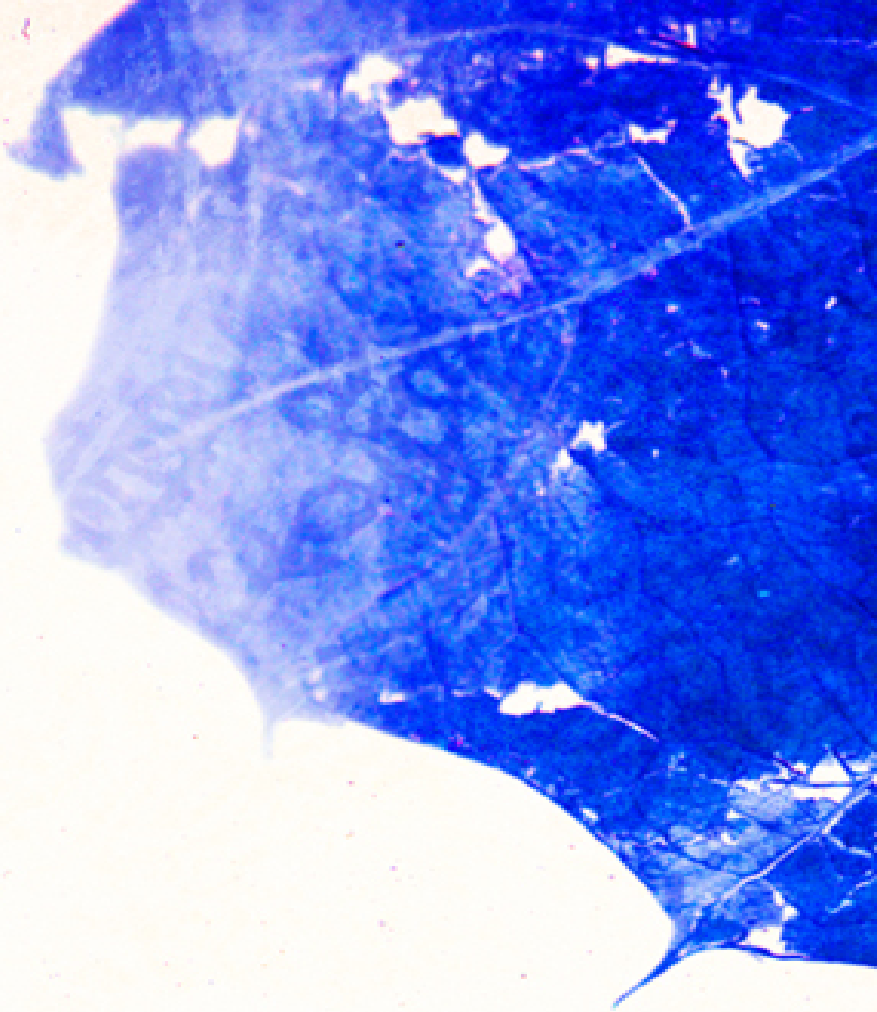
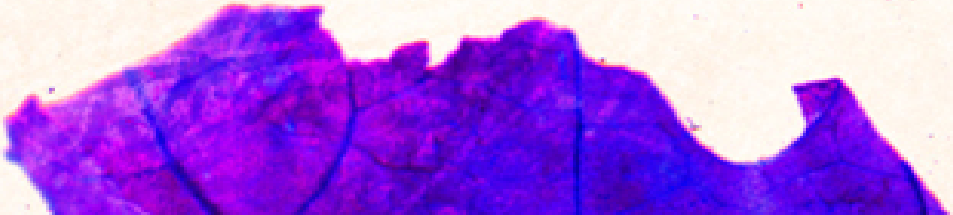
A Novella from
The Artist of Disappearance



THE MUSEUM OF FINAL JOURNEYS

ANITA DESAI



The Museum of Final Journeys

A NOVELLA

Anita Desai

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN HARCOURT
BOSTON NEW YORK
2011

.

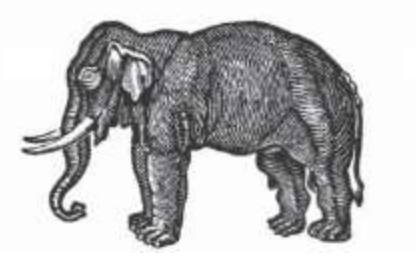
Table of Contents

First U.S. edition

www.hmhbooks.com
First published in Great Britain in 2011 by Chatto & Windus
E-ISBN 978-0-547-67787-3

.

The Museum of Final Journeys



WE HAD DRIVEN for never-ending miles along what seemed to be more a mudbank than a road between fields of virulent green—jute? rice? what was it this benighted hinterland produced? I ought to have known, but my head was pounded into too much of a daze by the heat and the sun and the fatigue to take in what my driver was telling me in answer to my listless questions.

The sun was setting into a sullen murk of ashes and embers along the horizon when he turned the jeep into the circular driveway in front of a low, white bungalow. This was the circuit house where I was to stay until I had found a place of my own. As a very junior officer, a mere subdivisional officer in the august government service, it was all I could expect, a temporary place for one of its minor servants. There was nothing around but fields and dirt roads and dust, no lights or signs of a town to be seen. Noting my disappointment and hesitation at the first sight of my new residence—where had we come to?—the driver climbed out first, lifted my bags from the back of the jeep and led the way up the broad steps to a long veranda which had doors fitted with wire screens one could not see through. He clapped his hands and shouted, 'Koi hai?' I had not imagined anyone still used that imperious announcement from the days of the Raj: Anyone there? But perhaps, in this setting, itself a leftover from the empire, not so incongruous at all. Besides, there was no bell and one cannot knock on a screen door.

I didn't think anyone had heard. Certainly no light went on and no footsteps were to be heard, but in a bit someone came around the house from the back where there must have been huts or quarters for servants.

'I've brought the new officer-sahib,' the driver announced officiously (he wore a uniform of sorts, khaki, with lettering in red over the shirt pocket that gave him the right). 'Open a room for him. And switch on some lights, will you?'

'No lights,' the man replied with dignity. He wore no uniform, only some loose clothing, and his feet were bare, but he held his back straight and somehow established his authority. 'Power cut.'

'Get a lantern then,' the driver barked. He clearly enjoyed giving orders.

