

NEW EUROPE COLLEGE



LOST IN SPACE

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BUCHAREST - A COLLECTION OF ODORS

MAGDA CÂRNECI

I pass by a rotten wall on the corner of Grivitei Road and Matache Market. Only the scaffolding of old bricks and humid crumbling mortar is left of the building, like the blanched carcass of a geometric animal between whose ribs the deep, cloudy sky can be seen right above. Inside, they have dumped refuse among the ruins. There is a mixed smell, salty, pungent, and sour, of garbage bin, mildew, and dereliction. A sumac has shot up in a corner, its bole already reaching above the half-collapsed walls. In summer, its inflorescence will give a sourish, shameful smell. I pass by the empty frame of a tall window on top of which a frontispiece decked with scrolls and angels is poised dangerously. Among the rejects, there are books, the smell of musty paper vigorously curling upwards, so suddenly I remember. Before 1989, here was a bookstore where I used to buy textbooks in foreign languages, and stationery. Before 1945, the place had been a delicatessen. And even before that a boyar's house close to which the poet Eminescu had lived for sometime. And before that I don't know, perhaps an inn, or a princely outbuilding, or perhaps a thieves' nest. Now, in less than two years the derelict building has become a ruin from where the destitute pick up whatever they think might come in handy. A genuine ruin. Imposing. Almost dainty. Like all ruin. A huge, depleted nostalgic cavity at the

core of the modern, vainglorious city. A spontaneous work of land art – like an open wound – about the almost organic rise and fall of constructions. The people of the place have a downright aesthetic feel for immediate history. Nothing endures here but fleeting beauty, everything gets transformed here, even brick and stone and concrete too, turning into something perishable, moldable in accordance with the aesthetics of the living. Anyway, that instinct was worth something two centuries ago.

A city of smells. A fabric of aromas and whiffs, of stench and perfumes. As if these mixed constructions, the crooked streets and the people had vanished into naught and for a time their volatile trace had lingered in the air like odorous astral bodies for the huge nostrils of some giant. Or as if I were blind, deaf and deprived of touch and I had to manage with just the sense of smell. A humble sense, the least of all the senses, less developed or rather the most degenerated since it doesn't seem essential for the survival and evolution of a purely rational species. Just as breathing – inhaling and exhaling air filled with scents – is taken for granted, an automated pulsation, as the night follows the day, like the seasons, so painless, so imperceptible that you fail to observe it although without air the much more pregnant splendor of the other senses would prove useless. And on the bottom of the huge terrestrial aquarium where we swim, squeezed under the sea of air, inhaling through our nostrils, it is only the breath of some delicate divine aroma that can at times bring to us tokens of superposed, ethereal, subtle worlds.

Let's see, or no, let's sniff Bucharest. Blindly, from above, from afar. Were it a broth it would be, say, a stew, a well hashed mixture of cheap cologne and a handful of freshly labored soil, a modicum of incense and loads of kerosene,

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gasoline and Diesel oil, and dry dung, parched cement and burnt exhaust fumes. I hover somewhere above and inhale greedily the steam of the big stew. From the fringes, there rises the moist, strong whiff of fields, sperm and cattle stench, then a sickening sweetish reek of slum and sweat bursts forth, and right after it comes plummeting the heavy, flat, rocky smell of concrete, a lot of concrete, concrete filled with human flesh, concrete inhabited by milk, blood, urine, feces. At long last, somewhere in the middle I feel a breath of old, crumbling books and too-long-had Chanel number 5. And on top of all this stew, there floats the overpowering smell of cooked food and dust, too much dust, enormously much dust. But also, a slight, strange, winding streak of noble aloe and myrrh fragrance.

My first escapade in the Capital city, sometime in my early adolescence. Confusion and ecstasy, the fear and excitement of the unknown, like in a foreign country where, strangely, everyone speaks my own language. A dizzying cocktail of smells: of trams and trolley buses, of crowds swarming in bus stops, whiffs of peasants carrying to the market baskets and sacks of vegetables and fruit, aromas of museums and monuments about which you learn in school, perfume of shop windows and stores with classy stuff, effluvia of elegant women and important men. The tantalizing smell of a capital, the inebriating flavor of a big metropolis, you are nothing but a projection of images, the fumes of yellowed photographs, the olfactory memory of a hodge-podge of readings and anxieties. A precious, strictly cultural construction. As if each memory, each mental holograph ought to receive, to be compounded, even illegally, by a smell, an air, an atmosphere in order to be able to breathe, to get re-embodied in the nostalgic cells of the psyche, to become tridimensional.

