

Title	The Missing Hippopotamus	Author	João Maria Gusmão
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## The Missing Hippopotamus

Translated by Eva Oddo and Jethro Soutar

We switch on the television, please dad, just this once, sit here with me, she says, you have to see this episode. I look at the sofa, she pats the cushion twice, here, next to me. I've been trapped, cartoons, then get dinner ready, so I sit down. The opening credits come on and the title of the episode flashes up, spelled out in psychedelic lettering, Cup O'Universe, the context is essentially indecipherable, it's best to just accept the incongruence of the story as it presents itself: three children and a snake are playing in a room, Sanjay, Craig, who is Sanjay's pet snake, Megan and another character, whose name I can never remember, but who has an eye patch like a pirate and is always showing his bum. One of them, I'm not sure which, finds a cup stuck to a t-shirt in Sanjay's pile of dirty laundry, and one of them, and this time I do know which, it's Craig, the snake, says, that's the strawberry milkshake you lost last week, Sanjay!, so they unstick the milkshake from the dirty laundry and say to one another how lucky they are to have found the milkshake, for now they can finally drink it, and they take off the lid and... Urghhh!, to their great surprise and disgust, a horrible smell emanates from the cup, Urghhh!, only the kid with the pirate eye seems not to mind, he still likes the look of the milkshake, despite the colour of its putrid froth, and he picks up the cup and keeps hold of it, I think this is pretty cool, if you don't want it, I'll have it!, and he heads off into the corner mesmerised by the contents of the cup, his one eye bulging and sinister, then the others approach, drawn by curiosity, what is it he finds so appealing about something so disgusting?, and despite the smell, the four of them become bewitched by the milkshake's phosphorescent swirls, the camera focuses on the mould, the fetid goo simmering with all manner of chemical fumes, Blup Blup, the toxic sulphur stinks, it turns multicoloured and bubbles away like a cauldron, Wow! they say. Then the camera zooms in to the surface of the milkshake, they inhale deeply, breathing in the cosmic vapours produced by this primordial matter, the stuff galaxies are made of, and they find themselves being sucked into the cup, where the mystery of mysteries is revealed to them: they get to glimpse the scene they're seeing, or let me say that again and try and explain it more clearly, they see themselves, but not as in a mirror, rather they see themselves as if they were looking at themselves from above, because inside the rotting strawberry milkshake is another room full of toys and a pile of dirty laundry, another universe very much like their own, only smaller, where another four minuscule characters stand stupefied before a tiny stinking cup of mouldy week-old strawberry milkshake, Kaboom!, *mise en abyme*, you slob. And I think, this story is encouraging the use of psychotropic drugs, I'm not sure it's suitable for children, I look at my daughter, this is funny, isn't it? A mouldy cup containing a micro-world in which, whether by chance, coincidence or parallelism, the same micro-characters have a second mouldy cup, they peer into it and see a third cup, mini-mini-Sanjays and Craigs, and so on, into infinity, as far as the imagination is prepared to go, Stop!...and lo and behold, in a second scene of the same hallucination, instead of looking inside Sanjay's milkshake cup, at mini-Sanjay's milkshake cup, and min-mini-Sanjay's milkshake cup, etc... all the Sanjay's simultaneously look in the opposite direction, upwards, and are confronted by the most frightening hypothesis, could it be that even in the first Universe, the one in which our story began, where there was a normal sized cup, not a smaller version, stuck to a t-shirt, in amongst Sanjay's dirty laundry, could it be that this first Universe is in fact contained inside an even bigger mouldy cup, where there are four enormous children, including a giant with a pirate's eye patch, his eye bulging and sinister like a Cyclops, and then above that one, an even bigger one-eyed giant, who's

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always showing his ginormous bum, and I wonder, why is it that in every episode, this character, who is so unappealing, farts spectacularly in order to show his friends the *anima* of his intestines, legs astride, lighter in hand, Kaboom, as he lets rip and sends a fireball fart into all parallel realities.

I ask my daughter, what's the name of the kid with the one eye, Hector, she replies. Hmmm...

