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## Five Poems by Michael Krüger

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Louise Stoehr  
Five Poems by Michael Krüger

Michael Krüger

*Berlin in February*

*Berlin im Februar*

Not to be forgotten: the beggar,  
under the Friedrichstraße train line  
he has his disturbing quarters  
his bed a pile of debris  
an opened-up grave.  
Forgotten by history,  
he performs a pathetic part  
in the history of justice.  
From afar one believes  
to draw near a secret  
that rests near the truth,  
nearby nothing but triumph and shame.

*Hotel Maritim ProArte  
Friedrichstrasse, Berlin*

*Berlin, Friedrichstraße,  
Hotel Maritim ProArte*

It's four thirty two in the morning,  
for an hour the plug has been pulled  
from the city, it takes a deep breath.  
The building across the street a file cabinet,  
dark, behind just one window there is  
a flicker, that is where the list is made.  
Am I on it? Why so curious,  
you'll find out soon enough.  
One needn't believe everything  
that Death has to say.  
And then it's light once again.

*Berlin-Charlottenburg*

We sat in the night flimmering with heat  
in front of our hotel on Meineke Street,  
before us the golden cobblestones  
that want to remind of previous residents,  
behind us the radiating warmth of the walls  
as a hunchbacked wind blew down the street,  
one of those that are without an origin  
and don't know where they should sleep.  
Yet they live within the four walls of the city,  
you hear their somber grinding  
winds on wanderings,  
sensitive to voices that we don't hear.  
Three or four sparrows let themselves be carried  
by it and a hard-to-read page  
from the History of the Planet  
that Raoul wanted to decipher over night.  
Please do not disturb it says on the door sign  
of a writer from Venezuela  
who finally wants to sleep in.

*Berlin-Charlottenburg*

*Hotel V*  
*Knesebeckstrasse, Berlin*

*Berlin, Knesebeckstraße,*  
*Hotel V*

The cold pursued me,  
I heard it clatter.  
An unforgettable room,  
and everything in Russian.  
Five years ago Russia  
Invaded Ukraine,  
can you remember?  
Mountains trembled along with the waters  
at their foundation, rock formations melt  
like wax. It sends fire and  
worms into their flesh,  
they will eternally howl in pain.  
The woman at the front desk  
had snow in her eyes.  
She looked so long at me  
until they were empty.  
Breakfast begins at seven.  
Was the day lost  
like so many days in Berlin?  
Even in death, fingernails grow,  
but then at some point it's over.

What I absolutely still wanted to do  
in the neighborhood of my early years  
To forget. At the Rehwiese valley  
two old people are walking toward me,  
arm-in-arm, together one hundred fifty years.  
They stop short, shuffle on.  
When I turn around, they stop still  
and look at me until we  
lose sight of each other.  
The last time we saw each other,  
we were twelve years old and had to  
cram Latin verbs.  
The banged-up knees of the one,  
the flaky skin of the other. Ingo?  
The acacias are still there, the rhubarb  
and the mole hills.  
I'm overcome by a yearning  
that I am not up to.  
You're mistaken, I call out to the old men,  
it is not I,  
you were already mistaken back then!

## Commentary

Michael Krüger was born in Wittgendorf, Saxony, Germany, in 1943, and grew up in Berlin-Nikolassee. He trained as a publishing bookseller and worked from 1962 until 1965 as a bookseller in London before returning to Germany. He began his career with Carl Hanser publishing house in Munich, one of Germany's most important publishers, as an editor in 1968, where in 1986 he became publishing director and in 1995 chief executive officer, a position he held until his retirement at the end of 2013. From 1981 to 2014, he was the editor of *Akzente*, Germany's premier literary magazine. In July 2013, he was elected president of the Bavarian Academy of Fine Arts and held that office until July 2019. Krüger has written over thirty volumes of poetry, several novels, and is also well known as an essayist.

At present, Krüger is undergoing therapy for leukemia that was discovered as the COVID-19 pandemic reached Europe, and is currently living near Lake Starnberg outside of Munich, Germany, in total isolation. He continues to write poems focused on his current situation for the weekly magazine insert of *Süddeutsche Zeitung*.

