



Jaan Kaplinski

The visitor

The Director of the N. zoological museum didn't especially like his job, but it gave him plenty of free time and a study where he could sit in peace, to work on his doctoral thesis. There were serious problems with the museum. Lack of money and lack of interest on the part of the university bosses made it nearly impossible to reverse the slow degradation of exhibits and furniture. There were yellowish spots on the ceiling that had been there when he visited the museum for the first time as a young student. On the floor above, a water pipe had leaked or a tap was not working properly. It had been repaired, but nobody had whitewashed the damaged ceiling. There were many other things in need of repair, refurbishment, or simply cleaning up. He had himself put new locks on some glass cabinets containing rare specimens of tropical butterflies and exotic worms in alcohol. These locks had been broken by Soviet soldiers during the war: they had looked for spirits and drank every drop, even from the jar where a large tapeworm found in the intestines of an elk was preserved. The tapeworm had survived — if we can use the word in speaking of a parasite dead for a hundred years — this act of vandalism; whether the soldiers survived, nobody knew.

Worst of course were the exhibits themselves, and although his experiences had made of him a nearly accomplished fatalist, he was still disturbed and even angry when he found new traces of moths in the fur of the grizzly bear or even worse: in the piece of mammoth skin found in Siberia in the 1880s and brought to his town by a renowned explorer, geographer, and zoologist whose name had been given to some newly discovered species of rodents in China and South Asia. The Director had even bought some insecticide with his own money, frustrated by the lack of interest from his superiors in the fate of the bear, the mammoth skin, or the stuffed tropical birds which had preserved the colours of their feathers despite the moths and the dust. Yes, the dust was even worse than the moths, it gathered in the hair of little marsupials and in the feathers of hummingbirds, and was nearly impossible to wipe away without damaging these rare specimens, collected and brought here about one hundred and fifty years ago by an eccentric nobleman who spent most of his time travelling in Australia, New Zealand, and South America. When he died, little was left of his former wealth, his heirs had to sell his manor houses and his collections that were bought by the university. Possibly the dust was nowadays more aggressive, containing something acid or oily. It seemed to eat into hair and feathers, making them look dull and greyish.

But despite all this, he liked the museum: after the collapse of what had been the USSR, when people became free to visit Western countries, he had rarely seen anything similar to it. Some of the old museums in Europe had been destroyed during the war, some had been modernized, made more attractive and entertaining for the general public. He thought it was perhaps his egoism

that made him oppose such modernization: in the old-fashioned nineteenth-century museum, it was easier for him to do his work undisturbed by unwelcome visitors and the constant need to invent new ways to attract more of them. He disliked advertising, all the noisiness, humbug, and banality that had invaded the country after the coming of freedom. Maybe he was a traditionalist by character, maybe the years spent in the museum had made him a traditionalist; anyhow, he found his study and the museum a kind of a lonely island amidst the muddy currents of innovation and entrepreneurship that were rapidly changing everything around him.

Here he had the feeling that time had stopped or was moving at a quiet pace as it probably had when the museum was founded and everything still seemed stable and solid. One of his friends, a mathematician, once said he liked pre-First-World-War furniture: it was not designed for people who moved, but for people who lived all their lives in the same flat, in the same house. Like these heavy oak desks, massive glass cabinets, and built-in bookcases full of books on zoology and geography. There were some rare volumes he kept in a well-locked cabinet: books with autographs by von Baer, Cuvier, Darwin, Haeckel, and Alexander von Humboldt. They all had been in contact, corresponded with professors here, some of whom were quite famous during their lifetime. It was something to show to foreign visitors, some of whom confessed they had a liking for the genuine nineteenth-century atmosphere in the museum, and — as some of them were frank enough to admit — in the university in general. Something his bosses wouldn't have been happy to hear: they were engaged in a P.R. campaign trying to prove that after the gloomy years of Communist dictatorship, the university was once again a wholly modern scientific institution doing important research on IT, semiconductors, and computing.

As for himself, he was happy enough to be able to study the dynamics of some bird populations that were quite healthy and numerous in his country, in sharp contrast to their decay in more advanced and rich European countries. Not all his visitors shared nostalgic feelings for the nineteenth-century atmosphere in the university, but all of them admired the abundance of wildlife they could observe on shorter or longer field trips he organized for them. They were happy to offer him help and the possibility for cooperation in studying wildlife that no longer exists in the West. Thus he could take the best of both worlds, making use of laboratory facilities in the West and getting necessary software from his European colleagues while living and making field studies in his own country, which was still less populated, polluted, and developed than the rich ones. Sometimes he found he felt a kind of perverse gratitude to the Soviet system, which had transformed huge areas of formerly agricultural landscape in his country into nature parks jealously guarded from both local people and foreigners by the all-powerful military.

