nib of their pen snapped, they scrambled for another and continued into the evening.

The godshard prepared to compose their own text. They thought about it most hours of the day. When the others ate, the godshard walked in the woods or carved block after block, often while they recited passages, committing them to memory. By day they studied with their rotation, debating books, drinking books. They burned down most of a taper candle each night.

And, too, it was time to open a channel to the other realm, to whatever might flow through to them. They entered the ritual bath at off-hours. When there was one, they requested the bath attendant to stay outside. Then they would wade in until the water closed over their head. The godshard submerged for hours at a time, entering a trance state, a waking sleep.

They reduced themselves.

As an embryo hears muffled voices outside the womb, the godshard caught glimpses of the divine knowledge beyond the Veil, kaleidoscopic echoes of things they once knew, long before they were born.

In the depths of themselves, the godshard communed with the goddess. She spoke falteringly at times, for what she might say, they might not even understand in a mortal form.

The godshard felt equal to her for once, because something of their mortal experience was not transmissible to her either until they should join her again. In such moments of loss, the pair simply enjoyed one another's company, a split thing momentarily whole.

By the end of another week, the godshard realized that eventually, their monstrous progeny would need to be delivered into print. A press would be needed.

Two days after the first glimmer of this idea, while the godshard weeded a garden in the heat of the sun, a rider came to Tarsha.

“Kirael!” shouted the rider.

And the godshard, startled, looked up into the face of their friend. “Keshet?”

After a stunned moment, they hurtled back into themselves from days on days of an extraplanar reverie. *Yes, a self, I am a self. A self and not a project and not a task.*

“Kirael! Get me off this thing so-help-me, I should have taken the cart after all,” said the rider. Another friend.

“Amag!” Tears sprang to Kirael’s eyes. They helped her dismount from the donkey. “You look sore and miserable. Oh – be careful not to use my name within earshot of anyone.”

“Is this a bit of godshard nonsense?”

“Doubtless. Why don’t I fill you in?”

In Kirael’s room, despite complaining of her aches and pains moments before, Amag stalked back and forth in tight lines.

“Are you daft? I came all this way for you,” she cried. “And I’ve pushed my body to the brink. I may as well stay and recover, even get some pleasure out of my destination, before I ship off once more.”

“Stay, by all means, but then you must go back to Rusham as soon as possible.”

“I do want to,” said Amag. “I have a family back at home.”

“I need your press,” Kirael insisted, taking her hand. It was surprisingly soft for someone who spent her days with chemical inks and tanned hides. “The book doesn’t exist yet, and it will be a while before you can help me.”

“I wouldn’t say that. You know why I’m in such hot water to begin with? We were firing off copies of some of these very texts of which you speak.”

“What? You did?”

“Let’s see... for starters, *The Uncovering*, and *The Book of Hidden Things*, and have you heard of *Gates of Virtue*?”

“You’re joking.”

“Of course not. It’s half why I left Rusham. In fact, I think I threw the evidence into the sea while you slept below decks.”

Kirael looked at her, astonished. Amag began to laugh at the purity of their expression, and they laughed with her, first in embarrassment, then pleasure, and finally with a kind of mounting hysteria.

“I am deadly serious,” said Amag. “You are the luckiest person alive.”

“Then when your business is sorted, you must help me write this.”

“Write it! I’m a printer.”

“I could use your proofing eye, your capacity to point me to this text or that gloss. You could help me track back the allusions. Actually, you’re quite well read. You said you grew up in a study-settlement like this one?”

“Yes, but it was more of a religious community,” she said. “We weren’t reading exactly this sort of thing.”

“You were reading the predecessors to *Emanations, Gates of Virtue*, the works. Please say yes, Amag.”

“Can’t you tell?” She shook her head. “You don’t have to convince me. I am yours for this task. It would be my honor to work jointly with you.”

TESTIMONY

Tirzi heard the front door open and braced themselves for the hated countenances of Minister Geved or Master Shiran to appear. Instead came their wife, her face tense but luminous and well-sunned, her curls a-frizz with harbor air. Tirzi fell upon her with kisses.

