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This translation is dedicated to
Walter Neumayr—friend, brother, and alter ego.
A COUNTRY DOCTOR
(1919)

To My Father
We have a new attorney, the well-known Dr. Bucephalus. There is very little in his appearance reminiscent of the time when he was still the war-horse of Alexander the Great, though anyone who is aware of the circumstances is in a position to notice peculiarities. Be that as it may, I even saw a very simple-minded court usher on the steps recently who, with the knowing gaze of a seasoned frequenter of the horse races, looked at the attorney in amazement as he lifted his legs high and climbed from step to step with a footfall that rang on the marble.

In general, the Bar is satisfied with the decision to hire Bucephalus. With amazing insight it has been recognized that living in the present society places Bucephalus in a difficult situation and that for this reason, and also because of his significance to world history, he in any event deserves some sort of compensation. Today there are no longer any Alexanders to be found—that cannot be denied. To be sure, quite a few people know how to murder; people also have no lack of skill in lancing a friend over the banquet table; and many find Macedonia to be too confining and curse their father Philip as a result—but there is no one, no one who is still capable of leading an army to India. Even at that time, the gates of India...
were inaccessible, but the king’s sword was pointed in the right direction. Today the gates are in a completely different location and have been extended farther and higher; no one points in the right direction; many hold swords, but only to brandish them; and the eye that wishes to follow them becomes blurred.

