

## Doctor Benn's astrolabe

Thursday's ride with bus number 110 to *Dahlem* is a Sunday trip into nature. Every turn promises the end of green suburbs, the tops of swaying sycamores and lindens, the end of the city and the beginning of the countryside are holding hands, squeezing, so that it is not possible to determine who is holding whom, the unfulfillability of promises: the green does not give over to a field, a pool to a lake, a mansion to a farm. The word lies, although the *Dahlem Dorf* station is covered with straw. Arabian students hang out in front of the entrance to the underground, and only the German kiosk of the kebab seller clues us in that the bus did not drive through a secret passage and set us down in Morocco. The university buildings are hidden among trees, intertwining paths and signposts, which exclude each other. The arrow points to another arrow three metres away, which is pointing back, perpendicular to the first. With signs making sure no one can get lost during his search, he searches and searches and it seems entirely irrelevant that he can never find the place he is searching for by tracing the signs. A Möbius strip, the circular blindness of the streets, an exhausted Minotaur are harbingers of the paths of this place, which only multiply behind the revolving door of the Ethnological Museum. Although every visitor's secret dream is to walk completely alone among the labyrinths of showcases in the labyrinth of halls in the labyrinth of the building in the labyrinth of the populace, in time the absence of other visitors fills him with suspicion that the museum has closed, they forgot him, an unknown name, wandering between the catalogue numbers of the Incan mummy and Polynesian sailboats. The surprised lurch forward of a female guard, disturbed while reading in a hidden corner of the hall, brings relief to the visitor that he is not the last of his kind. Being lost can continue. The Eskimos follow the oath of the German soldiers to the Führer, the scene of a couple in love returning home from a Russian cinema in spring 1946, a brick cube left half wrecked amidst Berlin ruins. Among the Mayans some voice asks where Africa is, and the guard, who quietly gargled thick air and was leaning back into the gap of afternoon sun, lifts his hand and stretches out his index finger without blinking his half-closed eyelids. Just up the stairs. Before the door marked EXIT in front of me, I get lost among the herds of cartographers. The chiselled brass of the astrolabe with labels in Arabic. A gaze through the opening in a round disc and a turn of the axles for measuring the position and distance of places and celestial bodies also denote the direction of Mecca and the hours of prayer. Half an hour later it turns out that I should have borrowed it, although six hundred years ago it was not made for the latitude where *Dahlem wood* lies. The road, drawn lonesomely across the white stain on my map, turns out to be a wood with paths that diverge. At the border I come across the pensiveness of retiree dog walkers but the barking soon stops, everywhere the same shrubbery, no lichen on the trunks. The evening light blunt among the treetops. After half an hour of walking I stop in front of a ravine. The noise of a distant highway or is it just the noise of the trees? I descend the steep pathless terrain through brushwood. I do not see that a path is waiting for me on the other side of the ravine. When I step all muddy from the wood into the parking lot of a discount store, lit by the evening sun, people, piling full bags into the trunks of their Mercedes, watch me as if I had tumbled straight from the Iron Age. Every question about where I am is redundant. Behind the mottled facade of *Lidl*, tombstones sink among the shadows of trees. The map at the entrance of the *Dahlem* cemetery confirms the familiar numbers 27W/31 004/699 and 004/700. But the yellow rose in my hand, which I buy at the entrance, becomes completely worn down after half an hour's search. The wooden board *Field 27* ends at C and the König grave. The metal curbs, which border every quadrant of thirty times thirty graves, fall silent, and white round emblems, jabbed into the graves, names and instructions for plant care, the dead and instructions for plant care, the dead and instructions for plant care end at 005/586. Although I walked among these graves years ago, I have not been so very lost at a cemetery. The signs deceived me so that instead of the instinct of the first movement, I followed the logic of the organizers of death. While going along the gravel path back to the entrance with the withered rose in my hand to study the plan again, I was increasingly certain that Benjamin's well-known sentence is not true. *It does not mean much if someone cannot orient himself in the city. But if one gets lost in the city like we get lost in some wood, then schooling is necessary. The names of the streets must come to him who*

*wanders around, to speak, like the crackling of dry branches talks, and little streets must reflect the hours of the day as clearly as the hollow.* I did not get lost on the pathless terrain of a wood, I got lost among the too perfect signs of the Dahlem wood cemetery, in an enclosed place, full of attempts to designate every square centimetre. The multiplication of signs wrapped me in too thick of a mesh. Instead of the signs of fields and the numbers of graves, I would need the Arabian astrolabe to find a dark star, which would not rise until I came running back a few minutes before the cemetery closed and placed the sleeping rose on the tombstone of Ilsa and doctor Benn.

