Straw in the Ice: Stories

ALEXANDER KLUGE
TRANSLATED BY RICHARD LANGSTON

Preface

March 13, 1967

Dear Axel,

[...]

You cannot know how much this question has occupied me recently in the most earnest of contexts, namely the inces-sant reproduction of barbarism. [...]

An inkling of this can already be found in The Communist Manifesto. [...]

I would have much liked to talk to you about whether and how this intention can be inserted into your plans, that is unless exactly this is already your objective, as I almost presume. Such a film could inch its way closer to the very thing occupying me more and more, namely the question of coldness. In my lecture on Auschwitz, I spoke about it and plan to write an essay about coldness when my larger projects are further along. That incomparable scene from Yesterday Girl where Lexi says, in response to the reproaches of the examining magistrate, “I’m cold even in the summer,” has stayed with me. I’m deadly serious. This is what all of this is really about. [...]

Cordial greetings from your old friend,

Teddie

[...]

Theodor W. Adorno referred in his letter from March 13, 1967, to the protagonist in my first film, Anita G., who was convicted for having stolen a female coworker’s sweater. The judge inquired into her motives. He found the loot insignificant compared to the sentence that the defendant had to face. At the time of the theft it was summer. “Why,” the judge asked, “did you have to steal a sweater at this time of year?” Speaking from personal experience, this was unusual. Anita G. (played by Alexandra Kluge) responded by saying, “I’m cold even in the summer.”

Essential characteristics, without which humankind would not have survived, come from the ice age. Hence the differenti-ation between hot and cold so important for warm-blooded animals: the basis for all FEELING. In this respect, it can be said that we human beings all come from the cold. At the same time, it can be observed that coldheartedness cannot be tolerated for long.

A.K.
Straw in the Ice: Remedies for the “Wreck of Hope”

The result of a mix-up, Caspar David Friedrich’s painting The Sea of Ice is also called The Wreck of Hope. Can hope be wrecked? Our relationship to hope is much like our multifaceted relation to coldness. As long as they are alive, there can be no absolute zero point of hope for human beings. Hope burns brighter the closer they are to freezing to death.

Straw in the Ice

All three floors in the house at Kaiserstraße 42 are heated centrally in the winter. Installed in 1912, the heating turns on without a glitch every year in late fall after the occupants freeze for two weeks in the name of saving money. Everyday when the thermometer displays a temperature below 0 degrees Celsius, my father leaves the three rooms constituting his medical practice on the second floor at 11:30 AM for the garden. The path leads him through the stairwell, the swinging door in the foyer, and into the dining room, where he then enters the winter garden. Without this greenhouse, the tropical plants would not keep in the cold months of the year. (For two winters after the destruction in 1945 the palm trees still stood even without the glass covering and heating before they eventually died—life is tenacious.) These TROPICS are portioned off from the REALITY OUTSIDE by a glazed veranda. There is never a draft in this sluice, because only the door from the winter garden to the veranda, or the one from the veranda to the garden, can be opened at any one time.

An artificial man-made basin of poured concrete, the garden’s oval-shaped pond separates two large circular flowerbeds (next to them are the rock garden and the walnut tree). However, aquatic plants and animals created a rich “natural appearing” organic soup within the vessel that with every passing year cannot simply be called water. It is an artificial product similar to the winter garden only a few meters away that imitates a climate whose natural state is itself thousands of kilometers away.

The garden and pond are covered with snow from the middle of December. The thick layer of ice atop the water is exactly two weeks old. Blown over with snow, its capacity for carrying weight cannot be tested. The harsh winds from the Harz Mountains rush over it. My father froze in the white lab coat he wore when he raced out of his practice. From the edge of the pond, he tested the consistency of the ice with a stick. His bones shivered imperceptibly, something he himself hardly noticed in his haste. He was in a hurry. The patients in the waiting room, private patients, impatient people. All the same, he methodically stepped onto the ice of the pond. My father is a thoroughly careful man.

When the pond finally froze over enough such that my father
considered it accessible, he cut holes in the layer of ice with a pickax. He stuck bundles of straw prepared by the chauffeur into the openings without daring to get too close as the stability of the ice was unpredictable in close proximity. The straw came from Klein Quenstedt. The narrow opening held the bundles in place where they then froze. However, narrow tubes in the dried straw remained, which supplied the fish in the pond with oxygen. My father called this “giving fish freedom.” He meant that the ice’s crystalline barrier should never be allowed to freeze over completely. Thick carp and obese goldfish swam under the layer of ice. They received the empathy of my father.

How come my father never got a cold from doing this? Why did he not put his jacket on, as was his custom even when making house calls in the immediate vicinity of our neighborhood? He never left the house “without getting dressed.” Yet the garden and pond belonged to the house, and presumably the breath of countless coughing and sniffling patients protected him against getting a cold; they exhaled so many viruses and bacteria on him that he—like Mithridates of Pontus—acquired an immunity to poison. He considered himself to be hardy. He never thought himself to be in danger. He was certain that only those who think about coldness end up getting a cold. He had no opportunity for such thoughts when he fashioned the holes and with a firm, quick grip, filled them with straw, or when several days later he tested the consistency of the straw and replenished the tufts.

