

Difficult  
Loves



<sup>1</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, *Sonnets to Orpheus with Letters to a Young Poet*, Manchester, Carcanet, 2000, p. 203.

<sup>2</sup> The Curator is the first of such characters to appear in this essay, real people whose names are changed into descriptions of their occupations or their roles in the photographer's life.

## Difficult loves

I

*How could things not be difficult for us?*

(Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*)<sup>1</sup>

For a photographer whose abiding themes have been empty spaces and absence, self-portraits are a matter of playfulness as well as caution. So, when invited to take part in an exhibition of self-portraits, Dayanita Singh sent the photograph of a young girl in bed hiding her face under a pillow. “But these are not your legs, Dayanita!”, exclaimed the puzzled editor. Calling this photograph a self-portrait provides a key to understanding the ongoing life of images in Dayanita’s personal archive. A photograph made by her is realized only when it becomes part of a deliberately crafted meaning, discovered in the process of bringing the image into relation with other images. So a single image could have multiple realizations at different moments of time, each placing it in a different sequence of images, and in a different context, form and date of publication. The photograph of the girl, for instance, is the opening image in *Go Away Closer* (Steidl, 2007). It reappears, in a much smaller format, as part of another sequence in the *Calcutta* volume of *Sent a Letter* (Steidl, 2008), and was shown in the same year in a show in Paris called *Exquisite Shadows*, where it was called *Poppy, 2005*. Dayanita made it in 2005 in Calcutta, while stopping at the house of an old friend during her travels with another friend, the Curator.<sup>2</sup> She remembers the moment of photographing her friend’s daughter, Poppy. “I’ve been here before”, she had found herself saying, and it constitutes what she later began to refer to privately as the Poppy Moment. And one of its defining elements is that it was not just a single moment, but one in which various strands of memory, several levels of being in time, converged to produce something like an epiphany, transforming her photographic practice and marking a profound shift in her inner life.

The emotions that were stirred up during that moment led back into her past, linking a vision of the past to a sense of the present, and opening up a vista into the unknown. They remained within her in all their intensity, compelling her to return to her contact sheets and start picking out those images that would echo, elaborate and counterpoint those feelings and associations that now cohered around the image of the girl. This was how *Go Away Closer* took shape, together with a way of sequencing photographs and of making books that was new to Dayanita. It inaugurated a manner of working that formed, in hindsight, the culmination of her movement away from photojournalism and documentary photography, towards a practice that would transform her relationships with people and her own self, with time and place, and with the other arts, especially literature, music and cinema.

The photograph of the girl was made in the house of a close friend in Calcutta in the company of the Curator. Both the girl and her mother figure more than once in the family portraits of *Privacy* (Steidl, 2003) and, later, in *Ladies of Calcutta* (2008), forming the nucleus of Dayanita's Calcutta family. Patterns of return and departure mark the spirals of repetition and progress in her evolution as a photographer: coming back to people, places and motifs, and then taking off in unexpected directions. Poppy's photograph comes out of the world of the family portraits and enters another story, and another way of making stories. But none of this would be possible without the stimulus and inner presence of specific people who bring their gifts into the life of the photographer and become not just the subjects of her photographs but, more crucially, the addressees of the new language that she forges out of their often-unwitting gifts. What is thus set up within her work are circuits of receiving and giving that begin to mesh with the patterns of departure and return in her life and work. The fruition of the Poppy Moment would not have happened without the incessant conversations on photography's relationship with the inner life that Dayanita was having with the Curator while travelling with him. These conversations over many weeks led to a way of sequencing photographs that eluded obvious chronology or arrangement by themes. The sequences would bring out hidden and unpredictable associations, shifts and rhythms, stirring the mind as much as the eye.

