

Globalism, in Stories

Ten days after graduating from Rochester, **Lenore Myka** '94 was on a plane headed to Bucharest, Romania, as a Peace Corps volunteer. Though the Peace Corps was 33 years old at the time, to Romanians it was nearly as fresh-faced as its youngest volunteers. It had been there just three years. Two years before that, the nation had watched with solemn satisfaction as a firing squad sealed the fate of its longtime dictator. Myka was entering a world that was ambiguous and uncertain—to Romanians, and to the international workers and volunteers who'd flocked there to serve them.

Myka, who teaches writing at Boston University, draws from her Peace Corps experience in a collection of short stories to be released this September. The 11 stories that make up *King of the Gypsies* (BkMK Press, University of Missouri-Kansas City) explore what she calls "the mechanics of cross-cultural interaction." The context for that interaction is global transformation.

"I think it's really hard to work in organizations overseas," she says. "It's also very seductive. You do tend to live a much better

quality of life than you would in your native country."

During Myka's time in Bucharest, the Romanian capital was experiencing a swift infusion of capital. High-end restaurants, hotels, and boutiques lined the streets, while only a few Romanians—but nearly every Western aid worker—had the means to patronize them. Myka encountered her fair share of children like her invented character, Irina [see excerpt, page 49].

"They were really, really bold, as Irina is," Myka says. "But they always impressed me because they were such survivors. They knew how to coax people into helping them out." The Peace Corps cautioned its volunteers to keep them at a distance, which was not easy for Myka. "You had to create an armor against their experiences," she says. "In 'Rol Doboş,' I imagined what might have happened if I hadn't done that."

Myka wrote quite a bit at Rochester. She was a student of novelist Joanna Scott, the Roswell Smith Burrows Professor of English, who has offered praise for Myka's new collection. She describes the stories as reflections on "the condition of foreignness."

"Whether the condition of foreignness is perceived as threatening or exhilarating, oppressive or liberating, it becomes motivation in this collection to think sensitively, boldly, and creatively about identity," Scott writes.

Author Lorraine López, whose 2010 book *Homicide Survivors Picnic and Other Short Stories* was a finalist for the PEN/Faulkner Prize, praises Myka for her depictions of social class and poverty among women and girls. Asked by *Vela* magazine for some of the best women writers on social class, Lopez named six women including Myka. Myka produced "unforgettably powerful stories," Lopez wrote, adding, "I am moved by the way the stories drive home the hard truth that the feminization of poverty has a global impact that is quite different than what is experienced in this country."

Myka's first published collection had a long gestation period. "When I attempted to write about Romania before, I had much more of an agenda," Myka says. "It really took me a good decade before I could start writing about Romania without feeling that it was really precious and sentimental."

Since completing *King of the Gypsies*, Myka has started writing stories set closer to home. The theme of cross-cultural encounters animates those as well. She says, "It's all very compelling and ripe creative territory." **R** —KAREN MCCALLY '02 (PHD)



ROMANIAN REFLECTIONS: In her new collection of stories, author Myka draws upon her Peace Corps experience in early postcommunist Romania.



EXCERPT

Trafficked in Bucharest

Irina is 13 years old, but she looks younger than that. She tries to keep it that way. Lured into a brothel in Bucharest in the early years of postcommunist Romania, she escaped. Found by her captors in an orphanage, she escaped again. Now she survives by begging on the streets of the capital, seeking just enough to eat to keep herself going. Just enough to maintain the childlike appearance that might help win the sympathy of the Western aid workers who've poured into the Romanian capital.

By Lenore Myka '94

She can smell their fur coats that carry the scent of chicken fat and rosemary, perfume and cologne. Saliva pools up in the caverns of her mouth. A few yards behind her, the guests of the Intercontinental Hotel push through the revolving doors of the front entrance, releasing blasts of hot air and piano music, the jingle of keys, laughter.

Irina's American is late.

She swallows hard. In front of her, great piles of snow have covered the cracked cement park, hiding its crumbling stairs and shrubs that in the summertime catch loose pages of newspapers and food wrappers in lifeless branches. It is below freezing and there is more snow than Irina has ever seen. The wind blows it up and over curbs and collapsing benches, against the walls of

Excerpt from "Rol Doboş" in King of the Gypsies: Stories (BkMk Press, University of Missouri-Kansas City, 2015), the debut collection of short fiction by Lenore Myka '94. Reprinted with permission.

buildings so that it creates tunnels of light down narrow back streets. Irina watches cars and people navigate the brown rivers of icy slush in Piața Universității; a hunched figure dusts snow off the row of wooden memorial crosses displayed in the center of Magheru Boulevard, uncovering the date scratched onto all of them: December 22, 1989. It was only five years ago but feels to Irina like a century; she had been eight then.

A gust of wind dips up and under her knotted skirts, nips at her legs. She pulls her coat to her still-childlike chest, adjusts the string she uses to keep it closed; sucks on the tips of her bare, throbbing fingers. If she weren't afraid of the consequences, she'd curse her American. At least she has her boots. She'd discovered them only this morning. They are several sizes too big, the soles are worn flat, but the wool lining is still good and saves her small feet.

