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The Elephant's Journey

Jose Saramago

José Saramago

The Elephant's Journey

TRANSLATED FROM THE PORTUGUESE
BY MARGARET JULL COSTA



Harvill Secker
LONDON

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For Pilar, who wouldn't let me die

In the end, we always arrive at the place where we are expected.

Book of Itinerari

José Saramago was born in Portugal in 1922 and has been a full-time writer since 1979. His oeuvre embraces plays, poetry, short stories, non-fiction and over a dozen novels, which have been translated into forty languages and have established him as Portugal's most influential living writer. In 1998 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Margaret Jull Costa has translated works by many leading Spanish and Portuguese writers, and her translations have brought her several prizes, among them the Oxford Weidenfeld Translation Prize for José Saramago's *All the Names* and the Premio Valle-Inclán for Bernardo Atxaga's *The Accordionist's Son*.

ALSO BY JOSÉ SARAMAGO IN ENGLISH TRANSLATION

Fiction

The Manual of Painting and Calligraphy

Baltasar & Blimunda

The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis

The Gospel According to Jesus Christ

The History of the Siege of Lisbon

Blindness

All the Names

The Tale of the Unknown Island

The Stone Raft

The Cave

The Double

Seeing

Death at Intervals

Non-fiction

Journey to Portugal

Small Memories

If Gilda Lopes Encarnação had not been Portuguese *leitora* at the University of Salzburg, if I had not been invited to talk to her students there, and if Gilda had not arranged for us to have supper in a restaurant called 'The Elephant', this book would not exist. Certain unknown fates came together that night in the city of Mozart in order that this writer would ask: 'What are those carvings over there?' The carvings were small wooden sculptures lined up in a row, and the first of them was Lisbon's Torre de Belém. This was followed by representations of various European buildings and monuments that clearly marked an itinerary. I was told that they illustrated the journey from Lisbon to Vienna made by an elephant in the sixteenth century, in 1551 to be precise, when João III was on the throne of Portugal. I sensed that there could be a story in this and said as much to Gilda Lopes Encarnação. She thought so too and undertook to help me gather the necessary historical facts. This book is the result of that chance encounter and owes an enormous debt to my providential supper companion, to whom I wish to express my deepest gratitude, as well as my esteem and respect.

José Saramago

Strange though it may seem to anyone unaware of the importance of the marital bed in the efficient workings of public administration, regardless of whether that bed has been blessed by church or state or no one at all, the first step of an elephant's extraordinary journey to austria, which we propose to describe hereafter, took place in the royal apartments of the portuguese court, more or less at bedtime. And it is no mere accident that we chose to use the vague expression more or less. For this enables us to write with admirable elegance, to avoid having to go into details of a physical and physiological nature which is often sordid and almost always ridiculous, and which, set down on paper, would offend the strict catholicism of dom joão the third, king of portugal and of the algarves, and of dona catarina of austria, his wife and the future grandmother of the same dom sebastião who will go off to lead the attack on al-cácer-quibir and die there during the first assault, or perhaps the second, although there are also those who say he died of an illness on the eve of battle. This is what the king, with furrowed brow, said to the queen, I'm worried about something, my lady, About what, my lord, The gift we gave to our cousin maximilian at the time of his marriage four years ago always seemed to me unworthy of his lineage and his merits, and now that we have him close to home, so to speak, in his role as regent of spain in the city of valladolid, I would like to offer him something more valuable, more striking, what do you think, my lady, A monstrance would be a good idea, my lord, a monstrance, I find, is always most welcome, perhaps because it has the virtue of combining material value and spiritual significance, Our holy church would not appreciate such liberality, it doubtless still retains in its infallible memory cousin maximilian's confessed sympathies for the reforms of the lutheran protestants, or were they calvinists, I was never quite sure, Vade retro, satana, exclaimed the queen, crossing herself, such a thought had never even occurred to me, now I'll have to go to confession first thing in the morning, Why tomorrow in particular, my lady, given that it is your custom to go to confession every day, asked the king, Because of the vile idea that the enemy placed on my vocal cords, oh, I can feel my throat burning as if it had been scorched by a breath from hell itself. Accustomed to the queen's sensory excesses, the king shrugged and returned to the difficult task of finding a present that might satisfy archduke maximilian of austria. The queen was murmuring prayer and had just begun another when, suddenly, she stopped and almost shouted out, There's always solomon, What, asked the king, perplexed by this untimely invocation of the king of juda. Yes, my lord, solomon the elephant, And what has the elephant got to do with anything, asked the king somewhat waspishly, He could be the gift, my lord, answered the queen, standing up, euphoric and very excited, He's not exactly an appropriate wedding present, That doesn't matter. The king nodded slowly three times, paused and then nodded another three times, after which he said, Yes, it's a very interesting idea, It's more than interesting, it's a very good idea, an excellent idea, retorted the queen, unable to suppress a gesture of impatience, almost of insubordination, the creature came from india more than two years ago, and since then he's done nothing but eat and sleep, with his water trough always full and a constant supply of food, it's as if he were a kept beast, but one who'll never earn his keep, That's hardly the poor creature's fault, there's no suitable work for him here, unless we were to send him to the docks on the river tagus to transport planks, but the poor thing would only suffer because his professional speciality is transporting felled trees, so much better suited to the curve of his trunk, Send him off to vienna, then, But how, asked the king, That's not our affair, once cousin maximilian is the owner, it will be a matter for him to resolve, he is, I assume, still in valladolid, As far as I know, yes, Obviously, solomon would have to travel to valladolid on foot, he has the legs for it after all, And then on to vienna as well, he'll have no alternative, It's a long way, said the queen, a very long way, agreed the king gravely, and added, I'll write to cousin maximilian tomorrow, and if he accepts, we'll have to agree dates and ascertain certain facts, for example, when he intends leaving for

vienna, and how many days it would take for solomon to travel from lisbon to valladolid, after that it's up to him, we wash our hands of the affair, Yes, we wash our hands, said the queen, but deep inside, which is where the contradictions of the self do battle, she felt a sudden sadness at the thought of sending solomon off to such distant lands and into the care of strangers.

