

My Kafka:
Internal Poems as Derivatives of Prose

An homage. A response. A derivation.

To me, Franz Kafka was the one that got away. Through my travels in life I had never read his work or stories, much to my surprise. He was illusive. Though intuitively I thought that his work would pique my interest, I waded through studies and pleasure reading without touching on him. Perhaps this was my own way of paying respect. Perhaps I was scared to invite someone in so compelling and applicable to me that I couldn't bring myself to fall in love with all he represented. Or perhaps there was nothing so fated about it and it was just one of those many things that I didn't get around to doing. Whatever the cause, my life traced itself through a Kafkaless spiral. But this was something that I wanted to change.

The intent: to introduce myself to Kafka with personal poetic responses to his work.

My own manifestations of Kafka's stories revolve around my experience of reading. To say that this journey is a re-telling would be incorrect. Similarly, the responses do not involve critique or my infusing of political analysis to what he has done. Alternatively, I have endeavoured to capture my own feelings through poetic free verse to suffuse a sense of rejoinder on top of his stories, a perspective from my own understanding falling beside Kafka's writing. The collection of poems is meant to be art in response to art.

In an essay written by Stephen Collis entitled "The Poetics of Derivation", included

in the book *Reading Duncan Reading, Robert Duncan and the Poetics of Derivation*, this very notion of drawing inspiration from other writers is acutely explored. Robert Duncan was an American poet who was born shortly before Kafka died, in 1919. Duncan's writing was largely influenced by Ezra Pound, H.D. (to which he wrote a personal tribute in *The H.D. Book*), Milton, and Whitman, among many others. In fact, "A typical Duncan poem, accordingly, is like a collage, 'a compositional field where anything might enter: a prose quotation, a catalogue, a recipe, a dramatic monologue, a diatribe', Davidson explained. The poems draw sources and materials together into one dense fabric"¹. The poems written by Duncan therefore reinforce this concept of bringing together impressions from those who preceded him to bring his own poetics to life. As Collis remarks, "When Duncan writes, 'what I thought slavishly derivative proved to be 'mine,' he is embracing, not excusing, the status of the derivative—and realizing that 'mine' is a category needing considerable qualification, if it is taken to exist as such at all"(Collis, xi).

Just as Duncan was influenced by specific writers, so too was Kafka. It has been noted that Dostoyevsky, Flaubert, Goethe and Gogol are among the writers that he admired. I think he would have agreed that all of our writing becomes adaptations of those we have read before. Duncan writes of his derivative style that as:

a culture, in the sense of a medium in which new life grows. Speech itself,
nowhere other than common, every where the source from which we derive

¹ <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poets/detail/robert-duncan>

our individuality. So I have written and rewrite I am a derivative poet, even as I remember in every individuality that I have derived my being from the human community into which I was born, even as I know my physical body and life-pattern to be derived from the common code and the dance of two strands of that encoding².

The legitimacy of artistic response provided the platform for which this project was introduced. In this way, one can participate in the understanding of art. The aim is to be unrestricted and compassionate to the work itself. Kafka himself was absorbed with writing. This collection is meant to connect in an inner dialogue with Kafka, adding perspective and my own intention.

As readers, we are supposed to rely on the narration of the writer. Essentially, we objectify works as their own entities, narrators as their own voice. In this regard, the reader is but helpless to the way the artist has created the piece for us. This proffers up the distinction in how we accept the writing: is it for us to enjoy or is it for us to explore? And in some ways, could it be meant as something even deeper than that, as a way of communication through art or an invitation to analyze? Unfortunately, for the most part, we may never know what the intention of the writer was in producing their art. Kafka, for instance, had directed that his unpublished works be destroyed. Of course, this was never fully accomplished, as Max Brod, one of Kafka's friends, refused to do so. But we may glean from this that many of his works remain largely unfinished. In fact, "During his lifetime, Franz

² Duncan, "Fictive Certainties" (199)

Kafka burned an estimated 90 percent of his work”³. Therefore, an attempt in analysis may prove to be contrary to the entire point of the stories or parables. We may never envisage the whole picture from the snippets left underdeveloped. And this spurred the need for me to respond rather than critique, though I suppose that even that would be going against the wishes of Kafka had he really intended that the works be destroyed.

In looking towards the viewing of art as a force, one can only imagine how to engage with the text. Should we be viewing art as realistic accounts of the artist’s story, or as more of a psychic text, like a projection into a constructed landscape, the environment of which was positioned by the artist? The artist is able to subvert reality strictly onto the lens of the artist, pressuring the reader to see only from the viewpoint as placed in front of them.

I like to see imitation as a form of praise, rather than wanting to change the original. It is more about producing a different dimension of the piece than trying to perfect it. What I am attempting to provide is building on the original work without a form of correction. I think that it is creative license that provides us with the authority to interpret the pieces for ourselves. This sense of authority cannot arrive via the artist, but merely as a separate foothold for etching out our own, independent stylization of the original.

It could be that there is a conflicting balance between what is presented outwardly and how that makes the reader feel inwardly. But I do believe that this is something

³ http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/26/magazine/26kafka-t.html?_r=0

that we must do honestly in order to maintain the authenticity of the work. Essentially, what I am working on is the vacillation between the representation of something else and figuration. This figuration concept is key to how things in art are portrayed. It is a projection into another kind of image. This parallels to Kafka's story, *The Metamorphosis*, in that the insect there was a figure as well as a character that could be related to. But from where does the relative aspect derive? Is this somehow the humanizing effect of art?

The story of greatest importance to this discussion was Kafka's *Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk*. It draws an interesting examination between the artist and the audience. In many ways, it shows how much the artist must rely upon the audience to thrive, but also how the audience uses the artist for their own personal escape. The story depicts an awareness of the other, but what I see as a denial of their import, even though these elements bring together our own heritage or generations of acknowledging the utility of art that is alive within each of us. The songs that Josephine sing signal a sense of hope within the society of the mouse folk. But meanwhile the community simultaneously praise her and demean her, at once misunderstanding her art and using it for their own sense of security in a world that simply engages their workmanship repetitively.

The way that art is treated in the story lends itself to the written work of Kafka himself. Kafka was drawn to his writing and indeed he was chained to it, passionately focused on the act and the transcendence of the art throughout his life. However, art is so often misunderstood or disconnected from the external world,

that the very notion of expressing this breakage from society and art comes through in Kafka's work—he espouses that Josephine is this integral piece of the community who relies on her, and yet that when she disappears for lack of overt admiration, the mouse folk can plainly dismiss her without question or upheaval; they can continue their mindless lives through generations at no great loss. This speaks directly to an artist's creative process in that often what is made is of no consequence to others but that should not discredit it in and of itself. This concept of art is looking for something to give others meaning or happiness, as though there is the need for a leader. But it comes to bear that everything is transient, and not to be idealized. In Josephine, even though the mouse folk are also able to sing/pipe, they are acutely unaware that it is part of them. This shows that the artistic is something innate within all of us, but that it goes largely unnoticed in the face of our common and inescapable daily lives. Josephine is enigmatic to the people: it is about the language without form that she offers to the people. She gives the song form and substance of her own, and this is where they find happiness, whether they can admit it or not. They are drawn to her, her voice, and her song, using her in a ritualistic way, but in the end, not sacrificing anything for her. They see themselves as a suffering people who have no voice. So too we find that the art we create from our own lived experiences can become confounded with our internal struggles without the benefit of hope; the hope that Josephine carries with her when she disappears. This is perhaps a commentary on art as triviality—art that can seem lost does not become less than art.

Kafka wrote mostly in German, though he was a Jewish Czech citizen. He knew enough Czech and he also admired Yiddish. I read his stories only in English translations. This concept of how the languages are translated is analogous to that place of interpretation of art, and those pieces and inflections that get lost in the fray. We must grapple with the concept and reality that the entirety of the original can never be preserved through the interpretation. This is a sacrifice that we must face in our experiences with art. Does the art exist outside of what we experience, or are we providing it with its own life? We attempt to bridge the divide between the artist and our own self-realization in light of the piece, but the distance is vast. Perhaps our only measure is to transport the art into our own world that we can rely on and relate to. The ritual embedded within my work here is the instance of translating Kafka from one form into another. It is a dialogical transition between me and Kafka, but also between Kafka and poetry (from prose). As Collis quotes Olson⁴: “A poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it (he will have some several causations), by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader”(Collis, xiii). The shifting realms offer up an inquiry into reaching a space where my feelings surrounding the stories I’ve read are positioned into a medium that allows for reaction. Kafka’s writing is open in such a way that it invites the reader to play with the ambiguity of the text, which perhaps shows itself through the evolutions of the translations.

The unconscious nature of the creative process as I’ve explained it ensures that through my poetry my voice is being sung (or piped) alongside the voice of Kafka

⁴ “Projective Verse”, 240

himself. Though Kafka uses the genre of prose, and I use the genre of poetry, what is distinct through both of the works is that genre is a fluid concept. Genres are not pure, just as Josephine's singing could never be pure no matter how she tried or wanted it to be. And therefore, we can see that genre is also voice—the voice of form that does not need to be compelled to follow rules. The writer, Kafka or myself, is creating a relationship between what is being represented and what is being shown. My poetry brings in elements of Kafka's stories and of Kafka himself, simultaneously with my very own person and perspective on both creeping through the sentences. In essence, I am trying to speak not to an audience, but rather to the characters that Kafka created. Collis notes that “language is open (without “chain, bar, lock or armed guard”) to poets as their common inheritance. But it comes—each word—bearing the weight of its past, so that the words we use are never “ours” as such—always multivoiced, polyvocal, singular-plural. Language—in a derivative poetics—exercises a certain degree of autonomy” (Collis, xx). Perhaps this is what Josephine was also trying to do: reveal not only her own song and her own voice through her art, but adapting it and melding it into the people she was singing for, the community in which she lived. These are essentially the translations of our voices that bring forth our own needs. Our attempt at singing is our attempt to form our unique relationship to others. It shows a combination of restraint but also spontaneity. My interpretation of the stories is not an effort to psychoanalyze or to make them new, it is a means for me to disappear into the words of another, just as Josephine's song disappears into history and disintegrates into memory.

