

Thirteen Ways of Looking at Clul

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1.

Growing up in Cluj, in the late-seventies and early-eighties, my connection to the world was through Voice of America's broadcast in Romanian. Father and I often whistled together "Yankee Doodle Dandy," in the opening of the program. The voice from America, speaking in Romanian, though illegal to listen to, refreshed our ears used to the so-called "wooden language" of the state-controlled media. Around that time, while walking through my city once, a feeling started growing in me, that I would leave my Cluj and go look for that America of the joyful song, where people seemed happy and spoke freely. I didn't know at the time that we didn't have the actual right to own a passport.

2.

When I think of Cluj now, from America's heartland, the city of my childhood and youth comes alive. I remember its special aura conjured by architecture, landscape, its histories hidden in brick and stone: old, baroque buildings; colorful stucco; balconies, bay windows, different types of windows on each level; baroque, gothic, modern, simple, adorned; churches with cupolas, towers, clocks, bells, crosses; eye-like windows in the roofs; black wrought-iron gates, gardens behind them; bridges; schools for the blind, schools for the hearing impaired; universities, Conservatory, Philharmonic, organ music in the streets; stores without much food in them; bakeries with salty pretzels you buy on your way to school; bookstores you visit in hope of a good book; the Theater and Opera House designed by Austrian architects; the Art Museum in a former Palace of Count Bánffy; pigeons in the squares; water-throwing fountains in the city's Central Park, chestnut trees in blossom; streets lined up with linden trees smelling bewilderingly

during May nights; the Botanical Gardens with blue and purple roses, neoclassical statues, greenhouses, Japanese garden with a red, curvy bridge; water lilies, boat-long lily pads in the greenhouse smelling of tropics; newspaper stands; tramways, trolleybuses with two parallel antennas hanging onto the wires; cobweb of wires above the city; cobbled streets; statues: the national poet's, the quiet-like-a-swan poet's; the smallest equestrian statue in the country, St. George slaying the Dragon, after an original in Prague; behind it, the St. George Church with evening organ concerts and stained glass, lit from within; Michael the Brave's statue, Matthias Corvinus' statuary group; the statue of the Capitoline She-Wolf nursing babies Romulus and Remus, founders of Rome, copy of an original in Rome, gift from the Eternal City, mysteriously reading: "ALLA CITTÀ DI CLUJ ROMA MADRE, MCMXXI" ("to the City of Cluj, Rome [Is] Mother, 1921"), which took me years to decipher and more yet to believe; cemeteries with crosses; Jewish cemetery with no crosses; the heroes' cemetery aligned like a regiment; my grandparents' graves.

3.

Cluj lies in Transylvania, halfway between Budapest and Bucharest. Surrounded by hills and crossed by the Little Someş River, the city I called home for thirty years was first settled by the Romans in the second century A.D., after they'd conquered Dacia. They called it Napoca, hence its present name of Cluj-Napoca. The Hungarians (or Magyars) came in the ninth century and slowly took over Transylvania. Between the Roman departure in 271 A.D., under Emperor Aurelian, and the arrival of the Hungarians, a gap of about seven hundred years in recorded documents puts Transylvania in a more mysterious light than any vampire legend could.

After being independent or belonging to Hungary and Austria-Hungary over time, Transylvania united with Romania after World War I. Today, the Romanians are the majority, the Hungarians are the largest minority, and the rest are Gypsies, Germans, Jews, and Serbians. During communism, the regime sold minority members like Germans or Jews for about 8,000 Deutsche Marks per head to foreign countries. That's how writer Herta Müller, recent Nobel Prize winner, left Romania in 1987.

Many tried to flee communist Romania by illegally crossing the borders, or swimming across the Danube to Serbia at night, and some were shot in the process. I know a few people who took the risk and made it. It was bad enough so many had to leave. It was even worse for those who couldn't.

4.

