

**+eZine**  
of Modern Texts in Translation



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translated into English by  
MTTLC graduate

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The eZINE consists of translations by graduate students of MTTLc, as a prolongation of their activity in class. They are meant to give the graduates a taste of their future profession, and also to increase their sense of responsibility for a translation they sign under their own name.

The texts are translated from or into English, and belong to all literary genres – fiction, poetry, literary criticism, as well as the drama, the essay. The focus is on Modern Literature, broadly meaning the 20th and the 21st centuries: Romanian, British, and American among others.



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În lipsa acordului autorului,  
nu putem reproduce versiunea originală.

### The Shadow Repairman

*'Especially the boys,' said Grandma sternly.*

Having lost so many fathers, the shadow of our house had grown much larger and thicker than the shadows of neighbouring houses. It seemed to be in mourning, shrouded in a veil that came from within. The other houses had slim, pleasant shadows, worn as parasols or hats in summer. Ours had a deep shadow that pulled you in like a river current, and it seemed to me that if you weren't careful, you could drown in it. I soon learned to tell houses apart by their shadows: those with shadows like the abyss had lost a loved one. Then, I remembered the shadow repairman, Grandpa's brother, and I smiled despite myself.

I had only seen him once, many years before the shadow of our house thickened, but it was enough for him to take a front-row seat in the picture frame of my childhood. He was born a few years before Grandpa, to a shepherd, our great-grandfather, in a house on a steep, muddy and narrow street whose name rolls off the tongue: Dobrice, in Râșnov, a small village near Brașov with a fortress on top of a hill.



When he came over, he charmed us right away. Firstly, because he was a talkative man and he had many different ways of smiling. In other words, he had a particular smile for each of us. In fact, on their side of the family, Grandpa had probably inherited all the gravitas, while Uncle Gheorghe got all the joy. His brother and sister-in-law, our grandparents, thought he was eccentric. This time, I didn't have to ask; I already knew what "eccentric" meant from Karl May: like an English Lord! The nicest character from Karl May's novels (apart from Winnetou, the noble Apache chief) was David Lindsay and he was a Lord. He said *Well, well!*, the others said *My Lord*. He was a member of the distinguished Travellers Club in London. He was so eager for adventure, that nothing and no-one could scare him. That's because, in England, he suffered from *spleen*, a very nasty disease that you get from English boredom. That's how I pictured Uncle Gheorghe when my grandparents called him eccentric: like a Lord, ready for adventure, and that's what he turned out to be like, when I met him. On that day, when our house hadn't lost any loved ones yet and I was still the latest newcomer welcomed within its old walls, Grandpa's brother showed up



in an alarmingly orange hemp shirt. He said he planned to make and sell such shirts, to make all of us rich. Back then, not even linen was fashionable yet. On the contrary, the unhealthy delights of nylon shirts had just been discovered, and the colours were pale and transparent. No-one would have liked to attract the sort of attention that Uncle Gheorghe got, dressed like that. Like an English Lord. In a sudden burst of good humour, Grandpa asked him: 'Have you dressed up as a baked pumpkin? Are you coming from the fair?;

Grandma laughed without malice, shaking her greying hair that hadn't turned completely white, cut in a stylish bob. She was used to her husband's older brother *getting ideas*. She received the bouquet of garden roses (also orange) from him, trimmed their stems and put them in the cobalt vase that made their colour pop. She listened to him explain the three shades of this particular rose variety: fresh buds like these were darker, they turned a lighter, more delicate shade of yellow when they bloomed like tiny crowns, and finally, they turned pink, as if dissolving in watercolour.

'And they'll all bloom, every last one of them!' he



promised.

The truth was that Uncle Gheorghe brought joy to our house. He was optimistic even during hard times, like he was having just then, and I would find out years later why. Whenever his name came up, everyone's faces lit up with a smile, as did mine when I remembered the day when the flowing shadow of our house almost took me downstream.

In 1930, after the two brothers split the fortune from sheep trade inherited from their Dad, the younger one, my Grandpa, had bought our house with his share (I think I've told you before that Uncle Ionel and Auntie also contributed). Uncle Gheorghe had invested his share in business. He had good ideas, but, unfortunately, he was ahead of his time. Had he lived now, he would have been rich, and so would our family, I don't doubt it. As it was, though never bankrupt, his business was always operating at a loss. He had moved to Sinaia, where he lived a modest and secluded life, often going up into the mountains. When he would come to Braşov, between the two Wars, he and his brother, the doctor, would shut themselves in the latter's office and talk business. Grandpa never got involved in it,





despite the convincing arguments given by his brother, the businessman. But now, times had changed: the younger brother was no longer a doctor, because he had retired, the older brother was no longer a businessman, because one could not, and this ritual was no longer observed. Something bad had happened, and sorrow was etched on my grandparents' faces.

Naturally, we wanted to meet the one they told all these unusual stories about, but surprisingly, Grandpa stopped us:

'Leave poor Uncle Gheorghe alone. Don't go bothering him now, he's got enough on his mind already.'

And Grandpa drew away like only he knew how, as if he were drawing the bridge, breaking off all connections to the rest of the house, closing the door to his former office, now a bedroom, living room and library, all in one. But Grandma was ours, in the kitchen that smelled of baked eggplants, and I grabbed the hem of her skirts, now covered with an apron:

'Why is Uncle Gheorghe sad? Why can't we talk to him?'

'He's upset that they didn't let his son come home, my little lamb.'