In spring, the profound honeyed smell of lime trees in bloom, on the Promenade or in the marginal districts. As if the city were drowned in a concentrated tea of tiny, yellowish flowers, leaving on the fingers pale pollen with a dusty pharmaceutical smell, like a child's dry saliva. Under the burden of the volatile tisane, people seem to reel, numbed by the fragrance, high on perfume. Sometimes they appear downright nauseated and they crawl along the sidewalks like little flies dropped into a huge jar of jam. I feel like taking a spoonful and swallowing. I inhale avidly this sweet, sedate smell about which there is something – how can I put it? – national. I, too, am giddy. I lose myself among the multitude of people swarming in markets among heaps of nettles, hyacinths, tulips, lilac, notch weed and spinach. There is an orgy of freshly cut flowers and crude sap, of tiny trees in bloom, mixed redolences of resurrection and death, of mud turned to greenery, rising barbarian, balmy fumes from the yards of low-rise houses and elegant plazas in between blocks-of-flats, flowing down the major thoroughfares like a delicate victorious onrush, despite all civilization.

In spring, Bucharest smells of flowers, like a field.

How to use your nose to discover Bucharest. As a person coming from the provinces to settle in the Capital City with the unexpressed desire of conquering it all you have to do is to roam the streets very long, to steal a glance down the windows of the apartments, your nostrils flaring to allow yourself to be imbibed with the smells of the districts and squares, letting yourself inhale and exhale at ease, in the secret and perfectly irrational belief that sniffing will teach you about the privileged inhabitants of this city more than any map, book or album. After the first snobbish and over-eager stage of roaming frantically the big avenues, amazed that nobody in

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the head-bobbing throng salutes you, quite rapidly you will get used to the cosmopolite smell of glowing cars, too expensive and not too well washed, of Kent cigarettes, Borkum Riff pipe tobacco and Snagov cigarettes, of Salamander leather briefcases and nail polish, of women's perfumes with sublime Parisian names, cheap cosmetics and dense exhaust fumes, and, in between, the horizontal, fizzy and noisy explosion of bars and restaurants. Just as only in a capital city can a man from the provinces discover the unanimous smell of sweat coming from the crowds pressed in trolley buses and buses, a sort of industrial, thick, city sweat, paralyzing like the terror of finding out what the big anonymity means, that collective being into which you will have to integrate, to become annihilated.

It was only late that I discovered the peaceful, narrow streets in the old districts, with their dusty-musty smell, dampish like the smell of an old body, rolling out in almost tangible waves from the low-rise houses, once painted in pastel colors and overdecorated, with stucco that has now peeled off, pathetic and endearing like a has-been belle. From the run-down interior yards and the crooked wrought-iron balconies with scrolls and sophisticated garlanded borders, with doors wide open, odors of heated frying oil and borsch ooze down into the street, mingling with the stench of baby urine and stray dogs. And further on you stumble, by accident, into an old shop with a dark empty window where, if you enter, the stale miasma of rotten-lace umbrellas, spectacle frames, watch chains, book covers bound in gilded cardboard, old photos, pipes, and glass balls steal on you. From among these, the smell of dry fish or paraffin-dipped relics of an old man or woman crawls towards you slowly.

The smell of a city smoldering in the scorching summer heat. If you arrive by train in Bucharest's North Station and

then you go out into the neighboring streets, the bodiless presence, yet of an almost palpable density, of the city's slightly pungent odor of molten asphalt, hot tin, and heated dust hits you in the face. Everything smells this way, the stairs of the apartment blocks, the boulevards, the sweaty clothes of the passers-by, the stale beer in the mugs dotting the tables of pubs, summer gardens and bistros. Down to the plump leaves of the huge, invasive chestnuts. You are not sure whether this is the smell of matter steaming with the unbearable, stifling heat or it is the very odor of the thick, animal heat that is catching on all things, as if everything were in a process of baking, of digestion, inside of a vast, airy motherly belly, heavy with a torpid, nearly liquefied world. A world almost begotten, almost born, yet still imprecise, vacillating, just not finished. Over which hovers, surreptitiously but all-prevailingly, a spicy and voracious flavor of grilled *mititei*.

