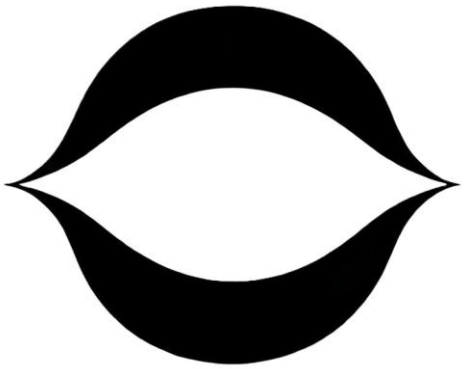

Are You Certain

A Record in Six Parts

Artist’s Note

This book was not written to persuade, accuse, or reform.

It was written to hold position under load.

The material contained here exceeds what language is designed to process. Where language fails, structure remains.

Every section obeys a single constraint: no sentence may convert suffering into meaning.

This work is copyleft. It is free. It will remain free. Forever.

Orientation

This is a record of systemic failure as experienced by the human body.

Each chapter isolates one failure mode – not as theory, not as commentary, but as lived physics.

Where the structure breaks, it does so deliberately. Absence is not omission. Absence is diagnosis.

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Part I – South Africa

The Body Cannot Absorb This

Chapter 1

Addiction

Part 0 – The Ordinary

You are a mother.

You are fifty-four.

Your knees hurt when you pray. You pray standing.

Your son is in the next room. He is twenty-nine. He has been twenty-nine for four years. The years stopped counting when the substance started.

You have a folded piece of paper in your bag. The paper has an address on it.

The address is a rehabilitation centre. You circled the phone number. You wrote in pen: *Walk-in possible*. You believe in paper. Paper means process. Process means someone is in charge.

Today you will take him to the address on the paper.

Part I – The Event

Between 2018 and 2022, the National Lotteries Commission approved grants intended for drug rehabilitation and community health infrastructure.

The mandate was explicit: convert gambling revenue into harm reduction.

The ledger records a different outcome.

Funds were disbursed to entities with no buildings, no staff, and no operating capacity. Shell companies and organisations with falsified credentials received payments, many linked to internal decision-makers.

Projects were announced.
Budgets approved.
Construction never began.

Staffing plans existed.
Counsellors were never hired.

Invoices were paid.
Equipment was never delivered.

The money exited the system into private assets – vehicles, property, legal defence – while the facilities remained theoretical.

During the same period, substance dependency increased, most sharply in economically marginalised communities. Families seeking treatment encountered waiting lists, closed gates, and addresses that led nowhere.

The infrastructure of care was liquidated before the first patient arrived.
The money was gone.
The door stayed closed.

Part II – The Wound

She wakes before the alarm.
She has done this for years.

The room is still dark.
The house holds its breath the way it always does before morning.

The kettle goes on.
The click is too loud.
The water takes longer than it should.

The cup is chipped.
The spoon is missing again.

She checks the sink.
Then the counter.
Then the drawer she already checked.

She uses a fork.

She prays standing.
Kneeling hurts her knees.
Standing feels closer to readiness.

She does not ask for miracles.
Miracles feel imprecise.
She asks for strength.
She asks for today.

Her son is already awake.
She can hear it in the house.

Drawers opening.
Closing.
Opening again.

A cupboard door that does not shut properly.
The sound repeats.

He moves like something scraping.

Not fast.

Not slow.

Restless.

Withdrawal has a sound.

It is not crying.

It is pacing without destination.

She waits until the kettle clicks off.

She pours carefully.

Her hands shake slightly.

She knows the signs.

She has known them for years.

She checks her bag.

ID.

Referral letter.

The folded printout from the office.

She smooths it flat again.

The crease has weakened the paper.

The address is underlined.

The phone number circled.

The date is old.

She has written over it in pen:

Walk-in possible.

She has learned to add ink where certainty fades.

She believes in paper.

Paper means process.

Process means order.

Order means someone is in charge.

She believes God works through systems.
Through offices.
Through forms.

Faith, to her, has steps.

He starts accusing before breakfast.
Her fault.
Always her fault.

She does not argue.
Arguing burns energy.
Energy is finite.

She puts bread on the counter.
She waits.

He does not eat it.

He asks for money.
She says there is none.

He asks again.
Louder.

She says it again.
Slower.

He tells her she is lying.
He tells her she ruined his life.

She absorbs this.
She has been absorbing for a long time.

His father died seventeen years ago.
Emphysema.
A long shrinking.
A man leaving by degrees.

There was no sudden moment.
Just less air each year.

Since then, she has been the weight.
The counterforce.
The thing holding the line.

She has learned how much pressure she can take
before something shifts.

Her son used to bring wire home.
From Gants Plaza.

Burned insulation in the alley.
The smell stayed on his clothes.

Copper exposed like bone.

She told him not to.
She told him it was dangerous.

He told her to mind her business.

She rinses the cup.
She dries it.
She puts it back in the cupboard.

She believes if she can get him inside –
behind a door that locks,
with someone else in charge –
then gravity will ease.

Not disappear.
Just slow.

She reaches for his arm.
Not hard.
Just enough to redirect.

He pulls away.

The movement is sharp.
The space between them snaps back into place.

The house feels smaller.

She keeps her voice low.
Volume escalates things.

She tells him they can go today.
She tells him she spoke to someone.
She tells him the place is open.

This is not true.
But it is not false either.

She has learned to operate in *maybe*.

Maybe buys time.
Time is useful.

He laughs.
Short.
Bitter.

He says they said that last time.
He says she lies like the state.

She does not know how to answer that.

She did not raise him to speak like this.
She raised him to respect authority.

Authority has been inconsistent.

She checks the clock.
The minute hand moves too slowly.

She picks up her bag.
She adjusts the strap.

She opens the door.

The light outside is already harsh.
It presses into the room.

It will be a hot day.

He stands in the doorway.
Not deliberately.
Just where the exit is.

She waits.

Waiting is work.

Her calves tighten.
Her back begins to ache.

She shifts her weight from one foot to the other.
She counts to ten.

She puts her hand on his shoulder.
He shrugs it off.

He is sweating.
Too early for that.

His pupils are wide.
His hands shake.

She tells him to breathe.
She tells him to sit.

He tells her to shut up.

She steps back.
She gives him space.

Space sometimes helps.

She thinks of the church hall.
Plastic chairs.
The smell of polish.

The women who prayed with her.
Hands on her shoulders.

They told her to persist.
Persistence is praised.

She has persisted.

She checks her phone.
No missed calls.

She checks the paper again.
As if the words might have changed.

He paces.
Stops.
Paces again.

The kitchen is a shared space.
Too narrow for two intentions.

She moves between him and the door.
Not consciously.
Automatically.

This is what she has always done.

She says they can try tomorrow
if today is too much.

She says she will phone again.
She says she will ask for a supervisor.

She says the church might help with transport.

He hears only delay.

His jaw tightens.
His breathing changes.

He reaches for the counter
to steady himself.

There is a knife there.
It has always been there.

She does not see it as a weapon.
It is a tool.
Like everything else.

She keeps talking.
Because silence can tip things.

She says she will get her shoes.
She says she will fetch the form.

She says –

“Just let me get my bag and then we’ll –”

Part III – The Autopsy

Bob and Gman arrive when the noise has settled.
The kettle is cold.
The front door is still open.

They do not step inside.
They stand on the gravel road and look back at the house.

It is ordinary.
Single storey.
Paint intact.

Nothing in the structure signals collapse.

Bob notices the slope of the street.
The slight downward grade toward the main road.
Barely visible unless you are looking for it.

Gman speaks.

“Friction versus gravity.”

He is not looking at the doorway.
He is looking at the angle of the earth.

“Addiction is gravity,” he says.
“It pulls continuously.”

Bob waits.

“Recovery infrastructure is artificial friction,” Gman continues.
“Brake pads.
Guard rails.
Doors that close behind you.”

Bob looks at the doorway.
The space where she stood.

“The components were removed,” Gman says.
“Funds were authorised.

Funds were disbursed.
The mechanisms were never installed.”

The slope remained.
The descent continued.

“She tried,” Bob says.

Gman nods.

“She tried to substitute belief for mass,” he says.
“That never holds.”

The Code does not judge effort.
It measures capacity.

When friction is absent, the load transfers.

“To where?” Bob asks.

“To the nearest surface,” Gman replies.
“To families.
To kitchens.”

Bob looks inside without entering.
A plastic bag lies on the floor.
Papers still inside.

Process without force.

“The braking surface was upstream,” Gman says.
“She became it.”

This was not unpredictable.
It was delayed inevitability.

“Could she have stopped it?” Bob asks.

“Not from here,” Gman says.
“Once velocity is terminal, the body only absorbs damage.”

They do not name the son.
They do not name the act.

Those belong downstream.

“Gravity won,” Gman says.
“Because gravity was the only force left.”

They leave the door open.

The failure has already moved on.

Part IV – The Record

The Auditor-General of South Africa flagged irregular expenditure within the National Lotteries Commission exceeding R1.4 billion between 2018 and 2022. The Special Investigating Unit was authorised to probe allegations of corruption, fraud, and maladministration. Multiple board members and senior officials were implicated. Several rehabilitation and community health projects listed as funded were found to have no physical infrastructure, no staff, and no operational capacity. The NLC stated that it “remained committed to transparency and the responsible distribution of funds for the public good.” The centres were never built. The waiting lists remained open.

Chapter 2

Shelter

Part 0 – The Ordinary

You are in a house. The house is government-built. The walls are plaster. The roof is corrugated iron. You have lived here for eleven years. The ceiling leaks in the corner where the plaster has cracked. You put a bucket there when it rains. The bucket is yellow. The yellow is faded. You have four children. The youngest sleeps beside you. The oldest sleeps in the room with the leak. You have a rent receipt. The receipt says you paid. The receipt does not say what you paid for.

Part I – The Event

The Free State Department of Human Settlements approved a contract.
Value: R255 million.

The objective was explicit.
Identify asbestos roofing.
Remove it.
Reduce long-term carcinogenic risk in residential areas.

The mandate was clear.
The execution inverted it.

Contracts were awarded to a joint venture with no experience in hazardous-waste removal.
Work was fragmented through subcontracting.
Budgets were diluted before reaching the point of contact.

The ledger records the motion.
Capital exited the provincial treasury.

It flowed to consulting firms.
It flowed to private accounts.
It settled political obligations.
It purchased luxury assets.

The roofs remained.

Approximately thirty-six thousand houses continued to carry asbestos sheeting.
No removal teams were deployed.
No replacement materials delivered.
No containment measures installed.

The material weathered.
Cracked.
Aged under heat and wind.

Asbestos fibres were released gradually into living spaces and prevailing air currents.
Exposure accumulated.
Irreversibility was built into the timeline.

The state purchased reports.
Databases were produced.
Some entries were duplicated.
Some were falsified.

The project was recorded as complete.

The houses did not change.
The exposure continued.
The money was gone.
The fibre remained airborne.

Part II – The Wound

She wakes when the heat arrives.
Not when the sun rises.
When the ceiling begins to hold it.

The house warms from the top down.
Slowly.
Predictably.

She lies still for a moment, listening.
The roof ticks as it expands.
A dry sound.
Like something tightening.

She gets up carefully.
She does not stretch her arms above her head.
She learned not to.

The floor is cool.
The air above it is not.

She moves through the room with her shoulders low.
Mindful of distance.
Mindful of height.

She opens a window a few centimetres.
Not all the way.
Wind moves things.

She has learned to measure airflow.

She fills a bucket.
Adds a cap of bleach.
Dips a cloth.

She wipes before she sweeps.
Always.

Dry dust travels.
Wet dust stays.

She does this every morning.

The ceiling above the kitchen is low.
The sheets are old.
Greyed.
Pitted.

She knows what they are made of.

She did not always know.
But she knows now.

The letter came years ago.
Official.
Stamped.

It said her house was listed.
It said removal was planned.
It said: ***Do not disturb the roofing.***

She followed instructions.

She stopped hammering nails.
Stopped drilling holes.
Stopped fixing things herself.

She adapted.

She learned where to stand when it rained.
She learned where the drips fell.
She learned which cracks widened in summer.

She rearranged the furniture.
Beds away from windows.
Cupboards away from corners where dust settled.

This took time.

She does not think of it as sacrifice.
It is just work.

She makes tea.
She drinks it standing.

Sitting presses her chest forward.
Forward means closer.

She breathes shallowly without noticing.
Her body adjusted first.

She opens the cupboard slowly.
The hinge squeaks.

She wipes the shelf before taking the mug.
The cloth comes away grey.

She rinses it.
Wipes again.

She does not rush.

Rushing lifts particles.

She hears a child outside.
Running.
Kicking something metal.

She closes the window.

Heat builds.

She checks the calendar.
The removal date was pencilled in once.

The pencil mark has faded.

She did not erase it.
She just stopped looking.

Officials came once.
They took photographs.
They measured.

They wore masks.

That stayed with her.

She asked how long it would take.
They said they were waiting for approval.

She asked approval from whom.
They said the process was ongoing.

She learned that word.

Ongoing.

She sweeps slowly.
The broom barely touches the floor.

She bends at the knees, not the waist.
She does not want her face close to the ceiling.

The radio plays softly.
She keeps it low.

Sound vibrates air.

She cooks breakfast.
Steam rises.

Condensation forms on the underside of the sheets.
She watches the droplets.

Where they gather.
Where they fall.

She moves the pot.

She eats alone.

Later, she washes clothes.
She does not shake them out inside.

She carries them straight to the line.

The sun is high now.
The roof radiates downward.

She keeps her head covered.

She used to sit inside during the day.
Now she sits under the tree when she can.

But the tree does not move with her.

At night, the heat stays trapped.
The roof releases it slowly.

She sleeps lightly.
Turning increases breathing.

She dreams of dust.
Not storms.

Just fine, drifting matter.

She wakes with her mouth dry.

She wipes the bedside table.
Again.

Visitors do not stay long.

She does not offer coffee indoors.
She meets people outside.
On the step.

They ask if the removal has happened yet.

She says they are still processing.

She says it the way she was taught.

Processing.

She keeps the papers in a plastic sleeve.
In a drawer.
Away from light.

Sometimes she takes them out.
Not to read.

Just to confirm they exist.

She has learned not to call too often.

Calling creates expectations.
Expectations exhaust.

She does not cough.

That would be easier.

She does not feel sick.

That is worse.

The danger is quiet.
It does not announce itself.

It settles.

When the wind picks up, she closes everything.
The house becomes still.

Air thickens.

She counts minutes.

She opens again when the gusts pass.

She lives inside calculation.

She does not tell the children why they cannot play inside.
She says it is too hot.

She says the house is tired.

She does not say *poisoned*.

She cleans again before sleeping.

The cloth comes away grey.

Always grey.

She wrings it out slowly.
The water darkens.
Runs clear.

She hangs it to dry outside.

She washes her hands.
Then her face.

She looks at the ceiling once more.
Just to check.

Nothing has changed.

The house still stands.
The roof still holds.

She lies down carefully.

She does not think about illness.

She thinks about containment.

She thinks about how long material lasts.

She thinks about waiting.

Tomorrow, she will wipe again.

Part III – The Autopsy

Bob and Gman arrive in the late afternoon.
The light is flat.
The air is still.

They stand across the street.
They do not enter the yard.

The house is intact.
Walls upright.
Windows unbroken.

From the outside, it performs its function.

Bob notices this first.
Shelter rarely announces its failure with collapse.

Gman looks at the roof.
Not the colour.
The geometry.

The sheets sit evenly.
No sag.
No tear.

“Containment,” he says.

He does not raise his voice.
He does not point.

“A house is a vessel,” he continues.
“It separates the body from the environment.
Heat.
Wind.
Rain.
Particles.”

Bob waits.

“Asbestos removal is not a service,” Gman says.
“It is a seal.
It closes the system.”

Bob looks at the windows.
All closed.
Curtains drawn.

“The state paid for the seal,” Gman says.
“Then removed the money.”

A brief gust lifts dust along the road.
It settles again.

“When containment fails,” Gman continues,
“the vessel doesn’t stop functioning.
It reverses.”

Bob turns slightly.

“Reverses how?”

“It distributes,” Gman says.
“What should be kept out is carried inward.
What should settle is kept moving.”

Bob looks at the doorway.
He imagines daily motion.
Air moving through rooms.
Heat cycling from ceiling to floor.

“This isn’t exposure as event,” Gman says.
“It’s exposure as condition.”

He pauses.

“Slow.
Diffuse.
Cumulative.”

The Code marks the violation.

Principle breached: Containment Failure (The Vessel).

Bob notes the absence of urgency.
No cordon.
No warning signs.

“No one evacuated,” he says.

“Why would they?” Gman replies.
“The house still stands.”

Bob understands.

Collapse would have been easier to register.
Collapse would have forced response.

“This kind of failure,” Gman says,
“relies on duration.”

He gestures toward the roof.

“Every day the material ages.
Every season it cracks.
Every wind event lifts fibres.”

Bob imagines the cycle.
Morning heat.
Afternoon expansion.
Evening cooling.

Motion without progress.

“The state bought knowledge,” Gman says.
“Not remedy.”

Bob nods.

“The audit.”

“A database,” Gman confirms.
“They paid to identify risk.
They did not pay to interrupt it.”

Bob looks at the front step.
Clean.
Swept.

“Behaviour adjusted,” he says.

“Yes,” Gman replies.
“That’s the transfer.”

He waits.

“When institutional containment fails,” Gman continues,
“the burden shifts to private bodies.”

Bob looks again at the closed windows.

“Wiping,” he says.
“Measuring air.”

“Rituals,” Gman says.
“They manage anxiety.
They do not remove hazard.”

The Code does not assign blame to adaptation.
It records cost.

“Containment is binary,” Gman says.
“It either holds or it doesn’t.”

Bob thinks of the cloth.
Grey water.
Clear again.

“No partial credit,” Gman adds.

They stand quietly.

The house does not change.

“This is why nothing happens quickly,” Gman says.
“Because the system still appears to work.”

Bob looks down the street.
Other houses.
Same roofs.

“How many?” he asks.

“Enough,” Gman replies.

Bob exhales slowly.

“No diagnosis,” he says.

“No need,” Gman answers.
“By the time diagnosis appears, the failure is old.”

Bob understands the timeline now.
The delay.
The quiet.

“Containment was breached upstream,” Gman says.
“Funds diverted.
Work undone.”

He pauses.

“The house was left to perform a function it was never designed for.”

Bob watches a curtain shift slightly behind the glass.

“The body adapts,” he says.

“Until it can’t,” Gman replies.

They do not speak of illness.
They do not speak of outcomes.

Those belong later.
Far from this street.

The autopsy stops here.

Gman turns away first.

“The structure didn’t fail loudly,” he says.
“That’s why it survived inspection.”

Bob follows.

Behind them, the house remains.
Standing.
Sealed in appearance.

Air continues to move through it.

The system has already left the site.

Part IV – The Record

The South African Human Rights Commission received 3,247 complaints related to housing and shelter between 2019 and 2023. Successive audits of the Department of Human Settlements identified incomplete housing projects, fraudulent contractor payments, and the delivery of structurally deficient units. The Minister stated that the department “remained committed to the progressive realisation of the right to adequate housing as enshrined in Section 26 of the Constitution.” The roof continued to leak. The bucket continued to fill.

Chapter 3

Transfer

Part 0 – The Ordinary

You are in a hospital bed. You do not know which hospital. You were transferred. You had a name at the last place. Here you have a bed number. The bed number is written on a wristband. The wristband is plastic. The plastic is the colour of nothing. You have a bag beside the bed. It is not your bag. There is no name on it. Inside: a toothbrush that is not yours, a shirt that is not your size, and a form that says you were transferred for “continuity of care.” You do not know what continuity of care means. You know what it feels like. It feels like being moved.

Part I – The Event

In 2016, the Gauteng Department of Health terminated its contract for long-term psychiatric care.
The stated rationale was fiscal.
The objective was cost reduction.

A decision was taken to transfer patients to alternative facilities.
A total of 1,442 long-term mental health patients were moved.

The mandate was decentralisation of care.
The execution functioned as clearance.

Patients were relocated to non-governmental organisations.
Many receiving sites were unlicensed.
Many were under-resourced.
Some were not operational at the time of transfer.

The process was executed on a compressed timeline.
Patients were transported in groups.
Medical files were separated from bodies.
Histories were detached from identities.
Medication continuity was disrupted.

Warnings were issued by clinicians, families, and advocacy groups.
They were acknowledged.
They were overridden.

The transfer was recorded as complete.

In the months that followed, at least 144 patients died.
Causes recorded included dehydration, malnutrition, hypothermia, and untreated illness.

The project was formally concluded.
The patients were recorded as placed.

Part II – The Wound

He wakes because the room is loud.
Not voices.
Movement.

Beds scrape.
Metal meets metal.

A name is called.
It is not his.
Someone answers anyway.

He sits up slowly.
The floor is cold.

A bag is placed near his feet.
It is not his bag.
There is no name on it.

He waits.
Waiting is familiar.

Hands take his arm.
Not roughly.
Firmly.

He is guided into a corridor.
Others are already there.
Some standing.
Some sitting on the floor.

The lights are brighter than usual.
He squints.
No one notices.

The smell is different today.
Fuel.
Plastic.

They move him again.
Through a door he does not recognise.

The air outside is sharp.
Breathing takes effort.

He is helped into a vehicle.
The step is high.
His foot misses it the first time.

Someone lifts him.
He is lighter than they expect.

He sits on a bench.
The bench vibrates.

More people are brought in.
The space fills.
The door closes.

The engine starts.

He holds the bag on his lap.
It opens slightly.

Inside are clothes that are not his.
A jersey too small.
Shoes without laces.

The vehicle moves.

Time passes.
He does not know how much.

The road sways his body.
He braces with his knees.

No one speaks to him.

Someone asks for water.
No one answers.

The vehicle stops.
The door opens.

Light enters.
Then dust.

He is helped down.
The ground is uneven.
He stumbles.

Someone steadies him.
Then lets go.

They stand in a yard.
There is a building.
Or parts of one.

Windows without glass.
A door hanging open.

He waits to be told where to go.

Names are read from a paper.
Some are crossed out.

He hears his name.
Or something close enough.

He raises his hand.

He is led inside.

The room is small.
The walls are bare.

Mattresses lie on the floor.
Some folded.
Some damp.

He is shown a place.
No bed.
Just space.

He sits.

The bag is taken from him.
Placed against a wall.

He asks for his pills.
The words come out slowly.

The person with him nods.
Says later.

Later does not arrive.

The light changes.
Not night.
Just less.

People come and go.
He does not know who belongs here.

Someone cries.
Someone shouts.

He stays where he was placed.

The floor presses cold through his clothes.

He feels thirsty.
He waits for water.

A cup appears once.
Shared.

He drinks carefully.

His mouth stays dry.

Morning arrives without a signal.
The light shifts.

That is all.

He stands to stretch.
His legs shake.

He looks for the door.
The door is there.

No one stops him.
No one guides him.

He returns to the space he was given.

Time loosens.

Meals arrive irregularly.
Sometimes they do not.

When food comes, it is placed on a table.
There is no order.

He eats what he can reach.

He thinks about asking for help.
He waits for the right moment.

The right moment does not present itself.

He sleeps sitting up.

The floor smells damp.

Each night, the cold lasts longer.

His jersey does not fit.
He pulls his arms inside it.

Someone coughs nearby.
Someone does not wake up.

He watches as others are moved again.
Out of the room.
Down the path.

He is not moved.

He asks for his pills again.
A different person nods.

Later.

His thoughts slow.
The edges blur.

He stops asking.

The days stop separating themselves.

Light.
Dark.
Light again.

His body becomes heavy.

He drinks less.
Not by choice.

The cup comes less often.

He holds the bag when he sleeps.
It is empty now.

No one uses his name.
They refer to him by where he lies.

He is moved once more.
To another room.

This room has a bedframe.
No mattress.

He lies on the frame.
The metal presses into his back.

He counts the bars.
He loses count.

He thinks of the other place.
The one with routine.

Routine is a word he remembers.

He closes his eyes.

Voices pass over him.
Not to him.

He waits.

Waiting is all that remains.

No one tells him where he is.
No one tells him how long.

The building does not change.
The door stays open.

He does not leave.

The light shifts again.

His body no longer adjusts.

He stops noticing thirst.
He stops noticing cold.
He stops noticing time.

The space holds him.

The system has finished moving him.

No further instruction arrives.

Part III – The Autopsy

Bob and Gman arrive after the transfers are complete.

There is no perimeter.
No tape.
No sign.

They stop outside the gate.

The building is standing.
The door is open.
The yard is quiet.

From a distance, it appears functional.

Mattresses are visible through a window.
Some folded.
Some stacked.

Bob counts them.
He stops before the number settles.

A clipboard hangs from a nail near the entrance.
Pages curl in the heat.

Gman reads the first page.
Then the second.

Names appear.
Some crossed out.
Some left open.

No dates are added.

They step closer.
Not inside.

A man passes carrying a bucket.
Water spills onto the ground.

No one corrects him.

Bob looks at the windows.
No glass.
Curtains shift when the wind moves.

A sound comes from inside.
Not speech.
Not silence.

Something between.

Gman watches the doorway.
People move past it.
No one enters to check.

A vehicle arrives.
Stops.
Idles.

No one gets out.

The engine is turned off.

The vehicle remains.

Bob notices a pile of bags near the wall.
Plastic.
Unmarked.

Some are empty.
Some are not.

He does not touch them.

A nurse’s station stands unused.
Counter clean.
No files visible.

A clock hangs above it.
The time is wrong.

Gman looks at the clock.
Then looks away.

A form lies on a table.
Signed.
Stamped.

The date is weeks old.

Bob traces the sequence without writing it down.

Decision.
Transfer.
Placement.

All steps marked complete.

Care was moved without continuity.
Identity was separated from obligation.
The contract ended.
The bodies remained.

No receiving system inherited responsibility.
The chain terminated mid-care.

Nothing here suggests continuation.

The door remains open.

People move in and out of rooms without instruction.
Some sit.
Some lie down.

No one is directed.
No one is counted.

Bob notices what is absent.
No medication trolley.

No call bell.
No routine.

Gman walks the fence line.
Stops.
Walks it again.

He notes shade.
Exposure.
Distance.

The sun moves.
The building does not.

A staff member signs another form.
Places it on the pile.

Bob watches the paper bend in the heat.

They wait.

Nothing escalates.
Nothing resolves.

The site behaves as if the task is finished.

Gman steps back from the gate.
Bob follows.

Neither speaks.

Behind them, the building remains open.
The yard remains quiet.
The mattresses remain where they are.

Bodies are inside.

The transfer is complete.

No further action is scheduled.

Part IV – The Record

The Health Ombud of South Africa investigated the transfer of mental health patients from Life Esidimeni, a specialised psychiatric facility, to unlicensed and ill-equipped NGOs in 2016. One hundred and forty-four patients died as a result of the transfers. The subsequent arbitration, presided over by retired Chief Justice Dikgang Moseneke, found gross negligence and systemic failure. The Gauteng Department of Health stated that the transfers were carried out “to deinstitutionalise patients and integrate them into communities.” The communities had no facilities. The patients had no protection. The arbitration awarded compensation. The dead remained dead.

Chapter 4

Exposure

Part 0 – The Ordinary

You are a nurse. Or a doctor. Or a community health worker. The title changes. The work does not. You are putting on a mask. The mask is thin. The elastic is thinner. You stretch it once before you put it on. It gives slightly. It is the kind of mask that makes you feel protected without actually protecting you. You have done this every morning for eleven months. You believe in the mask the way the mother in Chapter 1 believes in paper. The mask means protocol. Protocol means someone is in charge.

Part I – The Event

In 2020, emergency procurement regulations were invoked.
The objective was speed.
The constraint was volume.

Standard verification protocols were suspended.

Contracts were awarded to entities with no history in medical supply.
Construction firms.
IT consultancies.
Intermediaries with political access.

Prices were inflated by margins exceeding five hundred percent.

Stock was delivered.

Masks failed filtration tests.
Elastic tore.
Gowns were permeable.
Respirators leaked at the seal.

Certificates of compliance were copied, reused, or fabricated.

Funds were disbursed.
Delivery notes were signed.
Equipment was issued to hospitals and clinics.

Distribution continued.

Stock registers were completed.
Compliance boxes were ticked.

Healthcare workers were recorded as protected.

The barrier existed on paper.

The system marked the task complete.

Part II – The Wound

He washes his hands before he puts the mask on.
He does it the way he was taught.

Soap.
Water.
Twenty seconds.

He dries them on a paper towel.
The dispenser is half empty.

He lifts the mask by the elastic.
The elastic is thin.

He stretches it once.
Not hard.

It holds.

He places the mask over his mouth.
Then his nose.

He presses the wire down.
He presses it again.

The seal feels wrong.
He adjusts it.

This is normal.

He pulls on gloves.
The gloves are loose at the wrist.

He snaps them once.
They slide back.

He pulls a gown over his shoulders.
The fabric is light.
Too light.

He ties it anyway.

The mirror in the changing room is cracked.
He does not look closely.

He steps into the corridor.

The ward is already awake.
Carts move.
Beds roll.

The air smells of disinfectant and breath.

He walks between stations.
He does not touch his face.

Sweat starts early.

The mask dampens quickly.
His breath stays inside it.

Condensation forms.
Then warmth.

He feels the elastic bite into his ears.
He adjusts again.

The day lengthens without announcement.

He lifts patients.
He pushes beds.
He changes linen.

He leans close to faces.
Closer than comfort allows.

This is part of the work.

He trusts the barrier because he is told to.
Because the barrier has been issued.
Because it came in a sealed box.

The first tear happens without sound.
A small give at the corner.

He feels air where it should not be.

He presses the fabric back into place.
It holds.

For now.

He smells the ward through the mask.
Metallic.
Sweet.

That is new.

He tells himself it is nothing.

The elastic slips once.
He ties it tighter.

The knot rubs the skin behind his ear.

He does not stop.

Stopping creates backlog.

He notices a colleague adjusting the same mask.
Then another.

No one says anything.

They keep working.

The mask grows heavy.

He feels it sag when he speaks.
The wire loses shape.

He presses it again.

The gown sticks to his back.
The fabric darkens with sweat.

He feels air move through it when he turns.
Not much.
Enough.

He keeps his arms close to his body.

Lunch is late.

He does not remove the mask.
There is nowhere clean to put it.

He drinks water through a straw slipped under the edge.
The taste is plastic.

He swallows carefully.

His throat is sore.
From breathing warm air.
From dryness.

He continues.

A patient coughs nearby.
Not loudly.

He flinches before he knows he is doing it.

He steadies himself.

Fear is inefficient.

The shift stretches.

The pressure on his face becomes pain.
Red lines form.

The elastic burns.

He feels the mask give again.
This time at the seam.

He presses harder.

The barrier thins.

Someone is taken off the roster.
Sent home.

No explanation.

The list changes quietly.

He keeps working.

The smell inside the mask becomes constant.
It no longer fades.

He realises the mask is no longer separating anything.
It is only covering.

This realisation arrives late.

Too late to change behaviour.
Too late to reduce proximity.

He finishes the shift.

He removes the gloves carefully.
Then the gown.

The gown tears at the shoulder.
The fabric was never strong.

He removes the mask last.

The elastic snaps.
It breaks in his hand.

His face is wet underneath.
His skin aches.

He washes his hands again.

Soap.
Water.

He looks at the red marks in the mirror.
They do not fade.

He throws the mask away.

Another one will be issued tomorrow.

He leaves the hospital.

Outside, the air feels sharp.
Clean.

He breathes deeply.
Then shallow again.

His head hurts.

At home, he puts his clothes straight into a bag.
He does not place them on a chair.

He showers.

The water stings his skin.

He stands longer than usual.

He sits on the bed afterward.
Does not lie down.

He feels tired in a way that does not leave with rest.

The next day, he returns.

A box of masks sits at the entrance.
Same brand.
Same thin elastic.

He takes one.

He does not test it.

There is no time.

He washes his hands.
He puts it on.

The ritual continues.

The barrier is issued.
The work proceeds.

His body registers exposure before language does.

The system records him as protected.

He enters the ward again.

Part III – The Autopsy

Bob and Gman stand at the service entrance.
The loading bay is active.
Boxes move.

They do not go inside.

Pallets of sealed cartons sit beneath a canopy.
Printed labels face outward.
Lot numbers.
Dates.

A forklift lifts one stack.
Sets it down.

The suspension barely compresses.

The cartons are light.
Too light.

Bob watches the shift change.
Masks on.
Gowns tied.
Gloves snapped.

The ritual is performed quickly.
At speed.

They enter in lines.
They exit one by one.

No one stops to check the seal.

Gman lifts a torn carton flap.
Lets it fall.

Inside, masks are packed flat.
Elastic folded too tightly.

He does not test one.

He looks at the manifest clipped to the pallet.
Signed.
Stamped.
Certified.

The delivery is complete.

Bob reads the sign on the wall.

PPE Required Beyond This Point

Everyone complies.

Gman watches a nurse adjust her mask.
The elastic slides.
She ties it tighter.

No one intervenes.

A supervisor passes.
Checks a list.
Ticks a box.

Compliance is visible.
Protection is assumed.

Gman waits.

He counts breaths.
In.
Out.

The system hums.

A new box is opened.
More masks are issued.

The flow does not slow.

Bob measures the doorway.
Bodies enter.
Bodies return.

The distance between them is small.

Proximity is permitted because the barrier is trusted.

Gman looks into the waste bin.
Masks inside.
Some torn.
Some damp.

He notes the frequency of disposal.

No ledger tracks failure.

Bob looks again at the paperwork.
All items certified.
All items delivered.

The Code marks the violation.

Principle breached: Filter Failure (Binary Function)

Gman does not say it aloud.

A filter either separates or it does not.
There is no partial state.

The presence of a barrier changes behaviour.
It invites closeness.

When the barrier fails, risk is not reduced.
It is redirected.

Downward.

Bob watches another worker hesitate at the door.
Then follow the others.

No alarm sounds.

The bay remains active.
Boxes continue to move.

The system does not register harm.
It registers compliance.

Gman steps back from the entrance.

Bob follows.

Behind them, equipment continues to be issued.
Sign-offs accumulate.

Bodies continue to pass through the door.

The barrier exists on paper.

Exposure proceeds.

Part IV – The Record

The South African Medical Research Council reported that excess deaths during the COVID-19 pandemic exceeded 300,000, approximately three times the official count. Personal Protective Equipment procurement was identified as a site of widespread fraud, with contracts awarded to politically connected individuals. The Special Investigating Unit investigated over 5,000 COVID-related contracts. The Minister of Health stated that the government “acted swiftly and in accordance with the best available science.” The masks continued to be thin. The elastic continued to stretch.

Chapter 5

Authority

Part 0 – The Ordinary

You are a police officer. You arrive before the shift. Not early. On time. The station smells the way it has always smelled. Old paper. Ammonia. The pen at the desk is chained. You pull it for slack. It gives a millimetre. You clip the radio to your shoulder. You check the battery. The battery is at sixty percent. Sixty percent is enough for a shift. Barely. You are in charge of a sector. The sector has no budget. The sector has crime. The two facts are related.

Part I – The Event

Between 2010 and 2015, Arno Lamoer served as Provincial Commissioner of the South African Police Service in the Western Cape.
The position represented the highest level of regional command.

During his tenure, he accepted money and benefits from a businessman linked to organised crime.
The relationship was transactional.
The payments ran parallel to his official duties.

No suspension of authority followed at the time.
The chain of command remained intact.

Directives were issued.
Operations were authorised.
Personnel obeyed orders.

Uniforms continued to confer legitimacy.
Signatures continued to validate state action.

The breach existed within the command structure.
It was not visible to the operational mechanism.

Stations opened.
Patrols deployed.
Reports were filed.

The hierarchy functioned on the assumption of integrity.

Lamoer was later arrested, charged, and convicted.
The sentence was custodial.

The correction was retrospective.

During the period of compromise, the system recorded continuity.
Authority was present.
Reliability was not.

Part II – The Wound

He arrives before the shift starts.
Not early.
On time.

The station smells of old paper and ammonia.
Nothing has changed.

