

Night writing: a reading of Kafka's 'Metamorphosis'

I do not remember when I first read 'Metamorphosis', but I do remember mounting feelings of horror, sorrow and admiration as the story unfolded. It overwhelmed me, and instructed me. By that I mean it inspired me to want to be a writer. Reading it might have been the first time I began reading as a writer. And what does it mean to read as a writer? Perhaps it means reading with one's ear to the writing. Or waking up after the writing a different person.

Now rereading Kafka's story is another kind of experience, though still one that recalls my first encounter. It is still for me a matter of reading with an ear to the writing—or another way of apprehending this might be to say that as a reading writer I find I want to step inside a story, walk around in its rooms. Try to experience it from the inside. I find this time I want to approach Kafka's story from three directions or through three doors—remembering that Gregor Samsa's bedroom had three doors and the story itself is broken into three parts; there were three lodgers with three beards; and at the end Gregor's family, after writing three letters, is left as a threesome. The number three seems important to the structure of the story.

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The opening sentence of 'Metamorphosis' reads as follows in some of its various translations:

As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from a troubled dream he found himself transformed in his bed into a monstrous insect.

trans. VLADIMIR NABOKOV

Gregor Samsa woke from uneasy dreams one morning to find himself changed into a giant bug.

trans. J. A. UNDERWOOD

As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from a troubled dream, he found himself changed in his bed to some monstrous kind of vermin.

trans. ANGEL FLORES

As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect.

trans. JEREMY TAMBLING

When Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from troubled dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a monstrous insect.

trans. MALCOLM PASLEY

One morning, upon awakening from agitated dreams, Gregor Samsa found himself, in his bed, transformed into a monstrous vermin.

trans. JOACHIM NEUGROSCHER

The untranslated opening sentence is:

Als Gregor Samsa eines Morgens aus unruhigen Traumen erwachte, fund er sich in seinem Bett zu einem ungeheuren Ungeziefer verwandelt.

A literal translation would be:

As Gregor Samsa one morning from agitated dreams awoke, found he himself in his bed into a monstrous vermin transformed.

Ungeziefer means vermin, not insect, which is either *Insekt* or *Kerbtier* in German; and while the adjective *ungeheuer* means enormous, the noun *Ungeheuer* means monster (Kafka, trans. Neugroschel, xxi–xxii).

Given these radically different and differently nuanced versions of this famous opening sentence, we could ask which translation is closer to the original. But what would we mean by 'closer'? Closer in word order? Closer in being a literal translation of the German words? Closer to the particular cultural connotations of the sentence when it first appeared in 1915? Closer in feel and tone? Closer to the rhythm and drama of that opening sentence? Closer to the poetic qualities of the original sentence? Or closer to Kafka's intentions? This question is difficult enough for readers but has been even more troubling for translators who have made the decisions, for those listed above are the ones who have taken on the task of transforming this work into something that holds together and stands up as sentences and then as a story in English.

Looking at the choices made by these English language translators, it is immediately noticeable that they have worked in common agreement about the drama of this sentence. What Gregor Samsa was changed into is left invariably until the final word. This is not as it is in Kafka's sentence, for the word 'transformed' stands at the end of his opening sentence. When the final word is 'transformed' there is an emphasis on the bizarre wonder that has occurred and on a new instability in the world. (The story ends with a sense of renewed instability too.) But it would not work to have this verb placed last in an English sentence, so we are given the shock of the new creature, a dramatic end-point and a compelling reason to go on reading to the next sentence and the ones after.

The translators are not so sure though about what name to give this transformed being: insect, bug or vermin? Later in the story Gregor is called a dung beetle. Why is there such uncertainty here at the beginning? Perhaps partly because the German word itself is vague and partly because, as we discover, the transformation is not complete at the beginning of the story. Gregor only gradually, over the course of about a month, loses the sense and memory of his humanity. Does it make a difference then which word the translators use? It does make subtle differences in this case and important differences in other places in the sentence. The English word 'vermin' (even if it is the best literal translation) invites us to be disgusted, suggesting some feeling of disgust on Gregor's part too. But as the

story unfolds one of its remarkable aspects is the manner in which Gregor accepts and accommodates his transformation. He is not horrified but rather stolid in his reaction. So perhaps insect is a better choice because it is more neutral in English. And what about bug? Bug is an interesting choice, almost slang, and certainly naive in its tone. I want to return to this choice after discussing some of the other words in the sentence.

