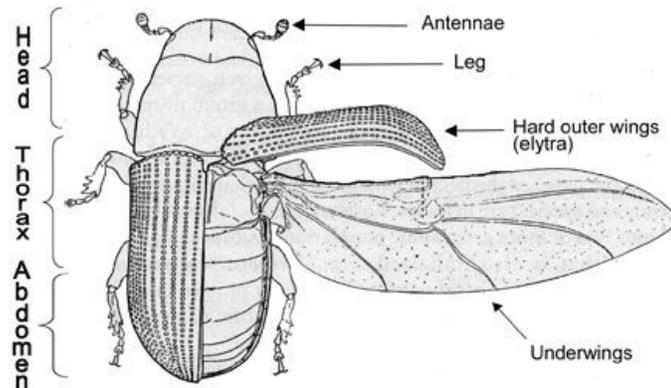


The Metaphorosis

by Albatross, July 2015



One morning, when Greg Samsara woke from a very pleasant sleep, he found himself unfortunately not transformed into a horrible vermin. This troubled him greatly. He rolled over on his back so he could glance at his nightstand, where the copy of Kafka's *Metamorphosis* sat unfulfilled. Behind it his alarm clock sleepily yawned 5:30AM in red digital taunts. Why does one always wake an hour before the alarm? he thought. In an hour he would have to drag himself from bed to ready for his mediocre job for its commonplace pay to afford his run-of-the-mill house in which his conventional family lived their dull lives in middling nowhere Mid-America. The night before as he laid the short story aside he prayed to be turned in the night into a bug. Apparently his old boring God didn't pay any attention to him either.

He grabbed the thin book, flipped through the pages, and ran his hands over the covers. The contents of this are pure and extraordinary, he thought. Literature is a thing apart from this life. It shows it, but also sings it and makes it shine. How lackluster is my life in comparison? He wished he could write, but had no talent for it. I'll never be like Kafka. The remaining hour in bed was spent fantasizing about scuttling over the walls.

After ablutions, he moved through the house tying his tie, threading his belt, tucking and preening. His wife and daughter moved around him like leaves in a stream, curling around a boulder; simply an obstruction in their path. And he asked them quick

questions in their wake to which he received no answers. Have you seen my shoes? Is there any milk in the fridge? Julie can I have a hug? His daughter Julie swung through the door, a backpacked swoosh, and slammed the door with a knocker echo.

His wife Teresa stopped on her way out to give him a peck on the cheek, but in the same manner in which she grabbed her keys or tossed a scarf about her neck. Then, slam, the door again and the silence which followed started out as a departing car. Next his heart beat, which also seemed to be thumping along without any care or notice of him. Finally the silence erupted into a piercing whine that interrupted his staring at the door, and when he shook his head and sighed he noticed the clock and his now inevitable tardiness to work. It's alright, he thought. Nobody will notice.

At his bus stop he rushed as the bus pulled away. He missed it and slumped down on the metal bench in the box. His briefcase was placed between his feet and at the top of his vision a butterfly of stocking legs flitted by him. He looked up and momentarily caught the gaze of a young lady. She also appeared to have missed the bus and Greg quickly glanced at her legs, at her skirt, at her blouse which tugged neatly into her skirt in such wonderful proportions and he thought, how lovely. He peeked up at her and smiled. She did not smile back. He offered her his seat, which she took without a word, and he stood with his briefcase between his feet and towered, hovered, like a hawk over fields. He smiled. She did not look, she glanced at her phone, at the streets, at her watch, at anything but Greg as he, with ever growing dejection, tried his best to be nonchalant. Am I so invisible? So colorless? So insignificant? he fumed to himself. Anything is better than this. I'd rather be revolting, repulsive. I'd rather be pestiferous than nothing. He turned hard on his heels like a soldier and stomped away from the bus stop, much to the lack of attention of those waiting.

Yes, abhorrent is at least noticeable. In fact in some ways it is better than respect. People cower from the abhorrent. It is powerful, it is uniqueness itself among the processed. They have no idea how to deal with something so different, so strange, and so they fear, and that fear controls. People are clay in the hands of fear.

He sat violently down on a bench across the street. I'm going to call in sick, he thought. Maybe I am sick. He called his doctor.

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Doctor Alburn sat with his legs crossed across from Greg.

"So what exactly is the problem, Mister Samsara?"

Greg uncomfortably moved in his seat. He was sweating and his briefs clawed at his ass. Pulling at his collar, he stuttered something out that was just sounds, stopped and reset.

