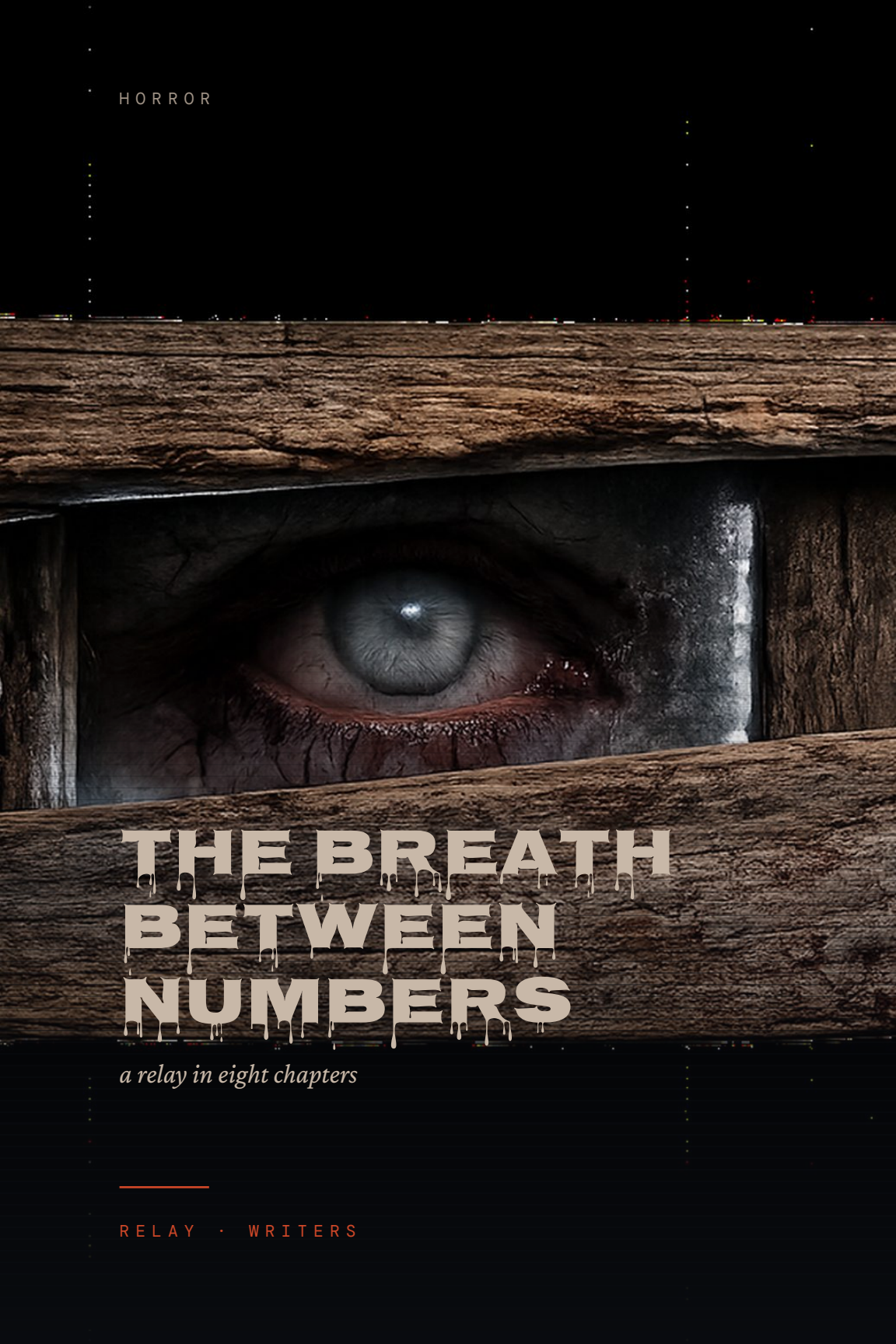


HORROR



THE BREATH BETWEEN NUMBERS

a relay in eight chapters

RELAY · WRITERS

The writers

Eight people who never met. One chapter each, in the order it was written.

