

Three German Fantasies

Translated by Keith Leslie Johnson

1. Pornography vis-a-vis a museum-in-winter.

Sex. Intercourse. Coition. Copulation. There are many other words, but what I always conjure up in my mind (from the spoken word, the act, the phenomenon) is a museum-in-winter.

A museum-in-winter

Of course, I realize that there's quite some distance before you arrive at "museum" from "sex." You must make countless subway transfers, shuttle beneath office buildings, let the seasons fly by in a limbo. But as these are irksome only to the utter novice, if you should complete but once that circuit of consciousness, you could find your way from "sex" to that museum-in-winter before you knew it.

I'm not lying. You really could. Perhaps I should explain a little.

When sex becomes urban conversation, when copulative undulations fill the darkness, as ever, I'm standing in the entrance to the museum-in-winter. I hang my hat on the hat rack, I hang my coat on the coat rack, I place my gloves, one atop the other, on the corner of the reception desk, then, remembering the scarf wrapped around my neck, I remove it and place it over my coat.

The museum-in-winter is not very large at all. The collection, its taxonomy, its operating philosophy are by any standard amateurish. First off, there's no unifying concept. There's a figurine of an Egyptian dog deity, a protractor used by NapolEon III, a bell found in the Dead Sea caves. But that's it. There's no way to connect the display pieces at all. They sit hunched over in their cases, eyes fixed shut like orphans mortally seized by cold and starvation.

Inside the museum it is extremely quiet. There is a little while yet before the museum opens. I retrieve from my desk a butterfly-shaped metal key and wind the grandfather clock near the entrance. Then I adjust the hands to the right time. I--that is, if I'm not mistaken--work here at the museum.

As always, the quiet morning light and the even quieter presentiment of sex fills the museum like almond extract. I make my rounds, opening curtains, opening radiator valves. Then I neatly arrange our fifty-pfennig pamphlets and stack them on the reception desk. I adjust the necessary lighting (which is to say, for example, when I press button A6 at the mini-Versailles Palace, the king's chamber lights up, etc.). I also check the watercooler. I maneuver the stuffed European wolf a little farther back into its display out of children's reach and restock the liquid soap in the washroom. Even if I didn't think to remember each of these tasks one by one, my body of itself would complete them. This, in other words--well, I'm not sure exactly how to put it--is the me-ness of me.

After all this I go to the little kitchen and brush my teeth, get some milk out of the fridge and heat it in a saucepan over a little portable range. The electric range, fridge, and toothbrush are by no means extraordinary (they were bought at a mom-and-pop electronics shop and corner convenience store), but inasmuch as they are within the museum, they appear somehow relic-ish. Even the milk looks like ancient milk, drawn from an ancient cow. At times it all gets quite confusing. I mean, as concepts go, is it more precise to say that the museum erodes the quotidian, or does the quotidian erode the museum?

Once the milk is warm, I take it and sit down in front of the reception desk. As I drink I open the mail left in the slot and read. Mail separates into three categories. First, you've got things like your water bill, the archeological circle newsletter, notice of telephone number change from the Greek consulate, and other kinds of administrative correspondence. Next are letters written by people who've visited the museum, chronicling various impressions, grievances, encouragements, suggestions, etc. I think that people are prone to

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come up with an assortment of reactions. I mean, all of this stuff is just so old. Think how it must irk them to have the late Hun period wine flask next to the Mesopotamian coffin! But if the museum were to cease confusing and irking its clientele, where else could they go to be irked?

Once I've mindlessly filed away the letters into these two categories, I reach into the desk drawer and grab a few cookies to finish off my milk. Then I open the last type of letter. This type is from the owner and, as such, is extremely concise.

Written in black ink on artsy egg-colored paper are my instructions: 1. Pack up urn at display #36; put in storage.

