

Mariam Ghani

A Brief History of Collapses

Voiceover Script – English Version, full text

N.B. This version of the script includes some material (five sentences or so, scattered through the text) that was not included in the final cut of the English voiceover narration.

The brothers Grimm might have begun this story with “There was once” and perhaps even added “and there will be again.” Arabic folktales begin with the phrase “kaan ya makaan” – there was or there was not – implying that the story that follows may or may not have happened as told, or at all, or as yet. In either case there rests a suggestion that time is not a purely linear construct, but rather something that bends around the events of the tale, or the storyteller’s will. Which is to say that the past and future both inhabit the present, and history can be imagined not simply as a relentless forward march, but also as a hall of mirrors, a spiral maze, a path switch-backing up a mountain, a door that swings back and forth on its hinges, or a dog endlessly chasing its own tail.

In Afghanistan, folktales begin with the formulation “afsaneh, seesaneh,” which means that the story you are about to hear might be one of seven, or thirty, you could hear about the same events, if you wandered like a lost anthropologist around the countryside, asking the same question in different houses. You could also interpret this beginning to mean that every story, examined closely, is made up of other stories, which depend on other stories, which lead into other stories, and so on, branching and twisting into infinity.

So: the story, or stories, you are about to hear may or may not be true. They may have happened long ago and far away, or quite close to where you stand today; within the reach of present memories, or before the precisions of recorded histories.

In these stories books, among other things, are burned, and banned, and stolen, and sought. So it is useless to pretend, while telling these stories, that words have no weight or consequences, or that myth never becomes history, or history myth. Equally it is useless to pretend that stories are told without intent. Every storyteller is locked in a struggle with posterity, mediated through the audience. Every storyteller is Shahrazade, fighting to preserve either herself or the existence of something she values.

So: there was once, or perhaps there wasn’t, a palace. The palace was a parliament, or a museum; a library, or a refuge; a ministry, or a battleground. We can agree, at least, that it was and is a building, or rather two buildings, constructed two centuries apart. We may imagine that one building echoes the other, and we may be certain that each building contains its own echoes, the ghosts of what did, or did not, happen within its halls.

These two buildings also share a curious condition. For those who know it best, the building exists in a state of suspension between what it was, what it is and what it could be. Perhaps this is true of every building. Perhaps every building is a stone in the stream of history, around which it is possible to see the waters froth.

Every building, then, is both object and process, and must be examined as such: a physical fact that is constructed and reconstructed by circumstance. In the case of the Museum Fridericianum, built across the line that once divided two communities, even the initial act of construction performed a kind of reconstruction. To lay the foundations of Friderich the Second's new museum, the fortified wall of Kassel's old city [Altstadt] was demolished, and the wall-stones used to fill in the old moat. Only the Zwehrenturm, the tower used as an astronomical observatory, was preserved and attached, anachronistically, to the Palladian lines of the new museum building.

A visitor walking through the Fridericianum in the years just after its opening would traverse a chain of galleries running along each wing. As you walked through each gallery to the next, the galleries grew smaller and the collections ever more detailed and minute. One wing might take you from sculptures to miniatures to cameos to coins; another from crowns and goblets to jewelry and gems; another from large animals preserved with brandy to stuffed tropical birds, dried sea creatures and shells, and finally butterflies under glass; another from a room full of astrolabes to another full of clocks to a collection of alchemical works and manuscripts; another from models, to maps, to a room where copper engravings could be made. Still other rooms held special collections like the wax figurines depicting all the heads of the state from the 16th century onwards, looking out over the square and the park beyond it, which seemed to melt into the architecture of the room through the trompe l'oeil perspective of the mural on the wall, which extended the columns of the Fridericianum's architecture into the Friderichsplatz outside.

