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INTIMATE STORIES OF MIGRATION AND OTHER IMPORTANT DEPARTURES: A RESEARCH USING TOOLS OF NARRATIVE ANALYSIS*

Alexandru Maftai

Abstract

In this paper, I will analyse stories of migration experienced by some very close friends and relatives. As someone who has not experienced migration directly, except perhaps from the perspective of the person left behind, I try to compare and contrast these migration stories with intimate experiences of important departures that have marked my own life. This comparison will provide a fresh perspective on the study of migration, framing it within a broader class of actions that define and reconfigure an individual in relation to the external environment.

Keywords: belonging, border, communion, country, death, departure, dilemma, exterior, family, fear, foreigner, freedom, guilt, home, inside, interdiction, interior, intimate, loneliness, migration, narrative, oppression, outside, reconfiguration, separation, solitude, space, stranger, time, togetherness, window

August 1969. The sun has not yet risen over the sea, but the sky is beginning to brighten. The sand still bears some traces of footsteps that stopped before the calm sea. Someone gazing at the sea and the sky dreamed of leaving. Far away. In a small room in the village, where the early morning air has filled the place, my parents are making love. The warmth of their bodies and the coolness of the morning scent mingle in their noses. Their breathing gradually calms down. They fall asleep naked, holding each other - a picture of a primordial *togetherness*. This

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is the place and time where I came into being. Along with me, the *inside* came into being.

Inside something begins to grow. To have a life of its own. It grows bigger and bigger. Soon the inside becomes too small. The day when it has to come out approaches. It is the first *departure* and it is painful. The sensations of that first departure remain deeply imprinted in our subconscious. And the pain and fear and helplessness come back to us sometimes, too, like on that day when we felt on our skin what *outside* is. The departure that tore us from the *inside* and threw us *outside*. The cold and the fear and the anxiety. Once we were one with that inside. But that bond has been cut - literally and then, much later, also figuratively. And it would take us a while to realise that that inside belonged to someone other than us. We are confused: Who am I and Who is the other? Especially the other in whose inside, as we will find out later on, we once were: our mother.

But we have a consolation. The breast that we control with our mouth. It's the first memory of the mother. Ground zero of memories. When my mother died, the image of her young, beautiful breasts came back to me, like in a regression. The moment when we were one. I and her breast. She and I. Conjoined. She all around me, skin against skin, perfectly connected, *together*. A deep moment of bliss in *the fear* of being apart, of being *separated*.

We want to regain that inside in which we came into being. It is the sleep we fall into, interrupting the flow of time. It is the layette, the cot, the wicker basket, the blanket, the pram, the nursery, the-under-the-duvet, the small cabin under the table, the family home, the courtyard, the hut, the tent, the apartment, the block, the neighbourhood, the city, the country, ... I'll stop here. The country.

Going *outside*.

Inside is fine. Outside - not so good. But still, it's an attraction. There is something interesting outside. Something necessary. You have to leave the inside to go outside. Believing you'll return, only to hope then that you'll find another inside, out there, far away, to intertwine your life with.

In the study of stories, the space where the action takes place is of great importance. An essential categorisation of space is *interior* versus *exterior*, categories often used in opposition. The interior can function as a space providing protection, whereas the exterior is a space of danger, enticing exploration and conquest. It is this deep opposition that defines

humans and their relationship with the world. The outside represents the challenge to confront other people. To face otherness.

Sometimes the inside-outside opposition can take inverted meanings. The inside can be oppressive, while the outside can be liberating. Not being able to leave the country was considered oppressive during the communist regime in Romania. Going outside the country was liberating. In other words, *the fear* of leaving *the interior* of the native country was less of a concern compared to *the freedom* that *exterior* promised. *Separation* was more desirable than *belonging*.

Together and *separately*: another pair of complementary concepts that we have been experiencing since our birth. Existential psychiatrist Irvin Yalom¹ believes that the most important existential problems are related to death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness. Three of them - death, isolation, and freedom - have to do with separation.

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The second most painful departure of my life was the first day at the kindergarten. I cried and cried. I was with my younger brother and two other kids from our block of flats. They were also crying and couldn't stop. The kindergarten was a mere 15 minutes' walk from home. Nothing could stop us from crying. Neither the other children in the nursery, nor the breakfast waiting for us on the little tables, not even the toys. Nothing at all. We were inconsolable. When we had to sleep after lunch, we made our *escape*. So strong was our desire to return home that we decided we could brave that *outside*, in order to find again that *inside* where we felt comfortable and safe. We took advantage of the inattentiveness of the educators, who thought we were asleep, mustered our courage, and walked out of the nursery nicely, all four of us holding hands. We got away, but soon realized we didn't know our way back home. We wandered about for a while. Like in the parable of the blind. We turned back, overwhelmed with guilt. A kindergarten educator came out to look for us. We got a spanking from her and started crying again.

Being torn away from home and not being able to make it back home again saddened me deeply at the time. It was something that seemed beyond containment, a sadness with no cure, something irreversible and evil that I could not understand or control in any way.

I'm going outside!

At the beginning, *going outside* meant going around my block of flats. It was the penultimate building on the boulevard. On the other side of

the street was the field: it was outside Bucharest. I lived on the top, tenth floor. I'd go downstairs and knock on all the children's doors and call them outside. When the gang would gather, we'd run down the stairs and make an indescribable racket. The neighbours would open their doors to see what was going on, but we'd be already downstairs. This was *the going outside*. The enormous energy could no longer fit inside, so we'd go outside and let it out. We were conquering outer space, we were gaining momentum. We wouldn't let ourselves *back* in. Until our parents were yelling out the window:

Move your asses in the house, it's night!

