

## BACK PAIN

I a lowly stricken bug  
lying helpless on my back  
Limbs like feelers scratch the rug  
Both my soul and body wracked

Cannot move nor turn nor rise  
nor yet even try to crawl  
Upward glancing, curse the skies  
Misery casts a painful pall

Just a normal, routine day  
Then a twist, a turn unsweet  
In an instant, I must pay  
Metamorphosis complete

Gregor Samsa, we are kin  
Twist of fate or tight-pinchd nerve  
All this suffering from within  
makes a life that's lost its verve

Insect with a human heart  
apple-backed and lonely, scorned  
Shunned, you lived and died apart  
Stunned, I too have been transformed

**Commentary:** When I composed this poem, I was lying flat on my back, munching anti-inflammatories and feeling sorry for myself, in the midst of an acute episode of back spasm. Having had back problems for 20 years, originally as the result of an injury, and later complicated by arthritic and auto-immune changes, I knew the drill. I couldn't read, couldn't use the computer, couldn't watch tv, couldn't work. All I could do was wait... and think. Experiencing serious back pain is unnerving, because it can strike at any moment, often without a clear precipitating event. It can be agonizing, and over time, debilitating. But it is also undignified. Rolling about on the floor, I began to think of Kafka's short story, *Metamorphosis*, in which the poor clerk Gregor Samsa awakens to discover he has been transformed into a bug. Gregor suffers, but he suffers in an ungainly, humiliating way. Mostly he suffers because even his family eventually avoids him, and is relieved when he dies. Back pain sufferers can experience a similar fate. Back pain isn't glamorous - it's not like Camille swooning romantically with tuberculosis - and after awhile even loved ones get tired of the whining. You can be a perfectly productive and cherished member of your family one day, and an annoying parasite the next. Not a pretty thought.

Published in *Journal of Medical Humanities*, 2002

Having nothing better to do on the floor that day, I imagined this poem. I chose a somewhat “formal” structure – complete with a kind of meter and even rhyme! – because figuring it out kept me busy. Also, since *no one* writes formal poetry anymore, it struck me as slightly ridiculous, and in that sense underlined the absurdity of my personal situation. When I finally came to write it down, I played with a visual format for the stanzas that would remind readers of that awful *tweak!* in the spinal column that signals the onset of an attack.

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Accepted for publication, *Journal of Medical Humanities*, March, 2002