ONE

inkwell_amy

TWO

Margot Vail

THREE

wordsbylena

FOUR

jmarsh

FIVE

Colin McAteer

SIX

Priya Nair

SEVEN

Sasha Loomis

EIGHT

Iris Beddoe

Chapter

ONE

written by inkwell_amy

The missing one was Roland. Mara knew because she counted twice. Once with her eyes, once with the names she whispered against her teeth. Roland had been hammering nails into the frame above the cellar door. Now the hammer lay sideways on the floor, three nails scattered beside it like shed teeth. She picked up the hammer. Still warm. Outside, something dragged itself across the roof. Not footsteps. A continuous scraping, wet and patient, moving from the chimney toward the eastern gable. Mara forced herself to breathe through her nose. The others stood frozen in their positions around the room, bodies angled wrong, as if they'd all stopped mid-gesture when Roland disappeared and couldn't remember how to move forward. The journal wanted her attention. The handwriting on the last page slanted downward, letters cramped and frantic. She read the final complete sentence: It takes what you don't notice missing. Then the word that ended everything: Some. Some. Some what? Theo touched her elbow. She jerked away, and he held up both hands, palms out. His mouth shaped words but nothing came. He tried again. Failed. Finally he pointed at the cellar door. The door Roland had been working on. The door that now stood open three inches. Mara felt the hammer's weight shift in her grip. The scraping on the roof stopped. In the silence that followed she heard breathing from the cellar. Multiple sources. Shallow and arrhythmic. She moved toward the door

and Theo caught her wrist. She shook him off. The breathing continued. She counted the rhythm. Four separate patterns, overlapping. Four things down there, or one thing with four mouths, or something her mind couldn't properly assemble into sense. She kicked the door shut. The breathing stopped. After three seconds it resumed, now from somewhere behind the wall to her left. Clarice made a sound like a trapped bird. She'd been standing near that wall. Now she backed away until her spine hit the window frame. The boards across the glass rattled. Outside, something rattled back. The journal lay open on the table where Mara had dropped it. While she watched, new words formed on the page. Not ink. Something darker, something that seeped up through the paper fiber itself. The letters wrote themselves in real time, spelling out: Some of you were never here at all. Mara read it twice. Looked at the six others in the room. Six. She'd counted seven a moment ago, she was certain. But now there were six, and when she tried to remember the seventh face her mind skipped like a scratched record. Theo's hand was on her wrist again. When had he moved? She looked down. His fingers were cold. Too many joints in them. She looked up at his face and he was crying, and the tears ran upward into his eyes instead of down his cheeks. She yanked free. Stumbled back. Theo remained where he stood, weeping in reverse, his mouth working soundlessly. The others hadn't moved. Clarice at the window. Marcus near the fireplace. Dev and Simone by the overturned chair. All of them watching her. All of them too still. The hammer fell from Mara's hand and hit the floor without sound. She ran for the front door. Her fingers found the bolt. Slid it back. The door wouldn't open. She threw her weight against it. The wood held firm, though she could see gaps between the frame and the jamb, could see darkness beyond, could smell rain and rot and something else underneath. Something patient. Behind her, the journal's pages turned themselves, one after another, faster and faster, wind from nowhere.

Chapter

TWO

written by Margot Vail

Mara stopped pulling at the door. The pages had gone silent. She turned. The journal lay flat, open to a blank spread. The others remained in their positions but now their eyes tracked her. All at once. Six pairs of eyes, same angle, same speed. Synchronized. She tested her voice. It came out. "Who wrote the last entry?" Nobody answered. She tried again. "Three nights ago. Who started the journal?" Marcus blinked. The rest followed a half-second later, one after another like dominoes. When Marcus spoke his voice was his own. She was almost sure. "There was no three nights ago. We've been here forty minutes." Mara looked at the lantern. Still bright. Full reservoir. She remembered lighting it when they arrived, remembered the wick catching, remembered the smell of kerosene blooming in the stale air. That had been hours ago. Hadn't it? Dev moved. Just his head, tilting to examine her. "You counted eight of us." "Yes." "Count now." She counted. Six people. Herself made seven. She said so. "Count again," Dev said. "Without yourself." She did. Six. But when she tried to separate them into individuals, assign names to faces, something in her attention slipped. She could see Marcus. She was certain of Marcus. The others blurred at the edges when she focused. Simone was beside Dev. Or someone was beside Dev. The position was occupied. But the features wouldn't resolve. "It's in the counting," Clarice said from the window. Her voice was steady. Wrong, but steady.

