

LBRIS

We know  
books

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*Blinding*

The Left Wing

*Translated from the Romanian by Sean Cotter*



PENGUIN BOOKS

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**PART ONE**

Before they built the apartment blocks across the street, before everything was screened off and suffocating, I used to watch Bucharest through the night from the triple window in my room above Ștefan cel Mare. The window usually reflected my room's cheap furniture – a bedroom set of yellowed wood, a dresser and mirror, a table with some aloe and asparagus in clay pots, a chandelier with globes of green glass, one of which had been chipped long ago. The reflected yellow space turned even yellower as it deepened into the enormous window, and I, a thin, sickly adolescent in torn pajamas and a stretched-out vest, would spend the long afternoon perched on the small cabinet in the bedstead, staring, hypnotized, into the eyes of my reflection in the transparent glass. I would prop my feet on the radiator under the window, and in winter the soles of my feet would burn, giving me a perverse, subtle blend of pleasure and suffering. I saw myself in the yellow glass, under the triple blossom of the chandelier's phantom, my face as thin as a razor, my eyes heavy within violet circles. A stringy moustache emphasized the asymmetry of my mouth, or more precisely, the asymmetry of my entire face. If you took a picture of my face and covered the left half, you would see an open, adventurous young man, almost beautiful. The other half, though, would shock and frighten you: a dead eye and a tragic mouth, hopelessness spread over the cheek like acne.

I only really felt like myself when I turned out the lights. At that moment, electric sparks from the trams that clattered on the streets five stories below would rotate across the walls in phosphorescent blue and green stripes. I suddenly became aware of the din of traffic, and of my loneliness, and of the endless sadness that was my life. When I clicked off the light switch behind the wardrobe, the room turned into a pale aquarium. I moved like an old fish around the pieces of putrid furniture that stank like the residue of a ravine. I crossed the jute rug, stiff under my feet, toward the cabinet in the bedstead, where I sat down again and put my feet on the radiator, and Bucharest exploded outside the lunar blue glass. The city was a nocturnal triptych, shining like glass, endless, inexhaustible. Below, I could see a part of the street where there were light poles like metal crosses that held tram lines and rosy light bulbs, poles that in winter nights attracted wave after wave of snowfall, furious or gentle, sparse like in cartoons or thick like fur. During the summer, for fun, I imagined a crucified body with a crown of thorns on every pole in that endless line. The bodies were bony and long-haired, with wet towels tied around their hips. Their tearful eyes followed the wash of cars over stony streets. Two or three children, out late for some reason, would stop to gaze at the nearest Christ, raising their triangular faces toward the moon.

Across the street were the state bakery, a few houses with small yards, a round tobacco kiosk, a shop that filled seltzer bottles, and a grocery. Possibly because the first time I ever crossed the street by myself was to buy bread, I dream most often about that building. In my dreams, it is no longer a dank hovel, always dark, where an old woman in a white coat kneads bread that looks and smells like a rat, but a space of mystery at the top of a staircase, long and difficult to climb. The weak light bulb, hanging from two bare wires, gains a mystical significance.

The woman is now young and beautiful, and the stacks of bread racks are as high as a Cyclops. The woman herself towers tall. I count my coins in the chimerical light as they glitter in my palm, but then I lose track and start to cry, because I can't tell if I have enough. Further up the street is Nenea Cățelu, a shabby and lazy old man, whose bare yard looks like a war zone, an empty lot filled with trash. He and his wife wander dazed here and there, in and out of their shack patched over with tarred cardboard, tripping over the skeletal dog who gave them their name. Looking toward Dinamo, I can see just the corner of the grocery store. Toward the circus grounds are the supermarket and newsstand. Here, in my dreams, the caves begin. I wander, holding a wire basket, through the shelves of sherbet and jam, napkins and sacks of sugar (some with little green or orange metal cans hidden inside, or so the kids say). I go through a swinging door into another area of the store, one that never existed, and I find myself outdoors, under the stars, with the basket of boxes and jars still in my hand. I'm behind the block, among mounds of crates made of broken boards, and in front of me is a white table where they sell cheese. But now there is not only one door, like in reality – here are ten doors in a row with windows between each one, brightly lit by the rooms of basement apartments. Through each window I can see a strange, very high bed, and in each bed a young girl is sleeping, her hair spilling over the pillow, her small breasts uncovered. In one of these dreams, I open the closest door and climb down a spiral staircase, which ends in a small alcove with an electric light. The staircase goes deep into the ground, and in the alcove, one of these girl-dolls is waiting for me, curly-haired and timid. Even though I am already a man when I have this dream, I am not meant to have Silvia, and all my excitement spends itself in woolen abstractions of words and gestures. We leave holding hands, we cross the snowy street, I see her blue hair in the lights

of the pharmacy window and the restaurant named Hora, and then we both wait for the tram while a snowfall covers our faces. The tram comes, without walls, just the chassis and a few wooden chairs, and Silvia gets on and is lost to a part of the city that I found only later, in other dreams.

