

## GABRIELA ADAMESTEANU

### The Hour Commute<sup>1</sup>

It's hot. Hot and glaring. You walk, squinting, faster and faster, leaving the platform behind: the closed newspaper kiosk, the barely gurgling fountain, the shovel scraping a pile of sun-baked rubble, filling the air with hot white dust. You start running, your bags full of bread<sup>2</sup> banging against your knees. Face flushed, neck crooked, you look desperately at dusty caps, black hats, scarves knotted tightly over fresh perms, at sunburned faces glistening with sweat and cheap metal teeth, all competing with you to get on the train. Reaching the engine, you turn back panting. Five carriages, four carriages, three, *I don't know what I'll do when I get old* . . . you hear Romica Puceanu's voice<sup>3</sup> from somewhere inside—somewhere beyond the throng of worn-out overalls, polyester bellbottoms, shabby briefcases bulging with bread, faded green dresses, flip-flops, scruffy shoes gripping the bottom step; somewhere beyond the fists clutching the rail, one on top of the other.

You're still running. It's so hard to get on. Really, how did you manage? You mumble, elbow, *could I get past*—You clench your fists, *what the hell*—You gasp, *excuse*—You step on a vinyl bag, shove your way with clawlike fingers through legs, hips, armpits, *sorry*—Half of you still hangs from the steps, *I don't know what I'll do when I get old* . . . Suddenly it seems to you the train is moving, and, terrified, you thrust yourself once more into the mass of flesh stinking of urine and plum brandy.

“Look! The men got on, leaving the women behind. Give her your hand, honey, and help her up!”

You keep panting for a while, one of your bags pressing painfully on your foot. Looking through the open bathroom door, you fix your eyes on a man

who's placed his briefcase on the wet, broken toilet seat. Swaying with the train, his feet buried under a pile of overflowing bags, he fumbles for something to hold on to. His hands slide down the stained mirror until his knotty fingers—his ring finger is just a stump—catch in the holes in the plywood where the sink used to be.

Do you think he has a better hold than you? Nobody can move anything but their hands and head. You hear them swearing, whispering, sighing, trying to protect their precious bundles.

“We left late, we'll get there late.”

“Did you catch the doctor before he left?”

It's the two old women who pulled you into the carriage—one wrapped in a thin woolen scarf embroidered in red, green, and tinsel; the other in a new calico scarf with a brown flowery print.

“I can't have salt, or sour soup. Just sweet soup. No polenta either, but I still sneak a bite sometimes. No fried meat, no milk . . . Marioara brought me a pail of mushrooms. They're good for you, she said. Yeah, but I can't eat them!”

“What kind of life is that?”

A younger woman has been trying to join their conversation—she keeps smiling and nodding her head respectfully. Is it because of her age? Thirty-eight? Forty-two? Something like that. Under her scarf her hair is only slightly gray, and her crooked teeth shine white (when she smiles) against her sun-burned face.

She goes on smiling, turning from one woman to the other, excessively attentive, almost servile. Only her forced voice betrays her. She sounds almost impertinent:

“What kind of life is that?”

The woman with the embroidered scarf—red, green, and tinsel—pretends not to hear.

“In the end, since we had them, I grilled them. On wood. I'm crazy about mushrooms and so is my man. But if the doctor says no, then it's no.”

A stinging pain in your left knee. You strain wildly to keep your balance—the man behind you is trying to push his wooden trunk past. Hold on! In a moment he'll be getting off and through the open door you'll see

a row of acacias

a field of dwarf sunflowers

a low house painted blue with strings of tobacco leaves hung out to dry on the walls

mist rising from the shimmering water and filling the valley

*I don't know what I'll do when I get old . . .*

How long were your eyes closed? As the train speeds along your hair escapes from your scarf and falls in your face. As if through prison bars you see a compartment full of men—workers' caps and peasants' hats; the swift movement of a hand dealing filthy, dog-eared cards; a foppish long nail on the pinky and a heavy gold ring on the index finger.

You can see and hear everything—the door is open.

