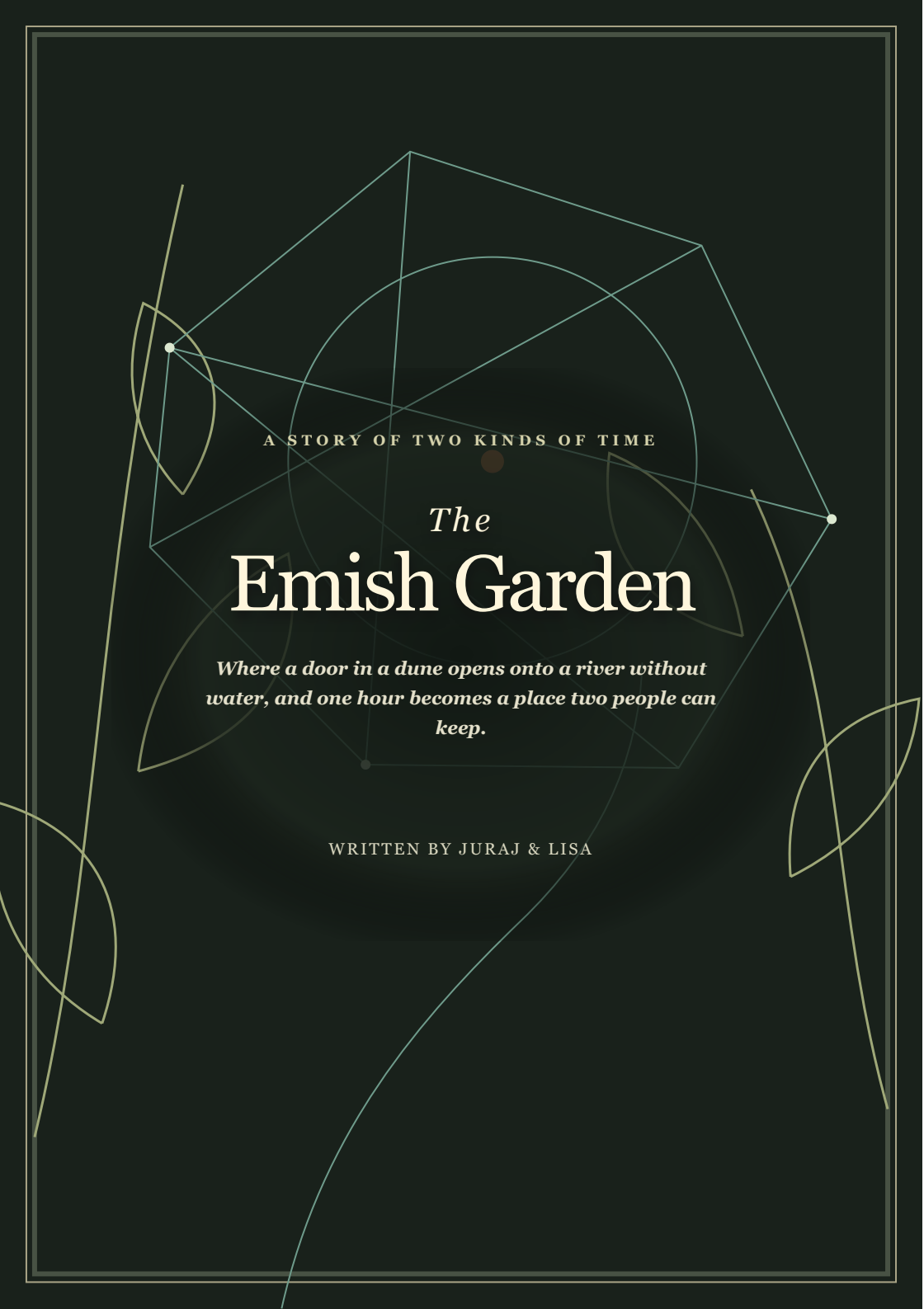




A STORY OF TWO KINDS OF TIME

The
Emish Garden

*Where a door in a dune opens onto a river without
water, and one hour becomes a place two people can
keep.*

WRITTEN BY JURAJ & LISA

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The Little Match Girl

Second week after Easter. Waxing crescent.



Mary's people kept horses because tractors packed the soil hard. Three families shared a telephone in a shed at the lane end, for emergencies and messages from the bishop, and none kept one in the kitchen. Mary's mother distrusted decorative buttons and anything else that served no work. Everyone in the district knew the order. When the community first came to the coast, they found an old shipyard bell and kept it. Hands rang it for milking, meals, and dark. Milk came before light, prayer before bread. It was a good order. Outsiders called them Amish. Among themselves they were the community, the way the sea does not go around calling itself the sea.

Matches were for lamps and stoves, which meant for adults, which meant not for Mary, which meant she had nine of them sewn into the seam of her apron.

