

We were walking in one of those wasteland areas in Berlin alongside a set of defunct railroad tracks, skirted by garden colonies that had been set up as the result of "Railroad Agriculture" in which employees of the state owned railroad company were given unused plots of land to cultivate so as to supplement their often, meager income. It was the tipping point time of year, between late summer and early fall when you cling to every last ray of sunshine and we were standing knee deep in the weeds and tall grasses when Matilda told me her story. After having suffered through a seven year relationship, she discovered to her dismay that somehow bit by bit she had become invisible, a non-entity. One day her partner said he needed to take a walk, left their house and never came back.

In Germany when a child is 10 years old, the teacher proposes which of four tracks they will enter into which, basically break down into two main life paths: the academic/professional path and the vocational/trade/craft-worker path.

When my friend, Matilda was 10 years old, her teacher determined that she should be placed into the vocational track because she was prone to day dreaming and struggled in her classes. Her parents, who were not of the working class, had strongly and successfully advocated for her and were able to move her into an academic track where she ultimately excelled and is now a professor of musicology at a prestigious university in Berlin. This got me thinking about how a system can be set up so that generations remain in the class they were born into unless people become bound and determined to break that system.

And this system of course works in both directions. Oliver, a former German boyfriend of mine was pushed by his father, who was himself a ship's captain, into pursuing a career in biology. As a university student, halfway through his PhD, Oliver dissected leeches in an underground basement in Berlin six days a week but during the time that I knew him, he and his research group made an expedition to Lake Baikal in Siberia to analyze the leeches that were particular only to that body of water. At twenty-five million years old, it is the oldest and deepest freshwater lake in the world.

He said that after working in the lab for days on end, located in the dark hull of the ship, he would emerge, jump off the deck and swim with his mouth wide open, drinking in the pristine water like a giant fish. The prospect of returning for the rest of his life to a windowless, underground lab after floating for weeks on those waters seemed inconceivable to him.

Given the structure of ones working life in Germany, once you find yourself on a life path, it is nearly impossible to jump out of it and shift into a new one. But in spite of this fact, one day Oliver announced to his father that there was no way he could spend his entire life holed up in a lab studying leeches and to the dismay and anger of his family and friends, he quit the PhD and became first a postman and then ultimately, happily a palliative care nurse who helps people transition from the end of this life into the next realm.

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Because my friend Matilda is someone who is so driven and successful in her career, I found it very difficult to accept that she was living a parallel life of deep submission to her partner at home. Six months after he left, a new friend was pursuing her romantically. During the course of this long walk among the tall grasses and weeds along the garden colony that skirted the old train tracks, I said almost no words. She walked and talked herself all the way around from complaining about this annoying, unlikely suitor to in the end asking herself, "Well actually, why not just give it a try?"

This mental trajectory, which lead from an emphatic "no" that was clearly based in fear of the unknown to a "yes, why not" opened onto a path that changed the course of her life forever.

It was in thinking of those crucial moments in life that set the course either this way or that, depending on how much or little we get in the way of our own lives, that I arrived at the idea for this piece *Tiergarten*.

The text was written between 1932 and 1938 and it was the last thing written by Walter Benjamin before his arduous attempted escape from the Nazi's on a footpath through the Pyrenees crossing France into Spain where he had hoped to flee to America. Once in Spain, he was told that his transit visa was not valid and that he would have to return to German occupied France the next day. That night he committed suicide with an overdose of morphine.

The curious thing about *Berlin Childhood around 1900* is that it serves as a final recollection of his upper-class Jewish childhood in Berlin not through remembrances of people, but of places, locations.

The Robert Schumann intermezzo that opens *Tiergarten* is intended as a short, independent piece of music, an intervening movement between the two larger pieces of his Opus 54 Piano Concerto, which was the only concerto he had ever completed. There is a characteristic fast-slow-fast quality to the three-movement concerto with the intermezzo occupying the slow space.

Schumann wrote music as if it were text, often establishing characters out of the music. His wife Clara, herself a pianist and composer, originally performed the piano part of this piece and wrote of it, "The piano and orchestral parts are interwoven to the highest degree. One can't imagine one without the other." I hear the intermezzo as an open ended conversation with no clear beginning and a finish that trails off like a thought left hanging in the air, like a possibility.