

**Catalin Dorian Florescu**  
*The Navel of the World*

*Translated by Lena Grimm*



Father crosses himself and says, “We got lucky.”

Father often dreams of Grandfather and how he comes towards him, straight through walls. Sometimes he appears so suddenly that my father wakes up sweaty and afraid. On days like those, my father insists, he will receive bad news.

On days like those, the letters remain lying on the hallway floor, and he peers at them only from a distance. One day later, Grandfather or not, they are opened, as if the contents were now different than the day before. Father has this quirk about superstitions. When he talks like that, the farmer’s son in him comes back to life, and with the farmer’s son, the other villagers too, living and dead, the wide, dry plain of the Danube, the animal herds, and the sun of his childhood. But more than anything, the superstitions as well, and with them droves of vampires, witches, ghosts, and the undead. “There was not a Christian soul in the street after sunset,” he says. “Vampire hour. Everyone in their houses and Dracula on the streets.” Father exaggerates occasionally.

Dracula was the one with long teeth who instilled fear in voluptuous Victorian women. He left Transylvania when it became too boring for him there. Dracula was the first emigrant from my home. In 1982, we followed—Father, Mother, and I—but you don’t need to be afraid: we’re not directly related.

“We got lucky,” says Father and exhales loudly, in order to demonstrate his relief. “We took the last train,” says Mother and looks mournful. After Father has made the sign of the cross, he turns the radio on. Radio Free Europe. The same station for eighteen years, every day at six o’clock. Father listens to home. When I’m visiting, I listen with him. Then I’m little again, tiny, and I see the both of us at home. At home on the street with the train station, where trains were still real trains, with fuming locomotives, groaning noises, and so on. Where there was no reason to be nostalgic, because nostalgia simply wasn’t part of the plan. Nostalgia is the price that only gets added once you are stuck. In Switzerland, for example.

When Father and I listen to the radio, our eyes shine and we take turns saying “shh! shh!” whenever the other talks too loudly. Father has the best commentary—he even knows the voices from

the radio by name. He knows the contexts. Because I like listening to him, I ask him about them. He likes to give answers and expands them into true stories. From my father, I inherited storytelling. From my mother, the graveness. Not too much, though, just enough to be grounded. You need to be grounded, if you don't want to float into the air like a weather balloon and fly homewards with all the voices from the radio.

On an August morning, 1982, everything became different than it was before. When I woke up, nothing in the apartment had changed. It was tidier than usual, since Mother had made a special effort; she didn't want anyone to think that she was a bad housewife after we left. Father had thought that her labor was pointless. By the time someone realized that we weren't coming back, the dust would have long settled again. Mother didn't let that unsettle her, and so we lived the last days at home as if in a museum. Only in the closets, the clothes were already missing, and little white slips of paper lay everywhere with the names of those who should get our things. I thought, "In this way, little pieces of us go everywhere."

If I made an effort, I would not even notice the slips of paper. Just don't look, go into the bathroom—a slip-free room—wash, change, and set out. We ate breakfast quickly and afterwards Mother wiped down the kitchen table, washed and dried the dishes, and placed them back in the cupboard. Father inspected the windows, the water faucets, the gas range, then was the last to leave the apartment. He locked the door twice, joined us in the elevator, and so we went silently down eight floors. Later, everything would be distributed according to our wishes. In my imagination, however, everything still lies in its place, even today, complete with white slips of paper. Not even the dust has settled. It is still and shady.

I can no longer remember if I regretted our departure or if I wished for it. If I was afraid. If I chose myself. It was a sequence of events, nothing more, and in this instance, memory fails. Maybe it was even a little bit exciting. Me, a little fellow traveler.

Switzerland fell in our laps like a lottery prize. Father had a good nose for this sort of thing. In front of a modest hotel in Zürich, after many days of travel through Europe, and ready for further travel,

Father asked a fine gentleman on the street for advice. Thirty seconds of inspiration was enough to overcome despair. It was like a soccer game when all is settled with a goal in the ninetieth minute. Whether the fine gentleman was God, we don't know. The only thing that we remember is that he drove a dark limousine.

