

*chris hall*

# **bneath cragshaddo**

*a Prague nocturne*

*In the winter of 1991 I went to Prague to teach English and remained there until early summer. A year or so had passed since the 'Velvet Revolution' and the removal of the remnants of the old Husak regime which had collaborated in the crushing of the movement led by Alexander Dubcek to introduce 'Communism with a Human Face' to Czechoslovakia in the Spring of 1968.*

*It was clear from conversations with my students, many of whom had been active in the events that led to sweeping away of the old order, that a degree of disillusion had set in amongst those of the progressive left. Many of them considered the revolution to have been hi-jacked by a coterie surrounding the then Finance Minister Vaclav Klaus, a committed free-market Thatcherite who was later to become Prime Minister, and latterly President, who seemed to have access to a great deal of financial and political support from interested Western sources.*

*One of the chief causes of the disillusion was the introduction of a process known as 'lustration', which can be translated as 'bringing to light'. This was based on a selective reading of the recently discovered cache of hitherto secret files, kept by the secret police of the previous government, that contained the names of all those who had any dealings whatsoever with that regime and its institutions. This knowledge was used by the right-wing to denounce their political enemies and to force their removal from public life.*

*What was surprising to me was that the prime targets of this McCarthyist crusade were not the apparatchiks of the old Communist nomenclature, many of whom had undergone a Pauline conversion and emerged as enthusiastic capitalists. Instead, the witch-hunt was mainly directed at those who had been involved with 'Prague Spring' and the events of 1968, who had been marginalised under Husak but occasionally needed to have pragmatic dealings with the agencies of the state in order to survive.*

*Having found themselves on the receiving end of abuse and maltreatment in the intervening years, they were now to be hounded by those who claimed to endorse the new cultural and political freedoms.*

*This poem is the story of one of those people.*

come down y  
deep blue midnight  
down o            com y down

sings th falsetto skatsinga  
finding the words t fit  
there on th stage v th  
club reduta  
just along from  
můstek station  
opposite end v  
rectangula square  
t where stands  
equestrian statue

                                 that king wenceslas  
                                 goodking václav  
lookinout astride sturdi mount  
out n over

                                 tributes t martyrs  
                                 v spring nd v velvet

nd in th side bar  
heddi wi jazzjuice n fluenci  
in earshot v drumbrush nd countertenor  
                 brayintrombone n silkentrumpet

ivana takes a sip  
v her darkred dalibor  
nd tells y  
by way v conversation

'my father is dead  
he prosecute suicide'

nd y bite y lip wanting t advise her  
by way v information  
'commit... commit...not prosecute...  
what kindv english have i bin a-teachin y  
these past few months...'

but y don't:  
y just sit there  
holden y haphazard tongue  
nd swigginawayat  
that old mountingoat velkopopovice  
reminding y self  
that by now  
y should have gotten use t this kindv  
czech smalltalk

nd ivana leans back  
nd looks y  
straight in the eye  
like she does  
like she normally does  
with her prague sardonic smile nd her deep blue  
midnight eyes

nd lets y know  
by way v explanation

'he jump into vltava  
below vyšehrad  
at end of winter  
just as ice break...'

then f some reason      known t who  
   (certainly not you)  
it crosses y tungtied mind  
   (no connexion no earthli connexion)

that it must be  
round about now                      up there at the wilson station

beyond wenceslas  
beyond muzeum  
beyond smetanová

jaroslav will be boarding  
th train t bratislava

nd ivana laughs  
relishin y silence nd th clarinet backdrop  
as y sit there thinkin  
swillinen thinkin  
tellen yself  
not f th first time  
'this is some crazi city!'

n she takes y hand  
there in th club reduta  
nd says t y                      'come...come...i show...'



it is quiet now  
cragshaddo quiet in th come down midnight  
here below vyšehrad in th land v smetana nd th city v kafka  
nd in that quiet  
y find th nerve  
t finally ask 'why, ivana...why did he jump?'

