

Directed by a Clown, the Cats Perform

Playing with the cat, how can I tell she is not amusing herself with me?

-Montaigne

. . . . Not perhaps a serious question. Does it really matter who provides and who receives the pleasure of these moments? I bring it up here simply because it came to mind recently at the end of a broadcast of the evening news. It was the closing item, offered as a “lighter touch” to what had gone before. Briefly, what was shown took place in a theatre in Moscow that presents a troupe of performing cats directed by a clown. Also shown, as the cats went through their paces, were the entranced faces of their audience, mostly children. As for the clown himself—(I believe the name was Yuri)—he is a long-time professional, someone at the top of his profession. This because he had to obtain permission to restore and refurbish the theatre that had long been standing empty. And success was apparently immediate: for the performances took place before packed houses. . . .

. . . . Now comes a more serious question, one I’m sure the reader has already thought to ask: how were these cats persuaded to perform? I have heard the usual grim stories about trainers using “induced helplessness” and something else called “aversion therapy.” But if I ever knew the details of what these terms include, I seem to have forgotten them. Without thinking much about all this, I have shared the general belief that cats are traditionally immune—a case apart—with their trademark of individual personality and independence. But I really don’t know any more about them than anyone else who has shared living space with a succession of cats over the years.

. . . . I had not intended to parade my ignorance here. I had hoped only to say what I had seen—and let it go at that. But I have to go further and confess that, as a child, and even later, I could never quite believe what I saw at the Circus. Not in the Tiger jumping through a hoop ringed with fire. Not in a troupe of Elephants in a prancing procession. This is not to say that I could not appreciate the wonder of what seemed to be happening—without having to admit that it was as real as things were in the real world. . . . I can hear the voice that says: “Isn’t this the path to denial?” And I do admit this now, thinking back to the entranced faces of those children. For them, there is as yet no urgent question of surrender and accommodation. They can still enter the realm of wonder without question. A realm where the Clowns and the Cats together give us those amusing moments that make our lives tolerable.

Kafka's Bridge

1.

We cannot tell, of course, just how this happened. But we can imagine that the image must have appeared to him at a moment of great intensity. That it came with a sudden rush of feeling—one of surprising directness and clarity—although with much yet to be defined. Perhaps for a while then it was still that familiar object enclosed in its own space: that taut swaying structure he had seen many times before, both in actual form and in dream. But then, as he looked closer, there was much that puzzled him as to the true nature of its existence. It appeared then, in spite of its bulk and material force, as a more ambiguous structure: a monument to human longing, to the restless desire for passage across divided shores. . . .

Thus as the bridge augmented, magnified, he began to compare his being *here* with its being *there*. The sound of the wind, the fragrance of the sea air entered the realm where dream and memory coincide. He began to feel what it would be like to hang suspended, totally exposed to the caprice of weather. As though its “body” had become his body. And he could watch the dark-winged birds diving past, pausing at the top of the taut, swaying steel cables and towers. . . . As he plunged further into this transformed state, the wind played upon the surface of his skin, forcing him to feel its impact, to become part of its steel and wind-tuned song. . . .

2.

Let us admit now what we must admit—that the reader may well perceive this as fantasy, wondering how the present writer could allow *his* imagination to go this far. I can only say in response: How else could Kafka have written his famous story of the bridge that “awoke” one day and saw itself imprisoned, condemned to carry the weight of human longing and restlessness?

How else could he have intuited that bizarre transformation: the tremors, the spasms, the uncoiling of that vast structure, that monument to human ingenuity and desire? Above all, how was he able, with passion and convincing detail, to bring us to that climactic moment when it began trembling with its new-found intimations of consciousness? Then started that fatal turn, twisting loose from its foundations, making that enormous, grinding effort *to look back upon itself*. . . .

3.

For years now I have planned to reread the story. But each time persuaded myself to be content with the version imprinted in my memory. It was better, I thought, to leave it there. Better to consider now what happens *in real life*, where for any number of reasons, one bridge after another has come crashing down. For I recall, as we all do, how after each of these disasters a parade of experts appear, all offering rational explanations. How from then on the air is filled with their absurd, ambiguous testimony. And of course nothing is accomplished. . . .

