Mahout
a short story by Jeff VanderMeer

"MARY: THE LARGEST LIVING LAND ANIMAL ON EARTH. 3 INCHES LARGER THAN
JUMBO AND WEIGHING OVER 5 TONS…"
-- Billboard for the Sparks Circus, 1916

You watch the bruised sky as the sun sets outside Dan's Eatery. Dan's lies off County Road Twelve, Tennessee. The farms and paint-peeled houses surrounding it form the town of Erwin.
Flocks of starlings mimic the dance of leaves on the dirt road outside. Rust-red leaves. Your hands are brown. People stare at you from other tables, someone whispering, "…East Indian darky…" 1916: you are sixty-seven years old and thousands of miles from home.
You arrived with the circus early this morning, south about a mile, where the railroad tracks crisscross a small station, amphitheater, and coal tipple: a staggering troupe of stiltmen, clowns wielding saws, and highwire women so stiff they cannot bend at the waist, at least until the next show. The trains don't even bother passing through Erwin, but this is your day off and you wanted to escape the swelter of people. Tomorrow your elephants, the ones you have trained for fifteen years, will perform for the Ringmaster. After the elephant show, you will perform again: Come see the amazing psychic! Can read your mind! Come see the Brahmin holy man! You are not truly psychic. Neither are you of the Brahmin caste. You wear a Sikh turban. They expect it, even though you are Hindu and the weather hot. But at least you can be near the elephants.

"I have been with the shows for three years and have never known the elephant to lose her temper before."
--Mr. Heron, press agent, Johnson City Comet, Sept. 14, 1916, pg. 1
'"Murderous Mary,' as she was termed by spectators, has been in the circus for fifteen years and this is the first time anyone has come to harm."
--Nashville Banner, Sept. 13, 1916, pg. 9

The light fades from the windows until the starlings are blurs of shadow and bar lamps reflect on the glass. You sweat despite the chill; the nervous tic under your right eye where the blood vessel has burst works in and out. Your hands become clenched claws.
The lady to the left with the matted hair and distant stare - she thinks about her next trick, the dull slap of flesh on flesh…the ache in her body, her heart. Tease, you tease too much she thinks. The man at the bar who deliberately combs his few hairs and sips his whiskey - he fears his bloodhound. It used to run for miles across his farm, but now the farm is smaller, eaten away at the edges by bankers. His wife has left him. The dog has tumors, weak back legs, and cannot hold its bladder. It lies at home by the furnace and dreams of better days. The man hates the dog. He loves the dog. If he goes home, he might find it dead, and then he will be waiting to die. Alone.
The claws bite into your palms, draw blood.
The waitress smiles as she leans over to take your plate. You smile back, her face blank to you. You can only sense the pain, enter minds through

agony. Sometimes you block it by concentrating on dust motes or the pattern of raindrops on a blade of grass. You can escape it.
When you are with the solid shadows of your elephants, all the sharp edges fade away. Your clenched hands untense.

> "Suddenly, Mary collided its trunk vice-like about his body, lifted him ten feet in the air, then dashed him with fury to the ground. Before Eldridge had a chance to reach his feet, the elephant had him pinioned to the ground, and with the full force of her biestly fury is said to have sunk her giant tusks entirely through his body. The animal then trampled the dying form of Eldridge as if seeking a murderous triumph, then with a sudden…swing of her massive foot hurled his body into the crowd."
> --Johnson City Staff, Sept. 13, 1916, pg. 3

