



Interview with Jana Prikryl

Justin Quinn

Jana Prikryl was born in 1975 in Ostrava, in what is now the Czech Republic. Her family fled Czechoslovakia when she was five years old, and after a year in Austria they immigrated to Canada, where she spent the rest of her childhood. She has lived in New York City since 2003, where she works as the executive editor of *The New York Review of Books*. She has published three collections of poetry: *The After Party* (2016), *No Matter* (2019), and *Midwood* (2022); a fourth, *The Channel*, will be published later this year.

Her work often draws on autobiographical material, but deftly disappoints our usual emotional expectations — instead of revelations of self she will often glance away to inspect details of the scene. The poems frequently take oneiric turns, reveling in the opportunities dreams provide to reconsider our waking lives. Prikryl has found an idiom that figures these transformations naturally, including our stumbling speech acts, and fluent acceptance of radically new contexts. The poems' language, as Evan Jones remarked, "draws on war and insurgency, the migrant crisis on the US-Mexico border, deaths in the Mediterranean, the climate out of control. [...] Everything is happening at once."¹ A poetry of dream logic might be one of the best ways to catch how our intimacies are caught up and transformed by such inimical shifts. The tone is often unsurprised and forensic, and the speaker is alert to the tiniest shifts in rooms, in voices, in expressions.

Prikryl is one of the most lauded contemporary poets in the United States. Her books are widely reviewed, and she has attracted the praise of leading critics, among them James Wood, Stephanie Burt, Nick Laird, and Dan Chiasson. Although the poet Tomáš Gabriel has translated some of her poems into Czech, she is not as well known in the Czech Republic. For the most part, Prikryl's Czech background has received only passing mention by North American critics, so this interview was conceived as an opportunity to explore the connections — biographical, literary, and other — to the country of her birth.

Prikryl and I were introduced by a mutual friend in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 2017, when she was a Fellow at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University. The interview was conducted via email during June 2024.

— JQ

1 Jones, Evan. Rev. of *No Matter*, by Jana Prikryl, *PN Review* 251 46, No. 3 (Jan-Feb 2020), https://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?item_id=10690.



Could you talk about the role of Czech language in your life at the moment?

It's quite dormant, almost absent. I have no Czech friends of my own generation, and the relatives I talk to most — my parents in Canada — have tended to speak the Czenghlish hybrid that we lapsed into pretty soon after arriving in Canada in 1981. But recently the Czech quotient has been increasing, because my father's diagnosis of Alzheimer's has made him less able to speak English. There's some sad irony in this because he was always the enforcer of English in our family, in public places — "Speak my language!" he'd say, if one of us spoke Czech within earshot of Canadians. He said it was the height of rudeness to exclude people that way. (How much shame or discomfort he felt about sounding different, being different, is probably too big a subject for me to discuss here. When people asked where he was from, he'd name the small town we lived in, in Southern Ontario. If they then remarked on his accent and used the word "originally," he'd turn the tables and make them guess.)

But Czech has always persisted in my mind as a kind of underground stream, so maybe I was wrong to say it has no role in my life. It's often popping up when I'm thinking in English, with the reminder that a certain Czech word or phrase is far intenser, more fused with what it signifies. But my Czech is rusty, my vocabulary largely limited to "kitchen Czech," and I'd need to live there again for a bit to feel confident speaking as an adult about more abstract ideas. In that sense the Czech that's printed on my brain, from early childhood, is a reminder of what language cannot do, of how far it falls short. I think this is one reason I write poems; poetry involves applying pressure to language until its otherness, its foreignness, becomes palpable.

Do you recollect much about growing up in Ostrava? Or about your time in Austria?

I do, thanks to the absolute way we left Ostrava in 1980 and then left Weyer, the Austrian village we'd settled in, almost a year later. In *Speak, Memory*, Vladimir Nabokov writes about how leaving Russia cauterized his memories, or that's one way to read this great sentence: "The break in my own destiny affords me in retrospect a syncopal kick that I would not have missed for worlds." Everything I remember is very centered on my family: our apartment in central Ostrava, the bedroom I shared with my brother, the park next door with its massive, actual warplane aslant a huge concrete cube, which the bigger kids were always climbing; Teta Vanda, my beloved nanny, and my nursery school; our small cottage in Ostravice and the meadows around it; constant ear infections and the very early ear piercing imposed on all Czech girls; my dad teaching me to ski on intensely cold trips to the Krkonoše, the Beskydy, and the Tatra mountains from when I was two or three.

