

The background of the cover is a high-resolution aerial photograph of a cracked, textured surface. The colors are a mix of various shades of blue, teal, and yellow, creating a complex, organic pattern. The cracks are dark and irregular, forming a network across the entire surface. The overall effect is one of a natural, perhaps mineral or biological, formation.

Bruno Latour

After Lockdown
A Metamorphosis

Translated by Julie Rose

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After Lockdown

A Metamorphosis

Bruno Latour

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polity

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Dedication

For Lilo, son of Sarah and Robinson

Hast thou perceived the breadth of the earth? declare if
thou knowest it all.

Job 38:18

1

One way of becoming a termite

There are many ways to begin. For instance, like a hero in a novel who wakes up after fainting and, rubbing his eyes, looking haggard, murmurs, 'Where am I?' It's not easy, in fact, to tell where he is, especially now, after such a long lockdown, when he emerges into the street, face masked, to meet only the fleeting gaze of the few passersby.

The thing that especially disheartens him, no, alarms him, is that recently he has taken to gazing at the moon - it's been full since last night - as if it were the only thing he could still contemplate without feeling uneasy. The sun? Impossible to be glad of its heat without immediately thinking of global warming. The trees swaying in the wind? He's eaten up with the fear of seeing them dry out or go under the saw. Even with the water falling from the clouds, he has the unpleasant feeling he's somehow responsible for seeing that it arrives: 'You know very well it'll soon be in short supply everywhere!' Delight in contemplating a landscape? Don't even think about it - here we are, responsible for every kind of pollution affecting it, so if you [*vous*] can still marvel at golden wheatfields, that's because you've forgotten that all the poppies have disappeared thanks to the European Union's agricultural policies; where the Impressionists once painted swarms of beauties, all you can see now is the impact of the EU decisions that have turned the countrysides into deserts ... No, really, he can only ease his anxieties by resting his eyes on the moon: for its circling, for its phases, at least, he in no way feels

responsible; it's the last spectacle he has left. If its brightness moves you [*tu*] so much, that's because, well, you know you're innocent of its movement. As you once were when you looked at the fields, lakes, trees, rivers and mountains, the scenery, without giving a thought to the effect your every move might have, however slight. Before. Not that long ago.

When I wake up, I start to feel the torments suffered by the hero of Kafka's novella, *Metamorphosis*, who, while he's sleeping, turns into a black beetle, a crab or a cockroach. The next morning, he finds himself terrifyingly unable to get up to go to work like he used to do before; he hides under his bed; he hears his sister, his parents, his boss's lackey knocking on his bedroom door, which he's carefully locked shut; he can't get up anymore; his back is as hard as steel; he has to relearn how to control his legs and his claws, which are waving about in all directions; he gradually realises that no one can understand what he's saying anymore; his body has changed size; he feels himself turning into a 'monstrous insect'.

It's as if I, too, had undergone an actual metamorphosis in January 2020. I still remember how, before, I could move around innocently taking my body with me. Now I feel like I have to make an effort and haul along at my back a long trail of CO₂ that won't let me buy a plane ticket and take off, and that now hampers my every movement, to the point where I hardly dare tap at my keyboard for fear of causing ice to melt somewhere far away. But it's been worse since January because, on top of that, I now project in front of me – they tell me non-stop – a cloud of aerosols whose fine droplets can spread tiny viruses in the lungs capable of killing my neighbours, who would suffocate in their beds, overrunning the hospital services. In front as behind, there's a sort of carapace of consequences, every day more appalling, that I have to learn to drag around. If I force

myself to keep the regulatory safe distances, breathing with difficulty through this surgical mask, I don't manage to crawl very far because as soon as I try to fill my trolley, the uneasiness intensifies: this cup of coffee is ruining a patch of the tropics; that tee-shirt is sending a child into poverty in Bangladesh; from the rare steak I was eating with relish emanate puffs of methane that are further accelerating the climate crisis. And so I groan, I tie myself in knots, terrified by this metamorphosis - will I finally wake from this nightmare, go back to what I was before: free, whole, mobile? An old-fashioned human being, in short! Locked-down, sure, but only for a few weeks; not for ever, that would be too horrible. Who wants to end up like Gregor Samsa, wasted away in a cupboard, to his parents' great relief?

And yet a metamorphosis there has certainly been, and it seems that we're not about to turn back by waking up out of this nightmare. Once locked-down, always locked-down. The 'monstrous insect' has to learn to move around lopsided, to grapple with his neighbours, with his parents (maybe the Samsa family, too, will start mutating?), all hampered by their antennae, their vapour trails, their virus and gas exhausts, all jangling with their prostheses, a hideous noise of steel fins banging together. 'Where the hell am I?': *elsewhere, in another time, someone else, a member of another human population*. How to get used to it? By groping around, feeling our way, as always - what else can we do?

Kafka hit the nail on the head: becoming a bug offers a pretty good starting point for me to learn to get my bearings and to now take stock. Insects everywhere are endangered, but ants and termites are still around. To see where it takes us, why wouldn't I start with their lines of flight?

