Born in Romania in 1965, Florin Ion Firimita began keeping a journal in 1977 of his paintings, essays, and short stories. In 1990, when he immigrated to the United States from Romania, Firimita took the original notebooks with him. He began writing in English in 1992, and now keeps the journal in his adopted language. Firimita’s writing has been published in France, England, and the United States. Recently, he started translating his early notebooks into English, and renamed them The Salt Diaries. They were the basis for Brian Kamerzel’s 2003 film, “The Art of Leaving.” Read more about Firimita and the film at www.absolutearts.com/fifstudio or www.theartofleaving.com.
FLORIN ION FIRIMITA

Excerpts from *The Salt Diaries*

BUCHAREST, Romania, June 10, 1990

I am throwing up again. Upset stomach, upset conscience, God knows what. I’ve spent the whole week in the bathroom, facing down into the toilet bowl, as if looking into a mirror that refuses to return my reflection.

Just a few weeks before leaving my country, I feel like a body losing its shadow. Soon, I’ll have no language, no friends, and no home to come home to. Romania doesn’t exist anymore. I’m terrified, depressed, and confused. I can’t paint. Colors don’t mean anything anymore, so why paint? Maybe writing in this journal will help me regain part of my identity. It feels that writing is my best chance at holding on to my self in this society that has increasingly become brutal and unforgiving. I hope that these pages will become a bridge between my past and my present. I hope that writing will open up some of the sealed doors. What’s this country to me? A sad circus, a diseased tooth, a perpetual funeral, a whorehouse. What’s left is my need to write about it. The desire to write about my country has become the only country that I have left.

Here is another notebook, another journey, maybe not written as impulsively as the others (hopefully, in the meantime I’ve gained some maturity), but in any case, started in the wake of these crucial events of my life. By giving me a chance to be both outside and inside the world, this journal has become a Noah’s Ark for my insecurities. I wonder if anyone else, during these terrible days, finds retreat in writing. The old communists, ready to bow in front of the neo-communists? The compromised poets, asking for forgiveness? The former prison guards, writing their confessions? The disillusioned students, whose peers died last December for a lost cause?

Probably no one. Six months after the official death of communism, the communists are still among us, fierce and ugly, unapologetic and rising. The Front has given them hope: although communist and Nazi crimes are similar in nature, there isn’t going to be a Nuremberg for the Red Plague.
I restart this journal after finally talking myself into leaving. It took some convincing. M. should take some credit for that, and D.C., of course. Then, the daily misery, too, and my friends. Maybe I am a coward, maybe I am just tired, but the stubborn patriot in me is quickly dying. I feel that my twenty-four years in here were a complete waste. I have failed to achieve anything, and if I stay, I’ll continue failing.

I am a fruitless tree. I am the last relic of my family. I am the last survivor on a deserted island. I am a twenty-four-year-old zero. What should I do with my life? That’s way too complicated to write down now, like some sort of a shopping list. Maybe I am too tired to become anything.

I was born here, in Bucharest, on July 30, 1965. My parents were 40 years old when they had me. I never knew why I was so late. Maybe it was the communism, maybe they just didn’t want any children. Who knows, maybe I was a mistake from the beginning. They died prematurely, before they could answer my questions, before they could advise me on how to live my life. Most of my questions will remain unanswered. All these years I’ve been looking for answers, looking for my own voice, but what a mistake! This country does not care for voices, unless they are part of a choir. This country has become one big, marionette choir.

I start writing again reluctantly, in a chaotic Bucharest, as a safer option to getting out into the streets and fighting the police. I live cautiously, one day at the time, in a huge, transparent dice rolled around Hell by invisible, out-of-control hands. Sometimes I get angry, and, foolishly, risk being arrested. Not now, you idiot. But nothing matters anymore: every thought, every hope, every plan, everything is built out of smoke.

This war zone is the city where I grew up. Bullet-ridden apartment houses, long waiting lines in front of mostly empty grocery stores, fresh cemeteries full of children who died in vain. In the past ten years, this city has become a caricature of what it once was. Where once was one of the most beautiful parts of the city—around Dealul Mitropoliei and the Jewish Quarter at the end of the sinister eight-kilometer Victory of Socialism Boulevard—lies now the ugliest building in the world: Ceausescu’s unfinished palace.

