



Window Lights

Jonathan Gainer

Noises sizzle over pavement as steel yields and windows blink from both sides. The light here has a cauterized quality; weak and immediate, dry, contingent. A welder in the street coughs and pulls back his helmet for a fresh breath. A welder inside a squatted building wipes his lenses. Sparks fall over a passing tram as its extension ladder catches a knot of wire. And briefly, softly, between rust veined leaves and rotten awnings this pallid light crawls the Oranianburgerstrasse. Walking by, you might pass the street welder without notice, but stop at the round metal door recessed in the squat's façade. The door is convex, blown out, like a segment of a bubble or the surface of an eye. Looking closer, in this pale light, you might see that the door itself is a carefully constructed image; a song's worth of faces edge for space in the common metal skin. Funny door, you might think. A gargoyle menagerie on hinges, a conceit of stolen metal scraps.

Inside the squat Christophe set the welder down and ran a flux rag up a length of statue. A carbonaceous face gaped through eyeless sockets under the rag. The work, a dystopian epiphany waged in steel and fire, had been pulling him in for weeks. It was almost finished: a stretched and gaunt Icarus with finely cracked wings hung lonely over a pedestal. Christophe applied the welding tip again to the sculpture and an eyeball formed in white heat on the steel face. Flux rolled like tears down a hollow cheek.

He could hear greetings and directions being yelled in the yard over the piston insistence of power generators. Two more groups of roustabout anarchists were expected from Cologne and Amsterdam this evening. He imagined their rigged-up trucks--the sound systems, the hydraulic merri-ments mounted on their beds, the drivers exhausted from raptures pursued and roads traveled. He could hear the trucks crawling, belching through the squat's sculpture garden, five hectares of eccentric scraps, fountains, half-buried cars and tired shrubbery.

Christophe turned as a rigger with crustylocks and a grungy Treacherous Orb shirt wandered in from the lot. He had thin, sinuous triceps, greasy forearms, and pants that might impede circulation were it not for a few thoughtful rips. He edged across the room with the parched, driven confusion of a speed junky.

Christophe pointed at the spot welder, made an explosive gesture and nodded at the can with an entreating smile. The man edged back on his toes and drew his mouth into an endearing grimace.

"S-sorry friend. Wind in the eyes," he said, theatrically shielding the can's spout.



Christophe laughed: “They’ll give you gas at the Linien, the big squat around the corner. You’ll have to sign for it—tell them Christophe sent you. Where are you from?”

“London,” the man maniacally piped, smiling even wider.

There was a window open and the door to the street was ajar. Stepping carefully over an oxygen tank, the Englishman aimed for the door but then, doubling back in an oddly fluid motion, turned and leapt through the window.

Another English raver, Christophe thought, in for a season of music and cognitive butchery.

Wings to Iron, he murmured, escaping back to the statue. The words were from a sixteenth-century opus on metallurgy that was currently mediating his thoughts and perceptions. . . Wings to iron, so that man might die more swiftly. And gasoline to boot!

He applied the welding tip to the gap and light burst, erupted, poured out of the connection between welder and sculpture: a fiery, uproarious brightness of breathing metal skin!

After drawing a seam on the statue’s neck he wiped his eyes and lit a cigarette. He sat in the craplighted dimness, rubbing his oily fingers together and trying to situate himself. . . this room. . . this squat. . . this city, Berlin, here and breathing but more than the same pattern, yes, more than the same pattern of delinquent pranks and political exhibitionism and finally eviction. But the thoughts inverted, turned back on him, and for a moment he envisioned the world and these insipid cycles to be a weight pressing on a deep core of his very being, a weight demanding to be countered. He contrived that he was sculpting to stop himself from breaking things. These ideas achieved heroic proportions as they took shape, first like bare concepts on a mental screen and then like a bubble around him. . . he was refusing to participate in his own criminalization. . . but then the same thoughts became suffocating. He popped the bubble and lit another cigarette. He smoked and reconsidered his home, this time in its modest immediacy: a world-wheeze of ashes and old webs ascrawl on the walls, steel sculptures waiting for adoption, the delicate blinking evening.