“Let's say you go to Paris and buy something there. It says ‘madeinparis,’ but what you don't know is, it was actually made in Militari!<sup>4</sup> You know how it was with colonies before? That's us now.”

He's been abroad. He's got himself a gold ring, and he works at a big factory in Militari. He's not unshaven as you first thought; he's just growing a beard.

“A colony, yeah! We make this for Paris, that for Dublin, furniture for the Russians . . .”

His bright green shirt, with a machine-embroidered flower on the breast pocket, is so new it's still creased from the package. The Sanyo radio-cassette player must surely be his, as must be the Romica Puceanu song it's playing, *I don't know what I'll do when I get old . . .* The index finger with the gold ring authoritatively presses a button: *It's halftime, and here in Craiova,<sup>5</sup> after forty-five minutes of play, the home team is ahead after Cartu's goal.*

“You should see how big my daughter's grown!”

The younger woman's face, with crooked white teeth, has frozen in a hesitant, plaintive expression—won't the other two notice her now?

They do. The tinsel-embroidered and brown-print scarves turn at the same time:

“D’you still see her?”

“I saw her last week, but she didn’t see me.”

The two speak in unison. Disapprovingly.

“But d’you visit her?”

“Not anymore.”

The younger woman smiles with cheerful humility.

“It’s five years since the last time. Her new mom told me to stop visiting.”

“Ah, she forgot you!”

“She doesn’t know you anymore!”

“It’s over! She’s gone!”

She agrees deferentially. Her crooked white teeth appear again on her sun-burned face. If they say so, that’s how it has to be. Her daughter’s gone.

“Yes, she is. I only have one wish now. She should know about her brothers.”

“What?”

“She should know she’s not alone in this world.”

“How old did you say she is?”

“. . . last week she was at the grocery store. She was selling eggs, and her brother came to tell me, ‘Mom,’ he says, ‘she’s selling eggs at the store! I was going to buy some from her, but I changed my mind. Her mother was in the office inside.’ See how big my daughter’s grown!”

The first stop is coming up. People pass their belongings toward the exit above their heads: jam-packed bags, broken zippers, handles tied with wire, bursting plastic. They fiercely elbow their way forward, graciously step aside, curse each other, suddenly refuse to budge. The man in the bathroom has managed—I wonder how—to get to the compartment door. The people inside jumped on the train just as it was leaving the depot. They saved seats for each other, throwing their battered briefcases onto the cracked vinyl benches.

The hand with the gold ring cuts the cards.

“We used to take our products to the border. We’d get there, let’s say, in the evening, and we’d stay there for a day or two. Until the importers came to collect them. We saw a lot of trains pass. And you know what, they all came fucking empty, and left jam-packed! For all the times I’ve been there, I never seen a full train come through.”

He stretches and closes the door. His bright green shirt is open to the waist; his heart-shaped pendant on a gilded chain swings among tufts of sparse, chestnut hair.

“How long is it since your man passed away?”

“Twelve years. Right. Twelve. My daughter was seven weeks old.”

“He must have been happy to have a daughter.”

“He was. ‘Now I’ve got someone to mourn me when I’m gone,’ he said.”

The young man growing a beard, from the factory in Militari, makes his way to the exit, the Sanyo radio-cassette player under his arm. His lean, muscular frame strains, squeezes through, shoves. His attaché case knocks against knees while between hips, buttocks, and bellies his left hand pulls two blue plastic bags, already frayed, with bread sticking out. There’s no point in your looking longingly at the vacated seat in the compartment—the man from the bathroom has made his move. He sits down with a sigh of relief and takes a bottle of plum brandy from his briefcase, corked with a corn cob.

“Didn’t I tell you? I work twelve-hour shifts. We have two secretaries, and gas heating in every room. I can sleep all I want, it’s a hotel! I pick a smaller room, turn on the gas, and it gets sooo warm! There are armchairs, a couch, the upholstery is two fingers thick! There are so few visitors I can sit wherever I want.”

He keeps his hand clenched in a fist to hide the stump of his ring finger. His close-cropped hair seems even whiter under the black hat. His beard is white, too, on his red cheeks.