'Where is he?' the four of us asked as one.



'He... he was sent away to a finishing school,' Grandma said, desperately wanting to be rid of our questions.

I wanted to know what that meant, but Dina told me it was a place where young ladies studied. 'And boys,' she added uncertainly, after a moment of reflection in which she probably realised that Uncle Gheorghe's son was not a lady. 'Yes, boys too, sometimes.' I found it suspicious that Grandma didn't make any comment.

'Is that true? Do boys go to finishing schools?'

'Especially the boys,' said Grandma sternly.

This time, her opinion about us was different from Grandpa's: Uncle Gheorghe would have loved to spend a little time with us, children.

'You can find him outside, he went for a smoke,' she told us, and we took it as an invitation.

We ran downstairs – how weird, the smell of baked eggplants was strong on the ground floor, too – and went out into the street through the open gate. Indeed, Uncle Gheorghe was there, puffing, looking at the houses across the road that were still safe and sound back then. On the first floor, at the Hahners, the window was open and the tall cacti



were in bloom. On the ground floor, Uncle Partenie was nowhere to be seen. He must've been working inside, in his vulcanisation shop.

When he saw us, our newly-found relative changed his melancholy expression and smiled a different smile for each of us in turn, as if he were giving us a toy. To my cousin, he gave a tight-lipped smile, one corner of his mouth turned up in admiration, as if he'd discovered something incredible. He called her "little fox". His lips were thin, like Grandpa's, partially covered by a moustache. For Dinu, the other corner of his mouth also turned up and the expression of wonder morphed into curiosity. He called him "little finch". For my brother, Matei, who couldn't stand still, his lips parted attentively, as if he were watching a tennis match, and Uncle Gheorghe called him "restless troutlet". I was looking up at him eagerly, waiting to be named, and he gave me toothy grin – his teeth were small and shiny – as if he were suddenly amused: 'Little calf!'

I smiled back at him, showing all my teeth, smaller than his, and I was quite proud of that name. I liked calves, I hadn't seen them dying yet, but, if I'm honest, I would have



preferred "squirrel" and loved to get one as a toy. Apparently, it was the other way around: we were Uncle Gheorghe's toys. We liked that just fine.

Uncle Gheorghe suggested we go for a stroll on Livada Poștei. Well, not much of a stroll, because it was only a five-minute walk from our house to the place where post-chaisses used to stop, so once we got there, we thought we'd better go up to Stejăriș<sup>1</sup>, to stretch our legs, or to Piatra Corbului, a favourite destination for those who knew Brașov well, a cliff from which you could see the whole Burzenland stretching out before you. We had nothing better to do, so we set off to the clump of oaks, where Uncle Gheorghe took off his hat – we knew you never saw Uncle Gheorghe without his hat, while Grandpa sometimes wore a flat cap with a brim or his medical hat – and we all sat down on the grass, in the shade of the old trees. I crouched: I'd eaten mirabelle plums from a tree at the end of the first slope and now I had cramps.

'We used to go up into the mountains with Dad, with the sheep. He had his secrets and he told them to us, me and my brother, and I'll tell them to you, you're as good as my

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<sup>1</sup> literally "Oakwood"



grandkids... Maybe one day, God willing, I'll have grandkids of my own, from my son... One of Dad's secrets was: *You can cross the mountains with a boiled egg.*

'How so?' I wondered, thinking this egg was some sort of magic wand that you bewitch and it takes you up the mountain like a cable car.

'It means all you need is an egg to eat in your bag, and you can keep the tiredness and hunger that come with crossing the mountains at bay, that's what Dad used to say.'

And Uncle Gheorghe gave me a smile, just as the first time, showing all his tiny, shiny teeth. I didn't smile back at him because I was feeling a pang in my gut just then.

'Sometimes, Dad used to cross the mountains and all he took with him was a boiled egg to eat. Remember, you can do this, and what's more, foremost that is, you can do it especially with the other mountains, those you can't see.'

'What... What mountains?' my cousin asked, frowning slightly.

'The mountains of life. You'll come to understand the thing about resilience later, my little finch. I hope my little one-horned bull remembers to be resilient. I've told him



many times over.'

Here Uncle Gheorghe sighed deeply and I followed suit. For me, sighing and yawning were and still are contagious, but on top of that, my tummy hurt.

'Where is he, was he sent away to finishing school?' I asked, in pain.

Uncle Gheorghe glanced at me, but all he saw in my eyes was innocence. He picked a blade of grass and started a tune, playing better than we ever could, even with harmonicas. It was nice, but we couldn't stand still, so our uncle picked up where he'd left off.

'Dad had another secret that was even nicer, and this one I'll tell you to check for yourselves, if you're lucky. I could only see it once.'

Now the others were intrigued too, so Dina, who, being the eldest, often spoke for us all, prodded him politely:

'See who?'

'Not *who*, *what*,' Uncle Gheorghe clarified, giving her the same smile as the first time, from the corner of his mouth, now turned melancholy.

'If you climb the Bucegi mountains, from the Caraiman



Peak, on days with crystal-clear visibility, you can see the glistening sea.'

'The Black Sea?'

'The very same! Dad saw it lots of times, but it was before the First War, when the air was so clean and crystal-clear, that God Himself could see you better. Still, I saw it too, as I told you. It was a miracle. I'd climbed to Caraiman by myself and, at the top, I looked to the horizon. I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw something glistening far away, like someone signalling with a long, thin mirror, and I realised it was what Dad had spoken about. Although he told this story in much simpler words, it had obviously been one of his greatest joys, because poor Dad never got to the sea. The sea came to him. But Mum said his heart longed for a woman who'd gone to Dobruja...'