Why was my father so responsible? Why did he launch into such a rescue operation? When trying to reach the ice, he could have slipped while surmounting the embankment. How he might have really fallen on the treacherous consistency of the pond between the paths bordered by the holes. With a certain vanity but also for reasons to do with class, he wore patent-leather shoes—dress shoes with smooth leather soles—in his medical practice. What protected him was once again his fervor, a concentration on the thing at hand. He also sought to return back to the warmth of his workplace. Indeed, he was by vocation neither a gardener nor a fish farmer.

“The reliability of one’s actions by hook or by crook” belonged to the diligence of my father’s generation of 1892. Had, for example, a group of Halberstadt citizens gotten drunk at a party following an event organized by the Cathedral Club (today the association no longer exists, but during the Red Army’s occupation it housed the commanding officer), then his practice would have opened an hour later at 9:00 AM instead of 8:00 AM. However, during the winter my father would never miss that moment every day at 11:30 AM when he interrupted his treatment of patients in order to look after the straw in the ice. It was as if he felt in his own lungs a lack of air for the fish. Sympathy
moved him more than any lack of sobriety, which revealed itself inwardly in his severe headaches and outwardly in his bloodshot eyes. My father was that type of person whose character could help a people survive in times of adversity; this mother’s son was, however, never really confronted in the ways for which his character was suited. He considered himself a happy man. He gladly let others make fun of his first name, ERNEST. In tender moments, he let women call him “Little Ernest,” as if there were a diminutive form of earnestness.

“Penitentes”
Penitent snow (icy formations reminiscent of penitent sinners): a form of snow accumulation in regions with low humidity and intense solar radiation. Traversing it on glaciers and firm fields is arduous. At the high altitudes of the Issik glacier, the pentententes are up to six kilometers high and because of the weight of their snow lean southwardly. The unusual forms were captured from a distance at an elevation of about 5,300 meters at five in the afternoon on the western slope of the eastern Alisu valley. No terrorist, no oppressor, or anyone else for that matter ever stepped foot on this expanse located in the politically volatile region between Kyrgyzstan, Kashmir Afghanistan, and the Wakhan Mountains, which Friedrich Kussmaul once researched. It is a region beyond humankind. (→ Chapter 18 of the DVD)

The Wreck of Hope
“And when I threw the breaks on this hope while it was cruising at full speed only to skid another 100 meters, this hope was nevertheless my own . . .”
Anne Weber

In 1822, Caspar David Friedrich painted a polar landscape (the painting went missing): A WRECKED SHIP OFF THE COAST OF GREENLAND IN THE MOONLIGHT. The inscription “Hope” could be read on the bow of the ship. That was a thoroughly common name for a vessel in those days. The large-format painting The Sea of Ice that later emerged was mistaken for the lost first image and acquired thus the name THE WRECK OF HOPE. The image was not sold in Friedrich’s lifetime. Gerhard Richter saw it on view in the Hamburger Kunsthalle.

Friedrich never directly saw a polar landscape. The consistency of ice was something he knew only from the pried-open winter ice on the Elbe that formed bizarre blockades. “With sharp pointed plates of ice stacked on top of one another.” (→ Chapter 6 of DVD)

The fantasy in the image dates back to newspaper reports as well as panoramas displayed in exhibitions in Prague and
Dresden like Winter Sojourn of the North Pole Expedition that responded to the theme in the popular press in the years 1822 and 1823. Commentators claim that the piled-up ice visible in Friedrich’s painting refers to the eternity of God and the WRECKED SHIP crushed by the ice to the helplessness and transience of human beings. They say the painting denies all hope of understanding God’s being in any rational way. In that case, Dr. Detlef Sturm replied, it is not all of hope, but rather just this one instance that would be considered wrecked. The tremendous power of the painting’s color, opined others, proves that at the very least Friedrich was not out to represent the “horror of the ice” but rather its TRANSCENDENCE. The layering of the ice floes evokes the stairs of a temple such that the icy plates appear to reach up toward the blue heavens: “an apotheosis of observed objectivity devoid of any illusion.”

After viewing the painting in the Hamburger Kunsthalle, Elfriede Ewers and Carla Stiffels sat a long while over coffee. They met one another only very recently. It occurred to them that the painting was labeled The Sea of Ice/The Wreck of Hope in the catalogue even though it was only called The Sea of Ice in the gallery. The wording THE WRECK OF HOPE left an impression on Elfriede.

—What do you find better, the title or the painting?
—It really doesn’t matter what I think.
—How so?
—In view of the painting, my judgment doesn’t matter in the least! You shouldn’t pass judgment when you’re dealing with transcendence. At least that’s what it says in the catalogue.
—It strikes me that no actual observers could have been present at a scene so far north. They would have frozen to death, would have certainly not been cared for, and would have never found their way back home to tell of their impressions. A heated glass tunnel would have been necessary, one connected to a ferry landing or a helicopter pad, in order to furnish a landscape—like the one painted by Friedrich—with spectators. That really puzzled me.
—And you think the painting wants to convey that to us?
—“A flower named nowhere.” And why is it that it’s a “wrecked hope”?
—It certainly doesn’t say that the painting is called The Wreck of Hope. Only the title The Sea of Ice is certain.
—In other words, visitors come here, cast a glance at transcendence and, while on their way home, hope appears once again.
—You can’t print that in the catalogue.

