

Thomas Meinecke, excerpt from *Hellblau* (Light Blue), transl. Susan Bernofsky

Friday, May 26, 2000. Excruciatingly slowly, the silver J-train crawls across the dizzying Williamsburg Bridge to disappear into the promised *shtetl* on the far side of the East River. Without a word, Vermilion takes my hand, and at the first station after the bridge we get out of the subway, which is now an elevated train. My heart pounding, I let her guide me across the platform and down the steep steps, at the bottom of which we find ourselves on the sidewalk of a busy street hidden in the cool shade of the iron trestles, Broadway. I have a black baseball cap from Baltimore on my head. Vermilion is dressed in a wrap skirt almost long enough to brush the floor and a long-sleeved blouse from the Carolinas. I wonder whether her hair, which she has fixed in place with hairspray, might possibly pass for a wig; whether the modest stubble I've left unmolested on my chin for several weeks now could count as a beard. A gust of wind catches Vermilion's skirt, briefly flipping it back like a curtain and letting her sinfully bare legs gleam in the midday sun. Horrified, we stop in our tracks and glance around. There is only a Puerto Rican greengrocer smiling at us from across the street, calling out a Spanish word neither of us knows. Then we turn the corner behind five hurrying youths who, despite the tremendous heat, are wearing black coats, with *tzitzes*, black hats and *peyes* blowing in the wind, onto Marcy Avenue, where we pass by several tenement buildings. Supposedly their elevators run all day on *shabbes*, stopping automatically at each floor so that the Chassidic tenants will not be forced to perform forbidden work, in this case by pushing an elevator button. But on the benches in front of these buildings we see Latin

American families as well, whose grown members are often employed in the workshops owned by the Chassids. Any sort of criminal activity on the part of the Latino workers, theft for example, is punished with beatings. They beat the thieves, then let them go, Vermilion reports. Once the Brooklyn police force turned up here to arrest a Chassid, and the officers received such a beating that in the end they had to call off the manhunt. This pious community was unable to surrender one of its members, as he would not have been provided with kosher meals in prison. Vermilion: If even a single member of the community violates the religious code, the entire group falls from grace.

On Division Avenue, we go into a bookstore full of nooks and crannies. I give the English-language Judaica section a thorough browse-through; behind me, clustered around the next shelf, several men with an air of the utmost spiritual refinement are leafing through various tomes with great concentration. The shape of their glasses is familiar to me from childhood. I can't help finding them oddly hip, and by contrast appear to myself utterly clumsy, barbaric and ignorant. Vermilion, the only woman in the shop, purchases a book bound in brown leather about the former Satmar Rebbe. *Gut Shabbes*, the bookseller says as we go back out onto the street. Men carrying black velvet cushions wrapped in transparent plastic beneath their arms walk past us. Their gait, like that of the boys and youths, possesses an appealing, unmasculine grace. A very young mother in a dress resplendent with color, a delicate scarf covering her well-tended wig, is pushing a wide stroller containing twins; she is accompanied by an African-American nanny with whom she is conversing in broken English. The nanny, too, is

pushing a stroller. It occurs to me that there are many fathers pushing strollers as well. I've never seen so many strollers in one place before.

We cross Havemeyer Street, Roebling Street—named for the architect of the Brooklyn Bridge—and meander down Bedford Avenue. Now we are surrounded almost exclusively by Satmar Chassidim. Vermilion calls my attention to the white edifice belonging to the Rebbe. Yellow school busses painted with Hebrew letters are delivering the schoolchildren to their homes, where family members are waiting for them out on the sidewalk. Never before have I seen so many beautiful people all at once. The cultural community you see here, Vermilion whispers, is in fact responsible for bringing us a quite significant subset of the arts in America: In the 1930s, Columbia, Warner Brothers, Paramount, Twentieth Century Fox, Universal, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and Goldwyn Studios were all in Jewish hands, and Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe laid the foundations for Hollywood glamour. It was a similar matter in New York's Tin Pan Alley, a central birthplace of pop music: Harold Arlen, Al Jolson and Eddie Cantor are all said to be the sons of cantors, and Irving Berlin, Vernon Duke and many others were first-generation immigrants. In the same era, Chassidic music was well on its way to becoming the most successful sector of the Jewish music industry. Chassidism: a plebian-religious moment with mystical-ecstatic elements. Even Socialism in the United States can be seen primarily as a Jewish import, Vermilion maintains. The Yidisher Kultur Farband (Yiddish Culture Association), founded in 1937, was still valorizing Stalinism. Back in Chapel Hill, Vermilion has an entire year's worth of the Socialist journal *Die Tsukunft* (The Future), which was published in New York. The titles of the