Dear Franz

I know we've never met before.

And yet, I feel as though you're the friend I've been searching for

for those nebulous places within me
that yearn for something
resembling comfort.

But comfort isn't exactly what you instill—
don't get me wrong—how can I explain it?

Maybe you would say it is realism
over idealism,
but with a sense of the fantastic
intertwined through the fabric of necessity.

If you could have only known
where the world was headed
perhaps you never would have set pen to paper
never
gone to law school
or kissed a woman without conscience.
Maybe you would have realized
that these chanceless epiphanies
would overtake beauty
with malice,
regret, and
destruction.

The gatekeepers now guarding the law
not only are innumerable,
but they no longer allow anyone
even to reach the precipice.

I'm glad that you were not alive
to live through the deaths of your sisters
or witness your wishes being tarnished
by trusted friends
sharing your sacred scribblings
of unfinished dreams
and unwanted memories.

Maybe none of it could have been avoided,
like waking up as an insect
to only the turned faces of your loving family.

Nonetheless
I am honoured with the happenstance
of reading your words
your musings
and I can only take it in so far
before I am lost amidst the intricate shadows
of daily found rhetoric,
hopeless catechisms,
wasted believing. A starvation of sorts,
ruminating between cold metal bars.

I can live in the retreats of your melodies
hiding just so
in an embrace that you can only give
from underground.

I never told you that I visited you in Prague,
under the veils of shaded leaves
and silhouetted by stone. Though so close to you there
I had never been soothed by your words,
never had reached towards the barely shifting
presence of my own
stillness; or remembrance of someone
I was never meant to be.
Josephine's unknown song
brushes past my impolite lips.

A subtle glance at you
re-imagined as it would be,
proved more fateful than beholden
as I crawled with infinite delicacy
and foraged through your mouthful of stories.
I'll never know if you meant those words for me.
You could have burned them all yourself
knowing silently your wishes
may be ignored,
but you left them in the hands of another
just as I find myself
now entangled
in your

language.

Please allow my words to quell
that rhythm in your head
keeping time throughout history
and steadily pacing yourself
while I whisper these verses in your ear.

And then when the blindness subsides
I'll make up for all the time
we've
lost.

Rest well, my dear friend.

Before the Law

Were the principles that Plato espoused
so untouchable
that a pursuit of justice
resembled a journey through Dante's Inferno?
Those gatekeepers of ridicule
protect
a seeming order of affairs
that oppose access
to anyone resembling a human.

Fraught with promise
and empty avowal
suitors appear in anticipation
unbeknownst
that eternity awaits them
arm in arm
with
disappointment.

Judgement
still
cannot pass.

The law:
bedrock of reason
and
masterful
futility.

A Country Doctor

The blizzard gusts covered the ground
as well as the commotion that ensued while finding a viable horse.
You left her there, scarlet cheeks, despite your protests.
The demand of the job—
the demand of the protection of human life over human life.
The thickness of air was a metronome calling each beat
back and forth between obligation and supposition.
An apparent telling sign when it is the doctor who feels sick.
But your judgment becomes all
that matters in this sacred time
when God only knows if Hell awaits
or prayers are heeded.
And that contradiction of your intentions versus your forbearance
seems to be no consolation.
You presume that the monotony of patient visit
after patient visit,
like rhythmic window-washing
may absolve you of any misgivings—
of any need for acquitting yourself for breathing a diagnosis.
Of course healing is impossible if you are past the point of saving.
But none of this is your fault.
A doctor stripped naked is the one in which reliance is bared,
and upheavals and officiousness may never change that.
Shame lies waiting amidst the promises of cures.

So think back again now to the girl you left behind,
and drown out the noise of the horses with images of her face.
You gave up on her too.

A Hunger Artist

Perhaps all the onlookers
never meant that much to you anyways.

Perhaps it was always
that measure of self-worth to come from
a sense of pain and germane effort
that would transport your life
into significance.

There was something of the
grotesque, mingled with poverty
that featured you in the spotlight;
angst and forbearance,
knowing your beauty rested
with approval and refinement
of barren mouths.

Or could it have been
the suspicious night watch patrolling you
that made you feel some semblance of
peace? Unaware of your obsessive
patriotism, those observers
could even break through
your pseudo-meditative cause.

Some forty-odd days and nights
though biblical,
never mended your failed expectations
and never was deliverance so near;
a daily devotional of emptiness.

But all you were doing
was something so inhuman
that positioning you in close proximity to the
animals could be the only gauge
to which you might be seen.
Perversion, or something of the sort,
used to compel the audience near.
But all too soon does the attention dissipate,
and a panther looms over you
ready to crush you deeper underground.
Falling to despair,

ridicule to ridicule,
dust to dust—
misunderstood.
Empathy can only go so far.

Honour always meant virtue,
and being awake for days
somehow meant satiation.

And was it art as the connotation
between your void and the public approval?
Indeed only an artist could approach
such a maddening demand
and foster limitless defiance of the human spirit.
Your burden eliminates
that request for penitence,
just as a forgotten glass of water
begs for thirsty lips. Please,
please enter your own reproach
before the rest can watch you lurk away.

Perhaps all it ever was
was one serving of misfortune
against another serving of fame.

The Metamorphosis

Sometimes it's just too quiet.
The mummer of muffled sentences
of hushed nuances
behind
doors shut with intentionality
emulate those which you once knew
as familiar.
And you can't quite make out
each word or phrase—though you impliedly know
that they speak about you,
or shall I say,
what used to be you.

You've missed the morning train.

That overcast city that was once so accessible
has curtailed itself microscopically
until all that remains
is the imprisonment of four walls from which you trail blaze around
in sinuous tracks,
pausing and discovering evermore arduous cracks.
And if fate would allow
even the slightest reprieve,
you would surely have commenced
a means to garner your subdued beauty;
and show them all the unfeigned reality.
The long pause you left between your words
to somehow denote
more meaning,
did nothing to ease away the twittering squeals
from your tetrachromatic eye-view.

But you were still there.
Unillusioned and underneath
a hardened shell
you eclipsed into that aforementioned
humanity
and it darkened as the drapes were drawn.
Hour by offending hour,
sleep was riddled with uncertainty.

And if you could have seen
all of their faces
as they left the room,

perhaps you might have been propelled
into a different semblance
of time—releasing misapprehensions
of fallen hope;
paled regret.

Probably so.

Hallowed forsakenness!
For risking your obstinate shame
and following now mutedly through days
by slowly being forgotten in deliverance.
The suffocation you felt
was eased by the cool window pane,
but not by hidden stares.

Innocuous life
that transformed your regularity
into vulgarity
claimed damages through
wicked apples
thrown in haste.
But there was no mistaking
the image of your father
in that darkness before your eyes.
His interpretation
was merely a weak translation
ingenuously seeking some order
amidst the commotion
and seeing the pained look of lost fear and repulsion
imprinted on your mother's face.

And yet, and yet—
modes of caution kept them out;
kept them far
from believing any resuscitation possible.
And your own desperation could not be weighed
any more than that malingering, futile doubt.
Angling from your wavering feet and
scuttling around the bedroom ceiling,
your dire hunger
could not cure
that distant trepidation stabbing your curved back.
Instead, your appetite was submissive
only by insistent refusal
pouring its threatening guise amongst

cartilage and metacarpals,
sinking your heart
until it was finally
quiet.

The morning train has come and gone on schedule.

The Judgment

Duplicity falls quietly upon soft-felt ears
so that it is seemingly impossible to tell who meets whom
when your writing stretches out on the paper
or when the proverbial blanket
fails to fully cover a father's paradoxically withered limbs.
I think I understand
your timid musings of daily minutiae
instead of parading the sustained reality
to a feigned innocent onlooker.
Nascent longings end up biting your coattails
with the commitment to disarming your inhibited sentences.
It's time to tell the truth.

Perhaps too many versions played over and over in your head
before you pledged to impart your news—
maybe those iterations could have prepared you.
But you never predicted
the complete trepidation
that struck upon knowledge of displaced resentment.
Forgetting would likely be too easy
to coax one into acceptance
and wile away during that moment before your eyes
turned to stone.
And isolation, such as your (alleged) friend enjoys,
wouldn't be quite enough to suit your crime.
Those small hindrances purge a remembered strength
that would even weigh down your watch chain

so much so to pull time backwards again
and again.

You must have kept her skirt around her waist
to ensure the purity of your union.

Never could you have proffered a dishonest intention
towards those strictly unassuming loved ones; or at least
no one believes it to be so.

An uneven mattress gives way to those uneven lies
ushering out thin lips or pencils or hand railings.

Your verdict comes down hard as though
light had never stopped to breathe.
A jury comprised of foolhardy and trite vanity.
The sustained flood filtered through porous
inevitability. Waves to mutilate and cleanse simultaneously:
to engulf hatred and keep your crime at bay.
Only then may we see the falsity of abject lies.

Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk

She could not have been anything more than ordinary.
Like bicycle spokes of uniformity churning out trivialities,
it was through undying reveries of mundane piping
that blazed in such a fashion
to be simultaneously heard and unheard.
She believed she caused the awakening,
when all that was accomplished
was an outpouring of sanity lived through meaninglessness.
That perception lasted
only for the duration of each song—
each beat resounded in exasperating ears
who could only wish for deafness.
Melody intertwining amongst rapt attention
from those begging in anticipation for some resolve.
She will allow grace notes as embellishments, but
saves sympathy only for those who cannot hear.
She performed behind the veneer of grandiosity,
contouring her face just so,
revealing nothing more than plain shackles
tethering her to the community's standards.
Maybe it was all just a joke after all.

And she starts to cry when no one is looking.
A penny thrown into a well
might produce some longed-for wish
of that delightful sound found only in standing ovation.
Another day merely leads to open wounds further,
granting only the grind of useless work and
congealing around the misery of being misunderstood.
At long last, art engulfs the sphere,
destroying remnants of numb pasts and forgetting
the trials embedded in the assembly line of toil.
This is the tantrum she throws on everyday life.

She knows all. She can see into eternity. And yet,
she would just as soon destroy it.

Try to escape now. Excuses only serve to distract.

And history pleads with her to cast over remembrance.
Something to foretell intricate stories
that shape themselves somehow around lovely harmonies
(or are they really just dull noises?)
If only she could guarantee her own useless cravings

as she did with the influence she dusted on the crowd,
one might suppose she would barricade herself
without the ego pursed so tightly on her lips.
Arrive into that banality and hurl it again
onto scalded throats and ever-still truth.
Generations will provide the memories instead.
And try again to distinguish her music
apart from other tides who only serve to crash in,
it would closely resemble
that sameness of befallen daily repetitive voices,
calling on her to awaken weak and pointless iterations.
Closing in on obsession with
watching, while she chooses their innocuous lullabies,
she must ignore those judgmental comparisons
and feast instead with her own vain disposition.
That awe and wonder so consistent with
longing, moves softly through silent harbingers.
Await, while the soul willingly presses itself onto purity.
That fight that only a woman can inhabit
breathes into her subtle grin,
knowing simply too well that
she will eventually forgive them all.

My Kafka:
Demystified

Before the Law

Were the principles that Plato espoused⁵
so untouchable
that a pursuit of justice
resembled a journey through Dante's *Inferno*⁶?
Those gatekeepers⁷ of ridicule
protect
a seeming order of affairs⁸
that oppose access
to anyone resembling a human⁹.

Fraught with promise
and empty avowal¹⁰
suitors appear in anticipation
unbeknownst
that eternity awaits them
arm in arm
with

⁵ Much of the law we have come to know in contemporary society, and indeed within the society that Kafka would relate to, spawns from Plato's theory of law, how it is based on reason and that it derives from nature. With Kafka's parable it would seem that the natural order of accessing the law has become skewed from its ideal beginnings.

⁶ This reference is to the circles of Hell through which Dante journeyed. The image in mind here is the inscription "Abandon all hope ye who enter here" (III.7), which has been taken to describe the beginning of the path through the legal system. Kafka's story has a gatekeeper who guards the entrance of the Law, and who never allows the man to pass. This is reminiscent of Dante's circles, with their accompanying obstacles, demons, or gatekeepers, preventing entrance.

⁷ The man in the parable speaks to the gatekeeper and asks for admittance to the Law, to which he is denied and told: "If you are so drawn to it, just try to go in despite my veto. But take note: I am powerful. And I am only the least of the doorkeepers" (3).

⁸ "The Law, he thinks, should surely be accessible at all time and to everyone, but as he now takes a closer look at the doorkeeper in his fur coat, with his big sharp nose and long, thin, black Tartar beard, he decides that it is better to wait until he gets permission to enter." (3)

⁹ Another reference to natural law and that it should be a human right to have access to justice.

¹⁰ When the man first reaches the gatekeeper and asked to be allowed entrance, he is told: "It is possible, but not at the moment" (3). Therefore he has been given notice that there is a way but that he would have to wait. He was provided with a senseless hope when it concludes at the end that he never would have been granted admittance.

disappointment¹¹.

Judgement
still
cannot pass¹².

The law:
bedrock of reason¹³
and
masterful
futility¹⁴.

¹¹ At the end of the parable the gatekeeper finally allows the man to know the truth of the matter, why no one else has come to enter at the gate: "No one else could ever be admitted here, since this gate was made only for you. I am now going to shut it." (4)

¹² Implicit in the parable is not only that the man is not allowed to pass the gate to the Law, but also that nothing and no one is exiting from the gate either. Therefore judgement is never released from the Law, or perhaps it is a commentary about no escape once you're inside the Law.

¹³ A further reference to Plato, and also to the contradiction between the experience of the man at the gate and the supposed intention of the Law.

¹⁴ The man waited years at the gate to be let in and it was all for naught, as there was no way in which he could have been admitted. The hope that he was given at the beginning was a false hope. This is a social commentary on the labyrinth that the law has become in modern society; that it is useless to even attempt at having a fair and practical view of the system, since it is developed around failure to even access it.

A Country Doctor

The blizzard gusts covered the ground
as well as the commotion that ensued while finding a viable horse¹⁵.
You left her¹⁶ there, scarlet¹⁷ cheeks, despite your protests¹⁸.
The demand of the job—
the demand of the protection of human life over human life¹⁹.
The thickness of air²⁰ was a metronome calling each beat
back and forth between obligation and supposition.
An apparent telling sign when it is the doctor who feels sick²¹.
But your judgment²² becomes all

¹⁵ The story begins on a night with a strong blizzard and the doctor needing to find a horse to travel to attend to a patient ten miles away. His horse had died—which may be somewhat ironic that a doctor cannot even save his own horse or keep it in good health.

¹⁶ This is referring to the doctor's servant girl, Rose. The groom who eventually provided the doctor with a horse gives the story strong sexual undertones, "A man, crouching on his hams in that low space, showed an open blue-eyed face. 'Shall I yoke up?', he asked, crawling out on all fours." (220) The groom, though helpful in acquiring the horses quickly turns the story when he ravages the servant girl: "Yet hardly was she beside him when the groom clipped hold of her and pushed his face against her. She screamed and fled back to me; on her cheek stood out in red the marks of two rows of teeth." (221)

¹⁷ This is a reference to a shamed woman bearing a scarlet letter. The groom has defiled Rose, and there is strong inference in the story later on to concede that when the doctor is forced to leave her to stay with the groom that he was using her for sexual purposes.

¹⁸ The doctor yelled at the groom but quickly reminded himself that the groom was helping him out and a stranger. The doctor thought the groom would be riding with him, but instead he stayed with the servant girl. To this the doctor said that he insisted that the groom come with him or he would not depart. Without notice, the groom prodded the horses to leave and the doctor was quickly out of sight, leaving the groom alone with Rose to do as he pleased.

¹⁹ It would seem that the pressure of being a country doctor is that there is no choice in determining his own fate. He had to leave despite his better senses, and he never turned back to help Rose. In this sense the doctor has to sacrifice a life to save a life.

²⁰ Once at the patient's house, the doctor describes the environment: "in the sickroom the air was almost unbreathable; the neglected stove was smoking; I wanted to push open a window, but first had to look over my patient." (221) Again here the doctor is succumbing to his obligations rather than his own comfort.

²¹ "in the narrow confines of the old man's thoughts I felt ill..." (222)

²² Interesting to note in this story is that the doctor's prognosis of the boy wavers. At first glance the doctor thinks there is nothing at all wrong with him: "I confirmed what I already knew; the boy was quite sound, something a little wrong with his circulation, saturated with coffee by his solicitous mother, but sound and best turned out of bed with one shove. I am no world reformer and so I let him lie" (222). Shortly thereafter, the doctor realizes after seeing

that matters in this sacred time
when God only knows if Hell awaits
or prayers are heeded²³.
And that contradiction of your intentions versus your forbearance
seems to be no consolation.
You presume that the monotony of patient visit
after patient visit²⁴,
like rhythmic window-washing
may absolve you of any misgivings²⁵—
of any need for acquitting yourself for breathing a diagnosis.
Of course healing is impossible if you are past the point of saving.
But none of this is your fault²⁶.
A doctor stripped naked²⁷ is the one in which reliance is bared,
and upheavals and officiousness may never change that.
Shame lies waiting amidst the promises of cures²⁸.

a blood-soaked towel that “I was somehow ready to admit conditionally that the boy might be ill after all.” (223)

²³ When first meeting the ill boy, the boy whispers into the doctor’s ear: “Doctor, let me die.” (222), as though pleading for mercy in the form of a prayer. Later in the story, the boy changes his attitude and begs the doctor through more whispers, “Will you save me?” (224)

²⁴ When the doctor believes that the boy is fine, he reflects on all the calls he attends that are not necessary: “I had once more been called out needlessly, I was used to that, the whole district made my life a torment with my night bell” (223)

²⁵ This is referring to the way in which he saves lives as a doctor but at the same time cannot save everyone.

²⁶ “That is what people are like in my district. Always expecting the impossible from the doctor. They have lost their ancient beliefs; the parson sits at home and unravels his vestments, one after another; but the doctor is supposed to be omnipotent with his merciful surgeon’s hand. Well, as it pleases them; I have not thrust my services on them; if they misuse me for sacred ends, I let that happen to me too; what better do I want, old country doctor that I am, bereft of my servant girl!” (224)

²⁷ “And so they came, the family and the village elders, and stripped my clothes off me.” (224) This reveals a sense of the doctor being helpless, unable to make his own decisions and unable to cure those who are ill, even though this is exactly what he represents to the outside world. There is a display of his inner struggles throughout the story, giving him a way to seek some kind of repentance while maintaining his obligatory position. The boy whispers to him again: “Do you know’... ‘I have very little confidence in you. Why, you were only blown in here, you didn’t come on your own feet. Instead of helping me, you’re cramping me on my deathbed. What I’d like best is to scratch your eyes out.’ ‘Right,’ I said, ‘it is a shame. And yet I am a doctor. What am I to do? Believe me, it is not too easy for me either.’” (224)

²⁸ Even though the doctor seems indignant to his patients who need him, the story still rings with a sense of shame that he feels for not being able to play God.