Irina has developed a routine over the past few months, as much as she has ever had one since escaping the brothel. In the early morning hours, after the last metro stop has closed and she has nowhere to keep warm, she kills time by moving. She searches dumpsters and sneaks into yards where someone might store

sacks of potatoes and onions, jars of canned pickles and peppers, or might hang laundry outside in the cold air, as stiff as salted animal hides. Five times a week, en route to work, the woman pauses in the middle of her commute to take Irina to a café. Even now, with her face directly in the sharp wind, Irina can taste the cup of hot cocoa and the slice of doboş—the only thing she ever orders—and hear the heavy tongue of her American negotiating in Romanian for extra whipped cream.

Across the street, the church bell tower chimes nine o'clock. Irina squints into the gray winter light and listens to the slightly off-key bells that seem not to pay tribute to the heavens but to warble helplessly after them, reminding her of the mutterings of dying pigeons that line the city's building ledges and scramble under park benches, pecking at each other's eyes, fighting over a breadcrumb. It's been over an hour. Irina's stomach grumbles. She sucks harder on her fingers but they continue to throb. A sound like heaving emanates from above. The sky finally relents; once again it begins to snow...

"Kel-ly!"

Irina sings out the name, as if her American might materialize out of the morning rush hour, coming to her like a well-trained dog. "Where are you, Kelly?"

It is not her American's real name but one Irina has given her, something she stole from a television show all the kids had watched at an orphanage where Irina lived for a short time. Her sisters hid her there but it didn't last; eventually she was discovered and brought back to the brothel. Kelly Beverly Hills. The name comes from Irina's favorite character on that television show, a girl with blond hair just like her American's and the same smile, too—straight white teeth so large they fill up her face.

Snow has begun to collect on Irina's head, the moisture seeping through her scarf, frigid water sinking into her scalp. She shivers more now, her teeth rattling when she relaxes her jaw. Recently her American has come later and later, and each time Irina resists thinking what this might mean. What if Kelly doesn't come at all today? The thought makes her want to scream and rage about the street, knocking over magazine displays, smashing the spotless windows of expensive restaurants, perfumeries, electronics stores that fill up the blocks of the boulevard. Instead, Irina works her stiff fingers over her scarf, trying to pull it more tightly to her throat...

Irina glimpses her American's shoes... Several yards ahead of her, a beacon of color flashing, then obscured behind a tangle of gray, black and brown pant legs. Irina leaps up onto the curb, speeding now, not bothering to avoid puddles and slush, running into briefcases and book bags, knocking the straps off shoulders, ignoring the comments thrown her way. She nearly passes her American by, shoving into her, hearing the faint oof! the woman makes. Irina skids to a halt. Wheels around. Finally.

"Kel-ly Be-ver-ly He-ills!"

The woman is not surprised to see her and—Irina cannot be sure—may not be pleased. "How are you, Irina?"

Irina throws herself upon the woman, clasping her around her waist, pressing her face into the American's side. With her nose pushed against wool, she inhales slowly, the scent filling her head, making her unsteady on her feet. Irina wants to burrow past the layers of clothing so that she might find the spot underneath where it is dark, silent, hidden. She wriggles her aching fingers through the folds of the woman's coat, trying to find a way inside. The woman accepts her embrace, even returns it, but the coat is buttoned up, impossible to penetrate. **R**

In the News



ROCKET SCIENCE: Cassada will investigate asteroids, and Mars.

He's an Astronaut!

Josh Cassada '00 (PhD) is one of NASA's newest astronauts. In July, he completed a two-year training program along with seven others selected in 2013 from among more than 6,000 applicants, the second-largest applicant pool in NASA's history. A former naval aviator, a physicist, and previously the cofounder and chief technology officer for Quantum Opus, Cassada received technical space system training, robotics instruction, and specialized hardware instruction at space centers around the world. In the coming years, he and the seven other newly minted astronauts aim to be part of the first human mission to an asteroid, as well as to Mars. NASA now employs about 45 astronauts.

Champion Doctor

Bojan Zoric '98 was a leading scorer and an Academic All-American when he played on the Yellowjackets men's soccer team. Now he's a physician for some of the world's greatest soccer athletes: the 2015 World Cup-winning United States Women's National Team.

The championship game was "exactly the type of game I like to see," Zoric told Dennis O'Donnell, director of athletic communications at Rochester, in July. "No one needed me." By which he meant, of course, there were no injuries during the game.

Zoric has been on the team's medical staff since 2008 and also served the team during their gold medal performance at the 2012 Olympic Games in London. He grew up playing soccer, first in Croatia and then in Sweden, where his family moved when he was six. He came to the United States for college because it allowed him to pursue both higher education and soccer. In addition to serving the team, Zoric is part of a group orthopaedics and sports medicine practice, Sports Medicine North, in Peabody, Massachusetts.

Celebrating the Dalai Lama in Song

To celebrate the Dalai Lama's 80th birthday last July, Michael Wohl '88 announced the completion of *Songs for Tibet II*, a follow-up to the 2008 recording *Songs for Tibet*, produced by the Art of Peace Foundation, which Wohl founded and directs. Wohl, who is also associate director of social entrepreneurship and entrepreneurship-in-residence at the University's Center for Entrepreneurship, wrote in the *Huffington Post* that the follow-up recording is intended to support Tibetans' "desires for fundamental freedoms of expression." Like the first *Songs for Tibet*, *Songs for Tibet II* features a star lineup, with 16 songs from such artists as Kate Bush, Elbow, Lorde, Of Monsters and Men, Sting, and Peter Gabriel. **R**