

Behind the Curtain

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Abstract

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This a testimony of dictatorship. A collection of personal memories and photographs that reflect the experiences of many. It is a look at the lives happening behind the curtain. And this curtain shifts its meaning throughout the manuscript to represent different curtains like the Iron curtain that separated Western Europe from Eastern Europe, the public life in communist Romania from private life, the life of the adults from that of the children's.

BEHIND THE CURTAIN

By Sabina Livadariu

The following is an excerpt from the book-length manuscript created in fulfillment of the requirements of the University of Washington Bothell's Creative Writing & Poetics MFA. This chapter has been chosen as a sample of the work and has been approved as sufficient evidence of thesis level work by Rebecca Brown and Miriam Bartha. The sensitive material and the personal character of the details included require additional protection. Following is a short statement of poetics.

Chapter 1: On Top of the World

It was always cold.

It is winter and it is cold on both sides of the window. Snow up to your neck and, every now and then, people passing by.

Inside, only sickly green walls, white chipped bars and children sleeping. I can never sleep when the other children are asleep but I am getting good at pretending I am.

I am bored, I have looked at the ceiling for what feels like hours, it is high, there are cobwebs, and I am starting to feel the cold. I get up carefully, I can hear them talking loudly in the next room.

The door is open, so I can see the big mossy green scale that weighs the potatoes when they come in. There is dirt in every crevice of the chipped paint. If you look closely you will see that there are fingerprints that dried into the green paint and then filled up with dirt. Maybe the women always yell at us because of the potatoes.

There is sudden movement in the next room, so I lie back in bed looking beyond the white bars of my nursery crib to see if any of them comes for me. Nothing. I lie in bed for a while looking at the chipped paint, under it, rusty metal bars that taste bitter. Better not put your mouth on them.

I try again to find a pattern in the chipping. There is none, but I am not giving up. There must be a hidden meaning in the rust patches' arrangement, I just have not found it yet.

Our nursery beds are aligned along three of the room's walls. My bed is in the best position possible, just under a window. I can see the snow caking the window, but not the outside world. That will require some effort.

I do not know how, but I got on the window sill. Maybe I can fly. It is colder here than in my crib, but it is ok, I can see the street, hills of snow, and from time to time, adults passing.

Look, here is a woman who has a big fur hat that makes her head look twice its size, just like my mom's. Maybe it is her. She looks toward the nursery, I wave, come get me. She sees me, stops for a moment, then she determinedly walks towards the entrance.

I am going home. I do not think I can get down from the window sill. But it is ok, one of the big white dressed women who yell at us comes towards me. She is going to get me dressed so I can go home.

She grabs me and starts shaking me as if I were a broken toy. My head moves so fast from one side to the other that I can hear my thoughts ringing inside my head. She starts yelling something about the cold and the winter and death and responsibility; she drops me in my bed and then her big rough, half-my-body-size hand starts dropping heavy on my body. She does not stop yelling even for a moment while she beats me. When she is done she covers me with the thin pale blanket and she leaves.

I am burning up, there is something inside of me that makes me get up, risking another beating. My face is hot, my whole body is burning. I want to get out the burning sensation and give it to her. I stretch my right arm, I bring my left under it to support it, I lean my face on my right shoulder, my gaze a straight line to Margareta's back and trembling I yell as loud as I can: "I'm going to soot you Malgaleta, I'm going to shoot you!"

She stops, turns around and looks at me. I am not afraid of her and her beatings anymore, let her come back.

She starts laughing and leaves. She tells my mom and this somehow becomes a funny family story.

I was maybe two and a half, and this is my earliest memory.

Ten years later, after the fall of the Iron Curtain, the building was deemed improper for a daycare, was completely renovated and became a police station. Where babies used to sit in metal beds, now, small time criminals rest behind thicker bars. Former communist policemen, now just policemen replaced the middle-aged women, but I imagine they all have the same slow walk reeking with grave importance. The difference is that now the building is warm and freshly painted.

*

Ana was born in the sixties behind the Iron Curtain in the Socialist Republic of Romania. Her mother and father were comrades working for their country's luminous future and Ana, after losing her twin sister two weeks into life, fit right in.

She was cared for by her grandmother until she was 3 years old because her own mother worked shifts of twelve hours a day in a garment factory to increase the production and help the rapid industrialization in the Socialist Republic of Romania.