We have gigantic, monstrous and giant as choices for the adjective attached to bug/insect/vermin. Gigantic and giant impress on the reader the dimension of size, but monstrous is an altogether different word. It calls up an attitude and a history of literature and myth about monsters. It provokes in the reader not only a suggestion of horror but an awareness of this as a monster story in the long tradition of monster stories going back to the Greek epics, the myths attached to Greek gods and equally ancient folklore about monsters from all nations. The Old Testament story of Jonah's travel inside a whale is one element in this tradition. Monstrous then is a more history-laden and literary choice of word.

For the important verb in the sentence there is in general a choice between transformed and changed. What difference does this make? Too little to concern us as readers or writers? The choice makes an enormous, perhaps even gigantic difference. The word transformed is perhaps more exact, certainly more descriptive of a process, and both more literate and more literary. Transformed is a Latin-based compound word. Latin has been for most of the past two thousand years the language of clerics, scholars, poets and writers. So the effect of this word on the sentence is to give it both a literary and literate feel. Change on the other hand is a less exact word and a simpler and more direct one. It does not draw attention to itself in the same way as transform does. The *Oxford English Dictionary* notes that it possibly has a Celtic origin. It is closer to a spoken, nonliterate, perhaps more brutally direct form of English. What difference does all this make? Most of the translators are perhaps so aware of this famous story as a literary masterpiece that they will tend to choose the sophisticated and eloquent word or phrase before the less literary, perhaps less aesthetic alternative. One

general point I am making here is that the words we choose and even the etymology of the words we choose will make important differences to the kind of story we produce. After all, that's what a writer is: a chooser of one word after another (with a view to the whole resulting pattern). A word can operate on a sentence like a stone dropped into a still pond. Or like a gong in a temple. A word can reverberate in all directions through the sentence or even the paragraph into which it is placed.

At first I was shocked to discover that Malcolm Pasley, in a new edition of Kafka's short fiction, had altered the English title of the story from 'Metamorphosis' to 'The Transformation'. It is, I suppose, in swapping a Greek-based word for one with Latin roots, no less literary in its heritage. It is, however, something of a sacrilegious move, a jolt to those who have grown up with the story being called 'Metamorphosis'. I imagine Pasley was delighted to find himself inspired to change, overnight, the title of the century's most famous story of transformation. Walking into a bookshop and finding Kafka's story renamed I felt a shock perhaps faintly similar to Gregor's experience. This, of all stories, might find its most vivid and lasting existence in the possibilities of translation.

There is one sentence among the alternative translations that stands out as different. J. A. Underwood's version, 'Gregor Samsa woke from uneasy dreams one morning to find himself changed into a giant bug'. It is direct, simple, and its language is more conversational than literary. Bug is the word a child might use. This version of the sentence alerts us to the story's folk origins as a possible yarn, parable or children's tale. There are many, many children's and folk-tales where people are suddenly changed into creatures. Underwood's translation takes the story emphatically into a familiar and unsettling territory we recognise as uncanny.

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'Hans My Hedgehog' is a traditional transformation story, sometimes included in collections of tales under the category of animal stories. It was taken down by the Grimm brothers in 1815 from a woman named Dorothea Viehmann who was also the source for

their version of 'Cinderella', much different and bloodier than modern versions. In condensed form, 'Hans My Hedgehog' is the story of a farmer who was unhappy because he had no children. He wished, one day, for a child, 'even if it turns out to be a hedgehog'. When his wife gave birth to a child half hedgehog and half human, both his wish and his wife's were embodied. What to do with such a monstrosity? They kept it behind the stove for eight years, expecting Hans to die. Finally Hans was given a bagpipe as a gift, and after having his rooster shod, he rode it out of town, leading some donkeys and pigs. He lived at the top of a tree in a forest while his donkeys grazed and multiplied. Occasionally he would give directions to lost kings, making them promise to let him marry their daughters. When his pigs and donkeys filled the forest he took them home and slaughtered them for the townspeople. Then he went to collect the maidens he'd been promised. The first daughter he claimed refused him, so he tore off her clothes and 'stuck her with his quills until she was bleeding all over'. The next daughter did marry him. Eventually he shed his quills and turned out to be a handsome young man. He inherited the kingdom and took his bride back to his village to show his family. The story ends with, 'My tale is done and now it's on the run'.

