

Jonas Lüscher

Kraft

A Novel

2017

Clothbound, 256 pages.

Sample translation © 2017 by Kári Driscoll

Pages 50–64

Chapter IV

Strength and kindness always go together.

—Honoré de Balzac

Kraft likes to row. Single scull. Pulling together isn't his thing. And because he misses the silent parting of the water of the Neckar river in the early morning, that swift, purposeful gliding, the daily ritual of feeling himself propelled forward by his own impetus; and because he is beginning to think that its absence may be the cause of his current cognitive crisis, and that the half-hour he spends on one of the immobile machines arranged in gleaming white rows at the Arrillaga Family Sports Center is at best a poor substitute and perhaps even a contributing factor to his crisis, one afternoon he decides to borrow Ivan's old Ford Bronco and drive out to the Port of Redwood City, where the university boathouse stands by the shallow bay.

A student provides him with the shell, and while the two of them place the narrow, lightweight vessel in the water, as a precaution, Kraft flexes his arm muscles and expands his chest underneath the cardinal lettering emblazoned across his sleeveless Stanford tee.

Kraft bought the T-shirt that morning at the campus bookstore. The memory of the night before was throbbing in the back of his head with an urgency that the roar and howl of the vacuum cleaner was powerless to suppress, until it occurred to him to try some retail therapy. It was a strategy that sometimes worked, since the act of purchasing things requires a bare minimum of optimism—after all, why would you invest in the new clothbound critical edition of the complete works of Henry James unless you take it for granted that life will go on one way or another? He was hoping to be able to capitalize on that feeling, to claw his way up inch by inch until he reached a level at which it no longer seemed quite so absurd to think about why this is the best of all possible worlds. But as he stood there in the line with those thirty clothbound volumes, in six shrink-wrapped slipcases, he broke into a sweat, despite the aggressively refrigerated air inside the store. Suddenly it was this purchase that appeared absurd. Absurd and senseless. The excess luggage alone would cost him at least eighty dollars, not to mention the fact that he would need to buy another suitcase just for these books, and the mere idea of having

to read thirty volumes of Henry James was enough to make the sweat on his brow turn cold.

Reluctantly, he put the books back on the shelf, well aware that his failure to complete this transaction meant that the rest of the day would be a complete write-off. Instead, he decided to take the opportunity to go up to the floor where they sold the university merchandise to look for a gift for the twins. As he walked past the stands with the keyrings and the shelves full of mugs, cardinal red shower curtains, and the interminable rows of sportswear, minute by minute he felt increasingly unsure what the girls would like, particularly since he didn't know what size T-shirts and sweatshirts they wore. With each article of clothing he held up in front of him the dimensions of his daughters' bodies would morph and shift in his mind's eye, so that before long he could no longer even say with certainty whether they came up to his chest or just his navel, or whether their skinny shoulders were wider than a coat hanger or not. After a while he grabbed a cardinal baseball cap and a nylon backpack with a stitched-on university logo—after all, they could always use a backpack, that much he knew—and on his way to the check-out he picked up a sleeveless tee for himself as well. In front of him in the line stood a young female student wearing what seemed to be the informal school uniform, and which he found somehow irritating. Sneakers, a T-shirt, and gym shorts—extremely short gym shorts, as he could not help but notice. This young student was wearing a gray cotton pair that only barely covered her buttocks,

across which the name of the university was written in large red letters. Not that Kraft found this get-up particularly alluring; nor was he shocked by it in the slightest. He was more than happy to leave feelings of indignation at scantily clad student bodies to other people. But all the same this outfit seemed somehow inappropriate; it signaled a hypertrophic athleticism that he felt was at odds with intellectual labor, even if in this country there seemed to be a closer link between physical exercise and academic study than in Germany—had he not himself witnessed Ivan promising the students in his seminar that by the end of term they would be “well trained” in late Heidegger, a term that Kraft associated less with the Black Forest philosopher and more with the javelin and the 100m hurdles? Yet it wasn’t so much the shorts that attracted his attention as the pair of spindly girls’ legs, which seemed to have sprouted and grown too quickly, and which were jutting out of the bottom of the shorts like a deer’s legs—they were just like his daughter’s. Kraft turned around, and, mumbling apologies, pushed his way back through the line, put the baseball cap and the backpack down on the nearest shelf and went looking for some cotton gym shorts. Armed with a light blue and a gray pair he made his way back to the check-out, stopping halfway to swap the gray ones for a second, identical light blue pair. This purchase provided Kraft with much more satisfaction than the Henry James boxed set ever could have.

