INTRODUCTION
BY THE EDITORS

Welcome to The Romanian Riveter. With this edition of our magazine of European writing, we focus not just on a country’s literature, but on the writing from a specific city and region: Timișoara and Timiș County. As you can see from the architecture that adorns our cover and illustrates this volume, Timișoara is a very special place. Located in the far west of Romania, close to the borders with Serbia and Hungary, it sits on a crossroads of both culture and history. This has made it particularly fertile ground for writing, as you will see from the diversity of form, language and style presented in this magazine. In fact some of Romania’s greatest contemporary authors hail from this region. Our magazine also presents some of the literature from the rest of the country.

This edition of The Riveter is a collaboration between the European Literature Network and Tudor Crețu, manager of ‘Sorin Titel’ Timiș County Library, director of LitVest, one of Timișoara’s two literary festivals, and an esteemed poet, novelist and literary critic. Our thanks go to him for curating a fascinating and eye-opening selection of writing from his city, and to Timiș County Council for making this magazine possible, the first ever magazine of contemporary Romanian literature in English. We’re launching it with some special events this September in both Timișoara at LitVest and London at the Romanian Cultural Institute. Details on our website!

With Covid-19 making travel to Romania difficult, we hope that this edition of our magazine will offer you the next best thing: a tour of the literature of Timișoara, the Banat region and wider Romania. Enjoy your trip!

Editors
Rosie Goldsmith and West Camel
Many people speak of the Banat region, of which Timișoara is the capital, as an area connected with civilization rather than culture, with material rather than spiritual values. The writer who put this region on the literary map and created the notion of a great Banat literature was Sorin Titel (1935–1985), our most important novelist, short-story writer and essayist, and one of the outstanding personalities of his era. Alongside poets Șerban Foarță, Petre Stoica and Anghel Dumbrăveanu, and critics Liviu Ciocârlie and Cornel Ungureanu, he belonged to the sixties generation around which the literature of Timișoara started to flourish. Șerban Foarță wrote, with Andrei Ujică – the outstanding film director who started his career as a prose writer – the best-known lyrics ever written for a Romanian rock band: ‘Lyrics for Phoenix’ (1976). By contrast, Petre Stoica’s great lyrical achievements, hidden beneath his cloak of man of the people, chronicling the daily and the domestic, place him among the finest poets of his generation.

Nevertheless, in spite of the great talent of the sixties generation, the most powerful group of writers from Banat came out of the 1980s, a time of darkness, communism and oppression. It is no coincidence that the author Herta Müller, who was born in Timiș County and became a recognised literary figure of the underground in Timișoara in the eighties, was later awarded the Nobel Prize (in 2009). Her generation came from a remarkable environment, one in which the eminent professors of Timișoara University’s Faculty of Letters (Eugen Todoran, G.I. Tohăneanu, Liviu Ciocârlie, Marcel Cornis-Pope, Simion Mioc, Iosif Cheie Pantea, Vasile Tudor Crețu and others) could boast that their students were
among the most talented ‘young wolves’ of Romanian literature.

The literary underground had considerable importance too at this time. The self-taught poet, Ion Monoran (‘Mono’), worked as a stoker in the basement of a typically communist block of flats – literally underground. ‘The whole Mediterranean Sea must have flown through these pipes’, he wrote. Monoran played a significant role in the 1989 revolution, which kicked off in Timișoara: on the 16th of December he stopped the trams in one of the city’s central squares, to encourage and strengthen the protests. After his death in 1993, he became something of a legend. One of the literary VIPs of the communist period once berated him for his eagerness: ‘What is it with you? Do you want to trample all over literature with your boots?’ But Mono became part of literature. And, ever rebellious, he did not take off his boots – that would have been too much like entering a sacred temple. His writing style is reminiscent of that of his German contemporaries, down to earth, direct and autobiographical. Indeed Vânăt potrivit până la tare (‘Moderate to Strong Wind’, 1982), the anthology of German poets from Romania, is among the most influential poetry collections of the decade.

Eugen Bunaru is another noteworthy poet of this Optzeciști (‘eighties’) generation. He does not take poetry onto the street; he is not colloquial and prosaic, nor does he use virulent language or messages. Instead, he moves the street into his poems and in his own unmistakeable manner: footsteps ‘are lost in their own labyrinth’ or they ‘listen to the silence’. Footprints are ‘like tiny insects / crushed underfoot’. Steps, footprints, streets – these are some of the ‘knots’ found in Bunaru’s poems.

Among the major representatives of 1980s Timișoara prose are Daniel Vighi, Viorel Marineasa and Mircea Pora – all featured in this magazine. Vighi started by writing short stories, but then turned to novels and more substantial projects, like the Corso Trilogy (2016), one of the most complex works about Timișoara ever written. In Viorel Marineasa’s short stories and novels, socio-historical fiction gains a new and original aesthetic dimension, while Mircea Pora writes the most poetic prose of the three. This does not detract from the strong narrative elements of his work, however. In fact, few writers can produce such an ideal combination of different registers: humour, social criticism, and oneirism – the literary movement defined by dreams, imagination and hallucinations that countered the realism and surrealism of the establishment. All this, we need to remind ourselves, occurring under one of the most oppressive communist regimes in the world.

The paradigm shift that characterised the Optzeciști generation has been rightfully recognised: American culture became the predominant model, to the detriment of Romania’s traditional links with
French. In Timișoara, the shift occurred through translations from American poetry by the poet Petru Ilieșu and Professor Marcel Cornis-Pope, a trailblazer in Romanian studies of English and American literature, and through Mircea Mihăies’ studies about Faulkner and Joyce, which were to follow.

German-language culture also played a major role, through Petre Stoica’s translations of the Austrian poet Georg Trakl, to take one example, through the activity of Aktionsgruppe Banat (the German-speaking literary resistance movement created in the Banat region), and through Herta Müller, who emigrated to the Federal Republic of Germany in 1987. It is also worth mentioning that the first great novel of Timișoara, The City Lost in Mist, was written by a Hungarian: Mélíusz József.

In the 1990s, after the Romanian Revolution, two categories of authors made their debut: those of the Optzeciști generation who had been unable to publish under communism: poets Ion Monoran, Gheorghe Pruncaț, Adrian Derlea etc; and those belonging to the new, post-1989 generation of authors.

Rodica Draghincescu is a leading light of this new generation. Vehement and reflective, erotic and political, her poetry now enjoys European recognition. Adrian Bodnaru and Robert Șerban are other notable voices, both of them also well known as editors and/or publishers.

After the 1989 revolution, Timișoara’s literary output excelled, through the series and collections of poems published by publishers Marineasa in the 1990s and Brumar after 2000. Up to June 1990 and the Mineriad, when democratic protests in Bucharest were brutally repressed, Orizont, Timișoara’s main cultural periodical, enjoyed a print run of more than 50,000 thousand copies. After the Mineriad, the magazine’s circulation fell by half. In 1990, the newly installed post-Ceaușescu government’s crackdown on the free press and the economic decline of the country caused similar drops in circulation in cultural publications across the country.

A remarkable phenomenon of these times was the involvement of Timișoara’s writers in drafting the country’s most important post-revolutionary political document: the Proclamation of Timișoara, whose famous ‘Point 8’ requested that ‘the electoral law should deny former party activists and Secret Police officers the right to be nominated as candidates on any list for the first three running legislatures’. Viorel Marineasa, Vasile Popovici, Lucian Vasile Szabo, George Șerban and Daniel Vighi were among the authors of the Proclamation.

The end of the 1990s and the first years of the new millennium were influenced by the activity of the Third Europe College, based in Timișoara, which explored the Banat’s Mittel-europa identity, and its multilingualism and multiculturalism (a consequence of its unique
geographical location), and became a centre of intellectual development. Among its defining figures were Adriana Babeț, Livius Ciocărlie, Mircea Mihăies, Cornel Ungureanu and Smaranda Vultur.

Another important literary establishment to gain importance over the years is the Pavel Dan Literary Society. Founded in 1958, it is the longest-running society of its kind in Romania. It is based at the Timișoara Students’ House and since 1996 its coordinator has been Eugen Bunaru.

Of the prose writers, who shone after 1990, Radu Pavel Gheo is one of the leading lights. His most important novels are Noapte bună, copii (‘Good Night, Children’, 2010) and Disco Titanic (2016). Blending realism and elements of the fantastic, they deal with the drama of those who grew up under communism. But women too have gained great prominence in the past few years. Daniela Rațiu cultivates a caustic poetic discourse. Her poems written in the second person, for instance, mock such demeaning epithets as ‘darling’. Another poet, Moni Stănilă, has shifted from religious to markedly political poetry in which the post-Soviet and new Western environments collide. Both Rațiu and Stănilă are also emerging novelists, which draws attention to another feature of this contemporary generation: authors who write both prose and poetry. While most of these started as poets, their prose seems to have influenced their poetry, making it more realistic and narrative. The reverse process – lyricised prose – is quite rare, however.

Other important writers of this new millennium include Alexandru Potcoavă, who started as a poet, only to shift to prose and narrative poetry. His most important novel, Viața și întoarcerea unui Halle (‘The Life and Return of a Halle’, 2019), is an expressive work in which the plot animates history – and vice versa. Another writer of this generation is Bogdan Munteanu. The biographical portrait plays a special part in his writing, and humour is one of his key ingredients. Two Serbian poets and fiction writers have also made their names in our region and beyond: Borko Ilin and Goran Mrakić. Ilin is particularly attracted to the landscape of the Banat plain – the pusztá – while Mrakić is concerned with urban mythology and folklore, dealing with topics rarely explored by contemporary prose, such as the world of football supporters. The most relevant names in poetry after 2010 are Aleksandar Stoikovici and Marius Ștefan Aldea, as well as Mariana Gunță, who died this year at the age of only twenty-five – far too young.

Literary life has been revitalised in Timișoara over the last decade: open, public readings of prose and poetry have turned into social-literary experiments and two new literary festivals have been launched, as has the independent bookshop Two Owls, a true cultural hotspot.

Through the ‘Sorin Titel’ Timiș County Library, Timișoara has become
The Capital of Public Readings. We have tried to turn what started as an experiment in literary performance into one of the institution’s key activities. The ConCentrica event and the urban picnic known as The Reading Blanket are among the most original and largest reading events in Romania. As a public library, our goal is to bring those people who have not traditionally engaged in art and culture closer to the world of books and to each other. We promote reading both as a means of community cohesion and as a private, individual activity. The library’s readings are socially comprehensive and totally democratic, featuring security guards and prisoners, sports players and the elderly, students and teachers, as well as folk musicians and singers. The public are both observers and protagonists, creating a mini Romania in their diversity and broad representation.

The city’s two new festivals both began in 2012: LitVest (which takes place in September and which I run) and Timișoara International Literature Festival (which follows in October and is run by fellow writer Robert Șerban). As these festivals have grown, the literary bohème of Timișoara has expanded its boundaries, its centre of gravity gradually shifting towards villages such as Socolari, in the neighbouring Caraș-Severin County, which the visual artists of Timișoara have brought back to life, renovating the houses and organising cultural events in this marvellous natural setting. We have also reached beyond Romania to invite international authors to come to Timișoara to participate in these festivals, several of whom are writing for this magazine.

All this new activity has been crucial for the city in obtaining its status as European Capital of Culture in 2021 (however, because of the pandemic, the year will most likely be 2023). The Romanian Riveter has been created to celebrate this new status and to showcase the writing of Timișoara and the Banat, with an additional short coda of writing from the rest of Romania. We’ve had to be selective – for reasons of space – and some of those we invited to participate were not able to accept our invitation. We’ve chosen mainly living Timișoara writers and haven’t been able to include many of the older or deceased writers, or the Timișoara diaspora living in the West, even though without them our local and national literary history would be incomplete. They are maybe for another magazine.

Our specially commissioned translations into English included in this magazine will give many readers an unparalleled first view of the diversity of Timișoara’s literary spectrum, introducing both its newcomers and its established names, and offering a glimpse into the past, present and future of the best writing from our great city.

Tudor Crețu
Writer
Manager of the ‘Sorin Titel’ Timiș County Library
## CONTENTS

### Introduction
by The Editors ................................................................. 1

### Editorial
by Tudor Crețu ................................................................. 2

### Timișoara Prose
From 20 Seconds by Tudor Crețu ........................................... 8
The Porous Borders of Romanian Literature: Timișoara
by Andreea Scridon ......................................................... 13
Jacob’s Death (I) by Sorin Titel ............................................. 17
Draft of Requiem
by Viorel Marineasa & Daniel Vighi ..................................... 23
The Walk by Mircea Pora ..................................................... 25
Whispers by Alexandru Colțan ............................................. 32
Ceaușescu in the Snow by Goran Mrakić .............................. 37
The Overcoat by Bogdan Munteanu ....................................... 41
The Foundations by Alexandru Potcoavă ................................ 48

### Timișoara Poetry
From A Handful of Words by Robert Șerban ......................... 54
A Multicultural Third Europe: Poets from Timișoara
by Stephen Watts .............................................................. 59
Poems by Șerban Foață ....................................................... 62
Registers by Petre Stoica ..................................................... 66
Poems by Eugen Bunaru ....................................................... 67
Rap in Novosibirsk by Petru Ilieșu ........................................ 70
Poems by Ion Monoran ......................................................... 72
Seasons by William Totok ...................................................... 74
Through the Wall by Simona Constantinovici ....................... 74
Corollaryvirus by Rodica Draghinescu ................................. 75
My Darling by Adrian Bodnaru .......................................... 77
Exorcism by Tudor Crețu .................................................... 78
Madame Bowery and David Lynch (Pandemic Poem)
by Daniela Rațiu .............................................................. 80
Football Diary by Moni Stănilea .......................................... 82
Sequences by Ana Pușcașu .................................................. 83
Poems by Marius Aldea ....................................................... 85
Poems by Mariana Gunță ..................................................... 88

### Reading Timișoara
by George Szirtes ............................................................. 91

### Romanian Literature:
Lost (and Found) in Translation
by Gabriela Mocan ........................................................... 95

### Ana Blandiana
Poems by Ana Blandiana ................................................... 97
The Sun of Hereafter and Ebb of the Senses
by Ana Blandiana, reviewed by Fiona Sampson .................. 105

### Magda Cârnceni
From FEM by Magda Cârnceni ........................................... 107
A Deafening Silence by Magda Cârnceni,
reviewed by Vesna Goldsworthy ........................................ 112

### Matéi Vișniec
From The Feeling of Elasticity When Walking on Dead Bodies
by Matéi Vișniec ............................................................... 114

### Herta Müller
From The Fox was Ever the Hunter
by Herta Müller ............................................................... 122
The Fox was Ever the Hunter by Herta Müller,
reviewed by West Camel ................................................... 126

### Mircea Cărtărescu
From Blinding: The Left Wing
by Mircea Cărtărescu ....................................................... 128
Blinding: The Left Wing by Mircea Cărtărescu,
reviewed by Lucy Popescu ................................................. 131

### Ioana Pârvulescu
From The Prophecy by Ioana Pârvulescu ............................ 133
Life Begins on Friday by Ioana Pârvulescu,
reviewed by Cristina Muresan ........................................... 137

### Romanian Literature – a Publisher’s Perspective
by Susan Curtis ................................................................. 139

### Ludovic Bruckstein
From With an Unopened Umbrella in the Pouring Rain
by Ludovic Bruckstein ....................................................... 142

### Translating Romania
by Alistair Ian Blyth .......................................................... 145

### More Romanian Reviews
Captives by Norman Manea,
reviewed by Rein Raud ....................................................... 148
Women by Mihail Sebastian,
reviewed by Max Easterman ............................................... 150
No Time Like Now by Andrei Codrescu,
reviewed by Anna Blasiak .................................................. 153
The Book of Mirrors by E.O. Chirovici,
reviewed by Barry Forshaw ................................................ 154

### My Romanian Revolution
by Rosie Goldsmith .......................................................... 156

### Afterword
by West Camel ................................................................. 161

### A Listing of Romanian Poetry & Prose Fiction in
English Translation (since 2010)
by Stephen Watts ............................................................. 163

### Romanian Riveter Biographies ......................................... 169
THE MINISTER FOR CULTURE WAS SEXY. He had ripped his old tan jeans, torn them off above the knees. They were shorts now.

They were walking through the long, honey-coloured grass: he and some of his mates from Peltova. It was at least ten years since they had seen each other, since they had been together, as it were. The river was narrower now. The trees were lower. They stopped every now and then and wondered:

‘Shit, it’s been a while, hasn’t it ...?’

The waterholes were spying on them. Dark, greenish. The men were aiming for the river, they would simply slide down as soon as they came across a softer incline, a friendlier opening. Only one of them had brought his child along, so that there was someone to lug the bottles, the whisky and the beer cans, in a scruffy, rough raffia bag, just like in the old days. The minister himself had insisted, in Darius’s courtyard:

‘That!’ And he pointed his finger at the bag hanging from a nail on the door. ‘So – since I’m not on TV, I can begin my sentence with so ...’

‘You can do whatever you damn please,’ his host chimed in.

‘So, I think Ceaușescu himself queued for food with this bag. Look at it,’ – he stood on tiptoes and grabbed it – ‘rougier than sandpaper, honest.’
And he threw the bag to the kid.
‘Go to your mother,’ Darius instructed his son, ‘and bring whatever she gives you. She’ll know what.’ And he pointed his finger too: at the kitchen door.

The clouds were lower and lower. The men had broken into a sweat. At some point they gave up wiping it away. A clearing appeared near a poplar. A steep path, barren.

‘Pop open a bottle. Come on, pop it open!’

The kid made to open the bottle, but his dad grabbed it from his hand.

‘Here!’

The minister downed a big gulp of Jack Daniels and passed it on.

Marcu chimed in, shivering: ‘The water will wake us up.’ They had drunk the night before as well. ‘It will knock some sense back into us.’

They started making their way down, one by one. The earth was yellowish and crumbly.

‘I think I’ll go straight in,’ the minister mumbled and then jumped.

The water was surprisingly warm.
‘Right you are!’ And Marcu jumped too.

The child passed the bag to his dad and cursed under his breath. He was not allowed to jump.

‘Minister, you take the fishing net. Just like in the old days.’ A smile softened the look on Darius’s face. ‘Stick it right here, under the willow.’

Darius had already pushed his arms into the slimy mud of the bank and winked wickedly. The minister did as he was told.

‘You.’ Darius turned towards the child. ‘Go over there to the left and don’t let anything past. And, you know, stamp your feet and shake your legs.’

‘Spook ‘em,’ the kid said.

The others had encircled a small island in the river, and submerged their arms all the way to their shoulders beneath it.
‘It’s a hole, a barbel’s hole, I think.’
Adiţă swallowed some water and spat it out, frowning.
‘Here goes!’
And he pulled out a chub fish about as big as his palm. His fingernail was bloody. The kid took a picture.
‘Here. Catch!’
And he threw the fish into the bag, among the beer cans.
‘Careful, you squashed it,’ Marcu told him off with a smile.
‘You smashed it. Watch out, I’m sending another one your way. I grabbed it by the tail.’
‘Oh-ugh …’
The second chub was way bigger. Adiţă grabbed it from underneath. He poked his nails straight into its gills. The fish had got caught in a tangle of roots.
‘Got it … Now you let it go.’
‘Are you sure it’s cute enough, mate?’
‘What do you think?’
Marcu lay back in the murky water and stretched out his arms. Adiţă was trying to squash the fish’s head. He’d given up simply pressing down hard and was now slamming it against the rotting wood. He was the strongest chainsaw worker in the village. His nails were square. Finally, he managed to almost grab it. His fingers were inside the fish.
‘Fuck you!’
And he pulled on it as hard as he could. The chub surfaced. Its head was bobbing. Its belly was all white. The child grabbed it, shivering, and tossed it on top of the tins. The minister lifted the fishing net slowly. It’s true that he had felt some faint movement at his feet. A murky sensation. The fish seemed liquid too. He wasn’t expecting to find anything in the net. The slow, agonising movement prolonged the suspense. But a purple barbel was thrashing about in the net.
‘Would you believe it?’ he said, nodding as if in a cabinet meeting.
Darius: ‘A barbel?’
Adiţă: ‘A beauty, and that’s the truth! I’ll trade you two chubs for it later.’
The barbels’ bellies were even whiter. He’d been obsessed with this species ever since he was a little boy. Their old next-door neighbour to the right, the one beyond the stone wall, always caught them like crazy. He would prepare his bait the night before, raking through the manure for worms. He never kept bait in matchboxes or cartons, but – and the minister learned to do this too – in small jars of various kinds, which he would line up on a windowsill, just as someone might in a room in a hostel. He would always put some soil at the bottom, at least a little.

They were moving upstream, through rapids. The banks bellied out.

‘Here.’ Marcu frowned and dashed over to the dry bush growing on the bend. ‘This is where I caught one that weighed a kilo. I don’t know when that was now. A year ago perhaps. Come on, Darius, hold my feet. I need to get under the bank all the way to my knees. You pull me out when I give the signal – I’ll flap my left foot three times, OK?’

A distant cousin of his had died a little further down the river. The first Saturday of his holiday. Perpelea, his mate, pulled him out of the hollow like a stick. He’d felt the guy’s ankles getting thinner. As old hags would say, his heart had burst in him; went pop, like a plastic bag. He was thirty-six. Perpelea had dropped him onto his back on a strip of wet sand. He’d been hesitant to ‘kiss’ him even there, in the wilderness, to do what he’d seen in *Baywatch*, mouth to mouth. They both had moustaches and ponytails. He had pounded him as hard as he could in the heart area, trying, as he’d later stated to the head of the police station, to ‘resuscitate’ him. The skin of the corpse had started to dry.

Darius: ‘You won’t catch anything else here even if…’

‘Go ahead, minister,’ Marcu barked, ‘stick the net in. Better still, give it to me.’

The minister threw it over with enviable precision. The net – it was finely meshed – swelled. Marcu grabbed it with one hand and jammed it in the mud, immediately behind the bush. He started to shake it hard, to stomp his feet.

‘Ugh-ugh!’
He howled like Tarzan and, after about ten seconds, pulled out the net. It was crawling with lăcisci. Small, bitter fish, which, unlike loach, couldn’t even be used as bait.

‘Small change, so to speak!’
He threw the fish into the air. As high as he could. Their fins were coloured. The child tried to catch a few of them in his raffia bag. He liked them: they were broad and playful. Every now and then they would bite a worm or a maggot.

Marcu sat cross-legged in the water, and then disappeared. In less than two seconds, though, the soles of his feet surfaced. His heels were cracked, copper-coloured. Darius grabbed Marcu’s ankles and pushed him down.

‘He’ll be OK for half a minute, don’t worry.’
The child took the phone out and started the timer. Marcu’s soles disappeared too.

Adiță: ‘He’s not afraid. That’s what I like about him. God forgive me, but I think he wants to die underwater, like his cousin.’

Five feet in, maybe more, under the bank, Marcu opened his eyes for a split second. The fish slapped him straight in the forehead. He snatched at it, catching it as if it were a fly. Almost instinctively. And then he plunged his teeth into its back. The creature writhed and arched. But that was when Darius decided to pull him out.

‘Like a woman, he spread his legs ...’
The child snapped pictures of Marcu’s hands as they emerged from the water, one by one.

‘Fuck, he caught nothing!’
But Marcu turned suddenly, as if trying to frighten his mates. Something that looked like poop, but darker, was leaking out of the fish’s anus.

‘Twenty seconds you were under,’ the little boy burst out.
‘Dad, watch this.’
And he handed his father the phone.

By Tudor Crețu
Translated by Dana Crăciun
When Romanians think of the city of Timișoara, the first thing that comes to mind is the revolution. The first rumbles of this historic event took place in this multicultural city, which has always had a proud history of turning its face towards the rising sun – perceived to be the West. In the bitter winter of 1989, which would soon represent a monumental, destiny-disrupting shift in Romanian history, the following slogan spread through the country like wildfire: ‘Today Timișoara, tomorrow the whole country!’ In Romania, this demonstration of bravery and emancipation was always accredited to the city’s geographical proximity to Western Europe.

More precisely, Timișoara is the Romanian capital of the Banat, a region that sits at a crossroads between Central and Eastern Europe. I say ‘Romanian’ as a nod to the region’s multicultural status, which is a result of centuries of imperial processes – Austro-Hungarian primarily, as well as Ottoman. After 1920, the Banat was divided among Romania, Yugoslavia and Hungary, and the Romanian Banat’s current ethno-cultural balance is mainly composed of Romanians, Swabians, Hungarians and Serbians. This multicultural status has promoted a continuous process of exchange, creating a tolerant, cosmopolitan attitude in the city often attributed to a spirit of European Enlightenment brought in with the Habsburgs.

The word ‘border’ is intrinsic to defining cultural history itself, almost always signifying great changes: just compare the concept of a cosmopolitan, free Europe with the very phrase ‘Iron Curtain’. This said, the region is not a utopia. Like anywhere else, the
Banat, and Timișoara itself, were, and are, characterised by hierarchies. An overall sense of peaceful cohabitation is historically verifiable, however, and the firmly entrenched local identity is characterised by a sense of diversity.

The word ‘border’ is intrinsic to defining cultural history itself, almost always signifying great changes: just compare the concept of a cosmopolitan, free Europe with the very phrase ‘Iron Curtain’. Serbian writer Miloš Crnjanski called Timișoara ‘Little Vienna’, and indeed the city’s international mosaic has long been a way of life, although clearly incompatible with the communist system. This is well demonstrated in this magazine by literary works such as Viorel Marineasa and Daniel Vighi’s haunting story ‘Draft of a Requiem’, in which resistance is a matter of ancestral honour and inheritance. Though the pair write in prose, it is a prose akin to the tradition of ‘dialectal’ poetry in the Banat region: concepts are archaic and filial, although the impact of the piece on us as readers is moving rather than old-fashioned.

Within this context of multicultural hierarchies, Goran Mrakić’s ‘Ceaușescu in the Snow’ uses vivid dialogue and bitter irony to deal directly with the repercussions of Europe’s bloodiest revolution of the modern era, while Alex Potcoava’s short story ‘The Foundation’, also ironic, presents an anecdotal case of the city’s rebellious spirit. In it, microscopic and mundane details of life cohabit with global and universal themes, highlighting the absurdity of our modern world. Mircea Pora’s ‘The Walk’ pushes against formal stylistic boundaries with a stream-of-consciousness evocative of Mrs Dalloway or Molly Bloom, but remains tethered in a bucolic, local atmosphere, also with a nod to the author’s Serbian heritage. Bogdan Munteanu’s short story ‘The Overcoat’ is wonderfully colloquial, with its cheeky, absurd humour. Its dry banality is juxtaposed with the fantastic as love and friendship, as in real life, fail to explain themselves.

Even the frontiers of time become porous at the fringes of Central Europe, where the ghosts of former empires continue to echo in the local architecture, cuisine, the medley of languages heard in the streets, and, of course, in the local literature. As such, stylistic choices like magic realism and literary reverie are popular with Timișoara’s prose writers, as well as with Romanian writers in general. In this magazine, Alexandru Colțan’s richly colourful ‘Whispers’ is reminiscent of Joseph Conrad’s depictions of a fundamentally unknowable universe. As if we were children being read a fairy-tale, we pass through invisible borders into metaphysical spaces, such as the highly symbolic ‘river of remembrance’. Whispering itself is a metaphor for the paranoia of the repressive regime that scarred our families and society for decades: conversations were held in hushed tones for fear that the Romanian Secret Police, lurking everywhere, might overhear something that could
be deemed inflammatory. Now, in these new times of freedom, once again, Eastern European writers have the opportunity to be the voice of their people, unrestricted in all ways, also by ideology.

Geography is another constant in the literature of Timișoara: the city’s manicured public gardens, the ever-churning Bega River and the flat plain of the Banat, stretching out to the horizon, give a sense of airy liberty, or, if we were inclined to pessimism, of futility and debilitating heat.

Given this inheritance of idealism and civic engagement, it will come as no surprise that quintessential examples of political dissidents connected to Timișoara and the Banat include Herta Müller, recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2009, and Ana Blandiana, contender for the 2020 Nobel Prize for Literature. As well as the other writers mentioned here, this magazine and the awarding of the status of 2021 European Capital of Culture to the Timișoara region mean we can focus on several important authors who fully deserve to be translated into English. Names to remember here are Sorin Titel, a novelist from the 1980s famous for Woman, Behold Thy Son, as brilliant as Umberto Eco’s The Name of the Rose in its narrative drive and intertextuality, managing to roll William Faulkner, Thomas Mann and Julio Cortázar into one imaginative landscape. Read Sorin Titel’s morbidly trenchant short story ‘Jacob’s Death’ in a special translation for The Romanian Riveter. The trope of the whisper reappears as the titular character, imprisoned by death, whispering his son’s name. The room in which Jacob is effectively imprisoned is hauntingly grim, suggestive of the age-old subjugation that Romanians consider their sinister dowry. The looming sense of lurking danger rises to fever pitch in this story as we approach the border between life and death.

Another contemporary author to introduce you to is Radu Pavel Gheo. His pre-and post-revolutionary bildungsromans speak directly and deeply to the generation that experienced both the bad and the good times, before and after 1989. These two conflicting traditions of cosmopolitanism and communism run through the literature of this city on the banks of the Bega River, so often informed by its history, and so often autobiographical. A literature also frequently characterised by a remarkable clarity of expression. As a result, some of these notable works of ‘autofiction’ have reached the big screen, including Tudor Giurgiu’s Parking and Stere Gulea’s I Am an Old Communist Hag. Timișoara’s authors have been able to create a distinctive imaginary space precisely because of their unique location straddling Central and Eastern Europe, which has given life to, and showcased, so many different realities and historical events.
The room should have a very high ceiling, so that if you look upwards you can barely discern the area where the white-washed walls – dirty white walls, repainted recently, while they were waiting for the old man to die – support the weight of the ceiling from which a thin, black string hangs; at the end of the string, a dirty bulb – with small, dark dots that resemble the reddish freckles on the old man’s face – spreads light that hits the shoebox-like rectangular walls; then there is the daylight, which comes from only one place, a window high up behind the old man, which goes through not to the outside, but to a dimly lit corridor – somebody has broken a glass or an ashtray there and the shrill echo of the broken glass seems to last forever – therefore the light comes from behind and now, when with an unexpected gesture he flips the switch in the heavy, grey, almost immaterial light of the room, his grey hair, lit from behind, resembles the moon’s obscure aura on long, long summer evenings (evenings when the daylightholds out for a while, flows into the night until very late and discourses it, the white, dead moon being the only sign that the brightness of the day is long gone, a grey, dreary moon hanging in a bluish void); he might remember this hour: the silver horses with hot, fragile, swollen bellies lying on a dull green field, the muddy holes in which the horses step and splash themselves all over ...

