

UNRAVELING THE BED



MIA LEONIN

POEMS



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SOUP AND BREAD

Angela wanders through the house. Because the halls are white and the furniture removed, she vanishes like people turn corners. Angela is bleeding. Ears ringing, bell noises, teeth dancing. Her bleeding is a stove of music. A stove broken on the inside that can make only fragmented sounds. It waits. It swells then stutters. It carries everything by. In Italy, with Juan Antonio, she learned to walk like the villagers. In Italy, to arrive means to circle the fountain once, twice, at least three times. To arrive means to come back again and again.

“No really, I want you to stay,” Juan Antonio urged. “Have you ever noticed how many ways these Americans use the word *mierda*?” he mumbled to himself, turning the knife to a troublesome cuticle on his right thumb. Angela didn’t move. *Dumbshit, full of shit, shit out of luck*. She stayed in the same position. *Bullshit, piece of shit, shitload*. So that she looked like she was leaning toward him, listening attentively. *Crock of shit, holy shit, talking shit, shit faced*.

“What shall we eat today?” her mother-in-law would announce every morning.

Angela is bleeding. Not between the legs exactly, but upwards. Her pelvis tilts like a prehistoric skull. Ancestors float through the crevices. She remembers a place of oranges and candied pineapple rings, apple cores flung to the sidewalk, black plums and banana halves. She remembers meat roasting: salty fire, smoky woods, footsteps, and the sensation of walking between magnificent, plump, orange-striped cats and the ordinary items purchased on the street: fresh chickens, throat lozenges, shiny red overcoats with pink trim.

Her mother-in-law would slap a palm-sized bread onto the breakfast table, “What shall we eat?” A proclamation. A question. An invitation.

Angela bends over her daughter, Gabriella. She moves through the house, winding clocks. Angela pours dry cereal into a cup and rolls the letter O to Gabriella. She reads over legal papers, counting on her left hand, pinkie first: what belongs to Juan Antonio, what's left. She claps the letter K across the table to Gabriella. The letter K has one leg up and one down. The letter K is kicking.

I am not a midwife. I'm not a helper or doer of good deeds. When needed, I rise to the occasion, but I'm not a Florence Nightingale or Saint Theresa. I mind my own business. I do my work. I tend to my loved ones.

"We have to run by Angela's house," my artist friend said. "She's not well, something female. Before the performance, we have to look in on Angela."

Some afternoons, the brown-haired one comes bringing bread the length of Angela's arm. He slides the white paper bag over her arm like a new dress. Not the blonde of morning or the black of midnight – his hair is brown because he comes in the afternoons. Not a boyfriend, exactly. Not a *novio*. "I don't *novio*," she laughs flinging her arms around him, ripping the paper, crushing the bread. *Un, dos, Un, dos, tres*, he always taps lightly, just when she's drifting into Gabriella's nap. She believes he's her talisman. She's convinced his brown shadow keeps danger away.

"Risotto. Today we shall have risotto. Yes, it's really very simple," her mother-in-law would confide, "Some milk. Some rice. The key is the rice. It must be of the highest quality."

Juan Antonio's hand clutched the knife. The knife pressed her neck. The neck imagined the knife was Persian turquoise, set in a choker of heavy silver.

"What shall we have for dinner?" Her mother-in-law would exclaim wide eyed, her elbows leaning into the breakfast wood, hands fluttering about the table.

Gabriella is resting on the bed, her head pressed to her mother's stomach. Below her ear, a pond stirs, a dark circle of blood widens beneath Gabriella's ear.

"Take your blue. Take your yellow and white," Angela had said,

"Pour the liquids into your shoe. Press them between the sleeves of your shirts. Juan Antonio, take your jealousy when you go."

I don't know why I volunteered to make soup. Angela's kitchen almost prohibits it; the missing faucet head is substituted with a baby's sock and electrical tape. The loosely hinged cabinets are crammed with fine china and spices, but there is no bread. No milk or fruit. Angela doesn't ask for anything. She can't get up from the couch. Her porcelain face is pallid – her eyes and hair the brown of Turkish figs. "Something female," my artist friend said. I remember one of his paintings – an oval-shaped ring floating above the pelvic bone. Diagonal black lines jutting out around the ring – the kind of lines that represent monetary value in cartoons. It had the effect of a minimalist crown in the center of the pelvic area – sexual, biological, regal. No one taught me to make this soup.

In the morning, Angela drinks from the water glass filled with sleep. She drinks half and gives the other half to Gabriella. In her sleep, she mixes plastic powders in shell-shaped bowls. She wields orange sticks and pushes back hundreds of cuticles from frowning thumbs, bleeding pinkies, and moping ring fingers. Tuesday, she'll return to work after four years. She'll take the hands of strangers into her own, as many as possible.

In the afternoon light, Angela is symmetrical. Each hand is a goblet lifted. Under the thumbs of the brown-haired one, her insides are as green and transparent as plant leaves. Her ovaries curve and join like the spines of plants. It's been so long since she has been kissed – his mouth seconds from the wall of blood.