The thing that is indeed nice and practical about mushroom-cultivating termites and the way they live in symbiosis with specialised fungi able to digest wood – the famous *Termitomyces* which turns the digested wood into a nutritional compost that the termites then eat – is that they build vast nests of chewed earth, inside which they maintain a sort of air-conditioning system. A clay Prague where every bit of food passes into the digestive tube of every termite in the space of a few days. The termite is confined, it's really a model of confinement, there's no case for saying: it never goes out! Except that *it* is the one who constructs the termite mound, drooling clump after clump. As a result, it can go *anywhere*, but only by extending its termite mound a bit further. The termite wraps itself in its mound, it rolls itself up in what is both its interior environment and its own way of having an exterior – its extended body, in a fashion; scientists would call it a second 'exoskeleton', on top of the first one, its carapace, its segments, and its articulated legs.

The adjective 'Kafkaesque' has a different meaning if I apply it to a lone termite, isolated without food in a prison-like world of dry brown clay, or if it instead refers to a Gregor Samsa, who is ultimately pretty pleased to have digested his mud home thanks to the wood snaffled up by his hundreds of millions of relatives and compatriots who've produced food that forms a continuous floodtide from which he has taken a few molecules in passing. This would amount to a new metamorphosis of the celebrated narrative in *Metamorphosis* – after many others. But then no one would find him monstrous anymore; no one would try and crush him as a cockroach in the manner of Daddy Samsa. Perhaps I should endow him with other feelings, exclaiming, as they did with Sisyphus, though for quite different reasons: 'We need to imagine Gregor Samsa happy ...'

This becoming-an-insect, this becoming-a-termite could allay the terror of a person who now, to reassure himself, has only the moon to contemplate since the moon is the only close thing that's outside his worries. Since, well, if you [*tu*] feel such uneasiness looking at trees, the wind, rain, drought, sea, rivers – and, of course, butterflies and bees – because you feel responsible, yes, at bottom, guilty for not fighting the people who are destroying them; because you have insinuated yourself into their existence, you have crossed their paths; well, it's true: you [*tu*] too, *tu quoque* (you likewise); you digested them, modified them, transformed them; you turned them into your interior environment, your termitarium, your town, your Prague of stone and cement. But why then would you feel ill at ease? Nothing is alien to you anymore; you're no longer alone; you quietly digest a few molecules of whatever reaches your intestines, after having passed through the metabolism of hundreds of millions of relatives, allies, compatriots and competitors. You're not in your old room now, Gregor, but you can go anywhere, so why would you continue to hide away in shame? You fled; now take the lead; show us!

With your antennae, your articulations, your emanations, your waste matter, your mandibles, your prostheses, you may *at last* be becoming a human being! And it's your parents, on the contrary, the people knocking on your door, anxious, horrified, and even your dear sister Grete, who have *become* inhuman, by rejecting becoming an insect *themselves*? *They* are the ones who ought to feel bad, *not you*. They are the ones who've metamorphosed, the ones the climate crisis and the pandemic have transformed into so many 'monsters'? We've read Kafka's novella the wrong way round. Put back on his six hairy legs, Gregor would at last walk straight and could teach us how to extricate ourselves from lockdown.

Since we've been talking, the moon has gone down; it is beyond your [*tes*] woes; alien but in a different way from before. You don't look convinced? The uneasiness is still there? That's because I reassured you a little too glibly. You feel even worse? You hate this metamorphosis? You want to go back to being an old-fashioned human being? You're right. Even if we became insects, we would still be *bad* insects, incapable of moving very far, shut away in our locked room.

It's this 'return to earth' business that's got my head in a spin. It's not fair to push us to come back down to earth if they don't tell us where to land so we don't crash, or what will happen to us, who we'll feel affiliated with or not. I was a bit too quick off the mark. That's the problem with starting with a crash site, I can no longer *position myself* with the aid of a GPS; I can no longer overfly anything. But this is also my chance: it's enough to start where one is, *ground zero*, and then try to follow the first track that crops up in the bush, and see where it takes us. No point hurrying, there's still a bit of time left to find a place to nest. Of course, I've lost my nice stentor's voice, the one that used to hold forth from on high addressing the whole human race, off-stage; like Gregor's to his parents' ears, my diction is in danger of sounding like mumbling, that's the whole problem with this becoming-animal. But what counts is to make heard the voices of those groping their way forward into the moonless night, hailing one another. Other compatriots may well manage to regroup around those calls.

2

Locked-down in a space that's still pretty vast

'Where am I?' sighs the person who wakes up to find they're an insect. *In a city* probably, like half my contemporaries. Consequently I find myself inside a sort of extended termite mound: an installation of outer walls, pathways, air-conditioning systems, food flows, cable networks, whose ramifications run beneath rural areas, for a very long way. The same way that termites' conduits help them get into the sturdiest beams of a house made of wood even over great distances. In the city, in a sense, I'm always 'at home' - at least for a minuscule stretch: I repainted that wall, I brought this table back from abroad, I accidentally flooded my neighbour's apartment, I paid the rent. Those are a few tiny traces added forever to the framework of Lutetian limestone, to the marks, wrinkles and riches of this place. If I consider the framework, for every stone I find an urbanite who made it; if I start with the urbanites, I'll find a trace of every one of their actions in the stone they've left behind - that big stain on the wall, still here twenty years later, is my doing, and so is this graffiti. What others take for a cold and anonymous framework, for me in any case virtually amounts to an artwork.

What goes for the city goes for the termite mound: habitat and inhabitants are in continuity; to define the one is to define the others; the city is the exoskeleton of its inhabitants, just as the inhabitants leave behind a habitat in their wake, when they go off or waste away, for instance when they're buried in the cemetery. A city-dweller lives in