

VERMEER IN HELL

1.

A Girl Reading a Letter by an Open Window

The first of his female figures—rapt at the center of
her world—maybe the first

& only real discovery he'll ever make.
She's holding the vellum out

to catch the fall of white-gold light—the edges curled
& sun-infused, as if

38 by stages burned away. She's two-thirds down the page,
& perfectly absorbed,

although she will soon glance up, I think, & stare out through
the open casement, into

the street & sky. I can't make out the color of
her eyes, but the fine, tight braids

of her chignon, straw-blond curls cascading from her temple,
& her lemon satin bodice

trimmed with black, all ravish me. Vermeer shields her
discreetly, with a massive

still life, featuring a blue & white Wan-Li bowl
overflowing with fruit—

one ripe peach halved already. There's an Ushak carpet
rucked up on the left,

& a shimmering, green trompe l'oeil curtain drawn partway
across the scene on the right.

Meanwhile, a grade-school class files in, sits down on the floor,
the teacher begins. I wander

off for an hour, as tour group after tour group enters—
Czech, then Japanese...

Later, I've settled back. A high, white north light slants
down through the window in

the room I'm standing in—as a high white north light slants
down through the window in

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the room *she's* standing in—the same light lighting her letter
lights this page in my journal.

Purchased, as a Rembrandt, in 1742,
by Augustus III,

for his Dresden pleasure palace. When I look up again,
the afternoon has passed.

She hasn't moved, she hasn't breathed, as I back off.
She's two-thirds down the page.

2.

Passing through the Zwinger gardens—balustrades & plumes
of fountains—straight out through the Glockenspiel Pavilion

where I pause to read an inscription on a marble tablet:

13 Februar 1945

Vernichteten Anglo-Amerikanische Bomberverband die Innenstadt Dresdens

but I don't read the rest—I turn left, follow the Sophienstrasse
into the Theatreplatz—its surface paved

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with round black stones, a sheen of midsummer showers
where fat black pigeons stroll before my feet

where the Opera, Schloss, & Hofkirche hunch like beetles around the
square—
their ornate, veined elytra drawn protectively around them

where the August-Brücke hopscotches the Elbe—its seven arches
still smoke-black in the middle

where yesterday—Friday—afternoon, 700 skinheads in black T-shirts
crossed en masse, just as I arrived from Berlin

where on my right a vast staircase ascends the air
like a waterfall of stone

where the sky burns blue above the town, where the dusk slides leaden—
black swans, manes of horses

where I remember seeing these stairs—in a black-&-white photo
of a wholesome blonde in braids, in 1935

where next to her—mid-flight, at the rail—a huge sign said:
Juden Zutritt Verboten

where I find myself on the Brühl Terrace—the river shivering
at my left, the Altstadt at my right

baroque cupolas, smoke-black angels hovering silently above
the Elbflorenz—this Florence on the Elbe

3.

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I feel a shadow behind me. A paddle steamer bearing the name “Augustus
the Strong” is moored below, in the swerve of river. Nothing over the hills
beyond.

Then I realize: this was the approach that night, straight up the valley, over
everything I see.

*

As the first wave arrived, at the end of its five-hour journey, the winter
cloud cover opened—as if on cue—over the marvelous city.

At 10:03, the eight Pathfinder Mosquitoes dropped a thousand sparkling
“Christmas Trees”—the white magnesium parachute flares that children
marveled at from windows & half-open cellar doors. Then, one by one,
the canisters of red flares lit up the soccer field—the aim-point at the west
edge of the Altstadt.

10:06: Dresden awash with hovering, incandescent light—the public speakers first announced: “Achtung, Achtung, Achtung.”

*

“Come in & bomb glow of red TI as planned,” said the master bomber, hovering low over the city. “Bomb the glow of red TIs as planned,” to the waiting pilots of Plate Rack Force.

And so, from 10:14 to 10:16, each squadron of heavily laden Lancasters banked in wingtip to wingtip over the aim-point, fanning out precisely two degrees apart: the ache of tension, bomb-bays open, everyone crouching, holding their breath.

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Starboard, steady, steady, steady, said the bomb aimer through the intercom—& *steady now*, the whole crew waiting for the *thrum-thrum-thrum* of the release—

When the calculated mix of air mines, high-explosive bombs, & stick incendiaries tumbled out into the night—plane after plane careening straight up into the sky—as everyone held on, held still, filling their lungs at last—

When 244 bombers—one every 7.5 seconds—let go 881 tons of bombs into the heart of beauty—

“That’s good bombing, Plate Rack Force,” said the master bomber, as the Lancasters headed home.

*

I'm at the end of the promenade, in the shade of a terraced garden with steep drop-offs on three sides. I'm looking for a name, a stone, which I don't expect to find. There's no one here. It's pleasant, nearly twilight, laughter wafting up from the bars & cafés in the narrow, curving Münzgasse on the one hand, broken haloes halfway across the river on the other. Breezes toss the lindens at my shoulders.

Here is the marker in my mind:

13 February 1945
Victor Klemperer
Author, Professor, Philologist
One of the last Jews left in Dresden
Survived the Firestorm Here

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*

When the second wave of 550 fully laden Lancasters approached at 1 a.m., the airmen could see the glow from a hundred miles away.

One of them, Doug Hicks, wrote: "Almost daylight conditions prevail. The sky is lit up from the horrendous inferno on the ground that is now the target. In this lighted environment I now see bomber aircraft everywhere... I have difficulty in comprehending this vast armada of aircraft converging on the target."

