

Alina NELEGA

From „Amelia Takes a Deep Breath, ” or, „The Internationale”

1. *Amelia, a school girl. She wears the red tie of a communist pioneer. She is praying.*

...and please protect Vitea and Lulu and Gramps and Babooshka. And please God, take care of *maman's* soul, and *papa's*¹ and Archimedes'...wherever he may be, 'cause he was the apple of Gramps' and Babooshka's eyes. 'Cause he cost such a lot of money. When they sold all the shiny things from the box we'd saved from the old house, when *maman* left. The green stone sparkling ring that bought us the cow, the long gold chains that got us the fodder, Gramps' old watch, the one with the engraved lid, that became two giant sacks of corn flour; and the pearl tiara that we turned into Archimedes – even if Archimedes wasn't his real name, 'cause Gramps was the only one who knew what it was and when he whispered it into his ear, oh, how the swine would enjoy it, like a doggie, he would even sit up on his hind legs and squeal. When they slaughtered him, Babooshka was so pissed that she got drunk again. She cried and shouted: singe him gingerly, scorch Joseph Vissarionovitch, may his gory soul burn in hell – and she cried so hard that Sasha and Gramps had to gag her and carry her into the house so that she wouldn't cry any more for poor Archimedes.

And please God, watch over Gramps' soul, even if Babooshka did not love him as much as she did Archimedes, 'cause she didn't shed a tear when Gramps kicked the bucket. She wouldn't even speak a word for three weeks, and she stopped bickering about the smallest things. Then she just left, without telling anyone. And forgive us God that we were so happy when she left us with Sasha. But we missed her eventually, 'cause Sasha wouldn't exactly feed us and he would leave us all alone all night long, and slept all day long, and he would not play with us as he'd used to, back at the old house.

And thank you God that you've decided to bring Babooshka back to us, even if she is so skinny now and has those purple and green bruises on her face. 'Cause we love her even if she's all bald, even if she's now so ugly that she looks like Baba Yaga.

Oh, and God, you can forget about Lulu, 'cause he bit me very hard when I said that *maman* was an angel, and he rolled on the floor and roared like a boar. And he is following me everywhere I go, and is throwing stones at my pecan, where Vitea and I made a mud hovel where I study every day, like I promised *maman* I would, back at the old house, on the terrace, that evening when we were looking at that black rocky road, and people and animals kept coming on and on, poor them, they were coming very slowly and some would stop at our gate, and Babooshka fed them – no, not all of them, only some. And Gramps would shoot at the others with his old rifle - but they kept on coming on and on and they would never stop coming...

¹ As in French

And after some time *maman* would start the breathing lesson: she would teach me how to become an angel, just like her. You have to breath deep, very deep. You breath deeper and deeper, you move your arms, like this, and, after some time, you take off, slowly, and rise. You keep on breathing deep and you find yourself floating higher and higher, until you disappear in the distance - and never touch land again. Exactly as she did, when she found out about *papá*. Everybody was crying, even Gramps was, but not her. (...)

It's just that...I don't understand, God, how somebody who has the lungs as weak as Uncle Milutz, who barely moves and breatheas and is so badly dressed in those grey and torn clothes... just don't get mad at me, God, like Babooshka. She always snarls at me not to ask so many questions and she prods Lulu. Who pushes me, pulls my hair and treads on my feet: Cozenka, baaa-baaa, polenta fingers, empty head. So what? Uncle Milutz died too, hah! and then we were allowed to pray for him. (...)

And God, please help Sasha, bring him back home, and do not let him do what *maman* did.'Cause he's got no idea about breathing. And he won't soar. Better take him to Bucharest, have him work for the people, for the Revolution for which you must give away all you have. When I grow up, I will work for the Revolution too, and have my head shaven, just like Babooshka, and have yellow spots on my hands and black broken fingernails and such a long-long face and moan at night and yell in my sleep and get drunk on August 23rd², and December 30th and the 1st of May, that I heard on the radio it's Theinternationaldayoftheworkerswhouniteinallthecountriesandmarchand singand dance.

And thank you, God, that you rid me of those stupid piano lessons and that moron of a German nanny and the boring French classes. And please, God, help me grow up and sing songs for grown ups, and flutter the red banner of the Party in the wind – and Vitea will dance like a wonderful flame, like we saw in a movie theatre when we were still at the old house and they were not running these amazing Russian movies with cranes. He will dance from *The Swan Lake* and *The Nut Cracker* and *Sherezade* and maybe he will also dance to that funny music, without rules, that makes you vibrate so, and...well, maybe I will play then, but not the piano, no! nothing could make me play that again – maybe I will play the saxophone like I saw when we were back at the old house. They came to our place, the whole band, all black, as if they were coming straight from monkeys, I promise you! Oh, God, I can hardly wait to paint myself all black and play and sing for the woork-iiiing claa-aas, and Vitea will dance. As for Lulu, let him sell the tickets.