This way of sequencing images is therefore inseparable from what the Curator stands for in Dayanita's artistic education. An earlier conversation is also crucial to how she would make her books. This was with the Publisher, in whose office, in the early 1990s, she had left a portfolio of photographs after failing to meet him. It was the Publisher who urged her to work out a combination of the visual and the verbal in *Myself Mona Ahmed* (Scalo, 2001) that turned the book into a mix of photo-book, biography, autobiography and fiction. Returning to *Myself Mona Ahmed* in the light of what Dayanita went on to do afterwards makes it a more significant achievement than a mere early work attempting to get out of the clutches of photojournalism. It is, in effect, a "visual novel" that uses various kinds of text alongside the photographs to weave together photography and literature in the unfolding of a life. This life is much more the story of an inward journey and a relationship than the documentary account of a different social reality and sexual identity. To call the book a visual novel would be to go beyond chronology and use a phrase that was part of a more recent conversation, on the Internet, between Dayanita in Delhi and the Publisher in Zurich. In it, he communicates to her his excitement after looking at a new body of work by her that he refers to as a visual novel, "the novels that lurk in pictures, with a contemporary consciousness of ruptures, blockages, surprises, interruptions". The origins

of this consciousness are in a specific kind of interiority: "Between the unconscious and the conscious there is a whole realm of semi-consciousness, where our collective imaginary houses in a huge palace of phantasy. It comes to us the second before we fall asleep and the moment after waking up. The realm of art." He goes on to compare the pulse of this new body of work with the "rhythms and frictions" of Steve Reich's music. But his experience of it remains anchored, nevertheless, to the physical experience of reading a book, in which "turning a page is more than a movement". *Myself Mona Ahmed* is thus born out of words, images and ideas moving between people to form a matrix of exchanges that transcends the linearity of time and the fixities of place.

Integral to this matrix is the Book-maker, whom Dayanita first met on the streets of one city, after the opening of her *Empty Spaces* exhibition in 2001, and then again and again in another city, where he would introduce her to a new combination of freedom and rigour. It was with the Book-maker that she began moving away from the gallery and the market towards the making of books, buoyed by the seriousness of his response to each of her artistic adventures. Henceforth, the realization of photographs would become identified with the book as a work of art in its own right. With the Book-maker, every stage in the making of a book is a process of unrelenting labour that would include being woken at four in the morning to check the proofs. It is with the Book-maker's unconditional and unwavering assent that Dayanita has been able to keep at the core of her work the notion of the book as a specific form of the gift that somehow by-passes the traditional ways of the market through radically different ways of dissemination. It is in collusion with the Book-maker that *Chairs* (Steidl and Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, 2005) became a limited-edition book that was distributed through a network of friends instead of being sold. Each friend got his own edition of ten, which he then gifted to people who were unknown to Dayanita. And *Sent a Letter* became a series of portable exhibitions that also fitted back into the reader's personal "nano-library" as mass-produced, affordably-priced volumes. In the *Calcutta* volume of *Sent a Letter*, Poppy's photograph becomes a moment in the journey, from daybreak towards nightfall, that the Book-maker made with Dayanita in Calcutta, stopping often to notice the making and selling of books on its streets.

At least four long, though intermittent, friendships, linked to four ways of life, and four ongoing conversations in four different places dovetail in the realization of the Poppy Moment. So the challenge of letting these realizations go into the world as exhibitions and books lies in forging new forms of doublespeak that address specific persons and invoke specific memories in a shared personal language, but also make a different kind of sense, to unknown readers who are given no information at all about these pictures. Literature and

music, always present below the surface of Dayanita's work, become the secret springs of this doublespeak.

Enter the Writer, a decade ago, with his gentle, difficult and enduring gifts acting upon the imagination like slow-release medication – books, music and films which have become part of the artist's private altar of gradually understood and imbibed principles and standards. Even when some are yet to be read, listened too or watched, they remain vital gifts purely because of the depth of their association with the giver. Real trips made with the Writer take on, in retrospect, the aura of entering the heightened world of art, or the fascination of exploring the labyrinths of an unknown and unknowable mind. So being in Venice with him would be like inhabiting the worlds of Mann, Mahler and Visconti without having to know their works directly, but through their mediation by a mind that they inform. One of the Writer's gifts was a recording of Mahler's *First Symphony*, which Dayanita was playing on a loop while editing and sequencing *Go Away Closer*. The epic scale of Mahler's storytelling, swinging between lightness and desolation, with its richness of feeling interlaced with intimations of mortality, its little subplots full of mischief and surprises, and its creation of closeness and distance within the structures of music – all these became part of *Go Away Closer*, as of every subsequent body of work in which sequencing plays a key role.

