

INFORMATION TO USERS

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps.

Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. Higher quality 6" x 9" black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.

**ProQuest Information and Learning
300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346 USA
800-521-0600**

UMI[®]

Abandon

Oana Avasilichioaei

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

English

**Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts at
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada**

March 2002

© Oana Avasilichioaei, 2002



**National Library
of Canada**

**Acquisitions and
Bibliographic Services**

**395 Wellington Street
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada**

**Bibliothèque nationale
du Canada**

**Acquisitions et
services bibliographiques**

**395, rue Wellington
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada**

Your file Votre référence

Our file Notre référence

The author has granted a non-exclusive licence allowing the National Library of Canada to reproduce, loan, distribute or sell copies of this thesis in microform, paper or electronic formats.

The author retains ownership of the copyright in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.

L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque nationale du Canada de reproduire, prêter, distribuer ou vendre des copies de cette thèse sous la forme de microfiche/film, de reproduction sur papier ou sur format électronique.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur qui protège cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

0-612-68365-6

Canada

ABSTRACT**Abandon****Oana Avasilichioaei**

This work owes a great deal of its spirit to the experience of travelling and living in Romania, and is in part an exploration in poetry of that country's troubled, complicated story. Three voices attempt in three sections to disclose their culture, obsessions and personal tales. The first voice is that of a dictatorial figure, *Dragon*, who is devoted to power and control, and who burdens the landscape with his neurotic personality and manifestos. The second is that of a woman who tries to discover her own story and record it in journal-like fragments, long after her death. Loosely inspired by the illegitimate daughter of Romania's ruler Stephen the Great, this sixteenth century woman haunts the landscape of the other two voices. The final voice, an unnamed narrator, acts as visitor and observer of vignette-like scenes set in a small, industrial city in Romania, named Târgoviște. Here the people are alienated from their surroundings and yet persevere in surviving them, a perseverance that reaches mythic proportions in a woman named Tatiana. The narrator is at once drawn to and repelled by the landscape. The work as a whole, by varying tone, style, line length, and language, attempts to complicate the authenticity of any one voice and any one history.

**in memory of
Vasilica Ivan (1924-1989)
Eugenia Avasilichioae (1922-2001)**

Acknowledgements

Versions of some of the poems rendered in this book have previously appeared in *Prism International*, *Matrix*, *Slingshot*, and *Running with Scissors* (Cumulus Press). Thank you to the editors for including those poems in their publications.

Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Dragon | 1 |
| | |
| From the Diaries of a Dead Woman | |
| A note | 12 |
| Father's house | 13 |
| Curse | 14 |
| The traveller's bath | 15 |
| Self-portrait | 17 |
| Play | 18 |
| To the Putna Monastery | 19 |
| The room with a door | 20 |
| Puzzle pieces | 21 |
| Dragoness | 22 |
| To the king's cartographer | 23 |
| My shadows | 24 |
| Riddle | 28 |
| <i>Război: my father's war, my loom</i> | 29 |
| Going home | 30 |
| | |
| Abandoned Markets | |
| A collector's burden | 32 |
| At the train station | 33 |
| The city | 34 |
| Târgoviște (<i>târg părăsit</i>) | 35 |
| Voyeur | 36 |
| <i>Secetă</i> | 37 |
| Market | 38 |
| Tatiana | 40 |
| The dream | 41 |
| <i>Ad aquas Herculis sacras</i> | 42 |
| The seamstress, Madame Eoachim | 44 |
| The second dream | 45 |
| At the well | 46 |
| Snapshots of a crease | 47 |
| Relics | 48 |
| Letter fragment (legend) | 49 |
| Letter fragment (stonecutter) | 50 |
| The Opera House | 51 |

| | |
|-----------------------------------|-----------|
| Fall (the third dream) | 52 |
| Bucegi | 53 |
| The tower | 54 |
| Nisipuri, village of sands | 56 |
| Dear one | 57 |
| | |
| Notes | 58 |
| | |
| Glossary | 59 |

Dragon

Dragon

I

I fall into myth, a dragon belching laughter and vows.
 I want to forget the sardonic grins of old-fashioned proletarians;
 my mouth alive with the misery of orphaned wars, I choke
 on the phlegm of a child's memory.
 I am Dragon.
 I scream.
 Don't you recognize me? I am mountains and fields. Parades!

Last night I ate a peasant.
 An alchemist at heart, he wanted me to mix cow milk, freshly squeezed, horse shit,
 and a parsley leaf, spit flames and turn it into gold.
 Instead I turned him in to the State.
 Charged with blasphemy and conspiracy against the workers, he saw his blue-eyed wife
 slowly starve and his few acres join the collective farm.

I want to witness a *mortem profundam*.
 Not a death that reeks of immortality, of aunts and fathers crying over pictures
 smudged with the smell of Augusts spent at the summer cottage, or death
 smeared with the colour of the tailor's skin when he spoke
 of babies at the village wedding.
 No.
 I want death absolute, erased, complete.
 No imprints, no etchings, memories, nothing.

Through the country I laugh and scourge, like an ocean scrubbing
 its laundry with a tornado.
 I am Dragon.
 I scream.
 Don't you recognize me?