I suppose that we could end here, on this skeptical, despairing note. But the story of our own bridge, which only recently survived a major earthquake, sustaining only minor damage, may offer a more hopeful example. For after many years of neglect, of taking its existence for granted, we have at last been sensible enough to begin correlating its existence with our own. We have instituted a celebration of the anniversary of its completion, honoring the workers and engineers who sacrificed so much to bring it into being. And just this year—as an example of civic pride—we have garlanded its towers with hundreds of small, friendly lights. Thus we have taken steps to ensure its appeal, not only in the present, but for years to come. We can only hope that our example will be noticed, and that similar steps will be taken—before it is too late—in other parts of the country. . . .



The Choice

1.

After all these years, the same room, same furniture. He stands holding back a corner of the drape, peering down at the quiet street. I wait for him to speak, knowing he will without turning, without raising his voice. *You have a choice*, he says.

So that too has not changed: the dry tone, the slight accent. I remember how it used to bother me: Christ, are we going through *that* again?

He moves away from the window, goes over to stand beside the bookcase. He pulls out a thick volume, holds it close to his face. What is it going to be this time? Buddha, Maya, Tetragrammaton, Mazda—something about the Quest, legendary figures rising out of the Sea? He puts it back without saying a word, sits down in the faded pink chair. Again, I anticipate the gestures, as he takes out that old brass key, begins turning it this way, that way.

2.

How long has it been? It doesn't matter, I suppose, except for the expense. A brief glimpse of a procession of mornings: my voice, his voice, the silences. . . . I feel the present silence gathering: it could easily become one of those prolonged ones. And so I speak, as much for the sound: You think I'm ready? *I think it's possible*. How can I tell? *You can't tell—in advance*.

We talk this way, I suppose, having gone over the same ground so many times. I am to understand, for instance, that the "in advance" refers to the need for discovery, but there are "no guarantees, no immunity" whether going this way, that way, or standing still. (All I can make of this, in terms of choice, is that it seems to exclude retreat.)

And what will I tell the others? He shrugs, puts the key back in his pocket. *You'll find something*. But it will be difficult, I insist. *Yes, it will*. His voice sounds far away; he seems eclipsed by the objects in the room.

3.

He has become more voluble, more animated. As though, having said this, something has been released. He is telling some tale about a man with a cart: there are the cows whose color changes, now black, now white, now something in between; the man's encounters with the people who live on the mountain; the adventures that come with the slow, difficult descent. . . . I can already tell how this one is going to end: the man returns to the marketplace (by this time almost thirty years have passed) and, unrecognized, takes his place among the friends of his youth. All is as it was, except that now he sees them differently: the butcher, the potter, the wineseller, the rugmaker, all clothed in radiance. But as he talks, something else is going on. My mind travels a different route—this way, that way, with no stages, no direction, no view that puts it all in place. Everything seems here and there, arbitrary, interchangeable.

I try to work it out: what do I mean by "there"? I mean meadows, hawks, shepherds, temples. And what do I mean by "here": lost streets, crippled dogs, store windows and newspapers, tabletops guaranteed not to burn, etc. And it is with these my days are filled. So while it may be valuable to have that "panoramic" view, it is the immediate with which I have to deal. . . .

He gets up, starts pacing the floor. Clearly he is disappointed at my lack of response. (I'm surprised how tall he is—never realize it until he stands, begins that back and forth motion.) Finally he returns to the window, continues in that low voice, again as if speaking to himself. And I listen in the same way, attention fading in and out, coming back, hearing it chime in my head.

4.

It is almost time to leave. My mind is filled with echoes and images: persons, places, remembered, forgotten. I regret not being able to accept the myth; certainly it would make everything easier. But it is the surface appearances—no matter how shifting or transient—with which I am most familiar. And at last this seems to reach him; for after another brief exchange, we are again mired in silence. . . .

Images of childhood; the usual inflated fears, the distortions associated with those dark places. All this sharply intersected by equally vivid images of old age: at eighty his leg turned black, gangrene; he began regularly to wet the bed; one day he bit an attendant. . . . Something begins to emerge: The Family Portrait. Look this way, toward the crawling child. Look that way, toward the crushed skin, the infected bone. Somehow this is what his words have evoked. It's hard to tell if there's any connection.

5.

Is it possible a week has gone by? The usual absurd question. He looks at me expectantly. I plunge right in (to hell with those silences!) and make my report: dreams, streets, the office, the bed, etc. He listens, nods, waits for me to finish.

