

Raluca Voinea
**Countryside
Roads**

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This text begins with the image of a dirt road snaking between countryside hills and leading to an imaginary farm. In 2020, writer Ema Stere took her pandemic-stranded readers there to tell them about a utopian, inevitably failing community of strangers. This was a group of people united by their unlikely stories, by their complete ignorance of the hardships of living in a rural Romanian village, by an endless winter spent with scarce resources, and by a desire to survive the absurdity of their situation.

Can you imagine the sight of thirty adults sleeping in three small rooms in a countryside house? Nobody could stretch their legs, we were all branched, jammed into each other like pieces of a puzzle. Someone snuggled on the big table in the dining room, another two were under the table. Some were left in a semi-seated position, leaning against the walls. Two of the Marcelots decided to sleep in the truck. They came back: it was too cold. But somehow, by midnight everyone had fallen asleep.¹

In socialist Romania of the 1980s, heavy winter snows sometimes shut down the regular commuter buses that carried people from the countryside to the nearest town. At such times, a special fleet of covered, former military 4x4s with wooden benches on each lateral side replaced the buses. People crammed inside with their bags, bumping into each other at every twist in the road. Closed off from the outside world in semi-darkness and forced into heavy sensorial proximity with each other, they remained thankful they did not have to walk for hours in the snow. It seemed that they minded neither the journey nor the companions. There are still many improvised means of collective transportation today, moving people, animals, and objects from one periphery to another, from suburb to village and back. In these temporary autonomous zones on board, distinctions are erased between local and foreigner, humans and hens, luggage and children.

The “Marcelots,” as the characters in Ema Stere’s novel are called, evoke the image of something that no one believes possible anymore – an image began to fade long before the pandemic regulations took effect. It’s the image of bodies touching every square inch of other unknown bodies, overlapping their stories, seeking refuge in the kind of community that can hardly exist these days. Yet they manage to produce, if not the full semblance of such a community, at least the story of how, in order to imagine it, everyone involved has to overcome the pettiness and comfort of their small,

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individual lives.

Agriculture is what seems to unite these people, but the shared belief that one can live from the land alone often turns out to be a curse. Generations of displaced urbanites have forgotten the wretchedness of country life: they have lost the skills to respond to each season with the appropriate activity, and they have cut ties with their grandparents' knowledge of and bond with the soil. Yet, whenever hard times loom in the horizon; whenever waiting in traffic for hours becomes unbearable; when all the city seems to be doing is waiting for the next fatal earthquake; when the air becomes unbreathable, and not only because of pollution, the dream of rural life lures these city people in again. And for many, 2020 made this choice appear as clear and fresh as a bright country morning.

The only problem is that life in the Romanian countryside has never been idyllic. It is even less so today. An ethno-nationalism that is increasingly pervasive in the public sphere, combined with the Orthodox Church's apparently inescapable grip on every aspect of public and private life, make it hard for many people to make the adjustment from urban anonymity to places where the "voice of the village" reigns, autonomy is restricted by the whims of the

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weather, and moral enforcement remains a public, collective business. This is a country that abolished slavery in the nineteenth century but is still profoundly racist and segregated, and one in which patriarchy, combined with unemployment and alcohol, makes women's lives cheap and dispensable. Thirty years of dismantling all forms of cooperativism has given rise to an antisocial, if not entirely psychotic, citizenry; ten years of unending protests, motivated by every imaginable discontent – from anti-austerity to labor-union demands, from ecological concerns to anti-corruption campaigns to purely fascist displays of ignorance and hatred – have exhausted the potentially emancipatory aspects of this form of collective struggle. In this place, a choice like leaving the city to live in the countryside is most often associated with escapism, for those who can afford it, and in the end with the abandonment of any hope in the possibility of collective redemption.

In 2020, around seventy-eight thousand people moved to villages from urban centers in Romania, not counting those who returned home from abroad. In itself, this is not a very telling statistic: almost double this number moved the other way around, and compared to other EU



Countryside asphalt road with poplars, 30 km north of Bucharest, May 2021. Photo: Dana Andrei.

countries, Romania still has one of the highest rates of poverty in rural areas. The majority of those deciding to “downshift” to the hills, woods, or plains of a generally very beautiful countryside are members of the middle class who can afford to telework. They want to reconnect with nature, with their families’ roots. They take classes on permaculture, they exchange advice, photos, and business ideas with peers on Facebook groups – the most famous of which, “Moved to the Countryside: Life Off the Clock,” now counts 147,000 members, having doubled in the year of the lockdown.² The through-line connecting the comments posted in these groups is a desire for solitude. People express their wish to escape not only their hectic urban life, but also their neighbors; not only car exhaust, but also other people’s odors on crowded public transit; not only sirens, but also loud music and early morning drilling that rings through apartment walls. Ultimately, these people are chasing an illusion of autonomy. It remains to be seen how many of those growing vegetables by day and posting online advice by night will create communities or integrate with the people they find in their new environs.