The most famous object in this museum of everything was the stuffed Goethe-Elephant, so-called because Goethe had used a bone in its skeleton to prove the truth of the theory of evolution. The elephant had been part of Friderich's menagerie until it broke free from a parade and plunged over the Schone-Aussicht cliff, questing after an elusive, delectable smell. Friderich himself was reputedly so excited about his new museum that he personally helped to pack and move some of the collections. But the design of the collections, the building and the square were all the work of Simon Louis du Ry, the second of three Huguenot architects to bear that name and serve the court of Hesse. Du Ry the third would later befriend Weinbrenner, whose work on Karlsruhe's Platz Central may well have owed something to Kassel, and certainly inspired a plan shaped by Walter Harten almost two centuries later on a patch of land to the west of Kabul, where the young Afghan king Amanullah dreamed of a new city called Dar ul-Aman.

In Amanullah's brief time on the throne he had already enacted a sweeping set of reforms. Dar ul-Aman, the 'abode of peace,' was intended to be both the smallest part and most visible symbol of this program of modernization: a new palace to serve as the seat of Amanullah's re-imagined government, open to the people it would serve and surrounded by a new city planned along rational and Enlightened lines. In this vision, the Dar ul-Aman palace would have been situated at the intersection of four major roads; today it sits at the end of one, the Darulaman road, and the beginning of another, the road to Rish Khor. On the first floor of the palace, with windows overlooking the city of Kabul, would have been the offices of the King and his cabinet. On the second floor, formal reception rooms, smaller conference rooms and a mosque; on the third, under a grand glass and iron dome, the *Majlis* or seat of Parliament, surrounded by the offices of MPs.

But Amanullah's reforms had raced too far and too fast, snaking out from the relatively sophisticated and adaptable center, Kabul, to disturb the conservative provinces and their entrenched power structures – a fatal pattern that would be repeated three more times in the twentieth century. Soon a small spark – perhaps supplied by British spies - was enough to set off a revolt, and Amanullah lost his throne. The regimes that replaced him reversed most of his reforms and retrenched the monarchy in the old city. Photographs of Amanullah were banned from circulation and the speaking of his name was forbidden for fifty years. The train track from Kabul to Dar ul-Aman was pulled up; the Henschel engine rusted slowly in a shed. The Dar ul-Aman palace was used to store raisins, and as a medical school. Detached from its intended purpose, it stood as a silent monument to Amanullah's unfinished project, until a fire simultaneously consumed and revived it by making it visible again.

Like a leader erased by his successors, however, a building can never really become invisible, even if we all conspire to ignore it, even if we collude in the fiction that this physical fact has no physical presence. Buildings are difficult to erase completely from collective memory, all the more so once they are emptied out; an abandoned building becomes its own archive, its history inevitably written upon its own skin. Perhaps this is why Dar ul-Aman remains so important to Afghans, who invest it with all the memories about which they do not speak.

If Dar ul-Aman as a ruin can be considered that most public of archives, the palimpsest, the archive maintained in the Fridericianum during its earliest years may be understood as belonging to the opposite order of the purely private records kept by the city-state. This private archive shared the building with the public museum and the state library, which balanced uneasily between holding private possessions and offering them, within limits, for public use.

The history of the library begins with a single manuscript, the only one owned by Hesse until 1500, when the Landgraf received a second manuscript as a gift. Wilhelm the Fourth, who gazed at stars, and his son Moritz, who sought the philosopher's stone, both built up the library to further their own pursuits. One sister married a Pfalzgraf and then died, bringing into the family much of the marvelous library of Heidelberg. But the core of the collection was built through the exploits of the Hessian mercenaries, who plundered across the continent and brought home books and illuminated manuscripts.

We can only speculate as to the motives of these collectors. Perhaps they were ruled by simple greed, or directed by the more arcane desires of their rulers. Or perhaps they were moved to preserve those manuscripts that otherwise might have fallen to the dicta of Martin Luther, who famously wrote – in a book also collected in the library – that Catholic manuscripts were like 'pigs dressed up in gold and pearls' and recommended that they should be used like yesterday's newspaper, to line shelves or bind account books. In any case, it was through the efforts of their mercenaries that the Hessian Landgraves acquired the entire library of the monastery at Fulda, which contained the earliest known manuscript written in old German [hochdeutsch]: a transcription of the oral epic known as the Hildebrandlied.