There are many of these kinds of stories. The tale of the six brothers who became six swans and had to be rescued by their sister is another marvellous one where, at the end, one brother is left with one arm still hanging off him as a wing. These folk-tales share a number of characteristics. I am indebted to Marie-Louise von Franz's, *The Interpretation of Fairy Tales*, first published in 1970, for inspiring this list:

- 1 They seem to be instructive but without making their meaning clear.
- 2 They are directed at both adults and children—with barely concealed sexual aspects, and often the ruthless opportunism of a new young generation shrewdly observed.
- 3 Characters are really abstractions or types. When I read Grimm's stories to my children I cannot resist stopping before the mention of an archetypal figure or the figure's attributes to let them

guess the next word. Invariably they can do it because these stories are like board games.

In the Western literary tradition of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries there has been much interest in fictional characters as individuals rather than 'mere' types. We have come to expect subtle, detailed, contradictory, flawed and developing characters from our great writers. Characters with complex inner selves, with much more to them than can be contained in a story. Writing within this modern tradition, Kafka gives us Gregor Samsa as one of these highly individualised figures. But he is also, strangely, an abstraction—a symbolic presence.

- 4 They are moral fables but not Christian ones. In 'Hans My Hedgehog' it seems that the first princess, reluctant to marry a half-hedgehog, has been assaulted, raped and thrown aside as a disgrace for the rest of her life. This is not a Christian version of justice.
- 5 They have become the basis for a sanitised children's literature and cinematic entertainment.
- 6 The cultural setting is not particular, though there is no disguising the quasi-medieval historical period.
- 7 They leave us feeling hopeful through our identification with the progress of the hero. Marie-Louise von Franz writes, quaintly, in relation to this:

There is a beautiful custom among Australian aborigines: when the rice does not grow well, the women go into the rice field and squat among the rice and tell it the myth of the origin of the rice. Then the rice knows again why it is there and grows like anything.

This sentimental legend falls on its face in Australia where it is common knowledge that Aboriginal people did not grow rice and could not have, given their nomadic civilisation, not to mention the aridity and thin soils of the country. But the land does speak through Aboriginal culture, revivifying stories of origins in cycles that have lasted for tens of thousands of years.

This optimism or sense of order is another element of story-telling that has faltered and been transformed under the force

of modernism in the twentieth century. Kafka's animal story of transformation cannot rise to a triumphant ending, which would be the salvation of its hero, because by 1915 this narrative ground had fallen away, revealing a spiritual abyss.

- 8 These stories are varied and irrational enough to be an antidote to more rigidly rational and moralistic attitudes to life. In fact they are about the breaking through of irrational, unconscious and instinctive forces into the conscious lives of characters. Kafka's pessimistic narrative means this aspect of such stories lingers with readers of 'Metamorphosis'.
- 9 There is often a quotidian concern with social hierarchies, contracts, debts, money and the fair exchange of goods, perhaps reflecting concerns of the rural poor who generated and preserved these stories. In the Hans story there are the contracts with the kings and there is the return of the pigs and donkeys to his home village. In Kafka's story there is the family's economic dependence on Gregor, and then their increasing economic independence as Gregor declines.
- 10 Processes of birth, death and renewal involving parents and their offspring are central. 'Hans My Hedgehog' follows Hans' fate in the world after he leaves home and ends with him caring for an aged father. The king who is willing to give up his daughter to a strange creature from the forest is the one who is rewarded.
- 11 Talking animals and human/animal transformations are commonplace. Marie-Louise von Franz notes how easily and immediately children accept stories of talking animals. She calls these stories 'the basic material, the deepest and most ancient form of tale'. Kafka's opening sentence calls up and locks in this deep tradition, though in handing us the image so blatantly at the very beginning there is a renewed sense of shock attached.
- 12 As well as featuring typical racial, cultural and social character types, the stories follow a general structure of repeated patterns:
 - (a) the number and arrangement of characters at the beginning is unbalanced in some way and by the end the same number is often reproduced but gender and age (or generation) balances have been rearranged.

- (b) The hero or heroine is subjected to magical events, humiliations and trials often involving a journey into and through a forest.
- (c) Ordinary or deformed people achieve royalty or are revealed as having been royal all along.
- (d) Through all this there is the presence of the number three. In the 'Hans My Hedgehog' story we have three figures at the beginning: father, mother and half-hedgehog son. At the end we have again three figures, but now the threesome is a fully human son, his princess-wife and the old father. Hans takes three kinds of animals (rooster, donkey, pig) into a forest. Three times he arrives and shocks his family: at his birth, on his return with animals for slaughter and on his final return as a handsome young man. There are three fathers and three families in the story. At the end Hans has formed a new family with his princess, while the disgraced king and daughter have been, in a sense, discarded. There is a new unity among a new threesome of families.