“What about Armat?” She encircled them with her arms as the door swung shut.

“That discussion can wait a few minutes. I’ve seen more of him than of you in weeks. But it can only wait a few. He’ll return this afternoon, or those other asses, I guarantee.”

“I do remember them.” Amag broke their embrace. “Or one of them, the guildmaster. The other is...?”

“Some lesser Minister of Heresy.”

“Naturally.” Amag left her bag by the door and started for the stairs, calling behind her, “How’s my mint plant?”

“Happy enough.”

“Why don’t I start a mint and meadowsweet infusion? I could stand to settle my stomach.”

Tea was served still scalding. Amag sat in her favorite chair and breathed in the steam. Tirzi stood behind her, absentmindedly twisting her curls around their fingers while they drank. They’d set the table with cheese tarts and a sliced apple. Amag had yet to touch either.

“Talk to me, beshert.” Tirzi nudged the dish of fruit toward her.

She picked up a slice without looking at it, and played with it rather than eating it.

“What can they do to us if we’re charged with distribution of heresies?”

“You know as well as I,” they said, then sipped their tea. “The question is always what they *would* do. I always believed, as you must have, that very little would come of it, that it was mostly to scare us.”

“Mostly we were right, and only warnings came,” she said.

They sat next to her. “They’ll want to detain you, my dove. You won’t have to go to the Council Chambers, at least. You’ll simply go into their carriage for maybe an hour—we underwent the same—and they’ll ask you things. What will you say?”

She put down the apple slice. “Do you think they would really jail us, Tirzi?”

They hesitated. “We’re repeat offenders. They sound willing to do so. Either way, the press shuts down, city printing license is revoked, and we are blacklisted by the guilds in our sister cities. Time to find a new business, if it goes that way.”

“That cannot be allowed,” she said. “We need to keep this place. I don’t want to start over with new, unvetted vendors and suppliers. Furthermore, there is one Afterworld text that I intend to print by any means necessary.”

“Well, which?”

“It hasn’t completely been written yet,” said Amag. “The writing commenced a few weeks ago. I’ll be helping on that front as well. Now, I know what you may be thinking...”

“Slow down. It just began?” Tirzi’s mouth struggled to keep up with their thoughts. They waved their hands in exasperation. “We can’t play games with the city for however many years the writing will take. And then to publish it? We need to quit while we’re ahead. We’re not even ahead anymore! Afterworld ends here. Heresies upon heresies, my dove!”

“This is a godshard’s work,” she said, softly. “A godshard of Diburah herself asked for our help. Really, their hand asked for our help. Oh, it’s too much to explain now, but Tirzi, we are entering the metaphysical playing field.”

“With every speck of my being, I delight in you,” they said, pressing their fingertips together.

She could tell that was the beginning of something, a conspicuous—if delicate—attempt to soften the vehemence of their forthcoming dissent. She rushed ahead of them.

“Listen to me, love. This is not like the others. My interest is more than scholarly. Nor is it rooted in my tenderness for the past. This is not about Yosel, or endorsing a plurality of knowledge.”

“This is not a good idea.” Their eyes were enormous. “The godshard can do it on their own. I don’t know what else to tell you.”

They both drank in silence. The scent of meadowsweet, not unlike marzipan, emanated from their cups.

“Did you print or in other ways facilitate the distribution of these materials?” Minister Geved read out the list. “*The Uncovering*, 1543. *Gates of Virtue* in 1545 or ’46; record’s smudged but still stands.”

“It’s smudged?”

“I’m not finished, Madam. *The Book of Measures*, date unclear, still stands. *The Book of Hidden Things*. *The Honest Ones*. *Canopy of Sleep*. These overlapped during the years of ’47 through ’49. Say honestly whether you produced these works.”

“I printed the allotted two copies of the last of these, for private use, and accepted no money for them. And as you have no doubt seen in the Guild archive, I had a permit to do so.”

“Did you print more copies than the two?”

Amag weighed potential answers. Omissions were one matter, but concerning outright lies, she was artless. “Yes,” she said finally.

