

6.5.2025

Part 1: No One Writes to the Researcher

On May 7, in his room at the Peerless Hotel, Dr K sits on a desk chair that groans faintly, the air thick and sour with the evening summer damp and incessant hum of an overworked air conditioner. K's laptop screen gives a pale glow that cuts through his internal dimness, revealing an email inbox completely unchanged, a silent, indifferent taunt. No word yet from TS, the young curator at the Indian Museum, nor from SB, its powerful deputy director, whose permission K has pursued through unanswered emails for two months. TS's single reply mid-April, polite and promising but vague, had recommended that K coordinate again once he finalised his dates for Kolkata. He duly sent TS his dates, followed afterwards with weekly reminders, each a measured supplication, each drowned by silence from the other end. K is Kafka's Mr K, only that he has armed himself with a PhD. He thought, foolishly, that this hallowed title was his shield – its brittleness aside – against the world's indifference. Today, On May 8, however, he sits chastened, not unlike Kafka's shadowed everyman or Coetzee's lonely Michael K. He thinks of Marquez's time beaten colonel too, waiting for a pension that never arrives, hope mixed into dust with cruel indifference. K is no retired colonel though (his university deadlines chain him to action) but the echo of futile waiting claws at him like a dull toothache that hurts most when you stop thinking about it.

On May 6, TS's unresponsiveness notwithstanding, K had come down to Kolkata anyway, driven by his researcher's stubborn faith, but, also by the utter lack of options. The tickets, the university's funds, the early morning hours cramped in an airplane's whirr – these were also among his meagre offerings to a project that sought to chase colonial ghosts in SM Tagore's instrument collections housed in the recesses of the Indian Museum in India's first colonial metropolis. This collection that included flutes, lutes, and other stringed relics with nondescript accession numbers (5977, 5980, 6066) had haunted K's thoughts over the weeks, their catalogued 2D precision, a map to a history he ached to touch. He saw them in his mind's eye, their wood smoothed by time or roughed up by its constant sandy rub, their dusty metal strings mute and heavy with heritage's deadweight.

A man of small plans, K had decided not to bring NK, his luthier collaborator, along with him to the museum on this first visit; he was sure of a subsequent trip next week, when he'd have requested NK to take time off from his workshop. It had seemed prudent to confirm access himself before involving another, a decision that today, on May 8, feels both like foresight and folly, he cannot decide which.

The event as it happened: On an unforgiving summer morning on May 8, K, music historian, freshly-minted recipient of a cool grant, steps into the Indian Museum in Kolkata, its colonial facade sagging under time's weight, where upon several enquiries, he manages, finally, to meet TS, the face behind a singular promising email, in his barely-lit, bare desk-and-chair office. Their handshake is tentative, noncommittal. TS is himself a PhD candidate. This makes K a momentary senior, a war-veteran even (this was no month for war metaphors in India). TS is researching archaeo-astronomy, a term K meets with private amusement, like he did another prolix label 'ethno-organology' he had recently encountered. Why are these inter-disciplinary fields grasping so eagerly at a hyphenated identity, all too desperate to give up the freedom interdisciplinarity looked to bring them? Non sequitur.

K feels a fleeting kinship with this young man caught between scholarship and bureaucracy, as he ask to see the collection after weeks of waiting – he had to ask, was it not obvious. TS spoke softly, almost confiding, but unapologetic. “It won’t be possible to see the instruments at all,” did he really say that? The director had not granted permission; his absence looming unspoken like a loud lacuna. The museum is understaffed, a truth too delicate for email. No permanent curators hold the keys, real or figurative, to the reserve. K’s mind churns in an instant: he pictures the instruments, locked away, so near yet untouchable, like clean air obscured by urban smoke.

Irritation flares up his nostrils, sharp and unbidden. “This is so thoroughly unprofessional, why could you not respond to my emails and let me know all these past weeks? Would it not save me this entire trek and this expense?” K snaps breathlessly, his voice cutting through the oppressive air with a loudness that surprises him unpleasantly. On the floor below, a bunch of chatty boys stop in their tracks. Silence.

TS flinches mildly, “Well you had to come to Kolkata anyway, right?”

“No, I had to come primarily for this, and I made that quite clear in my emails,” his frustrated voice is still loud. A dying tube-light flickers in the distance, punctuating his inarticulate ire into an ellipsis.

“Yes, we received your emails. But nothing can be done, you see, till the Director gives his approval. The instruments are in the reserve, and we have no one to open the lock.” Has TS become the museum wall itself, sans window, sans skylight?

K feels an icy tension calcify instantly, a chasm between familiar strangers transforming into an unbridgeable crater. A pitiful shame burns his throat. He is not some despairing shouter, but the obstinate silence that met his emails, the wasted journey, the ticking clock of his grant have cracked him. His predicament had already been foretold in Kafka, a maze with no mouth, no end.

There is a phone call that K cannot miss. He moves away, returns. The hex is broken.

“I’m sorry,” he says, unwillingly trying to temper the raw outburst from two minutes ago.

“No, I do understand.”

