

Translated excerpt

Lutz Seiler
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Translated by Tess Lewis



Behind the Screen

A man stepped out onto the street heading toward the city center and raised his arm. It was three o'clock in the morning. Without a word of thanks, he got in the car and leaned back in the seat. They drove for a time without engaging in conversation. "Stop just up ahead," the man ordered and stuck a bill rolled into a cylinder the size of a cigarette between the heating vent louvers on the dashboard. Carl had heard about gypsy cabs, but never imagined it would be so easy.

Just before Alexanderplatz he turned onto a street that seemed suitable at first glance. It was called Linienstraße. Only two streetlamps were working in the first hundred meters and Carl parked the Zhiguli somewhere in the twilight between them.

The neighborhood was filled with three-storey housing blocks from the 1950s, maybe even from the thirties. With their dirty limestone cement exteriors, they were ugly but at the same time familiar and trustworthy. Pigeons flew in and out of the semicircular dormers, also not a bad sign. But most importantly, this neighborhood was quiet; it was downright *silent* even though it was right in the center of the city. Only at the last moment, already half-asleep, did Carl notice the disturbing noises—laughter, shouting, and desperate screams that reached him from some nightmare.

In the first days, Carl made a few small rounds. He explored Berlin, but always returned to Linienstraße to sleep. He drove to Kastanienallee, which until now he had only known as the title of a book of poems, and he walked around aimlessly for a while. Carl was on an expedition. He could feel his heartbeat. Somewhere here, behind these façades, those good poems had been written and published in newspapers with titles like 'Liane' or 'Mikado'. Searching for their particular essence, Carl scrutinized the people on Kastanienallee and—even though it made him look foolish—he was respectful. In fact, he spotted more than a few who had that look of absolute necessity in their eyes that could make a writer; and one or another of them already seemed deeply immersed in his or her solitary 'I must', Rilke's dictum, which Carl, too, had followed ever since he'd come upon a volume of the Letters to a Young Poet. At the same time, Carl had the feeling on this street of being in a preserve, a district that was not easily accessible. In any case he preferred to approach it carefully, to not rush anything. He heard the sound of his footsteps on the sidewalk's granite paving stones and understood how odd it was (in light of what was happening to him just then) to maintain the idea of a proper sequence and this made him smile. "At four-thirty in the stairwell / of 30 Kastanienallee, there was a fleeting smell

/ of dead mice *lost in thought*.” Carl knew the smell, dead and lost in thought – these were the first lines of Kastanienallee, not a bad beginning for a volume of poetry.

Every evening, just before six, Carl telephoned. For his calls to Gera, he used a post office on Kollwitzplatz he had noticed on one of his forays through the streets of the good poems. For long distance calls, it had a narrow wooden cubicle with a tiny window in the door through which you could see the counters. Every time he called Mrs. Bethmann, she had a kind word ready for him:

“Your parents’ letters are surely being held temporarily somewhere, in some postal warehouse or other at the border. That certainly wouldn’t be surprising, Carl, in all the chaos.”

“Yes, of course. Thank you, Mrs. Bethmann.” He took a deep breath and pressed the receiver to his ear.

“Where are you now, Carl?”

Her voice sounded like it was coming from the middle of a snowstorm, from somewhere, in any case, that seemed much farther away than Gera. Carl was not used to telephoning (to talking into a machine). It annoyed him. Ultimately, you did not know if the other person truly existed.

“Carl?”

Now and then he drove as a taxi. Either it worked out on its own or it was enough to drive slowly through the streets and, with his head angled slightly, to look at the passersby on the sidewalk with some interest. His vague intention to earn some money as quickly as possible had soon taken shape. Gas cost 2.5 marks a liter and his reserves (the five hundred from his parents) would be used up in a few weeks even if he were frugal.

