**From “What It Really Means to Be 'Kafkaesque'”**

Author Ben Marcus says the beautiful but sorrowful strangeness of Kafka's "A Message from the Emperor" make it a perfect piece of writing.

A Message from the Emperor

The emperor—it is said—sent to you, the one apart, the wretched subject, the tiny shadow that fled far, far from the imperial sun, precisely to you he sent a message from his deathbed. He bade the messenger kneel by his bed, and whispered the message in his ear. So greatly did he cherish it that he had him repeat it into his ear. With a nod of his head he confirmed the accuracy of the messenger’s words. And before the entire spectatorship of his death—all obstructing walls have been torn down and the great figures of the empire stand in a ring upon the broad, soaring exterior stairways—before all these he dispatched the messenger. The messenger set out at once; a strong, an indefatigable man; thrusting forward now this arm, now the other, he cleared a path though the crowd; every time he meets resistance he points to his breast, which bears the sign of the sun; and he moves forward easily, like no other. But the crowds are so vast; their dwellings know no bounds. If open country stretched before him, how he would fly, and indeed you might soon hear the magnificent knocking of his fists on your door. But instead, how uselessly he toils; he is still forcing his way through the chambers of the innermost palace; never will he overcome them; and were he to succeed at this, nothing would be gained: he would have to fight his way down the steps; and were he to succeed at this, nothing would be gained: he would have to cross the courtyard and, after the courtyard, the second enclosing outer palace, and again stairways and courtyards, and again a palace, and so on through thousands of years; and if he were to burst out at last through the outermost gate—but it can never, never happen—before him still lies the royal capital, the middle of the world, piled high in its sediment. Nobody reaches through here, least of all with a message from one who is dead. You, however, sit at your window and dream of the message when evening comes.

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It starts with a compelling proposition. The emperor, the greatest figure of civilization, is sending a message to you. That opening configuration is captivating: An extremely important person has something to tell you, and you alone.

But the piece focuses on the impossibility of that message ever arriving. It turns out that the palace has ring upon ring upon ring of walls, successive outer palaces, and the messenger has to get through one and then the other, and then the other. If he could ever do that—which he never could, the narrator tells us the palace is too vast and impossible—then he’d only be at the center of the city, which is filled with people and garbage, all kinds of difficult obstacles. He will never get through.

The ending is haunting: You will never hear this message that’s intended for you alone. This breaks my heart. Something important has been communicated to you, but you’ll never hear it. And yet you’ll sit at your window and dream it to yourself—and so there’s immense yearning and hope coupled with the sense of impossibility and futility. These incompatible sensations all assail you at the same time. This is just perfection to me.

I think the emotional force of “A Message from the Emperor” is aided by the way it unfolds in an indeterminate setting. The world being described is not our own. We don’t have an emperor in a palace with ring upon ring upon ring of squares that someone has to cross through. Kafka’s tilted away from his own world, towards something ancient and mythic. At the same time, he puts us in the story with that pronoun “you.” He puts us at our own windows, dreaming of what we might be told by somebody important, by God, by some kind of unknowable figure (who he points out is dead now, it’s taken that long for the message to arrive).

This is a stunning feat of defamiliarization—we’re not in the real world, and yet the world is entirely familiar to us—from stories, from myths, from legends. It’s dreamlike. It’s not invented to the degree where you have to suspend disbelief—there’s a feeling of plain normalcy, this banal particularity that is our world, at the same time it’s otherworldly. I’ve always loved that effect, because I very readily start to take things for granted in my own life: I walk down the street, and stop thinking about how strange a tree can be. I stop thinking about how strange it is that you can walk on the surface of the earth, but not fall off of it. Or how strange it is that we built all these things to hide in called houses. But I start to become alert to the world, amazed by the very fact of it, when I try to forget what I know. If I can a way to strip away my assumptions, forget what I know, it’s a way to drop back into the world as if you’ve never seen it before. It’s delirious, it’s intense, it’s terrifying to try to see the world afresh. But that’s a literary space I love to explore.