He sat down, leaned on his knees. Automatically—probably because of how he was sitting, it occurred—he thought of a friend in Tegel prison. Nine months for torching a police van during an eviction. He’d lost the house and they a car, went the deal. At least he wasn’t homeless. And there was his Ossi *oncle*, despondent and bitter since his year in the DDR’s Bautzen prison in the eighties for ‘collaborative correspondence’ with a West Berliner socialist. He felt the memories threading into his future, into the thousand turns in a thousand streets he’d make at his leisure, the endless potential of threat and purpose spanning the changing city.

He splashed water on the second wing and studied the soaring torso: it might become a masthead door on a new squat, or observe from some



rooftop the ideological mop-up that would warm post-Cold War Berlin. The war was over but there was mental debris everywhere: if the soils of Salvador and Saigon were scattered with mines and hidden armories, Berlin was strewn with radical doctrines and a nostalgia for dialectics. And plenty of lonely corridors for them to take effect. Two years after German unification and the city's eastern half was ribbed with empty warehouses and crevice lots and government buildings sunning in the odd quiet left by evaporating bureaucracies. Police in the East were less concerned about squatters and the growing nocturnal subterranea than about dossiers linking them to the Stasi, but this was starting to change.

The power vacuum left by the vanished state had created an urban playground unprecedented in the twentieth century. He'd come over with the Kreuzberg misfits in October, 1989, when they heard the East's barbed wire doctrines were being contested from below. The stooge regime, eager even in its death throws to annoy its Western vanquisher, legalized squatting. He'd just met his cousin Elena, and they walked through the ghostly splendor of the Scheunenviertel, the neighbourhood still bearing scars from the forties like an eccentric old veteran. She showed him Helmholtzplatz and Kollwitzplatz and the Wasserturm, and he stared at the infinite shades of rust and stucco and exposed brick, so decrepit and yet so beautiful, and it was staggering to think of what he'd always known... that for all this time there'd been a whole society living under dictatorship in these ruined neoclassical structures, behind the bulletscarred and blacksmearred façades. They soon learned how many were empty.

In December he joined his cousin again. They went to a poorly-attended demonstration at Alexanderplatz, then drank schnapps at Marx-Engels Platz as they watched exhausted families return from their first trips west. Laden with televisions and electric appliances, they poured out of the packed S-Bahns into the icy December air, then stood at bus stops.

Every friendship begins with some affirming occasion, a shared experience that is shaded far enough beyond the routines of casual acquaintanceship that afterwards it either deepens or dissolves. Standing outside the S-bahn that cold December day, Christophe watched his cousin greet a man she knew. The man had just stepped out of the S-Bahn wagon holding a video player naked above his head, like a trophy. She gave him her big dimply smile, unwavering even as the instant long flash of shame Christophe saw in her ovular blue eyes trickled out somewhere beyond herself, beyond even the generalized empathy that was—circumstances as they were—enjoying an emotional vogue, into something that returned to her as a form of strength. It was all visible in a blink of his cousin's eye, or so he thought.

She listened curiously that day as he told her of his stage-building jobs for Heiner Muller productions in the West, and about the things he'd done later, the situations he and others had urged with music and sculpture



after stage building had started to feel irrelevant. Then they went south over the Janowitzbruecke and he tried to point out the various categories of Kreuzberg freak. He was charmed, haunted even, by her giddiness at seeing the kebab communists, the radical fetishists, the bipolar vegetarian terrorist aspirants and autonomous activists of every swagger, each a walking microcosm of some version or other of Kreuzberg democracy.

When, a few weeks later, a Kreuzberg group calling themselves the Dadakaziis urged that several decrepit buildings in Mitte be squatted rather than awarded to speculators, he offered to help. The parties thrown for this purpose used the new electronic music blowing back from Detroit, as it were, to transcribe the city's scorched steel and mortar carcasses into ideal sonic landscapes. The sound's dissenting millenarian fervour was contagious, and in a matter of weeks the buildings were occupied.