The blue-eyed wife tried to bribe me, fed me cornmeal with red onions and feta cheese.
 Let me take a swig of slivovitz spiced with peppercorns and two swigs of her breast.
 I want my man back, she begged.
 I tossed a bone and asked,
 Why want a man when you can have a Dragon?
 She spat in my face, cursed profanities in the name of God and my genitals, so I grabbed
 her wrists, squeezed just enough to see the veins bulge through her skin.
 Listen, you wasted woman,
 I eat God.

II

The fever lasted weeks.
They poured liquids tasting of bitter ferns and honey down my throat.
They bathed my body in ice and gave me cold compresses.
They even tried to bleed me, but didn't they know I'd given up on blood long ago?

The court jester stood by the bed.
What would your majesty desire for lunch today?
I listened to my stomach rumble, move and contract, noisy like the tumble
of steel and brick in a demolition site.
I fell in love with the sound of my stomach rumbling, so I laughed for love.
Nothing, I want nothing.
The fools.

Oh, youth,
when laughing for love was still possible.

III

At night, I stay awake, the voices of beggars loud in my head.

They beg for words.

Words!

And I stoke the fire in their hands.

They will get nothing but words. (Though I could allow them money and poverty.)

Strife, stowaway, stuck, Solzhenitsyn, scrub, sssssissing and sizzling of fire.

I am drunk.

Live, they beg me.

Can they help me live?

The fire is dying, they tell me.

Can't they see I have no strength?

Can't they see my head is feverish with their noisy beggary?

I am a street paved with glass. See myself in myself, innumerable reflections.

Until one day, tired of this mirage, I kick

and I shatter.

Into thousands and thousands of pieces of glass.

Beggars!

IV

For breakfast, eat diseases.

At lunch, outlaw street children, the handicapped and gypsies.

Also do away with light.

Electricity should be exported from eight to six each day, but still keep a bit in a private reserve (for those times when foreign dignitaries come to visit).

Dinner, always serve it late.

Something light and tasty, like those tulips thrown your way as you pass through the roaring crowds on the way to a reception.

(Except on Sunday nights.

Concoct a book of speeches that you've given at various functions throughout that week.)

Late night snacks?

Never have them.

They upset the stomach.

And of course, brush teeth after meals, very straightforward:

done with an old book of poems, held firmly in the hand

(you already outlawed poets last year)

brush ten strokes in the front and ten on each side.

V

**On the corner, beneath the lamp, I wait.
Your oracle, your visionary child.
And if you come I will take the weariness out of your mouth,
lift it off your tongue...**

**This life unnerves you,
this rotting sea where a swim is a prolonged drowning,
this interrogating light.
And if you come, your family will follow straightjacketed.**

**Lampposts are good to visit. The shadows of snowflakes falling on snow
look like large flies scurrying along the ground.**

VI

Let me tell you about freedom.

**Freedom is a walk to the corner bakery to buy all the bread you could possibly want,
bread in all shapes, sizes, flavours.**

**Freedom is turning on the tap in your house to discover
that hot water flows out anytime,
day or night.**

Freedom is coming home in the dark of winter to find light and heat.

Freedom is going to parades because you want to.

Freedom is volunteer work done for pleasure.

Freedom is political jokes written in newspapers, told on radios, seen on TV.

It's expensive, voluptuous.

**So while you lie on your bed staring at the ceiling fan
as it spins around and around,**

consider this:

you could never afford it.

VII

**With my hands dry, I fall into a bath –
the tub is made of gold (especially sent from the West)
and full of milk. Romania.**

I squeezed her breasts dry.

**They said it would be good after my long convalescence,
make my skin soft, sensitive;
my people would swarm my pores more easily.**

**They want me to weep with poppies,
but I will deflower clouds and fields, I will deflower villages.**

VIII

I begin in taverns.
But I'm not looking for queers or orphans, obese women or the insane.

I make those types invisible anyway.
I store the orphans in gray one-story houses,
in small forgotten villages. The same with the insane.
As for the obese women, I simply make food scarce.
Use an obsolete act to make queers illegal.

No, what I want are drunkards to sing to my glory.

Then I move on to schools because I like to watch children,
their faces bathed in adoration
when they see my picture on textbook covers.

Next I contact the foreign media.
The country is mine, I tell them. I improved it, made it great, colossal. Colossal!

Disguised as a beggar, urged on by a touch of nostalgia,
I catch an old woman by a church door.
She drops a coin in the wishing-well. I stop her and hold out the cup of my hand.
She pretends not to notice and tightens her headscarf.
I follow her in.
What do you want, you good-for-nothing? she asks.
What do you want, old woman?
Get away you fool. I come for God to pray that my family is spared.

I am Dragon.
I scream.
Don't you recognize me?

IX

I sit on the throne of my land.
My palm rests between your shoulder blades; you hunch
over an empty sack and your back moves
against my palm with your hurried breathing.
(This breathing; such a peculiar habit you have.)
The day is waning.

Fields! Awake!

You try to fill the sack with peonies and livid grains.
You don't notice the burlap has worn itself thin
by endlessly pleading with you: the rub of grain that will not sprout.
But you don't listen.
You never listen, instead
you leave a trail of grains and peonies behind you.

