

Breathe in, breathe out

The Way to Oz

By Mihaela Iancu

October 21, 2010

I was making my way with difficulty towards the electric stairs which would take me up to the surface, out of the “Timpuri Noi” subway station. Past six o’clock in the evening. I knew the rain had stopped by the dry umbrellas of those who were coming from the opposite direction. A cold, unbreathable wind was blowing in my face, almost suffocating me. I placed my arms on the black velvet coat in order to keep it stuck to me, I narrowed my eyes and I tilted my head. I inhaled a strong smell of paint. There was something toxic there, that kind of toxic which feels good, like a necessary evil which you allow to change you. I smiled and I opened my eyes widely. A man dressed in a pasty, blue uniform, was crouching and painting the doors which allow the access to the stations a bright red. His hair was grey, he wore a hat, he had an inquiring gaze, a cylindrical, silvery box, a paintbrush. I stepped by the garbage can on the left, saw the stairs. The smell had cleared away. What I had inhaled, however, had remained inside. I stepped on the first step and looked upwards, towards the exit.

My dad has been working in the same place since forever. “It’s called leather crafting” he told me. “What do you do ? What should I say when I am being asked? Tell me in simple terms so that I can remember.” “I repair sewing machines”. Sewing machines seemed like some steam toys to me, trackless locomotives. I am writing this dressed in a white night suit, with a repetitive small flower pattern, which was tailored at a sewing machine. Its sleeves are shorter than my arms. Its pants end with five centimeters above my ankles. I glanced at myself in the mirror. It shows a body wrongly wrapped, but I know these white buttons that I button up. I have played with them, with whole bags of buttons. Sewing machines have names, just like us: Ileana, Elena, Monica, Veronica, Nicoleta. They function with difficulty, just like us, and in fact they don’t function at all unless you touch them. They are cold and heavy, but once you get them started, there’s no stopping them, they run. Sometimes they get sick and my father heals them.

The name of our sewing machine is Singer. It's noble, dark and gentle, mysterious. Singer slept in the same room with me back in my grandparents' house at the countryside, where I grew up. I am six years old and I am listening to it from my bed, across the laundry drier which spread from one corner of the room to the other, lain with clothes that were tailored, mainly with its help, by my grandmother. The wall behind me, painted with chalk, covered by an antimacassar with colored triangles, is full of the shadows of the clothes. It's winter and the light is dim.

I hear a tapping like the beat of the drum, followed by a brake. I'm wearing a conical cap with a sharp topknot. Ioni, my sister, who is two years younger than me, is wearing one shaped like a square. They are both made by Singer. This sewing machine feels smooth to the touch, a bit greasy, even. It gets covered in thick dust, the dandelion fluffs love it. Sometimes it was so cold that I felt it climbing from my fingers to my bones, making me shiver slightly, as you do when you grid a fork between your teeth. These things have shaped me in an essential way.

It's big, it's made of wood, leather and metal, it has wheels and an inner box, just like us, which covers its vital organs. There's a small thing inside of it, hidden within a secret drawer, its own ink, which bears a delicious name: shuttle. It can write using red, green, purple, blue, orange, even white, it can write using all the colors in the world. It can draw rabbits, bears, cars, birds, guitars. It can change into *thefastestspeedcarwhichstaysinitsplace*. Place your child sole on its lever, firmly grasp the handles of the chair you are seated in, gather all your force and send it down to your feet, then look for the contact- not in the middle, that's why it won't work, a bit farther, a bit more to the side- place your other sole on the opposite side of the lever, and now step alternatively. It starts to tick. Its heart beats just like the one of a washing machine. The needle goes up and down quickly-quickly-quickly. Don't pull on its straps, it will hurt it and you'll weaken it. Place your palm smoothly on its front wheel, when the speed is at its maximum. You feel it running through your palm. When you want to stop it, press harder on the wheel in order to gradually reduce its speed.

I am fourteen years old and I go up the stairs in a building with its walls painted half green, half white. I enter a hall which is rather tight. I walk on the right side. It smells of gas, of leather, I can hear some kind of hammers, I see wooden doors, painted the same green or brick-like color, many of them having a beige grating, which is turned aside. I hear women voices, loud laughs, from time to time, a man's voice. The ceilings are high, the lamps have no shades. I'm there. I stop in front of a door which says "Mechanic Workshop". I enter. In a room slightly smaller than the kitchen of an average flat-block apartment, with its walls covered in the pages of some old, fashionable almanacs, a man in a pair of blue overalls is standing, his face turned towards the small, square window which is cut in the front wall. With his back to the door, he is slightly bent over the improvised worktable- a bench full of tools, grinders and grip vices, packs of Assos cigarettes, ferns, bottles of oils and rags. The smell of leather and paint is all over the room.

The man in the blue overalls turns around, facing me, he superficially wipes himself with the stained rags, and approaches me:

“Are you already here, my child? We’ll be leaving soon.”

He wipes his hands of oil on the overalls, crumpling them slightly in his hands and moving them around. I inhale all the air in the room. I looked at the cracked skin on his hands, full of wounds, with prominent veins and thick skin. They will hold on to this smell, I know it.

I’m up, at the top of the electric stairs from “Timpuri Noi”. The wind is blowing mildly from the West towards the East.

Translated by: **Mădălina-Ioana Borcău** and **Laura Bosnea**

MTTLC, Bucharest University

LiterNet.ro