In the meantime, dusk fell over Hamburg. The city’s museums were closed in the evenings. The heating ensured that the temperature in the rooms in which the paintings hung remained constant throughout the night.
The Underwater Artiste

With hands and feet bound, he jumped from the Belle Isle Bridge into the frozen Detroit River. He managed to pass right through the hole cut out in the ice for his jump. The current under the sheet of ice pulled him, however, downriver from the hole. Thanks to a minimal layer of air between the ice and the surface of the water he was able to breathe. The border between the aggregate states of water and ice is never precise. Monitors along the river were therefore surprised when miles downstream he knocked from beneath the surface of the ice at a spot where it began to thin out. Looking like a ghost, he could be seen below the ice, his nose pressed closely against its underside in order to secure the few deciliters of oxygen available at the interface.

“One can set out for every arbitrary point on earth, even inhospitable ones,” the artiste said after his rescue, “by tracing a spiral outward from the center of one’s own being.”

There Can Be No Downfall without Saying Good-Bye or Leaving a Trace: “Facts Void of News Content”

“On Thursday, icy winds and partially heavy snowfalls will accompany the second sudden drop in temperature this winter throughout large portions of Europe. A cutter sank under the heavy load of ice at sea in a matter of minutes after several icebreakers descended upon the ship but then became frozen.” No one who saw this survived. Marie Eilers wanted to deny outright that the account in question was factual. She therefore contested that the ocean froze and doubted that the icebreakers barreled down on the ship only in the end to freeze up.

“How then,” responded Eberhard Fischer (also known as “Little Fish”), who was in fact a woman, “did the ship sink? By a stroke of magic?” Even if they are devoid of news content, the facts are facts insofar as those individuals who had seen the disaster were also devoured by it.

According to the “Wet Ice Index,” the existence of a seventh cold period from 1540 to 1720 has been historically proven on a global scale and is known as the “Minor Ice Age.” According to the opinion of Allicon and Dartfort, it began, however, much earlier than previously thought: not in 1540, but rather around 1300 or even 1200 A.D. Until now, historians have held it responsible for at least one historical event: the disappearance of the first European settlers in Greenland, the “Norsemen” who settled there shortly before 1000 A.D. and ventured toward Canada. They vanished without a trace. A few thousand Vikings lived in Greenland back then. But around 1350 a portion of the settlement, Vesterbygden, was suddenly depopulated; the larger eastern settlement, Österbygden, was inhabited until roughly 1500. Thereafter, every single trace of the settlers van-
ished. Either they set out for an unknown destination or they perished miserably. There is hardly any archeological evidence, says D. Grimsby, whom I interviewed. And the few facts that may have emerged in recent years on account of excavations by the National Museum of Denmark are, *curiously enough*, being withheld. I jumped in at this point.

I: That’s rather strange.
GRIMSBY: . . . are, *curiously enough*, being withheld.
I: Does that have to do with Denmark’s affiliation with NATO?
GRIMSBY: I don’t think so.
I: It points to something mysterious when the results of research of that kind are withheld.
GRIMSBY: How so “of this kind”?
I: I gathered that from your use of the words “curiously enough.”
GRIMSBY: You can’t infer anything from that.
I: That they turned to cannibalism before perishing and that publishing such information would contradict Denmark’s reputation?
GRIMSBY: Not necessarily.
I: That they succumbed to illness and that their recovered clothing had to be disinfected first, but no one knows how? That the valuable antiquities already inventoried could not be destroyed but also could not come into contact with the present?
GRIMSBY: We don’t even know whether they found pieces of clothing.
I: Yes, but why are they openly withholding the facts?
GRIMSBY: What do I know? I’m as curious as you are. But we don’t even know whether or not they found anything at all to withhold. They have refused to admit that they found nothing. They have also not conceded that there is something there.
I: Baffling. And they don’t rule out that the Norsemen departed twice at two different dates, once around 1350 and then later again around 1500, without leaving a message or any news? Each time they departed without leaving a trace?
GRIMSBY: That doesn’t exist in archeology. A trace can always be found.
I: Perhaps they found traces of a curse that now is supposed to be prevented from reaching the Danish motherland or the American allies via Greenland. A final desperate curse? Something harmful?
GRIMSBY: That’s your assumption, not a fact.
I: No. Where is this fact supposed to come from if archeologists are withholding it?
GRIMSBY: Curiously enough.
I: I’m starting to believe by now that it has something to do with an arms buildup. Greenland is a deployment zone.

GRIMSBY: You think that the trace is being withheld because undisclosed locations of military utility, for example, would therewith be divulged?

I: Something underground.

GRIMSBY: It is your curiosity that is a fact.

I: When we otherwise have none. You, too, are ultimately not uncurious. You yourself spoke of something curious.

GRIMSBY: When?

I: Just now.

[. . .]

Pless Castle in Winter

In January 1917, the so-called supreme headquarters was located in Pless Castle near the Polish border. Three hundred rooms for officials, among them officers. Three moods prevailed: (1) depression, (2) determined will, to persevere, and (3) a narrowing of all thought, narrow-mindedness.