Three is the number that conjures images of fertility, for it is the sudden appearance of a third figure—a newborn child—that is celebrated in this number.

Kafka's 'Metamorphosis' is both like and unlike this sort of story. Franz suggests Jungian meanings for many of the symbols in these folk-tales. Journeys into forests, for instance, she suggests indicate a willingness to enter one's own unconscious self and risk becoming lost there. The animal forms taken on by human beings indicate an eruption of unconscious, archetypal elements of the self which must be accepted and integrated if the hero is to succeed. Succeed at what? Franz suggests all these stories are essentially about 'finding the Self', that is uncovering and accepting our deeply contradictory partly human, partly animal, partly spiritual, partly moral and partly venal selves. Integration is the name we might give to a hero's success; though 'integration' (as the word 'whiskers' indicates in *Tristram Shandy*) has been debased, and is now one of the pop psychology terms we use to describe the success of that frog who

finds the prince in himself. Is any frog safe any longer from the symbolic prince within? Like cigars, frogs struggle to be themselves in a symbolic world.

We don't need to consult a glossary of symbols and their meanings in order to be convinced that 'Hans My Hedgehog', besides being entertainingly absurd, is a strongly symbolic story. The child who arrives as a surprise to older parents might seem an alien creature and a shockingly physical being, one deeply connected to an instinctual life. It can be unsettling for new parents to discover how much civilising they must do with their new shitting, farting, vomiting, screaming, unsleeping creature. The child can come to represent not just a new element in their lives but the return of ancient, confusing and threatening elements of their own selves. Doris Lessing's fantasy novel, *The Fifth Child*, plays a relentless game with this possibility.

The animal transformation in the Hans story and in many such tales works as if a skin has been pulled over the human form. Characters in these stories need only shed the creature-skin to be fully human again. They do not become overtly froglike, swanlike or hedgehog-like in their natures. The transformation is safely symbolic. In Kafka's story it is like this at the beginning. Gregor is still very much a human personality, in fact very much still a salesman, but with the inconvenience of all those legs and the clumsiness of a shell-like body. What Kafka does from here, though, is the reverse of any story the Grimm brothers collected. He allows Gregor to be invaded by a dung beetle's nature until Gregor prefers rotting organic material as food and prefers clinging to the ceiling to lying in his bed. The change becomes literal and permanent. Gregor's desires, interests and needs become those of an insect. It is the literal-mindedness here that I find so instructive about the mind of a writer. Kafka is showing us the dogged literal-mindedness of the imagination. Just as Kafka the writer succumbs to the strange implications of a literal and permanent transformation, his character Gregor Samsa succumbs to his new shape. Here Kafka has grafted the realist, character-based literary short story of the early twentieth century onto a traditional transformation tale. Just as Gregor is the meeting place of incompatible natures, the story itself is the meeting place of two utterly

different genres. Using the literary tools of his trade and time, Kafka has pushed his both exotic and traditional idea to its literal limit to create an uncanny and hybrid story. It drips with symbolism, numbers, predictable tableaux and the kind of violence we find in a brothers Grimm tale and yet it retains that sense of being the story of the fate of one individual we come to know through the course of a conventional character-based story. Kafka has the mind that can ask, 'What if this really did happen?' and pursue the consequences not only imaginatively but literally. Each time I read this story I am reminded that I must immerse myself in each piece of fiction I write as if it really is happening.

Kafka's story still retains the effect of being a fairytale with a perplexing and deep moral intent. Like many of the Grimm brothers' stories, though, it is not easy to say what the wisdom or moral point might be. We can see that there has been an eruption of instinctual elements in this household and more dramatically in Gregor's self. We can see that here there is a moral of some kind about the way acts of charity (Gregor's financial support to his family) can cripple other people's potential, and even involve them in hypocritical deceit (Gregor's father hiding away the family's assets). Gregor's parents and his sister only become honest, strong and decisive once he becomes useless to them. The story has much to do with youth and old age and what this means to the dynamics of a family. Gregor does not go into a forest or on a journey like the hero of so many tales but he does go into a dream in order to find his insect self. His attempts at broaching the wider world are fiercely resisted by his family. Kafka does not allow his hero to travel through a forest, to emerge as a prince or even to survive as an insect. What does this mean?