two Satmar periodicals from Williamsburg are *Der Zeitung* (The Newspaper), the private property of Albert Friedman, and *Der Yid*, a community venture edited by a man who bears the unbelievable name Sender Deutsch. Both are weeklies, and both—thanks to their being printed in Hebrew characters—are undecipherable to me. At least the secular, social-democratic *Forverts*, whose authors once included the two Nobel laureates Isaac Bashevis Singer and Elie Wiesel, has had its English-language pendant since 1990, published under the title *Forward*, with contributions by Saul Bellow, Philip Roth and Joseph Heller. Even Art Spiegelman's famous comic strip about the Holocaust first appeared in the *Forward*. But Williamsburg's shops carry neither the English *Forward* nor the Yiddish *Forverts*. Vermilion says: A hundred years ago this was just an upper-middle-class neighborhood of Jews who spoke High German, but starting around 1930, the only language you would hear on the street was Yiddish. Even as early as 1870 there was a Yiddish newspaper in New York, *Di Yidishe Tsaytung*. And Manhattan's West 16th St. is still home to the legendary YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, the Yidisher Visnshaftlekher Institut (Yiddish Scholarly Institute), which was founded in Berlin in 1925 and in 1945 moved to New York City.

We leave Bedford behind us just as it is about to exit the Satmar *shtetl* so as to pass through the African-American slums of Bedford-Stuyvesant and, further south, the Lubawitsher *shtetl* of Crown Heights and then skirt the edge of the Bobov or Stoliner *shtetl* Borough Park on the far side of Flatbush, near Midwood; we take Flushing Avenue, which borders the neighborhood, for two or three hundred meters before turning onto Lee and heading north again. In the final hours before the shops close for the

shabbes, things are particularly busy. Just before we cross over the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, which slices through this neighborhood, Vermilion and I witness a schoolchild being struck by a car that has impatiently accelerated while turning the wrong way down a one-way street—the child is either hit full on, as Vermilion believes, or else grazed in passing. Then a head-on collision with a truck barreling down the street in the opposite direction puts an end to the inexplicable mad dash on the part of this unfortunate driver, who clearly does not know his way around. Several men are shrieking and running back and forth in desperation, one bends down over the child, which we can no longer see, another has whipped out his cell phone, and barely two minutes later several Chassidic ambulances—unofficial ambulances, from an American perspective—come tearing down the street with a sharp squeal of sirens and blue flashing lights hidden behind their grilles. Meanwhile an agitated crowd has gathered on the corner. Vermilion and I, on the other hand, are making our way, furtively, as if with guilty consciences, away from this assembly, our knees trembling. We buy a bottle of grape juice at a shop on the next corner as if nothing had happened. Nonetheless, thanks to the pious unity with which the local population has responded to this tragic occurrence, it has taken on a certain fatefulness in my mind, a sense of collective momentousness. A downright Old Testament experience, I think while Vermilion is buttoning her blouse closed over her star of David, but I keep this thought to myself, since the words “Old Testament” possess an anti-Semitic undertone in German and perhaps in all of occidental Christendom.

For our ambitious excursion to Crown Heights, Flatbush, Midwood and Borough Park, we avail ourselves of the VW bug. It needs exercise, too, Vermilion says. So we

toss the parking ticket into the gutter and, moments later, find ourselves cruising down the crowded lanes of the Bowery, just to the right of the center line. I lean back in my seat, Vermilion's resolute driving style is very much to my liking. She takes advantage of every opening that presents itself, and we're in good hands: Vermilion was flying airplanes as a little girl already. Now we're sailing across the Brooklyn Bridge at top speed. Today is Memorial Day, and most of the shops are closed. It will be a different matter altogether in the Chassidic neighborhoods, I am promised by my companion, who claims that I have amusing red splotches on my cheeks, which I attribute to the fact that we went dancing far too excessively the day before, from five until eleven p.m., in a warehouse called Vinyl, former home of Shelter, right across from the entrance to the Holland Tunnel, at a party entitled Body & Soul at which surviving disc jockeys from the legendary Paradise Garage spin disco and house records every Sunday from four in the afternoon until nearly midnight for an ethnically diverse crowd of enthusiastic, mostly gay dancers. The flyer announced: "For the month of May 2000 we would like to honor The Women of Body & Soul"—for which reason Vermilion was allowed to enter the club free of charge. The eager barking of the "party people," which I'd read about in connection with the rituals of the old Paradise Garage, could be heard even out at the coat check counter. When we stepped into the room with the gigantic dance floor, the music was still playing at a relatively modest volume, but a mere two hours later, with the sun still blazing high in the sky out of doors, everyone inside the club was covered with sweat as though it were just before sunrise. Now the only thing that could pierce the ear-numbing din of the hypnotic music were the sirens that blared at regular intervals. Joe Claussell, Danny Krivit and François Kevorkian took shifts at the turntables, clearly in

