

# *What the Water Carried*

*A Collection*

Alexa Daskalakis

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# The Man Who Poisoned the Water

*An allegory.*

*A work of allegorical fiction about what stays in still water.*

There was once a man who kept a harbor and complained that the water was bitter.

From the road, it looked clean: white posts, polished lamps, a swept dock, a sign repainted every spring though salt kept eating through the letters.

At low tide, he walked the shore with keys at his belt and a ledger under one arm. Some mornings he carried a hammer. Some mornings a cup. Some mornings nothing at all, which made his hands look innocent.

He bent over the water.

“You taste wrong,” he said.

Then he poured something in.

Not much. Never enough to blacken the harbor at once. A little by the gate. A little beneath the dock. A little near the rocks, where the shadow kept its mouth closed.

By evening, the water had changed.

“See?” he said. “It was always like that.”

The tide moved against the posts.

At the mouth of the harbor, he had built a gate. It did not close fully. It did not open kindly. It stood half-wide, iron against water, broad enough to admit the tide and narrow enough to wound it passing.

If the water stayed, he called it stagnant.

If it left, he called it ungrateful.

If it rose, he called it dangerous.

If it carried the poison outward, he called it proof.

At night, he leaned over the dock.

“No clean shore will take you.”

The water darkened beneath him.

“You will come back.”

The water touched the gate.

“You will learn what you are.”

Below the surface, things waited.

A chain left low.

A nail turned inward.

A broken cup.

The dull head of a hammer where no hammer belonged.

Stones placed too carefully beneath the only passage out.

Some had been there since the water was new.

Before the harbor had a name. Before the posts were painted.

Before the water knew its own depth. He had put things in early, so early that the taste seemed older than memory. The iron became the floor. The wound became the channel. The poison did not rise.

It taught the harbor its shape.

For years, he used fog.

Whenever the water cleared enough to show what had been dropped there, the machines behind the shed breathed white over everything. The mist softened the gate, blurred the chain, made

the harbor look gentle from the road.

“What poison?” he asked.

“What cup?”

“What stones?”

But water keeps what enters it.

Rust in the current.

Paint under the foam.

Oil along the reeds.

A bitter trace where the tide was forced to pass.

Then one season, the fog stopped.

The machines went quiet. The harbor stood plain.

The chain remained.

The stones remained.

The inward nail remained.

The taste remained.

One night, the man opened the gate wider than usual.

There was no lamp facing the channel. No marker. No shelter beyond the mouth.

He had opened the gate, not to free the water, but to blame the sea.

But water does not understand shame the way men do.

It understands openings.

Before dawn, the tide went through.

Not loudly. Not in triumph. It slipped beneath the chain, bent around the hidden stones, crossed the narrow cut, and reached another shore.

Then another.

Then another.

Everywhere it went, it carried what should not have been in the water.

A thread of rope.

A flake of white paint.

A taste of iron.

A bent nail.

A broken cup.

A skin of oil shining thinly in the morning light.

People on other docks looked down.

Not at the water first.

At what had been put into it.

They saw the scrape marks.

They saw the bitter film.

They saw rust blooming in a shape no tide makes alone.

They saw objects that did not arrive by weather.

They saw wounds cut too neatly to be storm.

No wave brings its own nail.

No sea poisons itself with a cup.

No current throws a hammer into its own throat.

Then they looked back along the coast.

At the polished harbor.

At the gate built against a tide.

At the lamps turned away from the passage.

At the white posts with poison blooming through the paint.

No one asked the water to explain.

The water had arrived alive.

The harbor had arrived with it.

By morning, the man returned with his ledger. He wrote that the tide had left dirty. He wrote that it had carried trouble. He wrote that no clean sea would have taken so much with it.

Then he looked down.

The cup was gone.

The nail was gone.

The oil had thinned.

The waterline had risen through the fresh paint.

And far beyond his harbor, on shores he had never meant to reach, people were holding the things he had thrown away.

From the road, his harbor still looked clean.

From the water, everything showed.

# She Won't Remember

*A poem.*

*A work of literary fiction.*

*Full disclaimer at end.*

She won't remember. That's the thing  
he told the dark. Not her. Not anyone.  
Just the room, and whatever God  
was looking the other way.

She won't remember, so it didn't happen.  
She won't remember, so he didn't do it.  
She won't remember—and this  
is the logic of a man  
who mistakes silence for innocence.