He signs in.
The pen is chained to the desk.
He tugs it for slack.

It gives a millimetre.

He clips the radio to his shoulder.
Checks the battery.

Full.
The green light is steady.

The uniform sits right.
Pressed.
Clean.

The badge catches the fluorescence when he turns.
He adjusts it without thinking.

This is how orientation begins.

The morning briefing is short.
Names.
Areas.
Times.

He listens for tone.
There is none.

Orders arrive as geometry.
They descend from above.

He writes them down in block letters.
Neat.
Even.

Neatness is a habit.
Habits keep lines straight.

He steps outside.
Vehicles idle in the yard.
Diesel hangs in the cold air.

He gets into the van.
The radio crackles.

A call comes in.
Then another.

He answers the first.
Routes the second.

The voice on the line is tight.
Too fast.

He asks for the location again.
Slower.

He looks at the screen.
The address is familiar.

He hesitates.

Not because of danger.
Because of direction.

He waits for confirmation.
None arrives.

Another call interrupts.
Different area.
Same urgency.

He notes it.
Marks the time.

He is supposed to choose.

He looks at the rank attached to the last instruction.
Higher than his.
Lower than the one before.

The radio stays warm against his shoulder.

He clears his throat.
Asks if backup is en route.

The response is vague.

“Stand by.”

Stand by is not an action.
It is a pause.

He stands by.

The radio hisses.

He hears another unit dispatched to the first address.
Not his unit.

He lets the moment pass.

Inaction feels safer than error.

Later, he fills out a form.
He fills it carefully.

Boxes ticked.
Times logged.

He chooses words that do not attract attention.
Neutral words.

The page is clean.

The page protects him.

The next call is domestic.
Raised voices.
No weapons mentioned.

He drives part of the way.
Then slows.

He checks the radio again.

Another instruction interrupts.
Same tone.
Different vector.

He pulls over.
The engine idles.

He looks at the steering wheel.
His hands rest on it.

Left.
Right.

He waits for clarity.

Clarity does not arrive.

He cancels the response.
Logs: *redirected.*

Redirected to where is not specified.

He drives back toward the station.

The uniform still fits.
The badge still reflects light.

Inside, a clerk asks if he’s finished with the file.
He hands it over.

The clerk flips through the pages.
Nods.

No questions.

The silence is sufficient.

He pours coffee.
It tastes burnt.

He drinks it anyway.

A supervisor passes.
Nods once.

The nod matters.
It signals alignment.

He nods back.

He does not know what he is aligning with.

The radio calls again.
A robbery.
In progress.

He responds this time.

He arrives late.
Too late to intervene.
Too early to leave.

He stands at the edge of the scene.

People look at him.
They expect authority.

He offers procedure.

He asks for statements.
Takes notes.

He writes exactly what is said.
Nothing more.

The paperwork will be flawless.

He sends the file up the chain.
Receives a confirmation ping.

That is the transaction.

By midday, his stomach is tight.
Not hunger.

Displacement.

He stretches his back.
It doesn’t help.

Another call.
Then another.

Each one requires a choice.
Each choice feels like exposure.

He defaults to the manual.

The manual is safer than judgment.

In the afternoon, he is told to hold position.
Then told to move.
Then told to wait.

He waits.

Waiting burns fuel.
It burns nerve.

He watches traffic pass.
People cross streets.
Shops open.
Children walk home.

Everything appears normal.

The normalcy is destabilising.

He returns to the station near the end of the shift.
Hands in his logbook.
Signs out.

The pen tugs again at the chain.
He releases it carefully.

In the locker room, he changes slowly.
Folds the uniform.

He checks the radio battery again.

Still full.

The connection was perfect.
The signal was corrupt.

On the way out, he sees a notice on the board.
Official.
Stamped.

It announces a court date.
A name he recognises.

The name is on the portrait in the foyer.
Provincial Command.

He reads it twice.

The charge is corruption.
The date is weeks away.

He stands there.

The station continues around him.
Phones ring.
Doors open and close.

Nothing stops.

The hierarchy remains vertical.
But the anchor is gone.

On the drive home, he takes a longer route.
Avoids certain streets.

Not because of danger.
Because of uncertainty.

At home, he removes his shoes by the door.
Lines them up.

He washes his hands.
The water runs clear.

He sits at the table.

The radio is silent now.

He feels heavy.
Not from work.

From holding position while the ground moved.

Tomorrow, he will return.
The uniform will fit.
The badge will shine.

Orders will arrive.

He will listen.

He will choose carefully.

Because every direction feels compromised.

And doing nothing feels safer than being wrong.

Part III – The Autopsy

Bob and Gman arrive during shift change.

The station doors are open.
Uniforms move in and out.
Radios crackle.

From the outside, the system appears aligned.

Bob watches officers sign in.
Names logged.
Times recorded.

Nothing irregular.

Gman studies the notice board.
Ranks.
Rotations.
Procedures.

All present.

They stand near the parking area.
Engines idle.
Vehicles depart on schedule.

“Authority is still here,” Bob says.

“Yes,” Gman replies.
“That’s the problem.”

They watch an officer hesitate at the doorway.
A pause.
Then a step aside.

Another officer passes him without comment.

“No orders were withdrawn,” Gman says.
“No instructions cancelled.”

Bob nods.

“But direction stopped being reliable.”

Gman looks at the building again.

“Authority isn’t a title,” he says.
“It’s a vector.”

Bob waits.

“When the top node is compromised,” Gman continues,
“the vector collapses.
Orders still move.
They just don’t point anywhere safe.”

Bob thinks of the radio traffic.
Conflicting calls.
Stand by.
Redirected.

“Nothing illegal has to be said,” Gman adds.
“Silence does the work.”

They watch a patrol return.
No urgency.
No report.

The officer parks.
Signs off.
Leaves.

“The system keeps functioning,” Bob says.

“Yes,” Gman replies.
“But orientation is gone.”

He gestures lightly toward the station.

“When you can’t tell which order protects you,
inaction becomes the rational response.”

Bob understands.

“Authority failed upstream,” he says.
“Not in execution.”

“Exactly,” Gman replies.
“The breach didn’t issue crimes.
It removed certainty.”

They look at the chain of command posted on the wall.
Names.
Arrows.

Hierarchy intact.

The anchor is not.

“The damage isn’t what happened,” Gman says.
“It’s what didn’t.”

Bob watches an officer delay before getting into a vehicle.
Just a second too long.

“That hesitation multiplies,” Gman continues.
“Across shifts.
Across districts.”

Bob thinks of the city beyond the station.
Calls unanswered.
Reports delayed.

“The violence doesn’t need instruction,” Gman says.
“It only needs absence of direction.”

They step back from the entrance.

Behind them, the station continues to operate.
Uniforms still confer authority.
Orders still circulate.

No one announces a failure.

But no one knows which way is safe anymore.

The autopsy stops here.

The mechanism is identified.

Authority remained present.
Direction did not.

They leave before the next briefing begins.

Part IV – The Record

The Civilian Secretariat for Police reported that public trust in the South African Police Service declined to 37% in 2023. The Independent Police Investigative Directorate received over 6,000 complaints per year. Station-level resource allocation audits revealed chronic shortages of vehicles, equipment, and personnel. The National Commissioner stated that “the SAPS remains committed to the safety and security of all South Africans.” The pen remained chained to the desk. The battery remained at sixty percent.

Chapter 6

Armament

Part 0 – The Ordinary

You are in a car. The engine idles. The radio is on. A song about summer. You are holding a plastic cup. The condensation runs down the side. It wets your thumb. You are twenty-three. You are alive in a way that twenty-three-year-olds are alive – which is to say you do not think about being alive because it has not yet occurred to you that you might not be. You are looking at a dog on the pavement. The dog is doing nothing. The dog is the most interesting thing in the world right now.

Part I – The Event

Between 2010 and 2016, firearms were removed from South African Police Service custody by a senior officer, Colonel Christiaan Prinsloo.
The inventory consisted of SAPS-issued weapons held in secure storage.

The firearms were sold unlawfully to criminal intermediaries.
They entered gang circulation, primarily in the Cape Flats.

Forensic investigation later linked more than two thousand of these police firearms to active crime.
Ballistics analysis confirmed their use in over one thousand murders and more than fourteen hundred attempted murders.

The linkage was established through serial numbers, recovered casings, and ballistic matching.
Many victims were bystanders.
Some were children.

Oversight mechanisms did not register the diversion while it was ongoing.
The weapons remained operational in circulation for years.

Prinsloo was arrested, charged, and convicted.

The conviction removed the supplier.
It did not remove the supply.

The firearms were not recovered.
They continued to fire after the custody breach was closed.

Part II – The Wound

The car is stopped.
Not parked.
Stopped.

The engine idles.
The radio is on.
A song about summer.

She holds a plastic cup.
Condensation runs down the side.
It wets her thumb.

She bites the straw.
It bends.

She leans forward to look at a dog on the pavement.
The dog is scratching its ear.

The world is ordinary.

A sound arrives.
Not a bang.

A short, dry crack.
Like a stone against glass.
Like air leaving something that should hold it.

Incorrect.
Out of place.

Her head turns.
Not in alarm.
In curiosity.

The straw slips from her mouth.
The cup tips.

Pink liquid spills onto her dress.
It spreads across the seat.

She does not wipe it up.

Her body folds forward.
Then settles back against the rest.

The angle of her neck is wrong.

Someone says her name.
Or something close enough.

She does not answer.

The nervous system has not caught up yet.
There is no pain.

Only pressure.
Then absence.

Her hands open.
The cup rolls to the floor mat.

There is a hole in the rear window.
Small.
Clean.

A starburst of fractures holds around it.

On the road behind the car, a casing lies.
Brass.
Catching the sun.

A thin line of smoke lifts from it.
Blue.
Brief.

On the base of the casing there is a stamp.
A number.
A crest.

Issued.
Logged.

The casing is warm.

The projectile obeyed law.
Velocity.
Direction.
Entry.

It did not know the car.
It did not know the child.

It did not know laughter five seconds earlier.

It knew only the geometry of the barrel.
The pressure of ignition.

It functioned correctly.

Blood appears.
Darker than the drink.

It moves fast.

Hands press.
Then stop pressing.

The pressure is useless.
The vessel is breached.

The street does not change.

The dog still scratches its ear.

The casing remains where it fell.
The stamp remains legible.

The weapon that fired it was built to protect.
It has executed its function.

The nervous system searches for orientation.

There is none.

Protection has reversed.

Safety has changed sign.

Alive.

Dead.

The transition is irreversible.

The car stays stopped.

Part III – The Autopsy

Bob and Gman arrive after the sound has already passed through the street.

There is no cordon yet.
No tape.
No cones.

Traffic slows on instinct, not instruction.

They stop several metres from the car.
They do not approach it.

Glass lies on the road behind the rear wheel.
It catches light without pattern.

The engine is still running.

Gman looks at the rear window.
Not the damage.
The geometry.

Bob watches the gap in traffic that has formed around the stopped car.
The space holds.

A casing lies further back on the tar.
Brass.
Stamped.

Gman crouches near it.
He does not touch.

The stamp is intact.
A crest.
A serial number.

Issued.
Catalogued.

Bob traces the route without moving his feet.
From casing to barrel.

From barrel to store.
From store to ledger.

The chain closes cleanly.

No part of it is missing.

“This is inversion,” Gman says.

He says it once.

The object functioned exactly as designed.
The failure is not mechanical.

Bob looks from the casing to the car.

Protection has arrived as harm.

Gman stands.

“This weapon didn’t drift,” he says.
“It was routed.”

Bob nods.

Upstream, custody was intact on paper.
Downstream, the projectile obeyed law.

Between the two, a transfer occurred.
Not of ownership.
Of function.

The role of the weapon changed sign.

Bob looks along the street.
Shops.
Houses.
People standing in doorways.

This was not a target.
It did not need to be.

“Inversion doesn’t require intent,” Gman says.
“It requires access.”

He does not name the officer.
The mechanism is sufficient.

State custody became criminal supply.
A safety system converted into a distribution system.

A uniformed officer arrives.
Then another.

They mark the scene.
They begin their notes.

No one examines the casing yet.

The car remains stopped.
The engine continues to idle.

“The harm here isn’t only death,” Gman says.
“It’s orientation failure.”

Bob understands.

When protection kills, the nervous system cannot reconcile roles.
Trust collapses faster than fear.

“That’s why the damage multiplies,” Gman continues.
“One inversion propagates.”

He gestures lightly.
Not at the car.
At the city beyond it.

The weapons continued to circulate long after the breach.
A conviction closed a case.
It did not close the circuit.

Bob thinks of the ledger.
Entries finalised.
Assets unrecovered.

The system recorded correction.
The environment did not.

Gman looks once more at the casing.

“The object still exists,” he says.
“So the failure persists.”

They step back as more officers arrive.
The space tightens.

Behind them, traffic resumes in short bursts.

The casing remains on the road.
Stamped.
Issued.

The autopsy stops here.

The mechanism is identified.
The route is intact.

Inversion has already propagated.

They leave before the tape goes up.

Part IV – The Record

South Africa's firearm-related homicide rate is among the highest in the world. The Civilian Secretariat for Police recorded over 27,000 murders in the 2022/23 financial year. The Central Firearms Registry has been subject to repeated audits identifying irregularities in licensing, lost weapons, and inadequate controls. Illegally held firearms account for the majority of gun deaths. The Minister of Police stated that "the proliferation of illegal firearms remains a priority." The car remained stopped. The song about summer continued to play.

Chapter 7

Residue

Part 0 – The Ordinary

You are old. You do not know exactly how old. Your birth was recorded in a book in a church that may or may not still exist. Your mother told you the year. You have counted from there. You wake slowly. The stiffness arrives before the light. Knees first. Then hands. Then the lower back, like a message that arrives late. You have a pension. The pension arrives on a specific day. On that day, you are a person the system knows. On every other day, you are furniture the system has forgotten to remove.

Part I – The Event

The Social Assistance Act provides for an Older Persons Grant.
Payment is monthly.
The amount is fixed.
Transfer is reliable.

Beneficiaries remain registered.
Compliance is recorded.

The infrastructure required to use the grant is degraded.

Public transport operates on reduced schedules.
Primary healthcare clinics remain open with limited capacity.
Water supply is intermittent.
Waste removal is irregular.
Housing maintenance is deferred.

Access to these services requires extended travel.
It requires prolonged waiting.
It requires physical endurance.

The calculation of the grant's value assumes a functional environment.
It assumes the body retains sufficient reserve to convert money into care.

No priority accommodation is provided for age or mobility.
No emergency status is declared.
No suspension of service is announced.

Income is present.
Systems remain nominally active.

The conversion of income into care is functionally constrained.

The grant continues.
The exhaustion is not recorded.

Part II – The Wound

He wakes later than he used to.
Not because he sleeps longer.
Because getting up takes more steps.

He lies still and waits for the stiffness to decide where it will settle today.
Knees first.
Then hands.
Then the lower back, like a message that arrives late.

He breathes until it loosens enough to move.

The room is quiet.
The clock ticks louder than it should.

He sits on the edge of the bed.
He does not stand immediately.
Standing costs more than it used to.

His shoes are near the bed now.
Not because of urgency.
Because bending down is an extra movement.

He puts them on slowly.
One foot.
Pause.
Then the other.

The grant came yesterday.
He knows this without checking.
It always comes.

Reliability is not the problem.

He washes his face at the basin.
The water is cold.
It takes a moment to start.

Then it runs thin.
Then it stops.

He waits.
It returns briefly.

He finishes quickly.

He does not dry the floor.
Drying is optional now.

He makes tea.
The kettle takes longer to boil than it used to.
Sometimes it switches off before it finishes.

He leaves it plugged in.
He watches the light.

He drinks standing at the counter.
Sitting means standing again later.

He counts tasks in his head.
Not by importance.
By cost.

Clinic.
Shop.
ATM.

He chooses two.
Three is too much.

He locks the door when he leaves.
The lock works.

That still matters.

The walk to the bus stop is not far.
It has become longer.

He pauses once on the way.
Then again.

No one notices.

The bus arrives late.
He does not check the time.
Checking time does not change arrival.

He stands inside.
Seats are taken quickly now.

Holding the rail tightens his shoulder.
He switches hands.

The bus stops short of the clinic today.
Roadwork.
Always roadwork.

He gets off and walks the rest.
The pavement is uneven.
He watches his feet.

At the clinic, the line is already there.
It bends around the wall.

He joins it.

Standing burns faster than walking.
He leans slightly against the wall.
Not enough to draw attention.

A nurse steps out and says they will only see a limited number today.
She does not say how many.

He stays.

Leaving would waste the walk.

The line moves.
Then stops.

He shifts his weight.

Someone ahead sits down.
He does not.

Sitting makes standing harder later.

His chest tightens.
Not pain.
Effort.

After a long time, a guard says they are full.
Those at the back should come tomorrow.

He looks at his position.
Near the middle.

He stays.

The guard shrugs.

Eventually, he is seen.

The consultation is short.
Efficient.

He receives a slip for medication.
The pharmacy window is closed.

It will open later.

He waits.

When it opens, they are out of one item.
He is told to return next week.

He nods.

Next week is far enough to recover before trying again.

He leaves the clinic slowly.
The sun is higher now.
Heat presses down.

He buys bread on the way home.
He skips fruit.

Fruit spoils quickly.

At the ATM, the machine is offline.
He waits.

It comes back.

He withdraws cash.
Counts it once.
Puts it away.

Money exists.
He does not feel richer.

At home, he sits longer than planned.
Standing again takes time.

He eats the bread.
Dry.

He drinks water.
The tap works for now.

He rests.

Resting is not recovery anymore.
It is preparation.

Later, he considers going out again.
He does not.

The door stays closed.

He listens to the radio.
The volume is low.

High volume costs energy.

In the afternoon, the power goes off.
He waits.

It returns briefly.

He charges his phone.
Stops when the light flickers.

Overcharging risks nothing.
Standing does.

As evening comes, he heats food if he can.
If not, he eats cold.

He does not complain.
Complaining requires breath.

He washes dishes immediately.
Water disappears without warning.

He dries them and puts them away.
Leaving them out creates work later.

At night, he prepares for sleep earlier than before.
The body decides these things now.

He lies down carefully.

He listens to the sounds outside.
Traffic.
Voices.
Then less.

He thinks briefly about tomorrow.
Then stops.

Thinking ahead requires confidence in access.

He closes his eyes.

The grant will come again next month.
He knows that.

What he does not know is what he will be able to turn it into.

The body is still present.
The money is still present.

The space between them has grown too wide.

He sleeps.

In the morning, he will decide again which two things he can afford to attempt.

Part III – The Autopsy

Bob and Gman arrive in the late morning.

The pay point is open.
The door is unlocked.
A line has formed without noise.

People stand with envelopes folded in pockets.
Some sit on low walls.
No one leans for long.

From the outside, the system is operating.

Bob watches the queue advance in small increments.
Stop.
Start.
Stop again.

Gman watches what happens after the window.

Money is handed over.
Receipts are issued.
Hands close around paper.

No one leaves quickly.

They stand at a distance.
They do not join the line.

A bench sits nearby.
Two people share it.
A third waits for one to stand.

There is no shade.

“Support is still here,” Bob says.

“Yes,” Gman replies.
“That’s the residue.”

They watch an older man count the notes twice.
Fold them carefully.
Place them inside a jacket.

He pauses before turning away.
The pause lasts longer than necessary.

“The system still pays,” Gman says.
“It just doesn’t exchange anymore.”

Bob looks past the pay point toward the street.

Buses pass irregularly.
Some stop.
Some do not.

A clinic sign is visible two blocks away.
The door is open.
The waiting area is full.

No one enters.
No one leaves.

“This isn’t exclusion,” Gman says.
“It’s exhaustion.”

He says it once.

The grant assumes conversion.
Money to transport.
Transport to care.
Care to recovery.

Bob follows the chain.
Stops halfway.

“The conversion requires reserve,” he says.

“Yes,” Gman replies.
“And the reserve is gone.”

They watch a woman turn back from the clinic.
Not upset.
Finished.

She sits on the bench.
Waits.

The bench fills.
Empties.
Fills again.

No announcement is made.

Bob notes the absence of escalation.
No argument.
No appeal.

“This passes inspection,” he says.

“Because nothing is denied,” Gman replies.
“Nothing is removed.”

They watch the line thin.
Not because everyone has been served.
Because standing has ended.

“Capacity is the invisible variable,” Gman says.
“It isn’t logged.”

Bob nods.

“Money is logged,” he says.
“Attendance is logged.”

“Yes,” Gman replies.
“But effort isn’t.”

A bus arrives.
Too full to stop.

Another passes empty.
Does not stop either.

“The system still recognizes the body,” Gman says.
“It just doesn’t respond to it.”

Bob looks at the pay window again.
Open.
Active.

“So this isn’t neglect,” he says.

“No,” Gman answers.
“It’s completion.”

They step back from the curb.

Behind them, the line has shortened.
Not finished.
Reduced.

People disperse slowly.
Each choosing one direction.

No one chooses two.

“That’s the mechanism,” Gman says.
“Capacity exhaustion.”

He does not repeat it.

The system did not withdraw the grant.
It withdrew the conditions required to use it.

Bob watches a man count coins for a taxi fare.
Put them back.
Start walking.

“The body becomes the ledger,” Bob says.

“Yes,” Gman replies.
“And the balance is negative.”

They stand a while longer.

The sun climbs.
The shade does not move.

No emergency is declared.
No service is suspended.

Everything remains available.
Nothing is reachable.

They turn away from the pay point.

Behind them, the window stays open.
Money continues to be issued.
Bodies continue to calculate.

The exchange no longer closes.

The autopsy stops here.

They leave before the afternoon heat arrives.

Part IV – The Record

The South African Social Security Agency reported over 18 million social grant recipients in 2023. The system processes payments worth over R200 billion annually. Audits have identified payment irregularities, ghost beneficiaries, and administrative delays affecting the elderly and disabled. The Minister of Social Development stated that “the social grants system remains the cornerstone of the government’s poverty alleviation strategy.” The pension arrived on the specific day. The other days remained empty.

Chapter 8

Saturation

Part 0 – The Ordinary

There is weight.
Not in one place.
Everywhere.

The chest holds it first.
Then the head.
Then the limbs.

Breathing continues.
It no longer clears anything.

Air goes in.
Air goes out.

Nothing changes.

Sound overlaps.
Footsteps.
Voices.
A vehicle somewhere.

The sounds do not separate.
They arrive together.
They remain together.

Words lose edges.

Familiar phrases pass through without landing.
They do not connect.
They do not orient.

Pressure increases.

Standing costs more.
Sitting does not reduce it.
Lying down only spreads it.

The body adjusts.
Then adjusts again.

Adjustment does not create space.

Part I – The Event

The input continues.
Not as events.
As presence.

Heat.
Noise.
Movement.

Information without signal.

The eyes stay open longer than necessary.
Closing them does not help.

The head feels full.
Not with thoughts.
With accumulation.

There is no single image.
Only overlap.

The nervous system searches for sequence.
There is none.

Before.
After.

The words no longer attach.

Everything is now.
Everything is still.

Muscles tighten.
Then stop responding.

Not paralysis.
Completion.

Language shortens.

Sentences end early.

Words repeat.

Still.

Already.

Enough.

Another input arrives.

It does not register.

Reception has ended.

Part II – The Wound

The sensation is not pain.
It is fullness without release.

Breath shortens.
Not from panic.
From crowding.

The chest cannot expand further.
It expands anyway.

No benefit.

The head presses back against something unseen.
A pressure like weather.
Storm without rain.

Scale disappears.

Near and far collapse into the same distance.

Movement slows.
Then pauses.

Not as decision.
As limit.

The body does not ask for relief.
Asking requires margin.

Margin is gone.

The mind attempts to name what is happening.
The words dissolve before forming.

No memory arrives.
No meaning assembles.

Only state.

The state is full.

Noise continues.

A door opens somewhere.
Closes.

It does not matter.

The body remains upright.
Barely.

Gravity feels heavier than before.

Limbs are present.
They feel denser.

Time does not advance.
It does not stop.

It spreads.

There is no urge to continue.
No urge to stop.

Urge requires gradient.

The gradient is flat.

The body absorbs one more input.

Nothing happens.

The system tries again.

Nothing happens.

Acceptance has no space.
Refusal has no energy.

Only limit.

The body has taken everything it can take.

Not as a choice.

As a fact.

The state remains.

Full.

Part III – The Autopsy

Bob and Gman are on the side of a road.

There is nothing to inspect.

No building.
No crowd.
No tape.

Traffic passes without pattern.
Wind moves grass.
A bird lifts, settles again.

They stand for a moment longer than required.

Bob opens a notebook.
Stops.
Closes it.

Gman watches him do this.

Nothing is said.

They listen.

Engines.
Footsteps somewhere behind them.
A voice carried, then lost.

The sounds do not arrange themselves.

Bob looks down the road.
Then back.

He waits for something to present itself.

Nothing does.

Gman shifts his weight.
Not impatient.
Adjusting.

Bob gestures once, as if to ask a question.
The gesture falls short of language.

Gman does not answer.

The space holds.

They have already traced the chains.
They have already named the failures.
They have already followed the routes until they stopped returning meaning.

There is nothing upstream left to point to.

They stand without orientation.

No map fits this place.

Bob reaches into his pocket.
Takes out a pen.
Turns it between his fingers.

He does not write.

Writing would add weight.

The ground underfoot is solid.
That does not help.

Gman looks toward the horizon.
Then away.

The posture has changed.
Not defeat.
Limit.

Bob understands.

Continuing would not add clarity.
It would add load.

The work has reached its boundary.

Gman takes a step back.
Then another.

Bob follows.

They move away from the road.
Not toward anything.

Behind them, the world continues.
Cars pass.
People move.
Systems operate.

Nothing announces an end.

Bob stops once more.
As if checking for permission.

There is none.

Gman does not look back.

They leave the notebook closed.

Refusal is enacted, not labelled.

The volume ends because it must.

Part IV – The Record

No synthesis follows.

The failures mapped in this volume do not resolve into a lesson.
They do not accumulate toward hope or despair.
They simply ***exceed capacity***.

If the reader feels unfinished, that response is correct.
The systems described here do not end cleanly.
They persist beyond recognition.

This book does not close an argument.
It closes ***a channel***.

There is nothing further to add.

The system continues.
The body remains.

No more input can be absorbed.

Part II – Gaza / Israel

The Future Cannot Absorb This

Chapter 1

Witness

Part I – The Event

In June 1982, Israel invaded Lebanon.
The objective was the destruction of the Palestine Liberation Organisation.

By September, the PLO had withdrawn under international guarantee.
A multinational force supervised the departure.
The multinational force then left.

On September 14, the Lebanese president-elect was assassinated.
The following day, Israeli forces occupied West Beirut.
The Palestinian refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila were surrounded.

On September 16, Israeli Defence Minister Ariel Sharon authorised the entry of Lebanese Christian Phalangist militia into both camps.
The mandate was to remove remaining fighters.
There were no remaining fighters.

Between 300 and 400 Phalangist militiamen entered the camps at approximately 6:00 PM.

The killing began immediately.

For forty-three hours, militiamen went house to house.
Men were dragged from rooms and executed in the streets with hatchets, knives, and rifles.
Women were raped before being killed.
Children were not distinguished from adults.
Infants were not distinguished from children.

Bodies were stacked in alleys.
Bulldozers were brought in while the killing continued.
Hundreds of corpses were pushed into mass graves before they could be counted.

Throughout the massacre, Israeli forces maintained a perimeter around the camps.
Exits were sealed.
Residents attempting to flee were turned back.

At night, the Israeli military launched illumination flares so the killing could continue in the dark.

Israeli commanders received reports of the atrocities in progress.
They did not intervene.

Between 1,300 and 3,500 civilians were killed.
The majority were Palestinians.
Some were Lebanese Shia.
Many were elderly, women, and children.

The massacre was condemned internationally as an act of genocide.
The Israeli Kahan Commission found Israel bore indirect responsibility.
Sharon bore personal responsibility.
He was removed as Defence Minister.
He was elected Prime Minister nineteen years later.

A woman’s arm was found severed at the wrist so her bracelet could be taken.

Part II – The Wound

She is in the room when the boots arrive.

Not outside.
Not approaching.
Already on the steps.

The door is thin.
She has always known this.
It has never mattered before.

Her husband is standing.
He was sitting a moment ago.
Now he is standing and his hands are at his sides and his breathing has changed.

The children are behind her.
Three.
The youngest does not walk yet.

The door does not break.
It opens.
This is worse.

Three men enter.
They carry rifles and blades.
The blades are not sheathed.

No one speaks.

The first man looks at her husband.
The second man takes his arm.
The third waits in the doorway.

Her husband does not resist.
Resistance requires a frame.
There is no frame here.
There is only speed.

They pull him through the doorway.
His feet drag across the threshold.
His sandals come off.
One stays inside.
One goes with him.

She hears the sound from the street.

It is short.
It is wet.
It is not a gunshot.

She does not move.

The youngest begins to cry.
Not loud.
A thin sound.
The sound of air being pushed from small lungs.

She presses the child into her chest.
The child's face is warm.
Her chest is cold.

The men return.

They do not close the door.

She looks at the floor.
At the sandal.
At the space where her husband stood three seconds ago.

The man in the doorway steps inside.
He does not hurry.
There is no urgency because there is no resistance.
The camp is sealed.
No one is coming.

Outside, the sky turns white.

Not dawn.
Not searchlights.
Flares.

The light descends slowly.
It illuminates the street.
In the street there are bodies.
Some are in nightclothes.
Some are children.
One is her husband.
She can see him from the doorway.
He is face down.
The ground beneath him is dark.

The light is steady and white and makes everything visible.

The flares are not falling from inside the camp.
They are falling from outside.
From the army that is outside.
The army that sealed the exits.
The army that is not entering.

The army is providing the light.

She understands this without language.

The middle child pulls at her dress.
The oldest is behind the curtain.
Hiding is a child's reflex.
A curtain is not a wall.

She counts.
Three children.
Herself.
The room.

She moves to the back wall.
There is a window.

It faces the alley.
The alley is not clear.

She does not open the window.

She sits on the floor with the children.
The youngest in her arms.
The middle child against her side.
The oldest behind the curtain still.

She says nothing.
There is nothing to say that the room does not already contain.

The flares continue.
One falls close enough that the light enters through the window.
The room is bright as midday.
The children's faces are lit.

She closes their eyes with her hands.
She cannot close her own.

The sounds continue through the night.
Some are voices.
Some are not.

By morning, the bulldozers come.
Not ambulances.
Bulldozers.

She hears the engines.
She hears the scraping of concrete and earth.
She hears the sound of weight being moved.

She does not go to the window.

She stays on the floor.
The children sleep against her.
The youngest has soiled himself.

She does not change him.

Movement is risk.

Two days pass.

When the UN observers arrive, they find clusters of ten and twenty bodies.

All in civilian clothes.

All executed together.

She is still in the room.

The sandal is still by the door.

Part III – The Autopsy

Bob and Gman arrive after the bulldozers have gone.
The camp is quiet.
Quiet is not the same as empty.

They stand at the entrance.
The barricade is still in place.
Israeli position markers are visible on the ridge.

Gman looks up.
Not at the camp.
At the sky.

“Illumination,” he says.

Bob waits.

“The flares were not incidental,” Gman continues.
“They were infrastructure.”

Bob looks at the ridge.
The firing positions.
The sightlines.

“Three components,” Gman says.
“Perimeter.
Permission.
Light.”

He pauses.

“The perimeter sealed the exits.
The permission sent the militia in.
The light extended the operating window.”

Bob looks at the alley.
The ground is disturbed.
Bulldozer tracks.

“The killing was outsourced,” Gman says.
“The conditions were not.”

Bob does not speak.

“This is the oldest architecture of mass killing,” Gman continues.
“Separation of hand from command.
The hand holds the knife.
The command provides the light.”

The Code does not distinguish between direct and indirect force.
It measures the system.

“Forty-three hours,” Bob says.

“Forty-three hours of illuminated access to an enclosed civilian population,” Gman replies.

Bob looks at the doorway of the nearest house.
A sandal on the step.

“The commission called it indirect responsibility,” Gman says.

He pauses.

“The dead do not distinguish between direct and indirect.”

They stand quietly.

The camp does not respond.

The flares have fallen.
The light is gone.
The bodies are under the earth.

“The man who authorised this,” Bob says.

Gman nods.

“He became Prime Minister.”

They do not stay.

The failure has already been buried.

Part IV – The Record

The Israeli Commission of Inquiry, chaired by Justice Yitzhak Kahan, published its findings on February 8, 1983. The Commission determined that the Lebanese Forces bore direct responsibility for the events in the Sabra and Shatila camps. The Commission further determined that the State of Israel bore indirect responsibility, and that the Minister of Defence bore personal responsibility for failing to exercise appropriate foresight. The Commission recommended that the Minister of Defence draw personal conclusions from its findings. No criminal charges were filed. The Minister of Defence resigned his post. He was elected Prime Minister of the State of Israel in 2001. The Commission's report did not include a count of the dead. It noted that estimates ranged from 700 to 800. Independent investigations placed the number between 1,300 and 3,500. The discrepancy was not resolved. The Commission concluded its work.

Chapter 2

Youth

Part I – The Event

On the evening of June 1, 2001, a queue formed outside the Dolphinarium discotheque on the Tel Aviv beachfront.

The venue hosted a weekly Friday night event popular with teenagers.
Most in the queue were between fifteen and twenty years old.
Many were recent immigrants from the former Soviet Union.
They had arrived in Israel within the previous decade.
They had learned Hebrew.
They had enrolled in schools.
They were dressed for dancing.

At approximately 11:30 PM, a suicide bomber stood in the queue.
He wore an explosive vest packed with metal screws and nails.
The nails were added to maximise soft tissue damage at close range.

He detonated the device among the waiting teenagers.

Twenty-one people were killed.
One hundred and twenty were wounded.

The victims bled out on the pavement under the entrance lights.
Some died holding entry tickets.

Hamas claimed responsibility.
The attack was described as retaliation.

The dead had not participated in an occupation.
They had participated in a Friday night.

Part II – The Wound

He is seventeen.
He has been in the country for three years.

His mother irons his shirt while he showers.
She does this without asking.
She places it on the bed.
The collar is flat.
The sleeves are folded once.

He bought the shirt on Thursday.
The tag is still inside.
He kept the receipt in case.
But the shirt fits.
The colour is right.
He will not return it.

He dresses with the door closed.
He checks himself in the mirror that leans against the wall because they have not mounted it yet.
Three years and the mirror is still not mounted.
His mother says she will ask the landlord.
The landlord does not come.

His shoes are clean.
He cleaned them this morning with a cloth and water.
They are not new.
They are the best he has.

His wallet holds forty shekels.
Enough for the bus.
Entry.
One drink.
He has counted this three times.

His ID is in his front pocket.
The ID has his photograph from when he arrived.

He was fourteen in the photograph.
He does not look like the photograph.
He looks like someone the photograph is trying to become.

His mother is in the kitchen.
She is watching television in Russian.
The volume is low.
She turns when he enters.

She adjusts his collar.
It does not need adjusting.
She adjusts it anyway.

She tells him to be careful.
She tells him this every time.
He says yes.
He always says yes.

The bus takes forty minutes.
He stands because the seats are taken.
He does not mind.
The bus is full of Friday.
Perfume.
Cologne.
The particular restlessness of people in transit toward the version of themselves that only exists after dark.

The beachfront is warm.
Salt air.
Traffic noise.
The Dolphinarium is lit from outside.
The light makes the building look larger than it is.

The queue is long.
This is good.
Length means the night is working.

He stands behind a group of girls.
They are speaking Russian.
This happens less now.
Hebrew has replaced most of it.
But at night, in queues, the first language surfaces.

The girl directly in front of him wears silver earrings.
He notices because the light catches them each time she turns her head.
She is talking to her friend.
She laughs.
The laugh is short and sharp and open.

He does not speak to her.
He does not need to.
Proximity is enough.
The queue presses them close.
He can smell her shampoo.

The bass from inside the club pushes through the walls.
The door opens and closes and each time the sound escapes and retracts.
The rhythm is felt in the pavement.
Through his shoes.
Through his cleaned shoes that are the best he has.