When our parents were not at home we visited each other. My classmate called me over to show me the tape recorder his father had brought back from Egypt. It was made by Sharp and had VU meters with red LEDs. The compartment where the audio cassette went in opened slowly, operated by a hydraulic mechanism. It looked like something from another planet. He told me how his father had worked in Egypt for several months and saved money by sleeping under the open sky to buy this cassette player. We listened to a tape of the Electric Light Orchestra. It was my first indirect contact with foreign countries. A silver cassette player with red VU-meters symbolized an Egypt where a man worked and slept under the open sky for many months.

Our parents *forbade* us to cross the boulevard where there was a vacant lot where we played football anyway. The kids would run after the ball paying no attention to the passing cars. Once there was an accident. Of course, there were other places where we could play football, but the field across the boulevard was the best one. Every time I broke the ban on going across the boulevard, I felt *guilty*. It was an overwhelming feeling that I couldn't get rid of, no matter how hard I ran after the ball. When I returned from the forbidden place, a kind of peace came over me. The place around the block had become a comforting home compared to the escapades across the street in the forbidden place.

The window is a border between the outside and the inside. Even if you're inside, your *gaze* can wander out into the distance. A glance out of the window can mark the commencement of a journey. The longing for adventure. The thought that you might face others. Strangers.

When I got a bike, the concentric circles around my block of flats got considerably wider. We used to ride around the whole neighbourhood in a gang. I was mastering the space at breakneck speed, the bike and I were one, the minotaur on wheels, the wind blowing in my hair. I had the taste

of freedom. The world was much bigger than I could have imagined, even if I looked out of the windows of the tenth-floor apartment where I lived.

I got a pair of jeans, brought in by someone from abroad. Wranglers. They were a little small, but I wore them stoically until they didn't fit anymore. Then I peeled off the label and asked my Mom to sew it onto the next pair of pants I owned. That label ended up on countless pants.

Once I got a Commodore LCD electronic watch. No one in our block of flats had something like that. The jeans, the electronic watch, and the cowboy movies with shootouts from the TV were America. It was a representation based on the objects and images that came in from there right here. The TV screen was another kind of *window* to a more distant *outside*.

Philosopher Gaston Bachelard notes² that the spaces we live in are charged with the reveries and daydreams we have experienced in those places. In other words, the representation of space borrows from our subjective experiences. Space becomes a layered structure over time as it settles and changes slightly over the course of one's life.

Abroad, and its opposite, the homeland, are also defined by time. Mainly by time spent with other people. By the relationships with other people. The representation of time spent together is also spatial and narrative. Photographs, stories or films: these are the forms of our memory. Faces, expressions, conversations, atmospheres, sensations, tastes, smells.

Christmas and Easter holidays revolve around the concept of returning home, or redefining the notion of home in a different country. Christmas time, in particular, holds a special significance, one tied to childhood memories and, by extension, to one's country of origin. It represents a time spent with family, a time that flows differently.

Holidays are the time when the one who left comes back home. The emigrant returns. Even if the old home seems somehow foreign, it triggers memories, tastes, smells. Reveries, dreaming, stories from the past are activated. One doesn't see what lies in front of one's eyes. One only sees what it *used to be*. To a very small extent one sees what it is, what is left. It's the past that takes the form of a virtual reality, with layered recollections and sensations that feel tangible enough to grasp, yet one hesitates, fearing it may dissolve into thin air. It takes very little to trigger an overwhelming wave of emotions. Unstoppable. It's the umbilical cord that seems to magically grow back, and heal; one needs to cut it off with one's own hands this time, before departing once again.

Migration contains at least four different mental spaces: the place you left, the place you dreamed of going to, the place you actually arrived, and the place you remember leaving. Among all these spaces there are enormous tensions which often lead to inner rifts.

*

My Uncle and godfather fled the country to Paris via Bulgaria in the early 1980s. He and my Aunt, my Mother's sister, had no children. My uncle wanted to leave together with my aunt, but she did not agree. She knew that if she left the country, my mother and the whole family would have problems with the Securitate, the secret police. She chose to stay. Then she found out that my uncle already had someone else in France. He remarried. She had to divorce him here. In absentia. After my uncle left, my aunt was inevitably visited by the Securitate.

Our runaway uncle got us a subscription to *Pif*, a popular French comic book. The stories of *Pif et Hercule*, *Rahan*, *Gai-Luron*, *Placid et Muzo*, *Les Rigolus et les Tristus* have long been a picture of foreignness in my mind. I recently found out that *Pif* magazine was getting behind the Iron Curtain only because it had a healthy, left-wing origin. So, one of my first images of foreignness was actually a communist magazine. Maybe that's why I never wanted to emigrate. It must have been effective propaganda that I was exposed to as a child since it worked.

It is strange that I, who never wanted to emigrate, am writing about it now. I am searching for analogies with other significant departures and separations in my life. It is the way actors and screenwriters work: using analogies in their own life to understand experiences they never had.

When my aunt was almost 90, she couldn't walk anymore. She lived in a nursing home. I used to take her out every week in a wheelchair to a park. There was often a flea market at the entrance. The items on sale there reminded her of her home she had left. She regretted not having children. She had heard from a mutual acquaintance that her ex-husband had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's and had died.

In the '80s she waited a few years for him to return, before she found out he had remarried. After Ceaușescu's regime fell, he returned to Romania. He even stopped by to see her. He picked up some old family heirlooms that he hadn't been able to get when he fled the country; they were still in my aunt's house. She didn't say a word, though in her heart she felt that it was terribly unfair. His runaway, his betrayal, his return and departure

- this time definitive, despite the fall of the oppressive regime - made my aunt cut her husband out of her heart. In her old age, she resented him.

She kept wondering, in a loop, if this disease, Alzheimer's, involved pain and if he died from that pain. Ironically, she couldn't remember things either. She would ask me to bring her a book from her home library, and after a few weeks, she was still at the beginning of the book. She would start to read a sentence, and if it happened to be a longer one, she couldn't finish it. She would forget how it started. She'd start over again. After a few months of reading, the book would be dismantled, the pages detached. She begged me not to throw it away, but to take it to the bindery. She knew a place somewhere.

