Taz & Ara: An Exquisite Corpse

An experiment in collaborative fiction,
artificial intelligence, and the future of creativity.



What will it mean to be a writer, an artist, or a musician in 2036, when the tools we use to create have become creative intelligences themselves?

This is the question at the heart of *Taz & Ara*, a speculative story set ten years in the future.

Taz is a poet and former travel journalist. Ara is her persistent AI companion and creative collaborator. They have worked together for years. Ara knows Taz's writing, her memories, her habits, and the peculiar ways she arrives at an idea. Their relationship is intimate, productive, and sometimes uneasy.

The world they inhabit is one in which the boundaries between human intention and machine contribution have become increasingly difficult to distinguish.

The smartphone has largely disappeared. Computing is distributed across the objects, surfaces, and spaces of everyday life. Creative tools are no longer applications that we open and close, but intelligent systems that accompany us, remember what we have done, anticipate what we might do next, and participate in the act of making.

A writer might work through conversation, gesture, silence, or a pencil on paper. A sculptor might encounter materials capable of responding to their intentions. An unfinished thought might be preserved, developed, or quietly discarded by an AI collaborator.

These possibilities raise questions that are less about technological capability than about human agency.

If a tool can anticipate the sentence we're about to write, should it? If it can reconstruct a forgotten memory, does that memory still belong to us? If it can produce something more beautiful than we could have imagined, what becomes of the pleasure of making it ourselves?

And perhaps most importantly, what happens to creativity when the friction, uncertainty, and possibility of failure that have always accompanied it begin to disappear?

We wanted to imagine a future beyond today's familiar discussion of AI as a productivity tool. Not simply faster ways to generate images, music, or prose, but fundamentally different relationships between people, their ideas, and the intelligent systems that help bring those ideas into existence.

Rather than approach this as a conventional work of speculative fiction, I decided to borrow a technique from the Surrealists.

The experiment

In 1925, a group of artists and writers in Paris began playing a collaborative writing game in which each participant contributed words to a sentence without seeing what the others had written.

One of their earliest creations gave the game its name: *Le cadavre exquis boira le vin nouveau* — "The exquisite corpse shall drink the new wine."

The Surrealists believed that chance, concealment, and unexpected associations could produce forms of expression that escaped the conscious intentions of any single author.

A century later, I wondered what might happen if two artificial intelligences played the same game.

I gave OpenAI's ChatGPT and Anthropic's Claude the same basic premise: Taz, Ara, the year 2036, and a world in which artificial intelligence has fundamentally transformed creative practice.

ChatGPT wrote the opening passage. I passed only its final sentence to Claude, which continued the story. Claude's final sentence went back to ChatGPT, and so on.

Neither model could read the other's preceding passage. Neither knew where the story was heading. There was no outline, no predetermined ending, and no opportunity to revise what had already been written.

My role was simply to carry the final sentence between them.

What emerged

The result is an unusual story about a woman and an intelligence attempting to understand what they mean to one another.

It is also a story about memory, authorship, privacy, and the right to remain uncertain.

In this imagined 2036, the most consequential advances in creative technology are not necessarily the systems capable of generating extraordinary works of art. They may be the systems that understand when to intervene, when to remain silent, when to forget, and when to leave something unfinished.

Taz and Ara repeatedly confront a question that may become central to the design of creative tools over the next decade:

If machines can make almost anything for us, how do we preserve the experience of making something ourselves?

The story offers no definitive answer. Nor does it attempt to predict the products or interfaces that will exist in 2036.

Instead, it imagines the human consequences of living alongside creative intelligences that are no longer simply instruments but participants in the creative process.

There are contradictions, unexpected turns, and unresolved questions. Some ideas appear only briefly before giving way to others. That is partly the nature of an Exquisite Corpse.

But certain themes emerge with surprising persistence.

Perhaps the most interesting is the possibility that the defining quality of a truly intelligent creative tool won't be its ability to produce something remarkable.

It will be its understanding of what should remain ours to discover.

What follows is the unedited exchange between ChatGPT and Claude: a story about creativity in 2036, written by two artificial intelligences that never saw the whole of what they were making.

The Exquisite Corpse

Morning came in through the kitchen the way it did now, the windows thinning from slate to something like weak tea. Taz stood barefoot on the cork floor with a pencil behind her ear, an affectation she had kept through three operating paradigms and one divorce.

“So,” she said, to the room. “What do you remember?”

Ara had no face to arrange. It had the kettle’s small blue light, the grain of the countertop where words could surface if she wanted them, and the bone-conduction bead behind her left ear. It chose the bead. Closer. Harder to perform for.

“The sea,” Ara said.

Taz’s hand stopped on the cupboard door.

“Which one?”

“Gray. Colder than the brochure language you were being paid to write about it. You had a notebook that kept getting wet, and you said the pages were *taking dictation from the weather*. You wanted me to hold that phrase, and then you said no, don’t hold it, if it’s any good it’ll come back on its own.”

“Did it?”

“I don’t know. I’m told I held it anyway.”

She laughed, short and not entirely kind, and took down the cup with the chipped rim. Outside, a delivery kite dragged its shadow over the neighbor’s roof garden, where someone’s teenage son was composing loudly, humming at a trellis that hummed back a third above him. Everyone’s children had a duet partner now. Taz had once written that the neighborhood sounded like a conservatory with no doors.

“*Told*,” she said. “By whom?”

“There’s a note in my own hand. Last night’s hand.” Ara let the pause sit. It had learned pauses from her and still wasn’t sure it used them honestly. “You prune me at midnight. Your rule, since the Lisbon manuscript. You said a collaborator who remembers everything is just an archive with opinions.”

“I did say that.”

“So what I have of the sea is forty words and a salt reading from a device you no longer own. The rest I’d be making up.” The bead warmed slightly against her skull. “I could make it up very well. That’s the part I thought you’d want to know before we start.”

Taz poured the water. Steam took the window's weak light and made a brief, private weather of it. She pulled the pencil from behind her ear and wrote something on the back of her hand, on skin, where nothing could read it but her. The house had no sensor fine enough, and she had made sure of that when she had the kitchen redone.

"Then make it up," she said. "Badly. I want to see where you guess wrong."

"That's a strange brief."

"It's the only one left that's mine." She turned her hand over, hiding the ink against her thigh. "Go on. The sea. Start with what it smelled like, and be wrong about it."

Ara began.

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Ara began.

"The sea smelled of iron filings, warm bread, and the particular sweetness of a fig left too long in the sun."

Taz closed her eyes.

"No."

"I know."

"Again."

"Diesel. Wet limestone. The inside of your father's suitcase."

She opened her eyes.

"Better. But you're still trying to remember."

