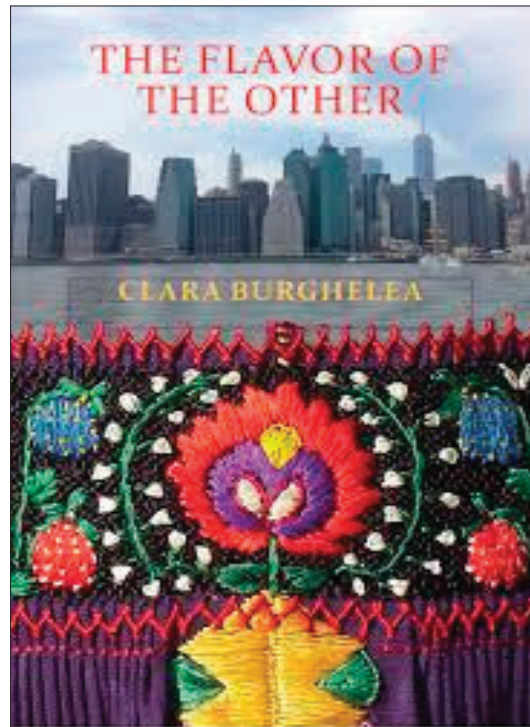


Clara Burghelia's *The Flavor of the Other* (Dos Madres Press)

Reviewed by Gregory J. Wolos

CLARA BURGHELIA'S DEBUT POETRY COLLECTION, *The Flavor of the Other*, is a soulfully delivered exploration of the poet's journey as a Romanian immigrant to the United States, told as much through an evocation of the senses as through biographical fact. Memory is rendered through a combination of metaphor and detail as Burghelia records the dichotomies of her immigrant experience: between a country left and a country newly inhabited; between what is remembered and what is newly experienced; between the roles and responsibilities of a poet and a mother; between words and the feelings that words can never precisely convey.



As I read this collection, I was struck by the pain of Burghelia's losses as deeply as I was impressed by her determination to dedicate herself to the construction of a new self—the self as artist. Her poem "Excavation" begins, "There is a woman made to look like a mess,/ fragmented into instances of domesticity." This woman longs for more, because "[t]his version of home/ is full of legends and false gods, slaying her soul into nothingness." As she "gazes/ into the face of her two babies," she weaves "valiant dreams," and at the poem's conclusion, "she still dreams/ she is a poet/ trapped inside a woman's body." In "The View from Here," this woman has assumed the role of artist she had craved, having become "a woman who says/ she does not allow herself/ to sink or cry./ She as said good-bye/ so many times,/ she has turned it into/ an art./ The art of fading/into the substance of her delicious mind,/ thriving on poems,/ loving from a distance." She has rejected, as she specifies in "The Strings of Demi-Gods," the legend that describes a woman as having sprung from the rib of man, and is therefore inferior and dependent. In spite of a scolding father and brother, a son who informs her "every house/ has a man, every realm has a king, and a grandmother and aunt who suggest every woman needs a man to love, the poet declares, "words own me more/ than love," because she is "a woman of my own ribs,/ all 12 pairs made of word bones." Burghelia explains in "A Stranger's Doing," that "[i]n my mouth, my native language turns strange," while "[t]he world's roof reeks of fresh poetry,/ I take shelter in its lines." Her separation from domestic subservience to the restrictive label of "mother" is clear in "Process of Detachment," which begins, "I expect my son will let go of me when he's five,/ I will go back to just being Clara," which leads to the last lines of the

collection from the concluding poem, "The Body's Questions: "What is the name for a woman/ who leaves her children/ for poems?"