This is the city where most of my friends live, and where my parents are buried. This is the city of my first kiss, the city of demolished churches.
and methodical architectural sterilization by the government. This is the city I once believed in and loved.

This is the city that has kept me alive, the city that almost killed me, the city that ultimately shattered all my hopes. The crooks and the poets, the whores and the philosophers, they all live here. They will stay here, sorting through the rubble. They have more courage than I. Maybe they will try to bring the old, real city back to life. I love you Bucharest. I hate you Bucharest. I love you Romania, but you’ve let me down so much that I won’t have any regrets turning you off as soon as I get out of here. You are just sewage water coming down the faucet of my soul. You, my beloved city, are the reason I can’t stop throwing up.

I am a painter that writes. Conflict of interest? Who cares! Who has time and soul left for painting? Canvases covered in paint are just a bunch of illusions. Writing is the only real thing left. I hope I won’t get tired of writing. Freedom. America. What does all that mean? It sounds so surreal, so far away from any preconceived ideas that I’ve built about it. What if, after the fall of communism, there’s nothing left for us? What if, after communism, all future generations will be lost generations? What if America exists only on TV? What if Freedom is a trap? What if it is only our desire to be free, and communism and capitalism are similar in essence? What if everyone, the good guys and the bad guys equally, have been lying to us all along?

I am choosing this path reluctantly, pushed by M., Dan, and Tino. Regardless of how selfish this sounds, I’m leaving my country because my country has left me. I can’t even remember when that happened. I am depressed, and given another chance, I’d rather stay here. Why not get a job, do some art on the side, wait for things to change? Why not just exist and, if nothing happens, later, just die? Why not prostitute myself, like just about everybody else?

Yet, leaving seems to be the most appropriate step toward my peace of mind. I have to learn to be selfish. I have to practice this excruciating, but necessary art of letting go. The art of leaving.

Far from being the ideal immigrant, I’ll carry with me two necessary qualities for someone who flees: I am equally disgusted and afraid. On the other hand, I wouldn’t want to turn into a professional victim; in a country where hope is dead, there are too many real victims around me,
people with bigger problems and worries than mine; they are more entitled to call themselves victims, they need more help. I am one of the lucky ones. I will get out.

I write these sentences in Strada Compozitorilor, across the street of my now-empty one-bedroom apartment. My friend, D.C. has offered me his small one bedroom apartment for a few weeks. Few people know about my leaving, some of M.'s relatives, some of my friends. I'm becoming quite good at keeping secrets.

As I write, the city seems peaceful, normal, almost a decent place to live in. Maybe it's the music (Dire Straits) that makes me feel more at ease. On the left, the hopping green and red lights on D.'s Soviet-made magnetophone, the only colors in my life. Because of this music, I realize that somehow, everything is going to be okay. Music had always given me the reassurance that life is worth living—but these days who cares about anything but basic survival?

I haven't written in this journal in a long time. Writing implies a particular detachment that only peace could bring, but in the past several months I've never had any of that. Last time I've tried writing in here was several months ago, after listening on Radio Free Europe to a tape, recorded in Timisoara by a Serb journalist who witnessed the massacre. People were out in the streets, and the Revolution had started. On that tape I could hear the desperate cries of women and children being gunned down. That night, I sat there, in the dark, next to the short-wave radio, and cried, and cried, and cried, and cried so much for this country. I cried until I ran out of tears, then I cried more, without tears.

Since that night, the night when I sobbed like a child whose toys have been stolen, a child who has lost his country, I haven't been able to write anything of substance, anything that makes sense. I am not sure if what I write now makes any sense either. For several days following the Timisoara, then, later, the Bucharest bloodbath, I tried, unsuccessfully, to put my thoughts on paper. Was it a way of becoming involved, was it a way of sympathizing with the victims, was it a way of justifying my cowardice? Only God knew what the most adequate form of involvement was, (certainly not the passivity of my writing, or anyone else's writing), but how could one have helped or prevented the carnage? And who the hell was I anyway? A dilettante, a failure, a man with no future, whose life has
been spared unnecessarily. Should I talk about that, too? The guilt of the survivor? The way I’ve discovered how easily I could swallow my frightened screams like a collection of rusty knives? The way I’ve seen men urinating on themselves at six o’clock in the evening, in a public plaza filled with thousands and thousands of people? The way human flesh felt under my feet? The way I tried, last December, to wipe other people’s blood off my black leather jacket?