In summer, Bucharest smells Oriental.

To dive into the cauldron of indecent stench on Lipscani Street one July morning. It is a sort of initiatory experience, as if compelled to breathe in the vicinity of a putrefying corpse you suddenly have the revelation that body is alive, pulsating with new tiny emerging lives, each replete with its minuscule vital biological odor. A whiff of Romanians, Turks, Jews and Gypsy, old and new, mixed with a smell of ancient Byzantine walls fallen into unthinkable decay, exuding lackadaisical oblivion. A smell of new poor-quality merchandise, blue jeans, plastic tidbits and imitation leather clothes, mingling with the smell of old, narrow, dark Phanariot stores full of useless objects and dust. And on top of everything, like an invisible binder, the scent of trade and sweat, the smell of mongrelisation, cross-breeding, as if then and there, in the lowly swarming streets, you watched the culling – now in full swing – from

many an older stock of a new human race, for the time being still too crude yet vigorous and with a great future. Its pungent, mottled and powerful smell has this quality for the olfactory papilla of some sophisticated creator of human perfumes – the piquant mixture of refined and barbaric, hard-to-define picturesqueness: the synthesis.

The burnt-sweetish smell of baked bell peppers, the salty-sourish one of freshly arranged pickles, the enticing mouth-watering aroma of thick, sour borsch, of greasy, cloying food exploding overpoweringly from every entrance into a block of flats, from any inner yard, any public office, any exhibition hall situated in the neighborhood of an apartment block, of a vegetables and fruit market, making you dream greedily of an overflowing horn of plenty, of Pantagruelian *fêtes*, although, in general, they are just the crust of poverty, the sign of long cooking hours in the crammed block kitchens, of the blindly fertile country clod climbing triumphantly to the highest stories, to the most sophisticated places, like an eternal memento, like lacerating nostalgia.

The impossible to forget whiff of the 1977 earthquake. Just like the persisting formol smell that won't just leave your nostrils days after having taken your first visit to a hospital morgue in order to enrich your life experience. While helping the volunteers and the soldiers, I am invaded, sort of plague-like, by the chalky stench coming from everywhere, of pulverized walls, of dislodged bricks, the cave smell of human dwellings severed and spilling out eiderdowns and toilet bowls, like wall vomit. As if a minuscule I watched impotently a live demonstration, a gigantic sectioning through a human-urban anatomy ruthlessly torn from its alveolae, having to put up with the insidious stench of crushed, decomposed flesh of its digestive, reproductive and evacuation

organs, identically repeated on the vertical in tens and hundreds of dwelling cells, all of a sudden turned indecent and infuriatingly visible, so much so as to make one noxious.

In autumn, Bucharest smells of baked leaves, calcinated by the might of a waning sun, of cool, appeased dust, of sweet wood smoke and of fog. Slowly, a muffler of rarefied air calms down the smells, sifting and lowering them to the asphalt or lifting them gently above the roofs. In the despairing melancholy that enwraps street corners and windows in multicolored shadows, a strange kind of styling takes place of strong smells and too consistent perfumes stealing away into the dusk. On sidewalks, you step on compact layers of leaves, on a sort of clean mess, vegetal refuse of overwhelming beauty. Wet with rain, mingled with slight fresh mud that smells of forest, and soon going into fermentation, only school children and drunks can appreciate it in the morning. A curious equalization occurs then with the outskirts and downtown, the same long, piercing dusks equally cladding in a certain noble air, a ghostly perfume, the crackled lime of old buildings and the glossy paint of recently opened boutiques. In the yards of the villas left standing among blocks of flats like mushrooms in a stone forest, fires of twigs are lit to ward off hoar frost and mosquitoes, and the good pungent smell of the choking smoke prompts you most violently to a nomad kind of reverie. You feel it even up there on the terraces of the new buildings with brown smoky glass walls from where the uneven sea of roofs of all shapes and heights reminds you of Paris. Everything seems inconsistent, unreal, depleted of matter, ready for a sort of take-off.

In autumn, Bucharest smells cosmopolitan.