After the fall of Troy, nothing is more difficult than Ulysses, Homer's hero, returning to his homeland. Revenge is wreaked by the Gods of Olympus, Poseidon is furious, Zeus is furious, and poor Athena and her dear Ulysses experience numerous trials and tribulations. It's a well-known fact that the Greek Gods dedicated many hours to procreating, and every once in a while they gave birth to unusual offspring whom they felt particularly affectionate and protective about, and this leads Ulysses to seek the hospitality of Polyphemus and results in a cataclysmic encounter with the God of the Seas...Lost in the Aegean, Ulysses' ships come across a land of uninhabited wilderness near the islands where the Cyclopes live, Book IX of the Odyssey, and they stop to gather supplies and gain respite from the supernatural storms, but Ulysses' curiosity gets the better of him: he sees, a few leagues away, the island where the one-eyed monsters live and decides to set off in its direction. Dawn, the rosey-fingered Aurora, rises bright and early with Ulysses, explorer and pillager of cities, and a dozen of his hand-picked brave men, heading towards Polyphemus, the Cyclops giant, whom they can see sleeping on a hillside tending a herd of goats and sheep. They enter Polyphemus' cave, but he's not there, so they decide to wait and fill their bellies with goat's cheese. When the Cyclops returns to the cave, he blocks off the entrance with an enormous, impassable boulder. We're done for, they think, and our heroes tremble, for the one-eyed monster is unhappy at their surprise visit and seems to be rather more fond of the taste of human flesh than he is of its company, and so the Cyclops decides to keep them in his fridge and slowly, one-by-one, or rather bit-by-bit, incorporate them into his ovo-lacto-vegetarian diet. By the second day of this imbroglio, with six of Ulysses' companions having been feasted upon and, as Homer recounts, Polyphemus sitting there licking his fingers with brains scattered about the cave floor, Ulysses weighs up his options and comes up with a plan. After dinner, he offers Polyphemus a generous amount of the wine he'd brought with him, drink Polyphemus drink, I offer you this delicate nectar and beg mercy of you, and the giant likes the soporific drink, pour me some more, he says satisfied, tell me your name and I will reward you for being the most polite of my guests with a gift, my name is Nobody, Ulysses replies, then I will eat you last, Nobody, I'll eat all the others before Nobody, some gift, thinks Ulysses, but later on I'll let rip with a flaming fart and poke you in the eye with that olive tree club of yours, having first sharpened and hardened it in the flame.

And when the monster slept, the surviving brave men of Ithaca took hold of the club and plunged it into the monster's closed eyelid, twisting it round to do as much damage as possible.

Damn and blast it, Ouch Ouch, Polythemus wailed, Nobody, it was Nobody!, he cried, calling out to his relatives in the neighbouring caves, help, friends, Nobody is trying to kill me!, Nobody came into my cave, ate my cheese and blinded me. Where is Nobody? Somebody find Nobody? And blindly the giant groped around the cave trying to find Ulysses and his brave men, who were hiding beneath the fleece of the largest of the sheep. It goes without saying that nobody came to Polyphemus's aid, if Nobody was bothering him, only the gods could help.

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Bertrand Russell said in a lecture room, there's a Hippopotamus in here, but we can neither see it nor smell it, let alone feel it, does this statement make any sense? Wittgenstein peeked under the desk, the hippo wasn't there, the biographers gave a long round of applause. Clap, Clap, Clap... An anecdote. Nobody hides in a very tall cup, peeks inside it and sees lots of people, and then thinks it's only right that this cup contains lots of people looking for hippopotamuses inside other cups while imagining Nobody peeking down on them from above. There's a hippopotamus at the bottom of my cup and Nobody is peeking at it, as if hippopotamuses might be small, big, huge or immeasurably enormous, and anybody might be Nobody. A bottomless bottom where Nobody can be found alongside Nobody, with thousands of hippopotamuses that cannot be seen, nor smelled, and especially not felt, almost, or even as if they did not exist.

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Is there anything inside the cup?, no, dad, it's empty, are you sure?, maybe it's full of air?

We switch the television off, I ask my daughter if she knows what a riddle is, yeah, of course I do, a riddle is an egg, she says, mixing up the question and the answer. What's born out of a hippopotamus egg?, I ask her, dad, everyone knows that, a baby hippopotamus, and what about a baby hippopotamus' egg?, an even smaller baby hippopotamus. When do you think it stops being possible for more baby hippopotamuses to be born?, when it becomes impossible for a hippopotamus to lay an egg, of course, she replies.

When Oedipus approached Thebes the Sphinx presented him with an enigma: "What has four legs in the morning, two in the afternoon and three at night?", he knew the answer – what came first, the chicken or the egg? Man, I think Man came before the egg, where did the chicken come from then?, from a hippopotamus egg, of course, as a child he crawls, as an adult he walks on two legs and in old age he uses a walking stick, a hippopotamus walking stick. In the course of a lifetime he invents a thousand and one chickens and lays lots of eggs. Ingres painted the scene twice: Oedipus 1 and 2. Freud hung a print of one of them at the door to his consultancy, in the first version of the painting we see Oedipus from the side, on the left, answering the sphinx, who hides terrifyingly and menacingly in the half-light on the right, while in the second version, which is very similar to the first but in mirror image, the sphinx hides in a hole in the rocks on the left. In the second painting, leftovers can be seen on the ground, the human remains of those who failed to solve the mystery of all mysteries: How many legs does a hippopotamus have, in the morning, in the afternoon and at night? In the distance, another character can be seen, one who's not present in the first version of the painting, making his way across a gorge, hurrying over with his arm raised as if wanting to warn Oedipus, the sphinx doesn't exist, he seems to be yelling, and you can almost see the sphinx retreating further into the shadows, for she's really just a chicken...