

Translated excerpt

Heinz Helle
Die Überwindung der Schwerkraft

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Overcoming Gravity

Translated by Kári Driscoll



The Elbe, along whose bank the procession was moving, had been of a thick, quasi-material blackness, my brother said, and beyond that, on the opposing shore, the easy shimmer of the more affluent neighbourhoods, where one could make out the occasional villa or historical building, presumably inhabited by some industrialist or scientist from Bielefeld or Australia. At first it's always a little embarrassing, he said, that initial, not-so-brief moment, when everything can still go either way, when a single, unsteady voice decides to sweep the others along with it, tentatively, arrhythmically, and usually a little off key, the lack of musicality in the performance standing in peculiar contradiction to the courage demanded by the act itself—after all, who would volunteer to lead a group of thousands in song?—and my brother had been reminded, he said, of family gatherings, the birthdays and Christmases, of the tension before the others finally decided to chime in—There's no way around it, Let's just get this over with, For he's a jolly good fellow!, O Tannenbaum!—but the most astonishing thing, he said, had been how short a distance had suddenly seemed to separate that tentative *Die Gedanken sind frei* and the monotonal barrage of *Wir sind das Volk*. And the moment this had occurred to him he had bent over and, without thinking about it, picked up a stone, without thinking at all, and he was still certain, he said, that he had felt its hardness and coldness in his fist for at least a few seconds before the word 'stone' had begun to form in his mind. I distinctly remember the sudden silence that surrounded us as we arrived at the war memorial in the Hofgarten and I also remember being slightly irritated by our own silence as we stood there beside a bronze soldier lying on his back with his hands folded beneath a two hundred and fifty tonne slab of travertine. It was in the shadow of the bas-reliefs, marching infantrymen on one

side and a field of graves on the other, on the steps where we had sat down to rest, that my brother told me that having a stone is kind of like having a plan. We laughed and got back up and walked on along the thick hedge separating the gravel path from the grass which the park rules instructed us to keep off. Back in Dresden, by the Elbe, one group had begun to grow louder, louder and louder, and the others had followed suit, and pretty soon it had been impossible to stay put for more than a few seconds at a time as the new arrivals had kept pushing in from behind, and those on the left had pushed from the left and those on the right from the right, and in front had been the police and behind them had stood the others who didn't want the things that the ones over here wanted, the ones who thought differently, who loved differently, who spoke differently, who listened and saw things differently, on the other side of the barrier, of the authorities, of the legal and juridical order. You don't know where you stand, my brother said, unless you've got enemies. We sat down on a bench and watched some couples dancing the tango in a gazebo at the intersection of four gravel paths that led through brightly coloured flowerbeds. So there I was, my brother said. Why? I had no idea. I had to stand somewhere, I suppose. From the other side I heard them shout, Foreigners Out!, and all around me came the reply, No Foothold for Fascists!, and then I heard, Germany for Germans!, and then, Auschwitz Never Again! This went on for some time, he said. The voices on either side of the police blockade had got ever louder and more numerous and then something remarkable had happened: suddenly they all found a common rhythm, a common frequency. Never Again Germany, Germany for Germans, Never Again Germany, Germany for Germans, and in this steady to-and-fro it had all sounded rather harmonious for a good while, musically speaking, he added, but at a certain point the slogans had all started to meld into one, Never Again Germany for Germans, and there had been a real, visceral sense of those two sets of multiply connected neurons firing steadily, one set on either side

of the police who had united the opposing parties by separating them, and a sort of collective consciousness had arisen from out of this neatly bisected mass of people whose disappointments, worries, dreams, and anger now fused together into a singular will: let 'em have it. And after the police had successfully pushed back the first surge, he had remembered that he was still holding that stone, clenched inside his fist in the pocket of his down jacket, and when shortly thereafter the second push had begun, this time from the other side, which was likewise held back, it had suddenly occurred to him that while the police are technically civil servants, the term seemed entirely incongruous in reference to this movable wall of humans in their monochromatic uniforms and riot gear hopelessly trying to stave off the mutual gravitational pull of two antagonistic particle systems. Soon, in any case, both sides had charged at once, at which point the police cordon had immediately dispersed, the dark be-truncheoned Michelin-men retreating to the safety of the blue flashing lights of their APCs, and the black-hoody-wearing vanguard of the respective groups of variously concerned citizens had immediately merged into a single, rapidly-dwindling dance—after one or two poorly aimed punches it seemed no one knew who was protecting who or what from whom—while the ladies and gentlemen in their tweed and their leather jackets and their trench coats and their shell suits, with their ponytails and side partings and their baseball caps and woolly hats and their credit cards and pension plans had all kept politely in the background, in safety and possession of the only truth in whose name they were prepared to drag their tired feet onto the cold street, and those young, courageous fighters, so full of hope and ennui, who had launched themselves headlong into the fray in search of victory or pain or of any kind of feeling at all, now stood around in confusion trying to tell from the faces beneath the hoods which ones wanted which kind of Germany. Then the riot vans had driven off and he could still remember the sudden feeling of dejection, said my brother, when it had suddenly dawned on them