Another, Miles Tripp, wrote: "The streets of the city were a fantastic latticework of fire. It was as though one was looking down at the fiery outlines of a crossword puzzle; blazing streets stretched from east to west, from north to south, in a gigantic saturation of flame. I was completely awed by the spectacle."

When the second wave arrived, none of their marker flares could be made out through the blaze & smoke—so in the end, the master bomber ordered the pilots to “bomb the center of the fire.”

When the second wave arrived, there was no warning at all.

And everything else, dear Reader, you know.

How everyone took to their cellars, mothers lying atop their children, wrapped in blankets, pressed to the floor—where it seemed some traces of air might be.

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How those who stayed in suffocated—waiting for firefighters who were already dead themselves.

How those who went out, went out into the gale-force winds, the actual pillar of flame.

How no one could help the women in maternity wards, the elderly in wheelchairs.

How no one could help the hordes in the Hauptbahnhof, the zoo, & the park—where a steady rain of bombs wailed down through the shattered & exploding trees.

And no one could help the Circus Sarrasani tigers, burning piteously in their cages.

And no one could help the royal Lipizzaners—led through the city by hand that night, in flight from the Eastern front—80 stallions cut to pieces with their grooms.

And yet:

*

Out of thirteen miles of ash & liquefied asphalt,
out of Dis itself, while the Furies howled above,
a 65-year-old man climbed forth—
laboring with bad back, bad heart,
& bleeding profusely from one eye.
A Protestant & a star-wearing Jew—
his ticket to Auschwitz already punched—
Victor Klemperer climbed this hill, & lived.

4.

45

When the second wave arrived at 1 a.m.,
Eva roused him & they raced downstairs—
she “two steps ahead” of him—

but just as they reached the courtyard door,
a near hit shattered glass & stone—& when
he stood up, she was gone. He searched the corners

of the Jew’s cellar, where women & children
clung to one another—as “bangs, as light
as day, explosions” blew the windows in

& “something hot” had gashed his face. He felt
for his right eye—“it was still there.” Then someone—
he never saw who—helped him to his feet

& pushed him out into the throat of the maelstrom.
Showers of blazing firebrands filled the searing
air—the updraft feeding the firestorm

fierce enough to uproot oaks, to wring
each molecule of breath from a blistered lung,
to knock the living off their feet, & fling

them headlong into the cauldron. In the Altstadt,
panic took hold: hundreds ran through fire
to the ten-foot-deep lagoon in the Altmarkt,

where even the strongest clawed in vain when the water
came to a boil. Still others raced
to the killing fields beside the Elbe. But Victor

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scrambled up the burning slopes of this terrace
garden. Here it was cooler; here he could breathe;
the view “within a wider radius

nothing but flames.” All night, he rode this spit
of rock & danced to the left, or else to the right,
as the bones of the Elbflorenz turned white-hot

& collapsed in torrents of sparks. All night,
he stood with his satchel full of manuscripts,
his mind a torment: “Why had I not thought

more about her?” All night, as I imagine it,
he soared above the fiery wind—as if
on the back of Geryon, who set

him safely down at last, in the city of
the dead. Ash Wednesday: rubble burning;
river pitch-black; nothing moving. Out of

drizzling rain & shadow—light returning
over the shoulders of the Saxon hills—
he left the shelter of the lindens, trembling

with fatigue, & walked out past the shell
of the Belvedere, onto the terrace. There,
in a group of refugees along the wall,

someone called his name, & it was *Eva*—
Eva sitting unharmed on her suitcase!
Victor held her tighter than he ever

had, as she told of her miraculous
escape... On the bank beneath—as small as ants—
survivors streamed past, burdened with small bundles

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or pushing handcarts. Everything was silent—
even the sky hung low & overcast.
The B-17s were coming. This was the moment

Eva opened her pocketknife & pressed
the point of it into her husband's breast
& cut the yellow star free from his chest.

5.

It's Sunday—my last afternoon in Dresden—&
the Picture Gallery

is empty. Charm of the young wife's transport as she reads—
her concentration, swathes

of fabric billowing around her, something about
geometry & love

& the fall of daylight onto her brow, as if I hadn't
seen it all before.

Pale ghost of her face as it floats across six panes of glass
in the partly open casement.

Now I lean in, inches from the sculpted surface...
Now I notice the bead

of white lead laid along the leading edge of things—
the emerald curtain, lip

of the Wan-Li bowl, the built-up collar at her throat—
the whole scheme burning like

a constellation, separate from its human story...
Thinking about her face,

I turn & walk out through the Zwinger's reconstructed
splendor—glossy parquet,

marble stairway. Dusk, the city's afterlife—
a busker flutes an expert

badinerie beneath the sonorous archways of
the Semperbau. I drop

a coin, then turn to the right this time, the Frauenkirche
reappearing on

my left after a block, its magisterial “stone bell”
reassembled in

its place in the skyline—over GDR slab buildings—
after sixty years.

I’m crossing the Altmarkt, where hundreds of Dresdeners
were “stacked like bricks” each day—

according to the SS officer in charge—
then trampled down & soaked

with gas, the great pyres smoldering on through spring. Pale ghost
of her face floating in

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six panes of glass, her spell unbroken still—because
of her downcast gaze, I think,

or the way each word unfolds in her mind, or because she is only
two-thirds down the page.