

ALEŠ ŠTEGER

Translated from the Slovenian by Brian Henry

GUILT AT LINDENSTRASSE 9

160

At Zionskirchstrasse 67 in the window on the first floor someone with a chain secretly shackled the stalks of two cacti. Like two old spouses who pass by. When they come to the intersection, each wants to go to a different side. Habit and fear make divorce impossible for them, prevent them from being mentally connected or physically isolated, an arm, which, in spite of years tightly shackled under the arm of another, refuses to go his own way. My way took me behind the flocks of tourists round Friedrichstrasse by Checkpoint Charlie. The wall still stands. It yawns at the city, where lives on the street dry up in an instant, facades change, the scent of dividends, which wafts to the most photographed guard of some border in Europe, replaced by the scent of social supplements. Tourists' looks through the screens of digital cameras replace the curious eyes of Turkish children. Their carefree seizure of the territory carries in itself the tacit promise of liberty. One would want to undo his tie, if worn, and join the ease of his feet, which run over the name Pessoa, over the name Heraclitus, over the name Prešeren, over the name Bachmann, while his eyes read the writing of clouds on the sky. Poetry is built into the ground. The one who stumbles and falls with his face on the plaque with verses of European classics, whispering that our living systems, our grip on existence are made of such volatile substances as words. The sky soon afterwards shrunk to a narrow slit of light, which penetrated beneath the top of an enormous concrete cube, opaquely illuminating its cold walls and Jacob's Ladder, placed high out of reach. The slit cast the premonition of outside light over the sound of the place, among desolate concrete blocks, around which, half demented, silence ran back and forth, like a captured animal. Reminder and Warning, two old men who would like to keep separate the walls of the museum. And their premature Guilt—like the drooping backpack of a homeless person with only what is most necessary for travel—Guilt was everywhere. I don't know why I fell into this black-and-white game of two mouths, one accusing and one begging for forgiveness, I fell into the latter. Guilt slipped through it and down along my body like water, from which it is made. A few sips still remained in the plastic bottle. While exam-

ining cases with scrolls of the Torah rescued from destruction, combs, letters and other personal objects of murdered Jews, I pulled her out of my backpack and put her to my mouth, dry from horror. Next to me the machinery of God's court suddenly activated. Jehovah's voice was coming from the mouth of one of the red-faced volunteers. At the appeal to piety I blushed. I did not know why, but I was guilty. As a fair punishment my excommunication followed. I stepped into the gloom of the Holocaust Tower. I heard an invisible chain, which was being dragged behind me, but I did not understand. Only later, at the S-Bahn Hallesches Tor station, did it become clear to me. A young punk couple, wrapped in chains, faces riddled with piercings, sat on the stairs leading to the platforms. Their dog every so often looked sadly upward, through the legs of passersby. And if loose change clanked into a plastic cup, the girl lifted her head and said thanks, while her boyfriend slept in her lap like the Berlin pietà.

From *Berlin* (Beletrina, 2007)