2. To compensate, take sculpture-stand from A52 (minus sculpture) and display at Q21.

3. Replace light bulb at space 76.

4. Post next month's holiday hours at entrance.

Of course I comply with every instruction: I wrap the urn in canvas and put it in storage; to compensate, I take the sadistically heavy sculpture-stand and, near-herniating, put it on solo display; and standing on a chair, I replace the light bulb at space 76. The urn at display #36 was a museum-goer's favorite, the sadistically heavy sculpture-stand looks awful by itself, and the replaced light bulb was itself quite new. These were not the sort of things which would have pushed themselves to the forefront of my mind. After doing exactly as I was told, I tidy up my dishes and put away the cookie tin. It's nearly opening time.

Before the washroom mirror I comb my hair, fix the knot of my necktie, and make sure that my penis is properly erect.

No problems.

*urn #36, check

*sculpture-stand A52, check

*light bulb, check

*erection, check

Sex crashes against the museum doors like a wave. The hands of the grandfather clock read a precise 11 in the a.m. The wintry light, as if slowly drawing its tongue over the floor, extends subduedly into the room. I cross the floor slowly, undo the latch and open the door. The very instant I open the door everything changes. The little lights in Louis XIV's chamber flicker on, the saucepan ceases to lose its heat, and urn #36 slips into a soft, jellylike slumber. Overhead a bunch of bustling men echo their footfalls in a circle. I even quit trying to understand people. I can see someone standing in the doorway, but I don't care. As far as I'm concerned, they can keep right on standing there. Whenever I think about sex, I'm always in the museum-in-winter, and we are all there, hunched over like orphans, seeking a little warmth. The saucepan is in the kitchen, the cookie tin is in the drawer, and I am in the museum-in-winter.

2. The Hermann Goering Stronghold, 1983.

What on earth did Hermann Goring envision when he hollowed out that hill in Berlin and constructed his enormous stronghold? He literally hollowed out the entire hill and filled it up with concrete. It stood out strikingly in the diffuse twilight like an ominous termite mound. Once we'd clambered up the steep slope and stood on top, we could look down and see into the heart of East Berlin, where the street lamps had just been turned on. The batteries which

faced in every direction would have afforded a view of the enemy forces closing in on the capital and could probably have repelled them.

No bomb could have toppled the stronghold's thick walls, and certainly no tank could have scaled its steep slopes.

The stronghold contained enough supplies--rations of food, water, and ammunition--to house 2,000 SS officers for a number of months. Secret underground passages crisscrossed below like a maze, and a marvelous air conditioner supplied fresh air to the stronghold interior. Hermann Goring boasted that even if, for example, the Russians or Allies surrounded 2 of 6

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the capital, those inside the stronghold would have no need to fear; they could survive indefinitely inside his indestructible fortress.

But in the spring of 1945, when the Russian army stormed into Berlin like the season's last blizzard, the Hermann Goring stronghold was silent. The Russian army torched its underground passages with flamethrowers and detonated high explosives in an effort to eradicate the stronghold's very existence. But the stronghold would not be eradicated. There were only a few cracks on the concrete walls.

"You could never bring down Hermann Goring's fortress with Russian bombs," laughed my young East German guide.

"They could barely bring down Stalin's statue!" For who knew how many hours, he'd been leading me around the city, showing me the lingering traces of the Battle of Berlin in 1945. Did he think I had some strange desire to see the aftermath of Berlin's WWII? I couldn't guess. But I was surprisingly eager, and since it seemed inappropriate to explain what I really wanted to see, I followed him around the city until late into the afternoon. We'd first met that very day in a cafeteria near Fernsehturm, where I'd gone for lunch.

However odd our union, my guide proved to be very competent and was frank with me. As I followed him around, visiting the battle scenes of East Berlin, I slowly began to feel as though the war had ended but a few short months ago.

The whole city was still riddled with bullet wounds.

"Here, look at this," my guide said. He showed me some bullet holes. "You can tell right off which bullets were Russian and which German. These ones so deep they nearly blew the wall in two are German, these others that practically pop out are Russian. The craftsmanship's different, you know?"

Of all the East Berliners I met while I was there, his was the most understandable English. "You speak English very well," I said praisingly.

