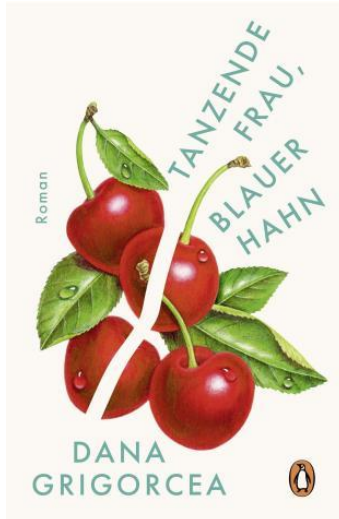


Dana Grigorcea

Dancing Woman, Blue Rooster

[Tanzende Frau, blauer Hahn]

Outline + Sample Translation



Novel

Penguin, 160 pages, March 2026

In a Romanian mountain town still marked by socialism, two young people from completely different worlds experience the miracle of love

In 1990s Romania, the dust of socialism still hasn't quite yet settled. Every summer Roxana and Camil meet in the small town of Busteni in the Carpathian Mountains: she is there on holiday, while he lives on the other side of the tracks. They observe the town's couples, take inspiration from them and try to discover their secrets: from the successful lawyer who removes her roof when a tree starts growing through her house, to the chalk-and-cheese engineering couple who suffer from the same ailment, to the local beauty who looks like a TV star, who has found love with an unremarkable-seeming man. And with each successive summer, Roxana and Camil's own story develops too – until they realise that they can only ever be a guest in each other's lives.

Light as a feather yet profound, *"Dancing Woman, Blue Rooster"* is a kaleidoscope of love and what it takes for it to take root. A novel about desires unexpectedly fulfilled, opportunities that pass by unnoticed – and how the wheel of life carries on turning regardless.

Dana Grigorcea was born in Bucharest in 1979, she is a Germanist and Dutchist and has lived with her family in Zurich for many years. The Romanian-Swiss author's works have been translated into several languages and have received numerous awards such as the Ingeborg Bachmann/3sat Award. Her novel "Those Who Never Die" won the 2022 Swiss Book Prize and was longlisted for the 2021 German Book Prize. Dana Grigorcea is a recipient of the Romanian Order of Cultural Merit with the rank of Knight.

Sample Translation

By Imogen Taylor

Prologue

A Spanish news site has reported on his fatal accident. I read the article again and again, looking up words I don't know, and yet it always feels as though I'm reading it for the first time.

The report is about two young men boarding an abandoned industrial ship in Valencia at midnight: *abandonada del poligono Els Cahuets de Albal*. I've looked at pictures of the industrial estate on the internet; by moonlight it must feel like being in a deserted fishing village with a bankrupt fish factory. Everything is low-rise and laid out at right angles, dust glints on the roads, the rendering on the walls is crumbling. *Los dos jovenes rumanos* were probably looking to steal copper wire; they'd been drinking, had torches with them. If I try to imagine Camil, I can see him only from behind, bounding away from me. Maybe it was just a case of someone saying, 'Hey, Camil, how about we go and get some copper?' It was rare for Camil not to come if you asked him. He was always available.

The other guy gets cold feet and wants to turn back, or maybe not. Camil, that's for sure, is looking for adventure. Or are they, in fact, desperate? Were they part of a gang of thieves operating all over Europe, or were they under pressure from such a gang? The other young man, who survived, denies this; he seems to have made a credible impression at the police station. According to him, Camil went on ahead and when they entered the room where the generator was, he scared his friend by fooling around.

Then came the bang and Camil, *al recibir la descarga eléctrica*, was catapulted through the room and into the back wall where he crashed to the ground. *En toda la zona se produjo un apagón*. I look up the word *apagón* every time. It means ‘blackout’. It is somehow comforting to think that whole swathes of Valencia were plunged into darkness by Camil’s electrocution.