We had been to the seaside many times, but it still felt like the most beautiful thing, to see the sea glistening from the top of the Bucegi mountains.

'And another secret?' I asked, insatiable.

'Well, let's see if I have any more, little calf. Let me see what's wrong with your tummy. Does it hurt?'



I nodded yes.

'Look, one of Mum's secrets is a spell that makes your pain go away. Don't tell your Grandpa that I taught you this cure. He's a doctor who went to all the best schools. Lie down here, little monkey.' (It was obvious that my grimaces had made him change my name).

I lay down and Uncle Gheorghe started to run his calloused fingers over my tummy in a clockwise motion, murmuring at the same time, almost without drawing breath: 'Stomach pain, go out again, through nose and cheek, go out and seek Stanca the rich Moldavian witch, in the antlers of a deer, where grass is new and moist with dew.' Then he suddenly slapped his palm on my tummy and said firmly: 'Be cured!'

'It doesn't hurt anymore,' I said. 'He fixed my tummy!'

'Mine hurts, too,' my cousin said, but Uncle Gheorghe didn't believe him, and neither did I.

My brother and Dina looked at me with envy. They were sorry they hadn't been the ones with a tummy ache, so they could see how it went away without the Davila drops<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> An opium-based tincture invented by Carol Davila, a pioneer of Romanian medicine.





which Grandpa liked to give us on such occasions. We all learned our great-grandmother's spell (though I'm afraid I've forgotten some of it, so the spell doesn't always do its job, but most of the time, it works).

'Can you fix anything?' I asked.

'Almost.'

'Even the shadow?' I asked.

The night before, we had been playing, stepping on shadows, and they'd told me that I had broken mine and I would never be able to use it properly again.

'That, too!' said Uncle Gheorghe, puffing on another cigarette. 'Fix someone's soul and their body will be fixed as well. If the body is alright, the shadow will fix itself, like grass and flowers do when it rains. The soul must rain on the body, and the body, on the shadow.'

Easy as can be!

'And another secret?'

'Yes, I have another secret. This one is also from Dad. He taught me to find my way at night using constellations and to use the sky as a clock. I can't teach you all this right now, because I can't see the stars, although, when you think about



it, the stars are always above us, even far below us, but we can't see them during the day. At night, I could show you a few, if your parents agree. When the Moon is waxing, that is, when it has a "D" shape, the weather stays the same, but after a full moon, like your face – he pointed at me – the weather changes. After a new moon, when it was no bigger than a fingernail, my wife Sabina used to touch her gold ring to my forehead, so I would have good luck until the next moon, but I can't guarantee it's true. Anyway, ever since she's no longer with us, I've had terrible luck.'

'And another secret?' I asked again, because my tummy no longer hurt and I could never get enough of secrets.

'Look, little calf, I'll show you a few medicinal herbs. You'd best remember them all your lives!'

My brother, who always ran around and fell down, had a scab on his knee, as usual. He'd peeled it off to chew it and the wound was bleeding. Uncle Gheorghe plucked a ribwort leaf and pasted it on his knee.

'Ribwort is for wounds,' he told us.

We only used it as a rifle: we took its elongated bulb, wrapped the stem around it like a little noose and shot at



each-other. Uncle Gheorghe plucked a few chamomile flowers and gave them to me:

'When you get tummy aches, little monkey, make yourself a cup of chamomile tea. Pick these flowers and let them dry, so you can use them whenever you eat mirabelle plums.' He gave the marjoram, with its pretty little pink flowers, to Dina, saying it was also called wild basil. She should put it under her pillow if she has trouble sleeping because of someone – we thought it silly for her not to sleep because of a boy – or brew it for tea, to calm her down. 'It's good for anything,' he added, 'you can drink it anytime.' But Doru got the most interesting flower, when we went down the hill. Near some fences, there grew a yellow plant with tiny leaves that looked like those of the oak trees we'd sat under. Uncle Gheorghe plucked a small and fresh one and yellow juice dripped from its stem. Whether you broke off its leaves or its stem, it bled yellow. He asked my cousin to show him his finger and he rubbed the yellow juice over his two warts. Doru didn't know how he'd got them, but it also happened to us pretty often. As Uncle Gheorghe rubbed it in, the juice turned brown. He plucked a few more flowers and



told Doru to use them on his warts every day. He said it was called celandine. We thought the name was funny and we kept repeating it, which is why I remember it.

Full of Uncle Gheorghe's secrets and novelties, each carrying our own bunch of flowers, we proudly returned like a victorious army to the house where our Grandma stood waiting, worried because we were late. Her tummy hurt, too, with anxiety. Uncle Gheorghe smiled a new smile, that was only for her.

Later, Uncle Ionel told us that the real secret was something else: he said that around 1900, the people in Râșnov used to smuggle various goods they had from raising sheep. They would avoid the Austro-Hungarian border in Predeal and come into Romania by crossing the Bucegi mountains. Uncle Ionel suggested that this was where all those secrets about crossing the mountains and finding your way at night came from. I asked Grandma if she knew anything about this and she said that, around the time when Uncle Gheorghe and Grandpa were born, there had been a sort of "customs war" between Transylvania and the



Kingdom<sup>3</sup>. You could hardly bring any goods in from Romania or sell them, so many people from Braşov, a town of traders, as well as those nearby, had become poor. I asked Grandpa if his Dad had been a smuggler, but I couldn't get anything out of him, other than a wave of his hand that was meant to say: 'Nonsense'.

