

For My Ukrainian Grandmother, If I Had One

Lindsay Labanca

My hands, her strong hands
grey-tinged and parched,
once rosy with flower-wreathed dances
and the water, the clear river.

Without a sieve on hand,
the spaces of my fingers
catch the grains admirably -
or tolerably, as she would have said
with a sniff and a secret smile.

*Grain is sacred, she spoke reverently.
See how it clings in wet bunches
like it sticks to the bones,
nourishing on a frost-morning.*

It washes in my hands,
sand-brown clumps
rivuleting cloudy river mud,
a few stray pellets
plugging the gaps between skin -
not one must be lost,
I remember, though too much already gone,
martyred in the murk.

What was that song
echoing through the kitchen
that her voice lilted
before I could understand the words?
Later, I thought it was
a hearth hymn, or the contented sigh
of cold cabbage shivering in a hot bath -
it was clear to see, not like this troublesome
but still treasured, Baba! -
rice, so difficult, but I doubt the old wives
measured handfuls of parboiled blandness,
not enough spice anywhere for that.

I know the origin -
The bag shows: product of India.

Where have I come from? These memories -
did she craft this once? do I?
the tree branches strain to heaven,
and wars were fought for less of a tie.
Could I then teach you one day?

I'm flattered and flightily tickled,
and is that my laughter
echoed in the cricking, draining grain?
The Pyrex dish isn't the tradition,
but neither is the family-sized can
of factory-grown tomato sauce
and airtight packaged "fresh" dill,
red and green of embroideries,
flowers, envy and bloodshed.

I am your daughter,
taught on a stove and a dictionary,
blushing from misunderstood ways
and learning from afar the meaning
of placid beyond reach of words,
steaming from a nest of native *nachinka*
and reflecting from a plastic sunflower
plucked under a night-lamp, wired sky.

Irreflective pool of globby butter,
knobs collapsing to lobulated puddles,
the droplets within droplets,
and still more waiting to show
that particular hue of pale gold-brown,
amber-ale, sunset-buckwheat gold;
this icy white castle, walls
unyielding, into dripping-soft
caramelized confection,
joyous in diving depths
of warm churned-milk womb.
Now, *na troikh*, the happy peasant, we three
sharing a fortune of gold rings,
self-contained honey-sweet liquor,

hot ichor of ancient harvest-gods
mixed into precious seasonings,
delighting to melt and meld within
while I watch, as they settle
into the companionable falling embrace
of heavy, heady mead
that flows into the pot's open mouth,
as I leave them to their cheery narrative;
the water turns and flips in playful rebuke
while I stare agape at the onion.

Delicate celery-sage
blooming into verdant vibrancy
before my silently eager sight,
chattering and chasing the water bubbles
fleshly green lips parted
beyond jealousy or fertility -
and what do you hide,
impliable core,
taut veins and rigid ribs
turgid with timidity?
I sink into thoughts
of your secret delights
and can only smile indulgence
of your modest mask -
my coaxing caress,
oh forgive, in worship
of flower layers, this unintended
careful violation,
gently easing off
the warm, damp-thinned frills
that spread into
twin angel wings
at a barely-touch,
steady hand easing
stroking, filling,
tunnel overflowing, teasing
back to perfect pulsing encircling
in steamed heat and pressing guiding

encompassed, embraced
completed, and hidden no longer,
you brilliantly exclaiming green
of ripening field, implacable emerald fire.

Little pigeon, little pigeon,
pretty pride of quiet kitchen,
why rest you so pale and still!

*Of soft red fruit I ate my fill,
with sweet smetana sopped the rest;
here quiet lies my sated breast.*

Oh little pigeon, greedy bird,
it's time to rise; have you not heard?
This lazy-feather cannot stay!

*Yet I care not, so come what may,
now, bring me juice of ripened vine;
no bird fears death with pots of wine!*

Oh little pigeon, tender dove,
the master here would dearly love
the taste of steaming pigeon flesh!
And there you are, delightful, fresh;
Oh, come now, stir that sleepy breast,
dawn's wiser than your evening's rest!

*Speak not to me of tsars and kings,
nor lecture me on learned things.
I'll not leave warmth and goodly fare
to see what terrors wait out there!
No, here I'll stay, green blankets wrapped,
and don't disturb me 'til I've napped!*

Oh, wake a little - here's the knife
to quickly end your tender life.
Oh pigeon, hunger cannot wait...
So be it, bird, and here's your fate -

but see! Where fly you, fickle pigeon?
He's fled this warm and cozy kitchen!

*Poor me with neither tail nor wings
must fly from what the carver brings -
woe, such a gift to give a friend!*

And here this sad account must end
with neither steaming wings nor tail...
some vodka now, to chase the tale!

The procedure of drawn-out perfection
is stunningly simple to see.

Formidable fire is first found
in lightning sparks, and awed sighs
hail the holy touch of heaven.
Rustic, ribbed, green-frost tissue
consolidates in coarse gripping deep,
near steppes where miniscule fibrous tips
scatter fortified seed to strident wind.

Desperate hands scramble soil;
idealistic hands begin interminable toil.

Unconforming waters of stream and sky
transforming brittle bitter grains
to sweating, swelling savour,
crystalline roots releasing powerful syrup
into pulverized, pungent plants.
Pristine sap of generated infancy
gathered in tugging grips to clump and rot,
and force in relentless turmoil to yield:
all gather to fill the hollow iron pot,
fired by smoking hands away from the field.

Hesitant hands pull flowers free
and plunge them to tumultuous delicacy.

Bleeding fruit flows volcanic acid-river,
lava and open-range flame steaming
harnessed storm in indoor calm;
fingers a-flurry over twisting shells,
a thousand more unseen turning and burning,
raging, touching and loving over a thousand days,
and the ending shock, a humble warmth.

Universal hands with tender touch and scar
speak silently for how simple traditions are.