Early the following morning, the king summoned his secretary, pêro de alcáçova carneiro, and dictated a letter that did not come out well at the first attempt, nor at the second or the third, and in the end it had to be handed over entirely to his secretary, who had the necessary rhetorical skills as well as a knowledge of the etiquette and epistolary formulae used between sovereigns, all of which he had learned at the best of all possible schools, namely, from his father, antónio carneiro, from whom he had inherited the post. The resulting letter was perfect as regards both penmanship and argument, not even omitting the theoretical possibility, diplomatically expressed, that the gift might not be to the liking of the archduke, who would, nevertheless, find it extremely hard to reply in the negative, for the king of portugal also stated, in a key passage in the letter, that there was nothing in the whole of his kingdom as precious as the elephant solomon, both because he represented the unifying force of the divine creation that connects and establishes a kinship between all the species, why, some even said that man himself was made out of what was left over after the elephant had been created, and because of the symbolic, intrinsic and worldly values that the creature embodied. When the letter had been signed and sealed, the king summoned his master of the horse, a gentleman who enjoyed his complete confidence and to whom he first summarised the contents of the missive, then ordered him to select an escort worthy of his rank, but one, above all, that would prove equal to the responsibility of the mission with which he was being charged. The gentleman kissed the hand of the king, who, with all the solemnity of an oracle, spoke these sibylline words, Be as swift as the north wind and as sure as the flight of the eagle, Yes, my lord. Then, the king adopted quite a different tone and offered some pieces of practical advice, I don't need to remind you to change horses as often as proves necessary, that is what staging-posts are for, and this is no time for false economies, I will give instructions for the stables to be supplied with more horses, and one other thing, I think you should, if you can, in order to gain time, try to sleep on your horse while you gallop along the roads of castile. The master of the horse did not understand the king's little joke, or else preferred to let it pass, and merely said, Your highness's orders will be carried out to the letter, I pledge my word and my life on it, and then he withdrew, walking backwards and bowing every three steps. No one could have a finer master of the horse, said the king. The secretary decided not to give voice to the adulatory sentiment that would consist in saying that the king's master of the horse could hardly be anything else or behave any differently, given that he had been personally chosen by his royal highness. He had the feeling that he had said something similar only a few days before. At the time, he had recalled some advice of his father's, Be careful, my son, any flattering remark, if repeated too often, will always wear thin in the end and become, instead, as wounding as any insult. And so the secretary, although not for the same reasons as the master of the horse, also chose to say nothing. It was during this brief silence that the king finally gave expression to a worrying thought that had occurred to him on waking, I've been thinking, I feel that I should go and see solomon, Does your highness wish me to call the royal guard? asked the secretary, No, two pageboys will be more than enough, one to carry messages and the other to go and find out why the first has not yet returned, oh, and yourself, secretary, if you would care to accompany me, You do me great honour, highness, far more than I deserve, Perhaps I do so in order that you may deserve still more, like your father, may he rest in peace, Allow me to kiss your highness's hand with all the love and respect with which I kissed his, Now that is far more than I deserve, said the king, smiling, Ah, no one can outdo your highness in dialectic and respons

Although there are those who say that the fates who presided over my birth did not endow me with gift for words, ~~Words are not everything, my lord, going to visit the elephant solomon today is~~ poetic act and will perhaps be seen as such in the future, What is a poetic act, asked the king, No one knows, my lord, we only recognise it when it happens, So far, though, I have only mentioned my intention of visiting solomon, Ah, but the word of a king would, I'm sure, be enough, That, I believe is what rhetoricians call irony, Forgive me, your highness, You are forgiven, secretary, and if all your sins are of like gravity, your place in heaven is guaranteed, Possibly, but I'm not sure that this would be the best time to go to heaven, What do you mean by that, There is the inquisition to consider, since confession and absolution are no longer the safe-conduct passes they once were, The inquisition will maintain unity among christians, that is its objective, And a very holy objective it is, highness, but what means will it use to achieve that, If the end is holy, then the means to that end will also be holy, retorted the king rather sharply, Forgive me, your highness, and may I, May you what, May I ask you to excuse me from today's visit to solomon, I feel that I would not prove to be very agreeable company for your highness, No, I will not excuse you, I need your presence in the enclosure, But what, sir, if I may be so bold as to ask, Because I lack the intelligence to know if what you termed a poetic act will take place or not, replied the king with a half-smile that gave his beard and moustache a mischievous, almost mephistophelian look, I await your orders, my lord, At five o'clock prompt, want four horses to be brought round to the palace gate, and make sure that my mount is large, strong and docile, I've never been much of a rider and, I'm even less of one now, what with all the aches and pains that age brings with it, Yes, my lord, And choose the pageboys who are to come with me very carefully, I don't want the kind who laugh at the slightest thing, it makes me feel like wringing their necks, Yes, my lord.