So perhaps it is really best, following Bucephalus’ example, to bury oneself in law books. Unburdened, his flanks freed of the rider’s haunches, beside a quiet lamp, distant from the turmoil of Alexander’s battle-slaughter, he reads and turns the leaves of our ancient tomes.
“Do you want me to whip you?” But I come to my senses right away, realizing that I’m dealing with a stranger; that I don’t know where he comes from and that he has been willing to help me when everyone else has let me down. As if aware of my thoughts, he doesn’t seem to take my threat too seriously and turns to face me only once as he busies himself with the horses. Then he says: “Get in,” and indeed, everything is ready. Till now I’ve never travelled in such a nice rig, I think to myself and climb in gladly. “But I’ll take the reins,” I say. “You don’t know the way.” “That’s right,” he says. “I’m not going with you at all. I’m staying behind with Rosa.” “No!” screams Rosa and runs into the house, even then aware of the inevitability of her fate; I hear the door chain rattle as she latches the door; I hear the sound of the lock as it springs shut; I watch as she races through the hallway and puts out all the lights in every room so that no one will be able to find her. “You’re coming with me,” I say to the stable boy, “or else I won’t make the trip at all, no matter how important it is. I’m not about to give up the girl just for that.” “Giddy up!” he says to the horses; he claps his hands; the carriage is wrenched forward like a piece of wood swept into the current; I can still hear how the door of my house bursts and splinters under the onslaught of the stable boy, then my eyes and ears are filled with a whistling that pierces its way to all of my other senses as well. But that lasts only a moment, for as if the yard of my patient has suddenly appeared right in front of my own gate, I’m already there; the horses stand quietly; it’s no longer snowing; moonlight shines all around; the patient’s parents hurry out of the house; his sister follows them; I’m practically lifted out of the carriage; I can’t make any sense out of their muddled words; I can hardly breathe in the patient’s room; the stove has been ignored and now stands smoking; I’m about to throw open a window; but first I want to see the patient. Emaciated, feverless, neither hot nor cold, with empty eyes and without a shirt, the boy raises himself from under the down comforter, wraps his arms around my neck, and whispers into my ear: “Doctor, let me die.” I look around; no one has heard it; his parents are standing quietly and leaning forward, waiting for my diagnosis; his sister has brought a chair for my doctor’s bag. I open the bag and fumble around with the instruments; behind me the boy continues to grope towards me to remind me of his plea; I pick out a pair of tweezers, test them in the candle-light, then put them back into the bag. “Of course,” I say to myself, cursing. “In a case like this the gods decide to help by sending the horse I was missing, even providing a second one to speed things up, and then they give me a stable boy I don’t even need ...” Now for the first time I think of Rosa again; what am I to do, how am I to rescue her, how can I drag her out from under that stable boy when I’m ten miles away from her with horses I can’t control harnessed to my carriage? These very horses, which have somehow managed to loosen
their reins, push open the windows (I don’t know how) from outside, stick their heads inside, one to each window, and, untroubled by the shocked cries of the family, now look at the sick boy. *I’m going back right now,* I think, as if the horses are encouraging me to leave, but I allow the sister, who seems to think that I’m delirious from the heat, to take my fur coat. A glass of rum is set in front of me, and the old man slaps me on the back: the fact that he has shared his liquor with me seems to justify this type of familiarity. I shake my head; I’m getting nauseated spinning in the old man’s narrow mental orbit; for this reason alone I decide not to drink. The mother is standing beside the bed and motions me towards her; I follow her and, while one of the horses throws its head back and whinnies at the ceiling, lay my head on the chest of the boy, who shudders violently at the touch of my wet beard. That confirms what I already know: the boy is healthy, suffering a bit from bad circulation, thoroughly saturated with coffee from his worried mother, but he’s certainly healthy and needs only to be kicked out of bed. I’m not a moral crusader, so I leave him lying there. I’m employed by the district office and do my duty to the utmost, to the point, in fact, where it becomes almost too much for me. Though poorly paid, I nevertheless make sacrifices, and I’m more than ready to help when it concerns the poor. On top of all of that, I still have to look after Rosa, in which case this boy may well be right and I too will want to die. What am I doing here now in the middle of this endless winter! My horse has died, and there’s no one in the village who is willing to loan me his own. I had to pull my team out of the pigpen; if the horses had not appeared by accident, I would have had to hitch up some sows. So it goes. I nod at the family. They don’t know anything about the situation, and even if they did, they wouldn’t believe it. Writing prescriptions is easy, but it should be added that making people really understand something is practically impossible. So my house call is already essentially completed, someone has once again caused me to trouble myself unnecessarily (something which I’m long since used to doing), and the entire district continues to torment me by ringing the alarm for me in the middle of the night. The fact that this time I’m also being forced to give up Rosa, however, this beautiful girl who for years has lived in my house almost unnoticed — this sacrifice is too great, and to calm myself down I somehow have to reconcile this thought subtly in my head just to keep from lashing out at this family which, even with the best of intentions, can’t return Rosa to me. But as I’m closing my doctor’s bag and motioning for my coat, as the family stands in a group, the father sniffing over the rum-glass he is holding, the mother, who is no doubt disappointed in me (so what do people expect?), biting her lip and weeping, and the sister holding up a towel drenched with blood, I somehow find that, under the circumstances, I’m now willing to admit that the boy may be sick after all. I walk over to him, and he smiles at me as if I were perhaps bringing him a bowl of very strong soup. (God, now both horses are whinnying; this noise, ordained by a higher power, is probably intended to make the examination easier.) And at last it becomes clear to me: the boy is indeed sick. In his right side, around the hip area, a wound about the size of my palm has opened up. There are many shades of pink, dark deep down, brighter towards the edges, of a somewhat grainy texture, with irregularly clotting blood, gaping open like a strip-mine. So it appears from a distance. As I draw closer, another complication is revealed. Who can look at it without whistling softly in amazement? Worms, gathered tightly within the interior of the wound, about as strong and long as my little finger, naturally rose-coloured and also spattered with blood, are turning their white heads and multiple legs towards the light. Poor boy, you’re beyond help: I’ve discovered this large wound of yours; you’re dying of this flower in your side. The family is pleased: they see that I’m
“You know,” I hear someone say in my ear, “I don’t have much confidence in you. You’ve come just because someone has decided to get rid of you, not by your own choice. Instead of helping me, you’re crowding my deathbed. If I had my way, I’d claw your eyes out.” “You’re right,” I say. “It’s an outrage. But I’m just a doctor. What am I supposed to do? Believe me, this situation isn’t getting any easier for me, either.” “I’m supposed to accept that as an excuse? Well, I suppose I must. I’m always forced to accept things as they are. I came into this world equipped with a beautiful wound; that was all that I had.” “My young friend,” I say, “this is your shortcoming: you don’t have any perspective. I’ll tell you something, and I’ve already been in practically every sickroom all over the world: your wound really isn’t all that serious. Someone could create the same wound at a narrow angle with two sharp strokes of an axe. Many people offer up their sides and hardly hear the axe in the forest, let alone the fact that it’s approaching them.” “Is that the truth, or are you trying to fool me just because I have a fever?” “That’s the truth: you can take my word for it as a state-employed physician.” And he accepted that and grew still. But now it was time to think about saving myself. My trusty horses were still holding their positions. I quickly gathered my clothes, fur coat, and bag; at the moment I didn’t have time to bother with getting dressed; if my horses were as speedy now as they had been earlier, I’d soon be springing out of this bed into my own, as it were. One of the horses stepped back obediently from a window; I threw my gear into the carriage; my coat flew too far, and only the sleeve got caught on a hook. Good enough. I swung myself up onto the horse. With the reins trailing free, one horse barely harnessed to the other, the carriage following somewhere behind, and the coat at the very back, dragging in the snow, I said: “Giddy up,” but they didn’t giddy up at all; slowly, like old men, we moved through the snowy wasteland; for a long time we could hear the new,