“It’s not personal frustration against you, TS.” He begins to describe his project, the colonial threads that tie Tagore’s instruments across the world, he regurgitates the urgency of deadlines and inflexibility of flight bookings. As if all that might lend a certain *gravitas* to his desperation and move the bureaucratic mountain. His words are too disconnected, way too cold to thaw the newly petrified ice, he feels. But TS nods, his eyes gentler than before. “I’m sorry too that it’s turned out this way but there is precious little in my hands to do,” he explains, resting his palms just below his fading keyboard, his apology a small consolation in that moment. “Have a seat, please.”

K slumps into the cracked leather of the chair but props his elbows on the table to listen for any half notes of hope, ungracefully dangling between frustration and supplication.

“I will try to reach the director again today, but I cannot promise anything. He is also the director of the council that includes many other museums of Bengal. He comes to this museum only a few days. Give me your number.”

“But is he on leave or is he just not here?”

That is a bad question. The kind of question that spawns non sequiturs in the first place.

Anyway, the number is given. Disappointment coils inside K's chest, an octopus's arms floating as they please. Too shaken to return to the hotel room's sterile confinement, he wanders out of the dark office, seeking distraction in the sprawl of the museum's disproportionately large public galleries that yawn in uncounted trinkets of various times past.

Various art collections unfold before him. Rich, chaotic, unsympathetic. Kalighat paintings with their bold colours, Abanindranath Tagore's delicate washes, Pahadi works from Kangra glowing within their miniature precision. Many sculptures, the most interesting ones guarded by prohibitive stanchions. They stir him, these traces of hands long gone and returned to elements. He clicks many photographs aimlessly, trying to avoid obscuring the artefacts with his own reflection in the unfeeling geometry of the cold vitrinas. But to him, the beauty of these paintings feels distant, mannequin-like, unable to soothe his frustration. He drifts into the geological gallery; a cavern of stones and minerals displayed with despotic monotony. The sheer scale impresses him: crystals glinting, ores in endless rows of more glass boxes. But it oppresses his spirit, a sterile archive of earth's innards, so unreservedly meaningless to him. He hurries out, sauntering along the large verandas burning under the May sun.

He finds a statue of Victoria – “the Empress of India” – good click for a blogpost, hardly a “find”, standing as it does in the middle of the middle of the museum, impossible for anyone to miss. Colonial connections so nakedly conspicuous that they draw vandals, not scholars, ever desperate for an invisible cobweb, spat from across centuries into the present.

He wanders into the zoological collections in the Western courtyard. It feels more inviting, almost more kind. Taxidermized leopards, lions, deer, looming ancient giants, and their glass-eyed dead stares. He likes them, their stillness a reprieve from the endlessness of the fossils and ores of the last gallery. He quickly assigns to himself, a new, *quasi* purpose, searching in vain for taxidermized birds, hoping to tie a peacock to the *tāus*, the peacock-shaped instrument common to all Tagore collections around the world. The oriental fauna fascinated colonial masters. They could name them into existence, Adam like. How could the officious sounding “peacock” – a derivative name, not even a name, a type – possibly capture the poetry, the music, and the dance of the “*tāus*”? There is none – peacock or taus – or they are hidden, but absence in this museum is a blade too blunted now to cut K further.

Inner annoyance projects on to insignificant details. He cannot help but note the carelessness of the curation: the thick unpolished glass vitrines make harsh the softest of lights, obfuscating the artefacts they are meant to exhibit. There is no story, no sense of history, no narration. It is a heap of broken images, broken, at the very least, from the pasts in which they had come to be. Do only dates and names make history? Why, then, history is merely a constellation of captions.

The ceilings of these galleries are high enough for a two-and-half-storey building, impossible for air-cons to de-humidify. Air is continuously stirred and made noisy by rickety, human sized pedestal fans from within their corroded iron frames. The museum visitors grate on him: couples on dates, giggling by the relics, drowning in selfies; families marshalled by loud old men, striding forth with proprietary swagger, letting out meaningless authoritarian instruction upon meaningless authoritarian instruction. Their presence is almost blasphemous to him. Let those Egyptian mummies sleep; he murmurs. Let these thousand Buddha rock sculptures meditate themselves back into oblivion. But the chatter of families is only a mockery of his own predicament.

K cannot bear it any longer. He collects his bag and steps into the sweltering heat, letting the city's lazy din swallow him. The walk to the Peerless Hotel is a blur, his thoughts a tangle of Sisyphus and Marquez's colonel, both trapped in a futile cyclicity. K is neither, yet both – a man driven to act, yet resigned to labour without reward, at least today. Until May 12, when his flight shall deposit him back to Delhi, he shall return to the museum daily, he shall plead again, wait again, and hope for someone to break the Sisyphian cycle. The instruments, comatose in the museum reserve, await his touch, until then they remain a soundless affront. He types a WhatsApp message now, fingers heavy, thanking TS for promising to try again. Hope is a frayed thread, but one must cling to it. Tomorrow's another day. Roll the stone. Roll the dice.