In the end, they did not leave until half past five because the queen, when she found out about the planned excursion, declared that she wanted to go too. It was very hard to convince her that it made no sense at all to prepare a carriage merely to go as far as belém, where solomon's enclosure had been built. And you certainly don't intend going on horseback, said the king peremptorily, determined not to allow any arguments. The queen obeyed this ill-disguised prohibition and withdrew, muttering that no one in portugal, or indeed in the whole world, loved solomon as much as she did. As can be seen, the contradictions of the self were multiplying. Having called the poor animal a kept beast, the worst possible insult for an irrational creature who had been forced to labour in india, on no pay, for years and years, catarina of austria was now revealing a hint of chivalrous remorse that had almost led her to challenge, at least outwardly, the authority of her lord, her husband and her king. It was basically a storm in a teacup, a minor conjugal crisis that would, inevitably, vanish with the return of the master of the horse, regardless of what answer he might bring. If the archduke accepted the elephant, the problem would resolve itself or, rather, the journey to vienna would resolve it, and if he didn't accept it, then they would simply have to say, once again, with the centuries-old experience of all people, that, despite the disappointments, frustrations and disillusionments that are the daily bread of men and elephants alike, life goes on. Solomon has no idea what awaits him. The master of the horse, the emissary of his fate, is riding towards valladolid, having recovered from the unfortunate results of trying to sleep while on horseback, and the king of portugal, with his modest escort of secretary and pageboys, is about to arrive at the river's edge at belém, within sight of the jerónimos monastery and solomon's enclosure. Given time, everything in the universe will dovetail perfectly with everything else. There is the elephant. Although he is smaller than his african relatives, one can still see, beneath the layer of dirt covering him, the fine figure nature had in mind when she created him. Why is this animal so dirty, asked the king, where is his keeper, I assume there is a keeper. A man with india

features approached, he was dressed in little more than rags, a mixture of his original clothes and others made locally, barely covered by or barely covering scraps of the more exotic fabrics that had arrived, along with the elephant, on that same body, two years before. He was the mahout. The secretary soon realised that the keeper had not recognised the king, and since this was clearly not the moment for any formal introductions, along the lines of, your highness, allow me to introduce solomon's keeper, and this, sir indian, is the king of portugal, dom joão the third, who will come to be known as dom joão the pious, instead, he ordered the two pageboys to go into the enclosure and inform the bewildered mahout of the titles and qualities of the bearded personage currently fixing him with a stern gaze that boded no good, It's the king. The man stopped, as if he had been struck by a bolt of lightning, and then made as if to escape, but the pageboys caught hold of him by his rags and propelled him towards the stockade. The king, meanwhile, was standing on a rustic ladder that had been propped against the stockade, and was observing the spectacle with an air of irritation and repugnance, regretting having given in to that early-morning impulse to pay a sentimental visit to the pachyderm, to this ridiculous proboscidean more than four ells high, who, god willing, will soon be depositing his malodorous excretions on the pretentious austrian city of vienna. The blame, at least in part, lay with the secretary and his comment about poetic acts, a comment that was still going round and round in the king's head. He shot a challenging glance at the otherwise estimable functionary who, as if he had read his mind, said, Your coming here, my lord, was, indeed, a poetic act, and the elephant was merely the pretext, nothing more. The king muttered some inaudible remark, then said in a clear, firm voice, I want that animal washed, right now. He felt like a king, he was a king, and the feeling is understandable when you consider that never in his entire life as monarch had he uttered such a sentence. The pageboys passed the sovereign's order on to the mahout, and the man ran to the shed in which were stored things that looked like and may well have been tools, as well as others that no one could have said quite what they were. Beside the shed was a building, presumably the keeper's house, made out of planks and with an unboarded roof. He returned carrying a long-handled broom, filled a bucket from the wine vat that served as water trough and set to work. The elephant's pleasure was plain to see. The water and the scrubbing motion of the broom must have awoken in him some pleasant memory, a river in india, the rough trunk of a tree, and the proof was that for as long as the washing lasted, a good half hour, he did not move from the spot, standing firm on his powerful legs, as if he were hypnotised. Knowing as one does the preeminent virtues of bodily cleanliness, it was no surprise to find that in the place where one elephant had been there now stood another. The dirt that had covered him before, and through which one could barely see his skin, had vanished beneath the combined actions of water and broom, and solomon revealed himself now in all his splendour. Somewhat relative splendour, it must be said. The skin of an asian elephant like solomon is thick, greyish coffee colour and sprinkled with freckles and hairs, a permanent disappointment to the elephant, despite the advice he was always giving himself about accepting his fate and being content with what he had and giving thanks to vishnu. He surrendered himself to being washed as if he were expecting a miracle, a baptism, but the result was there for all to see, hairs and freckles. The king had not visited the elephant for over a year, he had forgotten the details and did not like what he was seeing at all. Apart, that is, from the pachyderm's long tusks, resplendently white and only slightly curved, like two swords pointing forward. But there was worse. Suddenly, the king of portugal, and the algarves, who, a little earlier, had been so thrilled to have found the perfect present to give the emperor charles the fifth's son-in-law, felt as if he were about to fall off the ladder and into the gaping maw of ignominy. This is what the king was thinking, What if the archduke doesn't like him, what if he finds him ugly, what if he accepts the gift in principle, sight unseen, then sends him back, how will