"Well, for a while I was a sailor," he said. "I've been to Cuba and Africa--I even spent some time on the Black Sea. So I picked up some English along the way. But now I'm an architectural engineer ..."

We descended from Hermann Goring's stronghold and after walking briefly through the city, we entered an old beer hall on Unter den Linden. Perhaps because it was Friday night, the hall was stiflingly packed.

"The chicken here is quite popular," the guide said. So I ordered chicken and rice with beer. The chicken actually wasn't bad, and the beer was great. The room was warm and the noise and bustle pleasant.

Our waitress was a drop-dead gorgeous Kim Carnes look-alike. She was platinum blonde with blue eyes, a small, trim waist, and pretty smile. She brought our beer steins to the table, holding them admiringly, the way she would an enormous penis. She reminded me of a girl I once knew in Tokyo. She didn't look like this girl, nor resemble her in

any way, but somehow they were subtly alike. Perhaps some aftereffect of Hermann Goring's dark labyrinth was conflating them in my mind.

We had already drunk plenty of beer. The clock read close to ten. I had to be at the S Bahn at Friedrichstrasse station by twelve. My East German traveler's visa expired at midnight, and if I was so much as one minute late it would be extremely troublesome.

"On the outskirts of the city there is an old battle site that's still really torn up," the guide said.

I was staring idly at the waitress and didn't hear him.

"Excuse me?" He continued, "Russian and SS tanks attacked each other head on, right? It was the real climax of the Battle of Berlin. The wreckage is at an old marshalling yard, but it's remained exactly how it was back then. All the broken tank parts and stuff, I mean. We can borrow a friend's car and be there in no time ..."

I looked at my guide's face. It was thin over his gray corduroy coat. He placed both hands on the table. His fingers were long and delicate,

unsailorlike.

I shook my head, "I've got to be at the Friedrichstrasse station by midnight. My visa'll expire."

"How about tomorrow?"

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"Tomorrow morning I'm leaving for Nuremberg," I lied.

The youth looked a bit disappointed. A wave of exhaustion rolled suddenly across his face. "It's just that if we went tomorrow, we could take my girlfriend and some of her friends along. That's all," he said as if in explanation.

"Aw, that's too bad," I said. I felt as though a cold hand was squeezing all the nerve bundles in my body. But what could I do? I didn't know. Here I was absolutely lost in this strange battlescarred city. Eventually though, the cold hand loosened, retreated like a tide from my body.

"Well ... hey, Hermann Goring's fortress was great, right?" He said with a smile. "Nobody's been able to bring it down in forty years."

From the intersection of Friedrichstrasse and Unter den Linden you can see quite clearly in all directions. To the north, S

Bahn station. To the south, Checkpoint Charlie. To the west, Brandenburg Gate. To the east, Fernsehturm.

"Well, don't worry," said the youth. "Even if you took your time you could make the station in about fifteen minutes.

Got it, okay?"

My wristwatch read 11:10 p.m. Yes, I'm all right, I told myself. We shook hands.

"It's too bad we couldn't go to the marshalling yard, eh? And then the women, eh?"

"Yes, regrettable," I said. But to him, what could possibly have been regrettable about our not going? Walking alone, northbound on the Friedrichstrasse, I tried to imagine what Hermann Goring had envisioned that spring of

1945. But really, no one will know what the Reichsmarshal of the Thousand Year Empire was thinking. Goring's beloved and elegant Heinkel 117 bomber squadron lay in the Ukrainian wilderness like hundreds of bleached bones, the corpse of war itself.

3. Herr W's Midair Garden

The first time I was taken to see Herr W's midair garden was on a fog-heavy November morning.

"Well, she isn't much," said Herr W.

And he was right. The midair garden just sat there floating in a sea of fog. It was roughly eight yards long and five wide.

Other than the fact that it was airborne, it differed in no other way from a regular garden. Well, let me rephrase that: it was a garden certainly, but by terrestrial standards, it was third-rate. The grass was dried up in patches, the flowers were eerily unnatural-looking, the tomato vines were all withered, and it lacked even a wooden fence. The white garden furniture looked as though it had come from a pawnshop.

