



Sânziana Batiște

*Drawing by Aurelia Stoie Mărginean*

Sânziana Batiște

SWEET  
ARIZONA

Short Stories

Translated into English by Diana V. Burlacu

eLiteratura

rassment (clipped by refined observation and good-quality humour), to creating poems in prose, Sânziana Batiște is an exceptional observer of the vulnerable souls, which linger from the past into our present world, a world characterised by insensitivity, aggression and lack of hope.

Everything is witnessed with keen precision and lived to the maximum, the two realities – the inner and the external one – blend, thus creating a detailed and profound representation of the characters' destinies. The *Sweet Arizona* short-stories, silk-delicate and well-balanced, overflow with dignity, and, at the same time, offer a refined landscape of the human nature.

A scholar interested in the literary phenomenon or even in the history of literature could perceive the "birth" of such prose as a model of an archetypal destiny which saves and justifies itself by its own creation.

Together with her poetry, Sânziana Batiște's prose may equal an archetypal diary of survival.

**Ladislau DARADICI**

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*To my parents,  
Margareta and Dimitrie Moșneang*

*This is the miracle. Underneath any  
event, person or situation  
which seems 'bad' or 'negative', there is  
disguised 'goodness'.*

*This disguised 'goodness' reveals to you  
by your inner acceptance of what is.*

*Leave Life alone.*

*Let it be.*

*(Eckhart Tolle – Stillness Speaks)*

*Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual  
events is purely coincidental, the present prose writings belonging  
to literary fiction.*

## OLD MAN

The old man lent her the feeling that something concerning her was going to happen. His very presence seemed to be an omen of such course of events in her life.

He always came unexpectedly, from the same direction, passing by some building which once might have been a hospital and then stopping on the dam. He began. The sounds painfully seized her heart, reminding her of the afternoons when the voice used to rise up to pure tremolo, soprano-like. She felt the urge to scream: 'Mother!' The tune fascinated her – modern, strangely associated with his old age and the obsolescence of the instrument, as well as with the simplified, yet surprisingly accurate melodic line.

The waves rolled, rose and broke against the shore, whereas the cry within her rolled, rose and then ceased.

He passed by the people and sang. The children would not stop their clamour, yet the sordino mingled with their voices, fingers instinctively turned the radios down, discussions faded away and, for a short time, the sounds of the mandolin lifted above the sounds of waves, seeming to freeze time. However, the old man, a gray

shape, went farther on. Nobody dared give him money any longer, since last time he had rejected it hastily, visibly offended. What had brought him among people? Enough ... He was merely an old man with a mandolin coming from her far-away childhood, this and nothing more was all she wanted to know about him.

Then ... She had discovered him all of a sudden, yet not being taken by surprise. She had never met him before but knew it was He. It was not the doubt that made her watch him differently, so he spotted her, but the thought that He was here, before having been there. There, where she called him. He did not seem to enjoy the sand, the water, the sun... He used to sit down on the edge of the street, all by himself, the way he was left alone when the woman drew closer and He got up, welcoming her ... She then remembered the dream: He was standing on the solitary cliff at the seashore like on a pedestal, a statue twinning those representing the Northern sirens; like them, he was contemplating the infinite flatness of water, like theirs, his soul was torn between two worlds.

Suddenly, the voice echoed, the scream rose and shattered.

He was there, an inch away from her, yet far, so far away that the thought of reaching Him caused her pain.

## O, YE, DAUGHTERS OF BABYLON!

She was standing by the window of the students' dormitory gazing at the night starred with the city lights. The uproar of the street, wadded by the distance, would drill softly and remotely up to the last floor. The whistle of a railway engine harrowed her strained nerves. Yes, she felt the need to leave as soon as possible, to escape. This city bearing a sense of temporariness had nevertheless appropriated her against her will. The thought of being an intruder had been gradually growing into an inveterate feeling of hostility. No, she would not be part of this city, which, after so many years, still showed her its ice-cold smile, the cautiousness of the self-sufficient one.

The city ... Old existence with rusty houses, gravitating towards the majestic cathedral; new districts of blocks-of-flats devoid of any identity, yet proliferating obstinately, gathering within their walls and then flooding all over the streets a disoriented, chaotic mob of villagers transformed into city dwellers overnight ... Naturally, not the city, but she was to be blamed for. A shy, fearsome animalcule among those dashing, self-confident young people, her colleagues. They gestured and talked with the

easiness of those who are not afraid of facts or words, neither of their influence or consequences. They had the unwavering air of the ones who know exactly what they want, and they know it from the very first steps they take in their parents' home. Actually, the obsession of their goal was stamped on their faces. Still in her freshman year, she was stunned by the revelation of the fact that their relationships were not based on feelings and common goals, but on interest. She experienced alienation from both the students passing exams with no anxiety and no efforts – those extremely well-prepared, then the tricky ones or those whose parents were influential – and other students who toiled night and day. Disgust arose later, when she noticed the existence of the secret bridges between some of her female colleagues and some of the teaching staff. 'You have forgotten your pullover in my house', one day a teaching assistant told a colleague of hers, handing her the corpus delicti. 'Let her fall for this story hook, line, and sinker' – she said afterwards, laughing indifferently. 'I left it on purpose, of course'.

