

2020

# Life Writing Prize

ELENA CROITORU



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LIFE WRITING PRIZE LONGLIST 2020

## **On Sigma-Algebras**

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*Elena Croitoru*

I sneaked my passport into my back pocket, hoping my father didn't see it. Flights were being announced over the tannoy so I couldn't hear what he said. Because I only saw him once a year, it seemed as if parts of his old self were disappearing with each encounter. The only remnant of his youth was the summer-sea blue of his eyes. It made me wonder how little of us is left by the time we grow old. His skin – which had one deep wrinkle for each year we spent apart – hung loosely around his cheekbones, then bunched up on the sides of his mouth when he smiled.

"I'm so happy to see my little Ana," he said. When he hugged me, his hands felt shaky on my shoulders. "When do you have to go back?"

I planned to return to London the next day, but I knew that would disappoint him, so I said, "Let's go to the bus stop. The wake is in one hour."

The wake. Such a strange word. The ritual of watching over somebody who will never be awake in this world again. The last time Professor Coman and I saw each other, I had lied to him. I said I couldn't stay on as a lecturer in his department because I liked programming better. I didn't want him to think I chose money over research. During his last lecture, he barely looked at me. He stood in front of the blackboard with his hands covered in chalk dust and talked about sigma-algebras, which formed the basis of programming languages and helped machines unequivocally interpret what we meant. He defined them as pairs of sets and functions. Even a person was a sigma-algebra: a set of circumstances and the actions available to them.

My father and I headed out of the air-conditioned airport and into the overheated street filled with exhaust fumes. A group of kids gathered around

a sliced watermelon that lay in the trunk of a Dacia. Its fragrance wafted our way, reminding me of the hot summers I used to spend solving geometry problems and eating chunks of sweet, cold watermelon at my parents' country house while the macramé tablecloth left an imprint on my forearms. Nowadays, I wasn't studying much maths, just working in an office.

My father took my suitcase and kept lifting it, to protect it from scratches. "It has wheels Dad," I said. "Don't lift it. It's bad for your back."

He gazed ahead as if he hadn't heard me and moved with the energy of a teenager, though I knew he had taken an overnight train to Bucharest. I wondered at what age he would finally stop proving himself.

We boarded the bus and sat on hard plastic seats as a small TV screen showed food adverts. There were Romanian words I hadn't used in a while: *sarmalute* – vine leaf wraps, *visinata* – sour cherry brandy, *mortal* – something so amazing you'd die for it. Over the years, my native language had been fading and by the time I reached thirty, it felt as though my childhood had happened to somebody else, a foreigner who had divided their time between a cramped concrete flat and a classroom that smelled like diesel (which they used to treat the floors). I leaned against the dusty bus window and felt drops of sweat sliding down my back, beneath my voile blouse.

"Your mother is buying a wreath. She wouldn't let me do it. I said she should just buy a medium-sized one, but she's taking her time. She asked the florist to show her five different designs. Five."

I couldn't understand why after so many years, we still weren't used to each other's flaws. When I was little, my parents argued every day, sometimes my father would drink, sometimes my mother wouldn't let him into our flat. Between their arguments and the boys who bullied me in school corridors for being too skinny, there wasn't much room for silence. Back in London, there was silence in my flat, then silence in the office.

My father cast proud glances at me while I pretended not to notice. Dusk still lingered in the sky, so the tower blocks lining the boulevard looked like matrices of gold and black squares. I imagined their residents

keeping their kitchen lights on so they would feel more awake. I remembered what it was like living in a small flat. Back when I was in school, I used to think these places were containers for limited destinies.

"I think she is depressed," my father said, leaning toward me. "You know how she used to scold me every time I shopped at the supermarket, always saying I bought the wrong types of apples or meat that's too fatty?"

I suppressed a smile. It would be the first time he was able to tell anything concerning Mum.

"Well, she doesn't do that now. She's upset about something. I can tell."

"Give it some time," I said, but I agreed with him, it wasn't like her to hold back.

"Your mother and I are coming with you to the cemetery. It's Ceausescu's anniversary." He sighed and wiped his forehead with a battered handkerchief. "We used to be better off when he was alive."

My father's generation seemed convinced that communism was better for us, but I wasn't sure. It was hard to know what a person needed, let alone an entire country.

We got off in front of the University of Bucharest. My mother was waiting under the shelter of the bus stop. Her slight figure had been shrinking for years and now it drowned in folds of black cotton sateen. She was still in mourning even though grandma had died five years ago.

"Look at you, you're so slim!" she said, her arms flailing in unison with her words. "Why are you slim? Do you eat enough? You know your immune system can't function if you don't eat. Are you taking any vitamins?"

"You worry too much," I said. We were in front of the Mathematics building where I used to study. The Faculty of Languages and Literature, which she attended, was just a few meters away.