Thus encouraged, he returned to his desk in Hoover Tower and wrote a witty reflection on Stendhal's quip that the only excuse for God is that He doesn't exist, segueing elegantly into some thoughts on human autonomy and self-empowerment, which of course must be at the very center of any modern theodicy. But when he arrived at the thought that in Silicon Valley even the evil of failure could be transformed into a good by redefining it as an opportunity, he hit a snag, since he had not the faintest idea how to sell this as something that was cause for optimism. He could feel his creative impetus rapidly ebbing away, so he packed up his things, borrowed Ivan's truck, and went looking for the university boathouse amid the disorienting mass of flat-roofed buildings containing biotech and software companies, shopping malls, production plants, and shabby homes. He parked in the boathouse parking lot. Just as he was locking the truck he was startled by a small plane from the nearby San Carlos Airport buzzing past like a lazy stag beetle, and he instinctively ducked his head.

Kraft scans the bay, or what he can see of it. A narrow, brackish creek, beyond which lies Bair Island, a flat stretch of reddish brown marshland, crisscrossed with countless meandering waterways and dotted with electricity masts. To be sure, it's not the Neckar, but from his vantage point he is both unable and unwilling to see anything out there that would justify the following procedure: Despite Kraft's ostentatious muscle-flexing, which was meant to indicate

his rowing prowess, the student flatly refused to provide him with oars. No, those he could only get from Herb, along with an in-depth introduction to the tides of the island.

Herb is sporting a white goatee and a pair of those insect-like iridescent sunglasses that make even a gaunt emeritus physics professor like him look like the meanest son-of-a-bitch. The first “hey buddy” puts Kraft on the defensive. He tries his best to follow the relatively complex lecture on the tides, currents, restrictors, and navigation channels, but when Kraft is on the defensive he is never at the height of his faculties and tends to keep his head down and allow Heike and the twins and even Ruth and the yellow gerbera to occupy his mind, pushing Herb’s lecture, which right now is revolving around the Corkscrew Slough and the Steinberger Slough and whether to go around clockwise or counterclockwise, which, with the current level of the tide is definitely a bad idea, downright lethal in fact, into the background. Kraft nods obediently, yes, yes he understands that it’s forbidden to get closer than so-and-so many feet from the seals and in general the whole island is a national park and except for a few designated paths you’re not allowed to step foot there. Fifty minutes, Herb reminds him, that’s how long he will have to complete the circuit. After that it gets dangerous and a few stretches become impassable. At last he relinquishes the oars but also foists a waterproof bag on Kraft, for his cell phone, without which he won’t let him on the water under any circumstances. Kraft gets

in his shell, and since the sudden appearance of his four women combined with Herb's interminable lecture have thrown him a little off kilter, the boat wobbles dangerously and Kraft is convinced that Herb is giving him a skeptical look from behind his insectoid sunglasses.

But after just a few strokes, during which he can feel the muscles underneath his tank top, the boat begins to glide and Kraft begins to feel the longed-for sense of serenity. On the whole, he must admit that he has underestimated this place. After a couple of hundred meters he has left the harbor behind and is tracing an elegant arc through a concrete-lined restrictor to Corkscrew Slough and all of a sudden he finds himself at eye-level with the birdlife of Northern California. The herons nesting in the flat grassland eye him as he passes. Ducks of all colors paddle calmly behind him. A hawk is perched atop a wooden pole. Kraft stops and lays his oars flat on the surface of the water. He turns around to look for the plastic bag with his phone in order to photograph this ornithological panoply so that he can revisit it later with McKenzie's *All About Birds*. Not that he has ever been particularly interested in birds but somehow the incident with the robin has continued to bother him and at least this way he will be able to spend his sleepless nights, which he is already anxiously anticipating, doing something meaningful. Kraft is letting himself be carried along by the current while he tries to get those feathered heads to appear closer on his display, using his thumb and forefinger to execute a gesture that the twins taught him,