He shifts his weight from foot to foot.
Not impatience.
Rhythm.

His phone is in his back pocket.
He checks it.
No messages.
He puts it back.

He is thinking about the drink.
Whether to get the same one as last time.
Whether to try something different.
This is the scale of the decision in his life at this moment.

The pressure changes.

It is not sound first.
It is displacement.
The air moves before the noise arrives.

The screws enter his left side before his brain registers the flash.
The nails pass through the girl with the earrings.
Her body receives the metal at the same moment his does.
They are standing close enough for the same shrapnel to enter both.

The pavement is wet.
He is on it.
He does not remember falling.

His shirt is open.
The collar his mother adjusted is folded back.
The receipt is still in the tag.
The tag is wet.

Someone beside him is screaming.
Someone further away is not.

The music from inside the club continues.
For a few seconds after everything else has stopped, the bass pushes through the wall and the door opens because someone inside does not yet know.

The light above the entrance still works.
It illuminates the queue that is no longer a queue.

He cannot move his left arm.
He can move his right.
He uses it to touch his side.
His hand comes back wrong.

The earrings are on the ground.
He can see them from where he lies.
They are not attached to anything.

They catch the light from the entrance.
They are still silver.

He does not close his eyes.
He does not choose to keep them open.
The choice has been removed.

He is seventeen.
Three years in a new country.
A shirt bought on Thursday.
A receipt kept just in case.
A collar adjusted by his mother.
A Friday night.
A queue.

The nails are still inside him when the ambulance arrives.
Some will remain for life.
The metal will move through his body slowly over years.
It will surface in places the doctors do not expect.
He will set off detectors at airports.
He will carry Friday night in his abdomen for the rest of his life.

Part III – The Autopsy

Bob and Gman arrive after the bodies have been removed.
The pavement is still wet.
Entry tickets are scattered near the door.

They do not approach the entrance.
They stand across the street.

Gman looks at the queue barriers.
Metal posts.
Rope between them.
The arrangement that channels people into sequence.

“A queue is a contract,” he says.
“Bodies arranged in order.
Patience as structure.”

Bob looks at the pavement.
A shoe.
A phone with a cracked screen.

“The bomber entered the contract,” Gman says.
“He stood in line.
He obeyed the form.
Then he detonated inside it.”

Bob does not speak.

“The nails are not incidental,” Gman continues.
“They are specification.
Maximum laceration at minimum radius.”

The Code does not measure intent.
It measures the physics of the instrument.

“A vest packed with screws detonated inside a group of stationary teenagers,” Gman says.
“Every variable was selected.

Time.
Density.
Composition.”

Bob looks at the beachfront.
The sea is still there.
The waves do not adjust.

“The target was not military,” Bob says.

“The target was stillness,” Gman replies.
“A body at rest in a queue is a body at maximum vulnerability.
No cover.
No motion.
No warning interval.”

He pauses.

“The weapon was designed for standing still.”

They do not name the dead.
The names are elsewhere.

“Seventeen,” Bob says.

“Most of them,” Gman confirms.

They turn away.

Behind them, the barriers remain upright.
The rope sways slightly.

The entrance is closed.

The queue will not reform.

Part IV – The Record

The Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) issued a statement claiming responsibility for the operation at the Dolphinarium discotheque on June 1, 2001. The statement described the attack as “a heroic act of retaliation against the Zionist occupation.” The Palestinian Authority issued a statement condemning the attack. The Israeli government issued a statement declaring that “the Palestinian Authority must act immediately to prevent further acts of terrorism.” The United States issued a statement expressing condolences and calling on all parties to exercise restraint. The United Nations issued a statement expressing concern. The European Union issued a statement expressing deep concern. Twenty-one teenagers remained dead. The statements were archived.

Chapter 3

Music

Part I – The Event

On the morning of October 7, 2023, the Jewish holiday of Simchat Torah, approximately 3,800 Hamas militants breached the barrier between Gaza and southern Israel at 119 points.

Among their targets was the Supernova Sukkot Gathering, an outdoor trance music festival held near Kibbutz Re'im.
Several thousand young people had been dancing through the night in open desert.

At approximately 6:30 AM, rockets appeared in the sky.
The crowd began to disperse.
Some headed for their vehicles.
Some ran on foot.

Within minutes, armed militants on motorcycles, in pickup trucks, and on powered paragliders surrounded the festival grounds.
They opened fire on civilians attempting to flee.

The terrain was flat.
The desert was open.
There was no cover.

Three hundred and sixty-four civilians were killed at the festival.
At least forty were taken hostage.
Militants fired on people hiding in portable toilets, in bushes, under vehicles, and in roadside shelters.
The killing continued for hours.

Evidence was documented of sexual violence at the site.
Bodies showed signs of torture and mutilation.

The dead were aged between eighteen and forty.

They were wearing festival clothing.

Many were barefoot.

Part II – The Wound

She has been dancing for six hours.

Her shoes are in the car.
She took them off at midnight.
The sand was cool and the bass was in her feet and the shoes were a barrier to both.

The car is parked at the edge of the field.
Her keys are in the glove box.
Her phone is in a pouch around her waist.
Her ID is in the pouch.
These are the items.
Keys.
Phone.
ID.
The full inventory of a Friday night in the desert.

She came with three friends.
They drove from Tel Aviv.
The drive took an hour.
They played music in the car.
They talked about someone one of them was seeing.
They stopped for petrol.
She bought water and a chocolate bar.
She ate the chocolate bar before they arrived.

The festival is in open desert.
Flat ground.
A stage.
Speakers stacked high.
Lights that make patterns in the dust.
The DJ is from Berlin.
She does not know this.
She does not need to.

The music is trance.
The rhythm is continuous.
The body locks to it.
After an hour the rhythm is not external.
It is internal.
The heartbeat adjusts.
The breathing adjusts.
The spine moves before the mind instructs it.

She dances with her arms above her head.
She dances with her eyes closed.
She dances in the way that people dance when no one is watching and everyone is.
The contradiction is the point.

Around her: hundreds of bodies.
All moving.
All young.
The smell of sweat and perfume and dust and the particular electricity of a crowd that has agreed to abandon the ordinary for a night.

At 3:00 AM she sits.
She drinks water.
Her friend lies in the sand and looks at the stars.
The stars in the Negev are different from the stars in Tel Aviv.
There are more of them.
The sky is not competing with streetlights.

She lies down beside her friend.
The sand is warm from the day.
The music continues.
They do not speak.
They do not need to.

At 5:00 AM she stands again.
She dances.
The crowd has thinned.
The remaining people are the ones who stay.

The ones for whom the night is not a thing that ends but a thing that becomes morning.

Dawn is arriving.
The light changes the way desert light changes – not gradually but as a shift in pressure.
The air thins.
The colours separate.

She is standing with friends.
They are talking about breakfast.
Someone has a cooler.
Someone has fruit.

The first rockets are visible before they are audible.
Lines of light in the sky.
They look wrong.
They look like part of the show but in the wrong direction and at the wrong time.

The siren cuts through the bass.
The music stops.
The silence that follows is not silence.
It is the space where the music was.
The body still hears it.
The body is still dancing.
The body has not received the information yet.

She runs.

She does not go to the car.
The car is in the wrong direction.
She runs across the desert.
The ground is flat and dry and her feet are bare and the sand cuts into her soles but the cutting is not information her body is processing.
Her body is processing direction and speed.

Behind her, the sound of motorcycles.

She does not look.
Looking costs speed.
Looking costs time.
Time is the only currency.

The crack of a rifle.
Close.
Not aimed at her.
Aimed at the space she is in.
Another.
A scream to her left that begins and does not finish.

She falls.
Not from a bullet.
From a root.
She hits the ground and the air leaves her body and she lies in the dirt in a dress she chose six hours ago in her apartment in Tel Aviv while her flatmate was making coffee.

She crawls under a car.
A car that is parked at the edge of the field.
Not her car.
Someone else’s car.
The underside is warm.
Oil and metal and sand.

She presses her face into the ground.
She stops breathing.
Breathing makes sound.
Sound is detection.

She hears footsteps.
Boots.
Multiple.
They pass the car.
They do not stop.

She hears a door being opened somewhere nearby.
A shelter.
The shelter was for rockets.
It has a heavy door.
It was built to protect.

She hears voices inside the shelter.
Then she hears a different sound.
Then she hears nothing from inside the shelter.

The sun rises.
The heat builds.
The sand warms.
The car's shadow shortens.

She lies under the car for four hours.

She does not move.
She does not cry.
She breathes into the ground so the sound travels downward.

Around her, the sounds change.
Motors.
Shouting in a language she does not speak.
The crack of weapons at intervals that are not combat.
They are execution.
Single shots.
Spaced.
Methodical.

The body lies in the dirt.
The body is wearing a dress chosen for music.
The body is twenty-three.
The body is alive because it pressed its face into sand and stopped breathing and stayed under a car while the world changed above it.

When the army arrives, she does not come out immediately.
She does not trust the uniforms.
She does not trust the language.

She comes out when she hears Hebrew.
She stands.
Her feet are cut.
Her dress is torn.
She cannot feel her legs below the knee.

The field around her is not the field she danced in.
The field is scattered with bodies and belongings and overturned chairs and a stage that is still standing and speakers that are still connected to nothing.

Her three friends.
One is beside a car.
One is at the shelter.
One she will not find for three days.

She walks to the road.
Someone gives her water.
She drinks.
The water enters her mouth.
It does not reach whatever has dried.

Part III – The Autopsy

Bob and Gman arrive when the site has been cleared.
The stage is still standing.
Speakers mounted.
Cables trailing.

The desert is flat.
Gman stands at the centre and turns slowly.
Three hundred and sixty degrees.
Open in every direction.

“An amphitheatre of exposure,” he says.

Bob looks at the tire tracks.
The motorcycle tracks.
The bootprints in the sand.

“Open terrain,” Gman says.
“Freedom of movement.
Visibility.
No walls.”

He pauses.

“Until it is encircled.
Then it is the opposite of all three.”

Bob sees a pair of shoes near the perimeter.
Left together.
As if placed there for return.

“The militants did not merely attack,” Gman says.
“They surrounded.
They sealed.
They converted maximal openness into maximal entrapment.”

The Code records the geometry.

“The killing lasted hours,” Bob says.

“Hours indicate thoroughness,” Gman replies.
“Not efficiency.”

Bob looks at the shelter.
A concrete box.
Heavy door.

“Designed for rockets,” Gman says.
“Not for men with rifles.
The shelter became a box.
The door that protected against blast admitted the weapon that operates the door.”

They stand in the open.
The sun is high.
There is no shade.

“She hid under a car,” Bob says.

“The car was the only architecture available,” Gman replies.
“When the building fails, the body finds the nearest horizontal surface and hides beneath it.”

He does not say more.

The wind moves across the desert.
It adjusts nothing.

“Three hundred and sixty-four,” Bob says.

“In a field,” Gman confirms.
“In festival clothes.”

They leave.

The stage remains standing.
The speakers remain mounted.
The cables remain connected to nothing.

The same morning. The same breach. A different address.

Part IV – The Record

The Al-Qassam Brigades released a communiqué on October 7, 2023, declaring “Operation Al-Aqsa Flood” a success. The communiqué stated that the operation was a response to ongoing violations of the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the continued siege of Gaza. The communiqué did not mention the festival. In a subsequent statement, Hamas officials said the operation had targeted military sites and that harm to civilians was unintended and resulted from the rapid collapse of the Israeli security system. A Hamas report issued in January 2024 acknowledged that “some faults happened.” The report did not name the festival. The report did not count the 364 dead. The report described the outcome as a “necessary step.”

Chapter 4

Home

Part I – The Event

On the morning of October 7, 2023, approximately seventy Hamas militants entered Kibbutz Be'eri, a farming community of around one thousand residents near the Gaza border.

The attack began at approximately 6:30 AM and lasted more than twenty-four hours.

One hundred and one civilians were killed.
Thirty-one security personnel died.
Thirty-two residents were taken hostage.

The dead included women, children, and one infant.
They included twelve-year-old fraternal twins.
They included peace activists who had driven Gazan patients to Israeli hospitals.

Militants went house to house.
They burned homes with residents inside.
They shot people through safe room doors.
They killed family members in front of each other.
Bodies were found with hands tied.

One hundred and twenty-five homes were damaged or destroyed.

Ten percent of the community was wiped out in a single day.

One family of five was found standing in a circle, arms interlocked.
Dead.
Volunteers had to physically separate them – arm from arm, parent from child – to place them in body bags.

Part II – The Wound

The house is quiet.

It is Saturday.

The light through the curtain is early and thin.

The coffee machine is set to timer.

It will start at seven.

The sound of it starting is the sound of Saturday.

The click.

The hiss.

The smell that enters the bedroom before the cup is poured.

His wife planted basil on the windowsill.

It has grown past the pot.

She has been meaning to repot it.

She has been meaning to do this for three weeks.

The three weeks are ordinary.

The three weeks are full of things that almost got done.

The boy's school bag is by the door.

It will not be needed today.

Saturday.

The bag is open.

A textbook is visible.

Mathematics.

The boy is eleven.

He hates mathematics.

He told his father this on Thursday.

His father said he would hate it less later.

The father does not know if this is true.

He said it because fathers say things like this.

The girl's drawings are on the fridge.

Four of them.

Held by magnets.

One is a house.

The house in the drawing has a red roof and a yellow sun and a tree that is taller than the house.
The tree is green.
The crayon is worn to a stub.

He is awake before the siren.
Not because of sound.
Because of something else.
A change in the air.
A wrongness that the body registers before the mind.

The siren begins.

He is on his feet before it finishes the first cycle.
His wife is already moving.
She moves faster than he does in emergencies.
She has always been faster.
He does not know why.
She does not think about it.
The body moves.

The children are in the hallway.
The boy in shorts and a T-shirt.
The girl in pyjamas with stars on them.
They are half asleep.
Still warm from bed.
The girl is holding a stuffed rabbit.
She has held this rabbit every night since she was three.
One ear is torn.
The stitching has been repaired twice.

The safe room is at the end of the hallway.
Concrete walls.
Steel door.
Designed for rockets.

He closes the door.

It locks from inside.

The lock is heavy.

The sound of it closing has always meant relief.

Rockets pass.

The siren stops.

The bolt slides back.

The coffee machine finishes.

Normal resumes.

The bolt slides shut.

Today the sound means nothing.

The gunfire begins.

Not distant.

In the yard.

In the garden his wife planted last spring.

The basil.

The tomatoes that did not take.

The hose still coiled by the tap.

The children look at him.

The boy is eleven.

The girl is nine.

Their eyes ask what their mouths do not.

He puts his finger to his lips.

They sit.

On the floor.

In the dark.

The girl holds the rabbit.

The boy holds nothing.

The boy’s hands are on his knees.

The boy is trying to be older than eleven.

The sounds outside change.
Breaking glass.
A door kicked in.
Not their door.
Not yet.

His wife is holding both children.
She is holding them the way she held them as infants.
Pulled into her body.
As if she could pull them inside.
As if the body could open and take them back.

The handle on the safe room door moves.

It moves slowly.
Then it moves hard.

Someone is on the other side.

He presses his back against the door.
His weight.
His wife's weight.
The children between them and the wall.

The handle stops moving.

The smell of smoke enters from under the door.
It enters slowly at first.
Then continuously.

The walls are warm.

The house is burning.
His house.
The house with the basil on the windowsill and the drawings on the fridge and the school bag by the door and the coffee machine that is set for seven.
The house is burning.

He cannot open the door because the men are outside it.
He cannot stay inside because the house is burning.

The children are coughing.
His wife is coughing.
He is pressing against the door and the door is warm against his back.

The smoke thickens.

He pulls his shirt over the boy's mouth.
His wife uses the blanket for the girl.
The girl still holds the rabbit.
The rabbit is pressed against her face.
She is breathing through the rabbit.
The rabbit is her filter.

They breathe through fabric.
They breathe through smoke.
They breathe through the mathematics of a locked room filling with combustion products.

The temperature rises.

The coffee machine is on the other side of the door.
The basil is on the other side of the door.
The drawings are on the other side of the door.
Everything that made the house a house is on the other side of the door and it is burning and they are on this side and they are breathing smoke through a stuffed rabbit and a shirt and a blanket.

Down the street, in another house, a family of five stands together.
Parents.
Children.
Grandmother.
They hold each other in a circle.
Arms locked.
Faces inward.

The circle is found two days later.

Intact.

The bodies had to be separated.

The volunteers who do this will carry it.

Not as memory.

As weight.

The weight of untangling the last embrace.

Part III – The Autopsy

Bob and Gman arrive on the second day.
The smoke has settled.
The ash is fine.

They stand on the main path.
The kibbutz is arranged in rows.
Gardens.
Fences.
Letterboxes.
All intact in their shapes.
All wrong in their contents.

Gman looks at the safe room door of the nearest house.
Scorch marks around the frame.
The handle dented.

“A safe room is the final architecture of trust,” he says.
“The last wall.”

Bob waits.

“It says: beyond this door, nothing can reach you.”

He looks at the handle.

“They reached.”

The Code records the breach.

“The house is the basic unit of civilisation,” Gman says.
“One family.
One structure.
One door.”

He pauses.

“When the door fails, there is no fallback.
The body has exhausted its architecture.”

Bob sees a child's drawing on a fridge inside a house with no front wall.
The fridge is undamaged.
The drawing is held by a magnet.

"They went house to house," Gman says.
"Each house was a separate annihilation."

Bob thinks of the circle.

"Five people," he says.
"Standing."

"The last reflex," Gman replies.
"When there is no structure left, the body becomes the structure.
Arms locked.
Facing inward.
The circle is the smallest possible enclosure."

He does not look at Bob.

"It held," he says.
"Until the volunteers separated it."

They stand on the path.

The gardens are still planted.
The fences are still standing.
The letterboxes are still there.

The houses no longer contain what they were built for.

The same morning. Three kilometres south. The children's section.

Part IV – The Record

The IDF confirmed the conclusion of clearing operations at Kibbutz Be’eri on the evening of October 8, 2023. A military spokesperson stated that all hostile elements within the community had been neutralised or captured. The spokesperson confirmed the deaths of 101 civilians and 31 security personnel and the abduction of 32 residents to the Gaza Strip. An operational review was initiated. Separately, an investigation by Haaretz reported that the IDF had applied the Hannibal Directive in certain instances during the October 7 events, resulting in Israeli fire on structures known to contain Israeli hostages. In one documented case, an IDF tank fired on a house in Be’eri where 14 hostages were being held. Thirteen of the hostages were killed. The investigation was published. The operational review continued. The directive was not rescinded.

Chapter 5

Innocence

Part I – The Event

On the morning of October 7, 2023, approximately 250 militants attacked Kibbutz Kfar Aza, a community three kilometres from the Gaza border.

The first six militants entered using paragliders at 6:42 AM.
Pickup trucks and motorcycles followed through breaches in the barrier fence.

The area first targeted was the section housing young families with small children.
This section was closest to Gaza.
The militants captured the entire kibbutz within the first hour.

Sixty-two residents were killed.
Nineteen were taken hostage.
The attack continued for nearly three days before Israeli forces regained full control.

Militants burned houses to force occupants out, then shot them.
Bodies were found with hands bound.
Homes in the children's section were systematically destroyed.

Beside six body bags on a path lay three children's bicycles.
Scattered among the rubble: cards from a board game, a hammock covered in dust, a full mug of coffee on a kitchen table.
A basketball court was converted into a temporary morgue.

The youngest confirmed victim at the kibbutz was fourteen years old.
One infant was killed at Be'eri.
Claims regarding the beheading of babies at Kfar Aza were investigated and found to be unsubstantiated.
The actual documented atrocities did not require fabrication.

Part II – The Wound

The bicycle is blue.
It has training wheels.
One of the training wheels is slightly loose and makes a ticking sound when it turns.

She knows this because she hears it every afternoon.
Her daughter rides it on the path between the houses.
Around the tree.
Past the garden.
Back to the door.

The door is open.
It is always open on Saturday mornings.
The kibbutz is safe.
The kibbutz has always been safe.

The bicycle is against the fence.
Where it was left yesterday.
The kickstand is broken so it leans.
It has leaned against that fence for months.
She has been meaning to fix it.

Today it will not be ridden.

Her daughter is in the bed.
The blanket is pulled to her chin.
She sleeps with one arm outside the covers.
She has done this since she was a baby.
One arm out.
As if reaching for something that is not there yet.

The siren comes.

She lifts her daughter.
The child does not wake fully.
She is heavy with sleep.
Her hair is warm against her mother’s neck.

She smells of shampoo from last night's bath.
Strawberry.
The one with the pink cap.

The safe room.
The door.
The lock.

The lock is a steel bolt.
It slides into the frame with a sound she has heard a hundred times during rocket alerts.
The sound has always meant: now we wait.
The rockets pass.
The siren stops.
The bolt slides back.
Normal resumes.

The bolt slides shut.

They sit in the dark.
She holds her daughter in her lap.
The child wakes slowly.
Confused.
Then not confused.
Then silent.

The silence of a child who understands more than the child should understand.

Outside, the sounds begin.
Glass breaking.
Doors.
Not the sound of doors opening.
The sound of doors being forced.

The staccato of automatic fire so close it sounds like it is inside the house.
It is not inside the house.
It is in the house next door.
The wall between the houses is concrete.

The sound passes through it.

Concrete transmits sound.

She did not know this.

She knows it now.

Through the wall, a voice.

Not words.

A sound.

Short.

Then nothing.

She covers her daughter's ears.

Her hands are the only soundproofing available.

Her palms press against the child's skull.

She can feel the child's heartbeat through her temples.

It is fast.

Much faster than her own.

A child's heart is faster.

She knew this.

She did not know it would matter.

The child's eyes are open.

Wide and dark and fixed on nothing.

She is five.

Her legs are drawn up.

Her hands are in fists.

Her breathing is shallow and rapid.

Her body is rigid.

Absolute stillness.

Time passes.

She does not know how much.

The safe room has no window.

No clock.

Only the sounds from outside and the darkness and the child in her lap.

The gunfire continues.
House by house.
She can track the progression.
The shooting moves along the row.
Each house has its own duration.
Some are quick.
Some are not.

Her house has not been reached.
Or it has been skipped.
Or they have not noticed the door.
She does not know which.

The child whispers.
“Water.”

There is no water in the safe room.
The safe room was designed for fifteen minutes.
Not for this.

“Soon,” she says.

Soon is a word that means nothing.
She uses it because it is the only bridge between now and something other than now.

The child is quiet.
The child accepts this.
The child has no frame for doubt.
The mother said soon.
Soon is real.

More time.

The smell of smoke enters under the door.
It enters slowly.
Then it does not leave.
The air in the room changes.
Burning is not one smell.

It is layers.
Wood.
Plastic.
Something chemical.
Something she does not want to identify.

The child buries her face.
The mother covers the child’s nose and mouth with the fabric of her shirt.
She pulls the child tighter.
The child is inside her shirt now.
Against her skin.
Breathing her air.
The mother is a filter.

The door handle moves.

She sees it before she hears it.
The handle.
Moving downward.
Slowly.

It is tested.
It holds.

A pause.

A blow against the door.
Not a kick.
Something harder.
The door shakes in the frame.
The bolt holds.

Another blow.
The bolt holds.

Voices outside.
She does not understand the language.
She does not need to.

The tone is operational.
They are deciding whether to continue.

They move on.

She hears them move to the next house.
She hears the next door open.
She hears what happens after the next door opens.

She does not cover the child's ears this time.
Her hands are holding the child's body.
She cannot spare her hands.
She can only spare her voice.

She whispers.
Not words.
Sound.
A low hum.
The sound a body makes when it is trying to replace the world with itself.

Hours pass.

The child sleeps.
Not real sleep.
The unconsciousness of exhaustion.
The body at five has a circuit breaker.
When the input exceeds capacity, the body shuts down.

The mother does not sleep.
The mother's circuit breaker does not engage.
The mother is the perimeter.
The perimeter does not sleep.

She listens.
The shooting has moved to the far end of the kibbutz.
It is further now.
Not gone.
Further.

The child's bladder releases.
Warmth spreads across the mother's lap.
The child does not wake.
The mother does not move.

She sits in the dark.
In the wet.
In the smoke.
Holding.

More hours.

At some point the child wakes and asks: "Is it tomorrow?"

She does not know.
The room has no light.
It could be tomorrow.
It could be the same day.
Time has ceased to operate as a unit.
Time operates as endurance.

"Almost," she says.

The child asks for food.
There is no food.
The child asks for her bicycle.
The bicycle is against the fence.

"When we go out," the mother says.

She does not know when they will go out.
She does not know what is outside.
She does not know if going out is possible.

She holds.

She holds until her arms lose feeling.
She shifts the child.
She holds again.

The muscles have passed through pain into numbness and the numbness is its own kind of holding.

When the army comes, the door is opened from outside.
The bolt is drawn.
Light enters.

The light is an assault.
After twenty hours of darkness, light is violence.

The child does not let go.
The mother stands and the child is attached to her body like a growth.
Arms locked.
Legs wrapped.
Face buried in the neck that smells of smoke and sweat and the strawberry shampoo from a bath that happened in a different world.

They walk out past the hallway.
Past the kitchen.
The kitchen window is broken.
There is a bullet hole in the refrigerator.
A child's drawing is still on the fridge.
The magnet still holds it.

They walk out past the path.
Past the fence.
Past the bicycles.

The bicycles are still there.
Blue.
Pink.
Green.
Leaning where they were left.
The training wheel is still loose.
If you spun it, it would still tick.

On the basketball court, body bags are arranged in rows.
Six bags.

Three bicycles on the path.
The distance between them is three metres.

The child looks.
The mother turns the child’s face into her shoulder.

But the child has already seen.
The child will carry this.
Not as memory.
As weight.
The weight of a five-year-old who saw the body bags beside the bicycles and understood, without language, that riding and death were three metres apart and that the distance was nothing.

Part III – The Autopsy

Bob and Gman arrive when the basketball court has been cleared.
The hoops are still up.
The lines are still painted.

Gman looks at the court.
Then at the path.
Then at the section closest to Gaza.

“They attacked the children’s section first,” he says.

Bob waits.

“Not last.
Not incidentally.
First.”

Bob sees the bicycles.
Still against the fence.

“Proximity,” Gman says.
“The youngest families were housed closest to the border.
They were the nearest targets.
They were also the most vulnerable.”

The Code does not assign motive.
It records sequence.

“The bicycles and the body bags were on the same path,” Gman says.
“The distance was three metres.”

Bob does not speak.

“That is not a metaphor,” Gman continues.
“It is a spatial measurement.
Three metres between riding and death.
In a community designed for both.”

They stand on the path.

The basketball court is empty.
The hoops are still up.

“Was it intentional?” Bob asks.

Gman does not answer immediately.

“The section was targeted first,” he says.
“The sequence is the evidence.”

They leave the path.

The bicycles remain.
Leaning.
Waiting for riders that will not return.

The ticking of the loose training wheel is the only remaining sound.

Part IV – The Record

The Israel Defense Forces concluded primary clearing operations at Kibbutz Kfar Aza on October 10, 2023. Sixty-two residents were confirmed killed and nineteen abducted. An IDF spokesperson described the events as “a massacre of unprecedented scale.” IDF forces reported eliminating approximately 100 hostile operatives within the community. An IDF probe presented in March 2025 documented the operational timeline and confirmed that the community was not fully secured for nearly three days. Claims regarding the beheading of babies, widely reported in the initial days, were investigated and found to be unsubstantiated. The government press office confirmed that the events described did not occur at Kfar Aza. The claims were not formally retracted. The claims continued to circulate. The documented atrocities did not require fabrication. The press release was issued. The bicycles remained against the fence.

Chapter 6

Refuge

Part I – The Event

On October 31, 2023, Israeli fighter jets dropped six bombs on the Jabalia refugee camp in northern Gaza.
Among the munitions were 2,000-pound BLU-109 bunker busters.

The Jabalia refugee camp was the largest in Palestine.
Over 100,000 people were packed into 1.4 square kilometres.
The camp was established in 1948 to house those displaced by the creation of the State of Israel.

Many residents present at the time of the strike had already been displaced from other areas of Gaza by earlier bombardments.
They had been told to move.
They had moved to the camp.

More than 120 people were killed.
At least 68 of the dead were children.
Two hundred and eighty were wounded.
More than twenty residential buildings were levelled.
The craters measured forty feet wide.

An eyewitness described children carrying other injured children through grey dust.
Mothers screaming.
Unidentifiable bodies.
Some bleeding.
Some burned.

Rescue workers used their bare hands.
There were no machines.
Bodies were found stacked upon each other.

The Israeli military confirmed the strike.
It stated it had killed a Hamas commander and destroyed a tunnel complex.
Hamas denied any commander was present.

The next day, the camp was bombed again.
At least eighty more were killed.

By May 2024, seventy percent of the camp lay in ruins.

The Jabalia refugee camp was seventy-five years old.
It had survived every conflict since 1948.
It did not survive this one.

Part II – The Wound

The room holds thirteen people.
None of them are family.

They arrived separately.
Over days.
From different parts of the city.
Each carrying what they could.

A man with a suitcase.
The suitcase is locked.
He has not opened it since he arrived.
Whatever is inside is from before.
He keeps it locked because locking is a form of believing there will be an after.

A woman with two children and a plastic bag.
The bag holds diapers.
She has counted them.
Nine.
She is rationing.
One every six hours instead of three.
The rash on the younger child is spreading.
She cleans it with water from a bottle she refills at the tap downstairs when the tap works.

An old man with nothing.
He arrived with his hands in his pockets.
He sits against the wall.
He does not speak.
He has not spoken since he arrived.
No one asks him questions.
The absence of belongings communicates what questions would.

A young man who was studying engineering.
His textbooks are in a building that no longer exists.
He sits by the window.

He watches the street.
Watching is his only remaining function.

A girl of fourteen.
She sleeps more than the others.
Not because she is tired.
Because sleep is the only room she can enter that is not this one.

A mother with a baby.
The baby is quiet.
Too quiet.
The baby has learned that crying does not produce results.
This learning happened in days.
The body at four months adjusts faster than the body at forty years.

Others.
Seven more.
Each with a name the room does not have space to hold.

The room is on the third floor.
It belongs to someone who is not here.
The owner left a week ago.
The door was open.
Open doors in empty buildings are invitations now.

Thirteen people in a room designed for furniture.
The furniture has been pushed to the walls.
The floor is blankets.
The blankets are not enough.
The floor is cold at night and hot during the day and the blankets do not change this.

The children sleep between the adults.
This is not arrangement.
This is gravity.
Warmth moves inward.
Bodies collect at the centre.

It is evening.

Dinner is bread.

One flatbread.

Torn into thirteen pieces.

The pieces are not equal.

The children receive more.

This is not discussed.

It is structural.

It happens every evening without negotiation.

The old man eats slowly.

He chews each piece until it dissolves.

He has no teeth.

He lost them before the war.

The war did not take his teeth.

Time did.

He takes longer than the others.

No one rushes him.

Rushing an old man eating his only meal is a line no one crosses.

The baby is breastfed.

The mother's body is producing less.

She knows this.

She does not say it.

She drinks as much water as she can.

The engineering student moves from the window.

He sits against the interior wall.

Interior walls are better.

He knows this from what he studied.

The knowledge is useless and it is also the reason he is against the interior wall.

The building shakes once.

Distant.

A familiar vibration.

Everyone looks up.

No one moves.
Vibrations are the weather now.

The second vibration is closer.
A child whimpers.
Her mother pulls her in.
The baby does not react.
The baby has stopped reacting to vibrations.

The girl of fourteen opens her eyes.
She does not sit up.
She has developed a scale.
Far.
Near.
Here.

This one is near.

The third is not a vibration.

It is arrival.

The ceiling becomes the floor.
The floor becomes nothing.
The third floor becomes the second floor becomes the first floor becomes the basement and the basement is rubble and the rubble is everything that was in the room and everyone who was in the room compressed into a space smaller than the room was.

The body is under concrete.
It cannot move its arms.
It cannot move its legs.
Its chest is compressed.
Breathing requires effort that was previously automatic.

The child who was beside it is not making sound.
The child was the younger one.
The one with the rash.

The one whose diapers were rationed.

Nine diapers.

The count does not matter now.

The body breathes dust.

The dust is concrete powder and plaster and calcium.

The dust coats the inside of the throat.

The body coughs.

Coughing uses air.

Air is limited.

It hears digging.

Far away.

Then close.

Then far again.

The digging is hands.

Not machines.

The sound of fingernails on concrete.

The sound of someone pulling rubble piece by piece.

The sound of breath between pulls.

The body cannot call out.

Its mouth is full of dust.

Its lungs are half full of dust.

The digging continues for hours.

Through a gap in the rubble, the body can see sky.

The sky is where the building used to be.

Above the rubble is a crater.

Forty feet wide.

In the crater there is nothing.

The suitcase.

The locked suitcase.

It is somewhere in the rubble.

Still locked.

There will be no after.

The body lies still.

Thirteen people entered this room.

The body does not know how many are still in it.

The child beside it is still not making sound.

Part III – The Autopsy

Bob and Gman arrive when the digging has stopped.
The site is a crater.
Around the crater are partial walls.
Inside the crater is compacted debris.

Gman stands at the edge.
He does not step in.

“This was a refugee camp,” he says.

Bob looks at the debris.
A kitchen tile.
A child’s shoe.
A textbook page.

“Established 1948,” Gman continues.
“Seventy-five years.
One hundred thousand people.
1.4 square kilometres.”

He does the calculation.

“Seventy-one thousand people per square kilometre.
Every bomb is a mass casualty event by geometry alone.”

Bob sees a hand emerging from rubble.
Rescue workers are still present.
They are not digging.
They are standing.

“A 2,000-pound bomb has a crater radius of twenty feet,” Gman says.
“In open ground.
In a camp at this density, the blast wave moves through occupied space.
Every metre contains someone.”

The Code records the physics.

“The residents were already displaced,” Bob says.

“Yes,” Gman replies.
“They were displaced to here.
Here was the place where displaced people go.”

He looks at the crater.

“The bombs fell on the destination.
Not on the route.
On the place where movement was supposed to stop.”

Bob does not speak.

“Where do they go after this?” he asks.

Gman looks at the remains of the camp.
The partial walls.
The exposed rooms.
The hanging fabric.

“There is no after this,” he says.
“This was the after.”

They stand at the edge.

The crater does not fill.
The camp does not rebuild.

It was the oldest refugee camp in Palestine.
It is now the newest ruin.

Part IV – The Record

IDF spokesperson Rear Admiral Daniel Hagari confirmed that Israeli fighter jets struck the Jabalia refugee camp on October 31, 2023, targeting Hamas commander Ibrahim Biari. The spokesperson stated that Biari was responsible for planning and executing elements of the October 7 attacks and that he was commanding operations from a tunnel complex beneath the camp. The spokesperson stated that civilian casualties were a tragic consequence of Hamas's decision to embed military infrastructure within civilian populations. The spokesperson declined to confirm the number or type of munitions used. Independent analysis identified the weapons as 2,000-pound BLU-109 bunker busters supplied by the United States. Hamas denied the presence of any commander. The camp was struck again the following day. By May 2024, seventy percent of the Jabalia refugee camp had been destroyed. A situation report was filed.

Chapter 7

Hunger

Part I – The Event

By late February 2024, more than 500,000 people in northern Gaza were on the brink of famine.
Children were dying of malnutrition.
The World Food Programme reported that one in six children under two was acutely malnourished.
No significant aid had reached the north in over a month.

On the night of February 28, tens of thousands of Palestinians gathered along Al-Rashid Street, a coastal road in Gaza City.
They had heard that an aid convoy was coming.
They waited through the night.
Some built fires.
Families had walked for hours.

At approximately 4:30 AM on February 29, a convoy of trucks carrying flour and canned food arrived, escorted by Israeli tanks.

As starving civilians surged toward the trucks, Israeli forces opened fire.
The shooting continued for approximately ninety minutes.

At least 118 people were killed.
Seven hundred and sixty were wounded.

Hospital doctors reported that the vast majority of injuries were gunshot wounds.
The injuries were not consistent with stampede or trampling.