My mother shuddered when she saw the crumbling marble steps. Back in the early nineties, there was a miners' riot. Led by a former communist, they came all the way from Targu Jiu on foot and beat up passers-by who looked rich, then entered university amphitheatres and attacked students.

My mother was alone in a classroom, working on her PhD when they caught her. They dragged her by her hair, into the street while the skin of her legs bruised and turned red. She kept looking up at the sky as they shouted because she thought they would trample her to death and she didn't want to die without facing heaven. When they weren't looking, she got up and ran as fast as she could, then hid behind a yet-untorn monument dedicated to the Communist Party. Maybe that was when she became so fearful of everything. All this happened after the revolution. Our people let the wrong kind of wilderness out after being trapped for decades, or some of them hadn't wanted communism to end because their lives had been better back then. Every time I thought about it, I wanted to kick those men, to curl my fingers into the flesh of their necks, though I knew they were probably dead by now. Their life expectancy had been low. Life had been hard for them so they had wanted the same for others.

I wrapped my arm around my mother's shoulders. Now, we were surrounded by morning commuters who rushed to the metro station. How our country had changed.

We entered the building and followed the crowd which had gathered in the Ghica amphitheatre. The faculty staff made speeches but I wasn't listening. Professors sat on chairs, around an improvised stage and I recognised a few faces. The students in the back rows looked far younger than me.

I tried to remember some of the names of the undergrads I used to know. We used to borrow bread, Boeuf salad or leftovers from each other whenever we were too hungry. My days used to be the same: go to work in the morning, then study all evening in my dorm's hallway, while sitting on the polished concrete floor with my back against boxy radiators. Professor Coman once told us about stopping time sigma-algebras, which involved repeating an experiment until a particular time passed. I could have said to him this was what I tried to avoid by leaving, but I doubt we would have understood each other better. He loved those who gave themselves to ideas, whereas I gave myself to my own life.

After we arrived at the cemetery, I followed the funeral procession while my parents stood by Ceausescu's grave. I often thought about our former president and his execution which was broadcast on national TV. The way his body jerked as they shot him, again and again, stayed with me for decades after that. He had said, "Don't shoot my children, don't shoot." I was taken in by these soft words, even if they came from a dictator. Besides, how did they weigh his sins and decide how many times he should die? People often said he was condemned not so much for his crimes but for what he could say about other members of the Communist Party who didn't want the truth to get out. As I was growing up, I tried to build my life around this memory of violence, but it was always there and my past hardened around it. I sometimes think that when I saw him dying on that crumbling patch of red concrete, I decided I wasn't going to stay, though I was too young to have decided that. Even so, maybe my ability to leave places and people was a form of quiet violence.

I was ahead of the group of students and ended up close to the freshly dug grave which smelled of damp soil and crushed grass. A man with thick-rimmed glasses nodded at the priest and talked about the professor's legacy in theoretical informatics. I realised he was Professor Coman's research assistant. My replacement. He had the life I could have had and looked content enough underneath his apparent sadness.

The professor's pallid face was unrecognisable and all the inexplicable light that used to surround him had disappeared. It also felt as though my past was crumpled and crammed among the heads of red and white carnations lining his coffin. I tried to count all the flowers that were cut for this funeral, thinking their number expressed our wealth as a nation on a given day, or at least this was what Professor Coman would have said. Or maybe he would have looked at them and tried to discern a pattern in the way they were laid. One wreath, arranged in a circle with a split at the bottom and another bouquet at the top, looked like the Mandelbrot set. It made me think about the shape of his soul, out there in the nothingness.

He was the first person to say, “You can do things, Ana.”

Professor Coman could see things nobody else could.

“But don’t forget the important people,” he had also said.

My parents stood close together a few meters away, looking forlorn even though they were surrounded by a small crowd. I wondered if my mother had figured out that I had applied for British citizenship when I asked her to send me my birth certificate. She had an almost mystic intuition.

A man read from an old newspaper over Ceausescu’s grave, but my parents didn’t seem to be listening and kept looking at me.

I watched four men lower Professor Coman’s coffin into the grave and dropped my plane ticket onto the soft, black soil.

## BIOGRAPHY

**ELENA CROITORU** lives in Kent and has an MSt in Creative Writing from the University of Cambridge. Her work has been selected for the Best New British & Irish Poets 2019 and she won second place in the Edward Thomas Award, third place in the Open House Poetry Competition, and was highly commended in the Wales Poetry Award. She was shortlisted for the Gregory O'Donoghue Prize, Wasafiri New Writing Prize, Bridport Prize & other awards. She is also editing her first novel & working on a poetry collection. You can find her on Twitter [@elenacroitoru](https://twitter.com/elenacroitoru)