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In every city there is a street you can survey from beginning to end. You can look into it like a funnel, with the evenly tall rows of houses narrowing towards the end, where another road cuts it off. It is always unexpected, usually driving past, when a glance out of the window of a tram or a car alights on such a street and for a second is drawn into something that seems to exclaim: Here! This way! But the observer has already moved on and it will soon be forgotten, that corner, the rows of houses angling towards each other and the destination in the middle, the end point.

There is an end, here.

Is that what dwells on your memory when you've long passed a short street like that, one you can look all the way down?

Those who walk the city feel the undertow even more clearly, they draw to turn into that short street, a road you knew nothing of only minutes before, if you're new to the place.

Why does it dwell on my mind, beginning and end?

Things must come to an end. Calmly and quietly, like these rows of houses. They stand facing each other but the further towards the end of the street they are, the closer they inch in, until an intersecting road prevents them from continuing their approach, cutting them off for ever.

Streets like funnels. I know several streets like that. One of them was named Water Lane for a long time, another Lost Road. I once lost my way on one of them. It was a long time ago. In this old neighbourhood of criss-crossing, off-cutting roads, I found myself at the beginning of a dead-straight street I

had never noticed before, a hidden street, so to speak, one familiar only to those in the know and inhabited only by those same people.

That was how it seemed to me, at least, and I hesitated to set foot in it. The road too, I sensed, did not want me to, either. And then again, after a mute pause, I felt I had been granted permission after all.

If you've gone and found me, come on in. That's what it seemed to say.
And this too: Close the door behind you.

That's what I did.

I went in, closed the door behind me and stayed in there for many years.

Why did I want out, one day?

Did I walk away?

Am I still there? Fallen down a hole in that street?

Beginning and end.

Things must come to an end.

The year is 2015. Should this book ever be finished, should it actually be open in your hands, dear reader, printed and bound, which for now is barely conceivable, then there will be war, here where I am.

I've just come from Water Lane, which has had a different name for years now so there's no point using the old one, and there's no one left to remember Lost Road either, no one at all, indeed nobody even knows Poor Sinners' Lane these days, not even when they're standing right in the middle of it, and they can look all they like for Jews' Lane and Church Lane, they won't find them. They're wandering through time with the wrong names, the houses too disappearing and growing anew; I can't do anything about it and neither can you.

It's time's fault.

It changed, and the actual question was only ever: how?

How can we adapt to its oscillations?

At the beginning, on the upstroke, the constant question is:

What is to be done?

And at the end, when things turn downwards, it's always the same cry:

What?

What did we do wrong?

Me too, at the middle of this day and in the middle of my city, Berlin.

Will it be reduced to rubble again?

Will it simply be empty, devoid of people, or entirely abandoned and all the staircases to the Underground tipped full of trash because no trains run down there anyway, and so on, so on. Destruction is quicker to think than to wreak, but it is quickly wreaked too, and we do know, we from the last time around, how quickly all the shutters slam down in front of all the gold lettering, glass panes, pretty portals, and how long dust then falls on them.

Wasn't everything only just rebuilt?

A veritably fairy-tale sight to behold?

The short street with the widened end – why can't I get it off my mind?

Is it the shortness, the all-at-one-glance, or is it the inviting gesture embodied by a street widening like this towards the observer? Or not, after all, the trimmed end, like a cul-de-sac, and that means a trap, caught. An image like a parable.

It is easy to walk into, and then it's all over. Beginning and end in one frame – the question arises of its own accord: How did it all come about? The question of questions, for you too perhaps, dear reader, in the cold or the heat of your day, over there in the future. Don't despair – you have a book!

For your sake and mine, I shall go ahead and ask that question today, a short time before the onset of that condition that we may even have in common very soon, I shall ask it because I want to know too: How? How did it come about? How did we get here?

To where I am, and to where you are. In all presumptuousness – what happened?

The first thing to establish is that the street where I was lost was a straight street, not a crooked one. And its name has never changed; no, there are roads in the neighbourhood that stay true to themselves. Two such streets are Oranienburger Strasse and Rosenthaler Strasse, and also this hidden street, so it seemed to me at the time – but it only seemed that way to me, on the day of its discovery. For everyone else, it was already the secret main road of the whole run-down neighbourhood and has been called, for centuries now, Grosse Hamburger Strasse.

I lived on it and I left it, but now, in anticipation of disaster, the sight of a paltry short bent road takes me back to it.