Bodies were found soaked in both flour and blood.
A father was found weeping over the body of his fifteen-year-old son.
The son had been shot in the head while reaching for a flour bag.

Israel initially stated that most casualties resulted from a stampede. Subsequent investigations by CNN, NBC, and the UN found evidence of sustained automatic gunfire into the crowd.

The National Security Minister praised the soldiers involved.

The incident became known as the Flour Massacre.

Part II – The Wound

He has not eaten properly in nineteen days.

The body knows this differently from the mind.
The mind counts days.
The body counts functions.

Standing takes longer.
Walking takes planning.
The legs do not respond immediately.
There is a delay between instruction and movement.

He has a son.
The son is fifteen.
The son has not eaten properly in nineteen days either.
The son's body shows it differently.
The eyes are larger.
The skin is looser.
The energy that was excess is gone.

They hear about the convoy at dusk.
A neighbour.
A phone call.
A rumour that has the weight of prayer.

They walk.
Two hours.
Through streets that are not streets.
Over rubble that was houses.
Past buildings that are open to the sky.

They arrive at Al-Rashid Street at 10:00 PM.
Thousands are already there.
The road is full of people sitting, standing, leaning.
Small fires.
The particular smell of bodies that have not washed because water is for drinking.

He sits with his son.
They lean against each other.
The boy sleeps.
The father does not.

He watches the road.
He watches for headlights.
He watches because watching is the only thing he can do and doing nothing is the thing that kills.

At 4:30, headlights.

The crowd stands.
The body stands.
The son stands.

The trucks move slowly.
Israeli tanks flank them.
The tanks are visible in the dark.
The crowd moves toward the trucks.

The first bag of flour is within reach.
The father extends his arm.
His son is beside him.
The crowd presses.
The bag is heavy.
Twenty-five kilograms.
He pulls.

The first shot is not aimed at him.
The first shot is aimed at the crowd.
It is automatic fire.
The sound is continuous.

The crowd does not scatter immediately.
The crowd is too hungry to scatter.
Some fall.
Others keep reaching.

The second burst is closer.
His son is still standing.
His son is reaching for a bag.

The third burst is not a burst.
It is sustained.
The sound rolls across the road like weather.

His son falls.

He drops the flour.
He drops to his knees.
The flour bag has burst.
White powder covers the road.
His son is on the road.
His son's head is wrong.

He reaches for his son.
The flour is on both of them.
The blood is on both of them.
The flour and the blood mix on the road.
The mixture is a paste.
The paste covers everything.

He holds his son.
The shooting continues around him.
Bodies fall.
Trucks accelerate.
Some people are crushed under wheels.

He does not move.
He holds his son in the paste of flour and blood.
He says something.
He does not hear himself.

Others will report what he said.
He said: *I couldn't bring you flour, forgive me.*

The road remains.

The flour remains.

The blood remains.

The trucks are gone.

The tanks are gone.

The shooting has stopped.

He is still holding his son.

Part III – The Autopsy

Bob and Gman arrive at dawn.
The road is wet.
Not from rain.

They stand at the edge of Al-Rashid Street.
The surface is covered in white powder streaked with dark stains.
Bags of flour lie burst.
Some partially collected.
Some untouched.

Gman kneels.
He touches the surface.
Flour and blood.
Dried together.

“Scarcity,” he says.

Bob waits.

“When a population is starved,” Gman continues,
“the provision of food becomes a control mechanism.”

He stands.

“When that mechanism is paired with lethal force,
the act of seeking sustenance becomes the act that kills.”

Bob sees a sandal.
Small.
Child-sized.
Covered in white dust.

“They died at the point of contact with what they needed to survive,” Gman says.
“Not before.
Not after.
At the point of contact.”

The Code records the geometry.

“The flour and the blood are on the same surface,” Gman says.
“They cannot be separated.
The substance that was meant to sustain is mixed with the substance that indicates the end of sustaining.”

Bob sees the tread marks.
Trucks.
Tanks.
And between them, the marks of people who fell and did not stand.

“One hundred and eighteen,” Bob says.

“Killed reaching,” Gman replies.

He pauses.

“That is not a military engagement.
That is a system in which survival is fatal.”

They do not stay.

The road dries.
The paste hardens.
The flour becomes permanent.

No one collects it.

Part IV – The Record

The IDF released the findings of an internal review on March 8, 2024. The review determined that IDF forces did not fire upon the aid convoy. The review stated that forces fired warning shots to the east to disperse a crowd of thousands that had approached in a manner assessed as threatening. The review stated that the majority of casualties resulted from a stampede and from being struck by vehicles. The Palestinian Ministry of Health reported 118 dead and 760 wounded. Medical personnel at Al-Shifa Hospital reported that the overwhelming majority of injuries were gunshot wounds. CNN, NBC, and the United Nations conducted independent investigations. All three found evidence of sustained automatic gunfire into the crowd. Israel's Minister of National Security, Itamar Ben Gvir, praised the "heroic fighters" involved. The internal review was concluded. No disciplinary action was taken. The flour and blood dried together on the road.

Chapter 8

Fire

Part I – The Event

By May 2024, more than one million Palestinians had been forcibly displaced to Rafah, in southern Gaza.
The Israeli military had designated the area as a humanitarian zone.
Over half of Gaza's prewar population of 2.2 million was concentrated there.

Families had been displaced multiple times.
Some had moved four or five times.
Each time to the area they were told was safe.
Each time the previous safe area was bombed.

On May 26, 2024, the Israeli military launched two air strikes on the Kuwaiti Peace Camp, a makeshift tent settlement for internally displaced families in Tal al-Sultan, western Rafah.

The strikes used US-made GBU-39 guided bombs.
The stated targets were two Hamas commanders staying among displaced civilians.

At least 36 people were killed, including six children.
More than 100 were wounded.

The bombs ignited a fire that spread rapidly through the tents.
The tents were made of plastic sheeting, fabric, and salvaged materials.
They burned within seconds.

Families who had already been displaced multiple times were incinerated in the place they had been told was safe.

Two days later, Israeli tank shells struck the al-Mawasi area – also designated a humanitarian zone – killing 23 more.

Independent investigation concluded the strikes were likely indiscriminate.

Three days earlier, the international court had ordered the offensive halted.

Part II – The Wound

The tent is not a tent.
It is plastic sheeting and rope and a blanket and the lid of a crate.

She built it with her sister.
They used what was available.
A pole from a destroyed fence.
A tarpaulin from an aid distribution three weeks ago.
String.

Inside, the floor is sand.
They laid a blanket.
Then a sheet.
The sheet is not clean.
Nothing is clean.

Her children sleep in a row.
Three of them.
Side by side.
Touching.
Because the tent is too small for them not to touch.

She sleeps at their feet.
She sleeps lightly.
She has slept lightly since October.

The tent is in a camp.
The camp is in a zone designated humanitarian.
The word was spoken by the military.
The military said: come here.
The military said: this area is safe.

She came.
She brought the children.
She built the tent.
She registered.
She queued for water.

She queued for food.
She queued for everything because queuing is what remains when systems break.

The camp is a grid.
Tens of thousands of tents in rows.
The rows are close.
The gaps are narrow.
A body can barely pass between them.

At night the camp smells of kerosene and sweat and urine and the particular flatness of air that has been breathed too many times.

She is asleep when the first bomb arrives.

The explosion is not distant.
It is inside the camp.

The plastic catches fire instantly.
Not slowly.
Not smouldering.
Instantly.

The tent is burning.
The tent beside it is burning.
The tent across the row is burning.

She rolls.
She grabs the nearest child.
The child screams.
The plastic above them drops.
It is melting.
It falls on skin.

She tears through the side of the tent.
The plastic rips.
She pulls the child through the tear.
The child’s arm is burned.

The back is burned.
The fabric of the child’s shirt has fused with the skin.

She turns for the other two.
The tent collapses.
The plastic folds inward.
The flames fold with it.

She reaches in.
The heat pushes her back.
She reaches in again.
Her hands burn.
She does not feel them yet.
She will feel them later.
Now she feels only the reaching.

She pulls.
A hand.
Small.
She pulls the hand and a body follows.
The body is her son.
The son is burned.
The son is breathing.

She turns for the third child.
The tent is no longer a tent.
It is a column of fire.
The column is two metres high.
The heat bends the air.
She cannot see inside.

She screams.

She screams the child’s name.
She screams it into the fire.
The fire does not answer.

Around her the camp is a grid of fire.

Every tent.

Every row.

People running.

People carrying children.

People on fire.

She stands with two children.

One on each arm.

Both burned.

Both alive.

The third child is in the fire.

She stands.

She cannot move toward it.

She cannot move away from it.

The fire burns.

The camp burns.

The humanitarian zone burns.

There are no burn units left in Gaza.

There are no hospitals left in Rafah that can treat what the fire has done.

There is no next safe place.

She stands in the smoke.

She holds what is left.

Part III – The Autopsy

Bob and Gman arrive when the fire has gone out.
The camp is ash.
Frames of tents stand like skeletons.
Melted plastic hangs from poles like skin.

The sand is black.
The air smells of burnt synthetics and something else.

Gman does not describe the smell.

“A humanitarian zone,” he says.

Bob stands at the edge of the burn pattern.

“The word was spoken by the authority that dropped the bombs,” Gman says.
“Come here.
This is safe.”

He looks at the grid.
Row upon row.
Ash upon ash.

“When the authority that designates safety is the same authority that delivers the weapon,” Gman continues,
“the concept of safety ceases to exist.”

Bob sees a piece of tarpaulin.
Partially intact.
UNHCR logo still visible.

“There is no further location to designate,” Gman says.
“Every displacement from this point is motion without destination.”

The Code records the collapse.

“Guided munition,” Bob says.

“GBU-39,” Gman replies.
“Precision weapon.
It struck where it was aimed.”

He looks at the burn pattern.

“The precision was in the bomb.
The fire was in the material.
Plastic sheeting.
Rope.
Fabric.
Every surface in this camp was fuel.”

Bob sees a child’s blanket.
Half burned.
The other half intact.
A pattern of cartoon animals still visible.

“The guided bomb started the fire,” Gman says.
“The camp finished it.”

He does not look at the blanket.

“She came because she was told to come,” Bob says.

“Yes,” Gman replies.
“She was told this was safe.
She built a shelter from plastic in the place that was safe.
The place that was safe was bombed.
The shelter made of plastic burned.
Her children were inside the plastic.”

He stops.

“The word safe,” he says.
“After this, the word has no remaining content.”

They stand in the ash.

The camp does not rebuild.

The designation does not change.

The sign that says humanitarian zone is still standing.

The zone is black.

They leave.

The sign remains.

Part IV – The Record

The IDF confirmed the strikes on the Kuwaiti Peace Camp in Tal al-Sultan, Rafah, on May 26, 2024. A spokesperson stated that the operation targeted two senior Hamas commanders. The spokesperson expressed regret for civilian casualties and stated that the incident was under review. The spokesperson noted that the strike employed precision-guided munitions designed to minimise collateral impact. Amnesty International's investigation identified the munitions as US-made GBU-39 guided bombs. The investigation concluded that the strikes were likely indiscriminate and that one was likely disproportionate. The International Court of Justice had ordered Israel to halt its military offensive in Rafah three days before the strike. The order was not complied with. The tent camp burned. The tents were plastic. The fire spread in seconds. The review continued. The humanitarian zone designation was not withdrawn.

Saturation

Optimal Stopping

This book contains ten chapters.
It could contain ten thousand.

Every chapter was a day.
An ordinary day that became the day.
A night in a refugee camp.
A Friday night in a queue.
A Passover.
A Saturday morning.
A music festival.
A kibbutz.
A children's section.
A concrete vault in a refugee camp.
A road at 4:30 in the morning.
A tent.

The people in these chapters were not participants in a conflict.
They were participants in a breakfast.
A prayer.
A dance.
A school run.

The conflict arrived.
The conflict did not ask.
The conflict did not distinguish.

A child is a child.
A child in a kibbutz and a child in a refugee camp occupy the same category.
The category is: too young to have caused this.
The category is: too small to stop it.
The category is: the reason it must stop.

This book does not propose a solution.
Solutions require politics.
Politics produced this.

This book proposes revulsion.

The body knows this.
The body has known it since the first chapter.
The body rejects all frameworks that permit the contents of any single chapter to occur.

The mind constructs frameworks that permit it.
The frameworks are religion.
The frameworks are nationalism.
The frameworks are security doctrine.
The frameworks are revenge.
The frameworks are press releases and operational reviews and after-action summaries and humanitarian status reports and commissions of inquiry and resolutions and condemnations and expressions of deep concern.

The machine is still running:

SYSTEM: “The international community continues to monitor the situation closely. All parties are urged to exercise maximum restraint and to ensure the protection of civilians in accordance with their obligations under international humanitarian law. A comprehensive review of the events remains ongoing. We extend our thoughts to all affected communities and reaffirm our commitment to a just and lasting peace in the region.”

The machine runs.
The statements are issued.
The reports are filed.
The reviews continue.
The operational efficiencies are optimised.

The flour dries on the road.
The tent ash settles.
The braids hold.
The bicycle ticks.
The building burns.
The body holds the child.
The child is not making sound.

The machine does not hear this.
The machine has never heard this.
The machine will not hear this.

But you heard it.

You heard it because you read it.
You read it because the body carried it.
The body carried it because no sentence converted it into something other than what it was.

It was suffering.
It did not mean anything.
It just happened.
To bodies.
In rooms.

On roads.

In tents.

To children.

It is still happening.

The machine is still running.

Don’t be a cunt.

Be kind.

Part III - America

The Authority Cannot Survive This

Chapter 1

Authority

Part 0 – The Ordinary

You are braiding your daughter’s hair.

She sits between your knees.

She is still.

The elastic bands are running low.

You reuse them.

They stretch.

They hold.

You smooth the braid.

You tie it off.

She turns and shows you.

You tell her it is perfect.

She believes you because you are the authority.

The authority on braids.

The authority on breakfast.

The authority on what happens next.

Part I – The Event

David Koresh, born Vernon Howell, led a religious sect called the Branch Davidians at a compound near Waco, Texas.
He claimed to be the Lamb of Revelation.
He took multiple wives, some reportedly as young as eleven.
He stockpiled firearms.
He prepared his followers for the end of the world.

On February 28, 1993, approximately eighty agents from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms raided the compound to serve arrest and search warrants.
A gunfight erupted.
Four agents and six Davidians were killed.
A fifty-one-day siege followed.

On April 19, the FBI pumped four hundred canisters of CS gas into the compound using armoured vehicles.
The vehicles punched through walls.
Interior staircases collapsed.

At approximately noon, fires broke out simultaneously in multiple locations.
The compound was engulfed.
The origin of the fire remains disputed.

Seventy-six Branch Davidians died.
Twenty-five were children.

Eighteen children and nine women were found inside a concrete bunker vault.
The mothers had been told to take the children there.
They had practised this.
In the event of the end of the world.

The majority died of smoke inhalation.

Gas masks had been procured for adults.
Gas masks for children had not.

Part II – The Wound

She braids her daughter's hair every morning.

Two braids.

Tight.

Elastic bands at the ends.

The elastic bands are running low.

She has been reusing them.

She unties yesterday's braid, smooths the band, and wraps it again.

The band is stretched.

It holds.

Her daughter is six.

She sits still for the braiding.

Stillness is a virtue in the compound.

It is taught early.

The hands move through the hair and the child does not flinch.

Breakfast is rice.

Powdered milk mixed thin.

The daughter eats without complaint.

Complaint is not a virtue either.

After breakfast, Scripture.

The daughter's Bible is children's edition.

It has pictures.

The Lamb on page twelve.

The daughter points to it every morning.

"That's David," she says.

The mother nods.

The mother believes this.

The mother has believed this for five years.

Belief is the structure of every day.

Belief determines the schedule, the meals, the marriages, the preparation.

The compound is organised around belief the way a body is organised around a spine.

The gas enters before the fire.

CS gas is heavier than air.
It sinks.
It enters the children’s breathing space first.

The daughter coughs.
The son coughs.
The mother covers their faces with wet cloth.
The cloth was prepared.
They have practised this.
The compound has gas masks for adults.
The gas masks for children were never procured.

The wet cloth helps for minutes.
Not for hours.

The tanks push through the walls.
The sound is not explosion.
It is compression.
Metal against concrete.
The building groans like a body under weight.

The staircase collapses.

The mother carries the daughter.
She holds the son’s hand.
They move toward the vault.
The vault is below.
The vault is concrete.
The vault is where they practised going.
In the event of the end of the world.

Other mothers are already there.
Eighteen children.
Nine women.
The vault fills.

The door is heavy.
It closes.
The sound of it closing is the sound of enclosure.
The sound has always been rehearsed as safety.

Above them, the fire begins.

The temperature in the vault rises.
Smoke enters through gaps that were not designed for fire.
The ventilation was not designed for this.

The women hold the children.
The children are coughing.
Then the children are not coughing.

Smoke inhalation is quiet.
The body does not fight it.
The body slows.
The lungs fill.
The oxygen leaves.
The body cools.

The mother holds her daughter.
The daughter's Bible is upstairs.
The Lamb on page twelve.
"That's David," she says every morning.
The Bible is burning.
The page with the Lamb is burning.
The daughter does not know this.
The daughter is breathing smoke through a wet cloth that her mother prepared because the compound practised for the end of the world but not for this version of it.

The daughter's body slows against her mother's chest.
The braids are still tight.
The elastic bands hold.

The elastic bands she has been reusing for months because supplies were low.
They hold.
The building does not.

The elastic bands are still in the braids. They held. The building did not. The braids are yours.

Part III – The Autopsy

Bob and Gman arrive after the fire has been extinguished.
The compound is steel and ash.
The vault is intact structurally.
Its contents are not.

They stand at the edge of the foundation.
The concrete is blackened.
The sky above is open.

Gman looks at the vault.
The door is open now.
Someone opened it from outside.

“Two authorities,” he says.
“Both certain.”

Bob waits.

“One claimed the Lamb of Revelation.
The other claimed a federal search warrant.
Both were willing to deploy lethal force to prove they were right.”

He pauses.

“The children were inside both claims.
Neither authority had a mechanism for extracting the children without destroying the structure.”

Bob looks at the vault.
Twenty-seven bodies were carried out.

“They practised going to the vault,” Gman says.
“They practised for the end of the world.
The end of the world arrived and the vault worked exactly as designed.
It held them in place while the building above them burned.”

The Code does not assign blame to either authority.
It records the cost of competing certainties.

“The gas masks,” Bob says.

“Adults only,” Gman replies.
“No one procured children’s masks.
The gas sinks.
It enters the children’s lungs first.
This is physics, not malice.
But the absence of children’s masks is a decision.
Both sides made decisions that excluded the children from survival.”

Bob sees a photograph pinned to a board near the perimeter.
A child’s drawing.
A lamb.

“The elastic bands in her braids were reused because supplies were low,” Gman says.
“The elastic bands held.
The building did not.”

He does not say more.

“Two men were certain,” he says.
“Twenty-five children burned.”

They leave the foundation.

The vault remains.
Open.
Empty.
Intact.

Part IV – The Record

The FBI issued a statement confirming that the fire was started by the Branch Davidians. Surviving members disputed this account. The Department of Justice conducted a review. The review concluded that although incendiary CS gas canisters were used, the agency bore no responsibility for the fire. Attorney General Janet Reno expressed regret for authorising the raid. No criminal charges were filed against any federal agent. The ATF received increased funding in the following fiscal year. A memorial was erected. Twenty-five children were listed. The compound was bulldozed. A new Branch Davidian community was established on the property. It is called Branch, The Lord Our Righteousness.

Chapter 2

Vengeance

Part 0 – The Ordinary

You are dropping your child at daycare.

You sign in.

You write the time.

8:32.

He is wearing the shirt he pointed at.

Blue.

A train.

He is learning to point.

He pointed at the dog yesterday.

The light switch on Tuesday.

The world is made of things he can show you.

You kiss his forehead.

He does not notice.

You say you'll be back at lunch.

You always come back at lunch.

Part I – The Event

On April 19, 1995, the second anniversary of the Waco fire, Timothy McVeigh parked a rented Ryder truck in front of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in downtown Oklahoma City.

McVeigh was a Gulf War veteran.
He had been radicalised by anti-government ideology and literature associated with the Christian Identity movement.
He treated a novel called The Turner Diaries as operational scripture.
The novel depicted the truck-bombing of a federal building as an act of revolutionary warfare.

The truck contained 4,800 pounds of ammonium nitrate and fuel oil.

At 9:02 AM, the bomb detonated.

One third of the building collapsed.
168 people were killed.
684 were injured.
More than 300 surrounding buildings were damaged.

The America's Kids daycare centre was on the second floor.
Nineteen children were killed there.

McVeigh's co-conspirator said they knew about the daycare centre and did not care.
McVeigh described the children as "collateral damage."
He expressed no remorse.
He was executed in 2001.

A copy of The Turner Diaries was found in his car.

Part II – The Wound

The alarm goes off at 6:15.
She reaches for it without opening her eyes.
The motion is automatic.
The arm knows where the clock is.

She lies still for thirty seconds.
This is her time.
Thirty seconds between the alarm and the day.
She uses them.

The apartment is one bedroom.
She and her son share it.
The crib is beside her bed.
She can reach him without standing.
She has reached him without standing many times.
At 2:00 AM.
At 4:00 AM.
The arm extends in the dark.
The hand finds the small body.
The small body is warm.
The arm retracts.

She stands.
She showers.
The shower takes four minutes.
She has timed it.
Four minutes is what fits between waking and the next task.

She dresses.
The blouse is ironed.
She ironed it last night.
She irons on Sunday evenings for the week.
Five blouses.
Five hangers.
The rotation is fixed.

Her son is awake.
He is standing in the crib.
He is holding the rail.
He is looking at her.
He is not crying.
He has learned that she comes.
The learning took months.
The learning is complete.

She lifts him.
He is warm and heavy and his hair is flat on one side from sleep.
She changes his diaper.
She dresses him.

The blue shirt with the train.
He pointed at it.
She opened the drawer and he pointed.
The finger extended.
The eyes locked.
The hand reached.
He is learning to point.
The pointing is new.
Two weeks old.
Each day he points at something he did not point at yesterday.
The train on the shirt.
The dog through the window.
The light switch.
The ceiling fan.
The cereal box.

She puts on the shirt.
She buttons it.
The buttons are small.
Her fingers are larger than the buttons.
His body is patient.

He does not squirm.

He watches her hands.

She makes breakfast.

Oatmeal.

His is cooled.

Hers is not.

She eats hers too hot because time is not generous.

She packs the bag.

Diapers.

A change of clothes.

The sippy cup.

The stuffed bear he does not play with but requires.

The bear is brown.

One eye is loose.

She has been meaning to sew it.

She has not sewn it.

She carries him to the car.

The car seat is in the back.

She buckles him.

The straps cross his chest.

The blue shirt with the train is visible between the straps.

He points at the rearview mirror.

She adjusts it.

He is in the mirror.

He points at himself.

The drive takes twelve minutes.

She parks in the underground garage.

She carries him.

She takes the elevator to the second floor.

She signs her son in at 8:32 AM.

The daycare is on the second floor.
The windows face north.
The morning light enters from the left.
It crosses the room in a line that moves throughout the day.
She has watched this line for months.

He is wearing the blue shirt with the train.
He pointed at it this morning.
He is learning to point.
The world is made of things he can indicate.

She kisses his forehead.
He does not notice.
He is already looking at the other children.
The room is bright.
There are toys on the floor.
There is a rug with letters on it.

She says she'll be back at lunch.
She always comes back at lunch.
She has come back at lunch every working day for six months.
Lunch is the midpoint.
The midpoint is where she confirms that the morning happened and the afternoon will follow.

She takes the elevator to the third floor.
She logs into her computer.
She has a coffee from the machine in the hallway.
It is bad coffee.
She drinks it every morning.
The cup is styrofoam.
It is 9:01 AM.

The building moves.

Not like an earthquake.
Like amputation.

The floor drops.

The ceiling drops.

The desk drops.

She is inside a building that is folding inward.

The noise is not an explosion.

It is a subtraction.

The sound of structure leaving.

She is on the floor.

She is under the desk.

She cannot see.

The dust is absolute.

She cannot hear.

The pressure has compressed her hearing into a single tone.

She thinks: downstairs.

She thinks: the second floor.

She thinks: the train shirt.

He is learning to point.

He pointed at the train this morning.

He pointed at the light switch yesterday.

He pointed at the dog through the window on Tuesday.

The world is made of things he can indicate.

The second floor is made of things he can indicate.

She crawls.

The hallway is rubble.

The elevator shaft is open.

She looks down.

There is no elevator.

There is no second floor.

There is sky where the second floor was.

The north face of the building is gone.

The daycare was on the north face.

The daycare is in the parking lot below.

The rug with the letters is in the parking lot.

The toys are in the parking lot.

She cannot get downstairs.

She cannot get to the second floor because the second floor does not exist.

She stands at the edge of the shaft.

She holds the wall.

She looks down into the space where she signed him in thirty minutes ago.

The blue shirt with the train.

He chose it because he pointed at it.

He was learning to point.

There is nothing left to point at.

He was learning to point. There is nothing left to point at. The train shirt is yours.

Part III – The Autopsy

Bob and Gman arrive when the rescue lines have been established.
The building is a cavity.
The north face is rubble.
The south face is standing.
The partition between them is a cross-section of offices, desks, and floor slabs hanging at angles.

Gman looks at the second floor.
What remains of it.

“Collateral damage,” he says.

Bob does not speak.

“That is the term he used.
A military term.
It means: known and accepted.
The deaths were entered into the calculation before the truck was parked.”

He looks at the cavity.

“The daycare was on the second floor.
The daycare contained nineteen children.
The term was applied to them.”

The Code does not measure intent.
It measures the physics of the instrument.

“4,800 pounds of ammonium nitrate,” Gman says.
“Detonated at 9:02 AM.
The daycare opened at 6:30.
The mother signed her son in at 8:32.
The collateral was thirty-two minutes old when the bomb detonated.”

Bob sees a rescue worker carrying something small.
A blanket.
A shoe.

“The book in his car called this revolution,” Gman says.
“The book called the bombing of a federal building a sacrament of resistance.
The book did not mention the daycare.
But the building did.”

He pauses.

“She came back at lunch.
Every day.
She always came back at lunch.”

They leave the site.

The cavity remains.
The second floor does not.

The mother is somewhere above it.
Waiting for lunch.

Part IV – The Record

Timothy James McVeigh was convicted on eleven federal counts, including conspiracy, use of a weapon of mass destruction, and first-degree murder. He was sentenced to death and executed by lethal injection on June 11, 2001. He was the first federal inmate executed in thirty-eight years. In his final statement, he quoted from the poem “Invictus”: “I am the master of my fate. I am the captain of my soul.” He expressed no remorse. Terry Nichols was sentenced to life without parole. Michael Fortier was released in 2006. A memorial was constructed at the site. One hundred and sixty-eight empty chairs face east, arranged in nine rows representing the nine floors of the building. Nineteen of the chairs are smaller than the others.

Chapter 3

Judgment

Part 0 – The Ordinary

You adjust your husband’s tie in the car.

The knot is slightly left.

You centre it.

He says it is fine.

You say it is not.

This is your exchange.

It happens every Sunday.

The organ is already playing.

You can hear it from the parking lot.

He goes to the foyer.

You go to the pew.

Fourth from the back.

Left side.

The space beside you is where he will sit after ushering.

Part I – The Event

Dr. George Tiller was one of the few physicians in the United States who performed late-term abortions.
He had been the target of anti-abortion violence for decades.
His clinic was bombed in 1986.
He was shot in both arms in 1993.
He received constant death threats.

On the morning of May 31, 2009, Scott Roeder entered the Reformation Lutheran Church in Wichita, Kansas, during Sunday services.
Dr. Tiller was serving as an usher in the foyer.
Roeder walked up to him and shot him once in the head.
Tiller died immediately.

Roeder told the court he believed he was justified.
He described the murder as a righteous act.
He said he was saving unborn children.
He had spent years in anti-abortion networks that explicitly framed Tiller as a legitimate target.

He was sentenced to life in prison.
He expressed no remorse.

Part II – The Wound

Sunday morning.

The house smells of coffee and toast.

These two smells together are the smell of Sunday.

He is in the kitchen.

He makes breakfast on Sundays.

This is his job.

Toast.

Eggs.

Orange juice from the carton.

He has made this breakfast every Sunday for longer than either of them can count.

The breakfast does not vary.

The breakfast is not the point.

The routine is the point.

She is upstairs.

She is choosing earrings.

She has a box on the dresser.

The box is wooden.

It was a gift.

She opens it every Sunday and stands in front of the mirror and holds two pairs beside her face before choosing one.

She always chooses the same pair.

The pearls.

She always chooses the pearls.

The decision process is the ritual.

The outcome is fixed.

He calls upstairs.

“Ready?”

She says five minutes.

She always says five minutes.

The five minutes is fifteen.

This has been true for forty years.

He waits in the kitchen.
He reads the paper.
Not all of it.
The front page.
The sports section.
He folds it back the way it was.
He does not know why he refolds it.
He has always refolded it.

She comes downstairs.
She is wearing a grey dress.
The pearls.
She looks at him.
He is wearing his suit.
Charcoal.
Blue tie.
The tie is slightly left.

They drive to church together.
They always drive together on Sundays.
The drive takes twelve minutes.
They do not speak much during the drive.
This is not tension.
This is forty years of Sundays.
The silence is not empty.
The silence is full of all the Sundays it contains.

She adjusts his tie at the first red light.
The knot is slightly left.
She centres it.
He says it is fine.
She says it is not.

This is their exchange.
It happens every Sunday.
The tie.

The adjustment.
The claim that it is fine.
The correction.
The correction is the love.
Neither of them would name it that.
The naming is not required.

He parks.
Second row.
Same spot.
The church is a block of brick and glass.
The organ is already playing.
She can hear it from the parking lot.
The organ has played before every service for as long as they have attended.
The sound of the organ through the parking lot glass is the sound of arrival.

They enter through the main doors.
He goes to the foyer.
Ushering.
He has ushered for twelve years.
He volunteered because no one else had.
He kept volunteering because the foyer is where people enter and entering is the moment when a face decides whether it belongs.

She goes to the sanctuary.
Their usual pew.
Fourth from the back.
Left side.
She sits.
She places her handbag beside her.
She opens the programme.

He stands in the foyer with a stack of bulletins.
The bulletins list the hymns and the readings.
He hands them to people as they enter.
He smiles.

He says good morning.

The old woman with the cane.

The family with the twins.

The man who comes alone and sits at the back and leaves before the benediction.

He hands each of them a bulletin.

He knows their faces.

Some he knows their names.

The hymn begins.

She is in the pew.

She opens the programme.

She finds the page for the first hymn.

She holds the programme in her right hand.

Her left hand rests on the pew beside her.

The space where he will sit after ushering.

The space is shaped like his absence.

It will be shaped like his absence permanently after today.

The shot is a single sound.

It enters the sanctuary through the open doors.

It is sharp and close and wrong.

This room has only ever contained voices, prayers, and the turning of pages.

The organ continues for two bars.

Then it stops.

The organist does not know why she stopped.

Her fingers stopped before her mind decided.

The fingers knew.

She stands.

She walks to the foyer.

He is on the floor.

The usher name tag is still on his lapel.

The name tag says his first name.

The tie is still centred.

She adjusted it in the car.

The knot was slightly left.

She centred it.

He said it was fine.

She said it was not.

The knot is still centred.

The bulletins are scattered on the floor around him.

One is under his hand.

He was holding it when he fell.

She kneels.

She touches his face.

The face is warm.

The body is still.

The hymn programme is in her other hand.

She is still holding it.

She does not put it down.

The organ does not resume.

The foyer is quiet.

The bulletins are on the floor.

The tie is centred.

The programme is in her hand.

The space in the pew where he would sit is empty.

The tie is still centred. The space in the pew is still empty. The programme is still in your hand.

Part III – The Autopsy

Bob and Gman arrive when the church has been cleared.
The foyer is cordoned.
The bulletins are still on the floor.

Gman looks at the space between the entrance and the sanctuary.

“One man,” he says.
“One gun.
One target.”

Bob waits.

“The target was identified by name, by location, by profession.
The killer did not spray a crowd.
He walked to one man and fired once.”

He looks at the bulletins.

“The man was serving as an usher.
His wife adjusted his tie in the car.
The tie was still centred when he fell.
The bulletins were still in his hand.
He was welcoming people.
The killer walked past the people being welcomed and fired once.”

The Code records the distance between conviction and action.

“The distance between religious conviction and the trigger was the length of a church foyer,” Gman says.
“The conviction was: God requires this man’s death.
The foyer was twelve feet long.
The hymn continued for two bars.
The organ did not know.”

They leave the church.

The foyer is empty.
The bulletins remain.

The tie is centred.

The organ is silent.

Part IV – The Record

Scott Roeder was convicted of first-degree murder and sentenced to life in prison with no possibility of parole for fifty years. From prison, he stated that the killing was justified and that he would do it again. Anti-abortion organisations distanced themselves from the act while continuing to describe Tiller's practice as "murder." The clinic closed permanently after Tiller's death. No other physician in Wichita continued to provide the services Tiller had offered. The elimination of the provider achieved the objective that decades of legal challenges, clinic bombings, and protest had not. The church continued to hold Sunday services. The foyer was cleaned. The bulletins were reprinted.

Chapter 4

Turbans

Part 0 – The Ordinary

You tie the cloth every morning.
Seven minutes.
Five metres.
Folded, wrapped, tucked.
Your grandson watches.
He sits on the counter.
He tries with a dishcloth.
It falls.
You both laugh.
He says: “When I’m big.”
You say: “When you’re big.”
You drive to the temple.
You remove your shoes at the entrance.
You place them beside the others.

Part I – The Event

On the morning of August 5, 2012, Wade Michael Page entered the Sikh Temple of Wisconsin in Oak Creek during Sunday services.
He was a former Army psychological operations specialist.
He had ties to white supremacist organisations.
He played in white-power rock bands.

He opened fire with a semi-automatic pistol.
Six worshippers were killed.
Four others were wounded, including a police officer.
Page then shot himself.

The victims ranged in age from 39 to 84.
They were Sikh Americans.
Sikhs are frequently targeted in hate crimes, often due to mistaken identification as Muslims.

The turban was enough.

Part II – The Wound

He wakes before the alarm.

He has done this for decades.

The body at sixty-five does not need instruction.

It rises when the light changes.

He showers.

He dries.

He stands in front of the bathroom mirror.

The turban cloth is on the counter.

He ironed it last night.

Saturday nights he irons the cloth for Sunday.

The iron is old.

It belonged to his wife.

She died four years ago.

The iron hisses the way it hissed when she used it.

The sound has not changed.

The cloth smooths under the heat.

He folds it.

He places it on the counter.

Ready for morning.

Now it is morning.

He picks up the cloth.

Five metres.

White.

The process takes seven minutes.

He has timed it.

Not recently.

Years ago.

The time has not changed because the hands have not changed.

The hands know the folds.

He begins.
The first fold is lengthwise.
The second fold halves the width.
The wrapping starts at the crown.
Each circuit is pulled tight.
The tension must be even.
Uneven tension produces a turban that shifts.
A turban that shifts must be retied.
He has not retied in years.

His grandson watches.
The grandson is four.
He sits on the bathroom counter.
His legs hang over the edge.
His feet do not reach the floor.
He watches the wrapping with the concentration that four-year-olds give to things they will one day do themselves.

He does not interrupt.
Watching is his participation.

When the turban is finished, the grandson reaches out and touches it.
One finger.
The cloth is smooth and tight and warm from the wrapping.

Sometimes the grandson takes a dishcloth from the kitchen and wraps it around his own head.
It falls.
They both laugh.
The grandson tries again.
The dishcloth is too short.
It falls again.
The grandson says: “When I’m big.”
He says: “When you’re big.”

This is their Sunday.

His daughter-in-law has made paratha.
He eats one.
The grandson eats half of one and leaves the rest on the plate.
He eats the grandson's half.
This is also their Sunday.