To the right, also behind the old man there is a door; the moment it swings open with a long, wailing creak, he would be able to see what lies on the other side if he turned around,
if he were so humbly curious as to do so. He would see a long corridor lit by similar bulbs hanging from very thick black strings at equal intervals. By now, the old man should start fretting in the room, his back hunched, his nose knotty and hooked, his moustache stained with nicotine, his body bent very low, almost touching the black-and-white squares in the chessboard-like cement floor. Because seen from above, perhaps from the nook with a dirty, cobwebbed window, the old man might resemble the only pawn left on a chessboard, a pawn somebody moves hither and thither, from a black square to a white one and back; this is how you imagine him running from one chair to another, always searching for something with his short-sighted eyes. He bends his head so low that his thin grey moustache nearly dusts the chairs, those ordinary, blue kitchen chairs. All this lasts for hours, days, maybe weeks, until night finally comes and the old man calms down. At the end of the corridor, a door opens to the street, a door with a bell that opens from time to time, and then a prolonged sound, clear as a child’s voice, is heard in the corridor. A cloud of snow bursts in and somebody near the door stomps the snow off his boots. You can hear the dull stamps and the voice of the old man talking to himself: ‘I can’t leave, why won’t you understand? You think I don’t want to go, you think I’m heartless, you think …’ It is better if the old man talks while looking up at the dirty little window, it is better if he joins his words into a long, endless lament. And he will also say, ‘I can’t leave, please understand I can’t. The wind from Coșava blows so fiercely it cuts right through me. I can’t leave, why won’t you understand …?’ His voice must be high-pitched, he must reach the shrillest notes. Then his voice will break all of a sudden, in the middle of a sentence. The walls will play an important part in this: instead of absorbing the old man’s words, his childish whining, they will reproduce them endlessly; anyway, he thinks the words he mangles will come back into his mouth, so that he can chew them like some bitter drugs or spit them out again in disgust. ‘The biting wind’s cutting right through me … I can’t, Iosif, please understand, from beyond Coșava.’ The words are coming back erratically, disjointed,
although the oxen and the heifers and the old cow with the broken horn and the horses with their hot, swollen bellies are there, on the deserted plot of land of burnt grass, summer’s hot ashes. He says, ‘I can’t leave, you must understand I can’t.’ No more tears to shed; his eyes are dry. The warm nose of the playful, thin newborn calf barely standing on its spindly legs pushes the swollen udder, the milk bucket overturns, the milk spills – all over the place and warm, steamy manure in the middle...

As soon as the sound of broken glass fades away in the corridor beyond the nook window through which the yellow daylight comes, the old man starts singing in a loud, cracked voice. The song must sound as natural as possible, it must be long, gentle, monotonous, like a wail. He must turn around, nobody should be able to see his face, just the back of his head, his silver-grey hair with two knots on top of his head, his round head on a neck as thin as a child’s. He will also have to try not to shout the words; instead, he should blend them together, so that they sound like one single word repeated persistently. All this time, at the end of the corridor, the door will hit the wall, blown by the wind, in rhythm with the old man’s words. ‘I’ve left the horses in the woods, they are cold, I must cover them with a blanket, you see,’ says the old man, uttering random words. It would be better if the tram stopped at the end of the corridor so that he could finally leave, get on the almost empty tram. It is better to choose an older vehicle, one of the first electric trams that slightly resemble the horse-drawn trams. Once it has reached the outskirts, it would be better if it didn’t stop at all, but instead it moved very slowly, so that the hurried passengers can get off. The ticket seller can sleep on the tickets in her narrow cabin; then the tram could stop in a small forest where some calves could move their wet bellies closer to the tram windows. Then the old man will stay in his tiny room again, bent over the kitchen chairs, searching for somebody with his inquisitive eyes. ‘Ana has just been here with Milan’s mute boy,’ he mumbles, his tongue a bit too thick, so you can barely understand him. When he gets tired of searching, or when he merely gets tired,
he draws a chair to the window with great effort. After he has finally managed to climb onto it, he has to stand on tiptoes to look through the dirty little window into the mysterious room from where the sound of broken glass came. A room similar to his own should be chosen, a square, not a rectangular one, with whitewashed walls and a wooden ladder leading to the dark, rectangular hole of the attic. It must definitely have a cement floor with squares like on a chessboard, but red and blue, not black and white, like in the old man’s room. It should contain nothing but very big wicker baskets that the old man studies carefully through his dusty window. The basket closest to the little window the old man looks through is full of ripe tomatoes that were picked just a little while ago, that were washed here and there a short time ago, with water drops that reflected the strong light of the bulb. There must also be other baskets in the room, but the old man cannot see them because he is short-sighted. Then the attic door should be slammed shut, the light should be turned off unexpectedly and only the light from the old man’s window should remain. A streak of light separating the other room in two, shining on only half of the basket of tomatoes. ‘I can’t leave, Iosif, can’t you see I can’t leave, the wind from Coșava blows so fiercely that …’ says the old man aloud, pressing his mouth to the filthy little window, and his words remain there, crushed by the cold, dusty glass. This time the words will be more an excuse than a lament, they will mingle together freely, as the old man’s tongue has started growing thicker. ‘I can’t, you must understand, do you think I wouldn’t like to go, my horses are shivering with cold, the wind’s blowing so harshly, I’ve prepared the woollen blankets to cover them, and now I …’ And as he watches everything that is going on in the other room, he will have to keep staring at the tomatoes he can’t reach. Then, with a shaking hand, he will scrawl his name on the dusty, narrow window. But his hand gets tired after the first letters, the name is left unfinished, an i and an a scribbled in the dust, shaky, crooked, as if it were a schoolboy’s first attempt at handwriting. The old man climbs down awkwardly and drags himself to the other end of the room. He pulls out another
chair, lifts it with difficulty and tries to stand it on top of the first chair. The chair falls down and hits his legs. It would be better if he didn’t shout in pain. He should be much too concerned with his thoughts to be aware of the pain. He lifts the chair again with great effort and balances it on the other one with the skill of a circus artist. He clambers on top of the chairs, stands still, triumphant, and gazes at the room from high up. It looks totally different to him now. He lifts an arm and touches the ceiling with a finger, which fills him with joy. Then he leans on the window once more and presses his nose to it, feeling the strong smell of dust and dirt. On the other side, the light is on again and a young man stands half-naked in the middle of the room, among the fruit baskets. There are grapes and apples. Only now can the old man see them, because he is in a higher place. Head bent to one side, lips slightly parted, the young man looks at him with wide eyes. They stare at each other for a while in silence. Then the young man starts moving his lips as if asleep. Obviously, his slightly swollen and moist lips cannot utter any words. Finally, the old man realises he knows the younger one. ‘He is my son, Iosif,’ he tells himself in amazement and wipes the dirty window with his wrinkled hand, so that he can see him better. He even whispers his name as he places his mouth against the glass. The young man doesn’t answer; he just stands still and stares at him. The old man won’t give up, so Iosif finally moves the basket of grapes closer to the window and climbs on it awkwardly. His feet turn red from the grapes, the grapes melt his legs, he slips, falls on them and crushes them with his weight, stands up again and the bright-red juice oozes across his chest and shoulders, his hands and thighs, even his face is covered in that sweet, bloody fluid. He signals to the old man that he doesn’t have a chair, so he can’t reach the window. The old man will have to be surprised when he sees they look remarkably alike. He will probably have to be sad too, because he cannot squeeze through the narrow nook to the other side and the door is locked. Or maybe he will not even have to think about this. He will only have to tell his son, though he won’t be able to hear him, ‘I can’t leave, please
believe me, I can’t, the wind’s blowing so fiercely, I can’t ...’ Or the old man will have to imagine that he is talking, because no sound will come out of his mouth, except that continuous, meaningless gibberish. After a long time, he will start counting the walls. At first, he will count four, then five, and the faster he counts, the more walls he will find. They will take various geometrical forms and at a certain point there will be so many walls that all the angles will disappear and the room will become circular. It will be a smooth, round surface, white and by no means hostile. In the end, Milan’s mute boy, the village idiot, might turn up, sitting on a chair in front of the old man, staring at him and mumbling incoherently. After him, three old men will turn up as well, to watch him without moving. Then he will bend down to kiss the village idiot’s feet.

*Sorin Titel
Translated by Antuza Genescu*
The Mezins lived in Giulvăș and were among the richest people in the village. Two branches of their family, the Cipors and the Pătriconis, toiled on the Bărăgan Plain, harvesting cotton. What happened to everybody happened to them too: the army and the secret police turned up at their house. The Mezins took some clothes and food from the pantry, two wardrobes they would need to build themselves a shelter in the field near Ciulnița, a cow, a horse, some sacks of wheat and maize and a few chickens. They had to wait at the train station for a few days. The head of the household, Mita Mezin, went back home for a while; the soldier who was watching them granted him this favour. The next morning, Mita went into his courtyard. He stared at the deserted outbuildings, heard the starving cattle bellowing, the dog on its chain, barking, the chickens cackling in their pens. Hungry pigeons flew from under the eaves and the dovecote on the tall pole behind the grain barn and gathered around him. There are no words to describe his desperation. He ran his fingers through his hair and leaned his head against the wall of the house. In just a few days, his hair had turned grey.

Sofia Mezin, Mita’s wife, was found by the militiamen and the soldiers after a long search. She was hiding in a double wall where the family kept their grain. The place could be reached from the attic. She was sitting between the walls, on a pile of wheat. When they shone the torch on her, they noticed something beside her. It was a photograph of King Michael of Romania at the age of fourteen, when he had been
Grand Voivode of Alba Iulia. Sofia’s father had been the village mayor and he had once taken the young crown prince to Banloc Castle in a cart drawn by four white horses.

The soldiers also took Mita’s mother, Mărie Mezin, then eighty-one years old. The family shared the destiny of thousands of deported peasants: the long journey, climbing down from the train into a deserted field in a godforsaken area, the wardrobes turned into shelters and covered with tar paper and then, later, the dugout. That’s how the Mezins and everybody else around them spent an entire winter. After many of their animals had died of thirst, they dug a well that was more than 130 feet deep. The following year they built an adobe house, and people from the neighbouring villages started visiting them.

The old woman died there in the fields. She had begged her sons to take her back home. While she was lying on her deathbed, they told her she could rest in peace, because they were going to take her back to Giulvăz as soon as they were able to leave the Bărăgan wasteland. They promised they would bury her first in a shallow grave, so they could easily remove her from the ground when the time came to leave. They returned to their native village only after six years, old and sick. One of them died of cancer just after he had managed to reclaim his house.

Many years after the deportation, on his way to a sanatorium, lepta, the son-in-law of Vasa, Mita’s brother, stopped at Ciulnița to revisit the places where he had endured so much pointless suffering. In the evening, as he was getting on the train, he slipped and fell under the wheels. In the darkness, a pointsman heard someone moaning on the tracks. When he moved closer to check what was going on, the man on the sleepers put his hands around the pointsman’s neck. As the pointsman picked lepta up, he saw that only the upper half of his body remained intact. The pointsman fainted.

Lepta was buried not far from the old woman’s grave, in the land of Bărăgan, the land turned over twice a year with the ploughs of the gostat.
EPILOGUE

Twenty years after the deportations, in the capital city’s North Railway Station, three men of about thirty, one older and two younger, board the train bound for Timișoara. They carry heavy green backpacks, like forest rangers or hunters. They squeeze through the narrow aisle, checking their tickets against the enamelled seat numbers. They stop, slide the compartment door open, greet the other passengers, take their heavy burdens off their shoulders and rest them carefully on the luggage net above their heads. They sit silently on the bench until the train approaches Băile Herculane, where they intend to get off. When asked by a traveller if they are going to the spa, one of them turns around and, as he is putting his backpack on his shoulders, replies: ‘We are taking our families home from Bărăgan. We have washed their remains with wine and now we are bringing them home.’

Viorel Marineasa & Daniel Vighi
Translated by Antuza Genescu

THE WALK
BY MIRCEA PORA
TRANSLATED BY ALEXANDRU NEMOIANU

Autumn was unhealthy because of the warm air rushing in from everywhere, through the crowns of the trees. The atmosphere was calm, even dull, resembling those fallen hours that set in after a funeral. The buildings emerged from the night as dry as the streets, as the summer drought continued. No one was pushing my son and me to make our way out of our warm beds on which the strange torches of the night were barely extinguished. Let’s take a walk, even if we have to go through a rain of stars... The asphalt is so clean, it looks like a strip of milk, as you can see it is undisturbed by any impurity. The great achievement of modern roads. My son is so quiet,
perhaps overwhelmed by his failures, that with a thought he sends you to those rooms where there is a sudden silence, because the ladies who were playing the piano, tired, had laid their heads on the keys. He drove, driving effortlessly but in accordance with the regulations, while I tasted the landscape, freshly released from the straps of night. I was passing through a village with houses almost entirely covered in leaves. The rich, strong autumn had gathered almost everything to her chest. The most reassuring was the dome of the church, but also the rotations of the storks’ nests, now deserted, but full of greatness. What can I say about the sobs of the mayor’s office, about the microscopic erosions on its walls, which, while driving, we could hear for miles? At one point, on the side of the road, a cross. My son, with his familiar sensibility, stopped in front of it, in the bright light of day...

Oh, Lord, what deep oblivion had that symbolic wood fallen into, the mound of earth into which it was stuck ... As we thought about eternity, the moment called life that fades so quickly, the heavy cars passed behind us, like dreams that disturb you after prolonged funeral services, driven by drivers who had too little care for landscapes. Many of them, looking at us, probably thought that we had stopped so that we could finish a discussion, or indecently meet our basic needs. Go about your business you drivers, with the rare flickers of thoughts that accompany you... In the end we went on, convinced that we would not make serious driving mistakes. An uninspired braking, an overtaking that ruffled many feathers, a crossing over the railway right under the nose of a high-speed train, a small nudge given to a cyclist, who could have flown, bicycle and all, into a ditch, onto a bank. I was moving forward and kept looking at the landscape. We were dealing with a plain full of mole and hedgehog burrows. Country roads intersected country roads, and if a carriage had once appeared on them two hundred years ago, everything would have been perfect. Like a fan, it would have then opened the not infrequently mute wonders of bygone times, which are no longer talked about in schools. Solemn Sundays, holidays spent in deep closeness to nature, other
ways to reduce the fear of death. However, among the papers and mosses, along the small ditches the rain had dug, one could see, in a less than perfect state, it is true, bouquets of flowers. A wave of joy, of relaxation, immediately settled over the car. I now had clear evidence of a wedding. With godparents, priests, groom, bride, modest guests lending a helping hand, some of whom may have already died of malignant cancers or heart attacks. Moving along like this on the road, in the autumn, towards the vaulted souls of so many settlements, you could for a moment, at least, not think about the summer left behind like a shot swan. This great bird, until recently so hot, floating over the tongues of so much turmoil, now lay forgotten, bloodless, swallowed millimetre by millimetre by the distant horizon that seemed so gloomy. My son was driving and the scenery was spectacular. Empty places with white starlight, ditches for resting at night, alleys choked with creeping plants, walls where time had faded, the last shudder of life. Further on, hills that seemed to barely breathe under the autumn sun, clumps of trees, which as the car passed could be taken as the concrete expression of some agonist’s agonies. Far away, where the mountains began under blue lines, a moving speck, probably a hawk, undisputed master of those heights, which of course were barren. Later, they were just question marks, hanging from the sky like hooks. Here, finally, after miles and miles of natural beauty, a new village appeared under a regular mountain of thorns. For a few seconds the car, although moving slowly, jumped off the road and we saw, beyond the piles of weeds, a large sign that read: ‘Stopping for a while here is not a mistake’. Both my son and I took the announcement seriously, we found ourselves temporarily sheltered under the branches, which resembled the feathers of a raven, of a massive chestnut. From its leaves it blew a vague breath of air towards us, which seemed to have its origins in the blind eyes of deep cracks in the ground. ‘Let’s go slowly,’ I told my

Grandfather was a doctor, plump face, of great renown, lover of local mountains, Grandmother, teacher, Serbian, a bit severe, reserved. For so long, their shadows fluttered through the cemetery.
son, ‘I really don’t know anything about this village; nor did my grandmother, who passed the age of a hundred, ever tell me about it.’ We both felt the strangeness, the possibility of surprises, from the first steps we took. As far as the eye could see, the houses were either poorly repaired or badly affected by the passage of time. Most of the balconies and terraces had collapsed. In the slight movements of the air, rows of trees, nothing optimistic, encouraging. It was easy to imagine that you were walking through a prison where there were no dogs and guards, that you were being thrown by an adversary into a place that secret diseases had gradually silenced.

A trumpet of dust rose for a few moments in the square, in conflict with the stillness, the stillness of the scenery. Not even a hen appeared on the white plateau, which looked strikingly like the bottom of a long-dried sea. Then my son and I gained courage, we felt a strengthening of the muscles, a sharpening of our initiative. Let’s see what happens in the houses ... Being engaged in a longer walk and still fearing that we would be surprised by the darkness on the road, we would summarise what we saw in a few words ... All those whom we had met seemed to have slipped into a smooth, hopeless sleep. Some were sleeping on their feet, either ready to leave or with their hands outstretched for something, cups, icons, coloured pencils, driving licences, others had been caught asleep, frozen, laughing out loud, making eyes at bacon, a few city officials had fallen to their knees, presumably before a kindergarten inspector, the stillness in her arms had embraced the choir, the dancers, the maid, the teacher. I also came across pigs frozen in cages and migratory birds that the frost had plucked from flight. Perhaps with less courage than an hour ago, my son and I headed for the chestnut tree under whose branches the car was waiting. Neither of us commented on anything and after a few deep breaths we set off again. All the officials along the road seemed to be aware that we too had seen the ‘miracle’, which they had known about for a long time. In fact, the checks were all reduced to significant exchanges of looks. Fortified by exercises, by reading in the most exotic languages, and
modestly, using the strictest common sense, my son led the way forward, following his instincts as if to avoid potholes, harassment, unevenness. Both our beards had grown a little since we left, our cheeks developing a red patina, but I could still appear in a movie, in a play. With our heads bowed we passed through a village whose recent history is connected with an uncle of mine, who proved beyond any doubt that he did not care about death. For his deeds he deserved a monument, a small statue, a plaque, something commemorative, a tree planted in his memory. They will pay homage to him with something. The forests, the grey autumn clouds, the streams of water escaping from the strength of the mountains will pay homage to him. Further up, where eternity truly begins, there will be one to take care of this. And suddenly, round a curve, the Written Stone appears. Great emperors, whose deaths are in the chronicles, passed by, kings dressed in decorative chains, princes, deeply enlightened spirits, and famous women all got out of cars, out of carriages, to place their hands on the Stone. Now no one was here, only the railway bridge was swirling over it. With a boldness I didn't really recognise, I approached the Stone. It was neither big nor particularly heavy, but people were a little reluctant to touch it. Not exactly unconsciously, but fuelled by a strange courage, I took a few steps in there. For a moment I thought about stopping, but the hesitation passed, and what was to happen to me, it happened ... I had pushed the stone aside and was trying to look through that abyss that I had sensed was beneath. I did not lean on anything, I absorbed or I was deeply absorbed, as if I could leave the earth. There is a song that resonates in your ears when such situations arise. You accompany it, you look into the abyss below you, everything multiplies around you. The water below, the darkness, you don't even know, it rises up to you and as soon as you wipe your eyes, you are one with what it once moved and now doesn't seem to move. From the depths of your brain, inexplicably bright pieces of your life and of the lives that were close to you come to the surface and lie on the landscape of those depths. There are also images that once tormented
you, all kinds of phantasms, demanding their right to freedom again. That’s right, that’s what I remember, I’ve seen them before, my parents on the walk, each on their own, like two strangers, look, they don’t make any sign to me, two capitals coming together as one, a plane above all, before igniting, a period of history with the face of a man, turning yellow from moment to moment, the frozen mouths of a river unexplored by anyone, loneliness, for a moment shattered, but coming back strongly again, walking through her gardens, and again my parents, like two strangers, on I don’t know which streets, if I don’t know where … and my son’s voice, like a sharp whistle that warns you to get out of the mud … ready, you’ve looked enough at what’s under the Stone, now let’s put it back as it was and continue our walk … What can I say, what else is there to say? I replaced the Stone, the Written Stone, we then looked at it, like a spade looks at the flow of blood that keeps you alive, after which I moved on. You have to take a walk to the end to accomplish it, no matter what you have to face. After several bends between the rocks, after I got rid of the hawks that hit the windshield, after I spared at least a dozen cats who had cut us up, we stopped in another village. Here we had to solve the issue with the bouquet … The flowers, beautifully gathered together, had followed us in the back seat all the way. They had been chosen by a Viennese lady, a lover of balconies and vast terraces who knew all the intermediate states between joy, pathos and melancholy. Needless to say, they were not intended for any award-winning student, for any ‘Olympians’ in mathematics, physics, history, biology. They were not intended for any bride or couple celebrating their golden or diamond wedding anniversary. God forbid they be given to a colonel who was to be made a general, or to a priest on whose face no one had ever read thirst for profit or hypocrisy. It was meant for my grandparents, my son's great-grandparents. They had died more than seventy years ago. Grandfather was a doctor, plump face, of great renown, lover of local mountains, Grandmother, teacher, Serbian, a bit severe, reserved. For so long, their shadows fluttered through the cemetery. We were
approaching it, with flowers in our hands ... As we were coming up from behind, from the railway, something puzzled us. Why were there so many piles of earth in front of so many graves? A young man born well after the times of free competition between factories explained to us: ‘The cemetery, dear visitors, dear gentlemen, will be modernised, electricity, internet, Facebook pages, blogs, sewerage, entertainment, sports fields, mobile phones, and until then, its legal inhabitants have been transferred. I can’t tell you any more.’ My son and I walked as far as we could between the empty pits. They were all the same: deep, blind, deserted. Countless wreaths, bouquets, promises of eternal remembrance, tins, what may have been decorations, tufts of grass among lumps of earth, wet, dry. Eventually we threw our bouquet at random. To leave the cemetery I went out the front, because that was where the grave I was looking for was. And, what did I see ... our grandparents, our great-grandparents had not left but had come out of their graves next to each other, standing, slightly supported by their crosses ... I returned home late, red with fatigue. The monotony of the rooms was no greater than when we had left. Shutters advertising the Beer Festival were pulled down over the windows. Beyond that, one thing was for sure, we had not attached ourselves to anyone or anything on this walk ...
The fires were beginning to die down. The men held their clubs above the last of the flames, watching them lick the rags wrapped around their ends. Night birds called to each other in the air. After a while, the men stood up and started the journey down, working their way through a jungle of reed, sedge and foxtail. Had they looked up beyond their torches, they would have seen the first stars glimmering in the sky.

The grass was thick, their shirts torn and their arms scratched, but they pressed on, trying not to stumble and fall. They stepped carefully over rotten tree trunks knocked down by storms, through sharp-leaved shrubs rustling before them and under their feet. When they skirted the willows, an otter startled them, jumping up before disappearing back into the ground. ‘Not much longer now,’ Jacob told himself for the hundredth time, watching the sky shrink like a huge, blue stomach.

Bloodnut started singing, ignoring the other men’s mumbled protests. He had a clear, strong voice and for some reason, they all looked up at the moon’s white circle for a moment.

‘I think we’ll do a good job,’ said a voice from behind. The others must have been happy, as, one by one, the smells of the river welcomed them.

At long last, they reached the trees on the ridge. Before their eyes, ghosts danced in the mist on the wide river – the dark monster that rubbed its neck against the shore. Jacob no longer recognised the place. Never had the river on which death walked seemed so close.

They kept silent for a while, watching the water carry away the reflections of their torches and the souls of those who had once drowned. Eerie calls and whispers came from the darkness, which had caught up with them.

‘From here on we walk in pairs,’ decided Bloodnut, pairing them up quickly, ‘and we meet again at Stream Shedding!’
In the torchlight, they looked like strange creatures with red, misshapen faces, ruffled hair and glowing eyes. The creaking tree crowns billowed, invisible in the wind. The village had vanished, as though it had never been there at all. He was the last to leave. He saw Bloodnut and his brother disappear suddenly into the heart of the night. He knew Bitu was standing behind him, waiting for him in silence, his face lost in the dark. No time to waste, they had to move on. In truth, Jacob didn’t know the way back home.

They squeezed hastily through the thick foliage that grasped at them like a huge monster with green teeth and claws, pushing aside vines and weeds that grew freely, treading on dead branches covered in fungi. Torches in their hands, they walked along the shore. They passed by creepy figures dressed in ivy and dense grass, through tall ferns and thorny bushes, they ducked under lichen-mottled trunks. They heard the river roaring underneath their feet, as though from under the ground, biting the shore with long monster teeth, harder and harder.

The boy looked at Bitu’s fur coat and cursed under his breath. This was his first fishing expedition. Why had he ended up with this silent, wild man who never caught anything? He squeezed the fork his father had tied to a hazel branch tighter in his palm. It was his turn to become a fisherman and he was stuck with Bitu. Just his luck. Why had Bloodnut not sent him with the other lads, downstream, towards the log dam?

They stumbled over clods of earth. The path made a hairpin bend and then followed the fields. They left it and kept along the wall of vegetation, until they found another beaten path concealed by the undergrowth. The smell of wild mint was so strong you could chew it.

Then they went down a trail descending among burdocks. White clouds unfolded lower and lower in the sky, as if in a dream. Further down, Jacob found some steps carved in the ground and two well-anchored rods with tiddlers writhing on
the hooks. The fishermen had made a habit of leaving their lines by the bank during the night; the predators sniffed at the prey, swam around it in circles and eventually got caught themselves. Jacob had often heard about lads taking their boats out and tying their bait lines in otherwise impenetrable places or fishing in dangerous waters. It was common knowledge that every other day Bloodnut stuck a duckling on a hook that he had fastened to a tree. That’s how he caught the sharp-toothed pike-perch he sold to his friends. Once, Jacob saw him hide a huge salmon in a cart, the fish so heavy he could barely lift it.

They had reached a narrow opening between the leaves and roots, very close to the big river, the river of remembrance. They were finally there. Frightened birds were criss-crossing the sky above their heads, but Bitu would not hear anything. He was already climbing down and beckoned Jacob to follow. The boy obeyed, sensing he was sinking deeper and deeper into a cold trap, and suddenly saw his father drinking water from a tin mug, his face all wrinkled. ‘Whisper,’ he would tell him, ‘don’t let them see you, don’t let them hear you.’ He followed Bitu, who was now bent over the water, shining his torch on the glistening surface, his fork ready to strike. More than once, those who went down to the riverbank were pulled under by the currents or swallowed by the pits in the riverbed. It had happened to Roli, who had been found several days later, hopelessly tangled in the wires of the dam, his belly swollen, his eyes like those of a dead fish.

Jacob and Bitu advanced cautiously, trying not to trouble the water. It was a good thing they weren’t hurrying downstream, thought the boy. They had time to get there later. Hundreds of critters, water spiders, tiddlers looking for food swarmed at their feet, attracted by the light. They moved slowly around sunken tree trunks, but their prey was nowhere to be seen.

‘It should be somewhere around here,’ decided Jacob. ‘I must find it, catch a big one, brag to the whole village about it.’ Everybody knew that when spring came, when the forest echoed with birdsong, the nase swam up to the warmer
waters of the brooks to lay their eggs. That year it hadn’t been the children patrolling the bank with forks who announced it, but the fishermen. Rumours that the nase had swum by the waterhole spread all around the canton. Immediately gill nets were lowered, pens were mended, the men met and separated into groups. Those living closer to the edge of the river knew from experience that at that time of year, the nase swam blindly and were quite easy to catch. They didn’t taste very good, they had a lot of bones, but they were fish nonetheless – fish were meat, and meat was life.

Bitu stopped and crouched down to scrutinise the red surface of the water. Suddenly, he thrust his arm down and his fork struck something. The boy froze with the torch in his hand. Then he saw Bitu recover his weapon.

‘We’re separating,’ mumbled Bitu. ‘Stop following me. Go that way.’

Jacob watched as his companion’s silhouette, reflected in the night’s blue sky, faded away in the veil of mist. ‘He’s worried I may trouble the water and catch his fish,’ he thought.

He was all alone now. The thought made his hair stand on end. He shifted his torch to the left and shone it on the shore, towards the dark abyss that was calling him. ‘I’ll catch something. I’ve got to catch something.’

He waded on for a long while, stumbling over the shiny pebbles, among insects as tiny as nails, which seemed to be the only living creatures in that water. Now and again, he lowered his fork in order to relax his tense arm muscles. He flinched at every sudden movement, but it was only the grass and reeds whispering. At some point, he felt the whole substance of the night gather in the round, yellow eyes of an ominous spirit that was studying him curiously over his shoulder. He felt its breath like a cold gust of wind and thrust his fork forwards, to keep it at bay for a while.

Once he thought he heard the Hound-of-the-Swamps barking closely behind him and froze on the spot. He knew the river carried away the souls of the dead; they rode on ghost horses, chased by wild beasts. He knew this from Surdu, who had lost his marbles after meeting with a young
devil that called its dogs with a whistle. Older fishermen didn’t believe in such nonsense, but even older people could be wrong. It happened all the time. After all, what did they know? Weren’t they the ones telling stories about the miller’s daughter, who had green hair and goats’ legs, and haunted the waters dressed as a bride, to lure the lads into the whirlpools?

The boy kept searching, his weapon ready. Suddenly, a fish darted by his foot, too fast for him to catch. The fishermen had lied, he was sure of that now. The damned nase had not come yet. No surprise there. The cherry trees weren’t even in blossom, how could they have come?

Perhaps it would be better if he went further into the water. The current was stronger now, the water was colder, and fatigue seemed to leave his body through his leg muscles. His torch barely gave any light anymore. He wondered what the others were doing. Had they caught anything? No doubt, Bloodnut had sent him here, into dead water, so he would return empty-handed. Jacob saw the boys bursting into fits of laughter, then his mother’s still face came before his eyes.

The waves were rolling, spinning small crowns of yellowish foam. He slipped and nearly fell. A year back, when the ice was melting and the brooks flooded their beds, dead cows, uprooted trees and whole roofs floated where the currents were stronger on the river. It was strange how the river, yellow like pus, could feed both the forest and the fields.

Plink-plink-plink. Night was falling in small drops. He took a new torch from his fishing bag and lit it. Life slept on, hidden somewhere far away. That moment he heard the Hound-of-the-Swamps barking wildly just ahead of him.

*Alexandru Colțan*  
*Translated by Antuza Genescu.*
The end of 1999 found me in a Belgrade still shaking off the rubble and soot of the NATO bombings.

The world is getting ready to step into the new millennium, groups of football supporters aredowning beers in the park behind the Sveti Marko church, pensioners are feeding the pigeons among the statues of the Kalemegdan fortress, the cassette and CD sellers in front of the Students’ Cultural Centre are smoking weed, unhindered by the police, and young people are making plans for New Year’s Eve parties.

Snowflakes have begun floating down and I’m watching them settle on the roofs of the market stalls in Zeleni Venac Square. I’m having a vinjak¹ with Miloš and Dobrila, who are discussing the music they will take to the party in a few hours. It’s 31st December. After tomorrow, history will have a new prefix. Miloš is telling us about a book on the general psychoses that preceded the year 1000. I ask him what it was like during the NATO bombings.

‘What do you think it was like? We went out to concerts every day, playing rock music on the bridges, waiting for a bomb to fall on our heads and not giving a flying fuck.’

I throw Dobrila a confused look and he laughs heartily.

‘When death becomes a common – daily – thing, waving at you from behind every building, street corner or every little cloud in the sky; when children learn to fall asleep to the music of sirens, and when you throw all your vain hopes into the mind-blowing whirl of one of Anton’s guitar solos, then fear vanishes.’

‘And what’s left?’

‘What can be left other than madness and mockery?’

