

## Thoughts Banished

By Wallis Wilde-Menozzi

Book Review

*Releasing the Porcelain Birds*,  
by Carmen Bugar. Shearsman Books, 2016.



Carmen Bugar grew up among turncoat neighbors and hidden government microphones, before and after her father was imprisoned in Ceaușescu's Romania, in 1983, when she was 12 years old. He was freed in 1988, and in 1989, the family left the country, each member carrying one suitcase only. The title of this collection refers to the porcelain figurines the poet's mother saved as treasures from a normal life and how their meaning altered. In a police inventory of their possessions, Bugar finds listed "porcelain figurines."

My mother loved porcelain birds;  
they must have made her think of flying;  
when such thoughts were banished  
by men with keys to our house,  
who chained her husband to the walls of prisons,  
because his mind escaped to freedom.

In previous works, prose and poetry, Bugar has written about survival and displacement brought about by her father's resistance and imprisonment. Here the explorations and definitions of identity are traced through the conditioning mechanisms of the government's spying. In the now open Romanian State Archives, the poet first researches 1,500 pages of her father's files and then more than 3,000 pages gathered on her mother, her sister, brother and herself. She illuminates the experience of totalitarian government from another angle of narration.

Once Bugar touches the material, she realizes that the subjects, "have been turned out like the lining of coats hung to dry, / And our

souls have dried. . . . We are / Museums.” This is the extraordinary premise of her poems. Both in a private and a social sense, Bugan frames her exploration of memory as a personal possession that was twice violated: at the time the family censored itself because it was being monitored by the secret police, and subsequently when the state transcriptions of their daily lives were read by the poet years later.

During the years leading up to her father’s imprisonment, and then during it, the family is acutely aware of “the informer outside the window.” In the police texts there is confirmation that the spying didn’t come to an end even after he was released. “There are arrows that mark my words: I said to my father I would have saved him / from going to prison if I could’ve been his lawyer; he warned me about being tracked by them.”

In “Found in the Secret Police Records,” Bugan mixes her memory of her father’s release refreshed by reading a spy’s version. The voice in the poem, her voice claiming the event, is a mixture of the two.

They walked in the door holding hands, his wrists raw from chains.  
 He caressed my brother, wanted to know what I have learned at  
 school  
 Then went around the house visiting each room; he asked for  
 his shaver  
 And his radio, the night wore on.  
 The antennae at the top of our house  
 Transmitted our feeling, the microphones must have blushed  
 At our words after long silence.

Then in the last stanza, she speaks in her own voice, freed of the details fed to her by her research.

Twenty-five years have passed. This morning the snow arrives  
 like butterflies.  
 I see us in our small kitchen that first night standing around  
 each other  
 Not knowing what to say. The image disappears into these  
 thousands of pages.  
 I no longer remember the pain in my father’s heart. It was long ago.

Bugan's laceration is passionate, astute, and steady. A few pages of the translated transcriptions, which are reproduced as part of the collection's structure and dialogue, function differently from W.G. Sebald's photos in his prose: Bugan's verisimilitude is not about blurring different versions. Human handwriting and the uneven strokes of a manual typewriter are the banal evidence of words used to control and terrorize. They occupy space as if they were still live, as microphones. "When the censor took our words and talked *about* them, / discarded our handwriting and wrote *his*, / he became a flaying instrument," she says.

The inclusion of pages of police records, forlorn lists made on poorly typed sheets, is a dimension of Bugan's book that has an important role in creating the feeling of fragmentation. Their presences also create a haunting sensation that such flimsy and ridiculous efforts worked. Art was challenged by such reports. The banalities not only kept one person in prison, they broke up adolescent loves, blocked school advancement, stifled speaking above a whisper, filled relationships with doubt and blame.

A poem addressed to a spy, who appears in several poems because he seems to track the family most consistently, captures the violation and unending ache of the family's daily life.

#### A Letter to "P.A."

I see now how you marked the day with ellipses  
In the places where hours were allowed to pass

Into oblivion: them working in silence.  
In garage and kitchen, after that transcribed conversation,

I would like to know what mother made for dinner  
And where I was, where my brother and my sister were

That night, you often mentioned these things,—the coffee  
And the drinks my parents had with friends, the laughter

In the room. But not on 14 July 1988. Did you know  
I was to fail, as I did, the list of winners and losers . . .

"I know their politics," my father said.  
And mother answered, "That's all because of you."

The poet's courage to experience distorted acts that abused the privacy and truth of her family's life ultimately frees her from some darkness. The porcelain birds will fly in new and mended ways. The action of releasing echoes the process by which the Romanian government approached its recent history. Files that kept a population under government control can now be read in the light of different authority.

In the poem "A Birthday Letter," the poet refers to letters bundled in the archives, where they waited 25 years to be read. Her father, "snowbells at his temples," remarks poignantly, "I never thought I'd be back here as a free man." Bugan continues, using language that extends the metaphor of skin until it shakes free of sadism and vibrates with life and healing practice.

I reconstruct parts of the skin from the words  
That were copied out. We now know  
What has been taken from us and how  
Words alone saved us then  
And bring joy now, the joy of finding them. . . .

*Releasing the Porcelain Birds* is endlessly suggestive. The rewards are both emotional and intellectual. Bugan's juxtaposition of document and poem, perpetrator and subject, past and present illuminate poetry's power to distinguish the shape of truth. She touches identity, narration, government. The subject could not be more contemporary, although the incidents occurred nearly three decades ago.

The book is urgent reading in a moment when rigorous debate in our country about the meaning of truth and lies needs to be taken more seriously. The power of government to change lives for good or ill can be vividly explored in Bugan's meditation. Government's abuses take root when a population becomes indifferent or too frightened to critically pursue understanding its practices. Bugan shows us the importance of examining reality, however painful it may be, to find a basis in realism for determining the definition of truth.


She leaves us on the open-ended road of the present, where she converses with her son, who is young enough to hope for a stable root. He equates home with place and safety. Innocently, he wants the family to buy the Swiss apartment they are renting while her husband is working for CERN, the European nuclear particle accelerator in Geneva. Instead, in this poem, the boy is told by his mother, as consolation and truth:

There will be other windows,  
That will show us other things, don't worry about owning  
One. In having none, we have all of them.

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