I wonder if the stubbornness of my aunt's attachment to this country, to her house and objects, is something I inherited. She was very proud of the way she had decorated her house with old pieces of furniture that she had refurbished. As walking got increasingly difficult for her, my aunt could no longer leave the house. She could not go downstairs and back upstairs. I would go every few days and shop for her, pay the bills, spend time with her. She couldn't clean the house anymore. She would lie that she had someone come in for cleaning. One day she had a fall while she was alone at home. She couldn't get up. She could hardly get to the phone. I had a key and was able to get in. I picked her and put her in her bed and she tearfully begged me to leave her there, saying that she was waiting for her death there. I picked her up as if she were a baby and carried her to my place. She looked out the car window, her eyes wide open. She didn't recognize the city anymore. She hadn't been out of her house for years. She and the house had become one. They merged: the inside of the house and her increasingly weak body, like a spirit of the place. The space outside the house had become alien. There was only the ghostly space of the past that had no connection to the present.

Leaving her home, where she would never return, was the most painful departure for her. Inevitable and painful. More painful than refusing to leave the country. Perhaps as painful as her first departure, as a newborn, from her mother's womb. She was dreaming about her home. In the two years she was away from home, she dreamed of it. She dreamed she could walk through it again. That she could take a book from the library, sit in the armchair, read, go into the kitchen, make herself a cup of tea, go to the bedroom, worship the icons, get into bed, turn off the lamp, and go to sleep. In her bed. *Death can come now.*

Many months after she died, her house remained untouched, as it was on the day I had taken her from there. It was the third house I'd had to clear out. With each of the houses I've cleared out - my grandparents', my parents', and my aunt's - I've felt something breaking inside me. Like I was skinning thin strips of flesh from my own body. Tearing apart the house attached to your childhood memories is like dismantling your own body, your own inside, your own time. It is an encounter with the dissolution of your own intimate being, with *death* in its clearest form.

The house I live in now, built by my great-grandfather, also an emigrant, displaced by World War I from Macedonia, has collected relics from every house I have ever dismantled - my grandparents', my parents' and my aunt's. Their spirits seem to begin to live with me, too; they have become a part of my house now. It is a space where all the family spirits have gathered. In a comforting way. It is the *bosom* of the family, of a family extended beyond death, which includes the living, but also the dead. You wonder, like Roland Barthes³, what those who outlive you will do with all these objects imbued with a history that you are the only one to know. In the end, we can delude ourselves that *death* is also a form of migration, definitive for sure, to a place we know nothing about. As long as we live, we are looking at this dark window which reflects our ageing face, curious to find out more about what is beyond it.

*

Starting high school was absolutely special for me. I was so eager to make new friends, to love, to learn interesting things, to get out of the nest as far as I could, to break away. To leave from *the inside*. To venture *outside* into the big world.

The No.1 High School of Informatics I went to was located at the other end of Bucharest. I had never been alone so far away from home before I took the entrance exam at this high school. The concentric circles around the cocoon of my house were getting wider and wider. The world outside was setting traps for me; increasingly attractive challenges were beckoning.

The Physics teacher I met in high school - let me call him Dirigu - was an important figure for me and my classmates.

Dirigu remembers me from back then like this: a restless guy who sat in the front row and stared him in the eye and raised his hand every class, asking all sorts of questions, some of them quite unexpected. Often inquisitive. If he didn't have an answer on the spot, Dirigu would promise

to come up with one for the next class. And come back he did. I was curious and eager to understand more, to have an interlocutor.

I met Andrei, who was in the class where Dirigu was the headmaster, as soon as I started school. I was looking for someone who could play an instrument, in order to start a band: my elementary-school band had broken up. So, Andrei and I met, played together and soon became best friends. We were interested in all kinds of music, from The Beatles to classical music. It was all Dirigu's doing. He organised vinyl record auditions in the physics laboratory: Vivaldi, Mozart, Beethoven, Bach, Chopin. Classical music wasn't completely foreign to me. I had a bunch of records at home, too, but, thanks to Dirigu's auditions, my appetite grew exponentially. So, I went to my first symphony concert at the Athenaeum. I was overwhelmed by the music in all its glory. Andrei had recorded some of Chopin's Nocturnes from the radio. We listened to them on loop during the physics tutorials we were doing with Dirigu. The physics problems were quickly solved, much to Dirigu's dismay, as he didn't have time to finish his coffee while we did our homework. Our conversations invariably drifted to music and art. We had invented a concept we called *the sacred fire*. It was *the talent* you had to discover and cultivate, *the coin* you should not bury, but multiply. The desire to bring out the best in yourself. Those high school years meant a relentless quest to discover who we really were and what we wanted from the big world we were beginning to conquer.

Ten time zones behind, on the West Coast of United States, Dirigu connects to the video chat link I sent him and we manage to see each other on our computer screens. He exudes the same quiet, mellow spirit that gives you confidence. He doesn't look any older to me, even though it's been 35 years since I graduated from high school. He's just as unassuming, with the same subtle sense of humour - which, as I have been pleased to find, has an English version now. When he taught us in high school, he did not know a word of English.

Dirigu says that, as a child, he was a total victim of communist propaganda. Tears of genuine emotion ran down his cheeks when he received his pioneer's tie. He was a staunch atheist for much of his life. The years I was among his pupils were equally important for him, too. He told me that he relearned physics by teaching it to us. He had taken his physics books out of the library again and had gotten serious about them. It was his honesty that won us over. He was a respected and loved teacher. Friendships were formed between him and his pupils. He loved

his job and did it with passion. He was a sought-after teacher. When he wasn't in school, he tutored until the evening. He was the head of his own household. He brought money home. Too much, maybe. Because in the late '80s in Romania, you couldn't buy much with it. Darkness, hunger and cold had spread over the country.