Two years later and it was still going. He listened to the rigs playing in the sculpture garden. Voices cut in through the back door in three languages and varied volumes, and he thought of all the new faces drawn daily to the magnet—the fortress squats, Berliner Luft, revolutionary epithets. Thirty thousand empty apartments and most still without owners. A few more years and it might become cohesive culture. A generation under thirty—another one—was finally and again mustering the courage to revive the truisms that life was where you lived it, that franchises and corporate architecture were loveless, lifeless, joyless shit. But resuscitating the obvious was easy in a vacuum... ask the communard.

Metal for metal, he hummed, polishing Icarus.

*Metal for metal,
Eye for eye,
If the second time's farce,
You don't have to die.*

Volker came through from the stairwell with a backpack full of his piss-stained beekers, looking for company and promising to gather scrap metal for new projects. Christophe gave him beer, then sent him on.

He walked out to the sculpture garden. A 10k rig with citations from Saint Just and Situationist slogans in bleeding tricolour was playing techno spiked with housy organs. A group of painters from the second floor were dancing with their arms above their heads. The Londen rig had a connecting tent extended over lawn furniture and their sound system was patched into the St. Just. One of the new rig's DJs dropped the volume and held court on England's Criminal Law Bill, John Major's War on Dreadlocks and other Tory ills.

Christophe shared a joint with Baraguin, the builder and pilot of the St. Just and his closest friend. They listened as the new arrival offered a high-winded history of his tribe and rig.

"It's a battle for new sanctities, for emancipation from their idea of proper life" the DJ insisted, stretching the word proper as he hammed it up for the Berliners.

Baraguin dug the floozy English oratory. "Crazy quality, *ce type*. Quality crazy!" he said, exhaling with a rakish pout and passing Christophe the spliff. Christophe was also amused; another crank for Berlin.

"But zou know ze English," Baraguin laughed wide-eyed as he turned to his own rig, "talkatalkatalka runaways!"

Christophe moved closer to make out the DJ's words... "we've strained long enough, friends, in the cages of regulated leisure. In England," he said, stretching the vowels again and unaware that in German England literally meant narrow country, "we confronted the military-advertising complex with the fraudulence of the lifestyles they'd been shoving in our eyes and throats." He looked up, curious to see if anyone was listening. Some of the people from the St. Just had joined Christophe around a makeshift bar, and a few artists from the squat's second floor had meandered down to see what was about.

"... And fuck me it worked," the MC continued. "We siphoned an absolutely mad proportion of the glamour set with our parties and happenings, with the accelerated collision of our generation with itself. People understood we weren't born to just nod-off again. We travelled throughout England, throwing parties and discouraging employment. DJanes sprouted from harbor towns. Bass slipped through the factory walls..." a few of the sculptors from the second floor cheered at this figurative imagery, "... but the government was terrified. Such lawlessness. Sloans shagging dreadlocked men, soiling their tennis attire. So they spared no expense to torture us."

Special police units were organized to break the raves, he continued. Newspapers ran scare stories blaming them for drugged out schoolgirls and criminal activities. The military-advertising complex mobilized against them. They were run out of their East London squats, he lamented, by good citizens and their riot squads. It had been a Mahabharata of radical organizing and hallucinatory eruptions felled by the truncheon, by legal proceedings and diminishing morale.

"But here we are," he gestured over his companions, a heap of exhausted, ersatz heretics. "We're here in Europe, semi-scathed and drenched in experience. We're critical and we're massive. We're critically massive, actually, and we've come to join you." There was a light applause and the DJ stepped down and accepted greetings from various constituencies in the squat.

Christophe looked on as Chad and Volker retired with a group from the Linien squat to the half-buried bus, which meant either an exchange of drugs or Volker being dragged into Chad's roguery, or both. Chad was wise, Christophe reflected, to avoid his newly-arrived compatriots, who would

sense in his one-track roguery a corruption of their squatting principles.