I didn't, and was relieved when the chowkidar—for clearly he was the watchman for all his lack of a uniform—took over my bags and the driver turned to leave. It was night now, and when I saw the headlights of the jeep sweep over the dark foliage that crowded against the house and lined the driveway, then turn around so that the tail lights could be seen to dwindle and disappear, I felt my heart sinking. I did not want to stay in this desolate place, I wanted to run after the jeep, throw myself in and return to a familiar scene. I was used to city life, to the cacophony of traffic, the clamour and din and discordancy of human voices, the pushing and shoving of humanity, all that was absent here.

While I stood waiting on the veranda for a lamp to be lit so I could be shown to my room, I listened to the dry, grating crackle of palm leaves over the roof, the voices of frogs issuing low warnings from some invisible pond or swamp nearby, and these sounds were even more disquieting than the silence.

A lighted lantern was finally brought out and I followed its ghostly glow in, past large, looming pieces of furniture, to the room the chowkidar opened for me. It released a dank odour of mildew as of a trunk opened after a long stretch of time and a death or two, and I thought this was surely not a chapter of my life; it was only a chapter in one of those novels I used to read in my student days, something by Robert Louis Stevenson or Arthur Conan Doyle or Wilkie Collins (I had been a great reader then and secretly hoped to become a writer). I remembered, too, the hated voice of the gym master at school shouting 'Stiffen up now, boys, stiffen up!' and I nearly laughed—a bitter laugh.

All the actions that one performs automatically and habitually in the real world, the lighted world—of bathing, dressing, eating a meal—here had to be performed in a state of almost gelid slow motion. I carried the lantern into the bathroom with me—it created grotesquely hovering

shadows rather than light, and made the slimy walls and floor glisten dangerously—and made do with a rudimentary bucket of water and a tin mug. To put on a clean set of clothes when I could scarcely make out what I had picked from my suitcase (packed with an idiotic lack of good sense: a tie? when would I ever wear a tie in this pit?) and then to find my way to the dining room and sit down to a meal placed before me that I could scarcely identify—was it lentils, or a mush of vegetables, and was this whitish puddle rice or what?—all were manoeuvres to be carried out with slow deliberation, so much so that they seemed barely worthwhile, just habits belonging to another world and time carried on weakly. The high-pitched whining of mosquitoes sounded all around me and I slapped angrily at their invisible presences.

Then, with a small explosion, the electricity came on and lights flared with an intensity that made me flinch. An abrupt shift took place. The circuit house dining room, the metal bowls and dishes set on the table, the heavy pieces of furniture, the yellow curry stains on the tablecloth all revealed themselves with painful clarity while the whine of mosquitoes faded with disappointment. Now large, winged ants insinuated their way through the wire screens and hurled themselves at the electric bulb suspended over my head; some floated down into my plate where they drowned in the gravy, wings detaching themselves from the small, floundering worms of their bodies.

I pushed back my chair and rose so precipitately, the chowkidar came forward to see what was wrong. I saw no point in telling him that everything was. Instructing him abruptly to bring me tea at six next morning, I returned to my room. It felt like a mercy to turn off the impudent light dangling on a cord over my bed and prepare to throw myself into it for the night.

I had not taken the mosquito net that swaddled the bed into account. First I had to fumble around for an opening to crawl in, then tuck it back to keep out the mosquitoes. At this I failed, and those that found themselves trapped in the netting with me, furiously bit at every exposed surface they could find. What was more, the netting prevented any breath of air reaching me from the sluggishly revolving fan overhead.

Throughout the night voices rang back and forth in my head: would I be able to go through with this training in a remote outpost that was supposed to prepare me for great deeds in public service? Should I quit now before I

became known as a failure and a disgrace? Could I appeal to anyone for help, some mentor, or possibly my father, retired now from this very service, his honour and his pride intact like an iron rod he had swallowed?

Across the jungle, or the swamp or whatever it was that surrounded this isolated house, pai dogs in hamlets and homesteads scattered far apart echoed the voices in my head, some questioning and plaintive, others fierce and challenging.

If I had not been 'stiffened up' in school and by my father, I might have shed a tear or two into my flat grey pillow. I came close to it but morning rescued me.

***

I resolved to look for another, more amenable place to live during my posting here, but soon had to admit that the chance of finding such a place was very unlikely. The town, if you could call it that, was not one where people built houses with the intention of selling or renting them for profit; its citizens built for the purpose of housing their families till they fell apart. Many of the houses were embarked on that inexorable process, larger and larger families crowding into smaller and smaller spaces while roofs collapsed and walls crumbled. Families did not move even when forced onto verandas or into outhouses. The whole town appeared a shambles.

It must have had its days of prosperity in the past when the jute that grew thick and strong in the surrounding fields gave rise to a flourishing business, but that was now overtaken by chemical fibres, plastics and polyesters. Their products—the bags, washing lines, buckets and basins that hung from shopfronts—littered the dusty streets where their strident colours soon faded.

Every morning I went to court, a crumbling structure of red brick that stood in a field where cattle grazed and wash-ermen spread their washing, and there I sat at a desk on a slightly raised platform to hear the cases brought before me. These had chiefly to do with disputes over property. You would not have thought the local property was anything to be fought over but the citizens of this district were devoted to litigation with an ardour not evident in any other area of life. A wall that had caved in or two coconut trees that had not borne fruit for as long as anyone could remember, even these aroused the passion of ownership. I began to see it as the one local industry. I took back files with me to read in the evenings on the veranda of the circuit house while the power cuts held off.

In my office in the administrative buildings, I attended to more urgent matters like power and water supplies and their frequent breakdowns, roads, traffic, police—very important that, the police force—communications, security, trade and industry. (The litigators, and especially their lawyers, were always willing to have their cases postponed from one hearing to the next.) My secretary brought in the files to me, tied with red tape—I was amused to see these existed, literally—and ushered in visitors with their requests, demands and complaints. I would order tea for them, but try as I would, I could never have tea, sugar and milk served in separate pots as my mother would have: these would always arrive already mixed in the cups, and for some reason this irritated me greatly and I never ceased to complain about it.

I must have complained in my letters to my mother, too, because she worried that I was not being looked after as I would be at home. She even made efforts to find a bride for me, convinced that a wife was what I needed, a woman who would order my life and make it comfortable and pleasant for me. I was lonely enough not to discourage her, even though the idea of some stranger entering my life in such an intimate fashion did somewhat alarm me. No such thing came to pass, however. When my father discovered she was interviewing the unmarried daughters and nieces of her friends and acquaintances, dangling my position in the Civil Service and my prospects for promotions to high and important posts in the future as incentives, he put a stop to all such machinations: there was to be no marriage till my training was over and confirmation in the service achieved.