How strange and painful it felt, after years of censorship and public lies, in a country where satellite dishes were illegal until only several months ago, where VCR’s cost as much as a new car, where we had to stay in line for hours in order to buy eggs or toilet paper, to be able to hear on that small short wave radio my compatriots being slaughtered by their own army (which was supposed to protect them), and by the brutal forces of the secret police, the feared Securitate?

In the beginning, terror came to me not through a real, flesh-and-bone camaraderie with those martyrs of Timisoara, several hundreds of miles away, nor through my own experiences on the streets of Bucharest this past December. As an adult, terror came to me through the mouth of the small transistor Philips radio that my father had given me on my fifteenth birthday. It was the last gift I received from him; he died a month later.

There wasn’t much to listen to on Romanian radio, and there still isn’t. Some classical music, the usual fabricated news and party speeches, our own pitiful version of rock and roll, and pop music (Western music was banned here in the mid-seventies), but I was looking forward to Wednesday. Wednesday night was always the big night because it was theater night. Every week, starting at 7:00 p.m., along with thousands of invisible Romanians hidden in their cold living rooms, I religiously sat in front of my parents large Telefunken, and started dreaming. I would get deeply involved in the plots, absorbed by the magic of the invisible, excited that after all, it was not too difficult to visualize other worlds, initially revealed to us only through the spoken word. Censorship was strong, but most of the time, the director and the actors managed to get away with much more than they would be usually permitted on national television.

Did I value those magical hours of Camus, Bulgakov, or Sartre, because of the literary value of the material, the actors and their exceptional acting skills, or because that transistor radio was both a link to my father
an inviting gate toward my freedom? Hard to tell. But just imagine: the only real sets and props existed only in my mind; I had to create the landscape, the settings, to imagine the way the characters looked and walked; I had the freedom of participating in the creation of that play. On the other hand, it was comforting to picture other people doing exactly the same thing, immersed in the magic of that experience, exercising their imagination, searching for those last private gates to freedom.

Radio, and especially political radio, played a major role in my childhood, probably equally as important as the fairy tales read by my mother every evening before I fell asleep. Twelve years ago, back when my father was alive and I was only 12, he trusted me with one of our family's best-kept secrets: the daily ritual of listening to Radio Free Europe and the Voice of America. Most of the rituals in this country were punishable by law. My father asked me to promise that I would not talk to anyone at school or anywhere else about our secret, and I never did. He couldn't afford headsets (maybe you could not even get them in Romania at that time; I can't remember), so we would get together in his bedroom, in our apartment in Drumul Taberei, under an improvised tent made out of a large woolen blanket, and listen.

I don't recall my mother being a huge fan of all those American propaganda stations. She was usually busy running the household. She routinely caught the information later, during our dinner conversations.

My father would always close the windows, pull the shades, light a cheap cigarette, and start playing with the dial. The stations were jammed by yet another invisible force—the secret police—but we always managed to get most of the information. It was our main source of truth and entertainment at the same time. Who could argue with the fact that radio influenced our psyche so much, and contributed enormously to the fall of the Berlin Wall, and to our own revolution?

But after our nightly excursions in the realm of Western life, reality took over, and it wasn't nearly as exciting as the various forms we practiced of avoiding reality. We wanted the truth but we wanted to escape from the truth as well. Truth could turn into a virus, and sometimes would not set you free. On the contrary, truth as a heavy chain, aggravating, boring, slowly killing us, like a lethal injection for the soul.

Over the past years, we have spent hundreds of hours waiting in line
for food, gasoline, or even for the scarce buses around this city. We had only a few hours of electricity and hot water a day, usually during the time when we were at work. Our phone lines were tapped, our mail was opened. We were entertained by nightmares. We were tired, hungry and lonely, and Radio Free Europe could not save us. Nobody could have saved us.