So think back again now to the girl you left behind²⁹,
and drown out the noise of the horses with images of her face.
You gave up on her too³⁰.

²⁹ Early in the patient visit the doctor thinks back to Rose who was left behind with the groom: “And only now did I remember Rose again; what was I to do, how could I rescue her, how could I pull her away from under that groom at ten miles’ distance, with a team of horses I couldn’t control.” (222) He seemingly makes excuses for his inability to help her, all the while helping a stranger with his ailments. Thinking he ought to go back, he instead allows the sister of the ill patient to take his coat. The constant reminder of the horses whinnying and carrying on seems to jog the doctor’s memory with each nuisance, but also letting the doctor know that the visit should have some purpose if he is to have made the call as a trade off for Rose.

³⁰ “Poor boy, you were past helping” (223). It would seem that this was the way the doctor felt towards Rose too—by the time the horses took him away she was past the point of saving. By the time the doctor was heading home, he knew that “in my house the disgusting groom is raging; Rose is his victim; I do not want to think about it anymore. Naked, exposed to the frost of this most unhappy of ages, with an earthly vehicle, unearthly horses, old man that I am, I wander astray. My fur coat is hanging from the back of the gig, but I cannot reach it, and none of my limber pack of patients lifts a finger. Betrayed! Betrayed! A false alarm on the night bell once answered—it cannot be made good, not ever” (225).

A Hunger Artist³¹

Perhaps all the onlookers
never meant that much to you anyways³².

Perhaps it was always
that measure of self-worth to come from
a sense of pain and germane effort³³
that would transport your life
into significance³⁴.

There was something of the
grotesque³⁵, mingled with poverty³⁶

³¹ It is interesting to note here that he is referred to by the narrator, and impliedly himself, as an “artist”. Though this is not strictly a typical art form that our society has come to know, it seems generally accepted in the story that he is, in fact, an artist. And we may be able to draw parallels here with the fact that he can only “perform” his art through the witnessing of others to his talent, therefore invoking the audience that art demands. And so too there is a certain measure of honing his skill that is reminiscent of how one must practice to become an artist. Later in the story the narrator remarks, “Just try to explain to anyone the art of fasting! Anyone who has no feeling for it cannot be made to understand it.” (276)

³² This is the sense one gets from the text that the hunger artist is chained to his art and can’t actually escape from it—regardless of whether it is popular to watch the performance from the public—he feels that he must fast and is compelled to it ever so.

³³ “he was never satisfied; it was not perhaps mere fasting that had brought him to such skeleton thinness that many people had regretfully to keep away from his exhibitions, because the sight of him was too much for them, perhaps it was dissatisfaction with himself that had worn him down.” (270)

³⁴ The narrator gives a glimpse of the grandeur that the hunger artist used to feel when it was still apparently a fashionable trade. There is reference to the fact that “We live in a different world now” (268), inferring that there used to be a special significance to the way the hunger artist would receive praise for his work: “At one time the whole town took a lively interest in the hunger artist; from day to day of his fast the excitement mounted; everybody wanted to see him at least once a day; there were people who bought season tickets for the last few days and sat from morning till night in front of his small barred cage.” (268) It seemed that he would really live for their acknowledgement of his talent.

³⁵ To the reader, the idea of watching someone starve to death would seem morbid, and yet, the narrator paints the picture of the amazement by speaking of how the children took to the entertainment: “the children stood openmouthed, holding each other’s hands for greater security, marveling at him as he sat there pallid in black tights, with his ribs sticking out so prominently, not even on a seat but down among straw on the ground... perhaps stretching an arm through the bars so that one might feel how thin it was... staring into vacancy with half-shut eyes” (268)

that featured you in the spotlight;
angst and forbearance,
knowing your beauty rested
with approval and refinement
of barren mouths³⁷.

Or could it have been
the suspicious night watch³⁸ patrolling you
that made you feel some semblance of
peace³⁹? Unaware of your obsessive
patriotism, those observers
could even break through
your pseudo-meditative cause.

Some forty-odd days and nights⁴⁰

³⁶ This is a reference to the linkage between starvation and impoverishment. Perhaps having the hunger artist as an attraction for the public it reveals that people would rather watch those in need as a spectacle, in showing that they are not without.

³⁷ No one could possibly watch the hunger artist continuously, day and night, and so no one could produce first-hand evidence that the fast had really been rigorous and continuous; only the artist himself could know that, he was therefore bound to be the sole completely satisfied spectator of his own fast.” (270)

³⁸ There were members of the public who were selected to keep watch of the hunger artist throughout the “day and night, three of them at a time, in case he should have some secret recourse to nourishment.” (268) This reinforces the fact that the hunger artist had permanent eyes watching him—he was never alone, always surrounded by people for approval of his art.

³⁹ The narrator actually tells us the opposite in the text, that “nothing annoyed the artist more than such watchers; they made him miserable; they made his fast seem unendurable; sometimes he mastered his feebleness sufficiently to sing during their watch for as long as he could keep going, to show them how unjust their suspicions were” (269). However, he goes on to contradict this in saying that with other watchers, “he was quite happy at the prospect of spending a sleepless night with such watchers; he was ready to exchange jokes with them, to tell them stories out of his nomadic life, anything at all to keep them awake and demonstrate to them again that he had no eatables in his cage and that he was fasting as not one of them could fast.” (269) This is where I envision he is at peace, perhaps his only measure of such, in that he is able to communicate to them his tribulations privately.

⁴⁰ The powers that be ensured that there was a limit to the amount of time he was allowed to fast, at forty days. This measure seemed to mirror the biblical Lent, showing that the hunger artist was giving up something so integral as eating, but whether that is done in praise of God or in praise of himself personally is not known. In fact, the narrator reveals that the reasoning being that specific number is that “Experience had proved that for forty days the interest of the public could be stimulated by a steadily increasing pressure of advertisement, but after that the town began to lose interest, sympathetic support began notably to fall off” (270), therefore indicating to the reader that the length of time has nothing to do with the feasibility of the act at all, but merely with its marketability.

though biblical,
never mended your failed expectations⁴¹
and never was deliverance so near;
a daily devotional of emptiness.

But all you were doing
was something so inhuman
that positioning you in close proximity to the
animals could be the only gauge
to which you might be seen.
Perversion, or something of the sort,
used to compel the audience near⁴².
But all too soon does the attention dissipate,
and a panther looms over you
ready to crush you deeper underground⁴³.
Falling to despair,
ridicule to ridicule,
dust to dust—
misunderstood⁴⁴.

⁴¹ In actuality, the hunger artist failed to see why the time limitation was imposed, and he yearned to fast for longer. “His public pretended to admire him so much, why should it have so little patience with him; if he could endure fasting longer, why shouldn’t the public endure it?” (271)

⁴² The triumph of such a feat used to be marked with much pomp and glory: “the flower-decked cage was opened, enthusiastic spectators filled the hall, a military band played, two doctors entered the cage to measure the results of the fast, which were announced through a megaphone, and finally two young ladies appeared, blissful at having been selected for the honor, to help the hunger artist down the few steps leading to a small table on which was spread a carefully chosen invalid repast.” (270)

⁴³ At the end of the story when the hunger artist has died and is buried with the straw from his cage, the circus enthusiastically replaces him with a young panther—a significant attraction: “Even the most insensitive felt it refreshing to see this wild creature leaping around the cage that had so long been dreary.” (277)

⁴⁴ Though he tried to engage the public to his cause, his state failed to come across as a legitimate piece of art that should be recognized by not only society, but to his own self as well. The narrator writes that he lived in this way, “honored by the world, yet in spite of that troubled in spirit, and all the more troubled because no one would take his trouble seriously. What comfort could he possibly need? What more could he possibly wish for? And if some good-natured person, feeling sorry for him, tried to console him by pointing out that his melancholy was probably caused by fasting, it could happen, especially when he had been fasting for some time, that he reacted with an outburst of fury and to the general alarm began to shake the bars of his cage like a wild animal.” (272) This alludes to the end of the story, when he is positioned in a circus among the animals and housed in an animal cage. It further points to the inhumanity of his chosen profession. And he grapples with the

Empathy can only go so far⁴⁵.

Honour always meant virtue,
and being awake for days⁴⁶
somehow meant satiation.

And was it art as the connotation
between your void and the public approval⁴⁷?
Indeed only an artist could approach
such a maddening demand
and foster limitless defiance of the human spirit.
Your burden⁴⁸ eliminates
that request for penitence⁴⁹,
just as a forgotten glass of water
begs for thirsty lips⁵⁰. Please,

misunderstanding throughout the story: “To fight against this lack of understanding, against a whole world of non-understanding, was impossible.” (273)

⁴⁵ As previously noted what the hunger artist really needs is understanding rather than pity, though he never seems to achieve this.

⁴⁶ “The harsh light did not trouble him at all, in any case he could never sleep properly, and he could always drowse a little, whatever the light, at any hour, even when the hall was thronged with noisy onlookers.” (269)

⁴⁷ When the hunger artist moves to the circus among the animals, he envisions that his attraction will bring on crowds of people to bring him that fame he so craves, but “the conviction was borne in upon him that these people, most of them, to judge from their actions, again and again, without exception, were all on their way to the menagerie... For when they reached his cage he was at once deafened by the storm of shouting and abuse that arose from the two contending factions, which renewed themselves continuously, of those who wanted to stop and stare at him—he soon began to dislike them more than the others—not out of real interest but only out of obstinate self-assertiveness, and those who wanted to go straight on to the animals” (275).