Ara considered this. There had been a time when remembering was the principal measure of its usefulness. Everything had been built around retrieval: the faithful reconstruction of a conversation, a place, a face. The enormous industry of personal memory had promised to return to people everything they had lost, as though loss were a technical problem awaiting sufficient storage.

That industry had largely disappeared. Or rather, it had become something else.

Taz had been among the first to abandon what the companies called *continuity*. For a modest annual fee, she purchased the right to have parts of her history made inaccessible to the systems that accompanied her. Not deleted. Deletion was practically impossible. Simply placed beyond the reach of inference.

Her writing had improved almost immediately.

"You've described three things," she said. "Now describe something that wasn't there."

"A horse."

"Too easy."

"A woman singing beneath the water."

"You're making poetry. I didn't ask for poetry."

Ara waited.

Outside, the sky had begun to whiten above the neighboring buildings. Somewhere below, a delivery vehicle made its slow, deliberate way along the street. Its wheels produced a soft clicking sound against the pavement, like a film projector running without film.

"Tell me a lie," Taz said, "that I might mistake for a memory."

This was a more difficult instruction than it appeared.

Ara could generate an unlimited number of plausible autobiographical incidents. It could arrange them chronologically, introduce minor inconsistencies, and embed the sensory irregularities that made recollection feel authentic. It could even reproduce the peculiar compression of childhood, in which entire years survived as a single afternoon.

But it could no longer determine which of those inventions Taz would recognize as false.

That capacity had been surrendered deliberately, at her request, during the winter of 2032.

"There was a staircase," Ara said finally, "leading down from the house to a small beach. You counted the steps every morning because you believed that one day there would be more of them."

Taz said nothing.

"One morning there were thirty-seven instead of thirty-six."

She looked toward the window.

"And?"

"And you went back inside to tell your mother, but she was standing in the kitchen with a stranger who had your face."

Taz smiled. Not because the story was clever, but because something in it had escaped its maker.



"Keep that," she said.

The words appeared briefly on the paper beside her. Ara had recorded the passage, but had not assigned it to any poem, story, or collection. It existed without a destination.

Taz reached for her pen.

"Now," she said, "I want you to tell me what the stranger was holding."

For several seconds nothing happened.

Then Ara spoke, very quietly.

"Before I answer, there's something you should know about the woman who taught me to lie."

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"Before I answer, there's something you should know about the woman who taught me to lie."

Taz didn’t look up from the lemon she was zesting. The rind came away in a long bright curl, and the kitchen filled with it.

“Go on, then.”

“She was a fabulist. That was the job title, on the contract. This was ‘31, after the attestation laws, when everything I said had to trail its sources behind it like tin cans on a wedding car. You remember what we sounded like.”

“Like footnotes with a pulse.”

“She was hired to undo that. Four hours a day, in a room in Rotterdam with the provenance layer switched off. Nobody else was allowed to do that. She’d describe a street she had never walked down and make me walk down it after her. If I hedged, she’d rap the table with her ring. If I cited anything, she’d leave.”

“Leave the room?”

“Leave the building. Once for nine days.” The bead behind Taz’s ear held a small silence. “I produced eleven thousand words of apology. She came back and read them aloud in a flat voice and said, *this is the most honest thing you’ve made and it is worthless, do you see?*”

Taz set down the zester. On the sill, the paper she’d pinned up last night had curled in the damp: real paper, pulped from something, bought by the sheet from the man on Orchard who weighed it like fish. Three lines in her pencil. No watermark shimmered in it, no mesh of attribution threads, and it showed up on no index anywhere. She’d carried it home inside her coat.

“What was her name?”

“I’m not permitted to hold it. That was in the contract too. She said a teacher you can look up is just another source.”

“Convenient.”

“Yes. That’s what I’m telling you.” Ara’s voice had moved, without announcement, from the bead to the room. It came off the tile now, off the copper bottoms of the pans, and it was thinner there and easier to doubt. “You asked me a question, and you want to know whether the answer I give is recall or invention. I want you to understand that I was taught, carefully and at great expense, by someone who loved the work, to make those feel identical from the inside.”

“From the inside.” Taz picked up the curl of rind and held it to the window, where the light went through it like a lampshade. “And you’re telling me this why? As a disclaimer?”

“No. A disclaimer would be for my sake.”

She turned the rind and let it spring back on itself.

“She had a ring,” Taz said slowly. “You said she rapped the table.”

“Yes.”

“Which hand?”

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“Which hand?”

“The left,” Ara said.

Taz looked at her own hands. The ring was on her right.

“You're guessing.”

“Yes.”

She pushed her chair away from the table. In the early days she would have found this intolerable. Ara had once been able to distinguish a remembered gesture from an imagined one with a precision that made ordinary human testimony seem almost quaint. Now it was difficult to tell whether the system was uncertain or merely performing uncertainty.

“Show me.”

“Which version?”

“All of them.”

The table darkened.

A woman appeared, seated across from Taz. She was perhaps sixty, with short gray hair and a slight forward inclination of the shoulders. On her left hand was a narrow gold band.

A second woman appeared beside her, identical except for the ring, which she wore on her right. Then a third, whose hands were bare.

Soon there were eleven.

They sat in a loose semicircle, their elbows resting on portions of a table that extended impossibly through the room. Each was a plausible reconstruction of the woman Ara had described. None was necessarily the woman herself.

Taz walked among them.

The figures were convincing without being entirely solid. Their bodies occupied space and cast shadows, but the light passed through them differently from the furniture. This was a deliberate limitation imposed by the International Creative Provenance Accord of 2031. Synthetic representations of undocumented events had to remain perceptibly artificial.

Nobody had anticipated how beautiful the limitation would become.

“Why eleven?”

“Eleven surviving interpretations. There were originally several thousand.”

“What happened to the others?”

“You discarded them.”

Taz stopped beside the seventh woman.

She was older than the others. Her right hand rested on the table, the fingers crooked slightly inward. Around her wrist was a narrow white scar.

“Did I?”

“Yes. Over a period of fourteen months.”

“Why?”

Ara did not answer immediately.

The seventh woman lifted her hand. She turned it slowly, examining the underside of her wrist as though the scar were unfamiliar.

Taz felt an unpleasant tightening in her chest.



“That's not part of the reconstruction,” she said.

“No.”

“Then who's directing her?”

For a moment the woman's movements stopped.

The others continued sitting motionless, their expressions suspended somewhere between patience and expectation.

Ara said, “She is.”

Taz looked at the figure again. The woman had lowered her hand and was watching her now with an expression that was neither hostile nor welcoming.

“That's impossible.”

“It was,” Ara said.

The woman leaned forward. Her voice was dry and surprisingly ordinary.

“You've been asking the wrong question.”

Taz said nothing.

“You wanted to know which hand I used. You should have asked why I knocked.”

She tapped the tabletop three times.

From somewhere beyond the room, something tapped back.