But the body keeps what the mind releases.  
Not as memory. As shape.  
The way a field remembers a fire  
not in flame, but in what will not grow back.

He made sure she'd never ask.  
Not with a hand. With absence.  
Thirty years of nothing  
is not neglect. It is craft.  
You can build a silence so complete  
a child believes she was never owed sound.

And when she came anyway—  
when she reached across the quiet  
the way children do, unbearably, with hope—  
he made the reaching hurt.

Made closeness a punishment.

Made the door a lesson:  
do not come here again.

She won't remember. But she learned  
never to ask for anything.  
She learned that wanting was the error.  
She learned to make herself so small  
even hunger felt like greed.

A girl who won't ask  
will never ask why.

But he miscalculated:  
she never believed him.  
The cruelty was too far from the world  
to be the truth.  
You cannot make someone nothing  
when she never needed you  
to be something.

He thought he was speaking to someone broken.  
He was speaking to someone  
who never let him in the room.

She won't remember.

She does.

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# King of the Tiny Staircase

*A poem.*

*A work of literary fiction.*

*Full disclaimer at end.*

He was king of the tiny staircase.

Not of nations.

Not of men.

Not even of the house, really.

Just that narrow flight  
between one room and another,  
where a child could be made smaller  
than she already was.

A great man needs witnesses.

A small man needs corners.

Once, in the car,  
she laughed at something.

Nothing important.

Only the small, stupid mercy  
of being alive.

He said he would rather hear her cry  
than laugh.

There are sentences  
that do not pass through childhood.  
They stay there,  
standing in the doorway.

The staircase was not the first touch.  
He had crossed that border already.

He stood at the top  
with all the authority  
of someone larger than a child,  
which is to say:  
none at all,  
except in rooms where no one decent  
was looking.

There was a shove.

There was the body  
learning air.

There was the old wooden mouth  
of the stairs opening beneath her,  
step after step,  
each one saying  
remember this.

And she did.

She turned around  
with the stunned dignity  
of the very young  
when truth is still simple.

You pushed me.

Above her,  
the king adjusted his crown  
made of nothing.

No, I didn't.

That was the kingdom.

Not the fall.

The denial after.

Not the pain.

The command  
to mistrust the body  
that had just survived him.

In another room,  
in another year,  
he threw food at a child  
and called it funny.

Blueberries on the boy,  
a joke told later  
with the bright, practiced smile  
of a man trying to launder his hand  
through laughter.

This is what they do  
when they cannot keep  
their force off the living.

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# He Turns to His Own Victim

*A poem.*

*A work of literary fiction.*

*Full disclaimer at end.*

Someone else said it first.

Not the child. Not the one  
who had already learned  
what his hands meant  
before she learned the word for it.

The woman beside him.  
The one who had chosen him  
with full sight and no questions.

She said it plainly,  
the way people say things  
they have held too long  
and can no longer swallow:

You are mean to children.

The room did not move.

The air did not move.

He turned.

Not to her.

Not to the mirror.

Not inward.

He turned to the child.

The one he had already broken  
in a room no one entered.  
The one he had pushed down stairs  
and then denied the fall.  
The one whose credit he would later gut  
like a fish on a counter.

He looked at her  
and asked:

I'm not mean to children, am I?

There are moments  
when the whole architecture  
of a man's denial  
stands visible in a single gesture.

This was one.

He did not ask his wife to take it back.  
He did not sit with the accusation.  
He did not look inward.

He turned to the person  
who knew the answer best —  
and asked her to lie for him.

The child did not lie.

She looked around the room.  
She looked at the shape of him.  
She said nothing  
that would save him.

And the silence  
was not empty.

It was full

of every staircase,  
every locked room,  
every infant evening  
he thought no one would remember.

He asked his victim  
to forgive him in public  
for something she had not yet named.

She didn't.

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# The Table

*A poem.*

*A work of literary fiction.*

*Full disclaimer at end.*

He talked about the hotel the whole meal.  
The price. The view. The weight of the robe.  
He said the number twice  
like a man who needed me to hear it —  
at a table someone else paid for,  
in a house that was never his.

The old woman smiled at me.  
Passed the bread without asking.  
She had that look —  
not pity, exactly,  
but the quiet math of someone  
who signs the checks  
and says nothing.

He told me their envy  
was the reason for their silence.  
That they couldn't stand  
how well he'd done —  
with their money,  
in their daughter's name,  
under their roof.

