



**2019 Longlist**

**Four Memories from a Berlin Summer**

**by**

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I think of you, of the lake, of the city, of the burning days on the shore, in the sand, of the shadowy paths, of the musical breath of the air. The water is quiet, blue, I'd like to lie in a boat in the reeds, I don't want to speak, everything around me will tell you what I'm sensing.

— Ingeborg Bachmann

## Four Memories from a Berlin Summer



These are the yellow roses that Michael bought for me from a stall at the end of my street. As I watch them, hanging dry and motionless from the ceiling, I become acutely aware of the inside of my own mouth: swollen tongue, ulcer (raw, left-hand side, irritated by upper molars), plaque-backed teeth; all seemingly coated in a granular mixture of sand, ash and bile. Recognising the taste of cigarettes makes me want to wretch. I try to inhale steadily, ignoring the beads of sweat colonising my brow. Awareness blooms of my racing pulse; I exhale slowly.

From my horizontal position, I scan the room with my eyes searching for a container into which I might vomit, because I might vomit. A cool morning breeze rolls through the double balcony doors, over the low bed and across my face. Pulling the duvet up to my chin, I cast my mind back to the lost twilight stillness. Regret fills me that sleep has left me now, flown from the balcony doors and up into the air high above Berlin. I cannot say when it will return. I will have to wait.

“Morning. Did you manage to sleep?”

Michael is awake. He asks me if I have slept. “A bit”, I tell him, “I’m going to get up and have a shower. I want to feel human.” His brown eyes are half-closed; I can see the dull ache behind them.

I turn the brass taps in the bathroom, the showerhead shudders into life and I remember that I didn't buy any shampoo. I sometimes use shower gel instead but worry that it dries out my scalp. I wait for the sound of the old boiler to kick in. The sockets of my knees feel thick with grease and my chest is heavy, as if clogged with a million fungal spores. I take off my boxers and step warily into the enamel bathtub, expecting that at any second my body will buckle under its own weight. Blood rushes to my head and I sit down under the steady flow of water, trying to stay warm. The steam rising from my body fills the air before condensing slowly on the black and white tiles of the small bathroom.

I reach around blindly for the cursed half-empty bottle of shower gel and as I bring its citrus scented contents towards my irritated scalp, everything seems a little strange; the world tips on its axis, the base of the bathtub sinks through the wooden floorboards into the apartment below, the showerhead roars and the pipes in the wall next to me whistle in unison. I tilt my head slowly to the left, grip the sides of the bathtub and focus the stream of water above my right eye socket because that's where the pain is. Everything becomes a little quieter.

A while later, I hear the door open as Michael walks in:

“Do you mind if I use the toilet? Sorry.”

“That's fine”, I say without opening my eyes, “I'll be out in a minute.”

“Thanks.”

Leaving the shower running, I wrap a towel around my body and walk to the living room. A trail of wet footprints follows me there. The living room in the apartment is plain and bright, furnished with a few simple objects: a tatty red couch, a brass floor lamp, some stacks of well-thumbed books and an out of tune upright piano. By virtue of its position on the fourth floor, the living room incorporates a large stretch of curved wall, which in this otherwise plain space is like a broad stroke of yellow across a blank canvas. Depending on the time of day, I sometimes imagine that I am sat in one of those bleached white, circular houses overlooking the sea at Santorini. Yet this morning the room takes on a more sacred feel, like a secluded corner of a private chapel. I cannot explain why. As I watch dust particles swarm in the beams of sunlight penetrating the room, my gaze is drawn to the singular blue stained glass window

which sits in the middle of the curved wall. Each day, as the sunlight travels across the room, from the piano to the opposing bookshelves, a lapis coloured square of light wanders aimlessly around the room.