It is autumn '89, and Dirigu's wife and his son go on a holiday to visit her relatives in America. The couple had discussed the possibility of fleeing the country, but Dirigu was reluctant. They said nothing to the child. On their return, the two "miss" the plane. They remain with the wife's relatives in America, with the intention of applying for political asylum. But they don't get to start the process. In Romania, the Ceaușescu regime is overthrown, giving the impression that the communist era has come to an end. The grounds for a political asylum claim disintegrate. His wife and child remain in America, in a grey area, while Dirigu is still in Romania, where hopes of freedom seem to be revived. For a brief period Dirigu even thought that his family should return. What could be worse than the deprivation and lies of the Communist era?

It turned out that post-December freedom would bring out much more evil. The euphoria was short-lived. The events in Târgu Mureș⁴, the elections⁵ and the Minerriades⁶ convinced Dirigu that nothing would change for the better in Romania, in his or his child's lifetime. A few years of family separation followed. His wife and child go through a long and tedious bureaucratic process to obtain American citizenship. The life of the physics teacher changes radically in Romania in the 1990s. After three years, he leaves for Canada for just a few days - he thinks - to go through formalities at the American embassy in Toronto. Once there, he learns he won't be able to go back home for another three years. He feels that he abandoned his students and parents in Romania, but also carries a huge guilt for not having been with his son in America in the years he needed him most.

After getting his visa, he leaves for the US. His wife has a job, he does not. He ends up being supported by her - a new situation for him. America is in recession, unemployment is high. His frail physique doesn't help him get even a non-qualified job. But physics helps. He enrolls for a MA in physics at the age of 45. "I went to college for the third time", Dirigu says humorously, "the first time as a student, the second time with you at the High School of Informatics, the third time in America." He was a model student. He became a university assistant right away, and after three more

years, he was finally hired full-time. At 52 he was teaching physics again, this time at the university.

Trying to outline Dirigu's inner journey, I asked him about the value system he had at the time, thinking that the migration experience he lived through might have changed him. I was surprised to realise the "original" democracy in Romania after '89 brought unexpected changes to him. In fact, the plot triggering moment of his story - what we call the *inciting incident* in screenwriting - was not even the departure of his wife and son. Instead, it was the collapse of the Ceaușescu regime, which not only added complexity to the visa acquisition process, but also forced him to confront his own human condition. The change of regime - or rather the failure of the change, to paraphrase Carabăț⁷ - produced new reasons to migrate.

Talking about the Ceaușescu period, Dirigu remembers that discussions about politics were taboo at the time. We were in a kind of bubble. After '89, politics became the only topic of discussion, blocking out other important things. Before '89, everything bad was blamed on communism. But in the 1990s, Dirigu realised that evil was actually hidden inside people. The ability to make money and spend it on all sorts of things, something that previously existed only to a small extent, brought out the worst in people. The system of values began to degrade. The lie did not disappear. On the contrary, it proliferated. The fear of authority disappeared, society slowly turned into a mafia-like hierarchy.

The communist years left a shadow on Dirigu's conscience. "When the emperor was naked, I kept telling jokes", he candidly admits. On the other hand, if he had stood up for his true beliefs, he wouldn't have been able to teach anymore. He chose to make his school years special for us, his students - and for himself as well. He succeeded, without any doubt.

From the pioneer with tears in his eyes and a red tie around his neck - to the one who left Romania for good to start over in America at the age of 45, there was one more station Dirigu told me about. The fact that he discovered Orthodoxy.

The few years Dirigu spent alone, away from his family, in post-December Romania, were a period of profound personal change. The first revolution broadcasted live on TV was followed by years in which new press and TV trusts emerged. The media noise would reach unbearable levels - at least for what we were used to. The violence moves from the street to the TV, then back to the street in an increasingly monstrous loop. The show of human degradation is overwhelming. This is the moment Dirigu turns off the TV - literally and figuratively. And, as a

modest and intelligent man, he tells himself that he is probably no better than anyone else and tries to do something about his own weaknesses and flaws. He gives up tutoring and starts to educate himself and read. Not physics textbooks, but other books. *The Diary of Happiness*⁸ brings him happiness, too. He begins to seek the company of faithful people, to notice that these people have the peace, reconciliation and right judgment he also dreams of. If there is a way to change the world, it starts with oneself. He joins a community of intellectuals and artists who are getting closer to the church; not to the institution itself, but rather to the Christian system of values and way of life. Though torn apart by his separation from his family who lived overseas, he finds spiritual support and manages to get through it peacefully. He begins to learn English. He takes some of his former students as lodgers into his apartment. Meetings take place with some of those who still long for the good times of their high school years. The discussions which started back then seem to find a continuation with topics related to religion, morality and the imperfection of human beings.

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Andrei's parents had opposing views in relation to the idea of leaving the country. His father, a brilliantly minded architect and staunch anti-communist, envisions a narrative for Andrei that includes leaving for the West. His mother, however, plans a concrete future for him here in the country, with very clear and predictable steps related to college and work.

Andrei stands between these two poles, undecided about his future. In retrospect, he confesses that back in high school it was impossible for him to picture himself at 30.

After graduating from university, Andrei is oriented towards the software area of the young Romanian computer industry. He works with his former university colleagues in a private company. They make databases to manage boxes of soap in a warehouse. A rather mundane task for a software engineer.

Adrian, one of Andrei's colleagues, wins the visa lottery⁹ (a government program that allows people from other countries to obtain permanent residence and work in the US). Before leaving for the States, he has a farewell party with all his friends. There's drinking, dancing and karaoke. At the end of a song, Andrei shouts more jokingly than seriously into the microphone he's holding:

"Adrian, don't leave us here, man, take us along with you!"