The echoing exhalation of the defunct winding streets, of the pulled-down houses, of the annihilated squares, of the

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little churches so rapidly razed by bulldozers: Labirint, Seneca, Venerei, Infinitului, Minotaurului, Simonide. The damp-vegetal odor of the Dambovita River once flanked with lime trees and shady willows, now deeply buried into concrete and cement. The lavender aroma of a vanished world, the smell of dry flesh, minced to dust, as if a big part of tissue, with veins, arteries, cells and all, branching out like capillaries in apparent disorder, would have been all of a sudden extirpated by a huge scalpel from the slightly risen chest of the city. A pass perfume, like a dry flower, an aroma of chestnuts trodden under the feet, the odor of petty people from another by-gone world, with summer kitchens at the back of the long yards, drowned in greenery, at fixed hours smelling of tripe soup and stew, invading the sidewalks paved with rounded river boulders, heated by the summer torpor, with wells and faucets in the middle of the roads, crowded with masques, shells and metal griffins, others with just a name once famous, Lahovary, Balasa. Among the ruins on Uranus Hill where the People's House was to be erected, together with Angela and Serge, with many Gypsies and a few students, we used to look among broken bricks, German tiles and smoked door and window frames, in search of derelict objects. The smell of destitution and desolation, of bottomless cellars, of putrid wood and mice nests, undone and abandoned, was very strong.

The stench of a vacant lot crammed with refuse. The foul odor of dead dogs discarded on tops of piles of cans, jars, potato peels in ratty plastic bags. In the square of an old district with a famous name, Mantuleasa, I look ashamed and powerless at the heap of domestic garbage and try not to inhale the fetid stench. It's as if I were peeking at someone relieving himself in the middle of a ballroom once sumptuous. I am accompanied by an American journalist and for two hours, I have been trying

to open her eyes to inter-bella architectural modernism. Now I don't know how to make her close her eyes, how to divert her attention elsewhere. Eventually, I hear her say: Still, this city has a special charm. Somehow you realize, you experience the feeling that finally all this dirt, poverty, misery are not that important, that in the end what matters for you and for the people of Bucharest is something else, elsewhere, of a different order, although it would be hard to define this welcoming, endearing vagueness that eludes you, that eludes words. Perhaps it is the warmth, the amazing familiarity of people.

In winter, Bucharest smells of a freshly disturbed anthill covered by a huge mound of snow, of frozen silver doorknobs, of long patriarchal peace. As if a thick roll of white felt had descended over sounds and smells, as if everything had suddenly moved into the boundless steppe or at the end of the world, as if time didn't matter any more and from the suburbs henceforth nothingness would begin. Through the extremely pure and cutting air, almost unbreathable like a crystal, there climbs or descends a prehistoric, archaic smell. As though – with the lushness of the vegetation removed, along with the dust, the sterile restlessness of people – the ancient veins of the city had opened up exuding now and then an unhistoric slumber and a lot of torpor, a nakedness like in the beginning of the world, therefore essential, and also, at times, a profound, merciless lucidity. Under the thick layer of smoke-stained cold, the city, even down to its most luxurious apartments, feels and smells like a field of seeds buried deep under the snow, waiting indefinitely for an apocalyptic sprouting. As if its dappled, mingled humanity living in different, incongruent historical times, encapsulated in an architecture turned all of a sudden fragile, dwarfish, were just a germinal bed for a new, still unknown species of a future form of thinking vitality.

In winter, Bucharest falls back to a village.

You, city – seemingly gathered from alluvia of history, made up of remains of petty or uncircumscribed ambitions, and too little though of a will that is not only strong but also of long-standing, of a thinking not only clear but also illuminated by a vivid and sympathetic memory of its own past, as if inhabited by successive waves of people – only once have I taken you in with a certain pride, have I felt your dizzying perfume of a big citadel, of a metropolis. It was December, the people had besieged ministries, the palaces of the Administration, the boulevards, they burnt false books and perverted portraits in the middle of the roads, they hugged enthusiastically, brotherly, they flew flags on the windows of their cars and blew their horns over and over again. The air smelled of gunpowder, a communion without borders, an unbelievable freedom. And suddenly, looking around at the turmoil smelling of death risk, I saw the city with other eyes, this old, puffed up city. It evinced a strange grandeur, as if confronted with the eyes of the multitudes that by their revolt and sacrifice it had finally come to deserve it, this passive Bucharest, chockfull with upstart hillbillies and dialectic knaves, this Bucharest diminished and defeated by history had revealed its true face, unintelligible like a lost code. Disfigured by aggressive stupidity and greedy meanness, its discreet, hidden face of hub of the world, among other matching hubs, had that nobility of hot spot of great history, of a place where for a moment perhaps the destiny of the stars and of humanity was at stake. Yet, that moment vanished so quickly.