You grew up in Jaipur, under the maharajah's benevolent neglect; a man who employed your parents as servants. A man who, twenty years later, would sell his elephants to the Americans to pay his debts, and your services with them.
Every day you suffered headaches or crying spells. The leper woman with her bag of shriveled flowers would ask you for coins and you saw the young woman inside her, the pretty one who would have married, laughed many days by the washing stones. If not for the decaying flesh. You ran from her, not understanding how or why you had these visions.
The merchant at the market would say, "Nice boy: have a sweet," smiling at your parents and you would hear, from deep inside his coiled thoughts: Ugly child. Scrawny. No good for lifting sacks. The headaches would pick away your skull. You wondered why people lied so much.
Then, when you were seven, you met the elephant and its mahout. You went with your parents on holiday - to see the Amber Palace, a tilted terrace of fortifications and tile buildings and minarets atop a mountain ridge. The snake of road circled higher and higher. Below: fields and a lake. You gnawed your lip bloody listening to the desperation beneath beggars' prayers and your father's impatience with them as you trudged along. Your mother you could not read. Never could.
Then, sweaty, half-way up:
The elephant. Straddling the road, one front foot alone larger than you and your parents. Trunk curled, tusks capped in gold, a gilded carriage upon its back. You gasped, stumbled. And looked into its eyes. Long-lashed, black, with no hint of reflected light. Age wrinkles spiraled down into the eye. The elephant stared at you, measured you. You shivered. Ganesh, you thought. The elephant-headed god of luck and wisdom.
You wanted a ride. You begged your father, clutched at your mother's sari. They, tired of walking, smiled, said yes.
That was when the mahout stepped out from behind his elephant: a shriveled man with no flesh on his bones so that his head, small on another man, seemed large. A holy man. A wise man.
You stared at your future teacher unabashedly and he bowed, pressed his palms together.
"I am Arjun, mahout of the Amber Palace."
You, solemn, bowing also: "Gautam, boy of Jaipur."
He laughed. "And someday mahout, perhaps?"
You nodded, watching the elephant.

Only after your father shoved you up onto the side ladder and you climbed into the carriage did you realize that the mendicant's pain was gone. From the dizzying height, lurching forward, touching the prickly black hairs, you could not feel the world's agonies spread out below you: the farmers on the plate-sized fields, the swimmers in the lake. Nothing. You laughed. You laughed and snuggled into your mother's arms.
You remember that moment as if it happened yesterday. You felt like a god, free of pain. Though that is impossible. The elephant was the god and the mahout its keeper.

> "There was a big ditch at that time put there for the purpose of draining … and they'd sent these boys to ride the elephants. They went down to water them and on the way back each boy had a little stick-like that was a spear or hook in the end of it … And this big old elephant, Mary, reached over to get her a watermelon rind, about a half a watermelon somebody eat and just laid it down there; 'n she did, the boy Eldridge give her a jerk. He pulled her away from 'em and he just bowed real big; and when he did, she took him right around the waist … and throwed him against the side of the drink stand and just knocked the whole side out o' it. I guess it killed him, but when he hit the ground the elephant just walked over and set her foot on his head … and the blood and brains and stuff just squirted all over."
> -- W.H. Coleman, eyewitness.

Only one woman's face haunts you. You have been with many women, trying to block the pain. It never works; even in the throes of orgasm there is always a larger ache than before.
But you did not know this woman. Not even a name.
Four years ago - almost to the day you sit and eat at Dan's - she came to you as the shadows began to shut down your booth. Exhausted, half in trance, you had peered into the pains of a dozen men and women, lied for the contented ones who hid their disappointments deep.
The woman cleared your thoughts. She had an elegance beyond her simple cotton dress which reminded you of the leper woman as she might have been. Around her, the circus folk melted away. The Scaled Man and the Bearded Lady, the Man With Two Spears Through His Cheeks and the Lady Who Drank Blood: they enhanced her beauty all the more. She smelled of jasmine and treacle. You imagined her skin smooth beneath your touch.
You bowed to her, recited the routine the other performers had taught you, in the despised pidgin English. You speak the language with only a hint of accent.
She listened patiently, gave the drunken crowd gathered at her back a single glance, but did not wave them away. A large crowd, enlivened by an entire day of merry-making.
"Is my husband cheating on me?" A harsher voice than you imagined…
She had been biting back her pain and now it flooded out, embraced you.
You looked into her eyes (such pretty eyes: long-lashed and black, with no reflection) and winced. The answer was wrapped around her doubts. The lies she had told herself, the imagined explanations for late night forays.
You hesitated, glanced around you at the litter of bottles and cartons, the mud and filth.
"Come on!" It was a plea.

