KAFKA'S SELECTED STORIES

NEW TRANSLATIONS
BACKGROUNDs AND CONTEXTs
CRITICISM

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W. W. NORTON & COMPANY
New York • London
Before the Law

Before the law stands a doorkeeper. A man from the country comes to the doorkeeper and asks for admittance to the law. But the doorkeeper says that he cannot grant him admittance now. The man reflects and then asks whether he will be allowed to enter later. “It is possible,” says the doorkeeper, “but not now.” Since the door to the law stands open, as always, and the doorkeeper steps aside, the man bends down to look through the doorway into the interior. When the doorkeeper notices, he laughs and says, “If you find it so tempting, just try to go in despite my prohibition. But note: I am powerful. And I am only the lowest doorkeeper. But outside each hall stands a doorkeeper, each more powerful than the last. The mere sight of the third one is more than even I can stand.” The man from the country has not expected such difficulties; after all, he thinks, the law ought to be accessible to everyone at all times, but when he now looks more closely at the doorkeeper in his fur coat, his large, pointy nose, his long, thin, black Tatar beard, he decides that it would be better, after all, to wait until he has permission to enter. The doorkeeper gives him a stool and lets him sit to one side of the door. There he sits for days and years. He makes many attempts to be admitted and tires out the doorkeeper with his requests. The doorkeeper often begins little interrogations with him, asks him one question after another about his homeland and many other things, but these are uninterested questions, such as higher-ups ask, and in the end he always tells him that he still cannot be admitted. The man, who has come plentifully equipped for his journey, uses up everything, even his most valuable items, to bribe the doorkeeper. The latter accepts everything but says each time: “I am accepting this only so that you won’t think that you’ve neglected anything.” During the long years, the man watches the doorkeeper almost continuously. He forgets the other doorkeepers, and this first one seems to him the sole obstacle to his admittance to the law. During the first few years he curses his miserable luck loudly and carelessly; later, as he grows old, he merely mutters to himself. He becomes childish, and since during his long years of studying the doorkeeper he has also come to know the fleas in his fur collar, he begs the fleas to help him change the doorkeeper’s mind. Eventually his eyesight grows dim, and he does not know whether the darkness is really deepening around him or whether his eyes are deceiving him. But in the darkness he perceives a radiance that breaks out inextinguishably from the doorway of the law. Now he does not have much longer to live. Before his death all the experiences of the entire time gather in his

head to form one question that he has not yet asked the doorkeeper. He beckons to him, since he can no longer raise his stiffening body. The doorkeeper must bend down very low, for the difference in height has changed very much to the man’s disadvantage. “What can you still want to know now?” asks the doorkeeper. “You are insatiable.” “Everyone strives for the law,” says the man; “so how is it that in all these years no one except me has ever asked for admittance?” The doorkeeper perceives that the man has reached his end, and so as to be heard even as the man’s hearing is failing, he shouts at him, “No one else could gain admittance here, because this entrance was intended only for you. Now I will go and shut it.”

Jackals and Arabs

We made camp in the oasis. My companions were asleep. An Arab, tall and white, walked past me; he had been tending to the camels and was going to his sleeping place.

I threw myself on my back in the grass; I wanted to sleep; I could not; the howling lament of a jackal in the distance; I sat upright again. And what had been so far away was suddenly near. A writhing mass of jackals all around me; eyes of dull gold gleaming and fading; lean bodies, as if under the whip, moving nimbly, compliant with some law.

One came up from behind, pushed through under my arm, close to me as if it needed my warmth, then came up to me and said, almost eye to eye to me:

“I am the oldest jackal far and wide. I am glad to still be able to welcome you here. I had almost given up hope, since we have been waiting for you for time without end; my mother waited, and her mother and, farther back, all her mothers up to the mother of all jackals. Believe me!”

“That comes as a surprise to me,” I said, forgetting to set fire to the stack of wood that lay ready to keep the jackals away with its smoke; “I am very surprised to hear it. It is pure chance that I have come from the far north, and I am on a brief trip. What is it, then, that you jackals want?”

And as if encouraged by this perhaps overly friendly reception, they tightened their circle around me; all of them were panting and hissing.

“We know,” the eldest began, “that you have come from the north, that is exactly what our hope is based on. There is a rationality there that cannot be found here among the Arabs. From their cold arrogance, you know, not a spark of reason can be struck.