I bear the shame of being slighted in the compassionate or ironic eyes of the european community. What do you think of him, what impression does the creature make on you, the king asked his secretary, desperate for the scrap of hope that could only come from him, Pretty and ugly, my lord, are merely relative terms, to the owl even his owlets are pretty, what I see here, to apply a general law to one particular case, is a magnificent example of the asian elephant, with all the hairs and freckles proper to its nature, which will be sure to delight the archduke and astonish not only the court and the population of vienna, but also the ordinary people who see him along the way. The king gave a sigh of relief, Yes, I suppose you're right, Indeed, sir, and if I know anything about that other nature, the human variety, I would even go so far as to say, if your majesty will allow me, that this elephant with its hairs and freckles will become a political tool of the first order for the archduke of austria, if he is as astute as the evidence thus far suggests. Help me down, this conversation is making me dizzy. With the help of the secretary and the two pageboys, the king managed, without too much difficulty, to descend the few rungs he had climbed. He took a deep breath when he felt terra firma beneath his feet again and, for no apparent reason, unless, and this is pure speculation, for it is far too early to know for sure, the sudden oxygenation of his blood and the consequent renewal of the blood circulating around his brain made him think of something which, in normal circumstances, would probably never have occurred to him. It was this, The man cannot possibly go to vienna looking like that, dressed in rags, so order two suits to be made for him, one for work, when he has to ride on top of the elephant and the other for social occasions, so that he does not cut a poor figure at the austrian court, nothing fancy, you understand, but worthy of the country sending him there, Of course, my lord, By the way, what is his name. A page was despatched to find out, and the answer, passed on by the secretary, was more or less this, Subro. Subro, repeated the king, what kind of name is that, It's spelt with an h, sir, at least so he said, explained the secretary, We should have just called him joaquim when he first arrived in portugal, grumbled the king.

Three days later, towards the close of the afternoon, the master of the horse, at the head of his escort, its pomp now somewhat dimmed by the grime of the roads and the inevitable stench of sweat exuded by both equines and humans, dismounted at the palace gates, brushed off the dust, went up the steps and was hurriedly ushered into the antechamber by the lackey-in-chief, a title which, as we had before confess at once, may not actually have existed at the time, but seemed to us appropriate, given the fellow's own corporeal odour, which he positively oozed, a mixture of presumption and false humility. Anxious to know the archduke's answer, the king received the new arrival at once. The queen was also present in the state room, which, given the importance of the moment, should surprise no one, especially given that, at the behest of the king, she regularly participates in meetings of state where she has always been more than a mere passive spectator. There was another reason why she wanted to hear the letter read out as soon as it arrived, for the queen nurtured the vague hope, however unlikely she knew this to be, that archduke maximilian's missive would be written in german, in which case she, the most highly placed of translators, would be there, on hand so to speak, ready to be of service. Meanwhile, the king had received the scroll from his master of the horse, and had himself unrolled it, once he had untied the ribbons sealed with the archduke's coat of arms, but a quick glance was enough for him to see that it was written in latin. Now dom joão, the third king of portugal to bear that name, although not entirely ignorant of the latin language, for he had studied it in his youth, knew all too well that his inevitable stumblings, prolonged pauses and downright errors of interpretation would give those present a wretched and erroneous impression of his royal self. The secretary, with the agility of mind we have noted before and equally quick reflexes, had already taken two discreet steps forward and was waiting. In the most natural of tones, as if the scene had been rehearsed, the king said, My secretary will read the letter, translating into portuguese the message in which our beloved cousin maximilian is doubtless responding to our offer of the elephant solomon, it seems to me unnecessary to read the whole letter now, all we need, at the moment, is the gist, Of course, sir. The secretary ran his eyes over the superabundance of polite salutations, which, in the epistolary style of the time, proliferated like mushrooms after rain, then read further on and found what he was looking for. He did not translate, he merely announced, The archduke maximilian of austria gratefully accepts the king of portugal's gift. Among the hairy mass formed by beard and moustache, a smile of satisfaction appeared on the royal face. The queen smiled too, at the same time putting her hands together in a gesture of gratitude which, while intended, first, for the archduke maximilian of austria, had, as its ultimate recipient, almighty god. The contradictory feelings doing battle inside the queen had reached a synthesis, the most banal of all, namely that no one can escape his fate. The secretary went on, explaining the further contents of the letter in a voice in which the monastic gravity of the latin seemed to find an echo in the day-to-day portuguese into which he was translating. He says that he has not yet decided when he will leave for vienna, possibly around the middle of october, but he is not sure, And it's the beginning of August already, said the queen rather unnecessarily, The archduke also says, sir, that if it suits your highness, you need not wait until a time nearer the date of his departure to send suleiman to valladolid, What suleiman is that, asked the king angrily, he hasn't even got the elephant yet and already he wants to change his name, Suleiman the magnificent, sir, the ottoman sultan, What would I do without you, secretary, how else could I possibly know who suleiman was if your brilliant memory were not there to enlighten and guide me at all times, Forgive me, sir, said the secretary. There was an awkward silence during which those present avoided looking at each other. The secretary's face, which had initially flushed bright red, was now deathly pale. No, I'm the one who should ask your forgiveness, said the king, and I do so unprompted save by the promptings of my own conscience, Sir, stammered pêro de alcáçova carneiro, who am I to forgive you anything