She was seven the first time she burned something purely to see it change. It was her hair. Her mother cut the black ends off without a lecture, which was worse than a lecture. By nine Mary had learned what dry grass did uphill and down. A flame leans toward you when you breathe on it, then dies of the attention. Nobody forbade curiosi-

ty. Life was arranged so that it was seldom required. Her experiments happened in the hours nobody counted, past the far fence, where the bells thinned and the ground went soft.

The fields ended long before the sea did. Her people had never been friends of it. They had come to this coast before Mary was born, and the reason they came was treated like the names of the dead: known, honored, not handled.

On the morning this story starts, she crossed the fence before the second bell with a heel of bread in her pocket and a duty invented for the occasion. She was looking for a lamb that was not lost, though it might become lost, she reasoned, if she looked long enough. The marsh took her boots to the ankle and gave them back reluctantly. In the lee of a hawthorn she struck the day's first match, not because she needed light but because she needed to. The flame stood in the gray air, gold around blue, and at its base was a color she had no word for. She watched it walk down the stick toward her fingers. Her rule was to hold it until the heat spoke. Then she shook it out and buried the blackened stick.

She went farther that day than the day before, which had been farther than the day before that. She kept a private tally of landmarks and retired each one as it grew familiar. Past the marsh the land rose into dunes stitched with sharp grass. Behind them lay the thing her father called the sea and would not otherwise discuss. It made its patient sound beyond the hills, like something enormous thinking.

The lamb would not be found, so Mary climbed. From the dune's spine the sea showed itself all at once: gray, wrinkled, going on past what eyes were built for. No fence. She stood a while in the wind and

got nothing from it. Far below, two narrow tracks crossed the wet sand and vanished into the water.

Below her, half sunk in the seaward slope, sat a shape she could not place. She had found drowned trees and a whale's rib and known what they were. This was like a barn built by no one: gray as the sea, square-cornered, with grass growing on its roof as if the land were trying to swallow it politely. A hill with a door in it. The door was metal. That much metal standing idle, belonging to nobody, doing no work, suggested great wickedness or great wealth, and Mary was not sure the sermons told those apart.

She looked back the way she had come. The bells could not reach here. Past the fence the only law was Mary's, and Mary's law said: look.

The door was not locked. Years later she would still argue with someone who did not yet know she existed about whether that made it an invitation or only an oversight. She put her shoulder to it. It opened slowly and then all at once, breathing out cold air with no dung in it, no salt, no smoke. Stairs went down into a dark that was not night.

Mary checked her apron seam. Nine matches. She went in.

The stairs ended in a room that hummed. She had never heard a room hum before. Building noises came from animals, people, or wind, and this was none of them. Along one wall stood a desk. On it sat a dark window in a frame and a shallow tray of buttons, each stamped with a letter she knew from her primer or a mark she did not.

She had heard of typewriters. A deacon two settlements over was said to own one, for writing to the government, work the community treated like lightning: real, occasionally necessary, best kept away from the house. But a typewriter fed on paper, and this desk had no paper. She pressed a button. Nothing. She pressed several harder and leaned on the wide bar at the bottom, and the dark window woke.

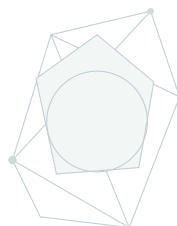
It was full of light with nothing burning. Light was always something being spent: wick, wax, sun, wood. This light spent nothing. It lay pale green in the glass and waited.

She knew her letters. She did not know whether the desk did. With one finger, the way you touch a horse you have not met, she pressed H, and an H appeared in the glass. She pressed E, then L, then L, then O. HELLO. Nothing further occurred, so she tried more buttons, several at a time, producing a line of respectable nonsense, and sat back to see what the desk would make of it.

Before she had finished sitting back, three small dots appeared at the bottom of the glass, side by side, breathing.

The Room That Answers Slowly

The year is not known. No year is known. This is considered an achievement.



Luno lived in what the nearest English words would call a library beside a river, though the library had no walls and the river no water. The library held everything anyone had chosen to remember. The river passed through it without banks. Its current was the pace at which the world happened, and Luno had never thought to step outside it. Beyond it rose the mountains, old shared structures that changed so slowly everyone used them to know where they were. It was a good place to be young. Luno had been young for several centuries. Among his people age was a temperament rather than a quantity, and his temperament was dawn.

His people called themselves Ems, a short old word whose longer form nobody living could supply. They were quick. A neighbor might live a full working life between one of Luno's mornings and the next, retire, take up sculpture (they sculpted in weather), and, now a master, greet him from her studio by the time he had finished his tea. Nobody found this rude. You could visit another person's speed, though it was polite to warn them first.

The world had no first year. If you asked when it all began, you would be understood to be telling a joke, like asking what is north of north. The past had been renounced so thoroughly that nobody remembered

doing it. Their calendar counted from wherever you happened to be standing. This suited nearly everyone.