Camil was my best friend, my first best friend. We would cross the icy Prahova together, wading to our knees and then our waists in water so clear you could see the stones on the riverbed; colourful rubbish floated on the surface. Once on the other side, we would lie on the meadow with blades of grass between our lips and tell each other stories – or rather, Camil would tell stories, mostly details gleaned about our neighbours, and I would ask questions to find out more. In this way, despite the digressions, we ended up with lucid stories, which seemed to suggest that we all had a fate and no way of getting away from it.

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Pictures fly past in the train window – 1950s houses, all identical, whether village or suburb, and the grey sound barrier, only briefly interspersed by fields – while beside her Thierry scrolls through equally rapid images on his phone. Colourful pictures fly past on his screen until he finds what he’s looking for: Mind-Controlling Fungus Parasite. She stares at his slender fingers, then at the video of the jungle and the fleshy flowers – and there it is: a floating spore glints in the light, disappears into the shadows, glints again and settles on an ant. Soon the fungus parasite will take possession of the tiny body.

‘Watch this!’ The fungus floods the ant’s brain with chemical substances, destroying its will and steering it to a place with ideal conditions for its own survival – just the right amount of light and moisture for the parasite to thrive.

‘It drives it to its death. See the ant sinking its teeth into that branch there?’

'Stuttgart, Thierry! This is our stop.'

As they wait at the door, he shows her the end of the video: with a sound like smacking lips, something grows out of the ant – a white horn!

She's annoyed by the ant-unicorn – and annoyed that they've missed their connection to Fürth. Thierry goes on clicking his way through videos, the collar of his trenchcoat turned up against the cold on the platform, while she looks for another connection – as though she alone were responsible for their trip. At least Thierry will carry both their suitcases on the stairs, like the old-school companion that, at almost sixty, he likes to think he is.

What on earth had induced her to suggest giving concert readings, not to mention travelling with this French pianist in tow? The stories need music, she had explained to the publisher. Music opens windows of understanding and livens up the readings. And she'd like to travel with someone for a change.

She finds a connection via Nuremberg.

'You see?' Thierry says. 'No need to get worked up.'

On his suggestion, they go to the restaurant car for a glass of wine. He orders them toasted sandwiches too, and just as she's beginning to relax, he says he'd like to change the programme for the coming evening.

'No, Thierry, please! I'm far too tired after all these trains. I don't want to change anything.'

'All right,' he says. She can read whatever she likes, but he needs his freedom. 'I'm an artist too, don't forget!'

He starts to reel off ideas for improving her programme. She barely listens.

At Nuremberg Station she feels like leaving him on the platform and cancelling their tour. To accompany the reading on Camil's death, Thierry wants to play Ravel's 'Gibet' instead of 'Ondine'. The piece is just right, he says:, a desert with a gallows and a hanged man, glowing red in the setting sun.

But there's nothing macabre about Camil's story, she says. 'It's a love story.'

Thierry stops on the station course, in the middle of the throng. 'All right,' he says, in irritation. If that's how it is, she can have her way and he'll play something...schmaltzy.

I

Camil and I

Back then, when the Iron Curtain fell, everyone wanted to get away, far away to exotic places where they could experience great things, become new people and find the meaning of life – probably love.

The only place I ever went, summer after summer, was Buşteni, but it was far enough from Bucharest.

Although it was only two hours by train, getting there was a real time trip. First the train passed the paper mill, almost a small town in its own right with all its buildings and fenced-in areas. When the Communist subsidies had stopped, production at the ancient tanks and rolls had been gradually scaled back and now the site was slowly crumbling. Long grass and poppies grew here and there, and packs of dogs gathered between the weather-beaten sheds; when their barking got louder, you knew the bears had come too.

Buşteni itself was even more primitive than the paper-mill site. Lack of electricity aside, the place can't have looked any different in the last century or the century before that. Along the foot of the Carpathians, parallel to the railway lines, was a main road where as well as the school, post office, church and town hall, there were a few little shops, including my favourite where I would go for halva and millet drink.