You're my secretary, to whom I have been disrespectful, Please, sir. The king made a gesture imposing silence, and then said, Solomon, as he will continue to be called for as long as he remains here, can have no idea of the anxiety he's caused us ever since the day I decided to make a present of him to the archduke, my feeling is, that, deep down, no one here really wants him to go, it's odd, isn't it, he's not a cat who comes rubbing around our legs or a dog who gazes up at us as if we were his creator, and yet here we all are, in a state of distress and near despair, as if something were being wrenched from us, No one could have put it better, sir, said the secretary, But let us return to the matter in hand, now where had we got to in this business of despatching solomon to valladolid, asked the king, The archduke writes that it would be best if the elephant came sooner rather than later so that he can become accustomed to the change of people and surroundings, well, the latin word he uses doesn't mean quite that, but it's the best I can find at the moment, Well, don't go racking your brain any further, we understand what you mean, said the king. Then, after a moment's reflection, he added My master of the horse will be in charge of organising the expedition, he'll need two men to help the mahout in his work, plus a few more to ensure that there are always plentiful supplies of food and water, an ox-cart just in case one proves necessary, for example, to transport the elephant's water trough, although in portugal, of course, there'll be no shortage of rivers or riverbanks where solomon can drink and wallow, although they might meet problems in that wretched place castile, which is always as dry as a bone left out in the sun, and, finally, a troop of cavalry in the unlikely event of someone trying to steal our precious solomon, our master of the horse will give our secretary of state regular progress reports, and forgive me, secretary, for involving you in such trivialities, Hardly trivialities, sir, the matter is of particular relevance to me since what we're dealing with here is neither more nor less than the transfer of a state asset, Solomon, I'm sure, has never thought of himself as a state asset, said the king with a wry smile, He would only have to consider, sir, that the water he drinks and the food he eats do not fall from the heavens, Well, as far as I'm concerned, said the queen, I hereby give orders that no one should come and tell me when solomon has left, I will ask you when I'm ready to know and only then will I expect an answer. This last word was barely audible, as tears had suddenly constricted the royal throat. A queen crying is a spectacle from which, out of decency, we are all obliged to avert our gaze. Which is precisely what the king, the secretary of state and the master of the horse did. Then, once she had left and the rustle of her skirts on the floor had ceased to be heard, the king said, You see, that's what I mean, none of us wants solomon to go, It's not too late for a change of heart, sir, Oh, my heart has changed, no doubt about that, but time has run out, solomon is already on his way, Your highness has more important matters to deal with, don't allow an elephant to become the centre of your concerns, What's the mahout's name, the king asked suddenly, Subhro, I believe, sir, What does it mean, I don't know, sir, but I could ask him, Yes, do, I want to know into whose hands I am entrusting solomon, The same hands he was in before, sir, for, if I may make so bold as to remind you, the elephant travelled from india with the very same mahout, Being so far away and being near at hand changes everything, up until now, I never cared what the man's name was, but now I do, Of course, sir, I understand, That's what I like about you, secretary, you don't need to have things spelled out in order to understand what a person means, My father was a good teacher and your highness is in no way his inferior, Such praise is, at first glance, of little worth, but since you're measuring me against your father, it pleases me, May I withdraw, sir, asked the secretary, Yes, go about your business, and don't forget those new clothes for the mahout, what did you say his name was again, Subhro, sir, with an h, Right.

Ten days after this conversation, when the sun had barely appeared above the horizon, solomon finally left the enclosure in which he had languished for two years. The convoy was precisely as the king had ordered, with the mahout, who presided from on high, seated on the elephant's back, the two men who were there to help him in whatever way proved necessary, the other men in charge of food supplies, the ox-cart bearing the water trough, which the bumps in the road constantly sent sliding from one side to the other, as well as a gigantic load of fodder of varying types, the cavalry troop who were responsible for security along the way and the safe arrival of all concerned, and, finally, something that the king had not thought of, the quartermaster's wagon drawn by two mules. The absence of curious onlookers and other witnesses could be explained by the extremely early hour and the secrecy that had shrouded the departure, although there was one exception, a royal carriage that set off in the direction of Lisbon as soon as elephant and company had disappeared around the first bend in the road. Inside were the king of portugal, dom joão the third, and his secretary of state, pêro de alcáçova carneiro, whom we may not see again, although perhaps we will, because life laughs at predictions and introduces words where we imagined silences, and sudden returns when we thought we would never see each other again. I've forgotten the meaning of the mahout's name, what was it again, the king was asking, White, sir, subhro means white, although you'd never think it to look at him. In a room in the palace, in the gloom of the bed canopy, the sleeping queen is having a nightmare. She is dreaming that solomon has been taken from belém and that she keeps asking everyone, Why didn't you tell me, but when she does finally decide to wake up, around mid-morning, she will not repeat that question and cannot be sure that she, on her own initiative, ever will. It may be that in the next few years someone will chance to mention the word elephant in her presence and then the queen of portugal, catherine of austria, will say, Speaking of elephants, whatever happened to solomon, is he still in belém or has he already been dispatched to vienna, and when they tell her that he is indeed in vienna living in a kind of zoological garden along with other wild animals, she will respond, feigning innocence, What a fortunate creature, there he is enjoying life in the most beautiful city in the world and here am I, trapped between today and the future and with no hope in either of them. The king, when he's present, will pretend not to hear, and the secretary of state, the same pêro de alcáçova carneiro whom we have already met, even though he is not a man given to praying, we need only recall what he said about the inquisition and, more importantly, what he thought best not to say, will offer up a silent prayer to heaven asking for the elephant to be enveloped in a thick cloak of oblivion that will disguise his shape that he could be mistaken by lazy imaginations for that other strange-looking beast, the dromedary, or for some other type of camel, whose unfortunate two-humped appearance would be unlikely to linger in the memory of anyone interested in these insignificant events. The past is an immense area of stony ground that many people would like to drive across as if it were a motorway while others move patiently from stone to stone, lifting each one because they need to know what lies beneath. Sometimes scorpions crawl out or centipedes, fat white caterpillars or ripe chrysalises, but it's not impossible that, at least once, an elephant might appear, and that the elephant might carry on its shoulders a mahout named subhro, meaning white, an entirely inappropriate word to describe the man who, in the sight of the king of portugal and his secretary of state, appeared in the enclosure in belém, looking every bit as filthy as the elephant he was supposed to be taking care of. There may be some truth in the wise saying that warns us that even the brightest blade grows dim with rust, because that is precisely what had happened to the mahout and his elephant. When they first fetched up in belém, popular curiosity reached astonishing heights and the court itself organised select excursions comprising noblemen and noblewomen, ladies and gentlemen, to view the pachyderm, however, the initial interest soon faded, and the result was plain to see, the mahout's indian clothes were