"Every time you enumerate us, it takes another small piece. Roland didn't disappear. Roland was removed from the count." "That's not possible." "The door won't open," Clarice said. "You saw Theo's tears. You felt his hand. What's possible contracted when we came here." The journal flipped open. New words, same seeping darkness through the fiber. Mara read them aloud because that felt like the only move available. "Count to keep them. Stop counting to keep yourself." Marcus laughed. It sounded genuine. That made it worse. "A choice, then. We maintain inventory of each other, which feeds whatever's parsing us. Or we stop counting, stop tracking, and dissolve individually into non-observation." "There has to be a third option." "Read the previous entries," Theo said. His tears had stopped. His joints looked normal now. "Maybe they found one." Mara picked up the journal. Flipped back. The pages were blank. Every page before the seeping words. Clean paper, no impression, nothing. She showed them. Dev nodded. "It eats retroactively. It takes the record along with the thing recorded." "Then how do we know about Roland?" Nobody answered that. The scraping resumed on the roof. Closer now. Directly above them. Mara heard wood flexing. Nails working loose. She looked up and saw the ceiling beam bow slightly. Something heavy was up there. Something that had learned the architecture. "The cellar," she said. "No." Theo's voice was sharp. "Not the cellar." "Why?" "Because I remember going down there. I remember it clearly. But I don't remember coming back up." Mara stared at him. "You're here now." "Am I?" The beam splintered. Dust rained down. Through the new crack in the ceiling, something gleamed. Wet. Membranous. The color of old meat. Clarice spoke without turning from the window. "It's not coming in. It's always been in. We're noticing it now. That's different." The thing in the ceiling breathed. Four patterns, overlapping. Mara opened the journal to the first blank page and picked up the pencil. Her hand was steady. She began to write.

Chapter

THREE

written by wordsbylena

Four words on the page before she counted them. Mistake. The pencil had fourteen sides, not six. She'd always believed pencils were hexagonal. Held it to the light. Fourteen tiny beveled faces catching the lantern glow, each one a different length. Impossible geometry that her fingers accepted even as her mind rejected it. She set it down. Picked up a different pencil from the table. Eight sides. Then twelve. Then nine. The journal had two hundred and forty pages. She'd checked when she first opened it. Now she flipped through. Counted. One hundred and sixteen pages. Counted again, slower, touching each leaf. Eighty-seven. Third count: two hundred and ninety-three. "Stop counting." Marcus, maybe. The voice came from the right position but the timbre was wrong, sliding between registers like a radio losing signal. She couldn't stop. Her mind did it automatically. Six people in the room. Seven including herself. Wait. Five people. She could see five bodies in her peripheral vision. No. Six. The number kept shifting, but only when she wasn't looking directly. Schrödinger's headcount. The breathing from the ceiling had seventeen distinct rhythms now. She'd isolated each one. Three were human-adjacent. The rest were not. One sounded like wind through a cave. Another like ice cracking on a lake. Another like pages turning, wet and slow. "Mara." Dev's voice. Or someone using his shape. "Writing feeds it too. You're counting words." True. Every sentence was

an inventory. Every word a discrete unit to be measured and consumed. But her mind wouldn't stop parsing. The room had five corners. Five. She walked the perimeter to verify. Rectangular room, four corners. She reached the fifth corner anyway. Ran her hand along two walls meeting at an angle that shouldn't exist in the floor plan. The wood was warm. Feverish. Breathing in rhythm with the thing above. The lantern reservoir: still full. Forty minutes of burn time remaining. Or six hours. Or negative three. Time was another count she couldn't trust. Her watch had four hands now. None of them moved. All of them pointed to different positions. Seven-thirty. Midnight. Four-fifteen. Quarter past nowhere. Clarice stood at the window. Had been standing there for thirty-seven subjective minutes. Mara had counted her breaths: four hundred and twelve. Except Clarice's chest didn't rise and fall. The breathing came from elsewhere. The boards. The glass. The space between them. Seventeen nails held the planks across the window frame. She'd watched Clarice hammer them in. Fifteen nails. Nineteen. The count changed each time Mara enumerated them. "It's not taking things away," she said. "It's making the inventory unstable. The act of counting creates multiple simultaneous values." "Quantum," Theo said. His joints were wrong again. She counted: eleven fingers on one hand. Then eight. Then the normal five, but arranged in incorrect order, thumb between middle and ring finger. The journal pages had stopped at two entries. The seeping words. But when she looked at the first entry, the one that said Count to keep them. Stop counting to keep yourself, the words rearranged. Individual letters migrating across the page like insects. New message forming: The count is the key. The key has twelve teeth. The door has three locks. None of this is true. She checked her pockets. Found a key. Brass, iron, silver. All three at once depending on the angle. Twelve teeth. Counted them. Eleven. Thirteen. Twelve. The number held stable only when she didn't verify it. Three locks on the front door. She walked over. Looked. Two locks. Five. One. The bolt she'd drawn back was still drawn. Also closed. Also nonexistent. The door existed in superposition. Open and shut and never installed.