Snow covered the manicured English grass. The sky was lead-grey. The Reich chancellor smoked cigarettes in his coupe nervously as he drove up to the castle along the long driveway lined by barren trees. He entered the enormous hall, its walls adorned with hunting trophies, and then climbed the marble stairs. He was led into the conference room constructed out of a redecorated dining room. His field marshal (Hindenburg), the quartermaster general (Ludendorff), the chief of his naval staff (Holtzendorff), and the emperor’s three cabinet chiefs were all waiting. The kaiser was informed that the meeting was about to begin.

All feeling in the room was unnerved. Those of the quartermaster general (a demonic person, whose willpower attempted to occupy those sitting next to him) were weighted down by the overload of fall and winter. The occupier ended up occupying himself. The kaiser, impatient, was not prepared to listen, neither to himself nor to others; he wanted away from here. The three cabinet chiefs were contaminated by the nonpresence of the kaiser. The people had already been here far too long. The Reich chancellor had hardly been on site long enough. His feelings, worn out, lay torn up somewhere between Berlin and the drive up to Pless Castle. They were unhinged in the train. In this emotional situation the decision was made to commence with “unrestricted submarine warfare,” which pulled the United States into World War I.

It was not the case that what was terribly wrong about the decision went unrecognized. After the chancellor gave his consent (everyone had left the hall), he sat at the window and looked at the frozen pond in the park.
Heidegger in the Gorge

Arrival by motorcycle. It was still nighttime. In order to ward off the icy wind, we were each wrapped up in two officer’s overcoats such that we could no longer move. We were practically blind from the wool scarves over our eyes and noses. A troop of partisans could have unloaded us from our vehicles and carried us away like packages.

The gorge was three and one-half kilometers long; they call it the “Grand Canyon” of the Crimea. We hiked it from six in the morning. The rock faces were 350 meters high. The narrowest passage at the bottom of the valley was three meters wide. At that point an iron grate passed over a river that otherwise rushed through the gorge. The river was frozen over when we saw it.

On the arid Crimean Peninsula streams are considered rivers. Water is unpredictable.

The Bolschoi Canyon Restaurant was four kilometers from the village of Sokolinoe. For one Wehrmacht coupon we could get a cup of tea.

We crossed two rivers, the Sary-Uzen and the Ausun-Uzen. Both were frozen over. They flow alongside one another frequently.

The uphill path led to a clearing where an oak tree, once struck by lightning, stood; it’s called the “postal tree” because hikers use it to exchange news. From there we took the steep middle path that led upward to the rim of the gorge. The ascent lasted forty-five minutes. Up above, a narrow trail forked to the right toward the edge of the steep walls. Roughly 200 meters along the rim a path leads to the first bluffs on the right side of the gorge called “Storozhevoy,” or lookout cliffs. There the eye can wander far beyond the peaks of the mountains and forests.

The most beautiful and most difficult passage of the hike came next. There was no path per se. Rocks. Stacked in layers up to two meters high, waterholes, now frozen like ruins. We required three hours to reach the “pool of youth” two kilometers away. The pool (“Wanna molodosti”) was a kettle-shaped depression formed by leaching in the limestone. It’s fed by a source hidden two hundred meters up above in the cliff and has a temperature originating from the earth’s interior. It was therefore not frozen over. The clear water is supposed to possess extreme rejuvenating properties. In our homeland, we would have called such a formation a “witches’ cauldron.”

We found the motorcycles, guarded by two privates, still intact. We returned in darkness. So, you warriors, Colonel von Sachtleben greeted us, how was it?

The question couldn’t be answered in a clear sentence. The fact was that the tour, which bodies longed for more than the mind, did not contribute to the gigantic struggle for domination.
in the East. No inspection of nature could lend a hand. The powers of volition had to mature in bunkers where they emitted their concentrated threats and destruction like bolts of lightning. In order to subjugate adequately FROM A SINGLE POINT the entire earth, or at the very least this fifth of the earth’s surface that calls itself Russia (and awaits the actual name of its creator). But this demands a double activity: introducing the forces of servitude and hauling them away again. Ergo: the task of an enormous monastization of the world, the cultivation of orders, the organized removal of power (or its metamorphosis) such that they do not assail the keeper of power and give him the same lockjaw that curtailed Cronus’s rule. My view from the “watchtower” was, in this respect, “practice in the ways of parting glances.” One must bid adieu either to those conquered or to one’s homeland. There is no third option.

**Beuys in the Crimea**

During the hopeless battles incurred during the retreat of German troops in the Crimea in the spring of 1944, a JU 87 dive bomber crashed in an open field in the northern part of the peninsula. These airplanes were usually occupied by two men. The pilot, crushed and mangled, was dead on impact. Pinned under the debris from the rear of the aircraft, the second man, Joseph Beuys, lay unconscious with a skull injury and broken bones. Tatars who pillaged the wreck supposedly rescued him. It’s said that they warmed him with felt mats; according to other reports, he was put up in tents made of felt, the smell of which he later remembered. The nomads supposedly also rubbed his wounds with fat. Beuys’s devotees allege that a shamanistic influence during this state between life and death, something Beuys himself later described, cannot be ruled out. The “aborigines” later delivered the wounded man to a German military hospital.