“During the day I stay in the restaurant and have a beer or two. I could have taken the three o’clock train and left the keys with the receptionist. But she was out today, and an inspector came. I was just closing the windows to—”

“It was meant to happen! The night he came, my little girl rushed to him with her arms outstretched: ‘Daddy,’ she said, ‘You came back!’ That’s what she said: ‘Daddy, I waited so long for you!’ And she hugged him.”

“The girl who works at the grocery store now?”

“Well, as if he was the first one who wanted to adopt her! But that’s what she said the moment she saw him: ‘Daddy, I waited so long for you!’ And I thought, it’s meant to be. She said, ‘Mommy, I don’t want to go to the collective anymore, there’s too many flies!’”

“Well, I never! How old was she?”

“Four! But she’d seen a lot already. I had to tie her down until she was two. ‘Don’t tie me, Mommy!’ she’d say. ‘I promise I won’t move!’ But what could I do?”

Her friendly smile broadens.

“I’d tie her and go to work at the collective farm. Otherwise they’d take away my plot of land. My older kids were in school. Later—”

“What about the man who killed your husband? Does he give you anything?”

“Does he give you anything for the children?”

“A hundred and fifty lei. My oldest has turned eighteen, so it’s just my younger one. When my daughter got adopted, I went and told him. They’d signed the papers, and that was the end of her allowance. Some people said I shouldn’t have told him, and just taken the money for myself. But I didn’t want to commit a sin for a hundred and fifty lei. I didn’t want that man to curse me.”

“But did he go to jail?”

“Three years. It was fate! I’d forgiven him, but that was the law. They put him away for three years.”

“But he didn’t mean to kill your man with his truck.”

“And now he’s really paying for it!”

The compartment door has opened again.

“How’d you get that kind of job?”

“Well, I knew somebody. This guy, Valcu—”

“Vantu?”

“No, Valcu. Sometimes I get him bottles of wine.”

“You should get him some chicken. Or something else, to hold onto your job.”

“So I didn’t take his money. Why should I? He got out of jail—”

“Did he get married?”

“Yeah. He has kids.”

She nods, smiling with her crooked teeth. In a contented voice she adds, “Yes, everything’s settled. Just as it should be.”

“I used to work at Baneasa Airport. Ten years! I don’t know how I put up with it. They stole so much honey they’re gonna burn in hell!”

Through the window of the compartment you catch sight of the enormous garbage dump in Chiajna. Then the crumbling walls of the old monastery,<sup>6</sup> under an inexplicable cloud of smoke.

“There were barrels there this big! They’d break one of the slats with a chisel and drain the honey into a jar.”

“Did you report them?”

“Of course! ‘Fuck you and fuck your parents,’ I’d say, ‘when the police come I’ll be the one responsible.’ With all the police and security forces, they’d just walk out of the airport with a jar of honey.”

Outside the window the soothing expanse of summer fields—corn with yellow leaves curling like rolled cigarettes, its roots parched by drought; long rows of castor plants with white and pink blossoms.

“What about the man you were with?”

“The man you were with? Did he come with you?”

“No, he didn’t.”

She smiles.

“I sold my house there. We moved here, and he told me to put the new place in his name. I refused, so he left.”

“Good riddance! How could you put your children’s house in his name?”

A green field passes giddily before your eyes; a red brick train station, a woman raising the signal flag. Strips of plastic sway in the wind on top of the vineyard posts—scarecrows for the starlings.

“Why should you put your children’s house in his name?”

“Really! He wasn’t a good man if he asked that.”

“You can’t do that! Not for him! The law—”

“Yes, you can.”

She smiles again.

“You just want to know he cares. He didn’t even tell me when he got paid. I never knew how much—”

“What d’you want, it’s acacia honey! You’d like a taste. You could have as much as you wanted. From time to time you’d take a jar of it. But you were always on edge.”

