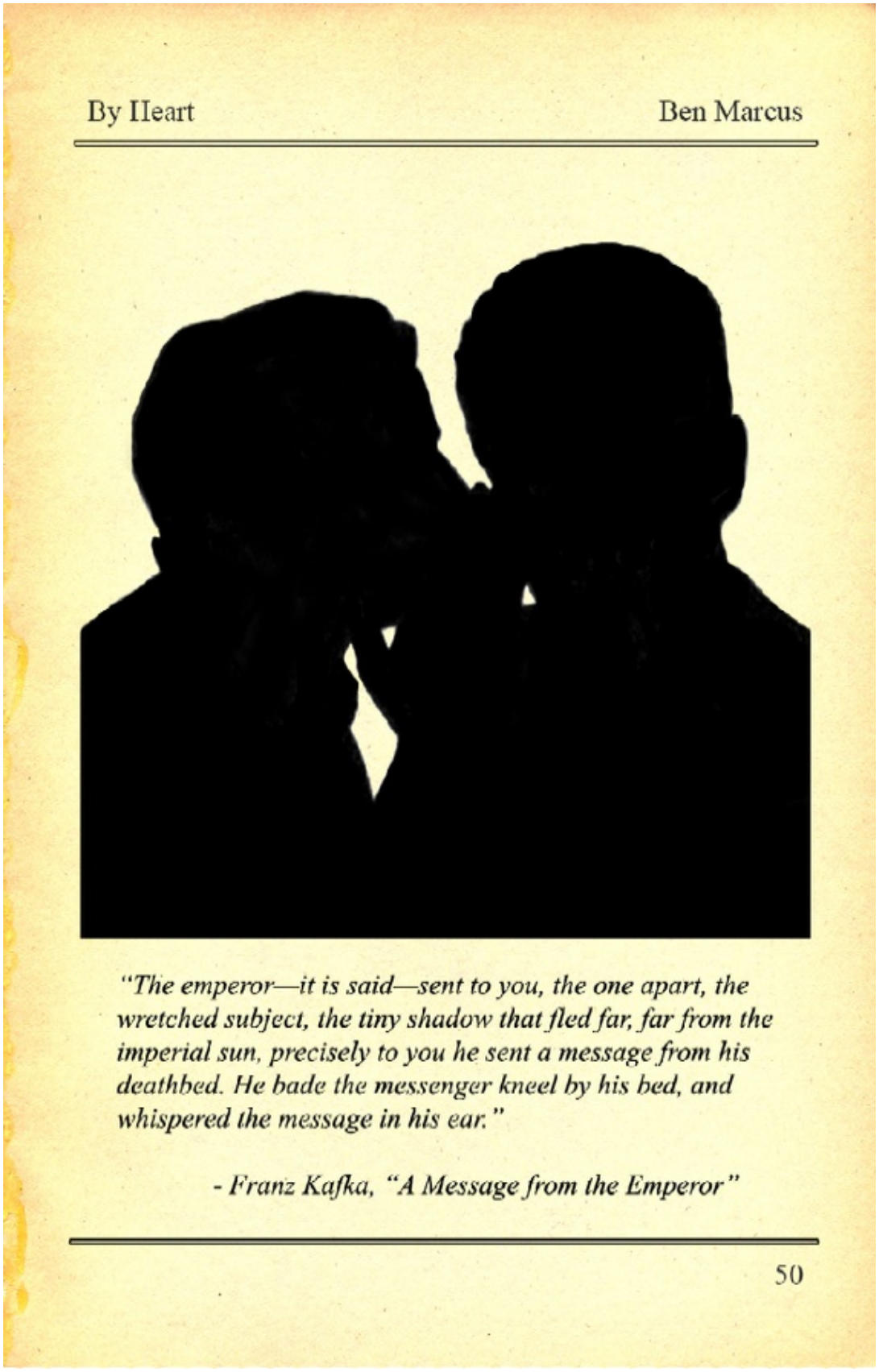
What It Really Means to Be 'Kafkaesque'

By Joe Fassler

By Heart is a series in which authors share and discuss their all-time favorite passages in literature. See entries from Jonathan Franzen, Sherman Alexie, Andre Dubus III and more.



Doug McLean

Writers, when they affect us deeply, become adjectives. Some authors' visions are so recognizable they can serve as a kind of shorthand: the "Proustian" reminiscence, the "Dickensian" slum, the "Orwellian" surveillance program. This is useful, maybe, but not especially precise. Great literature tends to be complex and up for debate, and maybe that's why these words—eponymous adjectives, they're

technically called—lend themselves so easily to abuse.

