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Writing Sample

Karen Villeda

Includes fragments from Dodo, fragments from Constantinople, and "BALLAD FOR ALICE RAHON."

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Karen VILLEDA

Poems

DODO
(Fragments)*I. THE GELDERLAND*

Seven rickety barrels. Seven barrels to justify fourteen arms. Forty-nine sacks, sacks of Saracen flour for the pugilistic mettle. Flies, a hundred. Seven smocks turning pale among the seven barrels. Fistfuls of salt. Fourteen rival arms, seven seas, one hatch.

Seven sailors with their tongues out. The castle staged with
tulip garlands. Fourteen arms fighting for the crow's nest.
A crab-sized foremast. A bell and the extension of the helm.
A helm without a helmsman, so much bleeding gum. "A
Flemish galleon that they baptized *Gelderland*."

Countless masts, seven topmasts, fourteen topgallant masts. Forty-nine bundles against the cold. Flies by the dozen. A cat's paw scratching at the anchor. A compass needle and a handkerchief. One red-crested cockatoo: an embodied farewell. 1598. Seven smocks.

Fistfuls of salt. Only one pinnacle, its body a waning moon.
Piles of splinters and a spyglass. Seven sailors with their
tongues out. Fourteen canons hold them in sight. Salt, salt
without forty-nine sacks. The bottom of a hull and one cask
of sweet water, the jealous sea.

He—one of us—will become the man. On our return, he will be called the Admiral. The wind swells. We tighten the rigging. Flies for the flies. Seven rickety barrels. Fourteen rival arms and salt without forty-nine traditional sacks. Seven arquebuses, one blast and one casket. He will peck our nipples if we call to him.

We spy an island. We hold it between thumb and finger. The scenery, a single fly. North Sea legends split open the Gelderland's ribs. Seven sailors nibble themselves. Seven swollen tongues and fourteen rival arms. Seven heads hanging onto one wave. One of us is hurling the harpoon.

The stern's mirror reflects seven smocks. Everyone looks over his shoulder. Fourteen hunched backs hoist sails, the slippery hull. Except one, everyone dreams of whaling. A wave breaks, spits on the dreamers. Six heads loll and one steady man. *We tighten the rigging.*

Translated from the Spanish by Josh Rathkamp

CONSTANTINOPLE
(fragments)

Constantine the Most Great,

With his golden *solidi* celebrating his victories in Baalbek and over the currents
of the Euphrates.

Constantine Son of Saint Helen,

Discovering the Holy Sepulcher.

His mother telling him: "You will not comport yourself as others do. All the
canticles are for you. The brief fire of before also is yours."

Constantine Martyr, even,

From the sword we move on to the cross.

Constantine,

Paganism stabs you in the back.

There is a cross inside this sun.

Saint Constantine, He who Burdens himself with Pagans

When Arius comes and bestows power upon him.

“I am Yeshu and all hope is in me,” he said among the people. “You are no longer of use to me, Apollo. You are no longer of use to me, your truth is not my light,” he said to himself.

—We talk of times when all faith was solar. We talk of times when all beliefs were solar. Love was solar. War, solar. Death, solar. A bow pointing at the sun, which says no more than this: A bow says nothing—.

Saint Constantine The Boreal,

In every sense pagan, with his enchantments, sacrifice and offerings.

Constantine,

He of the easy spells, which make of him the gesture of the Goth slaves, to become their chain and never free them.

Constantine The Brute,

He who defied Artemis.

He who laid his obligation on the whole earth, telling it: “Maxentius stands between the Empire and me.”

He who saw Maxentius drowned in the Tiber, at the Milvian Bridge giving thanks for that immortal republic.

He who stared at the Sun and was not blinded.

Constantine, Constantine,

He who swore:

Come. All shall live of me. I will give you bread for every house you build. No one shall betray me. I know you are cold but do not, do not, tremble! I am with you. Eat of my bread. No one shall betray me, no one.

Constantine Unique,

Born in the Purple.

He who said to us: "I brought you colored sand and showed you how to walk on this fresh water."

Constantine The Thirteenth Apostle,

In this sign thou shalt conquer.

Constantine Under the Cross.

Thou shalt conquer with the Relics of the Passion.

Constantine The Atheist.

He who was the Four Gospels and the apocryphal gospels on a radiant throne.

Saint Constantine,

He who unmade the labarum.

He who imposed the cross on the unconquered sun.

He who changed bread and circuses for the same bread, fresh water and salvation.

Constantine He who perseveres.

For him, the soldiers sung 'Christ conqueror'.

For him, they were called 'Glory of the Greeks, New Rome'.

For him, we are ourselves.

Constantine,

He who went west.

Translated from the Spanish by John Z. Komurki

BALLAD FOR ALICE RAHON

Ehécatl sneezes when Alice curls her eyelashes,

his changeable breath of amaranth dizzies

the chorus girls in their ruffled lapis lazuli panties as they improvise a can-can

due to the absence of a row of dancers

and the copious sweat of the cadence floods the bandstand

awakening a lake buried three, three meters underground.

—Frida has died or was the victim of spontaneous combustion—

Alice's tears now overflow the gutters of Tlacopaque,

Alice tamed by the weight of the agate necklace that hangs eternally from her neck,

Alice with her face turned tomato by the Acapulco sun,

Alice primitive with a damp chunk of wood she uses as a crutch,

Alice who rhymes with the clinking of a rusted key.

On the patio at the house made of limestone dug up on Jaina

a little kid wailing, wailing poor little Alice with her mask of Olinalá

and kicking that urn relegated to obscurity with the ashes of the small
illiterate ghost locked up in holy oils, back in 1947.

Ehécatl puts on his scarlet mask and out of the remains of El Espanto
makes diamantine and a party at the Figuet Gallery in a rainy Paris
for Wolfgang who crosses his legs in an old photograph and covers himself with blankets,
Chiconcuac's blankets for all who are at the entranceways of Tlacopaque
watching the chorus girls pass with their feet bandaged,
leaving little piles of perspired gauze as footprints
and a sardine —first silver showgirl— dancing clumsily
while it dies because the whispering dust devil catches it
and its eyes fill with scarlet crust.

(The damp cardboard Judas grows tinier and a kingfisher flies over its armpits).

Kites snake drawing the musical staff for a *huapango*

—there go the squandered dancers, how exquisite!—

and a mountain of stairs gnawed by Alice rises up with the tick-tock

to shelter the ferris wheel, circular temple to Ehécatl,

and the *güera* sacrifices her flaming eyelids in mourning.

The kites fall in disgrace and the flames don't give enough illumination

to the chorus girls who dive in pilgrimage,

holding up a skull as a sort of candelabra

and fixing the hair of spiderwebs with their fingers to say the obligatory rosary.

Alice's heart is a compass rose,

the principal attraction of the town carnival.

The chorus girls slip in their high heels made of thorns

that sow posterity in a triptych of aqueous pillars

and at their feet the horses are watered at the mouth of Tláloc,

envying the fortune of owls and Egyptian Maus

besieged by a faded piece of tissue paper.

An artiodactyl mammal

swims in a goddess's aquarium

—Lady of Our Urine with her insular humor, grumbling —

when Alice lights a match

(the conch she flaunts like a ring Chalchiuhtlicue would envy)

and the chorus girls with their bloody astragalus hurry to educate their march,

steps like letters, letters that tra-la-la what is inscribed on a cameo

forgotten on little Alice's engraved jade lap:

Frida with the eyes of a swallow and Alice with eyes of sublimated mercury,

while Alice Rahon cries for ten years:

1956-1966.

Translated from the Spanish by Jen Hofer