Dayanita's absorption of musical rhythm, shape and structure began when she was a child. Her father would take her to concerts of Hindustani classical music, which she remembers him recording on his spool deck. But a more prolonged exposure to Hindustani music happened when she travelled as a student photographer with the Musician and his peers during six winters in the 1980s, photographing them for a graduation project that became her first book. The Musician, together with his masters and peers, gave Dayanita the chance to experience the art of musical elaboration through the building up of the *raga*. It was another version of the old game of giving and not giving, of creating suspense by deferring the promised end. She learnt how they left their audiences unslaked, so that what the listeners carried away with them when the music was over was not only the memory of what was heard but also an unheard music, which becomes a gift in its not-being-given. But the Musician became a mentor in a larger sense too, his art of musical elaboration inseparable from a way of life that was as unconventional as it was focused. He made her realize that the rigorous nurturing of creativity demanded the rejection of conventional ways of being, and this demand could only be met by a kind of severance from the protection of the family. What the rejection of convention would serve is not a kind of artistic bohemianism, but its exact opposite: an austere, classical rigour ferociously devoted to the single-minded and undistracted pursuit of one's art. In this, he would

remain a mentor for life. A few months before she started her annual journeys with the musicians, Dayanita lost her father, but gained her mother's support for the path she would then choose as a student photographer. Her mother freed her, Dayanita writes in *Privacy*, "from social norms and even from herself". Adventures, at their most rewarding, would henceforth be founded on a series of such hard-won freedoms.

It is not only a music system that seems to be watching over Poppy's bed, but also a pile of books on its head-board and a shelf of them behind it. At the end of the book-haunted *Allahabad* volume of *Sent A Letter*, the Writer crouches in front of a bookshelf, much like the one behind Poppy's bed, absorbed in a book. Among his gifts to Dayanita are some books, which, like the Mahler symphony, would have a profound impact on the photographer's work. As they shrink in size and the words dwindle until there are almost none, her books ask to be held and read as one does a novel, a diary, or a volume of letters or poems. To want to create literature yet wish to be spared the use of words, to address someone yet keep that gesture silent, to crave the power of words yet want to elude them, to arouse the eye but feed the mind is to live out the paradox of a photographer who keeps moving beyond the making of pictures towards the making of books. Photography must therefore create its own access to a whole universe of reference – allusions, echoes, resonances and reflections – drawn from the myriad worlds of the other arts, determined by the peculiar character of the individual photographer's inner life and circumstances.

It is from the world of words that Dayanita draws her metaphors for articulating a vision of the limitations of photography divorced from thought. Now, more than ever, when it is possible for everyone to master the craft of photography with little effort and time, photography needs the slow shaping power of thought. For Dayanita, taking technically faultless photographs is like learning to use a language correctly. But just as learning to read and write English does not make one a writer, to be able to take photographs does not make one a photographer. It is not his learning to use English correctly but what he does with the mastered language that constitutes the writer's literary style. For this to happen, the words, however flawlessly spelt and understood, cannot exist by themselves. They must form sentences that combine to form meaningful units of text. Literature happens only when these units of text are shaped by thought and imagination into poems, short stories, novels and other literary forms. Similarly, to make photographs without being able to put them together into meaningful shapes and forms, or to delegate the work of thought to gallerists, curators, editors, publishers or catalogue-essayists, is to remain stuck at producing language without transforming it into literature. Yet, for Dayanita, finding herself in a community of artists characterized by the centrality of thought in their work is inseparable

from the presence of the Gallerist in her life. Unobtrusive, wise and naturally reticent, the Gallerist is like a common sky above her thinking artists. Shedding her gentle light upon their lives and work, she nurtures their worlds of thought, protecting them from the worldliness of galleries and markets.