Instantly, I realise this is true. Dozens of jokes are made about the bombings that took place a few months ago. The

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¹ Serbian brandy
country is on the rocks, poverty is baring its teeth, Milošević is still in power, and the world’s largest military alliance is being ridiculed even on the bumper and fridge stickers sold by gypsies at pavement stalls or the flea market. Miloš is telling the story of a group of volunteers that saved the Yugoslav Drama Theatre from a fire, back in April. He uses the abbreviation JDP – ‘Jugoslovensko Dramsko Pozorište’. I ask him what JDP means.

Dobrila lights himself a cigarette and says: ‘Jako Dobar Požar …’ Very good fire.

They both burst into savage and strange laughter. Outside, the snow is thickening and they mention casually that, two days ago, in the toilet of the small and picturesque bar we’re in, while sinking into the sugary rhythms of Cuban music, someone was shot in the head. I try not to look shocked, but my drink gets stuck in my throat. I cough. Miloš pats me on the back, laughing.

‘A run-in between gangsters, nothing special. Do you know what that busybody Bata Trlaja said five or six years ago? “Small pond, many crocodiles.” That’s Belgrade, a hell of a city …’

We sip our drinks, then we head off for our New Year’s Eve party. A guy named Fedja is playing music. I find out from the people there that he’s half Albanian, but he’s ‘cool’, he’s ‘one of us’. People are singing, dancing, drinking, smoking, having fun. We walk out of there at around five a.m. We stop to eat some skewers and pleskavica spiced meat at the Cerska Bitka bar. The owner is both bartender and cook. Some homeless people are pissong on crates at the back of the shack. Knele, as the owner is called, steps outside and threatens them with a hatchet, then he comes back and serves us, on the house, with a round of loza – grape brandy from Montenegro, his home. From the small radio on the counter we hear ‘Tempest Sailor’ by the band Atomsko Sklonište. With our mouths and glasses full, we sing the chorus at the top of our lungs: ‘The shore is fifty-fifty, but I’m giving everything to you …’ Knele boasts that he saw the ‘Atomics’ live when he was serving in the army, in Istria, back in 1984. Oh, those were the days ...
He takes the bottle of brandy and puts it on the table. ‘Here, drink as much as you want. It’s on me. The food, too, fuck it, it’s New Year’s Eve!’

The atmosphere at Cerska Bitka is more fun than at the New Year’s Eve party we’ve just been to. We get drunk and sober up at the same time, it’s a damn good feeling. The sun is rising slowly above our post-apocalyptic Belgrade. It snowed quite a bit last night, covering the tram stop, the tiles on the houses, the cars in the parking lot, in a blanket of white. We would all like to stay captive as long as possible in the fog of cigarettes and ĉevapi meat rolls that engulfs the small pub. The owner tells us of the horrors he lived through on the front line during the civil war.

‘I was a butcher at the slaughterhouse in Kragujevac for ten years, but I’d never seen as much pig’s blood as I did human blood in Bosnia…’

We listen in silence, we eat and, from time to time, we raise our shots of brandy. Flesh and blood are the food of the land we live on, and our land is a god who’s constantly thirsty and hungry. Outside the day has begun, but the darkness inside us is getting heavier. We watch the people waiting for the tram and wonder where the hell they’re off to on a Saturday morning, on the first day of the new millennium. The owner packs twenty ĉevapi to go, so we ‘have something to nibble on’ when we wake up. We line up behind the tram stop to empty our bladders, except for Dobrila, who ventures out to the bar’s seedy loo. We try to write something with our pee jets in the soft snow. A few feet away, we notice a drunk guy, collapsed in a very unnatural posture.

Knele points at him and cries: ‘Ha ha! Look at that bastard sleeping, like Ceauşescu in the snow!’

It’s my turn to burst out laughing like an idiot.

Knele looks at me, confused, but Miloš explains: ‘The boy is from Romania, I forgot to mention…’

‘So? Is there a problem? Did I offend you in any way?’ the ruddy-faced bar owner asks me, slurring his words.

‘No, not at all,’ I say, ‘it’s just funny, the whole scene …’
‘This is what I remember from the TV: after they executed Ceauşescu, he just lay there in the snow, like a football player celebrating a goal surrounded by his teammates.’

So this is what’s left, I think to myself, of the most-feared dictator of Eastern Europe – a joke made by a drunk in another country about another drunk. All that remains after the NATO bombings is ridicule, stacks of sarcasm and black humour. The haze of the end of a civilisation. An ugly, undignified, grotesque end. The execution squad of history is ruthless to those who see themselves as the eternal masters of things and destinies.

Knele continues his story, swigging from a bottle: ‘I had a friend who was working for the Novi Sad TV station. They were the first foreign journalists to get into Timişoara in 1989. He told me he got goosebumps when the entire square started chanting “Yu-go-sla-ri-a, Yu-go-sla-ri-a”.

‘Yes, that’s the way it was. People were waiting for help, for a sign they weren’t alone...’

‘God,’ says Knele, caressing his bottle and staring into space, ‘how wretched people must have felt if they were waiting for the dead to come to the rescue?’

‘Back then, Yugoslavia wasn’t dead yet...’

‘You know what Chekhov said: “If in the first act you hung a gun on the wall, then in the next act it should be fired.” Our house had been smelling of death for a long time, ever since the first act. The problem was, we were too drunk at the wake...’

The tram pulls in. We get on and, through the dirty window, we wave at Knele, who is opening a beer bottle on the doorframe. The snowed-in drunk wakes up and staggers away. We’re crossing the Danube, the umbilical cord of old Europe. Bridges are made to connect people, and the savages that destroyed them just didn’t understand rock ‘n’ roll. They create some bland, dysfunctional rules, and we break them with the lawlessness in our DNA. The sun smiles over the dome of Sveti Marko. There’s still a mouthful of brandy in the bottle, which I hand to Miloš.

‘Are we going home?’ I ask him.
‘Are you crazy? We’ve just entered history and you want to sleep?’

‘Then what should we do?’

Dobrila shakes the mud off his boots, fixes the red lock of hair that has escaped from his cap and, counting the cigarettes in his rumpled pack of Bond, says: ‘We’ll buy a few beers from the stall, then go to Kališ to watch the Sava meet the Danube at Ušće.’

We get off the tram and cross the city centre towards Kelemegdan. We park ourselves on a wooden bench and gaze at the Danube. A seagull flies down and lands on a cast-iron railing in front of us. We watch it silently, admiringly, and feed it the ćevapi Knele gave us.

‘It’s one of the few birds that has stayed loyal to us, for better or worse,’ says Miloš eventually.

‘Yes,’ says Dobrila, ‘I was going to get a tattoo of a swallow, but I think I’ll get a Danube seagull instead.’

It’s started snowing again. The invisible camera moves up, towards the sky, while we are left below in a static frame. A dot in the ever-flowing universe, like the river at our feet, where no Ceaușescu can ruin the beauty of the landscape through his acrobatic death.
It’s not working. I want to let it all out, I want to forget about this stupid visit, I want to scream, scream at someone. I’ll call my wife. The phone, Laura, here we go. Fuck. Out of credit. No job, nothing. Only debts. Oh Gigi, my man, what are you doing to me?

I’ve known Gigi since we were yay high. He lived in B11, and I’d recently moved into B12. I stayed in the house for two weeks before I had the courage to go outside. I’d seen Gigi through the window; he was the biggest and fattest of all the kids our age, and he’d slap anyone if something didn’t feel right to him. One day I mustered up my courage and went out. Nobody paid any attention to me, except for this fat boy. He came straight at me. I was shivering, I didn’t know what the deal was. Was I likeable, was he sniffing me out, was he just curious? This block belongs to me and my dad, he grunted, and pushed his finger into my belly. What are you doing here? I muttered something about having just moved into the building and not having anywhere else to go. He wasn’t pleased. He scowled at me, got close and burped in my face. That was what saved me. Before moving to the city, I’d been in hundreds of competitions against the guys in my old gang, so I was able to burp anytime, anyhow. I took a step back, drew a deep breath, and unleashed the most monstrous burp of my entire life. And thus Gigi and the others were seduced. First they froze as if they’d heard a dinosaur. Then they laughed their asses off. Do it again, one more time, again – they kept asking me to do it, and they were dying with laughter every time and kept asking me for one more, one more, and we’re done! I was floating on air ... Gigi immediately took me under his wing. Whoever picked a fight with me picked a fight with Gigi. All I had to do was burp whenever and however he wanted. It was an exchange that suited me perfectly. Football, tag, team leapfrog, little secrets, then later, booze, gambling, women, more secrets, but bigger – it was a friendship impossible to break.

And yet, for a time, we cut all ties. We didn’t speak to each other for years. We were both a little over thirty. What happened was this:
1: Gigi badly – really badly – fell for a girl, Loredana. I’m getting married, he said to me one day. I thought he was joking and I let out a light burp to defuse the situation. But he wasn’t joking; from his chest pocket he took out an invitation crowded with hearts, balloons and little birds. Congratulations, I’m glad, I said, and pretended I was glad.

After the wedding I saw him less and less. He was pissing me off, kept going on about how well he was and how awesome Loredana was, but not only that, because he wouldn’t have married her after only three months for nothing; Loredana this, Loredana that, and get your mind together and marry a woman like mine – he didn’t say it like his, but that’s what he meant, or at least that’s what I thought he meant. He was so in love that one day he forgot to ask me to burp – that was a first. It hurt a lot. Hurt so bad that I was incapable of saying anything at all.

2.1: On the rare occasion Gigi remembered I existed and invited me over – only to preserve appearances – to their love nest, Loredana would laugh harder at my jokes than at Gigi’s, would look me in the eyes more often than she looked at Gigi. She was awesome. Had it not been for that friendship, I wouldn’t have hesitated for a second.

2.2: The third or fourth time I visited, Gigi remembered our old habits. Yo, man, burp! he shouted. I perked up at once, but then immediately slouched – there was a woman there, I didn’t want to be rude. But they both insisted – the wine had gone to their heads. I said OK and let out a common-sense burp so I wouldn’t get anyone upset. They applauded, I felt great, I took a shot of pâlincă; that’s not important though – the fact is when Gigi went to the toilet, Loredana snaked her arms around me and whispered you pig, and bit my earlobe, and this made me forget about tag, team leapfrog, gambling, friendship, and all the Gigis in the world. You’re the pig, I said, and I pinched her ass, and she burst into laughter and – because Gigi had just flushed – she slapped me, and it was the best slap I ever got.

I want to cry, I want to scream, I want Laura to calm me down, I want to forget about this visit. And look, I don’t have any credit left. I begin to walk, damn, this cold is annoying me. I get to the bus stop. I light a cigarette, I need to try to calm myself down, to rewind, maybe things will come together.
3: A whole month hadn’t even passed, and Loredana became insistent and hysterical, and she kept terrorising me with I love you pig, if you don’t come here I’ll tell him everything and you’ll see what happens then. I started avoiding her, but it was too late. Gigi called me and shouted you piece of garbage, you lover-boy, how could you, man, how could you, and so on. Loredana had gone rogue and she’d even told him about the earlobe, and what happened next was pretty clear. I reacted as innocently and naturally as I could – What, Gigi, my man, have you gone mad? Shut up or I’ll come over and stab you, he shouted between gasps. And from that day on I didn’t exist to him. I shut up and regretted that I’d hurt my friend. He didn’t come to stab me, but he got divorced immediately – I was expecting that, he’d been the impulsive type since he was a boy.

We made peace some five years later, when I invited him to my wedding to Laura, with whom I’d fallen in love just because she was awesome. I froze when Gigi showed up – I wasn’t expecting him to come. We both pretended we’d forgotten what had happened. He’d married another woman, Sanda, got into business, made a lot of money – he bluntly told me all of this while having a cigarette in front of the church. After that he wished me, even more bluntly, congratulations. I awkwardly said thank you, and, ummm, I’m very glad you came, but I kept thinking of asking him if Sanda was as awesome as Loredana – a stupid thought that made me feel more and more pathetic. After we finished our cigarettes, Gigi slapped me so hard that every guest at the wedding just froze, and then he said, OK, it’s done, I’m over it. Now burp! I gave a grunt in front of the church. Loudly. My jaw hurt, but that wasn’t the reason for my tears.

After the wedding we began to meet on a weekly basis. We played backgammon, talked dirty and laughed. We ate and drank like jerks, always with Gigi’s money. Gigi was rich, I was poor. Gigi was high and mighty, I was small fry. Gigi was an XXL, I was a poor L.

Now Gigi was dying, and I was sound as a bell, and just as poor. I’d known for two months that he was in bad, bad shape,
they’d discharged him from the hospital, they weren’t able to
do anything for him any more. I visited him so often that his
imminent death became a casual thing. My legs didn’t even
shake when I saw him. He’d lost about forty kilograms, he
looked terrible. Frog-like eyes, popped out of their orbits,
sunken cheeks, a pile of bones almost piercing his skin. In his
last week he didn’t even have the strength to get out of bed,
he was just lying there, his only concern appeared to be the
morphine dose. The moment I stepped into his room I started
chattering, I couldn’t stand the silence, it seemed like every
moment of silence sucked a bit of life out of Gigi, I was rambling
on and on about childhood, do you remember when, what
about that time when, I was gesturing, making faces, and
when I let out a burp, seemingly by mistake, he smiled too, but
ghostily. And just like that a half-hour had passed, alright,
homie, I’ll let you sleep, your eyes are shutting, he begged no,
I can stay awake, look, and he kept his eyes wide open just to
show me he wasn’t asleep. He touched me with his skeletal
hand, I felt pity for him – I didn’t want that, I didn’t want him to
blackmail me and I was lying to him, my boss is going to scold
me for being late to work, what, didn’t I tell you I found a job
at a newspaper, come on, Gigi, I told you. We were laughing,
I touched the blanket in which he was wrapped, but carefully,
I didn’t want to feel his bones. I snuck out of the room and
forgot about him at once. I had my own problems, they’d laid
me off right after he got sick, I couldn’t find a job, we were
having a hard time, we were living off Laura’s money, little as
it was, in short, it was bad. Gigi was dying, I knew he could
solve my problems in the blink of an eye, but I didn’t dare ask
for money precisely because he was dying. The only debt
I could pay was that of being a good friend. I paid him visits,
I told him stories, I left. I didn’t even have to entice him,
his knew he was dying. It’s done, he rattled. It’ll be done
before Christmas.

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I want to cry, I want to scream, I want Laura to calm me down,
I want to forget about this visit. And look, I don’t have any
credit left. I begin to walk, damn, this cold is annoying me. I get
to the bus stop. I light a cigarette, I need to try to calm myself down, to rewind, maybe things will come together.

The overcoat, Gigi had said weakly, and made a sign to his wife to get it. I had been confused. What overcoat? What’s the catch? Sanda brought the coat and put it in my arms, it’s new, he doesn’t need it anymore, she whispered, what’s he going to do with it? And then him: Does it fit? Try it on. I made a gesture, oh, no, it’s not necessary, but in fact I was thrilled, it was a good moment for a present. And really, what could Gigi have done with it? He gave it to me. I would have done the same thing. I tried on the overcoat, it was big on me, I’d known that from the beginning. He is, or, you know, was, an XXL, me – an L at best. But still, it was a good gift. I said thank you, I smiled, wanted to make a joke, I have to put on some weight (God, what a stupid joke), I’ll be back tomorrow or the day after, and I made a sign to Sanda to put my old coat in a bag. I was about to turn left towards the door, take care, Gigi. And I heard him rattling again: twenty million, that’s what I paid for it. Hugo Boss. I froze. Why was he saying this to me? What’s the price got to do with anything? You take the price tags off presents. You don’t make someone feel bad and indebted. And then he dropped the bomb: I’ll leave it at ten. Brand new.

A steal.
What?
Ten what?
What steal?
Was he selling it to me!?

I looked helplessly at Sanda, maybe she could contradict him, maybe she could confirm this was just a sinister joke, people make this sort of joke when they’re dying, something, she had to say something! And there she was, not saying anything, she’d stuffed my old coat in the bag, and she looked at me like an idiot. And she smiled. My legs were shaking like the time I found out Gigi was dying. I was standing in the middle of the room, dumbfounded and ridiculous, with the Hugo Boss on me, I was sweating hard and I couldn’t look Gigi in the eye. I was imagining myself withdrawing a thousand lei in small bills, fives, tens, and throwing the money in the air,
I could see how the money would fall over Gigi and cover his skeletal body, how he’d rise happily from the pile of money and start counting it, and how I’d announce, burping triumphantly, every hundred. But I didn’t have that kind of money. Gigi was dying, and, because he was dying, I had to indulge him. No comment! Ummm, I’ll get the money to you, ummm, next time, I mumbled, and I left, wearing that stupid overcoat. On the street I realised I’d forgotten the bag with my old coat. They hadn’t said anything, Gigi or Sanda. They saw the coat and what did they think about? What a steal. Or maybe that I was disturbed.

Nothing came together in that cold. Only stupid things were going through my mind. Gigi loved money, I knew that. He loved me too, sure. Let’s play some backgammon. Let’s. Let’s drink. Let’s. Let me tell you a secret. Tell me. Burp! Boajahigoifdxf. One more time! Gmanpsosaeia. I too loved money, but I didn’t know how to make it. Maybe that’s why I loved Gigi. I started to do the math, how many times we’d gone out together, how much money he’d spent on pork chops and duck and turkey and beef and whisky, and other things we’d stuffed ourselves with and drunk. I came to the conclusion I owed him ten overcoats, not one, and I felt bad because everything I had to offer wasn’t measurable in his currency. Nonsense. I’d get my hands on a thousand lei and that was that.

* It’s New Year’s Eve. I’m at Gigi’s funeral. My autumn coat and two sweaters are no match for this cold. I’m waiting for the priest to start making the sign of the cross, maybe then I’ll thaw out a bit. But the priest just prolongs the service and gets on my nerves. I look to my left. My wife should be there, but she got sick. Nothing bad, it’ll pass. I look to my right. Loredana is crying. She leans into me, and that livens me up a little.

Oh, the overcoat. I sold it. For five hundred, I don’t know how to negotiate. Half of the money went to medicine for Laura and the funeral wreath, I drank the rest when I heard Gigi died. I burped an entire day in bars, but it didn’t have the same charm.
Before dawn, the workers descended into the giant crater, some thirty metres below ground, and manned their stations. They had almost reached the depth required to lay the piled raft foundation of the nineteen-storey skyscraper. The soil was muddy, the diaphragm walls and heavy-duty pumps could barely cope with the groundwater infiltration. Beneath Paris, there was an immense swamp just waiting to surface. The only way to keep it at bay was to pour reinforced concrete over the piles anchored in the bedrock seventy metres deep. The excavators still had a lot of dirt to remove from one corner, and were being pressed on by the steel fixers who were tying together the horizontal skeleton of rebar cages.

At the opposite end of the building site, the concrete mixing trucks were already discharging their viscous load through long hoses guided into the formwork. The deadlines were very strict, there was no room for hesitation. The workers were supposed to reach ground level by the summer and welcome the autumn from the tenth floor. Which was doable for a steel-frame building with glass curtain walls.

The operator sipped from his white plastic coffee cup. He drove the excavator bucket deep into the ground, scooped up soil, swung the arm over to the dump truck, unloaded it and swung back. He was about to sink the steel teeth forward and down again, when he saw a man climbing out of the ditch, waving his hands at him. The operator froze the boom in mid-air. The sudden halt shook the machine violently and his coffee spilled all over the dashboard. He swung the cabin door open and shouted out:

‘What are you doing there, you bloody idiot? I could’ve killed you!’

The man crept up towards the excavator. Apparently, he didn’t understand what the operator was saying. The operator grabbed a crowbar from under his seat, lit a cigarette, got down and squished through the dark, petroleum-jelly-like bog.
'Take a good look at this crowbar, ’cause I’m gonna shove it up your ass! You understand that, don’t you?’

‘Ich heisse Otto,’ said the stranger in a friendly tone and pointed a finger to himself. ‘Otto!’

‘Vasile,’ replied the worker. ‘I’m Vasile.’ He was Romanian, like all the other workers on that building site. ‘So why are you here?’

‘Wir sind in Frankreich, ja?’

‘What?’ Vasile frowned at the two-metre-tall intruder who had wormed his way out from under the earth, dressed in what looked like a black SS uniform with a swastika band on the left arm and wearing a German helmet with a miner’s headlamp on it.

‘Frankreich!’ repeated the stranger. ‘I,’ he explained, pointing to himself again, ‘come from the interior of the Earth.’ Then he pointed towards the mouth of the tunnel he had come from. ‘The Earth is hollow, like a ball. Football?’ he said, describing an imaginary sphere with his palms, before letting it drop to his feet and kicking it hard. ‘Gooaaaal!’ He started jumping with his arms raised in the air.

The operator knitted his brow. Who the fuck was this crazy guy? Better put him to sleep with the crowbar and find out who he was later. But the stranger was out of reach, and there was a gun on his belt, so Vasile decided it was better to work an unpaid extra hour to complete the day’s work than to take a bullet.

‘Ja, ja,’ Otto went on, ‘the Earth is hollow, has a sun in the middle and is inhabited by the Aryans who found refuge there after the Second World War, fleeing the outer surface of the planet. They all went below near the North Pole and then rushed like the Horsemen of the Apocalypse over the Atlanteans and the Aztecs, who thought they were safe forever down there. They were all Wagnerianly slaughtered – it was like the twilight of their gods. You thought Hitler died. Ja, his lookalike died, but he lived with us long enough to build a new Berlin according to Speer’s plans. When he finally passed away, the real Maréchal Pétain came to power and laid his body in a mausoleum like
Napoleon’s. You have to bow in front of him when you see it, and on top is erected a tower – baptised Eiffel – to cast your eyes over after you’ve bowed. The ruler of the Fourth Reich, who created a civilisation without Jews, Arabs and Negros, a purely French civilisation, as he called it, went on to change the name of the capital to Paris and that of the river down there to the Seine. His successor, Führer Lepen, kept these names and ordered the construction of a mausoleum topped with an arch of triumph for his predecessor and another one, with a glass pyramid above it, for when his time would come. And now he has sent me, his Deputy Führer, to Frankreich, to establish contact with its leaders and start negotiations to reunite us with our motherworld. Don’t think of it as incest, but rather as the kind of symbiosis not at all uncommon in nature. But I’m afraid I’m in a bit of a hurry, which is why instead of following the North Pole route, I’ve decided to take this shortcut. By my calculations, I’ve reached the right spot, so I’m asking you to...

‘Do you speak French?’ asked the operator. He couldn’t make out anything of the endless flow of words.

‘Was?’ asked Otto.

‘I, Romanian!’

‘Rumänisch?’ Otto slapped his forehead. ‘Here is Romania?’

‘Ja, ja,’ Vasile mocked, laughing.

‘You traitors!’ shouted Otto, taking a map of Europe out of his pocket. ‘This means I must dig another thousand kilometres to the west. Scheisse! I can hardly wait to meet you again, Vasile. We will wipe out all of you, you subhumans. It is because of you that we, the French, have lost two world wars.’

‘Whatever,’ said Vasile, shrugging as the tall guy turned around and left.

Otto disappeared back into his tunnel. Vasile climbed back into the cabin and set the bucket in motion.

* 

A month after this encounter, the foundations finally reached the right depth. Although Vasile had tried to block it up, Otto’s tunnel seemed like a bottomless pit. The chief engineer decided to place a large slab on top of the entrance and pour concrete over it. Once this was done, everybody forgot about it.
A couple of months later, having dug a thousand kilometres to the west, Otto surfaced under the Atlantic. Ocean water poured into his tunnel and filled the hollow centre of the planet, drowning the inner world. On the outside of the planet, sea levels dropped abruptly by hundreds of metres. Overnight, Japan was no longer an island, but one of China’s terrestrial nerve-endings; the Netherlands tripled its territory and went on to secure it by methodically expanding its dams; Venice emerged entirely from the lagoon and began to stink as never before, so it was abandoned; and Italy no longer resembled a high-heeled leather boot, but a round-toed rubber one. Most seas drained away, the deltas turned into cascades, while the USA and Russia massed border patrols, radar installations, rockets and masons on their new terrestrial border – the former Bering Strait, also called the New Checkpoint Charlie. The Bermuda Triangle was now opened for agriculture, although no insurance company would promise to compensate farmers if they lost their tractors and ploughs in the fields; while Cuba became part of the USA – the High Fidelity State. Its licence plates called it the Car Museum State. The idea of deepening the Suez and Panama Canals was soon discarded, leading to a sharp increase in the price of crude oil and a general switch from fossil to renewable energy resources. The planet took its time to adapt to the geographical and climate changes, but it eventually regained its usual pace and most countries carried on much as before.

This was the drop that made the glass of globalisation overflow. For several historical controversies were far from being resolved and the draining of the English Channel and the Mediterranean Sea helped reinstate them on the public agenda – much more effectively than opening the Channel Tunnel or the arrival of the last refugee boat. So is Great Britain only an ungrateful but strapping extension of France or, on the contrary, is the Gallic rooster nothing but a travesty of the perfidious raven of Albion, vocal but impotent, perched with ruffled feathers on the manure heap of the continent? Is l’Hexagone, which is now more an obese Octagon, a never-ending European-style strike taking place in an Africa that is on
social care ... or vice versa? Has Europe transformed itself into a giant hinterland of its former colonies or into a vast demographic and economic débouché of the Chinese? Besides these, there are other issues – such as what was more damaging for humanity, Nazism or communism; the rights of an individual versus those of the majority; liberty, equality, fraternity or death; why Romania and Bulgaria are in the Schengen Area and Russia in NATO; was there or was there not an Armenian genocide in Turkey; do ETs exist or are we alone in the Universe? (in which case nobody sees us from on high, so we can stop pretending) – all issues still to be debated some other time or, even better, forwarded to the UN for a resolution. Once an issue, global warming became just a joke the Canadians played on the Eskimos. And since fossil fuels were no longer in demand, all terrorists lost their jobs and were sent home, where each of them received an oil well, to use as they pleased.

Anyway, humankind was saved.

Alexandru Potcoavă
Translated by the Author

Robert Șerban is well-known in Romania as a writer, journalist and editor. He lives in Timișoara, designated European Capital of Culture in 2021, and he is very much present in Romanian literary life, hosting a TV show, editing a magazine, and organising festivals of literature in his city. He has published twenty books, has been granted many prizes, translated in some thirty countries and into as many languages.

I first read him when I translated into English a book for the Romanian Writers’ Union. He stood out for his direct simplicity and depth of emotion. He is a shy writer, who loves silence more than words – which might seem paradoxical for a poet. The shorter the poem, however, the more intense.

Besides their emotional impact, Robert’s poems are very much about the time and place he lives in; he is not a novelist, and yet his books tell many stories and explain Romania to those who have never seen it.

For me, the major quality of Robert’s poetry is the strength of his poetic language, which relies, as I have said, first and foremost on his concision. No word is used without good reason. Such economy makes one think of the best poets of any era, who have always been aware that naming is not the most important thing in literature. Making the reader guess what your intention is.

Below is a selection from a small group of such ‘mute’ poems, which say more than a thousand-page book.
IN ORDER TO WRITE BETTER

in order to write better
I place the sheet of paper
on top of a book

the author’s name
surfaces
now and then
like a drowned body
and tries to catch my hand

I write very fast, in forceful handwriting
while the words fill
the thin page
the same as clods cover
a fresh grave

*

whenever I look at the sky
I wonder
if God does not feel nauseous
watching us from
all the way up there

MIRROR

the sky is always beautiful
because the sky is the mirror
in which we never see ourselves
however hard we might stare
A GIFT FROM MY MOTHER

I’ll cut off your tongue
if I hear you say damn
my mother threatened

I was a child
absolutely everybody said damn
relatives neighbours in our block neighbours in the village
nursery school and later high school
people said damn in the street at the sweetshop while standing
in a queue or on the bus
damn damn damn
but mother, party member who would steal into a church
unseen
only when we spent a vacation in some resort
or when someone close died
would never allow me to say damn

if this were all my mother had left me
it would be more than enough

TREE IN THE MIDDLE OF THE YARD

Crina heaps chestnuts in the middle of the yard
and is so happy to have found a tree
that lays brown eggs

I have half a mind
to tell her the truth
but she has already arranged them in nests
and is now waiting for the birds
to hatch the chicks
BROKEN GLASS

have you ever broken a bottle?
have you picked up the broken glass?
have you cut your fingers?

well
friends are like broken glass
even though they make your hands bleed
you continue to pick them up

OLD AND UNCERTAIN

I climb down poetry
line after line
carefully
as an old
unsafe staircase
I am cautious
speechless
wary
very wary
line
after
line
down to the last

I wait a few moments
I look up
careful
transparent
then
I dive
SCARY LOVE STORY

all that will be left of me
will be an impression rumour gossip suspicion
a handful of words

my principled behaviour
my unforgivable faults
the energy I spent
doing what I did all my life
every little thing I ever did will be completely forgotten
they’ll say, maybe, well, he was a good bloke
hardworking
obliging
kind
insignificant
silly
a bloody bastard
a scoundrel
a shitty good for nothing

which means
nothing will matter
and nobody will take the time
to remember me as I was
part of me
spots and lines at least
drawn by a clumsy painter

I feel like howling for ever and ever
so that
in a thousand years
a million years
my howl may travel from mouth to mouth
like a scary love story
which has rescued mankind

Robert Şerban
Translated by Lidia Vianu and Anne Stewart
While Timişoara may not have produced its own ‘school’ of poetry or a defined body of works, some of the energies necessary for a rethinking of Romanian culture as a whole, both before and after 1989, can be clearly and definitively identified in the poetries we are presenting in this magazine. These energies are both real and varied, the result also of the region’s multiculturalism, coming as much from the particular intellectual corridor of the Timişoara region as from the combining of surrounding cultures, exemplified as much by the range of the city’s architectures as by its open-air food and craft markets. With such a broad cultural range, there is surely something innate to Timişoara that facilitates ‘a critique of the power principle’ (cf. Václav Havel’s ‘power of the powerless’) and which allowed Timişoara to stand so vividly at the vanguard of Ceauşescu’s overthrow.

All the poetries presented here are written in Romanian, yet there is latent in them a sort of cultural convergence – away from national identity and towards anger at totalitarian uniformities. They both celebrate that space beyond politics and lament current dystopias. Language matters in these poetries, but is beyond any specific Romanian identity, rather it represents a different identity. In a very real way these poetries present examples of what has been called a multicultural ‘Third Europe’.

It seems no fluke that the great Danilo Kiš was born in a city in Serbian Vojvodina, far closer to Timişoara than to the capital Bucharest. Or that the eminent Vojvodina poet Vasko Popa had Romanian antecedents, or that Ivan Gadjanski was from the Banat. Or that
the living practice of these ‘borderlands’ (Timișoara and the Banat both border Hungary and Serbia) has allowed hybrid openness and the richness of the ‘crack’ or the ‘crevice’ to seep both into and from these Timișoaran poetries. Borderlands are rich with possibilities and can provoke open poetries. At the same time, a borderland is also rich with the tensions between unity and diversity. The same could be said of Iași, or of Cluj and Sibiu, within the unmarked or internal borders of Transylvania; or of Bukovina, where two major Romanian poets, Paul Celan and Itzik Manger, were born (Celan left for Paris, not that his life can be crushed into four words; Manger spent twenty-five years in Czernowitz, Iași and Bucharest before leaving initially for Poland), or of Moldova (Moni Stăniliță, who is in this edition of *The Riveter*, left Timișoara to live in Chișinău), or even of Bucharest: these poetries of Timișoara share much that is vital and energising in the wider poetry of Romania.