When Ana was in middle school, her father, proud member of the socialist party (that almost everyone had to be a member of), managed to obtain an apartment for him and his family. They all moved out of the rented rooms in the crumbling old house they lived in, where the other

renters emptied their chamber pots onto the side of the street, into a new apartment with two rooms, one for the parents and one for Ana, a kitchen with a gas range, a bathroom with a toilet and a balcony with a view.

From the window of the 9th floor apartment Ana could see almost half the city. It was before the big earthquake in 1977 so no one was yet afraid of living so high up.

More than everyone else in the family, Eva, Ana's mom, would be the one who would love that apartment, and that view, the most. She would refuse to move to a different apartment even after the earthquakes, even after the apartment would turn into a frozen coffin in the 1980's, the ice melting off the walls only with the coming of spring.

Born in the country, a peasant, as her husband would remind her from time to time so she would know her place, miraculously never a member of the party that everyone had to be a member of, Eva would love the balcony that she filled with plants (and sometimes chickens to fatten up for later slaughter) and that view, of almost half the city.

What Ana loved was the apartment itself, the newness, the modernization. The fact that you got to be handed out a miracle like this, just because you were a member of the party.

Statement of Poetics

Part 1. Why this material?

I have spent the last ten years writing and rewriting in two languages, some of the texts that made it into this manuscript. The more distance I put between myself and my memories, the more I felt the need to go back to them.

I moved from Romania to the US eleven years ago, and this shift in my location has been the catalyst for this written "investigation." The emigration experience provided a release from my own memories while crumbling the identity that was built on them. The tectonic shift in my identity engaged the focus on memory, all the while around me, the spectacle of a completely different society continued playing. I feel that it was inevitable for me to write this memoir as my first long-length work.

Working on this manuscript has been a process of making a story real by sharing it with others, while also erasing it from my mind by writing it down. What is the need to hold on to memories if they are recorded and safe?

I cannot forget what happened to me, to my family, to a whole country. Forgetting will minimize the absurdity of totalitarian regimes, it will create the impression that what happened to us was acceptable, and it is the last thing I want. But holding on to memories of cold, hunger, and an overall abusive society where a policy of insufficiency made cockroach poison an item of luxury, is too much for one person to do.

Writing this memoir became an act of transfer, from my mind to paper, a technique of transplanting my memories on an external device: a book. I need these memories to exist, but I

do not want them to exist in my mind. Like an external memory device, this manuscript is holding everything my mind cannot.

I chose to write a memoir because I wanted to stand in front of the readers of this manuscript and say, look, this not only happened, it happened to me, a real person, it happened to the people I know, to the people I love.

I wanted various friends and acquaintances who believe that "it was not that bad" because their families were better able to protect them from the realities of our childhood, that never asked their moms how come they are an only child in a country with no legal forms of contraception and banned abortion, to see those bad things happened to the people they know.

I wanted people that never heard of Romania to get at least a glimpse of the absurdity millions of people endured during the communist regime in Romania.

People live for the stories they are told, for the stories they tell themselves. But in a country that is continuously "cleansing" its past and rewriting history in the Orwellian manner of "1984", how can you trust the stories you are told? In "1984," the main character, Winston Smith, works for the "Ministry of Truth", where his responsibility is to rewrite history to align it with the Party's truth. For people living in a tyranny, this is a process that most of them will willingly employ by themselves in order to reconcile their environment and their memory so they can keep on living.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie warns us in her TED talk titled "The Danger of a Single Story," posted in July 2009, against the problem with thinking about something in terms of the "single story." In a totalitarian regime, the single-story is, most of the time, also a made-up story.

In Romania, in the 1980s, the leaders of our country told us a story about why we had to stay in cold dark apartments, with the cockroaches. Like cockroaches. And many of us chose to believe it.

I refuse to believe that treating people as objects and dehumanizing a whole country's population by reducing them to their usefulness to an economy should be acceptable. I invite readers to take part in the events that shaped my opinion by writing and offering this manuscript.

Part 2. Why a memoir and not a novel?

I can imagine a novel centered around three generations of women surviving an absurd and dictatorship. It would have offered me the liberty to write about more events, including many more details of my life, of my family's life, of various people who survived in the 1980s in communist Romania. It could have been a historical novel, a multi-generational novel, anything I wanted to make of it.

But, I choose to write a hybrid memoir, and I think part of the explanation is that I needed it to stand up, in a way, both to the continuous process of erasure that affects personal memory and the brutal process of rewriting history implemented by tyrannical regimes.