I was young enough to sit.  
Too old to believe him.

He described the view from the balcony.

The robe. The door.  
He said it like a man showing a child  
a toy he'd never share —  
knowing the child  
had no bed that night,  
and the toy  
was borrowed.

The grandmother poured my glass first.  
I think she knew.  
I think they all knew.  
I think knowing  
was the only thing in that house  
that was free.

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# I Did That

*A poem.*

*A work of literary fiction.*

*Full disclaimer at end.*

She comes downstairs in almost nothing —  
the same woman  
who once stood over my body  
and decided what it was for  
and who it was for.  
The one who showed me to men  
I never saw.

I say what I have always said:  
If I wore that, you would have something to say.

She walks to her husband and says:  
She told me to cover up.  
That's how you know I'm a good mother.  
That's how you know I did something right.

Then she walks back to me —  
to me,  
the body she broke —  
and says it to my face:  
See? You said that because of how I raised you.  
You have values because of me.

And I stand there.

I cover my body  
because you made it unsafe to have one.

I flinch at skin  
because you taught me  
that skin is where the danger starts.  
I learned modesty  
the way a prisoner learns stillness —  
not as virtue,  
but as survival.

And you —  
who made the wound —  
point at the scar tissue  
and call it character.

You point at the flinch  
and call it grace.

You point at the girl  
who learned to disappear inside her own clothes  
and say: I did that. That's mine.  
That's proof I'm a good mother.

You took my survival  
and framed it on your wall.

And then you told me —  
to my face —  
that I should thank you for it.

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# What He Built

*A poem.*

*A work of literary fiction.*

*Full disclaimer at end.*

He came to me once  
and said:  
You're tougher than your brother.

As if that were a compliment.  
As if he hadn't made it true  
on purpose.

He asked me what I thought  
about the degree.  
I said: something useful.  
He said: it doesn't matter.  
Then he paid for it anyway.

That was never a question.  
That was a signature line.  
He wanted my name  
next to the wreckage  
so I couldn't call it wreckage later.

But I watched.

I watched them fill a boy  
with nothing  
and call it love.  
I watched them build someone  
who couldn't leave,

couldn't witness.

When his body broke  
they came with balloons.  
They performed at the hospital bed  
like cameras were rolling  
where no one was watching.

And now he walks in  
talking like a man  
who has never met himself.

He is mean to his sister.  
He doesn't know why.  
That is the whole of him now.

They took my brother from me.  
But I never had one.  
They made sure of that.

They never understood:

I didn't need a witness.  
The evidence is not hidden.  
It is the shape of everything they touched —  
visible to anyone  
who has ever looked.

They destroyed a perfectly fine person  
for nothing.

They engineered a dependent  
who can never leave them,  
never testify —  
and none of that mattered.

Because the wreckage speaks  
without me.

It always did.

And now they have:  
a daughter who remembers everything,  
a son who remembers nothing,  
and no legacy  
worth either of their names.

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received, interpreted, and evaluated solely as such.

# The System Sent a Man Into a Room

*A work of fiction about a mandate and a room.*

*This piece is not a critique of any system, institution, or process. It is a work of literature. A full disclaimer is included at the end of this piece.*

The system tried to intervene. It sent a man into a room.

There was a chair. A desk. A legal obligation to listen. I was thirteen. This was supposed to be the door that opened from the outside.

Five minutes before I walked in, the mother's friend called. She told me what to say. The mother stood over me while I listened. She did not speak. She did not have to. I understood the cost of anything else.

I sat across from him and said, "I need you to listen carefully to what I'm trying to tell you."

What I was trying to tell him was not in the sentence. It was in the looking. In the way I held his eyes and said almost nothing, hoping he could read what I was not allowed to say.

Can you see it.

Can you see what is happening.

Can you hear the distance between the words and the truth.

I do not know what he wrote after I left. I know only that he went back to court and said she was coached.

So he saw that much.

What I do not know is whether he understood it. The coaching was not to accuse. It was to stay silent. The child in front of him was not

being told what to say. She was being told what must not be said.

The father told the court my grades were slipping. I got one eighty-eight on one math test. One test. Everything else was an A. I was in the honors society every year of middle school.

Then the therapist said, “Your parents tell me your grades are slipping.”

I said, “I got one eighty-eight. On one test.”

But they had spoken first.

Meanwhile, the brother. No honors society. Not once. But they said he had a 3.88. They said he got a letter from the honors society and chose not to join. He lied. They repeated it. Then it sat in the room as fact.