In a very short time the routine of my working life became oppressive. When I entered the service it was with the thought that it would be an endless adventure, and each day would bring fresh challenges and demand new solutions. My father and my senior colleagues had all assured me it would be so. They talked of their own adventures—shooting man-eaters that had terrorised the locals and 'lifted' their cattle, confronting dacoits who had been robbing travellers on highways, hunting down 'criminal elements' that dealt in smuggling goods or illicit liquor, and, most threatening of all, instigators of political insurgencies. To me these remained rumours, legends, and I came to suspect that my leg had been pulled. *My* most strenuous activity seemed to be wielding the fly-swatter and mopping my face in the thick damp heat that clung like wet clothing in the most debilitating way.

There was the occasional visitor to the circuit house: another officer on a tour of duty would stop for a night on his way to inspect the waterworks or the sewage plant or the government-run clinic or school or whatever he happened to be in charge of, and leave the next day, having provided me with one evening of company. Since all we had to talk about was the business at hand, these visits did not provide me with the much needed diversion.

The only release to be had was to find an excuse to go 'on tour', summon my jeep and driver and make for the further reaches of the district. At its northern rim was tea country and the sight of that trim landscape of tea bushes and shade trees on softly rolling hills that rose eventually into the blue mountain range—alas, not my territory—was as reviving as a drink of cool water to me.

Seated in the ample cane furniture on the broad veranda of one fortunate tea-estate manager's bungalow over a whisky and soda, I could not help a sigh of relief tinged with melancholy that this salubrious place was not mine and I would soon have to return to my sorry posting below.

My host enquired how I was faring. When I told him—I admit with an openly pathetic plea for sympathy—he said, 'I know the town. I have to visit it from time to time. It doesn't even have a club, does it?'

'No! If only there were a club where I could play tennis after work...' I gave another sigh, drawn out of me by his evident sympathy.

'No social life either?'

'There's no one I could have a conversation with about *anything* but work. There's no library or anyone who reads. I'm running out of books too.'

My host got up to pour me another peg at the bar constructed of bamboo at the other end of the spacious veranda. My eyes followed him, admiring the polished floor, the pots of ferns that lined the steps and the orchids that hung in baskets above them.

When he returned to his seat, he handed me my drink and said, 'In the old days there used to be wealthy Calcutta families who owned land around here and who would come to visit it from time to time, throw parties and organise hunts. Of course, those times are over and their estates must have gone to rack and ruin by now.'

We talked a bit longer about this and that till I had to leave, and as I walked past the open door on my way to the steps and stood waiting for my

jeep to be driven round to the front, my eye fell on a small object on the hall table—two small Chinese figures in flowered tunics and black slippers carrying a kind of palanquin between them. It was both unusual and pretty and I looked at it more closely: the details were exquisite and there was a gloss to it such as you see on the finest china. My host saw me lingering to study it and said, 'Oh, it's one of those objects one sometimes comes across in these parts that belonged to the old houses I was telling you about. One of them even had a museum once: perhaps this came from there. My wife picked it up, she has an eye for such things. I told her she had paid too much—it's only a wind-up toy, you know, and has lost its key.'

'A wind-up toy!' I exclaimed. 'It looks too precious for that. Is it very old?'

'I couldn't tell you, I don't know a thing about it. It's a pity my wife is in Shillong—our daughters are at school there—she would have been able to tell you more.'

'Beautiful,' I said, and reluctantly took my leave.

I can't say I gave that beautiful object or its provenance any more thought. Inevitably, I grew more involved in my work and had to see through various projects I had started on as well as the daily routine of attending court to hear cases that grew drearily familiar, and going through the bottomless stack of files in my office. I even stopped asking for milk and sugar to be brought separately for my tea and resigned myself to drinking the thick, murky liquid I was served.

I became so settled in a state of apathy—it was like an infection I had caught from those around me—that I felt quite irritated when the chowkidar at the circuit house roused me from it one evening as I sat slumped in the reclining chair under the revolving fan in my room, waiting for darkness to fall and for him to call me to my dinner.

Instead he said, 'Someone to see you, sahib.'

'Who?' I snapped, and added, 'Tell him to come and see me in my office tomorrow. I don't see visitors here.'

'That is right, sahib,' the chowkidar acknowledged, 'but he has come from far and says it is a matter he needs to discuss privately.'

'What matter?' I snapped again (I had acquired this habitual manner of speech to those in an inferior position—servants, petitioners, supplicants; I found it was expected of me, it went with the job).

Of course the chowkidar could not know or tell. He stood there expecting some action from me, so, with a show of petulance, I threw down the newspaper folded to the crossword puzzle that I had been pretending to solve, and went out to the veranda where the visitor stood waiting: an elderly, rather bowed man with wisps of white hair showing under his cap like feathers, enormous spectacles with thick lenses and heavy frames attached to him by string, and dressed in a faded black cloth coat and close white trousers, perhaps the outfit he had adopted as a clerk (he had the obsequious manner of one) before his superannuation.

Some remnant of my upbringing surfaced through my adopted manner of irritable superiority (from behind my father's looming shadow, my mother occasionally emerged to stand watching me, hopefully, trustingly). I gestured to him to be seated and called to the chowkidar to bring us water. Just that, pani.

The clerical creature folded his hands and asked me not to bother. 'I am deeply sorry to disturb your rest,' he said in a voice just slightly above the whine of a mosquito, perhaps closer to the sound of a small cricket.

I found my habitual annoyance beginning to creep back and said abruptly, 'What can I do for you?'

'Sir, I have come from the Mukherjee estate thirty-five miles from here,' the poor man brought out as if embarrassed to make a statement that might sound boastful. Why should it? I wondered, and waited. 'I have served the family for fifty years,' he went on, barely above a whisper, and kept touching, nervously, his small white beard like a goat's—a goatee.

'I don't know the place,' I told him.

'Sir, it was once the largest estate in the district,' he said imploringly, seeing that I needed to be persuaded. 'The family owned fields of jute and rice and even tea and cinchona in the north. Also coal mines. Many properties in the district belonged to them. They were rented out. It was my duty to keep account of it all. In those days I had many assistants, it was too much for me to handle alone. My father had served before me and I was employed by the family when I was still a boy. They trusted my family and they put it all in my hands.'