It is in works of literature, rather than in photography, that Dayanita finds the closest reflections of the inward life and shape of her own books: in the way Michael Ondaatje mixes continuity and waywardness in *Running in the Family* to find the right form for his stories of loss and remembering; in his use of apparently disconnected fragments in *Coming Through Slaughter*, mingling history and fiction, jazz and photography, to explore the haunting of each by the other; and in Italo Calvino's creation of complex sequences and structures, with nuggets of fantasy honed to precision, in *Invisible Cities*. While discussing the writers who were most important for his own work, J. M. Coetzee writes that the "deepest lessons one learns from other writers are, I suspect, matters of rhythm, broadly conceived". It is not ideas that one picks up from other writers, Coetzee explains, but "style, an attitude to the world, [which] as it soaks in, becomes part of the personality, part of the self, ultimately indistinguishable from the self".<sup>3</sup>

If these books by Ondaatje and Calvino become part of the rhythms of Dayanita's work and of her being, then Calvino's "The Adventure of a Photographer", in *Difficult Loves*, and W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* open for her perilous windows into, out of and eventually beyond photography. These books, and others like them, are all double, and double-edged, gifts. Double, because they are not only gifts from the makers of words to a maker of images, but, in this case, they also happen to be actual gifts from actual persons. Double-edged, because, like most gifts, they exact as much as they enrich, arousing in the photographer a longing for the world of words that would always be the Elsewhere to her art. In *Sent a Letter*, the picture that ends the *Padmanabhapuram* sequence is an apt image for this aspect of the making and dissemination of some of Dayanita's most significant bodies of work: gifts received, absorbed, transformed and then given back again through the natural generosity of art. It is a photograph of the statue of a woman who joins her hands in a gesture that is frozen between giving and taking. Her hands are as empty as her eyes, but what turns this image into another self-portrait is the way the statue's hands rest against the belly, recalling how the Hasselblad is held while making a picture.

When the student photographer responded to an inner compulsion to leave her familiar life and what she had set out to study in response to the pull of another kind of art that had nothing to do with words or images, she was already opening herself to other forms of thought and vision, other means of creating beauty and knowledge, other ways of

<sup>3</sup> Quoted by David Attwell in an interview with Coetzee at <http://www.dn.se/kultur-noje/an-exclusive-interview-with-j-m-coetzee-1.227254>.

<sup>4</sup> Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, Vol. 2: *In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower*, London, Penguin, 2002, p. 450.

confronting the unknown within herself and in the world. From its beginnings, Dayanita's art risks situating itself at the threshold of a universe whose pleasures and fulfilments always appear to lie beyond the limits of the photographic medium. The worlds of eye and ear and those of the mind and the imagination exist alongside, or intertwined with, one another. But gazing across and beyond their borders also makes one confront the gulfs between them, and this constitutes the exhilaration and the peril of letting one's sensibility be irredeemably promiscuous. But that soon becomes the only way to be, making photography the vehicle as well as potentially the victim of such compulsions. With the entry of literature and reading, the dangers become more complicated. Books are not only cherished objects, but they are also spaces that open up inside one's head and behind one's eyes, pushing against the limits of either. Inside these spaces of reading, literature becomes inseparable from the stuff of lived experience, feelings and memory, so that they form, in turn, that "inner darkroom" in which, according to Proust, the ghosts of photography turn into creatures of more enduring substance: "Pleasures are like photographs. In the presence of the person we love, we take only negatives, which we develop later, at home, when we have at our disposal once more our inner darkroom, the door of which it is strictly forbidden to open while others are present."<sup>4</sup>

This is at once an affirmation of photography and its subordination to what is more immediate and real to the interior life of human beings: to love and its transformation into writing. In Proust, photography turns into a metaphor when confronted with the immediacy of love and the truth of literature, in spite of its relationship with the real and the beautiful. His door, rather than letting photography in, seems to shut it out from a realm of privacy meant for the solitude of reading and writing, and this solitude's secret traffic with memory and the emotions. To see how photography is continually invoked in Proust, as in Calvino and Sebald, only to be subsumed under the rule of reading and writing, to note how these writers allow photography to exist only when it looks towards something larger than or beyond itself, is to take a measure of the wealth of danger Dayanita admits into her art by placing literature and music, and their distinct worlds of thought and feeling, at its core. Her work is thus born out of a kind of intellectual and existential promiscuity, an all-absorbing hunger that is at once outwardly directed and inwardly trained. It is to risk the carpet being pulled continually from beneath the feet of her art, abandoning it to the *terra semi incognita* in which it must keep losing and finding its way.