transformed into rags and the elephant's hairs and freckles had almost vanished beneath the crust of dirt accumulated over two years. This is not the case now, however. Although the inevitable dust from the road is already coating his legs from foot to knee, solomon nevertheless walks proudly along, clean as a new pin, and the mahout, although no longer dressed in colourful indian garb, is resplendent in his new uniform for which, even better, either out of forgetfulness or generosity on the part of his employers, he had not had to pay. Sitting astride the part of the elephant where neck meets sturdy body and wielding the stick with which he steers his mount, one moment delivering light flicks, the next sharp jabbing movements that leave their mark on the animal's tough skin, the mahout subhro, white, is about to become the second or third most important character in the story, the first being the elephant solomon, who, naturally, takes precedence as the main protagonist, followed by the aforementioned subhro and the archduke, jockeying with each other for the lead role, now this one is now that. However, the character currently occupying centre stage is the mahout. Glancing from one end of the convoy to the other, he cannot help but notice its distinctly motley appearance, understandable given the diversity of animals involved, namely, elephant, men, horses, mules and oxen, each walking at a different pace, either natural or enforced, because on a journey such as this no one can go much faster than the slowest, and the slowest, of course, are the oxen. The oxen, said the subhro, suddenly alarmed, where are the oxen. Not a sign of them, nor of the heavy load they were pulling, the trough full of water and the bundles of forage. They must have got left behind, he thought, reassuring himself, there's nothing for it but to wait. He prepared to slide down from the elephant's back, but stopped. He might have to get back on again and not be able to. In principle, the elephant would proffer his trunk to raise him up and practically deposit him on his seat. However, prudence told him that one should always foresee situations in which the animal, out of ill-will, irritation or sheer contrariness, might refuse to offer his services as a lift, which is where the ladder came in, although it was hard to believe that an angry elephant would agree to be a mere support and unresistingly allow the mahout or whoever to climb aboard. The ladder was of merely symbolic value, like a small reliquary worn round the neck or a medal bearing the figure of some saint. In this case, though, he could not make use of the ladder because it was on the cart that had fallen behind. Subhro summoned one of his assistants so that he could warn the commanding officer of the cavalry troop that they would have to wait for the ox-cart. Besides, the rest would do the horses good, although, truth be told, they had hardly had to exert themselves, never once breaking into a gallop or even a trot, but proceeding at a sedate walking pace. This was nothing like the master of the horse's recent expedition to valladolid, which was still fresh in the memories of those who had gone with him, veterans of that heroic cavalcade. The horsemen dismounted, the men on foot sat or lay down on the ground, and several took the opportunity to have a nap. From his perch high up on the elephant, the mahout reviewed the journey so far and was not pleased. To judge by the height of the sun, they must have been walking for about three hours, although that put rather too favourable a gloss on things, because some considerable part of that time had been taken up with solomon's long bathing sessions in the river tagus, which alternated with voluptuous wallowings in the mud, which, in turn, according to elephant logic, called for further prolonged baths. It was clear that solomon was excited and nervous, and needed to be treated with great patience and calm. We must have wasted a good hour on solomon's little games, thought the mahout, and then, passing from a reflection on time to a meditation on space, How far have we travelled, a league, possibly two, he wondered. A cruel doubt, an urgent question. If we were still living among the ancient greeks and romans, we would say, with the serenity that practical knowledge always confers, that the main itinerary measures of distance were the time were the stadium, the mile and the league. Setting aside the stadium and the mile, with the

divisions into feet and paces, let us consider the league, which was the word used by subhro, a distance that was also composed of paces and feet, but which has the enormous advantage of placing us in familiar territory. Yes, but everyone knows what leagues are, our contemporaries will say with a ironic smile. The best answer we can give them is this, Yes, everyone did in the age in which they lived, but only in the age in which they lived. The old word league, or leuga, which should, one would think, have meant the same to everyone at all times, has in fact made a long journey from the seven thousand five hundred feet or one thousand five hundred paces of the romans and the early middle ages to the kilometres and metres with which we now divide up distance, no less than five and five thousand respectively. It's the same with other measurements as well. And if you need evidence to back this statement up, consider the case of the almude, a measure of capacity that was divided in twelve canadas or forty-eight quarts, and which, in lisbon, was equal, in round numbers, to sixteen and a half litres, and in oporto, to twenty-five litres. How did they manage, the curious reader and lover of learning will ask, How do we manage, asks the person who first mentioned this whole weights and measures problem, thus skilfully avoiding giving an answer. Now, having presented the matter with such dazzling clarity, we can make an absolutely crucial, almost revolutionary decision, namely that while the mahout and his companions, given that they would have no other means at their disposal, will continue to speak of distances in accord with the uses and customs of their age, we, so that we can understand what is going on in this regard, will use our own modern itinerary units of measurement which will avoid constantly having to resort to tiresome conversion tables. It will be as if we were adding subtitles in our own language to a film, a concept unknown in the sixteenth century, to compensate for our ignorance or imperfect knowledge of the language spoken by the actors. We will therefore, have two parallel discourses that will never meet, this one, which we will be able to follow without difficulty and another, which, from this moment on, will remain silent. An interesting solution.