'lustration,' she says  
'he die because of lustration'

y'v heard that word bifer  
heard it from th mouth v jaroslav  
when y walkd with him in th castle district  
by th president's palace nd th cathedral v st vitus  
nd made y way past th street v th alchemisits  
down th gradient t th lesser quarter  
f a rest nd a drink at th place v th two cats  
then onward t loiter on charles's bridge

it was there that he told y  
by way of revelation  
he would teach y  
a new word in english  
th like v which

'even you  
english teacher'

had never encountered

nd that's when y found out  
lustration meant 'bringing into the light'

n y remember commenting  
as soon as he mentiond it  
that y'd indeed never heard it  
yet now that y had  
it seemed t your ears  
a pretty fine word

but he scoffd as he spoke it  
nd politely asserted  
with that icy acerbiti  
these slavs reserve f abhorrence  
that this was no lexis v poetry  
this word was purely administrativ  
denoting th process v political exposure

th opening up v lost files  
concealed by th secret police  
during th days after dubcek nd th crushing v spring  
holding names  
so many names  
names v those whom klaus's people  
considerd collaborators  
nd punished accordingly



'of course' said jaroslav 'all kinds of people  
fall into hands of secret police  
prague spring people especially'e left y soon after in josefstown  
outside th jewish cemetri  
profusli apologising  
that in a week or so  
he must stop coming to classes  
because he must leave prague

y ask him  
where it is  
he's likeli t be off to  
sorry t lose th company  
v someone who seemed  
a man v some substance

nd he tells perhaps he'll go home

'home?' y venture

'home...yes, home

I am slovak...'

nd now here's ivana  
fayvrit student ivana  
tellin y here by th banks v vltava  
her father was one of them fingerd

nd y try t remind her  
there beneath vyšehrad  
hadn't she told y  
not long ago told y  
her father was hero  
her father th artist

hero v spring  
sixtyeight praguespring

when th tanks came in  
came in t prague n took away dubček  
dubček th slovak  
took him t moscow nd broke him?

hadn't she told y  
one april night told y  
how he urged her nd cheerd her  
out there on th street  
when she nd her comrades  
strove t create  
th velvet revolution

she stares at th river  
no ice now  
only dark dark water  
dark midnight vltava

' listen...I tell you  
tell you the story  
tell you what happen  
happen here in prague  
in czechoslovakia...

'when changes come  
klaus's people say

we want  
not just end of old order  
we want  
whole new order  
we want  
not just be free  
we want  
get rich quick  
yankee dollar  
we want top brick from chimney

'when changes come  
old-style stalinists  
big men in husak days  
they say

we so sorry  
about old system  
we make  
great historic mistake  
we now know  
communism wrong  
capitalism right  
we now learn  
walk on two legs

after all these years

we should know how to run show

'my father  
third-way person  
dubček supporter  
he say  
he and others say

now we are free  
must have social justice  
wefare state  
equality for all

we give

czechoslovakia

back to the people

'now klaus cronies say  
old communists

these days  
not so  
dubček people

they OK  
mend ways  
they good capitalists

they  
not be trusted  
still want  
all equal  
no poor  
no rich

they always be

socialism with humanface:  
communists at heart....'

nd she shrugs her shoulders there in th dark by th drift v th river

'so you see...it is simple...so simple...they lustrate him...give him grief...make him squirm;

it all big stitch up...this bring to light...'

y walk from there  
away from crag  
from place v death at break of ice  
up národní back towards  
nové mesto  
heading for  
old town square  
seeking out  
bit v solace  
restaurace  
decent goulash  
moravian wine

'soon' says ivana 'summer come  
and you will leave prague  
I go I think to šumava mountains

'in summer prague stink  
some say it one of most polluted places in europe  
I tell you  
english teacher  
sooner or later  
this beautiful city will choke you'

home again  
back here  
where th surrounding hills  
declare themselves to be  
or strive t find

genres v bread  
th onli available rhyme f orinj

here  
in this place v chickens nd ale  
v shellshockt thespians  
blind photographers  
nd violent quakers  
place v hens

heartache  
nd th verribest v friends

y look up  
from y eternal glass  
gaze beyond ashtray n woodpane  
beyond backroom band

rattlin away at  
tinroofblues

espy  
in y mind's eye  
there in a city in a not far country  
under shadow v vyšehrad libuše 's crag  
drifting from icebreak towards malá strana  
floating on th surface  
v th river vltava

beneath charles's bridge  
past castle district  
jewish quarter  
saint agnes convent

th face v ivana's father  
emerging outv deep blue midnight

coming t light