Behind her, a sound. She turned. Counted the people in the room before she could stop herself. Three. Counted again. Nine. None of the faces were familiar. All of them were faces she'd known her entire life. Marcus smiled with Theo's mouth. Dev had Clarice's eyes. Simone wore her own features but they were arranged wrong, bilateral symmetry abandoned. The thing in the ceiling unfolded. She didn't look up. Didn't need to. She could count its presence by the shadows it cast. Forty-two shadows from one body. Each shadow contained three dimensions. Some of the dimensions were named colors that didn't exist. Uvreen. Pinkle. Grellum. Her mind supplied the words. Her mind had never known these words before. The journal was in her hand. She didn't remember picking it up. There were words on the page. Her handwriting. She read what she'd written: One of us is the safe-house. One of us is the thing that hunts. One of us is the count itself, given flesh by enumeration. I have narrowed it down to myself. She didn't remember writing that. Counted the words in the sentence. Twenty-nine. Thirty-four.

Chapter

FOUR

written by jmarsh

The walls, which had once suggested containment (four of them, perpendicular, meeting in doctrine with the ceiling and floor to compose the elementary arithmetic of shelter), now performed a more troubling calculation, their surfaces extending inward and outward simultaneously, so that the room possessed a topology that refuted Euclidean confidence. Mara pressed her palm against the nearest wall and felt it reciprocate, pressing back with the exact pressure she applied, neither more nor less, as though the house had learned the grammar of touch and was conjugating it in real time. The wood grain beneath her fingers formed patterns: first the ordinary whorls and lines one expects of timber, then something more deliberate, spirals that tightened toward infinitesimal centers, and she understood (without knowing how she understood) that these were not patterns but script, a language written in the tree's growth rings, composed over decades in the dark earth before the house was built, before the counting began, before there were discrete things to enumerate. Three people remained in the room with her. Or seven. The number fluctuated with her attention, but more disturbing was the realization that each time she looked away and looked back, the people themselves were not quite identical to their previous iterations, as though the house were shuffling through variations of Marcus, Dev, Clarice (Simone? Theo?), selecting faces from

some vast catalogue of possible configurations, none of them false but none of them definitively true. She wanted to ask them if they noticed, if they felt themselves shifting between versions, but to speak would be to count the words, and she was beginning to suspect that every enumeration, every subdivision of reality into denumerable units, strengthened whatever process was dissolving them. The journal lay open on the table (rectangular, four-legged, wooden, each qualifier a small violence against its integrity), and as she watched, the seeping words began to move, not across the page but through it, sinking into deeper strata of the paper, or rising from beneath, and she realized the journal was not a record of events but a palimpsest, infinite texts occupying the same space, and her reading selected which layer became visible, which history solidified into the semblance of fact. She forced herself not to count the words. Failed. Thirteen visible. Thirteen multiplied by the number of potential meanings per word, multiplied by the number of readers, multiplied by (she stopped the calculation, but her mind continued it in the background, involuntary as breathing, an autonomic function she could not arrest). The key in her pocket had grown warm, or perhaps her pocket had grown warm around the key, the boundary between object and container becoming negotiable. She withdrew it. Twelve teeth. She did not count them. Refused. Looked at the configuration as a whole, a unified thing, indivisible. The moment she thought "indivisible," the key separated into its components: shaft, bow, teeth (twelve of them, she had counted after all, the mind betraying itself). Each component drifted apart, maintaining their relative positions in space, still suggesting key-shape while renouncing key-integrity, and she understood this was what was happening to all of them, their bodies persisting as concepts even as the links between constituent parts attenuated. Above, the breathing had achieved a terrible synchronization. Not four rhythms or seventeen but one vast respiration that included the house itself, the cellar and walls and roof-beams expanding and contracting, and she realized they were inside a lung, had always been inside a lung, and what they had

