



**Fodder for a Hundred Horses: Poems by Matei Vişniec
Translated from the Romanian by Adam J. Sorkin and Lidia Vianu**

This is an exciting and quite extensive selection from the acclaimed poet and playwright Matei Vişniec's excellent volume *Dinner with Marx (La Masa cu Marx)* translated from the Romanian by Adam J. Sorkin and Lidia Vianu. It's such a joy to be able to feature one of the most significant writers living and writing outside Romania today whose work we admire. And if you didn't see or read a play by Vişniec, be sure to check out [How to Explain the History of Communism to Mental Patients and Other Plays](#) (Seagull Books, 2015), the first anthology of his dramatic work edited by Jozefina Komporaly, a must read collection of seven of his most impressive and outspoken plays.

We'd love to hear from you: find us on Twitter [@TranslateMonth](#), tag us on Twitter [@TranslateMonth](#) and share using #NTM2018 and #TranslateMonth2018, join our mailing list, submit a translation month event, or like our [Facebook](#) page. We hope you'll join us and celebrate your favorite translations throughout September.

—Claudia Serea and Loren Kleinman

Till the End of Our Lives

Defeated soldiers were returning
led by their defeated generals
to the defeated city
the defeated populace was weeping
the children of the defeated were no longer allowed
to laugh, hop on one leg
or play at soldiers
the mothers of the defeated soldiers
covered their eyes in shame
the brass band of the defeated city
remained silent
the defeated weren't allowed to celebrate
their return home
we'll be the defeated till the end of our lives
the defeated told themselves
in fact they were the sole survivors
of the battle

Fodder for a Hundred Horses

It hadn't ever crossed my mind, tired
as I was, at the end of day, already forgotten,
forsaken on the plain disfigured by fog
It hadn't ever crossed my mind that I'd become fodder
for a hundred grazing horses
just because my body had
nourished the grass blades
during times of ugliness and drought
it hadn't ever crossed my mind that the last
grass blades
nourished on me for so long would become
fodder for a hundred greedy horses
a hundred starving horses
a hundred wild horses
harnessed to my body

Only the Ocean View

Nothing she promised me
turned out to be true
no wardrobes with a thousand dresses
no ballroom
no garden with peacocks and stags
not even a castle
for three days I looked for it along the sea cliff
and I couldn't find it, her palace with an ocean view
all I found was the ocean view
but in the end this filled me with warmth:
she hadn't lied after all
she's a good woman, she loves me

Somewhere, Sometime

Somewhere, sometime I lived in the desert
maybe I'd been a snake or a scorpion
maybe I'd been a bird that fed on mice
how else can I explain my joy in seeing the world from above

it's not that I'm exhausted
the sun's beginning to turn me into sand
I'd been a mountain now I'm a mound of stones
people pull themselves up by my shoulders
to climb to the top of my head
from up there something can be seen
but what?

It Felt like Punishment

There was great turmoil in the air, the skies, the universe
fogs lifted, rains fell heavily
raging meteorites collided together, sparks flew
thunder could be heard, a deafening clatter
as if a legion of nuts had come rolling
down a tin roof

but to me, in the center of the world,
nothing was happening, I felt sad
it's not a good idea to be in the core of the nucleus
in the heart of the kernel
the very place where equidistances radiate from

I was alone there and nothing was happening to me
but the fact that everything kept whirling about me
felt like punishment

I Can No Longer Hear

He's coming closer and closer, here he is
the waiter brings my coffee
and sets it on my table with a flourish
the spoon gleams, the white cream
whizzes
the lump of sugar seems a meteorite
that missed its target

I scarcely have time to consider
all this when the waiter
abruptly turns on his heels
and leaves without a word

I'm alone before my cup of coffee
gradually I become overwhelmed by despair
I can no longer see, no longer hear

to drink it?
or not to drink it?

