

VINTAGE SARAMAGO

THE ELEPHANT'S
JOURNEY

VINTAGE

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ABOUT THE BOOK

Solomon the elephant's life is about to be upturned. For two years he has been in Lisbon, brought from the Portuguese colonies in India. Now King Dom João III wishes to make him a wedding gift for the Hapsburg archduke, Maximilian. It means the poor pachyderm must travel from Lisbon to Vienna on foot - the only option when transporting a large animal such a long way.

So begins a journey that will take the stalwart Solomon across the dusty plains of Castile, over the sea to Genoa and up to northern Italy where, like Hannibal's elephants before him, he must cross the snowy Alps. Accompanying him is his quiet keeper, Subhro, who watches while — at every place they stop — people try to turn Solomon into something he is not. From worker of holy miracles to umbrella stand, the unassuming elephant suffers the many attempts of humans to impose meaning on what they don't understand.

An enchanting mix of fact, fable and fantasy, and peppered with witty reflection on human failings and achievements, it is, in the end, about the journey of life itself.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

José Saramago is one of the most important international writers of the last hundred years. Born in Portugal in 1922, he was in his sixties when he came to prominence as a writer with the publication of *Baltasar & Blimunda*. A huge body of work followed, translated into almost fifty languages, and in 1998 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. Saramago died in June 2010.

Margaret Jull Costa has translated works by Eça de Queiroz, Fernando Pessoa and José Régio, as well as a number of leading Spanish authors. Her translation of José Saramago's *All the Names* won the Weidenfeld Translation Prize.

ALSO BY JOSÉ SARAMAGO

Fiction

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

Cain

Non-fiction

Journey to Portugal

Small Memories

For Pilar, who wouldn't let me die

JOSÉ SARAMAGO

The Elephant's Journey

TRANSLATED FROM THE PORTUGUESE BY
Margaret Jull Costa

VINTAGE

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

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

Book of Itineraries

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, with admirable elegance, to avoid having to go into details of a physical and physiological nature, 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 alcácer-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 a 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 judah, 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 an 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, p ero de alc çova 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, ant nio 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 say 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 response, Although there are those who say that the fates who presided over my birth did not endow me with a gift for words, Words are not everything, my lord, going to visit the elephant solomon today is a 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, sir, 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 why, 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, I 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 peoples, that, despite the disappointments, frustrations and disillusiones 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 the animal so dirty, asked the king, where is his keeper, I assume there is a keeper. A man with indian 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 this 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 that 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 a 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. A somewhat relative splendour, it must be said. The skin of an asian elephant like solomon is thick, a 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 contented 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 of 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