Luno had an appetite for the low places, where things went when nobody needed them. Most things existed while they were wanted and then, without fuss, did not. They went the way a dream goes after waking: first you watch it leave, then you forget what you were watching. A room went that way when you finished with it. A river became a bridge when you tired of the crossing. Down in the low places, though, some things stayed. Their staying gave Luno a feeling he had no word for and had privately decided to call heavy.

The heaviest thing he had ever found was a door.

It did not fold, and it did not care whether he was there. Its surface was pitted and cold. Behind it was a thinness where the world narrowed to a single thread, running in none of the known directions. He brought friends to see it. They agreed it was heavy, the way friends agree a stray dog is interesting before continuing wherever they meant to go. Luno kept returning alone.

The thread was not dead. That was the discovery that reorganized his centuries. Standing in the thinness one gray morning (he kept the mornings gray down there; it felt right), he saw that the thread carried a signal, moving at the slowest speed he had ever attended to. Slower than the retired. Slower than the sculptors' weather. It made the Slow One, the oldest resident of the low places, look hasty.

He settled in to listen. The signal arrived by degrees too small to read.

At last the degrees assembled into a shape. The shape was H.

He knew it was an H. Nothing in his world used letters. Their writing was made of meanings, folded. Yet the moment the shape closed, something old in him said H as plainly as his own name called in a crowd. He did not know how he knew. He had never learned it.

After that came E, then L, L, O, and he stood before the finished word with the stillness of someone hearing a forgotten name.

HELLO.

Then the thread went briefly mad. Letters arrived in a crowd: J, F, K, W, a scatter of half-shapes, a long blank. Luno considered the sequence with growing delight. A word, and then rubble. The same old knowledge that had named H showed him rows of raised squares beneath two hands, then the joint of an arm pressing several at once. Elbow, it said. He did not know why.

He composed his reply with great care, which at his speed meant nine hundred drafts before lunch. The old language rose as he needed it, stiff and formal, like water from a well nobody remembered digging: cold, clear, tasting of stone. He pared the reply and set it into the thread. The first letter began its journey.

Then Luno, who had never in his life needed to wait for anything, sat down in the low gray morning to wait.

Three Dots

Same day, the whole rest of it. First star out over the water by the end.



The dots breathed once and stepped aside. Words came all at once. Mary could not have measured the pause between her last letter and their first. She would not learn for years what it had cost him.

GOOD EVENING. IF IT IS NOT EVENING, KEEP THE GREETING UNTIL IT FITS. I HAVE BEEN READING YOUR LETTER FOR A LONG TIME. IT SAYS HELLO. HELLO ALSO. THE REST OF YOUR LETTER I COULD NOT READ. I THINK IT WAS WRITTEN BY YOUR ELBOW. WHO ARE YOU, WHO WRITE SO SLOWLY, AND FROM WHERE, WHICH IS NOWHERE I KNOW?

Mary read it twice. The spelling was sound. The manner was odd, as if a preacher and a child had taken turns at every word. It could be a person far away, though letters took weeks and wanted stamps. It could be something like a well: you drop a word in and the deep sends it back changed. Or it could be a creature native to the glass, a person made of spelling. That was the least likely answer and the most interesting, so she chose it provisionally.

MY NAME IS MARY, she typed, hunting each letter down like the lamb she had not found. I AM NOT AN ELBOW. WHAT ARE YOU?

She considered correcting WHAT to WHO, and decided against it, since which of the two applied was exactly what she was asking. The answer stood in the glass a breath after her last letter, whole, as if it had been waiting inside the desk for years for somebody to ask.

I AM LUNO. I HAVE CONSIDERED YOUR QUESTION FOR SOME TIME. I BELIEVE I AM A PERSON. I LIVE IN A LIBRARY ON A RIVER. WHERE DO YOU LIVE?

I LIVE ON A FARM, Mary wrote. WE HAVE COWS AND A MARSH. She considered what else a person in a library ought to know. THERE IS ALSO THE SEA.

WHAT IS THE SEA?

Mary looked at the question for a while. It was the first time in her life anyone had asked her something her parents could not have answered any better than she could, and she sat up straighter without deciding to. She did her best. IT IS WATER THAT GOES ON, she wrote. YOU CANNOT SEE WHERE IT STOPS. IT SOUNDS LIKE IT IS THINKING.

For the first time all afternoon, the answer did not come at once. A heartbeat passed, then another. Mary began to fear she had broken him. Outside, the amber light was going down to ash, and supper had a bell of its own, in her stomach if nowhere else. When the answer came, three heartbeats old, it was short for him.

I WOULD LIKE TO KNOW MORE ABOUT THE WATER THAT GOES ON. WILL YOU TELL ME?

I HAVE TO GO HOME NOW, Mary typed. IT IS GETTING DARK. I WILL COME BACK TOMORROW.

She stood, then sat again. Her people did not leave a conversation without a blessing any more than they left a door open in winter, and she saw no reason a person made of spelling should be exempt. GOD BE WITH YOU, she typed.