The pages of this manuscript, seen today, appear to be stained with blood, reflecting its long history as an object to be desired, possessed and repossessed. The story set down in the Hildebrandlied is also bloody, and curiously reminiscent of another story, that of Rustam and Sohrab, told by Firdausi in the epic Shahnameh or Book of Kings, which chronicles dynasties both mythic and real. It is thought that both stories spring from an older, lost source. On the other hand, it is equally likely that two cultures of warriors might have evolved the same set of tragedies, independently of each other. In both stories, a father and son battle each other without knowing that they are father and son. Only after the father kills the son does he recognize his child, and bitterly regret the deceit he used to win the day. Rustam, like Hildebrand, is an old hand with an old man's tricks, a legendary warrior. His father was raised by a phoenix, and like the phoenix Rustam always rises from the ashes of defeat.

The mujahidin fighting over the territory of Dar ul-Aman as the twentieth century drew to a close invoked the heroes of the Shahnameh as antecedents in pamphlets extolling the 'love of jihad' embodied in the warrior spirit of Rustam. The walls of the palace itself record an ongoing dialogue between the lofty ideals and pragmatic realities of the war. Elaborate martyr memorials left by the first group of occupiers are overlaid with thicker clusters of names, left by the next group to take their place. In the next layer, sardonic commentary appears, perhaps reflecting the gradual degradation of group morale as the war dragged on with little prospect for resolution in sight.

Up the hill from Dar ul-Aman, in the Tajbeg Palace built by the same king for his queen, the Soviet servicemen who occupied the palace in the 1980s covered the walls with Cyrillic scrawls about mothers and girlfriends and how much they wanted to go home. In the 21st century the International Security Assistance Forces, having in turn appropriated the Tajbeg Palace and its strategic hill, would add their own legend to the walls: "Only the dead will see the end of the war."

Graffiti has a peculiarly bloody history in Afghanistan, dating back to the story of Rabi'a Balkhi, who was punished for an illicit love affair by being thrown into the Balkh palace *hammam* with her wrists slit. Before she died, she wrote a poem on the wall in her own blood, which finishes with these lines: 'My eyes can see horror and call it beauty / My tongue can touch poison, but taste sugar sweet.'

While in another country this might be considered a cautionary tale, in Afghanistan Rabi'a Balkhi is a beloved heroine, after whom many girls' schools are named. Indeed, we would do well to remember that the outward signs of victory, defeat, love and grief are different in different places; the mourning dress may be white here, but black there; a veil assumed here would be thrown off there. A white bird may signify peace, or an unquiet spirit; either way it would be unlucky to kill it. Rosewater, which is used to make the wedding sweets, also serves to wash a body before enveloping it, tenderly, in its final shroud. A building (like the Fridericianum, or Dar ul-Aman) that is set on fire - not once, but twice; not twice, but three times - should be examined closely. In the tales of Afghan fabulists, jinn are created from smokeless fires and return to fire as man does to dust. The jinn are everywhere and nowhere, impersonal and indefinable. Some jinn are evil, while others are more like imps of the perverse, the little voices that whisper 'what ifs' in your ears and

point out the loopholes in the rules of every game. All jinn are drawn to the heat of human anger, and the paler flames that flicker in unwary hearts.

Looking back now, it may well seem that Dar ul-Aman, if not all of Kabul, was infested with jinni in the decades following the fire of 1968, set by officials in the Ministry of Public Works to rid themselves of the records of their fraud. How else can we explain the perverse impulses that swept through government buildings, transforming generals into revolutionaries, politicians into puppets, and civil servants into secret policemen?

The city of Kassel must have its own portion of irony-loving jinn. While Dar ul-Aman was envisioned as a Parliament and never became one, the Museum Fridericianum was never meant to be a Parliament but became precisely that during the Napoleonic wars, when Jerome Bonaparte became King of Westphalia and converted the building into his *palais des états*. In return, amnesty from French looting was granted to the Fridericianum collections, provided they did not leave the building; the French had cleared out the galleries, but stored their contents in between the shelves of the library on the second floor. Some of the less trusting nobles of Kassel tried to smuggle some choice pieces out of the city and were caught; those pieces were confiscated and permanently lost.