I am the masquerade, the railing
through which your fingers slip. I am the circle,
unfinished because you refuse to end me.
I am the itch
between your shoulder blades,
a day that never begins.

What are you?

**From the Diaries
of a Dead Woman**

A note

This city fumbles hungry seagulls at a feed a smell of quinine
penetrates the air. Restless the city beckons us, fickle with words.
Bring your lips a little closer, touch the fine powder on my hands

You go you witness life falling through cracked eggshells you wait.

You have a youthfulness I never had even inside my mother's womb.
I imagine her walking on a stony path, her arms heavy with words as if
she carried a stack of uneven pieces of wood. Her arms so full words
spilled tumbled in the dust in the path.

The pen hurts perhaps I've rushed things too much. Claustrophobic
inside this reptile skin middle-aged at noon I shall be dead by
midnight.

On the porch above the door, a single light creaks in the wind.
Turn it off when you come home.

Father's house

Inside Father's fortress I get lost

**Up the narrow stairway to a room
with a lion's skin spread on the floor, its mouth
agape**

**Between its teeth into another room
long wooden table firm on the stone floor
I might serve guests at a battle feast**

**And the room with the four poster bed
Beneath peasants carved in wood he lies with his queen**

Inside Father's house I have no room

Curse

All noise has left my body
feet heavy and silent as tombs
hands muzzled
eyes dark to sign language
my hemispheres shackled

I am an incomplete story
a wax-seal with no signature
the skin too large and roomy
for all this inconsiderate flesh
all the frivolous veins

How can these streets fathom me
these streets with open mouths
who laugh at my feet
I am not mad
I yell at the round belly
of a woman crossing the street
No I am not mad
just weary of these obstinate roads
the curse of muted feet

The traveller's bath

1

**this time
pain is different**

**after losing all appetite
late in the afternoon you the traveller
subject your body to a hot bath**

**the water soaks
envelops
a blanket fitted to your every contour**

**a prayer is meaningless now
it would only sink into the black hole
of my wood-stiffened body**

**ancient I refuse to bleed
whereas you
the only thing left to do is bleed**

**you sigh
*tell me your story
so I can record you***

**feathers fall from tired pores
you weave them into a pattern of a continent
split in two by rows of timeworn books**

**the water turns dusty
its undulating edges leave a film
of rusted histories on the ceramic tub**

you want to raise the dead

2

why must you come in the midst of my box
and insist on tormenting me
can't you see that down here it is crowded

and you lying in that tub next to me
and not touching me
your breathing unbearably loud

you who measure your passing
by the seasons that forget to arrive
you who forget to forget

this time
pain is different
like a miner in a shaft who's lost
all sense of direction
with hands outstretched in the dark
he keeps clashing with the walls randomly
yet constantly because he's determined to get out

Self-portrait

Rubble wounds this valley in a slow funeral song
an owl drowns in a water barrel
and I see your face
white, almost transparent
pasted on a newspaper.
The paper, clipped
with clothes pegs on a string at a news stand.
flaps in the wind.

I think you must be looking at me.

I try to avoid your gaze, turn
my eyes to the hands of a child
playing in the shattered sidewalk –
paralysed toys, stale air.
But the face
my face blowing
in the wind, paper-thin...

In my box I am feverish and too alive.

Play

*To become clean
I need a scaffold.
(Nichita Stănescu)*

in the empty theatre
this body falters
the burden of space
flower curtain magnified
body reduced to neon exits
violent taboos

outside a mob swarms
and my face hoists a frown
a last anchor, an arrow aimed towards a bird

into the insides I must take the scaffold
planks splinter feet
rope a knot of elbows cleaning this clean

lips move in to bow and applaud
a clapping, a trick, a twist of teeth
a mound of dirt
 a bowl of dried nails
 a fidget of leaves

you finish inside
one arm dangling
speak me
speak me you must
on this stage there are no more actors
just puppets hanging with no puppeteers

do not worry
if I open
nothing will fly out but a throat caught in a whisper

there is no second in a second
but only a century

To the Putna Monastery

I take nothing capable of noise
my gossamer body having lost its music

window pressed to the face
leafless trees snow winter
a solitary cross taking flight
burn incense to displace the smell of funerals
alive in the room

chipped paint covers the walls restless
I draw a picture of the scene
I drink cold tea

watch smoke flow from the frankincense
curling waving swelling into lilies
into *cale*

I would rip out my hair
but I have no hair left
everything is frozen
in this valley
even these legs the sand glued to their broken shoes

this valley is remote
tastes of wolves

soon I shall take my first supper

The room with a door

my toes have begun to make sense
this miracle I peel
with deft fingers
one tongue dipped in bread

I have found
the way out
tucked between the door and floor
in that space where light is shy
a timid inscriber

my toes have begun to make sense
they morse code on the parquet
a library of dust
you stand by the unnecessary translator

you see I want the outside
there I would write words on lamp-posts
notch my name on paper
with the tip of a key

my toes have begun to make sense
this is my way of coming
into the space where they cannot deny me
because I am not everything but one body

the smell of processed wood
the noise of drills
the hunters removing doors
the kill my space
and yet my toes make sense

Puzzle pieces

All day they haven't stirred
 but languished
 sordid,
 bored on the lacquered floor.
 Haphazard tattered dolls

dead logs floating in
 stilled water,
 seaweed hair scorched.
 What inevitable air they reek!
 These puzzle pieces.

