“The boatman’s,” said the hunter.
“And now you intend to stay with us in Riva?”
“I do no intending,” said the hunter with a smile, and to excuse
his mockery, he laid his hand on the mayor’s knee. “I am here,
that’s all I know, that’s all I can do. My barge has no tiller, it is
driven by the wind that blows in the nethermost regions of death.”

I

No one will read what I write here; no one will come to help me;
if the task of helping me were set, all the doors of all the houses
would remain shut, all the windows shut, everyone would lie in his
bed with his blankets pulled over his head, the whole earth one
nighttime hostel. That makes sense because no one knows about
me, and if anyone did know about me, he would not know where I
sojourn, and if he did know where I sojourn, he would not know
how to keep me there, and if he did know how to keep me there,
he would not know how to help me. The thought of wanting to help
me is a sickness and requires bed rest.

This I know, and so I am not writing to call for help, even when in
moments, undisciplined as I am, e.g. right now, I think very seriously
of it. But it is probably enough to drive out all such thoughts for me
to look around and remember where I am and—this is something I
can say with certainty—where I have been living for centuries.

As I write this, I am lying on a wooden plank; I am wearing—it is
not pleasant to look at me—a dirty shroud; hair and beard, gray and
black, are inextricably tangled together; my legs are covered with a
large, floral-patterned, silk shawl with long fringes. At my head a
sacramental candle illuminates me. On the opposite wall is a small
picture, apparently of a bushman who is aiming his spear at me
while taking cover as best he can behind a gorgeously painted
shield. You find many stupid depictions on board ships, but this is
one of the stupidest. Otherwise my wooden cage is quite empty.
The warm air of the southern night comes in through a porthole in
the side, and I hear the water beating against the old sailboat.

I have been lying here ever since the time when I, the still living
hunter Gracchus, at home in the Black Forest, chased a chamois
and fell. Everything went in order. I gave chase, fell, bled to death
in a gulch, was dead, and this sailboat was supposed to carry me
into the hereafter. I still remember how cheerfully I stretched out
on this plank for the first time; never before had the mountains
heard such song from me as these four walls, still dusky at that
time. I had been happy to live and was happy to die; before coming
on board I joyfully threw down that ragbag of a rifle, knapsack, and
hunting coat that I had always proudly carried, and I slipped into

my shroud like a girl into her wedding dress. Here I lay and waited.
Then there happened **

Building the Great Wall of China

The Great Wall of China was finished at its northernmost point.
The construction was brought forward from the southeast and the
southwest and the sections joined here. This system of partial
construction was also followed on a smaller scale by the two great
armies of workers, the eastern and the western. It was arranged by
forming gangs of about twenty workers, each of which was given
the task of completing a part of the Wall of about five hundred
yards; the adjoining work gang then constructed a wall of equal
length to meet it. But then, after the juncture was accomplished,
the construction was not continued at the end of these thousand
yards, as you might expect; instead, the groups of workers were sent
into quite different regions to continue work on the Wall. In this
way, of course, numerous large gaps came about, and these were
only gradually and slowly filled in, many only after the construction
of the Wall had already been announced as completed. Indeed, it is
said that there are gaps that have not been filled in at all; according
to some people these are much larger than the completed sections,
although this assertion may be only one of the many legends that
have grown up around the Wall and which, given the length of the
Wall, is not something one person can verify, at least with his own
eyes and by his own standards.

Now, one would think that it would have been more advan-
tageous in every way to build continuously, or at least continuously
within the two main sections. After all—a fact generally circulated
and known—the Wall was conceived of as a defense against the
peoples of the north. But how can a wall that is not a continuous
structure offer protection? Indeed, not only can such a wall not
protect, but the construction itself is in perpetual danger. Those
sections of the Wall left abandoned in barren regions can easily be
destroyed, over and over, by the nomads, especially since at that
time these people, made anxious by the construction of the Wall,
changed their dwelling places with incomprehensible rapidity, like
locusts, and so perhaps had a better overview of the progress of the
Wall than even we ourselves, its builders. Nevertheless, construc-
tion could probably not have proceeded by any other method than
the one we used. To understand this, one has to consider the fol-
ture make us gasp aloud in our peaceful arbor; in artists’ paintings, faithful to the truth, we see these faces of damnation, the gaping maws, the jaws equipped with long, pointed teeth, the scrunched-up eyes that seem to squint at the victim whom their maws will crush and rend. When the children misbehave, we show them these pictures, and at once they fly, weeping, into our arms. But we know nothing more about these people of the northern lands; we have never seen them, and if we stay in our village, we will never see them, even were they to rush and race straight at us on their wild horses; the country is too great and will not let them come to us, they will run away into the empty air.