Snoggs was making his way to Christophe and Baraguin when Elena arrived with a huge sack of clothes strung over her sleeveless, goldfish-orange dress. Christophe saw Baraguin look on maliciously as the English DJ gave her the up-and-down: hardboiled blonde hair blown askant over minty blue eyes, fleshy cheeks moist with exertion, the tight abundance of her upper body, the sculpted strength of her lower. Snoggs' eyes tightened on lengths of healthy white thigh peering through rips in her turquoise stockings. He bowed, a ridiculous gesture for an anarchist unless it's executed perfectly. Already a little drunk, Elena bowed equally ridiculously, then laughed and extended an honest hand. Looking like he'd swallowed a small ice cube, Snoggs reached to shake her hand, but she pulled hers back at the last minute and ran it through her hair—that great old international gesture that said nope too slow—and laughed again at the poor MC's expense. Snoggs, now nearly in full swoon, did a half kneel and gestured to kiss her hand. This time permission was granted.

Baraguin now engaged the English DJ over a bed of metal roses. "You English have been on the run for so long. Now your tracks are on the run!"

"Guess your right there, er," Snoggs said, trying to sense the weight of the Frenchman's opinion, "Kermit."

Baraguin gave his rival a heavy look that was both calculating and offensive.

"There's something nonconfrontational evolving in't," the Englishman finally said, retreating. "You should 'a seen the bastards we were up against. But that's no' really about nationality, is 't? We've been on the run, but now we're here."

"Eef you run long enough"—Baraguin said, running in place with an extremely-arched back—"you become a runnair!"

Elena laughed, to Snoggs' visible dismay.

"But I," the Frenchman continued, turning to him, "I am a sweemer! I show you!"

Baraguin retreated to his rig, then reappeared over his turntables with his shirt off and wearing a mask-and-snorkel diving getup. He queued a record, releasing a stream of wet industrial sounds over the techno. It was a dirge of digeridoo and sump pumps, a leaky sonic submarine plowing murky depths of rhythm. The snorkel bounced in his long hair as he swam shirtless laps in his DJ booth.

Rising to the challenge, the English MC climbed onto his own rig, which was still patched into the St. Just. He playfully eyed the Frenchman as he queued his own record and counted eights. They were locked eye to eye, or eye to mask, the Frenchman smiling around the snorkel and Snoggs affecting a menacing grin as he dropped in his music. It was the Treacher-

ous Orb, an arrangement of sucking sounds commensurate to the Frenchman's pumps but dry and skyward, a black hole in rapturous contraction. Snoggs smugly spread his arms over his turntables in affected flight.

Elena gave Christophe a crafty look—she'd had affections for Baraguin for several months, and had agonized time and again as he'd chosen unbound thrills with other women. But his attack on Snoggs was proof of his affection. She took a baggy white suit out of her laundry bag and went inside. Moments later she reappeared on the Nemo Deck, a room on the squat's second floor whose exterior wall had been bombed off in the forties. The deck lit up to show her pulling a bulbous helmet on over the suit.

Looking up, Snoggs raised his levels, seeing in the white suit proof that Elena had opted for outer space. But another girl appeared on the deck with a shower head attached to a hose and Snoggs stared haltingly at the Frenchman, whose smile burst as he turned up his electronic dirge. Elena showered in the helmet and everyone danced.

Christophe watched as dust rose in the eager air. The evening wore into proper night, the sky darkening and filling again with stars and the rigs alternately fusing the squat's garden with rhythm and melodic promises. The sculptors were now dancing with people from the Cologne rig—half a dozen crusties and some kids that probably fell in on the way—and there were maybe eighty people between the lounges and the St. Just. The spaces between bars, sculptures, murals and Berliner shanties quivered with the smooth, half-dressed urbanity arriving from the other squats.