And the clash of openness is painful too, as the prose work by Daniel Vighi and Viorel Marineasa demonstrates (also in this issue). Or consider these lines of poetry from Ion Monoran:

‘What an evening, Lord, I am like a wooden effigy / My body is blind and my palms are riddled with worms. / And somehow I feel how the sky-nailed moon / inflicts a heavy damage within my voice.’

Or read Petru Iliescu’s end-of-the-century ‘Rap at Novosibirsk’ and Daniela Rațiu’s ‘Pandemic Poem’ which evokes the current lockdown:

‘Empty city streets / People in white coveralls / You cannot see their eyes, you cannot see their hands / Ambulances wailing in the streets / That’s all you see on the news.’

‘Coronavirus’, Rodica Draghinescu’s poem – she has lived for many years in France – also addresses the quotidian and political repercussions of lockdown, the familiar and unfamiliar threats to our lives and our freedoms. These poetries offer much-needed ‘aversions’, or perhaps ‘multiple versions’ and ‘re-versions’, of our current experience, and possibly obviate the dangers of a return to stagnation.

The poetries of Timișoara are international hybrids with many-sided identities and languages and provoke a resistance to the erosion of ‘freedoms’; they offer access to the positive and negative possibilities experienced by being on the margins, whether in the Hungarian of József Méliusz, the German of the ‘Aktionsgruppe Banat’ (the literary and resistance group founded in 1972, which included Herta Müller, Richard Wagner, William Totok and Oskar Pastior) or in the 1970s poetry of Ion Monoran (included in this issue of *The Riveter*) whose experimental writings align him more closely with fellow Romanians Mircea Cărtărescu and Alexandru Mușina, or with Mariana Marin, in being implicitly anti-authoritarian.
It has been argued¹ that Timișoara acts as a sort of ‘city-text’ or ‘node of confluence’. It instinctively attracts what matters to the ‘peripheries’ or margins, which inevitably subverts attempts to centralise or normalise. That is as true now as it was during any of the previous regimes. But precisely this public resistance, this poetry created of memory and imagination, also works on a personal level and feeds the current, intimate dystopias of the younger poets included here – what Mariana Gunță (1995–2020) alluded to when she wrote:

‘life’s not an equation / when you hug her / you only feel dry skin’

Or in the words of a poet from a generation earlier, Robert Șerban (b. 1970):

‘without anyone telling them / people know that / poetry is all that is left of life / after you have lived it’²

Stephen Watts

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² Tr. Ana-Maria Albu in Romanian Literature Now.
'Women are fruits. There are peaches, pineapples, hazelnuts…’
(Paul Valéry)

... Nuts, too gathered into themselves, and pineapples, too scaly (and of an almost weird exoticism); as for the peaches, we know them from Renoir.
What kind of fruit are you, though?
Leaving aside the smooth apple, juicy strawberry, astringent quince, cerebroid walnut – and considering your subtle tricolori (the very same as those of Ireland and the Ivory Coast): the white of your smile, the almost-green of your gaze and the chestnut of your helmet of fine hair –, you rather remind me of the almond: dehiscent with difficulty, pubescent, lactescent ...
The almond that, what nonsense, is called amande!
AMORE MIO

Steam up Madam’s nails, one by one, minus those two on the fingers without precious stones, within a circle of yellow gold, silver or only red copper (greened by time). Steam up Madam’s nails with pale lunules, – and the one with the black spot that in the red nail polish looks like the yellow iris of the feline between two naps, the opening of an eye is stone. Moisten every stone from the slabs of madam’s nails as the tiles that are bathing in yellow steam in the morning, one by one, – play in her angle between two fingers, with scales, red at the tip. Don’t forget: there are ten red aces in a pack as opaque as stone; don’t let them be reversed in those two closed inside hands of the madam, – that sticks her nails, one by one, in the back of the hand, yellow. As you try, between your teeth, the yellow to reveal the red core of herself; tear Madam’s nails, one by one (not like a stone, but like a cherry), by turns, on both hands. Madam’s nails, ten minus two, fogged up, in a yellow dusk in late summer would give you as a gift so much red to write in fog, like in stone, the letters, one by one, of Amore mio ... One, maybe two, in red, like on a stone or on a yellow, will be Madam’s cipher.
FARFALLA AMOROSA

Don’t forget, as evening falls, to make butterflies on her cheek, fluttering your eyelids: palpebral butterflies with two wings, semitransparent and frills of eyelashes, for which the insipid water of a tear takes the place of dew. Let them enjoy the tears, these unaltering butterflies, which, in autumn, are thirsty for dew, turned to frost between the lashes that melts only if the eyelids flutter like ever more quicklied wings. Don’t stop fluttering, fluttering your wings, at dusk moistened by so many tears, that dry when you flutter your lashes on her cheek invaded by butterflies like a peach tree whose pearly eyelids are crammed full of dew. Bathe her peach bloom in dew, or in the rustle of these wings that blink the same way as eyelids without sleep, that you flutter on her cheek glistening with tears, that have not been poured from her own lashes. Rejoice because from lashes other than hers, with eyes in dew as clear as that from which the butterflies that ‘wear the caterpillar between their wings’, angelically, water themselves – when, in tears, dozens of eyelids dissolve superposed on an eye with radial lashes, with, at their tips only, tears, as heavy as the beads of dew that trickle slowly on the wings of swarms of betrothed butterflies ... Fluttering your lids and lashes like wings, on her cheek in the dew of lively tears, in the evening, make for her butterflies.
Li, unit for measuring distance, specific to the Middle Kingdom, consisting of 360 steps (=644.652 m), is apparently, the equivalent of the beat of the human voice. – After Lia walked the distance of one li, she said something; from the distance of one li, she said, she whispered something. I don’t know very well what Lia said, from the distance of one li ...

But, she said something (that’s for sure), she whispered, mumbled something, which from the distance of one li, I should’ve heard. I should’ve heard what Lia said, from the distance of one li. I heard she said, but not what she said. Maybe Lia shouted, but the distance of one li has changed Lia’s shout into a whisper; it became a whispering, a murmur ... Maybe this li is not helpful for her: it doesn’t suit Lia’s voice ...

Then, I turn around towards Lia, asking her the next question: ‘Lia, from one li, did you say something?’ I’m saying it in a low voice on purpose, I’m whispering it, I’m murmuring it. It’s strange that she can hear me. Only that she doesn’t answer the question itself, Lia, – saying to me, smiling, that one li was (and still is) a distance of 360 steps (=644.652 m) and that the same li would be the equivalent of the beat of the Chinese voice. ‘Lia, do you mean, and then I murmur, of the human voice ...’ ‘No, of the Chinese voice,’ she persisted. ‘A li,’ said, added Lia, anyway, ‘only in the Yellow Empire is a vocative standard.’
My birth is recorded in the register
my baptism is calligraphed into the register too
the diagram of my diligence and of my laziness –
followed up through mountains of school registers
once upon a time stealing a rose, to give it to you
I was punished and recorded the register
between some pages with coarse headings
resides sealed meekly,
my eternal love for you
our son: recorded in the register too
over and over again Petre Stoica present in the registers:
for illnesses, for thoughts for so many debts
not repaid on time
until the day the lid on the coffin of the thick register
will fall for the last time
on my name
the name of a man who’s left the world of the living

Petre Stoica
Translated by Daniel Ioniţă
THE SHOW GOES ON
(Post-Trans-Humanist Gloss)

Another day settles down
in the almost outdated tempo of the evening. It lies already
musty in the album of history.
It sprawls in the books on the shelves stinking of praises and
cannon fodder.
Somewhere in the world death spreads methodically: step
by step,
body after body, explosion after explosion. Piles of hacked
bodies –
wherever you look. Blood mumbles indistinctly
on the wide metropolitan boulevards, flows into the gutters
irrevocably. Sliced-up bodies run mechanically here and there
screaming in all the languages of the world. Even the terrorist
and his death car
vanish, fading into the anonymous world of globalism, into
the black-and-white chasm
of the surveillance cameras.
On the big screens, death is broadcast live, in full colour.
Frantic journalists from all over the world report on-the-spot
details
‘that may impact you emotionally’. World leaders
express their indignation, their solidarity, on Facebook. From
their bunkers
they send their deepest sympathy to the grieving families.
They know everything about what we have to do from now on:
Together we shall overcome! Europeans of all countries,
unite!
Little by little, like dancing a waltz or going on a march
(a Radetzky march?), they show us the path to political
correctness,
the only path to victory from now on...
Other than that, the war, the hybrid war, goes on, the experts warn us, the strategists teach us. Weapons are still sold like there’s no tomorrow. Here and there, death is compensated for with a decoration, a posthumous promotion in rank, gun salutes, the national anthem enriching the funeral performance beautifully and pre-dict-a-bly. Alas, who died singing ‘The show must go on’?

Eugen Bunaru
Translated by Antuza Genescu

BAGGAGE

Each of us carries baggage loaded with nothing We carry it attentively we carry it with obstinacy with prudence, precipitated, beaded with effort sweat and hope We carry it with grace we carry it ridiculously each one at his own haste with an assumed air of indifference with a vague air of preoccupation we carry it each in a different direction in order to arrive (sooner or later) at the same destination.

Eugen Bunaru
Translated by Agnete Emanuel and Marion Emanuel
SOLD POEMS

For these poems
I sold – for two hundred German marks –
(really, for nothing!) –
the gold watch of the family,
passed on from generation to generation.
Now I remember eaten up with remorse
the solemn figure of my grandfather
his imperial moustache
his hair of soft snow
combed with a side part.
I see him
how he takes out from the pocket
of the waistcoat with calm-ceremonial gestures
that – for the child me – fabulously shining object
and holds it a while, in the strange wax air of the room.
Afterwards he places it on his calmly breathing belly
so as to see several times a day
what time it is ...

Eugen Bunaru
Translated by Agnete Emanuel and Marion Emanuel
The vibrations of an **Aeroflot** in an imaginary land crossed by the NGOs of Mother Russia in a landscape with birch trees mega-buildings far away in the forest oblique-eyed women a mixture of olive and pale cheeks soft look scented honey in cups apples oranges and fog hot aeroplane tickets having a melody a thousand kilometres away from the fringes of the ex-**Iron Curtain**

The abrupt conversations all in one breath with the soul on the lips flashing in the strong smells of rooms painted recently and thickly

Huge candlelight-trees projected over the **internet**
two women posh dressed in black trying to merchandise cosmetics on the stairs of the conference hall in the academic city

Andrei Tarkovsky saying something not necessarily for my ears
A few treacherous words like

*democracy institutions legalno reformo niet*

and a bottle of unopened champagne in room 99 of a 12th of September so familiar

indecipherable paper reams and the human tide of the former empire blasts of some massive men dressed in leather clothes with immense shoulders tossing their mobile phones from one hand to another in Moscow airports cigarette smoke and bottles of beer laughter

slow fretting cool air torn by the night **JET**s corks from bottles of champagne celebrating a poor world toasting in the camera flash and the tinfoil of Siberian chocolate peeling off from the enormity of the ‘sleeping’ power of Mother Russia

the suburbs of our world

the fragrances of Asia and the Georgian wine the translators and the wooden houses and tiny gardens aligning two three rows
of cabbage heads
among which heads with long straight cut beards are sliding slowly
and ancient Volgas and Japanese automobiles with the wheel
on the right

the structure of a new world and of a new way of accounting
in the buttresses of intelligentsia hidden in the middle of the tundra

from an antique shop a tiger eye ring rolling along
my past

to the end, brother Vysotsky
for I heard that ‘God is right within us,
at most one prayer away’
brother Vysotsky

For I have seen you brother Vysotsky galvanising the flashes of the discotheque
in a fabulous endless marble hall
disguised into ghostlike pairs who
go arm in arm and hit the air with their roiling blood

Brother Vysotsky the disease of your anxiety is grinding harshly
as I clench my fists and wipe the wine flowing from my eyes with my sleeve
while shrieking in Russian curses imagined but never understood

I cry brother Vysotsky in your imperial language because I can speak
with my soul
about the same cureless torment that pulls my mind under the birch trees
in search of what you have succeeded in finding now

I am crying brother Vysotsky
with my lips cut by the glass
with my inept language and the memory of imaginary touches
while you are spiralling in disguise
through the marble hall of the discotheque of the Siberian core
through the tens of comrades who will disappear
and die for ever tomorrow morning
when a loyal gigantic white Aeroflot swimming in the ‘foams of eternity’
will rock me into another world
in which I will carry under my tongue
the new drop of venom
to spit it in anguish into the cataract of the New World’s eyes
like a poem

from an apocalypse at the end of 20th century ...
Rain – not tears –
under the flood of curses and gnashes
that collapsed the moujiks’ plate of chow,
into the colours of one hundred lei,
what power, what pallor, what
treachery guarantees you a Balcescu.
You’re not forced to swallow swords,
to dwell beneath piles of lies.
A blister of a man, a blister, a zero.
That glittery paper swells within you.
A moujik like your old man (at twenty
you hope to repair yourself) and in those overalls
bespattered with the spittle and the belches of that seized
engine,
in the munching noises of the building,
eating tins of vegetable stew, dozing in barracks
splattered in ‘we host girls’ boy graffiti,
discharging wagons, digging foundations in December,
stripped to the waist.
Soldier, locksmith, lathe and bulldozer operator.
A blister of a man, a soiled fifteen-hundred man.
Your life runs on without these mouldy lands.
The blue hailstones of the furnaces darken your vision.
Black smoke black gas blue-green or yellow gas
floats on the dais of the most absurd narratives.
Heroism, fanfare, tiny snapping flags – world of whirlpools
in a muddy future of bogs,
with its fresh and potent sugar cane.
O plebeian beauty – in these agitated mornings –
by Venus’ eternal birth, I belong to you.
O plebeian beauty, our youthful misery

moujiks: Russian peasants.
Balcescu: Romanian revolutionary; appeared on 100 lei banknote.
Towards evening,
I believed in your sunburnt pasture,
and like a vagrant in a red sweater,
I avoided the villages,
skipping back and forth over the Timiș River,
crashing into
high-voltage power lines,
into tractors and ploughs.

I trusted you with our terrible love.

Reading the newspapers at random,
not suspecting that the tastes of the era might completely change the tradition,
without knowing that for you destiny is no chasm, even if it opens a similar perspective;
as long as cities and factories will be built,
new generations will be forced to comprehend that this will change no one.

I believed in you

like a big bad beast of burden with gentle salt-lick eyes,
confused that there are no distances between our villages, a lonely room far up in the blue remoteness.

Ion Monoran
Translated by Marius Surleac and Marc Vincenz

These poems were previously published in English on Asymptote: asymptotejournal.com
**THROUGH THE WALL**

**BY SIMONA CONSTANTINOVICI**

**TRANSLATED BY ANTUZA GENESCU**

voles scurry across ashes
and burnt apple peels

several tourists return from the desert
on tiny camels

in Mauritania
near the border with Senegal
lemon trees grow in orchards
and white goats graze

time
rolls on
far and wide
like balls
over the snooker table
the meadow is blooming again
bewitching
incandescent

beyond the wall lies nothing

Simona Constantinovici
Translated by Antuza Genescu
God help us we’re at a standstill any form of glory any form
of boasting is over neither yellow nor green garbage men come by
we begin to understand how much we consume
i carved a window in the wall the wind knocked over an empty glass on
the kitchen table and broke it this is the only form of activity here
a good opportunity to flinch when
no more buses pass by not even Bofrost frozen food trucks
no pretzel sellers no Fish & Chips no grannies with kids in strollers
no Gabors on the roofs no Turkish rug merchants the street seems much
more kind-hearted much more fair-minded no mailman calls out no tax
collector nobody puts up posters and ads nothing’s enough anymore
I wash my face with yesterday’s coffee
could I finally get lucky? come on, it’d be too easy to have a virus change
a woman’s destiny mom reaches me on the phone with news from home
dad doesn’t wash his hands he goes to the pub out of spite he has a screw
loose mom cries people have died here and they lie dead in their houses like
in Italy no one comes to note the time of death
they don’t even give them the certificate to be mourned and buried like they
should be
it’s a conspiracy against the elderly they invented the crown virus to avoid
paying our pensions in the spring! I waste my breath explaining to her that
in France there’s no more room in the morgues the dead are kept in
skating rinks at least this way they can skip the qualifiers for the Olympic
triple somersault
the fatal dernière chance while others give their last breath live streaming on FB with their final drops of strength the likes they get are the only oxygen tanks on the ward

lack of doctors and nurses and they call the vets for help

the truth always comes to light like wolves howling at the moon

no use to blame it on the state of the world’s healthcare system to tell her that I’m 100% sure there is no war or conspiracy against the third age

that it’s because of globalisation Europeanisation economic and political supremacy conflicts

the CIA the polymorphism and everything else but the kitchen sink

mom keeps at it: none of my business I have a garden to start
trees to whitewash vineyard to prune and spray‘cause work and only work is the way to keep our heads straight or the flowers and fruits will be lost to the attackers

I hang up the phone I hiccup.

French hammers are ringing outside the only sharp and orderly noise the Siegvo company has just started breaking our water pipes from six to six we have nothing to drink we are parched on parched land.

I look at the wax-sealed door

across the street the children lick the windows between the bars like sorbet in summer after it slips its leash on the street

a dog pees happily on the quarantine fence.

Rodica Draghinescu
Translated from by Diana Manole
A shelf of powdered milk jars stood where once our table had been.

I found a chair
and sat in front of it –
that was how much I missed you.

Later that afternoon,
the pharmacist asked me
if I needed anything else.

I asked her for honey powder
so she disappeared into the back room for a moment.

Then she asked if I could wait
only until the autumn,
when the place turned into a casino,
because it would not be long.
this entity
blind and swarthy
locomotive coal steam
something stuck on the inside like a sticker
a wild beast chased away with the shovel
let me invoke it spit it between the eyes
it is nothing but a ball of fur
and a leper’s grin
steam rising from a gory wound
let me call it hit it with the poker
we clash in gardens
in open air
where are you come out
where are you come out
a smell of charred cauldron
    of a funny gypsy coppersmith
soot and ashes of an old hut
come out crawl and go back
to the opened manhole
I shall poke the effigy deep into your flesh
the effigy burning on the grill
I shall scorch your fur your fat rolls
you will run like a mutt
hit with an old shoe
your hiss
louder than any brake screech
come out
this is a kind man’s shelter
it is the lord’s house and the town in the postcards
(red candles burning instead of furnaces)
you are a whirlpool a toxin
deluge and tremor
come out
these are the teachings on the whitest sheets of paper
come out
let me spit and wring
my shirt my dirty rags out
you do not exist you do not exist you do not exist
you’re but a painting on the carpet we wipe our feet on
come out
shrink wriggle and spring out
through my ears my nostrils or better my head –
in that moment
under a ceiling covered in bronze candelabra
shining in broad daylight
I’ll stand smiling fainting
and if need be of tremor let it be now
and if need be of an earthquake let the shore collapse now
and if need be of a fire let my barn burn down now
it is the lord’s meadow here and the sundays have only mornings
come out
the clean air will suffocate you
come out
the women’s scarves are – all – white
come out
the sound of the keys is the invocation
the little hammer that drives you crazy
that flattens your skull
come out
of the smoker’s lungs and the darkness of the smoking houses
come out
you old hag you shrew wagging your tail
leave a round hole behind in the window
like a bullet like a projectile

this is the house of honeycombs and kindness
of plain garments and clean asses
come ouuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuut
you have come out

Tudor Crețu
Translated by Antuza Genescu
And then I saw Madame Bovary dying in the film
Her porcelain skin
Her lust for life just as she was dying
Then the TV news about people wearing masks and gloves
The whole planet wears masks

Empty city streets
People in white coveralls
You cannot see their eyes, you cannot see their hands
Ambulances wailing in the streets
That’s all you see on the news
Our everyday soundtrack
Then images of deer wandering through European cities
People are scared they film themselves laughing and singing
People are scared they film themselves wearing street clothes
Taking the tube in their bathroom at home
People are scared they barricade themselves in their homes
Sleep among mountains of cans and toilet paper

Then the Pope alone in St Peter’s Square

We all get tired at the same time
Our hands are itchy and dry
We wash compulsively
Every inch must be rubbed harder and harder
Use more soap
More, more soap
Still not enough
Do not touch the doorknob, do not touch anybody
Do not hug anybody
No kissing
Cross the street
Do not get on the tram
Do not take the plane do not drive on motorways
Do not go to the cinema
Then dolphins, whales, deer, pigeons
Soldiers marching on empty city streets
David Lynch says we will be kinder
We will be gentler
Will we?
David Lynch, your films do not cover this
Empty cities millions of faces pressed against the windows
Your films do not cover this
People walking out in the silence of the night
Hunggrily breathing in the air
Listening to the night wind rustling the young tree leaves
The metallic sound of leaves touching each other click click click
People sneaking out like thieves
Afraid they may get caught
Voluptuously stepping on the pavement
The city is a lover you may not touch
The pavement is his skin
Thieves stealing the air of the city touching leaves trees
empty benches

Then blocks of flats on boulevards
People in window frames
Staring into space
Police sirens
Plastic bags whirling in the wind
Tags, paper wristbands for cancelled shows

Then Madame Bovary dying shedding tears
Bitter like poison
Crying for her life
David Lynch leans over her and arranges her hair for the final frame
David Lynch sits by her bed and takes her hand in his
They both look into the frame
Beyond the image
Emptiness

Daniela Rațiu
Translated by Antuza Genescu
20.

1. After the Chinese released onto the market the German soldier-doll Bastian.

2. After Mourinho said no and Ancelotti said no and the doll was retired ahead of its time and Guardiola exchanged Kroos for his friend Xabi Alonso. 3. After Reus, Neuer and Boateng were injured and Müller was substituted because the Italians didn’t like him. 4. After the Turks with Turks and Germans were offended by the site of the accommodation in the former Soviet Union and so the deciding match was played in Stalingrad – I wonder: did the Germans lose their qualifying place or their patience?

(Sometimes here in the Republic of Moldova someone threatens us with the Russians and we are not very comfortable despite there being a Transdnistria between us and a shallow rain that’s a bit toxic after the red forest of Chernobyl burned. An ugly championship put into question like a hedgehog under a shield. But glory to the VAR referee just as variably and arbitrarily used only when so ordered! Putin and Medvedev next on the carpet. Umbrellas. FIFA.

A championship of the non-champions. Everything for the crowd and

Everything out of love for the Russian army which won’t leave. Neither Ukraine.

Nor Moldova. Neither after the championship. Nor after the end of the world.)

Moni Stănilă
Translated by Florina Luminos
to learn more about the world before
you’ll have to ask the youngest among us

those who sleep a lot and barely cry are just ripe

once the coal dust hardens their skin
they start forgetting meaningful sequences
they get old, contaminating each other

those who sleep a lot and barely cry will show you

their heart
beating to the rhythm of the recycling centres
expanding over collapsed structures and machines
it will build you a spiral staircase, warily
overlooking the beams, to the outskirts

we’re getting old, they’ll tell you, just watch
the sparkling spines of those magnetic men
rummaging, searching each workshop
skinning conveyor-belt layers
fiddling their concert-worthy electrodes, harvesting nails
gauging heavy vices abandoned on workbenches
bending their backs, cursing, and lifting furthermore

rummaging, searching, skinning, fiddling
harvesting, gauging, cursing, and lifting furthermore

just before
the heat tightens like a screw in their skulls
forcing them to zigzag between ventilation ducts

we’re getting old, they’ll tell you, but watch
just watch the poverty, a lazy mother tucking in
fences, thrift stores, and gambling establishments
just watch the defeated world leaders
chewing crocuses in their nuclear bunkers
watch the rise of the first unforgiving diseases
women orbiting around containers
packed with sweaty naked bankers

watch the sky, the house none of your
loved ones will leave to buy bread

watch them: the volunteers waiting
to board planes about to get pulverised
by intercontinental ballistic missiles

Ana Pușcașu
Translated by the author
NELUTA

neluta buried grandpa in the ground
neluta ate grandma’s days away
neluta swung his knife to the left
and to the right, stayed hidden.
kissed gypsies on the mouth
broke their instruments

neluta played the leaf lute
on the hardest nights
he angered god
yelling in the rain
under the apricot tree in front of the house
lord you’re a brother of mine
when god struck the tree down
neluta took it on his shoulders
as you would with a drunk friend

neluta stole from the c.a.p
from his neighbours
from his parents

neluta sank the axe between the calf’s horns
and finished him off to amuse foreigners at the fair
stuck his sickle in a watermelon lifted it to the sun
then let the juice trickle down his face
neluta smoked bare chested in the shed
and spat out the blood from his gums

neluta never had a woman
and never wanted kids
neluta drank water just once in his life
neluta slept in the fields with wolves

when he came home drunk
he got beaten with a wet rope
and growled at grandpa
if you weren’t my dad i’d slit your throat
neluta buried grandpa in the ground
neluta ate grandma's days away

he's old now
he's alone knows that
he was always alone
and whines about the pain

laughs at the chained dog
soon he'll plant his fork in him
cause he doesn't have any more food to give
neluta will plant his fork in everything
and will talk between the cracks of the earth
with grandpa and grandma

neluta asks me if i got my baccalaureate
he knows that i got my baccalaureate ten years ago
now he's old but he still keeps his mouth away from water
grabs his phone laughs and yells dreadfully
i called you this morning
why didn't you answer
i called you boy
but the world knows neluta is alone

lord you're a brother of mine
neluta sticks his fork in the ground
neluta talks through the cracks
with grandpa and grandma

he knows he's alone and that no one
hears him

*

born in the countryside dead in the city
i once had a truly beautiful day
woke up at dawn
drank brandy on an empty heart
and started watering the garden

at noon the buckets were half mud
half water
my feet sinking in sludge
trousers lifted to the knees

i looked into the well
it seemed like

i’d loosened the collar on the dog
poured in his broken bowl
half mud half water
drink i told him

the sun had disappeared
the snow had settled quickly
it covered the rope
with which the animal was tied

a white cow
snowflakes melted on its hot muzzle

i took the shovel and loaded the burlap sacks
with snow from the front of the house
threw them on my back
carried them to the pit
44 i counted by the end

one by one i emptied the sacks in the dry mouth of the well
it was already dark out when i rolled up
my trousers to my knees again

that night the dog slept outside

Marius Aldea
Translated by Ilinca Gradea
life's not an equation
when you pull her tail she doesn't
break into a very long ‘muuu’
to reach the stars
life's not an equation
when you hug her
you only feel dry skin on yours
& no argument
kilograms of hangover
explode our heads like a grenade
in a drainpipe
the equation is a string
of accusatives & nominatives
eat them for breakfast
& lick your fingers

you fell asleep with your back to me
like a broken jar of zacusca
I’m looking for you under the duvet
like a lifebuoy
the memories deflate
in the water bed
we sit here quietly
nothing crashes
in the morning we eat cereal
we play games with milk
& how we got here
paranoid
as in the beginning of the world
the body’s asleep
as an expression
I’m more awake than ever
I’m more awake
& I hear rats nibbling
on human wrists
I hear the water boiling
& how a fly hits the window
I’m polishing the room
I see him get onto the chair
& how I slowly evaporate from my body
in a surplus of yellow wax
the body’s asleep
as an expression
the wind moves a little
nothing is more static
than this waking state

an outstretched hand catches the steam
that comes out of our mouths
she plays it with her fingers
like a puppet
until it evaporates
in small points
brilliant
street dancers
they are swirling ghosts
we smile at them with our heads turned
they will do something tonight
they will manage to sneak in
between the bricks
& fall asleep
there
tomorrow we will be fishermen
old & poor
with jeans cut at the knees

our house is made of wood
with chairs, tables,
a library
wooden forks and spoons

we will fish
& we will sleep in the cold grass
our children will come out from under the floor
they will slowly open their eyes
we will light a campfire

we will grow so big that
we will take back with us
a sample from
heaven

Mariana Gunță
Translated by Antuza Genescu
My first visit to Romania was in 1993. We were already in Budapest and took a train to Cluj-Napoca, where my mother had spent her childhood. The train was filthy and the door to the toilet was off its hinges. A very pristine young woman was reading an old history of France opposite us in the compartment. There was a long delay at the border and when we eventually arrived at Cluj, the station smelled of urine. My long lost, elderly uncle, Feri, was waiting for us there and we took a taxi to his flat in the centre. I had read and heard a lot about the terrible times under Ceauşescu but Cluj still shocked me. The shops were mostly bare, the streets were cluttered with rubbish, public transport was patched with ill-matched paint, buildings looked dilapidated and the river was bright orange. I had never before seen so many people with amputations. Cluj looked like a European third-world city, a barely working, demoralised dystopia. Uncle Feri was a darling, but we stayed only for a few days and the return trip by minibus (because the trains were on strike) was a long and tiresome affair through an equally dystopian, despoiled landscape.

Pretty soon I was back again, courtesy of a British Council tour of Romania involving a number of other British writers. This then led to further invitations, primarily to the Days and

The ghost of Ceauşescu has not vanished from the scene. He is, in some respects, like the figure of Mao in Chinese writing. Stories of the Cultural Revolution are still emerging, rather gingerly, from its child victims.

Robert Şerban – What’s left of life
Nights of Poetry at Neptun but also to Bucharest, and more recently to Timișoara. I met a great many Romanian poets in such places, mostly extraordinary women such as Grete Tartler, Liliana Ursu, Ioana Ieronim, Denisa Comănescu and many others. Romanian poetry, from that evidence, appeared to me to be chiefly female territory. The result for my personal work was a set of sonnets titled *Romanian Brown* that appeared in 1998.

The impression I gained from my meetings and readings was of Romanian writing as something more elemental and magical, less urban, altogether less ‘Western’ than the Hungarian work I was familiar with. Whether this impression was based on anything substantial I cannot say. It was not that the writers – and they were exclusively poets – were not modern. There was little that was formal or traditional (not a word I much like when applied to poetry), in the sense of regularly patterned verse. There was, perhaps, a deeper appeal to nature and a kind of ferocity, but the poems were clearly and recognisably modernist in approach. It was just that their material was taking them into different territory, or that they had started from different territory.

What was lacking – like anywhere in Central or Eastern Europe – was writing that dealt directly with political themes. Before 1989 it was simply not allowed. Instead there was poetry veiled and coded in ways that had become familiar to those who read between Cold War lines. The Romanian regime had been harsher, stricter and more punitive than many others, so the codes might have had to lie deeper. The Securitate was estimated to employ at the very least 15% of the population and Uncle Feri was scared to talk in the street.

Hungarian-Romanian tensions were very high under Ceaușescu and the issues underlying them look likely to remain unresolved for a good while. The fascinating thing about the revolution of 1989, which we saw unfold on our TV screens, was that it was sparked by László Tőkés, a Hungarian clergyman in Timișoara (Temesvár in Hungarian).

This is principally a Romanian-language Timișoara magazine of both poetry and prose, though not all the authors live in the city now. And things have changed. The poets I read and met back then all grew into maturity under Ceaușescu. How much and in what way have things changed, it’s hard to know. We can look at it in terms of continuity, from the oldest – Mircea Pora and Viorel Marineasa – to the tragically youngest, Mariana Guntosă, who died just this year at the age of twenty-five and was born the year after our first visit to Romania; but that won’t yield an entirely satisfactory answer.