## II

The girl on a narrow bed hiding her face from the woman with the camera becomes the wild and forlorn bevy on an expanse of terrace in Varanasi, held in what looks like an infinitely spacious confinement by river, sky and the dim, far shore. Self-sufficient in their work, play and worship, they seem caught in a timeless place between protection and abandonment. Poppy and these girls, who sometimes float like weightless spirits or shadows, conjure up the vision of a childhood lost and found in which the photographer herself occupies a strange, uncertain position. To be allowed to enter, or hover close to, other childhoods is to confront something like a wardrobe of impossible selves – impossible because they embody unrealized possibilities associated with people and places rediscovered through photography and made part of the history of the present. The terrace on which the girls work and play in Varanasi is that of an *ashram* for girls run by the devotees of a female mystic from Bengal, and head of a spiritual order, with whom Dayanita's father and his family have had a long connection. Being sent to this *ashram*, to which her father would take her as a child, was thus a real possibility during her early years. She recalls the family visits to the Mystic, whose world is associated in Dayanita's memory with her father's own robustly masculine, yet peculiarly mystical, spirituality, built upon the union of love and detachment. He would drive with her, on a whim, to see the Taj Mahal on a full-moon night, and they would often stay up until dawn talking about life and death. His combination of attachment and inner distance became the ideal against which her deep, everyday closeness to him was perpetually tested. A few months after his death in 1981, she took her father's ashes to Hardwar to scatter them in the river, accompanied by friends from her schooldays – her Bombay family – who had come with their father to scatter earth from their mother's grave in the river.

Almost two decades after her father's death, Dayanita returned for the first time to the *ashram* in Varanasi in the company of the Seeker – artist, fellow-wanderer and father of a daughter. He was the first person to alert her of a possible connection between filial loss and her preoccupation with empty spaces. She had met the Seeker in a bookshop in Calcutta, where he was showing his work. He had formed a bond with the city, and with its printers, binders and makers of paper, after creating some of his own books in Calcutta. He figures later in *Ladies of Calcutta*, standing beneath a portrait of a young girl in a Calcutta home. Love is at the heart of the Seeker's work. This is a love that finds its mystical emblem in a photogram of two dead rabbits with their entrails opened up and intricately entangled. It is also monumentalized in an immense daguerreotype of the Taj Mahal looming in a moonlit world of love and death, made as much of darkness as of light. The Seeker's



unseen presence informs the world of girls, terrace, river and sky in *I Am As I Am* (2001), words that were often spoken by the Mystic when Dayanita visited her as a child with her father.

If Dayanita speaks of Poppy's photograph as an image of what she is, then the portrait of what she could have been is the photograph of the Jumping Girl in the *Varanasi* volume of *Sent a Letter*. It would have remained buried in her contact sheets had the curator not noticed it there and made her realize it as part of the *I Am as I Am* series in 2000, to be shown again in 2009 in *Let You Go*. Dayanita does not remember the moment she took this photograph on the terrace of the *ashram*. Yet, this physically inexplicable image of a girl who seems to levitate on the terrace, and is suspended between earth and sky, childhood and adulthood, near and far, in a miraculous lightness of being, is not simply the vision of a road not taken. In its weird defiance of gravity, it captures the freeing power of certain key moments in the photographer's life when the confining pull of circumstances seemed to have been reversed by the magic hand of chance. The indignity of being stopped by the organizers and falling on her back as an eighteen-year-old trying to photograph the Musician at a concert, her shouting out to him afterwards that some day she would be an important photographer and "then we will see", and his amused invitation to her to be part of his entourage. Venerable Indian photographers recommending marriage and motherhood instead of an apprenticeship, countered by Mary Ellen Mark making Dayanita bargain with her mother for a photography course in New York instead of a dowry. Mona Ahmed ruining an assignment on eunuchs for the London *Times* by throwing the film in the garbage and drawing Dayanita into an embrace that would start a lifelong friendship. Stealing a Robert Frank book from the ICP bookshop as a poor student in New York, to have it signed a decade later by Frank himself. An unconditional grant from Frank helping her move away from the Indian photographer's staples of poverty, prostitution, AIDS and calamity towards *Myself Mona Ahmed* and *Privacy*. These instances become spots of time when unpredictable encounters with human beings plant seeds of possibility that later bear strange fruit.