The Wilhelm-Pieck-Straße that ran parallel to Linienstraße (its quiet back street) proved fruitful. This was particularly true on nights Jojo was open. Jojo was in the lowest floor of a recently constructed building, covered with brick-red tiles with two aluminum-framed windows, neon lights, and a disco ball. Only once had Carl pushed his way through the sticky, completely packed rooms and made it to the bar that stood behind a glass wall plastered with billboards. These billboards didn’t advertise bands, just DJs with names like Trent, Heretsch, or Pichground. They didn’t serve beer, only wine and mixed drinks. The woman at the bar wore a dove-gray top covered with small zippers. “Ice?” For a moment, Carl had no idea what she meant. He was not at all used to being offered the option of ice cubes in his drink. In honor of Hemingway he drank something called *Cuba Libre*, Club-Cola with Wilthener Goldkrone brandy—he recognized the label in the dim light. Almost everything was mixed with Club-Cola and there were bouncers everywhere, at the bar, at the entry, even on the dance floor. Club-Cola, order, and baby faces: they wore their hair above their foreheads cut short and straight, long in the back, and the outline of giant combs protruded from the pockets of their marbled jeans—it was all detestable. Right behind Carl, a fifteen, maybe sixteen-year-old girl was dancing. She spun around and looked at him, her arms (wings) raised helplessly, her eyes half-closed. “She’s like the wind.”

Carl felt old and dirty in Jojo and he was sweating because he didn't want to take off his leather jacket. It wasn't just that he was out of place there, it was more than that. For a moment, he had the sneaking suspicion that the world he belonged to had furtively disappeared and he was one of the remnants, a rotting piece of driftwood on the great, broad stream of the new age.

In the morning, Carl aired out his car. He carefully rolled up his faded cotton sleeping bag, wiped clear the fogged-up windshield, and put the seat back upright.

"Piss off!" was written in the dirt on the rear window. The idea that someone was looking at his face at night while he was sleeping was unpleasant. And didn't people usually write "pig" or "wash me" instead? On top of that, did people usually leave a signature: "Milva" – who was that supposed to be? Carl briefly considered covering the car windows with towels (which he didn't have) at night or taping up newspaper (which he could get ahold of), but not being able to see what was going on outside struck him as even eerier.

For the first time it was completely clear to Carl that he didn't know anyone in Berlin. He only knew a few poems that had been written here; nothing else had tipped the scales. Yes, to some extent he was imitating his parents' self-imposed exile – as if that were also a way (the real way) to be a good son after he had, in defiance of all agreements, abandoned his post in the hinterland. Like his parents, he had no address in view; he left without a destination, just some fantasy in mind, which wasn't a place to stay.

For breakfast he walked to a bistro on Alexanderplatz where he could use the toilet to wash up and brush his teeth. The bistro was below the Presse Café, a meeting place for people who looked like they knew their destination.

The bistro was actually too expensive for him and there were hardly ever any other customers, but it was the first place Carl went to after he arrived in Berlin, so he remained loyal. He ordered scrambled eggs with brown bread, which the waiter toasted to rock-hard slices and Carl softened again with butter, marmalade, and eggs. He was served at the counter; he liked this at first (Carl saw in this a kind of worldliness) but later didn't. This had to do with the waiter and his big city arrogance. His eyes were full of disdain. He deplored the tousled hair that hung down past Carl's shoulders; he deplored Carl's unshaven, sleepy face, and everything else about him that was easily scorned: the motorcycle jacket, the unkempt fingernails, the toothpaste-flecked pouch with his toiletries, etc. Carl was sure the waiter was cheating him in some way or other. You too will hear of me some day, Carl thought. At some point he managed to take his plate and retreat to a seat at the window.

He took out his notebook but as soon as he opened it, he felt tired, and couldn't think of a single thing to write. His last entry: "It will take your whole life, absolutely every moment from the day you were born. It wants to call the shots without revealing any more of itself – simply demonic!" What happened if it wanted you and you weren't suited? An

aberration, a false connection? Maybe at twenty-six he was already too old to seriously go about becoming a poet.

Carl awkwardly fished a ballpoint pen out of the hole-ridden lining of his motorcycle jacket and wrote:

12 DECEMBER

On the other side of the intersection lies Alexanderplatz. There is no greater desolation.

