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Man to Walk on the Moon), Cătălina Fometici (Beyond Night’s
Veil), Mălina Duță (Mary Stenton Returns to the Motherland),
and Andreea Șerban (Serpents among the Scent of Algae).

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Index

EAST OF A KNOWN GALAXY

An Anthology of Romanian Sci-Fi Short Stories

Edited by Daniel Timariu and Cristian Vicol



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FAST OF A KNOWN GALAXY A TO T2A3

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Index

A Word from the Editors

A Word from the Editors.....	7
A Note on Romanian Science Fiction Literature from Past to Present – Mariano Martín Rodríguez.....	10
Silviu Genescu – Transformation.....	23
Daniel Timariu – Bodies to Let.....	55
Cristian Vicol – Radio Killed the Video Star.....	73
Florin Purluca – The First Man to Walk on the Moon.....	95
Miloș Dumbraci – Tiger-men.....	107
Teodora Matei – Cursed Night!.....	137
Liviu Surugiu – The Dinner.....	157
Alexandru Lamba – Bug.....	193
Lucian-Dragoș Bogdan – The Story of Xieng Baohui.....	205
Cătălina Fometici – Beyond Night’s Veil.....	227
Lucian-Vasile Szabo – Mary Stenton Returns to the Motherland....	269
Ciprian-Ionuț Baciș – Serpents among the Scent of Algae.....	291

Transformation

by Silviu Genescu

*I've always been mad, I know I've been mad,
like the most of us... very hard to explain why you're mad,
even if you're not mad...*

Pink Floyd, *The Dark Side of the Moon*

Matecu had eaten so much he couldn't even finish the last piece of cheese. He pushed his plate away. His mother and his sister never let him stuff himself. They exchanged worried glances whenever he shovelled food into his mouth. "His glucose will go through the roof again", his mother would say. He had no idea what glucose was or how it could go through the roof. The first times he had heard those words he checked his tracksuit trousers, afraid he would see a monster crawling up his leg toward his enlarged goitre. Eventually he had grown used to his mother's passing remark and had given up looking for

glucose on his clothes. The doctor he saw monthly also talked about it.

Now his sister Livia and his mother were in the dining room, absolutely motionless. They had been standing like that for at least several hours. He found them like that when he came out of his room, his eyes heavily lidded from too much sleeping. Nobody had come to wake him up. Matecu tried talking to them, but they didn't answer. They were just standing there in the middle of the room, like the mannequins he had seen in shop windows, but not so nicely dressed. Matecu tried to figure out what was wrong with them. Were they were playing a game, like who could stand still longer? Or like when he and his sister played the quiet game and he had to refrain from talking and laughing for a while. Once he had kept silent from noon until evening and his sister came to his room from time to time to check that he wasn't cheating, talking gibberish and laughing stupidly as he always did. But that time Matecu had taken himself seriously and kept quiet until evening. Livia had rewarded him with a small bar of chocolate.

His name was Dan Mateescu, but he could not say Mateescu, it was too hard for him. So if you asked him his name he would answer Matecu or Dan. He had attended a school once, but could not remember much from those days. He could barely read a few lines and write his name in block capitals, pressing the pencil or the pen so hard the

letters appeared on the next several pages of the notebook. If he had to fill in a form, he tore the paper.

His mother and sister were still strangely motionless in the dining room. He ran into the enclosed balcony and looked outside. Not a soul in sight. He realised he no longer heard the tram wheels squealing around the corner of the park. And there weren't any vehicles running on the street either. Some cars were parked, but others seemed to have stopped abruptly, abandoned by their drivers who had probably vanished into thin air.

The wailing German trams, still sturdy after 40 years of running on the rails, had been missing since he woke up. Before he had heard them quite often and sometimes they disturbed his afternoon sleep. Before what? Matecu thought hard and decided the last time he had heard a tram passing by his block had been last night. He looked up and down the street, but he didn't see any movement. In the dead silence, the birds chirped louder, as if delighted that men had completely disappeared from the streets or had frozen in squares or at major intersections.

Matecu turned towards the dining room. He would have liked to ask permission to go out, but neither his mother nor Livia had moved. He knew he was not allowed to leave the flat alone, so he kept quiet, the words stuck in his throat. Seeing them like that worried him sick. Mother was wearing her pink nightgown and his sister blue print pyjamas. He took a few steps forward and

saw tears streaming from their eyes, but the traces they left on their cheeks were shining like silver. Maybe it was because of the light that penetrated boldly through the transparent curtains. Their stillness and the wet traces on their cheeks scared him silly. He knew you usually cried if something very bad had happened or if you were in pain. He started crying himself, silently, rounding his cheeks, as if in solidarity with their pain, though he could not understand it. He felt the salty tears on his lips. He could not take his eyes off his mother and sister. Their tears seemed oily, viscous.