He reaches into his pocket, and it occurs to me it's rather soon for turning the brass key. But I look up startled as I realize it's a nail file. (And he actually begins filing his nails!) Our eyes meet for only a second—long enough to establish the transgression—and it is back in his pocket. He is again attentive and concerned. After the initial irritation, I'm prepared to dismiss it as a momentary distraction. And yet his next response, when it comes, makes me wonder. . . .

I can't imagine what brought this on, but he has started talking about himself, some recent events in his own life: his daughter's wedding, his wife's collection of sea shells, plans for remodeling his house. . . . I suppose this sort of reversal does happen, yet it's extremely uncomfortable, being thrust this way into the role of listener. And if it had to happen, I cannot understand the choice of these trivial details. . . .

So we have lost it then—is that what it means? Yet I had felt we were at least coming close to what had to be said. I remember particularly the phrase “the grace of affliction.” The way he stopped then, took a deep breath—as though having tried to say too much. For a moment then, there was a tone I'd never heard before, and the glance that asked an urgent question. All I can make of it now was that some kind of “commitment” was called for: by its very nature not to be named. Something I had to give up, without asking anything in return.

6.

We are back now exchanging words. And I find that I am missing the old silences. Is it possible that I have got it all wrong? That I have understood nothing about the climbing of the mountain, the return to the marketplace?

Yet I still feel that, in my case, this is not intended. In spite of everything, I seem to belong with those who are bound—over and over again—to make the small mistake. The journey then remains, as before, from here to there, without intentions and without reasons.

As far as the brass key is concerned, there are doors *not* to be opened. Not only then is it difficult climbing those rocks and gullies, but even those few stairs above and below the present level of my existence. I realize that I may never reach what lies scattered in the attic, stored in those cold cellars.

Yet aside from this, I am willing to let the light fall in whatever direction; spaces open and close where they can and have to; entrance and departure take place with neither sound nor announcement.

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The Bridge To Dream/To Remember

1.

For years we lived with both bridges in place, satisfied that this arrangement offered an adequate choice of direction. The names alone, it seemed, served to clarify our intentions whenever we set forth on our various journeys. If asked about this, we might have replied: our need now is to cross *The Bridge To Dream*. Or with equal certainty: *The Bridge To Remember*.

Only a few of these journeys (do we need to explain?) have turned out well. In retrospect we have made the wrong choice over and over again. And with each of these mistakes, concluded that going the other way would have made more sense. . . . It is only recently that it has occurred to some of us that we need another alternative. Some of our leading citizens and lawmakers, acting from a variety of motives, are suggesting now that a third bridge must be constructed. A few speculative drawings have even appeared in the daily press; these purport to show it is entirely possible to connect this with the two already in use. . . .

2.

The *Remember/Dream Commission*, as it is popularly called, has had its first meeting. As many of us have expected, the advocates and opponents are sticking to their already announced allegiances. The arguments offered are almost impossible to follow. Instead of dealing with practical matters—the cost of such an enterprise, how it would deal with the worsening traffic situation—there is much concern with the “symbolism” of a third bridge. Much talk about an appropriate name: how could it be reconciled with the metaphoric content of *Dream* and *Remember*? No wonder our citizens are confused. For all this is creating a situation where one part of the population may well consider the two bridges already in place as separate, hostile entities: mutually exclusive and forever apart. . . .

3.

A bridge to dream. A bridge to remember. We name them separately when we need the separation. We name them together when these names appear as aspects of each other. But somewhere else—in another part of the mind—possibility beckons and necessity urges yet another (still unnamed) alternative. And still no one has suggested, as of this writing, that the structural engineer, the traffic expert sit down with the poet, the psychologist, the metaphysician and try to find out what this obsession with motion is all about. For according to the last figures, more than 25 million of our citizens move in any given year. And to accommodate the extravagant illusion that a better life can be found elsewhere, more highways, bridges are constantly being suggested. . . . If we were really to dream, really to remember, wouldn't this begin to subside? For if we began to confront what sends us forth on these endless forays and excursions, wouldn't it become plain what we have wasted and destroyed in the process?

But as things stand now, we continually retrace our departures and entrances, turning and returning across the same roadways, not willing or not able to name a single belief or allegiance to what was once—in some dream, some lost memory, the promise of arrival. . . .