There were times when I ran up against that image. Not when I was crossing the street, or in the restaurant of a cinema hall, or even in the crowd at the railway station. Not when I was wandering around all by myself, preoccupied, on a lonely bank of the river. Sometimes I ran up against it on untrodden paths, in the recesses of my mind.

My mind is like a satchel hanging from the shoulder of an itinerant traveller. I have lost track of the stuff that I have dumped into it over the years. I have picked up things as I’ve travelled the winding roads—a lot of thorns, a few flowers, some handfuls of dust. I have even lovingly taken a few ashes from the funeral pyre into my palms. Laughter, wailing, and regrets—the pieces of the game of shadow and light that goes by the name of human existence—are all tucked away in that satchel. Sometimes, when I am fatigued or depressed, my mind takes them out and stares at them. At such times, a certain image may fall out. A timeless image.

The image could be from some ramshackle, unknown temple in an obscure village. Over the years, I have been in thrall to that image and have silently tolerated its presence. What else could I do? Nor is the weight of this one small image inconsiderable. Do I have the strength to measure its size?
Yet I have not been able to throw the image away. I have tried to ignore it at times, but I haven’t been able to turn a blind eye to it altogether. I have been secretly playing a game of hide and seek with it—the image that I picked up one day and held so dear. Did I ever imagine, back then, that—out of sheer neglect on my part, for days on end—it would become so aggressive as to hover my head and upbraid me for my inadequacies?

The soaking wet evening in the month of Shravana had dried up, and the Bhubaneswar railway platform was bustling with activity. The warm calls of the tea vendor, the shrieks of the newspaper hawker excitedly announcing the headlines, and the pandemonium created by the passengers had made the evening come alive. I was standing on the platform, waiting for the Puri-Howrah Express. My brother was arriving from the Andamans via Kolkata on that train. I had come to meet him. But whenever I wait for a train, it invariably arrives late. I have therefore developed a great deal of patience when it comes to waiting for trains. In the grey haze of my patience, I took in the railway station, the trains, and the people surrounding me, focusing my attention on them.

I had waited for trains all my life and, in the process, had perhaps recognized the truth that, at any given moment, a railway station reflected life’s little joys and sorrows. I cast another affectionate glance around the platform. I watched people around me running here and there. Each was different from the others, each one a prisoner within the circumference of his or her own thoughts. Life has become so hasty! Everyone seemed to be in a hurry.

It is as though people of this age are meant to do nothing but run. One has to run, before the time is up. The hawkers competed fiercely among themselves to sell their wares and, in the process, did not mind getting into a scuffle. The blind beggar continued to beg amid all of this, stumbling over two men sleeping on a piece of cloth spread out on the floor. The people clambering in and out of trains were in a hurry to push ahead of the crowd, with their baggage, wives, and children in tow. What a lot of things and company were needed just to travel from one place to another! Each man had to hold on firmly to the hands of his children and the corner of his wife’s sari, never knowing when they might get separated in the crowd. Yet, when the train of death arrived, without whistle or signal, there would be no time to gather one’s things together. One would not
be conscious of the moment when, in a flash, the train arrived to pick one up. What would become of all one’s manoeuvring abilities at that time? But why am I thinking along these lines? Perhaps I’ve been waiting for that train of death, without even being aware of it. Could that be why I have grown sentimental about it?

As I was thus immersed in my thoughts, my eyes caught sight of something. What was this? Such a sculpture—inside a railway station? Although my eyesight was fairly weak, I had recently gotten a new pair of glasses, and what I was seeing seemed crystal clear: a sculpture made of black granite. But why put a sculpture like this in a railway station?

Then again, I reflected, mine was a land of crafts and sculptures. No one had bothered to keep count of the numerous beautiful images drawn on temples and palanquins, on floors, walls, and doors in unknown villages in my state. Who cared about them? The hunger of the stomach, the struggles of life, the terrible spectre of unsteady feet had taken their toll on the craftsmanship of artists. Now our government tries to beautify the city by putting artwork in public spaces. Perhaps this sculpture had been placed here to serve this purpose, as well as to display the skills of Odia artists to visitors.

Mercury light illuminated the platform. Everything seemed to glow. I took two steps forward in order to look at the image more closely. Yes, a black granite sculpture. An old man stood holding a staff. His eyes had sunk into their sockets and his stomach into the skeleton that passed for his frame. Behind him was a woman. In her arms was an emaciated baby, struggling to suck from her shrunken, half-covered breast. Evidently, the sculpture represented famine and hunger. Why this exhibition of poverty, though, in the name of art, for travellers from other states and foreign countries?