If Everything Has a Beginning

If everything has a beginning and an end
it means that death too has a beginning and an end

that's the reason I'm here with you
waiting for the end of death
as curious as a child
to see what will begin after all questions
get cut off by death

there's no hurry, I'll wait without protest
I know it may take a while
I know I may remain the very last one in the waiting room
just me with the word *death*
stuck to the roof of my mouth like the prompter in his box

strangely, all essential things come to me
in a foreign language
death invents new words
to hide its traces
but I'm still waiting and waiting,
for if everything has a beginning and an end
it means that our lives are comets
surely we must meet each other again
all we need is patience

Like a Coat Become too Large

There are days words get sick of man
of man's brain, of
man's mouth that bites in vain
even the word *man* itself
so to speak
that's the source of all words

irritated by their own origin
words grow useless
like a coat become too large
like the word *body*
that becomes irrelevant
once the body is buried

sick of what they're obliged to say
words bury themselves in the earth
in the hot, teeming earth
of man's mouth

Now

One sublime, singular, truly infinite morning
when many things were more than possible
the word *now* suddenly stumbled
upon itself

it suddenly bumped up against its terrible situation
it couldn't go beyond itself
it's as if I've been cursed, it said to itself
I'm a word without a future
in fact I've no idea where I come from
or where I'm going
whenever I try really hard to dig me
out of myself
an enormous root grows from me
and once again I fall back into myself
I'm my own trap
my own prison
my own warden

perhaps if I vanished from the universe
many things might breathe more easily
it's a lot better to have only a past and a future

Nothing

one couldn't go any farther
the word *useless* was planted firmly in the ground
in every gesture of ours
and even in the heart of all the other words

we could no longer come close to anyone else
the word *useless* had taken away our skin
as well as all other words
how can you come close to someone
when you no longer have skin?
when you no longer have limits?
when you no longer have words?

right beside the word *useless*
the word *impossible* had dug its teeth
deep in the ground
other dead bodies were scattered about
deflated words such as *nobody*
nowhere
never

as if there had been a storm
and it had vacuumed up the core of things
words had been sucked in together with people's mouths
in their wake remained only
one spare, unique word
on the shoulders of which always fell
the final cleanup
the word *nothing*

Waiting for the Resurrection of Flowers

I was waiting in front of the word *flower*
a bouquet of wilted carnations in my hand
I had it from a trusted source that the resurrection of flowers
was to happen within the next 24 hours

behind me the entire flower shop
smelled of death, of rotten
petals trampled underfoot
thousands of people were there
waiting for the resurrection of flowers

I had it from a trusted source that flowers
were to be resurrected within the next 48 hours
as for the dead, nothing was known, they needed longer to wait
but the flowers on their graves
were going to be resurrected on the third day

He Waited and Waited

He waited and waited until he his tusks were ground down
from waiting

his gloves were worn away from waiting too
but finally he was rewarded
longboats filled with sweat
floated down the river

as in a mirror that puked knuckles,
pitted skin and missed targets
he awoke to life
as big as he was, from time to time universal
riddled by white nights of sleeplessness, exhausted like a field
after a month or two of a blizzard

white and unrecognizable he began to move again
counting his steps
three more until he reaches me
one
two
three

Eye, Heart, Brain

When it had to choose, my hand no longer obeyed my eye
my eye no longer obeyed my heart
and my heart no longer obeyed my brain
they swooped together like a flock of birds: eye,
heart, brain, hands and feet
dozens of fingers, lips and ears
a cluster of organs each rushing
in a different direction

this was my chance
to obtain the object of my desires
and look at what I ended up with: I burst into the air
the atoms of my flesh started
to revolve around one another and rush outward
at a fantastic speed
but because of infinite time
on each of these tiny planets
forms of life have already begun to appear

At Least Two Hands

How at the same time can you be
sea and ship, bird and sky
something like this cannot happen in our world
you'd better return
to the womb you came from

in our world you just cannot be both
birth and born
hearing and ear
sight and eye
maybe there, in the swamp
you come from, in the song you hear us in
the blindness you watch us with
the only mother you can squeeze inside

maybe there, things can be as you wish
here with us you must learn to keep silent
and never touch a thing
until you grow
at least two hands

Everything That Disappointed You at Birth

Who else could I be but the wound collector?
yes, gentlemen, I've come here to buy
some of your hidden wounds

but gentlemen, hideous scars no longer interest me
now I collect only more sensitive wounds
secret traumas
hurts at least three generations old
pains inherited from parents
sharp cuts from the moment your feelings took form
everything that disappointed you at birth
that, gentlemen, is what interests me
your first drop of emotional blood
those first words that you spoke
and have yet to heal