"Yes."
The crowd roared. The circus folk chuckled, quietly mocking: the Scaled Man and the Bearded Lady and the Man With Two Spears and the Lady Who Drank Blood. A low mumble of "Fool!" and "Slut!" swept through the crowd. The wide, happy wave of amusement muffled her pain, numbed you.
You smiled. You almost laughed.
The smile left your lips when you looked up at her. You have never seen that expression before or since, the betrayal that bled from her eyes, the perfect mouth.
The woman pulled a knife from her purse. She plunged it into your chest, above the heart. Out it came, trailing red. She raised it to strike again - and on the downward stroke the Man With Two Spears caught the blade through his palm, wrenched it from her. The Scaled Man and the Bearded Lady dragged her away, she snarling and fighting them.
You stared stupidly at the wound, at the blood smeared across your costume. The crowd had broken down into its thousand parts, some screaming, some backing quietly away, a few calling for a doctor. You just stared. Time, urgency - these things were unimportant.
You daubed your finger in the bright, bright blood. This is me? you thought. I am bleeding? No pain. Like the leper in Jaipur. No pain. And, for one glorious moment, looking up into the clowns' faces, you believed you were free. But:
The clowns radiated pity. The Lady Who Drank Blood clasped your arm, aching over your wound, licking it. Your face became a mask, then crumbled. You had only become numb to your own pain. Like the old men in the Jaipur market who sucked and sucked on their opium pipes.
You are old now and the elephants have robbed you of your pain.

The cooking of crayfish brings your attention away from the window of Dan's Eatery. You know the sensation of death now (brittle, withering), have experienced it in many forms. Arjun eventually taught you to bear it, to sit still while life slipped away, though even he could never fully understand the pain.
The crayfish are lowered into the pot, their chitin turning red, dozens of eyes popping. Tiny slivers. Then: silence. Or an echo. The ghost of another, more distant pain. You cannot tell. Your hand cannot feel the heat as it clutches a cup of coffee.
You are homesick.

> "The crowd kept hollerin' and sayin', 'Let's kill the elephant, let's kill 'er…"
> -- Mr. Coleman
> "Sheriff Gallahan thought he could shoot her, but he couldn't with a .45. It just knocked chips out of her hide a little."
> -- Mr. Treadwell, eyewitness.
> "…[the owner] said 'People, I'd be perfectly willin' to kill her, but there's no way to kill her. There ain't gun enough in this country that she could be killed; there's no way to kill her."
> -- Mrs. E.H. Griffith, in a letter to Bert Vincent

Last night you shared the crowded freight compartment with your elephants; the chump chump of wheels on the track lulled you to sleep. You were so tired you slept standing up, leaning against Mary, your largest.

You dreamt.
Mary grew until her feet touched the four corners of the earth, so large that you measured less than the height of her toenails. Absurdly, the trinity - Brahma, Siva, Vishnu -whirled above her head on their appointed vehicles. She took you in her trunk, grasping you so gently that the tiniest twitch and you would have fallen to your death. She brought you up, up through the clouds until you were in the cold dark of the cosmos, looking into her eye. It seemed to question you.
You wept. In Hindi, you said, "Please, Ganesh. I am so old. Take away their pain. Give back my own pain…" You wept and Mary stared at you. There was no answer. It was only Mary, not Ganesh at all. The stars whispered in Sanskrit, wrote messages across the dark you could not decipher.
When you woke, you brushed her and fed her cabbage heads, watermelon rinds, cooed softly in her ear when the shivering of box car metal disturbed her.

"Everybody was excited about it, you know - 'n' come down there to watch them hang the elephant. They had a coal tipple down there; I guess the coal tipple was three hundred, four hundred feet long from the ground to the top of the tipple; and it was covered up with people just as thick as they could stand on that tipple, you know, besides what was on the ground. I'd say they 'as three thousand people there…"
-- Bud Jones, eyewitness

Your stomach is queasy as you walk out of Dan's Eatery into the humidity of main street Erwin. You stare up at the moon. Tonight, it is Ganesh's tusk, thin and bright through tree branches. A lucky moon.

