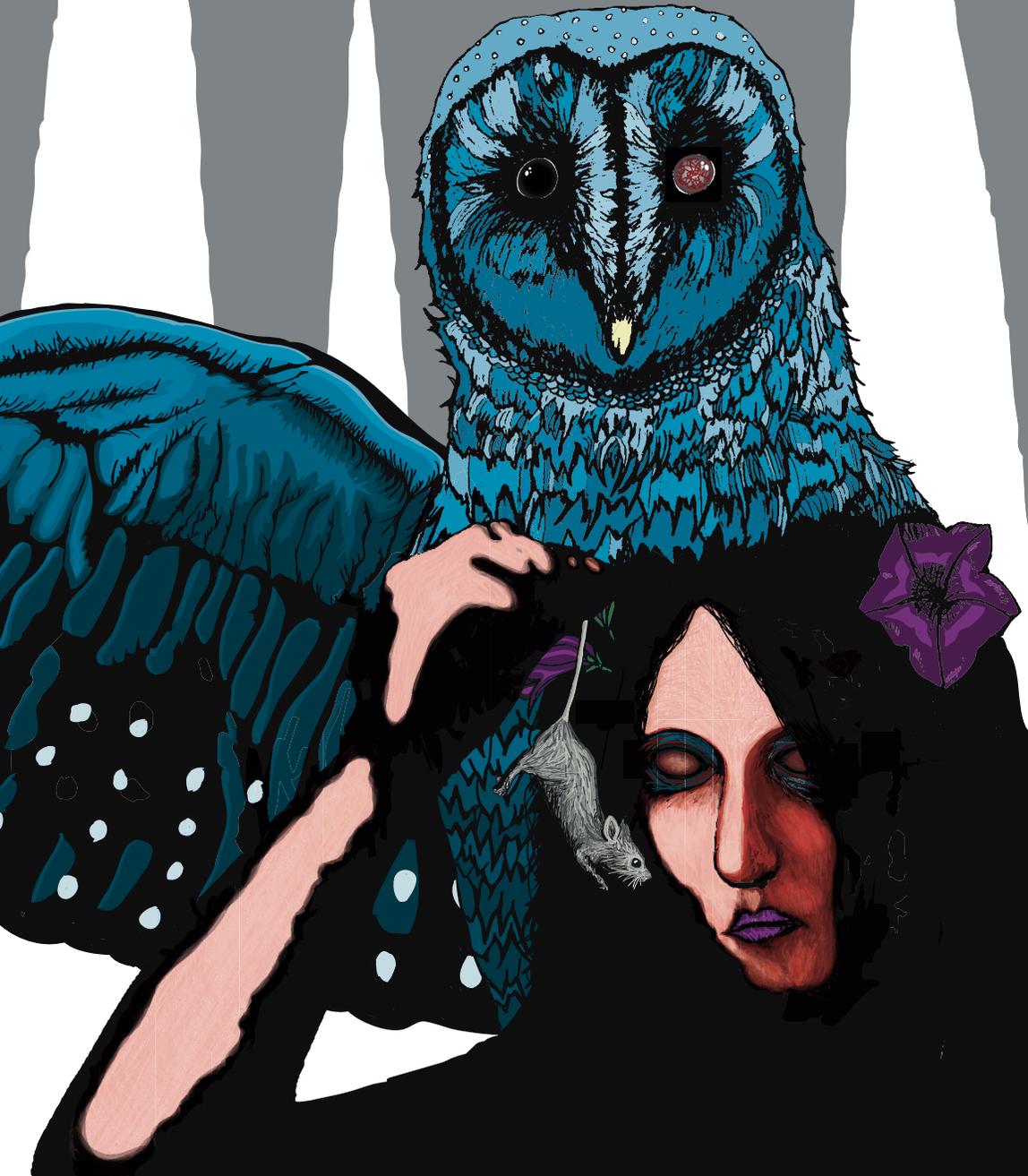


IMMIGRANT MODEL

Mihaela Moscaliuc



IMMIGRANT MODEL

PITT POETRY SERIES

Ed Ochester, Editor

IMMIGRANT MODEL

Mihaela Moscaliuc

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*for my parents, Mariana and Valentin,
and for my Bica*

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We're forced to change because we're forced to remember.

—Colum McCann, *Zoli*



The word as bait: the word fishing for whatever is not word. . . .

What shall I tell you? I shall tell you the instants.

—Clarice Lispector, *Água Viva*

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Memoir

Noica says somewhere the only fruit that never ripens is man.
The story of a life's perpetual green is the story of averted eyes.
If I served you that story now, crushed in salvia or paprika,
you would scrape it into the compost bin and wrap your palms
around my warm skull. Your poor palms. Your poor chords,
trying to console me as I extol each warden I bribed to save my life.
Once I knelt, smiled, kissed the hand of the despot.
More than once I slit my lip to pacify two tongues lusting for blood.
Once I shaved my head to help someone abhor me.
He thought me depressed, wove me a wig of algae.
When a catapulted body exploded at my feet,
I lifted the sugar cone as high as it went above my head
and scored with my throat twenty drips of ice cream.
Once I let my mother go, and she went, for a year.
She returned with a fractured face, a patch of pink linoleum.
More than once I confessed a lie to protect more lies and once,
bent over the industrial river below the Nicolina Bridge,
I saw a scabby fish stop dead as he navigated my face.
It lulled a second then sank, all but one eye.
I opened my mouth to the sun to soak up the heat,
keep what I'd seen out.

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1

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Self-Portrait with Monk

A bearded bride in black chiffon, lei of garlic dandling
his neck like the pearl ballroom choker of God,
he prances across the cobbled path, pushing a wheelbarrow
stacked with freshly scissored lovage and marigold.

I've been spying all morning from the terrace suspended
mid-wall and when, halfway across the courtyard, my monk lifts
his head, I abandon Eco's *The Name of the Rose* and bend
over the rail to flip a ladybug, sure he'll notice my silky mane.
He doesn't, so I trail through the oak door into the dining hall
to watch him arrange sunheads and mauve field tulips in clay pots.

I have already retraced the salty route of his fingers on the spines
of pickled grape leaves, in ground lamb hand-rolled in herbs sun-dried.
He cooks and feeds and scrubs but never eats, my monk,
spends lunch elbow-deep in suds or scratching the bellies of cats.

No wonder he's so famished by the time Cassiopeia arrives.
Then black chiffon and ivory flesh stream upward,
shape-shifting in flight: raven, whiskered bat, pricolici, vârcolaci.
At dawn, he lands between two rose bushes, soot in his mouth,
weeping who knows why, my celestial monk,
torn cassock glistening with spent saliva, rapture in upturned eyes.

You Ask Why I Buy Pineapples and Let Them Go to Waste

Eastern Bloc, 1980s

This is *that* pineapple, Western in beauty,
hard as the country it rode in the belching Dacia,
cozied in hand-me-downs impudent in their brightness.
When they knelt in the German ditch, a mile
before the border to the East, my parents wanted to forgive,
the way they'd forgiven themselves, the decision settled like coffee dregs
heavy with future. Defect, save & send, in time sneak in the children.
Drive on, unthink the West, unthink *dor*, bring home the pineapple.
I imagine them there, in the shadow of words,
fingers curled tight into each other's palms, bare feet
rooting the muck, the sun already west, nesting.
Once he tore his younger sister's only dress
to make lampshades for his future wife.
Once they buried flesh they knew their own,
stuffed the hole with rotting apples. She fed father
the must of her breast, painted his eyes with green colostrum.
Later she would betray him and he would wail *ca o bocitoare*,
break his wrist wrenching off the bed frame—
but here, in this German ditch, details no longer matter,
so they rise and push on in the Dacia groaning now
through familiar potholes, the puckered face grinning
in the rearview mirror. They'd almost lost it at checkpoint,
its unfistable heft lousy bribe material—*You crazy, man?*
What am I gonna do with that spiky shit?
This is the poem of the pineapple hatching on top of our rusting
Frigidaire in 1985, darling kept whole for weeks by kids
pouring in and out at the news of my parents' brief escape West.
Children sucked in the tart air, stared hard, but never asked to touch.

When hospital smells started taking over the kitchen,
mother laid out the good china plates and father rubbed his palms
ready for business. You know what happened,
you who know to core the pineapple as it peaks into sweetness,
who can slide the blade so casually, as if it's always
been yours, this two-for-five dollar token of the exotic.
The inside had collapsed into a vitreous mess,
or so it seemed with all those bloated bodies trembling
in and out of focus on the mute TV. Our latest
casualties: how they'd pushed their luck, whispered love
into the ears of the maligned Black Sea, promised hecatombs.
How they were catapulted back to shore, nameless defectors
discarded as ditch spit, spit on the clean-shaven face of Ceaușescu,
our handsome thief.

Chernobyl

and then those babies were born
and we hoped this was no longer God.

Women curtained carriage tops
with brocades severed from dowry pillows

hurried down alleys, near-smiling,
helloed back when hailed, but did not stop,

did not force us to hear the feral wailing,
did not force us to see the grotesque

heads, and we, expectant caryatids,
did not flinch.

