

Wild Cannabis Country—Notes

Claudia Serea



The setting of *Wild Cannabis Country* is the vast Bărăgan plain in Southeastern Romania, in Brăila County, in the small village of Căineni Băi, population 443. It's a remote village where my husband was born and where my mother-in-law still lives.

Căineni Băi was once a resort of local fame because of its salt water lake that features a sulfurous, silky, organic mud with healing properties for rheumatoid arthritis and other affections. People used to come from far away to sunbath and get their ailing bodies smeared with the special mud. This activity is not that popular any longer, and the resort is now decaying. Once a year, when we go on vacation, we visit the village and my mother-in-law for a few days.

Like many villages in the Romanian countryside miles far away from major urban centers, Căineni Băi is isolated, and its population is aging. Each time we visit, we see more houses abandoned and hear of

neighbors who died. People live here the same way they did a hundred years ago, the only difference being the satellite antennae spotted near some of the houses and the occasional presence of mobile phones.

Decades ago, the communist authorities decided to move the village from its previous location to in its current one, about a mile away, because they wanted to redirect the nearby Buzău river. The village church and cemetery were abandoned, leading to many folk tales about ghosts who moved when the village moved. The church still stands, and it's a strange sight in the middle of the field. My daughter and niece thought it would be cool to visit the church and take photos. Our presence in the church felt strange and I was fully aware of the contrast between the youth of the girls and the visible decay of the décor.

I wrote *Wild Cannabis Country* a couple of years ago, as a string of poems inspired by our visit to Căineni Băi. The village is slowly dying, but for some strange reason, I find it inspiring. Maybe it's the vast plain that makes me feel small under the huge skies. Maybe in those fields, there is a stronger connection with nature, with the past, or even with God. I don't know. I just know I wrote many poems about this place tethering on the brink of extinction. Recently, it occurred to me the same poems could have been written about many places, in the U.S. or elsewhere. That this sensation of emptiness brought by the great plains must be the same, prompting a similar connection with the past, with God, with family, and with other abandoned places. I hope my writing speaks to others because of this connection.

Here are some other poems I wrote about the same village:

Drinking moonshine in the middle of nowhere <https://ojarart.com/poem-1-2/>

The moon, my brother, and I <https://ojarart.com/poem-2-2/>

At the edge of the world <https://ojarart.com/poem-7-2/>





Claudia Serea's poems and translations have been published in *Field*, *New Letters*, *Prairie Schooner*, *The Malahat Review*, *Oxford Poetry*, and elsewhere. She is the author of five poetry collections, most recently *Twoxism*, a collaboration with visual artist Maria Haro (8th House Publishing, 2018, twoxism.com). Serea received the 2013 *New Letters* Readers Award, the *Levure Littéraire* 2014 Performance Award, and several honorable mentions for poems and chapbooks. Her poems have been translated in French, Italian, Arabic, and Farsi, and have been featured in *The Writer's Almanac*. She is a founding editor of *National Translation Month*, and she co-hosts The Williams Poetry Readings. She blogs at cserea.tumblr.com.