

Karen Villeda

Visegrád

Kafka with Double-F

Aladár Székely was born close to the border with Romania. His city – Gyula – is a breeding ground for physicists and chess players. One would think that the plains do not inspire a mind gifted at science or strategic games. The latter is probably due to the so-called Castle (*vár*), which is actually a fortress.

He took pictures of Margit Kaffka. Her portrait is one of the few known photographs of her at the time. She is a woman with a vigorous gaze. Nevertheless, I find her major strength centered in her chin.

In *Colours and Years*, her best-known novel, Kaffka writes the following: “I tell the young ones, terrified of old age, that it isn’t as terrible and decidedly bad as it seems from afar. People do not feel one state of being more intensely than another and don’t miss the things they ceased yearning for. If they enjoy a decent health, they don’t feel the old age in their own bodies: they can move their hands or legs; a nice cup of coffee, a tidy room and a comforting dream may suit them very well. Those pleasures aren’t too expensive; one does not risk anything, nor does one have to suffer much for them.”

Until when will my body comply?

Until I won’t be able to travel anymore.

The Polish Sappho

If we ignore the long and cruel history of female writers whose work has been published under the authorship of Anonymous, Elżbieta Drużbacka can then be considered Poland’s first female writer. Also referred to as the Sarmatian Muse, she is known for her work *Description of the Four Seasons*. This poem about spring is charming: “When the gloomy and tyrannic dominion of winter passes, / from you it is, that the earth draws fresh inspiration. You open warm passages / where ice and frozen remnants thaw. / When your gentle breath pours forth over Earth. / Life triumphs over death in every rebirth.”

Note: Translated from Spanish by Tara O’Sullivan

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One of her works is kept under protection in the National Library of Poland. And why do they keep us, women, protected from her? Where will we find her essays on female emancipation? Why did we lose them? It's a problem of languages, I suppose.

The Same Story, Back Then

This very same fragment of Pomponius Mela, at its end, says: "Everything that can be found on the other side is called Asia." Back then, the sea separated the world in two: Europe and Africa. More than eight hundred years passed, and this world remained the same. *Oceanum* was the name of the North Sea, there was nothing beyond that but Germania. Or, at least, history tells us that this was what the Germanic peoples – almighty as they were – believed when they reunited in the *thing*, a word which meant "government assembly" to them.

Later, *thing* simply came to mean "object" once the world became bigger and Europe aged.

One of the few references I have concerning what might have been a *thing* or a *bing* of Germania is a photograph that was taken in the middle of a forest in Schleswig-Holstein in 2005, one of the sixteen federal states in Germany. The reproduction bears witness to a site of dark-green pastureland, turning bald over the course of the years, and crowned by a circle of rocks. An old wooden bench lies beneath one of those rocks that, as I imagine, could be used as the seat of the learned person who presided over the assembly. This place is a scale model of Stonehenge and it's also the area where religious rites took place. If we dig, we won't find any bones, because the victims that were sacrificed to the gods here were burnt till they were nothing but ashes.

I believe that, in those days, blood was a collective feast. Yet, our world has not changed much.

It was that *thing* that came to mind when I saw one of those piano-shaped benches which, by scanning a code on the smartphone or tablet, provides information on the key places inside the authorized and unfinished biography of Chopin; the same one that records two possible birthdates of the author: February 22nd or March 1st. The tour could go on for almost two hours and is accompanied by a melody.

I remember that they played one of the most famous melodies when I approached this first bench, the *Nocturne Op. 15 no. 3*, written in G minor. I didn't recognise it for a long time. In fact, not until just now, in this memory.

An Improper Woman

Why didn't I write as much about the works written by the women from those three countries? Because of what Virginia Woolf wrote in her, timeless, *A Room of One's Own*: "I would venture to guess that Anon, who wrote so many poems without signing them, was often a woman."

Notes

Travelling is a way of rejuvenating.

Travelling is a way of overcoming.

Travelling is a way of remaining young.

Travelling is a *still*.

Travelling Visegrád.

Travelling.

Snapshots of the Tragedy

All of my travels seem to obey a masochistic impulse.

In Poland, I enter a desolate country. The soft light of December is ruthless, and I can barely sharpen my gaze. As I leave the Główny Station, the first face I see is that of an aged man with almost no wrinkles. His features are expressionless. He seems surreally young to me. In what year was he born? 1929?

I imagine, then, that

he has lived through it all: war,

communism, the European Union.

Some of the faces I encountered in his face reminded me of one of the witnesses in the *Shoah* documentary; of the man who saw how trains transported suffocating Jews. "At first, it was unbearable, but then I got used to the screams", he said and started to work, his gaze fixated on the trenches. The only difference between those faces and the one in the documentary is my memory.

In Poland I put together an interior album of the tragedy composed by 22,261 faces.