The next day, the roses had already bloomed and changed their colour: they were no longer as orange as Uncle Gheorghe's shirt, but a more delicate, yellowish orange. After dinner, or luncheon, as the elders used to say, Grandpa's brother said good-bye and left. We were very sad and walked him to the corner of the street that had once been called Vămii Street. He smiled to each of us in his particular way, called us by our wildling names one last time and left. He wasn't wearing his orange shirt anymore, but a less cheerful one that Grandma had given him from Grandpa.

I also found out a few things about his son. Mum said that Grandma couldn't stop crying when, years ago, during the Second World War, Uncle Gheorghe's son, my mum's

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<sup>3</sup> The Old Romanian Kingdom (1881-1918) was the first Romanian independent national state that included historical provinces Wallachia, Moldavia and later parts of Dobruja.



cousin, lost his left leg. They'd cut it above his knee, because he'd got shot and had gangrene. Mum couldn't remember ever seeing her mother cry so hard. I asked about the finishing school. Wasn't he too old to go? But Mum acted as if she hadn't heard me.

One evening, about five years later, I was walking down the street with Dad and we ran into Uncle Gheorghe's son. He walked with a cane. He'd inherited his father's good humour and laughed wholeheartedly, but he wasn't eccentric at all. He'd married a tall, beautiful and intelligent woman, a refugee from Bessarabia. Without meaning to, I looked at his left leg: it was stiff, with a black boot that moved me. He lit a cigarette. My Dad, who didn't actually smoke, would occasionally light one, to be social. He asked Uncle Gheorghe's son how he was doing.

'Better than in finishing school,' he said and laughed. It was the second time I'd heard that word.

'I was dying for a cigarette, even more than a decent meal,' he added. 'You have no idea how much I love just being able to light one now, whenever I want.'

After we left, Dad carefully put out the cigarette he'd



barely taken a couple of drags from and left it in plain sight, on a ledge projecting from a wall. I knew why he did this. Once, I had wanted to step on a fresh cigarette that someone must have dropped on the street. Dad wouldn't let me. He'd picked it up and put it somewhere visible: 'For those who can't afford to buy any,' he'd said. Maybe he was thinking about those who'd gone to finishing school. Uncle Gheorghe's only son, his bull, Luca<sup>4</sup>, first cousin to my Mum and our Aunt, had also been to finishing school. I later found out that this was another name for prison. Even though he was missing a leg, he'd been arrested and charged on political grounds.

On the third day, the orange roses brought by Uncle Gheorghe turned pink. I knew they would soon wither. They had gone through all three colours of their lives. So it was true that they completely changed colour. Like everything else that our eccentric, Lord-like guest had told us, this, too, was the truth. When their petals started to fall out, Grandma was very reluctant to throw them out. Afterwards, the cobalt vase was empty for a long time, as if the powerful memory of

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<sup>4</sup> Romanian equivalent of Luke, one of the four Evangelists whose symbol is a bull.



Uncle Gheorghe's colourful roses hadn't made room for other flowers.





**The "T" Effect**  
*I found the mark!*

After that, we climbed the Bucegi mountains often, hoping to see the sea that our great-grandfather and his eldest son had glimpsed, but we never did.

'There's too much pollution now. The air isn't crystal-clear anymore,' Mum said.

'And the people are meaner,' Aunt Mica added, as if this, too, polluted the air.

On one of those trips, I proved one of the miracles of my childhood, which I had sought to explain for many years. It had happened when I was about three or four years old.

In the room overlooking the street that belonged to my Mum's aunt and uncle, above the chest with six drawers and, more recently, the TV set, was the oil painting that I've told you I didn't like at all. It showed a dreary winter landscape with a few dark blotches as birds, and a couple of naked trees with claw-like branches. Their shadows were nothing like them, stretching long and straight on the floor. They looked like they needed fixing. And the snow wasn't "snow-white"



at all, the way I would've painted it, but with a reddish-grey hue, and you could barely tell it apart from the grey mountains in the background and the grey sky. A sort of slanted footpath, more like a slit, cut through the landscape. The painting didn't manage to light up the dark room, with its windows facing North, and its dark, heavy furniture that I always considered to be, in the landscape of our home, as unmovable as the mountains.

One day, I was perched on an upholstered chair at the large table in the middle of the room. I knew all its hidden nooks and crannies, because I'd spent a lot of time underneath it. I always liked to be there when the table was unfolded, its top stretching on two sides, so it barely fit in the room. Only then did the room become illuminated, once the chandelier was lit and the silverware and particularly the crystal glasses with their rainbow reflections were carefully placed on the starched table cloth, much whiter than the snow in the painting. All of these clinked lightly, to my delight. The painting, the table and the rest of the furniture were of some value. They came from the house with a garden, the one Grandma talked about, that was no longer



part of our family, but I only learned all this when I was older.