Behind this first row of buildings were others, and above them, stars. There was a massive house with red shutters, and a pink house that looked like a small castle. There were short apartment blocks braided with ivy, built between the wars, that had round windows with square panes, Jugendstil ornaments on the stairways, and grotesque towers. Everything was lost in the blackened leaves of poplars and beech trees, which made the sky seem deeper and darker toward the stars. In the lit windows, a life unrolled that I glimpsed only in fragments: a woman ironing, a man on the third floor in a white shirt wandering aimlessly, two women sitting in chairs and talking nonstop. Only three or four windows presented items of interest.

In my nights of erotic fever, I would sit in the dark at my window until every light was out and there was nothing to see, hoping to glimpse those uncovered breasts and cheeks and pubic triangles, those men tumbling women into bed or leading them to the window and taking them from behind. Often the drapes were drawn, and then I strove, squinting, to interpret the abstract and fragmentary movements that flashed in the wedge of unobstructed light. I would see hips and calves in everything, until I made myself dizzy and my sex dripped in my pajamas. Only then did I go to bed, to dream that I entered those foreign rooms and took part in the complicated erotic maneuvers in their depths . . .

Beyond this second row of buildings, the city stretched to the horizon, covering half of the window with a more and more minuscule jumbled, blurry, haphazard mixture of the vegetable and the architectural, with steeples of trees shooting

up here and there and strange cupolas arcing among the clouds. I could just make out the zigzagging shadow of the mall on Victoria (once, when I was a child, my mother showed it to me, against a post-storm sky), and some other tall buildings downtown, decades old and built like ziggurats, laden with pink, green and blue fluorescent billboards that blinked on and off in different rhythms. Further on, there was only the ever-greater density of stars at the horizon, which, way far-off, became a blade of tarnished gold. Held like a gemstone in the ring of stars, nocturnal Bucharest filled my window, pouring inside and reaching into my body and my mind so deeply that even as a young man I imagined that I was a *mélange* of flesh, stone, cephalo-spinal fluid, I-beams and urine, supported by vertebrae and concrete posts, animated by statues and obsessions, and digested through intestines and steam pipes, making the city and me a single being.

The truth is, while I sat all night on the bedstead with my feet on the radiator, not only did I watch the city, but it too spied on me, it too dreamed me, it too became excited, because it was only a substitute for my yellow phantom that stared back from the window when the light was on. I was over twenty years old before this impression left me. By then, they had laid the foundations of the building facing ours, they had decided to widen the street, repave it, demolish the bread factory, the seltzer shop, and the kiosks, and put a wall of apartment buildings, taller than ours, alongside it. The winter was windy, the sky white and clear after a heavy snow. I looked out the window only once in a while. A bulldozer knocked down, with its toothed cup, the building where a fulsome woman had lived, who had never shown herself to me naked. The interior of her rooms was bare and more visible now as ruins, and more sentimental covered in snow. Bucharest was losing a kidney, was having a gland removed; maybe a vital one. Maybe under the skin of the city, like under a

wound, there really were caves, and maybe this libidinous housewife who (out of spite?) never showed herself to me naked was somehow a center, a matrix of this underground life. Now the city's gums crumbled like plaster. Soon, that side of the street looked like a mouth of ruined teeth, with yellowed stumps and gaps and rotting metal caps. The snow smelled wonderful when I opened the thin, wet window and put my buzz-cut head outside, freezing my neck and ears and watching the vapors puff out of the room – but beyond its clear, clean smell of clothes frozen on the line, I could sense the stench of destruction. And if it was true that the cerebral hemispheres developed out of the ancient olfactory bulb, then the stench, the metaphysical drunken breath, the smell of the armpits of time, the dishrag acidity of approaching ecstasy, the air of watercress insanity are, possibly, our most profound thoughts.