The range of voices in this magazine runs from episodic realism in prose and poetry (Alex Colțan, Goran Mrakić, Bogdan Munteanu, Ana Pușcașu, Viorel Marineasa with Daniel Vighi, as well as Mircea Pora, who covers several generations of one family in his visit to a cemetery), through politically loaded realism-turned-fantasy (Alexandru Potoașă), through Bukowsky and Ginsberg-inspired beat verse with an ironic curl of
the lip (Borco Ilin, Petru Ilieșu and Tudor Crețu), hard-bitten, darkly witty lyric poetry (Eugen Bunaru, Robert Șerban), a touch of post-modernism (Moni Stănilea) and work about the Covid-19 pandemic (Daniela Rațiu, Rodica Draghincescu).

These are very broad-brush terms and are intended only as a rough map of the contemporary terrain. All the writers mentioned above work beyond those map descriptions and expand beyond them in that they may cover several areas at once or start from somewhere else. Șerban Foarță’s poems are a kind of playful engagement with female presence. William Totok’s poem harks back to the age of political imprisonment. Marius Aldea’s poem ‘neluta’ starts out like the kind of fable adapted from folk tales that Vasko Popa might have written, but is in fact an account of a real figure in rural life.

One might distinguish further. Bogdan Munteanu’s story about male friendship has a Salinger-like quality, Ana Pușcașu’s realism concerns an entire way of life, and Viorel Marineasa’s collaboration with Daniel Vighi recounts the harsh lives of a specific family under Ceaușescu. The executed figure of the dead Ceaușescu is the point of the story by Goran Mrakić which is set in Belgrade.

The ghost of Ceaușescu has not vanished from the scene. He is, in some respects, like the figure of Mao in Chinese writing. Stories of the Cultural Revolution are still emerging, rather gingerly, from its child victims.

What is notable here is that there is very little of nature or of the atavistic in the collection. This is, after all, work produced by citizens of a specific city although, in so far as all cities resemble each other in some ways while differing in others, much of the work, at least in subject matter, does not conjure Timișoara in particular. The Transylvanian-Hungarian side of its history is entirely missing for all kinds of understandable reasons and the conditions of life under Ceaușescu differed only in degree from life under Husak, Honecker or Hoxha.

What all the writers offer here is energy, ambition and imagination. This is a strong selection of writing with its own particular flavour, a flavour I recognise from my own background, but also as the world we live in right now, where similar shadows hang over all of us.

George Szirtes
We’re not leaving Timișoara – far from it – but I do want to introduce you now to some of the best of the rest of Romanian literature. Back in the summer of 2013, when I arrived in London to take over the role of project manager for the Romanian Cultural Institute in the UK, Nichita Stănescu’s words were ringing in my head. The famous Romanian poet’s witty first impressions of Britain, recorded under the title ‘In Engliterra’, accompanied me as I embarked on a roller-coaster ride without a seatbelt. 

How would you describe Romanian literature? What makes it stand out among the many literary traditions? Which are its most prominent representatives? These were some of the tricky questions I had to answer as I took charge of the Institute’s literary programmes. Trying to do so through countless events, designed to put Romanian writing on the map, I worked with wonderful British and international colleagues whose friendship and insight helped me along the way. It was a challenging but rewarding time.

Despite being less well known than its other Romance cousins – partly owing to the very few translators that take on its challenges, but also to the general difficulty of entering the impenetrable canons of world literature – Romanian literature should surely be seated at the international literary table. Over the years, it has not only mirrored Romania’s turbulent history – a country disputed by empires and cowed by communist oppression – but has also served as a foundation for the nation’s cultural identity. Since 1989, it has encompassed new writing styles, topics and autofictional experiments, and has offered literary inspiration to many other nations, with some of the most notable Romanian authors living and working abroad. These include the renowned

Much of the work has been about war, forced migration and flight, and tells of a multiplicity of horrors.
historian of religion Mircea Eliade (who lived and worked as a cultural attaché to the Romanian Legation in London in 1940, later the very address of the Romanian Cultural Institute); existentialist philosopher Emil Cioran; Eugène Ionesco – one of the foremost playwrights of the Theatre of the Absurd; Tristan Tzara – founder of the Dada movement; tragic Jewish poets Paul Celan and Benjamin Fondane; Vintilă Horia – winner of the Goncourt Prize; Nina Cassian and Monica Lovinescu – icons of the anti-communist exile; and Holocaust survivor and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, Elie Wiesel. More recently, some of the top representatives of Romanian émigré literature: writer and professor Norman Manea, poet Andrei Codrescu, and two writers featured in this magazine, the 2009 Nobel Laureate Herta Müller and the dramatist Matéi Vișniec.

In terms of the contemporary Romanian literary scene, despite their small number and rather limited distribution, remarkable English translations of Romanian fiction have been released over the years, inviting readers to discover exciting new voices, such as Mircea Cărtărescu, Ioana Pârvulescu (both featured in this edition of The Riveter), Gabriela Adameșteanu, Dan Lungu, Lucian Dan Teodorovici, T. O. Bobe, Răzvan Petrescu, Bogdan Suceava, Filip and Matei Florian, Ruxandra Cesereanu and Cecilia Ștefănescu, to name but a few. But an even stronger grip on international audiences, I would say, is held by poetry – and this was reflected during my London years by the positive response of UK literary festivals and publishers to Romanian poets and new works. As a popular saying goes, ‘Every Romanian was born a poet’. Throughout its tempestuous history, Romania has developed both an indefatigable spirit and a rich poetic tradition, a combination that has nurtured valuable authors across all generations: from Romania’s ‘national poet’ Mihai Eminescu – one of the great romantics of his time – to Lucian Blaga, the commanding personality of the interbellum period, Herder Prize laureate Marin Sorescu and surrealist Gellu Naum and, more recently, outstanding poets like Ana Blandiana, Magda Cârneci (also featured in The Riveter), Ileana Mălăncioiu, Nora Iuga, Ioana Ieronim, Ion Mureșan or Ioan Es. Pop.

Some of these names might ring a bell; all I trust will appeal to your curiosity and sense of discovery. However, so much more Romanian literature remains to be explored, much of it still unavailable in English. It’s my personal hope that many more titles will be found in translation, making their appearance on British bookshelves and touching readers in unexpected ways. There may be gaps between our two cultures, but let books inhabit them!

Gabriela Mocan
OH YOUR BODY

Oh I still see your body through the ink,
Ink that stains us even in our dreams
Like bitter animal sweat.
I want to reach you
And my fingers slide,
I can hardly see you,
I can hardly hear you,
Tell me, tell me once more that
The whirlpool I plunge into
Darkens us both the same.
I call to you,
But the ink runs violently out
Between us, as though from a wound
Do you still know me? Still wait for me?
Will you still let me go back,
Will you still receive me
From the purple mud?
Will you still come back to
These blue fields,
The desert seas,
Speechless and in tears
So I can offer my trembling mouth
And lips, bruised with words,
To your kiss?

From *Predator Star* (1985)

**YOU MOVE**

You move through the mist
And I know you do,
And therefore the clouds
Don’t seem to be cold
Insatiable coffins
That grow and grow to swallow up
All humankind
In a powdery fog,
Shifting and bitter,
That thickens the air.
You move through the mist:
Lucid and tall, a spirit that
Metes out meanings,
That garners worlds from death –
They tremble in amazement
As you effortlessly guide them,
Your hands on their shoulders
To calm their fears:
You move through the mist
And your eye splits open
Logical pathways
Through the chaos of life:
You move, love,
And I know you do...

THROUGH THE AIR

Enormous moments, floating in shreds through the air,
And moving shadows on barely tinted snow,
I watched them form, and row across the land
And vanish in the light that brought them there.

Guilty of impermanence, multiplied reflections
Of chimeras on complicit snow, arranged
As though such fragile beings had to have a reason
To exist. Or, bewildered, wanted to explain

To eternity the peaceful, intense thrill of
Living as ragged bodies of cloud. Tall and austere,
Exterior to history, innocent of meaning and sense.
Enormous moments, floating in shreds through the air.

IF

If I had been created
To stroll among the leaves of mint
On narrow banks of streams
That flow through grasses
With ancient scents;

If I hadn’t been made
With a bell in my skull
Whose constant chiming
Fractures the bone and
Makes up fears connected by rhyme;

If I weren’t always given
The same maddening proof
That stars flow away and mountains soften
Beneath the great commandment
That echoes in my ears so often ...

THE SCREAM

A comma, a few pebbles,
A smattering of snow,
A tenuous ray of light,
Some houses and leaves –
What modest props
To set off a scream!
The scream
Is straining to cling on with its nails
And always slips back down
Glass walls,
Broken pieces
In a pile,
Balance unsteady,
Up to the teeth
Savagely clenched
In endless silence.

From Architecture of Waves (1990)

TABLEAU

There are six or seven
With their snouts stuck
Into the same dead prey,
Their bodies made longer
By those terrifying slithering tails
Like the spokes of a wheel
On the asphalt,
Forming a sun
With fat, quivering rays,
Risen from the canal.
A sun of rats
In the asphalt sky,
Apollo of garbage, a future
Star with fur for
A different age of sewers and drains
Trickling toward the day of hereafter,
A rodent god
That gobbles up the years
With a halo
Of garbage.

OMPHALOS

A stone is a god that
Moves so slowly
My swiftly dying eye
Cannot perceive the motion,
As we cannot ask
A wave,
A cloud
To understand the ocean.
When everything collapses
And afterwards dissolves
Into a poisonous mixture
Of yesterday and tomorrow,
A stone is a seed of the world
Still alive,
The shrivelled sense that remains,
Omphalos and bud, from which the whole
Murdered universe
Will grow again,
When the god that was shattered
Into equal stones
Will rise up as a barricade.
FULL MOON

Come, moon, and wake us from our sleep,
Cast your nets into our waters
And bring us out,
Pour us
Into the insomnia of air!
We may not survive,
Our lungs have turned to gills from so much sleep,
But,
In spite of the risk, wake us
And leave us, alone and free, at sea:
So we can slowly move,
With infinite care,
Forward across the waters,
On the shifting architecture of waves,
A horizon stretched like a rope
Between two hells,
Staring into your lunatic eye, crazed with hope.

From *Clock without Hours* (2016)

AND SO ON AND SO ON

I only dream about myself.
Though I’m several other characters
Who terrify each other,
I know that I am always I,
Always willing to dream of this same self.

And even if I wake up
I know it’s only a dream
Of waking up
And I can hardly wait to dream that I’m asleep
To be able to dream that I’m dreaming.
How marvellous it is, this game of being myself!
A game without an end!
Because the end
Will also be something I dream and
So on and so on and so on ...

IN A WOUND

We live in a wound
And do not know
Whose body it belongs to,
Nor why.
The only certain thing is the pain
That surrounds us,
Pain
That our presence
Infects
When the wound tries to heal ...

BENEATH THE SNOW

They say the snow gives warmth.
Gives warmth?
Are you content beneath the walnut tree
You used to climb?
Do you recognise the town?
As everyone has gone
To harvest strawberries in Spain,
The empty town looks almost like it did
When you were a child,
Except that the dome of the church,
Covered in tin,
Is uglier now.
In spring
The grass will be the same –
You’ll see!
I’ll come back then to ask you
If it’s true that you can hear it grow ...
MESSAGE

Indecipherable message.
I can only understand
That it’s a message
Or a creed.
I try to decipher it
Without even knowing
If it’s meant for me
Or, conversely,
It’s a line
From my childhood,
A halo
Wiped out between then
And now
Without being read.

CLOCK WITHOUT HOURS

They plucked the hours from the clock
The way you’d pluck
Out an animal’s eyes
To make it blind.
Instead of 12 numerals
There were now only
12 black holes of the universe
Through which
Could be seen the great
Inferno of machinery,
The cog wheels
Kept on turning
The hands
Groping blindly around the dial
From one hole to another,
Not knowing what they pointed to.

Not knowing that they pointed to
A time without time –
A time named Never.

Ana Blandiana
Translated by Paul Scott Derrick and Viorica Patea
In their persuasive introduction to the English edition of Ana Blandiana’s *The Sun of Hereafter and Ebb of the Senses*, translators Viorica Patea and Paul Scott Derrick celebrate her courageous leadership as a poet of witness.

Blandiana, who was born in Timișoara during the Second World War and whose father was later a political prisoner, was sometimes banned and sometimes touted by the communist regime, especially in the 1980s. President of the early post-Ceaușescu, pre-corruption Civic Alliance and later the President of Romanian PEN, she has worked to make a difference during the worst of her country’s times.

The sustained intensity of her poetry reflects this. These two collections, originally published in 2000 and 2004, contain dreams and nightmares, interiors and cityscapes, from the chaotic years of Romania’s transition to unfettered capitalism. Their charged images are cathartic.

‘Buzești Square’ appeals:

Oh Lord, let the mongrel and the urchin
Bite into the same piece of bread
[...]
That still displays the teeth marks
Of the angel.

While, in a far from New Age ‘Mandala’:

Just as the snake, when it bites its tail,
Becomes a ring,
Deep within their endless roots
The peoples of the world all fall
into the same delirium.

But occupying a ringside seat for history isn’t by itself enough to generate great literature, and Blandiana is one of our most important European writers. Central to her poetic strategy is the yoking together of apparently opposing principles; and not only what the British artist Stanley Spencer called ‘angels and dirt’. Her extraordinary breathy and high-pitched reading voice, almost a chant, nevertheless dominates the largest of auditoria and articulates the darkest of material. It’s both fierce and stagily feminine. On the page, these apparent paradoxes of gender play out in poems that draw together intimate vulnerability – a wardrobe mirror reflects ‘the to and fro / Between life and death / At home’ – with the dangerous rhetoric of the
public world, ‘The lowest and / Most burning level / Of humanity’.

It’s no coincidence that death speaks in both registers. These are not consolatory poems. An exceptional cohort of strong women’s voices, including Magda Cârneci, Nina Cassian, Denisa Comănescu, Ioana Nicolaie, Mariana Marin, Grete Tartler and Liliana Ursu, dominated Romanian poetry at the turn of the millennium. Blandiana is among the furthest removed of these from lyric or confessional traditions. Even though she writes mainly in the first person, the lyric ‘I’ seems almost extinguished in her verse. It’s as if she witnesses rather than experiences her own emotion, as she records the fearfulness of living in an unheimlich world:

Appearances have rotted
And drained away like dirty foam
From the face of the essence,
Ugly and eternal.

Such metaphors seem both surreal and expressionist. In fact, Blandiana is undertaking something much more collective. She invents a gallery of imaginative objects almost like archetypes – things thought and things observed – for shared public use.

This too is a form of creative leadership. The poet creates a conceptual apparatus with which society can understand itself. And not just one particular society. As today’s world reels between crises, Ana Blandiana’s poetic authority grows ever more urgently essential.

Fiona Sampson
We are grateful to Deep Vellum for allowing us to publish this exclusive extract. (Editors)

MY BODY

I sat there, on the green bench in the city park, in the desolate and luminous morning, thinking about myself for the millionth time. Why wasn’t it working, what was wrong with me, where did I go wrong? I stared without blinking, almost hypnotised, at the sycamore trunks stained white and brown, damp with dew. Why was I not satisfied with myself, what was not right? The bench was old and rickety, the green paint was peeling, and underneath you could see a lighter colour, whitish-yellow, like an old leper.

Then I stared for a long time, avidly, at my young body, my hands, arms, chest, I passed quickly over my abdomen, slowly over my legs. I studied my pointed white shoes, as though I was seeing them for the first time. At that moment, a brown ant was hurrying over the tip of my left shoe. What is happening, why aren’t I right with myself, what have I forgotten, or what don’t I understand? Obsessively, the same thoughts passed through my mind, as my unsettled gaze rose over the transparent nylon socks wrapping my thin calves, then the gently curved thighs under the white dress I had on. I drew my eyes
slowly, more and more curious, over my womb, domed somewhat, then I came to the bodice, I held my gaze on my breasts, as though I were surprised by their round crests beneath the dress. For a second I imagined my small, flat sex, pressed between my thighs, indifferent, providing me no sensations. Then I embraced myself in a single gaze, head to toe, seated politely on a green and slightly damp bench. I tried to understand my body, to love it. It seemed so strange, this body which enclosed me as though in a hermetic box, this liveried and absurd body, as though it had grown by itself, without any effort from my part; I almost couldn’t recognise it, it almost wasn’t mine. A kind of surprised pity passed through me, mixed with disgust. Who had stuck me in this pinkish-white package, from which I could never remove myself? Who had put me, without the possibility of escape, in this uniform of flesh, bone and hair, with limbs that ended in ridiculous protuberances, with hands and feet that ended in claws?

I looked around me at the park. Noisy packs of students skipping school passed down the path in front of me, and an older man with a cane and white straw hat, two old women hauling a voluminous sack, a nanny pushing a bright, white stroller. Young couples passed, kissing hungrily, almost biting each other, then some stumbling drunk soldiers, and a lone high school girl, small and clutching her elbows. I stared at each of them in turn; I saw another old woman, a lady in a hurry, another girl. Young women, like me, timid and trembling like reeds, mature women sure of themselves, like proud, multi-coloured battle towers with feathered turrets, then aged women resigned like sad, smouldering ruins. I stared at them, marvelling at their existence, that women existed, like me, many women, so many women, it seemed so bizarre ... this multitude of versions of me, these almost identical copies ...
Their existence seemed more incredible to me than the existence of men. Them I accepted, so obvious, massive, self-important, self-evident. Weren’t they the important ones, the true and the strong, as my father would say? But women, how could they exist? And for what? Something so incongruent, fragile, so mixed-up and hidden ... I looked at them from the front, the side, the back, I marvelled at how they moved freely through space, forced by no one, independent of me, the surprising, undulating forms of their bodies. At once beautiful and odious. Extravagant and base. Exhilarated yet pitiful. I looked at myself again, wrapped in a white dress, and I could not stop wondering at the fact that I existed, in this impossible form, one so contradictory, unacceptable, painful. And it made me ill, I felt an empty spot under my diaphragm, in my solar plexus, just like every time I was in some physical danger, or facing some difficult and important decision. Something was not right with me, that much was clear; something was missing. But what, exactly?

On the green bench. In the park. Where did this evil come from? I repeated the question in my head, dizzy, holding myself with my arms as though I were suddenly cold. Why don’t I like myself, what can’t I accept, what am I missing? Where did I get the idea that I had made a mistake somewhere, that I had forgotten something important? Sometimes I understood myself without a sex, as though I woke up in the morning like a newborn with nothing between my legs, only to remember later that I have to put a costume on, not even mine, even though I keep it at my house. The costume is arcane and complicated, uncomfortable but luxurious, full of skirts, bows, zippers, embroidery; it is a costume I always have to take care of, to brush, clean and repair. A borrowed costume, one I have to employ with a certain seriousness if I want to play my part, my part – who knows who chose this part for me, who gave me this burden, who trained me, who forced it into my reflexes and brain. And precisely the strange, glossy gaze of the men I encountered on the street each morning abruptly reminded me to start playing the part again, to identify myself with the uniform I brought from home.
Clearly, by now I don’t even know if I would be able to play another part; I’ve been in this bizarre costume, some even call it beautiful, from the start; I could have been born a dog or a cat, a sheep or a wild goat, a platypus or an orangutan, a crocodile or an elephant, I could have come into this world an earthworm or a bee, or a sparrow, or a snake – so what didn’t I like about my young, supple body, what was wrong with me, what had I forgotten, what was my mistake?

I sat there for a long time on the rickety, green bench, watching people pass. There were men and women and children, women, many women. I was also a young woman, like the others, one of hundreds of women, one of thousands and millions of women in this hypnotic reality, and I could not grasp it. This curious division of one person into two. Like a gold coin broken awkwardly into two unidentical halves. And yet identical. No, unidentical. And yet the same. Something absurd, un-understandable, something unbearable. Like a black flash that burns through the neural filaments, like a blade that cuts, that cleaves the brain, splits what was unified and harmonious, whole, exultant, the luminous, perfect sphere. The park paths spread like a labyrinth around my green, rickety bench, the trees cast blue shadows over the freshly mown and watered lawn; then, glancing down, I noticed a kind of grand, multi-petaled rose in the irregular cracks in the asphalt. I stared, more and more absorbed, at these almost perfectly circular cracks, full of dark dust and bits of grass, unravelling from a deep, unseen centre, like a flower that shows and at the same time hides its obscure, tenebrous core. An ashen, asphalt rose, like a drop of grey lava, compressed and solidified, over whose convolutions my mind began to drift, undulating, expanding. Lifting my gaze, I saw a vaster, vaporous rose in the white clouds in the sky, their irregular edges tinged with gold and pink, slowly spreading, unravelling like a quiet floral explosion against the luminous azure expanse.

Then a woman passed my bench, she was tall, haughty, a strangely beautiful woman. Her beauty shocked me, and for a moment I couldn’t breathe. Her face showed an unbelievable
harmony, unbearable to look at, impossible to withstand, so complete, such distinct nobility. As though in a trance, or by magnetic attraction, I rose from the bench and followed this proud woman, I followed her through the paths of the park. Her figure, her gait reminded me of something, something mysterious, something I knew long ago, but what? As I followed her at a distance, an intense and strange image suddenly erupted from inside me; in my mind, in a flash, I relived a fragment of an old dream: on the peak of a perfectly conical mountain, not far away, a tall and haughty woman, a goddess – draped in a purple cloak with gold embroidery, outlined by a narrow halo of light – waved to me, she beckoned me to climb towards her, she called me to her.

When the flash of this inner vision had passed, I saw the tall and haughty woman again, moving quickly away, her perfect figure disappeared beyond the wrought-iron gate at the park’s main entrance. I ran after her, I took the street I thought she had taken, but I could not find her. She was gone. I ran through the streets for a while, the idea of losing her seemed unbearable, I felt that inside her, in that woman, was a hidden key, a vital answer, something crucial for me, but what? Then I became tired, I stopped, I gave up. I turned slowly back towards the park. I looked around at people’s faces, I thought I spied fragments of that magisterial beauty in the face of a teenager, in a child’s gaze, but it was not the same, it was not her. I seemed ridiculous even to myself, I was like a lover who thought he saw his lost love everywhere, in every woman, even in men, in all the people he encountered, as though a precious hologram were broken into thousands of fragments and shards, and every shard held a bit of an image, an allusion, a glimpse of the whole face, of the face of his beloved.

In the end, exhausted, I turned back to my green park bench, I lay down and drifted off to sleep. I don’t know how long I was asleep, in the cool air of the bright and sunny morning. When I opened my eyes again, a few metres in front of me on the path, I saw another woman, completely different from the one I had just lost. She was a squat housewife, with a round, hard face, a square body and modestly dressed, holding
hands with two children, two girls, in yellow and white overalls. And I remembered an old, yellowed photograph, of a young woman holding two children wearing overalls, a photo I had hidden in an old diary and forgotten. And in that moment, something broke inside me, and an avalanche of images flowed from within. Something like an internal movie inundated me.

Magda Cârneci
Translated by Sean Cotter

A DEAFENING SILENCE by MAGDA CÂRNECI
TRANSLATED BY ADAM SORKIN, MĂDĂLINA BĂNUCU and THE AUTHOR
(SHEARSMAN BOOKS, 2017)
REVIEWED BY VESNA GOLDSWORTHY

On belatedly discovering this slim but stunning bilingual selection of verse by the Romanian writer Magda Cârneci, my first thought was that its title – A Deafening Silence – might well be borrowed to describe the reception of Romanian writing in the UK. Romania has one of the richest, most varied literary traditions in contemporary Europe, yet little of it is accessible in English.

Mention Romanian writing and even well-educated British readers still think of mid-twentieth century Francophone exiles such as Eugène Ionesco, Emil Cioran or Tristan Tzara. This publication by Shearsman, ranging across two decades of Magda Cârneci’s poetry, is a small but audacious step out of that deafening silence. It is sadly telling that I only found out about it now, three years after its appearance: it deserves to be better known.

As well as being one of its leading contemporary poets, Cârneci is a significant figure on Romania’s broader cultural scene, former president of PEN Club Romania, a member of the European Cultural Parliament, and a notable art historian. Her first collections were published under the pen name Magdalena Ghica, which she used until 1989. That the year ended with the Romanian revolution is significant. Cârneci is part of that influential literary generation – including wonderful female poets such as Mariana Marin, Carmen Firan and Denisa Comănescu – that emerged on the Romanian literary scene in the last years of Nicolae Ceaușescu’s rule.

These poets and writers, known collectively as ‘the eighties generation’, grew up in a world of
shoddily built apartment blocks so cold in winter that water froze in the taps and in the lavatories, in rooms lit by twenty-watt light bulbs, with a single television channel showing two hours of programming a day. Food shortages were all pervasive, and an abortion ban produced armies of abandoned children. Ceaușescu’s Romania may not have been North Korea but, rivalled perhaps only by Albania, it was as close to it as Europe had. It offered limited freedom of movement and even more limited freedom of speech, unless you count Orwellian doublethink as one of its forms.

In fact, I thought of doublethink as I read this superb collection – my first but, I hope, not my last encounter with Cârneci’s work in English – a repurposed, poetic doublethink, here representing an ability to create a poem with several, often contradictory, meanings. Like paintings by Francis Bacon, Cârneci’s poems are both abstract and densely populated. They are full of humanity but not of individual humans. They are infused with strong sensory imagery, swelling to bursting with skin and flesh, with ‘the scream of broken organs, / brains, hearts, fingers, / the groan of living cells, / the sobs of the living, the dead, the unborn’ (‘fugue for unknown instruments’). Blood comes in drops, trickles and streams: it is one of the most frequently repeated words in the book.

Cârneci’s is a modernist, neo-avant-garde, urban and intellectual sensibility, yet there is something in her verse that is mythical and ancient. The eighties generation was called the ‘blue jeans generation’, but there is little of that ‘denim moment’ in her verse: it is not anchored in place and time. Rather, she revisits the metaphysics of creation and its violence again and again.

Silent waters keep resurfacing, they are here on the first and on the last page of the book, but they are never peaceful. Cârneci’s verse is full of foreboding, of increasing surface tension. Poems start with stillness then, like musical compositions, gradually gather force to erupt in violent crescendos: ‘an immense cataract of blood / a huge wave of love’ (‘fugue for unknown instruments’) or ‘the stuttering / of an enormous song waiting to start’ (‘now we’).

How do you write poetry when speech is dangerous but silence has become unbearable? Cârneci starts by naming human pain, both as it was, on a vast, tectonic scale in the Romania of the 1980s, and as it now recurs elsewhere in the world. The more you read, the clearer it becomes that A Deafening Silence conveys the inevitability of 1989.

Vesna Goldsworthy
On the Feeling of Elasticity When Walking Over Dead Bodies is a landmark play by Matéi Vişniec and is representative of the playwright’s major thematic and stylistic concerns. Vişniec brings together fictional and real-life characters, aiming, on the one hand, to pay homage to Eugène Ionesco (himself of Romanian origin), and, on the other, to commemorate the victims of communism and reveal the contribution of those who defied official culture, often at the price of personal suffering. One strand of the play is set in one of the most notorious prisons in the Romanian communist gulag, at Sighet, specialising in the ‘re-education’ of dissident intelligentsia in the 1950s. The other follows the fictional character Sergiu Penegaru, a writer and translator, emblematic for Vişniec’s recurrent preoccupation with the role of the artist, the social responsibility of creative minds, and the risks involved in aspiring to freedom in totalitarian conditions. As the epitome of cultural resistance, the uncompromising Penegaru
becomes the dissident writer par excellence, echoing actual anti-communist resistance in 1980s Romania, such as the activism of blacklisted poet Ana Blandiana and Vişniec’s own anti-establishment poetry.

Highlighting the imminent dangers of transgression, censorship emerges as a central theme in the play. In the extract below, set in a so-called re-education prison, the protagonists experiment with the cathartic potential of laughter, seen as a key instrument in maintaining human dignity: ‘You have to laugh in order to prevent yourself going mad’, claims Nicolae Balotă, eminent Romanian writer and literary critic, whose experience in communist prisons has been credited by Vişniec as the inspiration for this play. In this extract, the inmates discover the subversive energies inherent in unstifled laughter as they improvise a scene from Ionesco’s Bald Primadonna: bitter humour takes centre stage in the ensuing interrogation, where absurd blends into clownery as the prison governor makes the prisoners retake for the third time their virtual performance game, and engage in the very process of improvisation for which they were reprimanded in the first place. For Balotă, as well as for Vişniec, the absurd helped ‘to denounce the absurdity of the regime and provided a shield against it’,¹ humour being foundational to cultural resistance and acting as a lifeline for survival.

SCENE 11

THE POET, THE PHILOSOPHER, THE FORMER GOVERNMENT MINISTER and THE FORMER MAGISTRATE are interrogated by THE PRISON GOVERNOR.

= THE PRISON GOVERNOR: I’m asking you once again, as I assume you may not have heard my question: why were you roaring with laughter all night long, from Saturday to Sunday? (Beat) Well? Have you got nothing to say? Huh? Prisoner Penegaru, I asked you a question ...
THE POET: Yes, Comrade Governor.
THE PRISON GOVERNOR: So then, I expect an answer.
THE POET: It wasn’t all night long, Comrade Governor.
THE PRISON GOVERNOR: Are you pulling my leg, Comrade Prisoner?
THE POET: No, I'm not, Comrade Governor.
THE PRISON GOVERNOR: Yes, you are, you’re obviously pulling my leg, Comrade Prisoner.
THE POET: I’m really not, Comrade Governor.
THE PRISON GOVERNOR: Yet you had the audacity to be in hysterics in a communist prison, you dared to roar with laughter in a state prison, in a place for re-education. What was it that had you in stitches until three in the morning? I’m listening, Prisoner Penegaru.
THE PHILOSOPHER: He was sharing some memories with us ...
THE PRISON GOVERNOR: You were sharing memories ...
THE PHILOSOPHER: Yes, we ...
THE PRISON GOVERNOR: Cut the cackle! I know you’re lying, you reactionary bastard. I’m asking you for the last time: why did you laugh so loudly and without a break until three in the morning? If you don’t give me the correct answer straight-away I’ll have all four of you in solitary confinement for two months, with only dry bread and water for food and drink.

Beat.