As self-portraits, if Poppy is what she is and the Jumping Girl what she could have been, then, Pheroza Vakeel, swimming instructor of an old Bombay club, is what Dayanita would like to be. In *Privacy*, we see Pheroza standing somewhere between the comfort and familiarity of her bedroom and the darkness that comes in through the large open door behind her. Just above the door, along the upper edge of the photograph, is a neon whose glare falls on her, making her hair and *saree* shimmer against the night, which she seems to be guarding like a fearless and mythic sentinel. It is in photographs like these that the sumptuous interiors of *Privacy* open out into a world that always existed, we realize with something of a shock,

<sup>5</sup> Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny" (1919), in *The Penguin Freud Library*, Vol. 14: *Art and Literature*, London, Penguin, 1990, pp. 335-376.

<sup>6</sup> Italo Calvino, *Difficult Loves*, London, Vintage, 1999, p. 42.

<sup>7</sup> Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, Vol. 3: *The Guermandes Way*, London, Penguin, 2002, p. 83.

outside these rooms. This is the world of the night, which, the moment it is allowed in, touches those inside with its own madness. It makes their normal expressions, gestures and postures look touched with something other than the perfectly innocuous, something that Freud had called *unheimlich*, or unhomely – the uncanny or the alien in the midst of the familiar.<sup>5</sup> *Privacy* is too lovingly engaged with the feeling-world of family portraits to allow it to be touched too radically by this darkness. Besides, the people in the book are too solidly themselves to turn into the creatures of somebody else's imagination. But if one looks for long enough at some of the faces, holding out, like Pheroza's, against decay and loss, then something about the expressions in which they have been caught begins to suggest a strangeness outside the realm of the nice and the good, lurking not so much in the faces themselves as behind the eye that composes them into portraits.

Letting the night enter her art makes the distinctions between inside and outside, day and night, reality and fantasy, impossible to hold on to. This transformation coincides with a movement in Dayanita's work from black-and-white to colour. But her first body of work in colour, *Blue Book* (Steidl, 2009), even at its most desolate, does not let go entirely of its hold on a reality governed by colour, light and the unpredictable chemistry of photography. Even then, it becomes difficult to ignore what the eye behind the camera brings to all of this, although the cold and elevated serenity of *Blue Book*'s vistas give an inscrutable and unfeeling quality to this inwardness. It is with *Dream Villa* (Steidl, 2010) that the night truly becomes a world unto itself, a world that has ceased to exist in front of the camera and is its own medium and instrument of projection, its own giant screen. If Calvino's photographer had failed to keep his adventures with the camera away from "the race towards madness lurking in that black instrument", then *Dream Villa* releases this madness into a world that we all hold inside our heads.<sup>6</sup> This is the realm of dreams, and the realm of art, which comes into being during those richly indecisive moments between sleeping and waking. Its best guide remains the writer who, like Kafka, never slept at night.

In the third volume of Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, the narrator finds himself unable to sleep in an unfamiliar hotel room while visiting a town he does not know well. This sets off a fearfully precise description of those moments of absence from the real when insomniacs sense that their efforts to sleep are finally beginning to work, but they are yet to actually fall asleep: "... they notice that the preceding minute has been dulled by a pattern of thought in strict contradiction to the laws of logic and present reality, this short 'absence' indicating that there is now an open door through which in a while they may perhaps be able to escape the perception of the real."<sup>7</sup> *Dream Villa* opens this door, which seems to lead out of *Privacy* (and its kindlier respect for the real), into an outside that is somehow



more inside than *Privacy's* interiors. This is an escape, a slipping away from reality towards its transfiguration in the inner light of perceptions cut loose from the logic of the actual world. For Proust's narrator, it is "a great step forward when we turn our backs on the real" to face what appear to be amphibious versions of our daylight selves that straddle the worlds of sleep and waking.

