

Speech Fossils

by Kári Tulinius

Every Saturday I take my four-year-old son to a museum. Most often we go to the Natural History Museum, or as my son calls it, the Dinosaur Museum. Partly he loves to go because he loves big animals, and partly because they have the best hot dog he has ever had, a hot dog that comes with free juice and three sheets of dinosaur stickers.

During one of those trips, as we looked through a magnifying glass at a rock with embedded fossils, I noticed one that looked like the letter K, which is the initial letter in both my first name and my son's, and of course also the name of the protagonist in Franz Kafka's novel, *The Castle*.

Looking carefully at the remains of living beings who lived millions and even billions of years ago is a useful reminder for a writer that immortality is not much fun for the fossil, as beautiful as they are to look at. Writers are, biologically speaking, animals, homo sapiens, and every species of animal eventually ceases to exist, some leading to other species via evolution, others dying off completely.

Writing is a natural process, because we humans are part of nature, but it is also a technology, one that developed slowly over thousands of years, and is still developing. We do not know who invented the letter K, if indeed it was a single person, but we know that there was once a time when there was no such letter. Since then humanity has invented many ways to safeguard that letter, and all others, against time, in scrolls, books, electronic databases, and many others.

Fossilization is also a natural process, a life-form leaving a trace in non-living substance, whether those are footsteps, buried bones or something else. I say they are traces and not the thing itself because by fossilization the original substance is replaced by non-living mineral.

Written texts are like fossils of speech sound, inert remains of sound waves, and likewise fossils are nature's way of jotting down the annals of life.

Most of us who write will recognize how distant our written words seem from our thoughts, but nonetheless the words which we cover a white surface with, resemble our thoughts, like the fossilized skull of a Tyrannosaurus resembles the ancient animal. But while the animal itself cannot be brought back to life, some image of the giant predator is awakened in the mind of a person gazing on the fossil, like my son does every time we go to the Natural History Museum, two animals separated by millions of years. Or when he looks at a sheet of paper he has covered in dinosaur stickers.

Readers, when reading the words of a writer, have a thought appear in their mind, not the same thought as the writer's thought, but something that resembles it.

Not many animals leave fossils behind. Almost all simply vanish back into nature. The same is true of the human animal. And while we writers struggle to leave fossils behind, most of the time they vanish too. Franz Kafka died without publishing any of his novels, and his dying wish was to ask his friend Max Brod to burn the manuscripts. Thankfully for us, as readers, he did not do so. But plenty of manuscripts have burned throughout history, as almost every author is forgotten.

We have Sappho in fragments, only five percent of her poetry survives, and of that only one poem in whole. The writings of Catullus, an ancient poet whose works we have almost in their entirety, survived centuries of neglect only in a single manuscript that people in his home city of Verona thought to preserve because he was a local boy. That time-traveling manuscript is lost, and so are the copies made from it, but Catullus's poems survive.

Those of us who write, who let our words fossilize into text, will eventually be forgotten, maybe existing in books and electronic databases, unread, until some misfortune, fire, flood or neglect, erase our words from the fossil record of literature.

Some writers will only be forgotten when the human species disappears. Thousands of years from now, maybe even millions of years, a child or an adult will encounter the words of Sappho, Catullus and probably Kafka, and form new thoughts, that resemble the thoughts of the writers who wrote those words. And maybe they will think to become writers too, part of a tradition of poets and storytellers that has been part of human nature since there have been human beings. Like how every animal is a part of billions of years of evolution, of life, of nature.