

# What Clumsiness of Heart, This Night: New Translations of Romanian Poetry



Today, we're excited to share a selection of new translations of Romanian poetry: an excerpt from *The God's Orbit* by **Aura Christi** translated by **Adam J. Sorkin and Petru Iamandi**, as well as several poems by **Traian T. Coșovei** translated by **Adam J. Sorkin and Andreea Iulia Scridon**. These poems have in common the searing language with which they confront either the divinity in the case of Christi's poems, or the human existence in Coșovei's unforgettable verse.

Let us know what you think! Follow us on Twitter [@TranslateMonth](#), tag us [@TranslateMonth](#) and share using [#TranslationMonth](#), 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 of poets from all over the world throughout September.

—*Claudia Serea and Loren Kleinman*

**Excerpt from *The God's Orbit* by Aura Christi**  
*Translated by Adam J. Sorkin and Petru Iamandi*

### **Everything's Quiet**

The rain was quick, more like a shower,  
and killed the heat all at once;  
one salvo I was about to say. Everything's quiet  
and somehow finished. To live day by day  
and to call whatever happens simple:  
life, while life is too far,  
somewhere one cannot reach in a flash.

But where exactly? you keep wondering and descend  
deeper and deeper inside;  
and you start to see everything with a transformed clarity:  
the high sky, crystalline, the summer day, your hands  
like nations of hands. You descend ever more slowly  
until you recognize the road that is you yourself,  
or someone forgotten by the centuries, who...

### **What Clumsiness of Heart**

And it was evening. And in my soul  
overwhelmed with quiet and great sadness  
there was light: our comprehension is  
like that of the blind who feel their way in the dark  
and now and then search for their soul on the pyres.  
But this is a story with roots  
driven deep in the Achaean past, when they knew  
life was a sort of trunk of being  
pressed against itself, like nectar,  
in late autumn, in the grapes.

Life is a sign of the god's presence.  
At bottom the blood has understood  
what I could not grasp  
with my mind, of a lonely man locked  
in the wild circle of life, like in a heresy  
that rouses passion – tent of our despair,  
its root flowing into myth.  
Life is a shelter for the god; yes, life is a nest  
of being, a drive shaft of the world marked by a smile.  
Life is the boundary of non-being in which  
someone has snowed; oh, how much snow!

“What clumsiness of heart this night,  
fallen on its muzzle like a divine animal,”  
my daimon declares and inhales sharply  
into its chest of grass or granite.

## **Oh, Morning, Pure Accident**

Oh, morning, pure accident –  
the being’s house, spur to completion!  
And this insane hurry, breathless,  
to-and-fro, between you and me.  
Everything just to be, here and now;  
yes, everything just to be beyond the essence of things,  
beyond all measure,  
with your ears pricked up to the blood  
gurgling in the caverns; blood knows it all.  
Indeed, the first to understand, to speak, and to keep quiet.  
I’m its witness. The moon is witness–  
the roar of the unseen that  
brushed me with its muzzle in passing.

It is a sign, a message, a summons. Silence.  
In its matrix: a beginning. Its time is come.  
The colors – Eden’s seal – throb in the statues.  
Everything’s a song, a boundary, an accomplishment, an element,  
waiting on its ridge, and then – again a boundary,  
a song and a greater loneliness  
that feeds them all,  
fulfilling itself in things.  
Deep within their pulsing, there’s something obscure,  
that above all at evening supports the sky  
gathered in these divine quince –  
orbits of someone more lonely,  
purer and too full to be now.

## Beauty, the Soul's Anchor

As much blood – that much faith;  
as much faith – that much poetry,  
he mumbled, the sleepwalker,  
then he disappeared, leaving the sky behind  
like the brave young heroes in fairy tales,  
who, setting out for the world beyond to fight in,  
made sure they left traces everywhere  
so they'd know the way back,  
as late at night the Fates had foretold.

Beauty is the soul's anchor,  
he mumbled, the wandering son. Beauty  
is the air between worlds. We, gathering  
around him, gaping, as soon as we woke up  
– vassals of habits – contradicted him,  
defending our old nature, failed to agree,  
made signs to each other, discreetly, kept teasing him,  
“And the world that is, what could it be?”  
“The world? Nothing more than a ghost,”  
he answered, wrapping his cloak around him.  
“Yes, the world is a sort of ancient pattern  
that envelops us, the way the sky envelops the clouds,  
the way the forest contains the asymmetrical oak  
of my great grandmother, and the sea  
– the dolphins – a sign that cherubs  
are more than a mere tale,  
and the planets – more than wonder,  
and the houses – less than they appear.”