What might this insect or beetle represent for readers who are deeply affected by the story but cannot easily say what it is that the insect calls up in them? In a 1986 *Paladin* dictionary of symbols insects are said to represent precision and meticulous thinking: 'Insects are masters of detail and are often called on, in fairy-tales, to sort out things that have got impossibly mixed and muddled, such as grain and sand. Phobias about insects indicate irrational fear of detailed thinking'. I think of Gregor when still a man sticking that glossy magazine picture of a woman in furs on his bedroom wall.

Her forearm disappears entirely into a fur muff as if her body is being transformed, beginning with her arm. It is as if some part of Gregor knew days beforehand that human bodies could go feral from the outside in. He picked this small detail from a magazine and later he protected it with his insect body on the wall of his room. A woman transforming into a furry creature, a man turning into a shell-backed monster? In another dictionary of symbols the insect is an image of a shortened life. (Is this story Kafka's premonition of his own coming early death at forty-two? Samsa and Kafka echo each other.) The insect can also, apparently, represent semen, particularly the vicious, stinging semen of an unfaithful husband. Do such dictionary entries tell us what we already faintly know but have not yet admitted? Does this information help us to understand the meaning of Gregor's family's disgust and shame? Insect, apparently can also mean a poem: a poem is a case of metamorphosis, it is a placing together of separate parts and small details to make a strange new articulated whole. The sonnet in English can have the three-sectioned shape of a beetle. I am not sure whether these dictionaries really help us to understand such a story. Perhaps they are of some limited use after the event, that is after we have lived with the story and experienced its effects for some time. Then the dictionaries can perhaps help us to find terms and offer categories for our experience with the story.

From the detail of the possible meanings of a particular symbol, I move out (escape?) to the possible meaning of the whole story. Is Gregor a projection of his parents' own instinctual selves? Is Gregor their shadow-side? Does it mean that the presence of instincts in twentieth-century urban life became grotesque to many who had lost sight of ancient biological history in the human psyche? In the introduction to the new translation, Elias Canetti has suggested this story is about humiliation. The son and protector has been turned into an insect by his family, the members of which, one by one, are compelled to humiliate him. Does this mean there is in each of us a deeply inhuman self? Insects are perhaps the life forms that are the strangest and furthest from us while still within sight. This insect world is in competition with us. It is an irony of our biological domination of the world that we are slowly poisoning ourselves with billions of litres of insecticide residue. My back yard and the lemon

tree in it are full of ants. I am staggered and horrified at the numbers of them.

Since the nineteenth century, some modern literatures have been suspicious of science and suspicious of a too-easy belief in progress. The theory of evolution in its social manifestations has been spectacularly arrogant in using European civilisation's domination of other cultures as evidence that Europeans are an advanced life form. Until late in the nineteenth century Australia's Aboriginal people were regarded as examples of a pre-human missing link. Kafka's story acts as a dramatic denial that European man could be an evolved superior being. Gregor becomes the image of his own instinctual nature as a strange and beautiful simplicity comes to his mind (I think of his movement toward the music of his sister). In contrast the primitive and aggressive reactions of his family present them as little more than brutish.

The transformation of the story is not only Gregor's. Throughout there are other transformations. We have the ominous picture on Gregor's bedroom wall: a woman possibly transforming into a furry creature. His family members are changed from bland dependents to productive, strong individuals. Gregor's room is transformed from a human's conventional bedroom to a dusty tomb of half-light. The household servants are exchanged for a charwoman and three lodgers. The family finally plans to change their residence. What do we make of the sexual transformation of Gregor's sister into a young woman at the end? The story circles in on itself uncannily. One achievement of Kafka's 'Metamorphosis' is that it opens possible meanings and connections rather than narrowing the reader's options to one moral or one meaning. Doesn't the best art, the most controlled and well-shaped, even the most beautifully spontaneous art manage to burst like a firework inside us, pointing in all sorts of directions at once? Kafka's story does this. He barely keeps control of it. As a writer I seek this experience of barely being in control.