Beuys’s legendary works constructed out of fat and felt intimate these stories. Researchers who verified these claims in Wehrmacht archives, raise, however, doubts regarding details of Beuys’s account. The status of Crimean Tatars and that of a Luftwaffe soldier, whose warplane was smashed to pieces, are related; both can be considered as having been expropriated, both were driven to the edge of existence by official decree. As the original property owners of the Crimea, the Tatars were restricted from hiking areas; several of their clans were resettled in eastern Russia. After the German offensive, they were smuggled in groups back into their native lands. They existed “between all fronts.” This appeared to the Germans as inexplicable as it did to the Soviets who reconquered the Crimea. Not even the sultan, whose empire had claimed the Crimea two
hundred years earlier, commanded their obedience. They were hunters of good fortune, just like Beuys was; without forging his rescue, he plummeted to earth successfully, was picked up by thieves, and then reincorporated anew into the thievish society of the Great German Reich. The circumstances justify every legend.

[...]  

**Children Hungry for School/ The Nine Inseparable Ones**

Children hungry for school in the year 1902. They were called the nine inseparable ones. They lived on two solitary farms on the Russian border with Galicia. They met every day; Marinka was the youngest, Alexius and Isaak were the oldest. The nine children trekked the long path to school together. That year was especially cold. The teacher advised that classes be canceled. Two days before Christmas Eve, the children resumed school. They no longer wanted to be held up. The weather appeared placid. That afternoon, the children started their walk home. Grainy snow soon gushed down like a carpet. If we can just make it to the woodpile over there, said Nikolaos. The children huddled up to one another. A storm is coming. They sang. If only the children were back already! The parents said: something must have happened. Sleds, rustle up the horses, out with the carpets, the dogs. The tiny, rigid bodies under a pine tree. Brought home: That’s Alexius, the oldest, that’s Nikolaos, that’s Isaak, that’s Marinka, and there the five others. Even their grandfather died that same night. A sorrowful Christmas.

**The Sense of Beauty’s Evolution from Ice**

While drafting his alpine architecture (“the nature of mountains has not yet obtained its artistic form”), Bruno Taut claimed to be able to go back to PRIMAL EXPERIENCES OF THE HUMAN IMAGINATION. It is not our sense of beauty that is primordial, but rather our imagination. It was burned into collective human memory. This happened when strings of animals and the human beings following them traversed alongside the enormous obstacles that were the glaciers, wandering for decades over plains that had already turned into deserts following the impact of the encroaching ice. Those were the dire hopeless years. Only in the insides of both man and animal did a kind of glow from earlier times remain, one that promised warmth. In the end there was only a story. Until those who remained (they were all related to one another, since 90 percent perished; the offspring came from the rest) reached the oceans. It was here where caves were also found. After this time of privation, the globe aligned itself with the sun. A portion of the massive clouds that reflected the sunlight back into the cosmos,
fell to earth. Open bodies of water stored warmth. The memory
of that sharpened capacity for differentiation that emerged dur-
ing those times of coldness withdrew itself into our hearts. It is
there where we mistake it, Bruno Taut claimed, for a sense of
beauty.

**Adorno on the Cold Stream**

“We fed the heart with fantasies
The diet turned the heart to stone”

In the year of his death, Theodor W. Adorno made notes for
a book he intended to write after the completion of his AES-
THETIC THEORY. He waited till the end of the horrible nego-
tiations over the apportionment of the institute’s budget
between students, assistants, and its leaders. He sat for four
hours in the smoky seminar room. Adorno’s eyes teared up. It
seems as if he was writing down the speaker’s every word,
when, in fact, he was planning out his book.

He proceeds from the assumption that coldness is a current
that dominates modernity. It is, Adorno notes, “branched off
from the libidinous energy of the species like cognitive perfor-
mance. But unlike the latter, the former produces indifference,
the cold stream.”

“The prehistory of the subject” is sketched out in the
Dialectic of Enlightenment; it lacks the MODERN METAMOR-
PHOSIS of the subject (that from now on falls apart into parti-
cles). Why that? Marx observed that the human being—as a
producer of his own life and as producer of commodities—
comes to stand alongside the production process. This is alien-
ation. It justifies the observation that coldness arises at the spot
where a human being is cut off from its reality.

The book was supposed to begin with descriptions of the
earliest phases of geological history: How a glacial lake stretch-
ing out endlessly formed above the planet’s oldest rocks of the
Canadian Shield. How the power of such cool masses of water,
which nonetheless were in the process of warming up, broke
through the glacier’s barrier, which then blocked the east coast
of the old Americas. The powerful tidal wave raised the sea
level by up to six meters. The polar caps and dry land (includ-
ing Egypt) were flooded, thus triggering the ice ages in which
we still find ourselves.

Adorno wanted to demarcate this “natural history,” which
engendered the “intelligence that came from the cold” and
brought, in fact, the art of retaining heat and fire into the world,
from the icy gusts that emanate from fantasies and feelings. In
this respect, the comfort of those families that settled the Reich
also belonged to the phenomenon of Auschwitz. The produc-
tion of warm-hearted feelings plus exclusion = the cold stream.
A Short-Statured Woman with High-Heel Shoes
The opera singer approaches. She will sing the role of Tosca this evening. She wears high-heel shoes because she is stocky. She carries with her, unnoticed, a small feeling called: YOU'RE GOING TO FALL OVER ANY MINUTE. It lies hidden behind the passionate devotion and the desire to kill in a moment of desperation that belong to the role of Tosca; it is also concealed by Aida’s feelings, which the soprano sang last season. This feeling nevertheless possesses power, force, and ancestry.