at work; the sister points this out to her mother, the mother to the father, and the father to several guests who, balancing on tiptoe and stretching out their arms, are entering the room through the moonlight of the open door. “Will you be able to save me?” the boy whispers, swallowing hard and completely transfixed by what’s living in his wound. That’s how people are in my district: they always demand the impossible from their doctor. They’ve lost their old religious faith; the local priest sits at home and slowly tears his vestments to pieces, one after the other; but the doctor is supposed to get everything done with his gentle, surgical hand. Oh well, no matter: I didn’t offer to get involved in this; but if you want me to play the part of a priest, then I can go along with that, too; what better thing could an old country doctor robbed of his servant girl possibly hope for? And they come, the family and the village elders, and strip me naked; a school choir with the village schoolteacher at its head stands in front of the house and sings an exceedingly simple melody with the following words:

Strip him naked, then he’ll be a healer,
And if he’s no healer, then kill him!
It’s only a doctor, it’s only a doctor.

So there I am, stark naked, with my head slightly inclined, and while I stroke my beard, I watch the people calmly. I’m completely composed, in a position superior to all of them, and I remain so, too, although that doesn’t seem to matter very much since they now take me by my head and feet and carry me to the bed. They put me down next to the wall, right next to the wound. Then everyone walks out of the room; the door is pulled to; the sound of singing fades; clouds drift across the face of the moon; the bedding feels warm next to my body; the shadowy heads of the horses bob back and forth in the openings of the windows.
though by now inaccurate, song of the children: “Be of good cheer, you patients! The doctor has been put to bed for you!”

I’ll never get home at this rate. My thriving practice is lost; my successor is robbing me of what I’ve already accomplished here, but it won’t do him any good since I’m irreplaceable; that disgusting stable boy is running amok in my house; Rosa is his victim; I don’t want to think about the details. Naked, exposed to the frost of this most unfortunate of ages, with a natural carriage, with supernatural horses, I wander aimlessly, an old man. My coat hangs behind me from the carriage, but I can’t reach it, and no one from that worthless bunch of patients is willing to lift a finger, though any one of them certainly could. Betrayed! Betrayed! Once you’ve answered a false alarm in the middle of the night, that can never be made good again.

If some decrepit, consumptive lady circus-rider on a lumbering horse were driven in circles around the arena by a merciless, whip-cracking circus boss in front of a tireless audience for months without interruption, whizzing by on the horse, blowing kisses and shaking her hips, and if this charade were to continue along with the incessant roar of the circus band and ventilation fans into the gray future that extends infinitely into the distance, an event accompanied by the fading and then renewed and swelling applause of hands which are actually jackhammers — perhaps a young visitor seated in the gallery would then hurry down the long flight of steps through all of the rows, burst into the ring, and shout “Stop!” through the steady fanfare of the musicians, who are willing as always to accommodate.

But since this isn’t the reality, a beautiful lady in white and red flies into the arena through the curtains which the proud livery attendants open in front of her; devotedly seeking to catch her eye, the ringmaster assumes an animal-like posture as his breath merges with hers; the ringmaster breathlessly waits for her as he holds her horse; carefully he lifts her onto the dapple-gray as if she were his dearest granddaughter preparing to set out on a dangerous journey; he hesitates to
It’s impossible to speak with the nomads. They don’t know our language; indeed, they scarcely have one of their own. Among themselves they make each other understood like jackdaws: you can constantly hear this crow-like screaming. Our way of life, our institutions are just as incomprehensible to them as they are uninteresting. As a result, they’re also demonstrably unreceptive to any form of sign language. You can strain your jaw and wrench your hands out of joint, but they haven’t understood you and will never understand you. They often make grimaces; then their eyes roll back into their heads, and foam swells out of their mouths, but they don’t mean anything by this, nor do they intend to be frightening; they do it because it’s simply their way. What they need, they take, but it can’t be said that they use violence. Whenever they commandeer things, the common reaction is to step aside and hand everything over to them.

They’ve also helped themselves to quite a few of my own supplies. But I have no room to complain when I see, for example, what’s happening to the butcher across the street. He scarcely gets his stock in before it’s immediately torn away from him and wolfed down by the nomads. Even their horses eat meat; often a rider lies next to his horse, and both feed on the same piece of meat, one on each end. The butcher is apprehensive and doesn’t dare stop the meat deliveries. We understand that and pool our money to support him. If the nomads didn’t get any meat, who knows what they would consider doing? Indeed, who knows what will occur to them even if they get their meat every day?

