

The High Water

Vasyl Gabor

And it was here, in this very place, in these mountains reaching up to the skies, that I began to be pursued by the high water. I could hear it getting closer. If I closed my eyes for an instant, I could see a colossal wall of muddy water overwhelming me and engulfing the mountains at incredible speed. I saw the massive volume of water destroying everything in its path, spinning around in a wild maelstrom uprooted trees, roofs torn from buildings, and all manner of household implements, livestock, and domestic animals—cows, pigs, chickens, dogs, and cats. Amidst all this, human beings, dead and alive, were also being whirled round. The living desperately clutched at the branches of trees, planks of wood, and logs that were floating in the water, in an instinctive attempt to save themselves and their dear ones. But could anyone survive under the pressure of such deep water? The roar of the water grew louder and louder; it sounded as though some gigantic wounded beast was approaching. I could even hear the cold breathing of the watery beast, and then I quickly opened my eyes to see my last moments. Suddenly the vision disappeared, and peace and quiet reigned all around. From time to time it was interrupted by the deep buzz of a bumble-bee or the pleasant hum of a honey-bee. The blue mountains could be seen in the distance, and above them an eagle was circling, a tiny dot scarcely perceptible against the clear sky. Only the birds will survive the high water, I thought. But who knows whether they will be able to remain airborne for such a long time. As their wings become stiff with exhaustion, the birds will plunge like stones into the water's bottomless depths. For there is no escape from the high water.

I try to fathom what it is that is disturbing me, why I began to have this vision of water, purifying water, water that brings people into the world and carries them away. Can it be that the very water that created the world will also cause it to perish? Terrified, I close my eyes and again I see the gigantic wave, like a wide wall many kilometers high. Roaring, it is rushing towards the mountains, and I think of my parents, my brother and his family, I think of my wife and our children, all of whom I left behind in the valley. I run after them. I arrive, all out of breath. And they are all very peacefully sitting around in the dining room, calm as you like, chatting away happily while sitting at the table and enjoying their food and drink. I call out to them that the high water is coming, but they look at me in surprise, almost as though there were something wrong with me.

I see only the fear in my wife's eyes—not for herself, but for our children. I ask my father and brother to bind together with wire and chains the planks that have been lying in two piles in the garden, drying in the sun, for years now. My brother gives my father a quizzical look, but the latter gives him a nod, indicating that he should do as I ask. We only just manage to tie together the two piles of planks and get on the raft, taking with us a little bread and two axes, when we hear the frightful roar of the high water. Nobody had seen anything like it before. People began to rush about crazily, hurrying to untie the cattle and bring in or out some valuables, while others do the opposite, shutting themselves indoors.

Father tied us all to one rope and then to the raft, and just then we caught sight of the gigantic wave, so high it half blotted out the sky. Nothing will be left of us when that wall of water falls on us, I thought involuntarily. Amazingly, the water engulfs us and then lifts us, raft and all, and in a crazy maelstrom throws us up to the surface. And we all survive, though we are swamped by filthy, salty water. Oh God! All sorts of stuff is floating about—so much of it! In the whirling maelstrom we see people and terrified cattle, but we can't hear either human voices or the bellowing of the beasts above the water's roar. We push away the tree trunks and drive away the frightened livestock from our raft, to prevent them from capsizing it. Under the weight of our bodies the raft is already sitting quite low in the water, and the waves submerge it time and again, so if it were not for the fact that we are tied to it, we would be swept away into the inky black depths.

Survivors spotting our raft began to swim toward it from all directions, their eyes blazing maniacally. To them our raft was the last hope of salvation. We realized that if they climbed aboard we would all perish, because the raft would either capsize or sink. We exchanged glances among ourselves. We all knew that if we wanted to survive we would have to repel the people from our raft—our neighbors, our kin, and our best friends. We would even need to use the axes, because the poles would not be enough—the people we drove off would keep trying to clamber onto the raft again and again. We knew that once we raised the axes against someone, we would become murderers. Was it worth surviving, in that case? And then, even if we managed to survive, I thought, wouldn't we be merely prolonging the agony of dying? After all, our bread would run out and we would be left alone in the middle of the sea created by the filthy, salty high water. What would our fate be then?

