

A GUIDE TO BERLIN (1925)

IN the morning, I visited the Zoo. and now I am entering a pub with my friend and usual drinking companion. Its sky-blue sign bears a white inscription, "Löwenbräu," accompanied by the portrait of a lion with a winking eye and a mug of beer. We sit down and I start telling my friend about utility pipes, streetcars, and other important matters.

THE PIPES

IN front of the house where I live, a gigantic black pipe lies along the outer edge of the sidewalk. A couple of feet away, in the same file, lies another, then a third and a fourth—the street's iron entrails, still idle, not yet lowered into the ground, deep under the asphalt. For the first few days after they were unloaded, with a hollow clanging, from trucks, little boys would run on them, up and down, and crawl on all fours through those round tunnels, but a week later nobody was playing anymore and thick snow was falling instead; and now when, cautiously probing the treacherous glaze of the sidewalk with my thick rubber-heeled stick, I go out in the flat gray light of early morning, an even stripe of fresh snow stretches along the upper side of each black pipe, while at the mouth of the pipe that is nearest to the turn of the tracks the reflection of a still illumined tram sweeps up the interior slope like bright-orange heat lightning. Today someone wrote "Otto" with his finger on the strip of virgin snow, and I thought how beautifully that name, with its two soft o's flanking the pair of gentle consonants, suited the silent layer of snow upon that pipe with its two orifices and its tacit tunnel.

THE STREETCAR

THE streetcar will vanish in twenty years or so, just as the horse-drawn tram has vanished. Already I feel it has an air of antiquity, a kind of old-fashioned charm. Everything about it is a little clumsy and rickety, and if a curve is taken a little too fast and the trolley pole jumps the wire, and the conductor, or even one of the passengers, leans out over the car's stern, looks up, and jiggles the cord until the pole is back in place, I always think that the coach driver of old must sometimes have dropped his whip, reined in his four-horse team, and sent after it the lad in long-skirted livery who sat beside him on the box and gave piercing blasts on his horn while, clattering over the

cobblestones, the coach swung through a village.

The conductor who gives out tickets has very unusual hands. They work as nimbly as those of a pianist, but, instead of being limp, sweaty, and soft-nailed, the man's hands are so coarse that when you are pouring change into his palm and happen to touch it, the palm seems to have developed a harsh chitinous crust, and you feel a kind of moral discomfort. They are extraordinarily agile and efficient hands, despite their roughness and the thickness of the fingers. I watch him with curiosity as he clamps the ticket with his broad black fingernail and punches it in two places, rummages in his leather purse, scoops up coins to make change, immediately slaps the purse shut, and yanks the bell cord, or, with a shove of his thumb, throws open the special little window in the forward door to hand tickets to people on the front platform. And all the time the car sways, passengers standing in the aisle grab at the overhead straps and surge back and forth—but he will not drop a single coin or a single ticket torn from his roll. In these winter days, the bottom half of the forward door is curtained with green cloth, the windows are clouded with frost, Christmas trees for sale throng the edge of the sidewalk at each stop, the passengers' feet are numb with cold, and sometimes a gray worsted mitten clothes the conductor's hand. At the end of the line, the front car uncouples, enters a siding, runs around the remaining one, and approaches it from behind. There is something reminiscent of a submissive female in the way the second car waits as the first, male, trolley, sending up a small crackling flame, rolls up and couples on. And (minus the biological metaphor) I am reminded of how, some eighteen years ago in Petersburg, the horses used to be unhitched and led around the potbellied blue tram.

The horse-drawn tram has vanished, and so will the trolley, and some eccentric Berlin writer of the twenty-first century, wishing to portray our time, will go to a museum of technological history and locate a hundred-year-old streetcar, yellow, uncouth, with old-fashioned curved seats, and in a museum of old costumes dig up a black, shiny-buttoned conductor's uniform. Then he will go home and compile a description of Berlin streets in

bygone days. Everything, every trifle, will be valuable and significant: the conductor's purse, the advertisement over the window, that peculiar jolting motion which our great-grandchildren will perhaps imagine—everything will be ennobled and justified by its age.

I think that here lies the sense of literary creation—to portray ordinary objects as they will be reflected in the kindly mirrors of future times; to find in the objects around us the fragrant tenderness that only posterity will discern and appreciate in the far-off times when every trifle of our plain everyday life will become exquisite and festive in its own right—the times when a man who might put on the most ordinary jacket of today will be dressed up for an elegant masquerade.

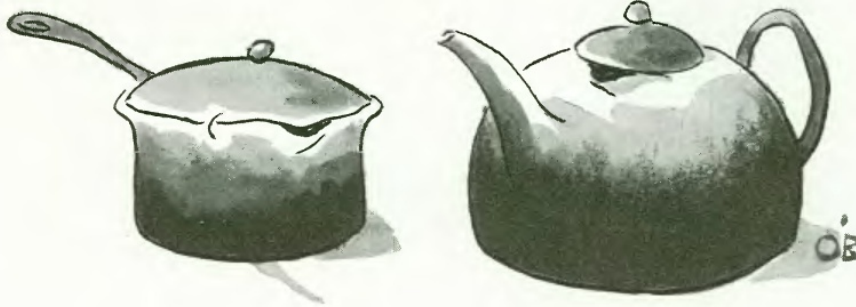
WORK

HERE are examples of various kinds of work that I observe from the crammed tram in which a compassionate woman can be always relied upon to cede me her window seat—while trying not to look too closely at me.

