

## Letter from Berlin

Jon Stallworthy

*My Dear,*

*Today a letter from Berlin  
where snow – the first of '38 – flew in,  
settled and shrivelled on the lamp last night,  
broke moth wings mobbing the window. Light  
woke me early, but the trams were late:  
I had to run for the Brandenburg gate  
skidding, groaning like a tram, and sodden  
to the knees. Von Neumann operates at t10  
and would do if the sky fell in. They lock  
his theatre doors on the stroke of the clock –  
but today I was lucky: found a gap  
in the gallery next to a chap  
I knew just as the doors were closing. Last,  
as expected, on Von Showmann's list  
the new vaginal hysterectomy  
that brought me to Berlin.*

*Delicately*

*he went to work, making from right to left  
a semi-circular incision. Deft  
dissection of the fascia. The blood-  
blossoming arteries nipped in the bud.*

*Speculum, scissors, clamps – the uterus  
cleanly delivered, the pouch of Douglas  
stripped to the rectum, and the cavity  
closed. Never have I seen such masterly  
technique. ‘And so little bleeding!’ I said  
half to myself, half to my neighbour.*

*‘Dead’,  
came his whisper. ‘Don’t be a fool’  
I said, for still below us in the pool  
of light the marvellous unhurried hands  
were stitching, tying the double strands  
of catgut, stitching, tying. It was like  
a concert, watching those hands unlock  
the music from the score. And at the end  
one half expected him to turn and bend  
stiffly towards us. Stiffly he walked out  
and his audience shuffled after. But  
finishing my notes in the gallery  
I saw them uncover the patient: she  
was dead.*

*I met my neighbour in the street  
waiting for the same tram, stamping his feet  
on the pavement’s broken snow, and said:  
‘I have to apologize. She was dead,  
but how did you know? Back came his voice  
like a bullet ‘ – saw it last month, twice.’*

Returning your letter to an envelope  
yellowed by years than when you sealed it up,  
darkly the omens emerge. A ritual wound  
yellow at the lip yawned in my hand;  
a turbulent crater; a trench, filled  
not with snow only, east of Buchenwald.

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