This text continues with the image of another road, one that leaves behind a deadly highway where people shoot each other for water, crosses through vast natural reserves

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filled with giant sequoias, and turns from asphalt to dirt, losing its trace, hiding from human predators to reveal a farm, whose former inhabitants were killed, which could become a home for a community of survivors. This new home would be built around a symbolic element: the acorn, a seed of hope, a seed for a future life that has time to grow in a world where the right to live is no longer a protected value, where climate change and social inequality have turned each day into an apocalypse. This is the community gathered along the course of a treacherous journey taken by a hyper-empathic teenager named Lauren, the protagonist of Octavia E. Butler’s science-fiction novel *The Parable of the Sower*. More than the religious fervor that vibrates in Lauren’s guiding words, what carries this group of miserable beings through the end of their journey, as well as beyond the grim hopelessness of their situation, is the promise of the seeds: the life-support they create, the shade they provide, the possibility of total strangers forming a community around their growth. As distant as Butler’s Earthseed believers and Ema Stere’s Marcelots are from each other, both in terms of the authors’ backgrounds and the characters’ fictional settings, they share the desperation of people with nothing to lose and the insane belief that maybe they have a chance at collective survival.



Alexandra Pirici, Maria Mora, and Mihai Mihalcea (Farid Fairuz) perform movement exercises that draw inspiration from “crown shyness” (*coroana timida*), a phenomenon whereby branches of different trees avoid touching or covering each other, growing together by negotiating space and access to light. This forms part of Pirici’s research project *Describing in Movement / Observing through Embodiment* (2020–ongoing). Video documentation can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FRiv1pqqeaQ&t=14s>.

But seeds don't always germinate, and communities don't always survive their inner and outer pressures.

In 2018, an artist brought a baby sequoia tree to the garden of an art institution. He proposed measuring the life-promise of this noble being against the precarity of institutions that are forced to bow to the whims of the real estate market, and to count each season of existence as a victory against the system. The little tree spent two years in that garden, growing indiscernibly in its pot, until the art institution left that space. The baby sequoia was relocated to a nearby university's botanical garden, surviving another season and appearing content in the company of its peers. Then it was abruptly killed off by a hot summer during a pandemic year, when schools were closed, teaching shifted online, and hardly anybody was around to make sure that young trees were not left to manage on their own. The little sequoia was not granted time to grow. The art institution did not have the means to cope with its own instability, let alone tend to its nonhuman companions. Not at that time.

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development situated in the line of modernist thought that held man as the ultimate subjugator of nature. Left on their own without government support, post-1989 peasants were unable to cope with the hectares of land to be cultivated, to do the proper crop rotation to help the soil regenerate, to maintain the irrigation systems or provisions against the increasing unpredictability of the weather. Once Romanian markets opened, the European Union stepped into this fresh territory, filling newly built supermarkets with Belgian cheese, German asparagus, Dutch tomatoes, Spanish strawberries, and Chinese garlic. Now they are giving young Romanian farmers funding to cultivate organic lavender.

Peasants are learning to write grant applications when they're not busy video chatting with their children who are working abroad (many of them gathering strawberries or asparagus in EU fields).

Young and middle-aged countryside transplants begin teaching their own parents about local species of plants, some of them precolonial. They don't plough the land anymore, but plant on raised beds and exchange information about companion plants that keep pests away without destroying the organisms that maintain the soil. As with leftist theories that (re)entered the former socialist countries via Western academia, people are learning about their ancestral, indigenous life visions and practices via worldwide movements toward post-development.

Whether through the advice of grandmothers or the theories of Donna Haraway, compost is now thriving the world over, creating debates among both urban and rural gardeners and leaking its poetry into descriptions of countless exhibitions and biennials. Compost is a community of degrading bodies and newly formed bodies that engage with one another, heating up together to enrich and reproduce the cycle of life. Compost is pedantry. Farmers and gardeners in the countryside collect animal waste and turn it into fertilizer; they don't necessarily have time to wonder about the moving entities that create life from death. They know it will be their turn to become compost soon enough. Accordingly, burial ceremonies are amongst the strongest community binders in rural villages. Urban services that allow a person to become a tree after death, by providing a prepacked sack where you turn your disposable body into compost, would be laughed off by peasants whose language is loaded with jokes about dying and slang for the four planks of wood between which nature eventually takes them back to the soil. The soil, the ground, the earth is indispensable not only to their vocabulary; it is



Claudiu Cobilanschi, *Avanpost Sequoia*, featuring Athena Dumitriu, 2018. Tranzit Garden, Bucharest.