At an intersection, the pavement has been torn up next to the track; by turns, four workmen are pounding an iron stake with mallets; the first one strikes, and the second is already lowering his mallet with a sweeping, accurate swing; the second mallet crashes down and is rising skyward as the third and then the fourth bang down in rhythmical succession. I listen to their unhurried clanging, like four repeated notes of an iron carillon.

A young white-capped baker flashes by on his tricycle; there is something angelic about a lad dusted with flour. A van jingles past with cases on its roof containing rows of emerald-glittering empty bottles, collected from taverns. A long black larch tree mysteriously travels by in a cart. The tree lies flat; its tip quivers gently, while the earth-covered roots, enveloped in sturdy burlap, form an enormous, beige, bomb-like sphere at its base. A postman, who has placed the mouth of a sack under a cobalt-colored mailbox, fastens it on from below, and secretly, invisibly, with a hurried rustling, the box empties, and the postman claps shut the square jaws of the bag, now grown full and heavy. But perhaps fairest of all are the carcasses, chrome yellow, with pink blotches and arabesques, piled on a truck, and the man in apron and





"You're a fine one to talk!"

leather hood with a long neck flap who heaves each carcass onto his back and, hunched over, carries it across the sidewalk into the butcher's red shop.

EDEN

EVERY large city has its own, man-made Eden on earth. If churches speak to us of the Gospel, zoos remind us of the solemn and tender beginning of the Old Testament. The only sad part is that this artificial Eden is all behind bars, although it is also true that if there were no enclosures the very first dingo would savage me. It is Eden nonetheless, insofar as man is able to reproduce it, and it is with good reason that the large hotel across from the Berlin Zoo is named after that garden.

In the wintertime when the tropical animals have been hidden away, I recommend visiting the Amphibian, Insect, and Fish House. Rows of illuminated displays behind glass in the dimly lit hall resemble the portholes through which Captain Nemo gazed out of his submarine at the sea creatures undulating among the ruins of Atlantis. Behind the glass, in bright recesses, transparent fishes glide with flashing fins, marine flowers breathe, and on a patch of sand lies a live, crimson five-pointed star. This, then, is where the notorious emblem originated—at the very bottom of the ocean, in the murk of sunken Atlantica, which long ago lived through various upheavals while pottering about topical utopias and other inanities that cripple us today.

Oh, do not omit to watch the giant tortoises being fed. These ponderous, ancient, corneous cupolas were brought from the Galápagos Islands. With a decrepit kind of circumspection, a wrinkly flat head and two totally useless paws emerge in slow motion from under the two-hundred-pound dome. And with its thick, spongy tongue, suggesting somehow that of a cacological idiot slackly vomiting his monstrous

speech, the turtle sticks its head into a heap of wet vegetables and messily munches their leaves.

But that dome above it—ah, that dome, that ageless, well-rubbed, dull bronze, that splendid burden of time . . .

THE PUB

"THAT'S a very poor guide," my usual drinking companion says glumly. "Who cares about how you took a streetcar and went to the Berlin Zoo?"

The pub in which he and I are sitting is divided into two parts, one large, the other somewhat smaller. A billiard table occupies the center of the former; there are a few tables in the corners; a bar faces the entrance, and bottles stand on shelves behind the bar. On the wall, between the windows, newspapers and magazines mounted on short staffs hang like paper banners. At the far end there is a wide passageway, through which one sees a cramped little room with a green couch under a mirror, out of which an oval table with a checked oilcloth topples and takes up its solid position in front of the couch. That room is part of the publican's humble little apartment. There his wife, with faded looks and big breasts, is feeding soup to a blond child.

"It's of no interest," my friend affirms with a mournful yawn. "What do trams and tortoises matter? And anyway, the whole thing is simply a bore. A boring, foreign city, and expensive to live in, too. . . ."

From our place near the bar one can make out very distinctly the couch, the mirror, and the table in the background beyond the passage. The woman is clearing the table. Propped on his elbows, the child attentively examines an illustrated magazine on its useless handle.

"What do you see down there?" asks my companion, and turns slowly,

with a sigh, and the chair creaks heavily under him.

There, under the mirror, the child still sits alone. But he is now looking our way. From there he can see the inside of the tavern—the green island of the billiard table, the ivory ball he is forbidden to touch, the metallic gloss of the bar, a pair of fat truckers at one table and the two of us at another. He has long since grown used to this scene and is not dismayed by its proximity. Yet there is one thing I know. Whatever happens to him in life, he will always remember the picture he saw every day of his childhood from the little room where he was fed his soup. He will remember the billiard table and the coatless evening visitor who used to draw back his sharp white elbow and hit the ball with his cue, and the blue-gray cigar smoke, and the din of voices, and my empty right sleeve and scarred face, and his father behind the bar, filling a mug for me from the tap.

"I can't understand what you see down there," says my friend, turning back toward me.

What indeed! How can I demonstrate to him that I have glimpsed somebody's future recollection?

—VLADIMIR NABOKOV

(Translated, from the Russian text of 1925, by Dmitri Nabokov, in collaboration with the author.)

LATE

We are not ever lost
and nothing delays us.
We carry the sun on our backs
and cover such ground
as you would not believe.

We are the colonists of dark,
the cousins of radiance,
who shall bloom
among you.

Listen,
do not move in your hard beds;
we enter your rooms
and the candles are lit
as if by themselves,
stars gather,
dreams pour
into your pillows,
memories of the moon,
warm bouquets of air . . . Listen,

even now
the breathing begins.

—MARK STRAND