

# **Things That Have Been.**

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*A small glass bottle is filled with thick, yellowing liquid;  
something like melted butter. In amongst the clouding viscous a jellied hand  
pushes from the inside. The fingers spread like an accidental spill.*

It's eight o'clock.

The bolts will be drawn back, the keys turned, the doors opened.

The Attendant begins his day amongst the long-departed, in the place of things that have been.

The Attendant nods at the Nightwatchman. The Nightwatchman screws the cap on his blue plastic thermos and tries to smile. He has dark bruised circles for eyes and a wide yawn that reveals teeth the colour of custard.

"All yours," he says and slips out into the hot spotlight of the waking day beyond the doors. There is still a world alive somewhere.

This is less of a museum and more of a mausoleum. The blocks that hold the building aloft are the granite of gravestones. It is cold and moist to the touch. This is the stone of empty churches. These are the tiles of cathedral floors. It is a world, and a time, away from the vein-pumping, lifeblood coursing past just feet from the front steps.

Work colleagues gather beside The Attendant. They discard coats, scarves, hats and gloves into closets before scattering throughout the building and leaving him with himself again. There are four floors, twenty separate galleries, a viewing platform, cafe and a shop. He takes a moment to digest his daytime home. This museum contains hundreds of years of history scattered throughout the building's jigsaw-piece rooms. Like a child's play box of random-scaled toys. Shards of flint sit alongside stolen birds' eggs and woven tapestries hang next to sawdust stuffed mammals. Things piled in amongst things: The flotsam of human endeavour and the jetsam of the natural world. The Attendant scratches an eczema-crusting elbow and looks up at the domed ceiling above the hollow atrium. The morning light begins to warm the stone at his feet. It makes patterns that if he had time, paper, and inclination he might capture in paint. He gazes around. There's worse jobs, he tells his wife.

"It's not really much of a job though, is it?" She says.

"It suits me."

"It would."

"So?"

She's a pair of stooped shoulders at the sink. The twitch of her head is as good as a shake.

At the foot of the wide regal stairway frowns the likeness of the museum's founder: Sir Sebastian Merryfield 1846 – 1903. The Attendant thinks he looks a little uncertain for someone with such a collection to his name. The brass label at his shoulder tells of a hero, of an altruist, of a true humanitarian, but it's not clear whether Sir Merryfield's arched expression is a sculptor's slip or the reflection of some growing self-doubt: Those weren't his ceremonial masks and religious statuettes to take, were they? They weren't his butterflies and fossils to forage. What possible part can pieces

of flint and birds' eggs, can woven tapestries and sawdust stuffed mammals play now that he's dead? Is that regret Sir? The Attendant studies Sir Merryfield with a frown: A building full of dead things for company. Not much of a legacy. He picks crust from his nose and let's it drop at the dead man's feet.

*Behind the hand in the jar is a tiny folded body.*

*A little thing. Its legs tucked under its belly.*

*There's a look of contentment on its small, barely shaped features.*

*Its lips are white, its skin the colour of waxed paper.*

The Attendant contemplates his journey to the belly of the building. He knows it well. He could close his eyes and find his way with arms outstretched. The atrium opens to the north, east and west: Each a mouth-way to a complex jumble of rooms. Some have low ceilings with only the smallest of entrances and exits. Some are no more than corridors. Others are big and open and echo with each footstep. But all are filled from floor to ceiling:

There's a room for stolen shells: Big cream and white spiral shells, tiny blue conical shells; pearlised shells, starfish barnacles, urchins, crusted cockles, conches and cones. There's a room full of fossils. One of birds suspended by cat gut. There's glass-eyed animals, carved wooden Polynesian women with conical breasts, worn Roman coins. Things. Lots and lots of things.

The air sits heavy with the dust of the past. It fills his lungs and catches his breath. But it feels familiar and warm. Just as a silken lined coffin might. The room he stands and guards all day is in the East Wing of the building. The sign above the entrance announces; Near Eastern Artefacts. It takes eight minutes to find if that's your destination with no diversions or delays. A little less if you aren't hindered, as he is, by a limp from a shortened right leg. It takes a new visitor wandering the corridors an average of thirty-eight minutes to get to his gallery. He has thirty-eight minutes to find his place, to indulge his thoughts and study everything that has been.

He walks the neighbouring rooms. Gallery 17. Gallery 9. Gallery 13. There's no sense to their placement. In Gallery 11 there are Lepidoptera of every shape, size and colour all around him in frames. A label on the wall tells him, that at best estimate, there are over 15,000 species of butterflies and 200,000 species of moths in the world. He's tried to remember as many names as his head can hold. He knows more Latin than English. He steps from frame to frame and pushes his nose as close to their fragile dry bodies as he can. They are splayed mercilessly in displays of singles, doubles and multiples. They have had all dignity stripped and arranged in grids and patterns. Nature improved. Their wings are brittle and devoid of the moist lustre of the living. And for every little dead body on the wall there's another twenty hidden away in cotton wool lined drawers. The Attendant feels an overwhelming need to pull open each and every drawer. To let light in. To offer some justification, however slight, for their incarceration.

The Attendant enters The Jurassic Age: Limestone, volcanic tuff, trilobites, fossil gastropods, bivalve cluster, fossil crinoids. He moves quickly through the room, he feels uncomfortable with a timeline he cannot fathom. It talks of age in terms of millions of years and he can't reconcile it with the pitiful seventy odd he's endured to date.