the tradition of the celebrated Larry Levan, now deceased, the son of a seamstress from Bedford-Stuyvesant; he was said to have once abandoned his turntables in the middle of a set to polish all six of the disco balls hanging above the dance floor with his own two hands, perched on a folding ladder, while the record that had been stirring up the crowd when he'd left his post went on endlessly spinning, needle stuck in its innermost band.

Vermilion drives her cinnabar-red Volkswagen at a crawl through the Bobov *shtetl*, passing through countless quiet streets, opulent front gardens and quite lovely properties. The figures on the sidewalks here strike me as clearly more prosperous than in the Satmar *shtetl*, but also less ethereal in their aura. We reach Thirteenth Avenue—the shopping district of Borough Park, now filled with afternoon hubbub—park the car on 50th St. and lose ourselves in the crowd. In the toy department at Eichler's Judaica Superstore I discover a multicolored Torah made of plush. In front of us at the cash register: tourists from Israel. The friendly cashier speaks both Yiddish and English. I'm too embarrassed to ask him for the Jewish edition of the New Testament which, according to Vermilion, offers an interesting construct: the continuity of Judaism within Christianity. Two gorgeous young women are studying the rack of Chassidic CDs labeled "New Arrivals." Within the constraints of religious law, they are perfectly fashionable in their dress; my heterosexual gaze is put off only by their strangely silky, luxurious strawberry-blond wigs. They look like two shop mannequins come to life, I whisper in my girlfriend's ear. Like female impersonators from outer space. Vermilion is balancing an entire stack of books bound in black leather on her hands. When we find ourselves back out on the street again, she explains to me that the married women in

Borough Park, unlike those in Williamsburg, don't necessarily have to have their heads shaved bare. Many of them, she says, wear an attractive short haircut beneath the long *sheitl*, occasionally even a chic bob that reaches to their chins. All the same, they are not allowed to display their own hair to any man other than their husband. Two fat beige Eichler's plastic bags are now hanging from my right wrist. The "Fluffy Torah" is fairly conspicuous. I take the current edition of a free paper called the *Torah Times* from its box and leaf through it as we continue on our leisurely stroll: Glamour brand stockings from Italy are all the rage and are now available for purchase in Borough Park at the two Family Hose Centers, Head to Toe, Hosierama and Hosiery & More, in Flatbush at Legacy and Plan Ahead, and in Williamsburg at Gold's Accessories.

Vermilion has stopped short before the display window of a wig shop. She tells me about the wealthy Chassidic women from Brooklyn who journey as far as the reformed Upper East Side of Manhattan to have their *sheitls* ministered to at the celebrated salon near the Leo Baeck Institute run by stylist Mark Garrison from North Carolina, himself a Southern Baptist and rumored to have done the hair of supermodels like Naomi Campbell, black, and Cindy Crawford, white. This trend started a good ten years ago, Vermilion says, when a bride whose red curls Garrison had cut regularly ever since she was a young girl had to have her head shaved for her wedding, which inspired in the master hairdresser the ambition to create a wig that would approximate as closely as possible the natural splendor of her original head of hair. The result must have been spectacular; in any case, the satisfied bride recommended this hair artist to others in her circle, and soon Mark Garrison's customers included a hundred and fifty bald women. In

an interview with journalist Susan Kirschbaum, who writes for *Forward*, he described the prototype of his Jewish clients as strikingly sexy and exotic. Garrison cuts and styles their *sheitls*, dyes them, cleans them, blow-dries them, and it isn't only the pony-tail styles he's a master of, Vermilion reports. A cut can be had for the handsome sum of \$600, washing and drying \$75, color adjustment and touchups \$150. In Flatbush, at Chevi's Salon, you pay only \$195 for a haircut, \$50 for washing and drying, and \$60 to \$105 for touchups.

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