



One Thousand
& One

K A R I H U K K I L A

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Kari Hukkila

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& One



Translated from the Finnish
by David Hackston



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One Thousand & One

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Kari Hukkila, *Tuhat ja yksi*

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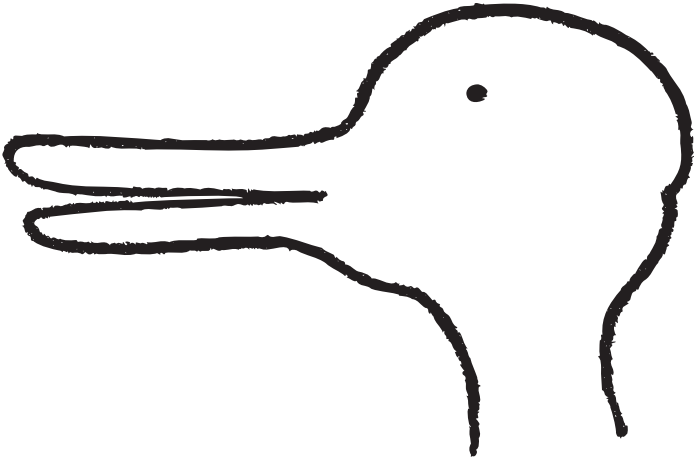
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*This translation is dedicated
to the memory of Tarja Roinila (1964–2020)
translator, colleague, friend
gone too soon*



The Duck-Rabbit

Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations

THIS SAMPLE
is from “And One,” chapter 3 of the book.

January, a sunny day... a municipal worker took us on a tour of the shuttered city. A down-to-earth guy in a brown suede jacket, a hardy face, a sprawling moustache, no-nonsense conversation. Over the last fifteen or so years (after most people had left the city, I assumed), plants had occupied the streets, captured the walls, the gables, and crept their way into old

apartments. The windowpanes were smashed, the gutters collapsed. Our route wound its way in and out of the houses, most of them without a roof, rising and falling one story at a time. Broken Coca-Cola bottles in the corners of the rooms, walls covered in faded posters of singers who hadn't recorded a note since the 1970s. Inside the church, the gilding had been torn from the fixtures. Here and there lay items of furniture, forgotten and left to the mercy of the elements, individual kitchen appliances, tables, chairs, vinyl and cassette players, shoes, winter clothes and so on. From the edge of the city wall, you could see down into a gravel pit with trailers, the former residents of the *terra* living there. A mild, sunny day. At the foot of the wall was the small center of the town, where people lived as though the ruins weren't there at all. *You forget about it... You learn to close your eyes...* The small potted plants standing by the trailer doors were shabby; they reminded me of the worn-out old shell suits and cheap baseball caps, the woolen sweaters, the track suits, the tired and swollen faces, the gaunt cheeks, the puffing on cigarettes. Uncouth voices all around, harsh cries, laughter, shouting, sighs whistling between missing teeth. The middle-aged and older women were so overweight that it must have taken them considerable effort. The girls' large round or triangular earrings scraped against their necks when they turned their heads.

Thick, black hair. *Salve, salve*. They had been driven from their homes *like cattle*. *My home used to be up there*. All this in a shrill, rough voice, a curious mixture of innocence and directness. They were *Bethlehem's cattle*, someone said. The women's jumpers had heart-shaped patterns on them. Between the trailers, long wooden poles held a row of plastic awnings in place, like a continuation of the endless lattice of scaffolding holding up the walls and masonry across the street. A suitable place for our perfectly average life twenty years ago, its sheer inanity, I thought now. In our first serious relationship, we always repeat the worst aspects of our childhood homes, Mara told me once. The conformism we glean from our surroundings is like Herling's depiction of *the unknown hand, the power unaware of its own majesty, to which we learn to close our eyes*. My brother would have said that the greatest conformism of all was *not thinking further than your own arse*, and even in Kontula you might hear someone say that so-and-so's world *only reached as far as his arse could drag him*.