This was going to be a long story, I realised, if I was to allow him to unfold it at this pace. We might need to travel backwards to generations now long gone, pallid ghosts disappearing one after the other into the dark night of the past. When would we arrive in the daylight of the present? I

wondered, sitting up with a jerk to accept a glass of water from the chowkidar and hoping by my brisk action to indicate that my time was valuable and it was running out.

But, like a mosquito that has got under one's net and can't be driven out, the ancient gnome went on murmuring, and the tale he had to tell was exactly the one I had feared: the usual saga of a descent from riches to rags, the property fragmenting as the sons of one generation quarrelled and insisted on ill-judged divisions, the gradual crumbling of wealth as tenant farmers failed to pay rent, and litigation that never led to solutions, only protracted the death throes. Then the house itself, the one the family had occupied while it multiplied, falling down piecemeal, the cost of repair and maintenance making its eventual disintegration inevitable.

The familiar story of the fabled zamindars of old. I could have recited any number of them to this poor, whispering ancient who seemed to think his was the only such story to be told.

But at some point—perhaps I had dozed off briefly, then woken—I began to hear what he was saying. It was the word 'museum' that had the effect of a mosquito bite after a long spell of droning.

'The museum at our house was started by Srimati Sarita Mukherjee who was married to my master in the year 19—when she was thirteen and he sixty years of age. She was the second wife of Sri Bhupen Mukherjee who inherited the property from his father Debabrata Mukherjee in 19—. He had no issue from his first marriage. Srimati Sarita Devi was of the Sinha family that resides in Serampore. The family was wealthy and accordingly she brought with her a substantial dowry. It was not so large in property as in gold and gems. The family was known for its love of art and literature and she had grown up in the company of educated men and women and had some education herself.

'It was not easy for her to adjust to the life on our estate, which is not only a great distance from her home but far from any other estate in our district. Sri Bhupen Mukherjee, being an only son, had no brothers or sisters-in-law who might have provided her with some company. Naturally she had many lonely years as the only lady in the house. Then, when she was nineteen years of age, a son was born to her. Sri Jiban Mukherjee gave us all joy as he was the natural heir and we had great hopes he would keep the estate intact and make it prosper. Sadly, Sri Bhupen Mukherjee did not live much longer and could take pride in his heir for only a few short years

before he expired. So my duty became very clear to me: I had to make sure that the inheritance that came to the young boy would be substantial and he and his mother would lack for nothing.'

At this point I found my knee beginning to jog involuntarily up and down. I am sure it was because I was growing impatient to learn: did *she* create a museum? Did it exist?

'Then we had a number of bad years in a row when the rains did not come and the crops were ruined and our coal mines suffered one disaster after another and had to be abandoned. For several years the estate had no income at all, only losses. There was no money available for repairs and maintenance. We were forced to take loans simply to keep the place running and we fell into debt.

'Times did improve but whatever income there was had to be spent on paying off debts. It was sad to see Srimati Sarita Devi's face so careworn and her hair turn grey before her time. She was burdened with worry not only with regard to finances but also to her son Sri Jiban's upbringing and education of which she had sole responsibility after the death of his father.'

At this point the narrator paused. He seemed crushed by the sadness of what he had to relate. I found I had become involved with it in spite of myself and so had to allow him to unfold the tale at his own pace which was slow but persistent. Having run out of books to read, even so slight and familiar a story as I was hearing now had enough interest to keep me from seeing off this unwelcome insect of a visitor.

'I am sorry to say she had to sell her gold and jewellery bit by bit to pay for his education as the estate itself could not bear the expense. She saw to it that he was sent to the best school in Calcutta, one run by the Jesuit fathers, and thereafter to university in England as his father would have wished. We had great hopes that on his return with a degree in law, he would set up a successful practice as a barrister so that he could support his mother in the manner to which she was born.'

His voice had grown so low that it seemed to mimic the dusk into which the circuit house, its veranda and the surrounding wilderness had sunk, leaving us in darkness, and for a while I could barely hear him at all, but perhaps that was because the chowkidar had arrived with a mosquito coil which he lit to drive away the mosquitoes now beginning to swarm, then went indoors to pump a Flit gun vigorously for the same purpose, and finally turned on the lights. He also coughed repeatedly, in a blatantly false

manner, to signal it was time for my visitor to leave so he could serve me my dinner, then retire. I could interpret all these signs after my protracted stay in the circuit house but my visitor ignored him and after a few long sighs resumed his narrative.

'Unfortunately, Sri Jiban, having lived abroad for several years, could not adjust to life on our estate or even to Calcutta. He had no interest in the affairs of the estate and left it all to his mother to take care of as before. We waited to see what his plans were for the future. Naturally he did not confide in me but one day I saw him packing his bags and heard him send for a tonga to take him to the nearest railway station. His mother wept as she saw him drive away and when I attempted to console her by saying he would surely return soon, she replied she did not think he would because he was planning a long sea voyage to countries in the East. I was astounded by this information because I did not see how he could fund such an ambitious voyage; nor could I see its purpose. I then learned she had sold the last of her jewellery to finance his desire.'

I was now beginning to wonder why I was being made privy to the family's secrets. I would have risen to my feet to indicate the time I had given him was now up, but something about his posture, so crushed, his hands held tightly together as if in agony, and the way his old white head trembled on its thin stalk of a neck stopped me. Also, frankly, I wanted to know where the story would go.

To my surprise, he now lifted his head so I could see his expression more clearly by the light that fell on us from the lighted rooms within, and I saw that he looked quite serene, almost joyful.

'Then the boxes began to arrive. They came from Burma, from Thailand, from Indonesia, from Malaya, Cambodia, the Philippines and even China and Japan, containing such objects as had never been seen in our part of the world! People would come from their villages miles away to our gates to watch the bullock carts they had seen hauling these boxes to our door, and there was much talk about what they might contain.' He actually laughed at this point, a dry rustling in his throat like that made by a bird or insect in a bush, a kind of cackle you might call it. 'Our people are simple folk. They have no knowledge of the world and the countries our young master had visited but, seeing the size of the containers, they thought he was involved in trade and that he had made a fortune so he could send his mother treasures in the form of silks and jewels and other valuable

goods.' He shook his head now at their foolishness and gullibility. 'They believed the young master would return a wealthy man and restore our estate,' and here his laugh ended in a small hiccup. 'We opened the containers as they came and were astonished by what we found. He had sent us few letters or messages and we could only conjecture where he had been and where he had found or purchased the goods revealed to us.'