THE PRISON GOVERNOR: So, then? You were telling each other political jokes, weren’t you?
THE PHILOSOPHER: No, we weren’t.
THE FORMER GOVERNMENT MINISTER: Not at all.
THE FORMER MAGISTRATE: Absolutely not.
THE POET: This is all my fault. I was telling them about a play.
THE PRISON GOVERNOR: A play?
THE POET: Yes, a play for the theatre.
THE PRISON GOVERNOR: What sort of a play?
THE POET: A play that is staged in a theatre.
THE PRISON GOVERNOR: You four, you’re making fun of me.
THE PHILOSOPHER: No, Comrade Governor.
THE PRISON GOVERNOR: I don’t like being made fun of.
THE PHILOSOPHER: We would never make fun of you. We would never dare to make fun of those who are in charge of our re-education.
THE PRISON GOVERNOR: Prisoner Penegaru, step forward.
THE POET: At your command, Comrade Governor.
THE PRISON GOVERNOR: Tell us what exactly you were
talking about.
THE POET: I was telling them about a play that I had read
before coming here.
THE PRISON GOVERNOR: And why were they laughing so
boisterously?
THE POET: Because the play is very funny, Comrade Governor.
THE PRISON GOVERNOR: Great, then be so kind and share
it with me, so I can laugh, too.
THE POET: Well, the play is a bit ... different, it’s a piece of
what they call the theatre of the absurd.
THE PRISON GOVERNOR: The theatre of the absurd. Here
in Romania?
THE POET: No, in fact ... only the author is Romanian. I translated
the play from the French ... it’s on in Paris.
THE PRISON GOVERNOR: It’s on in Paris?!
THE POET: Yes, it’s staged in Paris.
THE PRISON GOVERNOR: This can’t be true. I must be
dreaming. You’re either complete idiots or totally unaware of
the situation. You are telling each other, here, in my prison,
a story that’s happening in Paris? Are you kidding me? (Beat)
Get the play text out right now, or I’ll order a full body search.
I’ll personally check your bum holes! I’ll even check your
bowels if need be!
THE POET: But we don’t have a written text, I was telling
everything from memory. This is a play I translated from the
French myself.
THE PRISON GOVERNOR: From the French ...
THE POET: Yes.
THE PRISON GOVERNOR: Where on earth did you learn
foreign languages?
THE POET: I’m a teacher of French by training.
THE PRISON GOVERNOR: So instead of serving the language
of your own country, you translate from the French! What’s
the name of the bloke who wrote this play?
THE POET: His name is Ionesco.
THE PRISON GOVERNOR: Ionesco?
THE POET: Yes, Ionesco.
THE PRISON GOVERNOR: Ionesco and what else?
THE POET: Ionesco Eugène.
THE PRISON GOVERNOR (to all four): Where did you meet him?
THE POET: I’ve never met him in person.
THE PRISON GOVERNOR: Then who has?

*Beat.*

THE PRISON GOVERNOR: I’m asking you again. Who has met this Ionesco?
THE PHILOSOPHER: We went to university together.
THE PRISON GOVERNOR: So, Prisoner Noica, you are doing propaganda for the absurd, here in a people’s prison?
THE PHILOSOPHER: No, Comrade Governor. All I did was listen to this play, which is completely bonkers.
THE PRISON GOVERNOR: What do you mean?
THE POET: He means that it’s absurd.
THE PRISON GOVERNOR: Prisoner Steinhardt!
THE FORMER MAGISTRATE: At your command!
THE PRISON GOVERNOR: Why are you laughing up your sleeve?
THE FORMER MAGISTRATE: I’m not laughing up my sleeve, Comrade Governor.
THE PRISON GOVERNOR: You traffic foreign plays. Here ... in my prison! You are having fun instead of cooperating with your re-education. Do you think these shenanigans will get you out of here any time soon?
THE FORMER MINISTER: But honestly, we didn’t do anything wrong, Comrade Governor.
THE PRISON GOVERNOR: Shut your gob! You only speak if you’re spoken to. Understood? *(Beat)* I said, understood?
THE FORMER MINISTER: Yes, Comrade Governor!
THE PRISON GOVERNOR: I want to know about this Ionesco.
THE PHILOSOPHER: He’s a writer of Romanian origin, who lives in Paris.
THE PRISON GOVERNOR: In Paris?!
THE PRISON GOVERNOR (to all four): And how did you get in touch with him?
THE POET: We aren’t in touch with him. I have only read his plays. That’s all.
THE PRISON GOVERNOR: You really think, that’s all?
THE POET: Yes, I do.
THE PRISON GOVERNOR: Shut it!

Beat. THE PRISON GOVERNOR is pacing up and down in front of the four prisoners.

THE PRISON GOVERNOR: Well, there’s no doubt that we’ll have our work cut out for us. You are in contact with foreign agents.
THE FORMER MAGISTRATE: Comrade Governor … We were laughing because this was a funny play, that’s all. Our fellow prisoner, Comrade Penegaru, is also a translator of French literature. This is how he came across the play.
THE PRISON GOVERNOR: What is this play called?
THE POET: The Bald Primadonna.
THE PRISON GOVERNOR: The Bald Primadonna …
THE POET: Yes.
THE PRISON GOVERNOR: And you find this funny.
THE POET: It’s funny because … as I said … it’s a bit absurd.
THE PRISON GOVERNOR: You were laughing at an absurd play in a high-security prison. Riiight. Tell me the plot.
THE POET: It’s the story of a bourgeois couple … who visits another bourgeois couple … that’s about it. There is also a maid who terrorises everybody and a fire chief who has no fires to fight.
THE PRISON GOVERNOR: I see, I’m literally dying laughing.

Beat. THE PRISON GOVERNOR opens a file.

THE PRISON GOVERNOR: You started laughing at eleven o’clock at night and only ended your pandemonium at two o’clock in the morning. You were laughing without a break for three hours. You burst out laughing, all four of you, approximately 115 times. This means that you roared with
laughter every two minutes. I want to know why. I’m asking you, comrade Penegaru.
THE POET: This was because ... we acted out the first scene ... in the dark ...
THE PRISON GOVERNOR: You acted out the first scene.
THE POET: Yes.
THE PRISON GOVERNOR: Yes ...
THE POET: Yes.
THE PRISON GOVERNOR: Good, then you shall re-enact it for me. Exactly as it happened that night.

*The four prisoners re-enact the scene.*

ALL FOUR (they are ‘acting out’ the thirteen strokes of the clock):
Ding ... ding ... ding ... ding ... ding ... ding ... ding ... ding ... ding ... ding ... ding ...
THE POET: ‘There, it’s nine English o’clock.’

*All four burst out laughing.*

THE PRISON GOVERNOR: Why are you laughing?
THE POET: We are laughing because of ... the English clock.
THE PRISON GOVERNOR: What clock?
THE POET: It’s in the play. There’s an English clock that strikes English strokes.
THE PRISON GOVERNOR: Again!

*The four prisoners re-enact the scene again.*

ALL FOUR: Ding ... ding ... ding ... ding ... ding ... ding ... ding ... ding ... ding ... ding ...
THE POET: ‘There, it’s nine English o’clock.’
THE PHILOSOPHER: ‘Our English children have drunk English water.’
THE FORMER MAGISTRATE: ‘The oil from the grocer on the corner is of better quality than the oil from the grocer across the street.’
THE POET: ‘Mary did the English potatoes very well.’
THE FORMER MAGISTRATE: ‘Yoghurt is excellent for the stomach, the kidneys, the appendicitis, and apotheosis.’
THE POET: ‘No! “Only the Royal Navy is honest in England” …’
ALL FOUR: Ding ... ding ... ding ... ding ... ding ... ding ... ding ...
THE POET: ‘Look, it’s two English o’clock.’
ALL FOUR: Ding ... ding ...
THE POET: ‘Look, it’s ten English o’clock.’
THE PHILOSOPHER: ‘This wasn’t the clock, this was the doorbell.’
THE POET: ‘No, it was the clock! Why are you saying it was the doorbell?’
THE FORMER MAGISTRATE: ‘Anyway, there is never anyone at the door when the clock strikes seven English strokes and the doorbell rings.’
THE FORMER MINISTER: ‘In fact, when one hears the doorbell ring it is because there is never anyone there.’
THE PRISON GOVERNOR: You are making fun of our regime.
THE PHILOSOPHER: No, we’re not.
THE PRISON GOVERNOR: You are making fun of our People’s Republic. You are making fun of ... Where did you get the play text from?
THE POET: We didn’t have a play text, we improvised.
THE PRISON GOVERNOR: Here, in a communist prison?! Again!

Matéi Vişniec
Translated by Jozefina Komporaly
A shadow follows a woman, the woman is small and crooked, the shadow keeps its distance. The woman walks across the grass and sits on a bench outside the apartment block.

The woman sits, the shadow stops. The shadow doesn’t belong to the woman, just as the shadow of the wall doesn’t belong to the wall. The shadows have abandoned the things they belong to. They belong only to the late afternoon, which is now past.

Dahlias have been planted below the lowest row of windows in the apartment block. The flowers are wide open, the hot air has turned their edges to paper. The dahlias peer into kitchens and into rooms, into bowls and into beds.

Smoke reeking of burned onions flies out of one of the kitchen windows and onto the street. A tapestry over the oven inside shows a stag in a forest glade. The stag is the same brown as the colander on the table. A woman licks a wooden spoon, a child stands on a chair, crying. The child has a bib around his neck. The woman uses it to wipe the tears from his face.
The child is too big to be standing on the chair, too big to be wearing a bib. The woman has a blue mark on her elbow. A man’s voice shouts, those onions stink and you look like a cow bending over the pot like that, I’m getting the hell out of here, and as far as I can go, too. The woman looks inside the pot, blows into the smoke. In a quiet, stern voice she says, go ahead, pack your shitty things in a suitcase and crawl right back inside your mother. The man jerks the woman by the hair and slaps her in the face. Then the woman stands crying next to the child, while the boy quietly stares at the window.

You were on the roof, says the child, and I saw your butt. The man spits out the window right past the dahlias. He’s naked from the waist up, his chest has several blue marks. What’s there to see, he says, watch and I’ll spit right between your eyes. His spit lands on the sidewalk, together with the shell of a sunflower seed. There’s a lot more to see looking out of my ass than at it, says the man. The child laughs, the woman lifts the child from the chair and holds him close. You’re laughing, you’re growing, she says, you’re getting bigger and bigger, and he’s going to beat me to death. The man laughs quietly, then loudly. You took him up on the roof didn’t you, says the woman.

Every step of the sidewalk is spattered with spit and sprinkled with cigarette butts and sunflower seed husks. And now and then a squashed dahlia. On the curb is a page torn from a school notebook with the sentence, the speed of the blue tractor is six times greater than the speed of the red tractor.

School-day handwriting, the letters in one word falling on their back and in another on their face. And warts on the children’s fingers, dirt on the warts, clusters of warts like gray berries, fingers like turkey necks.
Warts can also spread through contact with objects, said Paul, they can migrate onto any skin. Every day Adina touches the children’s notebooks and hands. The chalk scrapes against the blackboard, every word she writes could turn into a wart. The eyes in the faces are tired, they are not listening. Then the bell rings, and Adina goes to the teachers’ bathroom and looks in the mirror. She studies her face and neck, searching for a wart. The chalk eats away at her fingers.

The wart clusters on the children are full of all the grabbing, all the pushing and kicking, squeezing and shoving, and full of all the bullying and bruising. They contain eager crushes and cruel snubs, the cunning calculation of mothers and fathers, relatives and neighbors and strangers. And if eyes well up or a tooth breaks or an ear bleeds there is simply a shrug of the shoulders.

A trolleybus passes by, windows lit, two sections connected by a wrinkled rubber-coated sleeve, an accordion. The horns glide along the wire overhead, the accordion opens and closes, dust billows from the bellows. The dust is gray, with fine hairs, and is warmer than the evening air. If the trolley is moving the city has electricity. The horns spray sparks into the trees, leaves drop onto the sidewalk from branches that lie too low. The poplars tower over all the streets, in the twilight they are darker than other trees.

A man walks in front of Adina, carrying a flashlight. The city is often without power, flashlights are an extension of the hand. On pitch-black streets the night is all of one piece, and a person on foot is nothing but a sound. The man holds his flashlight with the bulb pointed backward. Evening pulls the last white thread through the end of the street. White tureens and stainless spoons shimmer in the display window. The man has yet to turn his flashlight on, he’s waiting until the end of one little street falls into the next. The minute he turns on the flashlight, he disappears. He becomes a man inside his own hand.

The electricity isn’t switched off until it’s completely dark. Then the shoe factory no longer hums, and a candle burns at the
gatehouse, where a man’s sleeve can be seen beside the candle. In front of the gatehouse is a dog that’s completely invisible except for a pair of glowing eyes. But his bark can be heard, and his paws on the asphalt.

The poplars advance onto every street. The houses crowd together. Candles are lit behind curtains. Parents hold their children up to the light because they want to look at their cheeks one more time before the next morning.

Where the shrubbery is dense, night lurks poised between the foliage and assault. If the city is without power and dark, the night comes from below. First it cuts off the legs. The shoulders are still draped with a gray light, just enough for shaking heads or shutting eyes. But not enough to see by.

Only occasionally do the puddles glow, but not for long, because the ground is thirsty and the summer is dry, after weeks and weeks of dust. A shrub grazes Adina’s shoulder. It has restless white flowers with a heavy, insistent fragrance. Adina switches on her flashlight, a circle falls into the dark, an egg. Inside the circle is a head with a beak. The light is not enough to see by, merely enough to make sure the night can’t devour all of Adina’s back, only half.

The roses outside the apartment block weave a covering full of holes, a colander of dirty leaves and dirty stars. The night pushes the roses out of the city.

Herta Müller
Translated by Philip Boehm
The Nobel prize-winner’s most recent novel to be published in English translation is a book of details. From the opening image – ‘The ant is carrying a dead fly three times its size’ – the way in which the Ceaușescu regime invaded and pervaded every aspect of Romanians’ lives is communicated through precise but simple descriptions of humans’ interactions – with each other and with the physical world around them.

In the wire factory where a central character works, the gatekeeper searches the workers’ bags for contraband as they leave for the day:

‘His decision also depends on the gatehouse shade, and on the taste of the sunflower seeds in his mouth. If a few kernels are rancid, his tongue turns bitter. His cheekbones clench up, his eyes grow stubborn.’

But Müller doesn’t reflect the regime’s control simply through imagery, she also demonstrates it through the ways she expresses these details, in the linguistic relationships she creates between words. The state’s version of reality filters down even to the structure of language, so that objects attach themselves to unlikely and illogical descriptions. A woman scratches herself with a knitting needle and the stitch counter ‘gets caught in the gap between the woman’s teeth and inside the eyes of the cat. The telephone is shrill. The ringing catches on the wool, the yarn climbs into the gatewoman’s hand. The ringing climbs into the cat’s stomach.’

The main thrust of the narrative first appears as such a suggestive, disconnected detail:

‘A shadow follows a woman ... The woman sits, the shadow stops. The shadow doesn’t belong to the woman, just as the shadow of the wall doesn’t belong to the wall. The shadows have abandoned the things they belong to.’

But when the surveillance is explicit – when that woman, Adina, discovers that the Securitate have been in her apartment, and want her to know it – Müller allows the details to express everything she needs to say. Stepping on a fox-fur rug she has treasured since childhood, Adina finds the tail comes away. It is only when she goes into her kitchen and finds a half-eaten quince that she – and we – realise the damage to the rug is intentional. The heart-stopping moment is revealed through a simple thought
about whoever it was who ate the quince: ‘You’d have to remember that no one would ever leave half a quince just lying there, otherwise it would dry out like a fur.’

The fur continues to lose its limbs, one by one. Each day Adina comes home to find a leg cut off but put back in place, so to the observer it is still attached. The Securitate is closing in and the time has come to flee. While hiding out in the country with her ex-partner, seismic events take place. These began, we now know, in Timișoara, the setting for this novel, but rather than relate them, Müller focuses instead on the details – using a chamber pot in front of someone else, the skin on a cooled bowl of soup, and in an unexpected and significant image, the cutting of fingernails. ‘Ever since they’ve been cutting the fox, my nails grow faster’ says Adina. ‘When you live in fear, your hair and nails grow faster.’ But Paul, her companion, contradicts her. Pointing to a picture of Ceaușescu he says, ‘If that were the case, his hair would grow all the way from the forehead down to the toes in a single day.’ Ceaușescu is terrified, so we know the revolution is under way.

At the end of the novel we do see the televised deaths of the Ceaușescus, but again the details are bare and simple – and the linguistic disruption continues. Just before being shot on screen, Ceaușescu’s eyes ‘saw the nail clipper on the table next to Adina’s hand’. In death the Ceaușescus are ‘two old peasants … lying on the ground, and the soles of their shoes peered into the room’.

This, for Adina and Paul, is a ‘bullet-pierced image that swells until it bursts through the skull because the image is bigger than their heads’.

Müller’s response to the impossibility of truly capturing such an image in words is to focus on the finest of details, describing them in the simplest but most creative of ways, in doing so offering us the most human aspects of her country’s story.
Before they built the apartment blocks across the street, before everything was screened off and suffocating, I used to watch Bucharest through the night from the triple window in my room above Ștefan cel Mare. The window usually reflected my room’s cheap furniture – a bedroom set of yellowed wood, a dresser and mirror, a table with some aloe and asparagus in clay pots, a chandelier with globes of green glass, one of which had been chipped long ago. The reflected yellow space turned even yellower as it deepened into the enormous window, and I, a thin, sickly adolescent in torn pyjamas and a stretched-out vest, would spend the long afternoon perched on the small cabinet in the bedstead, staring, hypnotized, into the eyes of my reflection in the transparent glass. I would prop my feet on the radiator under the window, and in winter the soles of my feet would burn, giving me a perverse, subtle blend of pleasure and suffering. I saw myself in the yellow glass, under the triple blossom of the chandelier’s phantom, my face as thin as a razor, my eyes heavy within violet circles. A stringy moustache emphasized the asymmetry of my mouth, or more precisely, the asymmetry of my entire face. If you took a picture of my face and covered the left half, you would see an open, adventurous young man, almost beautiful. The other half, though, would shock and frighten you: a dead eye and a tragic mouth, hopelessness spread over the cheek like acne.
I only really felt like myself when I turned out the lights. At that moment, electric sparks from the trams that clattered on the streets five stories below would rotate across the walls in phosphorescent blue and green stripes. I suddenly became aware of the din of traffic, and of my loneliness, and of the endless sadness that was my life. When I clicked off the light switch behind the wardrobe, the room turned into a pale aquarium. I moved like an old fish around the pieces of putrid furniture that stank like the residue of a ravine. I crossed the jute rug, stiff under my feet, toward the cabinet in the bedstead, where I sat down again and put my feet on the radiator, and Bucharest exploded outside the lunar blue glass. The city was a nocturnal triptych, shining like glass, endless, inexhaustible. Below, I could see a part of the street where there were light poles like metal crosses that held tram lines and rosy light bulbs, poles that in winter nights attracted wave after wave of snowfall, furious or gentle, sparse like in cartoons or thick like fur. During the summer, for fun, I imagined a crucified body with a crown of thorns on every pole in that endless line. The bodies were bony and long-haired, with wet towels tied around their hips. Their tearful eyes followed the wash of cars over stony streets. Two or three children, out late for some reason, would stop to gaze at the nearest Christ, raising their triangular faces toward the moon.

Across the street were the state bakery, a few houses with small yards, a round tobacco kiosk, a shop that filled seltzer bottles, and a grocery. Possibly because the first time I ever crossed the street by myself was to buy bread, I dream most often about that building. In my dreams, it is no longer a dank hovel, always dark, where an old woman in a white coat kneads bread that looks and smells like a rat, but a space of mystery at the top of a staircase, long and difficult to climb. The weak light bulb, hanging from two bare wires, gains a mystical significance. The woman is now young and beautiful and the stacks of bread racks are as high as a Cyclops. The tram comes, without walls, just the chassis and a few wooden chairs, and Silvia gets on and is lost to a part of the city that I found only later, in other dreams.
woman herself towers tall. I count my coins in the chimerical light as they glitter in my palm, but then I lose track and start to cry, because I can’t tell if I have enough. Further up the street is Nenea Cătelu, a shabby and lazy old man, whose bare yard looks like a war zone, an empty lot filled with trash. He and his wife wander dazed here and there, in and out of their shack patched over with tarred cardboard, tripping over the skeletal dog who gave them their name. Looking toward Dinamo, I can see just the corner of the grocery store. Toward the circus grounds are the supermarket and newsstand. Here, in my dreams, the caves begin. I wander, holding a wire basket, through the shelves of sherbet and jam, napkins and sacks of sugar (some with little green or orange metal cans hidden inside, or so the kids say). I go through a swinging door into another area of the store, one that never existed, and I find myself outdoors, under the stars, with the basket of boxes and jars still in my hand. I’m behind the block, among mounds of crates made of broken boards, and in front of me is a white table where they sell cheese. But now there is not only one door, like in reality – here are ten doors in a row with windows between each one, brightly lit by the rooms of basement apartments. Through each window I can see a strange, very high bed, and in each bed a young girl is sleeping, her hair spilling over the pillow, her small breasts uncovered. In one of these dreams, I open the closest door and climb down a spiral staircase, which ends in a small alcove with an electric light. The staircase goes deep into the ground, and in the alcove, one of these girl-dolls is waiting for me, curly-haired and timid. Even though I am already a man when I have this dream, I am not meant to have Silvia, and all my excitement spends itself in woolen abstractions of words and gestures. We leave holding hands, we cross the snowy street, I see her blue hair in the lights of the pharmacy window and the restaurant named Hora, and then we both wait for the tram while a snowfall covers our faces. The tram comes, without walls, just the chassis and a few wooden chairs, and Silvia gets on and is lost to a part of the city that I found only later, in other dreams.

Mircea Cărtărescu
Translated by Sean Cotter
A mix of memoir and fiction, Mircea Cărtărescu’s three-part epic – seamlessly translated by Sean Cotter – is the first volume in a trilogy. To call it a challenging read is something of an understatement. Bogdan Suceavă, writing in the Los Angeles Review of Books, hailed Blinding as ‘a major discovery’, praising Cărtărescu’s ‘vision of the whole world’s array of antagonistic forces converging in one ultimate larger-than-life image, accomplished through literary expression that reaches beyond anything that our senses can perceive’. Meanwhile, in the Independent, Boyd Tonkin called it ‘a novel of visionary intensity’.

Cărtărescu’s narrator shares his first name, and we are taken on a hallucinogenic journey through the fictionalised Mircea’s past – his childish mind, his heightened sense of his adolescent self, and his fevered imaginings as he writes this book. We pick our way through his tangled memories and follow him through the history and neighbourhoods of Bucharest – in particular its numerous statues, labyrinthine streets and underground passages. We are told: ‘The past is everything, the future is nothing, and time has no other meaning.’

Mircea enjoys a happy childhood, but his adolescence is marred by a disfiguring facial palsy. He spends long weeks in hospital hooked up to a ‘rays’ machine and kneaded by a blind masseur and former Securitate officer. However, this long confinement enriches the boy’s imagination, hones his senses, consolidates his desire to make connections, and prepares him for a writing life.

Blinding circles around Mircea’s family and his mother Maria’s experiences before he was born. During the war, fifteen-year-old Maria and her older sister, Vasilica, worked long hours as seamstresses. At night they enjoyed the jazz bars of Bucharest, meeting a colourful array of characters, including the famous variety actress Mioara Mironescu and Cedric the black drummer from New Orleans – performers at the Gorgonzola cabaret. The sisters miraculously survive the wartime bombing of Bucharest before being fetched home by their distraught peasant father.

When Maria later returns to Bucharest and meets her future husband, she indulges her love of cinema. Her passion serves to represent a generation’s attempts to escape an increasingly totalitarian reality. Intertwined with linear accounts of Mircea’s parents’ courtship, a working-class upbringing and mundane hospital visits, are passages of fantastical musings and surreal flights of the imagination. Cedric the drummer regales the sisters with a fantastic tale from New Orleans’ French Quarter,
and we learn how Maria’s Bulgarian ancestors arrived in Romania: while crossing the frozen Danube they killed a giant butterfly, ate its flesh and made sheets from its wings.

The butterfly is in fact a powerful motif that runs throughout the novel. *Blinding* is also about the nature of creativity and the three volumes are meant to represent the butterfly’s two wings and abdomen – the right masculine wing represents Mircea’s father, while the left wing’s feminine nature corresponds to his mother, Maria, who also has a butterfly-shaped birthmark on her left hip that takes on mythic proportions. Indeed butterflies adorn pyjamas, tattoos and dreams throughout the book, and erupt from pregnant women’s abdomens, as Cărtărescu combines memory, folklore, real events and dreams to create a hypnotic, sprawling, carnivalesque world.

*Lucy Popescu*
BOOK TWO. THE TEMPEST

THE GOAT

The wind now drove the ship onward, and its bird’s beak pecked the swath of diamonds that stretched away to the setting sun. Eli stood for a long time on the prow before each sunset and never tired of the flashes, the gleams, the glittering flight of the soft-edged beads, now yellow, now orange, now red, that the sun scattered over the water. Jacob, who missed no opportunity to recite a parable, reminded him that there are three things that leave no trace in the world, or even four: the eagle across the sky, the serpent across the rock, and the ship across the sea. Elisha wanted to know what the fourth was, but the old man said it was too soon for him to know and besides, he would discover it not from him, but from a woman. One evening, still standing in the same spot, the boy heard the men talking about how a major sacrifice was required in order to give thanks for their escape from both plague and sea monster.

They decided to sacrifice the goat, a good choice given that they no longer had anything to feed it and it was quite scrawny. Apart from the old man, who knew the ritual of
sacrifice well and the various types of immolation, albeit only the Jewish ones, the others had never troubled their heads over such a thing. The captain made each pray to his own god, imploring that Leviathan would not approach the ship again. Then, because Jacob refused to officiate as priest for all of them, the honour fell on the Phoenician, who had the greater reason to give thanks and make sacrifice. He had fully regained his strength. He chose the butcher’s method rather than the priest’s, without any care for the small details, but truth to tell, the position they found themselves in justified certain shortcuts and simplifications. The goat bleated long and terribly, and three cups of its blood were poured into the sea as the Phoenician mumbled some words. Elisha understood those words quite well, since they resembled those of his own language. Only now did the lad turn towards them, gazing at them with obvious curiosity.

Since their departure from Joppa, he was the one who had changed the most, as indeed had his life. He was no longer recognisable. His hair was now clean and it curled, even though the salt wind had stiffened it. Jacob had made him cut his toenails with a large pair of scissors from his knapsack. His sick foot had healed (the old man had tended it and examined it every day thereafter) and his limp was almost gone. But the real transformation was that in the space of a few weeks the boy had become a young man. He had exchanged one body for another. His chest had grown broader, his Adam’s apple bobbed in his long throat when he swallowed, and down shaded his upper lip. His eyebrows were still tangled, his eyes still narrow, but now they were livelier. From Jacob he had learned the final letters: shin, ‘tooth’, s, 300, and tav, ‘sign’, t, 400. He knew how to combine the letters. He could count to a thousand. And his voice had grown deeper. He was waiting for something impatiently, but not even he knew what it was.

The captain felt the blood seething through his veins in gratitude when he thanked the great gods of the Iberian heaven, Endovelico, Nabia and Trebaruna, for the peace that reigned aboard his ship; nobody had died of disease, or envy, or other causes, the plague had not spread, the monster had given them a wide berth, and the fear of it had brought them only good.
and many times he waxed emotional for no reason, or irascible, or more often than not, sad. He was bored with life on the ship and wanted to be free again, free to do whatever he wanted, as he had been when Jacob first found him.

The others too had noticed the change in Elisha. At first, although he was Jacob’s servant, he served them all and each felt entitled to beat him. As he was inured to it, he didn’t care. But lately, he had refused to be beaten anymore, nor did he take orders from the others, obeying only the captain and Jacob. He answered them back, impertinently or maliciously, sometimes imploringly, begging for mercy. The more he learned – and this happened with each passing day, as fast as their eyes could see, since he assimilated knowledge easily – the more he learned, the more the men began to view him with mindfulness and a kind of intimidation. The Greek with the hooked nose sought his eyes, shaded by their bushy eyebrows, sought to be close to him. It was as if he were imploring him, begging something obscure. Eli, who had previously feared that Zeuxidamos wanted to kill him, now sensed that he had him in his power, that the tables had been turned, that the slave had become Zeuxidamos’s master, but this was as yet unclear. And since nothing can ever be wholly well, it was now Deimos who regarded him with enmity.

That evening they all ate goat’s meat and cast a fatty morsel into the sea for the monster. They also had fresh vegetables and wine. The week before, the ship had landed for the first time since its departure, in Azza, and from the Philistines they had purchased all they still needed. It seemed that everything was going well. The captain felt the blood seething through his veins in gratitude when he thanked the great gods of the Iberian heaven, Endovelico, Nabia and Trebaruna, for the peace that reigned aboard his ship; nobody had died of disease, or envy, or other causes, the plague had not spread, the monster had given them a wide berth, and the fear of it had brought them only good. Farther into the future he also glimpsed handsome earnings for himself, but he did not find it fitting to speak to the gods of that,
and instead he shared his joy with his ship, his little girl. On the evening of the sacrifice, they all lay themselves down to rest with full bellies and at peace.

It was also then that Zeuxidamos lay down beside Elisha for the first time, protecting him as if by chance with an out-stretched arm across his slender waist. It seemed to him that the lad was asleep and with exquisite delicacy he slipped his hand inside his shirt and softly caressed his chest, causing him to shudder, he moved his hand lower, down to his belly, he gently turned him over, caressed his firm buttocks, twisted him around once more, grasped the tender snake between his legs, rubbed its tip with soft fingers until, as swiftly as could be, he felt it harden in his ever greedier palm. Astonished, Elisha made no resistance.

For the first time since they had left Gat-Hefer, Jonah felt joyful and free. Perhaps he really had chosen the best course, that of assisting Jacob ben Benjamin, his father’s cousin. He fell peacefully asleep. The same as every night, Abiel nestled in the prow and, as had happened only once before, he dreamed of colours, not knowing what colours were. On waking, he was certain that that day something very bad would happen.

Ioana Pârvulescu
Translated by Alistair Ian Blyth
This is a daring book not only because it skilfully combines three different genres (crime, fantasy and historical non-fiction), but mainly because it tackles very different themes from most contemporary Romanian prose, which tends to focus on communism or the pitfalls of the post-communist transition. Set in Bucharest at the end of the 19th century, the novel is a beautiful account of a bygone era, which many Romanians now think of with nostalgia.

Set in the time when cosmopolitan and European Bucharest was known as ‘Little Paris’, a well-structured, intricate plot unfolds as it follows the appearance of a mysterious stranger, Dan Kretu, found lying unconscious on the outskirts of the city, and the death of a young aristocrat, originally found wounded in the same place as Dan Kretu. These two characters open two of the main themes of the book: fantasy and time travel, and the detective story, seemingly inspired by Agatha Christie. History is also a central theme, providing a fascinating, well-documented background of stories, characters and events, depicting everyday life in Bucharest.

With such a wide selection of themes and ideas, as readers we are faced with the delightful dilemma of either playing philosopher, and reflecting on time and time travel, or playing detective, trying to solve an intriguing crime, or even playing historian, immersing ourselves in a world of journalists, thieves, police and aristocrats, and a wealth of duels, famous crimes, social reforms and political debates.

The language is well-suited to nineteenth-century Bucharest and is sprinkled with an appealing variety of French, German and English words; with humour, metaphors, philosophical truths (‘Perhaps all that was and will be is now, in the present’) and comforting lines (‘If only you could stock up on laughter for when things go badly for you’).

I enjoyed the complexity of the characters, especially the dreamy Dan Kretu (who might be the reader himself), the sharp detective Costache (who reminded me of Hercule Poirot), the lovely newspaper boy Nicu (likened by many to Gavroche), or the insightful Iulia Margulis, whose mature understanding and journal-writing reminded me of Elizabeth Bennet from Pride and Prejudice.

The novel’s ending leaves a lot to the imagination, as well as many unsolved clues. Why, for one, do Iulia Margulis and Dan Kretu look so alike? Is theirs a story of time travel, reincarnation and shared past lives?

The characters often make predictions and one of my favourites is
about the future of Romania, which takes place during a conversation between the journalists Pavel Mirto and Mr. Procopiu. Romania is seen ‘as an orchestra’ that is ‘still rehearsing,’ but ‘at the concert, the melody will come together flawlessly.’ Or, it’s seen as a game of billiards, where ‘every move has a hidden aim and everything moves closer and closer, as part of a cosmic mechanism.’