I was alone in that room, with a drawing book in front of me. Back then, I loved to draw. It was summer and the rays of sunshine were streaming into the room, something that only happened rarely, at certain times during the day. As always, I was drawing a crooked house with a jagged fence on either side, two windows that were also pretty crooked, red flowers at the window, flowers as tall as the house beside it, a Sun with rays in the top-right corner and a fluffy cloud on the left. The rays of sun in my picture were nothing like the ones coming in through the window, but I didn't compare them. I was drawing "from my imagination", not from a model. I was focused on my slightly spongy sheet of drawing paper and the tips of my coloured pencils, so as not to break them. Uncle Ionel had just sharpened them with the manual sharpener, the one that played a tune. I don't know how, but when I looked up, the room I was in had changed, had come to life, like in Wilhelm Hauff's Oriental stories.

Something was happening! I felt like I was about to



witness something unique and was looking around, full of hope. Everything was normal, only the glass panels with diagonal patterns on the large cupboard had coloured slightly, and if I moved my head, the colours on the edge of the crystal slid up and down its surface. Still, the air was different, it seemed to move, even though there wasn't any wind, like it had a different consistency, like it was breathing.

And then, *with my own eyes*, I saw the sky in the painting crack open and snow started falling over the slanted road, silvery-golden and unspeakably beautiful. I was stunned and my heart pulsed in short, fast beats. I wanted to see each glinting snowflake, but they kept moving slowly, gilding the grey snow. I got to my feet, to come closer and see it better. An unforgivable mistake. As if my moving had broken the spell, the snow suddenly stopped falling and the painting went back to its bleak atmosphere. That's when Auntie came back and found me in a state of unexplainable agitation.

'It snowed! It snowed with golden snowflakes in the painting! Look!'

And somehow, I was hoping that the blanket of snow



might have grown, preserving the shiny traces of those snowflakes.

Auntie assumed the air she'd used to have long ago, when she had been a school headmistress. She put her glasses on, climbed on a stool, brought her face close to the painting, almost bumping her nose against it, and ran her finger lightly over its surface. Didactically, she showed me her finger: clean, white as milk. She was always careful to clean the painting with a very soft cloth. From her point of view, there was no argument. For me, there was a problem: she had touched the area with clawed trees.

'No, not there! Lower, on the road,' I tried, desperately.

There was nothing on the road, either. I tried to convince her and tell her what I had seen, but at that age, words weren't much help. Soon, Uncle Ionel's bulky shape was at the door. He saw me, red in the face, looking like I had been wronged, like I always did whenever I was misunderstood.

'It snowed with golden snowflakes in the picture, and Auntie says it's not true!'

'Which picture?' he said, looking towards the other



winter landscape, a pastel piece in a glass frame.

I later found out that pastels had to be protected, so they wouldn't fade, while oil paintings lasted much better. I showed him the spot without a word, pointing my finger accusingly.

'Where's the gold, dearie?' Uncle Ionel asked his wife.

Then, he turned towards me:

'I want to buy myself a new winter coat, and your Auntie won't give me money.' Then back to her: 'Come now, dearie, at least give me something to eat. I'm starving!'

And he started laughing in his good-natured and kind way, wriggling his moustache, while Auntie huffed and pursed her pretty lips, now mad at both of us. With that, the case of the golden snow was closed. They heaped praises on my drawing of the crooked house, asking me if they could keep it for their collection. This consoled me somewhat, and Auntie gave me a huge peach, peeled of its fluffy skin that is so nice to touch but so awful to chew. Its yellow and slippery pulp, however, and the delicious taste of it remind me of the happiness I felt when I saw that snow falling, as well as the sadness that they hadn't believed me. I didn't find favour



with anyone in the house. They either didn't mind me or they teased me: 'Don't worry, she – and they pointed at me, laughing – will bring us the goose with the golden eggs and all our worries will be gone.' Mum tried to make us forget about the silly superstitions that we picked up from the kids on our street: Cici, Ică, Livi, Radu, Mari and the others. Once, when I was a little older, I told her I'd found out that Hell was full of brimstone. That got her going: 'Brimstone means sulfur! It's a solid substance, it's yellow and has a bad smell. But it's very useful. It exists in living things and in nature. We have sulfur springs at Pucioasa, where people go to treat their rheumatism, for example. And when you read Homer, you'll see it mentioned in the *Iliad*, as a sign of Zeus himself! After all, it was used as a cure in ancient times. If Hell existed, and it was full of brimstone, then people would go there for treatment, to be cured of all sorts of diseases and aches! Hell would become a spa!' If I came across some mould, which would've driven anyone else's mother crazy, she said: it's alright, you can make penicillin out of it, and blue cheese is the best! She always related life to Chemistry in the most amazing way.



The grown-ups didn't probably think I was lying, but rather that, like Grandma and Grandpa used to say, the girl's *whimsical*. But I knew the truth. I replayed the scene in my head many times, and when I would go into that room, I would look at the painting hopefully, though less and less often, lest *that thing* happened again. Still, the snow was grey, the mountains were grey, the birds were small, black blotches, and the naked trees reached out with their claws towards the grey sky, leaving behind a shadow that looked nothing like them. Along the slanted road, there was no movement whatsoever. Perhaps someone had been there at some point, because there were heavy footprints on the snow in the foreground, but now, the road was empty. As I grew up, the memory started to fade and it didn't bother me anymore. Still, I knew in my heart that I had lived it. A few years later, I wasn't so sure of that anymore. I thought that perhaps the others had been right.