He was brilliant. She was difficult. He belonged at the school. She worked hard and still came up short.

The therapist said, “Bring her back next week.”

They never brought me back.

The mandate died in their hands. The system built a door. They took the key.

Three years later I found a school online. No adult showed it to me. No adult said: There is a place called Aldren. Aldren meant you slept somewhere else. They let me find the advertisement and follow it.

Later they said: “You never went to Aldren. You were too stupid. They would not have taken you.”

The year I turned sixteen, the mother told me — years after the fact — that I had been emancipated. She said it like a tip. Like a favor. “You should be able to apply for some assistance.”

I never saw a document. I do not know whether one exists. Either they emancipated me, or they lied about that too.

If a court emancipated me, why. I had no record. No trouble. No behavior. I was a good kid. I worked hard. I broke nothing. If a court released me from them, then somewhere, on paper, the state concluded what the house would not say.

And no one told me.

No one said: “You are free now.”

They let me stay two more years inside a life I may already have been released from.

And if they lied, they told a child, casually, over the phone, that she had been emancipated.

Either way, the life did not change. The child slept on the same couches. The child learned the same silence.

The system tried to intervene. It sent a man into a room. I looked at him and tried to say with everything except my mouth: Help me. Something is wrong. Can you see it.

I still do not know how much he saw. They never brought me back to find out.

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# The Couch

*A poem.*

*A work of literary fiction.*

*Full disclaimer at end.*

He always knew.

Every couch, every floor, every car —  
he knew where I slept.

I told him I was homeless.  
He laughed.

He offered me  
a married man's basement.

The wife did not know.

He had already arranged it:  
I would watch the children,  
sleep beneath them,  
in a room  
the wife did not know about.

That was the rent.

He told the man  
before he told me.

I said no.

He put his fist through the desk  
and said  
he would stab me.

I told him I was homeless.

He laughed.

And called it help.

I had nowhere else to be.

This piece is a work of literary fiction presented in poetic form. It is not a legal filing, a police report, a factual disclosure, or an accusation against any individual. No character is intended to depict, represent, or reference any specific person — living, deceased, or otherwise.

Relational terms used in this work — including but not limited to “he,” “I,” “the man,” “the wife,” “the children,” “father,” “daughter,” or any familial, domestic, or interpersonal reference — are narrative constructs serving a literary function. They do not refer to, depict, or identify any specific individual. The use of a relational term does not establish, imply, or support any connection between a fictional character and any real person.

Any events, circumstances, or details depicted in this work — including but not limited to references to a couch, a floor, a car, a basement, a desk, a fist, a room, children, a wife, a married man, an arrangement, rent, watching, sleeping, homelessness, laughter, help, a threat, a reference to stabbing, a refusal, or the nature of any relationship — are narrative elements of a literary work. They do not constitute a factual account, a personal disclosure, or a legal claim of any kind. References to financial hardship or housing instability depict universal human experiences and constitute common subject matter in literary fiction. The presence of such themes in a literary work does not establish a factual connection to any specific individual.

This work does not constitute, and should not be construed as, an admission, confession, accusation, characterization, disclosure, or acknowledgment of any act, event, or conduct — by the author or by any other individual. This work is not intended to function as, and should not be construed as, a statement of the author’s personal history or biographical fact.

The content of this work does not constitute, and should not be construed as, a

characterization of the author's impulses, fantasies, psychological disposition, stability, responsibility, judgment, parenting capacity, or fitness as a caregiver — past, present, or future.

This work is literature. It exists in the tradition of literary fiction and should be received, interpreted, and evaluated solely as such.

# Party of Three

*A poem.*

*A work of fiction about a photograph and a number.*

She wrote the caption. Tagged the man. Smiled.  
She counted to the number three, and stopped.  
A Saturday in January. Public.  
Beneath the hashtag: Family date night.  
One hundred thirty-six approved the sum.  
Nobody asked about the missing girl.

Ten years of photographs without her in them.  
Ten years of us constructed on a space  
Where someone ought to be. The bride in white.  
The invitations sent — but not to her.  
A guest list is a document. A choice.  
You do not overlook a man's own child  
The day you take his name.

The people writing Beautiful beneath  
The photographs did not know she existed.  
They believed the house was whole. They were not wrong.  
Every kind comment is a record  
Of a girl no one was told to look for.