“And you knew the statutes as outlined by the City and publicized by the Printers’ Guild.”

“I believe I did.”

“Are you aware of the consequences of disobeying the statutes?”

“I’m aware of your command over a multitude of terrors. But this is no blood court, the Rusham of our day. Now, I’m not sure whether I did these things; this was years ago. Perhaps you’ll understand when you’re older how long or short a year can be. But if I did do these things, then it seemed worth it to me to advance the limits of human knowledge. Please feel free to record that in your little book.”

“Madam...” Geved shook his head. “I don’t think you understand what you’re saying. Are you calling the City’s bluff?”

“I can’t understand it,” Tirzi moaned that evening. “Why are you acting this way? Has your communion with the godshard instilled you with a sense of invulnerability? You take a lamp’s might for a bonfire’s.”

“Maybe you’re right and I spoke too rashly,” said Amag. “But it could be that I’m finally approaching whatever age it is where you say and do what you like, and dare the consequences to come.”

“I’m shocked at myself for saying this, but right now that’s nothing to celebrate.” They shuddered. “We’re as good as shut down. I think I saw them *laughing*. And I don’t want to entertain my fears for nothing, but do we know anyone who would pay bail?”

Amag flushed with shame. “I know I acted as an independent when the consequences will belong to us both. I’m truly sorry, Tirzi. To be honest, this foolishness felt good in the moment, after checking all the little boxes for so long. But they gave no indication anything would come from it.”

“Little boxes? No doubt we’ll see them at the break of day with boxes on boxes, with wagons to put everything in. They can pack us up by midday with enough manpower.”

“Say it again?” Amag turned it over in her mind.

“Packed by *midday*—oh, dove, we’re lost!”

Amag looked out the window at the sky, marking the hour.

Early the next morning, in the first hour that could be called grey, Commissioner Armat, Master Shiran, Minister Geved and the team of eight at their disposal rode up Camory Street. The wagons were late; they were taking longer to arrange for than expected. The nearest ones available were the next neighborhood over.

Elil and Dina chose their city and their history, and the Guild into which inroads had already been made. Nonetheless they had honored their elders, who taught them how much

oil and how much lampblack, what was the till and what the spindle. They'd decommissioned the shop and packed up the rooms in which they slept and ate together. The four printers spent their last night as a family in a flurry of packing and loading crate after crate.

Having spent a significant portion of their life's savings on two wagons with goat teams and drivers, Amag and Tirzi fled for the nearest city outside of the Four Sisters. Once out of Rusham's jurisdiction, they could relax, but it was a solemn several days' ride to Yatha. On the second night, Tirzi buried their head in their hands and, silently, shook with tears. Amag stroked their hair, feeling stupid, guilty, and a little excited.

THE FLUTTER

The glue was dry. Outside, the day was drizzly, but bright, a heathery purple. In the new print shop—the third one, crowded with not only a press, and trays and trays of type in several fonts, but also easels and new wood shelves—two printers and a godshard clustered eagerly around a set of clamps.

Kirael much preferred this shop to the previous one. Upon arrival in Yatha, Tirzi and Amag promptly unpacked into a musty little room with too-small windows. It had neighbored a butcher, and smelled and sounded that way. Kirael wished they had seen the shop in Rusham, but compared to its immediate predecessor, this was the superior place to welcome the book into the world.

“Go ahead,” said Amag. “It should be you.”

“Actually, it should be you.” Kirael waved her ahead.

They watched her unscrew the clamps and slide out the book. A certain pride swelled in them as she flipped through the pages, for the sewing of the binding was their work, under Tirzi’s tutelage. The first copy had been unbound, more a set of folded and gathered signatures than anything, but the creamy pages looked right and whole now, swaddled in a cover of red calf’s leather.

There came a scuttle along the floor, against the wall. Kirael scanned for the source of that sound, finding nothing. In looking, they felt seen, uncovered but not threateningly so. They turned back to the same open, expectant expressions twinned across Amag’s face and Tirzi’s. Had they been the only one to hear it?