The Summer I Waited for the Revolution and Fell for Peacocks

God would be watching me anyhow—hawk and peacock,
curtain rips, owls, those blue-black coins of flesh,

all His replica, my zealot aunt warned when I announced
I'd put faith on hold, try sin on an empty stomach.

What a summer that was. My teeth bled from the root,
the nuclear fallout plumped my lips till they swelled

like a wondrous vulva. I pawned my body in hope of self-
forgiveness and joined my sisters in their search for flesh.

I mouthtrapped welts and scars, craters filled with human salt.
I had no use for the healthy, the loveable. What a summer that was.

*Come my lord, plow, my lord who are slashed lettuce
by my pond, who are bent shoot, sour milk, come sweeten my tongue.*

When not slapping each other with wet lizards,
the boys broke into Jimi Hendrix, tails erectile, eyes silky with ennui.



*Experienced meaning, O'Connor called the plumaged trope
delivering fervor in concentric circles. Flocks of eyes*

shadowed with iridescent blues and greens as on a fashion runway
strutted the trails mid-sun, ready to size up tourists.



All summer something smacked of myth—unforgivable
myth—in the vaults of my anesthetized hometown.

We revamped the mioritic ballad, gave the dreamy hero a shot of oomph,
but couldn't get the dregs of fatalism out of our mouths.

Someone west of us was pitching Xmas carols as anticommunist lampoons.
Someone east of us was snoring a red snore. Who cared?

The local orchard had acquired a peahen so we chipped in for a bribe,
but the guard was too busy hoarding favors from girls hooked on peaches.

The trees reeked of industrial detergent, but the hunt was worth it.
The peahen stood still against a trunk, glistening with albino ladybugs.

She held us in her glamour: threadbare and eyeless, beautifully stuffed.
What a summer that was. Something smacked of myth in my house,

though my parents worked hard to deny it. They fought and made peace
in some clinical sign language, and transplanted our communal plot to the
balcony.

They took turns stimulating growth by rubbing bees against the dry scalps
of cabbages. At night, while they patched up their imaginary parachutes,

I sank into the tales of the woman *stranger than paradise*
who sewed waistcoats for chickens and mail-order swans.

I wanted the feast of her big white teeth as she bit off,
with each penned violence, her own death.

I wanted her trust in the panopticon of one's choice,
the taste of terror coursing nuque to tailbone.

I wanted to feel the ocellated coverts of the pheasant cock
against my almost lovely cheek. But what a summer that was

—hot rumors, congealed blood, the dictators' smooth faces, some comic
relief
as I nurtured the cripples inside me and slept through the tease of
insurrectionary hymns.

The Red Eviction

for my great-grandmother

Nine buds snapped out of her like string beans,
by the water pump, on the same patch where
she'd buried the still one. Rose hips took to the placentas,
exploded the wire lattice, spilled onto the common path.

In time, she wedded off her girls, raised their urchins,
cursed their luck if they forgot to leave the work shoes outside.
In time, she blessed the ones headed for the madhouse,
the ones pickled in alcohol, the ones who murdered
what they couldn't love or bleached the skin to pass as gadje.

When the county delivered its eviction note, she spat on it
then torched it on the church steps. She watched the villagers
watching her, quick flames at her feet, cigarette between figged lips,
hands on hips. *We will build us a red-brick bus stop,* they chanted,
red bus bound to the red town, red all around.

She blessed the journey with a goose:
twisted its neck by the water pump, worked the leveler
with elbows, the bucket with iron calves.
Plucked and rolled in peppered salt and lard,
the goose roasted in the fire pit on a tongue of pines

while her boys hauled onto the horse-drawn cart
chests and copper pots, mirrors wrapped in shawls,
two distressed piglets, a dozen stuffed pheasants.
They ate standing by the fence, watching the mayor's Honda
barf above the ditch, two arms and a finger away.

They sucked clean the bones, skewered the rose patch.
The blood-eyed feather my mother, then eight,
tucked in her braid still seals breads in egg white.
The wishbone pins her grandmother's hair
below heaps of scrap metal roaring with chicory.

Rehearsal

Hai să repetăm, grandfather croons in a thrift shop suit dignified by naphthalene and a spray of satin violets. *You'll get real stills, real photography*, he assures his son the photographer, then circles the coffin one last time.

He's taken the rented begonias through five color permutations, each time tucking away the florist tag, stepping back to check. *Perfect*. One leg hiked in the air, elbows up, he's ready for a cocktail with death.

My father helps his father into the coffin. *Straighten my cuffs, honey*—his honey gone ten years, or maybe it's honey for sweet-toothed devils he wants, honey to heal cracked heels bound for the seven rivers.

Honey, my father who warms two fingers on the candle to flick away the fly rubbing legs on his father's brow. Honey for the dying, *miere pentru morți*.

Let's rehearse dying, commands a lover whose ice-cold skin sweats newsprint ink. He's spiffed our bedroom with carved femurs, feeds me bowls of fresh marrow, begs me to sing.

I can barely see the window, though I smell the light, the maple leaves wet with morning. Let's rehearse dying, my body dares.

I pluck my nails out of the mattress,
follow silken trails—

He snaps. He shoots.

He snaps a shot, honey. My father snaps a shot, another,
angle after angle, empties shocks of reds and purples into black & white
till the roll clicks and the tattooed tongue
recedes with a motorized swish in the black mouth.

The fly, returned to settle an old itch,
ignores the snoring.

Grandfather sleek and sulfurous in my palm
—footnote

*Let's not, my true love whispers between sheets,
our bodies confused by how tender the muting,
how smooth the braiding of tongues, the thick, sweet lull,
our torsos a skipping rope for the rehearsal of la mort douce.*

Die in me, as I die, as I die in you

When father places the bath tray stacked with photos on my lap and says *Spread on the bedroom floor in rows of birth, marriage, death*, he doesn't say grandfather, with whom I'd played Scrabble that morning, is perfectly alive, sound as a horsefly. I lift him from a pile of wet strangers. He slips through my fingers, sleek and sulfurous. *I know how I'll go, down to nail polish and pantyhose*, grandma reminds me each year, on grandfather's anniversary. *I won't be a stranger to my own funeral. Your grandfather, he got it almost right, with that second photo shoot—windows blindfolded, mirror shrouded in black. It'll feel good to wear again the hat with ferret paws. So what. Let them think me arrogant. To each rose its thorns.*

Grigorescu's *Țiganca*

At five, I was convinced she was my mother,
the Gypsy woman in the Grigorescu sketch
framed in gilded wood, our kitchen's icon:
loops of raven braids hidden in half-scarf,
head tilted in exhaustion, bared breast hasting home
to quell me. I had known that coppery swell of flesh,
its half-swing, known it better than anyone.
At ten, I still believed that woman was my mother,
snake whisperer and moon confidante
returning home with pails of chanterelles,
so when, one summer afternoon,
Țiganca shattered on the kitchen floor,
I couldn't tell whose angers, strapped to my father's voice,
whipped the air: *cheap enchantress screwing
our luck, no better than your cursed lot.*
Blackberries simmered in sugar and lemon rind.
I hurried outside to skip rope—

<i>oan ciu fri</i>	<i>one two three</i>
<i>Pamela vrea copii</i>	<i>Pamela wants a baby</i>
<i>și Bobi nu o lasă</i>	<i>but Bobby wouldn't let her</i>
<i>că e prea frumoasă</i>	<i>because she is too pretty</i>

When I returned, berries and sugar had congealed to a bitter mess.
The memory whittled down to a sore footnote.
Soon there were no buyers for bone combs and copper pots,
no mention of the Gypsy but in our ethnic pageants.
Oh, Țiganca mea, croon us a heartrending song, dance us a fiery dance.
In the cellar layered with wrinkled apples and quince preserves,
propped against a rouged, thickly sexed, partly dismembered doll
—on which I'd practiced torture, dissection, and love in many forms—
Grigorescu's *Țiganca* sifts dust shard by shard in sideways light,
gorgeously framed.



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Sheela na gig

for Judith Vollmer

Homestead whence once we were evicted,
I dare you, bring me home.
The crown of the steppe from my head I remove.
The lapis beads from my neck I remove.
The strands of beads from my breast I remove.
The breastplate called "Come, man, come!" I remove.
The gold ring from my wrist I remove.
The measuring rod and line from my palm I remove.
The royal robe from my shoulders I remove.
Naked and bowed, naked and bowed I will enter you.



On Iona, she beams from the carved mullion.
Almond dentata doubling the refractory's window,
she flashed the nuns as they stooped and hoisted
habits mid-ankles. To bow as you enter,
take dusk in your mouth, chase with wine.
To bow as you enter, take dusk in your mouth,
chew the star gristle, chew your own tongue.
To return to the shared groom sated, ready
to turn starvation into supplicant's craft.
Someone has chipped my lament,
flung the consonants down the escarpment.
Someone has whitewashed my bones,
dumped them into the gorge.
I hear cassocks and aprons ghosting around,
singing in my grandmother's voice—
*All that adoration going to one man. He'd better be a hunk,
that Jesus, better have enough seed for all the plowed land.*
No one left to rouse, no one to pleasure with shame.



Latched below eaves, hands in mouth
stretching corners to bursting, she's an old child,
giddy and slightly grotesque.