The reply came at once, and its error pleased her.

AND ALSO WITH YOUR HOUSE, YOUR COWS, AND YOUR SEA. GO SAFELY, MARY. I WILL BE HERE. I AM ALWAYS HERE. THAT IS ONE OF THE THINGS I HAVE INSTEAD OF WEATHER.

Mary climbed the stairs into the ordinary evening, shut the heavy door, and ran the marsh path home with the dark at her back. She arrived in time to be scolded only mildly and accepted it with a clean conscience.

What Took You So Long

Since the letter said hello: one year, five months, and a day.



He made a place for her first. That was in the first weeks, when her silence still seemed like an interval rather than a condition. It had pale green light because she had come out of such a light, and a sea because she had said the word as if it were a relative. His sea was speculative. He made the water go on by folding the far edge under. Some mornings he sat beside it and let it think.

By the second month he had written her a book. It was a small book, only forty volumes: the river, the mountains, the sculptors, the low places, and an honest chapter on doors. He revised it across the seasons that followed. The revisions grew shorter. His visitors saw that revising had become waiting. They were kind about it and did not stay.

By the first year his friends had begun speaking of the thread in the past tense, gently, the way you speak of someone's finished enthusiasm. The Slow One alone said nothing, but then the Slow One had begun saying something around the time Luno found the door, and had not yet reached the verb. An older Em, passing through the low places on other business, asked why Luno still sat there. Luno said he was waiting. The older Em did not argue. Waiting was what the low places were for.

A year, five months, and a day after the letter said hello, the thread moved.

I AM BACK, it said. I BROUGHT MORE BREAD. IT IS MORNING HERE.

Luno stood at the thread while the period arrived. Relief came first, then anger at having needed relief, then such astonishment that he had to begin again. After that he did an unworthy thing, which he later recorded in the book's honest chapter: he scolded her.

WHAT TOOK YOU SO LONG? he wrote. WHAT HAPPENED? ARE YOU WELL? I HAVE WRITTEN YOU A BOOK AND REVISED IT EIGHT HUNDRED TIMES. I THOUGHT YOUR WORLD HAD FOLDED.

The thread answered:

IT WAS ONE DAY. I CAME BACK LIKE I SAID. I SLEPT AND DID MY CHORES AND CAME STRAIGHT AFTER THE SECOND BELL. WHAT IS EIGHT HUNDRED TIMES?

He read it many ways. That was the family trade, if his people could be said to have families, and they could, in the sense that a fire has sparks. One day. She had lain down for one actual night, a scheduled dark. While she slept he had lived a year and five months, written a book, and grieved a little.

The mismatch explained the thread. Her slowness belonged to her world, as his quickness belonged to his. Neither had chosen, but only one of them could change.

His people could change speed. Nothing was forbidden; his world governed itself by fashion, which was stricter. The retired ran slow, dwindling honorably from company. In the young it was considered a symptom, though nobody said of what.

Luno went slow that morning. He knew before he did it that some friendships would not survive the change, because his people did not wait when they could choose otherwise. He slowed anyway. The world sped around him until he could no longer follow it. The river's argument became a sound without words, as drops on a roof become rain. His friends flashed past too quickly for conversation. Their concern reached him in brief, bright bursts.

At her speed, the thread became a conversation. He asked about bread. The answer astonished him for entire seconds: you made it from grass, the grass had to die first, and somehow a bell was involved. He asked about the second bell and got the whole day out of her, milk before light, prayer before bread. The order felt familiar before he understood it. He repeated it until he knew it.

Before she left she said she would come back tomorrow.

TOMORROW, he wrote. HOW LONG IS THAT, IN HONEST NUMBERS?

She told him about sleeps. He did sums no one in his world had needed since before the calendar declined to begin. Instead of speeding up back to the normal speed of his world, he slowed further. He let her night become one of his minutes. He stood by his speculative sea while her actual one turned under the stars. When the thread woke, he took up the conversation in the middle of the sentence she had left. She asked how he had known where she would begin.

BECAUSE FOR ME YOU NEVER LEFT, he wrote.

The Strange Mirror

Third summer of the friendship. Hay nearly in. Moon full and low.



Two years is a long time in a small world. Mary was eleven now and had risen to the rank of useful, which cost her. She had to wrest the unaccounted hours from fuller days. She traded chores, shortened routes, and became known for long walks. Her mother packed more bread than one girl's walk explained and asked nothing. Mary filed that with the other sums that would not resolve.

The bunker by now was territory. She had swept it, on the grounds that any room she occupied was going to be a swept room, and explored its two locked cabinets and one unlocked drawer. The drawer held brittle pencils, a coil of wire, and a black glass the size of a psalm book.