For Bucharest is a female city, a relatively beautiful but unkempt woman, with winding and disheveled forms, full of crooked circles, imperfect scrolls and curved mazes in which it seems that no earthly eye is any more capable of deciphering

any regular, harmonic geometry, let alone feel any balmy quintessence. And still, every city is a form of solidified thinking; you advance through it like through the convolutions of a brain whose symbolical logic could elude you for eternity, whose order could seem disorder only because you don't have access to a vaster form of freedom. Perhaps only a divine eye or only a loving eye, who knows, could detect in the jungle of obscure street arabesques, the harmonious interplay of concentric circles, like the ripples caused by a stone thrown in water, or the curves trammled like the baroque metaphor of a huge rose with a hundred thousand petals.

Unloved city, city without memory, your slashed, torn, mangled flesh smells of ruins and vitality. You are a sort of living relic, and mutant. I can stroll in you like in a botanical, zoological, and stylistic garden, or like in a reserve of lost cultures, like in a museum of human stupidity and futility. You are equally peasant and aulic, archaic and anarchic and more than modern, precarious and emphatic. Your feet smell of clods and dust, your ankles and all the joints in your body give a whiff of squalid, stale slum. Your innumerable churches and monasteries release a Byzantine perfume into the air, your markets, old shops and pubs stink of Phanar. Your ribs of districts and apartment blocks smell of big human anthills, and your armpits stink Gypsy-like. Your breast, shoulders, neck exude a nice smell though, of expensive toilet soap and well-cut clothes, fecund snobbery and frenetic business deals. Your palate, somewhere in the vicinity of the People's House, is redolent of geometrical, megalomaniac folly, but your head stands clear, in its casque of steel and ads, irradiating a wholesome normal smell, a genial, acidulated, friendly aroma, long sifted through rough and ruthless temporal filters, finally

arrived somehow at a poised consciousness, at peace with itself.

You are a city made of several cities, of urban pieces that are not superposed but fitted together like in a gaudy eclectic puzzle, like a huge pie, an enormous pizza with a patriarchal crust, drowned in Balkanism and greenery, with nourishing Neo-Classical portions and crunchy modernist sectors, with pungent post-Byzantine islets and Phanariot piquancy, and also with much crude, tasteless, insipid dough, risen inadequately among delicacies. Your smell is a compound of several and their synthesis is not a stylized perfume, but a garden once run wild and now getting tamed. Perhaps that is why the locals hate you passionately, while foreigners find you endearing, touching, like a normal anomaly, like an impossibility alive, a bazaar of styles and dilapidated yet living epochs, where nothing would seemingly go with anything and yet together they make up a slanted, garish organism which, what a wonder, breathes, eats, dreams. More, for those who can smell and see, a body capable of secreting a penetrating mythological scent, somewhat splintered, it is true, as well as a lofty metaphysical though very discreet aroma.

For who better than you, unlucky city, can cover its subtlety under modest, matchless garb, who else has the supreme refinement of being equally chaotic and logical, European and still vaguely Oriental, humble and yet long preserving small indelible gems? Who else knows better than you to hide under the seemingly unconscious confusion of districts and houses, of vegetation, dust and concrete, the recessive genes of a less obvious order that is profound nonetheless, the immemorial heritage of a spontaneous living harmony that does not boast the geometrical yet rigid beauty of theory but only the warm and disseminated beauty of slightly corrected nature? A

harmony that integrates everything into its alveolae without leveling anything, without disciplining anything, relating not to the horizontal, soothing yet artificial rigor of our reasonable and therefore limited intelligence, but guiding itself after the smoky horizontal of a devotional, less obvious and yet magnetic order?

Bucharest, you are an urban creature putting your foot into your concrete mouth while walking with your head in the clouds. You are a colony of human micro-organisms living with their thoughts half here half there, unknowingly, multiplying, expanding into space and time, very likely only to preserve the human touch under way of extinction, an ancient spiritual quality turned non-obvious today. You are, most probably, the place of a species about to become extinct and yet with an extreme staying power, trying to put together instinctively, in its marginal condition, the mud hut and Plato's grotto, the concrete cave and the altar, the Babylon of cheap prefabs and the celestial Jerusalem.

Bucharest, I think that your atavistic and childish smell is well liked up there.