So, the prediction is that Romania might eventually fulfill its destiny. Timely words, as the country currently undergoes a true citizen’s revolution, with mass, peaceful demonstrations calling for justice, the rule of law and good governance. Described by the Romanian author Mircea Cărtărescu as a quest to reinvent ourselves as a nation, these protests might just be the beginning of a deep social and political process to win Romania its historic game of billiards.

I felt sad when I got to the end of Life begins on Friday: it’s such a well-written and enjoyable read, with a surprising ending and a thrilling plot that made me wish to see it also made into a film or TV series. It was first published in Romanian in 2013, awarded the European Union Prize for Literature, then published in English in 2016.

Cristina Muresan

This is a #RivetingReview first published on eurolitnetwork.com in February 2017
‘For, on Saturday evening, after he counted at least three stars in the sky, Schmiel would pour slivovitz in a little glass, to the brim, ready to pour it over the corner of the table, that the week, the coming week, might be full. Rifka, his wife, would light two candles, which she gave to one of the smaller of their sons, to hold them up as high as he could, that the week, the coming week, might be luminous. ... And Schmiel would sing ‘Hamavdil’, the old hymn of bidding the Sabbath farewell, whose words he didn’t really understand, but which he had heard sung exactly the same way by his father, who had heard them from his grandfather, who had heard them from his great-grandfather, and so on. And the whole family, Rifka and the sons and daughters, would hum along.

After the final strains of the hymn died away, the spell was broken and everything returned to normal.’

(From Ludovic Bruckstein’s With an Unopened Umbrella in the Pouring Rain, forthcoming from Istros Books, 2021)
horrors and deprivation of war. Most of the thirteen stories of the book start their closing paragraphs with the words ‘At dawn one day in May 1944...’, or variations on that theme, followed by a description of the incarceration of the local Jewish population in the ghetto, then their journey on the ‘freight cars with planks and barbed wire nailed over the ventilation windows’, before their arrival at their final destination, Auschwitz.

Mircea Eliade (1907–1986) and the younger Ludovic Bruckstein (1920–1988) were compatriots in that they both emerged from the newly united country of Romania, which was formed after the First World War from the ruined empires of the previous era. However, their destinies would be very different: whereas the first escaped the communist post-war period and went on to become a respected researcher and writer with an international reputation, the latter was assigned to eventual obscurity by the vagaries of war and politics. Having survived the Nazi occupation and the camps, Bruckstein managed to build a successful career as a playwright and author in the now communist Romania, only to be wiped from the slate of national literature when he immigrated to Israel with his family in the 1970s.

Since my very first visit to Romania and during the many subsequent ones (at a rough count, I have been to the country more than twenty times over as many years) it was Mircea Eliade, along with the nineteenth century national poet, Mihai Eminescu, who were my first introductions to the literature. Then came an acquaintance with the ‘émigré writers’ of the mid-twentieth century: Norman Manea, Eugène Ionescu, Emil Cioran and, more recently, the Nobel Laureate Herta Müller. Publishing the early fictional work of Mircea Eliade – Diary of a Short-Sighted Adolescent, written when he was just seventeen, and Gaudeamus, the follow-up student novel, have been highlights of Istros Books’ nine-year publishing history, as well as a personal achievement after spending two years searching for the rights holder.

The subtle, beautiful work of Ludovic Bruckstein came to me with less fanfare, through the loving commitment of his son to revive these lost works, and through the talent and good sense of one of the very best translators from Romanian to English working today – Alistair Ian Blyth.

Alistair has also brought to Istros Books the work of contemporary historian and novelist, Ioana Pârvulescu, whose charming, lyrical historical novel Life Begins on Friday (reviewed in this magazine) won the European Union
Prize for Literature in 2013 and was published in English in 2016. We celebrated the publication, I remember, on the eve of the Brexit results in the elegant surroundings of the Romanian Cultural Institute in Belgrave Square, London, while the rain poured down outside, as if in protest.

Perhaps Istros Books has not been the biggest publisher of Romanian literature into English – the University of Plymouth Press won an International Enterprise award for its 20 Romanian Writers Series, which ran from 2008 to 2013 – but I hope we are one of the most committed. When I founded the company in 2011, one of the first publications was a small collection of poems by the Romanian writer and civil-society activist, Octavian Paler. His short Definition of an Impossible Alternative just about sums up why I do what I do, and why so many small independent publishers do what they do, and indeed writers too: not for financial profit (although that would always be welcome), not for fame, but for the sake of great literature in itself.

**Definition of an Impossible Alternative**

The fire has no other choice: either to remain itself or turn to ash.

*Susan Curtis*
A SLICE OF BREAD

Terrible cold, hunger. A persistent, nagging hunger. Like a relentless, evil spirit, which leaves you not a moment’s peace. It prevents you from thinking about anything else. It doesn’t prick you with a pin, it doesn’t cut you with a knife, it doesn’t hit you over the head. You’re merely hungry. Hungry. Hungry.

In the round hut, with the tapering walls and roof, made of thick green-painted cardboard, in the labour camp on the Wolfsberg, which is to say, Wolf’s Mountain. The camp is part of the Grossrosen cluster of concentration camps. The administration, the organisation, the execution of orders is flawless. Each inmate has received a striped uniform, like a pair of pyjamas made of stiff cloth, a cap made of the same material, grey with dark blue stripes, a tin plate and spoon, and a number. Which is to say, each has become a number.

And these numbers sleep in the round huts that form the perfect rows of the camp. Number 37013, curled up with the black blanket pulled over his head, cannot sleep. Hunger nags him. A dull, agonising hunger. And in the straw at the head of his bed is a bread ration. A dense slice of soya bread.
Every evening, after he comes back from his toil at the labour site where they are building a railway through the mountains, he receives a slice of soya bread and an extra, a cube of margarine substitute or marmalade. Every day, number 37013 eats all his bread and the zulag, the extra. And he sleeps like the dead. The next day, at the crack of dawn, when the prisoners receive their ‘coffee’ – water muddied with a kind of coffee substitute – he has not one crumb of bread left.

And so, he has made a firm decision. He will leave half his bread ration for the next day. And the slice of bread is beneath his head, in the straw, ten centimetres from his mouth. And the hunger torments him, nags him. He cannot fall asleep. Is it midnight? Maybe it is past midnight. An eternity. When will morning come? Not for an eternity will morning come ... He stretches out his hand, rummages in the straw beneath his head. Yes, it’s still there. He takes out the bread and begins to gnaw it. He eats it. All of it. To the last crumb. And he sleeps like a log.

A few days after that, at the labour site, he saw that one of the prisoners had a pencil. Good God! A pencil! Actually, it was the stump of a thick carpenter’s pencil. But a pencil nonetheless, with which you could write. With which you could put down a thought on a piece of thick paper torn from the sacks of cement. The haggling began. A quarter of a bread ration for the pencil. The other number demanded the whole ration. Do you want to kill me? Should I go a day without bread? The other man agreed to receive payment in two instalments. No, half a ration, and that’s final. More than that would be impossible! He bought the pencil and the very same day, during the brief meal break, after the thin gruel, he wrote on a piece of paper from the cement sacks. What did he write? He doesn’t even know any more. Something very important, obviously.

And that evening, after he received his bread ration, he carefully cut half a slice of bread and paid for the pencil. And
the other half he ate straight away, along with the cube of margarine substitute. And the whole night he slept like a log.

Line up! March! They go down into the valley, to Wustegiersdorf, to the bath. A long barrack. At one end, they get undressed. Stark naked, living skeletons, they pass under the shower. They come out at the other end of the long barrack. Here, each receives another striped uniform, reeking of disinfectant. The old uniforms are left behind. Along with his pencil and the scraps of paper from the cement on which he has scribbled. What was written on them? Who knows? Very important things, obviously.

Ludovic Bruckstein
Translated by Alistair Ian Blyth
I have lived in Romania since just before the end of the last century and have been translating from the Romanian for about sixteen years, mostly fiction, but also non-fiction, drama and poetry. Before the 2000s, most of the Romanian literature translated into English was poetry: the anthologies of Eastern European poetry that appeared immediately after the fall of communism, but also volumes by individual poets. One of the reasons for this was that at the time there were few translators able to take on a large-scale project such as translating a novel, but it was also not until the 2000s that post-communist contemporary Romanian fiction finally came into its own, with a whole generation of unique and talented voices emerging. Many of this new wave of Romanian novelists are published by Polirom, based in Iași, north-eastern Romania. Since 2006, I have translated an annual catalogue of excerpts from fiction by Polirom authors. As of last year, the catalogues have featured 123 writers in total, and the publisher’s website (www romanianwriters ro) provides an excellent introduction to the sheer range and quality of contemporary Romanian fiction.

The 1990s was a decade of social, economic and political chaos in Romania, with the psychological scars of the Ceaușescu personality cult and one of Eastern Europe’s worst totalitarian regimes still raw. Much of what was published in the immediate aftermath of the fall of the regime was non-fiction, an attempt at an historical reckoning with a communist past that refused to go quietly. It was not until the second decade of post-communism, from about 2000, and with the benefit of greater historical distance, that writers were able to begin to explore Romania’s traumatic past through fiction. One outstanding novel in this respect is Lucian Dan Teodorovici’s Matei Brunul (published in English under the same title by Dalkey Archive Press, 2018), in which the Stalinist regime cynically tries to mould into a communist ‘new man’ a naïve young puppeteer who has lost his memory as a result of brutalisation in
prison after being convicted as an enemy of the people. Filip Florian’s Little Fingers (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009) is also set in post-communist Romania, but its tale of the discovery of a mass grave becomes an allegory of all the unresolved traumas of the past. Florian’s second novel, The Days of the King (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011), is a tale of baroque imagination told in luxuriant prose, which takes us back to the mid-nineteenth century, when Romania was emerging as a nation state. Also set in the nineteenth century, a time of hope and promise for Romania before the catastrophes of fascism and communism that the next century was to bring, Ioana Pârvulescu’s Life Begins on Friday (Istros Books, 2016) evoke Bucharest’s belle époque in a tale of mystery and romance that ingeniously plays with the conventions of genre and literary fiction. One of the most important novels of the post-communist period, Varujan Vosganian’s The Book of Whispers (Yale University Press, 2017), spans a century of Romanian history, as seen through the lives and stories of Romania’s Armenian community, and is also a harrowing account of the Armenian Genocide.

As well as the contemporary novelists mentioned above, it has also been my privilege to translate one of the most important Romanian literary figures of the second half of the twentieth century: Dumitru Tsepeneag (b. 1937). Tsepeneag was the founder of ‘oneirism’, a literary movement that during the post-Stalinist partial ‘thaw’ of the late 1960s challenged the official literary culture of realism (socialist or otherwise) and that was banned during the totalitarian crackdown of the 1970s. Tsepeneag was forced into exile in France after his citizenship was revoked by presidential decree in 1975. His books vanished from Romanian literature until after the 1989 revolution, and his collected works are now being published in English translation by Dalkey Archive Press.

For me, translation has been an endless journey of discovery, and Romanian literature is far from having given up all its riches. It is worth remembering that Romanian literature is more than just literature written in Romania. Tsepeneag and Bruckstein are individual examples of Romanian literature in exile, but there is also the Romanian literature of Moldova, a country that shares the same language but whose historical and cultural experience has been vastly different. In 2010, I contributed translations to Archipelago, a Moldova PEN Centre anthology edited by writer Vitalie Ciobanu as an introduction to the highly distinctive literary tradition of Romania’s smaller neighbour. For me, it was a unique opportunity to discover Moldovan literature, which is all too often overlooked or unavailable in Romania, and my work on the anthology led to translations of short stories by Moldovan writers being
included in Dalkey Archive Press’s Best European Fiction series. My translation of Iulian Ciocan’s novel Before Brezhnev Died was published this year by Dalkey Archive Press, along with Emilian Galaicu-Păun’s Living Tissue. 10x10. Both novels are set in the Soviet Socialist Republic of Moldavia during the Brezhnev period.

For me, translation has been an endless journey of discovery, and Romanian literature is far from having given up all its riches.

Alistair Ian Blyth
Captives deserves to stand on the same shelf with Joyce’s Ulysses, Döblin’s Berlin, Alexanderplatz, Faulkner’s The Sound and the Fury, Kafka’s The Trial and a volume of stories by Yokomitsu Riichi. This, as the reader can understand, is both a statement of unrestrained praise and a warning, especially as some of these titles are relatively easy reading compared to this book. Manea’s debut and masterpiece is indeed not a novel that opens up lightly, but when it does, it will not let you go, not for a long time.

The author himself has remarked that the book may sound today like a message from another era, meaning that the depressed atmosphere of Stalinist Romania is now a world happily in the past. But this appraisal is true also in another sense: first published, as if by miracle, in 1970, the novel also comes from a distant time in which authors could trust their readers and be confident that they would only be judged on artistic terms, and not by the degree of challenge their texts posed. These times are now long gone, and quite possibly none of the aforementioned classics of modern prose would nowadays make it further than the desk of an assistant acquisitions editor of any reputable publishing house. This is why the publication of Manea’s novel is a miracle in our times, and this rare gem should receive all the critical attention it so richly deserves.

We get to discover the events that make up this ‘story’ – a word that should be used with caution here – little by little. We need to put the pieces of the puzzle together ourselves, and even so we never know which of the multiple available versions of the events we should prefer, as most probably there is no correct one among the perspectives from which things are told, over and over again. Sometimes the narrative glides over the surface and we only get to see the objects present, without any distinction to show which of these matters and why. Sometimes we have no idea about the spatial coordinates of the story, but only get to share the
narrator’s random impressions, and these, too, can jump back and forth in time without warning. Motifs repeat themselves from unexpected angles, details fall into place, only to be dislodged again. But the reasons why anyone does what they do are always deeply, deeply human, even if the deeds themselves are not. Only towards the end of the book, when a threatening clarity starts to emerge from within the kaleidoscopic polyphony, do we get a chance to see what has taken place, and even then we cannot really be sure.

The book is divided into three parts, ‘She’, ‘You’ and ‘I’, the latter making up approximately one half of it. ‘She’ is a teacher of French and music, and an avid reader of personal ads, which constantly entangle her in unsatisfactory liaisons. ‘You’ refers to the daughter of an officer, who has committed suicide, because he cannot live with his wartime memories; and ‘I’ is the nameless main narrator, an engineer working in a factory, once a young man of great promise, but now quite unable to sort out his own problems. As people, they are all broken, each in their own way – by the regime, by the times, by the circumstances, and by other people who do not hesitate to take advantage of any small edge that gives them at least a little bit of power over their peers.

It is a book that masterfully combines a high modernist literary achievement with a devastating diagnosis of totalitarianism – not, as we are accustomed to think of it, a political order imposed on individuals fully conscious and thinking about the world as we normally do, but as a debilitating state of mind that slowly, yet inescapably develops even in the most intelligent or ethically committed person, who has remained long enough in its suffocating embrace. Needless to say, we should consider ourselves very lucky that we can only feel this embrace when we read books like this.

Rein Raud
Mihail Sebastian was not an author I had read before and I came to Women not knowing what to expect. What I found is a piercing insight into the experience of love: an odyssey of casual affairs; the superficial observation of others’ relationships; the pain of rejection; and a comfortable, successful ménage à deux, which is cast aside like an unfinished book. Although Women is described as a novel, it is in fact a series of four novellas, linked through Ștefan Valeriu, whom we first meet, in book one, as a medical student in his early twenties, relaxing by a French alpine lake after the rigours of exams.

Ștefan is looking not so much for love, but for the experience of love, of women. His greatest priority is to keep his freedom and independence; in his lakeside hotel, he sets his cap at three women, all very different: Marthe, mature and invulnerable; Renée, inexperienced and desperate; and Odette, at eighteen years old, as she tells her, ‘intelligent and wise for your age’. She ripostes: ‘I’m a virgin. That helps me stay intelligent.’ For Ștefan, these liaisons are a game which he must win. He spars with the self-confident Marthe, who maintains her distance, intimidates him; his response is to challenge, then ignore. But at their last meeting she quietly leaves him defeated: ‘Her response… destroyed in one stroke the entire victory of the past three days, checkmate in one move.’ Odette, who plays him like a trout, rejects him, then finally yields, and immediately walks away untroubled, without a word of explanation. Even Renée, who throws herself at him, realises his shallowness. They are left with only memories of love and loss; but Ștefan comes to realise that forgetting is not an option, love may be transient but memories do not heal.

Mihail Sebastian was, as a Jew, driven to be an outsider in 1930s Romania, and Women is essentially about outsiders. Ștefan and the
women in his life are all to some extent at variance with the mores of their time, bent on escaping or ignoring convention. Odette, for example, is ‘a boy in a blue beret’. But the complications of being misfits are just what none of them can escape. Émilie, whom we meet in book two, is the saddest of all, a virgin in the low-life banlieue of Paris, a world of loose morals where ‘to be a virgin older than fifteen was an embarrassment’. Her tragedy is to meet Irimia, a former schoolfriend of Ştefan’s, another social misfit. Their story is narrated by Ştefan with an extraordinary mixture of compassion, glee and self-justification. He cannot accept the impact of his own manipulative role in the affair.

Maria, the woman in book three, is the polar opposite of Émilie: older, worldly-wise, yet fearful her love affair with a younger man, Andrei, will compromise her social position. Maria is a long-time friend of Ştefan and her story is a letter to him; he is otherwise entirely absent. He has confessed he loves her and she reproaches him for imperilling their friendship: ‘Why did you end up like the others? The fact that you love me … is an unnecessary complication’. Her story is told entirely from the woman’s point of view. She has the insight and sophistication that elude Ştefan. But she too knows her relationship will end and she will be left with nothing but memories.

Arabela is Ştefan’s last woman: matter-of-fact, practical, a home-maker. She accepts his irresponsibilities and organises his life. She is ‘someone … to bear all of life’s hardships’. But when the inevitable parting comes, it’s as simple and shoulder-shrugging as the way they first got together, and Ştefan is left once again with only memories.

Mihail Sebastian’s books are essentially experimental and Women sees Sebastian trying out different, alternative narratives. Ştefan’s role as the ‘link man’ is tenuous in several places, yet it works: he tries his hardest to manipulate the women he meets, though he doesn’t always succeed. But he is also an experimenter, and he does begin to understand the complexities of his relationships. He moves from a suspicious hostility towards self-confident women to an admiration for them; he accepts his attitudes are often cruel, so that ‘love’ is rarely permanent; but he begins to open up to his women and allows his vulnerability to show. Mihail Sebastian’s skill is to balance the telling of these stories between the man and the women: their voices are often the dominant ones in Ştefan’s odyssey.

It’s unusual to have two translations of the same book to contrast and compare, and the process has been an interesting one. There are bound to be stylistic differences and in this instance, there’s a clear divergence between the UK publication, where the language and tone are ‘European’ and the dialogue slightly old-fashioned and period – not inappropriate, I think, given the 1920s setting of the book – and the US one, in which the dialogue in particular is very modern American (of course, that
may change if the Americanisms are ‘translated’ in the forthcoming Penguin UK edition). Overall, I feel that, while Philip Ó Ceallaigh’s prose has a directness and power to it, Gabi Reigh’s flows more smoothly and the women’s thoughts and attitudes are more precisely expressed. Which you choose to read is entirely a matter of personal taste. What I did find surprising was that there are cases where the translations diverge on matters of fact. One example will suffice:

‘a woman’s voice, perhaps the English girl from yesterday who watched his vigorous front crawl and admired his victory over the water, complaining that she only knew breaststroke.’

and

‘Perhaps the Englishwoman from yesterday, the one he’d watched swimming powerfully. He had been surprised by the way she struggled with the water; she seemed to know only the breaststroke.’

The roles of the two characters are reversed. Which, I wonder, is the correct rendering of the Romanian? They cannot both be right.

Translators are only human: they make mistakes. And they are entitled, expected even, to take liberties with the tone and emphasis of their text, in order to reproduce the thrust and sense of the old in the new; but the above is of a different order. This is not the only such conflict I found and I do wonder how either translator might react on reading the other’s words. I’m glad to say, these conflicts did not detract from the overall impact of either version.

Max Easterman
Author of more than fifty books, including novels, collections of essays, as well as quite a few volumes of poetry, Andrei Codrescu is a prolific writer. He was born in Sibiu in Transylvania and moved to the US in the 1960s, first to Detroit, then to New York, where he met Allen Ginsberg and the Beatniks. At that time he didn’t speak much English, but that soon changed – his first poetry book in English came out a few years later, in 1970 (Licence to Carry a Gun).

Since then he has not only written, but also taught literature and poetry at several American universities. In 1989 he took the plunge and returned to Romania, to cover the political changes for American media. That also gave him a chance to reconnect with Romanian poetry. As a result he started writing in Romanian, his third language (after German and Hungarian). However, English remained and remains his main language – and this is the language of his latest poetry collection, No Time like Now.

There is a clear connection, a sturdy bridge linking his first and latest poetry volumes – both are mainly about New York. They are like two sides of the same coin: the troubled late 1960s are mirrored in the equally – albeit differently – troubled second decade of the twenty-first century. (The poems making up No Time Like Now were written between 2016 and 2018.) As Codrescu says himself, ‘Decades later the city has changed and the times are still troubled’. New York is the city of Codrescu’s youth, to which he returns after his time in Romania, the city which becomes the main protagonist of this volume, the city which lives and breathes, has red-hot blood running through its veins, little affected by ‘the hot grease of time’.

‘My farewell party is tomorrow just like my welcome / party which was yesterday. No time at all has passed but fashions / change. Explain that, science, and you can have my testes.’

What Codrescu sees is bitter-sweet, at times hilariously funny (often in a dead-pan way), at others agonisingly sad or even ominous. His poems are also brimming with absurdity and paradoxes, on a linguistic level too. He often takes words and turns them inside out, as if looking for their lining, surprised at what he finds there. He frequently reshuffles them like a stack of cards.

Codrescu is a shrewd commentator on modern life. He is puzzled by social media, by all the ‘tweets’ and ‘likes’, by OSs and Googling; he is saddened by what he perceives as the death of books; he scratches his head when
faced with everything gaining its ‘reverse-Ikea’ form:

‘Jesus was lucky with King James who hung all the bad translators. / The Bible is the Ikea of Christianity, more packed than Nietzsche.’

But even when he is acutely critical, he is – to use his own term – ‘not not’ warm and generous ...

Anna Blasiak

THE BOOK OF MIRRORS by E.O. CHIROVICI (ARROW, 2017)
REVIEWED BY BARRY FORSHAW

Literary success stories can have strange beginnings. After Eugen Chirovici came to England from his native Romania, it took only three years before his first novel written in English became something of a global publishing sensation. The book was the subject of a bidding war among publishers in twenty-three countries, and even such places as Iceland, which rarely takes a punt on unpublished books, secured the novel before publication in 2017.

The author had written ten crime-related novels in his own country, but his first outing in a new language had critics falling over themselves to praise it, and its occasional missteps are more than subsumed in the sheer accomplishment of the book, with the author (who numbers Hemingway, Steinbeck and Golding among his inspirations) basking in almost unalloyed approval.

The novel begins with a literary agent, Peter Katz, reading a book submission with the title The Book of Mirrors from an author named Richard Flynn, a memoir describing his English studies at Princeton in the 1980s and his closeness to the celebrated Professor Joseph Wieder. Wieder was savagely killed at his home in 1987, with no one ever charged for the crime. Katz starts to believe that Flynn is playing a curious game: his book is essentially a confession to the murder, or at least a way of revealing the identity of the killer. The manuscript is unfinished, and its author is expiring in a hospital, so Katz commissions tenacious investigative journalist John Keller to look into the case. What follows leads both men into darker and darker psychological territory.

The Book of Mirrors is a novel that swiftly acquired a slew of enthusiastic admirers, seduced by its off-kilter ethos – perhaps a result of the author’s Romanian origins filtered through an American milieu. The novel’s premise – a literary agent being seduced by fragments of a book – is both modern in
feel and satisfyingly old fashioned in its resonance; think of Henry James’ The Aspern Papers. Chirovici adroitly juggles the multiple voices here (the final section is presented via the voice of the ex-policeman who was part of the murder case in the 1980s), and what might initially seem to be a disadvantage – the cool distance at which the author remains from his characters – makes concentration on the forward movement of the narrative itself crucial. Essentially, the novel is a puzzle with the various components presented in intriguing fashion for the reader. Perhaps its central section is less involving than the opening and the revealing finale, but there is no slackening in the pace.

Is the novel a murder mystery or a literary jeu d’esprit? That’s really a matter for dispute between critics – the casual reader will want to know the answer to one simple question: Will the novel keep me comprehensively gripped? The answer to that is definitely yes. And the author’s other recent novel, Bad Blood, is similarly worthy of attention.

Barry Forshaw
MY ROMANIAN REVOLUTION
BY ROSIE GOLDSMITH, RIVETER-IN-CHIEF

In the autumn of 1989, I began working for BBC Radio 4 as reporter and producer on the new Eurofile series. I visited Yugoslavia, Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, Albania, Czechoslovakia and Germany, my feet hardly touching the ground, Europe spinning on a plate, one revolution after another, making BBC documentaries and writing my personal experiences of each country in private journals. Then Romania erupted. The Romanian Revolution changed my life and after my first trip in January 1990 I forged a deep love for this blighted and beautiful country, which I have visited many times since, those first impressions as a young journalist and journal-writer maturing and deepening with each visit, from Cluj to Timișoara, Bucharest to Brașov, reading its literature, seduced by its arts, crafts, blouses, architecture and natural wonders, and appalled by the horrors the country has endured. I have longed to create a Romanian Riveter for several years, to share with you my many literary discoveries, but was stalled each time by bureaucracy and funding, and then Covid-19. The fact that we have produced this magazine now, during a pandemic, is a huge triumph over adversity and thanks to the indefatigable teamwork of many gifted and generous editors and contributors and our guest editor, Tudor Crețu, who secured the funding. Recently, I sought out my diary from that dark winter of 1989–1990, curious to revisit my youthful impressions of the Romanian Revolution thirty years ago. Here are a few extracts. Romania is a very different country today but this is what I saw then, in personal raw, unedited thoughts, a privileged witness, a young Western reporter stepping into the unknown.

23rd December 1989 – London
What an amazing time. Our first BBC Radio Eurofile series began with the fall of the Berlin Wall, our last with the fall of Ceaușescu and the opening of the Brandenburg Gate. These past two months have been the most extraordinary of my life – and I have been a witness! Maybe it has not sunk in yet; maybe it is simply because it feels right for me to there. I have been involved, I have been able to make some contribu-
tion and to learn from others. Yesterday the detested Ceauşescu was toppled. I feel revulsion when I think of him, read of his brutality. The one country I thought would never change. Maybe one day I will go to Romania. The whole of Europe is shivering, rippling, shuddering with enthusiasm, joy and fear. It is the most wonderful time to be alive. Milestones every day.

25th December 1989 – Cornwall, home
And a couple of days later Ceauşescu was executed!!! What else, though, could you do with the man? ... But even I am shocked at the speed of change in Romania.

29th January 1990 – Hotel Modern, Bucharest
I’m in Romania, a weird and wonderful experience I never thought would happen, one of a handful of BBC journalists here to document the revolution. It’s midnight but I’ve been up since 4.30 a.m. so won’t write much but I could write pages already. Everything about being in this city is unfamiliar, dark, passive oppression, few redeeming features. Very, very poor, everything brown, grey and filthy, barely nothing in shop windows. But there are numerous people on the streets, demonstrating or simply hanging about. People are milling everywhere – especially in the hotel lobbies to change money or to act as interpreters or to help in some way. Everybody is willing to talk. Romanians who speak English cling to us, tell us what they hope for and believe. Is it because they have been bottled up for so long?

30th January 1990
Today I met a range of people who tested my powers of deduction. Employees at Romanian Radio and at the State Tourist Office. All of them had been part of the system, but what does this mean: are they Securitate? Had they been secretly harbouring dissident opinions all along? Can they really change their mind-set at a moment’s notice? This question is at the heart of the dilemma of post-Ceauşescu society. The National Salvation Front no longer has the support of the population; it has revealed communist and authoritarian tendencies; the opposition is ineffective; hundreds of Securitate are still running free; is the army entirely trustworthy? This is a dangerous society for us and for Romanians – it is impossible that there could have been a complete purge after only one month.

After one day I am already accustomed to Bucharest. It is very poor, ugly, gloomy, grim. People don’t smile because there is nothing to smile about. I thought Warsaw was an unhappy place but it seems bustling and prosperous by comparison with Bucharest. Bucharest can boast magnificent and megalomaniacal buildings, almost French in style, but they are the backdrop for the poverty of the streets. Unlike lovely Prague there is nothing endearing about Bucharest.

I popped into a supermarket today. Everything, absolutely everything, is scarce and what you do see – shelf upon shelf of jars of beans, maybe some milk, wizened apples, carrots and lettuce – is sad and unstimulating.

In the evenings Bucharest is even more like a war zone. The rare street
lights – only on the main boulevards – are dimmed and the rest of the city is in darkness. The other night my BBC colleagues and I walked to the restaurant through shell-pocked streets, the buildings burned and gutted from the fighting – the National Library was almost burned down – stumbling over the pitted streets and bumping into soldiers. There are soldiers all over the place, dressed in 1950s green uniforms with tinpot helmets and machine guns. And there are tanks parked in front of certain strategic buildings ... At certain points on the main boulevard that C. forged through the city centre there are bedraggled shrines to the dead of the revolution. Candles, dried flowers, wreaths, letters and people weeping. A reminder, again, of the horrors of only one month ago.

31st January 1990
Unusual events follow one upon another so quickly. Arrived back from my first evening in a Romanian home – the first time they had had a foreigner in their flat, previously forbidden – and there in my seedy hotel foyer stand two BBC diplomatic correspondents, Mark Brayne and Paul Reynolds, waiting to check I was OK. My editor had phoned up panicking that the situation was too volatile – for my safety or for my work? She wasn’t clear. Bucharest is in turmoil, but it is possible to function. However hard it is to work, we work. They have no idea, back home. That’s why we’re here.

Today was lovely. My first BBC feature is being formed: ‘Education Before and After the Dictator’ (people can’t bear to mention his actual name). Met English academic Georgiana, now my guide and interpreter. I could write a book about her. She speaks fluent if old-fashioned English, is like a champagne bottle uncorked. Warm and cheerful and happy to help. The prestige of the BBC, or is it me? She writes textbooks for English learning and teaches at Bucharest University. A gifted woman who has never lost her love of teaching and of English. She is moved by the new freedom and there were often tears in her eyes.

We visited two grammar schools and spoke with teenagers – they were so excited. They were unanimous about how they hated ‘HIM’ and how happy they are now. What energy they had! How well they spoke English! Foreign-language teaching escaped the strictures of the regime to a certain extent – except that there were too few classes – and children often started learning English at the age of nine. They are hungry for knowledge and we stood in front of the class to tell them about England, America and pop music! But the classrooms have no heating, little light; they need books and contact with the outside world. The pupils suggested that English schools might adopt Romanian schools – something must be done to help or they will lose this energy and goodwill. The situation here is so unstable.

Georgiana gave me a long list of books, mostly text books to buy back home to send to her, which will cost a fortune. She has no idea of the price of books. She works from ancient Practical English magazines, with stories about
black cab drivers and having tea with the Queen.