Talking without Talking, Hearing through Hearing

I traverse Prague, driven by a single incentive: the chocolate of the Villars brand, refined with the title of a provincial poem like “Absinthe’s tears from Val-de-Travers.” Interestingly, in the Czech Republic, one of the biggest producers of the *Fée Verte*, the packaging of this treat is only translated into English, French, German and Italian.

The import seal shows a sharp-edged language: *Čokoláda s náplní s chutil-kéru Absinth*. I only recognize *Absinth*, and, sometimes, *Čokoláda* from my general knowledge.

In my prejudice of considering a loose letter as just another linking word of the Castilian language, it seems to me that every *s* of the phrase means “and” or “from.” The caron on top of the letters *c*, *z* or *s* is a kind invitation to remain silent because my unskilled hearing mistakes the three sounds for “*shhh*” all the same. I do not find any familiarity with the Czech language. Someone assured me that Czech is a verbally inappetent language because some of its letters wear an admirable Breton hat.

This is not a transparent language because it has the wiles of the wind and burns my face. I try to pay more attention to the daily conversations of the people in Prague. It is an arduous task since the language turns out to be a trap full of symbols.

There are some promising moments when my auditory routine – badly habituated to consonants that are never accentuated – believes to recognize a word. Due to Anglo-Saxon carelessness, I confuse *most* with *más* [i.e. more] *til*, via a bridge-symbol on the road signs, I learn that it means exactly this: “bridge.” I sharpen my sense of hearing while searching for a word that could relate to the Spanish language. It’s useless. It takes a few futile attempts to realize, with disappointment, that this language rejects me.

Every time that the language of those that live here blankets itself with the veil of their palate, I hear a metallic whistle. I imagine an *útočný nůž* and some chapped hands that brandish their blade against the lusterless clouds.

Return to the Disneyland of the East

I recapitulate. Hordes of tourists make their pilgrimage towards this place without questioning the passion they profess for the city. “Prague has the charm of a showcase that attracts tourists just like honey attracts bees.” Out here, one can

prove that Bohemia (a neglect we inherited from Walt Disney) has become a paralyzing force: ninety percent of the tourists who visit the Czech Republic are only heading for this city. Everyone arrives with a map full of touristic curiosities as if it were some kind of Disneyland of the East.

It's the blindness of the masses
that rhymes with the following phrase:
"It's like a fairytale."

Prague enjoys itself like a tyrannic mannequin, worthy of taking up a part in Jiří Barta's *Club of the Discarded*. I think – whilst in Prague – that I could appear in the credits of this unsettling 1998 animated short film. It would be a routine within the routine: "imitating the already imitated" in Prague, like those tourists blinded by an empty sparkle.

Did they learn some Czech? Almost certainly they didn't. They would memorize the obligatory courtesies of *prosím* ('please') or *děkuji* ('thank you'). Much less the grandiloquent *Rukulíbám, milostpane* ('I kiss your hand, Sir'), which used to be the daily greeting in this country where the profession of the organ grinder was established for maimed soldiers.

Surely, tourists would chant a few single words, pronouncing them miserably:
– *Nejhezcíholčička*.

Or "the most beautiful girl."

Although if they'd pronounce it with the spacing like this:

– *Nejhezčí I lolčička*.

then, Prague would be "the best little girl."

Yes, and the thing is, everybody loves Prague because she is *nejhezčí holčička*, the most beautiful of all the princesses.

And therefore, Prague is not in reality
a collective and perfumed *poliklinika*
with chlorine that causes death.

It can't be real, the Prague of the ancient asylum in the Klemensgasse, nowadays the Klimentská street, where thousands of Jews lived before they were deported to the Majdanek concentration camp, to the ghetto of Łódź or the ghetto of Baranowichi.

It can't be real, the Prague of the cheap and public cafeterias that have been replaced by ethnic restaurants, such as the one called *Kabul Karolina* where they serve Afghan food, its name being the combination of a city in Afghanistan with plenty of underground anti-personnel mines and a typical Slavic name.

It isn't the ugly Prague.

And it is my Prague that nobody loves. It's normal that the newcomers feel that unlimited love for Prague before they bump into the first inhabitant that lives up to the reputation of Czech audacity.

I made my debut with a withered taxi driver who scammed us by offering his best service: the quickest and most expensive tour of my life for a little more than six hundred Czech crowns (kč).

That's how I got dragged into the vulgarity of this city and could come up with the following questions for the tourists and the pilgrims seeking magic:

Did you know that, not so long ago, there was *still* a curfew from eight o'clock in the evening and that the security officers gathered beneath the Powder Tower once they finished their raids?

Are you aware of how Prague used to be a low-budget Vienna during the monarchy of the Hapsburgs?

And that it was a German province during the World War II?

Do you take notice of the Praguian misogyny which affirms that “the prettiest and most intelligent Czech women live in Silesia”?