I still remember flashes of our drive from Yugoslavia to Austria, when in effect we fled home in 1980: we were in a line of cars inching toward the border and suddenly my dad (aware that he and my mom could be arrested if the guard up ahead decided to enforce the letter of the law) handed a roll of bills to my brother in the back seat, and told him to put it in his shoe. I was five and remember thinking, oh, that's not good. But the guard let us through. My dad pulled the car over some distance past the border and invited my brother to get out and "take his first pee in freedom," which the two of them did; how my mother and I metabolized this moment I do not recall.



The next year in Austria was (in hindsight) a sunny round of learning German, tromping up and down steep hillsides with my brother, attending a kindergarten where it was another girl (not me) who was incessantly teased (“Eveline, Waschmaschine!”), and playing with my first “boyfriend,” whose mother was an old Czech friend of my parents’, so he also spoke Czech. Our plan was to get married, buy a Lincoln Continental (red), and he’d work as a dentist and I’d work as a nun. I guess Upper Austria did get to me.

You mentioned in email that you’ve recently used some Czech words and phrases in a poem, and that this is part of a general shift in your attitude to the language that’s happening at the moment. Could you talk about this?

I recall when the 2007 edition of Ivan Blatný’s poems came out, including some wonderfully musical, amazingly inventive (in the best way) translations of yours.² I was also intrigued by Blatný’s later poems written in England, which sprinkle Czech words through the English verses (or maybe the other way around), and I thought: this does not work, though it’s a fun experiment. Those poems tended to confirm how I’ve always felt about these two languages: they don’t speak to each other, they’re incompatible. In my own writing, sticking Czech words into English poems has seemed a bit tacky or cheap; I did it with Czech surnames in “A Package Tour,” a poem in my first book, where I named a few of my great-great-great-grandmothers. But that was a way of showing how unspeakable Czech is, to me, in an English context.

What has changed lately is my dad’s use of Czech; he was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s in 2020, and this person who in the 1980s had transformed himself into a very fluent, snazzy speaker of English (he was often rolling out newly acquired idioms, and he and I often spoke together only in English) slowly contracted to halting and incoherent Czech. And now the Czech language seems islanded in him, barely able to cross the divide between him and the outside world. So in a poem this year I found myself quoting a few of the things he’d recently said. They have a terrible charge, as if a weight were being put on the words that they couldn’t possibly carry across. And it felt thematically right to include words that are in a sense mute in the English context — they are only sounds, they give the poem’s English lines an object to respond to, like a landscape or a painting. And later I found myself writing one entire (extremely short!) poem in Czech, because it seemed necessary to this new collection to go all the way (at least once, briefly) into that zone of difference. Once I had that poem on the page it also seemed quite funny to me, imposing this illegible object on the unsuspecting reader of English, a kind of slapstick gesture, so I suspect it will stay.

You’ve recently translated a poem from Czech for the first time. Can you tell us about the process?

Yes, I’m almost embarrassed to admit that I’d never tried this before. But a slightly random concatenation of things led me to Jan Skácel, a bunch of whose books I ordered and started rifling through earlier this year. My experience of reading these

² Blatný, Ivan. *The Drug of Art: Selected Poems*. Ed. Veronika Tuckerová. New York: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2007.



poems in Czech is more interesting to me than my translations, because the translations inevitably feel like failures. Somewhere in his interview with *The Paris Review*, Joseph Brodsky says a few wonderfully contradictory things that I think are all true: most English translations fail because the translator isn't a good enough writer in English; and most great poems need some lines that are not as good as the rest.³ So a translator, ideally, must be as gifted as the original writer, and be equally free of vanity — must be willing to reproduce the bad lines as well as the great, to repeat the words that the writer repeated, to use ordinary, functional phrases where she might be tempted to elevate the tone, and so on.

Absorbing Skácel's poems was quite overwhelming: it reminded me of the Czech meanings, qualities, associations, textures that cannot be reproduced in English, no matter the translator's skill. In a world of increasingly global literature, it's transgressive to suggest that translation is an exercise in failure, but the idea that you might take a Rodin cast in bronze and reproduce it using paper and still call it a Rodin, or take a sculpture made of car parts and reproduce it in ice — this idea would be ridiculous in the other arts, or it would rightly be seen as a deliberate form of subversion, and maybe a helpful, revealing one, but nobody would see it as a mimetic activity of great seriousness that promises the reliable conveyance of meanings from the one substance into the other. I know I'm overstating it — we need people to translate Kafka! Maybe this is all said to distract from my having lost German and then never worked to reacquire it.