"They brought those elephants down there, four or five of them together. And they had this here Mary bringing up the rear. It was just like they was havin' a parade, holdin' one another's tail … These other ones come up … and they stopped. Well, she just cut loose right there and the showmen, they went and put a chain, a small chain, around her foot, and chained her to the rail. Then they backed the wrecker up to her and throwed the big 7/8 inch chain around her neck and hoisted her, and she got up about, oh, I'll say five or six feet off the ground, and the chain around her neck broke. See, they had to pull this chain loose; it broke the smaller chain, and that weakened the other chain. And so, when they got her up about five or six feet from the ground, why it broke … "

--Mont Tilly, railroad crew
" … And it kind o' addled her when it fell, you know. And we quick 'n' got another chain and put it around her neck then and hooked it before she could get up."
-- Bud Jones, fireman on the 100-ton derrick car

You are running out of Erwin the moment the chain first bites into Mary's neck - down the dirt road, into the darkness of trees. The circus is a mile away. The trains don't even bother passing through Erwin… How will you save her now? Your teeth bite through your lower lip, blood trickling onto your shirt. You feel nothing.
The scene flickers across your mind, brought to you by clowns' eyes: bonfires lick across train tracks, the coal tipple engorged with people,

the crowd below noisy and whiskey-slicked. Mary trumpets as she rises. The derrick strains. The other elephants, already packed onto the train, trumpet too, butt their heads against the steel doors. You choke on tears as you run, the air tightening in your throat.
Soon, you can see the fires for yourself, the tops of tipple and derrick, twin towers. Mary trumpets, mahout!
The derrick (in the clowns' eyes) trembles, chain breaking, and Mary falls with a soft thud onto the grass, onto her lungs. You cry out, fall with her, tumble, and lie sprawled on the ground. Blind, images superimposed over your sight, you scramble to your feet.
The chain is brought twice around Mary's neck. You cannot breathe. A branch whips across your face, stings, but you see only Mary's shadow, lit by fires, rising again into the air. You choke on the crowd's fascination as they watch. The hooker and the man from the bar are both there, forgetting their own pain. Tease, you tease too much. You cannot go home to a dog which may be dead …
Mary against the fire sky, against the tusk of moon.
Now you sprint, sure you will die of the exertion, but not caring. You can smell the smoke, hear the crowd for yourself. So close. So close.
Mary jerks and you jerk, brought up short. Blood trickles from both your mouths. "Ere - look at the beast!" The crowd laughs. Clowns sob. The Bearded Lady rips out her hair. Mary's struggles weaken. Your legs dangle.

For a moment, a moment in which time has no meaning, you gaze out from Mary's eyes as you gently swing, look down upon the crowd, the dancing fires, across the tipple and its human cargo.
Juicy leaves; muddy waterholes; a lazy trunk across the backs of other elephants; hoopoo birds pecking lice from wrinkled skin; shadows of elephants at twilight, under the Sanskrit sky; and then danger, danger orange and bright; fangs and tusks. Tiger.
You cry out, convulse at the moment of death, the reluctant crack of neck, and as Mary's eyes roll back into her head, so do yours. Your neck snaps to the side and you fall, hands clenched so tightly a knuckle pops. Your nerve ends are on fire. Everything around you shrieks with pain; every blade of grass, every tree.
The pain is an elephant eye - coronaed in amber. Ganesh. Then you lose yourself in the reflectionless black.

> "She kicked a bit and that was all; see, that thing choked her to death right quick."
> -- Sam Harvey, train engineer

1857. The smell of attar, the humid, moist taste of death, surrounded Jaipur. A bad year for you when you could not be near elephants. You had nightmares. The Sepoy Revolt, starting outside Mekut, spread until even the maharajahs seized at chances for independence.
One summer day you glanced up from the lake below the Amber Palace and saw elephants trudging across the ridge, fitted out in full battle dress.
Arjun, your teacher now, rode the lead elephant, and he too was dressed for war.
Your parents had told you the plans last night, but you hadn't believed them. A show of strength, your father said. They would not fight, only bring luck to the maharajah. Your mother frowned, shook her head.

