

**Source:** Anna Maria Hong, *Critical Essay on The Elephant Vanishes*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

*Hong is a published poet and the editor of the fiction and memoir anthology Growing Up Asian American. In the following essay, Hong discusses how Murakami humorously and empathetically portrays a modern world marked by a sense of imbalance, emptiness, and unease.*

Like many of the stories in Murakami's acclaimed collection *The Elephant Vanishes* the title story 'The Elephant Vanishes' focuses on the life of an individual haunted by a sense of general disequilibrium. In this story, that individual is an unnamed narrator who relates how an old elephant and its keeper suddenly disappear one night from his town's elephant house. As an obsessive chronicler of the events related the elephant's disappearance, the narrator recalls news coverage of the incident, the futile attempts of the townspeople to find the elephant and the keeper, and the strange facts surrounding the case, which indicate that the elephant apparently vanished into thin air. In relating this odd, humorous, and surrealistic tale, Murakami lightly satirizes the problems of contemporary, urban society and explores the phenomena of alienation and imbalance that many people experience in the modern world.

The story opens with the narrator, a thirty-one-year-old public relations executive at a major kitchen appliance manufacturing company, telling how he read about the elephant's disappearance in the newspaper. From this initial description, Murakami draws attention to the absurdity of contemporary life by having the narrator recall the details of the article, as the narrator states, 'The unusually large headline caught my eye: ELEPHANT MISSING IN TOKYO SUBURB, and, beneath that, in type one size smaller, CITIZENS' FEARS MOUNT. SOME CALL FOR PROBE.' This headline seems both implausible and ridiculous, but as the narrator's recollection of events continues, the reactions of the townspeople to the missing elephant seem more and more absurd.

The first part of the story proceeds with the narrator interrupting his description of the newspaper article to tell how the elephant came to live with its keeper in a lone elephant house. He notes that the elephant's age led to its adoption by the town a year before the animal disappeared. When a private zoo had to close due to financial problems, the zoo relocated the other animals to zoos throughout Japan, but because the elephant was so old, no one would take it. The elephant then remained alone in the abandoned zoo until a deal was struck by the town's mayor, the developer who had bought the land the zoo was on, and the former zoo's owners. The narrator meticulously recounts the debates over how to deal with the elephant problem and the eventual outcome, with the town taking care of the elephant and relocating it to a new elephant house along with its long-time keeper. Throughout this section, Murakami pokes fun at modern life, again by having the narrator recall all the details with a wry, detached tone. Following his description of the new elephant house dedication ceremony, the narrator says, 'The elephant endured these

virtually meaningless (for the elephant, entirely meaningless) formalities with hardly a twitch, and it chomped on the bananas with a vacant stare. When it finished eating the bananas, everyone applauded.'

In this part of the story, Murakami also sets up the central theme regarding how commercialism and urban developments have supplanted older ways of life. The story is set in a wealthy Tokyo suburb during the 1980s, when Japan, the United States, and other countries were experiencing an economic boom. The event that sets the other events in the story in motion is the closing of the old zoo due to financial problems and the buying of that land by a developer who plans to build high-rise condos. This act – the literal replacement of a place of recreation and enjoyment with the money-making project – forces the elephant to be relocated to the new elephant house. The old elephant and its elderly keeper represent longstanding relationships and symbolize former ways of life, which have been pushed aside by commercial ventures. The narrator emphasizes that it is the elephant's age that keeps it from being adopted elsewhere, as it is deemed too feeble to be a good investment. But the relationship between the keeper and the animal is one of familiarity, love, and trust, not financial arrangements.

As the narrator begins again to describe the newspaper article about the elephant's disappearance, he discusses the facts surrounding the case that make it highly improbable that the elephant actually escaped. Upon rereading the article, the narrator concludes that the elephant had to have miraculously vanished somehow much to the bafflement of the town's authorities, who persist in denying this possibility. As he goes on to recount the town's responses to the elephant's vanishing, the narrator points out the futility of these actions, and again in having the narrator relate these details, Murakami satirizes the blind literalness and lack of imagination in modern life. Among other details, the narrator recalls how the mayor held a news conference defending the elephant house's security system and denouncing persons responsible for the elephant's disappearance and politicizing an event which defies ordinary comprehension: 'This is a dangerous and senseless anti-social act of the most malicious kind, and we cannot allow it to go unpunished.'