Amen!

2. *Amelia is breathing – a half-breath, fragmented long sob.*

Where have all the little things gone? The little things that are no more? Where has the tea that I drank this morning gone, the year 1960, the colored picture primer, the song I just sung, Misha the teddy-bear that I dropped into Gramps' grave and nobody would fetch it

² The day in 1944 when the Romanian army broke its alliance with Nazi Germany and joined with the Russian "liberating" troops. A national holiday until 1989. December 30th was also a national holiday: the day when the Russians forced King Michael to abdicate, in 1945.

back for me, Gramps - where is he – where is Vitea, where is *the* Paris, that city that *maman* and *papá* kept talking about, that we would go there, that we would all move there...?!

In the Yardlergard³, that's where all go. And the Yardlergard is watched by a Gramps, but he is not at all like my own Gramps, but more like papushka-Stalin, with an old rifle. Boom-boom makes the rifle each time someone uninvited comes too close to the Yardleygard. Bang-bang make at its gate all the things that are no more and want to escape and scatter again in the large world. Bang-bang-bingo-bing...dot-dot...makes Vitea. *Battement grand jetté*, makes *the* Paris. *Pashlee na Yardleygarda*⁴ makes papushka-Stalin and all get in the line, wait for their turn and go in, nice and quiet.

3. (*Amelia, 16, in the hospital, with perfusions. She is writing a letter. She was raped by the militiamen, lost her pet, a little piglet, and her granny. She has been singing along her life.*)

4. *Amelia is breathing – a half-breath, fragmented long sob.*

Thank you.

For my happy childhood – thank you.

For my quiet sleep, undisturbed by the underground moans of the political prisoners - thank you.

Because you electrified my country
and taught me how to read
in the deafening light of the electric bulb
syllabifying
from your dailies:

The Red Star, The Red Spark, The Red Banner, The Communist Beliefs - thank you.

Thank you for the portion of flax oil

that we use to cook the five eggs a month, for the salami mixed with brick dust
on which we feast every Sunday,

for the coffee mixed with charcoal dust, bitter, to save the sugar –
which, however, does not melt

is not sweet,

is not white,

actually is not sugar.

Thank you.

For the worryfree present – thank you.

For the fear of every day

and every night

when –

thank you that you take our light

so that we don't see too much,

³ Invented word for an unknown and scary place.

⁴ Get into the Yardleygard, in Russian.

hear too much,
or get warm at the same fire
with
the Hungarians, the Jews, the Gypsies, the Poles, the Russians, the Bulgarians, the Serbs,
or God forbid!
with the Germans
or the Americans.
Thank you for not letting me wander about in the world
all by myself –
in this world that does not belong to us,
but to the Capitalists,
the country traitors,
who ran away
and left us,
this ugly and dangerous world,
where my country
is the only true haven and paradise.
Thank you
that you have taught me
what to speak
and how to speak -
beautiful words
such as
the work division,
multilaterally developed socialist society,
agricultural co-operative of production,
class struggle,
monolith,
five-year plan,
industrialization,
whinny-cofee⁵
three-day queue,
censorship,
Tschernobal,
edible chicken claws,
Dacia 1300⁶,
luxury studio
of eight square meters
with toilet and shower
night telly-journal –
and forget
ugly words such as
passport,
Coca-cola,

⁵a coined word for the coffee made from oat that we drank in communism

⁶the only car that was produced in Romania until 1989

chocolate,
king,
psychoanalysis,
Greek-catholics,
Mercedes,
oranges,
Europe,
freedom,
to be,
me.

For the enlightened future – I thank the Party from all my heart,
to the Beloved Conductor,
to his dauntless wife,
our mother,
the mother of all of us.
In exchange for their caring,
we,
full of gratitude,
march, with open wings,
trustfully towards Communism.
And my beloved heimat,
my country, my land,
gloriously marches on,
under your secure hand.
My country is a little piglet.
Her name is Fanny.
She was eaten not long ago
by the militiamen
led by Comrade commander.
For all these,
and for many, many,
many other things -
Thank you.