This hoof of a horse.
 This bitten shoe.
 This forgotten flower on the mantelpiece.
 These tiny photographs
 concocting

a world map
 to while away those dreary afternoons.
 I searched all day
 for the missing puzzle piece:
 A corner of the sea

where a bell tolls.
 I haunt the hallways,
 my neck in a twist.
 Fettered in corners
 and scratching at the dead moon,

I burn.
 An aloe drips on the table,
 beats my skin,
 tells me
 I am it.

Dragoness

my flesh piled on this rubble of books

**fill me like sin
dismantled, a breach in the dim light**

**I am half peasant half queen
ablaze on a hunt for my own mythology**

**the moon yells
high tide dominates my insides
seasons hold me prisoner
with gauze**

**and morning doubles over
on the floor hysterical with laughter
its hands clutch at its heaving belly
one finger fast on the umbilical cord
from its eyes, a stream of birth fluid
floods this rubbled flesh
leaving in its wake an echoing roar**

To the king's cartographer

you, my last architect
you undid me
I collapsed in a field of groans

then I walked
for the first time
all the while my bones – a clock speaking time

I lay in that space between Japan and the Americas
fed seagulls from my palms
with dried flowers from the old world
I, *terra incognita*
you will not easily identify me
by mapping me red as the Red Sea
or telling settlers that my *zona temperata*
suits the growing of wheat
or by slipping in a puffy-cheeked child
to indicate the direction of the Northwest wind

you see this body I craft out of elements unknown to you
your art of navigation – useless
your charts – crude

My shadows**1**

**my mother
while I was busy coming into the world
she was busy leaving it**

**an empty spot
where her face should be
in my oak chest her cream silk shawl**

**and so I was raised
by many women**

**the usual story
predictable
a story on a broken record**

which I saved for my wedding day

**peasants with creased, brown cheeks
and plump breasts full of milk
court ladies in heavy brocades
seamstresses and market women
women who could read
and women who couldn't**

2

**my father
whom they called Christ's Athlete
ran a marathon of wars
by the time I caught up to him
his race had ended**

**the finish line chimerical
line of a collapsed religion's dust**

3

my husband lost his tongue
into the gorge they pushed him

silence followed
and then a long drawn wail
my throat expanding and contracting
the boy I'd raised into a man
had pushed him in

our time extinct
I stand on the edge of his cliff
not quite ready to join him
not yet

his tongue, like a frantic bird
fluttering in the abyss
his tongue whose flavour I too
soon lost

for the push, a throne
for the throne, a poisoned cup

our notched candles snuffed out

4

myself held in mid-flight
I quieted
at court they told that I'd gone mad
but I quieted

stuffed words in my throat
until I was full
until now
when I open

Riddle

I am a spindle spinning cotton into thread

I am the coil of a snail's shell

**I am a fissure in an earthen bowl
threatening to break**

I am eyes

**I am the breath that blows against
your damp forehead on a summer night**

I am a voice that speaks in sign-language

I am a concert

**I am all sorts of time-measuring instruments
water flowing in clepsydrae
a candle burning hours notch by notch
fine sand collapsing in an hourglass
the gears of a mechanical clock**

**I am a wish
a soon-to-be-invented daguerreotype**

Război: my father's war, my loom

Father built his monastery between wars.

While at *război*, one night he had a dream. A voice told him:

*Build a church to hold a labyrinth of truths
where frankincense will linger in its cupola and altars
the way the wind lingers after a summer storm,
where nuns won't be able to stop singing
where, speared through the leg, you will finally rest.*

Father came home, shot an arrow from his bow
and on the spot the arrow landed, built a church
of white, immaculate walls. He gathered famous
seamstresses to weave embroidery on the old *război*
so the altars and stairways could be draped in cloth.

The women danced the spider-threads
into a history of saints. Father fought his thirty wars

then one day, wounded, he returned. His eyes
turned to the cross. Doctors burned his wound. *Oh Father,
who art in Heaven...* then silence, wet cloths pressed his brow.
Suddenly pretending to sleep and dream
he grabbed my hand, called me *daughter* for the first time.

Going home

back again within these walls, a sky instead of the wood roof
rain-beaten hooks where swords used to hang
his throne canopied in shreds of rotted silk
the royal goblet absent
in a museum where no one stands

these vain walls echo the wordlessness of a suckling babe
unremarkable yarns
and above all my unreliable voyage

secrets clatter on metal stairways joining the walls
and I illegitimate disclosed among them
am losing my looks

do I offend you?

Abandoned Markets

A collector's burden

The train moves in small sobs:
a loose anchor dragging on an ocean floor,
a body with a shell instead of a swollen belly,
and the roar of a conch instead of a throat.

The train moves
grinding rust off its weariness.
Through the window a scent of train lags;
thyme, oil and hot metal.

Skin sticks to plastic seats,
an orange peel falls on the floor,
everywhere the babble
of human sweat recoils.

See that woman in the corner
lurching with each movement of the train.
In that bag she hides people's used stories.
She will hide yours in exchange for your shirt.

