

Celestial Lullaby: A Dramatic Poem

by Evelyn Hooven (October 2017)



By *The Deathbed*, Edvard Munch, 1896

Special thanks to Richard Selzer M.D. (1928-2016) for clinical detail in his medical narrative "Imelda" from Leon Kass's *Being Human: Readings from the President's Council on Bioethics*, 2003.

(Magda and her adolescent daughter Antonia live in a small village in a part of Latin America considered remote.)

I

MAGDA

They've come, the doctors who travel,

Who are generous to little towns;

Their knives will be kind.

ANTONIA

I've misplaced my scarf, my hat is crumpled—

MAGDA

They'll take away only strangeness,

I've heard they leave delicate stitches

That pale with time—

Intricate stitches

Like inscriptions on plants.

ANTONIA

Isn't tomorrow soon enough?

MAGDA

We'll walk the long walk

To their chambers—grateful,

Not minding the heat—

It's today, Antonia.

We move past streets we know

To the part that once was a field,

Past houses deep in slumber—

ANTONIA

Past ruins. The church gets

Further away and the café is closed—

Couldn't we stop at a friend's door

For tea or mineral water?

MAGDA

Courage, I'll lead you

Turn after turn

Finding the way alone.

ANTONIA

Cobblestones disappear

And the road's nothing but dust . . .

Dust, not a trace of wind . . .

MAGDA

I see the great door

And now here's a fan

And a cup of water,

The bench has space—

ANTONIA

For both of us together.

(*Pause*)

MAGDA

Perhaps, one day, you'll marry Juan

Of the grand colmado . . .

ANTONIA

Perhaps there'll be no time for us today—

A long wait, this . . .

MAGDA

Or it might be Vicentio,

He of the moustache,

The goats and gardens . . .

ANTONIA

Mother—my joy is to stay with you—

We'll spin and weave

Plant peppers, olives

And almond trees,

I'll bring cool water

For the goat to savor;

Though my face is in shadow

Yet my back is strong,

When you are older

I alone will carry wood;

Mother, what if I can't—

MAGDA

Take the cloth from your face—now, for me—

Tell him your name—that's right

Once and softly.

These are healers before you.

How quickly that one leads you

And shuts the door.

A man so sure of hand will do well . . .

(Pause)

Now I dream you as God means,

I dream your wound away—

It may not be Juan

Or Vicentio either

But a prince . . .

What is this cry

To the sound of running

A thicket of voices

At doors and in corners

The sting of fear?

“More ice, urgent

Anaesthesia, fever, allergic–

We have lost her!”

No precedent, no warning.

Dozens of cases

Without incident–

No precedent here.

This one did not seem exceptional–

The difference was where?

They take off their coats,

I think I see tears through my own–

You are so small on that great table,

All I have–taken.

The speed astonishes.

I go mute as stone

As thoughts gather within:

Shouldn't you know the difference

Between one who would get fever

And one who will not?

Who but you should know

What is cure or remedy
Or what will destroy?
Who made the stitches,
Was it you or was it death?
She was fourteen—
And you have need of pardon—
Antonia walked far
To your chambers,
How will she return?

II

MAGDA

Someone who left yesterday for a visit
Returns to the village today:
Good morning, Magda, how is Antonia?
You know the priest's library
Behind the chapel?

She's there. Her home's a coffin,
But her wound is gone.

(Pause)

Now I rend my garment thus,
And sit in black, respected—
Magda the dolorous, Magda bereft—
Silence in her walls
And one cup of milk at table.
Show her clothes, Señora,
Embroideries, keepsakes, veil,
Such a good mother, figure
Of dolor, encircled by loss—
Lost now, the dream
Of a newer chance.
I am marked by time
And what cannot happen.
The life of market
And dusting and church
Wearies me
But you never weary me:
Kingdom of possibility
Now a basket of stones

A wreath of shells with jagged edges. . . .

III

(Magda's house that evening—as in a dream)

ANTONIA

Oh, Mother, do not bury with me

Confirmation veil or wedding dress;

I'll need neither olive nor figs

Nor bread nor mineral water,

Neither gifts that nourish

Nor tokens of honor—

This is a journey:

One who was motionless and prone

Becomes an explorer—

Timid at first, then eager,

Lost halfway through

The astounding expedition

Then finding her way—

There you sit—

MAGDA

(Wonder and amazement abate as she resumes the accustomed intimacy.)

Blankets and earthenware,

Shirred muslin,

This wood, forced to brightness

By repetition of gesture,

Sheen of, film of—

Is it shroud or veil?

ANTONIA

Death's not a jilting, Mother,

Though I won't be marrying a man

Right as rain

Reliable as stone—

Death is a journey through waters,

Death is a journey alone.

Build if you will

A careful tomb

The only home maintained with roses

And chrysanthemums—

MAGDA

Tell me, Antonia, I must know this,

The parting from your wound—

Were mother and healer

Together in failure?

If the priest says

“God called her. . . .”

Shall I say I am the mother

Who led her where she could not go

And the kind doctor

Was without remedy?

ANTONIA

I have no compass like a sailor's

Nor an astronomer's glass—

I have crossed the border.

Home tools are no use—

No one's to blame.

MAGDA

Then I mustn't brood

With the mourner's envy

That says what right have *you* to live

When my own love's dead?

ANTONIA

Nor for my sake shun

Feast days, christenings, parades—

MAGDA

Nor say with tight-mouthed piety,

She is with God,

Was too pure

For this stark location.

So long to learn what love is—

Death means so much work

And the work is harsh.

ANTONIA

This is a parting,

From cords of bondage—

From window and prison both. . . .

Build if you will

A careful tomb

The only home

Maintained with roses

To mitigate the taste

Of a near-consuming dust. . .

But whether you embalm or scatter

Is all the same to me. . . .

MAGDA

It's not for you

To help me recover from the loss of you.

This is bitter,

What I begin to know—
You could not be parted
From your wound
And you alone knew.

(Pause)

There'll be a funeral
And a true wake—
No mourner's envy.
You could not be parted
From your wound
And you alone knew.
Your life was your own.
That mystery is sacred,
Treasure and anguish
Together.

ANTONIA

The one dream of the dead
The end of all dreaming
Is to awaken new and full of blessing
Entirely elsewhere.

NOTE: Forty-eight lines from this piece appeared as “Antonia’s Song” in *New English Review*, June 2016.

Evelyn Hooven graduated from Mount Holyoke College and received her M.A. from Yale University, where she also studied at The Yale School of Drama. A member of the Dramatists’ Guild, she has had presentations of her verse dramas at several theatrical venues, including *The Maxwell Anderson Playwrights Series* in Greenwich, CT (after a state-wide competition) and *The Poet’s Theatre* in Cambridge, MA (result of a national competition). Her poems and translations from the French have appeared in *ART TIMES*, *Chelsea*, *The Literary Review*, *THE SHOp: A Magazine of Poetry* (in Ireland), *The Tribeca Poetry Review*, *Vallum* (in Montreal), and other journals, and her literary criticism in Oxford University’s *Essays in Criticism*.

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