*Translated by Brian Henry*

## Sweet

Polarimetrics was not necessary. After lunch our sugar level dropped below the dramatic limit. But even the best cocoa from Java or the Andes could not entirely supplant the sugar from the cakes, which spun by us every twenty minutes like the truffle seekers who, lost in a wood, wandered in circles. Sugar is to a Prussian what air is to others, he said. His brother-in-law has always planted sugar beet hectare after hectare, all the way to the Mecklenburg horizon. Only the most fertile land was considered, preferably at the base of a mountain. He preferred to occupy himself with the calculation of the precise orbit of Sputnik 2, with undercover gangs, whose goal was to arouse Gagarin's spacey smile in the face of every woman, and the impact of the new regulations of the European legislation to the *Zucker Süd* stock exchange and the other producers of sugar salt. It was called this in the times when a kilogram of sugar was worth ten fat bulls, in the year of Our Lord 1393. Colonies and sugarcane reduced the price a bit, millions of slaves' bodies, broken by the work at plantations, made up for the difference. But then came Sigismund, Andreas Sigismund Marggraf, who discovered sugar in beetroot in his Berlin laboratory of the Prussian Academy of Sciences. It soon separated the sweeter sex from the bitter one. So that farmers from the outskirts of Berlin did not fall behind city gentlemen in eloquence, they demonstrated why working in sweet turnip fields is inappropriate for a man. By systematic cultivation of the Silesian sugar beet, an additional, so-called sweet vertebra grew in a man's spine. Women did not have it and thus could much better endure the long days bent in fields. But four hundred sugar factories, as many as Berlin still had a hundred and some years ago, needed the female sex. The first regular opportunity of university study for women came with the white crystals. Chemists at the beginning of the 20th century were new alchemists in skirts. From the heads, dug into the earth, they once made miraculous, now more and more ordinary dust, with which they sweetened tea, made compote and jams. The men were dedicated to the production of *Cyclon B*. The nerve gas, which killed at Auschwitz, was produced from the molasses of the sugar beet. If I saw in the Sugar Museum correspondence between the commander of the camp and the head of the sugar processing laboratory, who made the gas? I shake my head. They discussed in detail how it would be possible to improve the gas, to make it odourless, he adds, already holding the third lump of sugar against the light and finding that it crystallized beautifully. A century ago, when the world was not yet completely derailed, images of the city in royal panoramas circled before dormant Berliners. Today our bodies circle at a height of 204 metres. In the time of the *German Democratic Republic* I was working down here as a staff officer. From one of these white blocks, which grew in the ruins around *Alexanderplatz*, I walked every morning to my barracks, he says and points his finger to the depth. The name of the barracks was original, of course, *the barracks of Friedrich Engels*. Through the grate of the guard house in *Zeughaus* on the *Unter den Linden* I could see straight to the monument of Frederick the Great, our Fric, who introduced *the Goose-Step* to the army. He stands down there, but at a height like dirt on a carpet. You see that building, he says, there is still the balcony from which Karel Liebkecht declared *the Socialist Republic of Germany* in November 1918. At the next circle remind me to show you the building where Honecker governed from. We both like the Schwarzwald cherry tarts and the turning of the restaurant around the city, which stands. Since the wall came down, I haven't been on top of the tower, I have always only watched it from below, he says. Sometimes it is called teleasparagus. But when you are making asparagus, do not forget to always add a lump or two while cooking. Of sugar, at any rate, he adds.

*Translated by Brian Henry*

## Tacitus at the underground station

A thick hour, as long as the trip from the Berlin district *Charlottenburg* to *Prenzlauer Berg* lasted, was thin because of the names of the bars. *Schwarz Sauer* (Black Sour), *Entweder oder* (Or or), *Flotte Frieda* (say Fresh Frieda), *Babel Berlin* or *Gorki park* are places with stylishly demolished interiors, where the ritual smell of joints steams and tepid beer is served by waiters who have just stepped from a very very very cool fridge. The inscriptions above the door and on wet windows in cold months gave back to the bars the lost magical power of words so that they kept on glowing with the dark light of a spell when it began to get dark outside, in their light were revealed the faces of seers, saints, prophets, surrogate demigods, false and, sometimes, less false. Camouflaged Buddhas on ramshackle chairs, Christs in black, nailed to the bar by their palms, Marys with punk hairdos and Krishnas dressed like Central European intellectuals. Next to such fraudulent radiance of the surroundings and complex conversations about the stability of unstable loves, new legal regulations about returning plastic wrap and half forgotten poetic scenes from *Prenzlberg* out of the eighties is what quickly occurred to me on the way home, so that I tramped like Hildebrand's horse in the wrong direction, to foreign parts.

