

Summer

by K. Armstrong

Précis

Summer. Far from beautiful Prague, with its buzzing nightlife and pulsating, noisy crowds; away from the stamp, sway and spin, the odour of bodies, beer and cheap perfume; from the opulence and grandiose beauty, we sleep peacefully.

All of us, snuggled somehow, limbs awry, into one small carriage. The slow pulse of the train along the tracks mingles with our calm breathing.

Eventually we arrive in another city. Stumbling sonambulantly, craving caffeine, onto the cold platform where we wait for dawn, working in shifts for a dreamless, senseless sleep.

I wander, shivering, my breath a cloud, into the misty dark before the break of dawn, towards a proud statue that gestures triumph to every stumbling drunk, lost tramp and dizzy child who chances by him — unnamed, unremembered, proud.

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The dingy dance hall had filled up again with visions of unsullied youth beneath halogenic lights: gyrating and vibrating; sweating till the floor steamed — intensifying the stench of cheap perfume, body odour, stale beer and nicotine.

The sweaty barman wanders about the young, damp flesh; cloying, touching, reaching out to grab a soft, white arm; to lean his perspiring upper lip towards a feverish, delicate cheek; to whisper about the free drinks for any pretty lovely willing to dance for him.

As though entranced; as though dazed, they stumble as he leads them over, gesturing them towards their impromptu stage; helping them on to the lid of the grand piano, his fingers everywhere he dares. He nods, his mouth now an enraptured smirk as his little lady performs for him.

And how they come alive once there under the harsh glare intensified. They dance like a wound up toy released, throwing off

garments to the general glee of all who suddenly stop to focus; dazed, silenced by the vision before them.

Watch her arch her back, see her flesh move and curl and bend.

She dances on then jolts to a stop as the music ends. And she becomes no longer the focus of the light's stare. Awkwardly she will climb down, no hand to help her now — her job is done. She fumbles inelegantly in the semi gloom for her missing clothes as the dancers dance on.

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Detail

The journey back is usually soothing — no rush to cram on board, no worry over the day to come; just a leisurely jaunt across the river and through the southern stations. The beat of the train on the track; the gentle jolt of the carriage; the hushed chatting of the other commuters, and sometimes a paper or two laid out on the seats to pick through.

Try to read a tome or two, and you'll be in danger of missing your stop. Don't sit next to anyone likely to doze, or you'll risk a head drooling peacefully on your shoulder.

You're lucky to get a seat on the journey in, though — you might find yourself standing all the way to London Bridge, before the dash across the river into the city with the rest of the undead. As the clock starts ticking closer to nine, you'll need to position yourself near the door, open the window (easier to open the door from the outside), and prepare to jump, just as the train draws to a halt. Have your ticket ready to show the disinterested guard, and bolt towards the bridge.

Note the crowds of homeless snuggled into the corners — see the nosegays and incense sticks put up along the cold passageways by one lost soul hoping to win loose change from soft hearts. Beware that the incense, mixed with the scent of frying bacon from a greasy spoon, can turn a sensitive constitution.

Once you're on the bridge, you'll have to keep to the pace of the crowd, which is usually jaunty. You'll see the occasional camera out, usually accompanied by arts students, filming the scene sometimes;

once a year, your path will be blocked by a flock of sheep that are herded across the bridge as part of a tradition that will make you late for work. Bah. You'll also run the gauntlet of free magazines and advertisements thrust in your face. Be kind — if you've had a job handing out leaflets that no one wants on a cold day, you'll have some sympathy.

All normal. Then you see a man hanging off the bridge. No film crews. Is it one of those tests to find the Good Samaritan? Is it a joke? A few people have stopped, and a helicopter is buzzing overhead — is that boat ploughing through the murky water coming this way?

It's nearly ten to nine, and there's not a moment to be lost. You've got time to turn your head to glance, but that's all. By evening, when you're happily on the train, flicking through an abandoned paper, you've forgotten all about it, until you remember.

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Was it someone in the throes of an immeasurable tragedy? Shameful — the rest of the crowd untouched and immovable; perhaps a little curious, but not sympathetic or sorry. Always a little bit distasteful, the suicide attempt — usually the realm of little girls who want to have their stomach pumped to prove a point. Why pick rush hour? Self effacing or self dramatising? Gesture or meaning?

The train is going slowly today; you're only in Battersea. The crossword looks too hard to bother with, and the crowd isn't interesting — the usual crew of nodding business people, all clocked into nine to five, all going somewhere, listening to the dull beat of shoes across the river and the listless trundle though a day's work; and someone hanging off a bridge, grimly hoping to be able to let go.