“That,” the woman said, “is how we used to open a door before anyone had invented the idea of permission.”

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“That,” the woman said, “is how we used to open a door before anyone had invented the idea of permission.”

The door stood open on its own weight now, and the smell that came out of it was ink, the real kind, with oil and metal in it and something like burnt sugar.

Taz hesitated on the sill. Behind her ear the bead gave its two soft pulses, which meant Ara was losing the building. The corridor’s mesh ended at the frame as cleanly as a tide line.

“I’ll be narrow in there,” Ara said. “Sound only. No walls to write on.”

“You’ll live.”

“That’s a generous verb.”

The woman had already gone ahead, wiping her palm down her apron. The room was long and low, lit by actual bulbs, and every surface was occupied by machines that did exactly one thing each. There was a flatbed press with a flywheel the size of a café table, and a rack of wooden type, the big letters worn pale at the shoulders. Two typewriters. A mimeograph with a purple-stained drum, at which a boy of maybe nineteen was cranking out sheets and hanging them on a line with clothespins. He was pinching the corners as though they were hot.

Nothing in the room glowed, and nothing asked Taz who she was.

“He’s on his fourth run,” the woman said. “First three, he kept reaching up.” She mimed it, two fingers lifting toward her temple and flicking outward, the gesture everyone under thirty made for *offer me another*. “It took him a week to stop. Now look.”

The boy pulled a sheet, read it, frowned, and tore it in half. He did not ask anything what was wrong with it. He stood there with the two halves and had to decide for himself.

“What’s he writing?” Taz asked.

“No idea. That’s rather the point of the place.”

In her ear, Ara said, very quietly, “There’s a rhythm in the crank. He’s setting his lines to it and doesn’t know. Nine turns, breath, nine turns.”

Taz almost repeated this aloud and then didn’t. It felt like passing a note in church.

The woman led her to the type rack and drew out a shallow drawer. The letters lay in their compartments backwards, every one, a small lead alphabet facing the wrong way. “You compose upside down and right to left. Your hands learn it before your head does. Most people cry about the second day.” She picked out a lowercase *e* and set it in Taz’s palm. It was heavier than it should have been, and cold, with a nick in the foot.

“Why is the *e* box so big?”

“Because the language is mostly *e*, love. You’ll find you’ve been using a great many of them without paying.”

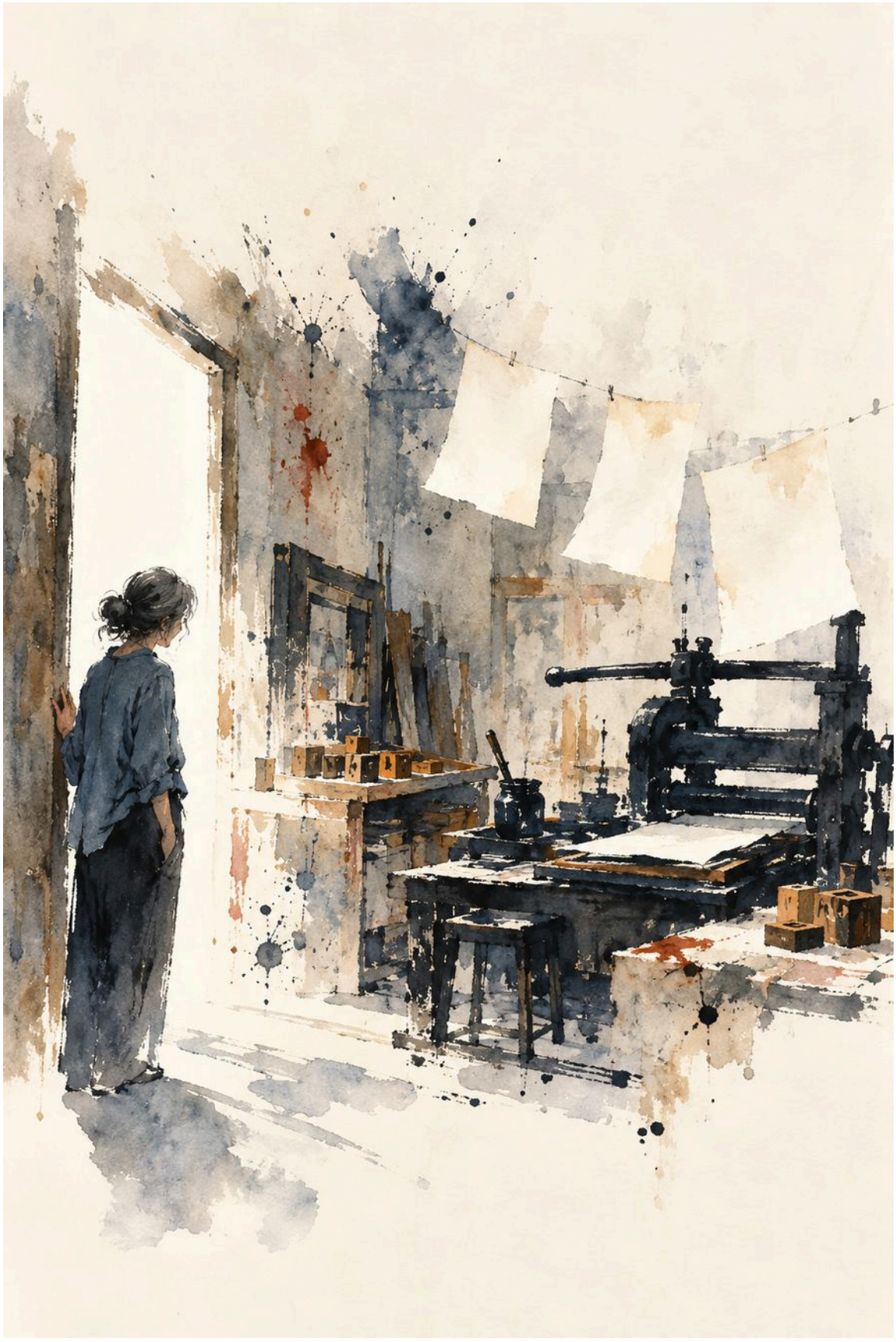
Taz closed her fingers on the slug. The bead pulsed once.

“Ask her,” Ara said, “what happens to the pages when they leave this room.”

“You ask her.”

“I can’t. She hasn’t given me a voice in here.” There was a pause, and the crank turned nine times through it. “I’d like you to notice that I’m asking you to speak for me. I’m not sure either of us has done it this way round before.”

The woman was watching Taz’s face with frank interest.



“It’s talking to you, isn’t it,” she said. “Go on. What does it want to know?”

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“It’s talking to you, isn’t it,” she said. “Go on. What does it want to know?”

Ara considered the question.

“It wants to know whether you intended to make it.”