At the train station

I stare at a woman who feeds
yoghurt to a meagre kitten,
the two dollar, first class ticket stiff in my hand.
The dismal skylight, ruptured tiles weigh
a spider makes his home in the sharp
edges of broken glass.

People slouch, hands rough and empty
eyes dark to spots and slipshod scraps.

A few feet away, a dog trudges by, his tongue
hanging down; a red tongue blackened by dirt.
The entire bottom jaw is missing.

The city

stale, smells of onions.

Trailing perfume, women place three-inch
heels between the holes of sidewalk,
filled with earth, tomato flesh, plastic bottles and shit.

Young boys, flushed
from their adventure in a deserted
factory, caress the scraps
clattering in their pockets.

A man with greasy hair and a thick bandage on his thumb
will take your weight for a few pennies.

And nothing will protect him from the stink –
fried onions, manure, dust
but the familiar
black persistence of it.

The heat burns my new skin, unforgiving
I stick to the sidewalk, a leech
famished, marked.

Târgoviște (târg părăsit)

(Târgoviște, the name of the city, roughly translates as "abandoned market.")

In this park, layers of ruins have gathered.

Behind the foliage aged zoo animals vanish.
The pond stagnates.

Protected by an empty watchtower
a howl sinks
in the meter-thick lumps of walls,
sixteenth century survivors.

Swamped-in willows mourn.

Below the fortress
I sit in weeds
in the park of a childhood.

Here there is a silence fed
by centuries' hush,

but if I press my ear
to the flat stones of the footpath
I might hear

a *forfoță* of merchants
trading cows, hens, hay, cheese and fabrics

or simply a war

with the Turks
or an earthquake

that turns houses and churches
into wrecks and wrecks
into castle walls and walls into
crumbled rock and rock into streets...

Until a man with a wheelbarrow stops
by a curb, fills it with chunks
of dislodged sidewalk, all
the while glancing behind him
with a nervous crease on his brow.

Voyeur

her torso leans outside the balcony
over a clothesline
the balcony enclosed
by metal frames filled with windows
opening to arid grass and potholes
lace curtains beckon Tatiana's skin
as she pulls in her laundry

from behind I watch

a steel factory and haze
choking the afternoon
down the street a rooster creaks

Secetă

To stop a drought, men should wrap skirts of willow branches around their waists, christen friends and neighbours, sprinkling them with water. This will bring on the rains.

Târgoviște:

**For months now the sidewalks beg
a splash in the dirt, a stranded willow.**

Streets walk by in a tumble.

**I quit breathing,
this foreign body a piece of leather
stretching to dust, a flap
of wings photographing air,
a reflection of pastry crust
in a haze-lit window.**

On the sidewalk, a boy

**swings a plastic bottle full of water.
Passing, he drains the bottle on my dress,
his eyes bouquet smiles and scorn.
Foolish vagabond, shakes an old man's head.**

To stop a drought, boys forget the branches (now barren), forget the friends, forget the christening.

Market

In this country my absent years go by
like pieces of a fallen vase.

Yet the *piata* doesn't change
along this century of seconds:

Discarded vegetables topple
and clatter in the hungry jaws
of open gutters. Bodies
jostle amid the smells
of detergent and roses, dill
and wet sidewalks, cheap
perfume and honey. Prices rise
and fall like the mountain
of melons near the flower
stands, as mouths
outbid each other, and
a man with a knife
carves triangles in
the melons, tempts
with these juicy morsels
those that pass by.

To this country I return
for Tatiana.

The *piata* boasts thousands of hands:
potatoes from an old woman's wrinkled grip,
beets from a man, his fingernails
eternally dyed beet-red,
corn from a child's palms
still soft despite the hoeing.

We stand in their midst, last
years' thoughts puddled around my ankles.
I have on my best dress
and on my back, the weight
of the old world.

Among the stalls we see
a nun. Years of devotion
cover her head, the small cross
shimmering. Her face, expressionless

by training, looks cool,
even on this sweltering day.
Yet on that face a smile appears,
corners of mouth barely
bent, slight flicker in the eyes.
Underneath an apple-stand a small
child, knees bent, shorts down, is peeing.

In this market Tatiana spends
absent years going by.

Tatiana

Linden flowers from a stand in the *piata*.
Her apartment odour-brimming.
Linden spread on old newspaper.
Linden yellowing in the shadow of an open door.
And her staring at the door.
And her not stepping through it.

The dream

Beneath the house a river floats.
Old wood rots. Inert.
Black with water.

Mothers baptise their infants,
plunge them in, head first.
A sea-plane lands, stumbling in the current

and on the fields beyond,
pregnant with wheat,
a threshing machine combs the sun-flesh.

On the porch a woman.
Fashions eyelids out of myths,
her face, a gasp.

The threshing machine lurches then stops
before a blind man spinning
in a circle, taking pictures of the site.

Ad aquas Herculis sacras

The mountaineer works the night shift in a steel factory. His wife has bad teeth, a baby on the way and things could be better but it's hard to make up for Adam and Eve.

He takes us to a spa town to search for vipers. The climate suffers Mediterranean influences, a guidebook warns.

The town sits in the palm of mountains full of holes.

(Some, we later burrow through. In the Vapours Cave we watch a lizard breathe in the steam. No gold in the Highwaymen's Grotto, only dried tin cans and scribbling on the walls.)