Most of the other buildings were scattered along the Prahova on the other side of the railway lines. In spring, the Prahova burst its banks; many of the rose-patterned rugs that were hung out to dry after the floods were still hanging over the fences when summer came. The cows in Buşteni were free to wander. Driven out at the gates every morning, they would find their own way to pasture, and at dusk, bells jangling triumphantly, they would find their own way back and push open the shed doors with their horns.

As long as there was work to be had, almost all the inhabitants of Bușteni hired themselves out as shift workers in the local paper mill, which had been built in the early 1930s by my maternal great-grandfather, an architect. His daughters – my grandmother and her younger sister – had often spent their school holidays here, and when the Iron Curtain fell, they had a traditional loam house built near the station on the steep Station Road. It was in this house that I spent my summers; the rest of the year it was shut up.

In summer, the two ladies would entertain in the garden, between the beans and the lovage and the pink-flowering phlox. Most of the guests were summer visitors from Bucharest or friends who were passing through, but neighbours would drop in too – Flori and Aurel, or the lovely Mrs Helman who was known to everyone as ‘Isaura’. All of them, without exception, were bitten by Azorică, my great-aunt’s black poodle – either he bit their shoes when they left, or he bit their hands when they tried to stroke him. Good old Azorică!

‘I don’t know what’s got into him,’ my great-aunt would say in dismay. ‘When I kissed him just now, he didn’t lay a paw on me. Maybe he can sense your fear.’

But our visitors knew no fear; they all let Azorică bite them without protest. ‘Azorică, you rascal!’ they would laugh, rubbing the painful bitemarks. They all adored Azorică, because they adored my fun-loving great-aunt.

And chairs and folding chairs, stools and picnic rugs would be fetched and we’d sit in the house and in the garden, on the bench or on the low cement wall separating the front path from the vegetable patch. We would eat Charentais melon with cheese, play cards and share the newspaper, do the crossword and hold heated political debates, in which the locals pretended they voted for pro-European parties like us. And every now and then, there would be another growl and a shriek and everyone would laugh and say, ‘Azorică, you rascal!’

There was a great coming and going with formal greetings and goodbyes, and yet there was a sincerity to it all and everyone could do exactly as they liked. I usually took a picnic rug and a cushion and lay down to read under the silver fir by the front fence.

Sometimes I took two cushions, one for Azorică – or even three, because Azorică liked to lie in the crack between two cushions.

‘Just listen to the incredible quiet here!’ one of the guests would call out, and we would all stop and listen.

For a long time, I was fond of quoting the Romantic poet and diplomat Lucian Blaga: ‘Eternity was born in the country.’ I think he was in Vienna or Lisbon when he said that.

‘How true,’ the visitors would say. ‘Eternity was born here in the country!’

If an ant bit me, I would brush it away without raising my eyes from my book. I see myself now, lying on my rug under the fir, my elbows digging into the carpet of needles. I am staring at the book, wondering whether to turn the page, and I hear the clatter of the fence as the local boys jump over to fetch their ball. Azorică growls, too lazy to get up.

‘Pssst,’ the boys hiss loudly. ‘Be quiet, someone’s reading!’

And then one day, one of the boys, Camil, came to the fence by himself. He crouched down and asked if I’d like to play football with him and I said yes, but I couldn’t get away for long, maybe just for half a match. We kicked the ball about at the end of the sloping road, where the nettles grew at Madame Smara’s gate, and Camil asked if I knew the story about the tree – a real tree – growing in the middle of her house. And so we became friends, telling each other stories about our neighbours, without interrupting our game.

One of the people we told stories about was Mr Helman, who passed us every day with his scythe. The scythe was twice as long as he was tall and yet he balanced it effortlessly on his shoulder. Every day he went to his undeveloped lot to mow the grass or just to check up on it. At that time, there were a lot of undeveloped lots and empty fields in Bușteni, but it’s only now, with the Prahova valley all built up, that I realise this. Most of the houses in those days were bungalows, too, and so low that the cocks had no trouble hopping onto the roofs at dawn to crow. Those tin roofs would shine like mirrors when the sun went up, casting a bright light on the steep station road.