Kafka's story exists as an exotic eruption in the landscape of twentieth-century literature. It seems at first there is nothing else quite like this. But then, after reading it, I begin to see this sort of crippled, arrested, troubled, strangely literal and threatening transformation story happening in odd corners all over the landscape. Two instances come from the American poets Elizabeth Bishop and

James Dickey. Elizabeth Bishop wrote her monstrous poem, 'The Man-Moth', after reading a newspaper misprint for 'mammoth'. Her man-moth is an uneasy half-creature called up out of his hiding place by the moon:

. . . He emerges
from an opening under the edge of the sidewalks
and nervously begins to scale the faces of the buildings.
He thinks the moon is a small hole at the top of the sky,
proving the sky quite useless for protection.
He trembles, but must investigate as high as he can climb.

Up the facades,
his shadow dragging like a photographer's cloth behind him,
he climbs fearfully, thinking that this time he will manage
to push his small head through that round clean opening

Towards the end of the poem there could be a nod to that image of a woman in furry muffs in the Kafka story:

. . . He has to keep
his hands in his pockets, as others must wear mufflers.

James Dickey who cut his poetic teeth writing slogans for Coca-Cola is more brutal and more threatening in his depiction of a monstrous transformation. His poem, 'Sheep Child', resonates with St Augustine's primal observation, 'We are born between the feces and the urine'. Dickey's poem is about 'farm boys wild to couple/with anything':

. . . in a museum in Atlanta
Way back in a corner somewhere
There's this thing that's only half
Sheep like a woolly baby
Pickled in alcohol because
Those things can't live . . .

Merely with his eyes, the sheep-child may

Be saying saying

. . . I woke, dying,

*In the summer sun of the hillside, with my eyes
Far more than human. I saw for a blazing moment
The great grassy world from both sides,
Man and beast in the round of their need,
And the hill wind stirred in my wool,
My hoof and my hand clasped each other,
I ate my one meal
Of milk, and died
Staring . . .*

Dickey's sheep child is, like Kafka's insect man, literal and terminal, a specimen and a horror without gothic trappings. Some other recent works that explore these half-worlds where the creature and the human make contact are Bernard Werber's *Empire of the Ants*, Kirsten Bakis' *Lives of the Monster Dogs* and a love song called 'Pulse' by the New York singer-songwriter Ani DiFranco: 'You crawled into my bed that night/like some sort of giant insect/and I found myself spellbound/at the sight of you there/beautiful and grotesque/and all the rest of that bug stuff'. The surrealists Magritte, Delvaux, Ernst and others were drawn again and again to literal and crippling transformations that reveal what is normally hidden. Kafka's story of Gregor engages with a long tradition of folk-tales and a contemporary strand of imagination (including the cinematic treatment of Spiderman) that seeks to encounter the non-human in the human.

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The writing of 'Metamorphosis' has its history recorded by Kafka in letters to his fiancée, Felice Bauer. The idea for the story came to Kafka on 17 November 1912 at a time when he was unusually happy, secure and in love. Thus one of the twentieth century's most disturbing stories was written when the writer had for a brief while some sense of security and hope in his life. He wrote to Felice on that day:

A postman brought two registered letters from you, that is, he delivered them to me, one in each hand, his arms moving in perfect precision . . . God, they were magic letters! I kept pulling out page after page, but the envelopes never emptied. I was standing halfway up a flight of stairs and (don't hold it against me) had to throw the pages I had read all over the stairs, in order to take more letters out of the envelopes. The whole staircase was littered from top to bottom with the loosely heaped pages I had read, the resilient paper creating a great rustling sound.

Later in the same letter he reported, 'Anyway, I shall be writing to you again today, though I still have to do a lot of running around, not to mention a short story that occurred to me in bed in my misery, and now troubles me and demands to be written'. Writers might profit from their misery and make art from their grief and depression, but it is at least equally true that writers and artists need security, some private space and the confidence that comes from being loved in order to complete even their most terrifying work successfully.

Nearly a week later on 23 November he wrote to Felice:

How could I give it to you to read, even if it was finished? It is rather illegible, and even if that weren't an obstacle . . . I don't want to send you anything to read. I want to read it to you. Yes, that would be lovely, to read this story to you, while I would have to hold your hand, for the story is a little frightening. It is called *Metamorphosis*, and it would thoroughly scare you, you might not want to hear a word of it, alas! I scare you enough every day with my letters.