At this time of the day, mother was always busy cleaning the house and if she had seen him there she would have snapped his head off: "Why are you in my way? Can't you see I'm busy? Go to your room and browse those illustrated magazines." But now she was dead silent. She just stared in the distance, without seeing him.

"What are you two crying for?" Matecu asked aloud.

He was frightened. He couldn't understand what was going on. Why were mother and Livia like that, why couldn't he hear the trams outside, why wasn't there anybody in the street? He drew nearer to his mother and ran a finger over her cheek. He wanted to wipe those shining, sticky tears away, to make them run down her cheeks. Endlessly. They resembled that oily, colourless liquid that sometimes dripped from the miracle-working weeping icons in village churches with smoked walls,

predicting dramatic events. His finger ran over the skin, following the wet trace. On an impulse, he put his finger into his mouth, licking it. His mother's tears tasted sweet, they smeared his finger like honey. They reminded him of the melted ice cream his sister gave him when she took him for the daily walk in the park across from their building. He licked it while she sat on a bench and read. Happy to be outside, he did somersaults on the grass, much to the surprise of the passers-by. Someone his age should not give such a performance, but you could guess immediately something was wrong with him.

He licked some more of his mother's tears. He stopped only when he reached her eye. He knew it was unpleasant when someone touched your eyes, but she didn't even blink. He turned to his sister. Her tears were also sweet. He liked the taste; he filled his mouth with it. It was as if he could eat chocolate glaze to his heart's content. He did the same when Mother gave him the bowl in which she had prepared cocoa cream for her cakes. He licked it clean with tremendous pleasure. The sweet taste made him forget about the question he had asked before: "What are you two crying for?"

The open eyes, like a pair of glass beads, caught his attention again. They weren't watching anything in particular, they didn't show any feelings. They were like the painted eyes of the characters he had seen in a wax figures exhibition, an itinerant collection of awful imitations that

bore no resemblance to the original political personalities and celebrities whom you recognised only by the names written in their presentation. However, his mother and sister shed sweet, stickier tears continuously. Their eyes literally swam in tears streaming slowly down their faces. Yet something stopped him from licking the transparent goodies collected in them. He knew they would only allow him to kiss them on their cheek. He licked his lips greedily, but he was too shy to make such a radical gesture and lick their unmoving eyes.

"Mother! Livia!" he burst, almost angry at their stillness.

The truth was he was frustrated at not being able to do it anymore. Having discovered why — his own fear that neither of them would have let him lick her eyes — he felt deeply unsatisfied. He was facing absolute prohibition. He gave them another close look and darted furiously to his room, the only place where he was always left alone. He sat at the small table by the window and started hitting the tabletop with his forehead, hands in his hair. He let out short, frustrated groans. Eventually he fell asleep.



He couldn't say how long he had slept, but as he lifted his head he saw it was still light outside. It must have been late afternoon. Everything seemed frozen, like in the morning. Puzzled, he touched the bump on his forehead,

feeling the skin scratched from having hit the tabletop so many times. He stared in horror at his bloody fingers, trying to remember what had happened. He went to the bathroom to wash and saw his reflection in the mirror.

He was looking at a stranger: slightly bulging eyes, chubby cheeks, double chin, white, sweaty skin, bloody forehead, greasy, unkempt hair. He studied the face thoroughly, hardly believing it was his own. It was as if he had never seen himself before. It seemed he had just come out of a deep coma and found that time had been merciless and he had put on weight while lying unconscious. He ran his palm over his right cheek, feeling the stubble of his wispy beard. He did not recall ever shaving, and his eyes fell on the shelf above the sink, where he noticed a razor. The shaving foam and brush were on the shelf above the bathtub. He shook his head. No, he didn't shave himself. His sister Livia helped him. Now she was in the dining room, stock-still like her mother. Suddenly he remembered he had licked their tears because they were sweet as honey and almost immediately he felt sick. He opened the toilet lid with the top of his foot, too disgusted to use his hand. He felt he had woken up in an unfamiliar house and had no idea how he had got there. The nausea passed and he looked again at his round face glistening with sweat, hair locks stuck to his forehead. He hated what he saw: it was a person he wouldn't want to meet, but felt pushed to do so. And that person was himself.

"Mateescu", he said aloud, looking at himself. "Dan Mateescu."