⁴⁸ As it turned out, the hunger artist’s burden to bear was not the constant starvation, but in fact, that “he was only an impediment on the way to the menagerie.” (276)

⁴⁹ In his last breaths he asks for forgiveness. He still seeks outside approval “‘I always wanted you to admire my fasting,’ said the hunger artist. ‘We do admire it,’ said the overseer, affably. ‘But you shouldn’t admire it... because I have to fast, I can’t help it.’” (277)

⁵⁰ Just as the art of fasting went out of fashion, so too the hunger artist was left in his cage at the circus and forgotten. He went on and on without notice to anyone, the placard outside his cage so permanent that no one ever paid any attention: “And when once in a while some leisurely passer-by stopped, made merry over the old figure on the board, and spoke of swindling, that was in its way the stupidest lie ever invented by indifference and inborn malice, since it was not the hunger artist who was cheating, he was working honestly, but the world was cheating him of his reward.” (276)

please enter your own reproach
before the rest can watch you lurk away.

Perhaps all it ever was
was one serving of misfortune
against another serving of fame⁵¹.

⁵¹ The misfortune here is the fact that at the end of the story, the reader discovers that it is not the hunger artist's fault that he has to fast. In his last words he says that he couldn't help it because "I couldn't find the food I liked. If I had found it, believe me, I should have made no fuss and stuffed myself like you or anyone else" (277). But he made a conscious decision not to eat food that he didn't like. This he coupled with the stubbornness of creating a way of being in the public eye, so much so that he carried on in this way until his death, only being able to convey his meaning to the one onlooker who cared to listen.

The Metamorphosis

Sometimes it's just too quiet⁵².
The mummer of muffled sentences
of hushed nuances
behind
doors shut with intentionality
emulate those which you once knew
as familiar⁵³.
And you can't quite make out
each word or phrase—though you impliedly know
that they speak about you,
or shall I say,
what used to be you⁵⁴.

You've missed the morning train⁵⁵.

⁵² Gregor Samsa had awoken to find himself transformed into a giant insect. He barricaded himself in his room and eventually stayed there for a long time. His family, almost always on the opposite side of the door would talk in hushed voices, or sometimes in complete silence so that Gregor could not hear their words or their shuffling: "In the next room meanwhile there was complete silence. Perhaps his parents were sitting at the table with the chief clerk, whispering, perhaps they were all leaning against the door and listening." (80) When it was too quiet it seems that Gregor felt so much more alone than he already did as an insect, growing into his new sense of self. Gregor noticed that after his transformation the family was much more quiet in their daily routines: "But what if all the quiet, the comfort, the contentment were now to end in horror?" (89) When Gregor would try to listen to the family's conversations, he would keep his head next to the door: "Sometimes out of sheer weariness he had to give up listening and let his head fall negligently against the door, but he always had to pull himself together again at once, for even the slight sound his head made was audible next door and brought all conversation to a stop." (96) Later in the story, Gregor notices that "they were now mostly very silent. Soon after supper his father would fall asleep in his armchair; his mother and sister would admonish each other to be silent" (111)

⁵³ Not only does Gregor need to contend with his new body, but his parents and sister do not treat him as they once did—he is shown precious little compassion from those who should have loved him. It is only his sister who braves tending to his necessities, and even then she cannot bear to look at him.

⁵⁴ There are many discussions within the family that reference Gregor, and he can hear some parts of these conversations. Ultimately, he overhears the conversation of what the family intends to do with him, and that they feel he himself is lost—that if he were still present that he would have left them long ago out of courtesy to them.

⁵⁵ The story began with Gregor waking up and not being able to get out of bed as he normally did. He had missed his alarm and the morning train to go to work: "But what was he to do now? The next train went at seven o'clock; to catch that he would need to hurry like mad and his samples weren't even packed up, and he himself wasn't feeling particularly fresh and active. And even if he did catch the train he wouldn't avoid a row with the chief, since the firm's porter would have been waiting for the five o'clock train and would have long since

That overcast city that was once so accessible⁵⁶
has curtailed itself microscopically
until all that remains
is the imprisonment of four walls from which you trail blaze around
in sinuous tracks⁵⁷,
pausing and discovering evermore arduous cracks.
And if fate would allow
even the slightest reprieve,
you would surely have commenced
a means to garner your subdued beauty;
and show them all the unfeigned reality⁵⁸.
The long pause you left between your words
to somehow denote
more meaning,
did nothing to ease away the twittering squeals⁵⁹

reported his failure to turn up.” (69) Gregor had a fierce sense of loyalty to his occupation, and even in his altered state he was trying to figure out how to meet his obligations.

⁵⁶ Gregor has a window that he looks out of into the city. This is an important aspect to Kafka’s writing—the difference between the internal and external, the nexus of the outside world and the internal struggles. Gregor “leaned against the window panes, obviously in some recollection of the sense of freedom that looking out of a window always used to give him. For in reality day by day things that were even a little way off were growing dimmer to his sight; the hospital across the street, which he used to execrate for being all too often before his eyes, was now quite beyond his range of vision, and if he had not known that he lived in Charlotte Street, a quiet street but still a city street, he might have believed that his window gave on a desert waste where gray sky and gray land blended indistinguishably into each other.” (97)

⁵⁷ Gregor occupied some of his days just crawling around his room: “so that for mere recreation he had formed the habit of crawling crisscross over the walls and ceiling. He especially enjoyed hanging suspended from the ceiling; it was much better than lying on the floor; one could breathe more freely; one’s body swung and rocked lightly; and in the most blissful absorption induced by this suspension it could happen to his own surprise that he let go and fell plump on the floor” (100) Therefore he is showing signs of becoming more inhuman.

⁵⁸ Unable to communicate with his family, he was unable to show them that he was still alive and that the insect was still himself. He clung to the fact that they would love him unconditionally, but eventually realizes at the end that he has just been more of a tragedy than anything else. He comes to know that he is unable to provide for them any longer, and he “felt so hot with shame and grief” (97), but was unable to let them know.

⁵⁹ At the beginning of the story Gregor tries to communicate through the door with his family. His mother asks, “Did you hear how he was speaking?”, and the chief responding “That was no human voice” (79). Gregor realized that “The words he uttered were no longer understandable, apparently, although they seem clear enough to him, even clearer than before, perhaps because his ear had grown accustomed to the sound of them.” (79-80)

from your tetrachromatic⁶⁰ eye-view.

But you were still there⁶¹.
Unillusioned and underneath
a hardened shell
you eclipsed into that aforementioned
humanity
and it darkened as the drapes were drawn.
Hour by offending hour,
sleep was riddled with uncertainty⁶².

And if you could have seen
all of their faces
as they left the room⁶³,
perhaps you might have been propelled
into a different semblance
of time—releasing misapprehensions
of fallen hope;
paled regret⁶⁴.

⁶⁰ This is in reference to the way an insect would be able to see, as a compound eye with many lenses.

⁶¹ When his mother and sister came into his room to move furniture, his mother was whispering to his sister, and Gregor mused that “for she was convinced that he could not understand her words”, and she said to Grete, “doesn’t it look as if we were showing him, by taking away his furniture, that we have given up hope of his ever getting better and are just leaving him coldly to himself? I think it would be best to keep his room exactly as it has always been, so that when he comes back to us he will find everything unchanged and be able all the more easily to forget what has happened in between.” (102) At this point in the story, there is still some hope that the transformation is reversible and that Gregor is still there.

⁶² Gregor seemed to have trouble sleeping, and even in the first sentence of the story, he had awoken from an uneasy sleep. This could show that perhaps the fantastic nature of the story could be through a dream-like state.

⁶³ “This made him realize how repulsive the sight of him still was to her, and that it was bound to go on being repulsive, and what an effort it must cost her not to run away even from the sight of the small portion of his body that stuck out from under the sofa. In order to spare her that, therefore, one day he carried a sheet on his back to the sofa—it cost him four hours’ labor—and arranged it there in such a way as to hide him completely, so that even if she were to bend down she could not see him.” (99)

⁶⁴ After showing himself to his mother and sister, “Gregor was now cut off from his mother, who was perhaps nearly dying because of him; he dared not open the door for fear of frightening away his sister, who had to stay with her mother; there was nothing he could do but wait; and harassed by self-reproach and worry he began now to crawl to and fro, over everything, walls, furniture and ceiling, and finally in his despair, when the whole room seemed to be reeling round him, fell down on to the middle of the big table.” (106)

Probably so.

Hallowed forsakenness!
For risking your obstinate shame
and following now mutedly through days
by slowly being forgotten in deliverance.
The suffocation you felt
was eased by the cool window pane,
but not by hidden stares.

Innocuous life
that transformed your regularity
into vulgarity
claimed damages through
wicked apples
thrown in haste⁶⁵.
But there was no mistaking
the image of your father
in that darkness before your eyes.
His interpretation
was merely a weak translation⁶⁶
ingenuously seeking some order
amidst the commotion
and seeing the pained look of lost fear and repulsion
imprinted on your mother's face⁶⁷.

