

Uwe Tellkamp, *Der Turm*

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Sample translation of chapter 72 by Henry Holland

Christian sat in the kit and equipment store – for which he'd at some stage been given a key – and bit, screaming, into a fresh packet of soldier's underwear. He sometimes thought he was going mad – that the barracks, the tanks, the transfers from company to company were all just dreams, which had to end at some point. And then he'd be lying, free, in bed, and maybe the Comedian Harmonists would be singing from the Stengel sisters' gramophone. Then he went into the barracks' library, a grotesque place guarded by a fat good-natured woman with granny's apron and knitting stuff – she knitted kidney-warmers for the “young comrades”. Blond trees shimmered along the sides of the barracks' streets. The officers' greetings sounded nervous, tension and fear upon their faces. The number of politics lessons doubled. Phrases seeped out of mouths and covered, invisibly, the ground, attracting dust, where they remained lying, scorned and not taken seriously by anyone. Exercises were gone through, they worked on the tanks and there was talk of an autumn manoeuvre. Christian counted the hours to his release. Although he'd served almost five years, he sometimes thought he wouldn't be able to bear these last days of imprisonment; he climbed up onto the roof of the battalion building, whose tarring by now was summery-sticky and boiled there among the thermals coming from the black rotating fans. Wrote letters that a kitchen help smuggled out of the barracks into a civilian's post box; read the things Meno sent him (Reclam books and Soviet prose from Hermes publishing house, which had reinvented itself remarkably – suddenly there were blue horses on red grass.) Most soldiers were now working in the state-run economy, in various companies in the local town, Green. Christian stood at a lathe and did shifts as an assistant lathe-operator. The soldiers wanted to go home, but on the morning of the 5<sup>th</sup> of October they got given truncheons. Pancake laughed, “first they give us the ends of guns – and now they give us the handles.” He asked Christian what he

would do. Christian didn't know, he couldn't and didn't want to imagine what would happen. Police came and trained them on the regiment football pitch in the use of truncheons. Attack from left, attack from right. Recognising the ringleaders, penetrating into a group. For a while it was said that Christian's unit would march out with firearms. The soldiers were thrown together out of the remaining companies - sometime in spring 89 the disarmament order had come through – coming from Cottbus, Marienberg and Goldberg: no one could keep track of the streams of transferees that had been let loose that summer. Gulper was just pleased to be able to scrape together enough food and clothing for everyone. Long goods vehicles started driving away. The kitchen help was still allowed out of the barracks and brought back gossip fresh from Green - where rumours were starting in the metal works – and from Karl Marx City, from Leipzig and Dresden. In the evening the order came to rest and relax. No firearms. Rubber-tipped truncheons, summer field-uniform, protective vests, a special ration of alcohol and cigarettes for everyone. Most soldiers were silent, staring at the floor. Pancake was smoking.

“You don't give a toss about anything,” said the man sitting next to Christian.

“Kiss my arse”, said Pancake, pushing his head up out of the hood of the tank. “Can't see anything, no place names.”

“If we'd at least know where we're going”, said a younger soldier who still had a year left to serve.

“To Karl Marx City”, said the guy next to Christian. “Obvious, innit. Hardly any of us come from there.”

“Nut, we're past that already”, said Pancake.

“Have you got a built-in map, have you?” asked the lance-corporal.

“Yeah, with a built-in milometer.”

“So Dresden it is then”, said the younger soldier.

“Man, give a few poofs a doing, makes a change, doesn't it?” said the lance-corporal.

“Hey, Nemo, are there lots of poofs in Dresden? Bet there are.”

“Class enemies”, prompted Pancake, while getting a light.

“D'you believe what they tell us? They're just rioters and that? Counter-revolutionary groups from the west?” asked the younger soldier.

“Bit like yourself eh, you just watch it”, threatened the lance-corporal. “Hey, Nemo, has the cat got your tongue or what?”

“You should leave him in peace”, Pancake said softly.

“I’m not going to take that kind of threat – and I’m not going to let anyone here insult the state”, said the lance-corporal.

“Laddie, which dark hole in the ground did they let you out of?” boomed a sleepy voice from the seat beside the driver’s cabin.

“You mean you want to hit out”, said Pancake.

“Course I do, they’re swines, aren’t they, don’t deserve anything better!”

“Right then, well I’m going to give you a roasting too then. You grunt, you know.”

“I’ll report you, Kretzschmar. You all heard what he said.”