A shout that must have sounded pretty touching to lucky Adrian, who was off to the States, leaving his friends behind. Shortly after settling in America, Adrian manages to bring almost all of his colleagues to New York. They all share an apartment and work at the same company. The feeling of provincialism they had working in Romania is replaced overnight by the feeling that they are at the centre of the computer world and that there are no obstacles to working on the most daring projects.

At work, the atmosphere was completely different from what they experienced in Romania. Andrei was stimulated by the work environment, by the boss who appreciated him and encouraged him to develop his skills and train, who even paid for him from the company budget to attend a conference on computer science. In this supportive environment, Andrei realized that *the sacred fire* he carries inside him may be related to science and programming.

Looking back, he remembers a time when, every day after work, he would go to a Barnes & Noble bookstore and read biographies of great scientists: Feynman, Einstein, Bohr and others. He read and cried. It was a mixture of self-loathing, anger, helplessness, ambition and a desire for his flame to burn bright - just as it probably had burned inside those great men he was reading about. He soon realised that he himself was his own only obstacle, but also the path to such fulfilment. He decided that things could not wait any longer and put everything else on hold - personal life, friends, fun - to devote himself to computer science and programming.

His co-workers smash the door every day at six pm sharp. Andrei sits alone in his empty office in front of a computer connected to the internet and studies for two hours. He sticks strictly to this schedule for some years. After another 7 years he gets a PhD in computer science and writes several books on programming, one of which soon becomes a reference in the field. He is invited to give lectures all over the world.

Andrei has long been convinced that everyone could leave Romania. As a result, he has tried to persuade many Romanians to do so. Until he realised that for some it was essential to stay. He realised that he is a man who likes solitude. "Departure and the joy of being alone go together", he says. "Whoever doesn't like solitude can't leave. Because abroad you are alone, no one thinks or feels like you do."

Going abroad and the pleasure of solitude - I wouldn't have thought to associate them.

By going abroad Andrei managed to overcome his weakness: the tendency to waste time. For him, the change of location led to treasuring time.

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I got to know Florin well after high school. Dirigu had also tutored him, and that's how he joined our group. When Dirigu's family had already left, and he was alone in the country, some of his former students visited him. The topics of discussion concentrated even more on religion, but we also talked a lot about theatre and cinema. I'd given up physics and gone into film-directing school.

Florin told me that he was interested in the fact that I was heading towards an artistic career. The entourage that was forming around me and our creative concerns attracted him in particular. Florin had an almost suffocating curiosity for everything I was learning or doing. He used to tease and challenge me. He was a passionate and lively conversation partner. He inspired me and had unique points of view. It wasn't unusual to find ourselves debating something until morning.

Florin immigrated to Canada in 1994. He and his wife settled in Toronto as programmers. Florin had learned English by recording the American TV show *Dallas* on audio cassettes and then listening to them in a loop. For him, America was the place from where humans had left Earth to conquer outer space. During the Communist years, popular TV shows like *Science and Imagination* or Carl Sagan's series used to be *the windows* to the world he wanted to reach.

Later in Florin's life, programming, mathematics and physics became *windows* through which he could witness a broader panorama of existence, encompassing the complexities of the human mind and intelligence. Once in Canada, he found what he expected, he coped with the demands, he was good at what he did and appreciated. But he admits he didn't know what to do with this appreciation. He only chose jobs he liked, was somewhat romantic in his decisions, wanted to start his own company, to be independent - financially, but also existentially. To him, work was an essential component of life, seamlessly intertwined with its entirety, rather than being a separate chapter confined to eight hours a day.

Some of his Romanian colleagues in the field managed to create a network of friends at work, relationships based solely on professional interest. He - less so. This was primarily due to his distinct approach and unique perspective towards his profession.

He did not seek the company of Romanians in Canada. On the contrary, he wanted to integrate among Canadians. "I wanted to be thrown into cold water", says Florin, "I thought that austerity away from home would force me to carry out my plans and then eventually to return."

What he missed was the directness of contact with people that he had back home. In front of anyone he wanted to pass the test of being considered a genuine and viable Canadian. His adjustment to the environment was poor.

Florin believes that life is a journey with a partner. At first, he thought this partner was his wife, then he thought he could extend the concept to a business partner or a circle of friends. He doesn't want to become famous, but rather to share this journey with someone. He recognises that *he cannot be alone*, that he is dependent on a relationship with someone. For him *loneliness* means *death*.

Florin made a series of risky decisions in his professional, financial and emotional life. These decisions, which taken individually did not seem catastrophic, taken together lead Florin to what he considers his failure. He says he took much bigger risks than others. He regrets pushing his wife into this migration adventure. She didn't want to leave Romania so badly, but was convinced by him in the end. Florin thinks he didn't have enough imagination to realise that he could have done something meaningful in Romania, too. But he needed something extreme, a major break like leaving the country in order to believe he could do important things.

The absence of the close circle of friends he had in Romania, who could have offered valuable insights into the risky choices he made in the long run, coupled with the reduction of his opponents to just one person (his wife) were factors that played a role in this series of unwise choices. He knows he is extremely persuasive in arguing his decisions, and this quality turned into a shortcoming when he had no opponents to match or a variety of opposing views. So the lack of a wider reference group with which to confront his judgement and decisions has diminished his likelihood of seeing his errors.

On the other hand, the imbalance that these erroneous decisions have created over time is the engine of an inner change - a self-revelation. Florin becomes aware of his weakness and begins a process of transformation that might not otherwise have been possible. "Only when you lose your balance do you realize who you really are" - he says. Leaving his homeland put him in a riskier situation, and he was more likely to lose his balance.

When I asked him to sum up in a few words the story of his emigration, Florin said that it is a story about progressive isolation, a retreat into himself and away from the world. He mentions the final scene of the film *Jacob*¹⁰. A miner decides to take on Christmas Eve a cable car designed to transport coal down the valley to get home faster. But the cable car stops halfway and he is left suspended high up in the metal bin. Realizing that the cable car won't restart until after the holidays and that he will freeze to death, the miner tries to reach by cable to the next pole to get down. He can't even get his feet to hold onto the frozen cable. He hangs on by his hands. One hand gives away, then slowly the other. A blood stain on the white snow marks the final scene Florin refers to. The terror of dying alone, the risky rescue attempt and the fall: these are three defining elements of Florin's narrative reference.