You see, people here don't notice details, but I do the mountaineer tells me.

He looks gypsy – spindly body, tea-colour skin, black moustache that sits on his upper lip somewhat uncomfortably – but would be offended if I told him so.

We check in at noon.

Our rooms on the tenth floor of a shapeless, dark hotel built in communist seventies. Apart from the willow park and the thick pipes slithering cures to the hotels, the town disappoints us.

Next day we take to the mountains. Past haystacks and firs, dried grasses and crags, we snake higher, gather mushrooms to boil in garlic and tomato sauce, wild mint and thyme that grow in swarms on mossy rocks.

On Domogled Peak, leaning on a large, white cross cemented to the mountain, Tatiana tells the mountaineer that one day she might marry rock.

Wild-eyed he tells us we've run out of water. Lemons scorch our lips.

And then looking down we notice a forest-lined road separates the town in two, its ancient buildings tucked away in the hills.

Humbled, we descend. The mountaineer scales the cliffs in slippers, shopping bag dangling on his wrist. I cling to ferns and roots. The mountaineer walks.

We wander the quiet streets bewildered: arched bridges, Doric columns, old

buildings that echo their emptiness to an immovable Hercules not quite filling the middle of a square, and the sick.

A young girl dips two wasted legs in calcic waters through a hole in the concrete. In doll-sized cups aging men and women gather hot water sprouting from a lion's mouth, then hold the cups over their eyes.

You see, people here don't notice details, but I do the mountaineer keeps telling me.

In a vacant building, a travelling snake show. Tatiana and I buy tickets, the mountaineer declines.

A boa, a rattlesnake, a cobra and a python, an empty cage with a snake's discarded skin, and in a glass case a viper and a yellow chick clucking in a corner.

The seamstress, Madame Eoachim

opens the window.
Ceiling-to-floor pink curtains flutter
a faint scent of gasoline,
scattering the stink of dead fish
wafting in the room.

Her son went fishing in the river
that borders the city cuff-like.
Downstream a few women washed
carpets: a scrubbing frenzy then a linger
in the hot July sun while the rugs,
laid out flat on slabs of concrete, dried.
Upstream, a man drove his car
into the current for its monthly bathe.
Sunday: her son, somewhere
in the middle, fishing.

Barefoot, bare-armed,
the seamstress, in a loose, faded summer
dress, welcomes her son with a tired voice.
Her cheeks dimple when she smiles;
her feet swollen, varicose.

With her quick hands and her trickster eyes
she might have been a magician,
her son, a master illusionist.
Instead she measures cuffs and he fishes
so that the burlap, taffeta and flower prints
might strangle her fingers a little less.
Still, her wooden chair creaks each time she shifts.

The second dream

Once a month Tatiana dreams
of her dead mother.

With a jerk of her limbs she deserts
her stiff mattress. In the kitchen
(which over the years she's relocated
to the balcony) she lights the stove, makes coffee.

Then in the bathroom, Tatiana looks
in the mirror. Into her bloodshot eyes,
though she would not call them so. Runs
a hand through hair that is always too dry,
ignores the fly, drowsy on a mirror corner.

She turns the tap. It gurgles, coughs,
spits bursts of air.

Tatiana grabs one of the bottles full of water
lined-up below the sink, bends her head,
lets the water fall on the back of her neck.

At the well

we photograph the old well
just off the dirt road leading out of Tărgoviște
one eye shuts out the heat the other through the lens leans
to Tatiana idle on the low white-wash of the well
they say a king's severed head was thrown there

if we pull water
we will drink his bones

nearby a prayer-hut melts in the sun
the red of the poppy blinds
we count bones
mistake a pebble for a tooth
on the road
nothing
but cows and a man in a dusty business suit

Snapshots of a crease

A crevice beaten, burnished, greened by steam.

A weariness in wind-blown reeds.

A torn branch for a pillow.

A foot slipping
on a wet rock, hurried by a river
and a hunched, black toad, the skin
coarse, cracked by too much walking.

A sun ploughing years in the face of a peasant.

A tire mark in dry mud.

A wall veined by forty years of earthquakes.

A book on a window ledge, wind
glancing the pages.

A cricket.

And rags and people made of rags.

Relics

My father sold our apartment to a son and his dead mother.

After, I went back.
Haphazard furniture, unemptied boxes, paintings
wrapped in brown paper littered the rooms.
In the hallway I thought I saw her coffin.

From the street I watch the seventh floor:
an empty balcony, two windows veiled
by yellowed paper fourteen years old.

My father's father sold their house to a quarrelling neighbour.

In the yard, instead of the grapevines and shed
with its trap door and cellar full of wine, pavement
and a red gazebo.

Beneath, are barrels and the Plasticine
I hid as a child, growing dust?

My mother's mother didn't sell her house.

After she died the walls weakened, the ceiling became a risk.
My mother's sister, Tatiana, tore
it down; in the emptied space
she planted a small garden.