as if trying to pry the phone's eyelids apart to look for a wayward eyelash. As he does this, and because, dissatisfied with the available zoom, he is leaning ever further out over the edge, the narrow boat begins to tilt dangerously to one side and Kraft is forced to grab the oars to avoid capsizing. Those who would accuse Kraft of clumsiness at this point are invited to try to grab hold of two oars in a split-second and show us how they would manage to keep hold of a mobile phone and not, like our hero, once they have regained their balance, be forced to acknowledge that quiet splashing sound as an unwelcome indication that they have failed. Kraft waits until his heart, which is racing from the double shock, is once again beating normally, curses, showers himself with rebuke, calls himself an idiot, slaps his forehead three times with his palm for good measure, declares the phone for lost, and, scowling at a duck bobbing alongside the boat, resumes rowing, the quicker to leave behind this place of solitary ignominy.

The Corkscrew Slough lives up to its name, winding its way in ever-tighter bends through the marsh, as if to remind Kraft at every turn that this is not the Neckar. He is finding the stretch quite challenging and since he keeps looking behind him he quickly has a crick in the neck. No chance of contemplative gliding here. He pulls the left oar with all his strength, only, a few strokes later, to be forced to compensate with the right. The elegant curves at the outset have given way to a frantic zigzag, and it is not long before the boat runs aground

with a screech. Kraft shimmies in his seat and with some deft oarsmanship manages to get free of the soft mud. At this, he notices how low down he now is; he can barely see the mainland. The tips of the tallest office buildings are still in sight, as is the mountain ridge in the distance, over which the evening fog is descending into Silicon Valley. The water level must have fallen significantly. Fifty minutes, Herb said, but how the hell is he supposed to know how long he's been out without his watch, which he left in the locker, and without his phone, the loss of which now pains him doubly on account of the seals that he spots lying in all their sausage-like majesty along the muddy banks, eyeing the passing rower with idle curiosity. That would be a picture to impress the girls with. There, not eight meters away from him, there's a whole pile of them, all in a row like Bratwursts on the grill. Eight meters, Kraft guesses, or less than twenty-five feet. Was it twenty-five feet Herb said? Is he sure it wasn't thirty-five? But isn't it really more like twelve meters between him and the seals, the number eight belonging already to the tale he will tell the twins of his experience? Kraft gets tangled up in yards, feet, and the metric system, in the jungle of conversions and shifting decimal points, and finds himself defeated by this anachronism of the Anglo-Saxon world. Better safe than sorry, he thinks to himself, and maintains as much distance to the speckled bodies on the shore as the channel will allow.

This proves to be easier said than done, however, as the channel is growing narrower and narrower as a result

of the receding tide, and everywhere he looks Kraft sees the mud banks jutting out of the shallow water, forcing him on several occasions to row a tortuous route that takes him far too close to the seals, which he wants to avoid at all cost, having observed one of the ponderous beasts crawl out of the water and move surprisingly adroitly across the ground, contracting its hide like an accordion into innumerable tiny pleats, before scaling the slumbering heap of other seals, resulting in loud cries of protest and explosive outbursts of violence amid the hitherto peaceful colony. A cacophony of bellows, cries and howls rings out and Kraft can see the sharp teeth in their open mouths as the seals' bodies smack against each other. The biggest of them, no doubt the alpha male, Kraft surmises, is clearly bothered by this impertinent newcomer and raises his massive body up and issues a fearful bark which fails to impress neither Kraft nor the rival seal. Kraft rows swiftly on.

Fifty minutes, he can hear Herb impress this upon him. Fifty minutes are long gone, Kraft knows, but whether he has been out for an hour or two he can no longer say. At any rate, the wall of fog has long since descended upon the Valley, and the software developers and marketing specialists have turned on the lights in their offices, which are now shining dully through the mist. Kraft hopes in vain that the fog will stop at water's edge, but soon he cannot see the seals until long after he can smell them and hear their excited barking at his unexpected approach. At least, or so it seems to Kraft, the