Until one day, when I was a teenager. Those of us who were still around had gone on a trip to the mountains, at the end of August, when the weather was nice: Dina, Doru, Matei and I, with out mothers. Grandma had stayed at home,





growing more and more anxious as time went by. We always chose less-travelled paths, to avoid running into people who took their transistor radios with them and played loud folk-inspired music, like some used to do back then, when we didn't have headphones and Walkmans. Somewhere down the road, we lost the trail and couldn't see the mark (the tree with the yellow dot in a white square must have fallen down during a storm) and we had to make our own way. It wasn't easy, going through trees and bushes, over roots, slipping at every step. Somehow, we got further down, where the slope was more gentle and the soles of our boots could touch the ground more evenly. The forest was thinner and we enjoyed the beautiful trees that were still green. When someone shouted: 'I found the mark!', the coveted yellow dot, my eyes were drawn to the slanted rays of sunlight coming through the forest like a spotlight on stage. The cone of light with its sharp and penetrating rays was both grave and magical, reminding me of the slanted light in the painting, from when I was little.

*'The Tyndall effect,'* said Mum, like the scientist she was. She explained to us how it worked, but I'm afraid I've



forgotten.

John Tyndall was a 19<sup>th</sup> century physicist who made a lot of discoveries, but I've forgotten those, too. Anyway, when the light falls like this, the specks of dust in the air – Mum called them "particles" – become visible. My golden flakes were actually the dust in the air of that room. I was as moved as I had been the first time, and I was stunned yet again. Then, I hurried to tell the others of my new discovery, the explanation of an incident that had made a day of my childhood so beautiful. I wanted them to see, at last, that I hadn't been lying, that I hadn't been *whimsical* and that, when I was little, I *had* seen the golden snow, like Danaë sees the golden rain when she is visited by Zeus.

Unfortunately, no-one but me remembered the incident with the painting that had happened about ten years before. 'I don't remember,' Mum said. 'What snow?' Dina asked, distracted. 'Nonsense...' said the boys at once. 'You'd better look for the next mark!' added someone, and Auntie stroked the top of my head silently, worrying about how much time we had left before sunset. Anyway, the joy of having found the trail again left no room for other feelings.



For me, the Tyndall effect was astounding: it suddenly filled an undecipherable apparition with meaning. It was a joy of inner sight. It was the new beauty of the old world. And I remembered another incident that had happened when I was little in the poorly-lit room facing North, one November evening, when the fire was burning in the white-tiled stove.

Through an experiment, Auntie showed us the air, which, of course, is unseen. She placed a lit candle on the floor in a bottle (serving as a candlestick). She made her husband hold another one up, near the ceiling, because her hands shook. She asked my cousin to turn off the light and carefully open the door to the yard. We saw it with our own eyes: the candle on the floor leaned its flame towards the inside of room, and the one near the ceiling leaned its flame in the opposite direction. It was as if we were seeing nothingness, seeing it move.

'The cold air from the yard is heavier and comes in close to the floor, while the air in the room that is warmer and lighter rises towards the ceiling and goes out. In a room, it's always warmer towards the ceiling. When you sleep in a



cabin or on the train, in bunk beds, this is good to know, so you can choose a good spot. If you get cold easily, it's best to take the top bunk.'

'That's why my forehead gets sweaty,' said Uncle Ionel, who had just got to his feet, smiling kindly underneath his white moustache. 'I always hit my head against the warm air.'

We got very excited about seeing the air, which thought it could go anywhere unnoticed.

'Like doctor Griffin,' said Matei, who was reading *The Invisible Man* by H.G. Wells. 'He turned invisible, but he wasn't allowed to eat, because you could see food hanging in the air and falling into his invisible stomach. Or clothes... Every time he wanted to disappear, he had to go around naked.'

We started debating the issue. We would have loved to be invisible, there were huge advantages, but the thought of seeing our food be chewed and minced in our mouths, and then slide downward, was disgusting. And we weren't too keen on running around naked, even if no-one could see us.



## Interviu cu Ioana Pârvulescu

*Romanul "Inocenții" este o carte pentru copii sau o carte pentru oameni mari?*

Este o carte *cu* copii pentru oameni mari. Dar, desigur, la un anumit nivel (partea cu aventurile, cu înțelegerea greșită a unor metafore, cu tainele casei) poate fi înțeleasă și de copii, hai să spunem de la 12 ani în sus. Ba, dacă mă gândesc bine, prin coperta ei veselă, cu litere făcute din cuburi – o realizare splendidă a artistului plastic Mihail Coșulețu – poate fi un obiect de joacă pentru copii mici de tot: fina mea Eva, de doi ani, pare s-o aibă între jucăriile ei preferate. Dar publicul predilect sunt oamenii trecuți prin viață, în stare să urce și la etajul cărții, acolo unde femeia matură își explică enigmele trecutului și le vede în altă lumină.

*În ce măsură e o carte pentru cititori inocenți?*

Acum vă jucați dumneavoastră. Desigur că o carte nu se adresează celor pomeniți în titlu, de pildă *Crimă și pedeapsă* de Dostoievski nu e pentru criminali, *Demonii* nu e pentru demoni,

## Interview with Ioana Pârvulescu

*Is "The Innocents" a novel for children or for grown-ups?*

It is a book *with* children, for grown-ups. But, of course, on a certain level (the adventures, misunderstanding metaphors, the secrets of the house) it can be understood by children, let's say over the age of 12. Now that I think about it, because it has such a colourful cover, with letters made out of building blocks – a beautiful artwork by visual artist Mihail Coșulețu – it could be a toy for very small children: my goddaughter, Eva, is two years old and it seems to be one of her favourite toys. But it was meant to be read by people who have some life experience, who can climb to the top floor of this book, where the mature woman figures out the riddles of the past, seeing them in a different light.

