

A Personal History of a City Called Brăila

It bothers me to think that I was being listened to, that my phones were tapped, my walls too,
and the neighbours had glasses up to theirs.
In fact the walls were so thin there was no need for glasses.
As a boy I could hear how my neighbours upstairs chased each other and the woman screamed:
“Help!”
But nobody stopped her husband.
I couldn’t whisper a joke about Ceaușescu¹ without being told to “Shh.”
I realized it even then.
I knew I couldn’t say everything I wanted or everything that came to mouth, but that was fine.
I now know not everything that comes to mouth is useful.
Not everything, if anything, is worthwhile.
But there in my home, and in my grandparents’ home, what was there to listen to?
Why would it interest anybody else?
Do you want to hear how my parents are unbelievably tired and bad-tempered, shouting at each
other because they can’t understand each other’s point of view?
You don’t want to hear that.
You can hear that in your own home.
I certainly didn’t want to hear it.
Do you want to hear what we’re screaming at our new colour television? We’re screaming:
“*Bullshit!*”
because we no longer believe what you’re showing us.
You’re telling us how everything’s rosy and how we’re the best but I don’t see that on the table.
My table’s empty and I’m hungry.
The electricity’s gone off.
We light some candles.
The walls start shaking and so does the floor.
Do you want to listen in to our panic as we hold on to what we have so it doesn’t smash on the
floor and we lose it all?
Nature tells us that we’re fragile.
At times, during our exile, we wanted to leave the problems of living in a foreign country as
refugees and go back home to what we thought we knew.
Would you swap isolation and loneliness for love?
The love, we felt, would not come simply from our family, but from the very trees and the earth
that uprooted them.
The expressions on peoples’ faces would make us feel like we belonged. Be it poor, sad,
heartbroken, happy, delirious.
We had these fantasies.
I still get flashes of fantastic euphoria though I know that they’re as much bullshit as what the
Communists were feeding us.
I’ve learnt to mistrust the easy answer.

Maybe you’re so interested in my family because television’s not enough for you, your life is not
enough, so you start listening and reporting, rattling and spreading lies about us because you are
now a fully-grown unshakable demon of a pervert.
You’re addicted to what we’re having for dinner, hooked on to our morning routine, how mama

1 Nicolae Ceaușescu (1918-1989) was the President of Romania from 1965 to 1989.

brushes my hair or how tata² shaves, how many plops you hear in the toilet.
You're in love with our dreams and imagination, how innocent, naïve and terrifying.
Most of all, it bothers me to think that some element of happiness or sadness or honesty was lost
because we were hiding it from you.

We didn't want you to know how deeply scarred we were, our stomachs slashed inside and our
hearts burning slowly on a spit, but all you heard was some hysterical laughter or howled cries.

That's all you heard.

What we couldn't hide.

And mama realised we're alive right now so why waste it?

Why give so much and receive so little?

What does it matter now though?

You must feel utterly satisfied sitting in your villa in the mountains with the eagles singing to you
and a great big pitchfork impaled up through your anus and out of your mouth.

Enjoy the horrifying silence you created and upheld.

When people ask me where I'm from originally I say Romania.

If they know a bit more they will ask me another question.

What town or city?

I, in return, gulp to the anti-climax for nobody has ever recognised the city in which I was born.
In all the years of living in the UK, or Canada, not one person has said "Oh yes! I know Brăila!"

My city

(and I prefer the word city to the word town because town implies small and insignificant)

is nowhere, lost, hidden, dead.

Completely unknown.

No tourist would want to go there because no tourist guide has more than a paragraph devoted
to it and what, after all, is a tourist without his

tourist guide?

The way I look at it, my parents lived in Brăila for thirty-five years therefore it can't be that bad.

Geographically speaking, Brăila is situated in south-eastern Romania.

It's a hundred or so miles away from Bucharest, the capital, near Galați, in a zone called

Muntenia although, ironically, considering the name, Brăila is flat.

I could say "Brăila is near Ukraine" or I could even say "Brăila is near Moldova" but it'd be
received with a polite nod and a change of topic.

If you really want to know, Brăila is close to the Delta, a wetlands famous for its rare species of
birds

(Bill Oddie should go there)

and wild, untamed, vegetation.

I am proud of having been born close to wilderness in a city that
nobody's heard of.

