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**LEGEND OF THE
WALLED-UP WIFE**

Translations from the Romanian of
Ileana Mălăncioiu



Gallery Books

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Translator's Preface

Ileana Mălăncioiu was born in 1940 in a village near Câmpulung in Argeş, about 100 miles from Bucharest. She trained originally as an accountant but began to write poetry, took degrees in philosophy (her doctoral dissertation was on 'tragic guilt') and worked in journalism and films.

From *Păsărea Tăiată* (The Slaughtered Fowl, 1967) onward, her poems draw on rural life and folklore, on religious and literary icons, but their true focus has been on the trauma of history. In an early poem, 'Bear's Blood', translated here, the peasant remedy is juxtaposed with actual state violence: the man addressed as Ieronim had suffered terrible injuries as a political prisoner. Ten more books of poems appeared in the 1970s and '80s, and in 1992 came the full text of *Urcarea Muntelui* (Climbing the Mountain, 1985) which had been heavily censored by the Ceauşescu regime. Newer poems have been included in two recent enlarged collections spanning her whole career, on which this selection draws.

Mălăncioiu's writing is valued in Romania as a moral force. A courageous critic of the former political masters of her country, she has also been forthright in her responses to the new order. To read through the poems published under Ceauşescu is to be astonished both at what she succeeded in publishing, and at her survival. Censors and secret police may not have been the most penetrating readers of poetry, and in fact her major clash with the regime was on her attempt in 1988, when she was editor of the literary review *Viaţa Românească*, to publish work by the controversial philosopher Constantin Noica, another former political prisoner. The issue of the magazine was suppressed and she resigned. If it had appeared, that issue would also have contained her poem 'I could have come', translated here, a good example of her dense, tense blend of oblique Biblical reference and direct questioning of a culture of collusion.

Writers under censorship can employ many strategies; personae from Melville's Ishmael to Yorick to Antigone, metaphors from folklore, the Old Testament and Orthodox

Christian ritual, can be deployed without being devalued or reneged. A ruse is her repeated attaching the title ‘Pastel’ to poems expressing prophetic or personal rage. It is borrowed from the delicate, plaintively autumnal and rural poems of George Bacovia (1881-1957), and there are allusions to her rural background in the poems so labelled. However they assert anger and frustration — she characteristically describes her own voice as a shout or scream — framed and almost stifled in a seasonal lyric.

Another of her repeated titles is ‘Ruga’ which can mean ‘prayer’ or merely ‘request’ in Romanian; I have used each term once for the two examples in this selection, as the context and tone seemed to demand. In general, my translation is as faithful to Mălăncioiu’s words as possible, given that I also wished to reflect the colloquial fluency of her poems by offering versions which might be consonant with an ordinary Irish speaking voice. The casualty has often been rhyme, so much harder to manage in English than in a Romance language.

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A number of these poems appeared first in *After the Raising of Lazarus* by Ileana Mălăncioiu, translated by Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin (Southword Editions, Munster Literature Centre, 2005). Thanks are due to Pat Cotter.

Some of these poems (or versions of them in Irish) appeared in *Cyphers* and *The Stinging Fly*.

The original versions of these poems were published in Romania in a collected edition, also called *Urcarea Muntelui* (Editura Corint, Bucharest, 2007).

A Request

I'm asking you, fearless lad,
Though you climbed the wall of death at the children's fair,
Don't come to rescue me from the seven-headed giant
In hopes of half the kingdom for your reward.

I came to this place of my own free will,
I swept the cobwebs from the hearth,
I kneaded the earth twice over and
I filled all the ovens with bread.

Then I broke it roughly in a cloth,
To let out the heat, and he felt it far away,
And instead of a thrown club a humming like a storm,
A great sniff from his fourteen nostrils.

I waited for him to find out the taste of the bread
And only after a bump of my heart I found all was well,
He was buried in the earth up to his breast
And from the shoulders up jammed in the moon.

Come all you girls who belong in this story
You have been stalked so long by dread,
When it is so simple and so human
Just for once to try falling for a giant!

Custom

After seven years the dead are disinterred,
The bones laid side by side in boxes
And even if the forehead bone is eaten away
They are mourned like people living and whole.

Three days they remain in the holy place
Flowers are brought and placed at their head and feet
They are told about who has been born,
They are given charge of the people who are dying.

And then our heads begin to ache
With all the lilies around them, and turn by turn
We move away from the blue flames,
Chanting for their return into the earth.

The gravediggers ready at the head and feet
At the proper moment come together
To leave them back in the graves they had before
And lay on top of them a firmer stone.

Ieronim Sleeping

He sleeps with his head on my arms
With open eyes, it is late,
And I am afraid to take my arms from under his head
It's quiet and I lean against him.

You have one glass eye, Ieronim,
A little bluer than the other
A little rounder too a little deeper
And it has ridges on it like the old glass icons.

In the middle is a hole like a pupil
And it seems to bear a trace of weeping and it is
So cold that I begin to shiver
Ieronim I'm afraid, wake up Ieronim.

But he stays there with his head on my arms
And he sleeps with open eyes and he dreams
That he will never wake and I cry out to you all:
Quiet, please, quiet, Ieronim is sleeping.

Bear's Blood

To make you well, Ieronim, I had brought you
Bear's blood and I begged you in a whisper:
'Just taste a little, it will do you good.'
And truly I believed that in that night
With bear's blood I could make you well again.

You couldn't stand to touch the blood.
I tried to pour it down your throat by force,
It was so thick it stuck to your lips,
I unstuck it gently and threw it away
And came again with another cup of blood.

You deliberately spilled it and screamed at me
And you don't know, Ieronim, how sorry I was,
I would have wished all otherwise that night, although
Your crushed bones, piled hastily together,
Even the blood of a bear could not hope to heal.

Over against the Mountain

The heart of the queen rose up out of the rock
Only I in silence come
To the place where she was buried
To pay respect to the hollow that remains.

Over against the mountain is the cross,
The inscription now rewritten by the wind,
A white lily hides the place
Where it enters the earth.

The night gets darker still,
Silently I circle the gates
With the royal arms, closed
Between me and the hollow place.