'And -?'

'One room after the other was filled with these objects. We brought in carpenters to build glass cases and put up shelves to display them. Each container provided the contents for a different room, the rooms that had been empty for so long—we had been selling items of furniture and other belongings ever since we fell upon hard times—and now they were filled again. Visitors came to the house and were astonished by what they saw. One even wished to make a catalogue of these objects and publish it to make the collection known. Srimati Sarita Devi could not tell them anything about the objects or where her son had obtained them, but they gave her great solace because they allowed her to accompany him on his voyage. Only I was perturbed: I did not see the use of such things. They were objects of beauty and interest, but what was the use of collecting them? I could not see, but Srimati Sarita Devi did. She told me, "Bijan, we are creating a great museum. My son's collection is forming a museum that people will hear about all over our land and will come from far to see."'

Ah, so there *was* a museum! I found myself growing excited to learn this had not been merely a rumour or a folk tale but actually existed. I even asked him if I could come and visit it.

At this he first closed his eyes as if in weariness, then opened them wide with a radiant gaze, and cried out, 'Sir, this is my dearest wish! Come, please come and visit us, advise me what to do! I am old now, as you see, and I do not know what will become of it once I am gone. Already people —visitors, perhaps even members of our own staff who have learned there are no guards, no security—have been removing some small objects. I have myself seen these things appearing in markets here and there. The only way open to me to keep it intact is to request the government, the sarkar, take it over and maintain it. If you come and see it for yourself, you will see how great the need is for security and support. Without it—' He broke off, as if the alternative was unthinkable, and mopped his face with a cloth he withdrew from his pocket.

But was there no alternative? Did the errant son not return to his ancestral property? What of Srimati Sarita Devi, his mother? What were her wishes in the matter? I tried to probetactfully.

'Sir,' the unhappy man confessed, 'she left us with no instructions.'

This seemed vague to me. Had she died and 'left for her heavenly abode' as they say in the classified columns of our newspapers? Or moved out of the museum/mausoleum and left it to him? He seemed strangely unwilling to say. He had come to the end of his narrative and had, he seemed to indicate, no more to say. 'The collection' was all that was left at the end of it.

My own enthusiasm came to an abrupt halt as if it had met with an obstruction, a speed break. I began to see only too well the tangle of legal problems ahead. Not at all what I had imagined, although I should have done so. I felt let down by the realisation that it all came down to practicalities, legal and administrative. Just as if I hadn't had my fill of these. While others dreamt dreams and lived lives of imagination and adventure, my role was only to take care of the mess left by them.

My curiosity about the museum and my desire to see it were quickly evaporating. But, if they afforded me a break from the daily routine of office and courtroom in this oppressively limited outpost, why not accept? I told him I would have my driver bring me, asked for directions, and found a suitable date. His gratitude made him practically bow before me—a display of obsequiousness that was more than I could bear. I turned my head and went in to my dinner, leaving him to find his own way out.

I should have known better than to expect some miraculous Xanadu. As my jeep bumped and bounced its way along the mudbank that passed for a road between flattened fields of stubble with only an occasional coconut tree or grove of bananas beside a stagnant pond to break the monotony of a landscape bleached of colour, my expectations dwindled and sobered. The last stretch ended at what no doubt had been an imposing gateway, but now consisted of two pillars of brick with parasitic trees growing out of the cracks, and only some rusty hinges left to show where the wrought-iron gates had hung.

Ahead of us lay what had probably been the driveway but was now a grassy field in which a few skeletal cows grazed, watched over by a cowherd with a staff. He stood with one foot resting against the knee of the

other leg like a flamingo blackened by the sun. His face did register some astonishment at seeing a motor vehicle make its way over the hummocky grass, but other than that he made no acknowledgement of our intrusion. And the cows merely switched their tails and flicked their ears at our passing and a few cattle egrets took off from their flanks with lazy flaps of their wings.

Having traversed the length of the field we came to what had to be 'the palace' I had come to see. What did I expect? There was a broad flight of stairs with grass growing between the flagstones, and beyond it the mournful remains of what I had been assured was once the most substantial house in the district. At first sight I could make out no architectural features in the blackened, crumbling ruin.

Only time, and dissolution.

But here came my acquaintance, the clerk/caretaker, tumbling recklessly down the irregular stairs while adjusting the cap on his head and the buttons of his long black cloth coat as if these gave him his identity and status. Yet his manner on greeting me was gracious and courtly in a way that could only be called 'cultured' or even 'aristocratic', and I felt a twinge of shame at recalling how brusquely I had dismissed him. Although, when he launched into a flowery speech of gratitude at my coming, his joy at seeing me, the honour it accorded him and the house he served, I could not help cutting him short and being curt once again. I suggested we set about doing our tour.

He insisted, however, that I first rest a little and take some refreshment. On the broad veranda spread around the rooms like a lap on which they had settled, a table had been set with an embroidered cloth and a tarnished silver tray on which was a jug, covered with a square of net edged with beads, and some tall metal tumblers. A servant boy emerged from somewhere— a coal-hole, I conjectured—to pour out some coloured sherbet drink that I was not able to refuse.

'Bring the keys,' my host the clerk commanded, assuming the posture of one whose right it was to give orders. Before my eyes he became stiffly upright—still small of course but upright nevertheless—his mouth set in a firm line, his eyes sharp and watchful, his bearing almost arrogant. Here was a person, I saw, who was much more capable of commanding than I was. I observed him and the air with which he accepted the ring of keys from the servant boy as though they were the keys to a castle, his castle.

Then, to my surprise, he held them behind his back with one hand, and with the other gestured to me to precede him through an open door. Were the keys only some part of a charade?

We entered the hall of the palace of the past between two marble—or highly polished ceramic—slave figures holding up lamps filled with dust and dead moths; they had onyx for eyes that bulged grotesquely out of their heads.

