

## **Hrad Devin**

*Dominic Symes*

*For my grandfather, František Vnuk*

like a dream  
or rather  
an exhausted yawn before sleep

*Hrad Devin*

it sprawls like an illness which  
keeping you bedridden  
we arrive to find you writhing  
kicking at the sheets

looking at the river

with a face like Guernica

its eddies & swirls

its ending up nowhere fast

soon we see it form patterns

in a confluence of giving up

being chronically exhausted

& out of breath

as if arms were rudders

paddles or sleepers:

enough of them

together

might reach us

across the water

bodies broken by the current

are canonised here

in the warped metal of the monument

in the aftermath of a blast its flash

lasting a generation

it retains

    the molten heat  
of a religious symbol  
cross becoming crosshair  
the Morava

    & the Danube  
you need cross only one  
to be in Austria

a man with a German shepherd smoking a cigarette  
launches his boat from neighbouring Austria

    the dog is silent  
the castle is over twelve hundred years old  
this afternoon its shadow forms a bridge across  
the fast flowing water  
spreading all the way to Austria  
a silent dog

    a man unmoored  
I see them  
in the shadow of the castle  
twelve hundred years  
insisting on being the last stop  
at the edge of a landlocked country  
flooded with people  
who wanted to  
but simply couldn't swim

    between swimming  
    & its close neighbour  
    drowning  
    is swimming  
    between  
    two close neighbours  
    two neighbours who couldn't swim

between them only  
drowning

all the way to being Austria  
the border drifts

crows circle the turrets  
as if a warning  
says my grandfather  
half a century ago  
this is not what I decided  
& so he hitches further north  
bribes his way across the land border  
with tins of spam & speaking a little German  
crows returning  
haunting  
even now

Napoleon used this castle  
as an outpost but got sick of it  
put explosives beneath it  
wanted it gone  
suspicious of plots & insurrections  
as we walk around the gardens  
Austria peers through every bush  
spying on us in the dappled light  
the sound of water rushing by

my sister  
arriving yesterday  
breezes into  
Bratislava  
on a €5 bus  
from Vienna

headphones  
dangling from  
her ears

they hang like a busted portcullis  
thick climbing branches of the past  
holding fast  
to the crumbling brick  
we walk beneath  
    wheeling her suitcase  
    noisily

we see your Bratislava first in the dark  
drunk on slivovitz we walk through mist  
then as I drift off to sleep it repeats  
no one  
no one  
no one knew how to swim

did people know & then  
    forget  
    how to swim?

this country forged  
    on forgetting  
    its past

this monument  
a remembrance  
for those who couldn't swim fast enough  
    or at all  
dodging the bullets  
from the turrets

when the red army arrived  
in the landlocked country  
    you knew

you left  
spooked by the ancient myth of Svatopuk  
which holds that all Slovaks must  
    all stick together

you make it to Australia  
somehow

this country forged  
    on forgetting

to tread water for a few years  
in the heat of a foundry  
finishing your honours  
    degree in history

tonight I sleep beneath  
St Michael's clock in the old city  
the rusted gates are up  
& the city is open

your email comes to say  
you're still alive  
& how do we like  
    the city  
    you left behind?

& not that you ever could have

    in all the sepia pictures of

my mum & her siblings at the beach  
you're wearing a three piece suit

but I think thank god  
you never tried  
to swim

**Dominic Symes** lives quietly on Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung country (Melbourne) and writes poetry, some of which has appeared in *Overland*, *Cordite*, *Rabbit*, *Australian Book Review*, *Australian Poetry Journal* and *Best of Australian Poems 2021*. He helps curate NO WAVE, a monthly poetry reading series on Kaurna country (Adelaide) near where he grew up. His first book, 'I saw the best memes of my generation', will be published by Recent Works Press in late 2022. IG: @no\_wave\_poetry