

G?

*Japan has many reasons to be sad, and elephants are
almost unknown there, I don't know why.*

NEHRU

Now, in retrospect, it is difficult to remember exactly how or precisely when it happened. You should be like the elephant, the animal which can remember all its earlier lives in visions, which stands there contemplating without moving, and then chews the cud: grass, all grass. A life is the metamorphosis of the earlier one(s). A clever man has said – if civilizations can survive only through metamorphosis then the world consists of that which has been forgotten. (But another sly one objected that the living constitute the memory – event and thought – of the dead.) I'd love to see and to recognize a black elephant. Black he must be, but not rubbery. Rather more like silk. Silk that by candlelight has a silvery skin as if of frozen dew when day breaks over the dunes. And its eyes must be huge and dark, and mild, a concentration of the night, the night bumped; and with long eyelashes.

When we lived in Wellington, when I was only a pipsqueak as high as a lap, in the house by the railway tracks close to the station, but the embankment upon which the lines were laid – the beams and the shiny rods especially like protracted silver notes which ought, thus you thought, to vibrate into eternity – this embankment was higher than the house itself so that the trains were in heaven at night, there I was sitting one day on the edge of the small cement reservoir, the dam being in the yard under a tall bluegum tree and the shadow of the tree was as birds, no, more like finely notched wet stains on the earth and against the grey walls, petticoats of black lace stripped from the bodies there – you might have seen it in this way if it hadn't been that the soil itself was already shiny and black from the coal-dust and the soot; I was holding something in my hand and turned it upside down so that a liquid at first squirted over the wall and then flowered. A long golden jet over the wall. The stream, the gold, a snake or a hose or an intestine or perhaps even more intimate – it remained suspended like that: thick and alive. I felt that it was something come forth from my own nebosity and even so from outside myself. Something which may be my protection. If I could only pin it down! In a manner of speaking, of course. A godliness? A god? But it also left me thinner and more empty. Can that which exhausts you nevertheless take you under its wings? (Maybe this incident was not during the day; perhaps it was already towards nightfall “when you can see three stars at a glance”; the stars like the illuminated windows of a train, and the fair napkins, decanters of wine, silver cutlery. . . .)

A second time I saw that original house when I passed by there many years later, this time in a train with my wife, and I pointed it all out to her. The house was deserted and ordinary. (Against one wall the bleached signboard for “Joko Tea”.) How did the building, with the flip of a wrist, get to be so ugly? The wire

gauze around the back porch was full of holes. So the flies at last obtained entry – by gnawing? Plunderers! (What we in our hurry see as shadows is in fact a liquid chucked out by the light, all the dirt which light hides behind objects in order to cleanse the eye. It is this wetness which is transformed into flies. Shadows are widows of the light. Death too is a widow.) All about the house the grass grew tall. The front, that side which looked away from the rail embankment over the marshes and further along the dark nick of Port Jackson on the river banks – the river of a silver trunk, and slightly higher upstream to the left was a favourite bathing pool where brown water used to be dammed behind a floodgate for use by the distillery on the bank, the manager of the distillery was a small fellow with wrinkles, dark hair and a big voice and he had pretty daughters on bicycles, I remember N. Bok with the tits, the thighs twitching whitey under the shortish school skirt – that front of the house was built of wood, an enclosed veranda and a few rooms on either side, and the whole caboodle was rickety now, an old beast with the hindquarters a-drag, the wood most likely moldy and musty, greyish green from the years which are no longer there. There was still the cement dam in the anthracite back yard, empty now, a dusty glass eye. There also, look, was the bluegum tree full of dust – and without monkeys! (The then house was similarly under dust, and at times it moved from top to bottom, a war widow dreaming the hands of a lover, a servant believing ghost stories; and at regular intervals it used to be filled – pierced – by a fierce whistle as when my cousin Kowie the toothless driver came steaming by in his gleaming locomotive: a pig poked; waving of black neckerchief in white hand-palm and rosy shells of gums.) Also the row of plane trees running parallel to the tracks. Then, between the houses and the marshes, the enclosure where grazed the donkey bought for half a crown from the pound when we were small still. And,

unexpectedly, a pomegranate bush, flowering crimson in the hedge around the enclosure. But the train flashed as fast as a photo past all this. Lickety-spit.