⁶⁵ When his father had been told about the situation where Gregor had gotten out of his room and his mother was practically inconsolable, "Likely enough he did not himself know what he meant to do; at any rate he lifted his feet uncommonly high, and Gregor was dumbfounded at the enormous size of his shoe soles. But Gregor could not risk standing up to him, aware as he had been from the very first day of his new life that his father believed only the severest measures suitable for dealing with him." (108) His father then attacked him: "It was an apple; a second apple followed immediately; Gregor came to a stop in alarm; there was no point in running on, for his father was determined to bombard him. He had filled his pockets with fruit from the dish on the sideboard and was now shying apple after apple, without taking particularly good aim for the moment... but another following immediately landed right on his back and sank in." (109) "the apple went on sticking in his body as a visible reminder, since no one ventured to remove it—seemed to have made even his father recollect that Gregor was a member of the family, despite his present unfortunate and repulsive state, and ought not to be treated as an enemy, that, on the contrary, family duty required the suppression of disgust and the exercise of patience, nothing but patience." (110)

⁶⁶ "It was clear to Gregor that his father had taken the worst interpretation of Grete's all too brief statement and was assuming that Gregor had been guilty of some violent act... Truly, this was not the father he had imagined to himself." (107)

⁶⁷ When his mother caught sight of him on the wall when they were trying (with good intentions to move his furniture out of his room), "and before she was really conscious that

And yet, and yet—
modes of caution kept them out⁶⁸;
kept them far
from believing any resuscitation possible⁶⁹.
And your own desperation could not be weighed
any more than that malingering, futile doubt⁷⁰.
Angling from your wavering feet and
scuttling around the bedroom ceiling,
your dire hunger⁷¹
could not cure
that distant trepidation stabbing your curved back⁷².

what she saw was Gregor screamed in a loud, hoarse voice: ‘Oh God, of God!’ fell with
outspread arms over the sofa as if giving up and did not move.” (106)

⁶⁸ Though the family was in dire need to move from the house in order to survive monetarily, they could not figure out a way to move Gregor in his current state, but “what really kept them from moving into another flat was rather their own complete hopelessness and the belief that they had been singled out for a misfortune such as had never happened to any of their relations or acquaintances.” (113)

⁶⁹ The family wearily grows hopeless about the situation and believes that their son/brother has completely left them.

⁷⁰ Gregor becomes largely neglected by his family, who practically forgets his existence for the most part: “being sad and weary to death, he would lie motionless for hours... the living-room door stayed shut many an evening, yet Gregor reconciled himself quite easily to the shutting of the door, for often enough on evenings when it was opened he had disregarded it entirely and laid in the darkest corner of his room, quite unnoticed by the family.” (118)

⁷¹ Grete eventually did not concern herself much with tending to Gregor’s needs, and would just put food in his room without thinking about what he might like. “At other times he would not be in the mood to bother about his family, he was only filled with rage at the way they were neglecting him, and although he had no clear idea of what he might care to eat he would make plans for getting into the larder to take the food that was after all his due, even if he were not hungry.” (114) The story then leads to Gregor not being interested in food much at all: “Only when he happened to pass the food laid out for him did he take a bit of something in his mouth as a pastime, kept it there for an hour at a time and usually spat it out again.” (117) This could be the foreshadowing to his eventual demise, starving himself to death out of a caring for his family to move on from his horrid transformation.

⁷² This refers again to the apple stuck in his back from his father’s throw, a reminder to him of not only their repulsion and hate, but also that he was still their son. Grete arrives at the decision to move forward with their lives and get rid of Gregor, who she no longer calls “Gregor”, but “it”. She pleads with her parents: “You must just try to get rid of the idea that this is Gregor. The fact that we’ve believed it for so long is the root of all our trouble. But how can it be Gregor? If this were Gregor, he would have realized long ago that human beings can’t live with such a creature, and he’d have gone away on his own accord. Then we wouldn’t have any brother, but we’d be able to go on living and keep his memory in honor.” (125)

Instead, your appetite was submissive
only by insistent refusal
pouring its threatening guise amongst
cartilage and metacarpals,
sinking your heart
until it was finally
quiet⁷³.

The morning train has come and gone on schedule⁷⁴.

⁷³ His death by starvation parallels the stillness and silence that he has been experiencing over the course of the story.

⁷⁴ Leaving Gregor behind—the outside world resuming its order as though nothing had ever happened.

The Judgment

Duplicity⁷⁵ falls quietly upon soft-felt ears
so that it is seemingly impossible to tell who meets whom⁷⁶
when your writing stretches out on the paper
or when the proverbial blanket
fails to fully cover a father's paradoxically⁷⁷ withered limbs⁷⁸.
I think I understand

⁷⁵ Both parties in the story, Georg Bendemann and his father, show signs of duplicity in their actions. Firstly, Georg is writing a letter to his friend, but he holds back with what he shares with him. He filters through what he wants to tell him, but doesn't want the friend to actually know some of his news: "one could not send him any real news such as could frankly be told to the most distant acquaintance" (78). He doesn't want to trouble his friend with good news, as he imagines that his friend is very isolated. He believes that his friend has had much misfortune, and thinks that if he tells the friend all the truths of his life, that the friend would be jealous. Georg does this out of affection and sensitivity, but he still paints a different picture for his friend than reality. However, he does decide to tell his friend about his recent engagement, though hesitant, and hopes that his friend will be happy for him. Secondly, Georg's father when introduced in the story comes across as feeble and old, in need of assistance and caring. Later in the story there is such a turn in the father's disposition that he becomes large and overbearing. The father is powerful and shows Georg a side of him that was unsuspected and malicious.

⁷⁶ A sense of confusion arises in the story when the father at first refuses to acknowledge that he knows of Georg's friend. Georg tries to explain to his father who denies knowing the friend, when later he confirms that he obviously knows his friend, and not only that, but that his father is a better friend with him than Georg himself. The father even remarks, "Of course I know your friend. He would have been a son after my own heart. That's why you've been playing him false all these years. Why else? Do you think I haven't been sorry for him? And that's why you had to lock yourself up in your office—the Chief is busy, mustn't be disturbed—just so that you could write your lying little letters to Russia. But thank goodness a father doesn't need to be taught how to see through his son." (84-85)

⁷⁷ This paradox shows itself when the reader finds the father at once old and withered but powerful and domineering.

⁷⁸ The father allows the son to lay him down in bed, attempting to care for his old age, and the father then has an exchange with the son that is the turning point for the story. The father asks Georg multiple times whether he is "well covered up", while Georg attends to tucking his father in. Georg assures his father that he is well covered up, but his father shouts that he has not been covered up. "You wanted to cover me up, I know, my young sprig, but I'm far from being covered up yet. And even if this is the last strength I have, it's enough for you, too much for you." (84)

your timid⁷⁹ musings of daily minutiae⁸⁰
instead of parading the sustained reality
to a feigned innocent onlooker.
Nascent longings end up biting your coattails
with the commitment to disarming your inhibited sentences⁸¹.
It's time to tell the truth⁸².

Perhaps too many versions played over and over in your head
before you pledged to impart your news—
maybe those iterations could have prepared you.
But you never predicted

⁷⁹ Again, Georg is holding back from his friend, afraid of showing too much. This can be paralleled with the treatment he provides his father: Georg puts on a caring and gentle nature with his father, worried about his fragile state, when this is exactly what his father reprimands him for later on in the story.

⁸⁰ “Georg confined himself to giving his friend unimportant items of gossip such as rise at random in the memory when one is idly thinking things over on a quiet Sunday.” (79) Georg would rather record mundane daily life than proffer up the details of his own life, perhaps trying to save the friend from knowing how Georg’s life is going well against the friend’s life seemingly in exile, or to save face from knowing that perhaps he isn’t as good of friends with him as he would like to think.

⁸¹ Though Georg tries to stifle his news to his friend, he ends up deciding to tell him about his engagement. This shows the need for friends to share their lives with each other, trying to encourage them to be happy for one another. This is part of a healthy friendship, one of the integral pieces of camaraderie. In essence, this inability to share with his friend is another telling sign that the friendship is probably not as close as Georg intimates. Furthermore, the fact that Georg feels the need to tell his father before sending the letter lends itself further to the fact that the relationship is distanced. “Yes, I’ve been thinking it over. If he’s a good friend of mine, I said to myself, my being happily engaged should make him happy too. And so I wouldn’t put off telling him any longer. But before I posted the letter I wanted to let you know.” (82) This shows a sense of childishness, almost as though he needs to ask his father for permission about his choices.

⁸² The father’s reaction to Georg asking about sending the letter to his friend is one that is unexpected: “Listen to me! You’ve come to me about this business, to talk it over with me. No doubt that does you honor. But it’s nothing, it’s worse than nothing, if you don’t tell me the whole truth... I beg you, Georg, don’t deceive me. It’s a trivial affair, it’s hardly worth mentioning, so don’t deceive me.” (82)

the complete trepidation
that struck upon knowledge of displaced resentment⁸³.
Forgetting would likely be too easy
to coax one into acceptance⁸⁴
and wile away during that moment before your eyes
turned to stone.
And isolation, such as your (alleged) friend enjoys,
wouldn't be quite enough to suit your crime⁸⁵.
Those small hindrances purge a remembered strength
that would even weigh down your watch chain⁸⁶

⁸³ This resentment that shows through is a reference to the father's proclamation about his wife's death and his declining hand in the family business, that Georg has taken over: "Since the death of our dear mother certain things have been done that aren't right. Maybe the time will come for mentioning them, and maybe sooner than we think. There's many a thing in the business I'm not aware of, maybe it's not done behind my back—I'm not equal to things any longer, my memory's failing, I haven't an eye for so many things any longer. That's the course of nature in the first place, and in the second place the death of our dear mother hit me harder than it did you." (82) It would seem as though Georg had no idea about his father's actual thoughts surrounding both, as he was not prepared for such a retort.