And you can't say that nobody lives there.

There are over two hundred thousand people living in Brăila, and over three hundred thousand
in the county of Brăila.

And it's a multi-national, multi-cultural place too.

Jews lived there

(my grandmother's boss was Jewish and so was the great Mihail Sebastian),

Gypsies, Greeks and Russians, or Lipoveni as they are known locally

(like tata and his family).

It is true, though, I never once saw an African, Oriental or Asian person. Not even on TV.

Or perhaps I'm lying.

I'm sure I saw Ceaușescu's best friend, Arafat.

My grandparents lived in a studio flat in an area of the city called Hipodrom.

What I remember was how magical their block seemed.

Surrounded by greenery, gardens, trees, flowers, and close to a playground. There were kittens
and puppies in the garden, under the stairs, trying to find a safe spot.

These were the vagabonds and we were friends.
I knew them all.
The one under the stair, the black cat and her litter in the garage, the dogs near the swings, the
cat near the window and the bats in the night in the hole above the door.
Nature and my grandparents were linked and tied up to my levels of expectancy.
The architecture is and was basic and thin.
But it's calming and peaceful in its feeling of reassurance.

As the Americanised say, "It's ok."
The dogs are barking and I can't sleep.
"It's ok."
The neighbours beat their rugs in the back near where the cars are parked on uneven ground.
There is a hospital across the street on the right-hand side.
Again, it's rather grey, or a greying cream and grey seemed to neutralise our personal revolutions.
Maybe we all said: "It's ok."
The hospital is an imposing block.
And next to the hospital there lies the sports centre.
Here you can play table tennis, lift weights, go swimming or even grind it out on the clay courts.
The sports centre is actually the start of the park which, I like to think, is an extension of my
grandparents' garden.
I tried to help tataia³, holding an old rake and digging in.
The speckles of earth cascaded over me.
He would say that we're letting the Earth breathe.
Then we picked the ripe tomatoes so that mamaia⁴, who I could see at the window and who's
forever in the kitchen, could use them in her stews. Then we watered the rest.
We said hello to our peculiar lonely neighbour who was also working on his patch.
From there I saw the park that we used to frequent.
Walking.
Cycling.
Playing.
Falling over.
Crying.
Laughing.
Begging for sweets and candy floss.
In wintertime tobogganing down the snow and ice while being wrapped in layer upon layer of
suffocating clothing.

When the circus came, tataia bought me a harmonica
(I still haven't learnt to play it).
I watched tataia cycle and move and I never pitied him.
I never thought 'Poor him, he's disabled...' and if I did think it I tried to block it out.
Tataia can do with one hand everything that any other man can with two working hands.
Not only that, but tataia can invent, put together a complex circuit and give reality an edge.
"Don't do that!"
"Why not?"
"You're hurting that tree. It's weeping."
I tried to listen to the tree, bringing myself closer so that I could hear its terrible sobs from the
pain I had inflicted upon it.
The main boulevards in Brăila are very Parisian, wide, expansive, and you're hardly likely to bump
into anyone else while walking along.
There is a sense of false grandeur as you keep expecting to see something truly wonderful but
never do.

3 My personal Romanian version of Granddad.

4 Romanian version of Grandma.

It's only when you reach the agricultural centre and the mayor's apartment that you are faced with a decent enough fountain with stairs leading down to a plaza where they have concerts from time to time near the Danube.

I would call it pretty.

But I would also say it's forever associated with taking tataia out for a walk and how he wanted to keep going because he was damn well invincible.

As soon as you leave the drab concrete blocks of the centre of town you get to the crumbly architecture of the old town.

There is plenty of character to these buildings and they stand like mini-revolutions in themselves, stray dogs hugging the pavement searching for shade.

Here also is the theatre built in classical style.

And there's a small tranquil park whereby you come across a blue clock that I find mysterious.

Why is there a blue clock in the middle of this anonymous little city?

The Maternity Hospital is where I was born.

It was in the afternoon and, I like to believe, it explains why I love napping any time from one o'clock to six o'clock.

I feel like I'm back in the womb and there can be no better feeling.

Surely that's what drug addicts or space explorers yearn for.

Apparently, I was one of the longest and noisiest babies born that day. This doesn't really explain why they kept me away from mama for a whole day, the bastards.