Like back then.

And that is significant, of course. A street is made to be walked, to be driven, and that means: *Allez!* So on we go, onwards and only onwards, and precisely that was the difference back then and it is the same, essentially, with a funnel of a street like this one – the idea of stopping. Staying. The walking, the walking away; it has to have an end.

Here on the street, I met up with Eva, my friend Eva, whom I first met in my time on Grosse Hamburger Strasse, Eva whose whole life, or strife, however you want to put it, revolved around love, like for all of us, and it ended back then with walking away – and that ended with coming back, oh yes: back to Grosse Hamburger Strasse, and it was the same for me and we both sat, then, on her little balcony above the corner onto Oranienburger Strasse, and Eva had plonked a home-made cake or slices of such on the side table, as always, and she made every cup of coffee fresh from a special machine and showed me her newest dress and how tight it was on the fold of her belly, which she'd just put back on, to add insult to injury, and we called out, all of a sudden, almost in synch: Too much!

Eva, it was too much!

Too much walking away, Irina!

'How stupid must we have been?' asked Eva.

'I don't understand it either,' I answered, and she added: 'Mummy! But Mummy ought to have known!'

And I: 'What are you talking about? You sent her over to the West especially so you'd be allowed to join her!'

And Eva: 'She should have said no, she knew better! At least once she was over in the West, she should have said no!'

And I: 'You don't really believe that, Eva.'

And Eva: 'Messed up. It's all messed up.'

And I: 'It was our own fault.'

And now that the streets are on my mind, the crooked ones and one straight,
and the strange first impression they made, I think – wasn't it their fault?
These streets, they're not quite right, never were quite right to me, and one
thing's for sure, I lost my way back then.
And then again, I didn't.
I knew right away: This is the place.

Was it the light liveliness with which people came towards me?

They even walked on the road, it didn't seem to matter, they talked as they walked and laughed and some houses so small, facing each other, small and old, and a park, just as small, and then – a café! How rare back then was a small café!

A greengrocer next door, with a sign saying *Obst und Gemüse* in round Latin letters, and school and church and hospital, and a stationer, three steps up to it, three old steps, bookshop too, old bookshop, old woman working in there, and no gaps, no bomb sites like everywhere else, no – no vacant lot, how could there be, I was standing in it.

That was by no means the only gap, but at first glance I saw only the good. And everything was there!

And that was the truth. From the cradle to the grave, a person would never have needed to leave that street in their life, there was even a coffin shop for the last journey, everything complete.

Quiet, it was, too, no traffic at all, only sometimes, only a low vehicle sound.

That was strange from the beginning. On the streets all around, the tracks, the trams, the cars, the constant trucks, and they drove much faster than now, much noisier and dirtier, inconsiderate too; it was just here, here was the miracle of a lost war, a smashed city – a street that survived.

(...)

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At night, Grosse Hamburger Strasse lies dark, the graveyard shadowy; only on Oranienburger do the tram tracks gleam. They run past the two corner plots of Grosse Hamburger Strasse, both vacant.

A pedestrian, wanting to turn onto Grosse Hamburger Strasse, walks right across the empty corners, a diagonal right, a diagonal left, shortening the way. Only the trams go straight past on their steely tracks. These tracks, they extend like gleaming threads from Friedrichstrasse to Hackescher Markt, then left into Rosenthaler Strasse and there, they divide. One trail leads around the pharmacy to the right, then left onto Neue Schönhauser Strasse, then right and right again and from there straight on, straight on and on – until far into the margins of the city.

The other trail runs dead-straight past the ruined department stores of Rosenthaler Strasse across Rosenthaler Platz, then up the vineyard hill and full steam ahead along old Kastanienallee, out to the north, out to the green. A shine and a gleam of tracks by night, as if polished, and they do get polished for the trams come scraping along them around the clock, blazing and blank.

Their wheels are whetstones, razing the rails, they buff them, polish them and keep them clean, the threads of steel, so that they gleam in the moonlight. And in the dark too.

It's dark everywhere here at night, all around Grosse Hamburger Strasse, only slightly brighter by the station. Suburban trains rattle over the viaduct here, and now and then when they stop at the top, at Marx-Engels-Platz Station, someone comes down and then usually turns left in the passageway under the train tracks, to the tram stop.