In that dilapidated section of the house, the wooden part, we sat down in crooked chairs and knobby armchairs. (This, the third occasion to broach the house.) My father, my mother, my wife, I. And the sieur Vliv. The house is as seedy inside as, so long ago, it seemed to be from the outside. An underground network, a sunken graveyard, a slovenly aquarium full of dust, the lack behind a glass eye. In this room with the fusty wooden walls there are but a few pieces of furniture, grey eyes for windows, and a thick carpet of dust covers the glyphs and the horizontal planes. It's stuffy. As if the house keeps captive a greyish light. We came here especially from the past for our appointment with the sieur Vliv but he doesn't live here either; the house is now occupied by brown prostitutes, night butterflies, and one of them used to be in our service, she worked in the kitchen, early mornings when light was still opaque like train smoke she brought tea and rusks. They allowed us to use their house for our rendezvous. We hear the grousing of the bed in the next room, of how there are many sighs and whispers and giggles, how someone (or two persons?) then jump(s) up with brusque movements, the irascible footsteps over a floor of a woman without underwear, the swish of a cotton dress over naked buttocks, and then a voice outside in the yard, sharp: "Home! Go home, you! Viola-a-a, he tricked me! Viola-a-a, dammit, I say he tricked me!" A train rumbles past, higher than the roof ridge and higher than the tip of the bluegum; the house quakes. My mother goes to fetch coffee in the kitchen where there's a stove with a glowing red surface and she pours from the coffee pot's spout a thick jet of steaming black coffee in a cup, but in one way or another the coffee reaches her hands and she exclaims her pain, hands in the air, the hand-palms like little red bootees

for a baby. It's been many years since cousin Kowie ended up under the wheels of a train engine.

The sieur Vlilv has a long yellow face, deeply bruised by age, notched and chopped, crocheted in downhill creases. Above the forehead his hair waves, dead as winter's grass covered with hoar frost. He holds his two hands with the knuckle-fingers stretched so that the tips, interlaced, touch lightly, the two indexes resting on the chin. His fingers a slender spire. (Many years ago, in another country, I knew him as Alberto Giacometti. Evenings, at dinnertime, he sat sketching figures around a glass of red wine, over and over, the more lines he added the more elongated they became, disappearing into the paper napkin over the table. And then he went away with the cancer.) We have a weighty problem which we want to discuss with him, concerning which we need to obtain his advice. His eyes are burning quiet and yellow in the slanted light. He sits there, deeply withdrawn in the labile armchair.

“Why did you wish to see me?”

I hem and slide forward on my dusty chair. My father places both hands on his knees, he too leans forward, the eyes black swallows in the orbits, looks intently, looks small nests; on his pinky glows a ruby set in a broad golden ring. The coffee cups are still empty; just now, when the train puffed by, they were tinkling in the saucers with the pattern of blue flowers. Dust whirled and settled again. Against the gauze of the back porch the whisper of flies, the whirr of shadows.

“We have a weighty problem we want to discuss with you,” I say, “concerning which we'd like to have your advice.”

A voice in the yard screams: “Out of my sight! Fuck off! Viola-a-a, he tricked me!”

And then more remote (with a sob!): “I don’t screw around with goats. . . .”

Because this is what had happened in the meantime: In Paname we, my wife and I, had a lodger, a household god, so we thought, protecting us – for me, in fact, it was the same god of which I’d become conscious when young, something or someone issuing from me and yet not part of me, something or someone bleeding me white and therefore revitalizing me (a rumbling, a blinding flash, a shaft of light, a wetness) – Rab was his name and he was most sad and timid with a hollow yet soothing voice. He was big, taller than I, more solidly built too, and absolutely black. His body – up to the shoulders – was that of a human man, the flowing lines of a youth at home in his body like an animal in its own physicality, black and with pleasing proportions; his head was that of a bull, oblong and sleek and black and agreeable to the touch, and huge pitch-black eyes with extraordinarily long silky lashes. The lines from forehead over the raised eyebrowcrest and thence to the muzzle – which was damp, and of the same dark pigmentation as the hide – could only be described as noble. Below the broad lips and lower than the ridge of jaws the heavy dewlap swung in folds and dimples. (From side to side when he moved.) It was ever a joy for my wife to caress Rab’s dewlap, to grasp hold of a slim fistful.

Often Rab stood in the hallway, just this side of the half-open front door, from where he could observe the happenings on the street, the wet sidewalks with their superficial glistening of lights. There the transparent glimmer of coloured glass panes set into the door fell over him, the Rouault blue, the wine rosé, the evening ochre – and was reflected in his eyes so that, between the lashes, these seemed to have small windows. And he appeared melancholic and lonely: someone from a totally different civilization longing for a mate which probably never existed: and still he was too shy to risk it outside. Sometimes we

suspected that he stood there listening for something – perhaps the sound of the shepherd’s flute when the sinking sun clothes the bamboo groves in a downy blond gold, or the shingly hissing wheels of a train at night during the winter, or the white rustling of a lady filing her nails in a blue bed in a room overlooking the sea, or the ping-ping and the clackety-clack of steel balls on a pin-table, or the slow tearing sound (like orgasm) of a mirror breaking with the likeness still captive in it; or the movement of an articulation in a linen sleeve still protruding above the earth when the rest of the body is long since buried – something, a noise, a belief, something beyond our hearing.