5. (*Amelia, 35. She wears a folk costume and has brought some flowers that she gingerly places on a gravestone. She is at the grave of her son who was shot trying to cross the border by swimming across the Danube. She sings patriotic choral songs, has gotten married and is cheating on her husband, to preserve „equality between sexes”*)

6. *The change of regime has happened abruptly and Amelia sees it as if it were a dream.*

7. *Amelia, 55. The Otopeni⁷ airport, Bucharest. She holds a placard on which she has written VITKA.*

⁷Now "Henri Coanda" since 2003.

There he is! No, it's not him. Yes, oh, yes, it's him! Vitka, Vitea! No, it's not him...That one, that's him, the one with the green and yellow bag. He's always loved those colors. Vitka! Victor! he doesn't see me...well, of course, he's old. He's five years older than me, so he must be around 60. But look how goodlooking he still is! Here, Vitea, here! He's not changed a bit: same handsome and slim figure he has! Vitka! "Arise, ye workers from your slumbers..." sorry? What? Do you have a problem with that? You don't like music? Everybody can sing anything now – it's democracy: "So comrades, come rally..." Victorrrrrrr...

Ohhhh...! He looks so good with that blue cap of his! And how he looks around, has no idea that I am waiting for him. Oh, God, if only *maman* could see him! She was always so proud of him. He was the best breather of all of us. *Tendu, battement tendu. Grand jetté!* One, two, three, four – go! Deep, very deep! *Jetté!*...so elegant, so natural...Completely unlike Lulu. Poor Lulu. There is nothing left of him, 'cept that photo – him and Archimedes, and Lulu had made him wear watermelon peel shoes. He always liked to torture the animals. That's why they promoted him, eventually, from the Rehabilitation School, to head guard at Jilava⁸. What a shame he shot himself by mistake while cleaning his gun. At least that's what they wrote in the newspaper. They even published his photo.

Vitea! Here! Here! Let me pass! Vitka, it's me, Snejanka! Viteaaa! Oh, let me pass, when I tell you! I am taking him by surprise! He's gonna be so happy, dear him! After such a long time...

But I too, every day, step up to my duty! All the Air France flights. Sometimes at Tarom's⁹ too. But never got him, bad luck! He's now come here four times. He was received at Cotroceni¹⁰, they awarded him the *Chevalier of Arts*...I saw him on the telly. He didn't say a word about me. Maybe he is ashamed of me. But why – why would he be ashamed of me? What have I done for him to be ashamed of me?

Not there, Vitea! Again you are acting like a fool! You little idiot! Where are you looking? Just let me pass, damn it! Let me go! Vitea! Not that way! I'm here! Here! Oy! Are you doing that on purpose? He does it on purpose. Viteaaaaa...Viteaaaaa....Victor, Vic...Vic...to...rrrrrr...where's he gone?

He didn't recognize me. He must have forgotten that I existed. He looked kind of sissy. You could tell that. And those second-hand clothes...! What a jerky tee shirt he had, come on, tee shirt, at his age! And wearing bags, like those twenty-year kids – instead of having a proper suitcase, like everybody who has succeeded in life, in Germany, in France...

Surely he's worse off, that's why he's grown so soft-minded. What, you think the Great West doesn't soften your brain...? An old fogey, a gaffer who comes to play the great artist here, in front of us, 'cause nobody there cares for him any more. Who does he think he's fooling? Hah? After you have lorded it over capitalist whores, now you come here to look down on us...you'd be nothing without us, without the dung in the stable, that's why the floor would

⁸ A notorious Romanian prison, known for its hard regime.

⁹ Romania's largest and for decades only flight company.

¹⁰ The Romanian president's house.

slip, how you splattered yourself with shit at every pirouette, sprinkles, sprinkles, sprinkles, drop-drop-drops of shit, like a thin veil around you dear Vitka...

(...)

Yeah, right! What would you care? The thought of sharing with me the sugar Babooshka would secretly give you from under her apron never crossed your mind...you never wrote one single letter to me, all this time you never sent me a package of coffee or some nice salami, anything, a skirt or a cashmere jumper, like other people who had relatives abroad would receive. Vitka, nothing, all this time, nothing all these years, Vitka, how could you?! Fuck you, you capitalist pig!

(She drops the placard, angrily puts back on her cap and her apron and becomes an airport cleaner. She takes a large T-shaped broom and sweeps the floor.)

And, after all, why would he want to recognize me? What does he have with me? There is nothing we have to tell each other. "Ariiiiise..." no! it's over with this song too. I sing no more. Nothing. Since they did away with *The Shepherd* I have not sung a single note. They did away with everything. Absolutely everything. And the only reason I still live is that I breathe. This is all I know. Breathe. But nobody would give you a salary for that. Not to mention a pension.