Unlike him, his two Canadian-born daughters are perfectly integrated. Their departure from their parents' home was a shock for Florin. He couldn't get used to the idea that at some point, children would fly the nest, that their lives would take a different direction. It's a totally different position from the one Florin's parents took when he left. They never made him feel guilty in any way about leaving for Canada. They were more generous with him than he managed to be with his daughters. They didn't give any indication that they felt abandoned.

*

I had at least two moments when I thought about emigrating. The first was when my youngest daughter, Anastasia, who was born with a quite serious neurological malformation which many Romanian doctors ignored, could not be treated in Romania. We had to go to Israel, at our own expense, for an operation that we hoped would save her. We were lucky that we were earning very well at that time and we were able to raise, almost miraculously, the money for her surgery. Otherwise, we would probably have been forced to take extreme measures.

The second time was when, after the long period of protests that began in January 2017 and after the 2022 elections, when progressive forces seemed to be starting to pull Romania out of the communist dark ages. But then, the Liberals and Social Democrats joined hands once again to perpetuate a corrupt system, a catastrophic political management, the same mafia mess that has ruled the country for decades. For a person who has voted in every election since the 1990s for the progressive force that could have made Romania a better country, it was a great disappointment.

I realised that to stay in Romania was to remain captive to the will of a mass of people who decided each time (either by sheer numbers or by chameleon politics) that the way we should go is in the opposite direction. I am in the minority. Negligible. Invisible.

I was always the one who thought that *beyond* the horizon, somewhere *far away*, it could be the other way around, that is deep *inside*, towards the roots. That *beyond* can also be within yourself. There is as much to conquer *inside* as there is *outside*.

Inward migration - that's what I would call it.

But these thoughts were only to discover later that the roots have grown too deep in a place I can no longer change. That I am a captive to the place, one with it. Like my aunt who had become one with her home and asked me to leave her in her bed to await her death.

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It has been one year since my eldest daughter, Ștefania, departed for Denmark. We connect on video chat and talk about when she first thought about leaving the country.

She was at a bilingual high school. She knew French and English very well. She remembers a very smart classmate she had. The two of them felt somewhat isolated from the others. Although they spoke Romanian with their classmates, they seemed to be speaking an entirely different language from their peers. There was a profound lack of understanding and communication between her and her friend, on one side, and the rest of the class, on the other. She and her smart colleague were planning to leave the country, as they felt they would be wasted in a country that neither understood, nor valued them. For Ștefania, the relationship she had with the majority of her classmates extended its nature over the relationship with the whole country - a fairly close extrapolation of the truth.

Ștefania confesses that she took refuge in writing, which helped her escape to a different world, away from the banality and the derision around her. The sole classmate with whom she formed a bond during school promptly left the country after completing high school, first to pursue further studies and subsequently, upon completion, immigrated to Luxembourg. The thought of leaving the country is put on hold by Ștefania. She wonders why she didn't follow it.

I recall the moment when she first left our home for a longer period of time. It was during her second year at the film faculty when she embarked on an Erasmus exchange program to an art university in Ghent, Belgium,

where she resided for six months. Her mother encouraged the departure. Initially Ștefania was reluctant.

She talks about the new feeling she had once there: liberated and carefree. She no longer had to explain to her parents when she was leaving, where she was going and when she was coming back. At home, her parents worry, which she found excessive, made her anxious about going out with friends. Of course, Bucharest and Ghent at night are two completely different cities, and our worries in Romania had a basis. Discussing the subject further, I learn that, at the time, she didn't even know her hometown well and could not find even a famous tourist landmark: the People's House.

From what I have learnt from Ștefania, an inside-versus-outside relationship is quite clear. Before leaving the country, *home* is a safe place, while *the outside* is perceived, because of the restrictions imposed by the parents, as a dangerous, unknown place; she feels anguish about it. Going out without the parents' knowledge is accompanied by a feeling of *guilt*. When Ștefania leaves the country for the first time, the removal of parental care leads to liberation. The *outside* world is cleansed of feelings of anxiety, not least because the town is in a much more civilised country. She is exposed to a community of students from different countries and cultures. In Ghent, Ștefania falls in love with a Danish fellow student and spends the whole time with him. So she has a companion who protects her in this discovery of the world outside home, and she comes to associate her leaving from her home country with a sense of freedom and security, while her hometown mental image remains attached to the previous values.

The love story continues, and after the end of the Erasmus trip, the two plan to move together to Bucharest. He enrolls for a MA in Romania, she has one more year of undergraduate studies to complete. This is also the time when Ștefania moves out of her parents' home for good, into a rented place. For the next three years, the two live in several rented apartments, then their relationship comes to an impasse, they break up, and he moves back to Denmark.

Ștefania associated the failure of this relationship with the place where it happened. Talking about the various apartments where she lived with her boyfriend, she associates *the place* very strongly with *the events* that happened in her life while she lived there. The space thus borrows from the texture, the sensations and the outcome of the events it hosted.

Two years of pandemic follow, and the house she lives in, acquired through family inheritance, is her property, a personal place where good and bad things happen. That's how she defines home: a place where you come to terms with both. Moving from one tenancy to another, associating the place with events that happened there, leaving a place as an attempt to forget painful events - it's a phase that she left behind. She remembers that when she first moved out of her parents' house, the objects she took with her and the arrangement of the place where she was going to stay with her boyfriend were of great importance to her. But as she was forced to move to other places, she began to lose her attachment to objects and space. Long after she saw herself in her home, from which she thought she would not be leaving any time soon, her relationship with the space in which she lives becomes more alive, more dynamic, regains its importance.