You are transported a thousand miles away; the memories bring a glow to your tired, worn features, and the passenger opposite glances suddenly at you with momentary attraction. The train beats its steady rhythm upon the track before coming to another shuddering halt. There's a bustle and noise as the carriage empties,

then fills. An argument has begun in the station, but the rowdy noises are muted and lost.

The lights are flashing and the night goes on and on. It's a dingy club in the middle of some old town square, and you see a girl — you think — moving, gyrating, bending her small form to and fro in the music with alarming speed. She arches her back and every rib and vertebrae is visible. She is alive in the beat. Her dress is a thin slip of white material; her wispy hair is pulled back from her face in French pleats; on her feet are two flat red slippers. She is grotesque yet stunning; entrancing and repulsive, and everyone stops to stare. They cannot draw their eyes away.

The music changes, and she draws back, disappears into the depths — she is sitting on a table, her back pressed against the stone walls, her eyes dark hollows of pain, and, now that the music has died away, the exertion of movement is paining her body.

An ossuary beneath a city, perhaps the same city, brought her back to you — or she reminded you of it. The skeletons stretched out in methodical, formulaic patterns. Her hair, drawn back harshly from her skull; her body, arching. Beautiful. Thousands of bodies crammed into that room; grotesquely deformed into chandeliers, thrones, crowns; elaborate, detailed, wondrous. Gazing at those bones, you see the whirls and energy of the designs around them, and you see the dancers beneath the stone city.

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Prague is beautiful. Travelling through the night, from Amsterdam, still damp from a terrific thunderstorm that lit up the sky; waking momentarily as the train pulled into Berlin station, and out again. Six bodies crammed into one carriage, curled up awkwardly against each other, and sticking to the leather seats — bones ache as we dismount the train. There's a smell of fresh dew in the air, from which the scent of the city curls up: of frankincense; cheep beer; the murky river; of dark corners in dusty churches.

Climbing from the train, heaving heavy backpacks, we are greeted by a line of hoteliers, ready to offer excellent rates to naïve travellers. A man has pushed his way forward to offer us three-star

accommodation with a pool table thrown in; by turns he talks furiously in Czech into a mobile phone, and in broken English to us. He leaves with irritation stamped on his brow, as we murmur indecisively, and a small woman, who has hung back till now, steps forward, smiling. Nice rooms, yes? For the ladies and the gentlemen. Good price, yes? Six English pounds. Follow.

Still blinking away sleep, we follow her onto the cobbled streets, past elegant, austere stone buildings. We stumble behind the little woman, not sure if she is quite real, as she darts disinterestedly through the streets; we are dazed and overwhelmed by the sights and the swiftness of our guide's step. Up to a great, wooden door on a side street — the stone edifice of the building seems to stretch to the clouds. Through the door, and into a darkened stairwell.

Fumbling for a light switch, the guide hits the button and the light crackles into action. There's a noisy timer system, and we're submerged in darkness before we have climbed to the first floor of the dirty, dank concrete flight of stairs. As we stand uncomfortably on the landing in silence, water drips from an unknown source down the walls, and there's a scrabbling sound somewhere nearby.

The woman is unnoticing and unperturbed; she unlocks a door that we cannot even see. It swings open and the light of day hits us again, colouring the room in front of us. We fall in through the door together, and are stung into life. We begin to chatter, excitedly examining the lofty rooms, with their tall ceilings and lengthy windows. We hand over the colourful notes of a currency we don't understand, and the woman leaves. Through the window, she can be seen, winding her way through the busy main street, still smiling.

The tents, sodden from the storm, are draped out across a large mass of metamorphic furniture. The sun is streaming in through windows, and, one by one, we fall asleep, listening to the sounds from the street.

We awake a few hours later, and it is early afternoon. The sun beats down as we wander along the streets towards the heart of the city. In the main square, a large crowd has accumulated to one side

of it, and we are drawn to it — they are queuing to walk down a thin strip of what looks like brass attached to the cobbles.

An Italian man — small, wiry and incredibly hairy, with the exception of his head, which is polished bald — in too-tight, too-short shorts explains that walking the line will lead to fortune. He is Italian, he informs us, but lives in Beverly Hills, working as a fitness instructor to the stars. Perhaps we have heard of him. We smile, embarrassed, and he looks pityingly at us. A few suggestive comments and glances later, and we move on.