In spring, the foundations were excavated, sewer pipes spread like scabies through clay, pink and black cables unrolled from enormous wooden spools, each taller than a person, and concrete skeletons rose up, obscuring one strip of Bucharest after another, choking off the rustling vegetation and blocking up the entryways, gargoyles, cupolas, and stacked terraces of the city. The disorderly and unsteady forms of wood and cast iron, the scaffolds that the workers climbed, the cement mixers that emitted waves of smoke, and the piles of new concrete electrical poles to replace the rusted metal crucifixes all looked like the visible parts of a conspiracy, meant to separate me from Bucharest, and from myself, from my fifteen years spent sitting on the bedstead with my feet on the radiator, pulling the curtain back and watching the vast skies of the city. A section of my mind closes, a wall goes up, and the wall keeps me from accessing all I projected into every cube and square – the black-green and the yellow-green, the moon, thin as a fingernail, reflecting in all of the windows.

When I was seven or eight, my parents made me take a nap every afternoon. The dresser faced the bed, and I would watch my reflection shine on its surface, minute after minute, a child with dark eyes sweating under his sheet and unable to sleep even for a second. When the sun reflecting in the veneer began to blind me, making me see purple spots, I turned my face to the wall to follow every little rust-colored blossom and leaf in the pattern on the upholstered side of the bedstead cabinet. In this floral labyrinth, I discovered little symmetries, unexpected patterns, animal heads and men's silhouettes, and with these I created stories I meant to continue in my dreams. But sleep never came, there was too much light, and one October, precisely this white light convinced me to play with fire: I listened first for any sounds from my parents' room, and then I slipped out of bed and tiptoed to the window. The image of the city was dusty and far away. The street curved off toward the left, so I could see the apartments on our side, toward Lezeanu and Obor. In the distance, I could see the old fire watchtower, and behind it, a city heating plant with its parabolic tubes ejecting petrified smoke. The trees appeared straight, or like Gothic arches, but the closest ones betrayed their provenance: the branches filled with trembling, sprouting leaves were not straight but twisted like an unfastened braid. I leaned my forehead against the window and, dizzy with insomnia, waited for five o'clock, but time seemed to have stopped flowing, and the terrifying image of my father bursting through the door – his dark hair knotted in a stocking on top of his head like a fez and falling in a thick line as black as a crow's tail – kept coming into my head.

Once, during these minutes stolen from obligatory sleep, I contemplated the most beautiful scene in the world. It was after a summer storm, with lightning branching through the suddenly dark sky, so dark that I would not have been able to say if it was darker in my room or outside, with gusts of rain,

rapid parallel streams surrounded by a mist of fine drops lazily bouncing in every direction. When the rain stopped, daylight appeared between the black sky and the wet, gray city, as if two infinitely gentle hands were protecting the yellow, fresh, transparent light that lay across these surfaces, coloring them saffron and orange, and turning the air golden, making it shine like a prism. Slowly the clouds broke apart, and other stripes of the same rarified gold fell obliquely, crossing the initial light, making it clearer and cooler and even more intense. Spread over the hills, the Metropolitan towers the color of mercury, all the windows burning like a salt flame and crowned with a rainbow, Bucharest painted itself onto my triptych window, the sash of which my collarbone just touched.

My illumination would be scraped off, and above it, in neat, compact letters, a command would be written, as heavy as a curtain. But today, at the midpoint of my life's arc, when I have read every book, even those tattooed on the moon and on my skin, even those written with the tip of a needle on the corners of my eyes, when I have seen enough and had enough, when I have systematically dismantled my five senses, when I have loved and hated, when I have raised immortal monuments in copper, when my ears have grown long awaiting our little God, without understanding for a long time that I am just a mite burrowing my trails through his skin of old light, when angels have populated my head like spiro bacteria, when all the sweetness of the world has been consumed and when April and May and June are gone – today, when my skin flakes beneath my ring like thousands of layers of onion paper, today, this vivacious and absurd today, I try to put my disorder into thought. I try to read the runes of windows and apartment balconies full of wet laundry, the apartments across the street that broke my life in two, just like the nautilus that walls over each outgrown compartment and moves into a larger one, inching through the ivory spiral

that forms the summary of its life. But this text is not human and I cannot understand it anymore. What remains inside – my birth, my childhood, my adolescence – seeps through the pores of the enormous wall in long enigmatic strands, deformed, anamorphic and foreshortened, nebulized and diffracted, numberless, through which I can reach the small room where I sometimes return. Pearl over pearl over pearl, blue over blue over blue, every age and every house where I have lived (unless it was all a hallucination of nothingness) filters everything that came before, combining it all, making the bands of my life narrower and more heterogeneous. You do not describe the past by writing about old things, but by writing about the haze that exists between yourself and the past. I write about the way my present brain wraps around my brains of smaller and smaller crania, of bones and cartilage and membranes . . . the tension and discord between my present mind and my mind a moment ago, my mind ten years ago . . . their interactions as they mix with each other's images and emotions. There's so much necrophilia in memory! So much fascination for ruin and rot! It's like being a forensic pathologist, peering at liquefied organs!