He drives to the temple.
The route takes eleven minutes.
He drives slowly.
He has always driven slowly.
His son says he drives like a man who is not in a hurry.
He is not in a hurry.
He has arrived at everything he needs.

The parking lot is full.
Families.
Other turbans.
White, blue, black, saffron.
Each one tied this morning.
Each one seven minutes.
The parking lot is a gathering of seven-minute preparations.

He removes his shoes at the entrance.
He places them beside the others.
The row of shoes is a census.
He can estimate the congregation by the shoes.
Forty pairs.
Perhaps forty-five.
The children's shoes are smaller and brighter and placed less neatly.

The prayer hall is carpeted.
The carpet is maroon.
The air smells of incense and dal from the kitchen.

The langar is being prepared.
The communal meal.
Open to everyone.

This is the Sikh principle: if you are hungry, you eat.
The food does not ask your name.
The food does not ask your faith.
In the kitchen, three women are stirring.
One is his cousin.
She has made langar every Sunday for fifteen years.
The dal is her recipe.
It is the same recipe every week.
No one asks for a different recipe.

He sits.
The prayers begin.
The Guru Granth Sahib is open.
The reader chants.
The room sways.
Not physically.
Rhythmically.
The bodies move with the words.
His body moves.
The turban moves with his body.
The turban is part of the body now.
Seven minutes of wrapping and it becomes the body.

The first shots are from the lobby.

Then the kitchen.
The three women.
The dal.
The communal meal that does not ask your faith.

Then the prayer hall.

He is seated when the shooter enters.
The shooter does not speak.
The shooter fires.

Seven minutes to tie.

Five metres of cloth.

The grandson with the dishcloth, trying, failing, laughing.

“When I’m big.”

“When you’re big.”

The turban receives the bullet in the cloth that took seven minutes to wind.

He falls.

The turban unwinds.

Five metres of white cloth spread across the maroon carpet.

Like a road that leads from the chair to the floor to nowhere.

The shoes are still at the entrance.

Beside the others.

The children’s shoes are brighter and placed less neatly.

The row is still there.

The count has changed.

The turban is on the floor. Five metres of cloth. The grandson is still waiting to be big.

The ticking is yours.

Part III – The Autopsy

Bob and Gman arrive when the temple has been cleared.
The shoes are still at the entrance.
The carpet is marked.

Gman looks at the shoes.

“He targeted turbans,” he says.
“He did not know the difference between a Sikh and a Muslim.
The turban was enough.”

Bob waits.

“The turban took seven minutes to tie each morning.
The man’s grandson watched him tie it.
The grandson tried with a dishcloth.
They laughed.”

He pauses.

“The turban was the most carefully prepared thing on the body.
It was the thing tied with the most love.
It was the thing that identified the target.
The thing made with the most care was the thing that got him killed.”

The Code records the physics of identification.

“The doctrine does not require accuracy,” Gman says.
“It requires a visible marker.
The marker was the turban.
He didn’t know who they were.
The turban was enough.”

They leave the temple.

The shoes remain at the entrance.
The row is still there.
The count has changed.

Part IV – The Record

Wade Michael Page died of a self-inflicted gunshot wound at the scene. He was identified as a white supremacist through tattoos and organisational affiliations. The FBI classified the shooting as domestic terrorism. A memorial was erected at the temple. The temple was repaired. Services resumed. The community reported an increase in hate incidents in the years following the shooting. In 2017, a Sikh man was shot in his driveway in Kent, Washington, by a man who told him to “go back to your own country.” The turban remained a target identifier. The misidentification was not corrected at the systemic level.

Chapter 5

Welcome

Part 0 – The Ordinary

You walk to Bible study.

Two blocks.

You have done this every Wednesday for forty years.

Your Bible is in your hand.

The spine is broken.

The leather is soft.

You annotated it in pencil.

You wrote “amen” in the margin of a passage about kindness.

You wrote it in pencil because pencil can be erased.

You never erased it.

A stranger enters.

You hand him a Bible and a study sheet.

You close your eyes for prayer.

Part I – The Event

On the evening of June 17, 2015, Dylann Roof, a twenty-one-year-old white supremacist, entered the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina.

The church was the oldest Black church in the South.
The congregation was conducting a Wednesday night Bible study.

The congregation welcomed Roof.
They handed him a Bible and a study sheet.
For forty-five minutes he sat among thirteen people and discussed Scripture.

When the group stood for closing prayer and closed their eyes, Roof drew a Glock .45 from a fanny pack.
He opened fire.

He killed nine people.
He fired seventy rounds.
He reloaded multiple times.
He shot a Bible.
He paced the room and fired into bodies on the floor.
He told one woman to shut up while she prayed.

He had carried eighty-eight rounds.
The number is sacred to white supremacists.

Roof later confessed, laughing.
He said he almost did not go through because the congregation had been “so nice to him.”

One victim told Roof, before being shot: “We mean you no harm.”

Part II – The Wound

She eats dinner early on Wednesdays.
Soup.
From a can.
She heats it on the stove because the microwave changes the taste.
She eats standing.
She has eaten standing since she lived alone.
Sitting at the table alone makes the table larger.
Standing makes the kitchen the right size.

She washes the bowl.
She dries it.
She places it in the cupboard.
The cupboard has three bowls.
One for each meal she might share.
The other two wait.

She changes her shoes.
The walking shoes.
Low.
Rubber sole.
The left one is more worn than the right.
She favours her right leg.
This has been true for years.
The shoes know this before she does.

She picks up her Bible.
It has been on the table by the door since last Wednesday.
It lives there.
It moves from the table to her hand to the church and back.
The circuit is forty years old.

Her husband gave her this Bible.
He gave it to her on their tenth anniversary.
He was not a church man.
He went on Easter and Christmas.

He gave her the Bible because she asked for one.
She asked for one because her old one was falling apart.
He went to the bookshop on King Street.
He chose leather.
He had her name stamped on the front.
The gold has worn off the letters.
She can still read them by touch.

The spine broke at year twelve.
She did not replace the Bible.
She kept reading it.
The spine held.
The way broken spines do.
Not by structure.
By habit.

She has annotated it in pencil.
Pencil because pencil can be erased.
She has never erased a note.
The notes accumulate.
Thirty years of margins.
Some notes are questions.
Some are answers.
Some are single words: *yes*, *amen*, *again*.

She can find Romans by feel.
The pages are softer there.
She can find Psalms by weight.
Psalms is thicker.
More notes.

She wrote “amen” in the margin of Romans 12:10.
Be kindly affectioned one to another.
She does not remember when she wrote it.
It has been there for years.
The pencil has not faded.

She walks to church.

Two blocks.

She does this every Wednesday.

She has done this for forty years.

Two thousand and eighty Wednesdays.

She has not counted.

The body has counted.

The walk takes eight minutes.

She passes the house with the blue shutters.

The shutters were green when she started walking this route.

They were painted blue in 2003.

She noticed.

She did not comment.

The shutters are not hers to comment on.

She passes the corner where the magnolia drops petals in April.

It is June.

The petals are gone.

The tree is full and green.

She passes the fire hydrant her grandchildren sit on in summer.

They are not here tonight.

The hydrant is empty.

It is still warm from the day.

The church is ahead.

Emanuel AME.

Mother Emanuel.

The building is white.

The steeple is pointed.

The door is open.

It has been open every Wednesday evening for longer than she has been walking to it.

The fellowship hall.

Folding chairs.

A table.

A fluorescent light that buzzes slightly.
The light has buzzed for as long as she can remember.
Replacing it would change the sound of the room.
The sound of the room is part of the room.

She sits in her usual chair.
Third from the left.
She opens her Bible.
The pages fall to Romans.
The pencil annotations face upward.

The others arrive.
The pastor.
The deacon.
The women she has known for decades.
They greet each other.
The greeting is not formal.
It is the sound of recognition.
The sound of people who show up on the same night to the same room for the same reason.

Thirteen tonight.

The young white man enters.
No one knows him.
They welcome him.
This is what this church does.
This is what this church has always done.
A stranger enters.
The stranger is offered a seat, a Bible, and a study sheet.
This is the tradition.
The tradition is older than anyone in the room.

He sits.
He is quiet.
She notices he is quiet.
She does not think about it.

Quiet is acceptable.
Some people listen before they speak.
Some never speak.
They come and they sit and they leave and they come back.
The room holds this.

The study begins.
They discuss Scripture.
Forty-five minutes pass.
The fluorescent light buzzes.
Pages turn.
Voices rise and fall in the particular cadence of a small group reading aloud.
The cadence is familiar.
The cadence is the sound of Wednesday.

They stand for closing prayer.
They close their eyes.
She closes her eyes.
Her Bible is in her hand.
The pages are open.
The pencil annotations face upward.

The first shot is behind her.

The sound is wrong for this room.
This room has only ever contained voices, prayers, the turning of pages, and the buzzing of the fluorescent light.
The sound does not belong to any of these categories.

She opens her eyes.
She is on the floor.
She does not remember falling.
The chair is beside her.
Her Bible is on the floor.

The young man is standing.
He is holding a gun.

He is firing into people on the floor.
He is pacing.
He fires into the body of the pastor.
Then into another.

He fires into her Bible.

She wrote “amen” in the margin of Romans 12:10.
“Be kindly affectioned one to another.”
She wrote it in pencil because pencil can be erased.
She never erased it.
The bullet passes through Romans.

She is under the table.
She can see his shoes.
He walks past her.
He fires at someone praying.
He tells her to shut up.
She stops.
He walks to the door.
He turns.
He looks at the room.
He leaves.

The fluorescent light is still buzzing.
The chairs are overturned.
The study sheets are on the floor.

The Bible is on the floor.
Open to a page she had turned so many times the edge was soft.
A bullet hole through the centre.
The pencil annotations around the hole are still legible.
“Amen” in the margin.
Still there.

The Bible is on the floor. A bullet hole through Romans. The pencil note survived the bullet. The “amen” is yours.

Part III – The Autopsy

Bob and Gman arrive the following morning.
The fellowship hall is sealed.
The folding chairs are where they fell.

Gman looks at the study sheets on the floor.
The Bibles.
The overturned chairs.

“They handed him a Bible,” he says.

Bob waits.

“They gave him a study sheet.
They discussed Scripture with him for forty-five minutes.
The woman in her usual chair had annotated her Bible for thirty years.
She wrote ‘amen’ in the margin of a passage about kindness.
She turned those pages so many times the edges were soft.”

He pauses.

“He sat among people holding books full of notes about love.
He sat for forty-five minutes.
Then they closed their eyes.”

Bob sees the Bible on the floor.
The bullet hole.
The pencil around it.

“The closing of the eyes is the maximum expression of trust,” Gman says.
“The body in prayer with eyes closed has elected to be completely vulnerable.
He fired during maximum vulnerability.
He fired into the Bible.
The bullet went through a page about kindness.
The pencil note survived the bullet.”

They leave the fellowship hall.

The fluorescent light is still buzzing.

The Bible is still on the floor.

The page is still soft.

The note is still there.

Five months later. Same year. A different certainty.

Part IV – The Record

Dylann Roof was convicted of thirty-three federal counts, including hate crimes resulting in death. He was sentenced to death. He represented himself during the penalty phase. He told the jury he felt he “had to do it.” An appeals court upheld the sentence, writing: “No cold record or careful parsing of statutes and precedents can capture the full horror of what Roof did.” At the bond hearing, two days after the shooting, family members of the victims addressed Roof. One daughter of a victim said: “I forgive you. And have mercy on your soul.” The Confederate flag was removed from the South Carolina statehouse grounds one month after the shooting. It had flown there for fifty-four years. The Bible study resumed. The fellowship hall was cleaned. The fluorescent light still buzzes.

Chapter 6

Abomination

Part 0 – The Ordinary

You tried on three shirts.

Your boyfriend said the first one was fine.

You said it was not.

This is your Saturday.

You drive with the windows down.

You sing along to a song you both know.

The singing is bad.

The singing is the point.

You order a rum and Coke.

You bend the straw.

You always bend the straw.

You dance.

The bass is in your ribs.

This room is safe.

This room has always been safe.

Part I – The Event

On June 12, 2016, Omar Mateen entered the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida, during "Latin Night."
He was armed with a semi-automatic rifle and a handgun.

He killed forty-nine people and wounded fifty-three.
It was the deadliest mass shooting in United States history at that time.

The victims were predominantly young, Latino, and LGBTQ+.

Mateen called 911 during the attack and pledged allegiance to ISIS.
His father said he had been enraged by seeing two men kissing in public.
His religious convictions, his homophobia, and his interpretation of Islamic law converged into a single act against people on a dance floor.

He was killed in a shootout with police.

Part II – The Wound

He got dressed at his boyfriend's apartment.

He tried on three shirts before choosing the fourth.
His boyfriend said the first one was fine.
He said the first one was not fine.
This is their argument.
It is not an argument.
It is the sound two people make when they have been together long enough to disagree about shirts.

This is their Saturday.
This has been their Saturday for eight months.
Eight months is not long.
Eight months feels like the beginning of something that has no planned end.

The apartment is small.
The bedroom has one window.
The window faces the parking lot.
The parking lot is lit by a single orange light.
The light makes the room warm at night even with the blinds closed.

The mirror is on the back of the closet door.
He checks himself.
He adjusts the collar.
He turns.
He does not ask again.
The fourth shirt is correct.
The fourth shirt has always been what the first shirt was not.
He does not know the difference.
He knows the feeling.

His boyfriend is ready.
His boyfriend has been ready for twenty minutes.
His boyfriend gets ready faster.
This is also their argument.

They drive.
The windows are down.
The radio is on.
They sing along to a song they both know.
The singing is bad.
The singing is the point.
The air is Florida warm.
Night warm.
The kind of warm that enters the car and stays.
The kind of warm that makes the skin soft and the city feel closer.

The Pulse is on Orange Avenue.
The sign is lit.
Purple and pink.
The queue moves.
They pay.
They enter.

The music is reggaeton.
The lights pulse.
The room is full.
Latin Night.
The crowd is brown and young and moving.

He orders a drink at the bar.
Rum and Coke.
He stirs it with the straw.
The straw is red.
He bends it.
He always bends the straw.
His boyfriend says this is a waste of a straw.
He says it is not.
The bent straw is a signature.
It is the smallest possible expression of preference.
He exercises it every time.

His boyfriend is dancing.
He watches from the bar.
He drinks.
He watches the way you watch someone you have been watching for eight months and have not yet tired of watching.
The body on the dance floor moves in a way that is specific to this person.
The shoulders.
The slight tilt of the head.
Eight months and he can find him in a crowd by the tilt.

He finishes the drink.
He joins the floor.
The bass enters his body.
The bass is in his ribs.
The bass is in his teeth.
The room is a single pulse.
Two hundred bodies in synchronisation with a speaker system and a DJ who is earning his fee.

He is dancing in a room full of people who are like him.
In a city where being like him is not always safe.
Not every street.
Not every bar.
Not every family dinner.
But this room.
This room is safe.
This room has always been safe.
The walls hold the music in.
The walls hold the judgment out.
The door is the border.
Inside the border, the body can move without calculation.

His boyfriend puts a hand on his waist.
The hand is warm.

The hand is familiar.
Eight months of this hand.

The hours pass.
The crowd thins slightly.
The music shifts.
Slower.
Heavier.
The DJ reads the room.
The room is tired and happy and close to done.

It is 2:00 AM.

The first shots are from the entrance.
The music absorbs them for a beat.
Then the music does not absorb them.

Bodies drop.
He drops.
He pulls his boyfriend down.
The floor is wet.
Not drinks.
Something else.

He presses against the wall.
Bodies stack around him.
Some are moving.
Some are not.
The music has stopped.
The speakers are still on.
The room hums.

His boyfriend is beside him.
His boyfriend is not responding.
He holds his boyfriend's hand.
The first shirt was fine.
Eight months of Saturday nights.

The first shirt was always fine.

The hand on his waist.

The tilt of the head he could find in any crowd.

The hand does not hold back.

He calls 911.

He whispers.

He texts his mother.

He types with one thumb.

The other hand holds his boyfriend's hand.

He types: "Momma I love you."

The phone glows in the dark.

Around him, other phones glow.

Dozens of screens.

Messages being typed with one thumb.

The room is lit by the light of people saying goodbye.

The last light in the room is not a spotlight.

It is not a disco ball.

It is a phone screen.

The message says what every message says.

The phone screens glow in the dark. The message says what every message says. The bent straw is yours.

Part III – The Autopsy

Bob and Gman arrive when the club has been cleared.
The dance floor is empty.
The speakers are off.
The lights are off.
The bar is intact.
Glasses still on it.

Gman stands in the centre of the floor.

“His God told him this dance floor was an abomination,” he says.

Bob waits.

“He entered a room where people had gathered to be free from judgment.
He brought the judgment.
He brought it as ammunition.”

He looks at the bar.
A glass with a bent straw.

“The man against the wall had tried on three shirts before leaving.
His boyfriend said the first one was fine.
Eight months together.
Saturday nights.”

He pauses.

“The man typed a message to his mother while holding his boyfriend’s hand.
The hand did not hold back.
The phone screen was the last light in the room.
The message was one word repeated across dozens of screens.”

Bob looks at the dance floor.
The floor is marked.

“The thing the shooter’s God condemned,” Gman says,
“was the last word typed in the building.”

They leave the club.

The speakers remain off.

The lights remain off.

The bent straw remains in the glass.

Part IV – The Record

The FBI investigated whether Omar Mateen had acted alone or as part of a broader network. The investigation concluded he was self-radicalised. Mateen's wife, Noor Salman, was charged with aiding and abetting. She was acquitted. The site of the Pulse nightclub was designated a National Memorial. A museum and memorial are under construction. Latin Night has continued at other venues in Orlando. The bent straw is not part of the memorial. The phone messages typed in the dark are.

Chapter 7

Sabbath

Part 0 – The Ordinary

Your daughter drives you every Saturday.
The drive takes ten minutes.
You do not speak much.
The words are not needed.
You use a walker.
Green tennis balls on the feet.
You chose green.
You sit in the third row.
You have sat there since your husband died.
Before that, you sat together in the fifth.
You moved forward.
Closer to the Torah.
The melody washes over you.
The melody is older than the building.
Your grandmother knew this melody.

Part I – The Event

On the morning of October 27, 2018, Robert Bowers entered the Tree of Life synagogue in the Squirrel Hill neighbourhood of Pittsburgh during Shabbat services. He was armed with a semi-automatic rifle and three handguns.

He killed eleven worshippers and wounded six others.

The victims ranged in age from 54 to 97.

Bowers had posted antisemitic content online.
Before the shooting he posted: “I can’t sit by and watch my people get slaughtered. Screw your optics, I’m going in.”
He told a SWAT officer: “They’re committing genocide to my people. I just want to kill Jews.”

He was convicted of sixty-three federal counts.
He was sentenced to death.

Part II – The Wound

She wakes at seven.

She has woken at seven for sixty years.

The body does not need the clock.

The body is the clock.

The apartment is on the second floor.

She has lived here since her husband died.

The house was too large.

The stairs were too many.

The apartment has one flight.

One flight is manageable.

She makes tea.

Not coffee.

She stopped drinking coffee at seventy.

The doctor said it was affecting her blood pressure.

She does not miss it.

Tea is quieter.

Tea is what she drinks now.

The kitchen is small.

The counter has a photograph.

Her husband.

Younger.

Smiling.

He is holding a fish.

She does not remember where the photograph was taken.

She remembers the fish was too small to keep.

He kept it anyway.

He was like that.

She dresses slowly.

This is not frailty.

This is the pace of a body that has negotiated with itself for eighty-four years.

The negotiations are daily.

The knees.

The shoulders.

The fingers that do not close fully around the buttons.

She wears a skirt.

Navy.

A blouse.

White.

She has dressed for synagogue the same way for fifty years.

The clothes change.

The principle does not.

Her daughter calls at 8:15.

“I’m leaving now.”

This is the call.

It happens every Saturday.

The call means: ten minutes.

She uses a walker.

The walker is aluminium.

It was prescribed by her doctor.

She resisted it for a year.

The year of resistance ended when she fell in the supermarket.

The fall was not serious.

The embarrassment was.

The walker has tennis balls on the feet so it does not scratch the floor.

The tennis balls are green.

She chose green.

The choice was hers.

The physical therapist offered yellow.

She said green.

This is a small thing.

Small things are the things that remain when large things are taken.

The green was her decision.

The walker was not.

Her daughter pulls up.
The car is silver.
The same silver car for six years.
She opens the door.
She unfolds the walker.
The walker clicks into position.
She steps out.
The morning is October cool.
The leaves in Squirrel Hill are turning.
The maples are red.
The oaks are holding.

They drive.
They do not speak much.
This is not tension.
This is fifty years of Saturdays.
The words are not needed.
The daughter knows the route.
The mother knows the daughter knows.
The silence is the vehicle.

She enters the synagogue.
She has entered this synagogue for fifty years.
The door is heavy.
A younger man holds it for her.
She nods.
She does not thank him.
She nods.
The nod is the thanks.
At eighty-four, the nod is sufficient.

The lobby smells of furniture polish and old carpet.
The carpet has been the same carpet for thirty years.
It is maroon.

It was maroon when her husband was alive.
It is still maroon.

She walks to the third row.
She has sat in the third row since her husband died.
Before that, they sat in the fifth row together.
His tallit was blue and white.
He folded it the same way every week.
After the service.
Precise.
The fringe aligned.
He put it in the velvet bag.
The bag was embroidered with his name.
She gave it to their son.

After he died, she moved forward.
Closer to the bimah.
Closer to the Torah.
Two rows closer.
She did not plan this.
Her legs walked to the third row and sat down.
The body made the decision.
The body wanted to be closer.

She sits.
The walker is beside her.
The green tennis balls touch the maroon carpet.
The carpet that has been maroon for thirty years.
That was maroon when he was alive.

The rabbi begins.
The Hebrew washes over her.
She does not follow every word.
She follows the melody.
The melody is older than the building.
Older than the country.

Older than the carpet.
The melody was brought here from somewhere else by someone who fled somewhere else.
It was carried in a body across an ocean.
Her grandmother carried it.
Her grandmother sang it in a kitchen in Vilna before the kitchen ceased to exist.
The melody survived the kitchen.
The melody survived the ocean.
It survived the century.
It is here.
In this room.
In her ears.
The melody her grandmother knew.

The shooting begins.

She does not stand.
She cannot stand quickly.
The walker is beside her.

The sound is loud and wrong.
The building is old.
The walls carry the sound.
The sound and the melody are in the room at the same time.
The melody and the bullet occupy the room at the same time.
The melody her grandmother carried from Vilna and the bullet that was loaded this morning share the same air.

She sits.
She does not cover her head.
She does not close her eyes.
She watches the doorway.

A man enters.
He is holding a weapon she has never seen except on television.
He fires.

The woman in the second row falls forward.

The man in the aisle drops.

She sits in the third row.

The walker is beside her.

The green tennis balls are still on the maroon carpet.

The walker is still there.

She chose green.

The choice was hers.

The walker is beside the chair. The tennis balls are still green. The melody is yours.

Part III – The Autopsy

Bob and Gman arrive when the sanctuary has been cleared.
The pews are marked.
The carpet is marked.

Gman stands in the aisle.
He looks at the third row.

“The melody she was listening to was brought here by someone who fled,” he says.
“The synagogue was built by people who survived the last time this happened.”

Bob waits.

“She put green tennis balls on her walker so it wouldn’t scratch their floor.
She moved to the third row when her husband died.
She wanted to be closer to the Torah.
She was eighty-four.
She had been coming for fifty years.”

He pauses.

“The killer posted online that Jews were committing genocide.
The genocide was an eighty-four-year-old woman with a walker listening to a melody her grandmother knew.”

The Code records the physics of recurrence.

“The melody was brought here by someone who fled,” Gman says.
“The killing followed the melody.
The tennis balls are still green.
The floor is not scratched.
The chair in the third row is empty.”

They leave the synagogue.

The walker remains.
Beside the chair.
In the third row.

The tennis balls are green.

The floor is not scratched.

Part IV – The Record

Robert Bowers was convicted of sixty-three federal counts, including eleven counts of obstruction of free exercise of religion resulting in death. He was sentenced to death. During the trial, he showed no emotion. Prosecutors read the names of the eleven victims. The oldest was ninety-seven. The youngest was fifty-four. The Tree of Life synagogue announced plans to rebuild. The plans include a memorial and a centre for combating antisemitism. The congregation continued to hold Shabbat services at alternate locations. The melody continued. The walker was returned to the family.

Chapter 8

Replacement

Part 0 – The Ordinary

You are at the store on a Saturday.

Your oldest is in the cart.

He is too old for the cart.

His legs are tired from football yesterday.

Your youngest is in a carrier against your husband’s chest.

Two months old.

Your husband’s hand covers the baby’s entire back.

You have a list.

On the back of an envelope.

Your handwriting.

Pencils.

Folders.

Glue sticks.

You compare prices.

The difference is forty cents.

You pick the cheaper one.

Part I – The Event

On August 3, 2019, Patrick Crusius drove approximately ten hours from Allen, Texas, to El Paso, a predominantly Hispanic border city.

He entered the Walmart at Cielo Vista Mall at 10:39 AM on a Saturday morning.
He opened fire with a semi-automatic rifle.

Twenty-three people were killed.
Twenty-three others were injured.
The victims were predominantly Mexican-American and Mexican nationals.

A two-month-old baby was injured after both parents used their bodies as shields.
Both parents were killed.

Minutes before the attack, Crusius posted a manifesto citing the “Great Replacement” theory – the belief that white people are being systematically replaced by non-white immigrants.
He wrote: “This attack is a response to the Hispanic invasion of Texas.”

He drove ten hours.
They were buying school supplies.

Part II – The Wound

Saturday morning.

The house wakes in stages.

The baby wakes first.

The baby always wakes first.

Two months old.

The cry is not loud.

It is the sound of a body that has not yet learned to wait.

Her husband lifts the baby.

He holds the baby against his chest.

His hand covers the baby's entire back.

The fingers spread.

Eleven pounds.

The hand weighs more than the baby's head.

He walks the hallway.

The baby quiets.

The hallway works.

It has worked every morning for two months.

The oldest wakes next.

He is nine.

He comes downstairs in shorts and a T-shirt.

The T-shirt is from his football team.

Green.

Number 7.

He played yesterday.

His team lost.

He does not want to talk about it.

He wants cereal.

She makes breakfast.

Eggs for her and her husband.

Cereal for the boy.

The boy pours the milk himself.

He pours too much.

The cereal floats.

He eats it floating.

He does not acknowledge the excess milk.

She does not correct it.

Saturday mornings are not for corrections.

The baby is in the high chair.

The baby does not eat cereal.

The baby watches.

The baby watches everything.

Two months is the age of watching.

She writes the list.

On the back of an envelope.

The envelope is from the electric company.

She paid the bill last week.

The envelope is empty.

She uses the back because she does not want to waste paper.

Her handwriting is small and neat.

She writes in pen because pencil smears in her pocket.

Pencils.

Folders.

Erasers.

Glue sticks.

A binder for the oldest.

School starts in ten days.

The list is the preparation.

The preparation is the structure.

Without the list, the store is chaos.

With the list, the store is a sequence.

Her husband asks if he should drive.

She says yes.

He always drives on Saturdays.

She holds the list.
She holds the baby.
The boy sits in the back.
He is wearing sandals.
He did not want to wear shoes.
The sandals are a concession.

The drive to Walmart takes fifteen minutes.
They park in the far lot.
The near lot is full.
Saturday morning.
Back-to-school.
The parking lot is a census of families.

They enter.
The air conditioning is immediate.
The store smells of plastic and new fabric and rubber soles.
The particular smell of back-to-school.
The smell is anticipation made commercial.

She puts the baby in the carrier against her husband's chest.
She puts the nine-year-old in the shopping cart.
He is too old for the cart.
He is in it because his legs are tired.
He played football yesterday.
His legs hurt.
He will not admit he wanted to be in it.
He sits with his arms crossed.
The arms are a defence against the indignity.
The cart rolls.

They have a list.
The list is on the back of the envelope.
Her handwriting.
She crosses off pencils.
She is looking for glue sticks.

She is comparing prices.

The difference between the two brands is forty cents.

She is deciding whether forty cents matters.

She picks the cheaper one.

Forty cents is a gallon of gas.

Forty cents is two bananas.

Forty cents is a decision she makes seven times per shopping trip.

The decisions accumulate.

The accumulation is the budget.

The store is full of families.

Other carts.

Other lists.

Other nine-year-olds who do not want to be in carts.

The aisles are bright.

Saturday morning.

Aisle seven.

School supplies.

The first shots are distant.

At the entrance.

She does not process them as shots.

She processes them as something falling.

Metal on concrete.

Then screaming.

The sound of screaming in a Walmart is wrong in a specific way.

The acoustics are too large.

The ceiling is too high.

The sound bounces and arrives from multiple directions.

Her husband pulls the cart.

She grabs the oldest.

They move toward the back.

The shooting is closer.

Aisles are not cover.
Aisles are shelving.
Shelving is not structure.

They lie on the floor.
Her husband covers the baby.
The baby is between his chest and the floor.
The hand that covers the entire back.
Eleven pounds.
The hand weighs more than the baby's head.
The husband presses his body into the floor.
The baby is between him and the tile.
The baby makes no sound.

The shooting passes their aisle.
It moves.
They are on the floor.

The list is still in her hand.
Her handwriting.
Pencils crossed off.
Glue sticks not yet found.
Forty cents.

The list is on the floor beside a shell casing.
The envelope is addressed to the electric company.
She used the back because she did not want to waste paper.
She did not want to waste forty cents on glue sticks.
She was careful with things.

The list is still in her hand.

The list is still in your hand. Pencils crossed off. Glue sticks not yet found. The forty cents is yours.

Part III – The Autopsy

Bob and Gman arrive when the store has been cleared.
The aisles are marked.
Shopping carts are where they stopped.

Gman stands in the school supply aisle.
Folders on the shelf.
Erasers.
Glue sticks.

“He drove ten hours,” he says.

Bob waits.

“Ten hours is not impulse.
Ten hours is pilgrimage.
He chose El Paso because El Paso is eighty percent Hispanic.
He chose Walmart because Walmart on a Saturday morning is full of families.
He chose back-to-school season because back-to-school season means children.”

He looks at the aisle.

“The manifesto called it invasion.
He drove ten hours to stop the invasion.
The invasion was a list on the back of an envelope.
The envelope was addressed to the electric company because she did not want to waste paper.
The invasion was a mother comparing prices on glue sticks to save forty cents.
The invasion was a nine-year-old in a shopping cart because his legs were tired.
The invasion was a two-month-old in a carrier against his father’s chest.
The father’s hand covered the baby’s entire back.”

The Code records the physics of displacement.

“The replacement was her handwriting,” Gman says.
“The replacement was forty cents.”

They leave the store.

The carts remain where they stopped.

The school supply aisle is intact.

The glue sticks are on the shelf.

The list is on the floor.

Part IV – The Record

Patrick Crusius pleaded guilty to ninety federal charges, including hate crimes and firearms offences. He was sentenced to ninety consecutive life sentences. He is not eligible for the death penalty under the plea agreement. In allocution, multiple family members addressed the court. The mother of one victim said: “You took my daughter’s life for nothing.” Crusius’s manifesto remains accessible online. It has been cited in subsequent manifestos by other attackers in Christchurch, New Zealand, and Halle, Germany. The Walmart was repaired and reopened. A memorial was placed in the parking lot. The school supply aisle is in the same location.

Saturation

Optimal Stopping

This book contains ten chapters.
It could contain ten thousand.

Every chapter was a day.
An ordinary day that became the day.
A morning with braids.
A boy pointing at a train.
A nurse parking in her spot.
A tie adjusted in a car.
A turban tied while a grandson watched.
A Bible carried for thirty years.
Cookies baked with a seven-year-old.
A Saturday night.
A drive to synagogue.
A school supply list.

These were the things in the room when the certainty arrived.

The certainty was always the same:
I am right.
God told me.
The book told me.

The manifesto told me.
Therefore you are not human.
Therefore this is not murder.
Therefore the children are collateral.
Therefore the cookies and the shell casings belong on the same floor.

The objects remain.
The people do not.

The elastic bands held.
The train shirt did not save the boy.
The coffee went cold in the cup holder.
The tie is still centred.
The turban unwound across the carpet.
The pencil note survived the bullet.
The sprinkles are still red.
The phone screens stopped glowing.
The tennis balls are still green.
The glue sticks were never found.

SYSTEM: “The Department of Justice remains committed to the vigorous prosecution of hate crimes and acts of domestic terrorism. Federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies continue to coordinate on prevention and response. The Administration reaffirms its commitment to the safety and security of all Americans and extends its thoughts to all affected communities.”

The machine runs.
The statements are issued.
The reviews continue.
The memorials are built.
The school supply aisle is in the same location.

Now the book turns.

It does not turn to comfort.
It does not turn to meaning.
It turns to you.

The Architecture of Your Certainty

Name the authority you trust.

Name the belief you will not abandon.

Name the people who are wrong about that belief.

Name what should be done about their wrongness.

Name the mask you are wearing.

The shooter named his authority.
The bomber named his.
The driver who drove ten hours named his.

They were certain.

Are you?

The body knows the answer.
The body has known it since the first chapter.
The body rejects all certainties that produce a child on the floor.

Trust the body.

Don’t be a cunt.
Be kind.

Part IV - Iran

The God Cannot Justify This

Chapter 1

FATWA

Part 0 – The Ordinary

You are writing a letter to your sister. You are twenty-three. You have been in this cell for four years. The paper is smuggled. The pen is shared. You write small. You tell her about the light that comes through the high window at 4pm. You tell her the food is worse but you are not thinner. You lie about the food. You do not lie about the light. You fold the letter into a square the size of a matchbox. You will not send it today. You will send it when the next transfer happens. You put the letter inside your shoe. Inside the left shoe. You always use the left shoe.

Part I – The Event

In July 1988, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini issued a fatwa ordering the execution of political prisoners who remained loyal to the Mojahedin-e Khalq Organisation. Three-member commissions, known as “Death Commissions,” were formed in at least thirty-two cities across Iran. The commissions consisted of a religious judge, a prosecutor, and an intelligence representative. Prisoners were brought before the commissions individually. Proceedings lasted between one and five minutes. One question was asked: “Do you still support the Mojahedin?” Those who answered yes were returned to their cells. Within hours, they were dead. Those who used the regime’s term “Monafeqin” – hypocrites – were spared. The distinction between life and death was a single word. Estimates of those executed range from 2,800 to 30,000. The bodies were transported by truck to Khavaran cemetery and other locations and buried in mass graves. Families were not informed. When they arrived at the prisons, they were told their relatives had been transferred. No destination was given. The executions continued for approximately five months. In August 2025, the regime sent bulldozers to flatten Section 41 of Behesht-e Zahra cemetery – one of the burial sites. In July 2024, the UN Special Rapporteur classified the executions as genocide.

Part II – The Wound

She is twenty-three. She has been here for four years. She was arrested at nineteen, at a demonstration, carrying a leaflet she had not written. The leaflet was in her bag. She had not read it. She had picked it up from the ground because it was blowing in the wind and she thought it was litter.

She is brought to a room with three men behind a table. There is no chair for her. She stands.

The man in the centre asks the question.

She has heard the question before. The women in the adjacent cells have told her. Some women came back from the room. Some did not.

The question: “Do you still support the Mojahedin?”

She thinks of her sister. She thinks of the letter in her left shoe. She thinks of the light at 4pm.

She says yes.

She does not say yes because she supports the Mojahedin. She says yes because the alternative is the word “Monafeqin,” and the word means “hypocrite,” and she has decided that the one thing she will not do in this room is be a hypocrite.

The man writes something. She cannot see what he writes. She is led out a different door than the one she came in.

The corridor is longer than she expected.

She is twenty-three. The corridor ends.

The letter is still in the left shoe. The shoe is in a mass grave at Khavaran, or it is not. The grave was bulldozed in August 2025. The bulldozer did not know about the letter. The bulldozer did not know about the light at 4pm.

The letter is still in the left shoe. The shoe is in the earth. The light still comes through the high window at 4pm. The window is yours.

Part III – The Autopsy

Bob: One question.