You once described yourself in conversation as a stealth Canadian poet in the US. How does that work? Is there a further iteration whereby you're a stealth Czech poet?

I'm reminded that it's always prudent to avoid conversation! Where my nationality as a poet lies I don't know — probably somewhere in the mid-Atlantic. By the time I finished university in Toronto, I cathected toward a bunch of non-Canadian writers (mostly English, Irish, American, and...Kafka) so I guess I felt that leaving Canada, when I was trying to begin as a writer, was a way of moving toward the voices that spoke to me most. Amy Clampitt in her *Paris Review* interview says of growing up in the Midwest, "everything was derived from somewhere else."⁴ Yet I "identify" as a Canadian person, among other things, though I became a US citizen eight years ago.

And I can hardly claim to be a Czech poet of any kind, although... Wherever I am on any given day, I feel slightly outside of things, a little different, with a secret history and an essential claim to being...something else. From Europe, but from a part of Europe that's on the periphery, or that was forced to the edge of that project long ago. My first love as a teenage reader was Kafka, and it was many years after I first

3 Brodsky, Joseph. "The Art of Poetry No. 28." Interviewed by Sven Birkerts. *Paris Review*, 83, Spring, 1982, <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/3184/the-art-of-poetry-no-28-joseph-brodsky>.

4 Clampitt, Amy. "The Art of Poetry No. 45." Interviewed by Robert E. Hosner. *Paris Review*, 126, Spring, 1993, <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/1961/the-art-of-poetry-no-45-amy-clampitt>.



read him that I learned — from his letters to Milena Jesenská, I think — that he was fluent in Czech. And that shocked me; the idea that he, whom I'd adored from the age of fourteen (if only in translation, ha!), had access to the same well of words that sits in my most private self — it didn't seem real. In some sense I operate on the understanding that no shared language is available between my inner self and the outside world — and this may be the way in which I'm a Czech poet.

Does any of this play out at the level of your kind of English? In a review Stephanie Burt referred to your language as “American English”. How do you think about the particular type of English you use? Does it have a provenance? American, Canadian, exophonic Czech?

I think Stephanie was right, it's “American English.” I'm not sure it's possible to grow up in Southern Ontario, an hour from the Niagara Falls border, with US movies and TV shows forming a constant cultural wallpaper, and claim to speak some unique version of Canadian English. But as a teenager what I read most ardently was probably the nineteenth-century English novelists — Charlotte Brontë, Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, plus Virginia Woolf — and in university I got into Nabokov, Jonathan Swift, Laurence Sterne, Chaucer, George Eliot, James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, Salman Rushdie, Martin Amis, the eighteenth-century satirists and the Romantic poets, plus T. S. Eliot, the originator of some of this cross-Atlantic confusion. I suppose American voices crept in only after all those other names; soon after graduating I fell hard for *Moby-Dick* and Toni Morrison's *Jazz*, among other things.

I was also reading *The New Yorker* in a fairly obsessive, almost Talmudic way starting in high school, and ultimately writers like Janet Malcolm and Anthony Lane and Paul Muldoon became a kind of signal light to me — it didn't really matter where you came from, what mattered was being part of this vast, pointed conversation. When I got to New York, on some level I was completing my dad's errand of moving us all to the West. If you arrived from what was then “Eastern Europe” and you grew up in Canada, it might appear that the distinction between Canada and the United States was severely exaggerated by the locals. Of course, after twenty years of living in the US, I know better. There is, alas, a difference!

That “vast, pointed conversation” is a very evocative phrase. And it's interesting that none of the three *New Yorker* writers you mention were born in the US. Could you say more about this conversation?

At their best the writers and editors based here are hugely curious, omnivorous, opinionated. I don't know where I'd be as a poet if it weren't for the first decade of hazing that I enjoyed in and around Bob Silvers's office at *The New York Review of Books* — it carved out for me an almost classical sense of language, of the scope of what a writer can say, of what wit and seriousness sound like. Of course a hefty proportion of the NYC conversation, in print or online, depends on scholars, critics, novelists, poets, translators who live just about anywhere, in college towns, in other countries, in upstate New York, in their second homes in the Berkshires—so the city has become a metonym, though some of us still live in it.