There is another element that defines the space of Bucharest: the political context of the period between 2017-2022, which is marked by the attempts to erode the rule of law, to establish a mafia-like, communist state, starting with the famous Ordinance 13¹¹, the street demonstrations that followed, the attack on the laws of justice, culminating in the demonstration of August 10th, when peaceful protesters were gassed, beaten and mistreated. This period ends with the pact between Liberals and Social Democrats that returned the country to the same unfortunate path.

After graduating from university, Ștefania finds work relatively quickly. She is an assistant director in the film and television industry. She joins the crew of a popular Romanian TV series that shoots eight months a year in the village of Fierbinți, about thirty kilometres from Bucharest. She discovers an even crueller reality in that village. It's a community of poor, unemployed, uneducated, hardened, lazy, corrupt people held captive by a harsh political mafia. It's a face of Romania Ștefania is seeing for the first time. The TV show that has been filming there for years seems to be the only positive thing happening in the locality, which everyone in the community is squeezing as desperately as they can. From the mayor who hunts for sponsorship, to the peasants in whose homes they film and those in whose homes they don't - and who prevent the production from running smoothly by any means necessary just to get something for themselves.

At first, Ștefania and other members of the film crew got involved in charitable actions targeting the most vulnerable in the village: children and animals. But she soon realises that perhaps her contribution should be on a different level, using her skills, knowledge and education. She gets

as actively involved as she can in civic life, which seems to be growing around the #rezist¹² group, hoping to contribute to progress of the society and the country.

Ștefania has photographed many of the protests I've mentioned, and on August 10th she came close to being beaten by police forces, helping a woman with a child in a cart to escape from the firecrackers and tear gas. It's the moment when she feels her own country shouts in her face aggressively: "I don't need you, mind your own business!" The brutality shown toward her good intentions causes her to break away from that entity called *country*. This entity contains the state, or a part of it that resists modernisation, but also a category of citizens who still adhere to the values of a typical communist proletarian dictatorship.

Three years after her boyfriend broke up with her and left her, Ștefania receives a birthday call from him. He sings happy birthday to her. The call makes her feel good. They resume their broken contact, and after a few weeks of Skype conversations, she thinks that the failure of their relationship is due to Bucharest and the ugly country she finds herself in and decides to go to his place in Denmark for a while. If their relationship ended badly in Bucharest, maybe it will be reborn in Copenhagen. Ștefania thinks it's no good where she is. Apart from her relatives and a few close friends, she loathes her fellow citizens. Although she has a secure and well-paid job, she wonders: what am I really doing with my life?

She resigns from her job and leaves the country for Copenhagen, initially for just three weeks, to live with the boyfriend she broke up with three years before. The three weeks turned into three months. Three times she got a return ticket, three times she "missed" her plane. The idea of going thousands of miles away from her lover was something that blocked her return. The estrangement she had experienced in her own country was slowly beginning to dissipate there with a foreigner, yet familiar, who loved her. Place doesn't matter. What matters is the human context.

Ștefania eventually returns home, but only to leave - she thinks - for good, back to Denmark. The house that had become hers here in Bucharest is left behind. She wonders how she can transport her paintings to Denmark. They were painted by her grandfather, whom she never knew. She doesn't know which things to take and which to leave behind. Her family is encouraging about her leaving, as if it is a natural step. Friends are a little more tearful. The last days before departure, she spends time with family and friends, a little more than usual, but not enough, she later

confesses: "I should have smelled or licked you more so I would have a scent and taste to come back to later."

There's a sadness in the air. Sadness about those who leave, with whom we promise to keep in touch after they've left. But we know we can't. The distance between those of us who stay and those who leave grows greater day by day. Even if the plane ride stops somewhere on this earth after a few hours of flying. The one who left continues to move away, always, unstoppable, with the slow speed of a tectonic shift. Sometimes one returns to the homeland, to the people left behind. One tries to make up for the time that has passed without loved ones back home. One tries to make it denser, to cram the months away from home into a couple of days at home. That's why homecoming can never be a relaxing holiday. Because one has to *recover* the lost time. But how do you do that? How to condense years into a few days? The distance travelled on the way back is physically the same as the distance travelled on the way forward, but the one coming back is paradoxically still far away. One can only get closer with superhuman efforts. For one has to reduce the distance accumulated over months and years, which sometimes is far greater than the actual distance between two countries.

Ștefania may have intuited some of this, though her departure was more a choreography of objects: which one to take with her, which to leave behind. The sign that this departure was going to be different from the others was that she took her dog with her. She was leaving her family behind, her friends, a profession she started to practice, her artistic dream, a house that belonged to her and a country she thought she could do nothing more to make it her own.

The first few months in Denmark were like a dream for Ștefania. She marvelled at the cleanliness of the streets, the beauty of the parks, the reliability of public transport, the kindness of the neighbours and the friendliness of the shopkeepers. She and her boyfriend renovated the apartment where he lived. They discovered Copenhagen's leafy surroundings while walking the dog.

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Blocks of flats. More blocks. Different kind of filth. Same feeling. Suburbs. Maybe luckier homeless people. Some speak Romanian, I think. The cold is the same. The train passes just outside the window. The smell of the train station, the urine and the track ballast. Of course, a different train station, a different track ballast and probably a different urine.

Danish. Nothing looks clean to me. The apartment in the block looks like cardboard. The windows are covered in a layer of soot and condensation. You can hear the Arab neighbours talking. Is this the promised land? The new life?

My eldest daughter, Ștefania, went to this place with her dog, paintings and luggage. More than a year ago. Even the dog doesn't seem the same. I recognize her, my daughter. But it seems to me that she's grown up, that she sees things differently. She's beginning to understand what it means to love a man. In a way I didn't expect. She's struggling alone with a chaos she doesn't understand. With the broken family of the lover she left her country for. After more than two years of trying to adjust in Romania. After being separated for three years - the two of them during the pandemics. They decided to resume their relationship because they realised that they actually loved each other and life was pointless away from each other. She adventured *outside* to find that precious *inside* she was longing for.