channel has grown a little deeper and less serpentine again. In fact, he seems to be moving in a perfectly straight line. Just then he begins to hear a low rushing, gurgling sound and then he feels a current seize hold of the shell and start to pull him forward faster and faster. Kraft tries to resist, squaring his oars in the water but this causes him to roll violently from side to side, and he can immediately see that it is senseless to resist. He turns his head and peers into the fog. The water around his boat is playing in little eddies and dancing waves and suddenly, through the fog, Kraft can see the contours of a wall up ahead with a wide gap in the middle, through which the water is rushing in white agitation. Kraft lets go of the oars and clings desperately to his boat which leaps and dances and rolls, but he valiantly keeps the little shell upright until, just as he is about to make it through the restrictor, one of the oars hits the wall, turning the boat sideways. Frantically, Kraft lurches from one side to the other, but in vain; the boat capsizes. He has the presence of mind to undo the straps on his shoes, which are fixed to the footplate, before diving overboard. He cuts his knee on a stone underwater and as he resurfaces the boat hits him in the back of the neck. Again the cold water closes in over him, a current grabs hold of his body, sending him reeling head over heels like in the spin cycle and pulling his trunks down and off. At last, he touches firm ground again that he can at least use to push against, emerging coughing and spluttering and quite stunned out of the water, whereupon he sets about swimming desperately against the current. He manages to

escape its pull, but the boat is gone, as are his trunks. With powerful strokes he tries to reach the shore through the fog.

Soon he has ground beneath his feet again, but it offers no respite. His bare feet sink deep into the mud and the eelgrass wraps itself around his manhood and tickles his scrotum. He lies down flat in the shallows and breathes heavily into the dusk. He wants to avoid accidentally finding himself in the middle of another seal colony; or perhaps that is precisely what he should do? He could crawl up the bank on his belly, howling pathetically like those fluffy baby seals that look at you with imploring eyes, just before they are clubbed to death—like in that YouTube video that the twins had shown him, teary-eyed—and then, benefitting from their blubber, he could nestle in among all those warm bodies. The cold, as Kraft, a seasoned manager of his own misadventures, has already worked out, will soon become his biggest concern. His hands find a bunch of reeds and he is able to pull himself out of the water. He crawls onto land, wheezing and caked in mud. Getting to his knees, he peers into the fog. No, there are no seals in sight . . . no one to keep him warm, but also no one with whom he will have to contend, head-to-head.

Kraft gets to his feet and relieves himself of his Stanford shirt, which is ice cold and soaking wet. Stark naked he stands there in the marsh. He expands his chest and squares his shoulders; has he not just saved himself from mortal danger? Is that not sufficient reason to stand

fully erect? Kraft knows that this kind of virile, vulgarly physical self-assurance, which under ordinary circumstances he would find at best ridiculous, is exceedingly important at a moment such as this, but at the first gust of wind that blows across his broad chest he can feel his nipples shrivel up along with his self-assurance. Shivering, he throws his arms around his sunken chest and devotes his full attention to the burning pain in his wounded knee. He's going to die here, freeze miserably to death—no, worse, Herb will come and save him as he lies there, naked, mud-caked, bleeding and helpless. Herb, that insect with the zero-percent-body-fat, that physicist with his tidal models, and his flow rates, distances and time frames, who sees everything in terms of variables in an equation to be stripped of all superfluities. What does someone like Herb know about the entanglement of the individual and the world, about the necessity of contingency, the beauty of the superfluous, of pain, of humiliation? For someone like Herb it's all a zero-sum game where every bad can be offset by a good. It makes no difference who it happens to, the only thing that matters is that the equation can be solved in the end. Elegance, they call it, those number jugglers. What does someone like Herb know about elegance? The abstract glory of totality, perhaps! But what about his, Kraft's, concrete suffering? What about his nakedness, his wounded knee? What about the wildness of the seals? The beauty and grace of the herons? No, he cannot allow himself to be saved by Herb, that apostle of the system. Not by that physicist.

Kraft must save himself. He will find his own way through the marsh and swim across the creek to the boathouse. With a little luck, perhaps he will be able to get to his locker unobserved. That way he wouldn't have to face Herb with no pants on. With no boat, admittedly, but at least not stark naked. And he would have saved himself.