I continue through the living room into the kitchen, deciding to cook eggs whether they will be eaten or not. Striking a match, I turn on the gas and watch as flames dance in contrary motion around the hob. Setting a heavy cast iron pan on the stove, I pour in some olive oil and wait for it to get hot. The lenses in my eyes involuntarily defocus as I stand motionless before the oven and memories begin to flicker of bottles of pilsner and of quick glances between men. I hear their harsh laughter and I can smell the thick fog of cigarette smoke which hangs around their necks in the bar on Hermannplatz. I watch as my hands crack four eggs on the wooden counter top and drop their contents into the pan. The whites glisten and bubbles form around their edges as the eggs make contact with the smoking oil. Four large yolks now stand tall around the pan and I think that they're what my mother would call 'proud yolks': yolks a hen and a mother can be proud of.

Falling back into mapping the previous evening in my mind, I recall the eyes of the barman; dark as creosote, they sat deep in the centre of his heavily tattooed face. His slicked-back silver hair shone with pomade and mirrored the many piercings which adorned his ears, lips and nose. He might be someone's grandfather, I remember thinking. I think now of my own grandfather, weak with bowel cancer back in England. My mother had asked me to call him this weekend but I don't want to speak to him like this. I make a silent promise to ring him tomorrow. Reaching for the wooden spatula, I divide the egg roughly into four parts before flipping two over and leaving the other two sunny side up – just how Michael likes them. "Your grandad's not been eating well", that's what my mother had said and I feel guilty for having no appetite.

Once the eggs are ready. I turn off the gas, slice up the end of a stale loaf of bread and make up two plates. My head swims with alternating thoughts of my grandfather and the barman. I walk back into the living room, sit on the red sofa and close my eyes, feeling the sickness rise again in my stomach. The breeze outside causes a branch of an oak tree to tap against the blue stained glass window. Listening to the tapping and the sound of the running shower through the wall, I sink into a sort of waking sleep.

When Michael walks into the kitchen, I am playing the piano and there are four fried eggs cold on the kitchen counter. The lapis square of light is moving across the wooden dining table. It is 1:25pm.



This is my friend Nina swimming naked across a lake in southwest Berlin. I watch her from the sandy shoreline as she propels herself confidently through the water towards a plastic pontoon floating in the middle of the lake. I shout for her to wait but she doesn't hear me:

“Nina! Warte auf mich! Wait for me!”

As I pause, my feet sink into the muddy sand, water curls around my toes and I feel the caress of reeds against my ribs. The light today is crystalline and I can see each individual water droplet that dances across Nina's back and hips as they roll in and out of the water. To my left, I hear a pair of ducks chattering under the shade of an overhanging willow and from behind me, Björk's 'Hyperballad' drifts over the bleached grass like a strange songbird come to narrate my thoughts:

*We live on top of a mountain. Right at the top. There's a beautiful view...*

Nina and I met at university and from the moment I saw her, I was compelled by her singular beauty; high cheekbones, an asymmetric haircut and fox-like eyes. I remember how she smiled coyly at me across the classroom on my first day, her eyes peering out of an enormous grey knitted roll neck jumper.

“Herr Hampson! Which of the three novels would you like to present to your classmates next week?”

“... das Zweite? the second one?”

Our literature professor Herr Müller looked bemused as he handed me the 650-page tome detailing the life and works of an East German architect. My sense of dismay upon seeing the novel I had chosen was profound and plain for all to see. I remember how Nina’s smile grew wider as I accepted the book, her eyes smouldering like embers.

My reverie of our first encounter continues unbroken as I dive into the cold depths of Teufelssee and begin to swim through its clear waters towards the floating island. Nina is already there waiting for me with a grin across her face. I drag myself up onto the pontoon, roll onto my back next to her and close my eyes to bask in the warmth of the afternoon sun.

Nina’s voice:

“What are you thinking about?”

“Oh, just about when Herr Müller gave me that bloody novel.”

“That was so funny... You, the poor British exchange student.”