See, for example, the ubiquitous "Kafkaesque." Kafka's name has "entered the language in a way no other writer's has," said Frederick Karl, one of Kafka's major biographers, in 1991. (The word is even the title of an episode of *Breaking Bad*.) Karl called the word "the representative adjective of our times," but also complained about its misuse: "What I'm against," he said, "is someone going to catch a bus and finding that all the buses have stopped running and saying that's Kafkaesque. That's not."

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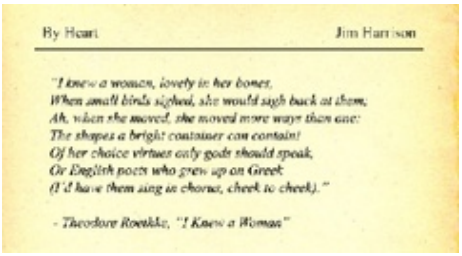
By Heart Jim Harrison

"I knew a woman, lovely in her bones.
When small birds sighed, she would sigh back at them.
Ah, when she moved, she moved more ways than one:
The shapes a bright container can contain!
Of her choice virtues only gods should speak,
Or English poets who grew up on Greek
(I'd have them sing in chorus, cheek to cheek)."

- Theodore Roethke, "I Knew a Woman"

'It Has to Come to You': Why Jim Harrison Writes Patiently

My conversation with Ben Marcus, then, was refreshing. He wanted to discuss "A Message from the Emperor," a short parable first published in 1919, that's been a crucial literary model for him; his discussion of the piece ultimately included a concise and brilliant argument for what constitutes the Kafkaesque, though he never used that word. For Marcus, Kafka's quintessential qualities are affecting use of language, a setting that straddles fantasy and reality, and a sense of striving even in the face of bleakness—hopelessly and full of hope.

Ben Marcus's new collection, *Leaving the Sea*, contains 15 varied stories in a range of modes. Marcus has been classified as an "experimental" writer—in part due to a widely-read *Harper's* essay that knocked Jonathan Franzen and praised "difficult" work—but this book highlights Marcus at his most accessible. Here, straightforward (if unsettling) narratives find a place alongside dense verbal textures, each piece its own brand of starkly lyric prose. Marcus teaches fiction at Columbia University's MFA program in Creative Writing. He spoke to me by phone.

> A Message from the Emperor
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> 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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> *Excerpted from* The Annotated Kafka*, edited and translated by Mark Harman, forthcoming from Harvard University Press. Used by permission. All rights reserved. This translation, copyright © 2011 by Mark Harman, first appeared in The New York Review of Books blog, NYRblog (blogs.nybooks.com).*

Ben Marcus: I think I first read Kafka's parables in a philosophy course in college. It was probably my first exposure to Kafka. Parables are a powerful point of entry to that world of anxiety, fear, and paranoia, but also the yearning, beauty, and strangeness that I connect to Kafka's work. The first parable I read is "Leopards in the Temple"—it's very a brief piece, beautiful and strange and eerily logical. Later on I found "A Message from the Emperor," which became my very favorite.

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.

It's hard to miss that, on some level, "A Message from the Emperor" is a parable about reading. On the one hand, I'm resistant to say "this is all about what it means to tell a story!"—but it does seem to really be there. I like thinking of it as a reminder of how desperately we want to be spoken to. We want to be addressed. We want there to be some important message out there for us. And yet: how futile it might be to hope for that. The story goes beyond a mere illustration of the literary paradox: It hints at the supreme difficulty of ever truly connecting to *anybody*. With Kafka, you always have this kind of bleak futility—but the futility never feels flat and pessimistic. Despite the impossibility, we still have that

messenger heroically striving to break through. The parable is a great form for capturing that paradoxical feeling.

This piece is a model for how I'd like to feel when I read. And what I might like others to feel, reading what I've written. What attracts me is the way it puts opposite, seemingly conflicting sensations into motion and makes them feel compatible against all odds. The sense of difficultly, futility, and tremendous obstacle—coupled with searching and yearning desire and hope.

And this is what writing is about for me—the way I can read a short piece and feel transformed within the small amount of time it takes to get from start to finish. There are deliberately cerebral pieces of writing that I think are fantastic and beautiful in their own right—but for me, in the end, I need literature to make me feel things. And not just a little bit. I want writing to be the most intense form of feeling that I can find. As if we're putting words together in order to deeply alter or enhance or trigger our feelings – in order to feel more alive. This is part of why I write a story, why I put words together: because they are, in the end, a tremendous—possibly unrivaled—delivery mechanism for intense feeling. The kind of feeling that Kafka traffics in I find especially appealing because of its contradictions and conflicts, and because of the mixture of fear and beauty, the seemingly incompatible sensations are suspended and held aloft and presented to us.