He was meek and without defects. At night the three of us sat around the table. On the table was laid a glistening white tablecloth crackling with light. Then there was nourishment put on the tablecloth but of that we (I at least) were hardly aware. We sat waiting for the light of the room to be a full ruby red pulsating in our wine glasses. Rab at the head of the table with a snowy white serviette by his left hand, straight, unmoving, both his hands lightly fisted on the table, his aristocratic head with an expression of silence. Later I would not remember if our hands ever really moved, although there was the clicking of silver shoots. When my wife had cleared the table, but the glasses were still deep with wine (and after having gently rubbed one hand over his dewlap, or sometimes both, when she put the dishes and plates to one side), we placed the chesspieces on the board and started playing. Rab was very keen on the so-called Polish opening (the one to which Rutger refers as the ‘orang-utan’) and in my riposte I always attempted to lure his queen forward as rapidly as possible and then to trap her. I wanted to annihilate the queen and thus disrupt the rhythm. Between my middle finger and the index a cheroot burned its thin tendril of smoke. Then Rab silently and deeply looked into my eyes until I entered the

domain, the moon-shadowed gardens, the empty palace in the night, the dormitories of sleep without ever knowing exactly when the line separating flying from falling was crossed. When I then stretched out on the bed next to my wife, her body under the nightdress smelled of carnation.

One evening, the sidewalks and the streets were wet like new black coins, Rab asked if he might borrow my car. But of course. My wife and I still accompanied him outside to where the automobile was parked in the stained shadow patterns of a street tree. He got in behind the wheel, started up the engine, and left. The tyres swooshed over the wet surface. Many hours later, when he did not return, my wife – and I too – became very anxious. With a crease between the eyebrows she decided to go look for him outside, and after phoning and commandeering her brother, Pip, to keep her company, she left the house with a yellow raincoat. Before the chessboard I sat listening to rain murmuring on the roof. I moved the pieces, move and counter-move, but without an opponent it was a sterile and schizophrenic game which I was fated to lose and to win. Each individual drop I could hear plopping on the roof tiles. When later on it was very late, and night soft and secretive, I went to take up a position in the hallway by the half-open front door, Rab's favourite vantage point; his odour still lingered there and I could insert myself in the area of this aroma to stand there in nearly the same way as he was accustomed to do – in the illusory wholeness! I was the stranger at the masked ball. My heart was clear, translucent, brittle glass.

And still later, I don't know what time it was since the night started drifting, I saw my wife and her brother, Pip, returning home. When she was just outside the door I could see the raindrops touching her, meandering over her face and the collar of her coat. The drops were big and slow like oil, like dying moths ending up in oil, like worms crawling through oil. (Just like that it had been earlier

in the evening when we escorted Rab to the car and when I closed the car door behind him and leaned forward with one hand on the windscreen, the finger-marks under my fingers were grey against the glass and with fine concentric labyrinth lines. Silver the drops were on the glass, the light beaded in the globules only, no reflection of my face, hard behind the windscreen and draped in these luminescent beads Rab's dark head looking straight ahead, a moment before the wipers would come into action with a *swosh-swush* and a light spray.)

In the entrance hall of our house I took my wife's wrists in my hands. Cold entered my fingers, the knuckles. This is what she told me while I was caressing her pulse:

“Down below by the crossing of boulevard Saint-Moche where the red lights are, Pip and I placed ourselves. There wasn't much traffic.”

“Ah!” I say.

“The lights regularly changed from red to green to a yellow colour rather like amber, then red again, again green, and so on. I thought, if he comes by, if our motor car passes, I shall see him, I shall recognize it.”

And I: “Ah!”

“Perhaps he got lost. . . . Perhaps he's looking for us. . . . The traffic flow became even less as it got later. . . . When it is late the streets are more present, more *street*. . . . And then I noticed it – our car – dark and wet and shiny with rain, just like a new black coin. I don't know if the traffic lights were red or green. It came by along the sidewalk where we stood and the tyres made a swishing noise on the wet tar, you know how, and how the droplets then splash in arcs.”

And I: “Ah!”