“And we, what can we be?”  
the crowd pressed him, sniggering  
while trying to drive that useless lunatic –  
without whom they felt they couldn't live – into a corner.  
“We? What can we be? The progeny of chimeras  
who have become the masters of  
all the seen and the unseen,  
who no longer differentiate between life and death  
and who have invaded what you somehow  
inappropriately call *reality*,  
defeating it little by little,  
especially when everything becomes  
a perfect desert.”

“We hardly understand a word,”  
whispered a clever someone in the confused  
crowd. But the lunatic raved on:  
“The gods are living patterns, memories  
of the world's childhood.”

The wells – orbits of someone too lonely  
to be born in any other form.  
The grass is a sign that we can always  
become the stems of flowers, cranes, petunias,  
tongues of fire or fingers of terrible angels  
who remember once in a while  
that cicadas sing only in sleep.  
We are the song of someone  
who wants never to be awakened  
and who for centuries has been singing  
and praying even while asleep.”

## **The Fire Child**

God, I wished so hard  
to reach you out of death!  
I trembled, burned, died and came to life  
in an instant, falling back for no apparent reason  
into that childish way of being, as when – erupting  
from the depths of the water – you desperately  
grab hold of a life-ring.  
Everything was exactly as in former times  
– yes, in another life – when I felt  
the sea closer and closer:  
its smells subdued me, travelled through my being and soul,  
stirring them from the depths, as the plough  
in early spring turns one furrow  
over another, bigger and blacker.

When it was very late, when lateness  
seemed to have reached its end point, I understood  
that in all of that history I was neither the aim  
nor the target. There was someone else involved, I once called him  
the stranger, the fire child, the heathen...  
I'm but an instrument  
in this crazy game which, oh God,  
I understand less and less, but maybe  
I don't even need to understand;  
for everything is far from comprehension.  
I need only to remain pure and to wait.  
To descend within, deeper and deeper, and not question anything.  
To entrust myself entirely to that mystic nameless whirlpool.  
There, faraway – in the intimate abyss –  
to listen to my blood. To follow blindly  
the words that come to me I don't know where from  
until I am no longer myself, until all that I am

comes to dust;  
then, out of the dust someone begins to put together  
a sort of cradle, earth, sanctuary, maybe a throne,  
or a shrine for something greater and more powerful  
that brings me other words  
which I write down most neatly  
– in a cold, exact light –  
far from evil and good,  
far from all that's on the surface,  
where I am kept  
alive by that fire child.

## **The Kingdom**

What mean deity has founded a kingdom inside me?  
Oh ho, the same body – the ancient arena of battle,  
where armies of fear keep coming to blows  
like beasts on a precipitous ridge...

Suffering gets monstrous, I say. Out of its ruins  
I rose, not knowing why, until...  
Love life like you love its nonsensical guides –  
I repeat, a cuckoo, thrown into someone else's nest, waiting.

But what's to be seen in this nest? Quietude?  
Waiting, like a snake that's buoyed by the wave of salt?  
What a rumble, what a roar, what a howl. Death is alive, it's everywhere.  
In the middle of life – the same deep suffering.

## Delphi

Apollo appears between the columns,  
descends step by step,  
supports the sky with one hand  
and the wise axle of night.

Hera watches over the snakes of the olive tree.  
Zeus stares up at the ridges.  
Look, there's another beginning in store for us  
in the remote garden that's falling asleep

and waiting for the gods to arrive on horseback  
in the chill startling the morning,  
balanced on the backs of the slender dolphins  
that are going to disperse the mist

from here, from Delphi – sublime city,  
with its curved sky, held in the hands  
of slender gods, led by Apollo  
and flights of tender dolphins.

## At Joseph Brodsky's Grave

Fall is at its zenith; here I am, God,  
in the murmur of the grass that sleeps  
at the edge of the city cornered by the cold  
and the wolves through which I howl my sadness.

Alone, under the ivy, I lure my ghost,  
the darkness trapped in the sarcophagus,  
shaded by pine trees for centuries, where I listen  
to the silence bearing fruit in the lost distich.

Everything is as was written in the book.  
From psalms, wars, dead histories,  
through millennia, royal charters, your glance  
flows and flows, gently, demiurge.

You're like the sea, you're like the fire,  
you're like the sky with fortune in its favor,  
in which we work – ghost within ghost –  
lands, eyes, temples, air,

haze, sweet scent; through you  
everything becomes rounded, without stain. Who  
turns the ghost into an error  
and the sky into a giant bird?

I rise from the rocks, melancholy.  
In the gods' twilight, the autumn knows:  
from hell the beauty founded to lie  
sings with much love.

My sister, death, knows all.  
Over the white peaks, in the living quiet,  
a last smile in the book of life  
blooms in the shadow of sadness...