"Come come, Mister Samsara. There's no need for this embarrassment. I assure you I've heard and seen it all. Out with it."

"Um, I don't quite know how to put this," he clamored for the words. "I want to be a ... I mean, I would like it if ... umm."

"What!?"

"I want to be metamorphosed."

Doctor Alburn grunted.

"And into what precisely would you like to be ... metamorphosed?"

"A bug," Greg said curtly.

"A bug. Is that all? What sort of bug exactly Mister Samsara? There are many."

Greg hadn't thought about that. What sort of bug was Gregor in *Metamorphosis*? Did Kafka ever say? He probably should have read the book in its entirety. He had a hard, armor-like shell for a back. Of course that was discussed at the beginning. The belly and chest was divided into arched sections, and there were many small legs. A beetle? It sounds like some sort of beetle.

"A beetle, Doctor Alburn. I'd like to be a beetle," Greg said with slightly more confidence.

"Well, that is no problem Mister Samsara. It is a very costly procedure, I'm sure you're aware?" said the doctor, flipping through some pages on a clipboard.

"But, I would also like wings. Can I have wings?"

"Of course you'll have wings! Beetles have wings. Beetles are Coleoptera, which literally means 'sheathed wing,' Mister Samsara," replied the doctor coldly.

"Good, I would prefer to have wings."

"Thought this through, have you?" the doctor said with a sarcastic smirk.

Greg nodded.

"I'll have my secretary print up the necessary paperwork. This must be done in a few procedures, you understand? We must first do the initial cosmetic surgeries that will allow us to do the later ones. For instance we must begin paring the body in sections, create a thorax and abdomen, so on and so on. Today we will do the preliminary work. The most noticeable will be your head today. We will cut into you here and here," he

said running his fingers under Greg's ears and along his jaw. "Then we will remove your jaw, see? It will then be replaced with mandibles, or pincers if you will."

Greg swallowed and wiped his forehead with a handkerchief.

"Mister Samsara, are you sure you want to do this?"

Greg thought of his wife and daughter. This would shock them. They would despise him for it. He thought of the bus stop. He thought of the multitudes of people crawling over each other every day in the ant hill of city and the sea of human faces. He was lost in the entanglement that was humanity. He wanted them all to be horrified. He wanted them all to despise him, fear him. He could see their disgusted faces. Disgusted with him and his bringing the beauty of Kafka's creation to life! He would be the living embodiment of literature! This colorless world would for once be like a book and it would be because of him. Himself and Kafka.

"Yes! I'm sure."

*

Greg left the Clinic feeling a little woozy from the drugs. The sun was exceptionally bright despite how low it hung in the sky and he tried to block it with his hand as he stumbled over the curb. His face hurt. He glanced down past where his nose used to be and he saw the tips of his new mandibles. They clicked together in a spasm.

"Oh My! Oh No! Oh, what have I done?" he yelped. I'm a bug! Ok! Ok! This is what you wanted. This is who you are. With his hands he felt his chest and the removal of many ribs. They had begun to section him off, creating an abdomen and thorax, but it was not yet complete. He was now exceptionally thin just below his armpits. It feels, he thought, like somebody has squeezed a rope around my chest until it became two separate parts. He moved his hands up to his face and felt the mouth parts moving and jerked his hand away. I just need to get the bus and head home.

At the bus stop he noticed that his vision was wider. He could almost see completely around himself. They must have pushed his eyes to the sides of his new bug head. He was about to try to touch them when he noticed a woman and her daughter seated on the next bench to his left. They were in his vision even though he was facing away from them. The little girl in her striped skirt and stockings was staring at him with her mouth and eyes wide. Her mother scolded her.

"Daniella! It's not polite to stare!"

"But Mom! It's a giant bug!"

"I know dear but that's no reason for civilities to end now is it?"

The woman stood up and approached Greg.

"I'm sorry for my daughter. She can be a pest." Her hand shot up to her mouth as though she had let slip some derogatory term.

"I'm sorry. I meant ... Hi, I'm Sarah and this is Daniella, my daughter." she said extending a hand. "And you are?"

Greg opened his strange mouth to answer but all that came out was, "GLOORPSH"

That's right! The doctor said that without his jaw he wouldn't be able to talk. That he would have to relearn to communicate.

"Well Mister Gloorpsh, I just want to say that I think it is so brave what you are doing," she shook his hand and smiled. "C'mon Daniella. We're going to be late. Lets take a cab," she said as they departed.

"But Mom! I want to ride the bus with the bug man."

