



Heinz Helle
Overcoming Gravity

Novel

(Original German title: Die Überwindung der Schwerkraft)

approx. 208 pages, Clothbound

Expected publication date: September 2018

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Sample translation by Laura Wagner

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Soon I'm going to be the same age my brother was when he died. Maybe that's why I have started to think about him more often lately, about the years when his sickness was slowly becoming obvious and we grew a little closer at first until we lost each other suddenly. It's not that easy for me to understand what happened between us back then and why it was so hard for me, despite the intimacy I felt when we were together, to disagree with him. Still today, more than seven years later, his death seems strangely unreal to me, and even though it is so fundamentally present in my daily life that I sometimes seem to almost forget that he existed, when I look at his picture I still feel the same as I did before, when he was alive. Maybe some part of him is still here after all, within me, in the things we saw together and talked about and thought about, delicate traces on pavement slabs or patterns in nerve cells, lines that refer to another place and another time. Or maybe it's just that I still haven't quite understood what the words *my brother is dead* mean, and the child in me refuses to acknowledge that something changed between us in that moment that I saw a box sink into a pit in the rain, in front of a wooden cross bearing his name. On the evening I saw my brother for the last time I wrote him a letter. He had left my flat a few minutes earlier without saying a word, because of a trifle, he could be very sensitive when he was drunk, and I felt that he was overexaggerating, so I wrote to him. I remember that I wrote with a pencil, which was unusual for me, and I also remember that the letters grew bigger and bigger with each page that I turned in my notebook. From the fact that I was writing in my notebook and not on the beautiful stationary my grandmother used to give me for Christmas year after year, I realised that I wasn't really planning on posting this letter, and when I became aware of this the tone became more and more ferocious, more ruthless

and abusive, which surprised me, as my brother hadn't done anything but convince me to have a few thousand unnecessary beers and shots and cigarettes, which I could actually have refused had I known how, and I don't know if he knew that I didn't know how, but sometimes I think that maybe he could have known, he, too, found it hard to say no, so he could have guessed that I wouldn't say no under any circumstance if he were to ring my doorbell in the middle of the night, and at that moment, my doorbell rang for the second time that night, and this time I picked up my jacket, hat and scarf straightaway, put on my boots and instead of opening the door, I stomped down the stairs loud and clear, reproachfully at first, then relieved about not having to write a letter that I was never going to send anyhow and to be able to keep drinking beer with my brother instead, and naturally, we didn't comment on the fact that he had left my flat just fifteen minutes earlier without saying a word. Instead, we thought about where we could go at this time of night, typically we'd go to the Bachwirt, but he had only locked it up an hour earlier, otherwise he wouldn't have come to my place, he didn't want to go back there so soon, no, we had to find somewhere else, somewhere that was open late, on a Tuesday, or was it a Wednesday, so we crossed the ice strewn with loose gravel cautiously underneath the tall, dark beeches at the playground diagonally across from my flat and then turned onto Jahn Street which leads to Fraunhofer Street, surely there'd be something open there, and when I, after looking at the delicate snowflakes in the white cones of light created by the streetlights, carefully said Sunshine Pub, my brother said Theaterklause, which surprised me because I thought he hated the people there since he quit working there, or he quit working there since he hated the people, in any case it became clear that we would go to the Theaterklause if he suggested it, at this time and after the amount of beer we had both drunk at my place, and if I'm being completely honest, I didn't care either way where we were going to end up as long as it wasn't the Flaschenöffner, and then we crossed Fraunhofer Street and passed the dark, empty Fraunhofer Pub and walked along Klenze Street to the Theaterklause which was also dark and deserted, and then first he and then I rattled at the door, and then I said, what a shame, already closed. A short while later we stood in the Flaschenöffner, my brother went to the bar and I hoped that he would be noticed soon, he did smile at me once more with pretend arrogance and disbelief, but soon after that his facial expression turned grim, and I thought I could see in it a flicker of the old childhood desperation about not being noticed, but at that same moment the brawny, moustachioed man behind the counter turned his head and saw my brother and went over to him slowly and flung his arms around his neck without moving his chubby cheeks or his eyebrows in any way whatsoever. It had something comical, this brute face over my brother's shoulder and two chubby arms underneath hugging a thin back, some people gain

