

**Opfer Müssen Gebracht Werden:
Otto Lilienthal Speaks**

Anklam, Germany, 1857

Look, Gustav:
see how the storks
soar, swoop, dive, glide
and land so gracefully?
How I yearn
to fly as they do
through the endless sky.
One day
by applying the power of thought
by studying their motion in flight,
by observing the properties
of lift and drag
and thrust,
by examining the design and movement
of each wing- and tail-feather
individually and collectively,
you and I
shall solve the enigma
of flying,
for to fly is everything.

Derwitz/Krilow, Germany, 1891

See, Gustav,
our first glider
is ready,
constructed of split willow-wands
and bamboo,
covered with waxed cloth
of cotton twill
and rigged with sturdy wire.
We are ready
to test our wings
to taste the freedom,
the glory,
the splendor
of flight
which only the birds know.

Some people
laugh at me
and say I am crazy.
They call me bird-brained,
and predict that I will kill myself.
So I may,
but opfer müssen gebracht werden.

I stand atop the hill
waiting for the wind.
My heart is a wild bird

frantically beating its wings
against my chest.
Feeling a breeze
like the breath of heaven
I run off the hill,
and leap into the air.

I am soaring!
Gliding
like the birds
I've studied so enviously
all of my life!
At last
my soul knows true peace
as I float effortlessly
on the wind.
I look to the horizon
and I glimpse the future
before drifting gently
back down to earth.
To fly
is everything!

**August 10, 1896; A Hospital in Berlin,
Germany**

Come closer, Gustav, my brother.
I am embarking
on my very last flight,
venturing
where not even the birds
dare fly.
The doctors tell me
I broke my spine.
I must have lost control
when a warm air current
gusted,
tilting up the nose of my glider,
causing it to stall.
I could no longer steer it
or control my flight path.
Gravity took over
and I plummeted to earth,
a wingless bird
falling like a stone
to the ground.
What was my altitude?
Fifty meters, you say?
Ah yes, I see...

Think, Gustav,
how far we have come
from our very first glider flight
of only twenty-five meters!
Two thousand flights later,
we have reached ten times that distance.

We have built monoplane gliders,
biplane gliders,
wing-flapping gliders
and even a motorized device,
which, I regret,
you will have to try
without me.
We have tested and retested
and modified our designs.
Our labor has been painstaking
and meticulous,
but opfer müssen gebracht werden!

Well, Gustav,
I have no regrets,
for I have soared over the hills of Germany
with the birds,
and yet
all of our achievements so far
are nothing more
than the unsteady steps
of children.

Tell all those who come after me
not to give up.
As the stork said
in my poem,
“It cannot be your Creator’s will
To doom you, the first he made, to earth until
Eternity, to refuse you flight forever.”
To invent an airplane
is nothing.
To build one
is something.
But to fly
is everything.
Above all, Gustav,
remind them,
and remember for yourself as well—
opfer müssen gebracht werden:
sacrifices must be made.

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