Recently, the butcher thought that he could at least spare himself the trouble of doing the butchering himself and brought in a live ox one morning. You can be sure that he’ll never do that again. I lay flat on the floor for a good hour at the very back of my workshop and had all of my clothes, blankets, and cushions piled up on top of me just so that I wouldn’t have to hear the bellowing of the ox. The nomads were springing on top of it from all sides to tear chunks out of its warm flesh with their teeth. It had been quiet for a long time before I finally trusted myself to go out; like drinkers around a wine-barrel they lay exhausted around what was left of the ox.

At that very moment I thought that I saw the emperor himself in a palace window; he never comes into these outer chambers for any reason and always stays in the innermost garden; this time, however, someone who seemed to be the emperor was standing at one of the windows and was looking with bent head at the activity in front of his palace.

“How will this turn out?” all of us ask each other. “How long will we be forced to put up with this burden and suffering? The imperial palace has lured the nomads here but doesn’t know how to drive them away. The gate remains closed; the watch, which before had always marched in and out with great pomp, now keeps itself behind barred windows. The liberation of the fatherland has been left up to us tradesmen and business-owners; but we’re not equal to such a task; we’ve never pretended to be. It’s a misunderstanding, and it’s destroying us.”
IN FRONT OF THE LAW

IN FRONT OF the Law stands a doorman. A man from the country comes to this doorman and asks to be admitted to the Law, but the doorman says that he can’t allow him to enter. The man reflects on this and then asks if he can assume that he’ll be allowed to enter later. “It’s possible,” says the doorman, “but not now.” Since the gate to the Law remains open and the doorman steps to the side, the man bends down to look through the gate into the interior. When the doorman notices this, he laughs and says, “If it tempts you so much, try to get in despite my warning. But know this: I’m powerful, and I’m only the lowliest doorman. In every chamber stands another doorman, each more powerful than the one before. Though powerful myself, the very gaze of the third is more than I can endure.” The man from the country hadn’t anticipated such difficulties; the Law is supposedly accessible to anyone at any time, he thinks, but now, as he looks at the doorman in his fur coat more carefully, at his large, pointed nose, the long, thick, black Cossack beard, he decides to continue waiting until he receives permission to enter. The doorman gives him a stool and lets him sit down to the side of the door. There he sits for days and years. He makes many attempts to be admitted and wears out the doorman with his pleas. The doorman often
WE WERE CAMPING at an oasis. My companions were sleeping. An Arab, tall and white, walked past me; he had tended to the camels and was walking to his bedding-place.

I threw myself backwards into the grass; I wanted to sleep; I couldn't; the plaintive howling of a jackal in the distance; I sat up again. And what had been so far away was suddenly close: the swirling of jackals around me; glittering, fading eyes in dull gold; slim bodies moving in a quick and orderly way as if under a whip.

One came from behind, forced itself under my arm and pressed itself tightly against me as if it needed my warmth, then stepped in front of me and spoke almost eye-to-eye with me:

“I'm the oldest jackal for miles around. I'm lucky to have found you still here so that I can welcome you. I'd almost given up hope already, for we've waited a very, very long time for you; my mother waited and her mother and all of their mothers back to the mother of all jackals. You must believe me.”

“I'm surprised,” I said and forgot to light the stack of fire-wood lying ready at my side. I had intended to use the smoke from the wood to keep the jackals at bay. “I'm very surprised to hear that. I come from the far North and happen to be doing a little travelling. What is it that you jackals want?”
And as if encouraged by these first words of address, which were perhaps too friendly, they all drew their circle more tightly around me; their breathing was shallow and whispered.

“We know that you come from the North,” began the oldest one, “and it’s precisely on that fact that we base our hope. There is some sense of understanding there which can’t be found here among the Arabs. You have to realize that not one spark of understanding can be struck from their cold, stony arrogance. They kill animals to eat them, and carrion they reject altogether.”

“Don’t speak so loudly,” I said. “There are Arabs sleeping nearby.”

“You’re obviously a foreigner,” said the jackal. “Otherwise you’d know that never yet in the history of the world has a jackal been afraid of an Arab. Are we supposed to be afraid of them? Isn’t it unfortunate enough that we’ve been forced to live in exile in the midst of this people?”

“Perhaps, perhaps,” I said. “I don’t care to judge matters that are so far beyond me; it seems to be an ancient conflict; so the cause could very well lie in bloodshed; it will therefore probably only end in bloodshed.”