Frankincense scents the air, resurrecting the guilt of two lost Catholic girls. We walk on to the water's edge and the stone bridges that will last an eternity, with the statues of the saints, of angels — of sin and sanctity. People stand in front of them, squinting into the waning sun, grinning at cameras. The river stretches away beyond, calmly and silently flowing past, as we trudge up to the castle. Through cobbled courtyards, decorated with marble fountains and stone statues, past McDonald's; past grave, tall, hardwood doors and elegant stonework, to the castle.

From the heights of the castle, we can see the city's rooftops, the river cutting through like a black band of silk. Again, incense on the heady air brings with it indelible memories; a lone violin is playing a Czech jig, and the sound is brought to us in fits and starts by the ebb and flow of the breeze. We sit for a while, laughing and talking, pointing and giggling, trying to drink it all in, and plan tomorrow. A moment later, and we are skipping down from the castle.

We are never in moderation: we are ravenous before we are hungry, we find, and make our way to a little restaurant where we laugh, and eat and drink, before stumbling back onto the cobbles, winding our way through little alleyways, to the majestic glory of the square. We sit outside, drinking cheap wine, intoxicated with a sense of eternity and adventure.

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Dusk is descending quietly. We leave our table and wander back towards the riverside. A young man in a sailor suit guides us underneath the bridge to a docked boat. There is a strange sizzling

noise, which, it transpires, is a neon fly-killer. As an unsuspecting fly, entranced by the light, flies into it, it is zapped dead in a sudden burst of brightness and a nauseating sizzle. They don't seem to notice their dead friends and relatives; they just continue their drunken, stunned flight into the light.

We are helped into the boat, and handed a plastic cup filled with weak beer. The boat drifts out onto the dark water, which shimmers and shifts in the breeze, like a film of black silk. It is quiet in the middle of the river away from the town. Their guide can speak Czech, German, French, Italian, but no English, and we are left in shameful silence to ponder our mono-lingualism. We chat lazily, and the water laps seductively against the boat. Staring into the depths makes you cling a little tighter to your seat, as if you don't quite trust yourself to remain in the boat; as if the will of the water is stronger than your own.

Back on dry land, we quickly shake off the spell of the river, and wend our merry way back into town. It is dark now and time to come alive. We find a club beneath the square, cut out of the rock, and make our way down stone steps. The club, which, as soon as we have left it, none of us can quite remember its location, is tastefully decorated as a torture chamber — it is cold and dank, and the walls are bare, grey stone, adorned with complicated instruments of uncertain torture, which dangle from incredible heights. They would be invisible in the gloom, if not for the fluorescent paint they sport. There are brightly-coloured skeletons and bones strewn across the gory decorations, also glowing menacingly at the revellers.

On the dance floor, youth and beauty prance and pace with arrogance and insanity to the loud beat of the music: it's an entrancing whirl of colour and noise that clashes with the silence emanating from the rock face. There are little enclaves, with rudely fashioned thick wooden benches and tables. We sit again, drinking in the sights and the cheap Czech beer, and waiting for the beat to infect us, and pull us onto the vortex of the dance floor. It will prove irresistible, as it always does. Already our eyes are fixed on the

moving, gyrating, entrancing flesh; the pulsating veins and beautiful, contorted limbs.

Eyes are drawn to a child-like figure, from whom the crowd draws back. She is dancing. Dressed in a tiny, white muslin dress, she arches her back to the music, throws back her head, thrusts open her arms. The music has brought her to life, so it would seem — every bone seems visible and infected with the spell of the beat. In the dingy light, her skin is transparent, if it is there at all. Remember the ossuary we saw, or were to see — the chandeliers, ornaments and intricate designs created from our own bones, aglow in a dusty chamber beneath a Roman street.

She wears a pair of little red shoes on her feet, which barely move as the music's tempo runs through her body like an electric current, charging her to dance, to breath in the life on the pulsating floor. What is left of her fair, downy hair is tied into two French plaits and offset with bright red ribbons to match the little shoes. The plaits wave and jump as she moves, shocked into artificial life by her energy.

The beat continues, seducing her, and she must dance on, it seems. We watch; watch her wasted body, and drink up her movements, hearing each dying muscle scream. She is the most beautiful sight, and she mesmerises the crowd who stand like ghouls watching her agony; yet she is repugnant and repulsive: the crowd move back from her, frightened to become infected. They envy her enchanting, wasted beauty, and pity her sad, little body, as it weeps.