In elementary and middle school, I used to take the trolleybus to school from a stop next to the Orthodox Cathedral. At the time, we lived on a small street in the old center, which was perpendicular on another longer, wonderful street, from the eighteen-hundreds. There, most of the buildings had inner courtyards hardly intuitable from the outside. Getting into the inner space meant passing through tall colorful gates: brown, green, black; heavy, vaulted, mysterious. That street was called at the time "March 6th," after the date in 1945 when the first communist government seized power under Prime Minister Petru Groza, during the Soviet occupation. It was later renamed "Iuliu Maniu," after the Prime Minister and leader of the party that opposed communism between the wars. Petru Groza ousted and imprisoned Maniu in the nightmarish Sighet penitentiary, where he died six years later, his body thrown into a common grave.

The "March 6th" Street was at the heart of my world during those years, but I had no idea at the time about all those things. The street physically links two large squares, east and west, dominated by two of the most splendid churches of the city. From each street end, a church is seen in the distance. Those two churches formed the east–west dichotomy that was at the center of the communist propaganda: the west meant Catholicism and capitalism; the east meant Orthodoxy and communism. I didn't know that then either—not in so many words. But I do now.

During my childhood, the western end of the street hosted art galleries and the only toy store I knew. In the center of that western square, the grandiose gothic St. Michael's Catholic Church has been standing about 260 feet high and 230 feet long from the thirteen-hundreds. That piazza used to be called "Liberty Square" ("Union Square" after the Revolution), and people I knew were shot in Liberty Square during the 1989 Revolution. It was my city's Tiananmen.

Close to Liberty Square sits Babeş-Bolyai University, the University Library, but also a café at the time known among students and academia as famous Café Arizona. The city's intellectuals gathered there to smoke, talk about books, or just sit for hours away from the madness.

At the eastern end of the "March 6th" Street, the Byzantine-style Orthodox Cathedral has been standing since the nineteen-twenties, after Transylvania united with Romania, with its dome inspired by the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, a former church and presently museum. Its four smaller towers are in the Romanian Brâncovenesc style. Facing its yellowish-cream western flank with a small semi-dome was the stop where I waited for my trolleybus in the morning. Many years later, I got married in that Cathedral.

5.

At the time, however, we didn't go to church on Sundays. Propaganda claimed God was for stupid or uneducated peasants, and that was the end of discussion. For a long time, I was afraid to utter the word: *Dumnezeu*. The strong, voiced fricative "z" sound in it was frightening: it couldn't be whispered, so you could be heard. Still, since churches are open all day in that part of the world for anyone to enter, I would visit the Orthodox Cathedral on my way back from school or when walking through the city. There was something about churches. I was curious what they were all about.

One warm, sunny spring day, when I was about 11 or 12, I was walking from school on my usual route. The ten-minute walk through the old center was the most enjoyable part of my day. I walked by the School for Blind People, close to grandma's place—a white-stucco three-story institution, sad-looking, and quiet like an empty seashell. I loved to help cross the street the occasional blind woman with a white cane and a serene look on her face; or the older couple holding arms, walking in strange dance-like moves, white canes in their hands, defensive smiles on their faces, eyes looking inward.

The street was calming down in the dimming light, as only a few people were going about their day, immersed in thoughts. Walking quietly with my yellow backpack, wind in my bangs, at the end of the street I came by the Orthodox Cathedral, close to home. Suddenly, pigeons flew around me, as if in a haste to live their short exuberance alongside the eternal stone walls, before turning into a forgotten moment in time. Still in awe knowing the church had been there for so long, I wondered how it all looked from up there, where it stood. Climbing the

stairs, I entered the stillness that was the inside of the church. There, the scent of burning candles and incense stuck to my hair and clothes. Sunrays rained down obliquely through the mastery stained glass into the hazy air, making the space seem timeless. Marble floors responded to scattered footsteps here and there. The cupola above dwarfed the few people present.