It was full spring now, doubtless and unabashed and driven by all the natural thirsts. Some tourists from Bonn had wandered in from the street when they heard the music; apparently unable to leave, they stood shamefully at the garden's edge, not knowing where or how to begin dancing but uncomfortable with simply gaping... all the shabby, pulsing splendor. Some actors from the Volksbuhne had come, not bothering to get out of costume. The rigs flooded the garden with green and amber lights as lines of stylistic consonance emerged spontaneously... veins of stretch velvet ran whole garden lengths, here across a pulvouse curve of ass, there vested on a DJ, there—a shade away—on a spiraling tip of bobbing hat. There were charlatan dancers, slithering wryly amidst the voluptuous amusements of girl after girl after girl. There were girls with no hair and black smears under their eyes and tits like citric armaments, devouring space. Baraguin danced laps around the garden, stopping here or there to spliff or shout a joke. DJ succeeded DJ, song melded into song, rhythms blossomed out of other rhythms as scales unfolded... melodies fell like thriving vaporuous sheets from the surrounding rigs as the music thickened, bodies arranged themselves in quadrants—less a lattice of flesh and technology than a synchrony of impulses and kind of becoming-soluble of the spaces between people, you might say—and the dance was just a picture



of this. Throughout the garden people were emerging from crevices, turned corners already dancing. Wallflowers were sired into motion. Intellectuals stopped thinking. Dust rose in the deep flooding lights as the mass rounded into muscular proportions, people dancing not with partners but with ribs of coil and seethe. It was 3 a.m. on some March Tuesday and Mitte was waking up.

Christophe was slowing after hours of dancing, but still held in the rhythm—sweats, the filterless presence. Elena and a friend were playing with Christophe as they danced, laughing as they slid by, then spinning back to parody his movements. She made a face that said SNORE! Cousin clown. She could levitate you with a joke. The two suddenly made sour faces, surprising him, and pointed up to a window in the squat's third floor. Two thin men in slick black shirts, permawet hair and careful goatees were videoing the garden with an expensive camera. One held the other as he leaned out the window to pan crowd and push the rigs, a digital age Cyclops.

Baraguin was turning for another lap when something erupted from the Garden bus. It was Chad, yelling above the music as only he could.

"Stow the video, dandyfucks, 'r I'll piss in yer' eyes," he thundered. Christophe walked slowly to the bus, pressed his nerves into a manageable bundle, and climbed in. Markos, one of the Linien squatters, seemed to be handling it.

"Subtle, Chad." Marcos was saying.

"Cunts," Chad insisted, "tryin' to turn us into home video. Three weeks thaiv been'ere 'n thaiv got new locks on the top floor doors. Cunts!"

"Bernard met them in New York," Volker said, turning to Christophe as he walked in. "He wrote for them some papers. Invitations about an art program on fake letterhead, from Tacheles, so they get credit at university for living here and taking our pictures."

"Art macht frei," Elena laughed over their shoulders, amazing Christophe with the edge her humour had taken.

Tensions had been high between individuals who wanted to sign lease contracts with private owners and those who wanted collective deals for all squatters. Now Chad, the Liverpool rogue and leader of a faction of glue-sniffers, was soiling the collectivist argument.

"New locks?" Markos asked, a collectivist himself, but of another faction.

"They've even called the fuckain senate fer' monay, fera circus here in the yard."

Marcos nodded. "They would evidently get to keep the profits, which would be subtracted from senate funds to rebuild squats with contracts."

"Well?" Christophe said.

"S'alright," Marcos said. "Someone's already put a call in to let their

university know it's a sham."

"Bravo," Christophe said. Too obvious to be true, these Americans and their digital census. But who could fight the boxes... how many video cameras were there in Europe? In the neighbourhood? But here we all stand, resentments bound in little packages for the Americans. His hands tingled with the thoughts, reminding him of the aggression he'd been suppressing—amazing, the mental stamina required to sift all the trick impulses out of the moment and still breathe.

"Cunts!" Chad barked again, apparently needing attention.

The threat of impending confrontation with the art school missionaries subdued Christophe's mood... the writhing lot now looked like it was enveloped in a glass case. So he walked the Oranianburgerstrasse, slow at first, letting the evening's various moments work their ways into memory, then with a furthered pace and ease. He turned into the Auguststrasse and let the thoughts flow with his steps.