A novel, even based on real facts, is a work of fiction. Readers are, after all, entitled to disbelief. When opening a memoir, the reader is acknowledging that what they are reading had existed at some point, that when fiction made its way into the book, it is incidental (a consequence of the writing process). Because the memories that I have put down in writing are childhood memories, it is hard to say where the remembering of events starts and where the story recorded by various

members of my family ends. I do know though that their essence surprised in little details that my family would not have known (like the shade of a specific color and tone, small gestures on my part, acute and intense feelings that incorporate corresponding details in my body) belong to my memories and not to the stories told by the adults in my life.

I also believe that adults tend to misjudge a child's capacity to remember. I suspect it to be a guilt redeeming mechanism. From my observations, children can remember events in great detail, and talking about those events only reinforces their own memories. I believe that the clarity of my memories, some of them as early as two and a half years old, is a consequence of some of these events becoming amusing stories for my family, and their own investment in them triggered over and over my own reminiscence of the events.

This manuscript is a hybrid memoir because even though at the center of this work are my own childhood experiences and memories, I chose to split the narrator in two. On the one hand, there is a first-person narrator who recounts her memories; on the other hand, there is a third-person narrator who includes the first-person narrator among the characters whose story it is recording.

It is a process of splitting my own experience through writing; I have the reality of my memories of my family's memories, and also I have the capacity to see my life as a piece of fiction.

Part 3. Why a hybrid memoir and not a memoir

It is important to note that I struggle to call this manuscript a memoir (even a hybrid one) because I feel that the author of a memoir, at least to some extent, is embracing her memory, the process of dwelling in the space of remembering. And I have never felt comfortable with much

less embraced my memories. They have felt foreign, a third-person narrative of myself, even as a child.

I have written this particular book because I felt that this is the story that I need to say. I needed to write "Behind the Curtain" to be able to write something else, something that I wanted to write, something I felt more comfortable creating. It has been a painful process that I have gone through only because of the requirements of my thesis. In a way, I needed to exorcise this story before I felt free to write about something else.

When I read Peter Handke's "A Sorrow Beyond Dreams," I have instantly resonated with it partly because I felt that the story I wanted to say was also centered around unspeakable sorrow.

I have wondered why I chose to write a hybrid memoir and not a memoir, and I believe that the reason behind it is that because the "I" in my memoir is not essential, it is a particular story, but it is not just my story. Because a single string of memories did not feel enough, it needed a third-person narrative, it required documents, and photos, it required a bigger picture.

It is my opinion that the reason why certain authors (like Sarah Manguso for example in her memoir titled "The Two Kinds of Decay" and Mary-Kim Arnold "Litany for the Long Moment") choose to write a hybrid memoir and not a memoir is that they wanted and needed to inscribe their personal experience into a broader view of life. Sometimes writing about your personal experience is not enough; it feels like a too narrow view of the subject.

This manuscript, this hybrid memoir is not trying to impart any kind of wisdom and is not even a revealing confession, I see it as more as a departure point, a place to safely store a past self while recognizing that it not only my story of so many others that grew up in similar circumstances.

I feel that by writing "Behind the Curtain," the story ceased to be mine. It is a memoir that, by being written, stopped being a memoir. Like Schrödinger's cat, the "I" person and its memories that compel this manuscript to be a memoir exist and no longer exist in the author of this piece of writing.

Part 4. How it was written

This paradox is why I have chosen to create a hybrid work where each chapter opens with an instance of me remembering something from my childhood and then moves to a third-person narrative that is a fictionalized story about my family. It is imperative for me to make this distinction from a technical point of view and also from an emotional one. I am not only writing about myself; I am recording fifteen of my childhood memories and pairing them with a fictionalized story of my family.

Each chapter also includes either a family photo or a picture of an official document that organized people's lives during that period. This reflects the choices I made regarding the written material, to alternate either focusing on a personal, single point of view, that offered by my memories, or on a broader one that included more than one person's story.

Initially, I did not know how to preserve these memories while also creating a book. How do I take the memories I have that I wanted to preserve as carefully as possible to my "recorded" version and create a book out of them. I was never interested in writing about myself or my life; what I wanted was to preserve the essence of these powerful and precise memories. I have always felt that those personal memories are more than just my experience in a brutal system, I

think that they represent a comprised version of what the experiences of people trapped in that system with little or no survivor skills.

The disjunctive nature of memory makes it hard to create a storyline, and the starting point for this manuscript were a few string memories that pushed me to explore the subject.