Her electrifying performance on the dance floor is soon over: as the song ends, she moves out to sit on a table to one side of the floor, and all but disappears into the gloom. If you look hard enough, you can make out her exhausted face, with its sunken cheeks. Stark pain is written in her eyes, as she tries to catch what little breath her body will hold. It is the music that evaporates her body's anguish; once it has left her, she is alone once again with her demons. The battle is almost over for her.

Still, she cannot hold our attention for long. We drift towards the dance floor, caught in its beam, drawn to the dance. Once on the

floor, we are part of the beat: swirling and twirling, we are alive. There are damp hands crawling on us, and we turn around to see a fat old man, smiling and sweating, who nudges us towards a battered grand piano in the corner by the bar. "Beer," he rasps, but we can't make out any more. We shake our heads, doubtfully and disdainfully, and watch as a busty girl clambers onto the piano. The spotlight's suddenly on her, and she becomes the new focus of the dance floor.

Cheers rise above the music as she dances for us, thrusting her cleavage out for the crowd, and then slowly stripping, to give us a more intimate picture of her voluptuous body. She flings her clothes and underwear to the floor beneath her and gyrates before us: we see pink flesh wobbling for us, before the spotlight leaves her and the gaze moves away, to leave her to clamber ignominiously off the piano and search for her clothes in the darkness.

A moment later and the piano is aglow: the fat, greasy man has tipped meths onto its lid and set it alight. It burns a bright blue for a few moments, and I can see it in the eyes of everyone on the dance floor. Soon it fades, to leave the dancing to continue, unabated.

Dawn is breaking when we make our way back onto the street. The sky is bright, although the town is still bathed in grey, and we quietly walk back along the cobbles, back to the flea-bitten mattresses, where we will sleep till noon.

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On the tube; nodding as it trundles along, carrying the last of the daily commute towards home. Don't think of the urban myth you were told for a truth just the evening before.

...the girl gets on the last tube of the night and is a bit spooked as she's on her own. The tube is a lonely place in the early hours. She walked the length of the carriages before getting on, trying to pick the one that looks safest. She finds one with a man, smartly dressed, at one end, and a young couple at the other, and hops on. She sits down. She glances about. She looks a little more. She begins to think that the couple opposite her are looking at her a

little bit too long. With a start, she realises they're staring right at her, unremittingly.

Is she sure? They're looking every time she timidly raises her eyes to their faces, forcing her to look away in confused embarrassment. She feels her heart speed up and the prickle of cold sweat on her hairline. She breathes in deeply, and suddenly is forced to contend with another horror. She gulps as the man in the suit makes his way very slowly and deliberately towards her; and sits down.

"I can't make you," he whispers, inclining his face to her ear very subtly, imperceptibly, calmly, "but I strongly suggest you get off at the next station with me." She takes some solace at his steadiness, but wavers as the train approaches the stop. She hesitates for a moment before throwing caution to the wind and blindly following him.

She feels weak with fear, wondering what is about to befall her, when he tells her that they need to get straight to the police — the woman that stared so glassily at her was a corpse; the man beside her, with his eyes glued to her, was drugged to the hilt...

It's the thought of the glazed stares that is so frightening. It's probably anti-drugs propaganda. It's all very unlikely, but it's still good that the tube is so crowded.

An old man clammers on at the next stop, reeking of urine, stale beer and filth; radiating an overwhelming stench of sour madness. He is caked in dirt, and carries two equally grubby plastic bags. He is talking to himself: two voices emerge. One is a deep, cockney voice; the other is highly educated, with a sly, squeaking, child-like tone to it:

Have you got a boyfriend?

Umm...

Where are you off to?

Tivoli. I want to go to Tivoli, for the sun and sand.

Very nice, very nice.

He stops to mimic the voice of the announcement as the tube pulls in to Warren Street. It's the sly voice:

Change here for the Jubilee and Piccadilly lines.

He takes a roll of wine gums from one of the bags, opening them slowly with grimy gloves.

I suppose you want one?

Yes.

Okay.

Oh goodie, a black one!

Fumbling greedily, he throws the sweet into his mouth. It is orange.

The next tube is full of activity. Two men who are old enough to know better are organising games. It's a hanging-from-the-bars competition, and every interested passenger must compete. Girls are shrieking; men are laughing, and everyone else is looking towards the fun with a sort of half-interested, half-embarrassed smile. The ringleader walks about the train, encouraging people to compete, and most people blithely follow him.

Remember that summer, years ago, when we passed through Tivoli; feel the warmth of an August afternoon as we rush past fields and vineyards in an empty railway carriage, and oust the gloom of the underground, under the city; dust and bones.