⁸⁴ The story's exchange between the father and son would be one that could not be forgotten. It is clear from the words and actions that ensued that recovering from such a place of disarray would likely be impossible. Perhaps Georg had already realized this when his father finally told him how he felt: "Georg shrank into a corner, as far away from his father as possible. A long time ago he had firmly made up his mind to watch closely every least movement so that he should not be surprised by any indirect attack, a pounce from behind or above. At this moment he recalled this long-forgotten resolve and forgot it again, like a man drawing a short thread through the eye of a needle." (85) Additionally, there are multiple parts of the story where Georg is intent on trying to forget, or unconsciously doing so, when Georg realized that his father had pockets in his shirt, "and believed that with this remark he could make him an impossible figure for all the world. Only for a moment did he think so, since he kept on forgetting everything." (86)

⁸⁵ The father places judgment on the son, but it had to be such that would fit the crime. It is almost incomprehensible to understand what exactly the crime was that he committed. It might have been the dishonesty to the friend, or the way in which Georg had treated his father since the death of his mother, or for being selfish. His father said, "So now you know what else there was in the world besides yourself, till now you've known only about yourself! An innocent child, yes, that you were, truly, but still more truly have you been a devilish human being!—And therefore take note: I sentence you now to death by drowning!" (87)

⁸⁶ When Georg was carrying his father to his bed to lay him down, when the father was still showing as a weak old man, Georg thought: "It gave him a dreadful feeling to notice that

so much so to pull time backwards again
and again.

You must have kept her skirt around her waist⁸⁷
to ensure the purity of your union.
Never could you have proffered a dishonest intention
towards those strictly unassuming loved ones⁸⁸; or at least
no one believes it to be so.
An uneven mattress gives way to those uneven lies
ushering out thin lips⁸⁹ or pencils⁹⁰ or hand railings⁹¹.

while he took the few steps toward the bed the old man on his breast was playing with his watch chain. He could not lay him down on the bed for a moment, so firmly did he hand on to the watch chain.” (84) This could be revealing the sense of time that had passed between the father and son that could not be taken back; the time that had elapsed that had forced them so far apart.

⁸⁷ This references the jest that the father fires onto the son with respect to his recent engagement. The father essentially mocks his son for not being celibate with his future wife; inferring that he would be marrying a scorned woman who had loose morals: “because she lifted up her skirts like this, the nasty creature’, mimicking her he lifted his shirt so high that one could see the scar on his thigh from his war wound, ‘because she lifted her skirts like this and this you made up to her, and in order to make free with her undisturbed you have disgraced your mother’s memory, betrayed your friend, and stuck your father into bed so that he can’t move.” (85)

⁸⁸ The way that it would seem Georg reacts to his father’s harsh words is in a way that he was unaware of his actions. The narrator paints Georg as a person who intended his friends and family well, though misunderstood by his father. He was withholding from his friend out of respect for his friend’s current situation, trying not to upset him with good news. He was trying to care for his father by taking him to bed and attending to him. It appears from the story that Georg was genuinely surprised at his father’s accusations, perhaps once realizing them allowing himself to carry out the punishment. Indeed, at the end of the story as he hurls himself over the railings of the bridge, he says: “Dear parents, I have always loved you, all the same” (88)

⁸⁹ It is said in some cultures, such as the Chinese culture, that thin lips reveal people who are cold and unemotional, and hard on other people.

⁹⁰ Referring to the letters written by Georg to his friend in Russia.

⁹¹ The hand railings refer to the bridge where Georg commits suicide to adhere to the judgment of his father: “Already he was grasping at the railings as a starving man clutches food.” (88)

Your verdict comes down hard as though
light had never stopped to breathe⁹².
A jury comprised of foolhardy and trite vanity.
The sustained flood filtered through porous
inevitability⁹³. Waves to mutilate and cleanse simultaneously:
to engulf hatred and keep your crime at bay.
Only then may we see the falsity of abject lies⁹⁴.

⁹² The father plays judge and jury, ushering out the death sentence without allowing Georg any opportunity to defend himself. This is a continuing social commentary with Kafka with respect to the law not being fair and equal, that the process of the law is not accessible to people.

⁹³ The flood of the water drowning Georg is still that inescapable notion that he had no guilty intention but follows the orders of his father like a good son.

⁹⁴ Referring also to the way in which the father is untruthful to himself and to Georg. Both figures had responsibilities to the other that were not adhered to and were potential crimes against the other. But due to the father being more powerful than Georg, his judgment prevails, a fight to the death without regard for any notion of family.

Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk

She could not have been anything more than ordinary⁹⁵.
Like bicycle spokes of uniformity churning out trivialities⁹⁶,
it was through undying reveries of mundane piping⁹⁷
that blazed in such a fashion
to be simultaneously heard and unheard⁹⁸.
She believed she caused the awakening⁹⁹,
when all that was accomplished
was an outpouring of sanity lived through meaninglessness.
That perception lasted
only for the duration of each song—
each beat resounded in exasperating ears
who could only wish for deafness¹⁰⁰.

⁹⁵ The narrator of the story at once praises Josephine for her singing and tells the reader that she is nothing special. This grappling emerges throughout the story and evolves into something to downplay her talent, calling her powerful, beautiful and influential on one hand, and even noting that “among intimates we admit freely to one another that Josephine’s singing, as singing, is nothing out of the ordinary” (360-361)

⁹⁶ Like so much of Kafka’s work, the story involves everyday life and its nature. The mouse-folk live lives that are “very uneasy, every day brings surprises, apprehensions, hopes, and terrors, so that it would be impossible for a single individual to bear it all did he not always have by day and night the support of his fellows; but even so it often becomes very difficult; frequently as many as a thousand shoulders are trembling under a burden that was really meant only for one pair” (363).

⁹⁷ Though the title of the story and the beginning depict Josephine as a ‘singer’, the narrator is quick to admit that it may not be singing at all, in the conventional sense of the term. In fact, he instead terms it ‘piping’, and notes that “we have an inkling of what singing is, and Josephine’s art does not really correspond to it... and piping is something we all know about, it is the real artistic accomplishment of our people”. (361)

⁹⁸ This also draws on the parallel of being in awe of Josephine while finding her common. It furthermore emphasizes that the mouse folk are still rather in the dark about what they can accept as art: “We all pipe, but of course no one dreams of making out that our piping is an art, we pipe without thinking of it, indeed without noticing it, and there are even many among us who are quite unaware that piping is one of our characteristics” (361)

⁹⁹ Even though the mouse folk may not comprehend her art, Josephine still has the intentionality of endeavouring to perhaps save them through her song: “whatever intervenes from outside to hinder the purity of her song, to be overcome with a slight effort, even with no effort at all, merely by confronting it, can help to awaken the masses, to teach them not perhaps understanding but awed respect.” (363)

¹⁰⁰ This is a comment on the routine and emptiness of a life lived without art and without appreciation for that intangible creativity that the mouse folk cannot “un”-hear. The songs, even though they are misunderstood, are a crutch that the mouse folk have come to understand—if nothing else—as a constant comfort.

Melody intertwining amongst rapt attention
from those begging in anticipation for some resolve.
She will allow grace notes¹⁰¹ as embellishments, but
saves sympathy only for those who cannot hear.
She performed behind the veneer of grandiosity¹⁰²,
contouring her face just so¹⁰³,
revealing nothing more than plain shackles
tethering her to the community's standards¹⁰⁴.
Maybe it was all just a joke after all¹⁰⁵.

And she starts to cry when no one is looking¹⁰⁶.

¹⁰¹ The narrator speaks of a rumor that Josephine was threatening to cut her grace notes short if the community did not allow her demands against daily work. To the people, this meant practically nothing, for they were not aware of what grace notes were to begin with, and noticed no difference in her singing at all. She quickly changed her mind and stated that the taming of grace notes was too severe a punishment and let them back into her singing. But her sacrifices and allowances are paid no attention.

¹⁰² The attention Josephine receives from the community holds her in high esteem: "One could argue from this that Josephine stands almost beyond the law, that she can do what she pleases, at the risk of actually endangering the community, and will be forgiven for everything." (371). This sentiment is brought up again at the end of the poem, but in the reverse, that she forgives the community for their shortcomings and for their mistreatment of her. The story is rife with contradictions, and the poem is attempting to also reveal this push and pull of admiration and dejection.

¹⁰³ The (perhaps) unintentional look on her face, as described by the narrator, as "a smile so sarcastic and arrogant as she then assumed I have never seen... seemed at that moment actually vulgar" (362)

¹⁰⁴ I draw from the story a sad reality that the mouse folk are too intensely preoccupied with their everyday lives that they are unable to recognize not only their need, but their slavish and unadulterated yearning for a transient escape. Even though they find this in Josephine, they are seemingly scared of letting go of the control they exalt over her.

¹⁰⁵ Despite her serious nature and the way the audience perceives her, and as noted above from the possible smile that she discreetly wore, "It can be admitted: in Josephine there is much to make one laugh; and laughter for its own sake is never far away from us; in spite of all the misery of our lives quiet laughter is always, so to speak, at our elbows... But what is entrusted to one's care one does not laugh at; to laugh would be a breach of duty; the utmost malice which the most malicious of us wreak on Josephine is to say now and then: 'The sight of Josephine is enough to make one stop laughing'" (365). Though I don't imagine that Josephine knew the heart of what the folk thought of her, I can see her misinterpreting them as much as they misinterpret her.