So Dumb

So dumb is the turtle
bearing the world on its back
that when it reaches me
 it gets stuck
one way to go around me is to the right
and another way to go around me is to the left
two different destinies open before it
I'm not allowed to speak but
 I can cock an eye
to the left is the abyss, endless pain,
 lies and hatred
to the right is evil, mortal sin
 the death of sons and oblivion
no middle way exists, I explain
 with my gestures
you'll have to choose

In Bright Light

In bright light the tiny grain
born in the dark
no doubt with a dark heart
melted at once and became a mountain of salt

this mountain of edible salt
dissolved in the salad, the soup, the bread
set on the table

I was dining alone and because I was hungry
I failed to connect cause and effect

I finished eating, drank my coffee sweetened
with salt
and again failed to understand
my life lasted a long time
what a long life, the illuminated grain said to me,
the essential grain
but I never heard that voice
later when the world found these lines
everybody thought them the words of a clumsy poem

About the author



Poet, playwright, novelist and journalist, Matei Vișniec was born January 29, 1956, in Rădăuți, a small city in the north of Romania. His first book of poetry appeared in 1980. Vișniec is the author of five volumes of poetry, six novels and more than 50 plays. His plays have been translated into over 30 languages and staged in many countries. A selection of his plays translated into English, *How to Explain the History of Communism to Mental Patients and Other Plays*, came out from Seagull Books in 2015.

Since 1987 Vișniec has lived in France where, from 1990 on, he has been a journalist at Radio France Internationale. After the fall of communism in Romania in 1989, his creative work developed between France and Romania, between two cultures and two languages, between West and East. He writes his poetry and fiction in Romanian, but his plays, now, in French

Matei Vișniec's literary achievements have been recognized by numerous awards, starting with the Poetry Prize of the Writers Union of Romania for his 1984 book, *The Wise Man at Teatime*. In 2015, he was honored with the Romanian Academy Prize as well as the Lifetime Achievement Award of the Theatre Union of Romania (UNITER). In France he has won the Press Award of the International Theater Festival of Avignon several times, the European Prize of the Society of Dramatic Authors and Composers (SACD), and the Jean Monnet Prize for European Literature (2016).

Dinner with Marx – from which these poems derive – is a translation of Vișniec's book of poems *La masă cu Marx*, which was initially published in Bucharest by the Romanian Book Publishing House in 2012.

About the translators



Adam J. Sorkin has published more than sixty books of Romanian translation. His work has the Poetry Society (U.K.) Translation Prize, the Kenneth Rexroth Memorial Translation Prize, the Ioan Flora Translation Prize, and the Poesis Translation Prize, among others. He has been awarded Fulbright, Rockefeller Foundation, Arts Council of England, New York State Arts Council, Academy of American Poets, Soros Foundation, Romanian Cultural Institute, and National Endowment for the Arts support for his literary activity. Sorkin's recent books include *The Hunchbacks' Bus* by Nora Iuga (Bitter Oleander Press, translated with Diana Manole), longlisted for the 2017 National Translation Award (NTA) in Poetry; *Syllables of Flesh* by Floarea Țuțuianu (Plamen Press, with Irma Giannetti); and *A Deafening Silence* by Magda Cârnelci (Shearsman Books, with Mădălina Bănuțu and the author). *The Return of the Barbarians* by Mircea Dinescu, translated with Lidia Vianu, is appearing from Bloodaxe Books in the spring of 2018. Sorkin is Distinguished Professor Emeritus, Penn State University.



Lidia Vianu, a poet, novelist, critic, and translator, is Professor of Modernist and Contemporary British Literature at the University of Bucharest, where she is also Director of the publishing house *Contemporary Literature Press* (<http://mttlc.ro>) and of the eZine *Translation Café*. She has been Fulbright professor at the University of California Berkeley and SUNY Binghamton. Vianu has published over 20 books of literary criticism, including *The AfterMode*, and *T. S. Eliot: An Author for All Seasons*. She has also published several English learning manuals, and has translated over 70 books into English and Romanian, among which Marin Sorescu's *The Bridge*, translated with Adam J. Sorkin, won the 2005 Poetry Society (U.K.) Corneliu M. Popescu Prize for European Poetry Translation. Vianu has published both in Romania and abroad. *Censorship in Romania* came out from the Central European University Press, 1997, and Vianu has also written a novel, *Prisoner in the Mirror* (1993) and three poetry collections: *1, 2, 3* (1997), *Moderato 7* (1998), *Very* (2001).