He remembered how he had introduced himself before: Matecu. His name, brutally abbreviated, like a loud bark, had come out after a prolonged, guttural howl.

"Matecu?" He made a wry face and shot himself a hostile glance.

He recalled how his sister called him when they were alone and nobody could hear them, right there in the bathroom, while she was shaving him and telling him angrily to keep his head straight, or in his room, as she was reading him stories when she would obviously have liked to do something else.

He left the bathroom, crossed the hallway in a hurry and entered the dining room. They were still there, both of them, shedding oily tears that shone on their feet and the carpet, staining their nightgown and pyjamas. He planted himself in front of his sister.

"So this is what you call me when you want to 'spoil' me," he said.

He doubted she could understand him, since her expression seemed captivated by a different world. He turned to face his mother.

"She calls me Lil Prick when she thinks no one can hear her, when it's just the two of us. 'Don't move, Lil Prick! Stand straight, Lil Prick!' That's what she calls me", he added huffily.

It was a revelation for himself too, but his mother didn't answer. Nor did she turn her head to him. Thick tears kept running down her cheeks, but he was no longer tempted to lick them. He looked around. Everything was familiar, yet different, as if while asleep he had been taken to another place, almost identical with their flat, but subtly different. What was more, he discovered he was able to remember amazing things like that insulting nickname his sister had given him. He could read the titles of the books in the wooden bookcase, which was totally unexpected, since he had barely graduated a school for disabled children and reading a few lines was an incredible effort. But now he found he could read the titles rather easily, though they didn't ring a bell: *The Three Musketeers*, *Otilia's Enigma*, *Darkness*, *The Master and Margarita*. He remembered the musketeers because he had seen them in a film fighting with their swords and making all sorts of jokes while duelling. Everybody looked happy in that film, even when someone was pierced by a sword like a chicken by the skewer. He took *And Then There Were None* from the shelf because it sounded almost funny, and opened it at Chapter One: "In the corner of a first-class smoking carriage, Mr. Justice Wargrave, lately retired from the bench, puffed at a cigar and ran an interested eye through the political news in the *Times*". Up until then, Matecu had been unable to grasp the meaning of the written words. The letters had danced under his eyes, making it impossible for him to discern

them. Now he understood that a certain Judge Wargrave (whose name he found very strange) was smoking a cigar and reading the news in a newspaper. He was curious to see what happened "there", so he read on: "He laid the paper down and glanced out of the window. He glanced at his watch — another two hours to go."

Matecu looked at the clock on a shelf. It was 7:46. Evening was falling, though the light was still bright, apparently unwilling to leave the frozen, deserted landscape swept through by gusts of wind that raised the dust and scattered it all over. He should hear street noises, doors being slammed, music screaming from the neighbouring flats, squealing German trams clattering when taking the bend around the park. All was strangely silent and Matecu shivered, turn as he turned his head to his mother and sister. Maybe it was happening to others too: they were at home and their eyes were producing viscous tears, that was why there was no movement on the street. The whole apartment building was quiet.

He put the open book down on a low table, on the macramé his mother was so proud of. Was everybody else frozen? he wondered, standing in front of his mother and Livia again. But why wasn't he crying? He remembered how he had cried when he got beaten up by Gicu, a boy in the neighbourhood. The other children were playing in the park together, but they wouldn't let him join them. Every time he tried to be part of their game, they called

him names: "Beat it, retard!" Gicu had banged his head on the door of the building and Matecu had burst into tears, more scared than hurt. His mother had come to take him home.

Now he didn't cry and his mind seemed clearer. He took the mystery novel and read several more paragraphs, just to make sure Judge Wargrave wasn't just a figment of his imagination. He finished the page very quickly. He was absolutely convinced he would have been incapable of doing that before.

"Indian island?" he mumbled in surprise. Somerset and Hollywood, the two places mentioned in the book, sounded equally enigmatic. So did Miss Gabrielle Turl. She reminded him of Gabi, the girl he liked so much. He saw her whenever they took him to the hospital, that old building with a weather-beaten facade, green walls and maze-like corridors. They met in the inner courtyard. She wore a grey coat and kept her hands in her pockets. She was the only one who talked to him. She talked nineteen to the dozen. He replied unintelligibly, but for her that was reason enough to keep talking. He didn't understand anything she said, but she had a nice face and clear blue eyes that soothed him when they locked on him. The last time he saw her was a week ago. He had spent several days at the hospital because he had become increasingly restless and frightened and had woken from his sleep screaming hoarsely. Whenever he was taken to Hospital 5,