The girl outgrew the yard. Outgrew the house.  
Outgrew the woman in it. Kept the screenshots.  
Let them build. Let them post. Let them perform  
A decade of the evidence themselves,  
Too certain of their safety to observe  
That every photograph was filing itself.

The wall is finished now. She built it shut.  
To scrub the timeline clean is to confess  
You know exactly what the pictures mean.  
To leave them up is to commit the act  
Again, each morning, with the sun as witness.  
Stop or continue. There is nothing else.

Before the judge, the question will not be  
Whether she knew. The question will be how  
She did not — when the evidence is hers.  
The captions hers. The smiles hers. The sum hers.  
She stopped at three. The fourth one kept the record.

This piece is a work of literary fiction presented in poetic form. It is not a legal filing, a police report, a factual disclosure, or an accusation against any individual. No character is intended to depict, represent, or reference any specific person — living, deceased, or otherwise.

Relational terms used in this work — including but not limited to “he,” “she,” “they,” “child,” “girl,” “man,” “bride,” “daughter,” or any familial, domestic, or interpersonal reference — are narrative constructs serving a literary function. They do not refer to, depict, or identify any specific individual. The use of a relational term does not establish, imply, or support any connection between a fictional character and any real person.

Any events, circumstances, or details depicted in this work — including but not limited to references to a photograph, a caption, a hashtag, a number, a guest list, a wedding, invitations, a timeline, screenshots, a wall, a courtroom, a judge, counting, silence, or the nature of any relationship — are narrative elements of a literary work. They do not constitute a factual account, a personal disclosure, or a legal claim of any kind.

References to digital-era objects or behaviors — including but not limited to screenshots, posts, timelines, devices, or documentation — are literary imagery reflecting the contemporary landscape in which this work was written. They are not references to specific materials in the author’s possession, nor do they constitute an

acknowledgment that such materials exist.

This work does not constitute, and should not be construed as, an admission, confession, accusation, characterization, disclosure, or acknowledgment of any act, event, or conduct — by the author or by any other individual. This work is not a statement of the author’s personal history or biographical fact.

The content of this work does not reflect, depict, represent, or constitute the author’s own conduct, actions, impulses, desires, fantasies, intentions, psychological disposition, parenting capacity, or fitness as a caregiver — past, present, or future.

A work of literary fiction is not probative of the author’s character, conduct, or credibility in any context. The creation of art — including art that engages with themes of conflict, accountability, or injustice — is a constitutionally protected act of expression and is not indicative of the author’s behavioral history, temperament, or propensity toward any conduct.

The use of precise or structured language in a literary work is a stylistic choice. It does not constitute, and should not be construed as, the construction of a legal argument, the preparation of a legal filing, or evidence of intent to litigate.

This work is literature. It exists in the tradition of literary fiction and should be received, interpreted, and evaluated solely as such.

The following is the author’s understanding of the literary tradition in which this work operates. It is not legal advice, legal analysis, or a legal opinion. The author is not an attorney. Any individual seeking legal guidance regarding this or any other work should consult a licensed attorney in their jurisdiction.

### **Regarding the phrase “Before the judge”**

This work contains the line “Before the judge, the question will not be.” This is a literary device — specifically, a rhetorical figure employing the imagery of judgment and accountability as a thematic element. It is not a reference to any pending, anticipated, or contemplated legal proceeding. It does not indicate that the author has filed, intends to file, or is preparing to file any legal action against any person.

The use of courtroom imagery, judicial figures, and the language of judgment in literary works is among the oldest and most well-established traditions in Western literature. Precedent includes but is not limited to:

- *Franz Kafka, The Trial (1925): An entire novel structured around a court proceeding that is never identified, never resolved, and serves as a metaphor for existential accountability. No one has argued Kafka was filing a lawsuit.*
- *The Book of Job (c. 6th–4th century BCE): A literary work in which the protagonist demands a hearing before God as judge. The courtroom is a metaphor for cosmic justice.*
- *John Milton, Paradise Lost (1667): God sits in judgment. Satan is tried. The courtroom is theological, not procedural.*
- *Claudia Rankine, Citizen: An American Lyric (2014): A work that repeatedly invokes legal and evidentiary language — testimony, witness, evidence, the record — as literary devices. It has been received, reviewed, and awarded as literature, not as a legal filing.*
- *Anne Carson, The Beauty of the Husband (2001): Subtitled “A Fictional Essay in 29 Tangos,” it directly addresses a specific betrayer using evidentiary language. It is literature.*
- *Sharon Olds, Stag’s Leap (2012): A collection that inventories the objects of a marriage with forensic precision. It won the Pulitzer Prize. It is not a deposition.*

The phrase “Before the judge” in this work operates identically to the above: as a literary invocation of the concept of judgment — moral, existential, or narrative — not as a reference to any actual judicial proceeding.

