



FRANZ KAFKA

A HUNGER ARTIST
& OTHER STORIES





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Translated by
Thor Polson



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*Diese Übersetzung ist Walter Neumayr gewidmet:
Wem sonst?*



A COUNTRY DOCTOR
(1919)

To My Father



THE NEW ATTORNEY



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.



A COUNTRY DOCTOR



I WAS IN a very awkward situation. I had an urgent journey in front of me; a patient in critical condition was waiting for me in a village ten miles away; a driving snow was accumulating rapidly over the many miles between us; I had at my disposal a lightweight carriage with large wheels, just the right type of carriage for our country roads; wrapped up in my fur coat, my doctor's bag in hand, I was already standing ready for the trip in the yard; but the horse was missing, the horse. My own horse had died the previous evening due to over-exertion in the icy winter weather; my servant girl was running around the village now to see if she could borrow one; but it was pointless, I knew that, and so I stood there without a plan, getting buried in more and more snow, becoming more and more immobile. The girl appeared alone at the gate and swung her lantern; of course, who would loan anyone his horse for a trip like this? I walked through the yard one more time; I couldn't see any way out of the situation; distracted and agonizing over what I should do next, I kicked the rotten door of the pigpen, which hadn't been used in years. The door gave way and slammed open and shut on its hinges. A dim stall-lantern swung on a rope inside. A man, squatting in a tight ball in the nearest stall, revealed his earnest, simple face. "Should I hitch

up?" he asked, creeping towards me on all fours. I didn't know what to say and bent down to see what else was in the stall. The girl was standing next to me. "You never know what sorts of things you have handy in your own house," she said, and we both laughed.

"Ho, brother! Ho, sister!" shouted the stable boy, and two horses, powerful animals with strong flanks, pushed themselves one after the other into and out of the small door, their legs brought up tightly against their bodies and their finely shaped heads lowered like camels, the entire effort only made possible through strong contortions of their torsos. But soon they were standing upright, long-legged, their bodies exuding a dense steam. "Help him," I said, and the girl hurried obediently to hand the harness to the stable boy. Before she barely reached him, however, he embraces her and thrusts his face against hers. She cries out and runs back to me; two rows of teeth are imprinted in red on the girl's cheek. "You animal!" I screamed in a rage. "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. "In fact, 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

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.



JACKALS AND ARABS



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 firewood 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.” “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



THE NEXT VILLAGE



MY GRANDFATHER USED to say: “Life is amazingly short. In recalling it now, it seems so compressed to me that I can hardly understand, for example, how a young person can decide to ride a horse to the next village without fearing that, quite apart from the unforeseen misfortunes that could occur, just the time needed for the normal life spent pleasantly isn’t nearly long enough for a ride like that.”

A MESSAGE FROM THE EMPEROR



THE EMPEROR (so it's said) has sent to you the individual, his miserable subject, a tiny shadow which in the face of the imperial sun has fled into the remotest corner of his realm, to you, then, and to no one else but you the Emperor has sent a message from his deathbed. He asked the messenger to kneel down beside the bed and whispered the message directly into his ear; so important was this to him that he even had him repeat the message back into his own. By nodding his head he confirmed that the statement was correct. And in front of all of those assembled to witness his death (every wall that stands in the way is in the process of being knocked down, and on the flights of steps which ascend into the distance stand the high-ranking nobles of the empire), in front of all of these he dismissed the messenger. The messenger departs without delay; a robust man, a man of inexhaustible energy; he makes his way through the crowd by thrusting first this, then the other arm in front of him; if he meets resistance, he points to his chest, on which stands the symbol of the sun; he moves forward, in fact, with an unprecedented ease. But the number of people is so large; their habitations continue without end. If only an open field would open up in front of him, how quickly he would take wing, and soon you would hear the welcome

pounding of his fists on your door. But instead, how pointlessly he wears himself out; he forces his way through the chambers of the inner palace; he will never get through them all; and even if he succeeded, there would be nothing gained; he would then have to fight his way down the steps; and even if he succeeded here, there would be nothing gained; there would still be the courtyards to cross; and after the courtyards yet another palace which encloses the first; and again steps and courtyards; and again a palace; and so on for thousands of years; and if in the end he were to burst out of the outermost gate (but this can never, never happen), he would only succeed in confronting the imperial capital, the middle of the world, heaped high with its own refuse. No one makes it through here, and certainly not anyone with the message of a dead man. — You, however, sit by your window when the evening comes and dream of what it could possibly be.





A HUNGER ARTIST
(1924)



FIRST PAIN



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.

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



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 rope-ladder 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



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.



PRAISE FOR THE TRANSLATION



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 Schöpfbeck, 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*

Thor Polson's translations evoke a present-day voice for Kafka's stories with a deliberate sensitivity that stays true to Kafka's subtleties and nuances. Polson mediates a style of Kafka that, by the end of this volume, has become recognizable as Polson's own. To a native German speaker and a student of German literature, both in German and in translation, Polson's Kafka is eerily reminiscent of reading Kafka for the first time. A great feat for a translator of Kafka is to convey that particular, ephemeral currency of Kafka's narrative, and something Polson achieves beautifully.

— *Nina Gerschack, editor and translator*

ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR



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**.

ABOUT FRANZ KAFKA



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.