When Bonaparte was banished in 1813, the Fridericianum became a museum once more, but not precisely the same museum it had been before. Perhaps the pieces now missing from the collection created gaps too important to ignore; perhaps the space had been too much reshaped by its uses during the war. In any case, the Fridericianum no longer attempted to bring together art and science, magic and technology, the beautiful and the sublime; it contented itself with charting a more traditional trajectory through the fine and decorative arts, its most fragile and covetable possessions.

By the time the Fridericianum burned in 1941, the building housed only a library, and the library lost most of its books, either to the fire itself or to the water that put out the blaze. Librarians salvaged what they could by laying the remaining books and pages across the undamaged stretches of floor and drying them with electric fans. Much of what was saved so carefully then, however, would be lost in 1943, when the Allied bombers returned to destroy the Henschel works that had been manufacturing Panzers for the front lines, and decimated most of the inner city.

Of course, by 1941 the library had already evacuated two separate sets of works – the books with Jewish or other ‘objectionable’ content or origins, which had been sequestered, and the most precious manuscripts, which had been moved to the provincial bank vault in Bad Wildening. Even as the library’s collection was being rebuilt with a new supply of stolen books - this time plundered by the Nazis from ‘enemy’ cultures all over Europe – its own treasures, including the Fulda Hildebrandlied, were stolen from the Bad Wildening vault. The Hildebrandlied would be sold, separated into two pieces, resold, and donated to the Roman Catholic Church before most of the manuscript found its way back to Kassel again; the missing first page, which had borne a tell-tale library seal, did not return until decades later.

During their tenure as Fridericianum librarians, Wilhelm and Jacob Grimm had published the first print edition of the Hildebrandlied. The brothers also opened the doors of the

library to the most ordinary of stories and storytellers, as circles of their friends and acquaintances met in the library to transcribe fairy, folk and household tales.

If one burrows through the layers of successive revisions, additions and excisions to those earliest versions of the famous Grimm tales, one finds a series of simple stories, some in fragments, some absurd, some with dark or erotic undercurrents. Morals and pious prescriptions of behavior are mostly encrustations that accumulate upon the originals, increasing with each successive edition released by the authors. This rewriting may have been motivated by pure creativity, or pressure to conform to the norms of the day. Or we may choose to link it to the brothers' concurrent involvement with the nationalist movements that sprang up in the wake of the Napoleonic wars. After all, what better tool with which to consolidate a culture than a compendium of its most cherished values, expressed through stories aimed at children? At the very least, the Weimar generation must have been thinking along these lines, as they waged a war of fairytales to win the hearts and minds of German children.

While writers aligned with the National Socialists created tales with heightened versions of classical Grimm tropes – the hero who saves his village from the threatening outsider, the woman who waits for her magical savior, the majestic might that is always right – Communist and Social Democratic writers were developing new utopian and proletarian fairy tales. In these tales, the soldier trudging wearily home from war is still a bearer of hard-won wisdom, but it is the wisdom of a man who has been commanded into military follies, who will never again execute an order unthinkingly. A king who has killed a hundred men because they could not guess where his daughters danced at night is a tyrant to be condemned, not a grieving father to be redeemed. Hope lies in clear sight – removal of the rose-colored glasses – and collaboration between victims to overthrow their oppressors; children are heroes because they question the way things have always been, and wonder why things might not work some other way instead.

While the belief in the power of words implied by the 'war of fairytales' may seem naïve, we must examine it in the context of history; not necessarily the moment in which the tales were produced, but the decades immediately afterwards, during which books were banned, burned and divested from the dead and disappeared, or collected for 'enemy studies' at the party's academy in Berlin by the former deputy director of the Fridericianum. By the time the war ended, the Allies who occupied the west half of Germany were taking fairy tales and their role in national myth-making so seriously that they banned the stories of the Brothers Grimm.