When we were still reptiles, we knew no feeling. Instead, we were of pure action. Resting. Waiting. Attacking or fleeing. Then came the ice ages. When the temperatures on our blue planet dropped considerably, we often thought wistfully of the primordial oceans and their waters warmed to thirty-seven degrees Celsius. We learned to have feelings; namely, to say: too hot, too cold.

To differentiate and to yearn, this is what feelings are capable of. Everything else is a matter of combination. My grandparents were simple farmers. Until the birth of Christ, there were sixty-four billion ancestors. Every one of these ancestors is related to an arboreal climber whom all forebears go back to and whose feelings (like falling asleep, it tastes good, biting, ouch, etc.) lead every FAMILY TREE back to a single pair of feelings: hot/cold. Adam’s rib was actually oversized yearning when the temperature dropped. Thirty-seven degrees in the warm waters of the primordial oceans. We cannot forget this. We remember it in the cold. We ignite this little fire in our insides. The forebears of this are the oscillations of colors in atoms. In this respect, music is older than any feeling.²

Superseding Causality
Imagine that the snow blown in from Prins Christian Sund way up north is poisoned, Hilda Böhlecke said, and I start to die right now, but not immediately, but rather in eight weeks, because the contamination takes effect slowly. Regardless, I am not afraid because it’s so nice and warm in my apartment. She wanted to send a postcard, got dressed, and was run over by a car on the corner of Tengstraße and Adelheidstraße. For this reason, death in World War III was something of no consequence to her.

A few of her cells were still alive a few days after the accident and conferred with one another as to what possibly the event could mean for them. We take issue with the fact that masses of snow from Greenland could be poisonous. In our opinion, Mrs. Böhlecke had a right to her own death. She shouldn’t then also have to come to terms with death by snow, one deceptively similar in form to the Christ Child, that not only threatens her but also drags on and on, when, in the mean-
time, an entirely different kind of death intervenes in such a form that the question of its appearance is rendered obsolete. As long as they still have a spark of life in them, individual human cells are jurists in disguise. They thirst simultaneously for both water and a modicum of justice on earth. Regarding the question of superseding causality: A rich man traveled by steamer to America in 1936. He owned a box of cigars. They were stolen from him by a poor man named Eike. Thereafter, the ship struck an iceberg and sank. The clever thief Mr. Eike said in his defense following the rescue: The box of cigars would have perished otherwise. Considered in retrospect, it’s immaterial whether the drowned owner, Mr. Graunke, would still in the end have owned the cigar box, or whether they would have been stolen from him. No, say the cells, that’s not immaterial in the least. Eike was a thief. Eike violated the owner’s, Mr. Graunke’s, right and the thief should be punished even if a rescue boat fished him out of the ocean. Even if the owner, Mr. Graunke, were not in the right, even if he were to pursue his rights that are of no use to him. There is a big difference between having a right and depriving a right. What purpose does a right serve that is of no use at all to a man who drowned in the icy waters of the Atlantic? We serve no one, the individual cells declared. We are not slaves.

The Heart of Stone

“And once again, the cold world strikes at my heart with irrepressible grievances”

Alexander Pushkin

His heart was like a stone in his chest. How was he still supposed to express himself? He wasn’t equipped for sentimentalities or parting words. On the second workday of 2009, he laid himself down on the tracks of the regional train line, a spot he chose himself that he, an otherwise resolute motorist, reached by foot. When the train entered the curve around the mountain, the engine driver would end up seeing him far too late.

A lawyer and millionaire as well as the son and grandson of industrialists, the man was not in principle at the end of his prospects. He still had partners. And of his assets, a last remainder would remain untouched, with which a new beginning would have been possible. What he could not forgive himself for was the fact that he signed contracts that the banks had presented to him in the final days of that “feverish December.” In this respect, he had a “heart made of stone” even though he considered himself to be rather flexible. He underestimated his own inflexibility. According to the Egyptian Book of Gates, the HEART OF STONE has two functions: After death, it is placed on a scale and measured against the stone weight of TRUTH,
RIGHT, and ORDER; it must not be too light. It also has the function of renouncing unflinchingly the lapses in the mortal “heart of flesh”; for this its stony nature is helpful. The man from Swabia had a similar heart of stone in the form of a monument that set itself in motion against a foe he had once seen represented on stage at the Stuttgart State Opera.

Concentrated indifference horrified him. Although his companies all appeared consolidated in July, this indifference confronted him during the rapid sequence of deadlines in the December crisis. Until then, he dialoged with a single counterpart from the bank. He dealt with people whom he knew how to size up and who could be moved to make compromises by means of concessions or allusions to a disadvantage to be suffered by the opposite party. The meeting with more than twenty representatives from various banks was different. They now sat across from him and his colleagues like a COLLECTIVE HAND. These weren’t bosses. Each one heeded the actions of every other; together they were under the yoke of their mutual mistrust. In their search for ways to avoid damages they remained immobile. In previous instances, it sufficed to make the threat that he was allowing his holdings to go bankrupt, a decree the banks would, however, not follow up on. He had this option. His damages would be noticeable, but those of the other side of the table would be even bigger. The banks’ representatives discerned no differences; they appeared to feel nothing.