To be clear: we stayed in this place because someone—God, for example—wrote down the name of someone who helped us further. Within seconds it was a done deal. One spends years making plans, but the crucial things happen quick as lightning. It could have been Patagonia. That it ended up being Switzerland, though, makes us especially happy even today. “The navel of the world, boy,” Father says, “the navel of the world. We got lucky.” Lottery home. We didn't dare to think that it could be Switzerland. Switzerland was closer to a plaything of the imagination. One day you stand smack in the middle of it, possibly meet God, and eighteen years later, you're surprised at how much time has passed.

Today, Father watches Africa on the TV and records animal films on video. When hunting scenes are shown and the lionesses prowl in the high savanna grass, he calls us all together. This is almost as nice as listening to our home language on the radio together. Sometimes a gnu even survives.

Father rewinds the film in order to check that the recording is alright. Then the lioness chases after the gnu all over again, and the gnu gets a second chance. But it dies just as pitifully as the time before. Father presses the pause button as the animal falls to its knees. He labels the tape and says, “I know a video in which the gnu makes it. It just pretends to be dead and runs away as soon as the lioness isn't paying attention. Gnu-cunning.”

In Father's video collection, gnus die, aliens land, Lady Di has an accident, and a tremendous number of goals are scored. But the most common are reports from home. Short segments, often just the last few minutes. But in order to recognize home, one doesn't need more than a few seconds. Even before one word is spoken, something catches the eye, and breath comes faster. The essence is visible then.

The particular kind of interior in a farmer's house, for example. Tapestry, woodstove, embroidered tablecloth, image of Jesus. Thick

bedspreads and pillows in the background. The farmer woman's dress: durable material, because of the hard work, flower pattern on the skirt, headscarf. A shrug, a nod, a smile. The courtyard with the draw well and the horse-drawn cart for the daily drive to the field. Behind it, the village pub: one room, three tables, five drunks. Barely any choice on the menu: schnapps in dark and light bottles. Intoxication takes care of itself. Chocolate Brand East, hard and bitter.

Then the TV camera enters another courtyard. There, they celebrate a wedding. The bride dances with her father and cries. The groom empties a glass of schnapps in one go. The dress rehearsal for the daily trip to the pub later. But such details don't interest us. We sit as if bewitched until the film is at its end. Afterwards, Father inspects the quality of the recording. Like with the gnus.

We were good emigrants from the beginning. Assimilated to the customs, white, and completely European besides that too. Lucky. People don't see our foreignness. Most, at best, hear it. Rolling Rs, the wrong word order, the wrong articles, the wrong case, long rows of "ums" until the right word comes to mind, helpful use of the word "thingamajig" or the question "how do you say that again?" always a bit effusive in tone. But the Swiss don't hold something like that against us, some even love the rolling Rs.

The problem is you don't want to stand out yourself. Standing out, not belonging. A permanent stay in a foreign zone. Illegality in perpetuity. For eighteen years already.

The pauses for thought have waned, words arrive more quickly on the tongue, and one is taken as someone "from here" more often. Okay, not exactly "from here," but less and less often "from there." From the mountains, for example. From areas where the Swiss also roll their Rs. For our sake, add in something soft, something good for emigrant tongues, for Father's tongue, for example.

Father says, "These tongue twisters put my brain in a twist." Even though he could be content. Our language here—finally I say "our"—is soft in general. Almost no strong language. So you could flat-out disregard the tongue twisters. So you could be literally happy to get by without any force at all. At any rate, no more force than is necessary to stay put. After eighteen years, I still arrange the words in

my mouth like pearls I am about to spit out. When I'm insecure, I mumble and imagine that no one notices.

You say "I love you" and feel nothing. You say "I hate you" and feel nothing. You only feel something once you translate it inside. Into the language of your childhood. Into the language in which Father cursed and the first girl desired me. If you still feel nothing, even then, you're lost.