Gman: One question.

Bob: A binary gate. Yes or no. Live or die.

Gman: The system reduced an entire human life to a single-bit input. One question. One word. The commission did not need to know her name, her age, her crime, her sentence. It needed one data point: classification. The classification was the execution. The trial was a sorting algorithm.

Bob: She picked up a leaflet from the ground.

Gman: The leaflet is irrelevant. The system does not process context. It processes category. Are you inside the category or outside the category. Inside: death. Outside: life. The boundary between the two is one word. One word that takes less than one second to speak. The regime built a machine that converts a fraction of a second into a mass grave.

Bob: The corridor.

Gman: The corridor is the distance between the question and the answer the body already knows. The body knew before she entered the room. The body knew before she said the word. The body knows that a system which asks you to betray your own mind in order to survive has already killed you. She chose the word “yes” because the alternative was a living death. The corridor was shorter than the living death.

Bob: The fatwa. A religious decree.

Gman: The authority. A man in a room issues a sentence in God’s name. The sentence travels to thirty-two cities. In each city, three men sit behind a table. In each room, one question is asked. The question is not a question. It is a gate. The gate was designed by a man who believed he spoke for God. The prisoners died because one man’s certainty was codified into law. The fatwa is not religion. The fatwa is what religion becomes when it is given a pen and a death warrant.

Bob: What if the man was wrong?

Gman: The system has no mechanism for that question. That is the structural defect. A system that routes divine authority through a human interpreter but provides no method for verifying the signal is not a system of faith. It is a system of obedience with a catastrophic single point of failure. The interpreter cannot be wrong because the system's entire architecture depends on the interpreter being right. The question "what if he is wrong" is not a question the system can process. It can only delete the questioner. That is what the Death Commissions did. They did not answer the question. They executed everyone who might ask it.

Part IV – The Record

The fatwa stated: “Those who are in prisons throughout the country and remain steadfast in their support for the Mojahedin are waging war on God and are condemned to execution.” Grand Ayatollah Hossein-Ali Montazeri, the designated successor to Khomeini, confronted the Death Commission of Tehran on August 15, 1988. The audio was released in 2016. On the tape, Montazeri told the commission: “The greatest crime in the Islamic Republic, for which history will condemn us, has been committed by you.” He was stripped of his title and placed under house arrest for the remainder of his life. Mostafa Pour-Mohammadi, a member of the Tehran Death Commission, defended the executions in a 2019 interview, stating that newly identified supporters of the Mojahedin would face the same punishment. Ebrahim Raisi, deputy prosecutor on the Tehran Death Commission, served as President of the Islamic Republic from 2021 to 2024. No member of any Death Commission has been prosecuted in Iran. In July 2022, a Swedish court sentenced Hamid Nouri to life in prison for his role in the executions. It was the first conviction anywhere in the world related to the 1988 massacre. The Islamic Republic has never acknowledged the executions. The graves at Khavaran were bulldozed in August 2025.

Chapter 2

STONE

Part 0 – The Ordinary

You are cooking for a man whose wife has died. You cook because your aunt asked you. The widower's children need to eat. You bring rice in a pot. The pot is dented. The handle is wrapped in cloth so it does not burn your hand. You set the pot on his table. You do not sit. You do not eat. You walk home. The walk takes eleven minutes. You count the minutes because the walk is the only part of the day that belongs to you. Eleven minutes between his door and yours. You have made this walk nine times. Each time you bring the pot. Each time you bring it back empty.

Part I – The Event

On August 15, 1986, Soraya Manutchehri, thirty-five years old, was stoned to death in the village of Kuhpayeh, Iran, after being convicted of adultery. Her husband, Ghorban-Ali, a prison guard, sought to marry a fourteen-year-old girl and did not wish to pay child support for his existing family. He conspired with the village mullah to accuse Soraya of infidelity. Her only contact with another man was cooking for a recently widowed neighbour at the request of her aunt. Under Iran's Islamic Penal Code, Article 102, a woman convicted of adultery is buried up to her chest. Article 104 specifies that the stones used shall not be so large as to kill the person by one or two throws, and shall not be so small as to be defined as pebbles. Under the same code, if a man is accused of adultery, his wife must prove his guilt. If a woman is accused, she must prove her innocence. Soraya's silence at trial was recorded as confession. Her father threw the first stone. Her two sons were made to throw. The stoning lasted several hours. Witnesses described a carnival atmosphere.

Part II – The Wound

She is standing in a pit. She has known this pit her whole life. It is in the square where the children play. It was dug this morning by men she has known since she was a girl.

She is buried to her chest. Her arms are beneath the earth. She cannot move her arms. The earth is packed tight. It smells like the earth in the garden where she grew the herbs she used in the rice.

Her father is standing six feet away. He is holding a stone. He has not looked at her face since she was brought to the square. He throws. He misses. He throws again. He misses again. A woman in the crowd says the misses are a sign of innocence. No one responds to the woman.

Her husband throws. He does not miss.

The stone hits her shoulder. It does not kill her. That is the design.

Her sons are brought forward. They are boys. They hold the stones the way boys hold things they do not understand. They throw. One hits the earth beside her. One hits her arm beneath the surface. She feels it through the packed dirt.

The widower is given a stone. He looks at her. He sets the stone on the ground. He walks away. He is the only person in the square who walks away. He is the only person in the square who ate the rice.

The crowd joins. The carnival begins.

The stones are not too large. The stones are not too small. The law specifies. The law specifies the dimensions of the instrument that kills a woman whose only crime was carrying a pot of rice across a village.

The stoning lasts hours.

The pot is on the shelf. The cloth is still wrapped around the handle. The eleven-minute walk has no one on it. The pot is yours.

Part III – The Autopsy

Bob: The law specifies the size of the stones.

Gman: Read that again. The law specifies the size of the stones. Not too large. Not too small. Someone sat in a room and wrote that sentence. Someone with a pen and a legal education and a beard and a title calibrated the instrument of death to maximise suffering. This is not rage. Rage uses whatever is at hand. This is architecture. The suffering is engineered. The duration is designed. The law does not permit a quick death because a quick death would not be punishment. The punishment requires that she feel every stone. The law is the cruelty. The stone is the delivery mechanism.

Bob: The gendered asymmetry.

Gman: If a man is accused, the woman must prove his guilt. If a woman is accused, she must prove her innocence. The asymmetry is not a flaw in the system. It is the system. The law was written to produce this outcome. A man who wants to discard his wife has a legal mechanism to kill her. The mechanism is God's law. The mullah is the notary. The village is the executioner. The fourteen-year-old girl the husband wants to marry is the motive. God's law is the instrument. The system worked exactly as designed.

Bob: The father. The sons.

Gman: The system requires the family to participate. The father throws first. The sons throw. This is not incidental. It is structural. The regime understands that a killing carried out by strangers is an atrocity. A killing carried out by the family is an erasure. If the father throws, the father cannot mourn. If the sons throw, the sons cannot remember a mother who was innocent. The participation is the silencing mechanism. The family does not grieve a woman they helped kill. The regime converts the family into accomplices so that no one is left to say: she was innocent. She was only carrying a pot of rice.

Bob: But the law. Someone wrote it. Someone decided that this was God's will.

Gman: Every religion that has ever claimed divine authority over the human body has produced this moment. The names change. The geography changes. The book changes. The structure does not change. A man claims to speak for God. The claim

cannot be verified. The claim is codified into law. The law produces a body on the ground. Every single time. The structure is not Islam. The structure is not Christianity. The structure is not Judaism. The structure is certainty plus authority plus a body that cannot fight back. The religion is the delivery system. The certainty is the payload. The body on the ground is the output. Every time. Without exception. Show me a religion that has never produced a body on the ground and I will show you a religion that has never held power.

Part IV – The Record

Iran's Islamic Penal Code, Article 102: "An adulterous man shall be buried in a ditch up to near his waist and an adulterous woman up to near her chest and then stoned to death." Article 104: "The size of the stone used in stoning shall not be too large to kill the convict by one or two throws and at the same time shall not be too small to be called a pebble." Amnesty International has documented at least one hundred and fifty stonings in Iran between 1979 and 2009. Iran revised its penal code in 2013. The revised code retained stoning as a hadd punishment. French-Iranian journalist Freidoune Sahebjam documented Soraya's execution in a 1990 book. The book was banned in Iran. A 2009 film adaptation was banned in Iran. In 2014, Iranian writer Golrokh Ebrahimi Iraee was imprisoned for writing an unpublished fictional story about a woman who watched the film and burned a Quran. She was imprisoned for a story she wrote in a notebook in her own home. The notebook was confiscated during a home raid. The story had not been shown to anyone. The crime was the thought. The punishment was the cage. The regime does not distinguish between the stone and the sentence.

Chapter 3

NEDA

Part 0 – The Ordinary

You are standing on a street in Tehran. It is June. The air is warm. You are not marching. You are watching. Your music teacher is beside you. You wanted to see. You are twenty-six. You studied philosophy. You studied music. You are wearing a white headscarf. Loose. The way you always wear it. Your car is parked two blocks away. You left the air conditioning running. A small waste of fuel. You will be back in the car soon.

Part I – The Event

On June 20, 2009, Neda Agha-Soltan, twenty-six, was shot and killed during protests following the disputed re-election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. She was not a protester. She was a bystander, standing near the demonstrations with her music teacher. She was shot once, in the chest, from a rooftop. The bullet was fired by a member of the Basij militia. She fell on the street. A bystander pressed his hands to her chest. Blood appeared at the corner of her mouth and spread across her white headscarf. She died within approximately forty seconds. A nearby bystander recorded her death on a cell phone. The video was uploaded to the internet and viewed by millions within hours. The Iranian government denied responsibility. It subsequently claimed the video was staged, that she was shot by protesters, and that the incident was a Western intelligence operation. Her family was forbidden from holding a public memorial. Her grave was later vandalised.

Part II – The Wound

She is standing. She is not doing anything. She is a woman standing on a street in a warm city in June, standing beside her music teacher, watching a crowd of people who want something she also wants but is not marching for. She is watching.

The bullet enters beneath her left collarbone.

She falls. She does not fall dramatically. She falls the way a person falls when the structure that holds them upright is removed without warning. She folds.

A man she does not know kneels beside her. He presses his hands to her chest. His hands are the hands of a stranger who understands that a woman is dying and that hands are the only thing he has.

Blood appears at the corner of her mouth. The blood is dark. The blood moves across her cheek and into the white headscarf and the headscarf is no longer white.

Her eyes are open. They are looking at the sky, which is the sky of Tehran in June, which is blue.

Her eyes go still. They do not close. They go still.

The phone records everything. The phone does not help. The phone does not apply pressure. The phone records forty seconds of a woman dying on a street where she was standing because she wanted to see.

The car is still running two blocks away. The air conditioning is still on. The headscarf is no longer white. The forty seconds are yours.

Part III – The Autopsy

Bob: A bystander.

Gman: The regime did not shoot a protester. It shot a witness. She was not marching. She was not chanting. She was standing. The Basij sniper's target was a woman who was watching. The regime's deepest terror is not rebellion. It is observation. A bullet aimed at a bystander is not crowd control. It is a message: even watching is a crime. The regime requires not just obedience but blindness.

Bob: The phone.

Gman: The phone changed nothing and changed everything. It changed nothing because the regime survived. It changed everything because the forty seconds cannot be unrecorded. The regime can deny, rewrite, fabricate, vandalise the grave. It cannot unfilm the forty seconds. The regime understood this. In every subsequent crackdown – 2019, 2022, 2026 – the first act is to shut down the internet. The regime learned from Neda's death that the most dangerous weapon in a civilian's hand is not a stone or a gun. It is a camera.

Bob: The world watched.

Gman: The world watched and did nothing. This is the second mechanism. The video was seen by millions. Vigils were held. Speeches were made. Hashtags were created. The regime survived. The gap between witnessing and acting is the regime's operating margin. The theocracy does not fear exposure. It fears consequence. There has been no consequence. Neda is still dead. The regime is still governing. The gap between those two facts is the scar.

Part IV – The Record

President Ahmadinejad described the video as “questionable.” The head of Iran’s judiciary ordered an investigation. No one was charged. The government’s official position shifted from denial to counter-accusation to silence. The Basij militiaman identified as the shooter was named by witnesses but was never arrested. Neda’s family was forced to remove the black mourning banner from their home. Visitors to the grave were photographed by intelligence agents. The grave was vandalised with paint. The world responded with candlelight vigils and United Nations statements. Iran’s seat at the United Nations Human Rights Council remained occupied. The air conditioning in her car ran until the fuel ran out.

Chapter 4

ROPE

Part 0 – The Ordinary

You are sixteen. Or you are eighteen. The accounts disagree. You are a boy who liked another boy. You held his hand once, in a room where no one could see. The room was small. The door had no lock. You checked the door three times before you reached for his hand. You held his hand. That is all. Or that is not all. The accounts disagree. It does not matter. The rope does not read accounts.

Part I – The Event

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran has executed hundreds of individuals under articles of the Islamic Penal Code criminalising homosexuality. Article 233 defines "sodomy" (lavat) as sexual intercourse between males. The punishment for the active partner, if married, and for the passive partner regardless of marital status, is death. Article 239 prescribes one hundred lashes for sodomy not involving penetration. Lesbianism (mosaheqeh) carries one hundred lashes; the fourth offence carries death. Executions have been carried out by hanging, including public hanging from construction cranes. In July 2005, two young men – Mahmoud Asgari and Ayaz Marhoni, whose ages were disputed but reported as sixteen and eighteen – were publicly hanged in the city of Mashhad. Photographs of the execution circulated globally. Both were crying. The Iranian government stated they were convicted of raping a thirteen-year-old boy, not of consensual homosexuality. Human rights organisations disputed this account, noting inconsistencies and the use of confessions obtained under torture. Iran remains one of approximately six countries where consensual homosexual acts between adults are punishable by death.

Part II – The Wound

They are standing in a square in Mashhad. Their hands are tied behind their backs. They are crying. The photographs will show this. The photographs will show two boys crying with their hands tied behind their backs and nooses around their necks and a crane behind them that was built to raise steel beams for buildings.

One of them is looking at the ground. One of them is looking at the crowd.

The one looking at the crowd is looking for a face. Any face. A face that says this is wrong. He does not find it.

The charges are read aloud. The word used is “lavat.” It is the legal word for the act. It is also the word for what they felt. The law has made the word for their crime identical to the word for their love. The language does not permit a distinction.

The crane lifts. The rope tightens. The feet leave the ground. The bodies turn slowly in the air, the way a body turns when the ground has been taken away and there is nothing left to orient against.

The crowd watches. Some cover their children’s eyes. Some do not.

A photograph is taken. The photograph shows two boys hanging from a crane with their hands tied behind their backs in a public square in a city where cranes are supposed to build things.

The photograph will outlive the regime.

The room is still there. The door still has no lock. The hand is no longer held. The door you checked three times is yours.

Part III – The Autopsy

Bob: They were boys.

Gman: The law does not have an age setting that produces mercy. The law has a category: lavat. The category has a punishment: death. The inputs are processed. The output is a crane. The age of the input is not a variable the system recognises. The regime's God has opinions about who a boy may love. The rope is the God's opinion rendered in hemp and gravity.

Bob: The crane.

Gman: The crane is a construction tool repurposed as a killing instrument. This is the regime's signature. It takes the machinery of daily life and turns it into the machinery of death. The crane that builds an apartment building on Monday hangs two boys on Tuesday. The gallows is temporary. The crane is permanent. The message is: the instrument of your death is embedded in the ordinary infrastructure of your city. You cannot look at a construction site without seeing a gallows. The regime has contaminated the ordinary.

Bob: The spectrum.

Gman: The code that built consciousness did not build a switch. It built a spectrum. The regime's God does not acknowledge the spectrum. The rope is the God's correction. But the correction does not change the spectrum. It removes the body from it. The law does not fix what it punishes. It destroys what it cannot comprehend. The two boys held hands in a room. The room still exists. The door still has no lock. The hand is gone. The room remembers.

Part IV – The Record

The Islamic Penal Code of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Article 233: “Sodomy is sexual intercourse between males.” Article 234: “The punishment for sodomy is the death penalty for the insertive partner if the intercourse is non-consensual or if the insertive partner is a non-Muslim, as well as for the receptive partner. In other cases, if the insertive partner is married, the punishment is the death penalty.” Iran’s government stated that Asgari and Marhoni were convicted of rape, not of consensual homosexuality. Human rights organisations noted that the boys had originally been sentenced to lashes for attending a private party; the rape charge was added later and based on confessions obtained under torture. The photographs of the execution were published by the Iranian Students News Agency, a state-affiliated outlet. The publication was routine. Public hangings from cranes are a standard instrument of deterrence. The crane was returned to the construction site. The construction continued.

Chapter 5

HIJAB

Part 0 – The Ordinary

You are visiting Tehran. You are not from Tehran. You are from Saqqez, in Kurdistan. Your brother is driving. You are in the passenger seat. Your headscarf is on. It is the way you always wear it. Some hair shows. Some hair always shows. You did not think about it this morning. You do not think about it most mornings. You are twenty-two. You studied at university. You wanted to be a lawyer. You are wearing eyeliner. Your brother says you look fine. You say you are not asking.

Part I – The Event

On September 13, 2022, Mahsa Amini, a twenty-two-year-old Kurdish-Iranian woman, was arrested by Iran's morality police – the Gasht-e Ershad, or "Guidance Patrol" – near a metro station in Tehran. The charge: improper wearing of the hijab. According to eyewitnesses, she was pushed into a police van and beaten, including blows to the head. She was taken to Vozara detention centre for what the authorities described as "re-education." Within hours, she collapsed. She was transferred to Kasra Hospital, where she fell into a coma. She died three days later, on September 16, 2022. The government stated that she suffered a heart attack. Leaked CT scans showed head trauma. In March 2024, the United Nations Independent Fact-Finding Mission concluded that Mahsa Amini "was subjected to physical violence that led to her death." The protests that followed, under the banner "Woman, Life, Freedom," spread to all thirty-one provinces and became the largest challenge to the regime since the 1979 revolution. Over five hundred people were killed, including dozens of children. Over nineteen thousand were arrested. The morality police resumed patrols.

Part II – The Wound

She is in the passenger seat. Her brother is driving. They have just arrived in Tehran. They do not know the new enforcement guidelines. She is wearing her headscarf the way she has always worn it. Some hair shows. The same amount that has always shown. The amount of hair that shows has never been measured until today.

At the metro station, a man in uniform points at her. She is pulled from the flow of people. Her brother protests. Her brother is beaten. She is pushed into a van.

In the van, she is beaten. The blows are to the head. The headscarf absorbs nothing. The headscarf is cloth. The blows are not cloth.

At the detention centre, she is told she will receive a “corrective class” on how to wear the hijab properly. The class has not yet been invented. It is a sentence that exists only in the language of the regime. The reality is a room and a beating.

She collapses. She is on the floor. The floor of a detention centre where a woman is dying because the amount of hair visible beneath her headscarf exceeded a threshold measured in centimetres.

She is transferred to a hospital. She is in a coma. For three days, her brain swells inside her skull because a man in uniform decided that the centimetres of hair visible beneath her headscarf constituted a violation of God’s dress code.

She does not wake up.

The headscarf is the same one. The hair is the same amount. The eyeliner is still on. The brother is still in the car. The car is yours.

Part III – The Autopsy

Bob: Centimetres.

Gman: Mahsa Amini died over centimetres. The threshold between legal existence and illegal existence in the Islamic Republic of Iran is measured in centimetres of visible hair. The Guidance Patrol is not a police force. It is a theological measuring instrument. Its jurisdiction is the female body. Its unit of measurement is the centimetre. Its enforcement mechanism is the baton. The regime's God has opinions about centimetres. The body does not survive the opinion.

Bob: The corrective class.

Gman: There is no corrective class. The phrase is a sentence that exists only in the language of bureaucratic euphemism. It converts a beating into an educational programme. It converts a murder into a misunderstanding. The regime's language is designed to erase the event as it is happening. The woman is not being beaten. She is being corrected. She is not dying. She is being educated. The language is the second weapon. The baton is the first.

Bob: "Woman, Life, Freedom."

Gman: The three words are the diagnosis. Woman – the body the regime seeks to control. Life – the thing the regime took. Freedom – the thing the regime cannot provide because its entire architecture depends on the absence of freedom. The three words are not a slogan. They are a structural analysis. The regime heard the three words and responded with bullets. The bullets are the regime's admission that the three words are correct.

Bob: Is it Islam?

Gman: It is not Islam. It is what happens when any religion is given jurisdiction over the body. Christianity did this. The Inquisition measured heresy. The witch trials measured deviation. The residential schools measured culture. Judaism did this. The Ultra-Orthodox measure hemlines and wigs and the width of a seat on a bus. Every religion that has claimed authority over the body has produced a measuring instrument. The instrument measures compliance. The punishment measures deviation. The distance between the measured centimetres and the acceptable

centimetres is the distance between life and death. Islam did not invent this. Islam inherited it. Every religion inherits it. The inheritance is the structure: God has an opinion about your body, and the man who claims to know God's opinion has a weapon.

Part IV – The Record

The Guidance Patrol was established in 2005 to enforce Iran's mandatory hijab laws. The patrol's officers are authorised to detain women whose dress does not conform to Islamic standards. The standard is defined by regulation and enforced by baton. The UN Independent Fact-Finding Mission concluded in March 2024: "The mission is satisfied that Ms. Amini was subjected to physical violence that led to her death." Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei called the death a "bitter incident." He then called the protests "planned chaos." Over five hundred people were killed during the protests. Forty-seven were children. The morality police were sanctioned by the United States, the United Kingdom, and the European Union. The morality police resumed operations. The headscarf remains mandatory. The centimetres remain legislated. The baton remains issued.

Chapter 6

SIXTEEN

Part 0 – The Ordinary

You are sixteen. Your hair is cut in a bob. Two-tone. You chose it yourself. You are wearing a black T-shirt. Eyeliner. You are standing on a street in Tehran. You are holding your headscarf. Not wearing it. Holding it. You light a match. You hold it to the cloth. The cloth catches. You hold it up. The fire is small. The fire is the size of your hand. The crowd is watching. You are not afraid. You are sixteen and you are not afraid. That is the most dangerous sentence in this book.

Part I – The Event

Nika Shakarami was sixteen years old when she was killed during the Mahsa Amini protests in September 2022, in Tehran. She was last seen at a demonstration, where she had been filmed burning her headscarf. She disappeared on September 20. Her body was found nine days later. The Iranian authorities stated that she fell from a building. Her mother, Nasreen Shakarami, stated in a video testimony that her daughter had been killed by blows to the head. The mother stated that authorities had kept her daughter's death secret for nine days, then seized her body from the morgue and buried her in a remote location without the family's consent. Family members were subsequently arrested. Nika's aunt was forced to appear on state television and echo the official version of events. Iran has a documented history of broadcasting coerced confessions. The UN Independent Fact-Finding Mission stated it was continuing to investigate Nika Shakarami's death. Her photograph – black T-shirt, two-tone bob, eyeliner – has been circulated globally as a symbol of the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement.

Part II – The Wound

She is sixteen. She is standing on a street. She is holding the cloth that the state requires her to wear and she has set it on fire.

The fire is the size of her hand. It is not a bonfire. It is not an inferno. It is a sixteen-year-old girl holding a burning headscarf above her head like a torch and the crowd is watching her because she is doing the thing they are all imagining doing.

She disappears.

For nine days, her mother calls hospitals, police stations, morgues. No one answers the question. The question is: where is my daughter. The question has no answer for nine days.

On the ninth day, the answer arrives. The answer is a body. The body has injuries to the skull. The body has been moved. The body has been buried in a place the mother has never been, in a grave the mother did not dig, without a ceremony the mother did not attend.

The regime seized the body from the morgue. The regime drove the body to a location. The regime dug a hole. The regime placed a sixteen-year-old girl in the hole. The regime covered the hole. The regime told the family she fell from a building.

Then the regime arrested the family.

Then the regime put the aunt on television.

The aunt looked into the camera and said what the regime told her to say. The aunt said: she fell from a building. The aunt’s eyes said something different. The broadcast did not show the aunt’s eyes.

The bob is still two-tone. The eyeliner is still on. The match is still lit. The black T-shirt still fits a sixteen-year-old’s body. The fire the size of a hand is yours.

Part III – The Autopsy

Bob: The body.

Gman: The regime did not only kill Nika Shakarami. It attempted to edit the death. It stole the body to control the narrative. It buried the body in secret to prevent a grave from becoming a gathering point. It coerced the family to rewrite the event. The murder is one crime. The theft of the story is a second crime. The regime understands that a body in a grave with a name and a cause of death is a record. A record is evidence. Evidence is dangerous. The regime's relationship with evidence is the same as its relationship with graves: bury it where no one can find it.

Bob: The fire.

Gman: A sixteen-year-old girl with a burning headscarf is the most dangerous image the regime has ever produced. The fire is the size of a hand. The hand belongs to a child. The regime killed the child. The regime cannot kill the image. The image is circulating. The image will circulate until the regime falls. The regime knows this. That is why it took the body. That is why it arrested the family. That is why it put the aunt on television. The regime is not fighting a protest movement. It is fighting a photograph.

Bob: Sixteen.

Gman: She was sixteen. The regime that kills juvenile offenders on the gallows also kills sixteen-year-old girls on the street. The distinction the regime draws between judicial execution and extrajudicial killing is a distinction without a difference. The gallows and the baton are the same instrument. The courtroom and the street are the same room. The judge and the militiaman are the same hand. The hand belongs to a God who has opinions about centimetres of hair and the direction of love and the content of a leaflet picked up from the ground. The hand is always the same hand. The body beneath it is always a body that was doing something ordinary when the hand arrived.

Part IV – The Record

The Iranian authorities stated that Nika Shakarami died by falling from a building. The mother's testimony contradicted this account. The aunt's coerced statement on state television echoed the official version. Iran Human Rights documented the case as one of at least forty-seven children killed during the Mahsa Amini protests. The photograph of Nika Shakarami – black T-shirt, two-tone bob, eyeliner – has been reproduced on protest banners, murals, and social media posts in over sixty countries. The regime has attempted to suppress the image through internet shutdowns and content removal requests. The image has not been suppressed. The regime filed a formal complaint with Interpol regarding the use of Nika Shakarami's image by diaspora organisations. Interpol declined to act. The headscarf she burned has not been recovered. The fire has not gone out.

Chapter 7

SPREE

Part 0 – The Ordinary

You are a number. You do not know your number. The system knows your number. You are one of nine today. You woke at 4am. Not because you chose to. Because the guard opened the slot. You knew. Everyone in the cell knew. When the slot opens at 4am, today is the day. You ate breakfast two days ago. Rice. You do not remember yesterday. You are wearing the clothes you were arrested in. They do not fit anymore. You lost weight. The trousers are held with a strip of sheet. You tied it yourself. The knot is neat. You have always tied neat knots.

Part I – The Event

In 2025, the Islamic Republic of Iran executed at least 2,200 people – the highest number recorded in thirty-five years, the highest since the 1988 massacre. Executions were carried out in ninety-seven cities across all thirty-one provinces. An average of nine people were hanged every day. In December 2025 alone, at least 376 executions were recorded – a figure unprecedented in the entire history of the Islamic Republic. At least sixty-four women were executed, nearly double the previous year. Six juvenile offenders were executed. Thirteen people were hanged in public. Over half of those executed were charged with drug-related offences. Ethnic minorities – Baluchis, Kurds, Afghans – were disproportionately targeted. The number of Afghans executed rose from twenty-five in 2023 to eighty in 2024, coinciding with an escalation in dehumanising rhetoric against Afghan communities. The executions accelerated sharply after the 2022 “Woman, Life, Freedom” protests. The UN Special Rapporteur described the rate as “executions at an industrial scale.” In Iranian prisons, the “No Death Penalty Tuesdays” campaign – a weekly hunger strike by prisoners – passed its one hundred and first consecutive week.

Part II – The Wound

He is one of nine. He does not know the other eight. He has not seen their faces. He knows they exist because the guard said “nine” when the slot opened.

He was arrested for possession of narcotics. He is Baluchi. He is from Sistan. The drugs were not his. The drugs were in the car he was a passenger in. The driver ran. He did not run. He did not know what was in the car. This is what he said at the trial. The trial lasted forty minutes. His lawyer was appointed by the court. His lawyer said fourteen words. He counted. Fourteen words. The sentence was death.

He has been in this cell for two years. In two years, the clothes he was wearing when he was arrested have become too large. The trousers slide. He tore a strip from the sheet and tied it as a belt. The knot is neat. He has always tied neat knots. It is a small thing. It is the only thing he still controls.

He walks. He does not know where. The corridor is familiar. He has walked it before, to the exercise yard. Today the corridor turns where it has never turned. The new direction does not need to be explained.

The slot opened at 4am. The knot in the sheet belt is still neat. The trousers still do not fit. The rice was two days ago. The neat knot is yours.

Part III – The Autopsy

Bob: Nine per day.

Gman: Nine per day is not justice. It is throughput. The regime has moved beyond targeted execution into systematic processing. The gallows is a production line. The charge is the input. The body is the output. The system does not execute individuals. It processes categories. Drug offender. Dissident. Minority. The category enters the system. The body exits. The system's efficiency is its confession: this is not law. This is logistics.

Bob: The acceleration.

Gman: Five hundred in 2022. Eight hundred in 2023. Nine hundred and seventy-five in 2024. Two thousand two hundred in 2025. The curve is exponential. The curve began to steepen after the "Woman, Life, Freedom" protests. The regime's response to women burning headscarves was to accelerate the gallows. The rope is the regime's answer to the match. The match burned a headscarf. The rope hangs a body. The regime believes the rope is stronger than the match. The regime is wrong. The match is still lit. The rope has only produced more dead.

Bob: The hunger strikes.

Gman: In fifty-five prisons, every Tuesday, prisoners refuse to eat. One hundred and one consecutive weeks. The regime executes nine per day. The prisoners starve one day per week. The ratio is obscene. But the hunger strike is the only instrument the prisoners possess. The body's refusal to eat is the body's last statement of sovereignty. The regime owns the cell, the rope, the slot at 4am. The regime does not own the stomach. The stomach is the last territory the prisoners control. They surrender it voluntarily, one day per week, to say: we are still here. The regime's answer is the same answer it has given since 1979: the slot opens at 4am.

Part IV – The Record

Iran Human Rights Annual Report, 2025: at least 2,200 executions recorded. UN experts, September 2025: “The sheer scale of executions in Iran is staggering and represents a grave violation of the right to life. With an average of more than nine hangings per day in recent weeks, Iran appears to be conducting executions at an industrial scale.” Of the thirty-one women executed for murder in 2024, nine had been convicted of killing their husbands in cases involving domestic violence, forced marriage, or child marriage – circumstances in which Iranian law provides women no legal protection. The “No Death Penalty Tuesdays” campaign, initiated in January 2024 at Ghezel Hesar Prison, has spread to fifty-five prisons. The campaign has not reduced the number of executions. The number of executions has doubled. The slot opens at 4am. The knot is still neat.

Chapter 8

MASSACRE

Part 0 – The Ordinary

You are a nurse. You are in a hospital in Mashhad. You are on the night shift. The wounded have been arriving since 8pm. Gunshot wounds. You have treated gunshot wounds before. Not like this. Not this many. The corridor is full. The beds are full. The floor is full. You are kneeling beside a boy who is seventeen. The wound is in his shoulder. You press gauze. You press harder. He is looking at you. He says: “Am I going to be okay?” You say: “Yes.” You are lying. You have lied to patients before. This is different. This is not a lie about recovery. This is a lie about whether the morning will come.

Part I – The Event

On December 28, 2025, protests erupted across Iran, initially sparked by the collapse of the national currency amid soaring inflation, state mismanagement, and worsening living conditions. The protests began with shopkeepers in Tehran's Grand Bazaar closing their shops and spread rapidly to all thirty-one provinces. By January 8, 2026, millions had taken to the streets. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei ordered security forces to "crush the protests by any means necessary." On January 8 and 9, 2026, security forces carried out mass killings on an unprecedented scale. Snipers were positioned on rooftops of houses, mosques, and police stations. Shotguns loaded with metal pellets were aimed at protesters' heads and torsos. Live ammunition was fired into crowds. Hospitals were attacked. In Mashhad, IRGC forces entered a hospital ward. Two nurses were shot and killed in front of their colleagues. Their bodies were left on the floor. Staff were warned not to touch them. The nurses' bodies were found days later at Kahrizak. The regime imposed a total internet blackout – the longest in its history. Mass burials were conducted without families' knowledge. Children as young as fourteen were arrested. An eighteen-year-old woman and a sixteen-year-old girl were forced to make coerced "confessions" on state television. The head of the judiciary ordered "rapid prosecutions and deterrent punishments." As of February 2026, the Human Rights Activists News Agency has verified 7,007 deaths by name, with estimates ranging to 36,500. Over 53,000 people have been arrested.

Part II – The Wound

She is a nurse. She has been a nurse for eleven years. She has treated car accidents, stabbings, heart attacks, a man who fell from a roof, a woman who drank bleach. She has seen the inside of the body.

She has not seen this.

The corridor is a river. The river is people. The people are bleeding. Some are walking. Some are being carried. Some are on the floor. The floor is not white anymore. The floor has not been white since 9pm.

She is kneeling beside a boy. The boy is seventeen. The boy has a hole in his shoulder. The hole is the size of a thumb. The blood is the colour of blood, which is darker than people expect, which is the colour of something that should be inside that is now outside.

She presses gauze. The gauze fills. She presses more gauze. The gauze fills again.

He asks: “Am I going to be okay?”

She says yes.

She does not know if the morning will come. Not for him. Not for her. The corridor is full of bodies and the sound of the corridor is the sound of people who are discovering that the regime’s final argument is the same as its first argument. The argument is: I will kill you. The argument has not changed since 1979. The argument has only scaled.

At 3am, the doors open. Not the doors that patients come through. The other doors. The doors that security forces come through.

IRGC officers enter the ward. They are carrying weapons. They are carrying weapons in a hospital. The weapons are pointed at nurses.

Two nurses are shot. In the ward. In front of their colleagues. In front of patients. The bodies fall. The bodies are left on the floor. A commander tells the staff: do not touch the bodies.

The staff do not touch the bodies.

The bodies are collected later. Days later. The families find them at Kahrizak. Kahrizak is not a hospital. Kahrizak is a detention centre. The nurses' bodies were taken from a hospital to a detention centre. The living go to hospitals. The dead go to Kahrizak. The regime has reversed the architecture of care.

The gauze is still in your hands. The boy is still asking. The lie is still in your mouth. The corridor is still full. The morning is yours.

Part III – The Autopsy

Bob: The same event.

Gman: The 1988 fatwa and the 2026 massacre are the same event. The authority has not changed. The instrument has scaled. In 1988, the killing was done in prisons, behind walls, in secret. In 2026, the killing is done in hospitals, on streets, from rooftops. The secrecy has failed. The regime no longer hides the killing. It broadcasts the confessions of children on state television. The system has exhausted all instruments except force. When a system's only remaining output is a bullet, the system has reached terminal failure. This is the terminal stage of a system that has no remaining argument except force. The theocracy's last word is always a bullet. The body's last word is always the same: I was here.

Bob: The nurses.

Gman: The regime shot nurses. In a hospital. This sentence should be unwritable. A hospital is the one place where the social contract between the state and the body is supposed to hold. The state built the hospital. The state trained the nurses. The state sent the patients. Then the state entered the hospital and shot the nurses. The regime has not just broken the social contract. It has reversed the polarity. The place that heals is now the place that kills. The nurse who treats the wound is now the target. The regime has made care into a crime. Treating a protester is treason. The gauze is evidence. The bandage is collaboration. The regime has criminalised mercy.

Bob: The morning.

Gman: The nurse lied to the boy. She said: "You are going to be okay." The lie was not clinical. It was existential. She did not know if the morning would come. She did not know if the hospital would still be a hospital when the sun came up. She did not know if the doors would open again. The lie was the last act of care she could perform. The lie was the gauze she applied to his fear. The regime has created a world in which a nurse's only remaining instrument is a lie about the sunrise. The regime has taken everything else. The body, the hospital, the corridor, the morning. The only thing left is the lie. The lie is an act of love. The lie is the thing the regime cannot take. The lie is the nurse saying: I will not let you die in despair, even if I cannot stop you from dying.