The UNREALITY OF THE HOLIDAYS ensued after he signed the contracts and fell into a panic attack, the likes of which he had never known in his lifetime. There was nothing to celebrate about the downfall of his empire, a chain of errors he could not forgive himself for. Why couldn’t 12.5 million euros in assets plus credit balance 16 million euros in nominal liabilities? Did he count for nothing? The matter was falsely represented in the contracts. The number of Saturdays and Sundays as well as official holidays at the turn of the year from 2008 to 2009 was the same as it was in the crisis of 1941: it was the maximum number of canceled workdays—if Christmas Eve falls on a Wednesday, then there were three workdays in the crisis between December 24 and January 5—when something still could have been saved. What brought the man with the heart of stone to die, literally to “ice” himself, was the suddenness of his fall. Since 1881, three generations invested a great deal of time building up the firm. It could have withstood a bet like a bad speculation of 300 million euros. Assets and liabilities are compared on a balance sheet. The assets and liabilities of invested lived time must also be added to this. And goodwill must be calculated in as well. In this respect, bankruptcy within three months is an “unreal phenomenon.”
Why did he still eat anything at all? Why did he sleep through the nights during these useless holidays? Having reached a particular point in the misfortune, the only question outstanding was who is going to put an end to it.

In the weather reports, there was talk that day of a sudden snow storm in the Federal Republic that would result in chaos on the roads in North Rhine–Westphalia. Where the man forged ahead toward his goal he saw only cold dankness: average weather.

**Annotated Index on Coldness and Cold Streams**

**Ice Ages:** Ice ages refer to periods in the earth’s history in which at least one of the planet’s poles is glaciated. There have been times when both poles were free of ice. The glaciers we see today in high mountains are not identical to glaciation in the **MAJOR ICE AGES**. In the last 10,000 years they have developed anew. For roughly thirty million years, the earth has been in the **Cenozoic Ice Age**. The Antarctic is extreme and the Arctic is not so severely glaciated. Our present age belongs to the **MINOR ICE AGE**.

[...]

**Coldness as Metaphor of Modernity:** In his book *Cool Conduct*, Helmut Lethen employs coldness’s world of forms as a central metaphor for the experience of modernization. The image of the “cold heart” goes back to Wilhelm Hauff’s fairy tale of the same name. Arno Schmidt refers to this text in his work *The Stony Heart* among others. Lethen defines “coldness” as the manifest expression of separation. Primitive accumulation, separation from productive powers and, above all, from the warmth of family and the clan were the stimulus for a counter-reaction that, much like a case of introjection by an aggressor, idolizes the “cool” sense, namely the ACCEPTANCE OF COLDNESS. According to Ernst Jünger, the ice age is the teacher of humankind. For both Jünger and Bertolt Brecht there exists a training in the ways of coldness, a “school of realism.” “Saint Joan of the Stockyards,” “torn between the Salvation Army’s warm stoves and the strikes in the snow, she catches a cold and dies of pneumo-nia.” Brecht: “Worship the cold and the dark and calamity dire! / Scan the whole earth: You’re a thing of no worth.” Nietzsche says that it is “better to live in ice” and has been associated with the cultural expression “glaciation of the soul.”

**Nature as Sansculottes:** In a research laboratory in Chicago, atoms were cooled down to a hundred-millionth of a degree Kelvin. A Bose-Einstein condensate can be observed at this
extreme condition that verges on absolute zero. Regardless of whether they are iron, gold, uranium, hydrogen, silicon, or a noble gas, all atoms are absolutely identical. Heiner Müller called the production of equality and fraternity among elements when in the proximity of absolute zero the “socialist achievement of nature” that entitles us human beings to hope.

The Opening of the Straits: Australia’s continental drift away from the Antarctic in the Oligocene opened (along with South America’s own subsequent shift) two straights: the Tasmanian Seaway and the Drake Passage; since then, a system of currents surrounds the Antarctic. A cold stream isolates the continent from warm water on the surface. Because of this we have an ice cap on the South Pole.

The Absolute Pole of Coldness: Absolute zero is minus 273.15 degrees Celsius. According to the third law of thermodynamics as revealed by the Nernst heat theorem, this lowest of temperatures cannot be reached. The movement of material would come to a complete stop. This contradicts the obstinacy of nature. In close proximity to absolute zero, helium becomes much more active and superconductive.

The Fly in the Pernod Glass: It appears to be immobile. Using the eraser of my pencil, I retrieve it from the green liquid and set it down on the wicker placemat. I assume it is dead. After a few seconds, the animal starts to move. A minute later, the short-lived fly vanishes from sight. It was obviously still capable of flying. It did not seem to be “drunk.” A tenacious animal that has earned my respect. The duration of our encounter lasted many years (according to its sense of time). Should it ever have offspring, they will certainly survive me. They have existed for over eighteen million years and practically possess eternal life.

Stabile Atlantic Currents: 10,000 years old.

[...]