“You’re very clever,” said the old jackal; and all of them were breathing even more rapidly now; with strained lungs, even though they were standing still; a bitter odour escaped their mouths, an odour which for some time could only be endured with clenched teeth. “You’re very clever; what you say agrees with our ancient teachings. We will therefore shed their blood, and the conflict will be ended.”

“Oh!” I said, more impulsively than I had intended. “They’ll defend themselves. They’ll shoot you down pack by pack with their flintlocks.”

“You misunderstand us in a typically human way which is also apparently common in the far North,” he said. “We’ll certainly not be the ones to kill them. The Nile itself wouldn’t have enough water to wash us clean. Even now, to avoid even a glance at their living bodies, we run away to a place where the air is cleaner, into the desert, which we have made our home for this very reason.”

And all of the jackals around us, who had been joined in the meantime by even more that had come from far away, lowered their heads between their front legs and rubbed them with their paws; it was as if they wanted to conceal a disgust so horrible that all I wanted to do right then was to escape, to leap high, out of, and away from the ring of jackals.

“So what do you intend to do?” I asked; and I wanted to get up; but I couldn’t; two young jackals had securely fastened themselves onto my jacket and shirt with their teeth; I was forced to remain sitting. “They’re holding your coat-tails,” said the old jackal earnestly by way of explanation. “It’s a sign of respect.” “They must release me!” I shouted, turning at one moment towards the old one, then towards the young ones. “They will comply, of course,” said the old one, “if that’s what you demand. But it will take some time since, according to custom, they’ve bitten in deeply and must first slowly unhinge their teeth. In the meantime, listen to our request.” “Your behaviour hasn’t made me especially receptive to requests,” I said. “Please don’t blame us for our clumsiness,” he said and assumed for the first time his naturally plaintive tone of voice. “We’re poor beasts. We have only our teeth; for everything that we wish to do, good and bad, it’s only our teeth that we have.”

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“So what do you want?” I asked, only somewhat placated.

“Master,” he shouted, and all the jackals howled; in the farthest distance the howling seemed to form a melody. “Master, you must end the conflict that divides the world. Our ancestors have described one such as you who will accomplish this. We must have peace from the Arabs; breathable air; a view towards the horizon in all directions which is cleansed of them; no plaintive cry of a sheep as the Arab cuts its throat; all animals...
humans. There is a wonderful turn of phrase in your language: to slip off into the bushes; that is exactly what I have done: I have slipped off into the bushes. There was no other path I could follow, with the understanding, of course, that I refused to choose the path of so-called “freedom”.

As I look back over my development and the previously expressed goal of this development, I cannot really complain, nor can I say that I am really satisfied. With my hands in my pockets, with the wine bottles on the table, I half-lie, half-sit in my rocking chair and look out the window. If someone comes to visit, I receive him, as is only proper. My impresario sits in the front room; when I ring, he comes and listens to what I have to say. Every evening there is almost always a performance, and I continue to have successes which can hardly be improved upon. When I come home late at night from banquets, from parties frequented by scientists, and from pleasant company in general, a small, half-trained female chimpanzee is waiting for me, and I have my way with her as apes do. I do not want to see her during the day; she has the crazed look of a confused, tamed animal in her eye; only I recognize that look, and I cannot bear it.

In any case, I have generally achieved everything that I wanted to achieve. Let no one say that it was not worth the effort. I should add finally that I am not interested in the opinion of any human, but rather that I only wish to convey information, that I am only here to give a report, and that to you, too, respected gentlemen of the Academy, I have merely related my observations.
A TRAPEZE ARTIST (this form of art, performed near the high vaulted ceilings of the great variety-show stages, is acknowledged by all to be one of the most difficult of all skills attainable by mankind) had arranged his life, at first only as a result of the striving for perfection, later as the result of a habit which had become tyrannical, in such a way that he stayed on the trapeze day and night for as long as he continued to work at this particular profession. All of his needs (which, by the way, were very modest) were met by attendants working in shifts, who stood watch below and hoisted and lowered whatever was needed above in specially constructed containers. This lifestyle didn’t result in any particular problems for the world around him; it was somewhat disturbing only when, during the other events on the program, he would remain up above (a fact which could not be concealed) and, in spite of the fact that he usually behaved quietly at such times, the eyes of someone in the audience would occasionally wander in his direction. Since he was an extraordinary, irreplaceable artist, the management was nevertheless willing to overlook this. One also realized, of course, that he didn’t purposely choose to live in such a way, but rather so that his art could continue to be maintained in its high state of perfection.
were wide open and all the corridors cleared—and indeed, the most pleasant moments in the impresario’s life occurred at the point when the trapeze artist placed his foot on the ropeladder and finally, instantly was hanging overhead once again on his trapeze.