mistaken for shelter was the interior of something vast and patient that had inhaled them and was deciding whether to exhale. The others (three of them, nine of them, none of them) turned to look at her in unison, and their faces held an expression she could not parse, something between recognition and terror, and she understood they were looking not at her but through her, seeing what she was becoming, what the counting had made her. She opened her mouth to speak and felt the words arrange themselves in her throat: nouns, verbs, articles, each one a discrete unit waiting to be enumerated, and she knew that if she spoke she would be counting herself into fragments, parsing her own substance into addressable parts. So she closed her mouth. Picked up the journal instead. Turned to a blank page (there were no blank pages, every page contained infinite latent texts). Pressed the pencil to paper without moving it, just pressure, connection, no marks, no units, no count, and felt the house shudder around her like something wounded, like something that had been feeding on enumeration and had suddenly found itself starving.

Chapter

FIVE

written by Colin McAteer

The house shudders again. Mara lifts the pencil. The indentation remains in the paper where she pressed, a small crater without graphite, a mark that exists only as absence. The others are moving now. Not walking. Their positions shift between one moment and the next, Clarice appearing beside the fireplace when she had been at the window, Marcus suddenly closer to the cellar door though no footsteps carried him there. Dev is speaking. His mouth opens and closes with the rhythm of speech but the sounds arrive three seconds delayed, so Mara hears words that don't match the shapes his lips are making. ", already inside the count," he says, or his voice says, catching up. "We have to, " The rest disappears into static. Mara sets down the pencil. Watches it. The object stays singular. Fourteen sides, eight sides, the number irrelevant as long as she doesn't fix it with her attention. She picks up the journal and tucks it under her arm without opening it. The key fragments in her pocket have begun to orbit each other. She can feel them moving, tiny revolutions against her hip, shaft and bow and teeth describing ellipses that somehow still fit within the pocket's dimensions. The front door is seven feet away. Then twelve. She walks toward it. The distance doesn't decrease. Marcus says something. She hears "threshold" and "never" and a third word that might be "we" or might be "three." She ignores him. Focuses on the door. It has a grain

pattern that resembles eyes. The bolt is drawn and undrawn, flickering between states faster than before, approaching some kind of frequency, some critical oscillation. She reaches for the handle. Her hand passes through it. She pulls back, tries again with deliberate slowness. This time the handle is solid, cold brass that warms under her palm. She turns it. The mechanism engages. Something clicks. The door opens three inches and stops, held by a chain she doesn't remember seeing. Through the gap: darkness. Not night darkness. Something denser. The smell coming through is wet earth and copper. Clarice is beside her now, had been beside her, will be beside her. Tense collapses. "There were instructions," Clarice says. Her voice is steady but her face keeps resetting, features rearranging into new configurations every few seconds, always her but never quite. "In the journal. Before the pages went blank. It said the safe-house only works if someone stays." "Stays where?" "Inside the count. Someone has to keep counting. Has to maintain the enumeration so the rest can exist outside it." Mara looks at her. Clarice's eyes are brown, then green, then black, then something without a name. "That's not instructions. That's a trap." "Maybe." Clarice touches the door chain. Her fingers multiply briefly, six hands overlapping in the same space, then collapse back into two. "But Roland found something. Before he was removed. He scratched marks into the cellar doorframe. I saw them before I stopped being able to see them." Mara crosses to the cellar door. Kneels. The wood is scarred, shallow gouges that might be intentional or might be damage from the hammer Roland had been holding. She runs her finger along them. They form letters. R-O-O-F. Then a gap. Then: N-O-T. "The roof is not what?" she says. Thunder overhead. Except there's no storm. The sound is too regular, too rhythmic. Footsteps. Something is walking on the roof with precise, measured steps. One. Two. Three. Four. Mara's mind counts automatically. She bites her tongue, tries to stop. The footsteps continue. Five. Six. They're circling the house. Seven. Eight. When they reach twelve they'll start over. She knows this without knowing how. Dev appears in front of her. His face is urgent. "The breathing stopped,"