The reddish light of the sunset hugs the brown field, speckled with white sheep and lined with furrows like an overripe melon. The white plays in your eyes until the stubbled field seems an unevenly trimmed graying beard, and the sheep-white hairs sprouting from the earth. Somebody elbows you, the window handle stabs you in the ribs, somebody else drags two enormous sacks stuffed with brown loaves over your feet. The three women move toward the door.

“You should see my older son, he’s been called up,” you hear her fake cheerful voice for the last time.

Women with scarves over sunburned faces and gray cotton stockings tied at the knee plant bell peppers in a field. A few of them stop to look at the train, shading their eyes with their hands. Suddenly the smell of earth and manure hits you. You hear a stork clattering its bill. A pond appears, the motionless mirror of the water made more beautiful by the bright green duckweed.

Big mosquitoes cut the air.



“Other people stole gas. Everybody who had a car did. One of them wore a shoulder bag—the perfect cover for a gas canister! He filled it with gas and left. Twice. Three times. Five. He just walked through the gate. Well, I said, fuck them, they steal way too much!”

Houses painted in vivid blue and green; strings of tobacco leaves drying on fences. The carriage stops right in front of the train-station café. Two short men in faded overalls and dusty caps come out carrying open beer bottles.

“In sixty-eight he stole a plane. A Red Cross plane! He filled the tank and off he went. He flew over Hungary to Austria.”

The hot smell of plum brandy hits you through the compartment door.

“They didn’t even offer you a seat!”

The woman standing near the compartment door has a strange look, and not because she’s cross-eyed. A tooth is missing next to her canine with the cheap metal crown. Maybe that’s why she lisps.

“They aren’t good people. People around here aren’t nice! They say it’s different in Transylvania. Or so I hear.”

She talks very fast. You can hardly understand what she says, showing the roof of her mouth with threads of saliva hanging down. She must be sick of having no one to talk to, and she’s turned to you.

“I don’t want to have anything to do with them, that’s why I didn’t sit with them. And if I sit I doze off and miss my stop at Vidra.<sup>7</sup> I don’t want to have anything to do with them, I said! If I was young, I’d take the train and goooooo! All the way to Satu Mare.<sup>8</sup> You have papers in your bag, documents, you have power, but where could I go with my broom? I’d go wherever the wind blows. You see, nobody knows what’s in my head. Another month or two and I’ll ask for a divorce. Then I’ll be free as a bird! I don’t want to have anything to do with him. He sent all his money to his mother to build her a house. A big house for his mother in Moldavia! Let him go. Nobody knows what’s in my head! There’s some things . . .”

Dust on the leaves of dwarf quince trees. On the marigolds at the edge of the ditch. Lumps of straw on the telephone poles—storks’ nests. Their bill clattering fades away as the train sets off.

“I don’t want to have anything to do with him. Or with anybody else. Men are all the same! What if he was from Satu Mare? D’you think he’d be any different? I couldn’t take him to a wedding or a christening. He’d get dead drunk and ruin my fun. All men do the same. The things I’ve seen! I don’t need a man anymore. If I was young I’d take the train and goooooo! All the way to Satu Mare. But there’s my mother, you see, she’s old. When I get a little money I give her some. There’s some things . . .”

*Translated by Georgiana Galateanu-Farnoaga and Robert Denis*

#### NOTES

1 First published in 1989, in a heavily edited form. This translation is based on the original version, provided by the author.

2 In the late 1980s there were food shortages in Romania due to the government’s efforts to pay back the country’s foreign debt through massive exports. Bread was rationed in smaller towns and villages, so commuters would buy bread in the bigger cities where they worked and take it home on the train.

3 Popular Romanian gypsy singer (1928–96).

4 Industrial district in Bucharest. Some factories manufactured products for export, especially to the West.

5 Large city in southwestern Romania boasting a soccer team in the premier league.

6 Chiajna monastery, a ruin today, was built in the late 1700s in the western part of Bucharest, and has survived a plague epidemic, wars, earthquakes, and neglect.

7 Large village (around 8,000) eleven kilometers south of Bucharest.

8 City in northwestern Romania, close to the border with Hungary and Ukraine.