

**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.

christopher m dempsey  
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