Behind him, Kraft can hear the rushing and gurgling of the restrictor. He strains his eyes to peer into the darkness. A cool breeze makes him shiver, but it also parts the fog for a moment affording a view of the cylindrical towers of Oracle Campus, pulsating in the dusk like giant batteries. Good; now he knows more or less where he is. He needs to bear left until he gets to the creek and then keep an eye out for the boathouse lights. Tentatively he begins to walk; he, who never goes barefoot, a fact which comes back to haunt him now, as the hard, salt-water grass stings his tender soles. If only he could better see where he is stepping, but by now it is almost completely dark and the fog is closing in around him again. He stubs his toes on sticks, stones, and wooden posts, and then unexpectedly he steps into a deep hole, twisting his ankle. He cries out in pain. If he's sprained it, it's all over. Death will come for him, or else Herb will. Gingerly he puts weight on the aching foot and takes a few halting steps. OK, it's all right, he can keep going. Limping badly, but still at least he's moving. It's slow going. The terrain is boggy and shot through with pools of water; every few meters he encounters a meandering stream. The salt is burning in his wound, and the wind strokes his

wet skin, chilling him to the bone. Trembling, he places one hand around his shriveled member.

Will she read of his death in the newspaper? Or of his shameful rescue? He finds the latter far more embarrassing. A sympathetic reader might potentially construe the former as tragically heroic in some way. Will the *San Francisco Chronicle* print his picture? NAKED GERMAN SCHOLAR RESCUED FROM BAIR ISLAND! Will that be the first thing that she, Johanna, sees of him tomorrow morning at the breakfast table, thirty years after he made her so angry that she moved to California for good?

Here in the muddy marshland, he must admit that he can make better progress if he gets down on all fours and feels his way forward. He must forget about walking upright, that uniquely human innovation which he defends so passionately to his students; he must abandon rational thought and devote himself entirely to the ground, the damp earth squelching out between his fingers, the rough grass that gives him support, something to hold on to, the low bushes that graze his ribs, the occasional rock, still exuding a residual trace of the day's warmth. If he lies absolutely flat on the ground, he can escape the wind. Now and again he raises his head to get his bearings. Suddenly the fog seems to become less impenetrable and he even thinks he might be able to make out some lights. Perhaps he's already almost made it to the creek, perhaps ... yes, he's definitely almost there, and he is filled with renewed hope. Then suddenly the fog lifts

entirely, blown aside like a light silk-and-lace curtain to reveal the full extent of the valley. An endless shimmer and sparkle, a sea of light, the network of orange sodium-vapor lamps, the airport's blinking navigation lights, thousands upon thousands of yellow rectangular windows, the headlights of the cars coming and going, a reflected glow that illuminates the sky and casts the marshland in soft light. And, as if the fog had been like cotton wool in his ears, he can now hear the sounds emanating from this hive of activity, the rumble and buzz of thousands of engines and myriad air conditioners, the hum of people busy working on the digital future. Kraft pulls himself up to his full height. Naked, but upright, he stands there in the wind. There, less than three hundred meters away, lies the center of the world, the engine of progress, the incubator of the future, radiant and gleaming. It takes his breath away. He is overwhelmed. Johanna, Johanna . . . what did I do to make you so angry? Kraft slumps down, falls to his knees and, with a gesture of uncharacteristic pathos, throws his hands in front of his face, as if to shield himself from this barrage of civilization, which stands in such harsh contrast to his own sorry state. There, in this self-created darkness, this cave formed out of the palms of his hands, which smell of earth, of grass and fish and the sea, he gives himself over to an all-consuming sense of guilt. A resolutely non-specific guilt. But he gets lost in it, like in the darkened streets of some ancient city, and it seems to him that behind its walls, hidden from view, terrible things are happening, and he

does not know whether he is to blame for all of this evil or whether his guilt consists merely in his failure to prevent it. But no one can tell him that he didn't try. With the full force of his mind he tugs at the doors but they won't budge and he remains locked out, condemned to inaction, and as if from a great distance he hears his name echo through the abandoned streets: "Richard! Richard!" spoken with a California accent.

Kraft leaves the dark city and the moldy cave behind. Without regard to the pain, he gets to his feet and lurches forward, following the voices. Now he can also hear the chugging of an outboard motor and he sees the cone of a searchlight scanning the marsh. There, on the creek, is Herb, standing up in his rubber dinghy, calling his name at the top of his lungs. "Over here, over here," Kraft roars, and Herb brings the dinghy around, driving the plastic prow ashore. Kraft staggers the last few meters and feels himself caught in the cone of light. Like a deer in the headlights, he freezes and lets his arms fall to his sides. Herb leaps ashore and walks over to Kraft. "You've lost your pants, buddy," he says, putting a blanket around his shoulders. Kraft starts to cry.