And so, if this is how matters stand, why do we leave our homeland, the river and the bridges, our mothers and fathers, our wives in tears, our children who need instruction, and go away to school in a faraway city; and why are our thoughts even farther away, with the Wall in the north? Why? Ask the leaders. They know us. They, whose minds are roiled with enormous worries, know about us, know our unimportant work, see us sitting together in the low huts, and the prayer that the head of the household recites in the evening amid his family is found pleasing to them or displeases them. And if I may be allowed such a thought about the leadership, I have to say that in my opinion the leadership existed before this time, did not come together like, let us say, exalted mandarins who, inspired by a beautiful morning dream, hurriedly convene a session, hurriedly pass resolutions, and the same evening drum the populace out of their beds to carry out the resolutions, even if it were only to organize an illumination in honor of a god who had shown himself favorable to the lords the day before and, the following day, the lanterns having hardly been extinguished, give them a sound thrashing in some dark corner. Rather, the leadership has very likely always existed, and the same for the decision to build the Wall.

To some extent while the Wall was being built and afterward to this day, I have been occupied almost exclusively with comparative ethnography—there are certain questions whose hub, so to speak, one can get to only by this method—and here I have found that we Chinese possess certain public and state institutions that are uniquely clear and still others that are uniquely obscure. To trace the reasons, especially for this latter phenomenon, has always appealed to me and still appeals to me, and the building of the Wall, too, is essentially affected by these questions.

Among our most obscure institutions is certainly the empire. In

3. Kafka writes „Mauler, literally, “muzzles,” the mouths and jaws of animals and used only pejoratively of human beings.
densely crowded side streets, peacefully consuming the provisions
they have brought with them, while way out in front, in the middle
of the marketplace, the execution of their lord and master proceeds
apace.

There is a legend that expresses this relationship well. The
emperor, so it goes, has sent a message to you, one individual, a puny
subject, a tiny shadow who has fled from the imperial sun into the
most distant of distances, to you alone the emperor has sent a mes-
 sage from his deathbed. He has made the messenger kneel down
beside the bed and has whispered the message to him; it mattered
so much to him that he made him repeat it in his ear. He has nodd-
ed to confirm the accuracy of what was said. And in front of all
the spectators at his death—all walls that might block the view are
ripped down, and the great personages of the empire stand in a cir-
 cle on the wide and vaulting open staircase—in front of them all he
dispatched the messenger. The messenger began his journey at
once; a strong man, a tireless man, a swimmer without equal; now
thrusting out one arm, now the other, he makes his way through the
crowd; when he encounters resistance, he points to his breast,
which bears the sign of the sun; and he advances easily, like no
other. But the crowd is so deep, their dwelling places are without
end; if he could only reach open land, how he would fly; and soon
you would be sure to hear the wonderful beat of his fists at your
door. Instead, how uselessly he exhausts himself; he is still forcing
his way through the chambers of the innermost palace; he will
never get to the end of them; and if he did succeed, nothing would
have been gained; he would have to fight his way down the stairs;
and if he succeeded, nothing would have been gained; he would
have to cross the courtyards, and after the courtyards the second,
outer palace, and more stairs and courtyards, and another palace,
and so on through the millennia; and if he did finally crash out of
the outermost gate—but that can never, never happen—the im-
perial capital would now lie before him, the center of the world,
heaped to the top with its sediment. No one can penetrate this, let
alone with the message of a dead man addressed to a nonentity. But
you sit at your window and envision it as in a dream when evening
comes.

Just so, as hopelessly and hopefully, our people view the emperor.
They do not know which emperor is reigning, and there is even
doubt about the name of the dynasty. A lot of this sort of thing is
learned by rote at school, but the general uncertainty in this re-
spect is so great that even the best students are drawn into it. In
our villages, long-dead emperors are set up on thrones, and one
who lives on only in song has recently issued a decree that the
priest reads aloud in front of the altar. Battles from our most an-
cient history are just now being fought, and with glowing cheeks
your neighbor bursts into your house with the news. The emperor's
wives—overed among their silk cushions, estranged from noble
custom by cunning courtiers, swollen with lust for power, irascible
in their greed, expansive in their lust—commit their villainies again
and again anew; the more time that passes, the more terribly do all
the colors glow, and with loud lamentations the village learns one
day how millennia ago an empress drank her husband's blood in
long drafts.