And New York City is for fast talkers, extroverts, networkers. I would have said “hustlers,” but that word suggests a bygone era; there are too many hedge fund guys

and scions of the very rich here now. The artists who bought their Soho lofts for very little in the 1960s are dying off and their children are selling them for millions. This is not news, of course, but it's a difficult place for artists to get by in. I guess I am saying that (twenty-one years into my residence) I like to talk to one person at a time, slowly; to me the city's conversation is best distilled to the handful of writers I have lunch with a handful of times a year. And to the streams of emails I exchange with certain people who may live nearby but whom I don't see all that often because the city actually functions as a friend suppressant; it's possible to live three miles from a close friend and see them twice a year because they're busy, you're busy, and the subway system is decomposing.

You once mentioned your acquaintance with Janet Malcolm. Could you comment a little more about that? And perhaps more generally about your Czech identity in the anglophone literary environment of North America?

I met her when I started working at *The New York Review of Books*. Quite early on we discussed her own Czech background, and she told me her given name had originally been Jana; after that her emails to me were always addressed "Dear Jana," and signed "Jana," so I would address her as "Dear Jana," ...all of which was seriously delightful. From time to time she asked me to translate letters she'd received from her relatives in the Czech Republic, which was a fascinating window onto a very intelligent clan that (like most Czech families, I think) experienced the twentieth century as a long series of losses.

But Janet Malcolm is a good illustration of how a "Czech identity" sort of vanishes in the anglophone literary environment; serious readers have opinions on Hašek and Hrabal and Kundera and maybe Holub...*a tím to hasne*. Meaning, and that's about it, though as you know, the literal translation is more like "and so it [the light] goes out." One of those phrases that seems better in Czech. Unlike French or German or Spanish or Italian literature, Czech has had relatively little impact on English novels and poetry, so to have this spare language in one's back pocket at literary parties in New York...is not quite like having a native understanding of Proust or Cervantes. (Of course readers of Czech literature might disagree; I say this as a person who was raised in a very assimilationist family, where Czech literature was occasionally quoted with a wink but never presented as something worth studying.) I think this sense of irrelevance is one reason I'm grateful for the Czech area in my brain; it can't be traded on, it's almost anti-transactional, and in New York that's a rare commodity.

When Viet Thanh Nguyen is published in Vietnamese translation, his name is given in the anglophone order without diacritics. I'm told in Vietnamese it should look like this: Nguyễn Thanh Việt. I hope that it won't be long before a selection of your work appears in Czech. How might your name appear on the cover: as Jana Prikryl, as it does in your anglophone publications, or as your first, Czech name: Jana Přikrylová? Is it important to you? What's in a name?

Oh, that hadn't occurred to me, but I suppose I'd remain Jana Prikryl. In the summer of 1989, a few months before the Velvet Revolution, I returned to Czechoslovakia for the first time since we'd fled. I was fourteen, and I remember walking along a Prague street with a relative and noticing a celebrity magazine on a newsstand with "Julia





Robertsová” spelled out on the cover. I was (silently, secretly) outraged that her name was changed — I might say manhandled. Some essential difference between where I was born and where I was growing up seemed exposed in that one flash of caption.

Then again when I was six, soon after we arrived in Canada, my dad asked if I’d like to change my name to “Jane,” the English version of “Jana.” And I was absolutely baffled by this. “Jana” was part of me, like my skin or my bones; changing it seemed not just unlawful but actually not possible. My brother, Voyta, who was then thirteen, turned the *j* in his name to a *γ*, because being constantly called “Vodgta” was annoying. I somehow felt that having to correct everyone who called me “Djana” (which was everyone) was just the cost of doing business, as me. So I guess I am saying, I’d never change “Jana,” the very Czech part of my name, but I’d never change “Prikryl” either, the slightly Englished part — my mom changed that for me in Austria when I was five, for our UN passports, I had no opinion about it, and ever since it has seemed natural and even preferable to have the exact same surname as the other members of my family, male or female. Much as Julia Roberts has.

What was it like reading your poems translated into Czech?

It was amazing, it was unsettling — my favorite spots tended to be where the translator Tomáš Gabriel was perhaps trying *not* to make a great effort, going for plain, demotic diction, as when the quote “Don’t worry, don’t worry” from the poem “Ontario Gothic” becomes “Neboj, neboj.” Then for a moment it almost seemed like the Czech words were closer to my original thought than the English — and to me that’s a real “the room has suddenly turned upside down” moment. It was also just fascinating to see how some of my syntactical choices played out in Czech; sometimes I want sentences to run on and twist into new thoughts or self-contradictions, and in English I’m aware of precisely what’s happening in those spots, how they function as built units; in Czech the structural logic and the movement of thought are much more obscure to me, so it almost feels as if I’m reading someone else’s poem. And then there’s some anxiety that I do have to get a handle on it, make sure it’s what I *would* say in Czech, which may not be the point of this whole exercise.