We were waiting for Ronald Reagan to show up on a white horse. After a while, we started to believe that Ronald Reagan was just an actor who had never had any interest in coming out of his movies to save Eastern Europe from shame and hunger. After all, for us, the President of the United States of America existed only as a radio and television myth, as unreachable as our own backyard, colorless, pitiful dictator. Why were we so disappointed that he failed to show up at our doorsteps? It seemed that we'd lost the battle. Except for its voyeuristic, condescending attitude, the so-called “civilized” world stopped paying attention to our nightmare.

Eastern Europe with its gypsies, gymnasts, and dictators, couldn’t have been more than an exotic spice at the table of the rich Westerners.

Then last December, only a few days after the Timisoara massacre, virtually by taking a wrong turn, I became part of the University Square demonstrators here in downtown Bucharest, and discovered that change was possible. I’ve also discovered that real-life terror is much more horrific than any fiction.

How many sleepless nights filled with guilt and repulsion, how many nightmares, how many implosions and outbursts it took to make me go back to this journal? If writing is supposed to be part of healing, I truly hope that at least these pages will make me feel less guilty.

Until today—after being asphyxiated by newspapers—by the permanent grime of this city’s ruins, by the dust in the people’s souls, after witnessing hundreds of ways of debating, interpreting or misinterpreting freedom, misled and outraged by the new, “free” media, disgusted with the new opportunistic faces in our cultural and political arenas—I wasn’t able to pick up a pen, and could not write any words. I’m not even thinking about picking up a brush to start painting again. The simple gesture that used to bring me so much joy, today feels obscene.
For so many years, this journal replaced almost everything: my friends, my parents, my mentors. Sometimes, it kept me from becoming a criminal, it gave me a moral shore; probably it saved my life by keeping me within the borders of a temporary sanity. I write not because I hope for immediate answers, but because I need to spit out, scream my questions. I write because I feel abandoned. I write because I’m angry. I write because I want to hold on to the few friends that I have left, to make some sense of what has happened during these past years. I write because I’d like to look again at myself in a mirror without being tempted to spit at my own image. I’d like to get back into the world, to better know those whom I’ve known for a while, those whom I missed knowing, those whom I’ll never know. For me, these days, writing has become a form of being in love and clinging to my ideals. Writing has become a way of bringing the dead back to life, and embracing those who are alive today. Writing gives me the illusion that I could create a better world just by naming it. For now, this is my way of dealing with this terrible reality.

Sometimes, the wish to erase it all. But how could I? Writing is a vehicle for remembering, when I’ll be too old to rely on the frailty of my mind. Writing is my lifeboat. Without putting them in writing, pinning them down on paper today, all these people, horrors, and thoughts will look foreign to me and to everyone else, as if they were fantastic products of a strange imagination: empty, meaningless carcasses buried in the complicated, tired labyrinths of memory.

Common tasks or pleasures have become obscene. Reading, walking, going to the movies, making love. For the past several weeks, I’ve been struggling to start reading a book instead of peeking through the daily trashy tabloids. In only a few months, we went from a strictly government-controlled press to wide-spread pornography where anything goes. All those great books that kept our souls alive during the communist years are slowly becoming an endangered species. On our desperate way out of the cages of history, we’re stepping on the things that helped us escape. We’ve also found out that the initial forms of freedom are primitive, cruel, and unforgiving. In the past year, a major shift has happened in us. In a desperate search for the lost meaning and quality of our lives, we’ve traded our souls for the cheap pennies of an illusionary immediacy. It’s all about NOW, about that poor self, lost in the melting, foul soup of communism. How long
would it take us to regain our reassuring routines and rituals, to go back to “normal,” whatever “normal” means? How would Eminescu have reacted if confronted with this new, improved Romania, the Romania of the 1990s, the Romania of children, men, and women murdered in the streets?

