

GOING SOMEWHERE? WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THE SONG ENDS?

AMY MORENO

OPEN BOOK UNBOUND WRITING

The baked beans bubble up the inside of the pot – one jumps out on a suicide mission, letting out a hiss and a stink as it burns in the flame.

Angel sniffs, the radio news tells her there's been a traffic accident on London Road. That means her Mum will be late home again to her and the others. The buses always get backed up, one clunking and coughing behind the next, like the wooden beads on a thread that the youngest one still plays with when she thinks no one is looking.

Angel gives four hungry chicks, in their seventh storey nest, beans on potato waffles: ovals on squares on circles on the table. They spill their milk, and she soaks it up with a cloth stained with coffee clouds. Angel eats standing at the kitchen counter. The fifth seat has been broken since the last time her dad came to visit, bringing his crappy car and stale breath, and pockets full of crumpled old promises.

Mum arrives home and the house at once feels full to the brim, with her grocery bags bumping off the wall, jingling keys, and calls for help spilling out.

The little ones carry the bags through, like worker ants, so they can side-eye what's inside, looking for the tell-tale shine of sweetie packets. They know better than to take anything out without permission, though. They're used to waiting.

Mum huffs into the kitchen and heaves herself on to a chair. She flips off her work shoes with her big toes, and cradles her left foot in her lap.

“I tell you, Angel, that job gets more tiring every day. And I'd swear the road home gets longer.”

Angel imagines the road unravelling, like a coiled-up leather belt, her mum running along its edge, fraying shopping bag bouncing off her hip, leaving drumbeat bruises. She's always a step behind, trying to keep up.

As Mum goes over and over the issues of the day, she presses them flat and rubs them between her palms. Angel feels the room grow smaller and darker. She's a mouse in a shoebox, like the one Peter from upstairs trapped last year. He hand fed it tiny pieces of bacon fat and broken biscuits every day until it bit him, then he flung it out of the window.

Angel should be studying for her exams, but Mum keeps talking, chattering on like a broken toy. They will be the last exams for her – she'll sit, tick the boxes and wipe up some words, until she can leave. It's easier to go through with these things than the hassle of refusing. Angel can feel herself being shoved along the discount supermarket conveyor belt towards the till, along with the dented tins and nearly-off bread; that's what comes next. For Angel, the exams are not a promised route, lit brightly by streetlamps, but more an ending that shrugs its pavements and dries up.

“She's depending on me to get a job, bring home mashed-up worms for the chicks,” Angel thinks. That heavy, plodding life she has already shouldered for so long, crushes in on all sides and closes every door. The living room door is loose on its hinges, and she notices there is a slice of light, at the side. It reaches its fingers out through the space, they stretch across the floor, and point to the window -

“But maybe I'll go far – further than I can see from up here. I'll go somewhere fast; I won't take the old, coughing bus”, Angel tips up her chin.

And rubs her upper arm, in the same place where Ally has his twisted bottle tattoo. His arms are strong, his motorbike is fast, and when they drive together, they go without planning a route; no destination – it lets in air between her shoulder blades. When they're gliding like steel, she's nothing to anyone – she's not a daughter, a big sister, a carer of others, a falling mouse. She just leaves a space where she should be. When she rides, she's between

everything, like cool air in the moonlight. Ally cares for his bike, he's named her. He's protective; he holds Angel a little too tight, like a medal he doesn't quite deserve. Angel wraps that up as a gift to herself, as it were a good sign. Ally's words are few, but Angel tries to cup them in her hands, she closes her eyes to the slippery bits that fall between her fingers and stain her skin.

Mum tells Angel everything; presents it to her, all displayed under a magnifying glass; chicken bones to pick at and examine. Mum is proud of this openness; she stacks boasts on the shelves, telling colleagues how Angel tells her everything too. She doesn't know about Ally. Ally with his long hair and solid forearms and fast motorbike and edging-in demands. He gave Angel a helmet for her birthday – it's black and silver with a shaded visor. She would never tell anyone, but wearing it, she feels like a film star, it does more than any fancy gown could; she stands taller, her muscles contract. She keeps the helmet in the bottom of her wardrobe, behind damp folders of schoolwork.

Mum's listening to her melancholic CDs in the living room again. She won't move to digital, stuck where she is. Angel can't concentrate in the kitchen – the sentences keep sliding off the page on to the floor and slinking out the doorway. Her bedroom won't be any better – she can hear two of the little ones jumping from one bunk to the other. Someone should tell them to stop; they'll break the slats again. There's no point in trying, really. The tannoy calls her to the check-out again and a panic prickles across her chest.

But then finally, after that endless evening of the same songs and complaints and tidying on a loop, it'll be different in the flat. It always changes when the rest of them have gone to bed. Everything is tucked in: the space cools down, the dust stops demanding; her breath suspended. Her mum's soft body slouches, becoming part of the sofa. And then Angel can creep out of the flat again, leave this nest in the clouds, full of worms and wasted worries. She doesn't want to die this way. Ally has a fast bike; he'll get her out of here. It's her turn to go somewhere.

Amy B. Moreno writes poetry and fiction for adults and children. She writes in English, Scots, and Spanish, including multilingual pieces. She has recently been published by Mslexia, The Common Breath, The London Reader, and Dreich magazine. New picture book, A Billion Balloons of Questions, coming in Spring 2022. Connect with her on Twitter: @Amy_B_Moreno