that the departure of the police did not mean that the enemy had disappeared but only the ability to name him, the idea of a front line one could hold, of a border one could defend, while of course the true enemy was still there, would always be there, invisible and invincible, in the midst of an angry mob where it was getting harder and harder to figure out how you got there. I remember how at this point my brother suddenly seemed embarrassed, how he hesitated, looked around, dug his heel into the gravel and then looked right at me for a long time. He couldn't really explain it, he said finally in a low voice, but at that exact moment, just when the danger had passed and everything had suddenly calmed down, he had raised his arm and let it fly. And in those few seconds that he could see the stone in the air above the throng of people he had once again thought to himself that it is the human fear of being alone, the fierce desire to be part of a group, of a pack, a tribe, that is responsible for all the anger and violence in the world, from the fathers shouting from the sidelines of a game of five-a-side to the few freezing remnants of a hundred-thousand man army who stay where they are in the ice and snow even after the slow erosion of any and all structuring motives—achievability of the objective, integrity of the command structure, martial jurisdiction, the supply of food and fuel—and wait in silent obedience for the end, while the final order comes down that when the ammunition runs out they are to try to fend off the enemy's tanks, cannons, and rocket launchers with knives, or with their teeth if necessary. And in a way he regretted having thrown the stone without knowing where it would land, deeply regretted it, but at the same time, at the risk of sounding cryptic or simply callous, to be perfectly honest, he said, he had to admit that in that moment as he watched the stone, solitary and hard, sailing over that sea of heads, hermetically sealed, he had enjoyed imagining himself as just such a stone, solid, unerring, and impassive, rushing inexorably to be united with a furious brain.

I don't know if it was that supposedly German commitment to loneliness or just a more general weariness of human company, but I do know that after his time in Switzerland my brother embarked upon a phase of intensive itinerancy, traversing the continent by car, and he later told me that he had always had a pleasant sensation in his belly wherever he encountered that circle of stars on a blue background, emblazoned on a sign next to shiny new stretches of tarmac running through desolate backwaters, in southern Serbia, for instance, where the walls of the mosques were still riddled with bullet holes only barely concealed by desiccated shrubs, and, he said, he used to wonder whether they would rebuild the toppled minarets if in exchange this country were given a genuine opportunity to join the political union which had initially financed only the motorways, which served as long, sleek runways to show off the latest models from Munich and Sindelfingen, and at the time, he said, it had cost him considerable mental effort to remember that a beautiful, true idea doesn't become any less beautiful and true just because it benefits the German economy. It had been during these long car journeys, frequently at night, in the wind and the rain, that he had come to appreciate the transnational unifying force that lay in such cold, unambiguous guidelines as keeping right except when overtaking, or the advisory speed limit, or the two-second rule, and hence his vexation had been all the greater when, one night, in Germany of all places, he had first been confronted with the fragility of even these last remaining universal norms. He had been on the autobahn somewhere between Kassel and Fulda when, after a long curve, out of nowhere, the tail end of a line of cars had loomed up in front of him, and fortunately he had not been going too fast or been too tired, and the taillights of the cars in front of him had been red and numerous enough, that