The sound of her laughter wills me to open my eyes and squinting, I sit myself upright; water rolls down my face, silvering my peripheral vision. Looking down at my legs, I think how pale I am in comparison to Nina and then casting my gaze back to the shore, I perceive the faint glimmer of the aluminium tops of Fanta bottles that she had tied together with string and left in the lake to cool. Further back, I see her friends sat in a group drinking beer and prosecco for someone’s birthday. They are smoking roll up cigarettes and laughing loudly every few minutes when someone says something I cannot hear.

“Machst du Spaß? Are you having fun? Nina asks me.”



“I am yeah, everyone seems nice.”

“Yes, they are all nice.”

Closing her eyes, Nina lets her head fall backwards to rest on her shoulder blades, warming her long neck in the sun. I think what a beautiful portrait would be of her and try to imprint it into the fabric of my mind since my camera is still in its bag on the shore.

After an hour or maybe two, the pontoon begins to rock slightly as small waves lap at its sides. Further away, across the other side of the water, the pine trees of the Grunewald sway almost imperceptibly in the young breeze. The sky reflects across the lake like a gigantic mirror, conjuring a vast expanse of blue which is sliced in half by the thin strip of shoreline and distant forest. I point this out to Nina and she opens her eyes again to gaze across this continuum of lake and sky. After a pause, she tells me that she always finds the world more beautiful when reflected in a mirror; a remark, which fills me with some unexpected sense of sadness. I am leaning over the edge of the pontoon now, considering my own reflection. There I am, except I think I look like my mother. My face is rounder, my eyes bigger. I have only spoken to her twice since arriving in Berlin a month and a half ago. She does look more beautiful in the lake.

A splash to my left brings me out of my daydreaming and I turn to see Nina's head bob up from under the water, her hair slicked back by the speed of her dive. Seeing the surprise on my face she laughs again, motioning with her hand and tells me to hurry up:

“Komm mal Sam –they're cutting the cake!”

I look back once more across the water, hold my breath and dive into the clouds.



This is Michael lying in an empty bathtub in front of a disused radio receiver tower. I am kneeling down next to him on the dry dirt holding my camera. My back is turned to the sun as I focus the 35mm lens. His green paisley shirt hangs around the nape of my neck to prevent sunburn and I think how naked he looks. Gazing deeply into the camera, his long brown hair falls over his left shoulder and the bushes around him creep into the frame, forming a vignette of branches. Holding my breath, I steady myself and press the silver button. The shutter snaps.

“That’ll be a beautiful picture”, I say, lowering the camera. Michael smiles knowingly, as if he is already holding the photo of himself. I smile too and take out a cigarette, lighting it between my lips, bluish smoke curls upwards into the still air and I survey the landscape around us. We are sitting on the top of Teufelsberg, or ‘Devil’s Mountain’, which stands in the heart of the Grunewald. To the north and east I can see the unassuming urban expanse of Berlin, lying low to the ground, reflecting the sun’s rays off its many cream and white post-war buildings. Red clay tiled roofs merge with the leaves of the outlying forest, giving the impression of the oncome of an early autumn. The rest of the horizon is enveloped by the Grunewald, which stretches to the south and west for many miles. Its vast conferences of pine and birch gently undulate across

the Teltow plateau, which is pockmarked with small wells of blue water that form its many thousands of lakes.

Teufelsberg is the tallest point in the Grunewald and like many geological anomalies, it was borne of fire and ash. When the allies' intensive bombing campaign against Berlin ceased in 1945, the city was left desolated, choking on its own dust and ruin. Over years, the many thousands of flattened houses, shops, schools and factories were piled up in a clearing in the Grunewald, eventually becoming this unassuming testament to the terror of war. As life began to creep into the broken bricks and pulverised cement, filling its crevices with the roots of dandelions, cow parsley, poppies and nettles, men claimed the mountain once more, constructing an American radio spy station on its peak. This was in use until 1989, when it was abandoned again to the elements.