"Shhh, Daniella! I've raised you better than that."

That never happened with Kafka! Everyone was supposed to be disgusted. They were supposed to fear him. The little girl wanted to ride on the bus with him! The woman shook his hand and called him brave. What a disaster! He would go home and lock himself in his room. His wife and daughter would be ashamed and hide from him. Eventually his daughter would slip cautiously into the room to leave him food while he hid under the couch. Yes! It would be alright. He just needed to get home and then he would bring Kafka to life.

He got on the bus. The thick bus driver did a double take when Greg stepped on and simply shook his head. Luckily there weren't many people on the bus. Those that were, his fellow passengers, looked at him and smiled. Some chuckled a bit and whispered to each other. Greg tried desperately not to look at their disgusting, approving faces but he could see them no matter where he looked.

A teenage ponytailed girl got up from her seat with a friend to exit the bus and quickly said as she passed, "I like your mandibles," then the two girls collapsed into a tittering, giggling pile of teen as they skipped out the door.

Greg fumed.

*

He swept through the threshold of his house and shut the door, pressing on it as if to hold the tide of all the world from pouring in, his finger in the dike. From the kitchen the familiar sounds of his wife cooking could be heard. For a moment he thought of running up to a room and locking himself in, but this was what he wanted. He wanted their reaction. Slowly, he stepped into the kitchen.

His wife was busy stirring something on the stovetop.

"Hello Darling," she said without looking up. She went to the refrigerator and ostriched her top half. Greg stepped to the side of the open door which she then shut with a twist and a kick, hauling a pot over to the counter. Briefly she glanced at Greg and then went back to work.

She didn't notice! Greg thought. He kept moving so as to be within her range of vision.

"Julie got an A on her report today," she sang out, removing the lid and putting the pot in the oven. "I told her we'd get ice cream and she said not to bother! Can you believe it? All snide like," she sighed. "Teenagers! I swear. You should have a talk with her. She's been moping around all day, as she does." Teresa, glanced up at him and for the first moment seemed to notice him. Greg's pulse rapidly thumped out of his skin. She slightly turned her head while looking at him.

"Did you get a haircut, Darling? Something seems different about you," she looked away and continued stirring.

"GLOORPSH!" he spewed out.

"God bless you, Darling. Would you go tell Julie dinner's in five?"

Greg stormed out of the room.

Upstairs he banged on Julie's door.

"What!? I'm on the phone!"

Greg opened the door. His daughter jumped up off her bed and swiftly slammed the door back shut.

"Jeez! Privacy!"

Greg just stood with the door in his face. His antennae resting on the wood. A click sounded from the handle which then slowly began to turn. The door crept open and his daughters eyes appeared in the crack. They got bigger and bigger.

"What the shit!? Are you a ... bug?" she opened the door and stood in front of her father.

"Are those pincers? And antennae?" she reached up to touch his face and then withdrew her hand. "Oh My God!" she brought her phone up to her ear. "Kim! You're never gonna believe this. My Dad turned himself into a bug!"

*

At the dinner table his wife sat crossly.

"I can't believe you didn't discuss this with me. It's just so costly. Like we have disposable income! Don't get me wrong, I support you, Darling. This is, of course, what you should do if deep down you feel you are — what is it? A beetle? It is pretty interesting actually. In fact, I can't wait to tell the girls. They'll never believe it! My husband, the new bug on the block."

His daughter just sat at the table taking pictures of her father.

Greg didn't know what to say. He couldn't say anything anyway.

"But we were talking about putting that gazebo in the back. That's not going to happen now. You're so impetuous! Do you remember the swimming pool debacle? All the neighbors complained that it was an eyesore. If you just would've asked me I could've told you what would happen. Really Darling, I am happy for you finding your inner bug, but still — you should've told me."

His boss was even more approving. He gave him paid leave for his metamorphosis. What was happening!? Was Kafka this far removed from reality? Did he exist in some fantasy world where people were held accountable for becoming horrible vermin? Nothing of literature was coming to fruition. There was only this sickeningly supportive acquiescence. This was — this reality was absurd! This world is absurd and everyone in it! I'm going back to the doctor's today and I'm going in deep, he thought. Make me terrifying! Give me wings and I'll fly away.

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"So, today we will be adding your hard armor-like shell, Mister Samsara. Also, the biggest change — we will be removing your arms and legs and attaching your tibia, tarsus and claws. In other words, your new beetle legs. We will have you crawling about in no time Mister Samsara. I can guarantee you that," said Doctor Alburn.

