

Liam Hodkinson

Sun at Peace

The train takes its final breath in Central Transdanubia, in a valley south of Slovakia, as the grey and tired eyes of dusk close. I shouldn't be there. I shouldn't hear the engine's final rattle, that CLUNK CLUNK SLAM followed by silence. I shouldn't see black smoke rising as the world stops going east - the low-built houses on the horizon slowing, slowing, and then finally still. I shouldn't stand up, choke, and follow a pale uniform out into the Hungarian October, shake off the last 14 hours like a coat, and watch the sky over Tata, Vértestolna and Tardos bleed a rose-garden red.

I should be 35,000 feet higher, observing this unfold from a point above, passing through the invisible corridors that stretch from cloud to cloud between London and Budapest. I should be sipping dull tea with a stranger's knees in my back. I should be buckling and unbuckling my belt to the call of a red light. But I don't trust the laws of aerodynamics. The air vibrates. The wings bounce. My mind stampedes. I know fear up there, and this train is how I've talked myself out of it.

So my day begins before the sun's. Platform nine. Brussels Midi. I breathe the cold in silence and watch the numbers flip on the departure board until they become the ones I'm looking for. The train door opens with a morning groan, and the conductor steps down and tips his hat. En voiture, he says. All aboard. I find an empty carriage and wait. The engine stirs, clears its lungs, and as the first train to Frankfurt departs, I rest my head against the window and gently rock alone towards dawn.

I'm out until the iron bridge spanning the Rhine jabs me awake. Belgium has passed in a sleep and the clouds have collected until there's no sky, just an empty colour saying: today it will rain. Outside is Cologne and a medieval cathedral with spires that pierce the weather like teeth. The city's streets are busy with trams, and the trees that line them blaze a golden orange. The leaves have started to fall and as the train picks up speed I watch them fill the gutters like confetti.

The hours tick on and the woman to my right gets older, then younger, turns into a child and later a middle-aged man. I move through Germany to Munich, past the stone towers and red roofs of Nuremberg, and the foothills of the Alps lined with stoic pines and green water so clear I spot scales swimming through it. Somewhere I pass into Austria, and the pastures grow so thick and lush I think of Anschluss, Do-Re-Mi and the Von Trapps dancing in old Hollywood.

Now and then, this nostalgia is cracked by darkness. The air compresses, my ears pop, the world disappears. I hold my breath in these tunnels. It's involuntary. I don't know why. And when the land and earth come piercing back, the hills seem brighter than before, and I ask myself, am I dreaming, or have I now, this second, woken up?

The motion stops not long past Győr, at the meeting of the Mosoni-Danube and Rába, in Hungary's Little Plain, on the final straight to Budapest. I smell the burning before I see it. Like toast left unattended or a neighbour's bonfire. I'm tired and want to be moving, and it's not until smoke clogs the carriage that I accept my journey has ended.

Minutes later I'm sitting on a straw-yellow ridge as the engine steams like a kettle. A man in a dirty workshirt offers me a cigarette.

"Very sick", he says, pointing at the train.

"Me... you... going nowhere".

I haven't smoked for years, but he's right, so I take two and wait.

Then, suddenly, the day is over. The light a poem; this its final stanza. The evening gathers in the branches of the oaks, and the cars in the distance are going home. Against the sunset, an old farmhouse pours purple shadows across fields of wildflowers. A plane roars overhead, marking the sky. I stand for one long minute and watch it leave. When I started, I thought today was lost, but as the night closes in and the hours run together, I know different.

The Hungarian word for sunset is napnyugta. It translates literally as sun at peace. I witness it sink and for a brief moment I'm thankful for my fear, and as the lavender disappears I wonder about this electric feeling, this life with myself. I smoke and watch the light leave the blue-river hills and as the stars begin to talk, I say to them, quiet, not even a whisper, where will you, NO, where will this dread take up and bring me next.