

KHADANOVICH Andrej

**The Catcher in the Sky:
About Landscapes and Airplanes**

Contrary to what the title may imply, we will not be talking about Harry flying on his broom, playing quidditch and trying to capture the golden snitch. Life is much more interesting than fiction, even fantasy fiction written for kids. I am flying on Japan Airlines, but even though the plane consumes the best fuel and I consume a bottle of fine plum wine, this does not mean I am capturing life. Life provides scenery that cannot be captured in a notebook, or even with the camera prudently bought in the duty-free shop in Korea. The scenery I am trying hard to grasp, to consume, is already living inside me.

Consumption. We all know the phrase: “You are what you eat,” I would expand on that dictum: we are everything we take in, what we see and hear, smell and touch. And of course what we eat, and drink, drink, drink...

We are the scenery we are painted into. Landscape, read like a text, is in equal proportions familiar and unknown, and these two components relate to the most basic human needs. The first, related to what is familiar, is the need to feel safe, to be able to build a comfortable world around the self. But that world is always at risk as we persist in our pursuit of the unknown. Mandelshtam wrote: “Everything has been, everything will be again/But the moment of recognition is sweet nonetheless,” and the desire for the unknown, for our expectations not to be met, is sweet, too.

In my vague understanding, a human dreams in both REM and deep sleep. In that way, dreams of poets also exist in two phases: the inhale and the exhale, so to speak. At the inhale, the poet excitedly absorbs the external, accumulating the impressions directly and indirectly. You could say he becomes a chameleon, taking his form from his surroundings. On the exhale the poet becomes the writer, throwing himself out into the external, creating ambient scenery in his own image.

Maybe it is a development of the Belarusian partisan skill, finessed over centuries, to mesh with the surrounding landscape, because for me (and perhaps I'm not alone among Belarusian poets) the first strategy in writing is to use the landscape around me in full, to let it guide my phraseology. In the same way Tsvetayeva's and Brodsky's language can carry the poet far, environment too can advise in an intuitive way, and lead an author to surpass his abilities.

Scenery, environment, dictates the behavior of poetry--learned people will tell you that the rhythm and melody of the metrical line of medieval Arab poetry is directly related to the paces of camels.

A certain Belarusian poet finds himself in Berlin for the first time. Someone “up there” is clearly thinking about me and my well being, because, in the reverse of Leonard Cohen--I first take Berlin, then take Manhattan...for my own safety. As it turns out, Berlin with its freedom and openness is more than enough, because three days after arriving, this metrical, rhyming poet is suddenly producing vers libre, that will later be titled “bers libre.”

Still, on my return to Belarus, I go on a kayaking hike and my writing, strangely, goes back to its original form. Why does this happen? Maybe cultural ties, since during the anti-Russian revolt of 1863, right there in Kotra's wild forests, Kastus Kalinousky wrote his publicistic pamphlets. But more likely it's the fact that the local moonshiners on the banks of the Kotra River spend the whole week returning a cosmopolitan Berliner to his Belarusian roots. Or even more likely, it is the hythmic, monotonous

paddling. One way or another, “bers libres” were forgotten and this poet goes back to good old syllabic-tonic.

But the scenery does not only affect technique. Landscape, to a certain extent, decides not only what is expressed and how, but also who tells it. The writer starts changing according to what he sees and it all turns into text.

Here in Iowa City where the majority of people I see are students, I start thinking of this place as a city of eternal youth. I start feeling younger--maybe even childish. New impressions multiplied by lots of free time do their job. It's been awhile since I took so much pleasure in sprawling on the grass with a notebook. It's been awhile since my last silly photo: in any pose, in any company, and next to anything. I can't even tell you the last time I jumped up in excitement, scaring people passing by, because I thought of an interesting metaphor. At one point a metaphor came to me at the university swimming pool, and I might not be standing here but for water getting into my nose and sobering me up a bit.

There was nothing that could sober me, though, from images of Korea followed by a sixteen hour flight to Iowa. After an hour at the Confucian Academy I started talking in sharp dictums and wasn't able to stop till the late evening---to the annoyance of everyone around me.

I probably shouldn't talk about the vodka Soju and rice wine Makgeolli which a poet from brotherly Estonia and I mixed to the point of finding ourselves at midnight in the middle of a man-made lake, where, between you and me, we weren't allowed to swim. It's one thing for Belarusian (one word: Slavic), but why on God's Earth would an Estonian citizen climb into midnight waters? Only the creators of Korean adult beverages know for sure.

They may also be the only ones who know how to calm down the typhoon that has been tearing over Korea for the past three days. They show me how to flag down a car on an absolutely empty road between Gimche and Busan. The car driver – a gorgeous village woman - smiles at me even though neither she nor the GPS on the dashboard know even one word of English, not even “airport” or “international”. She speaks her own language and sounds like a foreign music that tells much to my heart, but nothing whatsoever to my mind, which is letting me know that I must get to the airport at any price to catch an early flight, or I am screwed.

So I jump headfirst into her car and we speed through the night. The word “airport” keeps escaping my lips, but in return I hear only music from her. Then charades: I start flapping my arms as if they are wings and make what I think is an airplane noise “uuuuuuuuu”. She makes noises too, but it is hard to tell whether it's airplane or something else entirely. At least I am the only one with flapping arms in the moving car. But suddenly we see a guiding star, so bright, brighter than anything else in the Korean sky. It will show us the way, and I calm down because this star is an airplane that has been cleared for landing, showing the way towards “international” and “airport”.

And in spite of (or maybe thanks to) vodka and wine I make it to my flight. The airplane accelerates over the runway almost as if making fun of my earlier “uuuuuuuuu”. But I don't mind, at least it's not flapping its wings--and it looks like the typhoon calmed down too.

A few hours later I am in Tokyo; another thirteen hours and Chicago welcomes me. And four more and I am back in Iowa City, where the next day I almost drown because of a metaphor, and two weeks later tell it all in the broken English of a poetic landscape catcher: flapping my arms and making airplane noises. Here and now.