# Class Action

*A poem.*

*This is a work of fiction. It is not a real lawsuit, a real claim, or a real accusation against any real person. The characters, names, and events in this work are invented. This is a poem.*

*This piece borrows the structure of a class action lawsuit as a literary form — with respect for the tradition it references and the professionals who practice within it. The author is aware that the structure used here does not reflect the procedural requirements of an actual class action. The author is not an attorney, and this is not legal advice. For legal advice, seek a qualified professional.*

The man who created eleven witnesses against himself by refusing to pay for his kid.

IN THE COURT OF PUBLIC RECORD

Case No. 12

THE COMMUNITY, collectively,

v.

VICTOR, individually and in his capacity as father,

Plaintiffs

A mother who wasn't hers.

Another mother who wasn't hers.

A father who drove in a snowstorm for someone else's daughter.

A woman who left the porch light on and never said why.

A family who set a plate and never counted.

A household that said stay as long as you need

and meant it in a way her father never did.

Eleven households.

Every single one of them somebody else's parent.

### **Statement of Facts**

The Defendant did not leave his daughter on a doorstep.

He did not drop her off. He did not deliver her

to the care of others in one definitive act

that could be named, dated, or grieved.

He simply refused.

Quietly. Continuously. The way a faucet leaks—

not enough to flood, just enough to rot the floor beneath.

And she had to find people willing to say yes.

Had to ask. Had to stand in someone's kitchen

with a bag she'd packed herself

and explain that she had nowhere to go

without saying *my father won't take me*

because that sentence doesn't leave your mouth clean.

She found them. One by one.

Each household a negotiation she shouldn't have had to make.

Each spare room, each set of borrowed keys—

earned. Not given. Not arranged. Not assigned.

Found. By a daughter doing the work her father wouldn't.

She asked. More than once.

He said he had three dollars.

He said to take responsibility — as if she hadn't been.

He said to stop asking.

Once, she told him she needed something medical.

It was not elective.

His response was not concern. It was offense.

Said she had some nerve. Quite frankly insulting.

Said he didn't know who she thought she was, asking like that.

Repeated it. Circled it. Made her need into his wound.

As if her body failing was something she did TO him.

He visited once. Saw the house. Saw the family.

Said he'd try to help now that he could see the problem.

Then left. Then didn't.

He asked her once what she was up to.

She said she was fine.

She wasn't. She was on someone's couch.

But she wouldn't say whose — because even then,

even homeless, she was still protecting his name.

He said she was full of shit.

Not because he thought she was lying.

Because she wouldn't give him what he wanted

without him paying for the right to know.

He wanted to know where she was.

He never offered where she could be.

He sent someone once.

Not to help. To ask where she was living.

A man she barely knew — called out of nowhere,  
making small talk like it was casual,

circling the question like a dog circling a bowl.

“Where are you staying these days?”

She knew.

She always knew.

He wanted the address without paying the rent.

She stopped asking.

Eleven families are the reason she survived the silence that  
followed.

The Defendant did not know he was building a case against himself.

The Defendant did not consider that every family he forced to step  
in

would remember what it cost.

The Defendant assumed the people raising his daughter  
would never speak.

He assumed wrong.

### **Count I**

We fed her. We didn't think about it.

She was at our table so we set a plate.

She never asked for anything.

She showed up and helped before we could offer—  
cleared dishes like she was paying rent with motion.

We watched the Defendant post a photo leaning on a car he doesn't  
own.

We paid for your kid.

### **Count II**

She stayed with us while he went on vacation.

We didn't know it was permanent until it was.

She made the bed every morning like she was afraid  
we'd change our minds if she left a wrinkle.

We watched the Defendant buy a round for the whole bar  
the same week we bought his daughter shampoo.

We paid for your kid.

### **Count III**

She slept in our spare room while she saved.

We drove her to work because she didn't have a car.

She never complained. Not once.

Not about the hours. Not about the cold.

Not about the fact that her father had one  
and she didn't.

