

Outsider

By royal decree I live beyond the Empire's limits for a crime I did not commit. I am a gentle man, or once was. Not the sort to slay the innocent over nothing. I have learned that behavior only lately. I did not know it then.

At the time of the verdict against me, I considered my slightest transgressions abominable. Hiding fearfully in the defunct bell tower of the less popular local tabernacle, I crossed myself feverishly on behalf of a God Who knew my every moment, Who pierced my soul with an unblinking eye, there apprehending all truth, to which I woefully confessed.

Yet one human stride beyond the Empire's walls that dread connection was lost. I have tested its existence many times over the years, sneaking lightly to the closest possible point outside the Empire wall, pressing my chest and right cheek against the piled stones. Despite the danger, I have come away laughing every time, and acquire the reputation of a vengeful ghost or wild animal, although reputation is not possible outside the Empire.

What exists here is immensity. As it permeates the mind, nothing made possible by borders and arbitrary terminologies remains. I am tempted on occasion, and sometimes awaken while sleepwalking the idea, to return to the Empire in blatant disregard of my criminal status, the better to demonstrate how irrelevant Judgment is before tasting the outside world.

I see myself in that homecoming as a man decked in thick pelts and coarse fabrics woven from roots. A crowd gathers around me with impossible speed as I stride into the Empire, and for the first time since its creation the tabernacle bell repeatedly chimes.

At times I believe I faintly hear that cherished ringing, and seek its source at each distant horizon. How else shall I find the Empire again now, having lost it immeasurably both in time and in space? I am beginning to wonder did it ever exist.