Trams number 49, 63, 71, 72 and 73 stop right outside that passageway. And waiting for the right tram to come at last, the nocturnal pedestrian can take many long looks at the letters above the shop on the street side: *Photo – Häberle. Sale – Purchase – Repairs. Photography.* Next door, above a barred pub window, another word: *Mariola.*

That is the entire heavenly realm for which so many will come to yearn.

The yellow caterpillar with the small face of a maidservant – here it comes now.

Blazing bright and squealing on its tracks, it stops obediently, even at night, outside the passageway under the station by the name of Marx-Engels-Platz. The doors don't open automatically, oh no – you push them open with a handle, you push them open, then you climb up and it waits for you to get in. Moves on.

One journey costs twenty pfennigs. No matter how far and how long you travel, twenty pfennigs. You insert it into a kind of coffee grinder, where the coin remains visible under glass before you nudge it onwards by ripping off a piece of paper from a ribbon, nudge it a bit further towards a hole in the money box, in the cassette underneath it. It's hand-operated, simple and cheap. Too cheap; many don't bother paying.

It's not impressive, this simple way of paying, and no one gets inspected anyway. Almost never. After all, as we all know, on the other side of the city in the West, the legendary West, they don't even know what a tram is these days. They take the car or travel underground, it's all dashing and darting over on that side, and when you pay at machines they're gleaming and new, big boxes inside which something goes on, something complicated, and that costs something and that's worth something and that gets strictly inspected, oh yes – that's how it's done in the world, not like over here, these rattling old tea chests. Not worth a thing, here in the East, not worth a thing.

Nothing's worth a thing.

This payment box with the handle on it, by the way, was invented by apprentices, who make suggestions every year at a fair for the foremen of the future, suggestions for improving something or other, and if it hits the spot it gets made, it goes into production. You have to see the little box as an accolade for very young people, but no one knows that, almost no one; we don't know them, they're unknown apprentices.

Look at the walls of the buildings, so scuffed and scraped, crumbling, so old. Since the war they've been untouched, since the war. They too bear the light for us, they too.

A labyrinth of dirty walls, it is, between which the tram shudders us, first to the left onto Rosenthaler Strasse, then straight across Rosenthaler Platz and up the vineyard hill onto crooked Kastanienallee.

The wheels screech on their tracks, the doors judder, the bell jingles as we move off, oh yes, it's midnight on the tram, but I'm not all alone. There are two young girls in the rickety carriage with me. Smoking and talking, off out dancing at Café Nord, and here we are now, that was quick: Schönhauser Allee!

All we have here for that big-city feeling is Schönhauser Allee, but what a place, my goodness! What a ghetto!

There it is again, that bad word. And another: discarded!

We discarded it, threw it all away!

The trams as well – thrown away, sure, but how did it happen? They'd just been upgraded; at the end we rode on Tatra-brand trams, with bucket seats and fast engines – what happened to them?

Probably crushed and piled high in neat heaps, so neat they must have been very high heaps, neatly squashed flat, like they do with cars. A car ends up in the crusher – yesterday the family's darling, today a rusty flounder in a pile, a pile of flounders, of floundered moments of happiness, oh yes, that's right – happy moments!

I really did once fall in love on a tram, on the number 46; it went so slowly and screeched so loudly at every turn that you couldn't hear your own words. It wasn't like that every time, but this one, on that evening, was so very uncoiled that you couldn't hear your own words, and there we stood – he and I – and could really only look at each other, gaze at each other, and smile and smile on and on, oh yes, that kind of thing happened, and I have to get off now, I'm here now.

Pankow. That was where my home was. So what?

Do I have to get off now?

Oh, come on, a few yards, it's just a few yards and you'll be outside a house. A Berlin apartment block, so tall and handsome, but I don't want to go in, it's not part of my agenda – this journey now, alright, and the neighbourhood –okay, but I don't want to go in the front door, and I won't touch it. But then it opens.

All on its own?

The front door is opened and a child comes out, a girl in a woollen coat, red and bright, brightly coloured checks, on her shoulders a satchel – is it morning already?

The girl's holding a cloth bag, thank God she's remembered her sports kit, I won't have to run after her with it – my love, my little darling, so sweet with her pigtails and a fringe to go with them, she doesn't see me, doesn't see me, turns her back to me, walks along the road in her little coat, short, always straight ahead, her little figure moving away so serious and so straight – oh, it hurts and it's none of your business!
That front door stays shut!

All this book is about is Hamburger Strasse, Grosse Hamburger Strasse, about the old pages of a diary. That is my work and here we are again, and it's morning.

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