All these observations, ponderings and cogitations led the mahout finally to descend from the elephant's back via its trunk and to stride boldly over to the cavalry troop. It was easy enough to find the commanding officer. There was a kind of awning that was doubtless protecting some eminent personage from the punishing august sun, so the conclusion was easy to draw, if there was an awning there must be a commanding officer beneath it, and if there was a commanding officer, there would have to be an awning to protect him. The mahout had an idea which he didn't quite know how to introduce into the conversation, but the commanding officer unwittingly made his job easy, When will those oxen get to, he asked, Well, I haven't actually seen them yet, sir, but they should be here any moment, Let's hope so. The mahout took a deep breath and said in a voice hoarse with excitement, If you'll permit me, sir, I've had an idea, If you've already had the idea, you obviously don't need my permission, You're quite right, sir, forgive my imperfect grasp of grammar, Tell me what your idea is, then, The main problem is the oxen, Yes, they haven't yet arrived, What I mean, sir, is that the problem will remain the same even once they have arrived, Why, Because oxen are, by nature, very slow creatures, sir, Well, that much I know, and I don't need an indian to tell me, If we had another pair of oxen and yoked them up to the cart we already have, we would be able to travel more quickly and all at the same pace, Sounds like a good idea, but where are we going to find another pair of oxen, There are villages nearby, sir. The commanding officer frowned, he could not deny that there were indeed villages nearby where they could buy a pair of oxen. Although why buy them, he thought, we'll requisition the oxen in the name of the king and, on the way back from valladolid, leave them here, as good a state as I hope they'll be in now. Just then, a roar went up, the oxen had finally come in view, the men applauded and even the elephant raised his trunk and trumpeted contentedly. His po

sight did not allow him to see the bundles of forage from that distance, but the vast cavern of his stomach echoed with protests that it was high time he had something to eat. This doesn't mean that a healthy elephant has to eat at regular hours like a human being. Amazing though it may seem, an elephant gets through about two hundred litres of water a day and between one hundred and fifty and three hundred kilos of forage. So we shouldn't imagine him with a napkin tied around his neck and sitting down at table to eat his three square meals a day, no, an elephant eats what he can, as much as he can and where he can, and his guiding principle is not to leave anything behind that he might need later on. He still had to wait nearly half an hour before the oxcart arrived. Meanwhile, the commanding officer gave the order to pitch camp, although they first had to find a place less exposed to the sun if soldiers and civilians were not to be burnt to a crisp. About five hundred metres away there was a small copse of poplar trees for which the company duly headed. The shade was fairly sparse, but better than stay and roast beneath the implacable metal disc of the king of planets. The men who had come with the party in order to work and of whom very little, indeed absolutely nothing had so far been required, had the usual kind of food in their saddlebags and haversacks, a large piece of bread, some dried sardines, a few dried figs, and a wedge of goat's cheese, of the sort that becomes hard as stone and which, rather than chew, you have to gnaw at patiently, thus allowing you to enjoy the flavour for longer. As for the soldiers, they had their own arrangements. A cavalryman, with sword unsheathed or spear at the ready, whether charging the enemy at a gallop or simply accompanying an elephant to Valladolid, has no need to worry about supplies. He's not interested in where the food comes from or who prepares it, what matters is that his plate is full and the stew not entirely inedible. In scattered groups, everyone, apart from Solomon, was now busily engaged in masticatory and deglutitory activities. Subhro, the mahout, gave the order for two bundles of forage to be carried to where Solomon was waiting his turn, to untie them and leave him be, If necessary, take him another bundle, he said. Many will doubtless disapprove of this deliberate excess of detail, but this description serves a useful purpose, that of encouraging Subhro's mind to reach an optimistic conclusion regarding the future of this journey. If Solomon eats at least three or four bundles of forage a day, he thought, the weight in the cart will gradually be reduced and if we get that extra pair of oxen, then however many mountains may step into our path, there'll be no holding us. The same thing happens with good ideas, and, on occasions, with bad ones, as happens with Democritus' atoms or with cherries in a basket, they come along linked one to the other. When Subhro imagined the oxen pulling the cart up a steep hill, he realised that a mistake had been made in the original composition of the convoy, a mistake that had not been corrected during the journey so far, an oversight for which he considered himself responsible. The thirty men who had come as assistants, and whom Subhro took the trouble to count one by one, had done nothing since their departure from Lisbon, apart from going off for their morning walks in the countryside. The two men on the ox-cart would be perfectly capable of untying and dragging the bundles of forage over to Solomon, and in case of need, he himself could always lend a hand. What should I do, send them back, and free myself of that weight of responsibility, wondered Subhro. That would have been a good idea if there hadn't been a better one. The idea brought a bright smile to the mahout's face. He shouted to the men and gathered them round him, some of them still chewing on their last dried fig, and he said, From now on, you will be divided into two groups, in order to help push or pull the ox-cart, because the load is clearly too much for the animals, who are besides, slow by nature, so, every two kilometres, the groups will swap over, and that will be your principal work until we reach Valladolid. There was a murmur of what sounded very much like discontent, but Subhro pretended not to hear it and went on, Each group will have a foreman, who, as well as having to answer to me for the good results of the work, will have to maintain discipline and