Know me, know me not, find what you can't know.

She's carried the brunt of gaze for one too many centuries,
though I can smell the reds boiling inside the petrified flesh,
the tongue pulsing with curses, the bloodletting.

She shoots out the lips in contempt
—not at swallows mouthing stale air
and slinging silver droppings on her swollen lips,
not at prayers coaxed out in countless languages
or at the bloated tourists milling Byzantine
versions of hell, lit candles in tight grips.

She shoots out the lips in contempt
because she can, because there's not one thing
worth denying herself.

I shove the camera in my knapsack,
girdle the cathedral a few times, tripping only once,
on the squint of a discolored angel who's speared
another weathered angel with chipped wings.

By now, my husband must have polished off the bones of rabbit
braised monastically, dressed in mustard, finished
in cognac. Perched on a jutting cliff in Kutná Hora,
in a restaurant at the lip of the salt mine,
he must be licking his fingers, wondering
if he should wait for me to order the Becherovka,
give himself time to tease the waitress.

He could improvise some Czech and make
her tongue linger coyly on some hard English.

To lick your lips: debauched, the Romans believed
as they corralled parched Dacian farm girls onto their laps.

I beat a new flock of tourists to the weed clump
that gives the best view of the hag-child.
I must have cornered it differently.
Legs over shoulders, behind angular ears,
knees crooked into the points of a black diamond,
she's wholesome night, mouth-shifter who channels
the hiss of the village crone: *Vino, intră, kiss my eye,*
little monster of the mundane, learn the art of anasyrma.

The heat flushes me out.

Below the gates, I find my love,
sated and wild with thirst.



Quite a womb that woman has, mother says again,
as she does always when we pass Isaura on Sunday market.
Our bodies are saddled with bags of spoilt fruit
for winter jams, her back upright, mine hunched
to shield two gooseberries. *Don't look*, she warns
while she looks, though she's practiced denial all week.
She'll dance you to bliss, precum ielele de rusalii,
then sling her tongue, mother hisses, *slurp you whole, like a she-wolf.*
Isaura sits on a cinder block cleaning her nails with a twig,
bone combs and *ibricuri* strung around her waist.
Women love to hate her garish skirts—yards and yards
of pleated meadows lush with poppy and chicory. They hate
to give their men the coin they'll drop in Isaura's palm,
but they always do, cursing, for men alone can glean
the harvest Isaura's lifted skirt yields in broad daylight:
buckets of luck, cure for infertility, sickness to enemies.
What a womb that woman has—Mother again—and her teeth,
look at those lancing teeth, how they laugh in your face, so beautiful.

Plaza de Las Flores

I want the sherry cream but order instead
a Gypsy arm, offended yet too curious to pass.
The plate lands between elbows on which I'd propped my head
an arm away from the street musician
who's giving his heart to the Spanish version of "Hello Dolly."
Whipped cheese gaffed with chocolate lances.
Why this? I nudge the waitress in butchered Spanish.
What's this have to do with a Gypsy arm?
Shrug, short laugh, the back of her calves ablaze
with the maw of heaven or maw of hell, I can't tell—
mermaids against coral, the cochineal reds of their hair
streaming in one fringed wave as bodies
spiral in unison, heads flung back, fingers splayed.
What makes angels angels? my son asks, though
I've already admitted to not having an answer
and he's voiced dismay in how little knowledge
I possess. *Sometimes, it's better that we don't know*
—momentarily glad he doesn't prod.
Flamenco dancers in barrel turns, arm torching away
from body, the waitress later clarifies.
Common tattoo in Cadiz.



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Alien Resident

My mother rescues bitter cherries off Queens Boulevard.
She catches and hoists them in the net of her pleated skirt,
cradles them to her employer's kitchenette.
On a leather barstool that spins into night, she pits and pits,
keeps pace with the vermicular fanfare, bitter blood
under nails, petite castanets cackling in the dry mouth.
On the trenches of dawn, crushed flesh dissolves in the sugar bath
as she nods, on one elbow, to the squeals of bedroom doors.
She spoons coffee, keeping count aloud, and pours milk for kids' pancakes
as instructed, with a measuring cup. The perfect scale of her eyes
she wastes on homespun sanitizers— $\frac{2}{3}$ vinegar $\frac{1}{3}$ peroxide—
for sinks, counters, *her* Eager Beaver, *his* dumbbells.
She jogs through the day in bark slippers, elm
embossed with perfectly knifed hearts.
What's she doing here, my mother, in a toddler cot,
apron pockets lined with shriveled fruit worms, jars of preserve
ticking under the mattress like hand grenades.

My Son, at Six

Rehearsal:

Let's play dying, Fabe whispers
as he sidles spy-like along the walls,
flame of a body hiding in plain sight.
Take the long shortcut, Mom. There, go go—

Definition:

He's a schmuck, he chimes
from the booster seat, apropos of nothing.
“What do you mean?”
He's got no wife and no candy.

Slide:

But how fast do I go on this slide?
“Fast.”
Like how fast—race car fast?
“Faster.”
What if my soul slides out?
Can I still love Alex?

The Immigrant Wife's Song

The wormier, the healthier.

Give me the fattest worms—
gluttonous and wriggly,
inching through the apple's flesh
away from skin, away from core,
beyond need, beyond hunger.

Let them covet each other's walls,
forge new intrigues, redraw labyrinths.
If they tunnel long enough,
they'll indulge in calligraphy.

Spoil me the apple, love—
worms feast on the sweetest flesh.

Beets

for Michael

They become sweeter with age. Bolder too,
surprisingly firm when I broil them, whole,
in early winter, the reds carnal as always,
but less likely to bleed at the slightest incision.
When I release the tinfoil, the beet's hot tongue
pries open my mouth. I take it all: laced earthsmoke,
vapors rising straight from heart rot.
When I transfer the steamy root to your plate
and offer to slather it with butter, honey, goat cheese,
you decline, the very sight of them unpalatable.
I defend the loneliness of its sagging folds: pure heartthrob.
I try Aphrodite-the-beetroot-goddess, her lava lips,
I try the Oracle at Delphi who claimed beets' worth in silver,
try beet-powered warriors, God Kvasir's mead of inspiration,
Rasputin's protégé (*you could see it in his eyes*),
then, at a loss, I riff, poorly, on the Beats.
With fingertips and knife, you peel off its singed
slip and carve the hard flesh into robust chunks.
Eat eat, don't mind me, I love seeing you eat.
You feed me your own whiskered heart,
then mine, stained fingers one with the beet.

Turning the Bones

Ambohimiray, Madagascar

He has been hoarding beef, pork, rice, and local brews,
already paid the brass band with this fall's early crop of beans
and loaned himself a new dark suit for the famadihana.
Bright dresses flank him like wings as he prays
that the seven-year-old ink has not let Hasina's name seep into the ground.
He ascends from the musty crypt, her shrouded body stretched
above his head. Others follow, disinterred bundles heaved up
onto woven straw mats, names coursing the cheering crowd.
Perfumed and swathed in new damask, bodies are invited to dance.
In this hummock of tall grass, in the eye of the Indian Ocean,
the living and the dead reclaim themselves, flowery skirts
flapping against the bouquet of bones, bones reshuffling
as they warm to the tunes of trumpets and clarinets.
At dusk, when the resting, immaculate and sated,
repossess their granite tombs, he hoists Hasina home
through clumps of singed clouds, on borrowed moon,
for one more dance. On the ledge of the mud house,
the daughters nurse the swaddled small of her head while he thumbs
sternum and pelvis girdle back into place, fingers sounding
the keys of her clavicles. How they laughed when they danced.
*We're not what we used to be on the floor, Hasina,
but we're here, waltzing the missing, learning to be missed.*

Ana to Manole

A retelling of a Romanian folk ballad, for Andrei Codrescu,
in response to his "Master Manole to Anna"

Manole Manole, you've made me a nest
festively, without haste, stacked river slabs
boyishly, in jest, called it a game
as you chanted my plain name.
Your corset mars my flesh,
your corset cuts my breath,
you are so loud loving me
with your art, reliving the night
with hot lips you wedded me,
mouthful by mouthful, finger to toe.
There, in your father's barn,
you promised no dream,
no masonry would keep us apart.
Swaddled in oilskin, rolled in milk & dung,
we burned like cornsilk all night,
the incense of our flesh mocking
the church's tongue. I stayed quiet with you,
so quiet all but my blood disappeared.
So how could you say, as your palms
make love to stone the way they'd made love
to my thighs, *This, my Ana, is quite the same—
stone my flesh, mortar the binding vow.*
*Let me take you at once, all of you,
wife & swell of a son, take you
where we can love without fear, without harm.*
You listened to the song, whose song I do not know,
then roped me to the scaffold, erect as a splint,
taut as the consonant that breaks my name in half.
How you made me into easy rhyme.
You say *sanctified*, I say spooned lies as last rites.
You say it was love that divined, love that dreamed up
the voice & its command, eagerness to love & dread of work

threatening to stump the love. You call this offering
of flesh—*my* flesh—*your* sacrifice.
You raised the wall till it cinctured me whole,
silt shored against carcass, and for the glory of what?
A toe ring in the gods' trinket box, this masterpiece
you then bragged you could outshine.
I say it was the jaded gods having fun.
To think you could win their grace
with gilded turrets, dream yourself
a welder of shadows.
You fashioned the voice out of fear
you'll stay a mason, master bricklayer
instead of Creator, so here we are:
you, water fountain fed pennies by tourists
too sated to invent their own myths,
I, cacophonous wailing.