Then he is back at Near Eastern Artefacts. It is no comfort that Near Eastern Artefacts is little more than a thoroughfare to lifts, stairs, toilets - disabled or otherwise - and baby changing facilities. Visitors don't linger long in Near Eastern Artefacts. They are not as sexy as Nefertiti. Or as engaging as a velociraptor. Families don't linger long enough to study the ornate weave of the rugs of Persia.

Kumara, the Hindu God of War, shares his frustration. Kumara is only small but with six heads has plenty of ears with which to listen. He is a sage counsel. He's a beautiful slice of carved alabaster, stately and refined, and that is all he has to be to understand. In turn The Attendant feels sorry for Kumara. The little God has travelled half way around the world to be left without worshippers. He must of been something in his land, a big deal to the people who spent their time carefully carving each delicate limb. Just another old thing in a glass coffin. The Attendant studies a colourfully decorated dance crest from Uvol, next to it on the same display is a feather gorget, stirrup spout bottles and clay bowls. Somebody once loved them, made them, caressed them, held them, worshipped them, wore them. Now just dead flies and dust adorn them.

There is a chair for him to sit on - an uncomfortable, tubular affair - but he prefers to stand. Standing feels liberating, as though he has made a choice and he is free. If he sits he feels he might just become one of the exhibits he guards. Or worse, a fixture. Like a fire extinguisher or an exit sign. He steps back and forth to remind him he is a living thing. Some thing. Any thing.

*The little body is lost to the fluid that holds it aloft:  
The liquid is the colour of its skin, its skin the colour of the liquid.  
Inside the body is suspended the misty blue  
cataract shadows of bones and guts.*

But today is different. Today The Attendant will leave his post unannounced. Today Sir Merryfield will be proud of this adventurer. This mercenary, this hunter, this pioneer, this speculator. Today The Attendant will do something he's never done before. He will exit the fire doors on the far side of the room and leave his gallery unattended. He will leave Kumara, the Hindu God of War, by himself. He will leave the colourfully decorated dance crest from Uvol, the feather gorget, stirrup spout bottles and clay bowls to the mercy of the museum's visitors. Today he will descend three flights of cold stone stairs and weave his path through the twisted large intestine beneath the museum.

He will vanish forever. He will disappear into the archive of unwanted detritus piled, labelled, lost and left in echoing vaults deep beneath the ground. These are things that have been plundered, cheated, stolen, donated or found, but things of such mundanity that they don't even deserve a guest appearance in the world above ground. They exist in the hope that some fashion might resurrect them, that someone might once again have a passion for carved ivory salt cellars, boxes of anthropods, seabird skulls, fragments of iron age tools. They won't. They will stay lost until they become dust.

Fat copper pipes gurgle and mark his route. They twist and hug the corridor like ivy fingers. The tunnels are cold and smell of damp fur and compost. He hastens

his stride and doesn't let his hands brush the walls. There's so many doors they break the urgency of his pace. He knows where he is going. There is a small alcove secreted at the far end of one of the farthest rooms. It's a room no one needs to visit. A metal shelf stands in front of it and he grabs its legs and scrapes it out of the way. The screech could wake the dead. But they can't be bothered to open their eyes and challenge this interloper. He's welcome anyway. Anyone's welcome if they can be bothered. He dips his head as he enters the alcove and wipes imaginary webs from his hair. The walls are chewed brickwork and wet to the touch.

He thinks of the things he's left above ground: Kumura, Sir Merryfield, his colleagues, his wife. They are gone from his mind as fleetingly as they appeared. They really mean nothing against a backdrop of 230 million year old bones and eighteen thousand species of lichen. Against the furthest wall is what he is looking for: Dozens of glass bottles of all shapes and sizes: Great big jars filled with thickening liquid, small cork-stopped ones. They are haphazardly lined up in rows. Many of the bottles have handwritten labels wrapped around their sides. Others remain anonymous.

The little sliver of light from the freshly disturbed opening creates a wondrous yellow glow inside the bottles. Each one contains its own mysterious occupant. Wonderful twisted disturbed occupants: There's a two headed turtle, there's an albino baby alligator. There's snakes with bulging eyes, with engorged stomachs, with heads at either end. There's grotesqueness beyond Grimms' imaginations. There's a dancing lamb, a calf's head, eyeballs floating, limbs, guts and entrails. There's just one empty bottle, by itself in the corner. It is three foot tall with a mouth nearly as wide as its base. It's more than large enough for an aged homo sapien.

He shrugs off his shirt, trousers and shoes. And climbs inside the jar. He crouches and lowers his chin to his knees. His skin drinks in the embryonic fluid about him. It smells of liniment and clover, of aniseed and birth. The liquid soaks into his skin, wraps about his limbs, crawls into his nostrils. He closes his eyes. There is no sound but the echo of his aorta pumping the blood around the circuits of his body. It's so loud in his head that he fears the vibration might shatter the jar, so he gently holds his breath and thinks of peaceful things. Like the coolness of the glass that encases him. He feels like the dried up chick inside the tiny robin's egg in the undisturbed drawers in Gallery 12.

*The foetus in the glass bottle is twisted in his direction.*

*Its eyes are no more than thin scars in the flesh.*

*Its right hand is frozen, pointing at him; You're just another thing.*

*Another thing that has been.*