The poems above are from Krüger's latest volume, *Mein Europa: Gedichte aus dem Tagebuch* [My Europe: Poems from my Diary]. By no means a travelogue, *Mein Europa* is a collection of impressions written over the span of five seasons as Krüger traversed the European continent. The poems are observations of and reflections on the human condition in the early twenty-first century. These reflections and observations are written in a "plain" poetic style, that is, Krüger uses colloquial language in poetic arrangements that evoke a deep sense of melancholy.

The selections here are some of the poems Krüger wrote about Berlin, the capital city of Germany. While these poems focus on only one European city, they represent much of what is important for Krüger to explore and share with his readers: Social justice, his own personal history and mortality, the difficult history of Germany in the twentieth century, and everywhere the simplicity and purity of nature that contrast with the busy life in the big cities of Europe. His focus is on the apparently simple things, birds, trees, light.

While Krüger's poems in this volume do not present thorny translation issues, as with all translation, there are aspects of interpretation and elements of cultural awareness that need to be considered. As always, the visual representation of the words on the page, that is, the very materiality of the relative length of lines and their placement on the page should, to the extent possible, reflect the original German. Likewise, instances of poetic devices, such as rhyme and alliteration, should be represented in the English versions as well.

### *Berlin in February*

In "Berlin in February," culturally-relevant knowledge is necessary to entirely appreciate the poem. Here, it is important to recognize the central role of "S-Bahn Friedrichstraße" as one of the larger commuter train stations in Berlin and one with a notorious past during the postwar division of Germany—an aspect that is not even mentioned in the poem but is still ever present by force of the location. Today, Friedrichstraße train station is a vast maze of hallways with shops and food; its stairways, and escalators that combine commuter trains with the trains of the underground system. On the outside, the train stations covers an entire corner of a city block and attracts not only travelers but is also a hangout for local beggars and is used as shelter by a number of homeless people. Against the backdrop of the working-class and more well-to-do travelers and shoppers in this expensive neighborhood of Berlin, it takes Krüger only a few lines to evoke—in the deep, dark northern German winter—the crass lack of social justice in modern Germany as he draws the stark contrast between those who thrive and those who have been forgotten by society.

In terms of form, the English does reflect the physical appearance of the original German, most notably in the relatively similar length of the first three lines and the much longer final line of the poet. In the final three lines, the poet not only employs a sort of alliteration but actually varies the concept of "near" by using three related lexical items: *nähern*—to draw near, *nah*—near, and *Nähe*—nearness or the nearby, which are reflected in the English version.

## *Hotel Maritim proArte, Friedrichstrasse, Berlin*

Also written in winter, the poem “Berlin, Friedrichsstraße Hotel Maritim proArte” reminds the reader that the bustling metropolis of this capital city virtually never rests, with, for example, no official closing time for pubs. Public transport begins as early as 4:30 in the morning and runs on a regular schedule until the last trains rumble through the city at 1:30 the following morning. Krüger poetically shortens the time span during which the city sleeps and catches a moment of this relative quiet that covers the city when he gazes at the building across from his hotel at 4:32 am, right about the time when the city is preparing to awaken to its busy life again. This cultural note makes the poem more accessible because it reminds the reader that real-life observations enter the poem.

However, even more notable is the poet’s curiosity about what is happening in that one room where he sees a light flickering. The image of someone in the eastern part of Berlin maintaining lists may lead the reader—via a flashback in history—to imagine the former East German State Secret Police (*Stasi*) still engaging in their meticulous keeping of records about everyone in that society. Of course, in light of scandals involving U.S. and German security agencies, this worry may have much more recent causes. More important, still, is that fear of being surveilled, which is immediately replaced by a definite sense of foreboding. The poet recognizes his own mortality and perhaps awaits his own death, only to realize that the new day begins and his lease on life has been renewed, at least temporarily. Indeed, images representing the end of journeys and the end of life recur throughout the poems in this volume.

## *Berlin-Charlottenburg*

This poem begins with a group of people sitting on a warm summer evening at a restaurant or café before their hotel in the Charlottenburg neighborhood of Berlin, but this idyllic scene is immediately interrupted by the reference to “the golden cobblestones that want to remind of previous residents.” These “golden cobblestones” are *Stolpersteine*, or “stumbling blocks,” the

size of regular cobblestones, appearing to be golden because they are brass-clad. Created by Günter Demnig as individual testaments in memory of the murdered Jews of Berlin and Europe, thousands of these *Stolpersteine* have been laid into the regular pavement in front of the last voluntary residence of Jews before they were deported. The *Stolpersteine* identify each individual human being by name, date of deportation, and—usually—the date that person was murdered in the Holocaust.