Collectivization and industrialized agriculture were types of planned state

also part of their collective souls. As artist Anetta Mona Chisa writes:

Soil – a word that leaves a flavor in the mouth. Soil, soil, soil. My dear soil, you mean so many things. We even started to verb you and degrade you to something filthy, feculent, contaminated, yucky, abject or morally corrupt. Dirt, shit, mud, muck, dung, crap. I wonder if the language will evolve so that soil will become a swear word. “Soil you!,” “You fuckin’ soil!,” “Soiling shit!” or just “Soil it!” The word “Soil” has a good length and sound for being a juicy curse word. It is a bit softer, less aggressive sounding than “fuck,” but it befits better the feeling of disgust and revulsion. Besides the yuck factor it could perform well as a relief interjection. Soil! Or, on the contrary, soil could become so revered by future generations, that the word “soil” would become a word with soothing, caressing connotations, something like “you’re the soil of my life,” or “having a soiling (embracing) look.”³

This text concludes with an asphalt road. It serves as a reminder that we live in post-socialist, still-capitalist times where the comfort of a car is the ultimate sign of achievement in both rural and urban lives. This is the kind of road whose end you don’t see; it could take you to the seaside, or to an abandoned village. Either way, you probably don’t care anymore.

It is important not to drive alone while traversing it. In previous decades, a small car was big enough to allow for two families to be stuck inside, children included, and all the necessary amenities to survive for a month on a desert island, even when the destination was actually a hotel with three meals included. Overfilling the car with people from multiple households is no longer allowed anymore. Overcrowded public transportation vehicles are regarded with suspicion; during the height of the pandemic they were generally only used by the working classes. Ultimately, what is lost outweighs what’s gained: the fee for comfort and safety is paid with overproduction and alienation. Bigger and bigger cars, carrying lonely drivers speaking on hands-free devices, consuming all the fuel that never was enough to begin with, lead us down a certain path to self-destruction. The roads have become conveyor belts for deadly metal sarcophagi, which cannot even be turned into compost.

The asphalt road is lined with poplar trees on each side. Poplars grow too tall for their frail roots, and they break easily. They prefer swampy areas, and if conditions change, they die out. In places that are drying up due to climate change,

old poplars, declared monuments of nature, are being considered for mummification in order to be preserved. Poplars are not solitary beings, and the image of clusters of trees frozen in time, disconnected from their former environment, could not be more appropriate as a metaphor for how advanced desertification (a consequence of capitalist modernism and urban agglomeration) is engulfing our collective soul and draining its sap.

In her series Embodied Encyclopedia of Relationships Between Plants, artist Alexandra Pirici uses something other than classic observation to enable an understanding of plant movement and the relationships among different plants: she instead uses her own body and the bodies of other performers, along with a little botanical knowledge. The performances use plant behavior to model new possibilities for humans to negotiate their existence with each other and with other entities in the world. Unlike us, many plants already know how to move and grow together without stepping on each other, how to support one another, how to feel and follow each other so that growth is organic and does not destabilize one’s neighbors. Plants know how to confront their own limits, how to adjust to the contours of difference, how to enter the spotlight and step out of it with grace.

In a particular garden in Bucharest, after the baby sequoia and the art institution both left, the poplars were also cut down. In some places, seeds stop germinating, trees are seen as a menace, and art does not belong. In those places, drought is not a weather condition and confinement to solitary living is not a consequence of pandemic regulations.

The poplar-bordered road takes both this text and the art institution towards the promise of a future community – one that’s no less prone to failure than those of the Earthseed-believers and of the Marcelots, yet one that is not fictional. This community tries to establish itself in a place where art, the art institution, and artists can settle and eventually belong. Where hyper-empathy is a gift, not a painful flaw. Where they can fit in without bending to the pressures of the half-human, half-car people who live nearby behind tall fences, nor of the patriarchs with sharp medieval thorns protruding out of their tongues, foreheads, and hands. Where they can live with each other in small spaces, because the scale is set not by buildings, but by the open sky. A community that has time to germinate its seeds and see them grow, in ways that align both with traditional local knowledge and with planetary wisdom.

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This text is shaped by work experience over the years as a curator at tranzit.ro in Bucharest, and by the time for

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reflection I could allow myself in a difficult pandemic year thanks to a research grant from the Foundation for Arts Initiatives.

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1
Ema Stere, *Copiii lui Marcel* (The Marcelots) (Polirom, 2020).

2
Ruzandra Hurezean, "Migrație semnificativă de la oraș la sat în 2020: 'Numai că viitorul satelor nu ține de mutarea la țară în masă și atât,'" *SINTEZA*, April 24, 2021
<https://www.revistasinteza.ro/migratie-semnificativa-de-la-oras-la-sat-in-2020-numai-ca-viitorul-satelor-nu-tine-de-mutarea-la-tara-in-masa-si-atat?fbclid=iwar3hyqgbdlvshqcdhll2xik-zpbk60x0wdvs0saq-kzcv8-x-rqzt1hmhm>.

3
Anetta Mona Chisa, *Soil Diary* (Liquid Dogmas, 2020)
http://www.liquiddogmas.org/photo/ChisaEn_60916352e9039.pdf.

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