Sometimes it's a bit difficult, breathing I mean, because now that we have liberty and democracy, and the borders have opened, lots of foreigners go by, but shit still smells like shit. You wouldn't say, but that's exactly so. I used to think there were differences. English shit must smell like lavender, and French shit like Boeuf Stroganoff. The Russian like fish, and the Swiss like the fresh ink they use to print the Euros. Like shit they do! Shit is shit! *(She stops in position.)* You want to go in? of course...What? No, nothing, I was just...you look so much like someone...someone...it doesn't matter...oh, I remind you of somebody too...really? You spent your childhood in Romania? And this interesting accent – French, isn't it?...oh, you think so? No – really...? My name? What is my name? Does it matter? If I can sing...? Funny questions you ask me...what exactly do you want from me? Of course, you're right. We couldn't have met before – ever. What a meeting – in a public toilet in Otopeni airport...impossible, isn't it? You say that your sister couldn't have ever become a janitor in the airport. Of course, people like us are sisters of the broom and cousins of the cleaning liquid...I am happy that you think 'tis funny. Your sister...as you say, she had a heart of gold. Really? Well, then... there is absolutely no possibility that I am your sister. We don't have a heart. No, really, it's true. In our country there are a lot of people who don't have a heart. Actually, most people my age. Men, women, it doesn't matter. Many, very many people without a heart. About four out of five. And you know why? It's a secret, but you seem nice and you remind me of someone, too. So I am going to tell it to you: because they ate it.

Once upon a time, there was a hard winter.

It was cold, very cold,

and we had to chose: we either ate it

or we died.

I didn't like to eat my heart – they had to force me, but I soon discovered -

it actually happened after the first bite -

that it was quite tasty,

so that, after all,
it proved to be easier than I'd thought.
It was tender and soft, and very warm.
Each of us ate their one and only heart.
I, in mine, found lots of things that you can play with:
a few hills and a small doll house, and a big-big box.
And out of it came *maman* and *papá* and Vitea and Lulu and Babooshka and Archimedes and
Comrade commander and Fanny and Victorash and Japan and the whole Paris was in my
heart. I also found some bones - the kind that stick between your teeth, and little jumpy
frogs that were so hard to catch.
On one side it was so hard that it seemed made of stone.
Stones are good for your digestion.
I sometimes hear, even now, especially at night, small pieces of it slowly digesting
and quietly creaking.
Heart is not a light meal, you know...
It takes years to digest it.
And fear makes digestion even more difficult.
Fear of the moment when all the pieces will have gone, when my belly will have pushed
them lower and lower, and my bowels will eliminate the last remains of my heart.
And I will die.
You can't live without a heart.
Nobody has ever done such a thing.

8. *Amelia, 70, in an old people's home. She talks to the patient beside her.*

Is it the first time you're flying? Oh, me - I have traveled extensively, all around the world.
Let me tell you something: Paris is a village, Mona Lisa - a fat lady with big hands and bad
teeth, the Louvre - a bore. As for the rest - nothing new. I have been to London, too. Poor
Vitea - my brother, you know, you must have heard of him, of course he is famous - poor
him, he thought I would faint with emotion. But not me, siree, not me! Not even when he
eventually got me to Albert Hall. Not bad, but after all, still a house of culture, like Reshitza.
So much fuss only because it's on the Thames. And so much work - for what?! He would
take me to places with him: Santiago de Chile, New York, Tokyo. In summer we would stay
with a friend in Nice. Tiring. My feet hurt - I can hardly walk. And all that food: steak
tartare, gin-and-tonics, champagne... Three months he stuffed me with all that junk, I almost
died of indigestion.

But the worst is that we don't go anywhere without his friend, Alphonse. Thirty, dyed hair,
expensive perfumes and double rooms. And this guy Alphonse - he is not even Vitea's child,
he is his chauffeur, his maid, his cook... they even sleep in the same bed. Every morning he
gets him *croissants*, like those Fanny used to crave, *café-au-lait* and jam of *fraises*. *Mon petit,*
comment ça va? ça va bien? O-la-la! and *madame Amélie* how is she? O-la-la as well! And after he
dies, he will leave everything to this Alphonse guy - he's already made his will, so every
morning I expect to find him poisoned with that awful French coffee, or to have a heart
attack in that red car that I am not setting another foot in ever again! I promised that last
year, when we came from Monaco, full of roulette chits, all that way because Alphonse-dear
had a hankering for a morning walk in *Quartier Latin*, that slum! Not to mention that this

boy is kind of dark – I can't imagine what Vitea sees in him! He is not a gentile – that is absolutely sure. No wonder, Paris looks like Beirut – if it were not for the Eiffel Tower, you'd think it was an African capital.