“All that remains is the gilt stamping and tooling,” Tirzi said. “Take your time getting to know it first. Wouldn’t want to rush this.”

Amag handed them the book. They weighed it in their hand, rubbed the spine with their thumb. It was a book so heavily footnoted as to translate into actual weight.

“What do you think?” She murmured. “Are you experiencing the flutter?”

“Not yet,” Kirael said.

“I thought I had, but I was wrong. Sometimes it takes a little time.”

Kirael brought the book to their nose and breathed it in. Tanned leather, wheat starch paste, and shop smells besides, sawdust and ink. Distantly, too, came the aromas of window-box herbs, fennel and anise. The watched feeling ebbed in them.

They opened to the title page, with their name and hers, and waited for the feeling. Corporeally, they felt not so much as a tingle in their stump. On the inside, though, a slow, buttery warmth began to take hold.

It occurred to Kirael that since it would take a while for their contribution to the canon to be disseminated widely, they could not know when their divine task would be complete. Perhaps they’d evaporate as soon as the first cleric read it. Or maybe once a certain number of copies were sold, or the first time a passage was copied out by hand in candlelight. Perhaps they’d have several more years, or fifty, or longer. Even if they disintegrated that very instant, still they’d have gotten the few years they begged from Diburah, what felt like eons ago.

“It hasn’t quite registered yet, the quiet gravity of right now,” said Amag, and her voice returned the godshard to herself. “It doesn’t feel done.”

“Why stop?” Kirael closed the book. “It doesn’t end; it goes on with or without us. Couldn’t we continue to play along?”

TRACKS

Blackened and cracked and ancient were the train tracks, a black creek streaking through the countryside. The tracks were flanked by trees, so thick together that their roots bent the metal rails, tore the slats into soft splinters. The tracks now passed through a forest, but had not always done so. When first the railroad was laid centuries ago, it had signified a beginning, as roads often do. Now it witnessed what followed the end.

When it rained on the tracks, the many depressions between the slats welled up, and the water was milky brown with earth. Sometimes a fox would drink from such a pool, but more often, in the seconds before it decided, sometimes even when the penny-bright neck was outstretched, the deceptively soft mouth starting to open, the fox would startle at something unseen, or at least pretend to. Before it ran, it would freeze, looking down the tracks with its wet eye ringed with amber like a solar eclipse. It listened for a whistle or wail that would never again come.

As surely as they knew these things, the rider who followed the tracks knew that their donkey could go no farther. They dismounted and stroked her nose. They allowed her to weave her way between the trees, to drink if there was water, to play.

An opal dangling from the rider's ear dropped silently into the leaves, unnoticed. The rider sat beneath a tree and waited for the donkey to return. Then they would meander a little closer to their ultimate destination, waiting for the day when it would allow them in, unmake them. It waited for them too, ten miles east of the tracks, four thousand miles deep.

Afterword: This Too is Torah

This is a heretical book, but, I would argue, not more heretical than the treatises within the Jewish mystical canon that influenced and salted it. There are myriad Jewish texts overflowing with not only now-familiar golems but dybbuks and sheydim, apocalyptic visions, and magic. Before there was one more generalized Judaism, there was something more like a plurality of related regional Judaisms. By this I mean smaller schools of thought with different texts, customs, and beliefs, which were also influenced—even down to the written linguistic level—by the cultures of their neighbors, wherever they lived.

I wrote *The Godsbard's Word* knowing that some Jews would feel represented by it, and others would be insulted. But this is a Jewish book, not only because a Jewish writer wrote it, and not only because it borrows heavily from our customs. It was written in a spirit of Jewishness. I wrote it, selfishly, as an act of Torah.

I don't describe the writing of this book that way in order to position it as a sacred text. The rabbis of the Talmud sometimes say of the mundane, even profane, that "this, too, is Torah". If they can apply this designation to sex or even defecation, then certainly an earnest engagement with Judaism can come from exercises in fiction, however heretical. This book is, for me, a sandbox where I asked myself what Jewishness is, how expansive it can be, and how it fits into my life, a life that orbits a different kind of text than Talmud.