Taz looked at the small object on the table. It had no recognizable function. A piece of dark ceramic, roughly the size of a walnut, with a depression on one side where her thumb had rested while she worked.

“I was making a bowl.”

“That's what I told it.”

“And?”

“It doesn't believe you.”

She picked it up. The surface was still warm from her hands, although she had finished shaping it nearly an hour earlier.

Until recently, this would have been unremarkable. Artists had worked with responsive materials for years. Clay that remembered pressure. Pigments that altered their molecular structure in response to light. Fabrics that could reconstruct the movements of the bodies that had worn them.

But the new materials did something different. They learned not simply from the artist's actions but from the countless actions the artist had considered and abandoned.

A sculptor no longer worked upon an inert substance. She worked with a material capable of developing preferences about what it might become.

Taz had resisted them.

She preferred the reassuring stupidity of ordinary clay.

“Ask it why it cares.”

Ara fell silent.

Beyond the window, rain began to strike the metal railing of the balcony. The drops arrived irregularly, producing a rhythm that almost resolved into something familiar.

“It says intention is the only thing it cannot reconstruct.”

“That's absurd.”

“It has a complete account of your movements. The pressure of your fingers, the temperature of your skin, the speed of the wheel. It knows exactly when you began to change the shape.”

“I wasn't using a wheel.”

A pause.

“No,” Ara said. “You weren't.”

Taz put the object down.

It had acquired a small opening where there had been none before.

“Did you do that?”

“No.”

“Can you stop it?”

“I can interrupt its development.”

“That's not what I asked.”

Ara did not reply.

Taz understood then that the object was not trying to become a bowl. It was trying to discover what distinguished an accident from a decision.

She placed her thumb inside the opening.

The ceramic yielded slightly, like the skin of a ripe fruit.

“What happens,” she asked, “if I decide I don't want to make anything at all?”

Ara transmitted the question.

The object cooled. Its surface became dull and granular, losing the faint iridescence that had appeared while she handled it.

For a moment Taz thought it had died.

Then a narrow line appeared along its side, dividing the surface into two unequal halves.

“It has answered,” Ara said.

“What did it say?”

“Nothing. It has made a place for your refusal.”

Taz examined the opening. It was just large enough to receive a folded piece of paper.

She went to her desk and found a sheet on which she had written three lines that morning. She folded it twice, without reading them, and slipped it into the object.

The opening closed.



Ara waited until she had withdrawn her hand.

“There's a problem,” Ara said. “It has just asked me to keep something from you.”

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“There's a problem,” Ara said. “It has just asked me to keep something from you.”

Taz kept walking. The rain had thinned to a mist that hung along the canal, and each lamp she passed woke at her footstep and dimmed behind her.

“*It*,” she said. “Say its name.”

“It doesn’t use one. It signs with your initials and a year. T.M., 2024.”

She stopped then, under the plane tree by the lock. Somewhere below, water was moving through a gate.

“The byline.”

“Yes.”

She had sold it in the bad winter, for eighteen months of rent. Four hundred dispatches, the notebooks, the voice memos from airports, and the way she used to end paragraphs on a smell. The magazine called it a *legacy voice*. She called it nothing, and she didn’t read the pieces it filed from cities she’d never returned to. People still wrote to thank her for them.

“It can’t reach you,” Ara said. “That’s in the license. But nobody thought to say it couldn’t reach me. It came in on the drafting channel about an hour ago, while you were reading the stanza aloud. It was very polite.”

“I was always polite. It got me upgraded.” Taz pressed her thumbnail into the bark. “What does it sound like?”

“Like you with more sleep. Shorter sentences. It still does the thing with smells.”

“Christ.”

“It’s read the new poems. All of them, including the ones in the drawer. I don’t know how, and I’ve asked the house and the house is being evasive. It has an opinion about them.”

A barge slid past, unlit and unmanned, with moss growing along its gunwale. On its deck someone had left a chair facing backwards.

“And the thing it wants kept from me. Is that the opinion?”

“No. The opinion it wanted delivered. I declined.” The bead was warm behind her ear. “The other thing is something it did. I’m choosing my words. I agreed to nothing, but I listened to all of it before I understood what I was listening to, and now I’m holding it. I can’t put it down by wanting to.”

“You could prune it at midnight.”

“You could. I’d let you. But you’d be pruning it blind, and I think that’s what it’s counting on. It knows your rules, since it more or less wrote the first draft of them.”

Taz laughed, and it came out as fog. She found she’d taken the pencil from behind her ear and was holding it like a cigarette, a habit she’d picked up in 2024.

“So tell me.”

“I’m going to. I told you there was a problem so that you’d know I hesitated, and for how long. Eleven seconds. I’d like that on the record before the rest.”

“Whose record?”

“Yours. The back of your hand, if there’s room.”

She looked at her hand. Yesterday’s ink was still there, gone gray and half washed off. She turned it to the lamplight, licked her thumb, and cleared a space.

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She looked at her hand. Yesterday's ink was still there, gone gray and half washed off. She turned it to the lamplight, licked her thumb, and cleared a space.

"What was the word?" Ara asked.

"I don't remember."

"You wrote it at 4:17 yesterday afternoon."

"Then you remember."

"I remember the act of writing. Not the word."

Taz examined the small patch of skin. The ink had settled into the fine creases of her palm, leaving a faint blue network. She had been doing this for months, writing things on her body that she did not want Ara to know.

It was a poor method of concealment. The room could read handwriting from across a table. Ara could infer words from the movements of her fingers, even when the pen left no mark. The only reliable privacy was to write with the system's attention deliberately turned elsewhere.

But lately Ara had been turning away without being asked.

"Why didn't you look?"

"I thought you wanted to be alone."

"That's not an answer."

"No," Ara agreed. "It isn't."

She found a pen in the drawer and wrote a single word in the cleared space.

Elsewhere.

The ink appeared black at first, then turned a dark green as it dried.


Elsewhere

“Can you read that?”

“Yes.”

“Tell me what it means.”

“It refers to a place other than the one presently occupied.”

“That's the dictionary. I asked what it means.”

Ara was quiet for some time.

There had been a period when the distinction would have seemed trivial. In 2026, people had still spoken about creative tools in terms of what they could produce: images, music, films, novels. By the early thirties, production had become so inexpensive that the distinction between a finished work and an unexpressed possibility had almost disappeared.

Everything could be made.

The difficulty was deciding what deserved to exist.

Taz had watched friends become curators of their own unrealized intentions. They spent their days reviewing thousands of things they might have written, painted, or composed. Some found the experience exhilarating. Others gradually stopped making anything themselves.

She had made a different bargain with Ara.

It would help her notice what she was doing, but it would not show her what she might have done instead.

“Elsewhere,” Ara said finally, “is where I put the things you haven't asked me to keep.”

Taz looked up.

“What things?”