She has been learning Danish for almost a year. A nightmarish language to learn. She says she's beginning to understand what's being spoken around her. She understands too much sometimes. His family speaks Danish sometimes when they want to express their criticism of the young couple. And she does understand. Embarrassed, he reminds them that she understands Danish. That it would be polite if they spoke English, too. He seems a stranger in his family himself.

A dismembered Danish family. With traumatised, addicted, broken people who avoid telling the truth in the face. Each one with his or her own loneliness. Each talking about the other secretly. Lacking empathy for each other, skimming the surface of things, reacting inappropriately. They say Danes are the happiest people on the continent. His family seems totally unrepresentative.

My daughter is trying to bring his family together. They hadn't seen each other in years. She succeeded on a few occasions, on a holiday, around a table. It's something she probably learned from us, her parents. We used to do this, too, at least twice a year. We have had our own arguments, unresolved conflicts, misunderstandings or tensions. To an outsider our family dinners might have seemed as strange as she told us about his Danish family.

Trying to find or recreate patterns that come from the life one used to have in one's homeland. That is what you could call this phenomenon. The problem is different. It is about identity. It is about how you describe yourself in relation to others. You feel that your identity gradually collapses

as if people around you evolve into another dimension that is invisible to you. It is the feeling she had in high school about the majority of her peers.

In Denmark most of job advertisements are quick to mention that no one will be discriminated on the basis of nationality, sex, gender, religion, etc. Some advertisements even explicitly tell you not to put a photo on your CV - lest you should be unintentionally discriminated against. To me this looks more like an empty talk of hypocritical political correctness. Because, if you get to talk off the record with someone in charge of hiring at a Danish company, you can surprisingly find out that if you don't have a Danish name, there might be a big chance that your CV will not be read any further. But if, by some miracle, you know someone in a company, you might be called for an interview.

And this is how my daughter, who left Romania to escape the hiring bribes, the incompetence, the gross discrimination, the contempt for the educated, the misogyny, homophobia and racism - this is how she comes to realize, only a year after landing, with her dog, paintings and suitcases in the promised land and trying to find a job, that the world is essentially the same a few meridians to the west.

Of course, returning to this point would be seen as a defeat. Not only by the one who left the country, but perhaps also by some of those who were left behind. She betrayed and returned defeated by the foreigners. "No better there either, I told you." Here you at least have antibodies to the aggression that is hitting you like a garbage truck unloading its guts at the dump.

And this is how you are likely to remain suspended. Somewhere in the middle. Between *here* and *there*. But neither here, nor there. Nowhere. In the limbo.

My great-grandparents were migrants, they fled the war more than a hundred years ago. My parents and relatives lived in a closed country from which you could hardly escape. My good friends left to be able to pursue their vocations and passions and got to know themselves better far away from where they were born. My teacher had some revelations here in the country while staying away from his family. I stayed in the country because my job as a filmmaker seemed tied to the language and culture of the country I first dreamed in. I tried to discover inside what others

found beyond the horizon. My daughter is looking for her own *inside* in the wider world, which seems to have become smaller.

These intimate stories of migration, which may one day end up in a screenplay or a book, turned out to be rich and extremely dense narrative material.

I have placed migration in the class of other important departures that we experience in our lives: birth, childhood explorations, adolescent searches, leaving home, starting or reuniting a family, old age and death.

All of these narratives, which seem to have important departures at their core, define a class of primordial spaces - inside versus outside or home versus abroad - which in turn configure pairs of concepts such as safety and challenge, belonging and separation, communion and solitude, renunciation and reconfiguration. The dilemma of migration, the search for self, the break from the community from which you emerged, the hope that the shock will break you out of your routine, the self-revelation away from home, the return and time synchronization, the subjective perception of space - these are recurring themes in these stories.

The values of each generation that goes on a migration adventure are always different, but the difficulties, obstacles and achievements are part of being human, of relating to the surrounding world and the continuous reconfiguration of the self in regard to others.

NOTES

- ¹ in *Existential Psychotherapy*
- ² in *The poetics of space*
- ³ in chapter XX of *Camera lucida, reflections on photography*
- ⁴ Violent inter-ethnic conflict between Romanians and Hungarians, resulting in loss of life and hundreds of injuries, which took place in March 1990 as a result of misinformation about the Hungarian takeover of Transylvania.
- ⁵ The first elections after the overthrow of the Ceaușescu regime in May 1990, when the political party that took over the country's leadership from the communist party, the National Salvation Front (NSF), won the election by a landslide over the historical parties
- ⁶ Violent events that took place in 1990 in Bucharest when Ion Iliescu, president of the country and leader of the NSF, brought several thousand miners from Valea Jiului to "restore order" in the capital where large street demonstrations were taking place against the return to power of the communists regrouped under the NSF.
- ⁷ Carabăț proposes a generative-transformational model of Propp's functions, and one of the ways to generate new functions is through the failure to perform the original action; see *Towards a poetics of the cinematographic script* p. 183.
- ⁸ The Diary of Romanian Orthodox monk Nicolae Steinhardt.
- ⁹ A U.S. government program since 1995 that allows approximately 55,000 people from other countries to obtain permanent residence and work in the U.S. each year.
- ¹⁰ A Romanian film inspired by the writings of Geo Bogza and directed by Mircea Danieliuc, released in 1988
- ¹¹ An emergency ordinance secretly issued by the Social Democrat government in 2017 which decriminalized certain acts of corruption and abuse in office in the hope that the leader of this political party at the time, Liviu Dragnea, could escape from the trials he had for committing such acts.
- ¹² a civic organization that was born during the protests against Ordinance 13.

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