REZUMAT

Trec pe lângă un zid putred de pe calea Griviței colț cu piața Matache. Din clădire n-a mai rămas decât scheletul de cărămizi vechi și mortar umed, fărâmițat, e ca o carcasă albită a unui animal geometric, dintre coastele rupte se vede direct cerul înnorat și adânc. Înăuntru, printre ruine, sunt aruncate gunoaie. Miroase amestecat, sărat, iute și acru, a pubelă, igrasie și părăsenie. Un oțetar s-a înălțat într-un colț, trunchiul lui întrece deja marginile de sus, rupte, ale pereților. La vară inflorescența lui va mirosi rușinos acrișor, ca un sex încălzit.

Trec pe lângă forma goală a unei ferestre înalte, deasupra ei un fronton cu volute și îngerași stă să cadă. Sunt cărți aruncate printre gunoaie, cu copertii roșii și maronii, mirosul de hârtie mucegăită urcă vertiginos, și brusc îmi amintesc. Aici a fost înainte de 1989 o librărie, din care-mi cumpăram uneori manuale de limbi străine și rechizite. Și înainte de 1945 fusese un magazin de coloniale, ținut de niște turci. Și mai înainte fusese o casă boierească, lângă care locuise cândva Eminescu. Și mai înainte de asta, nu știu, poate un han la drumul mare, poate un acaret domnesc, poate o ascunzătoare de hoți. Acum, în câțiva ani, părăsită, clădirea a devenit o ruină, din care țiganii săraci dimprejur mai extrag câte o bârnă, o cărămidă, ceva încă utilizabil. O ruină adevărată. Impunătoare. Aproape gingașă, emoționantă. Ca orice ruină. Ca o carie enormă, golașă, nostalgică, în mijlocul orașului modern, vanitos. Un fel de lucrare de land-art spontană, creată de nimeni, doar de neputință și delăsare, ca o plagă deschisă, despre creșterea și descreșterea, aproape organică, ca o respirație, a construcțiilor. Oamenii locului au un instinct dramatic s-ar zice, ori de-a dreptul estetic, al istoriei imediate. Nimic nu durează aici, doar frumusețea de-o clipă, fulgerătoare ca o sclipire de dimineață, în rest totul se transformă aici, chiar și cărămida, și piatra, ba chiar și betonul, în ceva friabil, perisabil, modelabil după estetica viului. Dar instinctul ăsta era bun acum două secole.

Un oraș de mirosuri. O țesătură de arome și izuri, de duhori și parfumuri. Ca și cum construcțiile astea amestecate, străzile întortocheate sau drepte și oamenii mărunți ca niște bacterii s-ar fi evaporat în neant și ar fi rămas pentru câtăva vreme urma lor volatilă în aer, ca niște fine corpuri astrale odorante, pentru nările uriașe ale unui oarecare gigant. Sau ca și cum aș fi oarbă, surdă și lipsită de simțul tactil, și ar trebui să mă

descurc doar cu simțul mirosului. Simț umil, cel mai din urmă simț, cel mai puțin dezvoltat, ori cel mai atrofiat, căci nu pare esențial pentru supraviețuirea și evoluția unei specii pur raționale. Asemeni respirației – a trage și a arunca din tine aer încărcat cu miresme pare de la sine înțeles, o pulsație automată, ca ziua și noaptea, ca anotimpurile, ca anii, atât de nedureros, de insesizabil încât nici nu mai observi, deși fără aer splendoarea mult mai apăsată a celorlalte simțuri n-ar folosi la nimic. Iar pe fundul uriașului acvariu terestru în care înotăm turtiți de marea de aer, înghițind prin nări hălci de aer, numai adierea vreunei delicate arome divine mai poate aduce la noi, uneori, semne din lumi suprapuse, eterate, subtile.