But I cried all night and one nurse, who must've hated my piercing howls, ripped open my right ear with her nails.

She ripped me open.

A newborn slashed open, blood was on me and pain was with me hours after birth.

Welcome to the world she said!

But my God how happy they were to see me after the hospital incident. My family had a taste for rebellion and I, with a torn ear, was one of them.

More than once have I had Strauss' tune in my head when near the Danube because it's not only blue but long, deep and sparkles like a devilish mirror in summer or when the sun slides across and the seagulls come to survey their snacks.

Tata said he swam across it when he was young.

Oh the things one does when one is young!

A time of extraordinary achievement and failure and such a pity that it all must end when we settle down to the ticking of the clock.

If you cross the Danube you will reach a small island where Russians/Lipoveni attempt to live.

They struggle, isolated and pecked by the limitations of circumstance. You will see a people stuck in time, unable to escape, a people so used to their strife that if you offered them gold on a plate they'd probably throw it in your face.

If you cross the Danube, sunlight will blind you and you will have time to romanticise, if only in your mind.

On another small island, close-by, people go to sunbathe and relax away from the busy torment of city-life.

At one time, Brăila was a port town.

Ships flowed to and fro and on these ships travellers hid to find distant lands.

Travellers like Panait Istrati, who went away, came back and then went away like he couldn't decide where to go and what to do in his search for meaning in a harsh world.

Panait Istrati, the Maxim Gorky of the Balkans say some.

Because of the ships, lots of people here once made a living.

In factories people worked to make parts for the ships.

Commerce came and commerce left.

Now it's gone.

Disappeared.

I loved going on the trams with tataia.
He would be so concerned about me, especially if I didn't have a seat.
I'd ask him a million questions, the whys and what's and where's.
That's where my aunt lives.
That's where my cousin is.
There's the church we go to at Easter.
That's the moon and it's following me.
But I heard about the crash the other day.
I hope we don't crash but I see the crash in my mind and how we're all going to die.
The tram flops to one side and we drop one on top of another and crush each other's lungs.
It makes my heart palpitate.
And yet I am here and have no choice in the matter.
I am here and I dare not leave.
I can't leave.
I can't leave this here moment right now here.
The trams are old metal.
They creak, moan, disagree with their route.
That's why I'm thinking about crashing.

The shopping centre has changed.
You can now buy Western goods.
Everything's for sale.
Incredibly expensive fur coats even.
People open shops in their own homes.
Come in and buy this keyboard I'm typing on – why not?
Most shops have a wide variety of goods but the shops themselves look identical.
You could probably buy your deodorant, jeans and Shakespeare within twenty square feet.

Under my city there are lots of tunnels, escape routes built in the days when Romania acted as a
Christian fortress against Islamic invaders.
The tunnels were also used in the World Wars.
I wonder what happens when unrepentant earthquakes hit the city and the pylons are dug deep
into uncertain holed earth.
It could be thought of as a balancing game, a juggling act.
While we're holding the furniture the earth's holding the building and God's holding it all up.
And, more importantly, where do the tunnels lead?
Where can a citizen escape to?
Heaven or hell?

If you close your eyes and reopen them you will see that Brăila has a potential for beauty.
We have the therapeutic Lacu Sărat⁵ close to home where you can splash stinking mud on
yourself and then float on the water.
Last time I went it was still free, or near enough.
We have parks.
We have old impressive buildings.
We have the Danube.
In fact I see great beauty every time I go back.
There is everlasting beauty in the broken people, in their mini-dictator's complexes, in their
harsh, brutal, fresh and finished attitudes.
There is beauty when I hear something I don't like.
Something provocative.
I'm too thin!
Stick thin.

I haven't grown.
I don't eat enough.
I look pathetic.
I know I am but I don't want anybody actually telling me that!
I've seen true beauty on the faces of children who are running through the streets with the
happiness of not knowing.
Great beauty in the manner of celebration – we'll celebrate Christmas even if we can't pay the
bills!
We'll smoke our cigarettes even if we can't afford to eat!
That's right.
We do what is necessary.
A strong defiance rooted in time.
I wonder about some of the people I know: how do they keep going? How can they work
months without getting paid?
How do they put up with the corruption and bribery?
How can they not explode when everything, everything is a chore?
It must be their fort like defiance.
Donkeys in human clothing.
Beautiful.
Endless years living with a fear that shut up the mute.
Tough skin.
Impenetrable.
If you take away the rubble, these people are the architecture and the scenery.
The landscape.
They are born with an ingrown taste for survival.