We watched the Defendant post next to a sports car  
he couldn't afford and didn't drive home.

We paid for your kid.

### **Count IV**

I didn't know her well. She was a friend of my daughter's.  
But she showed up one night with a bag  
and something about her face made me not ask questions.  
I just turned the deadbolt and said the couch pulls out.  
I watched that man's page for years after.  
Car show this. Bottle service that. Hashtag ProudPop.  
Proud Pop to who?  
I paid for your kid.

### **Count V**

My son brought her home.  
She was working. She was in school. She was handling everything  
the way people handle things  
when no one has ever handled anything for them.  
I gave her a room. She stripped the bed when she left.  
Wrote a thank-you note on the counter  
like a guest at a hotel.  
She was not a guest. She was a daughter without a house.  
And I saw that man post from a dealership, smiling.  
Smiling like a man with no debt.  
I paid for your kid.

### **Count VI**

I drove her to school in a snowstorm  
because I asked who was taking her  
and the silence told me everything

silence has ever told anyone.

I bought her a coat that year.

It wasn't expensive. But it was mine to buy

and it should have been his

and he was somewhere warm

and she was not.

I paid for your kid.

### **Count VII**

I waited on rent. Twice.

Not because she asked—

because I'd seen his face online by then.

I knew what he leased. I knew what he tipped.

I knew the price of the watch on his wrist

in a photo taken the same month

she couldn't make the first.

I said nothing. I just covered it.

The way you cover for someone's father without calling it that.

I paid for your kid.

### **Count VIII**

I advanced her a paycheck without asking why.

She paid it back within the week.

She always paid things back—

faster than she should have,

like someone who learned early

that debt is how you lose people.

Her father never learned that.

He's been in debt to eleven families for years

and never sent a check.

I paid for your kid.

**Count IX**

I'm not her aunt.

But she called me that

because the word fit the shape of what she needed

and he never provided the real thing.

I answered every time.

He didn't.

I paid for your kid.

**Count X**

I left things on the step

and pretended it was a mistake.

Because she wouldn't take help

if she knew it was help.

That's not how someone acts

when they've been taken care of.

That's how someone acts

when they've learned that needing something

is the fastest way to be left.

Her father taught her that.

I just tried to unteach it. Quietly.

One bag of groceries at a time.

I paid for your kid.

### **Count XI**

I still call on her birthday.

Her father doesn't.

I paid for your kid.

### **Pattern of Conduct**

Each plaintiff, independently, observed the same:

A daughter who worked like she owed the world something.

A daughter who built like no one was coming to help.

A daughter who asked for nothing

because she'd been taught that asking was losing.

A father who provided nothing.

A father who performed everything.

The Defendant posted from car shows.

The Defendant leaned on hoods that weren't his.

The Defendant hashtagged a word he never earned — #ProudPop

—

while eleven households absorbed the cost of it.

The community did not coordinate.

The community did not conspire.

The community simply noticed

what the Defendant refused to:

his daughter existed.

She needed someone.

He made sure it wasn't him.

So he created eleven witnesses.

Each one with a spare room and a memory  
and a receipt he never asked to see.

### **Relief Requested**

None.

There is no relief for this.

You cannot repay a village for raising your child.

You cannot write a check to eleven families  
for what they saw and what they did  
while you leaned on things that weren't yours  
and bought rounds for strangers  
and hashtagged a title  
that none of your plaintiffs  
ever heard her call you.

The community does not seek damages.

The community seeks the record.

This is the record.

Filed this day by the community.

*The Defendant is invited to respond.*

*The Defendant has been invited to respond his entire tenure as*

*father.*

*The record reflects his silence.*

This piece is a work of literary fiction presented in poetic form. It is not a legal filing, a class action lawsuit, a complaint, a demand letter, a factual disclosure, or an accusation against any individual. No character is intended to depict, represent, or reference any specific person — living, deceased, or otherwise.

### **Regarding the Legal Structure**

This piece borrows the structure of a class action lawsuit as a metaphor for collective witness. It is not, and does not purport to be, a viable legal instrument.

The use of legal terminology, case formatting, plaintiff/defendant designations, numbered counts, and the language of testimony are stylistic choices operating within the tradition of literary fiction. They do not constitute, and should not be construed as, the construction of a legal argument, the preparation of a legal filing, or evidence of intent to litigate on behalf of any party.

