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Book Review: *A Dirt Road Hangs from the Sky* By Claudia Serea
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Review by Thomas Livingston

Claudia Serea's *A Dirt Road Hangs from the Sky* displays her consummate skill in assuming a range of voices as the tone of her poems shifts through rage, betrayal, compassion, sorrow, regret and the other emotions engendered from growing up in Romania under the dictatorship of Nicolae Ceaușescu.

Stalin would have welcomed Ceaușescu as a blood brother in ruthless brutality to eradicate the smallest signs of rebellion. A poem of protest was enough to send you to prison. In fact, Serea's father was jailed at the age of 18 for writing such a poem. Where Stalin used the NKVD, Ceaușescu used the Securitate, the Romanian communist party secret police, to kill and torture his own people.

In "My Grandma's curse for the Securitate man," Serea assumes the voice of her grandmother whose husband has been sentenced to 25 years in prison and who has been evicted from her house. Some of the stanzas:

*I don't wish you dead.
May you rot alive.*

...
*May your mouth be filled
with a hundred flies
for every word
in the reports you filed.*

...
*May the crows of the world come
in a black flood
to peck your eyes
and tear at your balls*

...
*May I see the day when you cry
tears of blood
as I cry today
so help me God!*

The tone of cold rage, the relentless images of the revenge she desires and deserves reveal one of Serea's voices.

But we then hear another voice, totally different, the voice of the tortured captive who has betrayed his fellow compatriot in the resistance. This voice assumes a tone of guilt and grief as he discloses the details of his betrayal of a man named Dumitru, also the name of the poem:

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*If I could pick up your name from the floor,
put it back under my tongue,
swallow it,*

I would.

*I didn't mean to spit it out
with the vomit and blood
when the blows hit my stomach.*

*Fragile, a small egg
next to the guard's boot,*

*your so-called co-conspirator
against the social order name*

*quivers in its placenta
of guilt and saliva*

*and the hits don't stop,
and shame sears.*

*If I could take it back,
I would.*

*Your name.
Given.*

*Your life.
Taken.*

*Du-
mitru*

The regret in this poem is more than palpable; it's heart-rending and Serea increases it in the last three stanzas, the first two of which each use only four syllables, to show abruptly the reason for and result of a life ended equally abruptly. The last stanza of three syllables breaks Dumitru's name so it lies on the page, broken like the speaker's spirit, like the name falling out of his mouth into the mess of blood, vomit, guilt and saliva next to the guard's boot, an image not of the birth of betrayal but of betrayal begat by such dreadful violence it can only end in a miscarriage.

Voice and tone, however, aren't the only poetic elements in which Serea excels, for she is willing to take big risks—like personifying inanimate objects, a precarious device that frequently exposes a poet's descent into sentimentality, cuteness, or just plain failed imagery.

In "My father's quiet friends in prison, 1958-1962," however, these five friends, "The gruel," "The blanket," "The piece of glass," "The small stone," and "The moon," function as life support for her imprisoned father. They assume not only human voices but human frailties that allow our imaginations to accept these personifications as valid and necessary to

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portray both the despair and the short moments of hope that occur during her father's incarceration. When The blanket says:

*I can't protect you from nightmares,
or from the hands that grab you in the dark
and push you back
into the beating room.*

...
*I can't even protect you
from the cold.*

*But I can offer you my checkered field
where you can move the armies
made of bread,*

*molded with salvia
and hardened
into soldiers,
horses, bishops, towers,
and queens.*

At last, this battle is yours to win.

We don't focus on the fact a blanket is speaking but on the images the blanket creates: the father being pushed into the room for more beatings, the image of an old thin blanket that can't even keep him warm, the blanket as chess board, and finally, in a game of chess he may win, a hint of hope, no matter how small, hope that nourishes a prisoner's soul and keeps him going.

A Dirt Road Hangs from the Sky is an extraordinary book by a multi-gifted poet. Read it.