She: “I lifted my hand, this one” – she twists the one wrist between my fingers so that the right hand lies palm up, a baby bootie washed up in a gutter, a

wrinkled fish – “so that Rab may see me, may see my hand, and a rivulet of water ran down my sleeve all along the arm. . . . But he didn’t see me. . . . I don’t know if he saw me. And then I suddenly realized that he was not alone in the car. By the glow of the street lamps and the late night café on the corner I noticed *Rab is not alone in our motor car*. In fact, he’s not the one driving it. Behind the wheel there’s someone else, a black man wearing a coat looking like a clown’s costume, such a big blocked pattern. A smartly dressed fellow. And he wears a hat with a feather stuck in the band. Duck. His face shone and his lips were slightly parted and puffed so that one could see the whiteness of his teeth – just as if he were humming a tune through the nose. Both his hands were posed on the steering wheel higher than the dashboard. Black hands – broken-winged ravens. Rab sat next to him. He looked directly in front of him. His head was dark. The dewlap. . . . I saw it all in such a hurry and yet I keep on seeing it still. Oh. . . . I know. . . . I don’t know anymore. The car disappeared. It doesn’t stop. Neither does it return, no, never again. Oh. . . .”

And “Ah,” I then said.

Light failed. (It was a sad affair.) The sieur Vliv never budged; only the fires in his eyes smouldered. (Tomorrow, one thought, the flaked ash will fleck his withered cheekbones.)

After the explanation and the silence it was clear that the moment for taking back the sieur Vliv had been broken open. I propose to do so and my father acquiesces with dark eyes; the sieur Vliv says it’s most decent of us, considerate et cetera, but that it will be quite sufficient if we could take him as far as the station; he has a return ticket to his destination. We walk down to the enclosure where the captive donkey used to graze, long ago. We find a carriage there, a tame one. We get in and I drive. We must remain standing with our eyes closed

to slits for it would seem that at earlier times the carriage transported hay, and bits of chaff were now blowing all over. There is the sharp tang of long-gone life. We drive over the bumpy ground under the grass, out on to the gravel road and further to where it catches the asphalt. The sieur Vlilv's hair is swept upwards by the wind; among the curls one sees the glistening of the chaff's faded gold; the backs of his hands, the knuckles, are pale with the effort of clinging to the carriage's edge. Evening sky is of tin; the colour and the heat of day burnt away.

The carriage is awkward to handle, not so easy to swivel – with the result that I'm forced to choose the way where I can best control the vehicle.

Nearer to the station the town begins, the first tall buildings with man-high marks of rubbing and scraping against the whitewashed walls. The streets are gorges of twilight, up high among the inclining balconies (canopies) with their empty washing lines the first three stars; bats speed in low parabolas through the weak sky, with the sound of mirrors crackling and splintering, the squeaky noises of radar in orgasm. Despite my best intentions we get caught up in a labyrinth of blue clots – the narrow and sombre and twisting lanes; I no longer know in which direction the station is situated. The high and soundless buildings exclude the heavens. Had there been more space, perhaps a horizon, one might still have oriented oneself by the smoke-flags of some train engine, but already it is too late and too dark and day lies smouldering, finished: the smoke is everywhere. We end up among a procession of refuse lorries descending, just like us, in concentric circles through the network of narrow thoroughfares – and on all sides, scraping behind the buildings, are other lanes, again buildings and streets once more, like the grainy pattern of a fingertip, falling lower, so that we hear the rising of hubbub and clanking, how it washes against the

façades, flows under the arches and in the tunnels. The dust lorries are closed in, with long spouts on the bodies, like threshing-machines. These spouts eject a yellow liquid, golden in the dusk, up into heaven. It splashes all over us, the thick jets, the big dark drops; I see the stickiness in the sieur Vliv's hair; my father closes his eyes so that his spectacles are emptied; soaked-through bats plunge down, fall into the carriage where they lie fluttering – blue cots in the greener obscurity.

And I think back on something which the sieur Vliv pronounced in a very tranquil tone of voice earlier in the afternoon, a citation it was from the *Bhagavad-Gita*, namely a dialogue between Arjuna going forth in his war chariot to do battle (the two enemy armies are in position for the confrontation), keening now with the futility of all this, bewailing all the people, kings and soldiers, friends and relatives and antagonists (the king on the opposing side is blind already) who will have to bite the dust, die (and why?) and Krishna, disguised, of course, but still, as ever, a reincarnation of Vishnu, with him in the war chariot; and Krishna saying:

*Your words are wise, Arjuna, but your sorrow is for nothing.
The truly wise mourn neither for the living nor the dead.
There never was a time when I did not exist, nor you, nor any
of these kings.
Nor is there any future in which we shall cease to be. . . .*

*Realize that pleasure and pain, gain and loss, victory
And defeat, are all the same: then go into battle. . . .*