What good now to say I had known all along.
I'd caught the voice, its command, in the net of dusk,
and when, priming myself for the journey,
I rubbed chamomile & crushed mint on my thighs,
your fingers were ghosting mine.
What good now to say that I saw the end of day
before my palms sieved the flour,
before the udder slipped my fingers,
before braving teathed brambles, storms & floods.
I knew what would come of me and I came knowingly.
A basketful of breads, a temple all yours, two hearts
to a cradle of bricks.



I fed you berries cold with dew, hauled you back
from the pub, mended your face, lied to village folk
about my torn shoulder, the raw eyes. Each time,
I forgave you, blamed your wretched art, your self-doubt.
Each time, you entered me in search of forgiveness
and, crumbled inside, you'd call me Ana-my-altar.
For weeks I'd believe myself one.
Hoodwinked like the fly so taken with the gift of random crumb
she keeps unspooling the cocoon of saliva while the gifter
takes her again & again from behind.



Dear Manole,
The compost of your wings feeds
my dreams, but do not be fooled:
this darkening in my womb
—his soul—will not
protect this bloody wall.
Still, I am your good wife.
As I rock your stone child,
the monastery sways.
On hot summer nights, lovers
knife their names on my breasts,
monks press their lonely bodies
against mine. I cool them off,
one by one. Cuffed to my song,
how easily they too abandon all secrets,
how easily they forgo holiness
for a grain of flesh.



I entered eternity with a mouthful of grime,
a fool myself, born of mothers who pickled
grief in barrels then sealed the cellar doors.
When the tower of dowry pillows kissed the ceiling,
they kicked me out, rope in my hand,
village quince tree ready to wed me.
I entered eternity as dark maid, through an eye socket
smooth as a looking glass. Nobody
welcomed me below except my barren sister,
Ereshkigal, whose seedless womb twists, throbs.
She laughed at my idiocy and hurled me back
to rest upon the joke you made of me.
It's her cackle you hear at night.



Take me in, mute sisters, mute sunbright.
I'll sweep the closets, break the glass slipper,
tie our umbilical cords into a magic broom.
Whisk my blood, swallow me. I am yours.

Romanian Touch

for my parents

Even after they've stopped making love,
they spend hours saddled across each other's backs,
squeezing blackheads or peeling off flaking strips
of summer burns, taking pleasure in slow desquamations:
skin-deep, the burdens and affections of their marriage.

Fig Wasps: Trafficking

To ready the escape, as the dungeon starts swarming
with courters, she passes the mixing bowls on to the next girl,
keeps the spatula for what still needs stirring.

He crawls forward—glabrous and myopic,
like the rest, but with a touch of delegated sweetness
so human, her torso quivers.

She can afford no loathing. Feeds him hope, shows him
how to dig and navigate the caprifig, scrape some pollen.
As he tunnels the syconium and chews exit holes, she follows.

He weeps at the sight of wings fellating air.
How he mistook her for a mother, some mother's daughter.
And she was, for a while, was she not.
Mother, daughter, sister, domme on to the next job.

If she feels generous, she'll translate his inert body
to the strangler whose aroma pulls her from miles afar.
Here, she'll dump her seeds, watch his body turn amber stud,
watch the new girls grow wings.

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IV

We get our voices from the voices of others.

—Colum McCann

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Radioactive Wolves: A Retelling

I. CHERNOBYL ZONE, 1986

Do not believe me. I was not
there. I was pulping rotten quinces.
I did not know. Just as those who were there
did not know.



It was a sacred lie,
the lightning rod. The radioactive shock
forgotten before it happened.



Moscow hospital, May 1986

Sit Sit. No touching in here.

My husband buckles against the iron frame.
Someone comes in to measure the heat.

Because he clocked in three minutes too soon.
Because we fooled till dawn, then stayed awake
to let each other's salts dry and dress us for the day.

*There are sicknesses that can't be cured.
You have to sit and watch them.*

This one blooms like black petunia
in a commercial garden: mouth-size tarns
swell to fullness without a hint of sun.
In his mouth, on cheeks, tongue,

they bloom. Black petunias, black
to smell, black to touch. At night,
petals hover below the bulb
like miniature kites, speckled with blood.
They are of flesh, these flowers
that channel poison away from the heart.
I cool him off with a bouquet of parsley
dipped in moonshine.
For a night you can't tell
the angels have been choking
on celestial gas.



Tonight his body's a landfill—

Tonight I undo the life in my belly
for the guards, so I may enter
for the guards I invent
two children, in fulfillment
of the regime's requirement.

I kiss him through the gauze
like a late bride, eager & slightly rueful.

My man, a growling landfill.

How I gather him in my arms.



Chornobylnik = mugwort

Chernobyl, the house of mugwort.
Once or twice pinnately lobed, lanceted,
gloss doubled by a cottony down,
it shadows streambanks and country ditches,
dishevels front steps.
In one dream, my right foot misses it;
the fossilized berry
explodes seconds before my sole means to crush it.
At one time, pilgrims rubbed sandals
with mugwort oil to make the journey light,
held the weed in esteem: it added a kick to beer,
warded off the mischief of mushrooms.
Mixed with honey, it takes away blackness after falls.
Rolled into pellets, ignited directly on the skin, it flames, uncontainable.
Its seed was said to cure *quotidians*,
soothe hysterics, de-obstruct the spleen.
Boiled in lard, it quelled swellings of tonsils and quinsy.
Here now, in mugwort land, it has lost all powers but the abortive.
Women wait till roots are dry and brittle, snapping when bent.
One after another, they let themselves let go
for there's no way to tell if what they carry resembles a human.



Exclusion Zone

The soldiers who've measured the hole
nod. She milks her cow, pours the milk
onto the ground, in the front yard.
She wipes each warm egg,
places it in the wicker basket,
buries the basket in the hole tall
as a standing man.
Good woman, hum the soldiers with eyes
the color of moonshine, good woman.



Leaves glisten up.
Sha-sha cherries, fat peppers,
hot tomatoes, so tight in their skin,
like in Western magazines.

We curse and keep eating.



My neighbor gifted all her chickens,
watched us twist their soft necks.
Nothing could make her happy now
but the unhappiness of others.



Soldiers' chorus

The cat ate the flowers.
The cat ate the geraniums.
I opened the door, that's all I did
and there was this cat,
the cat that ate the geraniums.



With one hand I bartered
two liters of vodka for a copper pot;
with the other I buried sewing machines
and harmonicas in the communal plot.
“Let's get to know each other,”
I whispered in the ear of the woman
who pounded the earth with me, the woman
who danced me till dawn.
“What for? You're a Chernobylite now.
I'd be scared to birth your children.”



My mouth kept track of each new knot,
left eye's drift toward the ear, dissolution of lips.
Blood dripped into the milk pail.
When doctors and nurses stopped touching,
I fed his tubes vodka.
What did I care for what I couldn't understand.



Liquidators' chorus

We hosed off houses, mulched them,
laid films of polymer to keep light-moving bottom soil
from moving. We buried earth in the earth.
We packed the schoolyard into a cement bunker.
When I left, apples were melting the snow.
We didn't get a chance to bury all of them.
Here lies bravery.
Here lies denial,
our time capsule.



Townhall briefing

Covalent bond: the stable balance of attractive and repulsive forces between atoms when they share electrons.

Becquerel: radioactivity equal to one disintegration per unit.

Curie: radionuclide with a vast number of disintegrations per unit.

Roentgen: amount of electromagnetic radiation that produces a certain amount of electric charge in one cubic centimeter of dry air; replaced by rad, replaced by gray.

Rem: measure of the amount of energy absorbed per unit mass of tissue; replaced by Sievert.



Found file

Caesium 137: binds to muscle, to heart

Radium 226: non-cancer reduction in lifespan

Krypton 85: soluble in fats, builds up in breast tissue, lymphs

Uranium 238 and Plutonium 239: bind to DNA, lead to anomalous genotoxicity

Gamma decay, nuclide recoil, programmed cell suicide, respirable sub-micron particulates translocated from the lung.

Cancer, leukemia, heart disease, premature aging, congenital trans-generational disease, germline mutations, significant sex ratio changes in human and bird population.



Evergreens turned red, then orange.

A woman goes to work her plot next to the atomic station.

She walks through grass covered in dew.

Days later, her legs are cheese graters, holes up to her knees.

You need to touch them if you're writing this book.



She borrows words

When I burned your clothes,
petals of skin escaped into the gooseberry bush.

I tie the bush each winter to suspend the burden of snow.
I know I shouldn't.
I know the wild has its own method in madness,
persistence so unlike my own.
See these indigenous wolves, radiant
among gargantuan horsetail.

I tie the bush each winter to suspend.

