On applying the drain for my first pneumothorax (a cut with a scalpel higher above my breast and the introduction of a rigid tube down into a crevasse of my lung or pleura), the doctor in the ER had caused little pain, I believe thanks to some anesthetic. Instead, here in the thoracic department the pain was atrocious, aggravated by the fact that I was under the CT scanner and forced to remain immobile. I am not quite certain, but I believe the scan was needed to guide the tube down my insides.

As I am convinced that no-one believes you unless you shout loud enough, I screamed like a damned soul in the hope that, if nothing else, the doctor would have taken more care rather than put up with my cries. It didn’t work. He pushed even harder, apparently irritated by this old lady who, in spite of her condition, still had the strength to make so much noise. Over the following days my lung continued to misbehave, refusing to expand and continuing to make the liquid bubble in the container, fortunately hidden by the edge of the bed. The situation would have been considered normal only when the liquid remained still.

The Head of the Thoracic Department, a good-humored and sensible man, appeared in the morning. With him came his retinue, usually his assistant and two young doctors (newly specialized, perhaps, or about to become so), followed by two rather aloof female doctors with well-to-do Milanese accents, designer ballerinas and cashmere sweaters under their white coats. Evidently the two ladies saw themselves as the reincarnation of Mama Cocha. They all scrutinized the revolting liquid closely after which the Chief offered a few words of encouragement.

Three or four days later I was informed I needed a second drain. This time I had a bullet in my gun, and I was well prepared to defend myself. Straight away I attacked the doctor who was presumably about to commit the offence (the very one who had introduced the first drain with no regard for my suffering). Threatening a fainting fit at the first sign of pain, blackmailing him with the heart attack and even resorting to the most humble supplication, I did obtain that the tube slid down almost without my noticing. Which makes me think that this novel Monsieur de Sade could have spared me the pain the first time, too.

However, in spite of the second drain, the liquid continued to bubble in the container, relentlessly. In the meantime, I was curled up in my bed between a young Romanian girl and a not so young lady from Brescia, with whom I chatted incessantly all day. They needed to talk and I to hear new voices.

Other days, another morning. His first round of visits over, the Head of the Thoracic Department returned to my room. After commenting on the obstinate defiance of my lung, he asked my consent to perform an injection of my own blood into the chest wall, implying it was the only possible alternative. I cannot remember if he said the method was only or mostly used in the United States, or if it had already been practiced sometimes in Italy. Of course, I accepted. First of all, because having explained at length what the procedure consisted in, the doctor, man of solid credibility, had convinced me it was painless. Secondly, because this same Head of the Thoracic Department had transplanted both lungs on a twenty-year-old who now...
exercised by going up and down the hospital stairs. What could a simple little procedure like mine be for such a great surgeon? Obviously, he did not do it himself, but the doctor who had inserted the two drainage tubes. Assisted by the two Mama Cochas. Out went my blood from my arm, with a seemingly enormous syringe, in went my blood through one of the drainage tubes to my pleura. Put that way, it sounds simple. Not at all. But it was painless, at least physically. To see my blood reaching my body not through my veins but pouring in like a glass of magic potion from the drainage witch’s cauldron, provoked contrasting emotions in me. Repulsion, alarm, exaltation. Blood is not a good sight, especially one’s own, and it always rouses fear in me. As for the exaltation, I confess I was proud of myself for having had the nerve to face this bizarre test alone. Who knows, if it worked I could have taken part in saving my own life. Admittedly, I hardly slept that night. I was worried, but in a sense resigned at the same time. I thought I detected a little concern in the doctors, too. It seemed they had explored all the possibilities and now it was a question of waiting. The next morning the miracle had happened. My lung had decided not to slight its own blood and had started to function once more. ‘Better than the blood of St. Gennaro’, I told the doctors! I think I managed a smile. And then, ‘Thank you’.

Translation by Ada D’Aniello
From “Faccia un bel respiro” 
by Laura Grimaldi - Collezione Libellule © 2012 Arnoldo Mondadori Editore SpA, Milano