Despite all this, what hurts me most is that I haven’t touched my brushes in more than six months. I could blame it on a lot of things, on the fact that I’m not in the mood, or that I can’t afford to buy art supplies, or on the fact that I don’t have any decent ideas. But at this point, I feel (and I believe that I’m not alone) that art is irrelevant. I feel as spiritually empty as my country. What is important now is making it to the next day. If I could only find some simple meaning in tomorrow, a reason to get up and keep going. But before finding any meaning, I have to make sure that I could find eggs, toilet paper, margarine and bread at the grocery store. And even if most of my fellow artists in this country are in the same boat, why am I unable to find comfort in this brotherhood of sorrow, in the simple thought that I’m not alone in this misery?

We have stopped paying attention to beauty, to art. There is no shoulder that I can cry on, because all our shoulders have become weak from years of unbearable gloom. All the shoulders that I need to rest on have collapsed like sandcastles. The most immediate solution: keep dreaming. Dream like a fool, dream like a child. Dream like a drunk sleeping in the gutter. Dream like you’ve been taking drugs. Foolishly, abjectly, I refuse to stop dreaming. I refuse to stop hoping for that impossible day when I’ll have my well-lit studio, a place to work in peace, away from this mess. One day… When? Where?

Empty house. Why doesn’t this emptiness depress me? Probably because something new is about to start, something else that I can’t quite describe, but I can feel so acutely. I know that there is no way back. The voices in my head keep whispering: let the past go, the past is only smoke. Setting up a few suitcases in the bedroom, the same bedroom in which not long ago, my mother had died. My only possessions consist of a huge Bible (the 1688 version, barely legally re-issued in 1988), a few folk art ceramic jugs, a bronze medal depicting Mihai Eminescu, the Romanian national poet, several small paintings that I can’t seem to be able to part with, two brand-new suits and several large, heavy hand-woven wool sweaters made by a peasant woman I met in Piata Unirii in Bucharest. I’d also like to take
with me the small lamp under whose orange-red light I learned how to read in my parents’ apartment, a cardboard box full of old photographs, two tapestries for my future home (what “future home” when I am close to being homeless?), and a first, rare edition of Eminescu’s poems. To own nothing but a few suitcases filled with memories, things that I consider important but others might throw in the garbage, what a strange mixture of sorrow and happiness, never experienced before!

The only important asset that I have now is Hope. Not much, though. Would it fit in one of my suitcases? I often contemplate my spiritual treasures piled up in the bedroom, two thousand books to which I am so strangely attached. Maybe the process of purging objects and other useless things is finally complete. Maybe I should not attempt to take any of these books, just leave them behind, and open up to new challenges. Maybe I should shed my old skin forever, and never look back. It is obvious that I tend to attach myself too much to the objects that surround me, and too little to the people, maybe because I still believe that objects never change, maybe because they sometimes give me an illusion of safety, even a chance at immortality (objects are “safe”—they deny me any complicated responsibility that I might otherwise feel for people). In other words: I am such a coward. Loving is much harder than owning.

I look at several photos from the 1970s, me as a child, next to the old Sevres clock. It is probably worth a lot of money, but I sold it for only three hundred dollars, a handful of crisp, precious American bank notes (not counterfeited, hopefully) for all the trouble of guarding it for so many years. I hope that someone will love it as much as I did.

Those twenty-year old photos of me as a child next to the old clock. I have changed, but the hand-painted marquis and the marchioness are still carrying on their flirting games since 1758, on the cobalt blue background of the fine porcelain. Maybe only people have the ability to change. Objects never do, unless we give them a chance.

The time for nostalgia is gone. My fascination with old houses smelling of freshly cleaned parquet, freshly baked cookies, and books with a slight touch of mold—just an old maid complex. What now replaces nostalgia is the need to escape from this daily deformity of the spirit, from the contagiousness of fear and the coldness of these cement blockhouses, from this Eastern European ghetto life, from the stupidity of my compatriots,
incapable of changing anything and could not be changed themselves either. What pushes me out, replacing this almost shameful craving for a normal life that is not possible anymore here, is ultimately, the daily routines, the poverty, the rage, the theater of the absurd. I want to learn how to live outside fear. Although I’m not exactly sure of what I want, I know that I no longer want to be the keeper of this virtual cemetery. I’d love to have the strength to tear it down, and on its ruins, build something new and alive. I crave to find myself and to being found. It is time to finally start my life.

Translated from the Romanian by the author, from his 1990 journal