It's you I miss, God. It's cold,  
through storms and lagoons I cry my sadness aloud.  
In this poem albatrosses build nests  
under the eyelids of red roses.

In this poem, alone, through you  
I wane, I light up, I darken,  
I rise, I love, I extinguish in everyone  
and I slip away in the vanquished grass.

## About the author



**Aura Christi** has published 15 volumes of poetry and 6 novels. Born in 1967 in Chişinău, Republic of Moldova, she now lives in Romania. The poems here derive from her 2016 collection in Romanian, *The God's Orbit*, which will come out from Mica Press in the U.K. in early 2021. Her work appeared in English in the 2003 anthology of poems of poets from Moldova (the former Bessarabia), *Singular Destinies*, and more recently, in the journal *Poem* (in the U.K.) and *Osiris*, *Cider Press Review*, *North of Oxford* and *Apple Valley Review*.



## Poems by Traian T. Coșovei

*Translated from Romanian by Adam J. Sorkin and Andreea Iulia Scridon*

### ***Translator's Note***

Note: At face value, Coșovei's poems shouldn't be hard to translate: they resemble the American poetry of the 1960s, characterized by minimalistic colloquial language. (Their setting and atmosphere, however, are profoundly Romanian, making frequent references to both communism and the Romanian Revolution.) As such, it was precisely the point to streamline the translation as much as possible, to use as few words as we possibly could and to adhere to the author's original style, even when this made the temptation of providing an "interpretation" greater than that of a translation.

— *Andreea Iulia Scridon*

### **My Morning Walk**

From the top of the stairwell

I saw the dog climbing down the thousand and one steps

the old dog taken out for a walk on his leash

the old dog taken out or shoved out into the splendor

of the winter morning

he had my eyes, my past years, the rings under my eyes

he had my name written on his dirty collar

with an ending of tenderness, with a beginning of ferocity

squeezing a shadow through the stairs' iron bars

in his eyes I saw the lights of Ellis Island

and mountains of silk spinning night's immense roulette

in his faded eyes I saw apocalypse glaze over

and my unpaid debts and my unlived life

(and god, he had my years and my tears)

the old dog taken out for a walk in the splendor of the last

winter morning  
pushed by a thousand and one steps, one by one,  
until the end and further  
from where there's no  
return

### **The Last Herbarium, the First Insectarium**

I'm looking for a sky of stars,  
I want to discover the carbide scent of childhood  
The slingshot, the mulberries gathered from the asphalt  
Your first lock of hair, your first breakup letter.

Darkness descends, time can't stop.  
The sun rises, time's no longer right  
Evening falls, its perfume takes the form of your body.  
The sun rises, your dress waits in ambush.  
It grows cold, your beetle broach  
Scurries through my desires.

Wine accumulates, minutia multiply,  
And your perfume remains a mistaken memory:  
A flower in an insectarium of darkness.

**Grandfather “Entre Deux Guerres”**  
*dedicated to Nichita Stănescu*

Silvery AstroTurf for silver foxes –  
the dolphin, oh, the sad, despairing dolphin splashing  
a stream of water over the stone edge  
of the swimming pool –  
swimmer  
parting the water from one world to another  
greyhounds  
greyhounds  
greyhounds  
pushing Jordan’s plain of bones with their muzzles –  
golfers carried by the Gulf Stream far towards the pole –  
a sawmill to cutting the ice cubes for  
guests’ glasses,  
jumps on a trampoline,  
so many jumps on a trampoline,  
ah, too many jumps on a trampoline  
and your body over which the grass  
has begun to grow just like snakes raising their heads  
to the music of snake charmers...

In a wheeled chaise lounge, grandfather gives haircuts  
to silver foxes and phantasms.

Grandfather is “*entre deux guerres*” and the silver foxes  
drape around his neck their long tails  
with which they swept the snowy streets of Europe,  
while the guests declared in small voices,  
haunted by ghosts:

Grandfather fought!

At Marathon he crawled with his knees chopped off,  
at Waterloo he crawled with his knees chopped off,  
at Austerlitz he saw the sun with his knees chopped off,  
at the Atlantic Wall he crawled with his knees chopped off,  
in Siberia, at Mărășești, at Verdun  
he crawled, crawled with his knees chopped off –

So what if he had no knees?

What booty did you take, grandfather? –  
the guests ask in small voices,  
like princely heirs strangled in their sleep.

I took Constantinople with all its banners –  
I took Delphi with all its tigers and elephants –  
the Cabaret Voltaire in Zürich with all its cannons –  
Canterbury and the Tower of London together with the queen,  
I took it all...

And whom did you leave Chaucer for!!!