The shouting of the people got louder, and dripping wet hands grasped at our raft as the first people began to clamber onto it.

"Push them off! Push them off!" shouted our womenfolk inaudibly. "Save our children!"

The axes trembled in our hands.

"I can't do it!" shouts my brother. Like them, he is shouting too, but I can't hear his words.

"Neither can I!" says my father, shaking his head.

We drive the terrified people off with the poles; we are soaked in sweat and water, and they keep swimming towards the raft. Our arms are already becoming numb, and all our strength is deserting us.

"Oh God, if they get onto the raft we'll all perish," shout the women. We still can't hear their voices above the roar of the water, but we can read their words on their lips and in their eyes, full of despair and terror.

And we know it will be as our women say, since there are crazed looks in the eyes of the people who want to be saved, and wild, hoarse screams struggle to escape from their throats. All that is left of our former fellow villagers, our best friends and neighbors, is their human form. The high water has turned them into animals. But wait a moment, are we really any better? Perhaps we are the animals, because we are cruelly driving people away from our raft instead of offering them a helping hand.

And then our father fell, and they started to drag him into the water. How fortunate that he was tied to us by the rope. We rush to his aid and strike at the arms of the attackers with the butts of the axes. We rescue our father, but he is hardly breathing. Blood is flowing from the scratches on his face. The women are crying.

"Leave our raft alone!" we keep shouting, but our attackers don't hear us and clamber up.

We know that our raft is an uncertain means of survival, yet it gives us at least some faint hope. But more and more people are trying to get aboard.

I can't watch this frightful vision any longer, and I open my eyes. The vision disappears, but I can still hear the roar of the rushing high water in the distance.

I can't understand why it is pursuing me. I try to think about something else, to get it out of my head, but it steals up on me like a gust of wind, making itself felt like a gentle breath of air, which is enough to strike fear into my very soul. It seems to me that I used to experience feelings like this when I was fifteen years old. For a long time then I kept having the same dream again and again. I dreamt that I was being led through a cemetery by someone who was very close to me and yet was a stranger, who was showing me the graves of my descendants. I see the names of members of my family carved on the headstones, with the dates of their birth and their death below: the year 6500, the year 6900. I was surprised and gratified to see how prolific our family turned out to be, but I was terribly afraid to look around, since I knew that my own grave was behind me. I was gripped by fear at the very thought that I would see the date of my own death on a headstone. At that point, I started to run. First I ran through the whole cemetery, then through the town. The town was large and empty, like the cemetery—its buildings and roads were black. Only when I collapsed, exhausted from running and not far from our house, did I see that the road and our building were different in color. At this point I always

woke up, with incredible relief and joy in my heart that I had not looked round and seen the year of my death on a gravestone.

Ah, I thought, so this dream was not pointless—it was a premonition of danger. In those days of my youth, that alien force could not get the better of me, and it left me in peace. But now it had returned and was trying to force the vision of the high water on me. Of course, I know very well that it can end only in death—but does anyone want to see his own demise, or that of other people?

True, initially the idea of committing suicide had come to my mind, so as to obliterate the vision of the high water absolutely. But, I thought, in that act I would discover only my own powerlessness and weakness, and in the end would not avert the coming of the high water. What disturbed me most was that by this act I would not only distress those dearest to me, but I would leave them to face the high water on their own. When it comes, I want to be by their side—and my sense that it is approaching is ever more keen. In despair I wipe my face and squint. Once more I see myself with my family and my brother with his family and our elderly parents on the raft, driven by the waves to the farthest edge of the wall of water that extends over many kilometers. It begins to dawn on me that the high water is carrying with it all that is living and non-living on the earth, like a wheel destroying everything and crushing everything into a mire. Is it really our turn now to hurtle into the black abyss? No, no! I shake my head, banishing the vision as my heart starts to race and my hands tremble. Why should it be me that suffers all this? Why can't I get rid of these terrifying premonitions? And why did the vision of the high water start to appear here, of all places, in the mountains, which one would think cannot be threatened by any water? Are they the first to sense our demise, and are they already weeping over our final days?

Don't come, high water, I whisper faintly, and I find that I am ridiculous: for it is already on its way and nothing can stop it now...

Translated by Patrick Corness and Natalia Pomirko

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