My approach to this has been to research the 1980s communist period in Romania by reading various books and articles published in Romania and interviewing family members about general impressions of that period and exploring some of their memories. All the while, reading different memoirs written in English to understand the memoir genre better and to research different structural and stylistic choices.

The writing style of this manuscript reflects some of the content; it is condensed and stark, stripped to the bare essentials. There are few places where I have allowed the writer to relax, mirroring the few places where the stories do not bear their usual grimness. The trauma inflicted by the political regime and its effects, the absurdly stripped down to essentials existence of the people surviving a dictatorship, is reflected at a structural and linguistic level. There are pieces of childhood memories paired up with a snippet of life, all driven by the tunnel vision caused by pain and trauma of living under a tyrannical regime.

The research that I have done in Romanian focused on one side on better understanding the political and economic realities of the 1980s in the Socialist Republic of Romania, and on the other side on triggering my own memories. There were in particular two collections of "I remember" stories written by Romanians that felt the need to recount memorable experiences during the communism that helped me remember numerous details: from the hot brick wrapped in rags that my grandma put in the bed that my mom and I shared to warm it up, to the green

soaps obtain through complicated negotiations and products and services exchanged that were placed in between our clothes to make them smell good.

The articles and studies provided information about the economic challenges that Romania faced in the 1980s due to failing policies, and explained just how monstrous the programmed starvation was meticulously applied for almost eight years, until the fall of the Iron Curtain, was. A man that lived in a palace with faucets made of gold decided that the rest of his countrymen were eating too much.

While exploring the facts of the last years of communist leadership in my home country, I also read recently published memoirs of various writers to see how other authors chose to explore their own materials.

The numerous memoirs and hybrid memoirs that I have read offered examples of how to use structure and style as an extension of the story, but also examples of how too many details, for example, can distract the reader from the story. "No Friend But the Mountains: Writing from Manus Prison" by Behrouz Boochani, for instance, is a memoir so intent on recording everything that, as a reader, I was overwhelmed by the amount of details. As an author, I realized that not mentioning a specific memory that did not fit in the story, no matter how attached to it I was, must be an essential part of the writing process.

I had a series of disparate memories that I wanted to use as the book's skeleton, but I had no idea how to do this. That is why my first attempt to structure the disjunctive material I already had was to organize the stories literally along a human skeleton. I named different chapters with names of various bones found in the human body and organized them starting from the arms

raised in a gesture of self-defense down to the skull, along the vertebrae to the tibiae and the phalanges of the feet. I wanted the story to feel like an exploration of the human body.

But as more and more chapters accumulated, it became harder and harder to follow this structure, and in the end, I realized that this kind of structure would probably work better for a poetry volume.

This manuscript contains two stories and two narrators; there is a first-person narrator who remembers childhood events and identifies as the author of the manuscript (the Prologue establishes that) recording her memories in communist Romania between 1985 and 1989, and a third-person narrator who tells the story of Ana growing up and maturing in the Socialist Republic of Romania from the beginning of 1970s till the end of 1989. Ana is identified as the author's mother, while the author is mentioned as a character in Ana's story. Ana's character, while based on my mother (and identified as my mother), is a fictional version of her.

As I was finishing writing episodes that centered around my memories told by a first-person narrator or the experiences of my family told by an impartial narrator, I realized that the manuscript needed some consistent structure to balance the narrator's shifts throughout. So I chose to organize the episodes in the second part of every chapter in chronological order. That created a narrative arc centered around a character, Ana, while also allowing me to arrange the author's episodes of remembrance in the first layer of the book according to aesthetic criteria.

This was also necessary because, stylistically speaking, the manuscript includes a lot of very intense tragic moments that needed to be balanced out by relief-offering sections. I was able to pair dramatic memories with less dramatic experiences in Ana's life, but that still echoed the impression of the first section, or on the contrary, to pair less intense memories with traumatic

experiences in Ana's life. I intended to use the two narrative layers to mirror and complement one another. For example, in chapter 3, "Looking Out," in the first part, I describe one of my childhood games based on the knowledge the children in my social setting had about geography and world politics in the late 1980s. In comparison, in the second part, I tell the fictionalized story about the complicated way my family managed to buy a radio in the 1970s. What I wanted to do is show not only how absurd life in a dictatorship was (the isolation, the economic disaster, the absurd challenges), but also how this knowledge dripped down through society to reach its most unaware citizens (the children) who actually had an acute awareness of the political regime as you can see reflected in their games and ways of interaction.

I realize that this manuscript is still a work in progress that will require multiple editing processes as I continue reading and thinking about what I need to put in this book.