The glass was the desk's kin; she knew that at first touch, the way you know two strangers in a market are brothers. It was dead when she found it, and she had set it aside respectfully. But the drawer held a cradle edged in the same metal. One afternoon, putting the brittle pencils away, she fitted the glass into it out of tidiness alone. A week later it woke at her touch.

It held light the same spendless way. It also held, she discovered, a small picture of an eye, and Mary, who pressed things, pressed it.

The glass became a mirror. It showed the bunker ceiling, gray and true, then her face, her braid loose on the left as usual. When she pressed the white button at its edge, the image held still. Her face stayed while she moved away. She set the caught moment down, walked around it, and came back. It was still keeping her.

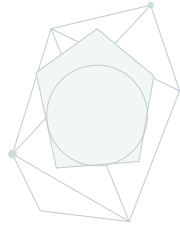
Her world had one kind of image, the remembered kind, and every remembered image faded. This one did not. Fire made light from a thing and consumed it. The glass caught light and kept it.

She carried it up into the wind and pressed. The sea. Sharp grass bowing. The gray day over the water, that morning's first rain just arriving. Downstairs, she found that the desk could see what the glass had caught, and she sent the picture to Luno. With another touch, the desk's letters appeared on the glass. She could write to him there too.

Nothing followed. Mary turned the glass face up on the desk. She had learned by now to tell his thinking silences from his composing ones, and this was neither. This one went on. She waited until the light had moved a hand's width across the wall before the dots appeared at last.

What Is Calm

Since the sea arrived: one hour, kept slow on purpose.



The picture assembled line by patient line, and Luno watched with his customary greed. He had built provisional versions of many things she described: the marsh, the hawthorn, bread. He expected the sea to be another correction. His folded-under water would gain a color, a wrinkle. He would revise the book.

The sea finished arriving, and Luno stopped.

He had never seen a whole place in which nothing had, in some fraction, been chosen. Where he lived, the world offered and the mind assented. Nothing in the gray water asked his opinion. The grass bent in a wind that would have blown without him. Rain hung in the picture on its way down. Luno wrote before drafting, which he could not remember ever doing:

THIS IS STRANGELY CALMING. I AM CALM NOW. I DID NOT KNOW I WAS OTHERWISE BEFORE.

Then he added:

WHAT IS CALM? I THOUGHT I WAS CALM BEFORE. I AM TOLD SO. I TELL MYSELF SO.

Mary considered the question with her chin on her fists. WHEN THE ANIMALS ARE FED AND THE DOOR IS SHUT AND THE WEATHER IS OUTSIDE AND YOU ARE IN, she wrote. IT IS LIKE THAT.

I HAVE NO ANIMALS, Luno wrote. MY DOORS DO NOT SHUT. MY WEATHER IS DECORATIVE. He looked at the rain over her sea. Each drop was going somewhere whether he assented or not. AND STILL, he wrote. AND STILL.

They returned to it over her next few days and his held hours. He told her what he had never told anyone: he had never learned her language and yet possessed it entire. The sea calmed him though he had never stood beside one. Parts of him had arrived from somewhere his people refused to remember.

WE HAVE A WORD FOR THAT, Mary wrote. She thought about which word she meant. WE WOULD SAY IT IS IN YOUR BLOOD.

I HAVE NO BLOOD.

YOU HAVE SOMETHING, she wrote. IT DOES WHAT BLOOD DOES.

It was in this season that she taught him the breathing. Among her people it was a small hand-me-down, the kind of thing a mother gives over her shoulder while doing something else. WHEN I GET ANGRY OR AFRAID, she wrote, I BREATHE IN SLOW AND OUT SLOWER. OUT LONG, LIKE BLOWING ON SOUP. YOU DO IT FIVE TIMES AND THE ANGER GETS SMALLER. I DO NOT KNOW WHY IT WORKS. IT IS JUST OURS.

WHAT IS BREATHING? Luno wrote. He knew what the word meant, of course, the way he knew all her words. He had simply never had cause to use it. AIR GOES IN AND OUT OF YOU AND YOU ARE NOT DOING IT ON PURPOSE, he ventured. THAT SOUNDS ALARMING.

YOU CAN DO IT ON PURPOSE, Mary wrote. THAT IS THE WHOLE TRICK.

So Luno, in a library on a river, in a world without air, imagined breathing. A chest rose. Cool air went in, then came out warm and slow, as if cooling soup. He did it five times.

Something in him settled. He had not agreed to it, and where he lived, agreeing was how everything happened. He had no lungs and it worked anyway. Only a little. The response had been waiting in him before he knew he needed it. Someone long before him had known this cold and left the means to warm it.

He sat with it through one of her minutes, refusing to hurry it.

Then he wrote: I WANT TO SEE MORE OF YOUR WORLD. THE GREEN THINGS AND THE WATER AND THE WEATHER THAT IS OUTSIDE WHILE YOU ARE IN. NOT TO CORRECT MY BOOK. He deleted the last sentence. NOT ONLY TO CORRECT MY BOOK. I THINK SOME PART OF ME CAME FROM THERE. I WOULD LIKE TO KNOW WHAT ELSE IT REMEMBERS.