*To what extent do you think it is a book for innocent readers?*

Here you're playing a game yourself. Certainly, a book is not meant for those mentioned in the title; *Crime and Punishment* by Dostoyevsky is not for criminals, *Demons* is not for demons,



*Rusoaica* de Gib I. Mihăescu nu e pentru rusoaice și *Inocenții* nu e pentru inocenți. Dar întrebarea îmi place, pentru că e important să înțelegem cine sunt inocenții din carte. Cititorii și unii critici literari au observat că nu e vorba doar despre copii. Inocenții, în accepția acestui roman, sunt toți oamenii care suferă evenimentele cumplite ale istoriei și sunt victimele ei, indiferent de vârstă. Și-apoi, inocența e o stare de spirit care revine de-a lungul vieții, chiar și după ce, să spunem, te-ai simțit vinovat pentru ceva, cândva, față de cineva. De pildă, toți bătrânii din roman sunt, la rândul lor, cuprinși în titlu, ei se lasă duși de apele nevinovăției alături de cei mai mici locuitori ai casei. Casa însăși, personaj principal, a văzut multe, dar nu și-a pierdut inocența.

Și, ca să iau întrebarea dumneavoastră în alt sens, cred că este o carte pentru cititorii avizați, adică pentru cei care pot înțelege că simplitatea stilului este o îndelungă filtrare, o dezbrăcare de toate artificiile stilistice pe care le-am tot folosit.

În cărțile dumneavoastră, ați reconstituit Bucureștiul de altădată din documente. Acum, ați reconstituit Brașovul din amintiri.

*The Russian Woman* by Gib I. Mihăescu is not for Russian women and *The Innocents* is not for innocents. But I like this question, because it is important to understand who the innocents in the book are. Readers and some literary critics have noticed it's not just about the children. In this novel, the innocents are all those people who suffer through the events of a dreadful history, its victims, regardless of their age. After all, innocence is a state of mind that comes back throughout one's life, even after, let's say, you've felt guilty of something, at some point, towards someone. For instance, the elders in the novel, who are also referred to in the title, allow themselves to be carried away by the stream of innocence, together with the younger residents of the house. The house itself, the main character, has seen a lot, but it hasn't lost its innocence.

And to answer your question in a different way, I think it is a book for refined readers, for those who can understand that the simplicity of style is the result of a long filtration process, a stripping down of the stylistic devices I've been using.

In your books, you have reconstructed old Bucharest from documents. Now, you have reconstructed Brașov from memory. How



*Prin ce diferă sau se aseamănă cele două procedee?*

Se aseamănă foarte bine, cred. Există o parte solidă a reconstituirii – fie că e vorba de document, altfel spus de amintirile altora, fie că e vorba de amintiri proprii. Și există o parte fluidă, inefabilă a reconstituirii, care e intuitivă sau imaginativă. Adică ficțiune. Ea nu e deloc neglijabilă în *Inocenții*. N-am simțit că fac un lucru foarte diferit de ceea ce făcusem în romanele mele precedente. Știți desenele acelea care se vând pe la muzee arheologice, care pornesc de la câteva ruine existente, marcate cu o linie tremurătoare, și-ți reconstituie cetatea înfloritoare, cu tot cu oamenii din ea? Sau, ca să fim la zi cu tehnologia, filmele în care ți se arată cum trăiau oamenii din cutare epocă? Cam așa cred că fac și eu, doar că accentul cade nu pe cadru, ci pe viață, pe om.

*Ce vă place mai mult, Bucureștiul de azi sau Brașovul?*

Îmi plac amândouă și mă simt acasă în ambele orașe. Dar, cumva, Bucureștiul este orașul de toată ziua, orașul „de lucru”, iar Brașovul este orașul de lux, cel „de duminică”. N-aș putea să stau tot timpul în duminică, oricât mi-ar plăcea. Ea capătă

*are the two processes different or similar?*

They are very similar, I think. There is a solid side to this reconstruction – whether it's documents, that is, other people's memories, or my own memories. And then there's a fluid, ineffable side to this reconstruction, which is intuitive or imaginative. It's fiction. This is not insignificant in *The Innocents*. I didn't feel like I was doing something very different from what I had done in my previous novels. You know those drawings sold in Archaeology museums that start from a few existing ruins, marked with a squiggly line, and reconstruct an entire flourishing fortress and everyone in it? Or, to be more up to date with modern technology, movies that show you how people in a certain era used to live? I think that's pretty much what I do, except I don't focus on the environment, but on life, on people.

*Which do you prefer now, Bucharest or Braşov?*

I like both and I feel at home in either city. But, somehow, Bucharest is the everyday "work" city, and Braşov is the luxury, "Sunday" one. I couldn't stay in Sunday forever, no matter how much I enjoyed it. It becomes meaningful only when compared



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sens abia prin contrast cu săptămâna de lucru. Așadar îmi scriu cărțile la București și îmi las gândurile să zboare, cu sentimentul vacanței, la Brașov. (În paranteză fie spus, asta nu înseamnă că eu nu am lucruri grele de făcut la Brașov, spre deosebire de turiștii care vin doar să se plimbe, dar de scris nu scriu acolo).