Are you aware that restaurant diplomacy has singled out English students as *personae non gratae* because of their stag parties?

Beside of its hectoliters of beer, the Czech Republic is also known to be a porn empire.

Examples for the latter can be found aplenty on Google:

“A mature Czechoslovakian whore fucking-Porn.es”

<https://porn.es/videos/65969/una-puta-madura-de-czechoslovaquia.html>

“This old gal needs a good fuck and should have a lot of experience. That's why she accepted a guy from the street who wants his hard dick to be sucked.”

“Porn casting of a gorgeous Czech girl-Canalporno.com”

<https://www.canalporno.com/ver/casting-porno-a-una-preciosa-checha/>

This gorgeous brunette shows up in a porn casting to become a porn actress. Although she is a little shy at first, she then lets herself go and ends up showing everything she is capable of in front of the cameras.

There was a time when Prague was an ordinary girl, with one single dress in her closet that others looked down on during balls. Her origins are humble: *práh* means “threshold” and an ancient Slavic root defines the word *praga* as ford. Now she is selling her body. However, *we* will be charged dearly for it.

Mirage

I have a dream on my way to Cracow.

I slowly cross a creek with sleek serpents at my ankles.

I am at a recital by Wiesława Szymborska: “Snakes appeared in my path, / spiders, field rats and young vultures. / Back then, there were no righteous nor

evil ones – just all living creatures / slithering and leaping within a common fright.”

I awake exactly forty-five minutes later.

The same old woman who accompanied me to Oświęcim is now returning with me. We don’t know each other, and we’re intimates all the same.

This is the third face I’m acquainted with in Poland. Her physical rigidity is a tragic and moving poem. She is miles away from herself.

Human’s only purity is its animality. The rest of us is raised by circumstance and context.

These are our faces.

Warszawianka 1831 Roku

Zbigniew Herbert wrote: “Our ancestors didn’t have the habit of creating museums like we do. They didn’t transform ancient objects into objects held for display in showcases. They used them in new constructions, incorporated the past directly into the present.”

Warsaw is a museum in which everything belonging to the past is worthy of rescue. The city has been toughened by the assails of history but does not cease to sing out passionately: “Rise, Poland, break your shackles. / Today is a day of freedom or death!” In Warsaw, the ancient is not displayed in a museum, it’s an element of the present.

All of its history was written between the Wars.

There is something, I am not sure whether it’s a tune perceived in the wind or the military formation of the snow, that makes me think it’s always winter here, and that the city is always at war. It might be the factions of Varsovians or maybe this all too grayish park where no one wants to take a walk. “Fall in love with Warsaw” is the city’s tourism slogan. It’s a sad love, though. A love that will blossom someday. Meanwhile, it leaves one with the feeling that the city still lies in ruins.

Warsaw is a *living* museum.

The lustrous asphalt contrasts with a shabby building covered in canvases, showing photographs of Jews at one of the corners that used to mark the border of the ghetto. The sidewalk is covered with slabs, revealing the brick wall that defined the limits of the ghetto.

Behind number 55 of Sienna Street, the journey of a boy on a skateboard is stopped by a persistent fragment of the wall, the only surviving one.

What defines it is the craft and technique, because even the weather can be fought.

I also think about how this boy could be named Mieczysław. He has a melancholic gaze while standing in front of the bricks. “Only the one who is able to use his memories adequately can call himself a holder of true knowledge: only he can be fully human.” I would like to tell him that the pain can be false when you find yourself scolded by a past that isn’t yours. They force you to have what does not belong to you and to respect it as well. I want to tell him not to be afraid. Yet, I also feel fear.

I think about this street and its name, Sienna or Siena, like the title of one of Zbigniew Herbert’s essays where he reveals how the poets of his country, such as the writer Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, Eleuter in secret, had been born to honour the Tuscan landscape in song while the Polish countryside spread out before them as inspiration: “The fume of pastoral fire is unwavering / above the flame, pliant, white, one does not know / whether among those flames in colours of prune / angels descended to seduce silver olive trees / or if . . .”

From one side to the other the landscape does not vary much.

Karen Villeda (born 1985 in Tlaxcala) is a Mexican writer, poet, essayist, and digital artist. She has published several collections of poems: *Anna y Hans* (2021), *Constantinopla* (2013), *Dodo* (2013), *Babia* (2011), *Tesoro* (2010), essay collections: *Agua de Lourdes. Ser mujer en México* (2019), *Visegrado* (2017), *Tres* (2016), and also children’s books. Her work has been recognized with more than a dozen awards, such as the José Revueltas Literary Essay Fine Arts Award (2017 for *Visegrado*), Gilberto Owen National Literature Award (2019) or Ignacio Manuel Altamirano National Poetry Award (2020 for *Anna and Hans*). On her website POEtronicA (www.poetronica.net), she brings poetry and multimedia into dialogue.