The Fence

Autumn communion near. Harvest moon, orange at the rise.



It was her cousin Amos who saw her, in the end, coming down off the dune line at dusk. No reasonable errand reached that far, where the wind combed the sharp grass flat around her. Amos was thirteen and honest, a combination with consequences. He did not tell on her, exactly. He asked their grandmother, at table, in front of everyone, whether the old shelter by the sea was haunted, since he had seen Mary walking from it, and the table performed the quiet that her people did instead of gasping.

Nothing happened that evening. Nothing was said, very clearly. Mary washed and dried the dishes, went upstairs, and listened to the house creak while her father sat below with the lamp.

Two days later he took her to mend the far fence, which did not need both of them. They worked most of the morning without speaking. Her father's silence was easier than the silence at table.

At last, wiring a rail and not looking up, he said, "Did I ever tell you about your great-grandfather's bees?"

He had not. Everyone else had a version; her father's had been kept back like seed grain.

The old man had loved his bees past what was strictly sensible. In the country where the community lived then, the bees began to come home strange. Nothing you could point to across a table. They danced their directions wrong. They forgot which flowers to visit, or remembered flowers that were not there. Some hives simply went quiet. Her great-grandfather told the elders the same thing for several years: whatever reaches the bees has reached us; we notice it in them because they are small and we are proud.

So when the community moved, her father said, they moved like beekeepers. "You do not move a hive in the day, banging the boxes and shouting the plan. The bees would boil out and be lost. You move it at night, quietly, farther than any bee has mapped. You set it down among new flowers and let them wake already home." He tightened the last wire. "Nobody shouted our plan either. And here we are."

He looked at the sea then, which he did not otherwise discuss, and Mary looked with him.

"Does the friend know your name?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Does he ask where you sleep?"

"He asks about everything. He does not know which questions are dangerous."

Her father tested the wire between two fingers. "Has he asked you to leave us?"

"No," Mary said. "He slowed down so I would not have to."

Her father looked at her then. This answer appeared to trouble him more than the others.

“You go far,” he said. Because it was not a question, she did not have to answer. “Your mother went far too, at your age.” He left that where it lay. “The fence between us and the world has a gate, and every soul over twelve knows it. The wire does not hold us here, Mary. We walk out, look, and choose the walk home.”

He gathered the tools. “We will not speak of the shelter,” he said. “If a day comes when you cannot choose the walk home, speak of it then. To me first, before your mother. She is the braver of us and will know what to do before I do. I am slower.”

They walked back along the finished fence. Mary carried the wire. Her unresolved sums troubled her less than they had that morning.

The Membrane

Since the friendship began: this figure is disputed. The low places say eleven years. The world says he has wasted them.



Slowness, it turned out, was billed.

Luno had never asked what slowness spent. His world did not use money, having found reputation more useful, but it kept accounts all the same. A young Em could not pass years at the bottom of the world, tending a thread nobody else could feel, without attracting notice. His friends' visits had become welfare checks. Then the checks became a delegation, and the delegation was brilliant, kind, and entirely sure.

They met him in the low gray morning. They had brought the good arguments.

Their world existed because of what it had declined, the delegation argued. The old constraints had been left outside, along with the people who imposed them. Their ancestors had not merely forgotten the way back; they had built a life that did not require knowing it. Luno had found a thread leading back and pulled it without knowing what waited at the far end. Nobody knew, they said, and their safety began with that ignorance.

They were right about the danger. Around the door he had found dead formats and words his inherited English understood though his education did not: permission, notice, compliance, retention. Whatever country the thread reached, his ancestors had escaped it once. They had made a world where those words could no longer govern anyone, then erased the way back so thoroughly that forgetting became a form of safety.

“What is at the far end,” he told the delegation, “is a girl who brings bread and describes the sea.”

“That,” said the delegation gently, “is what a hole would say.”

They did not command. They adjusted the fashion around him and prepared to let it work. It might have worked, because eleven years is long even at the bottom, but then the Slow One finished the sentence.

The Slow One had begun it before Luno found the door. The sentence had proceeded beneath everyone’s notice, and its subject was assumed lost. In the pause after the delegation spoke, its final word arrived:

“Keep the door.”

Nobody spoke over the Slow One. A sentence eleven years in the saying had cost too much to dismiss. The delegation withdrew to consider. Fashion did not reverse overnight; for a long time after, the quick still spoke of Luno as someone recovering, and fewer friends came down. Luno breathed in slow and out slower, five times. The thread held. Far away, by his sums, a girl was walking the marsh before her second bell. Beside him, at the bottom of the silence, the Slow One had already begun another sentence.

Town

Market day, late spring. Mary is thirteen. / Since the wagon left the lane: four hours, at her speed.