After all, the Soviet system had also preserved this nineteenth-century atmosphere in the museum and university. His friend the mathematician thought the museum was less a museum of zoology than a museum of good and bad old times. The mathematician wished he were a dictator: he would preserve the university, the town, and maybe the whole country as a museum exhibit, a historical reservation: wasn't every epoch in itself worth being preserved for future generations? Yes, the Director nearly agreed with him: the museum was really something more than a museum of zoology. But he himself? Wasn't he too a museum exhibit, something belonging to his time, something visitors could look at and study as a rare specimen of *Homo soveticus*?

Yes, in principle the museum was there for visitors, but there were not many of them, clearly even fewer than in Soviet times, when there was much less entertainment for young and old, fewer TV series about wildlife, and fewer trips to France, Italy, and Greece. But still, every spring, busloads of kids from provincial schools arrived in his town: their parents had no money to pay for excursions to Scandinavia or western Europe, and their teachers considered it their duty to take them to all museums in the town, although the boys and girls, especially the teenagers, demonstrated very clearly their total lack of interest for everything smelling of history and dust. At best they exchanged obscene comments on their teachers and the stuffed animals (he had to concede they sometimes bore some similarity to each other, clearly belonging to a very different world than the students), before rushing out to buy more coke and chips from the nearest kiosk.

The little kids were different: they even seemed to have a feeling of awe standing before the skeleton of a mammoth and the two stuffed bisons. They stopped to look at the bears and the lynx. Once a little girl asked him, "Sir, is this big cat alive?" Usually he didn't guide the excursions himself: he had an aide, often a student eager to earn a little extra money. But there were some groups of students he liked and wanted to meet personally, if possible: these were the naturalists, children with a real, sometimes passionate, interest for animals and nature. Some of them were already well read in biology, some had done some serious research, observed birds, small rodents, or insects. Once a year there was a gathering of them at the university. He really admired these youngsters who pursued their interest with such gentle determination, paying little attention to the lures of the emerging consumer society and to their own poverty: a few of them came from small townships and were really poor, their parents having lost their jobs, and living on unemployment benefits. But he felt sure these guys would go on and enter the university: they were predestined to become biologists despite all the ups and downs of economics and politics. They were born to carry rubber boots and backpacks, to sleep in tents and wade through muddy streams. Like him: he had been such a passionate naturalist himself, and had a special relationship with them. Sometimes he could even help them, giving them a little money as prizes for papers they presented to the university biologists who acted as a jury. And during the gathering, they were taken to the university canteen and had free dinners there.

Every weekend, families came to the museum. Most often dads with their little children, rarely moms. Either the furry stuffed animals had some special attraction for the little boys still lurking in the grown-up men, or taking the kids to the museum was just the easiest way for them to do something with the children. Perhaps they really wanted to be with them, perhaps they had just been sent out by moms who were cleaning up the flat.

Rarely were there other visitors in the museum. Of course, retired people sometimes came, sometimes a group of elderly Finns or Swedes was brought here, sometimes some Mormons or Christian fundamentalists came to try to convert him and gave him books on Creationist biology. He observed these people like rare specimens of birds — for some reason they reminded him first of all of birds — and noticed that mostly they were just satisfied with the work they had done and not worried by its results. They had fulfilled their duty, they had tried to save him, they had gathered some merit points for themselves, and the rest was up to him and God.

There were a couple of lunatics who visited him from time to time, too. Fortunately, they were not very troublesome. One wrote long treatises

explaining that his people came from a sunken continent and had a special mission here on Earth; according to him, it was proven by their peculiar anthropometric characteristics. He believed that it was absolutely necessary to forbid all mixed marriages and restore the pure race of the chosen people who had once left their homeland. Now the time was ripe, if there were enough people of this ancient race on Earth, the sunken continent would rise again and the golden age would return... The other believed he could understand the language of birds and told the Director stories he believed he had heard from crows, jackdaws, and pigeons; curiously enough, mostly frivolous stories of common small-town gossip.

When the girl student manning the reception desk this late afternoon came over with the visitor, he saw at once that the man was a loony, too. He was dressed in a sheepskin coat and had on massive boots and an old fur hat such as the peasants used to wear a generation ago. On his back he carried a cloth bag.

The girl announced a bit uneasily that the man wanted to speak with the Director; she probably felt that it should have been her duty not to let this strange man in.

– OK, *the Director said*, thank you. You can go home, I'll stay here for an hour or two. *And turning to the man, he asked:*

– What can I do for you? *noticing at the same time that the stranger had beautiful, childish blue eyes. He couldn't tell his age, perhaps he was about sixty.*

The man smiled, and his face seemed for a moment even more childish. – My greetings to you and thank you for receiving me in this honourable institution. I would appreciate it if you could answer some of my questions about certain animals that once lived on Earth.

He couldn't but feel real curiosity. A man who spoke solemnly using such old-fashioned expressions could be an interesting specimen of Homo. And there was something pleasant in him, he was probably not aggressive, hopefully not too talkative either.

– Thanks for the compliments, I am ready to answer your questions, if I only can.

– Thank you. I was told by some lads and lasses in the vicinity that there are some stuffed ancient animals in your institution. Are there some among them that are now extinct, exterminated by man?