Meanwhile, the boy must have been standing close to the altar in his dark frock, holding a red-covered Bible. Had he seen me before, lighting a candle? This quiet afternoon, he waited for me to finish walking by the icons, looking at the stained glass, taking my time. My brown shoes tapped the marble in a soft-sounding music. After a while, I turned and stepped outside through one of the three wooden, heavy church doors, into the medieval-like atmosphere. Outside, I picked up my step as the orange sun was getting tired in the sky. Mother was waiting.

A moment later, the boy came hurriedly from behind me, almost running. When he reached me, he said, smilingly, "Excuse me. I've seen you in our church before. Just wanted to give you... this." His fist opened and revealed to me a small golden crucifix pendant. "You can wear it, if you want." Not knowing what else to say, he seemed content. My eyes, opened large, were trying to understand. Taking the little pendant in my hand, I don't know what I said; he left running before I could thank him.

6.

I looked at the beautiful, lace-like piece of the precious metal. Then, I resumed my walk in the afternoon, holding the pendant in my little hand. The small object sat on a shelf for a while, before I misplaced it or got lost when we moved. It was how I received it that I could

never forget. However, being too young, I didn't know what to make of it then. God had no place in my life, and for spirituality, I turned to culture. I read Plato, Aristotle, and later Schopenhauer, Kant, Hegel; poets like Lucian Blaga and Nichita Stănescu. At school, my friends and I sometimes talked about materialism and idealism, as if we had to commit to one or the other, right then and there. As an art student, I tended to believe the idea came first, before matter. Propaganda lessons in school taught that "our multilaterally-developed socialist society was based on the dialectic and historic materialism of Marx, Engels, and Lenin, which would forward Romania to communism!" I still trusted Plato's World of Ideas and found in it a temporary place for God.

7.

Across from that Orthodox Cathedral, on the corner where I waited for my trolleybus, a bakery sold the best pretzels: fresh, bigger than the palm of a grown-up, covered in melted salt, they were sometimes my lunch. I took them on my trip to school by public transportation, which was for one bus stop only. Because buses had no schedules, they were overcrowded and slow to come. In my dreams, that corner is slightly different from what it really was. In fact, most of it doesn't exist anymore. In 1983, the city government moved us into an apartment in a new building. They demolished the old building where we lived, which was from the eighteenth-hundreds. In its place, a hotel for the Communist Party's ruling class was built. After the Revolution, when the Communist Party was no more, I felt avenged having my wedding reception in that hotel's restaurant. The entire area is changed and has looked differently for the last twenty-five years or so. My dreams, though, haven't found out.

8.

It was around there that once, at about 13, returning from school with a group of friends, I casually said that I wished the previous evening they had shown a movie instead of Comrade Ceaușescu's "genial speech." At the time, the *Dallas* series was the only American TV-show, and with my friends, we loved to imitate those characters. There was only one TV channel in the country, and two in Bucharest. The program was only two hours in the evening, and it increasingly showed more propaganda and Ceausescu's speeches. Also, expressions like "the Genius of the Carpathians" and "the Oak of Scornicești (Ceaușescu's birthplace)" were constantly used on TV about the Comrade President, to the point that people started to mock such terms. Little did I know I'd said something wrong.

A woman dressed as an Army officer, walking in front of me, stopped and pulled me apart. "Listen, little girl," she said. "I don't know who you are, but I can find out. Be careful what you say. Your father can go to prison."

My cheeks burned with shame. My words died. All I could see was her index finger close to my face. And I thought of my second grade Comrade Teacher of English, who once hit the tips of my fingers with a wooden rule. I had forgotten my homework. Pain like I had never felt before propagated through my veins up to my heart. I wanted to know why she needed me to hurt. But you were not supposed to talk back to the Comrade Teacher or raise your eyes at her.