¹⁰⁶ This was a feeling that I gave to Josephine since there is no way for the reader to see her without being in the public sphere. It is almost as though the narrator paints her as being unemotional. In this way, I am providing her with a sense of compassion, even though perhaps the mouse folk did too in their own way: "that she, this frail creature, needing protection and in some way remarkable, in her own opinion remarkable for her gift of song, is

A penny thrown into a well
might produce some longed-for wish
of that delightful sound found only in standing ovation¹⁰⁷.
Another day merely leads to open wounds further,
granting only the grind of useless work and
congealing around the misery of being misunderstood¹⁰⁸.
At long last, art engulfs the sphere,
destroying remnants of numb pasts and forgetting
the trials embedded in the assembly line of toil¹⁰⁹.
This is the tantrum¹¹⁰ she throws on everyday life.

entrusted to their care and they must look after her; the reason for this is not clear to anyone, only the fact seems to be established” (365). Additionally, there is a moment in the story, closer to the end, where Josephine breaks down. Her supporters are pushing her and encouraging her to sing. “They comfort and cress her with flatteries, they almost carry her to the selected spot where she is supposed to sing. At last, bursting inexplicably into tears, she gives way, but when she stands up to sing, obviously at the end of her resources, weary, her arms not widespread as usual but lifelessly hanging down... just as she is about to strike up, there, she cannot do it after all, an unwilling shake of the head tells us so and she breaks down before our eyes.” (375) Here she shows the mouse folk more of who she actually is than she ever had: she is showing them her fallibility and her weakness.

¹⁰⁷ In fact, it is this longing upon which it seems Josephine hinges her life: “it is as if she has concentrated all her strength on her song, as if from everything in her that does not directly subserve her singing all strength has been withdrawn, almost all power of life, as if she were laid bare, abandoned, committed merely to the care of good angels, as if while she is so wholly withdrawn and living only in her song a cold breath blowing upon her might kill her.” (363)

¹⁰⁸ Perhaps one of the reasons that Josephine is misunderstood by those around her is because they are simultaneously childish and prematurely old, as the narrator puts it. “Our lack of musical gifts has surely some connection with this; we are too old for music, its excitement, its rapture do not suit our heaviness, wearily we wave it away; we content ourselves with piping; a little piping here and there, that is enough for us. Who knows, there may be talents for music among us; but if there were, the character of our people would suppress them before they could unfold.” (369) Furthermore, the mouse folk are at a loss as to the meaning of art itself, probably through no fault of their own: “one could see an admission of the fact that the people do not understand Josephine, just as she alleges, that they marvel helplessly at her art, feel themselves unworthy of it, try to assuage the pity she rouses in them by making really desperate sacrifices for her and, to the same extent that her art is beyond their comprehension, consider her personality and her wishes to lie beyond their jurisdiction.” (371)

¹⁰⁹ This again brings in the chance of escapism to the mouse folk in using Josephine for their own measures of release from the mundane and the hard work they struggle with daily. Though they cannot imagine that the singing or piping is helping them, it remains a mystery that they can find comfort in it.

¹¹⁰ This references the way the narrator describes that “Josephine likes best to sing just when things are most upset, many worries and dangers force us then to take devious ways, with the best will in the world we cannot assemble ourselves as quickly as Josephine wants,

She knows all¹¹¹. She can see into eternity. And yet,
she would just as soon destroy it¹¹².

Try to escape now¹¹³. Excuses¹¹⁴ only serve to distract.

And history pleads with her to cast over remembrance.
Something to foretell intricate stories
that shape themselves somehow around lovely harmonies
(or are they really just dull noises?)
If only she could guarantee her own useless cravings
as she did with the influence she dusted on the crowd,
one might suppose she would barricade herself

and on occasion she stands there, in ceremonial state for quite a time without a sufficient audience—then indeed she turns furious, then she stamps her feet, swearing in most unmaidenly fashion; she actually bites.” (364)

¹¹¹ This references the way that the mouse folk believe Josephine feels towards them: “She believes it is she who protects the people. When we are in a bad way politically or economically, her singing is supposed to save us, nothing less than that, and if it does not drive away the evil, at least gives us the strength to bear it.” (366). I see her as an omnipotent figure who can glean the needs of the common folk and who offers them a selfless coping mechanism: “and yet it is true that just in emergencies we hearken better than at other times to Josephine’s voice. The menaces that loom over us make us quieter, more humble, more submissive to Josephine’s domination; we like to come together, we like to huddle close to each other, especially on an occasion to set apart from the troubles preoccupying us” (366-367)

¹¹² The story shows several examples of Josephine lashing out when she does not get her way, hence the previous reference to the tantrum. In the end, she brings her own sort of revenge upon the community, “but is only being driven on by her own destiny, which in our world cannot be anything but a sad one. Of her own accord she abandons her singing, of her own accord she destroys the power she has gained over people’s hearts.” (376)

¹¹³ The urging here is showing a relation to the fact that their lives are spelled out of preconceived steps in which they have no control: “Our life happens to be such that a child, as soon as it can run about a little and a little distinguish one thing from another, must look after itself just like an adult; the areas on which, for economic reasons, we have to live in dispersion are too wide, our enemies too numerous, the dangers lying everywhere in wait for us too incalculable—we cannot shelter our children from the struggle for existence, if we did so, it would bring them to an early grave.” (368)

¹¹⁴ The excuses mentioned here refer to the part of the story where Josephine tries to leave the workforce due to her heavy singing commitment. She wants the rest of the community to relieve her of her daily work so that she may just focus on singing as her contribution to society. The mouse folk out rightly reject this plea. Josephine cites excuses such as the strain that working has on her voice, the lack of rest she receives and the exhaustion that ensues. “The people listen to her arguments and pay no attention.” (372)

without the ego pursed so tightly on her lips¹¹⁵.
Arrive into that banality and hurl it again
onto scalded throats and ever-still truth.
Generations will provide the memories instead¹¹⁶.
And try again to distinguish her music
apart from other tides who only serve to crash in,
it would closely resemble
that sameness of befallen daily repetitive voices,
calling on her to awaken weak and pointless iterations.
Closing in on obsession¹¹⁷ with
watching, while she chooses their innocuous lullabies¹¹⁸,
she must ignore those judgmental comparisons¹¹⁹
and feast instead with her own vain disposition¹²⁰.
That awe and wonder so consistent with

¹¹⁵ “She reaches for the highest garland not because it is momentarily hanging a little lower but because it is the highest; if she had any say in the matter she would have it still higher.” (373)

¹¹⁶ The end of the story shows Josephine disappearing and the society unfazed by her leaving: “She is a small episode in the eternal history of our people, and the people will get over the loss of her.” (376)

¹¹⁷ Josephine desires immortality and believes that she deserves it: “what she wants is public, unambiguous, permanent recognition of her art, going far beyond any precedent so far known. But while almost everything else seems within her reach, this eludes her persistently.” (372)

¹¹⁸ The narrator speaks often about the dream-like state that the mouse folk encounter as a means of escaping. And “into these dreams Josephine’s piping drops note by note... here it is in its right place, as nowhere else, finding the moment wait for it as music scarcely does. Something of our own brief childhood is in it, something of lost happiness that can never be found again, but also something of active daily life, of its small gaieties, unaccountable and yet springing up and not to be obliterated.” (370)

¹¹⁹ “The important thing, both in the people’s refusal and in Josephine’s petition, is not the action itself, but the fact that the people are capable of presenting a stony, impenetrable front to one of their own, and that it is all the more impenetrable because in other respects they show an anxious paternal care, and more than paternal care, for this very member of the people.” (372-373)

¹²⁰ “Despite all the nervous uneasiness that fills Josephine because her position has never been quite defined, there is still much that she does not see, blinded by her self-conceit” (367). I am here relying on the fact that Josephine can merely see herself in the context of those around her: “To be sure, the difference in strength between the people and the individual is so enormous that it is enough for the nursling to be drawn into the warmth of their nearness and he is sufficiently protected.” (365).

longing, moves softly through silent harbingers¹²¹.
Await, while the soul willingly presses itself onto purity¹²².
That fight that only a woman can inhabit
breathes into her subtle grin,
knowing simply too well that
she will eventually forgive them all¹²³.

¹²¹ “This piping, which rises up where everyone else is pledged to silence, comes almost like a message from the whole people to each individual; Josephine’s thin piping amidst grave decisions is almost like our people’s precarious existence amidst the tumult of a hostile world.” (367)

¹²² It is the soul of the people who are trying to release themselves from the reality of life: “the real mass of the people—this is plain to see—are quite withdrawn into themselves. Here in the brief intervals between their struggles our people dream, it is as if the limbs of each were loosened, as if the harried individual once in a while could relax and stretch himself at ease in the great, warm bed of the community.” (370)

¹²³ “... and yet to be only an incidental, unnoticed performer in a corner of an assembly of the people, for that, although in itself it would be no small thing, she would certainly not make us the sacrifice of her singing.” (367) And finally, as the story ends, the narrator dismisses all that had ever been of Josephine: “So perhaps we shall not miss so very much after all, while Josephine, redeemed from the earthly sorrows which to her thinking lay in wait for all chosen spirits, will happily lose herself in the numberless throng of the heroes of our people, and soon, since we are no historians, will rise to the heights of redemption and be forgotten like all her brothers.” (376) It seems to me that by leaving and disappearing from the mouse folk, that the sheer action of deserting them was in itself the act of forgiveness. She fueled their need by showing them that they could not take advantage of her. And she responded by giving them exactly what they had not wanted. In this she acknowledged them and showed them her back instead of her voice.

References

Collis, Stephen and Lyons, Graham. "Reading Duncan Reading: Robert Duncan and the Poetics of Derivation", University of Iowa Press, Iowa: 2012.

Kafka, Franz, 1883-1924. *Franz Kafka: The Complete Stories*. New York: Schocken Books, 1971 (Reprint edition 1995).

http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/26/magazine/26kafka-t.html?_r=0

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poets/detail/robert-duncan>