We lived near the train station so we were always close to going.
My grandparents lived four or five tram stops away while tata's parents were nearer to the train
station than us.
I didn't see them much.
I'm not sure if they didn't like me or accept me but they certainly did not accept mama so I
presume I was next down on their list.
Communist mass-construction buildings are a definite eyesore and my block seems particularly
ugly.
Come in through the parting in-between the concrete.
Smell the piss.
You can come and see the graffiti on the walls:
"Fuck your mother!"
"Suck my dick!"
Old people are disgusted by this.
Young people spit and smoke cigarettes.
The grounds are dusty and there's no greenery.
We used to play football on these barren grounds
(now my friends prefer dreaming),
kicking a heavy ball until our feet hurt and shoes busted and our ears got twisted or our hair
pulled.
The cars are parked anywhere: pavement, road or curb.
One evening, at dusk, we got home after picking mama up from the hospital.
When we stepped out of the car, a ball flew in front of us and I saw mama holding her face, her
spectacles knocked off.
Tata shouted to a youth in the distance "Come here you bastard!"
The youth started running.
Tata ran after him.
They disappeared.
We went home and waited.
We waited, my heart alive and panicking me.

I kept asking mama what tata was doing, imagining at the same time, the possibilities.
Maybe he caught him and gave him the beating he deserved.

Maybe the young one was stronger.

Maybe he stabbed tata.

Impossible.

Tata would never allow that to happen.

I kept waiting for the doorbell to ring and eventually I heard it and ran to open the door.

Tata did not look too happy.

“What happened? What happened? Did you catch him? Did you
give him a good beating?”

He smiled.

“I chased him round the neighbourhood,” and I imagined tata panting like a dog looking left and
right, circling the houses, peeking over fences, “but I lost him.”

I must’ve looked disappointed because then he said “Don’t worry, when I see him, and I’ll
recognise him, I’ll hit him good.”

In all honesty, I wanted him to dish out justice to everything and everyone that hurt us.

From home, it was incredibly easy for me to get to school.

I would turn right from our block of flats and keep going straight, past the church, pizza place
and park

(where we used to buy doughnuts),

then turn left to the Bălcescu School of Music.

Reading about Nicolae Bălcescu I’m not sure what I think of the man.

A radical stance sounds good but dying young and ill doesn’t.

I’ve also read that people don’t know the origin of the name Brăila.

I believe it comes from Braille because locals say “Even the blind can find their way to Brăila.”

If you follow the tram route onwards from my home and then turn left you will reach the area
where tataia built his house.

There are no big ugly blocks here, only small houses full of character, petite, as they were once
upon a time.

The roads are hazardous.

Crater-like holes sort out the locals from the tourists.

If you don’t know where that hole is you’re in trouble.

And yet, cars and carts weave their way through in an astonishingly skilful manner.

The roofs are pointed with chimneys like in storybooks.

Fairy tales.

Through that small gate there is a garden on either side of the path leading up to the main door.

The toilet is usually outside, in the garden, having the appearance of a shed with a hole in the
floor.

A hairy mutt is waiting for you in his kennel.

He’s been waiting a long time for a fool, barking at everyone he doesn’t know and when he’ll get
old and blind he’ll bark at anything that moves. There are probably chickens near the back and
maybe a pig or two if we’re lucky, if not we’ll have to tuck in next door.

As you walk along this road, and you admire the sentiment of blissful communal living, you
might see a few old men playing dice.

They’ll be sitting on chairs with a small table between them and on that table there will be the
game board.

They don’t want to be interrupted.

A drink, maybe, but whining townfolk babble forget about it.

You may also see someone dragging a wheelbarrow
(pushing their TV, fridge, or enough onions to last the season)

or kids playing in the street.

God knows what they’re playing at running around like that.

What do they think freedom grows on trees?

Before you go you might like to stop over at the cemetery.

Here, tataia is buried.

Close to his family and home.
Family members come and sweep the graves.
They usher a prayer, wave incense, and memories are strong enough to stifle.
But they don't go under.

They straighten their backs and attempt to appear dignified as they start their walk back.