Luckily there was always to be found on the street some Tacitus, who directed my doubtful trot in the direction of the lost underground station. The escalator absorbed us like a time machine while Gaius Cornelius was telling me about the old Germans, about people between the Rhine and the Danube unfit for physical labor, about the tribes who challenged the enemy to combat rather than cultivate fields, about the idlers who two thousand years ago liked to sleep long into the white day and walked around covered with fur coats, pinned with a thorn, or rather just naked, about people without autumn, with only three seasons, about the great devotees to fidelity, monogamy and a woman's marital status. In the dim throbbing of the platform halogen light Tacitus disappeared. In the last years of the first century in Rome, he had stuffed himself with Caesar's notes on Germania and listened to the unbearable narratives of legionnaires and merchants returning from the cold north. As a freethinking man he got totally fed up with strolling around the underground stations of ancient Rome, searching for opportunities to meet one of the characters from his texts in person. I got fed up as well and it was immediately clear to me that the Roman's suddenly graceful disappearance was dictated to him by his valuable experiences with underground places. A group of descendants of the dissidents of the Germanic tribes, dressed in black jeans and leather, saw me, one of them shouted something, chains, hanging from him as from a Christmas tree, clanked, in the world above it was midnight when he steered toward me with two others. With Tacitus, ten points speak on behalf of family continuity between the Germans and the street people. First: Tacitus reports that, especially in winter, the Germans like to dwell in dug out caves that give heat and are difficult for the enemy to notice. I looked around myself and noticed that we were completely alone, me and the approaching friends in black in their dwelling. Second: *Ut primum adoleverint, crinem barbamque submittere nec nisi hoste caeso exuere votivum obligatumque virtutis habitum*; when they grow up, they let their beard and hair grow and shorten them only when they kill the first enemy. Third: when he approached me, the street man shouted again, his squeaky voice echoed around the secluded station and was lost in the darkness of the railway tunnels, from where it came back as nothing but the squeaking of rats. Tacitus describes the fighting songs of the Germans as inharmonious. Their main objective was to achieve a coarse blaring sound. While shouting the German warriors held a shield in front of their mouths to achieve a much greater resonance. This evening my face was used instead of a shield, drops of saliva from the darkness of the shouter's mouth sprinkled two fingers in front of me. Fourth: Tacitus says that they seldom wash themselves. Fifth: above the mouth, from which a voice rattled into me like a ghost, two large silver earrings pierced the nose. The bravest of them, Tacitus says, wear a steel ring, otherwise a sign of shame. They wear it as a bond from which they break free with the murder of the first enemy. Sixth: beer, the ritual drink of the Germans, forcefully evaporated in their mouths.

Seventh: *Convictibus et hospitibus non alia gens effusius indulget, quemcumque mortalium arcere tecto nefas habetur*. According to Tacitus, no other nation surrenders itself to entertainment and hospitality as extravagantly as the Germans do. Eighth: silver is more valued than gold, Tacitus says, and adds, not out of a special love for silver but for practical reasons, because the value of silver coins suits their

everyday purchases better. With this in mind I pulled a coin for two Euros out of my pocket and offered it to the shouter. Ninth (this is my personal favourite): the Germans do not measure time with days but with nights, not with light but with darkness. Despite this, my heart stopped beating like crazy only when the platform shook slightly. Behind the street man, behind the invisible inhabitant of the underworld, behind the disgraced German king and behind the lost soul in the middle of the modern city, behind the figure, with which we were casting a common fan of four shadows, behind this illusion, which was everybody and nobody, behind this body with a beer bottle in one hand and a coin in the other, which, with bulging eyes, was still swaying, so close our noses could touch like the noses of kissing Eskimos, the lights of the underground appeared in the depth of the tunnel. Tenth: who, Tacitus wonders--not taking into account the dangers of the dreadful and unknown sea--would voluntarily leave Asia or Africa or Italy to visit Germania, a country with no charm, with a harsh climate, with no solace for him who cultivates its land as if he were just looking at it? Except, adds Tacitus, if Germania is not his native country.

*Translated by Brian Henry*