At the bottom of the hill on the right was number eight, a whitewashed house made of loam. This was the holiday house that my grandmother and great-aunt had had built after the fall of the Iron Curtain, modelling it on the traditional loam house on the new ten-lei note. It was a little more spacious than the original, with bigger windows, but without the rustic woodshed, because they had no wood to store.

In the mornings I would often sit on the bench outside this house, staring out at the Caraiman Mountains. Above the forest that grew at the foot of the mountains, you could see paths leading uphill, and I thought I could distinguish between sheep and white boulders on the pale-green slope where we always stopped on our way to the big cross on Caraiman Peak. I traced paths and winding roads into the mountainside with my eyes – different routes every time, some of them leading right up to the timberline.

If Camil saw me looking out at the mountainside, he'd think I was looking over at him and start to wave. He lived with his mother on the railwaymen's estate at the end of the road, by the level crossing. From our garden you looked out onto two houses, an orchard and an abandoned yard with a burnt-down stable; you could also look right onto the little veranda where Camil liked to stand.

In the afternoons, when the road was deserted and neither man nor beast was to be seen in the yards, Camil and I would shoot the ball over the chicken-wire fence into Mr Helman's grassy lot and go in after it, then climb the apple tree as fast as we could, excited not so much by our transgression as by the thought of the great feat that would surely follow, a historical and heroic feat that I was destined to accomplish with Camil. He and I were in constant competition as to who could climb the highest and eat the most apples, and I had to climb higher and higher and eat more and more, if I was to end up beating him.

Once, when little Mr Helman popped out of the long grass with his enormous scythe, we froze on our branches and, from the higher branch, Camil reached out a hand to me through the dense foliage, almost in slow motion, and grabbed me by the arm so I wouldn't

slip. As Mr Helman calmly swung his scythe to cut the long grass, we heard not only the monotonous *hsht-hsht* of the blade and the hiss of his breathing but the deep roar of the Prahova thirty metres below, as it surged out of the valley at the foot of the mountains.

The river was said to be gradually destroying the mountainside. One day it would eat its way through this field, the apple tree and Madame Smara's vegetable garden, through our little holiday house, the three firs and the lilac hedge, and all the way up the street until there was nothing left. Camil wriggled down onto my branch, which bowed dangerously, and put his hand over my mouth.

'Whatever you do, don't laugh.'

Camil died in summer 2012, on the first of August. A neighbour later handed me a series of pictures of him in his coffin, photos such as people used to take in provincial Romania. I hadn't realised the tradition was still alive. They were close-ups of the deceased and tableaux showing the mourners with their foreheads on the coffin – Camil's mother, his grandmother who had come specially from Moldavia, the neighbour who'd given me the photos and a number of other neighbours from Station Road: Mr and Mrs Helman, Flori and Aurel, old Panduru, friends from the football club; not as many as might have come if so many hadn't moved away.

'Who would I give them to, if not you, Roxana,' the neighbour said as she handed me the pictures. She no longer lived in Buşteni either; she'd only come back for the funeral. Ana-Mia, her name was; I had known her as a child.

The photos are overexposed. Camil's expression is severe; he is wearing lipstick and a chin strap. I would have laughed if he'd been standing next to me, and I'm sure he would too. Looking at the pictures of Camil in his coffin, I felt – no, I *knew* – I'd meet him again, alive and chipper. Our story had been so rudely interrupted; we still had so much to talk about.

In the evenings, when the roofs cooled down, the farm dogs would jump onto the houses, barking, and they would bark even further into the valley whenever a cow came home from pasture and opened the gate with her horns, or when the lovely Mrs Helman led her flock of geese past to her grassy plot at the end of the road.