All of a sudden, a sweet fragrance spread through the air. I saw an overweight woman slumping onto a bench not far from me. Opulence was written all over her. She wore a pair of spectacles with rolled gold frames. A coolie was busy putting her baggage in order. Bedroll, suitcases, lunch basket, bottle of water, and so forth. I could tell from the way she wore her sari that she was a Marwari woman. Her husband was paying the coolie. The lady kept imploring her handsome son to eat something, making it seem that her sole concern was with him. My gaze naturally
shifted to the son. I saw that the boy, of about seventeen or eighteen, really was very attractive. He wore expensive clothes. But what was this? The boy’s left leg was missing. Some accident maybe. Two crutches were beside him. How sad!

It is perhaps God’s special artistry to leave insects in every beautiful flower.

A group of men suddenly barged onto the platform, shouting all kinds of slogans. They were all holding long wooden clubs. I edged closer to the Marwari lady, who was hugging her son to her chest. The men walked past us to a corner of the platform, hitting their sticks on the floor. They were shouting slogans such as “Give us work!” “Give us food for free!” “Blind government won’t do!”

The Marwari gentleman came over to his wife and said, “Why are you scared? These people were here for a rally. Perhaps they’re going home on this train.”

In the meantime, the two men who had been asleep on the floor sat up. One of them, naked from the waist up, took a paan out of a small, dirty pouch and applied lime to it. “What else would we do,” he sighed, “if we couldn’t take part in political rallies? These days, we have no other way to make ends meet. There are no crops in the fields and no work available anywhere. We have to eat—so what are we supposed to do? One party calls on us today, and their opponents call on us the next day. We’re always ready. We get something to eat for a couple of days, and we get some money. That’s how we manage to keep body and soul together.”

“Aintha Bhai, you’ve come here to attend rallies before, haven’t you?” the man sitting beside him asked, waving away the mosquitoes. There was a huge hole in his vest, and the mosquitoes were biting him there.

The other put the pouch under his arm and chewed on the paan. “What else could I do?” he replied. “I came here last month, too. The leader said that he would pay ten rupees, besides the food. But, in the end, he gave me only five rupees. All the same, I managed for four days on the amount. The whole village was brought here in trucks to listen to the lecture of the minister from Delhi. One babu told us what to shout along the way, and we did exactly that. Then another babu gave us different instructions, and we carried them out, too. We don’t need to know who the leaders are. All we want is to survive somehow.”
I took a good look at the man. He was right. He had told the truth about how political rallies attract such crowds. He took out his purse and began to count the little change it held, but he stopped midway, staring straight ahead, his eyes transfixed. The Marwari lady had opened her lunch basket, which held five containers of food. She had laid everything out before her son and was begging him to eat something. Her love for her son was touching. She paid no attention to the crowd around her. The two village men were gazing at those open containers, without so much as blinking. Their eyes seemed to be saying, do people really get so many different things to eat?

The Marwari gentleman frowned. He looked at his wife and stood in front of the lunch basket to block their view.

At that point, my own eyes fell upon something. What was this? Earlier, I had seen something very clearly. But was I mistaken?

The black granite sculpture had been some distance away from me—but it had moved closer, as if on wheels. The woman carrying the baby was behind the old man, and there were two other children as well. All of them seemed to be imploring, “Give us something to eat, Ma, give us something.”

The sight filled me with intense anger and self-loathing. I wanted to curse myself. What I had taken to be an impressive piece of art had turned out to be the stony frame of a living man! The man’s face and eyes were so lifeless that he seemed to be made of rock. How could a living man turn into a rock? Who had turned him into a rock?

The woman and the two older children had extended their hands, and the Marwari gentleman was shouting, “Go away—get lost!”

However, the lady seemed overcome with pity. She admonished her husband, “Why are you shooing them away?” She gave the children food from the lunch basket, enough to satisfy them, and then she gave some to the woman. She opened another basket and gave them what was left of the bread and fruit. It was as if she had promised herself, for the sake of her own son, that she would not permit any child to go hungry before her eyes.

Tears rolled down from the sunken eyes of the old man, who was filled with gratitude toward the lady. They shone in that black face under the bright light. A few unintelligible words escaped from the corner of his
dry mouth, like the squeak of a mouse. I wasn’t sure whether they were an expression of his pent-up grief or his joy at receiving something. But I felt that the sound came from deep within his sunken stomach. The old man kept muttering, “My village, my soil, cheats . . . cheats . . .”