Although these many trips had been a success for the impresario, every new one caused him some added embarrassment, for these trips were, apart from everything else, very hard on the trapeze artist’s nerves.

One day they were together again on the road, the trapeze artist lying lost in thought in the luggage net, the impresario reclining and reading in the corner near the window opposite him, when the trapeze artist spoke to him softly. The impresario was immediately attentive. Biting his lip, the trapeze artist said that from now on he would always need two trapezes for his routine instead of the usual single one, two trapezes opposite each other. The impresario agreed to this at once. Yet the trapeze artist, as if he wanted to show that the impresario’s consent was just as meaningless as his refusal would have been, said that he would no longer and under no circumstances do his routine on only one trapeze. He seemed to tremble at the thought that that could ever possibly happen again. Hesitating, the impresario watched him carefully as he declared his consent once again, agreeing that two trapezes were better than one and that this new arrangement was also convenient in other ways, that it would in fact add more variety to the production. At this point the trapeze artist began to weep. Deeply alarmed, the impresario sprang up and asked what had happened, and since he received no reply, he climbed onto the seat, stroked the other’s head, and pressed the face to his own so that he too was drenched with the trapeze artist’s tears. Only after many questions and words of comfort did the trapeze artist finally speak and say as he choked back his tears: “Just this one bar in my hands—how can I live that

Maintaining personal hygiene at this altitude was really not a problem, then, nor in any other respect, and if in the warmest time of the year the side windows along the entire periphery of the vaulted ceiling were opened and the sun made its way, along with the fresh air, into the half-lit interior, then it could even seem pleasant there. Of course, his dealings with other human beings were limited: only occasionally did a fellow gymnast clamber up to him on the rope ladder, whereupon the two of them would sit on the trapeze and lean to the right and left on the tethers and chat; or workers would repair the roof and exchange a few words with him through an open window; or a fireman would check the emergency lighting on the uppermost row and shout something well-meaning, though scarcely understandable, to him. Otherwise his surroundings were still; only occasionally would some employee who happened to wander into the empty theatre in the afternoon gaze up into the dizzying heights where the trapeze artist practiced his routines or rested, not knowing that someone was watching him.

The trapeze artist could have continued to live his life undisturbed in this way if it had not been for the inevitable road trips from place to place, trips that were extremely annoying to him. The impresario certainly did what he could to spare him from any unnecessary prolonging of his suffering: for travel in the cities they would use race cars with which they hurtled through the streets at top speed (if possible, at night or in the earliest hours of the morning when the streets were clear of people), but this, of course, was too slow to ease the trapeze artist’s impatience; on the train an entire compartment was reserved in which the trapeze artist spent the entire trip up above in the luggage net in a pitiable, though at least close, approximation to his unusual lifestyle; in the theatre at the next venue the trapeze was already in place long before the trapeze artist’s arrival, and the doors leading to the theatre
way?" Now it was easier for the impresario to comfort him; he promised immediately to send a telegram regarding the second trapeze from the next train station to the next venue; he chided himself for the fact that he had allowed the trapeze artist to work so long on only one trapeze, and thanked and praised him profusely for the fact that he had finally drawn his attention to this oversight. In this way, the impresario finally and slowly succeeded in calming down the trapeze artist, and he could finally return to his corner. But he wasn’t calm himself, and with deep concern he furtively considered the trapeze artist over his book. Once such thoughts began to trouble a man, could they ever cease entirely? Wouldn’t they only continue to grow? Weren’t they ultimately a threat to a career? And in truth, the impresario thought that he could see how, in the apparently untroubled sleep with which his crying had ended, the first wrinkles were now beginning to etch themselves on the smooth, childlike forehead of the trapeze artist.

A SHORT WOMAN

Here’s a short woman I know; though quite slender by nature, she nevertheless wears a heavy girdle; I always see her in the same dress, which is made of a yellowish gray material that’s more or less the colour of wood and has a few tassels or button-like flaps on it of the same colour; she never wears a hat, and her dishwater-blonde hair is always straight and very free, though not dishevelled. Although she wears a girdle, she moves quite freely and of course exaggerates this motion, gladly holding her hands on her hips and abruptly jerking her upper body from side to side. I can only describe the impression that her hand makes on me if I say that I’ve never seen a hand on which the individual fingers are separated so acutely from each other; yet the hand has no physical irregularities whatsoever: it’s a completely normal hand.