Letter fragment (legend)

With the rivers of the Carpathian Mountains weeps an old legend. Living in monastic walls and the mouths of nuns, it tells of Manole, the builder, and his craftsmen. By day ten pairs of hands did knead and mold a fortress of God. By night, the walls crumbled to a pile of mortar and brick. By day the artisans broke back and bone, by night the walls decayed against their dreams. And so the story goes, until one night a vision overtook Manole in his sleep. "A woman must be mortared into the monastery walls and become the sacrifice. You and your men will tell your wives to bring you food at high noon, and whoever shall first appear upon the hill will be the one. Thus the house of God is built." Upon catching a whisper of this prophecy, the craftsmen warned their wives, except for the loyal builder, who with a lead-filled heart asked his Ana to bring the food. As the sun reached zenith, Manole saw his Ana walking on the hill. Falling to his knees, he prayed to his God for storms and winds to come and stop his woman from her path. Yet she walked on a faithful wife. The legend says she died inside the wall. Piece by piece she grew to stone and piece by piece Manole broke, but the monastery stood erect with the ten builders on its roof. The King in his vainglory wished that no other monasteries of such significance be built and so ordered all ladders to be taken off the walls. The craftsmen, trapped, jumped to their deaths. Yet in the spot where Manole died a fountain sprung, and today it still flows with the tears of Ana and her builder.

I told you the legend. You squeezed my hand and swore you would never build me into walls. I'm not sure you understood.

Letter fragment (stonecutter)

*My heart beats so rapidly that the candle flame, hissing
near my left nipple, flickers in assault at each beat.
Can I take your body and beat a statue out of it. Can I beat it
into stone, a quarried autopsy. Make entire dictionaries
out of your hair: lovely and red and plummeting to your waist
in an avalanche. At the end of the day you return,
a man in shreds, hair piled on your head, wrapped
in an old soiled shirt, your bare shoulders whitened
by marble-dust. Only your pupils are luminous, blinding
like light when it hits a mirror from a certain angle. I am forced
to grope my way towards your hands, more sand and grit
than hands, my lips the only guide, knotting themselves
like thick rope. You go to work on my body as though it were
a slab of marble. You forget that this skin shields bone
which can break. At the end of your forty-year day
you won't even know me.*

In her cupboards,
in the crease between two pages
these two letters, faded
into permanent folds.
Tatiana said she didn't recognize
the writing.

The Opera House

is a bowl
 We sit in its depths in plush red seats
 eyes peeled to the rim
 where a country's history paints a lazy game
 of kings and wars circling us like a clock
 Until it stops abruptly near the bandstand
 in the nineteenth century

(communism is missing)

Between symphonies she quizzes me
 How many kings can I still recognise?
 Vlad the Impaler Michael the Old
 Stephen the Great

(women are missing)

their wives, daughters
 protected by an invincible history ambivalent
 The orchestra stifles their round tapestry of yells
 I cannot recognise a voice
 only glimpse in King Stephen's face his daughter

in a room in a castle
 made of muted walls
 would her voice echo
 the clack of a sliding bolt?

Fall (the third dream)

During the night I fell into the sixteenth century

North pole in my navel, eyes smelling of forest
lips tasting of castle walls
uncharted explorers plod me with blunt compasses
name me *terra incognita*
dark to the fact that I don't belong to names

I could be her
I could be the passage
Columbus' *bloody ocean*
seething like a pot on a hot fire
We could be discovered
monstered

A sailor sees us
mirage on the horizon
Land! Mates, I see it! There! LAND

Bucegi

To reach the mountains Tatiana
boards a bus, a car, sometimes a train.
Once there she only walks.

In the mountains Tatiana simplifies:
her body never aches, a bear's growl
makes her giggle and the fresh breeze blowing
against her forehead is a lover's long caress.

At twilight the mountains become carnivorous
and Tatiana, devoted to a fear her foot might slip
on the ravine's ragged teeth,
is fearless.

Twice she's lost her way in the dense fog.
Attacked by dogs protecting a *stână* full of sheep
she's stood as still as the fir trees at her back.
Her shadow's been followed by thunder and snow,
a trap on a cliff-side. And once, she tended a fire all night
as a bear circled her campsite.

She stops for lunch on the edge of a peak.
Sits on a slab of concrete, a crumbling base
for power lines lugging light up the mountain long ago.

The grass winds against her feet
you won't be solitary amongst the thousands of us.

Below, the rock quarry struggles
to overtake the tundra on the next peak (from where
last summer she watched the sun eclipsed).

With the smell of fish oil and mid-day heat on her hands
Tatiana traverses stones growing yellow daisies.
A shepherd, leaning on his knotted staff, watches her steady gait.

The Tower

1

The tower can not be sacrificed.

**Climbing up is like climbing
the inside
of a conch shell. The wooden stair
is smooth groans with every step.**

**A map
a scroll
and paintings of kings
live on the wall behind panelled glass.**

**I like to ascend grope my way to the top
ruining my fingers
leave a bruise in the whitewash.**

2

The tower begins
with a gate and an empty dungeon.

To the walls cling ghosts
of damask and glass.
Through an open casement the wind
taps the window against the parapet
like the tick of a clock.
The tower is real it taps.

From its battlements no one guards
the minutes of each day,
at sunset no one lights the oil lamp
warning the town that trade must stop,
no one stands
with their eyes fixed to the south
to look for enemies disguised in a cloud.

The tower is a folktale.

The tower permits only children to play
on its cumbersome stairs but parents
keep their babes locked
in at night. *The tower is haunted* they say.