he was able to brake in time, as were the hundreds or even thousands of pairs of headlights suddenly racing out of the apparently empty nocturnal darkness behind him. The traffic wasn't simply slow-moving, or stop-and-start, or anything of that sort, no, everything had come to a complete standstill, and he couldn't say what it was precisely that made him switch off his engine right then and there, whether it was because he had seen that the other drivers had also done so, or whether when it came to the operation of motor vehicles there was some sort of subconscious sense attuned to vibrations in the immediate vicinity, or rather to the lack thereof, or whether it had just been the suddenness of his braking, the total deceleration, the absoluteness of this unexpected stasis there in the left-hand lane of the autobahn at two thirty in the morning on the way back to Munich from Wilhelmshaven. Next, he said, he had tried to work out in his head what the distance between his car and the cars in front and behind him must have been in order for him to have been able to have had the feeling of having the road entirely to himself for two whole hours while travelling at a hundred and sixty kilometres per hour, but had given up, having never been good at mental arithmetic, and in any case the fact that the autobahn was now completely full after having been completely empty for so long was no doubt surprising but not logically impossible. And then everyone had got out of their cars. It's always a little uncanny, he said, when people begin to coordinate their actions without first having communicated verbally to determine the purpose of those actions, and as soon as a group's internal communication consists exclusively of glances and gestures, sometimes, he continued, something like a pre-civilized determination emerges, which, it seemed to him, had something to do with the difficulty of non-linguistic collective decision-making, and in such a situation, he said, he imagined an individual's consciousness to be an open, untethered force awaiting its appointed direction, its goal, like the sea slowly flowing backwards into a surging wave, and that when, in such a group of

people who have looked around and at each other, someone finally makes a move, it is only then that those preceding glances retroactively gain their significance, which may be entirely at odds with the original intentions of various other members of the group, but now it's too late, someone has taken the initiative and in a troop of monkeys it's a few million years too early for discussion, and so when one of them suddenly takes off the others follow. He had in any case never heard anything as unsettling before or since, he said, as the sound of rows and rows of car doors opening and closing in quick succession all around him, those next to him making up only a tiny part of this acoustic phenomenon, but apart from the paradoxical relationship between the similarity of the individual sounds and the total arbitrariness of their audible point of origin, it was above all the pitch, which had sounded decidedly natural, when, after an overture of individual irregular thuds, it all condensed into a single, unified whoosh, dampened by rubber linings and tempered glass, followed by another couple of isolated thuds, then silence. And just as suddenly as moments ago the road had been full of cars, it was now suddenly full of people who together exuded a curious energy, a mixture of uncertainty and exhilaration in the face of this unusual situation in the middle of the night on a three-lane motorway, and even more unexpected than the darkness, which, like the warmth of that summer night, he had only really noticed upon stepping out of the car, was the total silence, which seemed so completely at odds with this place and with the number of people and vehicles assembled there. They had all just sort of stood there, next to their respective cars, but only for an instant, and then the menacing collective of the alighted had immediately dissipated into so many individuals, some stretching their backs and legs, others lighting cigarettes or clambering over the crash barrier for a pee, and here and there some had even struck up conversations with their neighbours in waiting, and he had been amazed, my brother said, to see how many drivers evidently had beer in the car, and he had wondered what they needed it for on

nights when they didn't inadvertently find themselves in the middle of an unannounced road closure. Once or twice, he said, he thought he had sensed a moment's uncertainty among that section of the company of the waiting that he could perceive around him, first after about ten minutes, then again after about twenty minutes, as if bottlenecks had to follow a particular rhythm like trains or a school timetable, but then suddenly it had all gone very quickly, people getting back into their cars in a neat orderly manner, row by row from the front to the back, swiftly but not hurriedly. After having crawled along for about three kilometres his engine had started to overheat and the next time the traffic stopped an unremarkable man had got out of his minivan and brought over a bottle of mineral water which he had proceeded to pour, face expressionless, into the radiator, while my brother told him over and over that he didn't know how to thank him. After that there had been no more interruptions. They had exited the autobahn, following a diversion that took them along country roads for several kilometres, past villages whose transitional status must have been hard to bear even in daylight, but now, in the middle of the night, ignored by hundreds of brightly lit, passing cars, there had been something heart-breaking about the darkness of those villages, my brother said, and then as they got back onto the autobahn, each of the cars had accelerated and disappeared in the roar of their engines, annihilating kilometre after kilometre between them and the loneliness of their destinations and points of origin, and it was then, I believe, as we stood beneath that beech tree on the bank of the Isar, that he first expressed to me his theory that perhaps the real reason you are allowed to drive so fast in Germany is so that you can more quickly forget where you come from.