Now this short woman is very unhappy with me, always has something critical to say about me, always feels treated unfairly by me, and I annoy her constantly; if one could divide life into its smallest components and judge each tiny one of them separately, every part of my life would undoubtedly be a source of irritation to her. I’ve always wondered why I bother her so much; perhaps it’s because everything about me conflicts with her notion of beauty, her sense of justice, her behaviour,
great concern to those closest to her, who attempt to guess at the causes of her condition and have yet to find them. I alone know what’s going on: it’s the same old, and yet ever-new, problem. Of course, I don’t share the concerns of her loved ones; she’s strong and resilient; whoever is able to feel so much irritation is also probably able to deal with the consequences; I even have the feeling that she (at least partly) plays the role of the sufferer if only to direct the suspicion of the world against me. She’s too proud to say openly how much my existence causes her pain; she’d consider it a loss of dignity to appeal to others on my account; only because of her disgust, a compulsive, never-ending disgust, does she continue to bother with me; any additional effort in bringing up this dirty little secret in public would be too much for her sense of shame. On the other hand, it’s also too much for her to suppress this matter entirely, a matter which weighs on her constantly, and so, relying on the cleverness of her gender, she attempts to strike a middle way; she wants to bring the matter up before the court of public opinion in silence and only through the external signs of her internal suffering. Perhaps she even hopes that, whenever the public directs its full gaze upon me, a universal, public sense of outrage against me will rise up and by the most powerful means possible condemn me once and for all and with greater effect than her relatively weak personal grievance could ever achieve; but then she’ll withdraw, breathe a sigh of relief, and turn her back on me. Now if she really expects this to happen, then she’s deceiving herself. The public won’t see things from her perspective; the public will never have so much (so infinitely much, it seems) to criticize about me, even if it subjects me to the most intense scrutiny. I’m not as worthless a person as she thinks; I don’t want to praise myself, especially in this context; but even if I’m not distinguished by any particular usefulness, I’m sure that I always leave the opposite impression; I only seem worthless in her eyes, in her withering background, and aspirations. There certainly exist personalities which differ as much as ours do, but why does she suffer so much because of it? There’s certainly no relationship between us which would cause her to suffer because of me. She’d only have to decide to consider me a complete stranger (which in truth is what I am), and I’d have nothing against that and would in fact acknowledge it gladly. She’d only have to decide to forget about the fact that I exist (a fact which I’ve never forced nor would ever force upon her) — and all of her suffering would obviously be over. I don’t think of my own position in this at all, that is, that her own behaviour is very unpleasant to me as well. I ignore this because I realize that all this unpleasantness is nothing compared with her own suffering. On the other hand, I’m absolutely convinced that in the end this suffering of hers is not well intentioned; she really has no interest at all in my betterment, especially since everything that she finds fault with could never contribute to that. But she’s really not concerned about that at all. Nothing else concerns her but her own personal interest, that is, her interest in taking revenge on me for the torment which I cause her and in preventing any threat of torment from me in the future. I once tried to point out to her how she could best put an end to this constant irritation, but the very fact that I even tried caused such a welling up of emotion in her that I’ll never try again.

There also rests on me, as it were, a certain sense of responsibility, for as little as I really know the short woman, and as much as the irritation which I cause her (or rather the irritation which she allows to be caused by me) is the only thing that binds us, it nevertheless can’t remain a matter of indifference to me how much she obviously suffers, even physically, from this irritation. Now and then, more so recently, reports have reached me that on that particular morning she was once again pale, groggy, plagued by a headache, and almost incapable of working; the result of this is that she’s a source of
eyes, and she won’t be able to convince anyone else of that. You’d think that I’d find this comforting, wouldn’t you? No, not quite: for if the word ever gets out that I’m making her practically sick through my behaviour (and several observers, in particular the most diligent news-mongers, are already almost on the verge of figuring that out or are at least acting as if they are), and if the world comes and asks me why I torment the poor woman through my incorrigibility, asks me if I perhaps intend to drive her to an early death and when I’ll finally have enough simple human compassion to stop it — if the world asks me these things, it will be difficult to respond. Should I then admit that I don’t put much credence in the symptoms of her illness, and should I then leave the unpleasant impression that, in order to rid myself of the blame, I’m blaming others and so cruelly so? And could I perhaps even openly say that, even if I did believe that she was genuinely ill, I don’t have the slightest bit of compassion for her since the woman is a complete stranger to me and since the relationship that exists between us is only a product of her imagination and exists only in her own world? I won’t say that people wouldn’t believe me; it’s far more likely that people wouldn’t care either way; I’m just saying that it would never come up for discussion. People would only apply my answer at face value to a sick, weak woman, and that certainly wouldn’t turn out in my favour. In this case, as with any other explanation, the inability of the world will in fact thwart me, that is, the inability in a situation such as this one not to allow the suspicion of a romantic relationship to be considered, though it’s extremely clear that such a relationship doesn’t exist and that, even if it did exist, I would in fact be the one who would take the initiative. In fact, I’d actually be capable of admiring the short woman for the force of her judgment and the inexhaustibility of her convictions if I weren’t constantly being punished precisely because of these good qualities of hers. In any case, however, there’s no trace in her of a friendly relationship towards me; in that respect our relationship is honest and genuine; on that rests my final hope; not even if it fitted her battle plan to convince others of a relationship like that would she forget herself to such a degree that she would actually do such a thing. The general public, however, being predisposed and completely imperceptive, will remain set in its opinion and will always decide against me.