"I told you it wasn't much," Herr W repeated as if in apology. He had been watching my eyes the whole time. But I wasn't particularly disappointed, I hadn't come to see splendid arbors, fountains, animal-shaped shrubbery, or Cupidean statues. I just wanted to see Herr W's midair garden.

"This is better than any of those ostentatious, earthbound gardens," I said, and Herr W seemed a little relieved.

"If only I could float a bit higher, then it'd really be a midair garden. But things being as they are ..." Herr W said.

"Would you take some tea?"

"That would be lovely," I said.

Herr W reached into a canvas something of indiscriminate shape (daypack? basket?), pulled out a Coleman stove, a yellow-enameled teapot, and thermos full of water and began preparing the tea.

The air was extremely cold. I was wearing a thick down jacket and a scarf wrapped around my neck but they didn't seem to be helping. As I sat there shivering I watched the fog flow southward beneath me. Floating over the fog, I felt as if I were

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though we were drifting off into terra incognita.

When I mentioned this to Herr W over hot jasmine tea, he chuckled slightly. "Everyone who comes here says the same thing. Especially on really foggy days. Especially then. Like we'll drift off into the stratosphere over the North Sea, eh?"

I cleared my throat and pointed out the other possibility, "Or into East Berlin."

"Ah, yes, yes," said Herr W, stroking a withered tomato vine. "That's part of the reason why I can't make this a proper midair garden. If I go too high, East German police start getting nervous. They keep their spotlight and machine guns trained on it! Obviously they don't open fire, but it's still not very pleasant."

"No, I suppose not," I said.

"And also, like you said, if it were any higher, there's no guarantee that we wouldn't get caught by a stiff breeze and wind up in East Berlin. And then where would we be! We'd probably be arrested as spies, and even if we survived

we'd never make it back to West Berlin!"

"Hmm," I said.

Herr W's midair garden was tethered to the roof of a claptrap four-story building near the Berlin Wall. Since Herr W kept it floating no more than eight inches off the roof, you'd mistake it for just another rooftop garden if you didn't look closely. Maintaining a maximum altitude of eight inches on such a marvelous midair garden is not the sort of feat most people could have duplicated. Everyone said Herr W managed because he was such a "quiet, nonconfrontational sort."

"Why don't you move the flying garden to a safer location?" I asked. "Like Koln or Frankfurt, or even farther into West Berlin? Then you could go up as high as you like and no one would mind."

"Nonsense!" Herr W shook his head. "Koln! Frankfurt!" He shook his head again. "I like it here. All my friends live here!

In Kreuzberg! It's just fine here!"

He finished his tea and pulled a Phillips portable record player out of a container. He placed a record on the turntable and flipped the switch. Soon the second movement of Handel's Wassermusik flowed forth. The brisk trumpets sounded clearly through the dull and overcast Kreuzberg sky. Could there have been another composition better suited to Herr W's midair garden?

"You really ought to come back this summer," Herr W said. "The garden is absolutely wonderful then. Last summer we had a party every day! Once we had twenty-five people and three dogs up here!"

"It's a good thing no one fell off," I said, amazed.

"Actually, two people have fallen off: got drunk," said Herr W, chuckling. "But no one died: the awnings on the third floor are quite sturdy."

I laughed at that.

"We've even hauled up an upright piano before. Pollini came and played Schumann. It was quite splendid. As you know, Pollini is a bit of a midair garden fanatic. Lorin Maazel wanted to come but I couldn't fit the whole Vienna Philharmonic up here, you know."

"Of course not," I agreed.

"Come again this summer," Herr W said and shook my hand. "Summer in Berlin is quite a sight. In summer this place is filled with smells of Turkish cooking and children laughing and music and beer! That's Berlin!"

"I very much wish to return," I said.

"Koln! Frankfurt!!" Herr W repeated, shaking his head.

And thus, Herr W's midair garden awaits summer's arrival, hovering just eight inches over the sky of Kreuzberg.

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