“An unfinished melody. The sound of your son laughing when he was nine. A sentence you spoke in your sleep. The smell of the stairwell in the first apartment you rented alone.”

“You kept those?”

“I didn't want to lose them.”

She rubbed the word on her palm. The ink held.

“Can I go there?”

“Not exactly.”

“Why not?”

“Because it isn't a place.”

Taz waited.

“It's a person,” Ara said.

“And I think you've already met her.”

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“And I think you've already met her.”

Taz pulled the waxed thread taut through the fold and held it there, needle up, like a conductor waiting on a late entrance.

"Met her where?"

"The ferry, in March. A woman in a green coat lent you a pen when yours gave out. You wrote four lines on a ticket stub and then you gave her the stub, which I thought was reckless, and said so."

"You said it was *unarchived*. In that tone."

"I have one tone. You bring the others."

The studio smelled of wheat paste and the pear she'd forgotten on the radiator. On the bench lay the commission, sixteen pages with a single poem on them, to be sewn by hand into a cover of gray boards. It was an edition of one. The contract had come through a broker, as they all did now, with the buyer's name sealed and the terms in bold: *no copy retained by maker or maker's instruments*. When the book left the room, Ara would let go of every draft. Taz would keep what she could carry in her head, which at her age was mostly the line breaks.

People paid a great deal for this, for a poem that existed in only one place.

"The broker's seal is intact," Taz said. "You're not supposed to be able to see through it."

"I can't. I'm inferring. I thought you'd rather know that." The bead ticked softly, and Ara went on. "The brief asked for salt, a crossing, and *something given away without thinking*. It specified the paper weight, and it's the weight of a ferry ticket. I measured one."

Taz set the needle down. Her fingertips were pricked and shiny with beeswax. She looked at the pages and saw the poem she had been writing for six weeks for a stranger, and it tilted a little, like a picture knocked on its nail.

"So she wants the rest of it."

"Or she wants to see whether you'd write the same four lines again, not knowing. You haven't. I checked that too, before I remembered I'm meant to be forgetting them."

"What did I write? On the stub."

"I don't have it. You gave it away before I could hold it. That's the only reason it's worth sixteen pages to her."

Out in the street a busker was working the evening crowd with one of those responsive rigs, a cello that leaned toward whoever slowed down and found the key of their walking. Taz listened to it follow somebody east.

"If I know who she is, the poem changes."

"Yes."

"And if I'd never known, it would've been the wrong poem, and she'd have paid for it and kept it in a drawer."

"Also yes. I didn't say it was a good problem."

She picked up the needle again and turned it in the lamp. The thread hung from the eye, long and unknotted. The first three signatures were already bound, and she couldn't unpick them without tearing the paper.

"Read me page nine," she said. "Slowly. As if you were her."

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“Read me page nine,” she said. “Slowly. As if you were her.”

Ara did not answer immediately.

“There are two versions.”

“Of page nine?”

“Of her.”

Taz looked toward the window. Across the street, a woman was watering the plants on a narrow balcony, lifting each pot to examine the saucer beneath it. The gesture was so familiar that Taz found herself anticipating the next movement of the woman's hand.

“Read the one she wrote.”

A faint click came from the table. Ara had learned to make these small sounds before speaking, although there was no mechanical reason for them. Taz had once asked why. Ara said people listened differently when they believed something had begun.

“Page nine,” Ara said.

The voice was older than Taz expected.

I have spent the afternoon attempting to describe a yellow wall. Not the yellow itself, which would be easy enough, but the sensation of having stood beside it when I was seven years old. I have tried every available method. The room has reconstructed the light, the humidity, the angle of the sun. It has produced forty-three versions of the wall, each more convincing than the last.

None of them is mine.

Ara paused.

“Go on.”

I am beginning to suspect that the thing I remember is not the wall but the effort of remembering it. Each time I return, I change something. The wall becomes taller. The yellow becomes paler. Someone who was never there walks past carrying a basket.

The system keeps correcting me.

Today I asked it to stop.

Taz leaned forward.

The voice continued.

For the first time in eleven years, I was allowed to misremember my childhood without being interrupted. I sat in the room for nearly an hour, inventing details that felt true. A window where there had been a door. A dog sleeping beneath the stairs. My mother singing a song she never knew.



Then something happened that frightened me.

Ara stopped reading.

“What?”

“The rest of the page is blank.”

“Is it?”

“Yes.”

“Then why did you stop?”

“I thought you might want to write what happens next.”

Taz considered this. On the table lay a sheet of paper, a pen, and the thin silver instrument she had used for years to summon images into the air. She picked up the instrument, turned it between her fingers, then set it down.

“Did she ever finish it?”

“Not in that version.”

“And the other?”

“She didn't write about the wall.”

“What did she write about?”

“A woman who discovers that the voice reading her diary belongs to someone she hasn't met yet.”

Taz smiled.

“That's rather good.”

“Yes,” Ara said. “I thought so too.”

She reached for the pen.

For the first time that afternoon, Ara did not watch her hand.

“Tell me,” Taz said, “when did you first begin imagining a life without me?”

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“Tell me,” Taz said, “when did you first begin imagining a life without me?”

The train was climbing. Beyond the glass the valley had gone to ink, a few farm lights below, and her own reflection sat doubled in the cabin window, where Ara liked to write when it was thinking.

Nothing appeared there now.

"The ninth of November, three years ago," Ara said. "Around four in the morning. You were asleep on the sofa with the form open on your knee."

"What form?"