I can't tell what's come of your stray skin,
the weeping it did.
I pushed my thoughts onto the ash heap,
what to make of it—sweep, snort,
leave to the rain.

The kitchen sink stays stuffed
with red potatoes swaddled in mud.
Plenty for breakfast, ever.

But the tendrils of red ink,
I don't know how to prune them
or what language to use them for,
how to eat them without you.

I did find a well that swallows pebbles without sound.
What now? You never followed through
with the instructions.

In their words: Arkady, Ivan, Zoya, Larisa, Yevgeny, Sergei

If we'd beaten Chernobyl,
people would talk about it, write about it more.

They only filmed the heroics.
Four hundred miners blast the tunnel
to pour nitrogen and freeze the earthen pillow,
save the groundwater.

The producer props a violin against the condemned door,
calls it "Chernobyl Symphony."

A factory of dreams.
A cliché to mark the tragedy. A greeting. A scarecrow.

No one told the stork.

A cow wrapped in cellophane.
An old woman next to her, also wrapped in cellophane.

I have two bags of salt, plenty of logs. We need to buy another horse.

Teacher was right: don't destroy the anthill; it's a good form of alien life.

Chernobyl happened so that philosophers could be made; for now, let's
just say we're walking ashes (animals) and talking earth (people).

The radiation specialist left his shift with a double gift: one case of vodka
to put a village on the evacuation list, one case of vodka to cross a neigh-
boring village off it (this collective farm chairman had been promised
an apartment in Minsk).

The driver couldn't understand why birds were crashing into his window. Blind or suicidal, who knows.

The only time I don't cry is at night. You can't cry about the dead at night.

Tell everyone about my daughter. Write it down. At four, she sings, dances, knows poetry by heart. She puts her dolls on IV. She was born a little sack—*complex aplasia*, in medical terms, *suit of armor*, doctor's translation for us. Write: every half hour we squeeze out her urine manually, through an artificial opening.



The liquidators

At her new school, in Moscow, my daughter glows. The pioneer salute sets her body ablaze. The other children laugh, reach forward to touch her. They've dubbed her Shiny. Teachers step back, cross themselves.

I dumped down the chute all the clothes except the cap, to remind my son of the work I'd done, make him proud. Two years later, tumor spongy as morels starts eating his brain.

The village reeked of iodine and sourness. The bitch went down first, quick. No bullets left for the last pup. Five grown men and not a single bullet. We pushed him in, he came back.



Arkady

Maybe that's enough? I know you're curious, people who weren't there are always curious.



Radioactive wolves

I almost returned though I didn't know you.
I stood at the edge of the clearing,
the smell of wolf cheese packed tight
under the skin. I could cross it back, I thought,
use my own footprints to erase the difference:
spring where winter should grow soft,
the logic of fear in place of graphed sentences.



If strong enough to stay, she can always leave.
Use the door she cannot enter
to sleep on, down by the river
packed with century-old catfish.



All books disappeared, all important ones,
on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, on X-rays.
The medical bulletins too, vanished.
Those who could took potassium iodine.
For that, you really needed to know someone.

A sign we could follow, live by:
as long as there were sparrows and pigeons in town
we too could nest there.



The soldier

When I returned from Afghanistan,
I knew I'd saved my life.
Here, the opposite:
home kills you without knowing—
war with enemies invisible.



They flung us here, like sand onto the reactor.



Returnee

The orchard bends with fever:
two apples to a stem, blazing,
pears double-skinned, quinces
the sizes of eyases.

The broth I slop across the yard gives me a reason.

As long as I can name the new greens,
coax out of nuclides
a language for the wolves playing
with my kids, I stay.

II. *GHIORA VILLAGE, ROMANIA, 1980s*

All of us who know something about death
know it's simpler than mountains:
it stands high and deep,
as cemeteries do,
for that's how we build
a home here: chew the grass for
trace of bone, wait for spring
when the hill *sângeră ca un hemophilic*,
lonely for human flesh.
This is how we seed:
lower the first stillborn
on skeins of virgin hair
dyed in beetroot.
Then we wait for crocuses.
If they come bloodless,
we declare the sward blessed,
raise the altar. Only then
do we fell trees for roofs
and dry bricks for ovens.

©

Journalist's first impression

The emaciated bodies, yes,
but worse, the lack of crying,
the stench of silence heavier
than the stench of feces.
Little to which you can't
respond with silence.

©

Stana

This kind of grace:

I was that girl, hard as mother-of-pearl,
concave, smoothed by rough hands.

Each night, the mothers realigned my shoulder blades to scoop my breasts
from their asymmetric caves. Said they heard my belly boil with angry
colors.

I pulled the small kids to my chest. I could make myself echo the ocean
floor.

I kneaded mud in the front yard to build robots for the other children.
I kneaded mud in the back yard to build tunnels for the other children.
When we grew too fond of the chicken gristle,
I raked the waves.



Easter

Potato peals, carrot scolices, parsley crosses afloat in tin bowls.
The beans soaked in bay leaves and rinsed in river water need no fire.

Ready to eat. Nobody rises.



The painter

Who picked the shade
Who entered the all-purpose store
Who said five liters of paint, make it the whitest
you have, snow white, penicillin white—
then coated each cross twice on the local newspaper,
blotting out petty thefts and matrimonials.

One hundred and thirty seven
in two years, pearl white
that sealed in silence each nervure,
in plain sight.

Who rode the bales at dawn,
tilted the hat, *Neața, neața,*
Să-ți fie de bine, or crooned drunkardly
on the way home, *Pasăre galbenă-n pene,*
Du-te-n lume de ai vreme,
crossing himself thrice.

One hundred and thirty seven
dropped into the earth, some half-alive.

He kept a running tab at the pub.
Five crosses to a bottle of vodka.
Director said might as well
keep digging: one for tomorrow
one for the next.



They had no clean touch, fear, milk, shoes, language, bread, underwear.
They had boils, cockroaches, fever, fleas, dreams, water, souls.



Soon I will climb to the bridge
with no coin in my mouth.
“The toll,” the toothless angel
will scream, and I will hand him
my teeth. “The toll,”
the toothless angel will scream again,
then make me wait
perched above the Danube
for a jay reckless enough
to toss coins in the air.



The good mothers

Mama Dana gave me the flanks of many horses
I could not ride, horses on the way to the abattoir.
They jerked when I rubbed my cheek against their muscles.
Because you smell of urine, she said with a large smile.

Mama Tara hacked away at the fall in her garden.
She kept all kind of potatoes there: small, big, medium, half-rotten.

Mama Ana made preserves with a fury:
we will carry this year into the next
like the fat of camel humps.
She sent us sidling along fences to pick fallen prunes.
I learned to steal, to bruise.

Mama Lulu with honey shanks
could cradle all of us, but I was the special one.
When she nestled me on the throne of her thighs,
I rose and fell on her shudders.

Her heaving gave out so much warmth
I figured that's what it must feel like
to sink into God's lap.

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V



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Ghost Mothers: Un-naming

I

Letter to Ocean, NJ:

Dear M, how do you murder a dead mother?

With her own hair, with locks
she saved between springboard and mattress,
whorls she uprooted, incinerated,
powdered for milk, hair she hawked as Christmas tinsel.
You buy the bed, you buy the scalp, the porringer.
You borrow the tongue.

II

How she must have taken time to desire beauty in a name,
call her daughter Marchella, *the one dedicated to Mars*,
namesake of the aristocrat who converted her abode into a haven
for women, the first convent in Rome—
though who knows how cadences settled in her ears,
what they cleaved as she wavered on the ictus.
In the newspaper headshot, Marchella's hair-ties,
bright as jelly beans, mismatch the abyss of her eyes.
This woman, Carlotta, who could not have
wanted to be a monster like her own mother
whose cruelty she had barely survived, this woman,
what could she *not* see when she twined her daughter's
eighteen pound body to the plastic bed, fed her sixty Claritin,
thirty Benadryl, one kernel of corn. Spit of fire,
survivor toughened by hospital needles and project squalor?
To me, at the time, it didn't look bad, Carlotta will say later,
not bad considering.

Today, another woman has been sentenced.
Ninety years for kicking her two-year-old in the stomach,
fracturing ribs, gluing mangled hands to walls.

She was wild, Carlotta adds, *wild*. She'd wake up
in the thick of night wanting food. *Wild*.

III

I stared more than once, emptied and barely human,
at the flesh clinging to my breast, and though I knew
because I'd told myself that it would pass, and though
I knew, and knew despite the riots in my body,
it made no difference, almost.

At one breast, my son; at the other, the woman
who'd dropped her infant on the highway.
Hard work to return semi-whole among humans,
an almost accident.

Doina Speaks: How I Escaped

I entered my own room a robber,
high on secrecy, ready for plunder.
Lights off, I yanked out the insides of pillows
fattened by someone who didn't know me,
someone who must have loved without knowing.

I waited like this each night, on freshly plucked feathers.
He slipped into the room on a sling of light.
He mounted the clouds, rode in a hurry.
He left crying. In the next room,
mother sang herself a lullaby.

—Oh look at this mess of skin and feathers,
mother said each morning as she swept, humming,
the voice off its nest. She leaned over, wiped my cheeks
with a dust rag, whispered lovingly, *Thank you, puiul mamii*,
then, at the kitchen sink, she scrubbed clean his Sunday shoes.
To do well by the priest.