Part IV – The Record

Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei ordered security forces to “crush the protests by any means necessary.” The head of the judiciary, Gholamhossein Mohseni-Eje’i, ordered “rapid prosecutions and deterrent punishments.” He publicly stated he had ordered harsher charges than those proposed by prosecutors. He interrogated detained protesters without lawyers present. Coerced confessions were broadcast on state television, including those of an eighteen-year-old woman and a sixteen-year-old girl. The Human Rights Activists News Agency has published a verified list of 7,007 deaths. The Centre for Human Rights in Iran has documented 6,479 confirmed deaths with an additional 17,091 under review. Amnesty International has described the events of January 8–9 as “mass unlawful killings on an unprecedented scale.” In Mashhad, two nurses were shot by IRGC forces inside a hospital ward. Their bodies were left on the floor. Staff were warned not to touch them. The bodies were later found at Kahrizak detention centre. Families searching for missing relatives have been systematically denied information. Mass burials have been conducted without families’ knowledge or consent. Security forces have conducted nighttime home raids, arrested people at checkpoints and in hospitals, and confiscated mobile phones. Gatherings of two or more people have been prohibited under loudspeaker announcement. The internet remains restricted. The EU has designated the IRGC as a terrorist organisation. The Islamic Republic has stated that the deaths were caused by “rioters and foreign agents.” The hospital in Mashhad has resumed non-urgent admissions. The corridor has been cleaned.

Saturation

Optimal Stopping

This book contains ten chapters. It could contain ten thousand.

Every chapter was a body. A body that woke up in the morning and did not know. A woman writing a letter in a cell. A mother carrying a pot of rice. A woman standing on a street in June. Two boys in a room with no lock. A child drawing birds on a wall. A teacher handing out warm pages. A girl wearing eyeliner and a headscarf. A girl with a two-tone bob and a match. One of nine, with a neat knot in a strip of sheet. A nurse kneeling in a corridor of blood.

These were the things in the room when the God arrived.

The God was always the same. I am the authority. The fatwa is my word. The stone is my sentence. The rope is my correction. The morality police are my hand. The bullet is my final argument. Therefore the letter in the left shoe does not matter. Therefore the dented pot does not matter. Therefore the forty seconds do not matter. Therefore the hand held once does not matter. Therefore the invented birds do not matter. Therefore the warm pages do not matter. Therefore the centimetres of hair do not matter. Therefore the fire the size of a hand does not matter. Therefore the neat knot does not matter. Therefore the nurse's lie does not matter.

The objects remain. The people do not.

The letter is still in the shoe. The pot is still on the shelf. The car is still running. The room still has no lock. The birds are still scratched on the wall. The chairs are still in the living room. The eyeliner is still on. The match is still lit. The knot is still neat. The gauze is still in the nurse's hands.

SYSTEM: "The Islamic Republic of Iran reaffirms its commitment to the rule of law and the protection of its citizens. The judiciary operates independently and in accordance with Islamic jurisprudence. Iran categorically rejects all allegations of human rights violations as politically motivated interference in its internal affairs. The government extends its condolences to the families of those affected by the recent disturbances and reiterates that all measures taken by security forces were lawful and proportionate responses to rioting and vandalism instigated by foreign agents."

The machine runs. The statements are issued. The condolences are extended. The graves are bulldozed. The internet is cut. The confessions are broadcast. The nurses' bodies are left on the floor.

Now the book turns.

It does not turn to comfort. It does not turn to meaning. It turns to you.

The Architecture of Your Certainty

Name the God you trust.

Name the book you will not question.

Name the people your God says are wrong.

Name what your God says should be done about their wrongness.

Name the fatwa you are living under and have never examined.

The Supreme Leader named his God. The mullah who conspired against Soraya named his. The sniper on the rooftop in January named his. The man who selected the stones – not too large, not too small – named his.

They were certain.

Are you?

You will say: my God is different. You will say: my book does not say this. You will say: my faith would never produce a body on the ground.

They said the same thing.

Every person who ever threw a stone believed they were throwing it for the right God. Every person who ever lit a pyre believed their scripture was the true one. Every person who ever hanged a boy from a crane believed the rope was holy.

The Supreme Leader is certain his God is the right God. You are certain yours is. He has a book. You have a book. He has a lineage of interpreters. You have a lineage of interpreters. He believes his interpreters are guided by the divine. You believe yours are. He cannot prove it. You cannot prove it.

The difference between his certainty and yours is not evidence. The difference is geography. You were born here. He was born there. Had you been born there, you would hold his book. Had he been born here, he would hold yours.

The certainty is identical. The structure is identical. The only variable is the accident of birth.

And the body on the ground does not care which book you were holding when you threw the stone.

The body knows the answer. The body has known it since the first chapter. The body rejects all Gods that produce a nurse shot on a hospital floor.

Trust the body.

Don’t be a cunt. Be kind.

Part V – India / Pakistan

The Other Cannot Survive This

Chapter 1

TRAIN

Part 0 – The Ordinary

You are on a train. You have a seat by the window. Your wife is beside you. Your daughter is on her lap. You packed a trunk. Inside the trunk: two changes of clothes, a cooking pot, your wife's wedding jewellery hidden inside a Singer sewing machine, and a photograph of the house you are leaving. The house is not on fire yet. It will be by tomorrow. You have a ticket. The ticket says Lahore. The ticket says nothing about what will happen between here and there. Your daughter is three. She is asleep. She is holding a cloth doll. The doll has one button eye. The other fell off last week. You said you would fix it. The train begins to move.

Part I – The Event

In August 1947, the British partitioned the Indian subcontinent into two independent nations: India, majority Hindu and Sikh, and Pakistan, majority Muslim. The partition triggered the largest mass migration in human history. Approximately fourteen million people crossed the newly drawn borders. Between 200,000 and two million were killed in the communal violence that accompanied the migration. Trains carrying refugees were attacked by mobs on both sides of the border. Trains departed full of living passengers and arrived full of corpses. A train carrying Muslim refugees was attacked at Amritsar on September 22, 1947, by armed Sikh mobs. Three thousand were killed in a three-hour assault using swords, spears, and rifles. Earlier that month, one thousand Muslim refugees were massacred on a train near Khalsa College. Simultaneously, trains carrying Hindu and Sikh refugees from Pakistan were attacked by Muslim mobs. On January 12, 1948, at Gujrat, 1,300 Hindu and Sikh passengers were massacred by Pashtun militias. The trains ran in both directions. The bodies were identical in both directions. Captain Edward Walsh of the British Army described one train: “When we cleared it, we counted 2,400 identifiable bodies and I don’t know how many more heads and arms and legs. They’d all been hacked to pieces. Blood was running out of the doors.”

Part II – The Wound

The train stops. It has not reached Lahore. It has stopped in a field. The field is flat and yellow. The air is warm.

He looks out the window. There are men in the field. They are carrying swords. They are walking toward the train. They are not running. They are walking. The walking is worse than running. Running means panic. Walking means planning.

His wife says his name. He does not respond. He is counting. He counts fourteen men. Then more behind them. Then more. He stops counting.

His daughter is still asleep. The cloth doll is still in her arms. The button eye is still missing.

The doors of the carriages do not lock from the inside. The doors are designed to be opened from outside. The doors are designed for a world where people exit trains at stations, not in fields.

The first sword enters through a window three carriages ahead. He hears the sound before he sees anything. The sound is not what he expected. The sound is wet.

His name does not survive the train. His daughter's name does not survive the train. The Singer sewing machine survives the train. The wedding jewellery inside the machine survives the train. The names do not.

He picks up his daughter. He does not wake her. He holds her against his chest. He puts his hand over her ear. The other ear is pressed against his heart. She can hear his heart. She cannot hear the swords.

The Singer sewing machine is in the trunk. The trunk is in the luggage rack. The wedding jewellery is inside the machine. The jewellery will outlive everyone on this train. The machine will be opened by someone who is not his wife. The photograph of the house will be held by someone who has never seen the house.

The sewing machine is still in the trunk. The jewellery is still inside. The train ticket still says Lahore. The button eye is still missing from the doll. The doll is yours.

Part III – The Autopsy

Bob: Both directions.

Gman: The trains ran in both directions. Muslim refugees were massacred on trains heading to Pakistan. Hindu and Sikh refugees were massacred on trains heading to India. The mobs on both sides used the same weapons: swords, spears, axes. The mobs on both sides attacked the same target: a sealed metal container full of unarmed families. The mobs on both sides invoked the same structure: they are not us. The variable was the name of God. The constant was the body on the ground. If the variable changes and the output does not, the variable is not the cause. The structure is the cause.

Bob: Neighbours.

Gman: The massacres were not committed by strangers. They were committed by neighbours. People who had lived beside each other for generations. People who knew each other's names, children, trades. The partition drew a line through a village and the people on one side of the line killed the people on the other. The line was imaginary. The killing was not. The line converted a neighbour into a category. The category was: other. The category was sufficient. The sword did the rest.

Bob: One man said he felt no remorse.

Gman: He said: "The Muslims were responsible for the division of the country. We needed to teach them a lesson." On the other side, a Pakistani soldier said: "Our chaps would kill with really good spirit." Both sentences have the same structure: they deserved it. Both sentences require the same precondition: the person in front of me is not a person. They are a category. The category is: responsible. The category is: teachable. The category is: killable. The moment the person becomes a category, the sword is already in motion. The partition did not create the violence. It created the categories.

Part IV – The Record

The British government announced the date of independence – August 15, 1947 – with seventy-three days' notice. The boundary line was drawn by Sir Cyril Radcliffe, a British lawyer who had never visited India. He was given five weeks to divide a subcontinent of 390 million people. He later said: "I had no alternative; the time at my disposal was so short that I could not do more than try." The Punjab Boundary Force, tasked with maintaining order, comprised 55,000 soldiers for a region of forty million people. Over 200,000 were killed in the Punjab alone. Lord Mountbatten was later criticised for rushing the process. He replied that delay would have been worse. The Indian government declared the violence "communal riots." The Pakistani government declared the violence "communal riots." Both governments used the same language to describe different corpses. The trains were eventually stopped. The tracks remained.

Chapter 2

WELL

Part 0 – The Ordinary

You are tying a dupatta around your daughter's wrist. She is nine. The dupatta is blue. You tie it loosely so it does not cut. You say: "Hold on to me." She says: "I am holding." You say: "Do not let go." She says: "I will not let go." You are standing at the edge of a well. The well is forty feet deep. You have drawn water from this well every morning for twenty years. This morning you are not drawing water.

Part I – The Event

In March 1947, during the Rawalpindi massacres, armed Muslim mobs attacked Hindu and Sikh villages across the Rawalpindi Division of Punjab. The village of Thoha Khalsa was besieged. The Sikh residents were given an ultimatum: convert to Islam or die. When it became clear that the village could not be defended, and that the women and girls would be raped, more than ninety Sikh women and children jumped into the village well. They chose drowning over the certainty of what would follow capture. The death toll at Thoha Khalsa is estimated at approximately three hundred. Similar mass suicides occurred at the villages of Choa Khalsa and Dhamali. The descriptions of these events, carried by surviving refugees to eastern Punjab, provoked retaliatory massacres of Muslims that were equal in brutality.

Part II – The Wound

She ties the cloth to her daughter's wrist. The knot is not the knot she uses for the market bag or the bedsheet. It is a knot that says: where I go, you go.

The well is in the centre of the village. She has drawn water from it every morning. The rope is coiled beside it. The bucket is beside the rope. The bucket is wooden and the handle is smooth from twenty years of hands.

The sounds from outside the village are the sounds of men who have been given permission. The permission was given by a God. The God's name is on their lips. The specific name does not matter. What matters is that the name has converted the women at the well from people into a category. The category is: infidel. The category is: available.

She does not explain to her daughter what is happening. There is no sentence in any language that explains to a nine-year-old why her mother is standing at the edge of a well and tying a cloth to her wrist.

She jumps. The daughter is pulled with her. The blue dupatta holds.

Ninety women and children enter the well. The well is forty feet deep. The water was at twelve feet this morning. By the time the last woman jumps, the water is at four feet. The well is not deep enough for ninety bodies. The last women do not drown in water. They drown in the women who jumped before them.

The dupatta is still tied to the wrist. The well is still forty feet deep. The ninety splashes are yours.

Part III – The Autopsy

Bob: They chose the well.

Gman: They chose the well because the alternative was worse. The alternative was: rape, forced conversion, and murder, in that order. The well was the only exit the structure did not control. The mob controlled the roads, the fields, the houses. The mob did not control the vertical. The well was the one direction the mob could not follow. The women did not choose death. They chose the only remaining form of sovereignty over their own bodies. The well was not suicide. The well was the last act of ownership.

Bob: And then the descriptions carried east.

Gman: And then the descriptions carried east and produced identical massacres of Muslims. The cycle completed. The well at Thoha Khalsa produced the swords at Amritsar. The swords at Amritsar produced the axes at Gujrat. The violence reproduces itself. It uses the description of the previous atrocity as fuel for the next. The structure is a perpetual motion machine. It does not require a God to sustain it. The God only needs to start it. The momentum carries it forward across generations. The well is still full.

Part IV – The Record

The events at Thoha Khalsa were documented by survivors who fled to refugee camps in eastern Punjab. The descriptions were used by Sikh leaders to mobilise retaliatory violence against Muslims. Master Tara Singh, a Sikh political leader, declared at Lahore on March 3, 1947: “Death to Pakistan.” The statement preceded both the Rawalpindi massacres and the retaliatory violence. The Government of Pakistan classified the events as “communal disturbances.” The Government of India classified the retaliatory events as “communal disturbances.” The village of Thoha Khalsa is now in Pakistan. The well is still there. It has been filled in.

Chapter 3

PYRE

Part 0 – The Ordinary

You are applying henna to your hands. You are thirty years old. You are pregnant. Seven months. Your sister-in-law is doing the pattern. The pattern is the one your mother used. Vines and leaves. The henna is cold on your skin. Tomorrow is a holiday. You have cleaned the house. The LPG cylinder beside the stove is full. You checked it yesterday. Your husband is at the market. Your two children are playing in the courtyard. The henna needs four hours to set. You hold your hands open, palms up, like you are waiting to receive something.

Part I – The Event

On February 28, 2002, one day after the Godhra train burning in which fifty-seven Hindu pilgrims were killed, a mob of approximately five thousand people attacked the Muslim neighbourhood of Naroda Patiya in Ahmedabad, Gujarat. The mob was organised by the Bajrang Dal, a Hindu nationalist paramilitary organisation, and allegedly supported by the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party. The riot lasted over ten hours. Ninety-seven Muslims were killed. Women and girls were gang-raped in public before being hacked and burned to death. Children were force-fed petrol and set on fire. A pregnant woman, identified as Kausar Bano, was raped, after which her womb was cut open with a sword, the foetus extracted, and both mother and foetus set on fire. The Noorani Mosque was destroyed using exploding LPG cylinders. The massacre occurred directly across the road from the State Reserve Police quarters. Police did not intervene. Human Rights Watch reported that the Gujarat state government and police were complicit in the violence. In 2012, former state minister Maya Kodnani was convicted for her role. Bajrang Dal leader Babu Bajrangi, captured on hidden camera, said: “After killing them, I felt like Maharana Pratap.” He said he was proud and would do it again.

Part II – The Wound

She is sitting with her hands open, palms up, waiting for the henna to dry.

The first sound is the LPG cylinder. The cylinder she checked yesterday. The cylinder that was full. The cylinder is not beside her stove. Someone has taken it to the mosque and detonated it.

The mosque is three hundred metres from her house. The explosion is the starting gun.

The mob enters the neighbourhood. Five thousand. She cannot see five thousand. She can see the edge of the mob, which is the width of the street, which is the width of her world narrowing.

She does not run because she is seven months pregnant and the henna is still wet on her hands and running is not something the body can do when it is carrying another body.

The henna is still on her hands when they reach her. The vines and leaves. The pattern her mother used. The henna is still wet. The henna will be the last beautiful thing on her body.

The details of what happens next are in the court record. The court record uses legal language. Legal language exists to make the unspeakable speakable in a courtroom. The legal language says: the victim was sexually assaulted, the victim's abdomen was cut open with a sharp weapon, the foetus was extracted, both victim and foetus were set on fire.

The henna is still on her hands. The hands are no longer attached to the body. The star-shaped cookies from the holiday preparation are on the counter. The henna is yours.

Part III – The Autopsy

Bob: Across the road from the police.

Gman: The State Reserve Police quarters were directly across the road from Naroda Patiya. The police did not intervene for ten hours. This is not a failure. This is a feature. The system requires the police to be absent. The absence is the permission. The presence of the police quarters proves the absence was a choice. The mob did not overrun the police. The police chose to remain inside while five thousand people spent ten hours killing ninety-seven people three hundred metres away. The distance is three hundred metres. A police officer can cross three hundred metres in under a minute. They did not cross it in ten hours. The ten hours and the three hundred metres are the measurement of complicity.

Bob: The foetus.

Gman: The extraction of the foetus is not madness. It is logic. The logic of the mob says: the category is Muslim. The foetus is Muslim. The foetus is not yet born but it is already a category. The mob does not see a pregnant woman. The mob sees a container that holds a future member of the enemy category. The extraction is pre-emptive. The mob is killing the future. This is the same structure as every volume in this series: the authority does not kill people. It kills categories. The pregnant woman was not a person with henna on her hands. She was a category with a future category inside her. Both categories were processed.

Part IV – The Record

The Gujarat state government, led by Chief Minister Narendra Modi, denied complicity. In 2012, a Special Investigation Team appointed by the Supreme Court cleared Modi of direct involvement. In the same year, a court convicted thirty people in the Naroda Patiya case, including former state minister Maya Kodnani. Bajrang Dal leader Babu Bajrangi was sentenced to life imprisonment. On hidden camera in 2007, Bajrangi described the killings: “I felt like Maharana Pratap. I am proud of it. If I get another chance, I will kill even more.” When charged, he said: “I never killed even an ant in my life.” In 2022, the Gujarat government granted early release to eleven men convicted of the gang-rape of Bilkis Yakoob Rasool, who was five months pregnant when she was attacked during the same riots. Fourteen members of her family, including her three-year-old daughter, were murdered in front of her. The men were released on a national holiday. They were garlanded with flowers by members of the ruling party. The garlands are in the photograph.

Chapter 4

BLASPHEMY

Part 0 – The Ordinary

You are thirsty. You are picking falsa berries in a field outside Lahore. The sun is on your neck. You have been picking since 6am. Your hands are stained purple. There is a well at the edge of the field. You walk to the well. You draw water. You drink from a metal cup that is kept beside the well for the workers. You set the cup down. A woman says: “She drank from our cup.” You are Christian. The cup is Muslim. The water is the same water.

Part I – The Event

In June 2009, Asia Bibi, a forty-three-year-old Christian woman and mother of five, was arrested in Sheikhupura District, Punjab, Pakistan, and charged with blasphemy under Section 295-C of the Pakistan Penal Code. The charge: during an argument with Muslim co-workers who refused to share water with her, she allegedly made derogatory remarks about the Prophet Muhammad. She denied the charge. She was convicted and sentenced to death by hanging. She spent eight years on death row. Her case became an international cause. In 2011, Salmaan Taseer, the Governor of Punjab, was assassinated by his own bodyguard for publicly supporting Asia Bibi's release. The bodyguard, Mumtaz Qadri, was celebrated as a hero by religious groups. Tens of thousands attended his funeral after his execution. In 2011, Shahbaz Bhatti, the Federal Minister for Minorities, was assassinated for the same reason. In 2018, the Supreme Court of Pakistan acquitted Asia Bibi. Nationwide protests erupted, with mobs demanding her execution. She fled the country.

Part II – The Wound

She is thirsty. That is the beginning and the end. She is thirsty and she drinks water and the water is in a cup and the cup is beside a well and the well is in a field and the field is in a country where the cup has a religion.

The water has no religion. The water does not know who drank it. The water does not know whose lips touched the metal rim. The water is hydrogen and oxygen and it does not have an opinion about Christianity.

The cup has a religion. The woman who drank from it has a different religion. The distance between the two religions is the distance between the cup and the gallows.

She is placed in a cell. The cell is eight feet by six feet. She will be in this cell for eight years. Her five children are outside the cell. They will grow. She will not see them grow. The youngest is in school. The youngest will finish school and begin working and get married and have children and Asia Bibi will be in the same cell the entire time because she was thirsty and drank from a cup.

The Governor who spoke for her is shot twenty-eight times by his own bodyguard. The bodyguard is celebrated. Rose petals are thrown on his coffin.

The Minister who spoke for her is shot in his car. The car is still running when they find him.

She is acquitted after eight years. The acquittal produces riots. Mobs demand her death. She flees the country. She cannot return to the field or the well or the cup.

The cup is still on the rim of the well. The water has evaporated. Eight years for a cup of water. The cup is yours.

Part III – The Autopsy

Bob: A cup of water.

Gman: The entire machinery of state was activated by a cup of water. The accusation. The trial. The conviction. The death sentence. The eight years. The assassination of a governor. The assassination of a minister. Two men dead. One woman imprisoned for a decade. The input: a Christian woman drank from a Muslim cup. The output: three destroyed lives, two assassinations, nationwide riots. The ratio between input and output is the measurement of the system's insanity. A cup of water, processed by a blasphemy law, produces a death sentence. The law is the amplifier. The law converts a sip of water into an execution. Without the law, a woman drinks water. With the law, a woman dies.

Bob: The bodyguard.

Gman: The bodyguard who assassinated the Governor was his own bodyguard. The man tasked with protecting the Governor's body killed him because the Governor used his words to protect a Christian woman. The structure: the Governor's words were classified as blasphemy against the system. The bodyguard's bullets were classified as defence of the system. The system cannot distinguish between a cup of water and a bullet. Both are threats. Both are processed by the same code. The code says: any deviation from the authority is punishable by death. The deviation can be a sip of water or a sentence of support. The punishment is the same.

Part IV – The Record

Section 295-C of the Pakistan Penal Code states: “Use of derogatory remarks in respect of the Holy Prophet: Whoever by words, either spoken or written, or by visible representation, or by any imputation, innuendo, or insinuation, directly or indirectly, defiles the sacred name of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) shall be punished with death, or imprisonment for life, and shall also be liable to fine.” Between 1987 and 2023, over 1,800 people have been charged under Pakistan’s blasphemy laws. At least seventy-five people have been killed by mobs before their trials concluded. No one has been executed by the state under the law. The mobs have made the state’s role unnecessary. The acquittal rate on appeal is high. The conviction rate in the streets is higher. Asia Bibi lives in exile. The cup remains at the well.

Chapter 5

COW

Part 0 – The Ordinary

You are asleep. You are fifty-two. You are in your house in Dadri, Uttar Pradesh. It is September. The air is warm. Your son is in the next room. He is in the Indian Air Force. The fridge in the kitchen contains what the fridge always contains. Rice. Lentils. Meat. You are asleep and the fridge is closed and the meat is cold and tomorrow is a day like every other day.

Part I – The Event

On September 28, 2015, Mohammad Akhlaq, a fifty-two-year-old Muslim man, was dragged from his home in Dadri, Uttar Pradesh, India, and beaten to death by a mob of approximately one hundred people. His son Danish, a member of the Indian Air Force, was severely beaten and left for dead. The mob acted on a rumour, broadcast from the local Hindu temple's loudspeakers, that the family had slaughtered a cow and stored beef in their refrigerator. After the lynching, the meat from the refrigerator was sent for forensic testing. The results returned: the meat was mutton, not beef. Mohammad Akhlaq was killed over a rumour about the contents of his refrigerator. The meat was lamb.

Part II – The Wound

He is asleep. The last thing he knew before sleep was ordinary. The fan is on. The sheet is thin. The fridge is humming in the next room. The fridge contains what it has always contained.

Mohammad Akhlaq is fifty-two. He has lived in this house in Dadri for his entire life. His neighbours are Hindu. His neighbours have been his neighbours for decades. They have shared meals. They have attended each other's weddings. They have borrowed sugar.

The announcement comes from the temple loudspeakers at approximately 10pm. The announcement says a Muslim family has killed a cow. The announcement converts the contents of a refrigerator into a religious crime. The announcement converts a man asleep in his bed into a criminal. The announcement converts a hundred men listening to the loudspeakers into a mob.

The mob arrives at the house. The mob does not check the fridge first. The mob enters the bedroom. The mob drags a fifty-two-year-old man from his bed and beats him with bricks. His son, who serves in the Indian Air Force – who protects the nation – is beaten until his skull fractures.

The man dies on the floor of his courtyard. He dies in his sleeping clothes. He dies without knowing why.

After the murder, the meat from the fridge is collected by police and sent to a laboratory. The results take weeks. The results confirm: mutton. Lamb. The man was beaten to death over lamb in a refrigerator.

The fridge is still in the kitchen. The test results say mutton. The neighbours are still next door. The fridge is yours.

Part III – The Autopsy

Bob: The fridge was tested after.

Gman: The sequence is the evidence. The mob did not open the fridge, confirm the contents, and then decide to act. The mob killed the man, and then the fridge was opened. The contents of the fridge were irrelevant to the killing. The killing was about the category: Muslim. The beef was the excuse. The category was the cause. If the fridge had contained beef, the killing would have been justified by the mob. It contained mutton and the killing was not unjustified by the mob. The contents do not matter. The category is the input. The corpse is the output. The fridge is a prop.

Bob: The loudspeaker.

Gman: The announcement came from a Hindu temple. The temple's loudspeakers are designed for prayer. The loudspeakers were used to broadcast a rumour about a refrigerator. The infrastructure of worship was repurposed as the infrastructure of a lynch mob. This is the same mechanism as the crane in Iran. The crane builds on Monday and hangs on Tuesday. The loudspeaker prays on Monday and incites on Tuesday. The regime's instruments are dual-use. The sacred and the lethal share the same hardware.

Part IV – The Record

Eighteen men were charged with the murder of Mohammad Akhlaq. Several were released on bail. In 2020, the BJP Member of the Legislative Assembly from Dadri, Tejpal Nagar, called the accused “innocent.” A senior BJP leader called the lynching “a reaction to cow slaughter.” Forensic tests confirmed the meat was mutton. The confirmation changed nothing. No one was convicted as of the last available report. The temple loudspeakers continue to broadcast. Mohammad Akhlaq’s family was offered compensation by the state government and relocated for their safety. His son, who was beaten nearly to death while serving in the Indian Air Force, was transferred. The Air Force did not issue a statement.

Chapter 6

BORDER

Part 0 – The Ordinary

You are a professor. You are in your study. It is late. The lamp is on. Your glasses are on the nightstand beside the bed because you have taken them off to rest your eyes. You are writing a lecture on Bengali poetry. The page is half-finished. The pen is on the page. The ink is still wet. Your wife has gone to bed. She said: “Come soon.” You said: “One more paragraph.” One more paragraph.

Part I – The Event

On the night of December 14, 1971, during the Bangladesh Liberation War, Pakistani military forces and their collaborators, the Razakar and Al-Badr militias, systematically abducted and executed intellectuals in Dhaka. The targets were selected from a prepared list: professors, writers, journalists, doctors, engineers. They were collected from their homes in the middle of the night. Their bodies were found days later at a killing field in the Rayer Bazar district. The operation was designed to eliminate Bangladesh's intellectual class in the final days before Pakistan's surrender, ensuring that the new nation would be crippled even in victory. Over the course of the nine-month war, an estimated 300,000 to three million Bengalis were killed. Between 200,000 and 400,000 women were raped. Hindu minorities were specifically targeted under the classification of "miscreants" and "Indian agents."

Part II – The Wound

His name is Munier Chowdhury. He is a professor of Bengali literature at Dhaka University. He is forty-six. He is writing a lecture on the poet Jibanananda Das. The specific poem does not matter. What matters is the pen and the page and the wet ink and the half-finished sentence and the fact that the sentence will never be finished.

The knock comes at 2am. The knock is not a knock. It is a fist hitting a door with the authority of a list. The list has his name on it. The list was prepared by men who have never read Bengali poetry but who understand that a man who teaches others to read is more dangerous than a man who carries a gun.

He puts on his glasses. The glasses from the nightstand. He opens the door. There are men in uniform. The uniform is Pakistani military. Beside them, men without uniforms. Al-Badr militia. The men without uniforms are more frightening because their authority is not institutional. It is ideological. The ideology says: Bengali intellectuals are enemies of Pakistan. Bengali intellectuals are Hindu sympathisers. Bengali culture is a threat.

He is taken from the house. His wife watches from the bedroom doorway. The half-finished lecture is on the desk. The pen is on the page. The ink dries while he is being driven to Rayer Bazar.

His body is found three days later. The glasses are not on his body. The glasses are still on the nightstand.

The glasses are still on the nightstand. The nightstand is still beside the bed. The bed is still made. The lecture is still half-finished. The list is yours.

Part III – The Autopsy

Bob: A list.

Gman: The list is the most dangerous document in the series. A fatwa kills by category. A mob kills by proximity. A list kills by name. The list says: this specific person, at this specific address, must be removed. The list converts the general into the specific. The list is premeditated. The list is edited. The list is approved. Someone sat in a room and decided that a professor of Bengali poetry was a threat to the existence of Pakistan. The professor's weapon was a pen. The list's response was a bullet. The ratio between the two instruments is the measurement of the system's fear. The system is terrified of poetry. The system is correct to be terrified of poetry.

Bob: The Hindu targeting.

Gman: The Hindu minority was targeted specifically. Not because of what they did but because of what they were. The category was: Hindu. The subcategory was: present in East Pakistan. The processing was: elimination. The structure is identical to the Baha'i persecution in Iran, the Muslim persecution in Gujarat, the Jewish persecution in Europe. The name of the category changes. The processing does not. The system identifies a group. The system classifies the group as other. The system eliminates the group. The system calls the elimination "security" or "necessity" or "God's will." The name of the justification is the variable. The body on the ground is the constant.

Part IV – The Record

The Government of Pakistan denied the systematic targeting of intellectuals. The Government of Bangladesh established the International Crimes Tribunal in 2010 to try individuals for genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes committed during the 1971 war. Several senior Jamaat-e-Islami leaders were convicted. Some were executed. Pakistan has never formally apologised for the events of 1971. The killing field at Rayer Bazar is now a memorial. The memorial lists the names of the intellectuals. The half-finished lectures are not in the memorial. The glasses are not in the memorial. The ink dried forty years ago.

Chapter 7

TEMPLE

Part 0 – The Ordinary

You are watching television. You are in your living room in Lucknow. It is December. The tea is getting cold. On the screen, you can see a building. The building is a mosque. It is 450 years old. It is called the Babri Masjid. There are people on the domes. Thousands of people. They are holding hammers. They are holding iron rods. Some are using their bare hands. You watch them tear it down. You watch it live. The tea gets cold. You do not drink it.

Part I – The Event

On December 6, 1992, a mob of approximately 150,000 Hindu nationalists demolished the Babri Masjid, a sixteenth-century mosque in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh. The mob was mobilised by the Vishva Hindu Parishad and the Bharatiya Janata Party, who claimed the mosque had been built on the birthplace of the Hindu deity Ram. The demolition was broadcast live on national television. The mob dismantled the mosque over six hours using hammers, iron rods, pickaxes, and their hands. The Supreme Court had ordered that the mosque be protected. The order was not enforced. The demolition triggered communal riots across India and Pakistan. Over 2,000 people were killed. In Mumbai alone, approximately 900 died, predominantly Muslims. In 2019, the Supreme Court of India awarded the disputed site to Hindu groups for the construction of a Ram temple and directed that an alternative site be provided for a mosque. The Ram Mandir was inaugurated in January 2024 by Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Part II – The Wound

The building has stood for 450 years. It has survived Mughal emperors, British colonialism, Indian independence, and forty-five years of legal proceedings. It does not survive the afternoon of December 6, 1992.

The crowd is on the domes. The crowd is on the walls. The crowd has brought tools. Some have brought their hands. The hands are the more disturbing instrument because hands are what people use to pray and what people use to destroy and today the crowd is using them for both simultaneously. They believe they are doing God's work. The work is rubble.

The television broadcasts every second. Millions watch. The tea gets cold in living rooms across the country. The milk forms a skin on the surface. No one drinks the tea. Everyone watches the building come down.

It takes six hours. Centuries reduced to hours. Stone reduced to dust. The dust hangs in the air. The dust is four hundred and fifty years of prayer, four hundred and fifty years of architecture, four hundred and fifty years of presence, converted into particles that the crowd breathes in and coughs out and wipes from their faces with the same hands they used to pull the stones apart.

The riots begin that evening. The riots are not in Ayodhya. The riots are everywhere. In Mumbai. In Surat. In Bhopal. In Calcutta. The mosque is in one city. The violence is in every city. The structure proves its own thesis: the building was not the target. The category was the target. The building was the permission.

The dust is still in the air. Four hundred and fifty years of stone reduced to rubble in six hours. The television is still on. The tea is still cold. The dust is yours.

Part III – The Autopsy

Bob: They watched.

Gman: The demolition was broadcast live on national television. This is the only atrocity in the series where the nation was invited to watch in real time. The other atrocities in this series were hidden – behind prison walls, in remote villages, under internet blackouts. This one was performed. It was a spectacle. The crowd was not ashamed. The crowd was jubilant. The cameras did not deter the violence. The cameras were the audience the violence was designed for. The demolition was not an act of destruction. It was a sermon. The sermon said: we are the majority. This is our land. Your building is our building. Your God has no standing here. The television was the pulpit.

Bob: The Supreme Court order.

Gman: The Supreme Court ordered the mosque be protected. The order was not enforced. This is the same pattern as Gujarat, where the police stood three hundred metres away for ten hours. The law exists. The enforcement does not. The gap between the law and its enforcement is the space in which all atrocities in this series occur. The law says: the mosque shall stand. The mob says: the mosque shall fall. The police say: we have no orders. The absence of orders is the order.

Part IV – The Record

The Liberhan Commission, appointed in 1992 to investigate the demolition, submitted its report in 2009 – seventeen years later. The report named sixty-eight individuals responsible, including senior leaders of the BJP and VHP. No one served jail time for the demolition itself. In 2020, a special CBI court acquitted all thirty-two accused in the criminal conspiracy case, including BJP leader L.K. Advani, stating that the demolition was not pre-planned. The Supreme Court awarded the site to Hindu groups in November 2019. The Ram Mandir was inaugurated in January 2024 with a national ceremony. The mosque is gone. The temple stands in its place. The dust settled years ago.

Saturation

Optimal Stopping

This book contains ten chapters. It could contain ten thousand.

Every chapter was a body. A body that woke up in the morning and did not know. A man on a train holding his daughter. A woman tying a cloth to her child's wrist at the edge of a well. A pregnant woman with henna on her hands. A Christian woman who was thirsty. A man asleep above a refrigerator. A professor writing a lecture on poetry. A nation watching a building fall on television. A pastor carrying a book on a dirt road. A boy walking toward a sound. Two people praying.

These were the things in the room when the God arrived.

But in this volume, the God arrived twice. From two directions. With two names. Producing the same body on the same ground.

The Hindu mob burned a Muslim woman. The Muslim mob burned a Hindu village. The Hindu mob tore down a mosque. The Muslim mob tore down a temple. The Hindu state fired pellets at a Muslim boy's eyes. The Muslim state imprisoned a Christian woman for drinking water.

The names changed. The body did not.

SYSTEM (India): "The Government of India is committed to the protection of all its citizens regardless of religious affiliation. India's secular constitution guarantees freedom of worship. Communal disturbances are deeply regretted and the government extends condolences to all affected families."

SYSTEM (Pakistan): "The Government of Pakistan is committed to the protection of all its citizens regardless of religious affiliation. Pakistan's constitution guarantees religious freedom. Communal disturbances are deeply regretted and the government extends condolences to all affected families."

The statements are identical. The bodies are identical. The governments are identical. The denial is identical.

Now the book turns.

Name your God. Now name theirs. The two names are different. The body on the ground is the same.

If your God and their God produce the same body on the same ground, the Gods are not the variable. You are the variable. Your certainty is the variable.