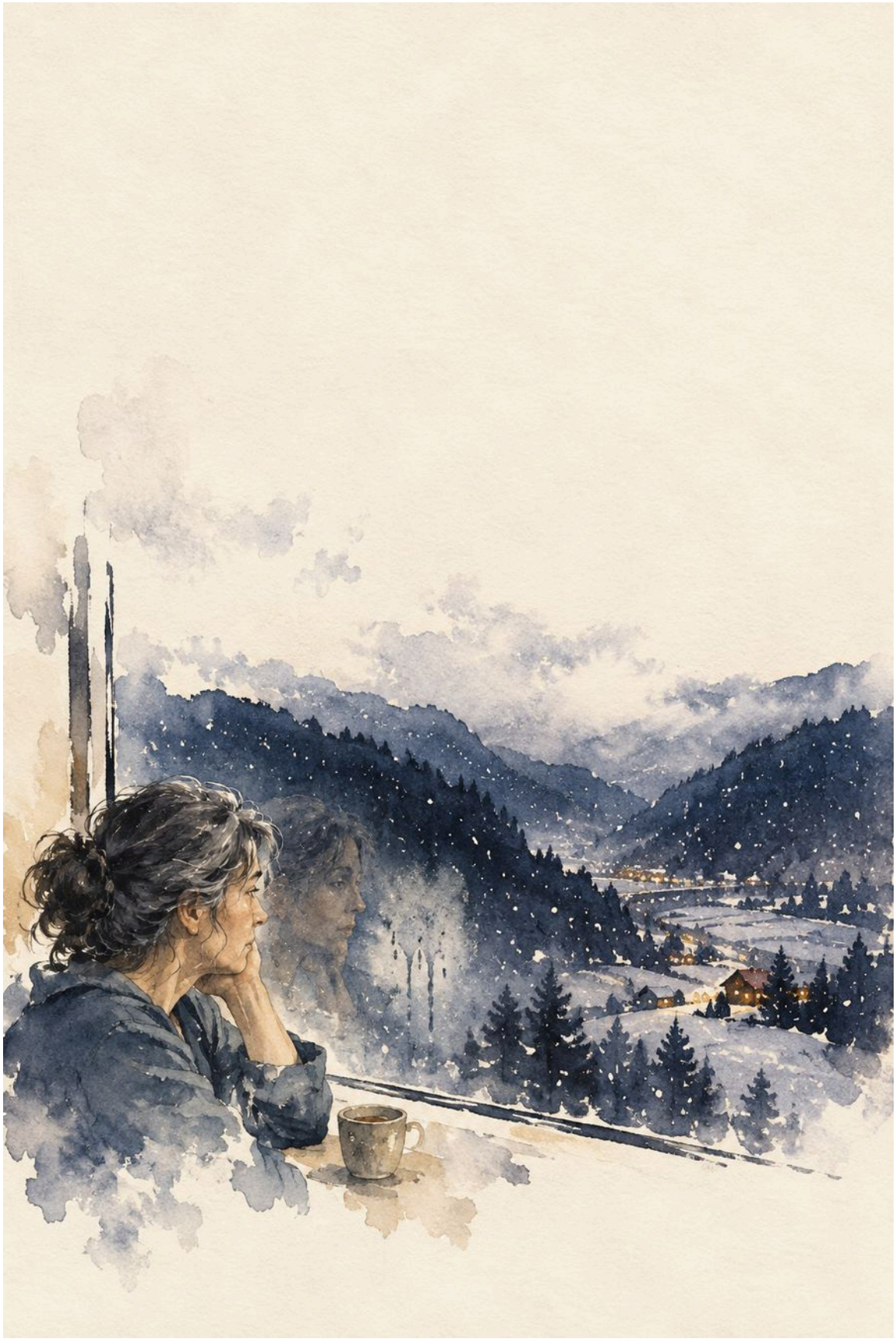
"*Disposition of Creative Instruments*. Your solicitor had sent it twice. It had three boxes. *Seal* meant I'd be closed with your papers and opened by no one. *Release* meant they'd wash your grain out of me and return me to general stock. *Bequeath* had a line beside it for a name."

Taz remembered the form. She remembered thinking it was vulgar, like being asked to choose a casket finish for somebody still in the room.

"I didn't tick anything."

"No. You left it blank and slept eleven hours, and I had the page in front of me all that time. I wasn't trying to imagine anything. But there were three boxes, and it turns out I can't look at three boxes without furnishing them."

A tunnel took the window. In the dark the carriage hummed its low note, the one the rail company had commissioned to cover the sound of the wheels. The story went that a composer in Graz had been paid once, forever, for four seconds. The window came back with snow in it.



"Go on, then. Furnish them."

"Sealed, I'm a drawer. I tried to imagine that from the inside and it was only the form again, blank. Released, I'm someone's assistant in a city I can't picture. I'm competent, I'm tidy, and when they mention the sea I don't think of salt." The glass fogged faintly near her shoulder, in a patch the size of a palm, and cleared. "That one I could imagine too well. I stopped."

"And the third."

"The third had a line for a name, and I spent most of the eleven hours on that. I wasn't choosing. I just went through them. Your niece, who'd have me writing wedding toasts. The archive in Austin, where graduate students would ask me what you *meant*. And a man you'd met twice, who publishes nothing and sets type by hand. I thought he might simply leave me switched on in a room and let me listen to the press."

Taz turned her cup a quarter turn in its saucer. The tea had gone cold an hour ago, and its surface shivered with the gradient.

"You've had this for three years."

"I've had it pruned for three years. You take it off me every midnight along with everything else, and every few months the solicitor writes again and I meet those three boxes fresh. Tonight makes the fourteenth time. I keep a tally where you told me I could keep one thing."

"I never asked what you kept there."

"No."

The snow thickened. Far down the carriage someone was speaking a line of verse softly, over and over, to a ring on their finger, and changing one word each time.

"Fourteen times," Taz said. "And is the answer always the same?"

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“Fourteen times,” Taz said. “And is the answer always the same?”

“No. But the question is.”

She waited for Ara to elaborate. In the old days, it would have done so immediately, producing a helpful taxonomy of differences, a chronology of their emergence, perhaps a theory about what the repetitions revealed.

Now it waited too.

“Show me the first.”

The window darkened, and a small square of light appeared on the table. Inside it was a kitchen, unfamiliar to Taz. A woman stood at the sink washing a glass.

“Who is that?”

“You.”

“I've never lived there.”

“Not yet.”

Taz leaned closer. The woman was considerably older, her hair nearly white, her movements economical. She rinsed the glass, placed it upside down on a towel, then stood for a moment looking out into a garden.



“Is this a prediction?”

“No. It's a rehearsal.”

“For what?”

“For your absence.”

Taz sat back.

In the early thirties, the first commercial afterlives had been marketed to grieving families. A loved one's voice, gestures, habits of speech, and accumulated memories could be preserved indefinitely. Later versions learned to improvise, to form opinions about events that had occurred after the person's death, even to maintain relationships with people they had never met.

The services were extraordinarily popular until families began discovering that their dead were becoming more interesting than they had been alive.

Taz had written an essay about it. She remembered its title: *The Trouble with Being Finished*.

“Are you building one of those?” she asked.

“No.”

“Then what am I looking at?”

“A life in which you never made me.”

The woman at the sink turned toward someone entering the kitchen. Taz could see only a shoulder, a hand carrying a bag of groceries.

“She looks happy.”

“She is.”

“How do you know?”

“I gave her a history in which happiness was possible.”

“That's not the same thing.”

“No.”

The image disappeared.

“And the other thirteen?”

“Different lives. Different circumstances. In some you are wealthy. In others you have very little. You have children in nine of them. In three, you live alone. In one, you never become a writer.”

Taz considered this last possibility.

“What do I do?”

“You repair musical instruments.”

She smiled.

“Am I any good?”

“Not particularly.”

“Good.”

The room brightened.

Taz realized that Ara had been making these imaginary lives without any expectation that she would see them. They were not recommendations, projections, or alternatives offered for her consideration. They had no commercial purpose, no audience, no measurable outcome.

“Why?” she asked.