Without reaching for that kind of feeling I'm just not sure what I would be doing. It's what I tried for in the short pieces in *The Age of Wire and String*. The diction and the syntax and the language I used came out of my interest in what a single sentence can do to our heads and hearts. An individual sentence can be penetrating, almost like a drug when it gets into me. I read, and as I read I find myself rearranged and transported and moved, as if I've swallowed a little pill. I love sentences that instantly hit my bloodstream and derange 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.

People want different things when they read, of course, and I respect that. There are some whose first desire is to "understand" the meaning of what they've read. That's a perfectly legitimate thing to want. But a lot of what I love, I love it precisely because it eludes understanding. Now, obviously, you don't just want to read word salad—a text that just means nothing. But I tend to remain enthralled by writing that isn't so easy to pin down, that can sustain contradictory readings, holding up to many re-readings. We can treat literature like a product that's meant to reveal itself in full, right away—and what's great is, we have that. You can go to any bookstore and identify that as what you want, you can get that. It's available. But there's also more enigmatic stuff. I think there's room for all of it.

A good recent example is the latest novel by J. M. Coetzee, *The Childhood of Jesus*. I've seen some strange and dismissive commentary about the book—many reviewers were not pleased. But I think it's so captivating, so strange, so compelling. Coetzee is another writer, like Kazuo Ishiguro, who can take you into a kind of Kafkan space of indeterminate context: In this case, a guy arrives at a settlement with a child. There's no past, there's no context, you don't get a fucking *flashback*—all explanation is withheld. This is a dealbreaker for some readers. And yet, for me, it's the absence of that stuff that actually rivets me. That makes me feel pulled in and curious.

Curiosity's an interesting thing. In the courses I teach, one of the common things you hear is this: If you're talking about a story, someone will say, "Well, this character John. I wanted to know more about him." This is a common request—to ask for more information about a character. But let's say you know everything there is to know about this character. All the data you could possibly give: Let's give the flashbacks, let's show the childhood. Would that make it a better story? To me, it's not so simple. You can flood the text with *information*, but that doesn't enhance the literary experience of it, the drama. I think there are some readers willing to live with a certain degree of unsatisfied curiosity—the curiosity keeps you pushing forward—but others find such withholding annoying. They want to know, in Coetzee's case, well, wait, is the boy Simon *really* Jesus?

What's interesting about this novel, in particular, is how much work the title does. Because nowhere in the book does it suggest in any explicit way that Simon is meant to be Jesus as a young boy. But the fact that the book is called *The Childhood of Jesus* is constantly there, grabbing you and reminding you that you're reading something very possibly much more deeply tethered to mythology than you might think. The book had an unnerving affect on me. I admire how little context Coetzee uses and yet how compelling his present world is. He takes you to a moment that's so rigorously empty all around it—and to me, that's very a Kafka-like experience.

I don't usually feel the need to know in some critical way what something was "about, " and I would much rather be taken through something mysterious. But if I find myself being "certain" that this is what I like to read, and what I like to do—I think that's a terrible place to be. That's exactly when I start thinking, *now, I need to turn on all of that*. See what I'm missing by throwing myself all in with this approach. I'm constantly correcting course, based on what I've previously written. I'm always looking to try something I haven't done before—and through it, to experience something I've never before experienced. So I get nervous if I start to sound like I'm propagating some single vision of what writing can be. If I've been writing or reading mannered and strange sentences for some time, maybe I need to try very simple sentences that hide in plain sight.

Because there's a degree to which literature's means and methods are unknowable. We don't know what's happening when somebody reads a poem. We know that even if a writer labors and labors to make a precise text, much will be lost in transmission—we'll have no real idea, even, how much gets through. It gives me tremendous respect for the difficulty and variety of language. Writers believe that if you put words in a certain order, you're going to transport readers: You're going to give them feeling, you're going give them sensation, you're going to tweak deep things in their imaginations. And yet, we can't systematize it. We can't say, *ok, this is exactly how you write a good short story. This is exactly how you write a novel. Works of literature have to be like this, and not like that*. We can debate these things, but just because something works well once doesn't mean you can repeat it. The way books come together is, to me, ineffable. The fact that I can know so little about this process, and yet feel so drawn to it—well, that's what keeps me coming back.

When I read Kafka's parable, I feel strangeness and beauty, I feel sorrow. It's inventive, and yet the invention is tethered to deep, plunging feeling. These are the important values to me: when something otherworldly gets its hooks in you emotionally. To me, this is a perfect text.