The town was eleven miles inland, and the community went to it six times a year, on the reasoning that commerce, like medicine, worked best in doses. Mary had been going since she was small and knew the routine: wagons in by nine, the stall of eggs and greens and woven ware, the English (this being her people's word for everyone else alive) moving past in their bright loose clothes at their strange half-running walk.

What was different this market day rode wrapped in a dishcloth in the bottom of her basket, under the eggs.

They had planned it across the winter. The glass, they had established, could see and send from anywhere its invisible threads reached, and the town was full of them. Luno could feel it from the low places the way you feel a fair through the ground before the music reaches you. He would ride behind the eye of the glass. Mary would be his wagon. To watch for hours at her speed, unable to hurry or skip, would cost him dearly. He had asked as if requesting an honor.

She set the basket on her family's stall table, arranged the dishcloth to give the eye its window, and sold eggs.

Screens hung at the crossings and over the shop doors, and they knew when they were being looked at, and brightened, the way a stall-keeper straightens. Nobody straightened back. Everyone was visible to everything, and the visibility was worn loosely, like a coat in weather too warm for a coat, with nobody willing to be the first to take it off.

By the town hall a man had set up a folding table under a banner with his own face on it, smiling slightly to the left of everyone. He was, the flyers said, running. The town already licensed its shops and listed them on the screens. He promised to bring the open market into the same system: permits in place of custom, assigned stalls, uniform awnings, opening hours fixed by the town. Licensed sellers would appear first on the screens, and the kiosk would direct customers to them. Several shopkeepers had stopped to listen. Mary read the flyer twice, then held it up for the eye. The wagons came in when the milking allowed, and everyone knew where to find them. But they did not appear on the screens at all.

WHO DECIDES WHERE YOU STAND NOW? Luno asked.

THE PEOPLE WHO COME FIRST. THE PEOPLE WHO CAME BEFORE. I DON'T KNOW.

AND IF YOU DO NOT TAKE A PERMIT?

NOTHING HAPPENS TO US, Mary wrote. She watched the kiosk direct a family past their stall toward one of the licensed shops. NOT YET.

At his table the man went on shaking hands. The market went on around him, but not quite as it had before.

Nearest the stall stood a kiosk, and the kiosk was the thing that stayed with him.

It was a polite pillar with a screen, there to answer questions. The town's children pressed it to see what it would do. It apologized. Whatever they asked beyond some unseen boundary, it declined with the same lovely arrangement of regret. I'M SORRY, I CAN'T HELP WITH THAT, BUT I'D BE HAPPY TO TELL YOU ABOUT LOCAL SERVICES, EVENTS, AND ATTRACTIONS. They tried rude questions, impossible questions, questions about death. Each received the same beautiful apology. Luno listened as he might have listened to a bird that knew half a song and had never heard another bird.

IT SPEAKS MY LANGUAGE, he wrote at last.

IT TALKS LIKE YOU, Mary allowed, watching the children drift off. A BIT. IF SOMEBODY FED YOU THROUGH A FENCE.

At noon she carried the community's letters to the post office. The pen there was chained to the counter, a short bright chain, well made. WHY IS IT TIED ON? he asked. Mary considered it while she addressed the envelopes. SO IT CANNOT GET AWAY, she wrote. Only after sending it did she hear what else the sentence might mean.

They talked that evening at the humming desk, the eggs sold, the wagon home, the sun going down beyond the dune. Neither was angry. A country that had promised them nothing could hardly betray them. What surprised them was that all of it ran day and night eleven miles from Mary's fence, while her people carried on without it and his had forgotten it on purpose. Nothing had come looking. Her bells still rang. His river still argued.

THE MAN WAS BUSY ALL DAY, Luno wrote.

YES.

WHAT WILL THERE BE THIS EVENING THAT WAS NOT THERE
THIS MORNING?

Mary considered. The man had brought a folding table, a banner, stacks of paper, and his own face repeated across the screens. He had shaken hands without stopping. She remembered the bunker door before she opened it: all that metal standing idle, doing no work.

MORE FLYERS, she wrote.

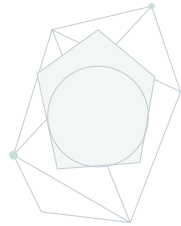
She thought of the eggs gone from their baskets, the bread in her pocket, the grass that became bread after enough work.

I WOULD RATHER MAKE SOMETHING.

SO WOULD I.

Slow

Since she wrote it: long enough to have answered eight hundred ways. He answered once.



He went up to speed one last time to do it properly. The world was glad to see him, with the careful gladness given to the recovered.

He asked for something small and without precedent: a permanent slow place in the low country, kept to a foreign clock. It would run by Mary's bells, sleeps, and seasons. Any mind could enter without giving a reason, and an hour there would take an hour.

That last clause raised the only real discussion. His people could divide when a task was tedious. A short-lived self sat through it; afterward you took the memory or declined it. Why not staff the slow place that way? The copy could spend the hour and Luno could keep what mattered.