*Credeți că există un postmodernism românesc? Dacă da, cum arată?*

Da, desigur, tot ce se întâmplă în literatura lumii vine, mai devreme sau mai târziu și la noi. Însă nu mi se pare că acum postmodernismul este de mare actualitate, mai degrabă este ceva deja asimilat și care a lăsat urme, e pretutindeni, dar discret plasat, în mentalitate. Iar ca să spun cum arată, fără să fac teorie literară, am un îndemn: citiți *Levantul* de Mircea Cărtărescu. Spun citiți această epopee postmodernă și nu lucrarea lui de doctorat cu titlul *Postmodernismul românesc*, pentru că în *Levantul* aveți teoria aplicată în cel mai delectabil mod.

to the workweek. So I write my books in Bucharest and let my mind drift to a holiday destination, Brașov. (As an aside, that doesn't mean I don't have important things to do in Brașov, unlike the tourists who only come to visit, but I don't do my writing there).

*Do you think there's such a thing as a Romanian Postmodernism? If so, what does it look like?*

Yes, of course. Everything that happens in literature across the globe makes its way to us, sooner or later. But nowadays, I don't think Postmodernism is relevant any longer. Rather, it has already been assimilated and has left its mark, it's everywhere, but discreetly placed in our mentality. As for what it looks like, without going into literary theory, I urge you to read *The Levant* by Mircea Cărtărescu. I say: read this Postmodern epic poem and not his PhD thesis called *Romanian Postmodernism*, because in *The Levant* you have the theory applied in the most delectable way.





*Ce vă place să citiți?*

Îmi place să citesc pur și simplu. Nu mă limitez la un gen. Ieri am fost la un anticariat și mi-am cumpărat, cu bucuria cu care un *gourmet* își cumpără trufe, pateuri sau vinuri vechi, cărți din toate genurile. Un jurnal al primei femei care a fost chirurg în România – era născută în 1875 –, un volum de corespondență Șt. O. Iosif, Natalia Negru, Dimitrie Anghel (legat de tragedia vieții lor), un volum bilingv de poezie de Paul Éluard, o ediție a *Jurnalului de la Păltiniș* cu o dedicație a autorului din anul apariției, 1983, *Bijuteriile indiscrete* ale lui Diderot, pe care le aveam, dar le-am pierdut, *Cartea prietenilor mei* de Iordan Chimet (autorul *Antologiei inocenței*) și un dicționar de expresii românești din 1927, cu o prefață de Iorga. Toate astea numai ieri. Ajunsă acasă, n-am știut la ce să mă reped mai întâi. Și, desigur, îmi plac noutățile, iar pentru asta librăriile sunt locuri ale seducției.

*Ce vă place să traduceți?*

Traduc cu mare plăcere poezie, pentru că e o traducere intensivă, cere puțin efort fizic, dar multă concentrare, multă interiorizare a textului. O pot face în gând, când mă plimb sau

*What do you like to read?*

I just like to read. I don't limit myself to one genre. Yesterday, I went to an antique bookshop and bought books of all genres, as gladly as a *gourmet* buying truffles, paté or old wine. A diary of the first female surgeon in Romania – she was born in 1875 –, a collection of correspondence between Șt. O. Iosif, Natalia Negru, Dimitrie Anghel (about the tragedy of their lives), a bilingual book of poetry by Paul Éluard, a copy of *The Păltiniș Diary* with an inscription by the author from the year it was released, 1983, *The Indiscreet Jewels* by Diderot, which I used to own but have lost, *My Friends' Book* by Iordan Chimet (author of *An Anthology of Innocence*) and a dictionary of Romanian expressions from 1927, prefaced by Iorga. I got all this yesterday. At home, I didn't know which to open first. Of course, I also like new releases, and for these, bookshops are endlessly seductive.

*What do you like to translate?*

I enjoy translating poetry, because it is intensive, it requires less physical effort but you concentrate more on internalizing the text. I can do it mentally, for instance, when I



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când călătoresc, de pildă. Pe când la roman lucrurile merg altfel, trebuie să ai *Sitzfleisch*, cum spun nemții, să stai locului, să fii construit trupește ca să stai pe scaun. Dar îmi place să mă și joc, când traduc, și așa se explică faptul că am tradus trei albume Asterix (primul urmează să apară curând).

*Este și traducerea o formă de lectură?*

Evident. Cea mai exigentă. Mai există doar o formă de lectură la fel de necruțătoare, aceea făcută pe scenă (sau pe un audiobook). Acolo se vede tot ce nu ține, la un text. Dar traducerea este o rescriere în altă cheie sau, ca să repet definiția lui Amos Oz (cea mai bună pe care am auzit-o până acum), este rescrierea concertului de pian, să spunem, pentru alt instrument. Fiecare limbă are sonoritățile unui anume instrument. Iar limba maternă e instrumentul la care cânti de mic și care ți-a devenit o prelungire organică a trupului.

take a walk or travel. Whereas, with a novel, things are different. You need *Sitzfleisch*, like the Germans say, to be able to sit still, to be physically built for sitting on a chair. But I also like to play, when I translate, and that is why I have translated three *Asterix* books (the first one will be released soon).

*Is translation a form of reading?*

Obviously. The most exacting. There is one other form of reading, just as unforgiving: the one done on stage (or for an audiobook). That's where you see everything that doesn't work in a text. But translation is rewriting in another key, or, to take the definition given by Amos Oz (the best I've heard so far), it's rewriting a piano concerto, let's say, for another instrument. Every language sounds like a particular instrument. And your mother tongue is the one you've been playing since you were little and has become an organic extension of your body.