Visited Georgiana and lugubrious husband Dan tonight in their concrete-block flat (in my rental Dacia car, anarchic, appalling roads, no road signs). Their address: District Nr ... Street Nr ... Block Nr .... Stairway Nr ... Floor Nr ... Flat Nr. No names, just numbers. All the buildings away from the central boulevards of Bucharest are concrete blocks, identical and ugly. An inhuman environment. Their flat is small but full of books. A tray of farm apples and carrots were on display and little else. G. collects art and pottery, by friends, from different parts of Romania. So this evening I had my first plum brandy and my first contact with Romanian art. G. insisted on giving me a book on miniatures and some ceramics. It was overwhelming. These people have so little and I was given so much.

1st February 1990

Kafkaesque day. Monolithic bureaucracies, apathy. Ugly office buildings where men sit behind a desk with a couple of pieces of paper on them, a telephone and a newspaper. Sub-activity. Sub-motivation. The confusion of Romania entered my blood today, as did the mud on the streets (plastered with it) and the pollution in the air. There was no water in the hotel, telephone lines were cut off ... I wandered the streets looking for an architect who could speak English to talk about the systemisation of the villages – my BBC story number two. People are very kind, want to help, but this extreme kindness was like a millstone round my neck. It got me nowhere. My one interview today was with a charismatic man from the Education Ministry. He spoke about the utopian new society. He is a member of the ‘Group for Social Dialogue’, which I believe will play an important role in the renovation of this society.

My dinner: a jar of cherries in alcohol and a fresh pear.

They’re playing the Lambada downstairs in the hotel tonight! It’s a party! Live music, food, wine, women dressed and flirting lots of bright make-up and dyed hair. Georgiana says the Romanians love entertaining ... but under ‘his rule’ they were discouraged from mixing, everyone was suspicious of everyone else. The tragedy of this country becomes more apparent by the day; the constant revelations break your heart. Today, we drove to a demolished village outside Bucharest to record people talking about the systemisation of the villages – Romanians forcibly evicted from their farms and villages by HIM to live in concrete blocks in the city, in order for HIM to centralise power, build monoliths and make the populace more productive. But these people are peasant farmers, they are idle, they miss their cattle and chickens. It has ruined their lives.

I drive, Georgiana keeps up a constant patter, without taking a breath. In the car, I have learned the whole history of Romania and together we have updated and revised
her English-language textbooks for post-Ceaușescu publication. Thanks to me the word 'video' will appear in Romanian school textbooks for the first time!

5th February 1990 – Otopeni Airport
Leaving Romania is a hideous experience. Airport crawling with soldiers, incompetent baggage checks. Bureaucracy, bureaucracy and very, very slow. And why the hell am I carrying a bottle of plum brandy and two jars of strawberry jam back home? Courtesy of Georgiana, of course. If I had taken everything I’d been given – crafts, cake, farm apples, cheese – I would have been more loaded up than when I arrived. What irony. Such kindness. Overwhelming. My colleagues and I are regarded as ambassadors from another world – a privilege and responsibility. I am carrying with me personal letters to various authorities in Britain requesting books, schools, food and aid for universities and villages.

Finally, an episode of beautiful Romanian bureaucracy when I returned my Dacia rent-a-car to the Tourist Office. I’d just filled it up with petrol (a feat in itself) and I was told not only that I’d returned the wrong car but that I hadn’t filled it up with petrol. Then they insisted that the milometer showed too few miles: so, had I been driving backwards all that time?

Rosie Goldsmith
Our Romanian Riveter has a strong focus on a particular geographic location and is designed to celebrate Timișoara’s and the surrounding region’s prodigious literary output and great festivals. But in commissioning and editing the magazine’s content, I have developed a strong sense that location is a powerful influence on all the contemporary Romanian writing we cover in this edition.

I do mean location in terms of a sense of place – the way these writers communicate the atmosphere, and landscapes and cityscapes in which they live and create; but I also mean location in terms of the people that inhabit a place. The reasons why people live somewhere, the culture they bring to that place and, importantly, the places they have left, all leave their mark on the Romanian literature we present to you here.

As Andreea Scridon (herself a Romanian writer and translator) and Stephen Watts (the British poet and translator) discuss in their essays about our selection of poetry and prose from Timișoara, the city and the Banat region around it are a melting pot of languages and cultures, a place of shifting borders and mobile peoples. Herta Müller, Romania’s only Nobel Laureate for literature, is from the region’s Swabian, German-speaking population, whose history of migration, state-making attempts and subsequent deracination is shared with groups across the country. As we are ominously told in ‘Draft of a Requiem’ by Viorel Marineasa and Daniel Vighi, which relates the story of a family being forced off their land, ‘What happened to everybody happened to them too’.

While writing my review for the magazine of Herta Müller’s most recent novel in English translation, The Fox Was Ever the Hunter, I was struck by something that has been articulated by our own Rosie Goldsmith in her poignant diaries from the revolution. The novel takes place in the city, Timișoara, but the countryside seems ever-present, and memories seem linked to rural locations. As Rosie discovered in the winter of
1989–1990: ‘Romanians [were] forcibly evicted from their farms and villages by HIM to live in concrete blocks in the city ... they miss their cattle and chickens. It has ruined their lives.’

Indeed forcible eviction, exile and deportation mark several of the writers we cover in this edition. Playwright Matéi Vişniec claimed asylum in France, but his work, as demonstrated here by a play set in a Romanian ‘re-education prison’, still focuses on the reasons he had to leave his home country. The story of Ludovic Bruckstein is perhaps the most sharply marked of these dislocation tales. Bruckstein was a Romanian Jew, who survived Auschwitz and the Holocaust, and was then de-recognised by Romania as a writer because he moved to Israel. His later work might now reach Romania for the first time through the English translations being published by Istros Books.

There are other expatriate Romanians in the magazine, of course: Mihail Sebastian lived in Paris, poet Andrei Codrescu lives in the US and often writes in English, while crime writer E.O. Chirovici also wrote his bestseller, *The Book of Mirrors*, in English.

But with this magazine we hope we have taken you, our readers, on a journey too; a positive and productive one. The core of the magazine is the work of poets and prose writers from Timișoara itself. For many this is the first time their work has been published in English, despite being long-established and highly regarded in Romania. At a time when travelling is nigh-on impossible for most in the English-speaking world, we hope you have enjoyed your trip to Timișoara and to Romania as a whole, have feasted on the wealth of literature this city and this country have to offer, and will take home and cherish this *Riveter* as a souvenir of your Romanian tour.

*West Camel*
Romanian literature is very rich, and rich also in translation: this bibliography is only partial, but I hope it gives some idea of, and access to, these rich and fluid trends in contemporary poetry and prose. It’s a bibliography of twentieth- and twenty-first-century poetry and prose in English translation (so it doesn’t include, for example, Mihai Eminescu) and of translations published in book form since 2010 – so some major writers who have no current translations, e.g. the wonderful poet Tudor Arghezi, are not here either.

It’s partial in another sense, because for reasons of space I’ve trimmed it down, especially the poetry section. Additionally, Romanian literature, which from the outside can seem monoglot and solid, in fact has wonderful linguistic, thematic and cultural diversity. Within the boundaries of Romania – fluid and varying boundaries historically, often painfully so – poetry and prose have been, and are, written in Romanian, but also significantly in German, Hungarian and in Roma languages, while several major Yiddish and Hebrew poets were also born in greater Romania. For this specific Riveter bibliography I’ve made certain choices, including, for instance, English translations of German-language writers from the Banat and Timișoara, Herta Müller among them, and also from Bukovina, the early Romanian-language poetry of Paul Celan, but also many translations from the German of Celan’s later poetry written in Paris.

Mention of Paris is apposite: many Romanian poets have lived there. Some, like Arghezi, who stayed only a year or so, or like Magda Cârneci, who lived there much longer, continued writing in Romanian; while others, great writers among them – Benjamin Fondane, Tristan Tzara and more – wrote mostly in French, so I have included translations of the French work of these latter. Major playwrights such as Eugène Ionesco and more recently Matéi Vișniec also lived in France and wrote in French, as did
influential philosophers such as Emil Cioran.

I have of course included Romanian writers who write in Hungarian, but mostly only contemporary ones; the great classic Hungarian poets and novelists born in what is now Romania I’ve largely not included, for reasons of space inter alia.

While listing translations from all these languages and trying to demonstrate the range of literatures within Romania, the main thrust of this brief bibliography is to give some indication of the breadth of modern Romanian-language poetry and prose fiction that has been made available in English translation in the decade since 2010.

Stephen Watts

ROMANIAN LANGUAGE POETRY

BATIȘTE, Sânziana (b.1943)

BLAGA, Lucian (1895–1961)

BLANDIANA, Ana (b.1942)

BOBE, T. G. (b.1969)

CÂRNECI, Magda (b.1955)
O ÎNȚĂCRE ASURȚIOARE / A DEAFENING SILENCE tr. Adam J. Sorkin with Madalina Băncu & the poet. Romanian & English texts. Shearsman Books (Bristol UK) 94pp (note p. 94) 2017 paper only.

CELAN, Paul (1920–1970)

FLORA, Ioan (1950–2005)

GALAȚANU, Mihai (b.1963)

HINOVEANU, Liliana (b.1956)
GARA NOIEMBRIE / NOVEMBER STATION tr. Alin Ioan Cioclar pref. Daniela Micu. Romanian & English texts. Editura Aius (Craiova) 95pp (pref. 5–7) 2014 paper only (wrs.). Preface given in Romanian only.

IERONIM, Ioana (b.1947)

ILICA, Carolina (b.1951)
VIOLET tr. Olimpia Iacob & Jim Kacian & Lidia Vianu. English text only. Proverse Hong Kong (Hong Kong) 107pp (note etc. 105–107) 2019 paper only.

IONESCU-QUINTUS, Mircea (1917–2017)

ISANOS, Magda (1916–1944)

IVANCU, Emilia (b.1979)
MANGYING WITH NETTLES tr. with aft. Diamrud Johnson. English text only. Partisan Books (Cardigan UK) 63pp (atl. & note 55–63) 2015 paper only.

LEONET, Carmela (b.1964)
GERMAN POETRY

MÜLLER, Herta (b.1953)
TRAVELLING ON ONE LEG tr. Valentia Glajer & Andre LeFeuvre, Northwestern University Press (Evaston IL) 149pp 2010 paper only.


KÁNYÁDI, Sándor (1929 – 2019)
IN CONTEMPORARY TENSE tr. with intro. & note Paul Sohar for. Helga Lénárt-Cheng note Alan Britt. English text only. Inquity Press (Island Heights NJ)/Irodalmi Jelen Könyvek (Arad) 342pp (intros. 18–28, aft. etc. 331–342) 2013 cloth only. Each poem has title in Hungarian also.

SÁNCHEZ, Géza (b.1953)

HUNGARIAN LANGUAGE POETRY

BALÁZS, Attila F. (b.1954)
MISSA BESTIALIS Editions tr. Lucia Gorea. English text only. Libros Libertad (Victoria BC) 120pp 2015 paper only.
BÖSZÖRMÉNY Zoltán (b.1955)

FARKAS, Árpád (b.1944)

KÁNYÁDI, Sándor (1929 – 2019)

MÜLLER, Herta (b.1953)

SHMUVEL, Ilana (1924 – 2011)
TOWARD BABEL Poems and A Memoir tr. Sandra H. Gillespie. German & English texts. Sheep Meadow Press (Rheineck NY) 146pp 2013 paper or cloth. At the 1986 Venice Festival.

WICHTNER, Ernst (b.1952)

FRENCH LANGUAGE PROSE

FONDAINE, Benjamin (1898 – 1944)

LUCA, Chersini (1913 – 1994)


RADULESCU, Stella Vinitchi b.1946) (Poet also writes in Romanian & English)

TZARA, Tristan (1896 – 1963)
MARIUS ALDEA has published two poetry collections and co-created the award-winning The writers are on Facebook and Filip Florian. His work has been translated into twenty-four languages. He is a translator (with Marta Dziurosz) of Renia’s Diary by Renia Spiegel. Her bilingual poetry book, Café by Wren’s St James-in-the-Fields, Lunchtime, is out from Holland House Books. annablasia.com.

ANA BLANDIANA was born in 1942 in Timişoara, Romania. She is an almost legendary figure who holds a position in Romanian culture comparable to that of Anna Akhmatova and Vaclav Havel in Russian and Czech literature. She has published fourteen books of poetry, two of short stories, nine books of essays and one novel. Her work has been translated into twenty-four languages. She has won numerous international literary awards and was awarded the highest distinction of the French Republic, the Legion d’Honneur, in 2009.

ANNA BLASIAK is an art historian, poet and translator. She has translated over 40 books from English into Polish and, mainly as Anna Hyde, Polish into English. She is a co-translator (with Marta Dziurosz) of Renia’s Diary by Renia Spiegel. Her bilingual poetry book, Café by Wren’s St James-in-the-Fields, Lunchtime, is out from Holland House Books. annablasia.com.

ALISTAIR IAN BLYTH is one of the most active translators working from Romanian into English today. A native of Sunderland, England, Blyth has resided for many years in Bucharest. His many translations from Romanian include: Little Filip Florian; Our Circus Presents by Lucian Dan Teodorovici; Coming from an Off-Key Time by Bogdan Suceavă; and Life Begins on Friday by Ioana Pârvulescu.

ADRIAN BODNARU is a poet, editor and member of the Writers’ Union of Romania (WUR) and has published several volumes of poetry. Since 2003, he has had a poetry column in the periodical Orizont and has received several awards for his poetry and translations.

PHILIP BOEHM is a playwright and translator. He has translated numerous works from German and Polish by authors including Herta Müller, Franz Kafka, and Stefan Cichwin. He has received awards from, among others, the American Translators Association, the UK Society of Authors, the National Endowment for the Arts and PEN America.

Romanian writer LUDOVIC BRUCKSTEIN’s work was erased from the national literature catalogue when he moved to Israel, and remained undiscovered for many years. His writing centres on the multicultural Carpathian region during the years preceding, and including, WWI and World War II.

EUGEN BUNARU, a poet and journalist, has published seven volumes of poetry. For two of them, An Air of Nobleness and A Shadow’s Youth, he received the award of the Writers’ Union of Romania. Timişoara branch. He is the coordinator of Pavel Dan Students’ Literary Society of Timişoara.

MIHAELA BURUIANĂ is an English / French / Romanian translator. She has translated close to forty books, including Grief, Is the Thing with Feathers, by Max Porter, and Normal People, by Sally Rooney. Goran Mrakić’s short story sees her trying her hand translating Romanian literature into English.

WEST CAMEL is a writer, reviewer and editor. He edited Dalkey Archive’s Best European Fiction 2015, and is currently working for new press Orenda Books. His debut novel, Attend, is out now.

MAGDA CĂRNECI is a poet, art essayist and prose writer. After the revolution of December 1989, Cărneci became actively involved in the political and cultural scene in Bucharest, Romania. Awarded a Ph.D. in art history in Paris in 1997, she was director of the Romanian Cultural Institute in Paris and is currently president of PEN Romania and a member of the European Cultural Parliament.

MIRCEA CÂRTĂRESCU is a poet, novelist, and essayist, and was part of the 1980s Blue-jeans Generation. His work has won several literary prizes, including the 2000 Romanian Writers’ Association Prize, and the 2012 Berlin International Prize for Literature.

EUGENO CHIROVICI was born in Romania to a Romanian-Hungarian-German family and is a prize-winning newspaper and TV journalist. He has published eleven novels. His first book in the English language, The Book of Mirrors, was published in January 2017. He now lives in Brussels.

ANDREI CODRESCU was born in Sibiu, Transylvania, Romania, and emigrated to the United States in 1966. He is the author of numerous books of poetry, essays, and founded Exquisite Corpse; a Journal of Books and Ideas. He was a regular commentator on NPR’s All Things Considered and has taught literature and poetry at Johns Hopkins University, the University of Baltimore, and Louisiana State University.

ALEXANDRU COŁTAN’s writing has been published in the literary periodicals Vatro, Tribuna, Timișoara, and in five anthologies. He has won several literary awards. He is currently working on a volume of prose and a book of literary criticism. Coltan has been a member of the ‘Pavel Dan’ Literary Association, Timişoara, since 2007.

SIMONA CONSTANTINOVIĆ has published eleven books of poetry, prose, stylistics, semantics and literary lexicography. Her poems and short stories have appeared in many Romanian anthologies and literary periodicals. She has been honoured with several awards.

SEAN COTTER’s translations from the Romanian include Nichita Stănescu’s Wheel with a Single Spoke and Other Poems, which was recipient of the 2012 Best Translated Book Award for Poetry. His essays, articles, and translations have appeared in Conjunctions, Two Lines, and Translation Review. He is Associate Professor of Literature and Literary Translation at the University of Texas at Dallas, Center for Translation Studies.

DANA CRĂCIUN teaches 20th-century literature and American Studies at the West University of Timişoara. Her other research interests include post-9/11 crises of representation, critical theory, and, more recently, conspiracy theories.

TUDOR CREȚU is a writer and the manager of the ‘Sorin Titel’ Timiș County Library. He writes prose, poetry and literary criticism, and organises cultural events such as the International Festival LitVest. His poetry collections include Dantelăriile Adeliei (Adela’s Lacy) and Fragmente continue. Poeme live (Continuous Fragments, Live Poems) won the Poetry Book of the Year award of the Romanian Writers’ Union, the Banat branch. His translation includes Coste moreasă by Ioana Pârvulescu.

SUSAN CURTIS set up Istros Books in 2011 to promote and publish the literature of Southeast Europe and the Balkans—a region much neglected in the English-speaking world. Since 2014, she is both director of the company and the chief editor.

PAUL SCOTT DERRICK is a Senior Lecturer in American Literature at the University of York, UK. He has co-edited and co-translated into Spanish a number of critical editions of American works. He and Viorica Patea have translated all of Ana Blandiana’s poetry into English.

RODICA DRAGHINCESCU is a linguistics researcher, cultural expert, bilingual writer (Romanian-French), performer, translator and poet. She has published twenty-two books in eight countries. Born in Timişoara, Romania, she has lived in Lorraine, France for the last 15 years. She was named the Amazon Warrior Poet of Romanian women’s poetry of the 1990s.
MAX EASTERNMAN is a journalist—he spent 35 years as a senior broadcaster with the BBC – university lecturer, translator, media trainer with ‘Sounds Right’, jazz musician and writer.

ROBERT ELSIE, a linguist, translator and critic. He is editor of the anthology: *The Pig Poets: Contemporary verse of the Transylvanian & Danube Germans of Romania* (1990). Sisters AGNETE and MARION EMANUEL were born in Timișoara, Romania. Both of them studied English Literature and Linguistics at Belgrade University, Israel. They now live in Belérm Sheva where they teach English as a second language.

ŞERBAN FOARŢĂ one of the most important Romanian poets, was born in 1942 and has worked as a poet for sixty years, and has published more than ninety books – of poetry, essays, literary criticism, prose, and translations.

BARRY FORSHAW’s books include: *Crime Fiction: A Reader’s Guide*, *Euro Noir* and the Keating Award-winning *Brit Noir*. He’s one of Britain’s best-known reviewers of crime fiction, as well as a regular Riveting Reviewer.

ANTUZA GENESCU (b. 1968) is a freelance translator, teacher and writer. Besides several volumes of Romanian poetry and art albums, which she has translated into English, her work also includes translations into Romanian of various poets around the world (Sudeep Sen, George Szirtes, Fiona Sampson, Jean Portante, Alice Notley, Erkut Tokman, Kama Sywor Knaak, scienec肪 Architecture). She has published poetry albums in English language. Her script translations have been produced in London and Chicago. Her recent translations include two volumes on theatre by Mihai Viteazul, her Romanian editor, is one of the most important Romanian literary magazines. She teaches modern Romanian literature.

ROSIE GOLDSMITH is Director of the European Literature Network. She was a BBC senior broadcaster for 20 years and is today an arts journalist, presenter, linguist, and translator of Romanian. While she received several prizes for her poetry, none of his books were published during his lifetime, but four have appeared since his death.

VESNA GOLDSWORTHY professor in creative writing at the universities of Exeter and East Anglia, is a bestselling and prize-winning writer, academic and broadcaster whose books have been translated into a dozen languages and serialised by the BBC. She was born in 1961 in Belgrade and writes in English, her third language. Four of her books have been translated into Romanian, and her most recent, a novel entitled *Mr K* released by Humanitas as *Mr. Ciobanu* in 2019, was a bestseller. Vesna is proud that Denisa Comănescu, her Romanian editor, is one of the poets of the eighties.

ILINCA GRADEA was born in France, but has lived in a number of countries, including Singapore, Canada, Scotland. She translated *Outfit*, directed by Andrea Gavriliu, into English. She is currently working on the translation of *sinistra* by Marius Aldea into English and French. She currently lives in Clairefontaine.

MARIANA GUNȚĂ (1994–2020) was a member of the Pavel Dan Literary Circle and published poems in some of the most important Romanian literary magazines. Her post-mortem debut collection will be published in the near future.

PETRU ILIESU is a writer, artist and social activist. He ran an experimental theatre before it was closed down by the authorities and was one of the dissidents under the Ceausescu regime. Iliesu has published more than twenty books of poetry, essays and historical studies.

DANIEL IONITA teaches organisational improvement at the University of Technology Sydney. Published works include *Testament – 400 Years of Romanian Poetry* and three volumes of his own poems. His work has been included in several anthologies in Australia and Romania. He is the current president of the Australian-Romanian Academy for Culture.

JOZEFINA KOMPORÁLY lectures at the University of the Arts London, and translates from Romanian, and Hungarian into English. Her script translations have been produced in London and she has collaborated on and translates cultural essays, historical articles, and political analyses in magazines and on the Internet. Her recent translations include two volumes on theatre by Mihai Mâniuțiu (co-translated with Nicoleta Cîmpean) and Matei Vignescu’s Mr K Released.

FLORINA LUMINOS studied Romanian and English Language and Literature at West University, Timisoara. Currently working in the UK and working as a data manager for a pharmaceutical company, she has completed several literary translations as a way of staying in touch with contemporary literature.

NORMAN MANEA is a Romanian writer, living in New York City. His writing comprises novels, essays, short prose and he also frequently writes reviews and essays about Romanian and foreign writers and about contemporary literary issues. He has received important cultural awards for his work in Romania, America and Europe. He is a Laureate of the Romanian National Prize for Literature and is the first Romanian writer to be awarded the American MacArthur Fellowship.


VIOREL MARINESA is a prose writer, essayist, journalist and editor. He is a member of PEN Romania and associate professor in the Department of Journalism at the West University of Timisoara, and he has written several books together with Daniel Vighi about the mass deportation of over 40,000 people in 1951 by the Romanian communist regime in its support of Moscow.

GABRIELA MOCAN is a lecturer in English for Specific Purposes and Intercultural Communication at Babes-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca. Between 2013 and 2019, Gabriela was Head of Literature, Visual Arts and Cultural Heritage Architecture at the Romanian Cultural Institute in London, where she also led the organisation’s PR and communications. She holds a PhD in Cultural Studies.

ION MONORAN (1953–1993) was a poet and publisher. His first poems were published in 1976 and he lectured at the Pavel Dan literary circle in Timisoara. He received several prizes for his poetry, none of his books were published during his lifetime, but four have appeared since his death.

GORAN MRAKIĆ has worked as a publisher and journalist at the Serbian newspaper Naša Reč in Timisoara. His poems and short novels, in both Romanian and Serbian, including *Punk Requiem* (2015) and *Garage Stories* (2018).

HERTA MÜLLER is from the German-speaking minority in the Banat region of Romania. After refusing to work for the Romanian secret service, the Securitate, she lost her job as a translator in a machine factory. *Nadir*, her first book, was heavily censored when it was published, but the manuscript was smuggled to Germany and published there in 1984. In 1987, she emigrated to Germany and has lived in Berlin ever since. She has a string of literary prizes to her name, including the Nobel Prize for Literature (2009).

BOGDAN Munteanu has published three short-story collections, the most recent being *Ai uitat să răzi* (2016). He also organises cultural events, campaigns and helped coordinate Scriitorii sunt pe Facebook (’The writers are on Facebook’), which won the award for best PR/marketing campaign at Romania’s 2014 Book Industry Gala.

CRISTINA MURESAN is a Romanian writer from Transylvania, based in London. In 2015 she published *Angel Dust*, a book of poetry and short stories. She is also a blogger and holds a PhD in International Relations.

TIBERIU NEACȘU is a Romanian poet, author of two full collections, and a translator of American poetry, including the work of Frank Bidart and Lloyd Schwartz. His poems are published and translated internationally and have most recently appeared in *The Shallow Ends*.

ALEXANDRU NEMOIANU worked as a museographe before becoming a political refugee in the US in 1982. He has worked as an archival historian and, collaborates on and translates cultural essays, historical articles, and political analyses in magazines and on the Internet. His current translation is *Life* (co-translated with Nicoleta Cîmpean) and Matei Vignescu’s Mr K Released.

IOANA PĂRVULESCU is a Romanian writer, and winner of the EU Prize for Literature for her book *Life Begins on Friday*. Several of her novels have been translated into multiple languages. She is currently a professor at the Bucharest Faculty of Letters, where she teaches modern Romanian literature.
Viorica Patea is Associate Professor of English and American Literature at the University of Salamanca. She has published critical studies of Sylvia Plath, T.S. Eliot’s The Waste Land (2000), and studies in the area of writing in East European countries. She has edited, translated and analysed the work of Nicolea Steinhardt (2007) and Ana Blandiana (2008, 2011).

Lucy Popescu is a writer and critic. Her anthology, A Country to Call Home, focusing on the experiences of young refugees, was published in June 2018. She is chair of the Authors’ Club Best First Novel Award.

Mircea Pora is a writer from Timișoara, Romania. He has been a member of the Romanian Writers’ Guild (USR) since 1998, and his books include The Jar (2015), I Lived in Communism (2016), The New Aristocracy (2018) and You Are Master (2019).

Alexandru Potcoava has worked as a journalist for many years and is a member of PEN Club Romania. His poetry, short-story collections and novels include Alexandru Potcoava and Bianca Sat on Alex, Pavel and His People, Our Country’s Scouts Must Always Be Cheerful! and The Life and Return of a Bull.

Ana Puscasu is a Romanian poet and scholar. Her first poetry collection was published in 2012 and her poems have been published in several Romanian literary journals. She is currently a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Timișoara’s Romania.

Daniela Ratiu is a Romanian writer, cultural journalist and TV producer. She has published poetry books, novels and dramas. She was one of the finalists in the 2015 HBO screenplay contest, as a co-author, with a screenplay about Ana Pauker, one of the communist leaders of the 1950s.

Rein Raud is an Estonian writer and academic. Three of his novels have been published in English, most recently The Death of the Perfect Sentence (Vagabond Voices, 2017).

Fiona Sampson is a leading British poet and writer whose twenty-five books have been translated into thirty-six languages and won a number of national and international awards. An editor, critic, translator and broadcaster, she has a special interest in the literatures of south-east Europe.

Andreea Iulia Scridon is a writer and translator from Romanian to English. She studied Comparative Literature at King’s College London and is now studying Creative Writing at the University of Oxford. She is assistant editor at Asymptote Journal. She writes for Asymptote, World Literature Today, and Central Eastern European London Review, among other journals.

Playwright and novelist Mihail Sebastian was born in Romania in 1907 as Iosef Hecter. He worked as a lawyer and writer until antisemitic legislation forced him out of his public career. He survived the war and the Holocaust, was killed in a road accident early in 1945.

Robert Serban is writer and journalist, and is president of the International Festival of Literature at Timişoara (FLTIM). His first book, Of Course I’m Exaggerating, was awarded the Romanian Writers’ Guild Prize for a debut publication. It has been followed by twelve further volumes of poetry, interviews and prose. His poems have been translated into several languages and published in numerous anthologies and literary publications in Romania and abroad.

Gheorghe Şfaier is a documentary film director and producer, as well as a video artist, director of photography and photographer. He is an associate professor at Timisoara University of Arts. His films have been presented and awarded at numerous festivals and exhibitions across the world.

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Moni Stănilă runs the ‘Republica’ literary circle with Alexandru Vakulovski and has published four poetry collections, a novel, a fantasy novel for teenagers and a literary biography of Constantin Brâncuși. Her poems have been translated into multiple languages.

Anne Stewart is a poet and reviewer. In 2014, she was awarded a Hawthornden Fellowship and her work has been widely published in poetry magazines and anthologies. She has had two bilingual collections published in Bulgaria.

Petre Stocca (1931-2009) was one of the most important poets of Romanian post-war literature. He became known for the ‘camouflaged’ refinement which defines volumes like O caseta cu ceri (A Box of Snakes), Irony, everyday life, domestic chronicles or, by contrast, sharp authors’ and political observations are some of the key characteristics of his writing.

Marius Surlea is a Romanian physicist, poet and translator from English to Romanian. He has published an original collection of poetry in Romanian; Zeppelin Jack and a bilingual collection of translations. His recent work has appeared in Solstice and the Ibanot Review.

Born in Hungary in 1948, a child refugee of the 1956 uprising, George Szirtes published his first book of poems in 1979. It won the Faber Prize. He has published many since then, winning, among others, the T. S. Eliot Prize in 2004. He has also won various international prizes for his translations of Hungarian literature including the Man Booker International award.

Sorin Tite is one of the most important Romanian fiction writers of the 20th century. He is one of his best known works are Ana Pauker (1971), was translated into French by Marie France Ionesco. His most significant project is the tetralogy published between 1974 and 1983. Its novels include Fine Banat as a literary text, mixing diverse influences – the nouveau roman, Chekhov, oneirism – his writings are both innovative and tragic.

William Totok was co-founder of the Aktsionsgruppe Banat and was imprisoned for propaganda against the socialist order. He has lived in Berlin. His most recent volume of poems, Anger Rages on the Streets, appeared in Ludwigsburg, in 2016. He has also published several volumes of essays and diaries, political and historical studies.

Lidia Vianu, a poet, novelist, critic, and translator, is professor of English at the University of Bucharest, where she is Director of the Centre for the Translation and Interpretation of the Contemporary Text (CTITC), which she established. She has been Fulbright lecturer at the University of California, Berkeley, and the State University of New York, Binghamton. Vianu has published literary criticism, two books of interviews; a novel; three poetry collections; English-learning manuals; edited anthologies; and four translated books.

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Marius Vincenz has published eight collections of poetry; his latest is Becoming the Sound of Bees. He is the translator of many French-, Romanian-, and German-language poets. His translation of Klaus Merz’s Unexpected Development was a finalist for the 2015 Cliff Becker Book Translation Prize and is forthcoming from White Pine Press.

Mătăvi Visniec is a multi-award-winning Romanian-born novelist, playwright, poet, and journalist. He has been based in Paris since 1947, where he is a permanent guest at Radio France Internationale. He is the recipient of several awards including the 2016 Jean Monnet Award for European Literature for the novel The Merchant of Red Sentences and the Lifetime Achieving Award from the Romanian Union of Theatre Practitioners.

Stephen Watts is a poet, editor and translator. In 2017 he was Translator in Residence at Southbank’s Poetry International and National Poetry Library. His recent books, include Republic of Dogs / Republic of Birds, which is being made into a film. He is also a bibliographer of modern and contemporary poetry and prose in translation.
THE RIVETER Edition Eight, September 2020

Produced by the European Literature Network for Sounds Right

with support from the Timiş County Council, Timişoara.

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