Today, flowers bloom across the mountain's slopes and I get the sense that Teufelsberg is still listening. Reggae played through sound systems has taken the place of coded radio transmissions whilst high above the forest, the station's listening spheres are ragged and flap unceasingly in the wind. Makeshift artists' studios built from pallets and tarpaulin emit soft industrious sounds of hammering, sawing and mixing whilst birds build their nests amongst the rafters. The station's concrete skeleton has been covered in graffiti of atomic bombs, dogs in Uncle Sam hats and Tibetan mandalas. Oil drums around the site blaze after sundown as an invisible quiet spills over the mountain.

I look back at Michael and think that he still looks the same as he did when I met him a year ago today in a Parisian bar. His hair and beard are perhaps a little longer and he's gotten a tan but otherwise he's the same. He takes out a pack of paprika crisps from his backpack and we talk about the previous year: whether or not we miss Paris, how few books we've read and how nervous we were to meet each other's parents. Later, we wander around the station's many domes, shouting upwards into them and laughing as we sing in some imagined language and harmony. I find a piece of broken metal pipe on top of a crate and begin to dance around the tallest sphere, hitting girders and scaffolding as I spin, marvelling at the different echoing vibrations that I can make. Stamping his feet, Michael claps his hands and hollers over my percussive racket as the wind sings through tears in the rubber dome above.

Some hours later, after warm cheese sandwiches and rum, we make our way down the Devil's Mountain. The sun is sinking into the distant treeline and the sky above the city glows softly. As we reach the forest floor, everything becomes a little darker and colder. The ground is matted with dry pine needles and I pull on the jumper which I have tied round my waist. As we walk, tall trees pass us on either side, rising up like paper silhouettes before joining the ever darkening sky. I hear no stirrings in the gloom as we follow the white sandy path northward. All is quiet.

After walking for half an hour or so, I see a flash of white in a clearing to our left. Pausing, I squint into the deep shadows beyond the path; there is movement. As my eyes adjust to the low light, I make out three or perhaps four figures dancing around each other, holding each other's waists and kissing one another. Michael has stopped now too and instinctively looks towards them. I see the men's white socks pulled high on their shins, they have black trainers on their feet and baseball caps on their heads. No music reaches my ears and the strangers in the darkness are naked. One kneels, another bends over, holding onto the trunk of a pine tree. Shuffling grunts shimmer through the darkness as we stand there - watching. Michael moves closer to me and I put my arm around his waist. We make no sound.



This is a willow tree on the banks of the Spree in East Berlin. Its roots drive deep into the land and the river as it feeds upon the sunlight, the water and the sparse nutrients held in the sandy earth. I am lying beneath it, gazing upwards at the mirror ball which hangs from one of its outstretched branches. The ball spins slowly and unceasingly in the summer breeze. Sunlight pierces the tree's many scapular leaves before refracting upon the ball's uneven surface, radiating out onto the many bodies around it.

Bass vibrates the dry soil and the yellowed grass; my pulse quivers. Pupils wide, my jaw shakes and I swallow every few seconds, licking my teeth clean of an unpleasant chemical taste, feeling the rushing synapses in my brain fire on overdrive. I am home here, sheltered from any harshness outside the club's walls. A sense of belonging pours through me as well as an understanding that my body is not entirely mine. The willow leaves bristle seemingly with pleasure and I close my eyes, allowing the ground to hold me firmly.

"Do you want to go back in and dance?"

Nina's familiar voice appears to my right. I try to imagine standing up and dancing but decide that I want to stay lying down on the warm earth, looking upwards into the cerebral mass of branches. "Soon" I say, "give me five more minutes. Go back in if you want to."

The minutes pass slowly and blissfully as waves of electricity roll up and down my limbs then back to my brain, which feels as though it's being caressed by a thousand fingers. Eventually I feel able to sit up and I look around at the field of bodies gathered in small groups beneath the tree. Groups of boys in black skirts holding fans and laughing amongst themselves; muscled men in leather harnesses swaying left and right, caressing each other's chests and backs; women in black crop tops drinking from glass bottles and rolling cigarettes. Michael and Nina are sat next to one another, smiling at me, their feet tapping to the subterranean bassline.

"Let's go back inside."

