

# The Time Garden

WHEN WE FIRST MOVED TO Berlin, we rented an apartment in a turn of the century Jugendstil Altbau building with six floors. The ceilings were very high, and the stairs were very steep. Our apartment was on the top floor, and we would both be out of breath by the time we climbed up. Climbing those stairs never got any easier it seemed, even after time.

Our apartment had views onto a back courtyard garden, shared by three other buildings. Throughout the first winter the trees, bushes, and grass were coated in deep snow. There was never anyone there as no one was permitted to enter the garden. Sometimes, as I stood gazing down from our living room window, I saw other people staring down also from their apartments in the opposite and adjacent buildings. I imagined they too felt a longing to be in the garden and they also felt the absence of children, of dogs, of music, of old people sitting on benches. A single, solitary stone statue of a female figure crouched in the corner in the bushes. Only the large Berlin fog crows, the *Nebelkrähen*, felt free to be in that isolated white space.

The garden came to symbolize the restraint and containment of our new neighbors and my loneliness as a foreigner in a new city. If we were lucky, our neighbors nodded to us as we passed them on the stairs; few words were ever spoken out loud. No one in the building ever asked where we were from, why we were there, if we needed anything. All through that first, isolated Berlin winter, I looked down at the garden on a daily basis. Often, the melancholy sound of someone practicing cello would drift out from one of the other apartments and travel up

to me across the lifeless, snow covered lawn.

We had moved to the city, in part, so I could continue my research on the lives of ordinary German Jews before the Second World War. It was for this reason that I wanted us to live in this old, once Jewish neighborhood. I spent my days scouring through local antique shops and markets looking for old memorabilia, old photographs, record books, wedding keepsakes, diaries, and letters. I used the names, the dates, and any other information I could glean for my work, making detailed notes from which I hoped to see patterns and understand information about genealogy, culture, and facts.

Sometimes, at the market, I found old Jewish wedding keepsakes inside heavy, ugly frames called Hochzeitsbilder. I would have to ask for help from my husband to get these home. Once we got them in, he would help me open them with a stanley knife to loosen the frame from the backing. Inside, there would be all kinds of memorabilia. Often, I found little black and white photos with a bride and a groom, never appearing fully happy, both with a terrified expression on their impossibly young faces. The grooms never seemed as handsome as the brides were pretty. Sometimes there were bridal garlands, tiny wax flowers strung artfully on arched wire, or minute fabric myrtle leaves and flowers. Often, there were small satin hearts encased along with the garlands which bore the name and wedding or anniversary dates of the original bride and groom; these I carefully added to my records.

The marriages seemed to me to be entities in their own right, two souls, monstrously entwined, encased and festering behind glass for decades. I came to think of it as my duty to release these poor, trapped pockets of energy.

One day we carried home a particularly heavy Hochzeitsbild

in the snow. In the same antique shop, I had also found an enormous old lace bridal veil which I carried home draped around my shoulders.

“Surely, you don’t need that thing for your work?” said my husband. “It smells musty and old. There is something creepy about it.”

I pulled the delicate fabric tighter around myself and breathed in the smell.

On the long climb up to our apartment, we passed the silent old man who lived on the same floor. We often passed him, and it seemed we were always bringing home antiques or heavy shopping. Like many of our neighbors, he never looked at us, he never spoke. But his face was rich in pain and feeling.

My husband muttered, “What a miserable old asshole!”

I wanted to say, *But he has so many stories to tell. He belongs to the spaces between the being of things.* But instead I just helped my husband carry up the heavy antique.

“Are you sure you need so much of this stuff?” he said as we finally got it inside. It had been exhausting carrying it home in the snow. I draped the old lace veil across the back of a chair. I saw a tightness in my husband’s face as he gazed around at our apartment now cluttered with dusty, old things.

We pulled the Hochzeitsbild into the living room and found the knife to loosen the frame. As the glass was lifted away, I imagined the spirits inside fluttering out, shimmering, barely visible.

As the snow cleared in late winter, I was able to see the Stolpersteine outside our building and in the surrounding streets, the little brass plaques set amongst the cobbles of the pavements, inscribed with the names of the Jewish people who once lived in the buildings. They showed the dates of birth and the

dates of death. And the name of the camp that they had been taken to. Of course, all of this data was perfect for my records. I spent many hours wandering the neighborhood, carefully photographing each plaque, then transcribing the information when I got home.

In quiet moments, sitting at my desk, cataloging the photographs of the plaques, I found myself bracing as though against a sudden, angry banging on the door. I heard screams, not with my ordinary senses, but in a distant, inner place.

That year, I often had trouble sleeping at night. I would wake in the early hours of the morning and my husband would be breathing heavily next to me.