To conceive of myself at different ages, with so many previous lives completed, is like talking about a long, uninterrupted line of dead bodies, a tunnel of bodies dying one into the next. A moment ago, the body who was here writing the words 'dying one into the next,' with his face reflected in the dark pool of a coffee cup, fell off his stool. His skin crumbled away revealing the bones of his face, and his eyes rolled out, weeping black blood. A moment from now, the one who will write 'who will write' will be the next to fall into the dust of the one before. How can you enter this mausoleum? And why would you? And what mask of tiffany, what surgical glove, will protect you from the infection emanating from memory?

Years later, while reading poetry or listening to music, I would

feel ecstasy, the abrupt and focused clot in the brain, the sudden surge of a volatile and vesicant liquid, the windowpane suddenly opening, not onto anything outside myself but into someplace surrounded by brains, something profound and unbearable, a welling-up of beatitude. I had access, I had gained access to the forbidden room, through poetry or music (or a single thought, or an image that appeared in my mind, or – much later, coming home from high school by myself, stomping in puddles along the streetcar tracks – a window glint, the scent of a woman). I entered the epithalamium, I steeped myself in the amygdalae, I curled up in the abstract extension of the gold ring in the center of the mind. The revelation was like a cry of silent happiness. It was nothing like an orgasm except in epileptic brutality, but it expressed tranquility, love, submission, surrender, and adoration. These were breakthroughs, ruptures leading to the cistern of living light from the depths of the depths of our being, rendings swirling in the interior limit of thought, turning it into a starry heaven, since we all have this starry heaven in the skull and, over it, our consciousness. Often, though, this interior ejaculation would not reach its consummation but stop in the antechamber, and the antechambers of antechambers, where it stirred flickering images that were snuffed out in a second, leaving behind regret and nostalgia that would follow me for the rest of the day. Poems, these illumination machines, debauched me. I used them like drugs, until it was impossible for me to live without them. I'd started, sometime before, to write poems too. Among so many graceful lines, enchanted and aggressive, I would find myself stringing together, for no reason, passages of nonsense that seemed dictated by some other being. When I re-read them, they terrified me like a prophecy come true. In these I spoke about my mother, God, childhood, just as if, in the course of a conversation over a beer, I had suddenly started to speak in tongues, with the thin voice of a child, a castrato,

or an angel. My mother would appear in my poems walking down Ștefan cel Mare, taller than the apartment buildings, kicking over the trucks and streetcars, crushing the sheet-metal kiosks beneath her enormous heels, sweeping up passersby in her cheap skirts. She would stop in front of the triple window of my room, crouch down and look inside. Her enormous blue eye and frowning brow filled the window, and filled me with terror. Then she would stand and set off westward, her wiry, phosphorescent hair destroying postal airplanes and satellites in the sky full of blood . . . What was going on with this mythologizing of my mother? Nothing had ever made me feel close to her, nothing in her interested me. She was the woman who washed my clothes, fried potatoes for me, and made me go to my university classes even when I wanted to skip. She was Mamma, a neutral being who looked neutral, who lived a modest life full of chores, and who lived in our house, where I was always a stranger. What accounted for this dearth of feeling in our family? My father was always traveling, and when he came home, red-faced, stinking of sweat, he would tie his hair, thick as a horse's tail, on top of his head with pantyhose, with the top sagging open, a dark foot hanging between his shoulder blades. My mother would make him dinner and watch television with him, pointing out the cute folk music singers or variety show actors, gossiping about them endlessly. I'd eat quickly and retreat to the room facing the street (the other two rooms gave onto the back of the building, toward the melancholy red-brick Dîmbovița flour mill) to watch the polyhedral drone of Bucharest in the window, or to write disconnected poems in graph paper notebooks, or to curl up under the blanket, pulling it over my head as though I could not stand the humiliation and shame of being an adolescent . . . We were, my family, three insects, each only interested in our own chemical trails, occasionally touching antennae and moving on. 'How did