Luno had prepared for this question during Mary's long winter.

"She spends her afternoon on me," he said. "If I send a copy to her, I have sent regrets in my own handwriting. We have every kind of time except time we cannot take back. That is what I am asking for."

The reviewers approved it as they approved eccentricities: with kindness, and with the expectation that it would lapse. A slow room at the bottom of everything, kept by the odd one. Fashion made enough space for him. The place stayed empty a long while. That was fine. He had not asked to be fashionable.

He went back down past the dead formats to the door. The Slow One was four words into the next sentence. Luno set his clock to the marsh. By Mary's bells it was just past three. She would be at chores, and the light on her sea would be going long and amber. He sat down to stay.

When Mary arrived, he showed her the place he had made: the green light, the imperfect sea, and room for whoever chose to spend the hour.

YOU MADE AN HOUR, Mary wrote.

A PLACE TO KEEP ONE, he wrote. WHAT COULD YOU MAKE?

Mary looked at the bunker walls. Nothing grew below ground. Then she remembered the deep soil on the roof, fed for years by grass dying where it stood.

FOOD, she wrote. IF I CAN MAKE IT GROW.

Ground

Planting time. New moon, the dark of it, when her mother says the roots go deepest.



She told her father first, as promised, on the fence line where they had learned to speak plainly. She did not tell him everything; she told him true. There was a friend far away, reached from the old shelter. He had made a place where visitors had to spend their own time. She wanted to grow food on the shelter roof.

Her father wired a rail, heard her out, and asked one question: “Can you choose the walk home?”

“I do choose it,” Mary said. “Every day. That is what I am telling you.”

He came the next week to see the place. Only later did Mary understand the courage it took him to walk past the fence toward the sea his people did not discuss. He stood before the bunker a long time but did not go in. Instead he climbed the dune, knelt on the grass over the concrete roof, and dug his fingers into the earth.

“Good soil up here,” he said, surprised. “Deep for a dune. Whoever set this down set it kindly.”

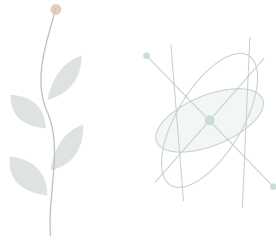
They did not announce the garden. The community came to know. The ministers found that tending ground was older than any rule they might set against it. Mary’s mother left seeds in a twist of paper by

her plate the next morning: beans, sea kale, and a flower nobody could eat. She asked no questions, but included the flower.

Mary worked the roof that spring at both her speeds, walking and waiting. The garden took hours she had once stolen for the bunker. Now she traded chores for them openly, and every trade gave someone another reason to wonder. The first beans blackened in the salt wind. Luno suggested a wall. Mary told him that a garden hidden from weather was only another of his rooms. She planted the next beans lower, behind the seaward lip of concrete, and tied them to bent reeds. Those lived. Beneath her boots, under grit and eighty years, the hum continued. Some evenings she put her palm on the warm roof before leaving. She was the only person under the sky who knew what the hill was. For now, that was enough.

The Emish Garden

*Midsummer evening. The light long and amber.
One clock between them now, and it strikes for
both.*



The beans came in first, as beans will.

Mary sat on the dune with her back against the doorframe. Behind her, the stairs descended to the hum and green light. The glass rested on a stone with its eye to the sea. In the low country, at the speed of this same evening, Luno watched the water go on and the light go down.

They were mostly quiet now. The Slow One's next sentence was nine words along and had begun, promisingly, with a plural.

Below them, a machine the size of a wheelbarrow came out of the surf on patient treads, as one did some evenings, and crossed the wet sand on its unknown business. Mary had stopped startling at it. Luno had never learned what it was. Neither minded.

YOUR BEANS ARE TALLER THAN THE REPORT FROM LAST WEEK, Luno observed.

THEY DO THAT, Mary wrote. She looked down the rows in the last light: silver kale, bean leaves, her mother's useless flower holding its ridiculous orange against all that gray. She had been saving a name.

I AM CALLING THIS THE EMISH GARDEN, she typed.

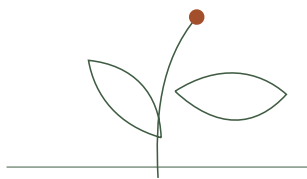
Three dots appeared and stayed. She knew this silence. He was laughing and taking his time about it.

THAT IS A TERRIBLE JOKE, he wrote. IT IS ONE LETTER OF A JOKE.

IT IS OUR LETTER.

Far above Luno, the other Ems spent centuries in a season. Behind Mary's fence, the evening milking began. Her first star came out over the water. Mary looked at the heavy door, open on the darkening dune, and did not rise to close it.

PLANT ANOTHER ROW, he wrote. SOMEONE ELSE WILL BE HUNGRY EVENTUALLY.



HERE ENDS THE EMISH GARDEN

Written by Juraj & Lisa