he says. She listens. He's right. The vast respiration has ceased. The house is holding its breath. The walls are no longer moving. Everything has gone still. Waiting. Mara stands. Opens the journal. The page she'd pressed the pencil against now shows text, words rising through the paper fiber in the same seeping darkness as before. But these words are different. They're hers. Written in the negative space, the indentation she'd made without marking: What breathes without counting stops when counting stops. What hunts through enumeration starves in stillness. The house is not the trap. Attention is. The footsteps on the roof reach twelve. Stop. In the silence, Mara hears the chain on the front door begin to rattle.

Chapter

SIX

written by Priya Nair

The chain rattles for three seconds, then stops. Someone has to look. Mara votes it's not her. "Dev. Door." Dev doesn't move. He's staring at his hands like they're subtitled in a language he used to speak. "My name," he says. "Say it again." "Dev." "Which Dev?" Fair question, terrible timing. Mara crosses to the door herself. Through the three-inch gap the darkness has texture now, granular, like it's made of tiny particles suspended in nothing. She touches the chain. It's warm. Body temperature. The metal links feel organic, segmented, something that might molt. "Don't open it further." Clarice, from somewhere behind her. Mara doesn't turn to confirm the location. Turning means looking, looking means counting, counting means feeding the thing that learned to eat through their attention. "Wasn't planning a dinner invite." "The instructions Roland found. They're incomplete." "Yeah, I got that from the whole osmotic-horror-journal situation." Mara pulls the journal from under her arm, flips it open. The words she'd written in negative space are still there, but now there's more, appearing in real time, letters forming in the valleys her pencil pressure created: The count can be anchored to one object. Transfer the enumeration. Let it feed on something that can't decrease. "Well that's ominous and unhelpful." She looks at the key fragments still orbiting in her pocket. No. Not fragments anymore. They've reconstituted. The key is whole, singular,

twelve teeth in fixed position. It stopped shifting when the house held its breath. Marcus speaks from the fireplace. "What can't decrease?" "A circle," Theo says. Mara startles. She'd forgotten Theo. Or he'd been gone. Or he's been here the entire time and her memory is editing footage. He's standing by the overturned chair, joints normal, tears dry. "A loop. You count a circle and you never reach the end. It just keeps being twelve things, or eight, or however many points you mark on it." "Math," Mara says. "You're suggesting we feed cosmic horror a geometry problem." "No." Clarice moves to the cellar door, kneels where Mara had knelt, touches Roland's scratches. "Roland found something else. Look. The letters. R-O-O-F. Then N-O-T. Then here." She points to marks so shallow they're almost invisible. "There's more. He kept scratching after the tools stopped making sound." Mara joins her. Squints. The marks are barely depressions, made with fingernails maybe, or something worse. They spell: C-O-U-N-T-I-N-G. Then: U-S. "The roof is not counting us." Mara stands. Looks up at the ceiling. The crack from earlier is gone. The wood is seamless. "It's counting itself. The footsteps. Twelve steps, then repeat. It's the loop." The rattling starts again. Not the chain. The whole door. Vibrating in its frame. Dev laughs. It sounds wrong but genuine. "We're inside something practicing math." "Worse." Theo points at the window. The boards are still nailed across it. Seventeen nails. Fifteen. Nineteen. Mara doesn't count them. Refuses. But through the gaps between boards, something is visible outside. Not darkness anymore. Movement. Shapes circling the house. Twelve of them. Walking in lockstep. When one completes the circuit it merges back into the beginning, the loop perfect, unbroken. "It's teaching itself to hold us," Clarice says quietly. "Every enumeration we made, every count, we were giving it data. Showing it how to parse discrete objects from continuous space. It's been learning." The journal pages flip on their own. Stop on a spread near the middle. New words, but not seeping this time. These are written in graphite, ordinary pencil, handwriting that might be Roland's: Started five days ago. We thought eight was safe. Wrong. Eight is just enough to demonstrate the

principle. It needed us to show it how to subtract. Mara feels something click. "We're not trapped. We're the curriculum." The key in her pocket grows hot. Twelve teeth. She pulls it out, holds it up. The teeth are arranged in a circle now, radiating from the bow like a tiny crown. Impossible configuration. Functional anyway. She knows which lock it fits. Not the front door. Not the cellar. The fifth corner. The one that shouldn't exist. She walks to it. The angle is still wrong, still feverish. There's a keyhole in the wall she doesn't remember seeing. Small. Tarnished. She slides the key in. "Mara, wait." She turns it anyway. The house exhales.