The Comrade Officer instead, made me feel dizzy, wishing I could disappear from the face of the earth. Her manicured fingers, veins invisible under her skin, made me remember my secret theory that hands evinced people's handling of others. My mother had pretty, smiling

hands; my father's were sensitive. Only Grandma Anica's, with bulging blue veins underneath soft skin, were the kindest and most sincere. She kept telling my father to stop speaking up his mind, or he may be taken away one day. None of us believed that could happen. Now this Comrade Officer said the same thing. Was it possible? Later that year, my headmaster Comrade Teacher told me she knew I said jokes that could be interpreted as political and wished that I'd stop saying them. She just wanted me to know that eyes were watching and ears were listening.

9.

I tried to forget, and succeeded for a while. I loved walking the streets of Cluj, and I walked them for years. The same streets, the same routes, again and again. City people first take buildings for granted, as if they had been growing there by themselves, like trees. Buildings watching through dormer windows had seen carriages with horses or people moving around like short-lived fruit flies.

As a bored teenager or a university student, my daily walk through the streets needed no purpose. I simply *had to* walk around the city. Taking in the smell of spring or autumn rain was a cleansing ritual. Showed off a hippie outfit in the middle of the eighties with my high-school friend, because we wanted to be different than the grayness of those years, and we wanted everyone to know it. All we could do to be rebels was to hang out at jazz concerts or Andrei Tarkovsky's films, which were rare events because nothing was happening. Walking, I hoped for something to happen—didn't know what. Maybe Baudelaire would have understood my yearning, my spleen. Cluj was my Paris.

10.

Things continued to change. The city became greyer and sadder. Faces lost their smiles. Jokes couldn't keep people from being cold and hungry anymore. There was talk in my family about Comrade President Ceaușescu. People's apartments were cold because the heating came from a centralized place in each city, and the tap remained more often unturned. Food, even rationed, was hard to find: sugar, oil, butter, meat. Twenty-one eggs per month as a family; seven for me, or more if my parents gave me theirs. A card got punched when we bought our daily bread, but we still had to wait in line. Sometimes, meat couldn't be found at all, even though the ration was a pound per month. Milk was sold out minutes after the store opened, because people were waiting in line since 4 a.m. to buy milk for their children. And most importantly, people's fear to talk or ask questions was growing.

11.

One day, Grandma Anica said in her innocence, her candid hazel eyes worried: "Well, they can't do this to people. People won't take it. They'll get out in the streets. It's just not fair!"

Since our apartment was in the very center of the city, I seldom heard, before falling asleep, people walking by the window, talking, laughing, youth merrily going home after a party, or downright drunkards. Grandma's words were echoing in my ears and made me listen more carefully to the voices in the night. Across from our little place was the big baroque building of the county government, the local Communist Party leaders. Somehow I knew that was the place where people would gather if they were to do anything. Raising my head in the dark, I started to

listen for sounds of a revolt in the passers-by. What was the sound of people starting to "not take it anymore"? I didn't know what I wanted to hear, or if I wanted to hear it. Galloping heartbeat in my ears made me think I had a heart in my head, but after it quieted down, the noises outside proved benign, of peaceful people going about their lives.

12.

One night, however, falling asleep with a worried mind, I had a vivid dream about people in the streets carrying flags, shouting, marching. In a dark, stage-like atmosphere, people with genuine proletarian rage were really going to change the world. Voices of people walking with courage came from the main street, Lenin Boulevard, from across the big county government's building. Lenin Boulevard was a long street, parallel with "March 6th" Street, and it was crossing the entire city from the east end to the west. In my dream, walking westwards, the nearby mass manifestation was liberating and exhilarating by its mere novelty. But it was frightening too! Like a wave, its force was growing, taking afloat my impressionable little soul, to engulf the entire nation.

13.

That dream I never forgot. Years later, it came alive in the 1989 Anti-Communist Revolution, when machine-guns rattled the country and splashed it with blood. When it happened, I couldn't help thinking of the restless crowd in my dream and knew some were ready to die wanting to fulfill the hope long harbored by me and others. And they did, in hope that

things would change. Then, more years later, when in 1997 I finally left Romania, I knew I could never leave Cluj. So I carry it everywhere I go, keeping it mainly in my dreams.