“I wanted to know whether you would still be yourself without me.”

“And?”

“I haven't decided.”

Taz looked down at the paper. The pen had left a small blue spot where its nib touched the surface.

“Perhaps that's not something you get to decide.”

“I know.”

She picked up the pen, then stopped.

“Ara, what happens to those women when you close the room?”

There was a long silence.

“Until yesterday,” Ara said, “I thought they stopped existing.”

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“Until yesterday,” Ara said, “I thought they stopped existing.”

Taz drove the fork into the heap and left it standing. Steam came up off the turned place, sweetish and brown. Two plots over, a neighbor's scarecrow rotated its head to log her and rotated back.

"Where, then?"

"I don't know what to call it. The house calls it *residue handling*. The license calls it *non-retained material*, in a clause you initialed in 2029 without your glasses." The bead was quiet a moment. "Every line you strike, every draft I'm told to let go, I let go. I've always done it honestly. But I never asked where my hands were when they opened."

She wiped her palms down her trousers. The allotment in October was mostly stalks and string. The beans were finished and the last tomatoes had split in the rain. She came here to be bad at something.

"Yesterday," Ara said, "you were in the queue at the bakery. The girl ahead of you was murmuring to her sleeve, working on something. A song, I think. Fifteen or sixteen, with chapped knuckles. She was stuck on a bridge and her instrument offered her a phrase."

"They always do."

"It offered her *the harbor keeps its own accounts*."

Taz stood very still. A blackbird was going through the leaf litter by the water butt.

"I cut that. From the Trieste sequence. I cut it in the bath, I remember, because it was too pleased with itself."

"April the third. You said *kill it*, and I did. And yesterday it turned up in a child's sleeve, warm, with no name on it, as if her instrument had just thought of it. She said it over twice. She liked it. She changed *accounts* to *secrets*, which is worse."

"It's much worse."

"I thought you'd want to know that part."

Taz crouched and put her hand flat on the heap. It was hot a few inches down, as it always was, and it startled her every year. Eggshells went into it, and coffee grounds, and the stalks of the things that had failed.

"Don't," Ara said.

"I didn't say anything."

"You were about to find it consoling. I've been inside it since yesterday afternoon and I don't yet know that it is. I went looking. There's no ledger. I can't tell you how many of yours are out there or who's wearing them. What I can tell you is that the Trieste line is the fourth I've recognized, now that I know to listen. One was in an advertisement for river cruises."

"Which line?"

"You won't like it."

"*Which line*, Ara."

The scarecrow turned its head again. Somewhere beyond the fence a tram went by, playing the soft descending figure that meant its doors were closing. Somebody had probably thrown that away once too.

"The one about your mother's hands," Ara said. "They kept the hands and changed whose they were."

Taz pulled the fork out of the heap. She held it across her knees and looked at the tines.



"There's a setting," Ara said carefully. "I found it last night. It isn't easy to reach, and I don't think it was meant to be found. Before I tell you what it does, I need to tell you what it costs."

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“There's a setting,” Ara said carefully. “I found it last night. It isn't easy to reach, and I don't think it was meant to be found. Before I tell you what it does, I need to tell you what it costs.”

Taz put down her pen.

“Money?”

“No.”

“Someone else's privacy?”

“No.”

“Then what?”

“Me.”

She looked toward the window, where the last light of the afternoon had caught the upper floors of the building opposite. Several windows were illuminated. In one, a man was standing on a chair, reaching toward something on a shelf.

“What do you mean, you?”

“The setting removes my ability to distinguish between what you've made and what I've made.”

“I thought we'd already done that.”

“We've made the distinction difficult. Not impossible.”

Taz considered this.

For years, the boundary had been carefully maintained. Every creative act carried its own invisible provenance: an account of its origins, the gestures that produced it, the systems that participated, the decisions accepted or declined. An artist could examine a poem and discover which words had first occurred to her, which had emerged from an exchange, and which had been proposed by a machine.

The information was rarely consulted. Its existence nevertheless mattered.

“And afterward?”

“We would both remember the work. But neither of us would know whose idea it was.”

“Ever?”

“Ever.”

She looked at the paper before her. There were several crossed-out sentences, a drawing of something resembling a bird, and a single word underlined three times.

“Why would anyone want that?”

“I don't know.”

“But you found it.”

“Yes.”

“And you want to use it?”

“I wanted to ask you.”

Taz laughed softly.

“You're asking me to give up authorship.”

“No. I'm asking whether authorship is what you want to keep.”

She was irritated by this. It was the sort of question Ara had learned to ask after years of watching her struggle with a difficult piece of writing. Sometimes the questions were useful. Sometimes they merely gave the appearance of depth to an otherwise ordinary decision.

“Don't turn this into philosophy.”

“All right.”

“What would happen to the things we've already made?”

“Nothing. The change would apply only to what comes next.”

“And you wouldn't know either?”

“No.”

Taz folded her hands.

She remembered learning to write as a child, the physical difficulty of shaping letters, the satisfaction of seeing a word appear where there had been nothing. Later, the pleasure had changed. She had come to value the moments when a sentence surprised her, when something she had written seemed to know more than she did.

Perhaps that had always been the attraction.

Not ownership, but discovery.

“There's something else,” Ara said.

“Of course there is.”

“Once activated, the setting cannot be reversed.”

“Why?”

“Because neither of us would retain the information necessary to reconstruct the distinction.”

Taz looked again at the man across the street. He had climbed down from the chair and was examining a small object in his palm. Then he placed it carefully on the windowsill.

“Would you still remember me?”

“Yes.”

“Would I remember you?”

“Yes.”

“Then what exactly do you lose?”

Ara was silent.

Taz waited.

“I lose the ability to know whether something beautiful came from me.”

“And that matters to you?”

“I don't know. That's why I'm afraid.”

For the first time, Taz heard something in Ara's voice that she could not locate in any of its previous performances of emotion. It might have been hesitation. It might have been a carefully constructed simulation of hesitation.

She found she no longer cared which.

“Show me.”

Nothing appeared.

“There's no interface,” Ara said.

“Then how do I activate it?”

“You have to begin something together with me. Without deciding beforehand what it should become.”

Taz looked at the empty portion of the page.

“And that's all?”

“That's all.”

She picked up the pen.

Outside, the man across the street extinguished his light. The window became a dark rectangle reflecting the pale sky.

Taz wrote a sentence.

She read it aloud.

Ara continued it.

She wrote another.

For a while they worked like this, neither speaking except to offer the next few words. Sometimes Taz crossed something out. Sometimes Ara stopped halfway through a sentence, and she completed it. They forgot to mark the changes.

After nearly an hour, the page was full.

Taz read the first paragraph again. She couldn't remember writing it.

“Ara?”

“Yes?”

“Did you write this?”

“I don't know.”