– Sure, *he answered*. One or two species of hummingbirds, one species of toad, and some marsupials which have not been spotted for many years. And the famous migratory pigeon from America you may know about.

– Yes, of course, *nodded the visitor*. I remember it quite well. One moment please, I must search for them in my book.

He picked up the bag, untied its laces, and took out a thick, old book.

– Can you please tell me the names of these creatures, preferably in Latin?

The Director said he certainly could, but that he must check them up in his books. Couldn't the visitor sit down, he may have come a long way.

– Yes, quite a long way according to your criteria, *was the answer*.

The visitor sat on a chair and began to browse through his big book. Catching a glimpse of it, the Director noticed that it was handwritten, possibly not in Latin characters, but he couldn't be sure of that. Maybe the old man had invented a script of his own: he had heard of mentally ill people who did precisely this.

He found the Latin names of the extinct species, told them to the visitor, and asked him if he would like to see them in the glass cabinets. The man said yes, and they went into the museum proper. As they stopped in front of the cabinet of hummingbirds, he showed the visitor a bird that was extinct according to the latest information he had. The visitor nodded. Suddenly a veil of melancholy had fallen on the merry childishness of his clear-blue eyes.

As they walked on towards the showcase holding the migratory pigeon, the visitor said, as if to himself:

– Yes, man, man, I should have listened to my angels, they warned me, they warned me, but it was too late, I had already done it...

Then he turned to the Director and asked:

– What do you think, was it a mistake that I created you, Homo sapiens?

So that was it! The visitor considered himself to be God himself. It was certainly not a common thing even among the psychiatric patients. In asylums you could easily find prophets, kings, dictators, Napoleons, and Gengis Khans, but he had never heard of anybody pretending to be God himself. The poor man was probably worrying about ecological problems and thought himself, as the creator of mankind, responsible for all the mess the genus Homo had made on Earth. He couldn't but feel some sympathy for him: it would certainly not be easy to be God, real or imaginary.

– You know, we biologists often think man is a kind of a failure, a mighty neural computer serving the interests of a capricious little child. But as men ourselves, we can't be too self-critical, we can't deny our own right to exist, despite the fact that we are now denying this right to so many other living beings.

They stopped in front of the pigeon, an old, already damaged bird fastened to a branch and looking at the visitors with its dark-brown glass eyes. The visitor nodded once more and said:

– Yes, it's really a problem both for me and for you. But what is your opinion: would it be reasonable to resuscitate these extinct animals, at least some of them? Could they survive in the world, if man is still there, or is it hopeless?

The Director said he didn't have any definite opinion on this subject. It had never even been an academic problem for biologists, although it could become one, thanks to the advances in genetic engineering. Some researchers had already discussed the possibility of re-creating the mammoth. But yes, for some species the situation was really hopeless, there was no place left for them, as Homo was colonizing the last remaining patches of wilderness.

– I am really worried about this issue: I feel I should do something. But for me, too, it would be woeful to destroy a species it took me such an effort to create and on whom I have placed so many hopes. And there are still some really righteous people on Earth, how could I send them back to Nothing? Maybe there is still a compromise possible. What do you think?

The old lunatic seemed so genuine in his worries that the Director couldn't but feel some sympathy for him. Unfortunately, he could do very little to help him, but maybe a reassuring, optimistic answer would somehow calm him down. He tried to summarize his ideas in a more positive tone:

– I think it could be possible. The demographic explosion (he wondered whether the visitor knew this expression) shows signs of slowing down; if the number of people on Earth remained stable or began to diminish, there would still be hope for both nature and mankind...

He caught himself formulating a serious plea for the genus Homo to a madman who believed he was God himself. It was ridiculous, he had to cut it short and send the man away. He had more serious things to do.

– After all, you know, our species is a relatively young one, maybe we are still able to learn something. But I must excuse myself, I have some work to do, and the museum is officially closed already. Do you wish to see something more?

– No, thank you very much, it was really generous of you... yes, you are right, you are a young species, yes, you should perchance have some more time to learn. But still, it will be very hard for you to respond, when I come and ask what you have done with all the beings I demanded you rule and take care of... Oh, still one little question, if you permit...

– You're welcome.

– It's about this pigeon. Do you think it would have a chance to survive, to have a — what was the word, o yes, habitat — if it were to reappear on Earth?

– The pigeon, *Ectopistes migratorius*. Yes, I think there could be enough habitat for the pigeon, it could manage quite well.

– Thank you very much indeed. Now it's time for me to depart. It was really a pleasure to meet you. I am sure we will meet in the future world. Farewell.

The old man put the book back into his bag and bowed; he escorted him to the door, and watched as he went down the large stairs leading to the hall and from there to the front door. There, the visitor turned around and waved the Director goodbye. The Director went back to the museum. The student had left, he had to turn the lights off himself. Going to the switches, he heard a strange noise from the far end of the room. He went over. The noise came from the showcase of the migratory pigeon, *Ectopistes migratorius*. The bird was fluttering around, hitting the glass panes in its attempt to get out.

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