Refugee passport. Blue with two gray stripes in the top right corner. If you have a passport like this, or another one with the wrong colors, the problems already start at the consulate.

"Foreign ID, work verification, confirmation certificate for health insurance. Confirmation certificate of a room reservation for the entirety of your stay, otherwise a declaration by the guest family to be acquired at city hall and signed by them concerning the defrayal of all additional costs during your stay in France. Hospital, property damage in case of accidents, and so on. A current bank statement. A month's waiting time, maybe shorter. What? You still have questions? I can't answer that, Monsieur. Please step aside. Next person, please. No, Monsieur, procure the documents checked on the form and then come again. Take a number on the ground floor and wait until you are called. Excuse me? Two photos, Monsieur, not four. Excuse me? Yes, 80 Francs for a one-time visa. Now step aside, Monsieur, you're standing in the way. What do you mean? Why don't I raise my head when I answer you? Please step aside, Monsieur."

I asked the Madame at the counter if she didn't want to know my dick size too. Maybe it was important, for France. Asked complete with rolling Rs and in French. She raised her head and barked, "Excuse me, Monsieur?" Stay polite, Madame. By any means, stay polite. I had barely asked the question when all of the other people waiting were laughing already. In the house of the French consulate in Zürich, liberating laughter spread. Anyone who understood even just a little bit of French was laughing.

They threw me out and locked the heavy door behind me. I kicked it. The door opened again, just a crack, and a bald man appeared. He said, "I will remember you, Monsieur. You won't receive a visa for France now, Monsieur. No decency, Monsieur."

“Who has no decency here?” I retorted, and saw everyone behind him, who had laughed before, duck their heads. “Chauvinists!” I yelled, “all hairless and chauvinistic!” It is useful to know that baldness and nationalism are linguistically close in France: *chauve*, *chauvin*.

In the middle of Zürich, then, I hit a border, hidden out of sight on the second story of an unremarkable house. You go about and believe yourself to be free, and suddenly freedom is no longer there. Suddenly it hurts, and you’re foaming with anger.

I live here happily. It is not an excessive happiness. It is the happiness of having a dependable lover. Slightly pedantic, slightly boring, slightly flexible. You are used to her bad breath. You save up the sex for someone else. For later, when real life begins. But, when exactly does real life start? And what kinds of decisions need to be made for it to happen?

Father is content here. “The Swiss were our salvation,” he says, and then lists everything from which we were saved. And yet my father has longings. Do you know how I recognize it? From six o’clock news on the radio. From Father’s attentiveness, his careful listening. From his recall, which doesn’t skip a single program. I recognize it by the way he curses home only to return there each year. He’s on his way again right now. Now he has a cell phone with him, so that he can maintain a connection. He stopped and called near the border between Hungary and Romania. Who would have thought that one day you could calmly step out of your car, exhale, and call your son. Back then, there was only one thing to do near the border: be afraid and piss your pants.

This particular sensitivity to borders. As places at which one appears, in person, and with a broad back for the rubber clubs. Where one can no longer say, “I’ll be fine. I am just one of many.” Where pissing your pants is one of the last remaining freedoms. A *gnu* without a second chance.

Men in uniform say, “Come with us.” Men in uniform take the whole car apart. Men in uniform make other men undress themselves. Behind the steering wheel, I shrink into a small boy who wants to close his eyes and imagine himself elsewhere. Or pretend to be dead. That would be something.

The emigrant has it just as bad as the unlucky daughter in the



fairy tales. At first glance, she is plain and cast out. Until she finds her prince and transforms herself, one has to read many pages. With the emigrant, no one knows exactly how many pages there are until the transformation occurs and he will be free of fear.

In the meantime, the task is to be brave and to say it out loud just once: “My land.” “My land” for eighteen years already. I have been asked about my land many times while abroad. I rarely knew an answer. Temporary answers. Something like answers in development. But I will practice giving answers. I will definitely do that.

I stand in the midst of life, in the midst of myself, and thirty-three is a good age. Thirty-three is surely a good age for something.