We float back through the garden, stepping and stumbling over lounging figures, apologising in German and English until we make it to the concrete archway which leads back through the toilets into the club. The bass grows louder now, rumbling in my chest as daylight fades away. High above, shouts and melody echo around the cathedralic space. Purple and green bolts of lightning flash across the ceiling and we climb the long metal staircase up into the Halle.

All around me, bodies writhe in time like a great sea of marching shadows. From the pulpit, a dark figure turns records in quick succession. I begin to lose myself in the clamouring sound which thunders from gigantic speakers lining the hall. Blood pressure rising, I smell a hundred armpits and sensing a lull in the melody, my hands twirl above my head like mating birds. Michael comes up behind me, wrapping his arms around my waist, he kisses my neck and slides his hands down my thighs. Innumerable men dance around me, passing by either side before disappearing amongst the crowd. After a while, I feel a hand take hold of mine, pulling me from the crowd towards the low-lit bar, where the staff are beautiful; women and men with shaved heads scooping ice cubes from deep buckets and tipping them into plastic tumblers before adding clear spirits and fruit juices. I survey the crowd once more and try to ride the wave of ecstasy that is pumping through my body.

"Do you want a drink Sam?"

"No, I'm alright for the minute. Are you having one?"

"Yeah, I'm getting some beers for us."

“Cool, I’ll have one.”

Some time passes. We are back on the dancefloor. The music drives onwards but I feel my body tiring. My stomach cramps occasionally and my eyelids begin to droop. “I’m going to sit down for a while”, I shout in vain, mouthing as many of the syllables to the others as I can. I make my way to the edge of the dancefloor, snaking along the concrete wall back to the metal staircase before following it down until I reach the wide open cloakroom area. Sitting down on a couch, I realise that Michael and Nina are with me. Their faces peer down at me and in the dim light I believe them changed: Michael’s eyes are sallow, bruised and his lip is cut; Nina’s face is swollen as if she has been crying, some of her teeth are missing and her body is thin and hunched. Panic rises in my chest and I blink slowly, wishing the terrible vision away as a dream. Nothing changes.

“What’s happened to you both?”

“What?”

“What’s happened? Has Nina been beaten up?”

“Sam, what’s going on?”

Their faces begin to morph again, swelling outwards from their skulls.

“Sorry. Don’t worry about it. I’m just not feeling that good. I’m going to go.”

Feeling the pulse in my neck vibrating, I tell the others I have to leave. Nausea grips me as I stand up and stagger towards the wooden counter before throwing my ticket onto it. I look pleadingly at the cloakroom assistant who passes me my jacket without making eye contact. Walking quickly away, staring down at the concrete floor, I exit the power station back into the sunlight.

After a confused eternity, I make it home. The stairs are longer than I ever remember them being and the apartment smells of stale cigarette smoke. I need to take a shower. The bathroom light flickers on with a fluorescent glow and I take off my damp clothing. My body feels thin and cold; the club entry stamp is purple over the blue veins in my

right wrist. I turn to face the mirror. The acne beneath the concealer is clear to see, my hair is dishevelled and my eyes are sunken and hollow. Approaching closer to the mirror, so close that the tip of my nose almost presses against it, I look deeply into my own blue eyes. Synthetic maggots begin to crawl out of the corners before rolling down my face. I am disgusted but cannot look away. A morbid fascination consumes me and I want to believe that this is happening, that I am host to parasites, flesh on which they feed. I turn away and then look back. They are gone. Abandoning my shower, I stumble out of the bathroom towards the bedroom where I fall into the white sheets of my unmade bed.



## About the author

Sam Hampson grew up amongst the tall pines of the Forest of Bowland in Lancashire, reading tales of the faeries and witches that live there. Later, Sam read modern European literature at King's College London and the University of Cambridge where he specialised in ecoliterature and ecophilosophy. Sam's writing often returns to the theme of ecology whilst also exploring related questions of sexuality and topography. 'Four Memories from a Berlin Summer' is Sam's first work to be published.