I was strangely scared of looking at the translations. It simply took me ages to open the document. In part this was owing to my constant unfortunate lack of time — between work and parenting I have very few minutes per day to do whatever I want with — but that’s not a real reason. It was only when you asked me about this last week that I finally forced myself to reopen the doc and not blink from its pages.

Several of the poems in your collection *No Matter* are entitled “Anonymous”; several others again are entitled “Stoic,” which both gesture to the erasure or demotion of the personal. There are elements of autobiography in the poems of *No Matter*, especially relating to your Czech background and move from Czechoslovakia. Some readers might miss these and still get much from the poems. Could you talk about the role of autobiography in your work?

It’s probably the motor driving all of it, because poems are made of feelings and our real feelings are always personal. But no, poems are made of language, and I have strong feelings quite often about ideas or visions or imaginary friends. I have trouble accepting that (modern) poetry is at bottom a documentary form, and some of my work



comes from this discomfort. Poems should be as inventive or intellectual as fiction, if not more so. (Not that fiction isn't often — or most of the time? — autobiographical, but it's expected to entertain, and this changes the way its autobiographical data are presented.) I'm sure that Shakespeare wrote his sonnets in the heat of personal experience, but they are so accomplished that to me they almost counterproductively raise the question of whether he “made them up.” And to me that's an interesting problem.

I guess the lyric poem needs to convince you that on some level it *happened to someone* — this sense of, or illusion of, authenticity is part of poetry's own entertainment factor. (The most voyeuristic form!) A feeling of intimacy needs to drop down around you and the voice on the page, and that feeling may be most easily generated by “saying what happened,” by another person's life story. But in how many ways could that feeling be conjured? Is “what happened” really the crux of what happened; are you sure you know what happened?? Some of my most intimate and personal poems — in *Midwood*, or “Thirty Thousand Islands” in *The After Party*, which is a kind of elegy for my brother — involve turning away from the linear, narrative, basically informative approaches of direct autobiography. I think when I'm writing as well as I'm able, I don't know what I'm doing (why I'm using a certain form or perspective or attitude) or where it will go. I'm trying to allow an instinctive response to the words I'm hearing, and this instinct, or this way of listening, is much more intelligent than I am. I'd be a fool to tell it what happened!

You're something of an undercover sonneteer. The form occurs frequently in your work, especially *No Matter*. What's the attraction of the form? More generally, how do you think about form?

I find sonnets congenial — they're friendly to the very reticent. Only fourteen lines will be required of you, and on the other hand you're forced to say more, to think harder, when otherwise you might be tempted to stop sooner. It's also encouraging to feel you're in conversation with centuries of sonneteers. As a woman I do feel some illicit little thrill at talking back at all those centuries of objectifying men. And I've enjoyed tinkering with different stanza structures; you can do various things with the number fourteen. To me this is a form of play — poetic form is play, not restriction — and writing poems should be playful. I want to be tinkering, messing around, being irresponsible when I'm writing, and one of the ways I do that is by thinking about the shapes my words make on the page. It sounds like a paradox: “I wanted to mess around so I ended up writing a sonnet.” But it's really very natural, like a plant growing. These days many poets are thinking through formal structures — Terrance Hayes, Shane McCrae, Ange Mlinko — without its seeming especially newsworthy.

To put it another way, writing these responses to your questions has been fairly excruciating. I reach again for Kafka; his story “On the Tram” underpins a lot of how I feel about being human and having the potential to impose on other people's time:

I have not even any defense to offer for standing on this platform, holding on to this strap, letting myself be carried along by this tram, nor for the people who give way to the tram or walk quietly along or stand gazing into shop windows. Nobody asks me to put up a defense, indeed, but that is irrelevant.



A poem always involves formal choices — even if they amount to an O’Hara-esque performance of nonchalance, banter, inner monologue — and to me the making of these choices somehow alleviates my guilt for taking up space on the tram. The formal maneuvers of a poem give me permission to be here — on the page, but maybe as a person as well. That’s pretty funny: I feel morally justified by my enjambments! But there it is. I would rather be answering your question with a poem.