

Vonnegut / Dresden / old liquor store / alcohol (yeast) / destruction / reconstruction / Art

I come in through the back door carrying Vonnegut's book under my arm. When I am finished moving breads from their square on the floor to the windowsills, I begin, standing beside the wrecked wall.

Listen: this is how many paragraphs of the book I'm reading start. "Listen," I read, and my attention increases. I open my eyes wider, compensating for the fact that my ears are powerless in this situation.

When I told my mom I was going to Dresden, she gave me this to read (*I hold up the book*): Slaughterhouse Five, by Kurt Vonnegut, (*I open the book and read p.341*) "a fourth-generation German-American, now living in easy circumstances on Cape Cod [and smoking too much], who, as an American infantry scout hors de combat, as a prisoner of war, witnessed the fire bombing of Dresden, Germany, "the Florence of the Elbe" a long time ago and survived to tell the tale." So I did, and before I set foot in Dresden this summer, I was imagining this city through his eyes. (*I open the book and read p.445*) "The Americans arrived in Dresden at five in the afternoon. The boxcar doors were opened and the doorways framed the loveliest city that most of the Americans had ever seen. The skyline was intricate and voluptuous and enchanted and absurd. [...] Somebody in the boxcar said "Oz"."

The little brick roads are not particularly yellow, but the streets are indeed paved with cobblestones, hard on bike riders, but so picturesque. By the way, did you know that cobblestones are valued in cycling road races? It requires considerable skill to ride cobblestones efficiently, without falling or getting a flat tire. From my riding experiences, I would add tram tracks, foldable bicycles and stubborn old German pedestrians to the list of additional difficulties on the Paris-Roubaix (via Dresden) Race.

Here, the stones are held together by sand instead of mortar, a fact which was pointed out to me last night. It has the environmental advantage of being permeable paving, which means that it moves instead of cracking when the ground shifts. Plants can grow in between. And it certainly makes it a lot easier to tear up the streets. (*I open the book and read p.465*) "Dresden was like the moon. Nothing but minerals. The stones were hot. Everybody else in the neighborhood was dead."

The beginning of Vonnegut's tale had led me to expect to see a fairyland. But after a few more pages, I began to fear I'd find a disfigured city, much like Pompeii, Detroit or Gaza. Of course, none of these cities have anything to do with one another, and I will not go into their respective destructions, which stem from a whole variety of causes.

I was impressed by Dresden's reconstruction; barely visible on the Frauenkirche, if it weren't for the old black stones, remnants of the primary building, fitted with white brand-new ones to reform the original shape. The identical twin, completed only ten years ago, now stands exactly where the first one was destroyed.

St Pauli's ruins remain though, a modern glass roof patching up the ancient construction. A theatre was built with the left-over church, as you make the best chicken soup with the carcass of yesterday's roasted bird. Use what is left of the broth to flavor your risotto, then make arancini with the excess, the next day. (That should do the trick: fried foods are so good, people always empty the plate.) This pattern should apply to everything, even to broken hearts. No matter how many bricks are still standing, if the rain pours in, thorns grow. Rebuilding is necessary to avoid more damage.

Destruction and reconstruction is still taking place everywhere: on the bridge over the Elbe, on the side streets of Neustadt. Heaps of stones are waiting to be encased again into a flat puzzle of shades of red or brown, to differentiate the bike path from the pedestrian way on the sidewalks.

See here, it is the same: large brown bricks for the back room, in opposition to the large gray tiles of the store front. This must have been the storage room of the Getränkemarkt. (Hey, this is another example of rehabilitation: from deficient liquor store to booming art studio!) So: raw material for bottles in bulk, smooth sober ceramic for the customers. Strange, the stale tile out there makes me shiver. Doesn't it feel better in here? Doesn't it feel special? When buying bread at the bakery in my childhood, I remember peering behind the cashier, through the door, to where the baker was rotating whole trays of loaves into and out of the oven. That was Oz to me. At least, it was on the way. I have been there, I have done that. It's like being behind the set of a film. The storage room is backstage, the special area where only a selection of people are allowed. A confidential space where deals are done, and secrets are exchanged.

Don't tell anyone, but the other night, at the Side Door -a bar where Dresden artists flock- I was feeling kind of nervous, as I am now, to appear in the Dresden art community as "working between LA and Paris" and whatever you might have read on the invitation. I may have tried to impersonate Kilgore Trout, who calls himself a representative of (*I open the book and read p. 530*) "all the thousands of artists who devoted their entire lives to a search for truth and beauty – and didn't find doodley squat" but rather than giving myself away like that, I sat on a stool, drank beer and acted local. (*I open the book and read p.665*) "Like everybody else in the cocktail lounge, she was softening her brain with alcohol. This was a substance produced by a tiny creature called yeast."

Boil the hops and malt in water, let it cool, add yeast, ferment for a couple of weeks, add the sugar and let it age for a month. Yeast organisms eat sugar and excrete alcohol. This is beer. Yeast, sugar, water; replace sugar with salt, add flour, obtain bread. Flour, salt, water and yeast; change the flour into cement, the salt to sand, and keep the yeast for brewing: there is mortar, that helps keep the pavement together or reconstruct bombed cities.

Equivalent equations; that is how all these elements came into this text. (*I open the book and read pp.686*) "If artists would explain more, people would like art more." That's all.

I bow, and exit through the door to my left.