Whenever a war ends and the historians decide which side won righteously and which was wrong, the public mourning of lost heroes becomes the private shame of owning the loss, and there spreads a certain kind of sorrow that turns inward and turns into a brittle, bitter, secret grief. But what happens to mourning when the war does not end, but instead reverses, changes sides, folds in on itself, and becomes an endless spiral? When the war has no end it becomes difficult to trace back its beginnings, untangle allegiances and sort heroes from criminals and innocents. When the war has no end, there is no time to mourn the dead; there is barely time to argue over their names and numbers, to write their names on the walls, to tie scraps of cloth over their headstones and call them martyrs' flags. We

are in the country of mass graves that have not yet been transmuted into sites of mass atonement.

Even our most famous martyrs, like the President whose photograph once adorned every office wall in Dar ul-Aman, may disappear into secret graves; Daoud's was not found until thirty years after he was buried. We must assume also that the Dar ul-Aman and Tajbeg palaces are surrounded by unmarked graves, dating from the night of Dar ul-Aman's second fire, the Soviet invasion in December 1979, which began with advance strikes against the army at Dar ul-Aman and party leader Amin in the Tajbeg, and ended with uncounted numbers of bodies rolled in the palace carpets being buried without ceremony on the grounds. That afternoon at the Politburo meeting, a drugged soup [aush] had been served; those who supped upon it slept through all the terrible events that followed, awakening the next day in an entirely changed world.

Ten years later, after a decade of wars both cold and hot, Dar ul-Aman burned for the third time when the Defense Minister attempted to use it as a launching pad for his coup d'état. When the hail of government rockets receded, Dar ul-Aman was repaired for the third and last time. Within a few years it was a ruin again, and this time no repair would be forthcoming: the only government that might have taken charge of its care had become one among the many forces destroying it inch by inch. Bullets, rockets, mortars, mines all made their marks on the walls and the floors, the windows and doors. The last blow to the structure came in 2001, when an American bomb crashed through the roof and all three floors, leaving a gap around which the rest of the building constantly shifts, losing a piece here, a piece there, little bits sifting and drifting away everywhere.

For decades, the road that leads to Dar ul-Aman was lined by maple trees. When they were planted, the road was envisioned as a Champs Elysée or Kurfürstendamm; but the district that should have grown up around it only existed on the yellowing paper of abandoned plans. By the time the trees were cut down for firewood, in the most desperate days of the civil war, Amanullah's dream of a new Kabul had been taken up, destroyed, taken up again, and destroyed more completely. The latest reconstruction of Kabul is an unruly and immoderate city, spilling down the valley and up the hills, growing haphazardly in the cracks and corners and hastily patching over all the wounds made by war.

The Fridericianum too remained a ruin for many years, while the rest of Kassel was rebuilt around it. In 1945, when most of the city was leveled, the rubble was collected and pressed into new bricks to construct new buildings. From the Fridericianum, the recovered material included some of the parts – a head, assorted limbs – of the larger-than-life statues of the Brothers Grimm that once presided over the library. In the Aue-Park a great heap of irregular stones from destroyed buildings was covered over with earth and planted with roses; today it seems like a natural hill, something that has always been there and always will be.

For ten years, the Fridericianum slept; roughly restored but still remote from any purpose, cleared of debris and unmoored from its history. The museum came back to the Fridericianum when the first documenta presented the art of the possible in this ruin of the past, which became once again a full-time museum – though once again, not quite the

museum it had been before. Our notion of what a museum should be had shifted again, towards something more like an empty container in which art appears and then disappears, like a magician's cabinet.

Perhaps the question that we must finally consider is whether it is equally possible to see the building that was and is no longer in a building that has been remade, and the building that was and is no longer in a building that remains a ruin. In destruction and reconstruction, equally, something is lost. One building loses a thread to the past; the other loses the path to the future. Somehow, though, what is lost is still hovering, just out of view, above or around or inside the building as it now exists: all the other buildings that could have been, but weren't; all the other buildings that were, but are no longer. Perhaps the code to enter that other building is scribbled on the wall; perhaps you only need to walk a little further down the hall.