If daytime Mitte was a gnarled web of construction and stress and traffic, the evening atmosphere could have descended from another planet. The Auguststrasse was a truly beautiful street... the crumbling facades drifted by, oily in the pre-dawn, their pastels smudged by half a century and running over eccentrically inhabited foundations, tunnel bars nameless and inviting and peered in unclosed hours. The whole street was dotted with impromptu gatherings like the one he'd just left... zigzagging rows of candles led through stairways to where artists showed their works in squatted rooms-cum-galleries, except they weren't galleries because they didn't really stop or start or close. Banners hung from windows. Balconies were sprayed into sports cars. Ivy shivered in funny coloured lights like oceanic plants on a great shipwreck. Christophe melted a little into the dreamy incompleteness of it all. Every crack and bullet hole a hint of time, a jest against peace and his life's loveliest moments... all night Mitte evenings, moonstreaked alvado glimmers, walks under hanging ferns, space between the harrows. Rooftops drifted breezewise in the clouds, cupolas and fretwork bent into portals that ushered city in. Through these the ubiquitous Alex fernsehturm hung high as a dreamland clock... shrill and naked and bereft of empire power, a prank hovering over halcyon Mitte for him and anyone alone with time enough to see it dash between the rooftops. No Stasi, no finished window arrangements, no shopping malls. Nothing to make people doubtful of their beauty. Tucholskystrasse, Sophienstrasse, Mulackstrasse, the neighbourhood of floating now, velvet predawn red like Boudoir curtains, where the dance of watchless wrists gleamed in the knowing zinc.

Rays of heat and steely tenor rose from the sidewalk in pink light as he walked over a grill set in the cement. He had a glimpse of punks dancing in a narrow cellar below as he walked past a pogo dive called the Ventila-

tor club. A group of electro girlies came out and screeched off in a neon orange Trabby. He dropped in the Dienstag bar for a Jaegermeister. A guy with pink hair was slamming to Prince's "Controversy," and the song's words brought his thoughts back to the new arrivals at the Tacheles, to Snoggs.

"The new sanctities," he'd said. What a worn, practiced speech. What tiring theory! And what was that he'd snuck in at the end about critical mass? It was half joke, half incitement. Amazing how it turned... the boldface leftist coinage of another time, now muttered under boulder-size eyelids as a parking application. But didn't the words have the same object as many of his own? Would authority twist his own words in the ears of others the way those of the English DJ had been twisted in his? What was it, this persuasive force that launched sneak attacks against his syntax as time wore on, this force around which most people seemed to gravitate with petty wishes and sickening deference, even in the otherwise limitless space of the mind... this thick, expanding sense of an alien certainty that seemed to attract and dissolve the facts of his own life? What was it that crammed zoning policies onto reluctant neighbourhoods and police bats onto the heads of peaceful demonstrators? Simply following traditions of revolt invoked their opposites, the traditions of eviction and the crush. It had run these ersatz radicals out of England, or turned them into runners, as Baraguin had said. And now it was molding the structure of his own city, his own mind.

That's why it was important to walk, sometimes for whole evenings. These wanderings through Mitte and the thoughts they provoked on the lives lived and living in the crumbling buildings were a way to respond to an ever-elusive sense of self and world.

Walking without external aim was a manner of self-placement—of being present in a place—and a step to something slightly beyond, which was also himself because he could only imagine it in his thoughts. It was his part in a history that was outside yet went through him. This sensing of history made it his own inasmuch as the sensing was accomplished on his own time, according to his own rhythms and whims, entering and exiting places as he pleased. It was the same for anyone else with time enough to decide how to take it. What was history anyway without the allegories it provided? A mirror of humankind-distorted as thought itself, but a mirror no less—at its most extreme and telling, a mirror woven of mythical piles that washed up on our shores from different times to illuminate our present. History was the tide of a larger mind. You had to see it to negotiate its treacherous currents. And here it was, washing up on the faded pastel façades.