The room itself was empty except for a small marble-topped table on ornate legs, carved like dragons. Under it was what looked like a china chamber pot—but could that be? Perhaps I have imagined or misinterpreted it, and other details. On the faded, mottled walls portraits hung from long ropes and huge nails, tilting forward as if to peer down at us. They were photographs in the main but tinted by hand to look like paintings, a strange technique by which one art was imposed on another, leaving the surface oddly ambiguous. One was of a small man in a large turban who stood in front of a dead tiger with its mouth propped open in a snarl; another of a large man with whiskers that bristled like the tiger's, seated upon a gilt chair. Yet another image of perhaps the same man standing, his foot on a recently murdered elephant, a gun in his hand and a row of barely clad servants—beaters?—on either side.

And then one of a woman, scarcely more than a child, slender, her cheeks tinted pink and with strands of pearls around her neck from which hung one large gem tinted green. She wore an old-fashioned blouse with long puffed sleeves that ended in lace at the wrists, and a sari that fell in sculpted folds from her shoulders to her slippered feet, its silver trim draped over her head where her hair was parted in two wings over wide-set eyes. This was the only female portrait, and as we passed it, I heard the clerk sigh, 'Srimati Sarita Devi.' Or perhaps I imagined that because I wished it to be her, the child bride. Since he had not said 'The late Srimati' I still did not know if she was alive, somewhere in the recesses of this faded mansion, and if I would be taken to meet her, or if she was the late, departed Srimati S. My escort remained silent on the matter.

He was already showing me into an adjoining hall where the beasts slaughtered by this family had been embalmed and stuffed to look lifelike or had had their pelts removed and stretched out upon the walls under a forest of antlers and the mounted heads of glass-eyed stags. I tried to avoid looking up at them: I did not enjoy the sensation of being watched,

accusingly I thought. 'The men in the family were great hunters,' my guide said, as if explanation were needed, and I could detect neither apology nor pride in his voice because he kept it as low as if we were in a mausoleum. I decided it was merely respectful so I too tried to look respectful but must have failed: my father had also been a hunter in his days and I had not liked to look on his trophies or hear about his exploits which sounded boastful and made my mother cringe. I probably looked merely blank as I stared at the scalloped and scaly skin of a crocodile or of a python, mottled and moth-like, one resembling broken rubble, the other faded netting. I turned to the clerk, who had his hands behind his back and his head uplifted to these specimens he was set here to guard, and indicated I wished to hurry on. But, before leaving this chamber of death, I had to pass a large, pot-like object by the door. From its folds and wrinkles and the massive flattened toenails, I discerned it to be the foot of an elephant. In case I missed the point of this dismemberment, some umbrellas had been placed in it, their cloth covering frayed and their tin ribs exposed.

Unfortunately the next chamber was one of stuffed birds and they did little to improve my spirits. If anything, the glass eyes set in grey sockets were even more accusing and I was certain that their faded, iridiscent feathers were creeping with parasitic life.

The only living creatures visible in these chambers were the spiders that spun their webs to make shrouds for the birds and the geckoes that probably fed on the spiders. I saw one lizard flattened against the wall, immobile, a pulse beating under its nearly transparent skin to show it was just waiting for us to leave, for night to fall, so it could come to life again. In one doorway, a gecko caught by the slam of the door had left its fragile skeleton splayed against the plaster like a web spun by one of the spiders, to stay till it peeled.

'Is this,' I demanded, 'is *this* the young master's collection?' If there was sarcasm in my tone, it was intentional.

My guide, proving aware of it, quickly responded, 'No, no, no. No, this was left to him by his ancestors. Now we will go to see *his* collection.' And, to my huge relief, we came out into a corridor completely bare of trophies, one side opening onto a courtyard where a marble goddess stood in the shallow basin of a waterless fountain. Her limbs were broken at the joints and lichen had crept up her sandalled feet to the hem of her robe. This stretch of corridor evidently led to the wing that held the items sent to the

estate by the absconding master in containers that had created such a stir in the district and a legacy for the inheritors—if any.

And now my guide produced the ring of keys from behind his back because we had come to a door that was locked. Choosing one extraordinarily long key from the ring, he inserted it into the lock and turned it with a great sense of drama. I followed him in with some trepidation and impatience: how many more hunting trophies and murdered spoils was I to be shown? The heat of the day was gathering in these closed, unventilated rooms, and although it must have been noon by now, there was very little light here.

Except, I was astonished to find, what the collection itself radiated. The chamber we had entered was hung, draped, laid and overlaid with rugs in the splendid colours of royalty—plum, wine, mulberry and pomegranate—woven into intricate patterns. I hesitated to step on one, they were surely precious and, besides, had not been touched in ages by hand, still less by foot. Only a raja might recline on one, with his rani, while listening to the music of sitar and sarod, tabla and tanpura. I could imagine these invisible potentates and pashas lifting goblets in their ringed hands or, better still, the chased silver mouthpiece of a hookah. Lives lived in such a setting could only have been noble and luxurious—not of this poor, hardworked land around.

It was only when I lowered my eyes to examine them more closely that I noted what the imperial colours concealed: patches that were faded, threadbare, some even darned and mended, clumsily.

My guide watched my reactions as they flickered across my face—I'm sure my expressions gave me away—and seemed gratified, a small smile lifting the corners of his compressed lips. But before I could bend and examine more closely these Persian, Turkish, Afghan, Moroccan and Kashmiri treasures, he ushered me into the next room.

And this was even more richly rewarding, for here hung the miniature paintings of Turkey, Persia, Moghul India, Rajasthan and Kangra. I was not enough of a connoisseur to identify them and it would have taken days, even a lifetime, to examine each separately and study the clues enclosed by the gilt margins. Here were jewel-like illustrations of floral and avian life, tiny figures mounted on curvaceous horses in pursuit of lions and gazelles, or kneeling before bearded saints in mountain caves. I glimpsed a pair of cranes performing a mating dance on a green hillock before passing on to a

young maiden conversing with her pet parrot in a cage and another penning a letter to a distant beloved, and so to a sly young man spying from behind a tree on a bevy of young girls bathing in a river, clothed, but transparently. Here elephants with gilded howdahs on their backs carried noblemen up bare hills to crenellated forts on the summits, and now blue storm clouds appeared, driving white egrets before them; a dancing girl performed in a walled courtyard; a prince posed with a pink rose in his hand, another proudly exhibited a hawk upon his wrist. Hunting dogs streamed after deer in a forest, a hunter following them with a bow and arrow. A ship set sail. Lightning struck. Lines of exquisite script curled through the borders, naming their names, telling their tales.