The *Dream Villa* terrain seems to exist in an intuitive communion with the sleepless world of sleep mapped by Proust in such sinister and loving detail. In Proust, next to the outer caves of the drowsing mind's auto-suggestions is "the private garden in which various kinds of sleep, so different from each other, grow like unknown flowers ... which remain closed until the day when the predestined stranger comes to touch them open and to let loose for long hours the aroma of their special dreams upon an amazed and unsuspecting being".<sup>8</sup> The characters of *Dream Villa* are also amazed and unsuspecting creatures, caught between beauty and terror. An eye that is full of tenderness, but also full of menace, holds them in its gaze, and follows them in their journey from this garden of waiting flowers to a darker chamber.

This chamber opens into the waking world in a sort of natural treachery, returning these travellers, quite as inexplicably, to a reality through which the threads of their dreaming continue to run, forming an aura that lingers long after waking. This chamber of fitful sleep is also like a cinema and a picture-gallery, and Proust's metaphors for the forms of consciousness it brings into being are drawn from the moving image and from photography. His dreamer turns the pages of a fanciful picture-album, driven by love, memory, curiosity and dread. The reader is never quite sure whether the pictures in the album or gallery are dreams or the memories of dreams frozen by the mind into the still images of art; next to this picture-album is "the revolving disc of awakening" that embeds these images in mundane fears and desires, and in more inchoate feelings about time, change, decay and death:

On the dark walls of that chamber which opens upon our dreams and within which that oblivion of the sorrows of love works away incessantly, its task sometimes interrupted and destroyed by a nightmare crowded with reminiscences, but soon resumed, the memories of our dreams are hung, even after we are awake; but they are so shrouded in darkness that often they become apparent to us for the first time only in the middle of the afternoon when the ray of a similar idea happens to strike them by chance; some of them, harmonious and clear while we slept, already so distorted that, having failed to recognize them, we can only hasten to lay them to earth, like corpses that have decomposed too soon or objects so seriously damaged and crumbling to dust that the most skilful restorer would be unable to reshape them or do anything with them.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., pp. 83-84

*Dream Villa* originates in moments that go back not only to specific people, but also, through them, to Dayanita's response to other kinds of art. In the spring of 2007, she was driving at night with the Poet through the village in Goa where she had begun to live, when he pointed out to her that the neons lighting the street looked like a row of musical notes. She used to loath neons, as among the ugliest of modern inventions. But the Poet's words resonated with her own preoccupation with the night, and she began photographing the neons, particularly when they lit up the trees from within. She saw how the white neons turned the moon into an exile in its own kingdom, while the green ones surreally heightened the natural green of the trees. Her photographs started coming together as a private language of nightfall with its different kinds of light, merging with her own prolific dream-life, that stayed with her long after she had woken up. As she travelled and photographed not just houses and trees and lights at night, but also strangers on the streets, her nocturnes got peopled with an assortment of characters that began to acquire a life of its own. They formed a world of kindred creatures in a very different way from how webs of kinship or friendship were created in *Privacy*. It became possible to recognize the *Dream Villa* people instantly in real life, but what made them so was like a secret that came out into the open only when one walked through the gates into the other world.