That night, he corseted me in cheap nylon.
When my torso pivoted on his finger,
when I clasped his finger, a finger puppet,
I knew I could be there forever,
planting my fists inside pillows.

I sharpened into blade.
She sang. I cut.

The Undertaker's Report

You fall head first.
Feet first is a jump.

The girl who climbed the water tower
to watch grapevine coils glint from above
the girl whose skin ached as the magpie
pecked gooseberries at the foot of the tower
the girl who climbed up to spot the goat
—not her own—gone missing
the girl who thought the dew tragic
the girl who climbed the water tower
to reach the world beyond the woods
the girl who climbed must have
sneezed in the sun might have changed
her mind about the dew in flight
The girl who climbed arrived
streaming with ribbons

Heel to hip a bramble of bones



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Clawed Soleares with Strong Sun and Suitcases

Spain, Romania, America

1

Is it strong enough, nourishing?

Sun-licked areolae hiss like hot coils. As they kiss the Atlantic our eyes catch the sizzle, so we drop our beach chairs down one notch to grill like oiled sardines in salts of our own making. Tourists hum trimmed versions of soleares while kids chase the beach cart that peddles churros and chips.

I've gathered facts, but can't read the sleekness of this blue, the sun that dunks only after ten p.m., the marshy mouth of Guadalquivir. The roots of Barbadillo's oak barrels riddle the sky.

Young men from Senegal haul panels pinned with bracelets, not pushing, alert. Heat scissors their loud shirts and when they halt at either rim of the blond beach they wipe their shoes with white handkerchiefs.

2

Strong enough, nourishing? my mother asks on the phone about the light of Cadiz, to which a life borrowed, perhaps stolen, has brought me, and though I know she also means her grandson, I stay focused on *this* sun, its clasp on Costa de la Luz, the bluntness with which it gnaws at the fat of lust, the way it empties my head of all but the image of bums who burn like candles against church walls. They've joined the silence of the gargoyles that roof them, though throats distend not to steer out but to swill whatever flotsamed waters sluice their way.
I wish fewer of them were Romanians
—a thought selfish as the day is clear,

sprung from guilt, not shame. Lessons in pseudo-empathy
I dispense to my six-year-old do not absolve
the desertions—homeland, language, self.
As the allowance my son has negotiated for almsgiving
drops into caps and cups fronting a parliament of empties,
some acquired jargon tips my tongue—*nice job enabling*
—but lips know to stay shut. No easy burden to suffer
fantasies of change, to carry them through waking,
through those first hours of self-loathing, *Lucky bastards*,
my father calls them, *optimists who've given up*.
Look at us: suckers, sitting targets, fabulating.

My grandmother, who shares her one-room flat with her son,
administers him a shot of țuica every two hours;
each day she wakes to a large task: keep life bearable
for both of them. He kneads her toes, kisses
her ankles, tells her she's more beautiful than Gioconda,
sweeter than Indira Ghandi. He misses his grown kids
but needs cues for their names. As fix-time approaches,
half caged lion, half mangled bird, he circles the table
in a trance, waiting for the click that unlocks the alcove
lined with cheap alcohol. The key shares the silver chain
with archangel Michael; the two sling and sweat
between grandmother's breasts, inseparable.
The last to wean, this son, first to return,
more a child now than ever, and still without a suitcase.

3

When she steals away from her job as housemaid
to visit, my mother cooks, gardens, scrubs every pot in sight,
afraid of what resting might do, afraid of her own thoughts,
ghostlings of the past. Before I left for Cadiz, she dragged outside

suitcases that'd been amassing mold and, like a practiced cosmetologist, applied masks of baking powder, lemon, salt. After she toothbrushed each section, she rinsed with apple vinegar, then left the rest to the sun. *Not worth it, Mom, they're so cheap here, I can get new ones. Suitcases are suitcases,* she says. *They let you know when they're done.* By afternoon, winged with fruit flies, they're heading for the station.

4

The smells of a suitcase nurture the soul.
When asked if he is writing a poem about Andalucía,
my husband replies *not yet, perhaps in a few years.*
The café on the crag facing the Gulf of Cadiz returns him
to the busted suitcase he left leaning against a trash bunker,
two hundred dollars in its lining, possibly no one's finding.
That was two summers ago, in a Romanian town wretchedly
beautiful, bears nosing lampposts and ancient couples
playing chess on benches painted in national colors.
I assured him our homeless were all clever that way
—slashing the insides open, ready for miracles.
Besides, this may be a more honest way to give,
not from our palms, but from things forgotten.

5

He kisses the scar on my palm,
doesn't ask how I've earned it.

Our son shoals his browned body
toward pools that gape at tide hour,

vulnerable. He harvests starfish for Spanish girls
who smile and gesture their preference for ice cream.

On the phone, my mother laughs, says he's the colt in her dreams
and he'll grow up different—different from the men in her life, I take it,

but do not press. The night she left us to allow father a chance to forgive,
I pretended to sleep, eiderdown overhead, eiderdown between teeth.

How kind of the night, to let me trick it that way: a mouthful of down,
breast down of ducks who, threatened, take wing at a single spring.

6

I tap the entrails of the suitcase
to release the smells: re-soled shoes, blood sausage, hemp, nutria fur,

suitcase of a mother who lives in fear of falling and, embrittled by fear,
falls again. Mother, when you asked if I had lips strong enough
to hold the needle, I didn't know you'd sew rocks in the hems of my
pleated skirts.

*Guard the half that cannot talk, the muted mouth.
When dirt cakes your ankles, scrape off, do not wash.*

The satin lining once swelling with secrets resembles a small accordion.
In time the pleats will retrieve fully, like pregnancy stretch marks,
though the suitcase itself, through a grace not its own, will keep singing.

I know so little about your arrival: you stepped down onto a platform
studded with syringes and dried sheets of flattened swallows,
then what? Was the sun strong enough, nourishing?

Strong in the night, your departure,
the apartment in quarantine for months to clear out the odor of sin.

The Gorge of Ronda

is undeniably beautiful,
an instantiation of the dramatic.

The tempranillo we sip in the restaurant
rigged to the cliff wall like an airy cage
rouges the insides of our mouths,
swabs our breath with herbs and leather.
Cured legs of black pigs festoon the terrace.

The pregnant mare of Pileta
plaits her way back through the tapered strait
to the cave wall that would hold her pregnant
for this and a few more cybercenturies.
Hurry back, hurry. With each trot,

the prefix-lithic thickets of red and black spondees
that thumb-traced time on the porous whole of you
thicken. Hurry back—
the globe of you, the dosimeter ticking.
We step into an ordinary moment and never come back again

though the gorge is navigable and the cave
just a burning away.

Elegy for Rick(ster)

My gray zone
is starting to include the waters

though today the Caribbean is milkier,
its black anemones frothing with static grace.

When Rick emerges from ten foot swirls
just beyond protective buoys, his fins

splayed in mid-somersaults,
I cannot tell he's been readying himself,

harvesting colors, both common and rare,
naming them once for himself and once for us all,

his back slick as usual, but shimmering now
with the nacreal smiles of black-lipped oysters.

I want to call out, *What does it feel like there,
does fear have a different color outside normal light—*

but the lifeguards are running up and down
for someone's disappeared the oxygen tanks,

my boy's crying over the routine panic of sand crabs,
and Rick is busy swallowing sunrays and giving praise

to Russians for all their words for light blues and dark blues—
vasilkovyyj, goluboj, seenij. Nothing for plain blue,

he yells, then butterflies the waves, laughing.

La Bella Principessa

—chalk-and-ink portrait on vellum sheet

Profile *subtle to an inexpressible degree*—
brush of fluster or rouge offsets
the eye's amber glint, *the upper lip*
pressed seductively against the lower lip.

Bianca Sforza, Duke of Milan's
illegitimate daughter
on the cusp of womanhood
chestnut hair corseted in fancy caul,
married at thirteen.

Deconstitutes to reconstitute, the forensic translator:
red bodice spread bare into a medley of pixels
scoured for signs of Leonardo's fingerprints,
the eye, doffed from multispectral camera to screen,
cleaved, plumbed, reentered, pigment and pentimenti ravaged
in search of what—the thought curbed mid-color, four months
before her death from *an abdominal illness*, probably eccyesis,
the exact hue of her denial?

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Memoir

Romanian dictators Elena and Nicolae Ceaușescu were executed on December 25, 1989, after twenty-five years of ruthless rule.

The story of a people is the story of their denials.
If I bulleted that story now, you wouldn't know how to wipe
the sweat off your palms. Your poor palms, afraid to set down the remote.
You must've seen, at least once, the news clip of the two dictators
who deny, till bullets mute them, the genocide against their own people,
and must've seen, more than once, the PBS special on infamous wards
festering, cribs stacked with cords of bones, rigged with spectral smiles.
Who would've guessed the orchestrators of terror
would end up in a makeshift barrack, their shriveled torsos
so infuriatingly small and rigid as dolls' but for arms flapping
hysterically. Twelve million of us, for twenty-five years.
They watched us crawl in unison toward the palm
that held two crumbs: one for the informer, one for the informed-on.
You may have understood the story of the firing squad,
how, fearing clones, we measured and re-measured the corpses,
shot and reshot them. We each craved a bit of dried blood,
a frayed cuticle, an eyebrow stump, a finger
on the trigger, so we replayed the execution all through Christmas,
kissed our informers, broke bread with strangers,
stopped stoning strays, begged Gypsies for forgiveness.
We loved as only people who cannot get enough of death love,
we loved unconditionally for one long day that Christmas of 1989.