Ready, we are taking off. Fasten your seat belt, 'cause if they catch you without it, they will scold you. These girls are very strict. Pretty, but harsh. No exceptions. The old bitch wouldn't allow any. She raids unexpectedly, sometimes even at night. How she shouts at them, poor things, how she treats them ...! Everybody is terrified of her ...everybody except me. We are in a plane. What could be worse? I like the food here, it's free. And it's fun – with all these plastic things...sometimes they give us ice cream. Maybe you don't believe me, dear, but I get so bored here. Unfortunately I have nobody left back in my country. And the rest of the world is pretentious trash. My only pleasure is flying to and fro. Paris-Bucharest, Bucharest-Paris. I have lots of free tickets. I used to work in the industry, you know, in the Otopeni airport. I make this journey once a week. I spend some time on The Victory Boulevard, than I go back. Have dinner in Paris. Cheaper, see what I mean?

Here comes the food! What are we having today? Yummy, chicken and mushrooms. Yesterday we had pasta. Aren't we having any soup today? I love the dessert. Except for compote. I hate compote. Last week we had it every day. Apple compote, yuck! I turned their trays upside down. ALL the mugs fell on the floor and there was this sweet pool with soft boiled apple pieces floating around and we all took off our shoes – all of us, even Tootsie, the dodderer. And all those little notes fell from under his blanket, you know, those notes he is sticking everywhere, in the toilet, on the trees in the park...those with " Arise, ye, Romanian pensioners, let's have a strike..." – and they were all soaked, and he was so desperate...yes...and we all splashed ourselves and threw apples at each other and fought with the teaspoons and that was the day Annie the Parkinson lady laughed so much she lost her dentures. And I broke my glasses, too. But I don't care. I see better without them.

I like it best when it's like now – when we are above the clouds. Look, it's so beautiful...! There's nothing to be afraid of. There are a lot more dangerous things in this world.

I always ask for a seat next to this door – see, it says "Exit in case of danger". Just in case, I mean in case of danger, let's say that Comrade commander shows up... I open, I breathe in a few times, and...the air is so clean here, above the clouds, you can breathe deep, so deep...you don't have to be afraid – but it is important that you breathe correctly. Until you feel you are becoming light, very light, and the air is like the sea water, it keeps you on the surface and there is nothing left for you but to softly move your wings.

What is he saying? Did he say anything? Oh, I am so unnerved by these voices in all kinds of languages – I don't understand anything. And Vitea promised he'd buy me a hearing aid to hear with. It seems the door is ajar, don't you think so? Yes, yes, you can feel a little draught. What? Speak up please, I can't hear a thing...all right, all right, you can take my dessert. Although in this case it's better to be as light as possible. As you wish...if you want you can have my chicken, too. Actually, I am not hungry at all. Not thirsty either.

Yes, yes, look, it's opening up. Easy, it's a heavy door. What? Come on, don't be afraid, just breathe. Do exactly like me, breathe deep, deeper...see? it's not difficult at all. Like that, yes...breathe...see? now it has opened all the way.

Come now, we can go out – don't be afraid, the air is like sea water, it keeps us on the surface. Oh, come on, show some courage! There's nothing to be afraid of! Come on...you don't want to go? Why? Ohhh...so...All right, then I am going alone. Come now, you'll be sorry if...if it shuts, I mean...all right, stay then. But you'll be sorry...this door opens only once in a lifetime. You don't have this opportunity a second time. Still no? All right, I'm going...I go out...I go...I'm out!

Oooohhhh...what a strong light...and how warm it is here...like in summer, after rain...and this wet grass...and, look! a rainbow, a glorious rainbow...

...Fanny, you have grown up, and you have become friends with Archimedes...Babooshka, your green spots have healed, and...Gramps! oh! Lulu – leave me alone, you savage! *Papá*, he is pulling my hair again! Sasha...where have you been, Sasha...Victorash, you are here, too? But Vitka, where is Vitka – late again, as usually...practising. *Battement grand jetté*...*Maman*...! ...I thought you'd left, *maman*...don't you ever leave me...if you knew what a long and impossible dream I dreamed, *maman*, what an absurd dream...a terrifying dream...I'm so happy...that it was only a dream...so happy...that I have waked up...so...happy...that I...have...woken...up.

THE END