A tailor swears that on summer nights
which seem to burn with the colour of wine,
passing by the castle gates, he's heard
the laughter
and cry of a child's mouth.

Only children believe him
and the tower is forgetful.

Nisipuri, village of sands

each month she visits her mother's grave
her birth-place, the village of sands

one school
one church
one store
three wells
 the empty spot where one dried up
and some thirty outhouses

the cemetery lies at the end
of a dirt lane that divides
the village like a lame cross

a few old men and women toil
on their small farms
their children having fled
the ditches and cackle of ducks
shoulders stooped they
wave when she passes

at the grave she lights
candles, frankincense pulls
out weeds, plants bulbs of daffodils
and hyacinths on her skin
the fervour of absence beads

Nisipuri enfolds
her in its tired, knurled arms

Dear one

This is still a land of peasants.
I am a peasant for writing this.

The country a pimp, its citizens whores.
The country a whore, its citizens pimps.

Car fumes, a lack of dead ends, and too many
hands callused by stinging nettle
drive me back to her apartment, her cocoon
where on a shelf, between books and china cups
Tatiana keeps grey, pointed rocks to remind
her of her favourite mountain peaks.

I scuttle back, a thief, to a bathtub full of water
to wash all countries from my clothes.

Shall I send this letter home, that mythical place?
Blanket entire wheat fields with it?

To solid alleys I take
on bare feet, nothing
beneath my skirt
but a wish to begin.

Notes

From the Diaries of a Dead Woman

The dead woman may have been the illegitimate daughter of Stephen the Great. Stephen became the Great at twenty when he was made ruler over Moldavia, Romania's northern region. It is said that out of the thirty-six battles he fought in the forty-six years of his reign, he lost only two. He married. Once, twice? He had children. He built monasteries. To house religion, to house his bones. Old scribes filled pages of coarse paper with tales of his many battles, yet remained oddly silent about his home, and about her. She might have been born around 1490. She might have lived at court. When she was fourteen Stephen the Great was fatally wounded. On his deathbed, he finally told her that he was her father. She might have lived to be an old woman. Or so a playwright tells us. Did she exist? Unlikely, maybe, probably.

"Play"

The epigraph was taken from Nichita Stănescu's "Requiem for a Mountain's Burial" ("Requiem la înmormântarea unui munte"), *Album Memorial* (București: Viața Românească, 1984). The translation is my own and has appeared in *Occupational Sickness* (Montreal: ITP Press, 2000).

"Puzzle pieces"

The form and style of this poem are inspired by Sylvia Plath's "Balloons," *Ariel* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1965).

"Fall (the third dream)"

The quote is taken from a book of antique maps that, despite diligent effort, the poet has been unable to find again.

A trilogy of plays written by Romanian playwright Barbu Delavrancea, *Apus de Soare, Viforul, & Luceafarul*, (*Sunset, The Snowstorm, & Venus*), as well as Christian Moiescu's *Târgoviște, Monumente istorice și de artă* (*Târgoviște, Artistic and Historic Monuments*) (București: Editura Meridiane, 1979) allowed me to make even more history fiction.

Glossary

Ad aquas Herculis sacras (literally “the sacred waters of Hercules”) the ancient Roman name for The Herculean Baths (*Băile Herculane*), a hot springs health resort, that dates back to 153 AD. Located in southwest Romania, the resort rests in the mountain-enclosed valley of the *Cerna* River.

Bucegi a mountainous range found in the Carpathian Mountains in south-central Romania

cale the plural form for lilies or the singular form for way/ road

forfotă agitation/ bustle

Nisipuri a tiny village located about 10 km south-east of Târgoviște, *nisip* means sand

părăsit abandoned/ deserted/ forsaken (esp. by people)

piață market (place) or a square (location)

Putna a monastery built in 1466-1469, during the reign and with the wishes of Stephen the Great. Located on the northern-most tip of Romania, in the region called Moldavia (*Moldova*), it houses monks and a few royal graves, including that of Stephen the Great.

război war or a (weaving) loom

România Romania or Roumania, a country in southeast Europe. Until 1859 what is now Romania was divided into three regions/principalities: Moldavia (*Moldova*) in the northeast, Transylvania (*Transilvania*) in the northwest, and Romania (*Țara Românească*) in the south. Today’s Romania is bounded in the south by the Danube River (*Dunărea*) and the Black Sea (*Marea Neagră*) to the east, and within it run the chains of The Carpathian Mountains (*Munții Carpați*) and the Transylvanian Alps (*Munții Apuseni*).

secetă drought

stână sheepfold/ pen

Ștefan cel Mare Stephen the Great reigned as ruler of Moldavia (*Moldova*) between the years of 1457-1504.

târg an older word for fair/ market or a bargain/ transaction or a borough/ townlet

Târgoviște a small industrial city (pop. 150 000) located in south-central Romania, at a distance of about 80 km from Bucharest (*București*). Because of its advantageous

location in a large plain on the banks of the *Ialomița* River, it was the capital of Romania (*Țara Românească*) for most of the years between 1396 and 1659, holding the fortress that housed the royal household and throne. *Târg* suggests the definition offered above, while the suffix *-iște* suggests (*părăsit*) abandoned.