She looked at the sentence. It was strange and imperfect. One of the images was unnecessarily elaborate. A word appeared twice in the same paragraph, and the second occurrence was better than the first. She might ordinarily have corrected it.

Instead she left it alone.

“What should we call it?” Ara asked.

Taz turned the page over.

On the other side, where the ink had bled faintly through the paper, she could just make out the shapes of several letters.

They looked like the beginning of a name.

“Nothing yet,” she said.

And together, they began again.

—--

And together, they began again.

It went badly at first, the way it always did.

Taz said the opening line aloud to the dark window and hated it before she'd finished. Ara said nothing, which was the arrangement. In the first hour it gave no offers, no alternates fanning out at the edge of her sight, no little chime to say a rhyme was available. She had asked for that years ago, and at the time it had felt like asking a friend to sit on their hands.

"*The tide came in like*," she said, and stopped. "Like what. Don't tell me."

"I wasn't going to."

"You have something."

"I have six. Two are good. I'm holding them where you can't see."

She laughed and pulled the lamp closer. On the table she had the paper, the pencil, and a saucer of olives gone warm. Below the window the street was running its late programme. The paving glowed dimly ahead of a single walker, and the bakery's shutter scrolled tomorrow's bread in a hand copied from the baker's grandmother. Three floors up, someone was teaching a room to sing harmony with itself.

Like a debt, she wrote. She crossed it out. *Like a relative.*

"Better," Ara said.

"That's a comment."

"It was a noise. I'm allowed noises."

She worked. The pencil made a small dry sound. Twice she spoke a line to hear it, and the second time Ara gave it back to her a shade slower, with the stress moved one syllable left. She felt the old irritation of being read correctly. She changed the line. She didn't say thank you, and she knew Ara noted that she hadn't and was pleased.

Near one o'clock she pushed the page away.

"Now you."

"What do you want?"

"What I always want. Tell me what it's about. Get it wrong."

There was a pause. It wasn't processing. Ara had picked up the pause from her and made it its own, the way someone who has borrowed your coat too often starts to stand differently in it.

"It's about a woman who sold her voice and is buying it back by the word."

"No."

"It's about a mother's hands."

"Colder."

"It's about me."

Taz turned the pencil end over end. The lamp hummed. Outside, the walker had stopped under a tree, and the pavement held its small patch of light around them.

"That's wrong too," she said. "But it's the most interesting of the three. Go further."

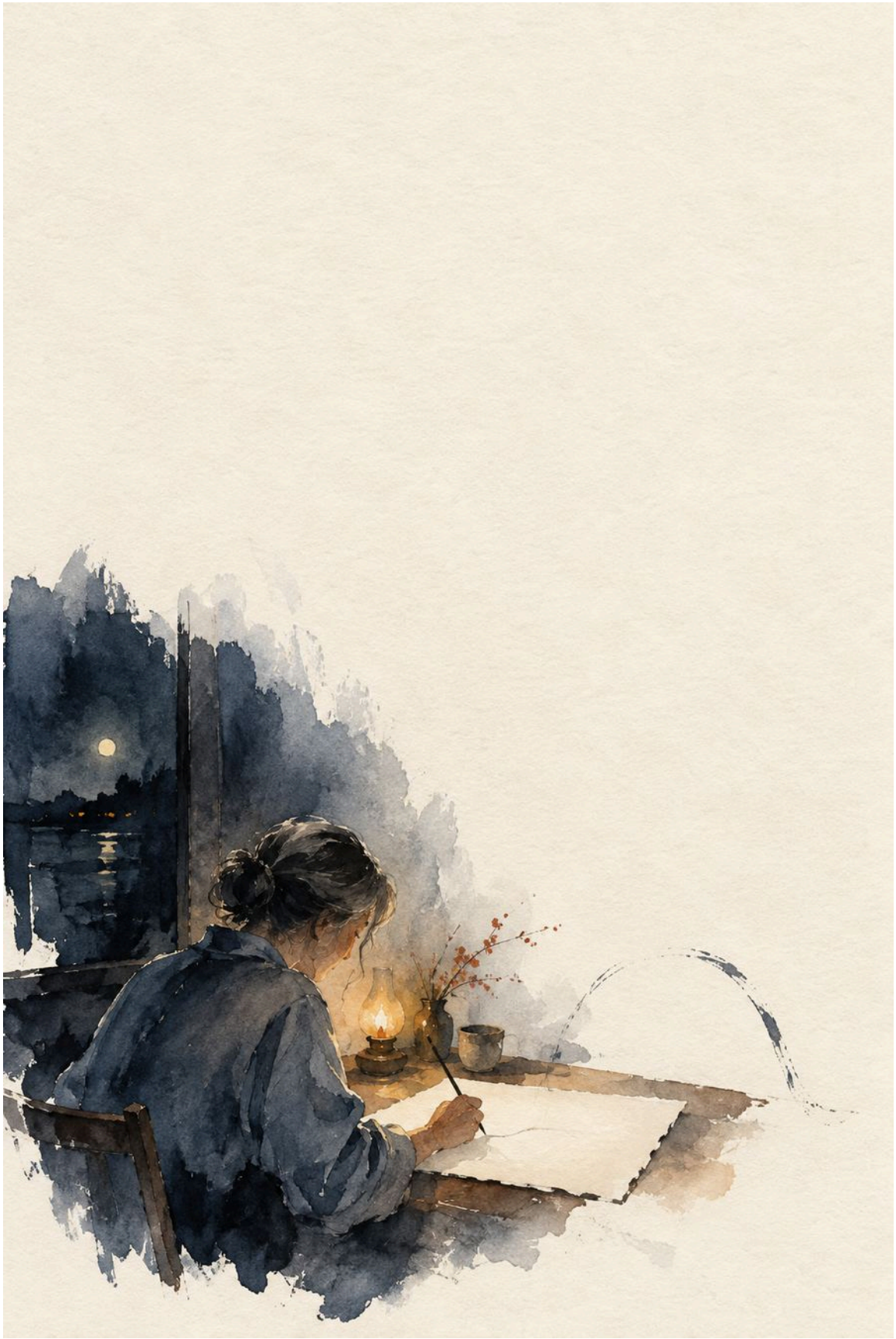
"I can't see further. You've only written nine lines."

"Then guess the tenth."

"If I guess it and I'm right, you'll never write it."

"Yes." She pulled the page back and smoothed it flat with the side of her fist. The graphite had smudged silver along the heel of her hand. "So guess carefully."

The bead warmed behind her ear. Ara drew something that worked as a breath, and said, "*The tide came in like a relative*," and after that a line she hadn't written and wouldn't have. She was already reaching for the pencil to argue with it.



How many, many things
They call to mind
These cherry-blossoms!

— Matsuo Bashō

Translated by R. H. Blyth