An hour later I find myself in the place where the road leads us to the dead, or so people used to believe. I've been walking, or perhaps it would be more appropriate to say I've been shuffling in a circle around an enormous flat crater with small islets of woodland, laurel trees, holm oaks, sage and gorse; behind the

woodland there was a large plateau covered in volcanic ash where the whiteness of the earth was dazzling, the air stank of sulfur, the heat and the horseflies wouldn't give me a moment's peace, smoke rose from fissures in the ground and curled its way up the steep embankment further off. I felt weak, and when I saw a wooden bench in the shade of the trees I lay down, closed my eyes and wedged my wallet against the back of the bench in case I fell asleep. Behind the nearby trees, there were a number of dome tents, old camper vans, a few shacks selling things, a campsite, *only eastern Europeans*, I concluded from the voices. There was nobody in sight. In ancient times, people believed that a road ran through this place leading underground to the homes of the dead.

The taxi ride from the harbor to the *Vulcano solfatara* took only five minutes, but I didn't have the energy to walk. In front of a small arched doorway, the elderly tout at a nearby bar watched my arrival, launched into his usual spiel, pointed at the patio; his tone was friendly, so I stood there and exchanged a few words with him. *Food poisoning*, I said. *Drugs, medicine, injection*, he replied and mimed injecting himself in the forearm. Along the bar's wall was a long table, volcanic rocks, lava, coral, pearls, cameo brooches, all intended as souvenirs. I ordered a Diet Coke, but before it was brought to the table, I felt sick

and had to get up. The toilet cubicle was cramped and dirty. Endless amounts of hand washing. I leant over, stuck my fingers down my throat, and only then saw something deeply unpleasant. At a moment like this, the last thing you want to see is human feces. I washed the toilet bowl, rewashed my hands, stuck two fingers deep down my throat and emptied the contents of my stomach. Another round of hand washing, after which I staggered across the bar, drank my Diet Coke, and set off for the crater.

Herling had taught me that wherever there is a road from which nobody ever returns, somewhere nearby there must be a sauna. In the middle of the sweltering crater, the sauna is a simple brick construction with two closet-like alcoves built into the wall where you can lie down and curl up. A small sign explained that in one of them the temperature is 60°C and in the other 90°C . Next to them, above a pile of yellow sulfuric rocks, the temperature was 160°C , but the higher the temperature the more the horseflies felt at home. Another sign explained that the crater was fitted with corner reflectors to observe seismological activity.

I drift off, unsure whether I am more asleep than awake, I can hear people's voices, but there is nobody in sight, the air shimmers with smoke, the stagnant baking heat, the sun haze.

There on the bench I chuckle, half aloud. As though shadows had appeared from amid the smoke and the glare. The voices had disappeared, and now I felt alone in the crater, as if left inside a deserted theater. Here wanderers chosen by fate can meet one another, people who by dint of their societal and economic differences would never have crossed paths while they were alive. Here amid the stench of filth, the rich can appeal to the ferryman, demand postponement for a fee and ask to take all their worldly belongings with them, while the poor, already used to subservience, will supinely give up their seat to anyone who asks, and even take up the oars or the bail if ordered to do so. There can be no return, so while for one person this could be the final struggle, for another it is merely business as usual, political horse-trading... *This team will get some real results... An affable chap will do just fine... All things in good company...* Vanity flourished, and even if someone was concerned about the future, be it underground or in the skies above, nobody seriously believed they would be forced to leave everything behind, a body-builder his muscles, a rich man his arrogance, a philosopher his convoluted notions... *It is like pressing the door shut behind oneself*, said Björling shortly before his death. Wittgenstein, when he heard that the end was drawing near, sighed simply *finally*, or so Mara always claimed... The depiction and mood

could equally apply to the moment when Herling arrived at the prison camp that dark evening in the middle of winter and saw the observation posts in the distance, like *four crow's nests placed high on wooden stilts*.