If the neon music pointed out by the Poet lit up a darkness that was the photographer's own, then her encounters, starting almost two decades before *Dream Villa*, with the precarious circus of the Sculptor's art began the confounding of illusion and reality that is essential to the slip-sliding world of *Dream Villa*. In this game, the Sculptor and the photographer were co-fantasists rather than collaborators, for most of the projects they conjured up were not meant to be actualized. Yet these joint fantasies fed each artist's work with a mutually clarifying madness. At the heart of the Sculptor's world is a reduction of the body's life to nightmarish, deadpan repetition, at once tragic and absurd, human and inhuman. It is a world informed by the hyper-realism of cinema and the enchantments of the fairground, each taken up into the bleakest and most modern of ironies. The Sculptor's contraptions would appear to Dayanita as forever on the brink of collapse, barely managing to survive their own complexity, but held together by the steadiness and depth of the very disenchantment that made them so full of irony. "Nothing is as it seems to be", they seemed to suggest. And this is a sense that informs *Dream Villa* too, in its mingling of beauty, sinisterness and whimsy, and in its perception of a fragility at the heart of things that is both nurtured and threatened by the night. It is a world of dragons and of princesses, as Rilke would put it, and it is impossible to tell them apart from each other. The passage in which Rilke writes about them in *Letters to a Young Poet*, asking the poet "always to hold



to what is difficult”, is heavily marked in Dayanita’s copy, acquired during her early years in the Sculptor’s studio: “Perhaps every thing of terror in our lives is in its deepest nature a helpless thing that craves our help.”<sup>10</sup>

### III

On a wintry night, a traveller was returning home through the empty streets of his city. As his taxi hurtled past familiar houses through the orange smog, he looked out of the window and suddenly, for the first time in his four decades in that city, he noticed a huge gate. It was made of dark, dented metal and was firmly shut. So he couldn’t make out what it led to. But he caught the two words written on the gate in large, bone-white letters: DREAM VILLA. And then it was gone. “I’ve been here before,” he found himself saying as he sped away, and the bizarreness of the feeling struck him at once. Wasn’t *déjà vu* supposed to be what you felt when something that was happening to you for the first time seemed also to have happened before, or when a new place suddenly felt weirdly familiar? The weirdness of feeling “I’ve been here before” lay precisely in being certain, at another level, that you had never been there before. He tried to unravel to himself the dizzying irony of being made to say the words in his own city by the glimpse of a gate with something written on it. Of course he had been here before, he had been here many times before! But why did it feel as if the city had slipped away from him at the very moment that he felt he had grasped it properly for the first time? What did it mean to feel, even if for a fraction of a second, that a city could be your own, and not your own?

He remembered Freud’s account of a strange experience. He, Freud, was travelling alone in a sleeping compartment on a train when a violent jolt of the train swung back the door of the attached WC, and an elderly gentleman in a dressing gown and travelling cap came in. Freud assumed that in leaving the WC, which lay between the two compartments, this man had made a mistake and come into Freud’s compartment instead of his own. Jumping up with the intention of putting him right, he realized at once to his dismay that the intruder, whose appearance he had instantly disliked, was nothing but his own reflection in the mirror on the open door.<sup>11</sup> In failing to recognize himself initially, the doctor had to go through the disconcerting experience of losing and then finding himself in very quick succession. It was like the skipping of a beat, a moment’s black-out, in his relationship with what he had taken to be the most familiar thing in his own life: his own self. Henceforth, his sense of this self would carry within it the presence of something that could change, in an instant, from the familiar to the strange. It could make him look at himself in the mirror and say, “I’ve never seen this person before”, or, stranger still, “I’ve seen this person before.”

<sup>10</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, *op. cit.* (note 1), pp. 204-205.

<sup>11</sup> Sigmund Freud, *op. cit.* (note 5), p. 371.

The traveller wondered later about the similarity between Freud’s experience and his own. It was a similarity that thrilled him. Yet, when he tried to work it out in words, it kept eluding him. By then, of course, the rest of it had come to him – the mystery of the gate, of the night, and of the city. In another city, in another room, on another wall, he had seen the words hanging in a large, luscious print without a frame. The paper was so glossy that he could see his own face on it, grotesquely distorted. It occurred to him that both he and Freud were travellers when they had these experiences. They were in motion when time suddenly stood still for them – not the time in which everything outside was speeding away, but the time inside their heads and in their eyes. He wondered whether this had happened to Freud during the day or at night. For the traveller, such a thing could have happened only at night – for night was the great confounder of cities. Something came into his head, like a line of music, as he contemplated this fact. He took out his notebook. *In the night of the mind*, he wrote in it, *my many cities become one.*