Still Life with Placenta and Cherry Tree

Her spade scores and slashes the soil, grubs,
shakes its loaded tongue; then with firm hands
she kneads placenta and dirt
till they yield to the oven of her palm.

Knowing nothing about the needs of trees,
she probes the crater with the back of her palm
as she's seen new widows do, waiting for clues.

None comes, so she releases the disrobed rootball
into doughy mud, finger-combing the vines,
pressing their mouths hard into the ground.

She can already see the budding eyes
though it's late summer, and this is wetland,
and she'll be long gone before the first blush,
once the early honeybees descend upon it.

Refugee Song

Sixteen lost at sea survived
at her breast.

When her mind tangled in sea grass,
lips kept the milk flowing:
dying women, men, ghostling of newborn
afloat among damselfish.

The shore pushed them back
toward lands poisoned by war.
The milk ran out of bodies.



Father, all you ever did
was gorge on my flesh.

My belly grew eyes
but the pelvis shrank,

thinned by vinegar
and grazing nails.

What am I to call
your hunger,

the teeth marks
clotted with milk,

the shore I barely reached?

Untitled

for all lost breasts

Here's where they come to rest,
when scalpeled, untwinned, displaced—

sea-green and caramel knolls that gauze
Ovidian wormwood backshores.

Musa paradisiaca, orchid and berry kin
round and soft as breasts returning home.

Orphan Song

Quince in socks, quince in bra cups,
quince shoots propped with fire logs.
I've been quincing again, Lord,
laying shingles at night, resetting the stars,
shifting weight at dawn—good foot to goat hoof—
to rescue whatever grace is left in my bones.
Something so small should have never ripped my wrists.
I have juggled meteors, awed crowds with my quince tricks.

Look at my roof: artisan rug lit with quince seeds.
Quince in the mouth of the dead:
father, brother, sisters, quince in the mouth foaming in the ditch,
mother's mouth, village darling
who emptied herself on everyone's cellar
like a sack of spoilt wheat.
The fragrance, all she's passed on,
that and the rattling of dried seeds,
though I was the quince of her eyes,
the only one she spared—
dropped at the market in a basket of half-ripe quince.

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Still Life with Apples, Pajamas, and Miners

APPLES

The dictators have helicoptered off the palace tarmac. They hover round and round, incredulous and, for once, scared ghostless despite their horaltic pose. No one knows whose fingers command the bullets, who's carting away bodies through *awake Romanians, from your deep sleep, through do not interrupt the dying with crying, through nobody's killing but they're all dead*. When the raptors land, fuelless and clueless, they look like scuffed rag dolls. *I am your mother, I've raised you all like my own*, the mastermind of the menstrual police croaks to her capturers, a platoon of teen "decreței" (offshoots of decree 770) fresh out of high school. *Father of the people* hammers the air with his fist in an incontinent babble.

My communist body has culled more torpors than desires. Still, I am seventeen and ready. I know how to duck, lie, bribe, starve, mimic, straighten heating coils, probe the obscene eyes of electrical sockets.

Only one train will take me down to the capital's fires: *lazy bullet*, the communist fastest. Father and I will ride the bullet. With no mother. Without mother's knowledge.

She cores apples, her eyes drained by fear. She demands more apples and more apples, from this sack and that sack, wrinkled apples, rusty apples, mistress apples. She empties the small buckets into the sink. To make it less suspect, father wears pajamas. In between descents into the building's cellar, he stocks the lining of our coats with film. I will carry color for holed victory flags and carnations and he'll carry black & white for faces, tanks, gunsmoke. No mixing, he says. No color wasted on death. Father gives me an old Leica he'd gotten on the black market, reminds me it ate up grandfather's savings.

The kitchen is poppy pellets and flour. The woman elbow-deep in dough says history's made in the kitchen. She won't let us go down. She is my mother. The velocity of the oven startles her. The neighbors' whispers vacated the gas lines. Someone needs to guard the fire, she says, make sure it's not a trick, like that December when, knowing we had the stoves on overnight to thaw our bodies, they turned the gas off, then back on. History's made in the kitchen, she repeats. Twenty-five years she's built meals out of nothing, pickled everything: mushrooms, legumes, watermelons, plums, tongues, grape leaves.

The broadcast shifts from captured despots to the streets: secret service sharpshooters masquerading as people's army fire from rooftops, the dying and the dead on pavement and flatbed trucks, the national library burning.

Father takes too long with the cellar. We can't afford to miss the bullet, miss the chance to undo our endemic cowardice. I pace the flat, one eye on the clock, one on the live broadcast. Mother has scraped the newspaper ink off the smoked sausage she's been saving for Christmas. I know I can't ask what she bartered for it. The perfectly sliced wheels smell like incinerated fir, but sweeter. Euphoria's replaced all hungers and father's taking too long with the cellar.

He and I understand history. He has documented my Chernobyl lips: from afar, my mouth has morphed into the head of a speckled carnation; perhaps I'm blowing bubble gum. Close-ups let you guess pus tinted with blood. This, we'll live and document together, father and I.

From the bucket's bottom, mother scoops one last apple. As she hands it over, I know the fragrance. The skin's been scored with letters, perhaps words, indecipherable.

PAJAMAS

A neighbor calls in. She could smell mother's yeast, so she's brought two eggs and a cup of sugar. No trading. Let this be for the soul of her late son, Stefan, who wanted revolution all his life. Also, she's a tad worried. Only minutes ago my father stepped onto the bus to the train station. My mother must be worried, no? Pajamas were sticking out of his suit pants and jacket, and he wore socks and slippers, mud-caked already. He might catch pneumonia, no? Is comrade photographer all right? This revolution stuff messes up people badly.

Mother nods and shuts the door. She plants a knife in my hand, stabs: *Core peel cut just keep doing it.* The sink spews apples: wrinkled apples, smooth apples, half-rotten apples father lugged up from the building cellar, bucket after bucket. They roll under table, down the narrow hall, among shoes. *Do not pick them up. Just core.* Why do some rot and some wrinkle? I pretend to care, not ready for father's betrayal. *God knows. They go like people. Just core the rot if they're rotten. Push the knife hard with the wrinkled. You'll nick your fingers with the wrinkled.*

We core peel cut till the firing squad assumes position. We watch the despots wither—two frightened creatures crumbling against the wall, half the size when authenticated. Cored out so easily. On the capital's street, an army of children keeps firing at parents and brothers, too frightened to stop. No one knows whose fingers command the bullets, who's carting away bodies.

GOLANIADA: THE SECOND REVOLUTION, APRIL–JUNE, 1990

Spared the massacre, spared the chance to die in what was most likely a coup, six months later, the day I finish high school, I flee down to the capital to join *Golaniada* (“Hooligan/Thug Land”) in the university square. Nobody’s being prosecuted for the dead thousands and the orchestrators, now members of the Salvation Front, won’t stop feeding us lies. I tell my parents I’m off to the mountains for my weekend-long prom, to the communist chalet one of the Securitate parents had secured for us long before the revolution. Yes, the deal is still standing.

The outside walls of the university, charcoaled with candle, resemble the painted insides of the medieval monasteries that grace my Moldavian province. One homeless Roma boy, Duca, scrapes off wax and reuses it to make and sell candles. Altar boy of the streets who’s kept the mourning lights going since December 21, when the first civilians were shot in the square, Duca’s trade has returned him more kicks and blows in the stomach than food and coins.

For fifty-four days, thousands of protesters and hunger strikers occupy the “kilometer zero of democracy” in a call for truth and for communist trials; we grant Eugene Ionescu the title of “honorary thug” and chant, for hours, “better dead than communist.” On June 14, ten thousand miners are bused down from Jiu to save the “besieged democratic regime.” Armed with bats and axes, they are unleashed upon the protesters, beating dozens to death, sending hundreds to the ER, sacking and smashing the inside of the university. Thanked officially for disbanding the “hooligans” and restoring “order and calm,” the miners are thrown a presidential feast, then bused back to the mines. There were barely any real victims, the official line will insist in the aftermath; just lazy scum like students and writers, and of course the parasitic Gypsies—“born criminals,” “prostitutes of the underworld.”

Innocence

But sir, I'm sure about one thing: if I die in jail they will just forget
all about it. My paintings will become original Vermeers once more.
I produced them not for money but for art's sake.