In the morning she witnessed her cousin Dana's festivity at the end of the school year. Her curiosity was stirred by a scene which, once filmed, would surely become a classic. Reality proved again to be the most ingenious stage director. Everybody was out in the schoolyard. A little girl apart, detached from her schoolmates, was delicately playing one of Mozart's minuets. Behind her, one head taller, arms akimbo, feet firmly on the ground, a

sturdy boy, easily branded as narrow-minded, was panting over her crown and chewing gum. How? Resolutely and incessantly, energetically passing the piece of gum from one jaw to the other, he was making grimaces out of boredom, yet showing slight interest. Contrary to expectations, he was not interested in the music, but was foolishly hypnotised by the movements of the fiddle bow. Cristina's heart froze. Her imagination replaced the boy with a placid Madonna contemplating her own self, always heedful of what could affect her, solely her, one way or another ...

Such colleagues of hers had been, for a while, a curiosity to her. Earnestly, scrupulously, calmly and self-assuredly, they used to interpret a role already written, thus preparing for something grand, for a place seemingly assigned to them. Meanwhile, she was tormented by so many doubts and so many unanswered questions! In addition to it, these people would parade their dresses, golden rings and necklaces, whereas she still counted the bruises received during the football matches ... this football bug! When in college, they drew her attention again. This time, beyond their apparent indifference, there lay great turmoil. This time, such 'Madonnas' realised that the place 'meant' to be theirs could easily be taken by someone else, a different she. More and more shadows would flutter over their delicate faces, their looks would change, now and then, from impersonal to

strangely mundane, and their distressed pretty smiles would go sour.

The music and the voices in the neighbouring rooms sounded pleasant and chilly. Cristina was not able to relax. To free herself. To free herself of this overwhelming love, which she had willingly accepted, yielded, lured ... *O ye, daughters of Babylon, that ye stir not up, nor awake love, till it please!* No, she should not have stirred up love until she was strong enough to face it. She compared herself to a poor tree whose branches, still tender, are in the danger of breaking under the heavy fruit.

The door of her room opened suddenly. Marta pulled her scarf away, undressed her coat and threw off her shoes. 'I am going to marry Petre!', she declared. Usually pale, also due to her chlorotic hair, in spite of her bulky, matron-like figure, Marta had now rosy cheeks and glowing eyes.

'What about Tinu?' asked Cristina puzzled. 'What will happen with Tinu?'

'What about him? What can he offer me? Some job in the countryside or, at best, a commute to Turda ... I have already given him back the ring ...'

'And how did he react?'

'How could he react? ... We both cried ...'

'Well, you are not in love with Petre!', exclaimed Cristina indignantly.

'No, I'm not', admitted Marta plainly. 'I've already told him ... I didn't even let him kiss me ... He said he doesn't care I don't love him, certain of the fact that soon enough I'll be no longer unruly ... Yes, I'll stop being unruly when he stops growing bald and fat ...'

'Marta, you're not aware of your acts!', flared up Cristina. 'How do you imagine your life with him? And after all ... You and Tinu love each other ...'

'Well, girlie, shoulder-shaking sobbing is a waste of time', Marta proclaimed. 'I'll wed Petre and then have him eat out of my hand ... And whenever he's not obedient, I'll make him put his buttocks in the water and stay there ...'

They both burst into laughter at the mental image of the cocksure plump Petre sitting in a corner, his buttocks deep in a washbasin – the kind of punishment Marta, once a kindergarten teacher, had threatened the naughty children with, in order to change them into 'angels'.

The corridor of the dormitory had become alive. Since now there was finally hot water running through the bathroom taps, all the girls were in a hurry to take advantage of such a short moment. Marta put her bathrobe on, thus covering her small childish breasts, a contrast to her robust frame and to her wide hips. She left the room, towel on her shoulders, affectedly uttering 'Bye, fresher'.

Cristina pulled the curtain, switched the light off and nestled in bed. She was tired. She had finally managed to conclude her diploma paper. The following days she had

to go all the way to the outskirts of the city, up to the University of Agronomy, to meet a lady willing to type it for a good price. She had carelessly spent all the money from home, so she was compelled to sell her ration book, save up tooth and nail and still, she was short of cash.

Her thoughts returned to Marta. Yes, Marta's personality hid something inflexible, which sometimes, in blunt speech, outstreamed through her green eyes. Blonde Marta often vexed ... She perceived her enter the room. She left the door ajar so that she could make her bed by the light outside in the corridor. Cristina breathed deeply, as if already asleep. She just felt too tired to resume the discussion. Marta closed the door.

How long could she have been sleeping? She had a dream. A dream about Marta being a bride, smiling happily at Tinu's arm ... She held her breath ... In the bed by the window, Marta was sobbing and sighing ... At some point she calmed down. Awake in the darkness, eyes closed, Cristina saw Marta's childish-fretful face fading away and being replaced by a stern figure, a cold, wicked mien. 'Nonsense', said that Marta, on getting down the bed. 'Shoulder-shaking sobbing ... total schmaltz' ... Then she went away, closing the door with no regrets and leaving behind a blonde girl sighing on a pillow ...

## SWEET ARIZONA\*

This has not happened to her in a long time. She has severely disciplined her cheek muscles and her reflexes to such an extent that her physiognomy would no longer reveal her thoughts, neither her genuine feelings. Her eyes alone used to betray her for a while, but then she learned how to imbue her gaze with the degree of indifference appropriate to the respective circumstance or even render it with utter blankness ... as a consequence, any outer trial of engaging her was doomed to failure. She took some breathing space by closing her eyelids; at that point her face regained the very blank expression which could embarrass even the one merely having considered intruding upon her spiritual life.

And now ... Her eyes betrayed her once again. Unexpectedly. Big tears were rolling down her all-blank face.

'So what is the news-views in the circus\*\*?'

'You sham', retorted Maia indignantly. There was one of the usual unexpected breaks after the morning outflow of patients all over the clinic hallway.

'Well, Madonna, this is the exact name of your business ... Have a look ... Health cir-cus\*\*', Dora read a