Coldness as Catalyst for the Great French Revolution: The summer of 1788 in France was marked by extreme drought and severe hailstorms. Twenty percent of all grain crops were destroyed. An extremely cold winter followed. Raids on grain transports occurred in the southwest. Farmers armed themselves against brigands (“la Grand Peur”). A king who knows not how to protect his country from such catastrophes cannot remain a sovereign for long.
Coldness in the Cosmos: The lowest temperature measured in space was taken beyond all heavenly bodies. This measurement was consistently three degrees Kelvin (minus 270 degrees Celsius). The difference with respect to absolute zero corresponds to the background radiation, the echo of an explosion at the beginning of the world. The instant a portion of material started to move in this cold stream, the temperature climbed over the minus 270 degrees Celsius mark.

Snowball Earth: Eight hundred million years ago the continent of Rodinia broke into two large fragments. Shortly thereafter, coldness fanned out over the planet. Had an alien observed the earth at this point in time, it would have seen a greyish-white, snowball-like celestial body. For several million years it seemed as if the earth would undergo an irreversible freeze much like moons devoid of any atmosphere and preserved at temperatures inhospitable to all life. Early primitive forms of life developed in the rocks and glaciers of this snowball earth. Only those that possessed a particular hardiness survived. After a sudden warming (approximately 500 million years ago) the first globalization became possible and with it the proliferation of life around the planet. (→ Chapter 30 of the DVD).

Theodor W. Adorno: Son of a wine merchant. Discussed the cold stream above all in his essay “Education after Auschwitz” and in Negative Dialectics. A “deficit of empathy,” coldness is implied in all of his works. On account of a misguided assessment of the present danger, Gretel Adorno and her husband visited the Nazi’s vacant rally grounds in Nuremberg on a cold damp day in the spring of 1937. Had they been stopped and asked for their ID, it would have been life-threatening. They would have never been able to explain why their visit had not been intended as anything other than a provocation.

“Eating Ice Cream to the Point of Being Gassed”: A popular expression common in the city of Frankfurt in the year 1928 as conveyed by Theodor W. Adorno. The philosopher and sociologist interpreted the strange phrase as a DISPLACEMENT of experiences in the Great War—gas warfare at Verdun and the Somme—onto an opposing image. The shocking image is replaced by another palliative one of eating ice cream. Conspicuous, said Adorno, is the long period of time between the experienced image of horror and its transformation into everyday jargon. On the other hand, he emphasized to Max Horkheimer, this expression is not a foreshadowing of the gassing in Auschwitz. Such “foresight” is indeed not impossible for human beings but is nevertheless improbable because such knowledge would be promptly repressed for the very
same reason why visions from Verdun are replaced by the image of “cold sweets.”

A year before his death, Adorno visited his mistress A.P. in Munich. The severely diabetic lover went with the young woman and their remonstrative child, who disapproved of the liaison with the philosopher, from one café to another along Leopoldstraße. It was a Saturday afternoon. He ordered big pieces of cake and bought ice cream cones in order to assuage the child and put a smile on the young woman’s face. He, too, consumed the substances so poisonous to his body only in order to endure the “impossible” present moment of an unsuccessful Saturday afternoon. Risking one’s health (life), said Adorno, is not too high a price to pay. Nothing fit together. Neither did the ice cream suit the cold rainy day, nor was the stridentchild conducive to the sought-after intimacy with the contrary woman. He dragged his male body behind him like a donkey. No amount of substitute happiness could be bought to balance out the day.

**Generosity:** Magnanimity. The ability to engage in free exchange. The permeability of empathy. The ability to give gifts as well as “oneself” as a gift. “[T]he opposite of forgetting” (Adorno).⁶

[...]
Notes

[Translator’s note: The preface, fourteen stories, and accompanying index translated here are taken from the booklet Stroh im Eis: Mittel gegen die “gescheiterte Hoffnung” that accompanies Alexander Kluge’s essay film on coldness, Landschaften mit Eis und Schnee. Both are contained in Alexander Kluge, Wer sich traut, reißt die Kälte vom Pferd (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2010). Stories 4, 5, 12, and 13 originally appeared in Alexander Kluge, Chronik der Gefühle, 2 vols. (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2000). Stories 2, 9, 10, and 11 originally appeared in Alexander Kluge, Die Lücke, die der Teufel läßt: Im Umfeld des neuen Jahrhunderts (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2003). Story 10 appears here in an entirely new translation; it was first published in English translation in Alexander Kluge, The Devil’s Blind Spot: Tales from the New Century, trans. Martin Chalmers (New York: New Directions Books, 2004), 37. The six stories original to Straw in the Ice—1, 3, 8, and 14 (along with the seventh entry in the index)—are republished in Alexander Kluge, Das fünfte Buch (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2012). The stories and indices chosen for this translation, though abridged, succinctly reflect many of the concerns captured in Kluge’s prose on coldness and reverberate as well with those in the accompanying article “Landscapes of Ice, Wind, and Snow” in this issue of Grey Room. In an effort to capture some of the interdiegetic themes conveyed by Kluge’s sequencing and juxtapositions, the excerpts here are retained in groups of fives, threes, and sixes in the same order they appear in the original.]

1. [The first sentence in this quotation can be found in Theodor W. Adorno, Negative Dialectic, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1995), 185.—Trans.]

2. The nucleus of an atom houses three colors, inconspicuous, as long as they are together. Indifferent, devoid of particular incidents. Were, however, one of these colors pulled apart a distance of a few meters, then a YEARNING would pull them together with an energy that could be used to illuminate our planet for three weeks; and that would be just one of the components comprising subatomic elements.