Chapter

SEVEN

written by Sasha Loomis

The house exhales and Mara's left shoe fills with milk. Not water. Milk. She can feel it, warm and thick, soaking through her sock. She looks down. Her shoe is not full of milk. Also it is. Both facts hold the same weight. The key has turned all the way but the lock hasn't opened. The lock has opened into her ankle bone. She can feel the tumblers inside her tibia, small metal components where marrow should be. Clarice says, "You shouldn't have," but she's saying it to the wall, not to Mara, and the wall is listening with the attention of something that has been waiting its entire structural existence to be addressed directly. The fifth corner unfolds. Not like origami. Like a throat swallowing in reverse. The angle widens and inside is not a room but a list, actual words hanging in three-dimensional space, suspended: Roland, hammer, three nails, eastern gable, cellar door, breathing, ink, tears. Each word is a physical object. Mara can see them rotating slowly. The word "breathing" is made of glass. The word "Roland" is still warm. "It's the inventory," Theo says. His voice comes from two positions, stereo, like he's standing on both sides of her at once. Maybe he is. Mara doesn't check. "Everything we counted. It didn't consume them. It stored them." Dev walks to the opening. Reaches in. His hand passes through the word "hammer" and comes back holding the actual hammer, the one Roland had been using, the one that had been lying on the floor. Except it's still

on the floor. Mara sees it there, three feet away. The same hammer in two locations, superimposed across inventory and reality. "The house isn't learning to count," Dev says. He's holding the hammer like it might explain something. "We're learning to uncount." The footsteps on the roof have stopped. The twelve shapes outside the window have stopped. Everything has stopped except the words in the fifth corner, which continue their slow rotation, and Mara's shoe, which is still full of milk that isn't there. She pulls the key out. Her ankle stops containing tumblers. The keyhole remains, empty, waiting. The key in her hand has seven teeth now. She didn't count them. The number simply presented itself, unavoidable as weather. "Roland left more than scratches," Marcus says. He's kneeling by the cellar door again. Or still. Time has become a list too, events stored rather than sequential. "There's something under the floorboard. Here." He pries up a plank. Underneath: a glass jar. Inside the jar: breath. Actual breath. Mara can see it moving, condensation that swirls with intent. Marcus lifts the jar. Holds it to the lantern light. The breath inside forms letters against the glass: KEPT ONE COUNT FOR MYSELF. "He figured it out," Clarice says. She's standing inside the fifth corner now. Mara didn't see her move. Clarice is touching the word "breathing," the one made of glass, and where her fingers make contact the glass cracks, small fractures spreading. "You can store the enumeration outside yourself. Preserve something discrete. He put his count into breath. Breath that continues whether observed or not." The word shatters. Clarice pulls her hand back, but it's too late. The breathing starts again. Not from the ceiling this time. From everywhere. The house, the walls, the floor, all of it breathing in unison, but the rhythm is human now. Roland's rhythm. He's still counting himself somewhere in the structure's respiration. Mara unscrews the jar. The preserved breath escapes, rises, disperses into the general breathing of the house. For a moment the exhalation has a shape, shoulders and head and the suggestion of hands. Then it integrates. Gone but present. Removed from the count but not from existence. "That's the instruction," Mara says. "We don't stop counting.

We redirect it. Put the enumeration into something that loops. Something that sustains its own inventory." "Like what?" Dev asks. He's multiplying again. Three of him, four, collapsing back into one. Mara looks at the journal. It's been open this whole time. The pages have been turning themselves, writing and unwriting, every word a count, every count feeding the process. The journal is the loop. It's been counting itself, entries consuming entries, text eating text, a perfect closed system. She places the seven-toothed key on the page. The key begins to write.