The author is not an attorney. This work is not legal advice, legal analysis, or a legal opinion. Any individual seeking legal guidance regarding this or any other matter should consult a licensed attorney in their jurisdiction.

### **Regarding Characters and Identification**

All characters in this work — including but not limited to the “Defendant,” the “Plaintiffs,” and any unnamed individuals referenced through relational terms such as “daughter,” “father,” “mother,” “son,” “aunt,” or any familial, domestic, or interpersonal reference — are narrative constructs serving a literary function. They do not refer to, depict, or identify any specific individual.

The use of a number (including but not limited to “eleven,” “Case No. 12,” or any other figure) is a literary choice. It does not constitute a factual count, a census, or an enumeration of real persons or real households.

Any hashtag, social media reference, or digital-era behavior depicted in this work is literary imagery reflecting the contemporary landscape in which this work was written. It is not a reference to any specific account, post, platform, or individual’s

online presence.

### **Regarding Debt, Obligation, and Financial Claims**

This work does not constitute, and should not be construed as, an acknowledgment, admission, or confirmation that any person — including the author — has received financial support, housing, material assistance, or any form of aid from any individual, household, or entity.

The phrase “I paid for your kid” and any similar language used in this work is dialogue attributed to fictional characters within a literary construct. It is not a statement of fact. It is not an admission of debt. It is not an acknowledgment of obligation — owed by any party to any other party, in any direction.

Nothing in this work establishes, implies, or supports a claim that any person is owed repayment, reimbursement, or compensation by the author or by any other individual. This work cannot be used as evidence of a debt, a financial arrangement, a creditor-debtor relationship, or any obligation — express or implied — between any parties.

The publication of this work does not create, acknowledge, or ratify any financial claim against the author by any person for any reason.

The content of this work is a literary and expressive act. It does not constitute an acknowledgment that any specific individual provided housing, financial support, or material aid to the author. It does not establish a creditor-debtor relationship between the author and any person. It does not convert a gift, an act of hospitality, or a voluntary act of goodwill into a loan, a debt, or an obligation of repayment.

It is the author’s understanding — based on publicly available legal information and not on formal legal education, a law degree, or licensure to practice law — that gratuitous assistance, including but not limited to the voluntary provision of housing, food, transportation, or other support, does not create a debt or obligation of repayment absent a contemporaneous, mutual, and express agreement to repay. This understanding does not constitute legal advice or legal interpretation. No such agreement is acknowledged, implied, or established by this work.

Nothing in this work may be construed as evidence of an agreement to repay, an acknowledgment of indebtedness, or a ratification of any financial obligation to any person who may have voluntarily provided assistance of any kind at any time.

This work is not an invoice. It is not a ledger. It is not a receipt. It is a poem.

### **Regarding the Author's Character and Conduct**

This work does not reflect, depict, represent, or constitute the author's own conduct, actions, psychological disposition, financial history, residential history, or biographical fact. A work of literary fiction is not probative of the author's character, conduct, or credibility in any context.

The creation of art — including art that engages with themes of neglect, accountability, community, or injustice — is a constitutionally protected act of expression under the First Amendment and is not indicative of the author's behavioral history, temperament, or propensity toward any conduct.

### **Regarding the Literary Tradition**

The use of legal structure, courtroom language, testimony, witness accounts, and evidentiary framing in literary works is a well-established tradition in Western literature. Precedent includes but is not limited to:

- *Claudia Rankine, Citizen: An American Lyric (2014): Invokes legal and evidentiary language — testimony, witness, evidence, the record — as literary devices. Received, reviewed, and awarded as literature.*
- *Anne Carson, The Beauty of the Husband (2001): Subtitled “A Fictional Essay in 29 Tangos,” it directly addresses a specific betrayer using evidentiary language. It is literature.*
- *Sharon Olds, Stag's Leap (2012): Inventories the objects of a marriage with forensic precision. Won the Pulitzer Prize. It is not a deposition.*
- *Franz Kafka, The Trial (1925): An entire novel structured around a court proceeding that serves as a metaphor for existential accountability.*
- *Terrance Hayes, American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin (2018): Uses*

*direct address, accusation, and the language of indictment as poetic form.*

This work operates identically to the above: as a literary invocation of the concepts of testimony, community, accountability, and judgment — moral, existential, or narrative — not as a reference to any actual judicial proceeding, financial arrangement, or interpersonal obligation.

This work is literature. It exists in the tradition of literary fiction and should be received, interpreted, and evaluated solely as such.