Regardless, to send elephants against the British was madness. How could elephants match rifles and cannon?
You watched for a long time, while trumpets sounded and peacocks gave their mating calls. To the west: smoke and vultures. The battle. All day, after the elephants had faded from sight, you watched the trail of smoke, the circling vultures. So many vultures. So much smoke. Sometimes you imagined you heard cannon recoil, a tremor beneath your feet.
The lake waters turned a darker and darker blue, shadows long and distorted. You fell asleep. When you woke, the smoke was closer, the vultures identifiable by species. Along the ridge, the sun's rays driving like spikes into their backs: the mahouts and their elephants. Some mahouts upon litters, bodies stretched out, others slumped across their elephants. You counted. Thirty elephants had gone out. Twenty had returned. You could hear their moans, could feel their pain, even from the lake. Your heartbeat quickened. Disaster …
You ran up the road to the Amber Palace, breathless. Through the quiet courtyard, the gardens, to the stables, there to meet a tired, wounded Arjun, death reflected in his eyes. He reeked of smoke and gunpowder, had burns on his face and arms. All around, elephants screamed, some with shrapnel wounds, veins laid open; others on their knees, their mahouts pleading with them to get up.
Your jaw dropped and the pain twisted your joints. Not real. A nightmare. Where was Arjun's elephant?
"Lakshmi, master?" Your voice shook.
For the first time, Arjun was an old man to you, back bent, movements slow.
"Lakshmi is dead."
"Dead?"
"Yes! Please. Go away."
And you left, too shocked to cry.
Ganesh dead? How could a god be dead?

> "We did not sit in judgment on her fate and I don't believe any of those who witnessed the event felt it was inhumane under the circumstances. She paid for her crimes as anyone else would."
> -- Mrs. Griffith, eyewitness

Blood drips onto the grass; the Lady Who Drank Blood laps at the widening pool. They have hoisted Mary upside down from the derrick. Her head hangs three feet from the ground, shadow small in the early morning light.
You crouch beside her, the clowns behind you. Mary's eye is open again, the wrinkles and long lashes and the reflectionless black. You wave the flies away. You are crying. You cannot help yourself. Your throat aches. Ganesh … You touch the bristly hair, the rough skin. Cold. Much too cold. You will not work the booth today. Or ever again. The clowns weep but you feel nothing. Just your own grief. Just the chill wind blowing through you, and you so light and heavy at the same time. Burnt out. Now what will you do? Take away their pain, you said.
But, like your old mahout, you know you will never be whole again.

> Quotes adapted, with permission, from the Tennessee Folklore Society Bulletin, Vol. XXXVII, March 1971.

Afterword

I got the idea for "Mahout" from a story someone told me about Mary, an elephant that was hanged for killing a person. The idea that an elephant would be hanged for a crime struck me as absurd and sad simultaneously. When I thought about it, hanging an elephant also said something about human beings in general. So I researched the story, not even sure it was true, and I came across an article in the Tennessee Historical Bulletin about the incident.

The more I read, the more it haunted me. But I couldn't think of a way to approach the subject which wouldn't be melodramatic or sentimental. Then, one day, I was staring at a photograph of myself as a child on an elephant outside the Amber Palace in Jaipur, India. Standing by the elephant was the elephant's mahout. Instantly, a synergy occurred. The story wasn't just about the elephant--what about its trainer? Its mahout. This was the person who suffered the most from the animal's death. This was the person I had to write about.

But when I sat down and started to write the story, it just didn't work. Everything I wrote about the elephant was sentimental and insanely melodramatic--bathetic. Everything about the mahout seemed remote and unconnected to emotion. So I thought about it for awhile and I came up with a solution. The story of the elephant's hanging would be told using the newspaper quotes to provide some distance from the events and to provide irony. The story of the mahout would be told in second person, to make the reader almost be the mahout, thus removing the distance. The problem, of course, is that second person is rarely used in fiction, so some readers might react in the opposite way to what I desired--they might feel more removed from the character than if I had used third person. (First person wasn't even an option--how could I possibly use first person for a 67-year-old Hindu man and get away with it?) But I didn't feel like I had any choice, so I stuck with second person. And then I decided that the flashbacks should not necessarily be chronological but instead thematic. Finally, I used my own memories of Jaipur, and being atop an elephant there, to create the flashback scenes--as well as my further studies in Indian/Southeast Asian religion and culture to frame the beliefs and viewpoint of the mahout in his maturity.

The result was the most complex story I'd yet written, and at the same time, I hoped, the most involving emotionally and intellectually. (Complexity is not always a good thing in fiction.) All of the elements with regard to chronology, structure, voice, that I used in "Mahout" I've since used in my most recent work, which is one reason I'm so fond of the story.

"Mahout" first appeared in Asimov's SF Magazine in 1995 and was reprinted in Jeff's collection, The Book of Lost Places, in 1996.