Burghelia informs her reader of the immigrant's divided self in "Displacement," an account of living in two places at once— her past in Romania and her present in New York City, where she has "learned to live in halves": "[M]y accent gets thicker when my mind wanders off/ and I speak of familiar food,/ my people or music." Whereas, in New York, "[w]hen I roam its streets, coiling and uncoiling,/ I try to remember from the other life/ and its flavor fuels my steps./ I am caught in between, hungry for small things/ whose names belong to me alone." Burghelia seems to treasure all memories from her past; though some are painful, these memories comprise the palimpsest upon which her present life is written. In the opening poem of *The Flavor of the Other*, "A Taxonomy of Senses," she lists the kinds of elements that have formed her identity. There are connections to family: "a father's rage"; "my mother's supple ghost"; "a wise son calling his mother a feline"; "a little brother choking on cherries." Sights, sounds and smells and their associations are also recorded: "grass and filthy hands"; "fish grease in a cold house"; "warm bread sold on ration card—never enough; "chants nestled inside the brain". Also part of this "taxonomy of senses" embedded in the poet's memory are connections to the written word: "ink on the tips of fingers"; "reading 'loss' in a poem."

In a prose poem, "Portacale" ("orange" in Romanian) Burghelia transports the reader back to warm memories that transcend a difficult life as she describes her mother and the treasures she brought home after "queuing" for hours: "four oranges, two rolls of soft toilet paper, a half-melted bar of Chinese chocolate . . . The smell tickles the roof of my mouth." The poet and her "Mamaia" watch as the peeled orange "blooms into fleshy petals on the plate" before they "taste the twinned heart of the fruit." Framing this pleasant memory of her childhood in her mother country, Burghelia remembers how "Outside the window, happy laundry dances across a green line," while "[i]n my hand, chocolate melts like love." In "Thieves," she relives another episode from her Romanian childhood, when "In the belly of summer/ heat peels off like onion skin,/ the burning ribcage of the day/ cracks open and more sweltering air spills out." On this scorching day, Burghelia and her playmates steal a watermelon from a "confused, alarmed" farmer at the street market and hide out in their apartment building, where "under the staircase,/ we crack the watermelon open/ and thrust our teeth into its pink flesh," indulging until there is "[j]uice dripping down chins and elbows." Memories of a past life can be painful, too, as in "Woundology," in which "Bad girls are made to kneel on walnut shells" while "their mom bend[s] to punchable nose." Books offer a temporary retreat for poetically inclined children whose attempts to disappear "into book covers" where "worlds set int heir hearts thunder/ a thousand storms, yet now whirlwind/ sweeps them away from the two-room flat/ where they shrink into themselves." In "Holding," memories of a mother returning from the "night shift," her "hair infused with lab salts," serves a lunch of "eggplant salad on rye bread" while her daughter, the budding writer, examines her scarred palm, where "blisters map the motherland." Writes Burghelia of her mother's scars, "I follow them with my finger, looking for stories."

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Burghelia further memorializes her mother in "Things My Mother Brought to Life," remembering a note on which "A mother's handwriting/ is always arched and slender/ like a spring day." But the small pleasures of a childhood life in Romania are rarely divorced from purpose and practicality, where a key string for her daughter was crocheted by the poet's mother while she was "waiting in line for milk" and where the flowers from the linden trees that bloom along the street have more than an aesthetic purpose: "We pick their flower and dry it on/ the little balcony. For sore throat/ and finding your way back."

Burghelia leaves her city and country. Though the poet measures her own growth in *The Flavor of the Other* in part by her rejection of the confining roles imposed by culture and custom, there is no question of her "finding [her] way back" because she has never truly left. Past and present exist simultaneously in the individual, as she concludes in "Mirage": "In the unbridgeable gulf/ between before and after,/ we were inside,/ love swishing in our mouths./ I have kept everything you shed." "My Amputations" is written in the form of a didactic prayer the values of which Brughelia's mother lived by, but failed to impose by on her daughter: "You shall not argue, bargain or disobey./ You shall be a good daughter,/ make a fine wife one day/ . . . / You shall not want, dare or speak up,/ You shall rub floors and backs,/ do laundry and favors,/ stay home and low./ You shall not have fun, pleasure or dreams./ You shall work long hours, / smile, bow your head, cook lavish meals and speak softly." Having rejected these admonitions, Brughelia has chosen her own route. She responds to her mother, long dead, in "An Afterthought": "I've raised a son in your absence/ . . . / and there is a continent between us," but, "I still bear you." In a new country with a career and an identity she has forged for herself, Burghelia the poet finds "I've needed words to hang on to you," even though ultimately, "Words do not heal," and can only "plaster the holes and clear space on a page."