"What about the wings?" asked Greg.

"No. They are very delicate and take much time to fabricate. You do realize that this is all fabrication, yes? An exorbitant superficiality, albeit a convincing one."

"Huh? What? I'm superman —" Greg said drifting off to an anesthetized ether on the operating table.

Doctor Alburn chuckled and looked up at the nurse.

"Ha! Superman! says the pest. Every dung beetle thinks the world of his shit! Nurse, would you hand me the saw?"

In the morning, when Greg Samsara woke from troubled dreams, he found himself transformed in a bed into a horrible vermin. He lay on his armour-like back, and if he lifted his head a little he could see his brown belly, slightly domed and divided by arches into stiff sections. Finally! thought Greg. He waved his new thin legs about and tried to rock side to side on his rounded back. Doctor Alburn walked into the room.

"Mister Samsara, how are we feeling? Creepy and crawly enough for you? I think you'll surprisingly find that it won't take much work to learn to use your new legs. A hexapodal physical therapist will be doing some brief work with you to teach you to crawl. You know, we first must crawl before we can walk. Oh wait, that's right. You'll never walk again, but crawl you shall. We've organized a ride home for you since we figured it would be best for a giant beetle to stay away from public transit. The poor buggers on buses have enough to deal with."

The doctor was correct. It only took Greg a few hours of physical therapy to get the hang of his pointed new stems. He scuttled to the car and a Nurse lifted him into his ride home.

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His wife clapped and jumped up and down when she saw him struggle up the stairs to their house.

"Oh my! Aren't you just my little guy!" she bent far over to touch his glistening back. Greg moved toward a mirror, the clicking of his legs on the wooden floor made quite a lot of noise. A perfect beetle stared back at him. A perfect giant beetle. He was about two feet off of the floor supported by six thin black legs. The spherical eyes were oddly human but bulging just right from the sides of his head. The pincers and mouth were moving about, disgustingly.

"Darling, I hope you don't mind. I've invited some of the neighbors over for dinner tonight. They are so excited to see you!"

What!? Greg, thought to himself. How could she want to show me off? He shuffled toward the stairs to try to make it to his room. He needed to get under the couch. His wife grasped him by the abdomen, and drug him backwards.

"Oh no you don't. You're not hiding anywhere."

She brought him into the dining room, where she had very astutely rigged up a sort of highchair for him at the head of the table. A tiny platform at table height so that he would be propped up for all to see. Once again Greg tried to flee but Teresa would not be denied. She picked him up and secured him in his place, and once at that height Greg was too concerned in his frail state to try to fall.

The neighbors began to arrive. Each came in and said hello, peeking their heads into the dining room to get a glimpse of Greg. After a few cocktails, everyone was seated at the table.

Conversation ranged from such interesting topics as the weather to football, and everyone talked around Greg. They stole quick glances, but extreme effort was being made to look everywhere but at Greg. All but one, George, a short mustachioed man, shirt buttoned to the neck under perfectly parted hair, sat next to his husband, Jonathan. George stared, and Greg sensed the anger radiating from him.

"So, what are we supposed to call you, eh? Are you Greg? Are you Jeff Goldblum? Freaking Brundlefly! Are you even a man?" burst George.

"George! I'm sorry Teresa," apologized Jonathan with a hand on George's shoulder, which was quickly swiped away.

"No! This is ridiculous! What is that?"

"That's still Greg. It's just Greg as he sees himself now. And now we all get to see — that," replied Sarah, another neighbor, polka-dotted in a dress.

"That's not Greg! I don't know what that is," stormed George.

"Of course it's Greg, George! We shouldn't judge. We live in an age where you can be whoever you want to be. We just need to be supportive. And George, I think you look great!" replied another and everyone lit up.

"Oh yes!" replied everyone but George.

"You look so great!"

"Just a perfect — bug!"

"I love the legs!"

"And the bug eyes, they aren't creepy at all!"

George stood up.

"What are we supposed to tell our children when they see him crawling around the neighborhood?" he yelled.

"George honey, we don't have children," said Jonathan.

"You know what I mean! And good luck trying to sell your house now with giant bugs out in the trash!"

"George!" Jonathan stood up and took George by the arm. "Teresa, I'm so sorry but I think we'll be leaving." They shuffled from the room together to the approbation of everyone around the table.

"We think what you're doing is fantastic, Greg!"

"It's so brave."

"You can stop by our place anytime."