Standing at the living room window, looking down onto the courtyard garden, the loneliness of that green space seemed to exert a magnetic pull on me. And then one night, as though the edges of my consciousness had slipped into dreams, I saw shapes begin to glide across the lawn, shadowy beings, flickering like figures from an old black and white silent movie.

Night after night, I watched them, transfixed, standing there until my husband got up too. He never looked down to the garden, he never saw the shapes. He just put his hand on my shoulder and said, "Are you coming back to bed?"

It was after I started seeing the beings in the garden that I began to understand that there was another world, lingering under the surface of the living one. It was always there, just out of reach. Like a double negative, superimposed, one world layered on the other. I began to long for that other world. I looked for it in the antiques I gathered, in the facts I found, in the faces of the old people, in the Jugendstil facades, in the plaques on the street, in the courtyard garden as I stood night after night at my window, gazing out at those strange shapes moving across the lawn.

As the weather warmed up, we walked the cobbled streets together, taking in the soft murmur of people sitting outside the cafes, the smell of cigarettes and perfume in the air.

We stopped to look at the Jugendstil buildings, to gaze up at the fairy tale like facades, the little cherubs and faces of maidens, scrolls and flowers and ornate details.

My husband said, “I really don’t like these buildings, they are too fussy and too close together. And there just aren’t enough English speakers in this area of the city. Just as soon as we can, we must move to a different neighborhood. I can’t stand living here. Either that, or we go back to New York.”

I looked up, to the blue space above the buildings, to the endless clear sky.

After that, the dreams began. The dreams where I entered The Other World. I came to understand that The Other World was rich and deep and textural in a way that those left behind would never know. They would not hear the groan of the wooden stairs as I travelled down them by night, my hands trailing the cool polished banisters, my being casting no shadow on the high white walls. They did not hear me pause outside each of their locked doors, and listen to the gentle murmur of their sleeping minds. As I glided effortlessly down the stairs I knew that I would never be heard or seen. As I passed each locked apartment door, I was aware of the soft drift of light behind my neighbors’ eyelids as they lay sleeping in their winter beds and I knew what they were seeing in the twilight shadow universes we call dreams. In The Other World, I could hear the most intimate sounds, the subtlest of nuanced realities, even the sleeping sensations of the dark city mice huddled in their nests inside the antique walls. I knew about the past soaked deep into the stone of our building, so many layers of it, the experience of all

those that lived there before integral to the structure as surely as the plaster and the planks of wood beneath my bare feet.

In the spring, the trees in the courtyard garden exploded with white blossoms and many small, pretty birds arrived. People began to sit on their balconies. I watched a woman with red hair plant flowers in little pots and drink wine every evening with a young man wearing glasses. Another couple came out to smoke and drink coffee.

Later, when summer was finally upon us, the air above the courtyard garden was always filled with white fluffy seedpods. The smell of myrtle flowers reached my nose. The dignified loneliness of the garden began to feel comforting to me. From my window, I watched the small birds settle on the stone woman's head.

Summer came and went and merged into fall. Soon winter was upon us again. One night, when we hadn't seen the sun for weeks and snow had been falling for days, I woke up again in the small hours. I left the warm bed with my husband snoring next to me and I walked to the window in the living room and looked out at the garden, just as I had come to do every night. Dark clouds were drifting across the full moon and casting moving shadows across the tall white walls. As I stood there and relaxed my mind, once more I could see the flickering, shadowy shapes moving across the white lawn.

I shivered; I was only wearing a nightgown and no shoes. I imagined my husband was about to come and get me to bring me back to bed, but he didn't. I walked back to the bedroom and as I was about to get back into bed I saw with a shock that my side of the bed was not empty. There was a sleeping woman already there. I stared for some time at the woman's face in the moonlight; her fading hair curled around her old-young fea-

tures, sleeping next to the man who I knew was her husband.

With a rush of understanding, I knew that I was looking at my own self, still sleeping there, back in the living world. And however much I might try, I knew I could never again fit myself back into the stifling case that was that body, that was that marriage, that life. Out of the corner of my eye, I seemed to perceive a slight fluttering in the air.

Effortlessly, I took the lace veil and tied its abundant, musty folds around myself. I opened the living room window and climbed up on the sill.

I heard the calling clearly now. The others were waiting for me, down on the lawn.

It all happened in one instant, and yet a world of sensations surged through me as I fell. The veil like a dying bird, undulated violently around my flailing body. The biting Northern cold. In those few moments, I experienced all the grief and joy of the building that had ever been, the condensed human history, the weeping and the laughter, every smile and every loss; births, deaths, marriages, celebrations and ceremonies.

I landed as softly as the falling snow. ■