Să vedem, ah, nu, să mirosim Bucureștiul. Orbește, de sus, de departe. Dacă ar fi o fiertură, să zicem, ar fi o tocană, o amestecătură bine mărunțită de multă apă de colonie ieftină și ceva pământ proaspăt arat, de puțină tămâie și mult petrosin, motorină, benzină, o combinație de balegă uscată, ciment incins și gaze arse de eșapament. Sunt undeva sus, deasupra, și inspir cu nesaț aburii calzi ai mării tocane. Dinspre margini urcă iz umed și tare de câmpuri, spermă de țară și putoare de vite, vine apoi o duhoare leșinătoare, dulceagă de mahala și multă sudoare, dar imediat cade greu mirosul plat, pietros de beton, mult beton, beton umplut cu carne umană, beton locuit de lapte, sânge, urină, fecale. În sfârșit, spre mijloc, ca într-o oază încăpătoare, simt miros de cărți vechi, coapte, și de apă de colonie Chanel numărul 5, păstrată vreme îndelungată. Și peste toată tocana plutește mirosul atotputernic de mâncare îndelung gătită pe aragaz și de praf, mult praf, enorm de mult praf. Dar și un fir subțire, ciudat, întortocheat de mireasmă aleasă, care ba apare ba dispare în țesătura celorlalte arome, ca un fel de ornament vechi și secret, un parfum discret de aloe și smirnă.

(...)

Oraș neiubit, oraș fără memorie, a ruină și vitalitate sălbatecă miroase carnea ta strivită, ruptă, destrămată. Ești un fel de relicvă vie și de mutant, în tine pot să mă plimb ca într-o grădină botanică, zoologică și stilistică, ori ca într-o rezervație a unor culturi dispărute, ca într-un muzeu al prostiei și zădărnicii umane. Tu ești deopotrivă țărănesc și aulic, arhaic și anarhist și mai mult ca modern, precar și emfatic. A glod și țărână mirosoare picioarele tale, iz de mahala meschină, stătută, emană gleznele și toate încheieturile corpului tău. Bizantin parfumează aerul bisericile și mănăstirile nenumărate, fanariot put piețele, prăvăliile vechi și bodegile. Precum mari mușuroaie umane îți mirosoare coastele de cartiere și blocuri, țigănește îți adie subțiorile. Pieptul, umerii, gâtul îți emană însă frumos, a săpun scump de toaletă și a haine bine tăiate, a snobism fecund și afaceri frenetice. Ca o nebulă geometrică și megalomană îți mirosoare acum cerul gurii, pe la Casa Poporului, dar capul e limpede, din casca lui de oțel și reclame iriază în jur un miros sănătos și normal, o aromă bonomă, acidulată, prietenoasă, îndelung decantată prin filtre temporale aspre și nemiloase, în sfârșit ajunsă la o oarecare conștiință echilibrată, împăcată, de sine.

(...)

Tu ești un oraș din mai multe orașe, din bucăți urbane nu suprapuse ci îmbrucate ca un puzzle pestriț și eclectic, ca o uriașă plăcintă, o pizza enormă cu blatul patriarhal, înecat de balcanism și verdeață, cu porțiuni hrănitoare neo-clasice și eclectice și sectoare moderniste crocante, cu insulite iuți post-bizantine și picanterii fanariote, dar și cu mult aluat nou, crud, fad, insipid, de blocuri de locuințe, crescut anapoda printre delicatose. Mirosul tău e împletit din mai multe mirosuri și sinteza lor nu e un parfum stilizat, ci e o grădină cândva

sălbătică dar pe cale de ordonare. Poate de aceea băștinașii te detestă cu patimă, iar străinii te găsesc atașant, ca o anomalie atrăgătoare, ca o imposibilitate vivantă, un bazar de stiluri și epoci delabrate și totuși vii, simbiotice, în care nimic nu s-ar potrivi cu nimic și totuși împreună dau un organism șui, fistichiu, care, minune, respiră, se hrănește, crește, visează. Ba chiar, pentru cine știe să miroasă, să vadă, un organism ce e în stare să secrete un pătrunzător iz mitologic, deși trunchiat, dar și o aromă înalt metafizică, deși foarte discretă.

(...)

București, tu ești o făptură urbană ce calci în străchini de ciment cu capul la stele. Ești o colonie de microorganisme umane ce trăiesc cu gândul jumătate aici și jumătate dincolo, însă fără să știe – înmulțindu-se, extinzându-se în spațiu și timp doar ca să prezeve probabil o nuanță umană în extincție, o calitate spirituală străveche și devenită astăzi non-evidentă. Ești probabil locul unei specii umane pe cale de dispariție și totuși extrem de tenace, ca să încerce să împace în mod instinctiv, în chiar condiția sa marginală, bordeiul de paie cu grotă platonice, peștera de beton cu altarul, Babilonul de ieftine prefabricate cu Ierusalimul celest.

București, mirosul tău atavic și copilăros, acolo sus, cred că place.