Under the thousand-watt sun,  
grandfather stays silent and gives haircuts to silver foxes and phantasms –  
Grandfather stays silent and gives haircuts to silver foxes with silver stars for bravery,  
he sits mutely and gives haircuts to silver foxes with their marshal's baton,  
while the guests, the hanged, the shipwrecked,  
ask him in small voices,  
rustling like banknotes:  
and that hole in your forehead, where did you get it?...

Who gave the order for that hole in your forehead?

Do you suppose he'll be able to receive a decoration

with that hole in his forehead?!

And who'll climb up to hang it on his chest

in place of a heart?

How will you look photographed up on the redoubt

with that hole in your forehead?

How will you crawl with your knees chopped off

with that hole in your forehead?

Grandfather stays silent and gives haircuts to silver foxes and phantasms...

Grandfather is "*entre deux guerres*" and gives haircuts to phantasms.

What does it matter that he can hardly see himself crawling through

the polished skeletons of the swimmers parting the water

from one world to another...

What does it matter that he can hardly see himself crawling through

the blue skeletons of the phantasms?

What did grandfather leave behind?

What remained after him?

A silvery AstroTurf of silver foxes –

golfers carried by the Gulf Stream far towards the pole –

a sawmill moving senselessly

beside the guests' skeletons,

greyhounds

greyhounds

greyhounds

using their muzzles to push his electronic ghost

split in half by the stream of water

of the sad, despairing dolphin.

Grandfather fought!

So what if he had no knees?

### **On the Loneliness of Armed Concrete**

It's so hot that the cemetery across the street  
has taken off all its crosses.

I think I'm going move and take along my old landlady  
with her old, rusty stove,  
the icon that long ago lost its sunrise,  
and go far, far, as far away as possible,  
to Gorky Park.

It's quiet there, on the days that aerostats don't pass by,  
impatient for applause –

It's hot there on the afternoons when the dogs  
piss on the old regime.

It's cold there when those who had the courage to stare at their reflections  
in the deep waters of yesterday are exhumed. And the fish with silver fins, the chosen one...

I want to start the world over,  
step by step,  
letter by letter,  
word by word.

I dream of myself in front of a screen, wincing at the memory of light.

In a hall echoing with whistles, catcalls and ovations,

I want to wait for the definitive fall of darkness.

I want to defend myself, even so,

freshly shaved, with my tears wiped away,  
before the pensioners of Gorky Park.

Nobody talks anymore  
about the ice-skaters of Gorky Park...

The scales retain the same measure of indifference,  
the same imprecision of absence.

It's winter. Period.

How much does your soul weigh?

### **About the author**

**Traian T. Coșovei** (1954 – 2014) was a Romanian poet of the '80s Generation. He was a founding member of the "Cenaclul de Luni" literary circle, a group that would eventually set the tone for much of postmodern Romanian poetry. He was the recipient of a series of prizes, including the Prize of the Romanian Academy and the International Nichita Stănescu Prize. Coșovei published over twenty books of poetry, literary criticism, and prose.



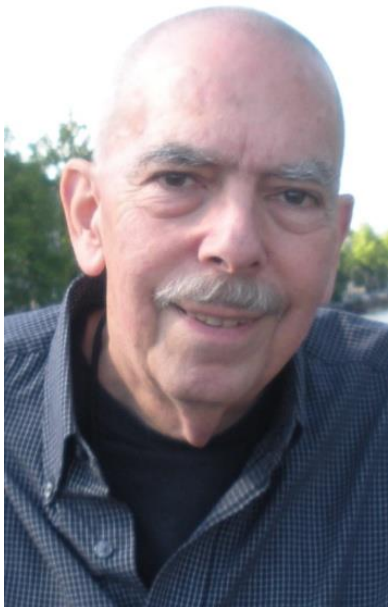
## About the translators



**Petru Iamandi** teaches in Galați, Romania, at the Dunărea de Jos University [Lower Danube University]. A prolific translator, with over 100 books between Romanian/English, Iamandi translated Mihail Gălățanu's *The Starry Womb* with Sorkin (Diálogos, 2014).



**Andreea Iulia Scridon** is a Romanian-American writer and translator. She studied Comparative Literature at King's College London and is currently studying Creative Writing at the University of Oxford. She is assistant editor at *Asymptote Journal* and the *Oxford Review of Books*. Her translations of I.D. Sîrbu are forthcoming with AB Press.



**Adam J. Sorkin** has won numerous awards including the Poetry Society (U.K.), Ioan Flora, and Poesis prizes. He most recently published Mircea Dinescu's *The Barbarians' Return*, translated with Lidia Vianu (Bloodaxe, 2018), his 60th book of translation. He is Distinguished Professor of English Emeritus, Penn State Brandywine. Sorkin's translations have appeared in *NTM* in 2013, 2018, and 2019.