Gabriella's narrow body is the needle of a compass. It floats, bobs in place, then turns completely – to Mama, to Pinocchio on TV, to the dark circle widening.

My artist friend said Angela was Argentine and going through a divorce from her husband, also Argentine, of Italian parents. I thought there would at least be tomatoes in the house. Some good roma tomatoes on hand. Only one small, yellow onion. She props herself up on her elbow and calls to me, "I'm sorry I can't offer you coffee or cakes." She went to the hospital where they performed a basic procedure to stop the bleeding. She won't be able to have any more children. An opaque smile spreads across her face. Spotted lime, pastry flour, party favors from Independence Day and a fistful of brown rice. Cavernous, some would call the white kitchen. Claw, I would say. The breakfast area juts into the living room as if it's reaching for something.

Everything must be done in threes. The beans immersed three times. Three cloves of garlic, three turns of the pepper grinder. My mother used to joke, "Unpaid bills, men gone crazy, a run in your stocking on the way to church. When everything goes wrong, make soup." She claimed that it's one of the few things in life that can't turn out wrong.

Even when he lost his temper, Juan Antonio's hands were always cool and full of light. That was his gift: beautiful hands. Even when his body grew sluggish and the spaces between the buttons on his

shirt began to open and yawn – his hands, his long, intelligent fingers gathered heavy shanks of her hair and wove them into a dark, braided whorl. Angela's hands would lose circulation, so she taught him to braid.

This soup was not meant to be. *Garbanzo beans – boiled, drained, and salted*. This soup doesn't exist. Not from inside the spoon's convex yearning. *Caraway seeds*. Not behind the ear of an old Romanian woman selling charms. *Ground cinnamon*. Not under the cracked sole of the furnace worker's boot. Not in the round arms of a market woman. This soup does not exist. *Sage. Crushed mint*. Not in the golden-edged pages of a storybook. Not on the wood stove of a pilgrim. Not between the cerulean tiles of a rich woman's kitchen.

Any knife is sharp. Held at the proper angle, any knife can cut deeply. Angela learned this from her father. He was a city boy, but his family raised chickens in the backyard. There were always chickens and everyone knew how to slaughter. The line of the blade must meet the neck at the sharpest angle for the knife to work best. Angela has always known this, so she held still under the hand of Juan Antonio and his butter knife.

I've never prayed into a soup, but my arm circles in threes. *Pinch of paprika*. Circle in threes. *Handful of onion*. Three times. *Oregano. Bay leaf. Parsley flakes*.

In the freezer, I found some dried basil pressed flat between sheets of aluminum foil. From the bottom of a basket, I unearthed a braid of garlic – a few cloves still worth using. With a large tin can of Sicilian olive oil in my hand, Angela calls me over, "Don't sauté over a high flame. The oil becomes bitter," she warns in long conciliatory syllables, "I went to a farm where they make the olive oil on huge wooden presses. Extra virgin means it's been pressed the most times."

THE FISHERMAN'S WIFE

Blue sedan parked diagonally, like someone hurrying to the scene of a crime. Right tail light blinking into the street. It's not that she was afraid. The knife was a moment, a spilling over from mind to hand. Juan Antonio didn't apologize. This is how Angela knew it wouldn't happen again.

This soup does not exist. This recipe has not been written: not in the folds of a medicine woman's skirt. *One can stewed tomatoes.* Not in the third row of the potato field. *Pinch of rosemary.* Not in the spine of the hoe. Not in the stuck wheel of the combine. *Dash of tamari.* Not in the articulate fingers of the sign-language minister. *Sweet potato.* Not in the bending of a waist. The leather reins of the queen's carriage. Not in the swinging of the midwife's locket. *Minceed celery. Cubed zucchini.* Not in the kneeling. *Crushed red pepper. Dash of vodka.* Not in the ear of the trombone, the glistening silt of the strip mine. *Turmeric. Ground pepper. Salt.*

As quickly as he'd appeared at her door, Juan Antonio turned on his heel and left. He decided to let a divorce be a divorce and not a scene for the TV news. He left and Angela who'd been feeling progressively weak, finally called her doctor and lay down.

"They did some procedure and now she needs to rest," our mutual friend said.

Why can't she eat from the sofa? Here, the spoon, the bowl of soup. Can't it be placed next to her just as easily as on the table? Turn off the war. Turn off the oven. We're not making bread tonight. I suspect the oven doesn't work properly, anyway. Open that folding chair and we'll put the soup beside her.

Bread: our curse and benediction, the ever present sail fluttering between feast and famine.

Over my husband's woolen shoulder, I watch the grainy masthead crumble into a stew of lobster and sea bass.

I hold the thin crust like an intimate note, a message I carry for someone else.

They say fishing teaches men patience, but it's the village that must learn to wait.

They say *He* will multiply fishes and divide the loaves into a living bread.

I hold mine like the flag of a nation now many years erased.

The vespers smolder and we rub crumbs between our fingers, waiting to sop up what remains:

capers and garlic, Galilee sloshing in the bottom of an iron pot.

Farther out, Peter and Paul sleep, joined by the same ear, the Fisherman's curved hook lowering.