Kafka read his stories to his friends, and his novels too. This is perhaps the only way to truly test a story's worth. Will people put away their tasks, their thoughts, their surroundings and let your story come into them through their ears? Perhaps it is an evasion to ask creative writing students to present thousands of written words to be assessed at the end of a unit of study. Perhaps their examiners should sit down with them in a small room and listen to their story being spoken aloud. Perhaps publishers should listen to manuscripts. Since becoming a father I have rediscovered the way the voice can test and carry a story to the hearts of listeners. To learn to read silently can be to forget how to hear. To learn to write can be to forget that words are strings and nets of sound.

On 25 November, a week after beginning, he complained of interruptions:

my story, alas, has already been harmed enough by my method of working. This kind of story should be written with no more than one interruption, in two ten-hour sessions; then it would have its natural, spontaneous flow, as it had in my head last Sunday. But I haven't got twice ten hours at my disposal. So one has to try to do the best one can, since the very best is denied to one.

Time, yes, time is always what the writer needs and it must be ridiculously generous uninterrupted time if anything substantial is to come of it. I have struggled to find three-hour blocks of my own time to write down these thoughts and at times in my life I have lost lovers and friends because I have ignored them for so long when I am eating up my time alone with a long piece of fiction. Only other writers—or the similarly obsessed—seem to understand this.

On 27 November Kafka remarked to Felice from inside brackets, 'the story progresses in a dull, placid way, illuminated only by moments of the essential clarity', and immediately I recognise this experience. Each writer, no matter how inspired, how talented or untalented, knows it. There are times when the placing down of the words one after another is like laying bricks to build the dullest of walls. The job must be done if the architecture of the vision is to be realised in the end. The writer is a drudge, a drone, an insect worker.

By 1 December he is tackling the third section and on 3 December he writes:

Dearest, I really should have gone on writing all night. It would have been my duty, for I am nearing the end of my little story, and uniformity and the fire of consecutive hours would do this end an immense amount of good . . . It is not so long since I started writing regularly and continuously, but since then I have turned from a by no means exemplary, but in some ways rather useful employee (my present rank is draughtsman) into a nightmare to my chief. My desk at the office was certainly never tidy, but now it is littered with a chaotic pile of papers and files; I may just know the things that lie on top, but lower down I suspect nothing but horrors. Sometimes I think I can almost hear myself being ground down, by my writing on the one hand, by the office on the other.

This should be all the warning we need to avoid ever becoming writers. Your mind will not be yours, your other work will suffer, and your health too when you try to find the time and energy you don't have. In all the ways that count you will be considered unreliable, distracted, unable to follow through with a thought or an instruction. Kafka relied upon one tolerant typist at work to wake him when he dozed off.

On 6 December, nearly three weeks after beginning, he writes:

I know it could have been done more neatly; this is particularly conspicuous in the more tender passages. That is the ever-gnawing realization: in more favourable circumstances, with the creative powers I feel within me, and quite apart from their strength and endurance, I could have achieved a neater, more telling, better-constructed piece of work than the one that now exists. This is a feeling which no amount of reasoning can dispel, though of course it is reason, too, that is right in saying that since there are no circumstances other than real ones, one cannot take any others into account, either. However that may be, I hope to finish the story tomorrow, and to return to the novel the following day.

When to stop working? Is exhaustion the moment when the rewriting, the fixing, the restructuring must stop? Is a feeling of satisfaction the sign to stop? How long does that last before becoming embarrassment? No one can teach a writer when is the best time to stop bringing a piece of work to its most telling shape. Sometimes I need to put pieces of writing aside for years before completing them. It was not until March 1913 that Kafka read the story aloud to his friends and I expect it underwent many small transformations in the months leading up to that reading.

Kafka's record of writing this story is filled with the typical experiences of the writer: the initial enthusiasm and preoccupation, embarrassment at showing it too soon, the plodding through necessary steps of the narrative, the long wait for it to take its best shape and the struggle with an awareness that it could have been better. The writer is making something from inside, without the aid of vision or mirrors. It must be done by feel.

Kafka's story came home to me recently on a visit to my dentist in the city centre. The appointment was early in January, just after

the Christmas break. When the dentist switched on the hissing, spitting mechanism that would blow and suck inside my mouth while he worked, the machine became blocked. Black sediment spurted from it where there should have been clear water. He told me the city's water pipes are populated by algae and over the Christmas–New Year holiday when the water stops flowing regularly the algae grow, blocking the pipes and then breaking up to come spurting out with the water. We are never, metaphorically and literally, far away from being overcome, overrun, overwhelmed, transformed by other life forms.