The narrator also describes the reactions of a 'worried-looking' mother interviewed on the news; Self-Defense Force troops, firemen, and policemen combing the woods for the elephant to no avail; and the silly commentary of a news anchorman about the incident. As he notes how interest in the story inevitably waned after several months of not finding the elephant or discovering how it disappeared, the narrator also mentions how dissatisfying all the official responses were. As he puts it, 'Despite their enormous volume, the clippings contained not one fact of the kind that I was looking for.' The narrator searches for answers regarding the mysterious case, which these typical contemporary actions have all failed to address, and he is left feeling increasingly bewildered. Another aspect of modern life is the often bizarre discrepancy between unanswered questions and the reductive, matter-of-fact news reporting that distorts a story in order to compress it.

As the story progresses, the narrator continues to feel confused by the elephant incident and saddened by the disappearance of the elephant and its keeper. He feels 'the air of doom and desolation' hanging over the empty elephant house, which he continues to visit. His sense of disorientation following the vanishing is so strong that he finds he cannot make decisions he would like to make. His confusion becomes most apparent after meeting a magazine editor at a party thrown by his company. The narrator recalls how he and the editor flirted at the party and continued their conversation at a hotel bar afterward as two people who 'were beginning to like each other.' However, after telling the editor about the elephant case, which had occurred a few months earlier, the narrator finds that their conversation becomes awkward.

While talking about the case, the narrator admits to having seen the elephant and the keeper on the night of their disappearance and says he was probably the last person to have seen them. He explains that he had been in the habit of spying on the keeper and the elephant through an air vent in the elephant house, which was visible from a spot on a cliff. When the editor asks if there was anything unusual about the two on the night they disappeared, the narrator goes on to say that there was and there was not. After hesitating, he says that although the two were doing what they always did, their relative size seemed to change, as either the elephant had shrunk or the keeper had gotten bigger or both. When the editor asks if he thinks the elephant shrunk until it was small enough to escape or 'simply dissolved into nothingness,' the narrator concludes that he does not know and that he has a hard time imagining what happened beyond the strange sight that he thinks he saw.

The editor and the narrator part ways soon after this conversation, and the narrator says he never saw her again. In spite of wanting to ask her out for dinner, he ends up never doing that, because it does not seem to matter one way or the other. The story concludes with the narrator admitting to feeling paralyzed. He finds it difficult to take action of any kind on his own behalf. He describes a sense of external and internal imbalance, which has left him disoriented:

'I often get the feeling that things around me have lost their proper balance, though it could be that my perceptions are playing tricks on me. Some kind of balance inside me has broken down since the elephant affair, and maybe that causes external phenomena to strike my eye in a strange way. It is probably something in me.'

Although the narrator blames himself for his sense of things being not quite right, Murakami conveys that the narrator alone is not to blame, as the banality of the world in which the narrator lives fails to provide the connection, continuity, and security that older ways of life offered. In the last few paragraphs of the story, the narrator notes that even as he feels things have lost their proper balance, he has become more successful than ever in his job, selling appliances by espousing a pragmatic viewpoint which he does not believe. The

narrator points out that his campaign has been successful, because people crave 'a kind of unity in this *kit-chin* we know as the world.' In this statement, both the narrator and the author seem to emphasize that as modern society replaces traditional modes with things to buy, people will continue to long for some kind of security or sense of familiar order.

That longing for solace accounts for the narrator's strange, obsessive interest in the elephant and the keeper, as they represent old ways of life that are being pushed to the literally invisible margins. The elephant and the keeper palpably demonstrate what has been lost in the transition to modern culture, as the two of them display an unusually strong bond of affection. The narrator watches them on a regular basis, because he marvels at the empathy he perceives, as he notes, 'Their affection was evident in every gesture.'

This long-term closeness and warmth contrasts dramatically with the isolation the narrator experiences in his everyday life as a company man and with the empty gestures offered by the narrator's society at large, which fails to see the mystery at the heart of the vanishing much less to explain it. The pragmatic, consumerist contemporary world provides no room for the kind of intimate, intuitive bond shared by the elephant and the keeper, and Murakami seems to suggest that their vanishing is inevitable in the face of the new prosperity and materialistic values. Murakami subtly underscores the immeasurable price of this loss by his narrator's paralysis. The loss fills the last lines: 'The elephant and keeper have vanished completely. They will never be coming back.'