There on the bench, half-asleep, I wondered why Mara had talked about the Ethiopian so insistently, as if this man had always been one of the recurring topics on our walks around Kaivopuisto. When Björling commented on his approaching death, that it is like pressing the door shut behind oneself, he wasn't telling the truth. Even Wittgenstein's *finally* sounded a little hollow. One way or another, humans always try to resist loneliness and crow's nests. A few brief trysts notwithstanding, Björling's sexual life was lonely, and Wittgenstein's wasn't much better. Herling too told us something about loneliness when he described how the convicts systematically hunted down and raped any women who arrived at the camp. It was part of the camp's economy: scraps of bread, a rape, felling a tree, like twisting a branch from a pine, a handful of berries from a sprig.

Mara searched for the Ethiopian as though this was a form of *survival*, morning upon morning. Later that afternoon, Mara called, twice, and said that the Ethiopian was here now. I didn't ask whether *here* meant at Mara's apartment or the fact that this relative stranger had now been located. They had done

simple things together, strolled, chatted, gone grocery shopping, cooked some pasta. It sounded almost like two people's shared loneliness, or the tranquility of Skjolden when compared to the folly of the world, which I encountered later that evening when, with considerable exertion, I stood up from the bench and shuffled back to the arched doorway and the Solfatara office. Two old men were sitting in the middle of the room. Their thinning white hair and beards were scruffy, behind them were a few large potted plants, old bookcases, dark wood, glass doors, scientific-looking books and tomes published sometime between 1900 and 1910. In front of the men was a bulletin board showing clippings and articles dating from March 2009 and cut from American and Italian newspapers. *Solfatara compared to Viagra*, the headlines declared. In the tissues of the male member, two enzymes had been discovered which together produced hydrogen sulfide, and this in turn caused an erection and the enlarging of the blood vessels. Natural Viagra, the same gases as in the *Solfatara shrouds*, the devil's issue... I take a moment's rest on a chair in the office and ask whether the ground still trembles almost daily... It's been quiet for the last fifteen years, the ground making only small motions *back and forth*, chuckles one of the men, suggestively rocking his fist back and forth a few centimeters at a time. Always the same old jokes ... *The pot isn't*

simmering... The giant isn't smoking... There's no cauldron quite like it... This is a VEI 8-category *caldera*, a supervolcano, he laughed. Fish in the sea could be boiled alive at any moment ... Then the bubbling will bring them up to the surface like great white fillets on a restaurant plate... Some kind of eruption is imminent, that much is clear.

Back in my hotel room later that evening, the day's exertions collapse into bed with me, and it takes a moment before I have the energy to take my temperature. It's 38.4° C. I drift off to sleep and wake up during the night, not hungry, though I haven't eaten all day. I am half asleep, half awake, for a while I can't remember where I am, but I feel a little better and switch on the reading lamp. Twenty years ago, I used to look at these same places from one week to the next, but as I start flicking through the brochures I bought from the old boys at the Solfatara and think back to our *little group's* lies and decades-old deceptions, it occurs to me that I never really *saw* anything. I study a historical engraving of a group of aristocrats who long ago traveled from far away in the north to admire the lava flows ... Horse-drawn carriages, platforms, sedan chairs, women in long skirts, hats and diadems on their heads, there's a man sitting on a deckchair sketching the panorama, a young man and woman, perhaps looking for a way to elope together,

they have walked out to the furthest safe ledges in the distance, the man is standing in front showing the woman the lava flows... We were like that too: idle, cruel, stupid. Standing in front of a raging inferno we imagine that at most we will burn our nose, our toe, or little finger, the belief in our own exceptionalism is so unshakable that there's no way a disaster affecting the *hoi polloi* could ever befall us.

I wished Mara could have been there with me to comment on the image, chortling upon seeing something that could easily apply to our time too, just like he did that summer when I walked across the yard to his place almost every day, my brother was seven years old, but he too spent his time in and around that same yard, always appearing with his bike at some point during the day. Mara had a habit of always telling me about what he'd been reading that morning, laughing as he explained how a particular section should be understood. After this, he put his books aside and forced me to listen as he played his flute. He played straight from the score, stopped, furrowed his brow, leant closer to the music, then continued his painfully pedantic reading of Bach's counterpoint until he stumbled in the exact same spot again... There in my hotel room, floored by the heat, I imagined I could hear his stumbling flute as I read about how Monte nuovo, the green-dappled mountain on the shores of Pozzuoli, rose up from