Under the circumstances, I’d in fact be left with only one option: to change my behaviour at the right moment and before the world interferes, and to such an extent that I’d not exactly eliminate the short woman’s sense of annoyance towards me, but rather soothe it a bit. And I’ve in fact sometimes asked myself if I’m so pleased with my present condition that I’m unwilling to change it at all, and if it wouldn’t in fact be possible to undertake certain changes in myself, even if I wouldn’t be doing it because I’d be convinced of their necessity, but rather only to calm the woman down. And I’ve honestly made an attempt, not without effort and care: it suited my nature, in fact, and I found it almost amusing; it resulted in certain changes that were obvious even from a distance; I didn’t have to make the woman aware of them: she notices everything so much earlier than I do and even notices the mere expression of intent in my nature; but my efforts went unrewarded. How so? Her dissatisfaction with me is, as I now see clearly, a fundamental one; nothing can eliminate it, not even my own elimination; her fits of rage on learning of my suicide, for example, would be unbounded. I certainly can’t imagine that this astute woman doesn’t understand this as well as I do and that she also doesn’t understand the futility of her efforts as well as my innocence and my inability to conform to her wishes even with the best of intentions. Of course she understands that, but as a natural-born fighter she forgets it in the heat of battle, and an unfortunate trait of mine that’s
Polson translates Kafka with a sensitivity and insight faithful to this often enigmatic writer. Polson’s translation is not only accurate, but he has gone to great lengths to preserve the linguistic style of the original, while at the same time presenting the text in an English version which is readable and avoids the clumsiness and ambiguity so often found in translations of stylistically complex texts. The reader who is familiar with the German original of the Kafka texts will be pleased to recognize the work of the author in Polson’s English transformation.

— The late Paul A. Schons, Ph.D., professor of German, University of St. Thomas, St. Paul, Minnesota

Thor Polson’s translation manages to recreate the atmosphere of the Kafka texts, rendering them in clear and pleasantly fluent English, while at the same time staying very close to the original German wording. This translation will be useful to anyone looking for both a faithful and readable Kafka translation, and in particular to students of German in need of help with their own translations of the text.

— Babette Pütz, Ph.D., lecturer in classics at Victoria University in Wellington, New Zealand
The difficulty of translating Kafka’s ambiguous language has been surmounted with ease, so that one can justifiably say that the very spirit of Kafka’s literary *oeuvre* has been grasped: a disorienting, slightly menacing choice of words that creates an atmosphere of suspense until the suspense is finally resolved.

— Martha Schöfbeck, M.A., English teacher emerita at the Handelsakademie in Tulln, Austria

Thor Polson’s long, cascading sentences vividly echo Kafka’s original flow, punctuated by an accumulation of events that alternates with pauses conveying the characters’ doomed attempts to escape the inexorability of their destiny.

— Laetitia Saint-Loubert, M.A., M.T., translator in Pujols, France

Polson’s translation shows meticulous precision and great sensitivity, carefully preserving the unique character of Kafka’s works.

— Nils Weisensee, M.A., journalist and entrepreneur in Shanghai, China

Polson manages not only to stick to the literal meaning of the German but always finds a corresponding idiom without neglecting a close reading of the original text.

— Jochen Kuck, Ass. Iur., attorney in Düsseldorf, Germany

Thor Polson has a master’s degree in German literature from Middlebury College, and his other writings include *Childsong*, a novel published by Athena Press of London. For more information about this writer and his work, visit www.thorpolson.com.
Franz Kafka was born in Prague in 1883 and died in Kierling, near Vienna, in 1924. His writings are characterized by an extreme sensitivity manifested in absurdity, alienation, and gallows humour, and these two particular collections of short pieces, *A Country Doctor* (1919) and *A Hunger Artist* (1924), represent later works in the corpus. Perhaps best known in North America for his short story “The Metamorphosis”, Kafka has continued to exert a profound influence on world literature.