weight when they drink, others lose weight, and then the man saw me and, of course, he still didn't smile, but simply nodded slowly, and then he was suddenly at the beer tap drawing us two Augustiner Hell, even though he knew that my brother preferred to drink wheat beer, and that's why I didn't like to come here, because each time I was unsure about how my brother would react to being patronised like this, but that evening he didn't seem to be particularly interested, he was thirsty, we clinked glasses and each took a big sip, then we set down the glasses, and Schorsch or Max, or whatever the owner of the Flaschenöffner was called, sat down at our table and rested his heavy face on his heavy arms and joined us in looking out onto Fraunhofer Street, where all of a sudden much thicker snowflakes had begun to fall. When Schorsch, or Max, turned his head to face me, I nodded in agreement, as if I meant to say, your Augustiner is especially tasty, or, look at that, it's snowing, or something like that, a reflex designed to create harmony, as I often do when bigger, older, or otherwise more powerful men look at me, and then Schorsch, or Max, asked my brother if his little brother could speak, and my big brother said, leave my little brother alone. I wasn't surprised by this reaction, but so touched that my heart started to beat faster, and when I saw how my brother's gaze hardened I thought hard about what I could say to loosen up the situation a bit, I knew that my brother, if he was in the right mood, would probably kill someone for me, whatever that meant exactly, kill someone for someone, or die for something, so I asked the owner of the Flaschenöffner, from whose speakers Robin Beck's *Fist time* was playing, if he also had Roxette. *It must have been love*. Shortly thereafter, my brother and I and three of the regulars, already looking somewhat worse for wear, were standing on the bench seat in the corner, arms around each other, bawling the words *But I lost it somehow*. I don't know if it was about me or about the United States, which my brother sometimes defended in a similarly ferocious manner, his mother's homeland, but in any case he suddenly shoved one of our co-singers to the side a little, at which the man pushed him off the bench but my brother caught himself nicely, stood up again immediately, grabbed my arm and took me outside, and with the hand that wasn't holding me he gave the world the finger. The cold air sobered us up instantly, as did the fact that the thick, white snowflakes, which had been reminiscent of Russia or Canada from inside the bar, dissolved into nothing on the outside, on a pavement in Munich, and my brother said that he couldn't believe that America, even though it had freed the Germans from Hitler, wasn't considered a friend any longer, but increasingly seen as a large, brutal, strange, consumption-oriented power. *Fucking Germans*, he swore, which I didn't hold against him, he himself was German after all, but also American, I don't know what your problem is, he added, which did irritate me a little, this constant harping on about consumption and capitalism, it's called

freedom, you serfs, and there is, as far as I know, still no law in Germany that forces you to eat at McDonald's or to wear Nikes or to listen to Roxette. They're from Sweden, I countered, to which he didn't respond, it's always about hypocrisy, he said, superficiality, phoniness, even though those fatso alcoholics in there aren't worthy of even thinking the name of the country that has produced my mother, nobody was more genuine than her, more caring, more reliable, and I won't even start with the fact that without us the other Europeans would have slaughtered you all in revenge in '45, he said, and I thought, fair enough, then I won't start with the Russians' contribution to the victory over Hitler. It's just jealousy, I said instead, and he immediately slowed down the speed in which he had been walking in front of me until then so that he had to talk to me over his left shoulder, and at the antiques store at the corner of Müller Street he suddenly stopped and peered inside through the shop window, at a reprint of an old copper engraving depicting the island of Helgoland in the seventeenth century, just before it was cut through by a storm tide, exactly in half. I believe that many people in Germany are secretly bitterly disappointed because the image that they had created of America no longer holds true, I said, and took it as consent that my brother, despite the late hour and the many beers, didn't object but kept listening silently as he stared at the faded red of the sandstone cliffs, at the North Sea, at the small houses protected from the wind by the cliffs. We're unable to forgive the Americans for betraying the right ideals while we remained faithful to the wrong ones until the end, I said oddly solemnly and with a seriousness that surprised me, as though the things coming out of my mouth were a long-since realised, examined and verified article of faith of mine and not one drunk person's spontaneous attempt to mollify another drunk person. [...]