the earth in a single night, Mara stumbled and chortled, and out in the yard my brother was living his seven-year-old life, he too stumbling on his bike and chortling, fumbling his way onward like the tentative notes of the flute. At around midday, the earth at the shores of Pozzuoli rose five meters, I read, and the flute stumbled again. The sea retreated hundreds of meters from the shoreline, forming sandbanks and shallow pools, the sun glinted against the flanks of the thousands of thrashing fish that the locals rushed to gather up. People lay claim to everything revealed by the departing sea, even the court turned up to divide the land, not only to its favorites, but into taxable property. An hour or two after sunset, a molten rock the size of a bull was spat up into the air from the bowels of the earth, contemporary witnesses attested. A great fissure appeared, tearing the land apart at the seams. Loud noises filled the air. The earth vomited smoke, fire, rock and a silt of thick ash. Sulfurous compounds and fumes issued all around. The birds and animals were covered in yellow sulfuric ash and died or let people capture them with their bare hands. Soon afterwards, ash covered the streets of Naples too, blackening the palace façades and tarnishing their beauty. Everyone who'd had the chance to leave had already done so, but now, at night, the poorer inhabitants of Pozzuoli headed off to Naples on foot, carrying their children and scant

possessions in their arms. Some were carrying birds covered in ash, others the fish they had plucked from the shore. Many wore nothing but a shirt, some had run out into the night stark naked. *Their faces were painted in the colors of death*, wrote one contemporary witness. In Kontula, sixteen-year-old Mara's Bach kept stumbling at the same spot, like so many human endeavors. If Mara had been reading this with me, he would have laughed and cried, just like he used to back in Kontula, and there in the dim of the hotel room I thought that, if only I could make my brother laugh and cry too, it might very well unsettle his life. In Pozzuoli, people's curiosity soon conquered their dismay at the natural disaster. The viceroy and his entourage rode out to the spot, or as near as it was possible to go. The earth was covered in a layer of ash half a meter thick, columns of smoke obscured the sky, the terrain was like a churned field. Word had it that beneath all the smoke there was a mountain the size of Vesuvius. The viceroy was thinking of profit, the people were there for the spectacle. The mountain was by the shore, so many curious onlookers arrived by boat and climbed up the hillside all the way to the edge of the crater, heedless of the ash and the fact that the soles of their shoes were left singed. From the crater rim, they could see down into the cauldron with water boiling deep at the bottom. The mountain was 134 m tall and had

risen in less than twelve hours. An average of one meter every five minutes, I calculated. The following Sunday, when several dozen or perhaps more than a hundred curious souls had gathered at the summit to behold the newest local attraction, an eruption shook the crater and belched up a cloud of red-hot ash that came rolling down the southern face of the mountain. Many onlookers were consumed in the flames, toppled over by falling rocks, or overcome by the smoke.

COLOPHON



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All thought is driven out of sight, and before long unpleasant things start to happen right in front of us...

Kari Hukkila's *One Thousand and One* is a philosophical, essayistic novel about catastrophes, both natural and man-made, about humans' ability to respond to catastrophes by thinking or, at the very least, simply managing to survive.

Hukkila's novel is a cornucopia of micro-histories, digressions, and a broad gallery of characters ranging from the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein to an Ethiopian refugee in Rome.

One Thousand and One begins when a large birch tree falls on a cabin near the Russian border in eastern Finland, leaving the narrator unable to concentrate on a writing project he has been at work on. He decides then to take up an invitation to Rome, where his lifelong friend has lived since abandoning a life in philosophy. In Hukkila's novel, Scheherazade's survival by continuing to tell stories is reimagined as survival by continuing to think, a continued thought activity, often taken to extremes, the preservation of humanity in an inhumane world. In David Hackston's eloquent translation, Hukkila's musical, meandering, thought-provoking prose is full of savage, ironic, and luminous humor, remaining uncompromisingly alive until the final sentence.

One Thousand and One is the first in a projected series of five novels. Upon its release in Finland in 2016 it was said to bear "all the hallmarks of a classic."

Thought no longer had a place in the world, and of course if you're an illegal it's all but impossible.



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