The German reader of Krüger's poems might also be aware of the historical background of this elegant neighborhood: the burough of Charlottenburg had once been home to many of Berlin's assimilated Jews, almost all of whom were deported to concentration camps. And yet, nature—evoked here in the form of wandering winds and sparrows—continues its journey “within the four walls of the city,” where the poets of today live and create. So the sparrows on their flight are carried by the winds. The same winds carry away (carry out of reach) a “page from the History of the Planet,” a page that tells the history of the Nazi crimes against humanity and that now confronts the group of people in front of their hotel. And these winds also create the sounds of a “somber grinding”—what is it they are grinding down within this city?

The line *Winde auf Wanderschaft* evokes the image of winds that have embarked on the wanderings expected of craftsmen after their apprenticeship in days gone by when young men would journey from town to town learning their trade with the goal of eventually becoming a master of the trade (hence, the term “journeyman”). The German lexical item *Wanderschaft* is correctly rendered as “wanderings” in English and, therefore, maintains the alliteration of the original, yet this noun in English does not as strongly evoke this concept of journeyman as the original *Wanderschaft*.

### *Hotel V, Knesebeckstrasse, Berlin*

One of the second set of autumn poems, this is perhaps the darkest poem in this selection. This poem is specific to Berlin because it was inspired by the Russian-owned/run hotel, where the poet is staying the night. Everything here is cold. The reader

is not only confronted by “everything in Russian,” with a “woman at the front desk” who “had snow in her eyes” but is also confronted with the memory of Russia having “invaded Ukraine.” There is nothing hopeful here, as Krüger first questions in lines 18 and 19 whether this particular day had been lost “like so many days in Berlin,” then driving home this hopelessness in the final line: “but then at some point it’s over.”

Images of mountains that “trembled... / at their foundation” and rock formations that “melt / like wax” evoke the agony of a country (Ukraine) punished by its bully neighbor (Russia) because of Ukraine’s desire for self-determination and a political orientation toward Europe. Again, Krüger depicts great injustice, this time on a national scale, calling on violent images of nature to depict the true extent of suffering.

### *Berlin-Nikolassee*

The final poem in this series takes the reader back to Krüger’s childhood neighborhood, the well-to-do neighborhood of Nikolassee, originally founded as a colony of villas, or mansions, in 1901 and incorporated into greater Berlin in 1920. The poet returns here to forget, and upon a chance encounter with classmates he has not seen for over sixty years, he is consumed with memories of those early days and finds himself “overcome with a yearning that [he] is not up to.” Clearly, something happened in those days of childhood for the poet to exclaim that his former classmates “were already mistaken back then!”

Two small translation notes are of interest here. First, anyone who knows this borough of Berlin and its geography will understand the reference to *Rehwiese*. Literally, it translates as “deer meadow,” but this does not make much sense in English nor does it offer a sense of the actual physical location in Berlin, for the Berlin *Rehwiese* is an approximately one-and-a-half-kilometer-long depression in the terrain, covered with grasses and used by many people for taking walks. While it might be rendered as “dell” in English, I opted for the more easily understood “valley,” which can also represent a shallow dale or vale. Moreover, this choice best reflects the linguistic tone of the original German and is very straightforward rather than somewhat archaic.

The second translation challenge in this poem is found in the second line, which refers in German to the *Kiez meiner Kindheit*. *Kiez*, as it developed as a slang term in German and has now for some speakers been adopted into the standard language, is best rendered in English as “’hood,” but “’hood” in English evokes images of the ghetto, of a neighborhood that is less than well-to-do. Since *Kiez* is becoming more acceptable in standard German, it is possible to render it as “neighborhood,” which was the choice here. However, something then had to be done with the German *Kindheit*, which has its direct equivalent in “childhood.” Wanting to avoid a poetic line with “-hood” followed by “-hood,” which would have distracted more from the sense of the original by adding an unintended rhyme, I chose to render *Kindheit* as “early years.” In addition, this serves the secondary purpose of maintaining relative line lengths in the English version that more directly correspond to those of the original German.

Source text:

Krüger, Michael. *Mein Europa*. Haymon, 2019, pp. 86, 88, 187, 211, 212.