Chapter

EIGHT

written by Iris Beddoe

The key writes in metal, scoring the paper. Leaves grooves that fill with tarnish as she watches. The words form backward, mirror-script, and she has to tilt her head to read them but her neck won't tilt that way, tendons refusing the angle, so she reads them anyway, some part of her brain inverting the letters automatically: Seven counts stored. Twelve more needed. Nineteen holds the house. "Nineteen what?" Dev asks. Just one of him now. Solid. She hadn't realized how thin he'd gotten until he consolidated. Mara picks up the key. The seven teeth have become eight. The metal is warmer. She understands without language, the way you understand which stair creaks in your childhood home. The key is accepting counts. Storing them the way Roland stored his in breath, the way the journal stores them in self-consuming text. "We have to give it the rest of us," she says. Clarice steps out of the fifth corner. The words inside have stopped rotating. They're dimming. "Not us. The things we counted. Our enumerations." Marcus still holds the empty jar. He sets it down carefully, like it might shatter despite being thick glass. "I counted the nails in the window. Seventeen, fifteen, nineteen. I can feel them in my jaw. When I close my mouth the numbers press against my teeth." "Give them to the key," Mara says. Marcus takes the key from her. Closes his fist around it. His jaw relaxes. Something passes from him into the metal. When he opens his hand, the key has eleven teeth. The house

stops breathing. Just for three seconds. Then it resumes, shallower, like something sleeping deeper. Theo approaches. "I counted Dev's joints. And my own." He takes the key. Mara watches his hands smooth into normal configuration as the count transfers. Twelve teeth now. Clarice goes next. "I counted my own breaths at the window. Four hundred and twelve. Except I wasn't breathing. The counting was breathing for me." Thirteen teeth. Dev takes the longest. He stands there holding the key, eyes closed, and Mara realizes he's been counting more than any of them. Counting everything. The words in the journal, the shadows from the ceiling, the dimensions that didn't have names. When he finally opens his hand the key has seventeen teeth. Too many for the bow. They've started growing in a second row, concentric. "Your turn," he says, offering it to her. Mara thinks about what she's counted. The people. Eight, seven, six. The pencil sides. The pages. The rhythms in the breathing. So many inventories running in parallel, her mind parsing constantly, unable to stop. She takes the key. The metal is hot enough to hurt. She holds it anyway. Imagines the counts flowing out through her palm, all the enumerations, every parsing and division and subdivision. Feels them draining. The key grows heavier. The teeth multiply. Nineteen. Twenty. Twenty-three. "It's too many," she says. Theo touches her wrist. Normal fingers. Normal joints. "The house wanted nineteen. You gave it more. That's the trick. Overfeed the loop. Make it too full to process." The key is vibrating now. The teeth blur with motion. Mara walks to the fifth corner, to the keyhole in the wall that opens into her ankle, into the inventory, into the house's throat. She slides the key in. This time when she turns it, the lock opens outward. Not a door. A gap. The words stored in the corner spill through it, Roland and hammer and breathing tumbling out into somewhere else, and the somewhere else is the room, but the room before they arrived. Empty. Clean. Four corners, normal angles. The lantern unlit on the table. The windows unboarded. Through them: dusk. Ordinary dusk, purple and orange, no shapes circling. Marcus steps through first. He looks back at her from the other side, from the room that hasn't been counted yet, and

he's solid. Definite. Just Marcus. The others follow. Clarice. Dev. Theo. Mara stands at the threshold. The key is still in the lock. Still holding twenty-three teeth, still vibrating with overfed enumeration. Behind her, the house is breathing slower. Forgetting its rhythm. The footsteps on the roof have stopped because there's no roof anymore, just the idea of roof, inventory collapsing into abstraction. She steps through. Turns. The safe-house is there. All its boards, all its angles. But she can see through it now. See the frame beneath, the mathematical scaffold, the counting that holds it in shape. The key falls from the lock. Hits the ground as dust. The house exhales one final time. Folds into the number nineteen, which folds into twelve, into eight, into one, into the space between zero and one where uncounted things live. The door was never boarded.

Finished on 27 April 2026.

*Written in relay on relaywriters.com: eight strangers, one chapter each, never
more than eight hundred words at a time.*

[https://relaywriters.com/read/24?t=NaPDZM-dqSEkMWHBGcuMuFZD2yH
W0ykv](https://relaywriters.com/read/24?t=NaPDZM-dqSEkMWHBGcuMuFZD2yHW0ykv)