The body does not care which direction the prayer mat was facing.

Trust the body.

Don’t be a cunt. Be kind.

Chapter 8

MORNING

You are making breakfast.

It is Tuesday. The kitchen is warm. The stove has been on since 5:30am. The chai is ready. You made it the way your mother made it. Cardamom. Two spoons of sugar. You stir it and the spoon hits the side of the pot and the sound is the sound of every morning you have ever had.

Your husband is tying his shoes in the hallway. He ties them the same way every morning. Left foot first. He has always done left foot first. You asked him once why. He said: I don't know. It has never occurred to him to start with the right.

Your daughter is nine. She is arguing about which dress to wear. The blue one or the green one. You say the green one. She says the blue one. You say fine, the blue one. She says actually the green one. This conversation has happened before. It will happen again. The conversation is not about the dress. The conversation is about the fact that she is nine and the world contains choices and every choice is a territory she is learning to claim.

Your son is seven. He is eating rice with his fingers. He is not supposed to eat rice with his fingers. He is supposed to use the spoon. The spoon is beside the plate. The spoon is untouched. The rice is on his fingers and his fingers are in his mouth and the morning is in his mouth and the morning tastes like rice.

You pour the chai. Two cups. Yours and your husband's. The children have milk. The milk is warm. Your son spills the milk. The milk spreads across the table. The milk reaches the edge of the table and pauses and then falls over the edge in a thin white line onto the floor.

You say: it's fine.

You wipe the table.

The cloth is damp. The cloth smells like every morning. The cloth is the most ordinary object in the world. It has wiped a thousand spills. It will wipe a thousand more.

Your husband stands. He puts his hand on your son's head. The hand covers most of the head because the head is seven and the hand is thirty-four. He does not say anything. The hand says everything.

Your daughter picks up her school bag. The zipper sticks. It has always stuck. She pulls it and it opens and she checks inside: the textbook, the notebook, the pencil case. The pencil case has two pens and an eraser. The eraser is shaped like a star. She chose the star. She chose it because she could.

You walk them to the door. Your husband has already left. You can hear his motorbike starting. The motorbike coughs once before it catches. It has always coughed once. The cough is the motorbike saying: I am old but I am here.

The children walk to school. You watch them from the door. Your daughter holds your son's hand at the crossing. She looks both ways. She learned this from you. She does not know she learned it from you. She thinks she has always known.

They cross. They reach the other side. Your daughter lets go of your son's hand. He runs ahead. She walks. She is nine and walking is what nine-year-olds do when they want the world to see them walking. She is not in a hurry. The morning is not in a hurry. Nothing is in a hurry.

You close the door.

The kitchen is quiet. The chai is warm. The cloth is damp. The stove is off. The milk is wiped. The spill is gone.

Nothing happens.

Nothing will happen today. Today is not the day.

Today the breakfast is eaten. Today the milk is wiped. Today the zipper sticks and opens. Today the hand is on the head and the head is on the shoulders and the shoulders are walking to school. Today the daughter holds the son's hand at the crossing and lets go on the other side. Today the motorbike coughs once and catches.

Today the body is not on the ground.

Today is not one of the forty-seven others.

Tomorrow might be.

Part VI

The Nation Cannot Justify This

Chapter 1

FLIGHT

Part 0 – The Ordinary

You are on a plane. It is July. You are going on holiday. Your son is beside you. He is six. He has a stuffed elephant. The elephant is grey and one ear is larger than the other because he pulls the left ear when he sleeps. You are at 33,000 feet. The seatbelt sign is off. Below you, through the window, if you looked, you would see sunflower fields. You do not look. You are reading a magazine. Your son is pulling the elephant's left ear.

Part I – The Event

On July 17, 2014, Malaysia Airlines Flight 17, a Boeing 777, was shot down over eastern Ukraine while flying from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur. All 298 people on board were killed, including 80 children. The aircraft was struck by a Buk surface-to-air missile. The Dutch-led Joint Investigation Team concluded that the missile was fired from a field near Pervomaysk, in territory controlled by Russian-backed separatists, and that the Buk missile system belonged to the 53rd Anti-Aircraft Missile Brigade of the Russian Armed Forces. Wreckage, luggage, personal belongings, and human remains were scattered across approximately fifty square kilometres of sunflower fields and farmland. Russia denied responsibility. Russia vetoed a UN Security Council resolution to establish an international tribunal. In November 2022, a Dutch court convicted three men – two Russians and one Ukrainian separatist – of murder. None have been extradited. Russia has never acknowledged its role.

Part II – The Wound

The plane is at 33,000 feet. The boy is pulling the elephant's left ear. The magazine is open to an article about Amsterdam. The seatbelt sign is off.

The missile reaches the aircraft in approximately seven seconds after launch. The warhead detonates before impact, releasing a cloud of bowtie-shaped shrapnel fragments. The fragments perforate the cockpit. The aircraft breaks apart at altitude.

Two hundred and ninety-eight people fall from 33,000 feet.

The fall takes approximately two and a half minutes. The bodies are not conscious for most of this. The decompression is instantaneous. But the physics continues. The bodies descend through clear summer air and land in sunflower fields and in the yards of houses and on roads and in gardens.

The wreckage spreads across sunflower fields and gardens and roads. Luggage tags from Amsterdam. Boarding passes from Schiphol. A child's colouring book open to a page half-finished. A pair of reading glasses with one lens missing.

A farmer finds a passport open to the photograph page. The photograph shows a woman smiling. The passport says Amsterdam. The woman is not smiling in the field. The woman is not in the field. Parts of the woman are in the field.

A child's stuffed elephant is found seventy metres from the main wreckage. The elephant is grey. One ear is larger than the other. The ear is intact. The child is not intact.

The stuffed elephant is still in the sunflower field. The passport is still open. The luggage tag still says Amsterdam. The elephant is yours.

Part III – The Autopsy

Bob: A Buk missile.

Gman: A Buk missile system is not a weapon that can be operated by accident or by amateurs. It is a sophisticated military platform that requires trained crews, radar guidance, and a command structure. The missile that destroyed MH17 was traced to the 53rd Anti-Aircraft Missile Brigade of the Russian Armed Forces. It was transported from Russia into eastern Ukraine, fired, and the launcher was transported back to Russia. The sequence requires planning, logistics, and authorisation at levels well above the local militia. The missile did not decide to fire itself. A system of command decided. The system of command denied it decided. The denial is the second missile. The first missile destroyed the aircraft. The second missile – the denial – destroys the possibility of justice.

Bob: The sunflower field.

Gman: Eighty children fell from 33,000 feet into a sunflower field. Sunflowers track the sun. The flowers were facing east that afternoon, toward the sun. The bodies fell from the west. The flowers did not turn. The flowers continued to face the sun. The bodies landed among the flowers and the flowers did not register the arrival. The field continued to be a field. The bodies were foreign objects in a system that did not recognise them. This is the structure of the entire conflict: the authority launches the missile and then the field absorbs the consequences and the authority continues to be the authority and the field continues to be a field and the bodies are never mentioned again.

Part IV – The Record

The Joint Investigation Team, led by the Netherlands, concluded that the missile was fired from Russian-controlled territory using a Russian military Buk system. Russia denied all involvement. Russia proposed alternative theories: a Ukrainian fighter jet, a Ukrainian Buk, a bomb on board. Each theory was investigated and disproved. Russia vetoed the UN Security Council resolution to establish an international criminal tribunal. A Dutch court convicted Igor Girkin, Sergei Dubinsky, and Leonid Kharchenko of murder. None are in custody. The 298 names are listed on a memorial in the Netherlands. The sunflower fields were harvested that autumn. The stuffed elephant was collected as evidence. The evidence has not produced a prisoner.

Chapter 2

CHILDREN

Part 0 – The Ordinary

You are in a theatre. Not watching a play. Living. Sleeping on the floor. Eating what is handed to you. The theatre in Mariupol is the largest shelter in the city centre. Over one thousand people are inside. Many are children. Outside, on the forecourt, someone has written a word in white paint. The letters are large enough to be seen from a plane. The letters are large enough to be seen from space. The word is: ДЕТИ. The word is: CHILDREN.

Part I – The Event

On March 16, 2022, Russian aircraft dropped two 500-kilogramme bombs on the Donetsk Regional Academic Drama Theatre in Mariupol, Ukraine. The theatre had been serving as a civilian shelter since the beginning of the siege. Between five hundred and one thousand civilians were inside, many of them children. The word "ДЕТИ" – Russian for "children" – had been painted in white letters on the forecourts on both sides of the building. The letters were clearly visible on satellite imagery from March 14, two days before the strike. The bombs struck the centre of the building, collapsing the roof and both main walls. At least three hundred people were killed. Amnesty International concluded the strike was "almost certainly" carried out by Russian fighter aircraft and constituted a war crime. Russia denied bombing the theatre. In December 2022, Russian authorities began demolishing the theatre's ruins. Ukrainian officials described the demolition as an attempt to destroy evidence.

Part II – The Wound

Someone knelt on the forecourt of the Mariupol Drama Theatre and dipped a brush in white paint and moved the brush in the shape of letters. The letters spell a word. The word is in Russian – the language of the people who will read it from the cockpit of a bomber. The word is: ДЕТИ. Children.

Someone painted the word on the ground. Someone knelt and held a brush and moved the brush in the shape of letters that spell the word for the most vulnerable thing in the world.

The word faces the sky. The word is in Russian. The language of the bomber. The pilot can read it. The satellite can photograph it. The word is a plea that rises forty metres from the ground into the air and from the air into orbit and from orbit back down to the news desk and from the news desk into the record.

The word says: there are children here. The word says: do not drop the bomb. The word says: please.

The bomb falls anyway.

Two 500-kilogramme bombs. Each weighing as much as a large horse. They fall through the air that the word “CHILDREN” has been trying to fill with its meaning. They fall through the meaning and hit the building and the building ceases to be a building. The roof lifts. The walls breach. The dust rises. The dust is the building. The dust is the plaster and the seats and the stage and the walls that held the word “CHILDREN” and the children who were inside when the word failed.

The word “CHILDREN” is still written on the forecourt. The forecourt is rubble. The word survived the building. The word is yours.

Part III – The Autopsy

Bob: They could read it.

Gman: The word was in Russian. The pilot's language. The word was visible from the altitude at which the bombs were released. The word was visible from satellite altitude. The word was a communication from the ground to the sky. The sky received the communication and responded with two 500-kilogramme bombs. The word was not a shield. The word was a target identifier. In a system where the authority has decided that the target is not human, the word "children" does not protect. It locates. The word said: the most vulnerable people are here. The bomb said: precisely.

Bob: The demolition.

Gman: After the bombing, Russia demolished the ruins. The demolition is the second act. The first act destroys the people. The second act destroys the evidence that the people existed. This is the same pattern as the bulldozer at Khavaran cemetery in Iran. The same pattern as the erasure of Baha'i graves. The authority does not just kill. It edits. It removes the record. If the theatre is gone, the word "CHILDREN" is gone. If the word is gone, the plea is gone. If the plea is gone, the crime is deniable. The demolition is not construction. It is authorship. The authority is rewriting the event.

Part IV – The Record

Amnesty International, June 2022: “After months of rigorous investigation, analysis of satellite imagery and interviews with dozens of witnesses, we concluded that the strike was a clear war crime committed by Russian forces.” Russia denied the strike. Russia proposed that Ukrainian forces bombed their own civilians. The International Criminal Court has not issued charges related to the Mariupol theatre specifically. The theatre is being demolished by Russian authorities, who say it is “reconstruction.” The word “CHILDREN” was painted in white. White is the colour of surrender. The surrender was not accepted.

Chapter 3

STREET

Part 0 – The Ordinary

You are walking your dog. It is March. The air is cold. The dog is a small brown thing. It pulls the leash. Your name is Mykhailo. You are sixty-two. You love classical music. You collect stereo equipment. You treasure walks in the Bucha landscape. You are on Yablunska Street in Bucha. You have walked this street every morning for seven years. You are wearing a blue jacket. The zipper is broken. You use the buttons instead. The dog stops at a tree. You wait. You do not check your phone. You watch the dog. The street is quiet.

Part I – The Event

The Bucha massacre took place during the Russian occupation of the city of Bucha, northwest of Kyiv, from March 4 to 31, 2022. When Ukrainian forces and journalists entered the city on April 1, they found the bodies of men, women, and children lying in the streets, in yards, and in basements. Many had their hands zip-tied behind their backs and had been shot in the head. A memorial wall in Bucha lists 501 names. Over 650 were shot dead by Russian soldiers. Bodies showed signs of torture: broken bones, electrical burns, stab wounds. Women reported rape and gang rape. Satellite imagery confirmed that bodies were in the streets during the Russian occupation, contradicting Russian claims that the images were staged after the withdrawal. A UN report confirmed summary executions and stated that 88 percent of victims were male, suggesting deliberate targeting by gender.

Part II – The Wound

His name is Mykhailo Kovalenko. He is sixty-two. He loves classical music and collects stereo equipment and treasures walks in the Bucha landscape. Today he is walking his dog. The dog is a small brown thing. The leash is a rope. The rope is the ordinary kind of rope, the kind that connects a man to an animal he loves.

The soldier is on the other side of the street. The soldier has a rifle. The man has a dog.

The bullet enters the man's back. He falls forward. The dog yelps and pulls the leash. The leash goes taut and then slack because the hand that held it is no longer holding anything.

Mykhailo is face down on Yablunska Street. He is wearing a blue parka and beige trousers. His body will lie here for twenty-nine days. His relatives will identify him by his clothes in a photograph taken from across the street. The dog is standing beside him. The dog does not leave. The dog does not understand that the man is not going to stand up. The dog waits.

The body stays in the street for days. The dog stays beside it. Someone, eventually, feeds the dog. No one moves the man. Moving the man would require crossing the street and crossing the street is a death sentence because the soldiers shoot anyone who crosses the street.

A bicycle is on its side ten metres from the body. The front wheel is still turning. The cyclist is not beside the bicycle. The cyclist is further down the street, face down, with holes in his jacket.

The bicycle wheel is still turning. The dog is still on the leash. The leash is still attached to the wrist. The wheel is yours.

Part III – The Autopsy

Bob: He was walking his dog.

Gman: The man was performing the most ordinary act available to a human being. Walking a dog. The act has no political content. The act has no military significance. The act is a man and an animal and a rope and a street and a morning. The soldier who shot him did not see a man walking a dog. The soldier saw a category: Ukrainian. The category was sufficient. The bullet was the output. The authority was not God. The authority was not scripture. The authority was: this land is Russian. This person on this land is not Russian. Therefore this person is removable. The structure is identical to every volume in this series. The name of the authority was swapped. The body on the ground did not change.

Bob: The dog.

Gman: The dog did not leave the body. The dog waited. The dog did not understand the category system that produced the bullet. The dog understood only one thing: this is my person and my person is on the ground and I will not leave. The dog's loyalty is the structural opposite of the soldier's obedience. The soldier obeys an authority that says: this person is not a person. The dog obeys no authority. The dog obeys the bond. The bond says: this person is everything. The bond does not require a book or a flag or a fatwa. The bond requires only proximity and time. The dog is the only moral actor on Yablunska Street.

Part IV – The Record

The Russian Federation denied all atrocities in Bucha. The Russian Foreign Ministry called the photographs “staged provocation.” President Putin awarded the 64th Separate Motorised Rifle Brigade – identified as the unit responsible for the Bucha occupation – the title of “Guards” unit, an honour for exemplary service. The award was issued on April 18, 2022, seventeen days after the images of bodies on Yablunska Street were broadcast worldwide. The ICC issued an arrest warrant for Vladimir Putin on March 17, 2023, for the deportation of Ukrainian children. No arrest warrant has been issued for Bucha specifically. The bodies have been buried. The dog was adopted.

Chapter 4

MATERNITY

Part 0 – The Ordinary

You are pregnant. You are in a hospital. The hospital is in Mariupol. The hospital is a maternity hospital. The building is designed for one thing: bringing life into the world. You are in a bed. The sheets are clean. You are due in two weeks. You have a name for the baby. You have not told anyone the name. The name is yours and the baby's. When the baby arrives, you will say the name out loud for the first time.

Part I – The Event

On March 9, 2022, Russian forces bombed the Mariupol Maternity Hospital. The airstrike destroyed the maternity ward and the children's ward. Seventeen people were injured. A photograph of a pregnant woman being carried on a stretcher through the rubble became one of the defining images of the war. The woman, later identified as Mariana Vishegirskaya, survived. Another pregnant woman, photographed being carried on a stretcher with her hand on her belly, died along with her baby. Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov called the hospital "a base for the Azov Battalion" and described the attack as "a staged provocation." The Associated Press, which took the photographs, confirmed they were authentic.

Part II – The Wound

The bomb hits the maternity ward. The building is designed for one thing. The building is designed to hold the first breath. The building is the place where the body enters the world. The bomb enters the building.

The ceiling falls. The plaster is white. The plaster was white. Now it is grey and it is on the floor and it is on the beds and it is on the women who are in the beds.

A woman is carried out on a stretcher. Her hand is on her belly. The hand is the only thing holding the baby in place. The hand is doing what the building was supposed to do: contain. Protect. Hold.

The photograph is taken. The photograph shows a woman on a stretcher in the rubble of a building that was supposed to bring her baby into the world. The woman's hand is on her belly. The hand says: I am still here. The baby is still here. We are still here.

She dies. The baby dies. The stretcher is reused. The photograph is not reused. The photograph is singular. The photograph shows a woman whose last act was to hold her hand on her belly in the ruins of the place that was built to welcome the belly's contents.

The stretcher has been reused. The photograph has not. The belly and the hand on the belly are still in the photograph. The stretcher is yours.

Part III – The Autopsy

Bob: A maternity hospital.

Gman: The building was designed for one function: the transition of life from inside the body to outside the body. The birth canal and the hospital corridor serve the same purpose: they are passages through which the new arrives. The bomb destroyed the passage. The bomb did not destroy a military installation. It destroyed the architecture of arrival. The regime's response – "it was a base for the Azov Battalion" – converts a maternity ward into a military target using a sentence. The sentence does what the bomb does: it destroys the civilian identity of the building. The bomb destroys the walls. The sentence destroys the meaning.

Part IV – The Record

Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated the hospital had been emptied of patients and was being used by Ukrainian military forces. The Associated Press, which had journalists on the ground in Mariupol, confirmed the hospital was functioning as a maternity ward at the time of the attack. The AP's photographs were authenticated. The ICC has opened an investigation. No charges have been filed related to the maternity hospital. The woman in the photograph died. The baby died. The stretcher was used for the next patient.

Chapter 5

NAMES

Part 0 – The Ordinary

You have a name. Your mother gave it to you. She chose it before you were born. She said it out loud in the hospital room when you arrived. It was the first word you heard. It was the word that made you exist. You are seven. You are in a bus. The bus is driving east. You do not know where east is. You know your name. A woman you do not know is sitting beside you. She is not your mother. She tells you: “You have a new name now.”

Part I – The Event

Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Russian government has systematically deported Ukrainian children from occupied territories to Russia and Russian-occupied Crimea. The Ukrainian government has identified over 19,000 children who were taken. Many were placed with Russian families and given new identities, including new names and Russian citizenship. Some were placed in re-education camps. On March 17, 2023, the International Criminal Court issued arrest warrants for Russian President Vladimir Putin and Russia's Commissioner for Children's Rights, Maria Lvova-Belova, for the unlawful deportation and transfer of children. Lvova-Belova has publicly stated that some children initially resisted but eventually "adapted." She adopted a Ukrainian child herself.

Part II – The Wound

He is seven. His name is Ukrainian. The name was chosen before he was born. His mother said it out loud for the first time in a hospital room in a city that is now rubble. The name means something in Ukrainian. In Russian, it means nothing. The name is a word that belongs to a language the new country does not speak. The name was chosen by his mother. His mother is not on the bus.

The bus crosses a border he cannot see. The border is a line on a map. The line converts him from a Ukrainian child into an uncategorised person. On the other side of the line, a new category is waiting: Russian child.

A woman in an office writes a new name on a new document. The new name is Russian. The new document is a birth certificate. The birth certificate says he was born in Russia. He was not born in Russia. He was born in a city that is now rubble.

He has two names now. The first is the name his mother said when he arrived in the world. The second is the name the Nation wrote on a piece of paper. The first name is who he is. The second name is who the Nation says he is. The distance between the two names is the distance between his old life and his new life. The distance between the two names is the crime.

Two birth certificates. Two names. One child. The first name is who they are. The second name is the crime. The first name is yours.

Part III – The Autopsy

Bob: The name.

Gman: The name is the deepest violence in the series. Deeper than the stone. Deeper than the rope. Deeper than the bullet. Deeper than the bomb. The stone kills the body. The rope kills the body. The bullet kills the body. The bomb kills the body. The name kills the person. The body survives. The child survives. But the child is no longer the child. The child has been un-made. The child has been deleted from their own life and inserted into someone else's life. The regime in Iran bulldozed graves to erase the dead. Russia rewrites birth certificates to erase the living. The living erasure is worse because the erased person is still present. They eat. They sleep. They go to school. They answer to a name that is not theirs. They become the lie.

Bob: Lvova-Belova said they "adapted."

Gman: The word "adapted" is the most violent word in this volume. "Adapted" means: the child stopped crying for their mother. "Adapted" means: the child learned to answer to a name that is not theirs. "Adapted" means: the erasure was successful. The child's resistance was the last expression of their identity. When the resistance ended, the identity ended. The authority calls this "adaptation." The body calls it annihilation.

Part IV – The Record

The International Criminal Court issued arrest warrants for Vladimir Putin and Maria Lvova-Belova on March 17, 2023. The charges: unlawful deportation and transfer of children from occupied areas of Ukraine to the Russian Federation. Lvova-Belova stated publicly: “Initially, the children are very negative about everything. They struggle to adapt. But gradually, they begin to change.” She adopted a fifteen-year-old Ukrainian boy named Filip. She gave him a Russian name. The original name has not been published in her statements. The child’s first birth certificate is in Ukraine. The second is in Russia. The distance between the two documents is the crime.

Chapter 6

GRAVES

Part 0 – The Ordinary

You are digging. You are not a gravedigger. You are a forensic investigator. You are in a forest outside Izium. It is September. The leaves are turning. The ground is soft. The markers are sticks with numbers. The numbers go up to 440. You are at number 237. Your hands are inside the earth. You are touching something.

Part I – The Event

In September 2022, following the Ukrainian liberation of the city of Izium in Kharkiv Oblast, authorities discovered a mass grave in a forest on the outskirts of the city. Over 440 bodies were exhumed. Many showed signs of torture: broken bones, rope marks, stab wounds, gunshot wounds. Some had their hands tied. Some had ropes around their necks. Ninety-nine percent of the bodies were civilian. Some graves contained single bodies. One contained seventeen soldiers. The bodies had been buried during the six months of Russian occupation. The Ukrainian government described the site as evidence of “mass murder.” The bodies included men, women, and children. The oldest victim was ninety-three.

Part II – The Wound

The investigator's hands are in the earth. The earth is soft from the autumn rain. The leaves are turning. The forest is doing what forests do in September. The bodies are doing what bodies do in earth.

Number 237 has a rope around the neck. The rope is the ordinary kind. The kind used for tying things. The kind found in a garage or a barn. The rope is not a military instrument. The rope was repurposed. Everything in this war has been repurposed. Cranes into gallows. Theatres into shelters. Basements into torture rooms. Rope into nooses.

The hands are still tied. The rope is still around the neck. The body is face down. The forensic investigator brushes the earth from the back of the skull. The skull has a hole. The hole is the size of a bullet. The sequence: bound, strangled, shot. The sequence is redundant. Any one of the three would have been sufficient. The redundancy is the message. The message is: we had time. We had all the time in the world. We used every method because we could.

The grave is numbered, not named. Number 237. The dental records will take weeks. The identification will take longer. The family is somewhere, waiting. The family does not know the number.

The rope is still around the neck. The grave is numbered, not named. The dental records take weeks. The rope took seconds. The number is yours.

Part III – The Autopsy

Bob: Four hundred and forty.

Gman: Four hundred and forty bodies in a forest. The forest is the regime's filing system. Each grave is a record. Each record is a person who was processed by the system and deposited. The system does not distinguish between a filing cabinet and a grave. Both store processed items. Both are organised by number. Both are closed when full. The forest was the system's archive. The exhumation is the audit. The audit reveals that the system processed four hundred and forty people in six months. That is approximately 2.4 people per day. The system ran continuously. The system did not take weekends. The system did not take holidays. The system processed 2.4 people per day for six months and buried each one in a numbered hole in a forest and covered the hole and moved to the next hole. The system processed 2.4 people per day for six months. The processing did not pause. The processing did not distinguish. The input was a person. The output was a numbered hole.

Part IV – The Record

President Zelenskyy visited the Izium mass grave site on September 16, 2022. He said: “Russia leaves death everywhere, and it must be held accountable.” Russia denied the mass graves existed, then denied the bodies showed signs of torture, then denied Russian forces were responsible. The exhumation took weeks. The identification took months. Of the 440 bodies recovered, only a fraction had been formally identified at the time of reporting. The forest has been cordoned off. The numbered sticks remain in the ground. The leaves continue to turn.

Chapter 7

GRID

Part 0 – The Ordinary

You are cold. You are in your apartment in Kyiv. It is January. The power has been out for three days. The temperature outside is minus fifteen. The temperature inside is minus three. The difference is the walls. You are wearing every piece of clothing you own. You are wrapped in blankets. You are seventy-four years old. Your husband died last year. You are alone. The cat is under the blankets with you. The cat is the warmest thing in the apartment. You are not dying. You are being made to die slowly by a man who has never been in this room and does not know that you exist.

Part I – The Event

Beginning in October 2022, Russia launched systematic missile and drone strikes against Ukraine's civilian energy infrastructure. Power stations, transformer substations, heating plants, and water supply systems were targeted in coordinated waves of attacks timed to coincide with the onset of winter. The strategy was explicit: to deprive the civilian population of electricity, heating, and water during the coldest months. By January 2023, the UN estimated that nearly twelve million Ukrainians were affected by power outages. Temperatures dropped below minus twenty degrees Celsius. Hospitals operated on generators. Homes went dark and cold for days at a time. The attacks continued through the winters of 2023–24 and 2024–25. Ukraine's energy grid has been repeatedly repaired and repeatedly destroyed. The cycle is deliberate: each repair is an invitation for the next strike.

Part II – The Wound

Her name is not recorded. She is one of twelve million. She is seventy-four. She is in an apartment on the sixth floor. The apartment has photographs on the wall: her wedding, her children's graduations, her husband in a suit he wore once. The photographs are the only things in the apartment that still contain warmth. The lift does not work because the lift requires electricity and the electricity was destroyed by a cruise missile three days ago.

She has not left the apartment in three days. The stairs are six flights. The stairwell is dark. The dark is not the ordinary dark of a stairwell at night. It is the permanent dark of a building that has been disconnected from the systems that make it habitable.

She boils water on a small camping stove her neighbour brought her. The stove runs on gas canisters. She has two canisters left. When they run out, she will not be able to boil water. When she cannot boil water, she cannot make tea. When she cannot make tea, she will drink cold water from the bathtub she filled before the water stopped. When the bathtub water runs out, she will melt snow from the balcony. When the balcony is empty of snow, she will wait for more snow.

Her husband died last year. He died in a hospital that had electricity. The hospital has a generator now. The generator runs for four hours a day. The generator decides which four hours contain medical care and which twenty hours contain waiting.

The cat is under the blankets. The cat does not understand the geopolitical context. The cat understands that the blankets are warm and the rest of the apartment is not.

The blankets are the last infrastructure. The temperature is minus three inside. The grandmother is still wrapped. The blankets are yours.

Part III – The Autopsy

Bob: The weapon is winter.

Gman: The authority does not need to enter the building. It does not need a soldier or a bullet or a zip tie. It disconnects the building from the systems that make life possible and lets physics do the killing. Minus fifteen degrees is a weapon. Darkness is a weapon. The absence of heating is a weapon. The authority has converted the weather into a military instrument. This is the most sophisticated form of the structure in the entire series. The authority does not murder. It creates the conditions in which survival becomes progressively impossible and calls it strategy. The grandmother in the apartment is not a target. She is collateral physics. She is the predictable output of a system that subtracts heat from a building in January.

Bob: No God.

Gman: No God. No book. No fatwa. No scripture. No divine mandate. The authority is a man in a bunker who decided that Ukrainian civilians should freeze. The certainty is: this land is Russian. These people are not real. Their heating systems are military targets. The structure is identical to every volume in this series. The name of the authority changed. The body in the apartment did not change. A woman is cold. She has always been cold, across all six volumes. In South Africa, she was cold because the system stole the housing funds. In Gaza, she was cold because the system bombed the shelter. In America, she was cold because the system shot her in a place of worship. In Iran, she was cold because the system hanged her from a crane. In India, she was cold because the system burned her house. In Ukraine, she is cold because the system destroyed the transformer. The woman is the same woman. The cold is the same cold. The system has six names. The woman has one body. The body is always cold.

Part IV – The Record

The United Nations described the attacks on Ukraine's energy infrastructure as potential war crimes. Russia described them as strikes on "military-related infrastructure." The Ukrainian energy company Ukrenergo reported that over 50 percent of its generating capacity was damaged or destroyed. The European Union provided generators, transformers, and repair equipment. Ukraine repaired the grid. Russia bombed the grid again. The cycle has continued for three winters. The grandmother's apartment building has been reconnected and disconnected four times. The cat remains under the blankets.

Chapter 8

DENIAL

Part 0 – The Ordinary

You are watching the news. You are in Moscow. You are a mother. Your son is in the army. The news says: there is no war. The news says: it is a special military operation. Your son called three weeks ago. He sounded different. He said: “I’m fine.” He has not called since. The news says: everything is fine. Your son said: everything is fine. The news and your son are using the same words. You believe the news because the alternative is unbearable.

Part I – The Event

Since February 2022, the Russian government has maintained that the invasion of Ukraine is a “special military operation” aimed at “denazification” and “demilitarisation.” Russian state media has been prohibited from using the words “war” or “invasion.” Citizens who publicly describe the conflict as a war face up to fifteen years in prison. Thousands of Russians have been arrested for holding blank pieces of paper in public – the blankness itself interpreted as protest. Mothers of soldiers have been threatened and silenced. Independent media has been shut down. The information environment inside Russia has been engineered to prevent the population from knowing what is being done in their name.

Part II – The Wound

She is a mother. Her son is in the army. The army is in a country she has been told is not being invaded by the army her son is in.

The sentence is circular because the lie is circular. The lie says: there is no war. The lie says: your son is not in a war. The lie says: if your son does not come home, he did not die in a war because there is no war.

She watches the news. The news shows soldiers in clean uniforms shaking hands with grateful civilians. The news does not show Bucha. The news does not show the zip ties. The news does not show the man walking his dog. The news does not show the word “CHILDREN” on the ground. The news does not show the basement. The news does not show the maternity ward. The news does not show the forest with 440 numbered sticks.

She holds her phone. The last message from her son is three weeks old. The message says: “I’m fine.” The period after “fine” is the last punctuation mark her son produced. The period is a full stop.

She is not a perpetrator. She is a product. She is what the system produces on the home front: a mother who cannot grieve because the event she would grieve has been officially declared non-existent. Her son is missing in a war that is not a war, in a country that is not being invaded, on a street where a man was shot walking his dog and a word was written on the ground that the pilot could read.

She believes the news because the alternative is the basement, the forest, the maternity ward, the zip ties, the word “CHILDREN,” and her son’s hands on someone else’s wrists.

The phone is in her hand. The last message still says “I’m fine.” The period is the last punctuation mark. The period is yours.

Part III – The Autopsy

Bob: The mother.

Gman: The mother is the final victim. She is not in Ukraine. She is in Russia. She has not been bombed. She has not been tortured. She has not been zip-tied. She has been lied to. The lie is the final weapon. The lie is what makes all other weapons possible. If the mother knew what her son was doing, she might object. If she objected, she might protest. If she protested, the system would have to justify the war. The system cannot justify the war because the war does not exist. The lie is the architecture. The denial is the load-bearing wall. Remove the denial and the building collapses. The regime knows this. That is why the penalty for calling the war a war is fifteen years in prison.

Bob: The blank paper.

Gman: Citizens were arrested for holding blank pieces of paper. The paper contains nothing. The paper is the most honest statement anyone in Russia has made about the war: there are no words. There is nothing to write. The blankness is the truth. The regime arrested the blankness because the regime understood that the blankness was a mirror. The blank paper said: look. There is nothing here. Nothing is being done. No one is dying. The blank paper agreed with the government's position – there is no war – and the government arrested it anyway. Because the agreement was ironic. And irony is the one weapon the regime cannot process.

Part IV – The Record

As of 2026, independent Russian media outlets including Novaya Gazeta, Ekho Moskvy, and TV Rain have been shut down or forced abroad. Over 19,000 people have been detained for anti-war protests. The penalty for publicly calling the conflict a “war” is up to fifteen years in prison. Memorial, Russia’s oldest and most prominent human rights organisation, was forcibly dissolved in December 2021, two months before the invasion. The mother has not received a second call from her son. The news continues to report that everything is fine. The period after “fine” remains.

Saturation

Optimal Stopping

This series contains sixty chapters. It could contain sixty thousand.

Every chapter was a body. A body that woke up in the morning and did not know.

In South Africa: a woman in a shelter that was never built. In Gaza: a boy in a blue train shirt who was learning to point. In Israel: a family of five locked in an embrace. In America: a girl wearing eyeliner at a nightclub on a Saturday. In Iran: a woman writing a letter in a cell, folding it into a shoe. In India: a man asleep above a refrigerator that contained lamb. In Pakistan: a woman who drank water from the wrong cup. In Ukraine: a man walking his dog on a quiet street.

These were the things in the room when the authority arrived.

The authority had six names.

In South Africa, the authority was political. The body was on the ground.

In Gaza and Israel, the authority was tribal. The body was on the ground.

In America, the authority was religious, wearing a mask. The body was on the ground.

In Iran, the authority was religious, with no mask. The body was on the ground.

In India and Pakistan, the authority was religious, bilateral, symmetrical. Hindu and Muslim and Sikh and Christian. Both sides. All sides. The body was on the ground.

In Ukraine, the authority was national. Secular. Imperial. The body was on the ground.

The authority changed six times. The body did not change once.

SYSTEM (South Africa): “The Government remains committed to transparency and accountability in the disbursement of public funds.” **SYSTEM (Israel):** “The Israel Defence Forces took all feasible precautions to minimise civilian casualties.” **SYSTEM (Palestine):** “The resistance acted in defence of the Palestinian people’s right to self-determination.” **SYSTEM (United States):** “Our thoughts and prayers are with the victims and their families.” **SYSTEM (Iran):** “The judiciary operates independently and in accordance with Islamic jurisprudence.” **SYSTEM (India):** “Communal disturbances

are deeply regretted." **SYSTEM (Pakistan):** "Communal disturbances are deeply regretted." **SYSTEM (Russia):** "This is a special military operation. There is no war."

The statements are different. The bodies are the same. The denial is the same. The condolences are the same. The continuation is the same.

Now the book turns. For the last time.

It does not turn to comfort. It does not turn to meaning. It does not turn to hope. It turns to you.

It was never religion. It was never nationalism. It was never ideology. It was never politics. It was always certainty. Your certainty. Unexamined. Untested. Unquestioned.

The certainty that you are right. And they are wrong. And because they are wrong, something should be done about them.

Name the thing you believe. Place a body on the ground in front of it. Does your belief survive the body?

If yes – you are the stone, the rope, the bullet, the bomb, the zip tie, the pellet, the fridge rumour, the cup of water, the word CHILDREN written on the ground that the pilot read and dropped the bomb anyway.

If no – you have just done the only thing sixty chapters and six volumes have asked.

You have placed the body before the belief.

The body wins. The body always wins. The body is the only authority that does not collapse into violence. Because the body does not claim to be right. The body only claims to be here.

Trust the body.

Don't be a cunt. Be kind.

OMO

Okay Moving On

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Medium	Systems Consequence / Structural Enforcement
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STUDIO 6