I could not read them, partly from the unfamiliarity of the scripts, but also because the glass that separated these wonderful worlds from the spectator was filmed with dust. No hand had touched them since they were framed and hung. There were no visitors to admire them, just the old caretaker who seemed more proud than knowledgeable, and I who could say nothing but 'Ah!' and 'Ahh!'

If I had been shown just these two chambers, I should have felt satisfied and certain of the value of this collection, but we did not stop here. The caretaker, bowing slightly, was showing me through the door to another chamber, this one filled with fans and kimonos. Disembodied, they contrived somehow to beckon and flirt. It was easy to imagine the fine tapered fingers that must have wielded these fans of carved ivory and pleated silk painted with scenes of gardens and festivals, or the slender figures that had worn these silk gowns, opulent and elaborate with sweeping sleeves and trailing borders of indigo and verdigris, bronze and jade, amethyst and azure. They seemed to plead for their glass cases to be opened so they might step out of these frozen tableaux and assume the roles of queens and courtesans to which they were born.

But such exposure might have revealed them to be ghosts, a touch of air might have turned them to dust. The sleeves were empty, the hems ended in no slippers and no feet. Their fans stirred no air. It occurred to me that the little toylike object, which had caught my eye in my friend the tea-estate manager's house, might once have stood among these ghosts, their plaything, before it was spirited away by some light-fingered viewer. And so they had no vehicle, not even a miniature palanquin.

I found myself invaded by their poetic melancholy and would have liked to linger, fancying myself a privileged visitor to a past world, but the caretaker gave a warning cough to remind me of his presence and our purpose in being here; I turned round to see him holding open another door to another chamber.

And so I was marched through one filled with masks of wood, straw, leather and clay, painted and embellished with bone, shells, rings, strings and fur, masks that threatened or mocked or terrified, then one of textiles—printed, woven, dyed and bleached, gauze, muslin, silk and brocade—and after that one of footwear—fantastical, foolish, foppish—followed by one of headwear—caps and bonnets of velvet, straw, net and felt ... What kind of traveller had this been who desired and acquired the stuff of other people's lands and lives? Why did he? And how had it all arrived here to make up this preposterous collection?

The guide, smiling enigmatically, would give me no clues. Now he was showing me cases filled with weapons of war—curved swords, stout daggers, hilts engraved with decorative patterns that concealed murderous intent—and now he was glancing to see my reaction to a display of porcelain and ceramic—delicate receptacles painted with scenes of arched bridges and willow groves, mountains and waterfalls, or abstract patterns of fierce intricacy in bold and brilliant colours.

I felt sated, wanted to protest, hardly able to take in any more wonders, any more miracles, but detected a certain ruthlessness to my guide's opening of door after door, ushering me on and on, much further than I wished to go. I had thought of him as aged and frail, but his pride and determination to impress me seemed to give him a strength and stamina I would not have imagined possible and it was I who was exhausted, overcome by the heat, stopping to mop my face, even stumbling, yet also curiously unwilling to admit defeat and leave what I had undertaken incomplete.

And there was a chamber we came across every now and then that I would have gladly lingered in, the chamber of scrolls and manuscripts, for instance, which I would have wished to examine more closely. Was this scroll Chinese, or Japanese or Korean? And what did it say, so elegantly, in letters like bees and dragonflies launched across the yellowed sheets, only half unrolled, with faded seals scattered here and there like pressed roses, the insignia of previous owners? Did states, lands, governments exist that

produced documents of marriage, property or cases presented in court with such artistry—settlements of wills and disputes, perhaps decrees and laws and declarations of war and peace? What were they? I compared them in my mind to the tattered files that piled up in heaps on my desk, and marvelled. But only insects examined the ones here, eating their way through papery labyrinths, creating intricate tracks before vanishing, leaving behind networks of faint channels the colour of tea, or rust, and small heaps of grey excrement.

Whole worlds were encrypted here and I looked to my guide for elucidation but he only gave a slight shrug as if to say: what does it matter? The young master collected them and that was what made them precious.

And there was still more to see: cases that held all manner of writing materials with inks reduced to powder at the bottom of glass containers, pens and quills no one would ever use again, seals that no longer stamped; a chamber of clocks where no sand seeped through the hourglasses, water had long since evaporated from the clepsydras, bells were stilled, cuckoos silenced, dancing figures paralysed. Time halted, waiting for a magician to start it again.

The sense of futility was underlined by the sounds my footsteps made on the stone flooring. My guide's feet were shod in slippers that only shuffled. We might have been a pair of ghosts from the museum the owner had conjured up in a dream.

My curiosity was now so reduced that, like a fading spectre, it barely existed. I found myself hurrying after my guide, no longer stopping to admire or decipher, wishing only to bring the tour to an end.

But now we came to a halt in the dustiest and shabbiest chamber of all, as if here the voyager's travels were being rounded up and stored away. It held all the appurtenances of travel itself—leather suitcases with peeling labels of famous hotels still clinging to them, railway and shipping timetables decades out of date and obsolete, baskets held together with string, canvas bedrolls with splitting leather straps and rusty buckles, Gladstone bags as cracked and crushed as broken old men, bundles of bus, ferry and railway tickets preserved by an obsessive, entrance tickets to castles, museums, palaces and picture galleries, reminders of experiences that must once have seemed rich and rewarding. On the walls, peeling posters for lands where beaches were golden, palm trees loaded with coconuts, cruise liners afloat on high seas, flags fluttering—their original

colours now barely perceptible. On a table in the centre, an antique globe, round as a teapot, with a map on it centuries out of date, showing continents that had shifted or disappeared and oceans that had spread or shrunk, and portraying marine life—spouting whales, flying fish, as well as mythical creatures like sirens and mermaids, all beckoning: come, come see!

Perhaps this had been the restless young man's source of inspiration. As for me, all desire I had ever felt for adventure had been drained away by seeing these traces that he had left of his, this gloomy storehouse of abandoned, disused, decaying objects. Their sad obsolescence cast a spell on me and I wanted only to break free and flee.

But my guide had one more thing he wanted to show me. Pointing at a long, shallow box that stood open along one wall, he said, 'This was the final box we received. It was empty and Srimati Sarita Devi knew it was the last. She said to me, "'There will not be another.'"

'And there wasn't?' I asked, wondering if I was meant to take this as some miraculous revelation of a mother's bond to her child or if it would lead to another tale.

'No, no more boxes.'

'And did he himself not return?'