develop the team spirit essential in any collective task. This language obviously failed to please his audience, because the same murmur was repeated. Fine, said subhro, if anyone is unhappy with the orders I've just given, he can go to the commanding officer, who, as the king's representative, is the supreme authority here. The air seemed suddenly to grow colder, and the murmur was replaced by an embarrassed scuffling of feet. Subhro asked, Right, any volunteers for the post of foreman. Three hesitant hands went up, and the mahout explained, I need two foremen, not three. One of the hands shrank back, disappeared, while the others remained raised. You and you, said subhro, choose your men, but do so in an equitable manner, so that the strength of the two groups is evenly balanced, and now off you go, I need to speak to the commanding officer. Before he did so, however, he was obliged to attend to one of his assistants, who had approached to inform him that they had untied another bundle of forage, but that solomon appeared to have had enough and all the signs were that he wanted to sleep, I'm not surprised, he's eaten well and this is the time he usually takes his nap, The trouble is he's drunk nearly all the water in the trough, Well, that's only natural after eating so much, We could take the oxen down to the river, there must be a path somewhere, He wouldn't drink the water from that part of the river, it's still salty, How do you know, asked one assistant, Because solomon has bathed in the river several times, the last time just near here, and he never once put his trunk in to drink, If the sea water comes up as far as this, that only shows what a short distance we've covered. True enough, but I can assure you that we'll be travelling much faster from now on, my word as a mahout. Leaving behind him this solemn commitment, subhro went in search of the commanding officer. He found him asleep in the shade of one of the more densely leaved poplars, sleeping the light sleep that marks out the good soldier, always ready to pick up his weapons at the slightest suspicious noise. He was guarded by two soldiers who, with an authoritative gesture, ordered subhro to stop. Subhro raised his hand to indicate that he had understood and sat down on the ground to wait. The commanding officer woke up half an hour later, stretched and yawned, then yawned and stretched again, until he felt that he had properly reawoken to life. Nevertheless, he had to look twice when he saw that the mahout was there again, What do you want now, he asked gruffly, don't tell me you've had another idea, Indeed I have, sir, Out with it then, Well, I've divided the men into two groups and they're going to take turns, every two or so kilometres, in helping the oxen, that will mean fifteen men at a time pushing the cart, you'll definitely notice the difference, Good thinking, no doubt about that round thing on your shoulders obviously serves some purpose, and my horses will certainly feel the benefit, being able to break into a trot now and then, rather than trudging along at parade-ground pace, Yes, that occurred to me too, sir, And to judge by the look on your face, something else has occurred to you as well, hasn't it, asked the commanding officer, Yes, sir, it has, What is it then, It seems to me that we should organise our lives in accordance with solomon's needs and habits, right now, for example, he's asleep, and if we woke him up, he'd be really irritable and only cause us trouble, But how can he possibly sleep standing up, asked the commanding officer, incredulous, He does lie down to sleep sometimes, but normally he sleeps on his feet, Hm, I really don't think I'll ever understand elephants, Well, I've been working with them almost since I was born and I still can't understand them, And why is that, Perhaps because an elephant is much more than just an elephant. Right, that's enough talk, But I have another idea to put to you, sir, Another idea, said the officer laughing, you're clearly no ordinary mahout, you're a veritable mine of ideas, You're too kind, sir, What else has that remarkable mind of yours produced, Well, I thought that since it's the cart that's setting the pace, it might be a better plan if you brought up the rear with your soldiers, with the ox-cart at the front, followed by me and the elephant, the men on foot and the quartermaster's wagon, No, that's what I call an idea, Yes, I thought so too, A stupid idea, I mean, Why, asked subhro, stung, and

unaware of the insulting nature of that blunt question asked directly of an officer, Because I and my soldiers would have to eat the dust kicked up by the feet of everyone else in front, Oh, how dreadful should have thought of that and I didn't, I beg you, sir, by all the saints in heaven's court, to forgive me, So what we'll do is gallop ahead now and then and wait for the rest of you to catch up, Yes, sir, that seems the perfect solution, may I go now, asked subhro, Wait, I have two further matters to take up with you, the first is this, if you ever again ask me why in the tone of voice you did just now, I will give orders for you to receive a good ration of lashes on your back, Yes, sir, murmured subhro, he bowed, The second has to do with that head on your shoulders and with this journey that has barely begun, I would like to know, always assuming there are still any useful ideas left in that noddle of yours, if you expect us to stay here until the end of time, for ever and ever, amen, Solomon is still asleep, sir, So the elephant's in charge here, is he, asked the commanding officer, half-annoyed and half-amused, No, sir, but you will doubtless recall that I mentioned earlier organising ourselves in accordance with, and I confess I don't know where I got that expression from, solomon's needs and habits, Meaning what, asked the commanding officer, who was beginning to lose patience, Well, solomon, in order to be at his best, and so that we can deliver him in good health to the archduke of austria, needs to rest during the hottest part of the day, Agreed, replied the commanding officer, slightly troubled by this reference to the archduke, but the fact is he has done almost nothing but sleep all day, Today doesn't count, sir, it's the first day and, as everyone knows, nothing ever goes well on the first day, So what should we do, We divide the days into three parts, the first, from early morning on, the third, lasting until sunset, so that we advance as quickly as we can, the second part of the day where we are now, should be set aside for eating and resting, That seems to me a good plan, said the commanding officer, deciding to opt for a more benevolent attitude. The change of tone encouraged the mahout to express the troubling thought that had been bothering him all day, There's something about this journey, sir, that I don't understand, And what is that, We haven't met a soul all the time we've been travelling and that, in my modest opinion, does not seem normal, You're mistaken, we've met quite a lot of people, coming from both directions, How is it I didn't see them then, asked subhro, his eyes wide with surprise, You were bathing the elephant, Do you mean to say that people passed each time solomon was taking a bath, Don't make me repeat myself, That's a strange coincidence, it's almost as if solomon didn't want to be seen, That's possible, yes, But we've been camped here for a good few hours now and no one has passed, That's for a different reason, people see the elephant from the distance, like a ghost, and immediately turn back or take a different route, perhaps thinking that solomon has been sent by the devil, How extraordinary, why, it had even occurred to me that our king had given orders to clear the roads, You're not that important, No, I'm not, but solomon is. The officer preferred not to respond to what seemed to be the beginning of a whole new discussion and said, Before you go, I'd like to ask you something, Please, I'm all ears, Do you remember, just now, having invoked all the saints in heaven's court, Yes, sir, I do, Does that mean you're a christian, now think carefully before you answer, More or less, sir, more or less.

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