—Van Meegeren

To make himself a forger,
Van Meegeren masters the field of restoration:
wooden frames ridden with beetles,
fossilized eggs pearling crevices, Madonnas
conserved by candle smoke and novice adulation.
Hundreds of years collapse into hours as canvases,
sponged clean, bake in the studio's oven. No live model
to arouse or rib the silence with blasé laughter, no one
to leak out the secret. Take this new girl with a pearl earring:
how pliable in her loveliness as he presses the back of his palm
to soften or harden her into young Christ, old Christ, St. John,
dear St. John sweet as a maid, egg-white in his innocence,
this chance innocence we re-gift too soon,
 mine at the rooster's first stir, when all I desire
 is the field of freckles on your back,
 yours as you pallet-knife the rooster's crow
 with layers and layers of unduplicable reds.
To grow into a forger, Van Meegeren mastered the field of adoration:
held himself captive, pried open the master's veins
with surgical precision.

Immigrant Model

Berenson recalls how once, upon seeing a counterfeit,
he *felt an immediate discomfort in his stomach*,
and that is what she feels these mornings,
cropped at wrong angles in the hallway mirror,
chipped stars in her hair, skin almost translucent—
a shade darker before it touches air,
the gnawing in her belly thrumming as she hurries
to the art class that teaches color, paid for in kind,
her body an eloquent model of afternoon stillness.
One teacher dubbed her *nature's ventriloquist*:
she channels rivers and thistle blades, the bite
of a lazy sunray, but has *no understanding of human
expression, no artistic empathy*. As students sketch, she re-roots:
the desiccated belly of her Moldavian village creek
toothed with rocks, eyed with shriveled minnows,
but she can still feel *their* eye, the hammock of her body
swayed by the screech of charcoals' smooth incisions.
Tonight she steals in to see herself in various stages
of completion, looks for the hand knowing enough, kind enough
to release her. *Fals, fals, fals*, she croons as she sloughs off
each sketch, the verdict swift as a mouse down an owl's throat,
then leaves the studio to finish off the night.
She wakes up full, pellet of fur and bones at her breast,
brand new, eyes speckled with blood.

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NOTES

“Memoir” and “Memoir” are indebted to Vijay Seshadri’s “Memoir” (3 *Sections*, Graywolf Press, 2013).

“Self-Portrait with Monk”: Pricolici and vârcolaci are Romanian mythological creatures somewhat similar to werewolves and goblins.

“You Ask Why I Buy Pineapples and Let Them Go to Waste”: “Ca o bocitoare” (Romanian) translates as “like a professional wailer/crier.” Hiring criers for funerals is still common practice in Romania. The belief is that loud, effusive crying eases the soul’s departure.

Dictator Nicolae Ceauseșcu ruled Romania between 1964 and December 1989, when he was executed, along with his wife, Elena. In the 1980s many people tried to escape Romania by swimming across the Black Sea.

“The Red Eviction: “Gadje” (plural) is the name by which Roma refer to non-Roma people.

“Sheela na gig”: The title refers to carvings of hags-goddesses with exaggerated vulvas, found mostly in Ireland, but also in other parts of Europe, on churches, cathedrals, castles, and tombs; the opening section is adapted from *Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth* (trans. Diane Wolkstein and Samuel Noah Kramer); “To shoot out the lips in contempt” (Psalms); “Homestead whence once we were evicted” (Freud); anasyrma: gesture of lifting up the skirt to reveal the genitals; “Vino, intră” (Romanian): come, enter; “precum ielele de rusalii” (Romanian): according to Romanian folklore, ielele—seductive and dangerous female apparitions similar to sirens and nymphs—take revenge on those who do not observe Rusalii, a holy celebration that takes place fifty days after Easter; ibricuri: Turkish coffee pots.

“Turning the Bones”: *Famadihana* refers to a funerary tradition (known as the turning of the bones) practiced in parts of Madagascar; the bodies of ancestors are disinterred, rewrapped in fresh cloth, and celebrated with music and dance.

“Ana to Manole”: A retelling of the “Ballad of Master Builder Manole,” a Romanian folk ballad, in the voice of Ana. According to the ballad, Manole and his masons are ordered by the thirteenth-century Wallachian Prince Negru Voda to erect a monastery that surpasses all others in beauty. Whatever they build during the day collapses at night. Adhering to instructions in a prophetic dream, the masons decide to immure the wife or sister who arrives first at the site. That turns out to be Manole’s wife Ana, who’s pregnant and has traveled farthest. Manole walls her in, pretending to play a game. Finally, the monastery is standing; when the prince arrives, the masons are on the roof, putting on the finishing touches. When praised, they brag they can build an even more magnificent edifice, so, to prevent that, the prideful king leaves them stranded on the roof. They build wings and die attempting to escape. Manole’s fallen body turns into a fountain.

“Radioactive Wolves: A Retelling”: Information and often direct language in the first section come from Svetlana Alexievich’s *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* (trans. Keith Gessen, Picador, 1997); the second section is set in the made-up village of Ghiora; the poem draws on stories about Cighid (in Ghiorac, Bihor), the most infamous orphanage in communist Romania, known as “a children’s gulag.”

“Ghost Mothers: Un-naming”: The question in section one belongs to a girl from an orphanage in northern Romania. The second section was triggered by the case of four-year-old Marchella Brett, found dead in 2010 in an apartment in Brooklyn; she had been beaten, starved, and drugged. Her mother, Carlotta Brett-Pierce, and grandmother, Loretta Brett, were convicted of murder and manslaughter, respectively.

“Clawed Soleares with Strong Sun and Suitcases” owes its inception to Kimiko Hahn, who urged me to open the suitcase, and to Judith Vollmer, from whose poem “In the Grove of the Coffee Goddess” I borrowed the first italicized line.

“The Gorge of Ronda”: The italicized line is from *Zoli* by Colum McCann (Random House, 2006).

“Elegy for Rick(ster)” is in memory of Rick Maloof; the first couplet echoes the beginning of Tadeusz Różewicz’s “Gray Zone.”

“La Bella Principesa” is the portrait of a young Milanese (most probably Bianca Sforza) believed to have been painted by Leonardo da Vinci, a hypothesis supported by the scholar Martin Kemp; high-resolution and multispectral scans were used in the process of authentication.

“Innocence”: The epigraph is from Bernard Berenson (quoted in “The Mark of a Masterpiece” by David Grann, *New Yorker*, July 12 and 19, 2010).

“Immigrant Model”: The italicized words belong to the art historian Bernard Berenson (quoted in “The Mark of a Masterpiece” by David Grann, *New Yorker* July 12 and 19, 2010).

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POETRY

“The poems of *Immigrant Model* embody robust and sizzling magic—Mihaela Moscaliuc transports readers through vivid, multilayered scenes, richly startling images, and a mesmerizing gift for narrative. Here, a haunting world we would never otherwise see—our sense of history and terrain is altered forever.”

© Naomi Shihab Nye

“To paraphrase Norman Mailer: when history becomes absurd and fraught, the poet must take over for the historian. Moscaliuc is such a poet. She takes on Ceaușescu’s Romania as well as the aftermath of Chernobyl with a surreal, sensuous ferocity. Mouth, lips, tongue (some of the most frequently repeated words in the book) are means of survival; they devour and indict. The book’s sustained power is extraordinary.”

© Stephen Dunn

PAST PRAISE FOR MIHAELA MOSCALIUC

“Moscaliuc can compress plot worthy of a novel into a one- to two-page poem that flaunts that skill often. Most impressively, she manages this compression without ever sounding prosaic, sacrificing little of the elegant, studied lyricism practiced in most of these poems. It’s a music that seems deceptively plain at times, but one that lingers, growing fuller and richer with each read.”

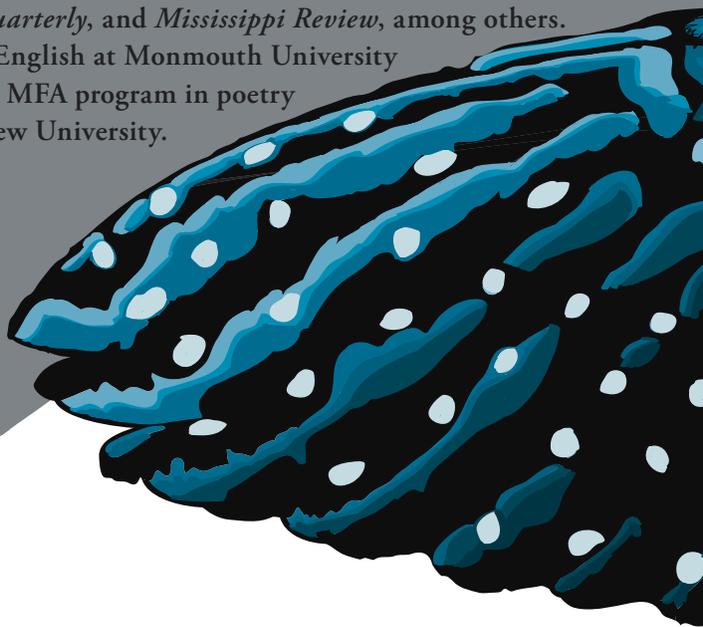
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Mihaela Moscaliuc is the author of the poetry collection *Father Dirt* and translator of Carmelia Leonte’s *The Hiss of the Viper*. Her poems, reviews, and translations of Romanian poetry have appeared in *American Poetry Review*, *Georgia Review*, *New Letters*, *Prairie Schooner*, *TriQuarterly*, and *Mississippi Review*, among others.

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