Two days later, the temperature dropped to five below. Carl sat in his Zhiguli with a bottle of brandy, picturing a film about gold prospectors in Alaska. A careless, inexperienced prospector who had almost frozen to death is revived with a swallow of brandy. “Take a swig of this,” the flinty but good man says to the half-frozen prospector. Then the bottle is brought to his mouth and at first it looks like the half-frozen man is being forced to drink against his will, as if a certain amount of effort is required: small, burning sips, heavy breathing. Gently but firmly, a small dose of consolation is poured into him, you could read it on the two men’s faces, most clearly in their eyes. The consolation is pivotal.

Before going to sleep, Carl whispered, “Take a swig of this,” to the windshield on which his pale reflection froze and the Klondike story played on. That evening he didn’t turn on the reading light over the dashboard – he was exhausted and wanted to remain hidden. “It’s better for the battery too,” he explained softly and stowed the bottle. His cheek touched the brown leatherette of the seat back, stitched in broad stripes. It was ice cold. He pulled in his knees and bunched his sweater under his head. He envied the couples that passed by on the sidewalk. He listened to the melody of their conversations and to the sounds of the trams, first a dull rumbling followed by a high note on the curves, then quiet again. He pictured his parents from a distance: in a long, dark column in the snow, wearing army backpacks and hiking boots; his father carried a small coffin on his back, the accordion; a strenuous climb on a mountain path, farther and farther west, following the call of gold.

Carl thought of Effi and pleased himself. It went very quickly. He was freezing, only his forehead and his dick were hot. Maybe he had a fever. As he was falling asleep, he heard a woman’s footsteps. The hard, metallic metronome of her heels on the pavement, tick-tock-iack-tock, would-you-fuck-off. Then laughter and screaming again, but these were just practice—they practiced far into the night. The day before Carl had discovered that the fortress-like façade on the other side of the street was the back of a theater called the Volksbühne.

The cold woke him around four o’clock. Half-asleep, he crawled forward, cranked the seatback upright, and started the engine. He could rely on the Zhiguli’s heater, built as it was for Asiatic winters. “Better than Mercedes,” his father had said.

He drove with his left hand on the steering wheel. His right rested on the gear shift’s dark knob. It was a pleasant, flowing drive. The Zhiguli practically rolled on its own and

Carl could daydream. He liked the sound of the radial tires on cobblestones, so he sought out cobblestone streets—up and down the night-dark Schönhauser Allee, for example, with the rumbling and grumbling under the cobblestones' skulls, until he warmed up. And with the rumbling, the dull ocean sound of the fan, wind and warmth on his cheeks. The Zhiguli ran as if on tracks that Carl, wise and farsighted, had laid himself and the warmth enveloped him. It was pleasant and he felt almost as if he were asleep again. At some point he turned on the radio and the windshield turned into a screen. Someone on the radio said that reparation would cost one billion, that would be the price for the broken-down East. At the words *one billion* the speaker's voice started to glow. Carl could hear the glow and a pre-Christmas light fell on the steering wheel's chrome-plated spoke. Carl wondered if he was part of the calculation, *included in the cost*, and if so, at what value.

In the news there was a report on the latest border crossings. It was now rare for a road in the West to be seen as an extension of a road in the East—Carl had learned this in his gypsy cab. The connection had been lost somehow. Again and again you came across dull, empty spaces, old wounds suddenly reappearing: half of the city was a knotted landscape of scars. Carl turned the radio dial. It was intoxicating to drive this way. The windshield showed a film about streets and facades starting to remember how things used to be, what it was like to be a complete city, undivided and that was the moment when someone said Carl's name over the radio. Carl was startled. He braked and skidded over the cobbles on the side of the road.

“... Radio p... is radio p... ellow sol... our meeting pl...”

He tried to tune in better but lost the signal. He attributed it to his fever, if it was a fever. To his left a subway train rumbled in the depths and in the next moment the voice returned. A long list of names was being read out, monotonous and full pathos, as if it were a list of victims or missing persons. At some point Carl realized that these were street names, house numbers, addresses, a front line.

Then it was over. Carl wound down the car window, took a deep breath, and steered the car back onto the street. The meat in the car trunk gave off a terrible smell; Carl found it hard to get rid of the meat. Simply throwing it in the garbage would have been sacrilege and another betrayal. That's what was so confusing about his sudden lack of parents: he reacted like a child. He still wanted to be a good son, a good orphan, Carl thought and immediately felt ashamed of this nonsense.