“Nobody’s getting reported”, said Christian.

“How I see it too”, said Pancake, “because actually nobody heard anything here. Sweet F.A.”

“They’re meant to have hung a policeman in Dresden.”

“Old wives’ tales.”

“The main train station’s meant to be closed, even more fucked than after the bombing.”

“That’s what they tell you! And you believe that bollocks! Those shite fucking lies!”

“Who said that? Who said shite lies?”

“And what if they’re true man?”

“Shut the fuck up”, said the sleepy voice.

The soldiers sat silently smoking, observing the number plates of the cars overtaking the military convoy.

Dresden. Rest.

They stood on Prague Street. The lights appeared to Christian to be something foreign and unknown, he came from this city but appeared not to belong here anymore, and the things, the buildings seemed to have come to life: the Round Cinema shamefully hid its showcases with the film posters; the Inter-Hotels looked down snootily, away over the heads of the soldiers, duty policeman and officer cadets, who were forming up under instructions from the older officers, running to and fro, while also instructing civilians in bomber jackets: screams, orders, threats.

No mercy.

Clamp down.

The enemy.

Counter-revolutionary violence.

Defence of the homeland of workers-and-farmers.

The people in front of them, pushing and reaching towards the main station.

The soldiers joined together into groups of a hundred, building chains by linking their arms together. Christian was in the second row, beside Pancake. A hollow, rhythmic banging thronged out of the main station. “Foooarr-waaarrd!” screamed the officers. Christian felt his legs going to jelly beneath him, the same feeling he’d had when the verdict was read out in the courtroom; if he could only fly away now, do something now to end the madness, turn round and just walk away; he was scared and saw that Pancake was scared too. The station was a gurgling, devouring wheelwork, a lit-up throat that swallowed steps and spat out water, fumes and fever. In there? We’re meant to go in there? Trams lay helpless, like seeds amid the swelling fruit flesh of the people. They were rolling a car over and setting it alight, Molotov cocktails fizzed through the air like burning bee hives, and burst, spewing out a myriad, of deadly, edgy, thorns of fire. The soldiers stayed standing in front of Heinrich Mann Booksellers and blocked off Prague Street. Christian saw Anne.

She was standing a few metres away from the bookshop in a group of people and was addressing a policeman. The policeman lifted his baton and smashed out at her. Once. Twice. Anne fell. The policeman bent down and went on beating her. Put the boot in. Got support straight away, when someone from the group tried to stop him. Anne placed her arm in front of her face, like a child. Christian saw his mother, lying on the ground, being kicked and beaten by a policeman. Lights rushed passed him like divers. Christian was in an empty space, a lost darkness, into which slid all the silence and defensiveness and obedience which had collected inside him. He took his truncheon in both hands and wanted to jump on the policeman, to beat him to death, but someone held Christian, someone held him in a brace and yelled, “Christian, Christian” and Christian screamed back and wept and struggled with his legs and urinated in his impotence – and then it was over, and he hung in Pancake’s grip as in a vice, like a dog whose neck they’ve broken. Could do with him what they wanted, he wanted nothing but to be in the future, in the far and still further distant future, he wanted nothing but to be

away from here, Pancake carried him back, Christian sobbed, Christian wanted to be dead.

He came back into the barracks, where he was questioned the next day by an employee of this place of sealed and barred-off doors. He studied Christian's file, sunk his head and his lower chin into his sleepy mat of folded hands and let out a slow, "Hhhmmm."

Christian had been given a tranquiliser from the doctor in the first aid station, and now said – (while thinking of Korbinian and Kurtchen: See you soon; You won't get out of here; Forgive and forget) – and now said "Schwedt", in a neutral, matter-of-fact voice.

His questioner stood up and went to the window, scratching his unshaven cheek. "I'm still thinking what to do with you, but I don't think that Schwedt would be a good idea. No. I think you need ..."

Christian waited apathetically, his nervous condition such that he was no longer capable of much reaction.

"A holiday", said his questioner. "I'm going to send you on leave. You've still got quite a few days to serve here. Go and visit your grandfather in Schandau. Although, actually, you might get yourself into trouble there ... You should go to Glasshouses." He pulled a leave document out of the drawer, and signed and stamped it. "You might be better not travelling through Dresden. You can get a bus through the country from Green to Forest Wells – and you know the way from there."

Christian remained sitting, with the leave pass in front of him on the table.

"Just say thank you, Comrade Captain. We're not all like you think, you know."