

The Waiting Room

Samantha Small

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VLADIMIR: That passed the time.
ESTRAGON: It would have passed in any case.
VLADIMIR: Yes, but not so rapidly.¹

We wait because we have to wait. And while we wait, we try to pass the time.

But the way we pass the time while we are waiting is completely different from the way we pass the time when we have nothing to do. Because all the time we are waiting, we have to be ready at any moment to drop everything and get on with what whatever it was we were waiting for: get on the bus, see the doctor, take documents up to the counter.

So we can't get involved in what we do while we wait, we can't invest in even the tiniest future. If we read, each time we start a new page, a new paragraph, a new sentence even, we can't be sure we'll get to the end before the interruption comes that is, after all, the thing we have been waiting for. So we hold ourselves back, keep something in reserve. The job of waiting constantly demands a small part of our attention, and therefore, we might as well say, all of our attention. For what is attention, if not the capacity to lose oneself entirely in what one is doing?

"Death has not required us to keep a day free," writes Samuel Beckett.² We have no appointment with death: too late or too soon, it will come eventually, of that we can be sure. We cannot be nearly so certain about the 8.07 bus. And so, unhappily, we are more oppressed by the bus timetable, or the doctor's waiting room, or the official who holds our fate in his hands, than we are by death itself, which requires nothing of us: no ticket, no papers, not even our attention. Waiting, on the other hand, requires all of us: it is a kind of surrender, a giving of ourselves to the nothingness of time passing.

Pietro Citati writes of Kafka that he loved to wait, so much so that he set his watch fast and always turned up early for appointments:

*A long wait, with unhurried glances at the watch and an indifferent pacing to and fro, pleased him as much as lying down on the couch with his legs stretched out and his hands in his pockets. Waiting gave a purpose to his life, which otherwise seemed so indeterminate to him.*³

But Kafka is cheating a little here, because to turn up early is not really to wait at all, but to savour anticipation, to draw out the sweetness of having no responsibilities. Real waiting only begins when the appointed time has gone past, and the sweetness of anticipation turns into anxiety, anger and loss.

Roland Barthes, in *A Lover's Discourse*, sees waiting as an act of love: "The lover's fatal identity is precisely: I am the one who waits."⁴ He imagines a miniature three-act play based on the drama of waiting. In the prologue the lover merely notes the delay (he looks at his watch several times). Then he decides to "take it badly", and Act I begins with anxiety, as he worries that there has been a mix-up with the *rendezvous*. In Act II he gets angry, reproaching the absent one. In Act III anger gives way to anxiety again, the anxiety of abandonment. The outcome depends on which Act the other arrives in: calm, or an angry "scene", or an excessive outpouring of gratitude.⁵



But what a relief at least to have an appointment: to be able to get angry, storm off, return, leave for good. How much worse to have to wait and not to know for how long! Like the prisoner who is condemned never to be condemned, who waits indefinitely for the trial to begin, who dreams of the moment when the prison door will open and he will be led in front of a judge who will pass a sentence—any sentence—and set a term to his sufferings. In the meantime the prisoner is sentenced to indefinite waiting, while the lawyers rush backwards and forwards in a frenzy of activity and the process grinds slowly on its unhurried course.

This is the waiting experienced by Joseph K. in Kafka's novel *The Trial*. Near the end of the novel a priest tells K. the parable "Before the Law". There is a gatekeeper who stands at the entrance to the Law. A man from the country comes and begs admittance, but the gatekeeper tells him he cannot allow him in at the moment. The door stands open, but when the man tries to peer inside, the gatekeeper warns him that he is only the first in a series of gatekeepers, each more fearsome than the last. So the man decides to wait, takes the stool the gatekeeper gives him, and sits out the days and years. He begs the gatekeeper incessantly, gives away all his possessions in bribes, but the gatekeeper always tells him he cannot be let in right now. Finally, as the man is dying, he thinks to ask a question he has not asked before: "Everyone strives to attain the Law. How does it come about, then, that in all these years no one has come seeking admittance but me?" The gatekeeper shouts into the dying man's ear: "No one but you could gain admittance through this door, since this door was intended only for you. I am now going to shut it."⁶

Why is this story so terrible? Perhaps it is because the man from the country is so apparently free, tied only by his wish to attain the Law. So too, Joseph K. desires only to clear his name, but cannot discover the charges brought against him. If only they could renounce their desires, accept their guilt, no matter how absurd, perhaps they could save themselves from the living death of waiting.

But it is desire that makes them wait. We might even say that waiting is desire in its purest form, for desire never keeps its appointments. Its object never arrives, because desire desires only itself, desires only to wait, as long as possible, until it's all over. Thus the tireless Vladimir and Estragon, who keep faith with Godot, with their desire:

VLADIMIR: We have kept our appointment. How many people can boast as much?
ESTRAGON: Billions.⁷

But against Kafka's man from the country, against Beckett's tramps, Barthes offers an alternative parable of waiting: waiting as spiritual discipline, a playing with fate, a kind of sovereignty:

A mandarin fell in love with a courtesan. "I shall be yours," she told him, "when you have spent a hundred nights waiting for me, sitting on a stool, in my garden, beneath my window." But on the ninety-ninth night, the mandarin stood up, put his stool under his arm, and went away.⁸

Russell Smith lectures in literary and film studies at the Australian National University, Canberra. He writes regularly on visual arts for a range of publications including *Broadsheet*, *Art Monthly* and *Real Time*. 2007

¹ Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, London: Faber, 1985, p. 48.

² Samuel Beckett, *Proust and Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit*, London: Calder, 1965, p. 17.

³ Pietro Citati, *Kafka*, London: Minerva, 1991, pp. 5-6.

⁴ Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, trans. Richard Howard, London: Penguin, 1990, p. 40.

⁵ Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, pp. 37-38.

⁶ Franz Kafka, *The Trial*, trans. Willa & Edwin Muir, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985, p. 237.

⁷ Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, p. 80.

⁸ Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, p. 40.