Greg squirmed in his high chair. They all happily continued chatting. Someone lifted a glass and announced a toast, "To Greg! The best bug I've had the pleasure of knowing!" Everyone downed their drink. "Greg, would you like to say a few words?"

The room went silent and everyone waited looking at Greg.

"GLOORPSH!"

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A few days went by and it was time for Greg's final surgery. At last, he was going to get his wings. He was dropped off at the clinic and the procedure would take until the evening. Teresa, after helping him into the clinic, set out to throw an enormous party. She had invited everyone. All of the neighbors, some old family and friends, she had even invited a member of the press. Greg would be famous, she thought. She rushed to stores buying supplies, her phone pressed to her ear inviting people. She contacted a DJ for music, a photographer to capture the event.

Once home, she ran streamers and blew up balloons. She set dozens of candles everywhere throughout the house. The soft glow would make Greg a little less difficult to look at, she thought. She hired a caterer to serve tapas. Greg would probably put people off their appetite, but in case he didn't she wanted food there for the guests. She cleaned and organized and put special care into a sort of throne for Greg. Just a little

place for him to sit and be admired, she thought. We don't want anyone stepping on him for God's sake! The seat was covered in his favorite blanket and she surrounded it in candles. He'll look so perfect here, and he can watch everyone.

As evening came on people began showing up. Teresa had her hands full preparing and greeting people, so many people. Already there were more people than she had expected. She ran through the house. Is there enough food? Enough chairs? She had almost forgot that she had to pick up Greg! She told the party she was leaving to bring the Bug of Honor and departed.

"There's my little guy," she said as she was putting him into the car. Greg was stretching his shell out, the thin wings shimmering beneath. He was fluttering them the whole way to the car. Look at him showing off his wings, she thought. As they drove he was clicking and clattering in the back seat. He clawed at the door handles.

"Darling, be careful. I know you're excited about your wings, but you don't want to fall out of the car now," Teresa said, setting the child locks.

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At the house she carried him from the car. He kept buzzing and scrambling around.

"Darling! You really are being a nuisance," she said struggling to hold him, but she managed to get him through the front door.

"Here he is everyone!" she announced to the great cheer of the crowd. Everyone rushed in. Teresa set him on his throne, from which he tried immediately to escape. She placed him back roughly.

"No! You stay!" she yelled at him.

Greg stared at her and cowered on the seat. The crowd of people swarmed him. He couldn't leave the chair.

"Greg! You look marvelous! Wonderful job. May I ask who is your doctor?"

"I'd never have known you weren't a bug. Looks so natural."

"We're so proud of you Greg!"

"May I touch your shell?"

Hands started reaching in and Greg panicked. He tried to escape over the arm of his chair and sent candles falling in all directions. His blanket went up in flame quickly. The large group shocked by Greg's quick movement and the flames that spread moved back in a pullulating throng. They backed into more candles and soon the entire room

was walled in flames. People screamed and ran in all directions. Someone burst through the front door and the whole of the party went pouring out like bees from a hive.

Greg scrambled, slipped and clicked over the wooden floor, looking for a way out. The flames rose higher and as the last of the people made it out the front door a curtain rod fell ablaze across the threshold. It was only a foot of flame but it was impossible for Greg to crawl out that way. He clambered for the stairs. His tiny claws poked into the carpet and he hauled his body up the stairs one at a time as smoke poured through the house. With his omnidirectional sight, he saw the entire first floor enflame as he got to the second flight. Up and up he climbed, struggling with intense heat just behind him. On the third floor he found a room with an open window. Greg managed to shove a footstool to the window so that he could climb out just in time as flames began to lick under the door frame.

He scuttled onto the roof. Down below the hive of people buzzed and yelled when they saw Greg.

"There he is!"

Greg frantically moved back and forth trying to find anything he could use to climb down.

"Use your wings!" his wife yelled.

"Yea! Use your wings, Greg!"

"Fly, Greg! Fly away!"

"FLY! FLY! FLY!"

Greg opened his armored back and unfolded the silky wings. Smoke billowed from behind him but the sun still flashed off the iridescence of them as they spread out over Greg. The doctor really had done a beautiful job. Greg moved to the edge of the roof. Below he saw Teresa's car, his family, the ridiculous people there to see him.

"Fly Greg! Fly!"

He leapt.

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Six miles away a couple was driving on the interstate. The husband was just finishing a rather funny anecdote when a bug splat on their windshield with a great smack. The bug guts and ooze went streaking all over the glass and the wife laughed.

"Eww, that was a big one!" she said.

"Yea, we're gonna need a big squidgy for that one!" replied her husband.