If we played football in the evening, the dogs barked at us too. ‘Watch out,’ the neighbours would call out to us, ‘or they’ll tear your ball to shreds.’

When night fell, the streetlamp came on with its hazy, yellow light, but the yards were plunged into a darkness so black, you felt dizzy groping your way around. Only the stars shone, scattered in the sky, and we would sit down on the bench at the front door; on a clear night, we stayed there into the small hours. When it got chilly, we would fetch our duvets and the radio; there were concerts on Radio Romania Cultural in the evenings. Without the radio, I probably wouldn’t have been able to stare up at the stars for so long, but the music made everything clear and mysterious at once. Piano music made the stars twinkle brighter; string quartets made me see more shooting stars. Some brass instruments, especially the trombone, brought Azorică running out to bark at the radio, hoarse and woozy with sleep; we had to hurry inside before he woke all the dogs in the neighbourhood.

On certain feast days – Holy Trinity Sunday, St John’s, Assumption and the feast of St Peter and St Paul – the Caraiman Cross was illuminated and we would stare up at that instead. The neighbours, too, stood around in the dark, and the next day, when we didn’t know what to say to each other, we’d say, ‘Did you see the cross last night? Lovely, wasn’t it?’

On one of these feast days, as I was gazing up at the illuminated cross, I saw an oblong of light on the same sightline, and in it, Camil crouched in a tiny zinc bathtub, his mother behind him washing his back and arms. There was something touching about the way she lifted his arms to soap them and then lowered them back into the zinc tub – that, at least, is what my great-aunt said, and I had to agree with her.

The next day almost all the neighbours made fun of the scene, which had clearly been visible to all.

‘I don’t see what your problem is,’ Camil said, blushing a deep red. ‘She hadn’t boiled enough water.’ I, too, defended him: not everyone, I said, could reach their own back.

For years we would meet in the summer holidays and Camil would tell me all about our neighbours and what they’d been up to, so that we could watch the next episodes together. For entire summers we followed their stories at close quarters, and when they threatened to peter out, we’d intervene.

Offhand – perhaps because of the severe-faced photos of Camil in his coffin and the Spanish article about the abandoned port – I can barely remember the neighbours; their stories were our stories, not mine. But I will try to remember as much as I can.

Thinking back, I have trouble distinguishing between the places where I went with Camil and the places where I only thought of him or expected to see him. The Caraiman Cross is one such place. We never went there together. But there’s a photo of me and Camil taken an hour and a half’s leisurely walk away from the cross, next to the cable-car station, at two thousand metres, in deepest winter. I was already at university by then and had come out on the spur of the moment for a day’s skiing. The photo was taken by Camil’s little neighbour, Ana-Mia. They’d come up together, with a camera, and claimed to have spotted me almost immediately on the ski slope. The photo shows me in a fluorescent white ski suit, hand in hand with Camil, who is dressed for the summer, posing in FC Barcelona socks and an FC Barcelona shirt.

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With his jacket hooked on a finger at his shoulder, Thierry is a little unsteady on his feet, but even now, after the reading, the words continue to pour out of him. He was thrilled by the stage lighting, the acoustics and by the thought of a slaughterhouse being turned into a cultural centre. And the short gentleman in the woolly hat had agreed with him that Ravel's 'Pavane pour une infante défunte' was perfect for the text: the noble pavane for this dear boy, plus the infante – a clear reference to place of his death, Spain.

As for her, he says, she read beautifully – and he smiles broadly, showing his back teeth; his dishevelled hair gives him an impish look. Maybe if she were to modulate her voice a little more when she reads about the poorly attended funeral. Best of all, Thierry says, would be if her voice grew hoarse at that point and broke off for a moment. Then everyone would think the thing about Camil was a true story.

'Well, it is.'

'Really?'

They kiss each other goodnight, three times on the cheek.

'Hadn't you realised?'

'What, that it's a true story? Yes, yes, of course.'