This, then, is how the people deal with past emperors, although
they mingle the current ones with the dead ones. If once, once in a
lifetime, an imperial official touring the provinces accidentally
comes into our village, makes certain demands in the name of the
ruler, examines the tax rolls, visits schools, questions the priest
about our doings, and then, before climbing back into his sedan
chair, summarizes everything in long admonitions to the assembled
community, a smile flickers across all our faces, each man looks
furtively to the next and bends down to the children so as not to be
observed by the official. What, you think, is he speaking about a
dead man like someone who is alive, this emperor died a long time
ago, the dynasty was wiped out, the official is making fun of us, but
we will act as if we did not notice, so as not to hurt his feelings.
But we will seriously obey only our present ruler, for to do otherwise
would be a sin. And behind the sedan chair of the official, as it
races off, some figure who has been arbitrarily elevated cliffs out
of his crumbling urn and stamps his foot as master of the village.

[Similarly, as a rule our people are scarcely affected by political
upheavals, by contemporary wars. Here I recall an incident from
my youth. A rebellion had broken out in a neighboring but
nonetheless far removed province. I can no longer remember what
caus ed it; anyway, in this context it is unimportant: reasons for up-
rising present themselves with every Dawning day, these are an ex-
citable people. And now at one point a flyer from the rebels was
brought to my father's house by a beggar who had traveled through
that province. That very day was a holiday, our rooms were filled
with guests, the priest sat in the center and studied the paper. Su-
ddenly everyone began to laugh, in the confusion the flyer was torn
to bits, the beggar, who had already been showered with gifts, was
kicked and shoved out of the room, everyone scattered and ran off
into the beautiful day. Why? The dialect spoken in the neighboring
province is basically different from ours, and this difference ex-
presses itself as well in certain forms of the written language that
for us have a somewhat old-fashioned ring. Hardly had the priest
read two sentences of this sort than we had made up our minds.
Old things, heard long ago, calamities long since recovered from.
And—so it seems to me in my recollection—although the horrors of living life spoke irrefutably from the beggar, people shook their heads, laughing and refusing to hear more. That is how eager are we to wipe out the present.4

Anyone intent on concluding from such phenomena that we basically have no emperor at all would not be far from the truth. Again and again I need to assert: there is perhaps no people more loyal to the emperor than our people in the south, but this loyalty does not benefit the emperor. True, the sacred dragon stands on the little pillar at the end of the village, and within living memory it has always blown its flaming breath in homage in the exact direction of Peking, but Peking itself is more foreign to the people of the village than life in the great beyond. Is there really supposed to be a village where the houses jostle up against each other, eclipsing fields that extend farther than the view from our hills; and between these houses people stand day and night, head to head? It is harder for us to imagine such a city than to believe that Peking and its emperor are one single thing, say, a cloud peacefully changing shape under the sun in the course of the ages.

Now, the result of such opinions is, to a certain extent, a free, ungoverned life. By no means immoral; on my travels I have hardly ever encountered such purity of morals as in my homeland. But still, a life that is subject to no current law and follows only directives and warnings that extend to us from ancient times.

I am on guard against generalizations, and I do not maintain that things are the same in all ten thousand villages of our province or, indeed, in all five hundred provinces of China. But still, on the basis of the many texts I have read on this subject, as well as my own observations—the building of the Wall in particular, with its wealth of human material, gave anyone of sensibility the opportunity to journey through the soul of almost all the provinces—on the basis of all this I may perhaps be permitted to say that the dominant attitude toward the emperor again and again and everywhere exhibits certain features in common with the attitude in my homeland. Now, I have no intention of accepting this attitude as a virtue, on the contrary. And while it is mainly the fault of the regime, which in this most ancient empire on earth has always been unable, perhaps through neglect of this concern in favor of other matters, to develop the institution of empire with such clarity that it would exercise its influence immediately and incessantly as far as the realm's most distant frontiers. On the other hand, this attitude also exhibits a weakness of imagination or conviction among the people, who are unable to embrace the empire obediently, in all its liveliness and presence, raising it from its submersion in Peking; and yet the subjects wish nothing more than just for once to feel this connection and drown in it.