Third Sunday of Advent. Shortly after midnight Carl bolted awake. His entire body trembled. Around him reigned deep, shadowless darkness. Once, when he was a child, dried pus from conjunctivitis had so completely encrusted his eyes that he woke in the morning but could only stare into the swaying darkness behind his closed eyelids. A few seconds of mute panic, then his scream: “I'm blind!” He lay in bed, screaming, and didn't understand that he hadn't even taken the necessary action for sight (opening his eyes).

Another attack of the chills. Carl pulled himself together and felt for the cigarette

lighter. The small ring immediately began to glow. It wasn't him, it was Berlin. Berlin has reverted to a primal state of utter darkness, "a time before God," Carl murmured and resolved to write this down later, but he forgot.

He peeled himself out of his sleeping, which took determination even though the faded cotton fabric didn't really warm him. He felt ill. When he opened the passenger side door, something fine and damp silently slid onto his lap – snow! It had snowed. 'We're completely snowed in here outside, Zhiguli and I.' The last radio message, we're all in despair down here on earth. A pigeon flew over the street.

It took a while for Carl to lock the car and shake off the sense of being in outer space – his hands shook. He had to walk, to get moving and he stamped a song into the sidewalk: "Lit-tle, whi-ite dove of peace..." He slipped and had to giggle, then he began to jog.

Even the lobby in Jojo was crammed with people. You had to press the back of your hand, an arm, or your forehead against the glass of the front door for it to be opened. To get in, you had to show a stamp on your skin somewhere. Carl realized that he had no chance of getting in that night. Still out of breath, he turned into the entrance of the next courtyard to relieve himself somewhere. The steam from his urine enveloped him and as he gradually regained full consciousness, he heard fine, melancholy music. Carl pushed through the shrubbery that overran the courtyard and approached the side wall. The music grew louder, someone would say something and another person would answer very calmly, in short sentences, but it was not a normal conversation.

"What did you do all these years?"

"I went to bed early."

Again, music.

Carl noticed a gray steel door, its edges covered with rust, all but invisible. A few seconds later he was standing in front of the man who went to bed early. His figure seemed to undulate slightly when Carl entered. Then Carl was grabbed, not roughly but firmly.

It felt good to give in. It even felt good to fall to the floor. He landed on a heavy piece of cloth, maybe an old velvet curtain. The dusty smell of stage sets, perspiration, and stale air. Right and left of him, a few people cuddled together. The cinema auditorium must be on the other side. They were looking at the film's mirror image. You clever pack, so this is your lair Carl thought.

Although it wasn't especially cold behind the screen, Carl got the chills again. It was unpleasant because during the quiet scenes you could hear how he froze. He clamped his teeth together and contracted his muscles. Someone stretched a hand out towards him and very quietly asked a question. The hand was cool and smelled of nicotine and a mixture of light oil and rust, a construction site odor, fundamentally familiar.

"Yes," Carl replied.

His eyes gradually got used to the darkness behind the screen, but he didn't dare turn his head to the side. He recognized a curtain with the inscription 'theater 89'. Because of the film he hadn't understood a single word, but he wanted the hand and the concerned

voice to stay, so he quietly repeated once more: “Yes.”

The small, cool hand slowly began to roam over his body. It was not a caress; there was no particular tenderness in its movement. It was rather a kind of anamnesis, an assessment of his outline, his dimensions. It was a measuring, an evaluation, done carefully and without haste. Carl accepted the hand. He didn't move but eventually it became unavoidable. He had swelled under the hand and met it with a small movement. The hand disappeared immediately and Carl felt the withdrawal. He had grown hard, partly of stone, which surely had something to do with his fever; in a few seconds he was going to explode. The hand had realized this. It returned and defused him.

“Oranienburger Straße,” whispered the voice he now felt deep inside, the hand's voice.

“Yes,” Carl whispered and fell silent.

For a length of time that was difficult to describe exactly, his cock lay in the small, cool construction site hand. For a long time, the hand simply held him firmly but then it serviced him in a powerful, perfectly balance, technically superb fashion.