I turned to the woman, who was standing near the old man, and asked, “Where is your village? What is he trying to say?”

The beggar woman, who was wrapped in a tattered sari, stared at me for a moment and then said, “He’s my father-in-law. He misses the village all the time. He always breaks into sobs after receiving alms and says, ‘I’m not a beggar. I’m not a beggar. I’ve been cheated. I want to go back to my village.’ He’s not able to speak coherently these days.”

“But who cheated him?” I asked.

And the story tumbled out. The old man belonged to a village in the district of Balasore. He used to work as a labourer. He had to toil long hours each day in order to keep the family going. But the old man was happy. He got his only son married off. Gradually, though, his strength began to ebb, and he couldn’t continue to work as hard as before. His son was nothing like his father. He didn’t have any initiative, and he didn’t like to work. Instead, he spent his time having fun with the other young men in the village. He returned home for meals and took it out on his wife when there was nothing to eat.

What could the poor young wife do? Somehow, she managed for ten days out of a month with vegetables from the backyard. But fate was ill-tempered. Floods and droughts alternated with each other, and there was no crop. Rice was nowhere to be found in the village. Those who had anything to eat hid it, while nature continued to revolt, destroying what was left of the crops. In the course of these disasters, the old man acquired three grandchildren. They were gifts of misfortune, and, out of love for them, he nicknamed them Flood, Storm, and Drought. But where was food to come from? Daily labourers could find no work, and people were leaving the village in droves. Even the old man’s worthless son—unable to bear the sight of his hungry children and the complaints of his wife any longer—left in search of work elsewhere, never to return.

Then, one day, an important man came to the village. He looked at the old man and said, “How consumptive you look! You can provide
first-hand evidence of acute hunger and living death. Come to Bhubaneswar. You’ll get food there. You’ll get shelter and work too.”

The helpless old man had held onto his wayward son’s family, but he could not provide them with food. Now something akin to hope glowed within him. After all, what more did a labourer need? A bit of strength left in his body, and some work at hand. Why not go to the city if he could get that? And if the children managed to survive, eventually they’d be able to work, too.

They were driven to the city in the man’s car. Their photographs were taken and published in the newspapers. Several well-fed and well-dressed people fussed over them for a few days. They asked questions and jotted everything down in their notebooks. They were sympathetic, too. But, in less than a week, the whole charade was over. A servant of the important man came to the garage where the family had been staying and turned them out into the streets, warning them never to come back again.

The old man was not one to give up. Striking his staff repeatedly against the pavement, he shrieked, “Babu promised to give us food, shelter, and work. Why have we come this far? Give us work! Give us work!”

The servant shouted back, “You had nothing to eat in your village. You’ve feasted here for six days. You can get plenty of work in the capital city. Work as a daily labourer or pull a rickshaw. If you don’t get any work, beg. People here carry a lot of cash in their pockets. Your stomachs will be filled even if you have to beg. Now get lost!”

The servant chased them away some distance down the road. The old man started blabbering that he was not a beggar. The delirium continued from that day. It had been going on for years. He hated begging, but he had no other way to live. Even as his inner self revolted, he extended his hand for a piece of bread. This silent struggle between his soul and the desire to live gnawed away at his vitals. That newly married girl from that distant village now walked on the streets of Bhubaneswar as a beggar. Life’s ways are beyond all understanding. This is all he thinks of. Nothing else.

There were no tears in the eyes of the woman whom I had taken to be a black granite statue—no sign of grief on her face. There was only an expression of lifelessness that made her seem even more poignant.
The Marwari lady sympathized with her situation. She took a sari and a blouse from her bag and gave them to her. She also gave her a one-rupee coin.

Without my realizing it, my hand was feeling the bills inside my purse. Ten rupees, five rupees, two rupees? Which amount would be most suitable? I wanted to be generous without offending her dignity. At that moment, the bell started ringing, and an announcement came over the loudspeaker that Puri-Howrah Express would arrive shortly on Platform No. 1. The passengers got busy gathering their baggage.

The beggar family that had created the illusion of art slowly moved away. I could not give them anything, even as I pondered the question of how much to give. How inconsequential my existence was in the face of their intense grief!

Their poverty and hunger were every bit as timeless as the art, dance, and music of Odisha.

Perhaps I smiled a little without being aware of it.