He shook his head and, as if to avoid a show of emotion, turned aside and pushed open the last heavy door.

And suddenly we found ourselves expelled from the darkness and gloom and outside on the wide stairs open to the white blaze of day. I tried to adjust my eyes to the harsh contrast and to think of something to say, but my mouth was dry and stale, in need of a drink of water. I turned to my host to take my leave and was startled to find he did not at all intend to let me go. Instead, he was hurrying down the stairs to the dusty, uninviting field below, no longer the meek, obsequious clerk who had come to petition me at the circuit house, nor the proud curator of what he clearly deemed a valuable piece of property, but a small, determined man doggedly performing his duties to the last.

'Where are we going now?' I protested, unwillingly following him to the foot of the stairs.

He turned back, suddenly snapped open an umbrella—a large black dome lifted on its rusty spokes—that he must have picked out of the unlucky elephant's foot without my noticing and said, 'This way, please, this

way. I have one last gift to show you,' and holding the clumsy object over my head to provide me with shade, proceeded to cross the field. We came to what was evidently the end of the extensive compound where there was a brick wall—or the remains of one—rising above the top of which I could see a stand of susurrating bamboo bleached by the sun.

He led me through a doorway—it was actually a gap in the wall and doorless—and suddenly we were in the bamboo grove that I had glimpsed from without. Here, in a rustling, crackling bed of dry, sharp-tipped leaves shed by the bamboo stalks, and looming up in the striped shade like a grounded monsoon cloud, restlessly shifting from one padded foot to another as if fretting at its captivity, an elephant stood chained. Its trunk swung downward as if wilted by the heat and gave out long deep sighs that stirred the dust on the ground. Although the animal glanced at us from under lashes like bristles, with small, sharp, canny eyes, it gave no sign of curiosity or alarm. Weariness perhaps, that was all.

A man, bare-bodied, his waist wrapped in a brief, discoloured rag, rose from where he had been squatting in the shade by some buckets and troughs filled with leaves, and came forward to meet us with, I thought, the same weariness as his charge.

To my surprise, my small timid host went up to the great grey wall of the elephant's side and placed his hand on it, proprietorially. The creature stood listless, the merest twitch running through its flank as if it had been bothered by a fly. And there were flies. Also heaps of dung for them to feed on.

The two men spoke to each other in one of the local dialects unknown to me, the one in rags not even troubling to remove the stalk on which he was chewing from his mouth, and the clerk/curator giving him what sounded like instructions. The keeper of the elephant shrugged and said something laconic from the corner of his mouth and scratched the sparse hairs on his chest. He and his charge, the one minute and the other monumental, shared a surprising number of tics and mannerisms.

The clerk/curator turned to me and his elderly face with its white wisp of a beard looked tired and older still than it had earlier seemed.

'She was the last gift Sri Jiban sent his mother. She travelled to us over the border from Burma; it was a long journey by foot and this was her final destination. Her keeper brought us no letter and no explanation except that she was sent us by *him*, and we have had the care of her and the feeding of

her ever since. And it is now many years. Srimati Sarita Devi saw to it as long as she had the strength and the means, then left her in my care. She gave me whatever remained in her hands, then departed for Varanasi where she has lived ever since. I did not hear from her again. Perhaps she is no more. She went there, you see, to die.'

I saw that he laid his hand on the great beast's flank with an immense gentleness; it might have been the touch a father bestows on an idiot son, a mad daughter or an invalid wife, gentle and despairing, because she also provided him with the purpose of his life.

'If she lives longer,' he murmured, 'and requires more feeding, I will have to start dismantling the museum, disposing of it piece by piece. It is her only inheritance.'

I had no idea what I should do or say, and stood there in the shade of the monstrous cloud, staring at the flies and the shifting padded feet and the dust they stirred up, away from the two small, spare men who, I now saw, were not only older and shorter than I, but also emaciated, probably lacking even the basic nutrition and necessities, while their ward lived on and on and fed and fed.

Then the clerk put his hands together and turned to me in pleading. 'Sir, please help us. Please appeal on our behalf to the government, the sarkar, to take the museum from us into its custody and provide for us, and for this last gift we were sent. I am ashamed, sir, but I can no longer care for her myself. Forgive me for begging you.'

I could not think of what to say, how to meet his request, his evident need. I mumbled something about it being late, about having to get back, about how I would think about what could be done and how I would let him know as soon, as soon as—

That year of my training in the service is long past. I have been for years now in senior positions, mostly in the capital. I have been transferred from one ministry to another, have dealt with finance, with law and order, with agriculture, with mines and minerals, with health care and education ... you could call it a long and rewarding career of service. I might even say my father took some pride in it. I am of course no longer the lonely bachelor I was when I was first sent out to the districts and compelled to stay in that benighted circuit house; my mother was able to arrange a marriage for me to a wife who is in every way suited to me and my life, and I am a family

man with grown sons and daughters. In fact, I rarely think back to that time now.

I am ashamed to say that once I was transferred to the capital I did not look back, I did not keep in touch with the keeper of the museum and I never found out what happened to it, or to him. What is that saying about ships passing in the night? Is there a landlocked version of it—caravans passing in the desert, or elephants in the forest?

Elephants—now those are creatures which make me uneasy still. Of course I rarely encounter one. Even when my children were young, I avoided zoos, circuses, any place an elephant might be sighted. I feared to have that sad, shrewd eye turned on me, taking my measure and finding it wanting.

Once I had a nightmare—it was while I was still in the district and it was never repeated and never forgotten—in which such a beast devoured, blade by blade, leaf by leaf, an entire forest till it was laid waste, and then it raised its trunk and stepped forward to the tree where I was hiding, to expose—what? I don't know because such nightmares do not have endings. One flees them by waking.

And in wakefulness I would think of the immense creature as innocent and defenceless, who dwindles from neglect and finally lies down not to rise again. A death so huge as to be incomprehensible. This disturbs me and I turn away to distract myself from it. I know behind it is the question: Could I have done more? But it is not for us to do everything for everyone. In the end my reputation in the service was good, solid. What else could I have done?

In fact, by now I am not even sure the museum existed, or the man who created it or his mother who received it or the keeper who kept it. Or if it was a mirage I saw or a book I once read and only vaguely remembered, with none of the solidity, the actuality of objects and men and beasts.

Occasionally a scene from it will rise out of my subconscious just as I am drifting into sleep. Then it slips away.