Thus this attitude is unlikely to be a virtue. It is all the more striking that precisely this weakness appears to be one of the most important means of uniting our people; indeed, if one may be so forward as to employ such an expression, it is the very ground on which we live. To supply detailed reasons for a reproach here would not mean assaulting our conscience but, what is far worse, assaulting our legs. And for this reason I will for the moment go no further into the investigation of this question.

Into this world news of the building of the Wall now penetrated. It, too, was delayed by some thirty years since its proclamation. It was on a summer evening. I, ten years old, was standing with my father on the riverbank. As suits the importance of this frequently discussed occasion, I can recall the smallest details. Father was holding me by the hand, something he loved to do right up into his old age, and running his other hand along his long, very thin pipe as though it were a flute. His long, sparse, stiff beard was raised into the air, for while he was enjoying his pipe, he was looking across the river at the mountains. At the same time his pigtail, the object of the children's awe, sank lower, rustling faintly on the gold-brocaded silk of his best gown. At that moment a sailboat came to a halt before us; the boatman signaled to my father to come down the embankment; he himself climbed up toward him. They met halfway; the boatman whispered in my father's ear; to get close enough, he put his arms around him. I could not understand what they were saying; saw only that my father did not seem to believe it; the boatman tried to corroborate its truth; my father still could not believe it; then, with a sailor's passion, he practically tore his gown to shreds at his chest to warrant the truth; my father became quieter and the boatman leaped with a thump into the boat and sailed away. My father turned thoughtfully to me, banged out his pipe, stuck it into his belt, and stroked my cheek while pulling my head to him. That is what I liked best, it made me very cheerful, and in this way we went home. There the congee was already steaming on the table, a number of guests had gathered, the wine was about to be poured into the cups. Without taking any notice of this activity, still on the threshold, my father began to report what he had heard. Of course, I do not remember the exact words, but because of the extraordinary circumstances, which engrossed me even as a child, the meaning made so deep an impression on me that I trust my memory to give a version of what he said. I am doing so because it was very characteristic of the people's way of understanding. My father then said something like: "***"
turning my head from side to side, adjusting my suspenders, I began to move along under the piercing glances of the gentlemen. At this moment I still almost believed that a word would be enough to free me, a city person, even free me honorably from this peasant breed. But when I had crossed the threshold to the parlor, the judge, who had run ahead and was waiting for me, said, "I'm sorry for this man." There was no doubt that he meant not my present situation but what would happen to me. The room looked more like a prison cell than like a tavern parlor. Large flagstones, a dark gray, bare wall, an iron ring cemented somewhere into it, at the center something that was half plank bed, half operating table.

Could I still sense any air other than that of a prison? That is the great question—or rather, it would be the question if I had any prospect of being released.

A Crossbreed

I have a peculiar animal, half-kitten, half-lamb. It is an heirloom from my father's estate, but it is only during its time with me that it has developed; formerly it was far more lamb than kitten, but now it has about the same amount of each. From the cat, head and claws; from the lamb, size and shape; from both, its eyes, which are flickering and mild, the hair of its coat, which is soft and lying close to the skin, its movements, which are at once skipping and slinking; in the sunshine on the window sill it curls up into a ball and purrs; on the meadow it rushes around like mad and can scarcely be caught; it runs away from cats, it tries to attack lambs; on moonlit nights the roof gutters are its favorite promenade; it cannot meow and loathes rats; it can lie in wait for hours beside the hen coop, but it has never yet seized an opportunity for murder; I feed it sweetened milk, which is what most agrees with it; it sucks it down in long drafts through its carnivore's teeth. Naturally it is a great spectacle for children. Sunday morning is visiting time; I have the little creature on my lap, and all the children from the neighborhood stand around me. Then the most amazing questions are asked, ones that no human being can answer. [Why is there only one such animal, how come I am the one who has it, whether there was ever an animal like it before and what will happen after it dies, whether it feels lonely, why doesn't it have babies, what is its name?] I don't make any effort to answer but confine myself to exhibiting what I

1. The lines enclosed in brackets were crossed out by Kafka in manuscript but retained as too good to lose by Kafka's first editor, Max Brod. In its first German publication, the editor of this Norton Critical Edition agrees with Brod's decision.