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The
Perfect
Day

POEMS BY ANDREA POTOS

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THE PERFECT DAY

ANDREA POTOS

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PARALLEL PRESS

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*In loving memory of my grandparents
Aristea Kosmopoulos (1908–1997), and
George Kosmopoulos (1892–1997).*

Wonder Bread, Fifth Grade

We couldn't wait to get out of the factory,
for the field trip to end –
climbing the steep bus steps with our prizes
clutched like babies to our chests, each of us awarded
our very own loaf for being good –
white bread just fresh
from the vast ovens.

We slid onto our vinyl seats while the chaperone
took roll call; absently we mumbled “here”
as we tore off the twist ties, dug our hands
into the moist centers, steam still rising
from their pores, bread as soft
as our grandmother's apron, as warm
as her morning kitchen.

After relishing five or six slices, we left the rest for art –
each slice – even the crusts –
scrunched and squeezed in our palms
like miniature globes
of white clay, as if we could go backwards
to the bread's beginning,
molding the dough, like the world,
to our desires.

The Perfect Day

All my fears have surrendered for now.
There's a pond of smooth water outside my window;
clouds parade across its surface
like happy animals.
The ground is nearly ready to spill its green.
Rain has scrubbed and rinsed the air of its soot;
I can see my child coming home
from miles down the road, just in time
for the bread
emerging from my oven –
arcs of amber,
mounds where the spirits live.

Papouli's Hands

(Papouli is the Greek word for "grandfather")

His house in Roumeli is rubble now.
My aunt returned with stones –
I keep one, small monument
on my nightstand – streams of white quartz
pressed, glittering in grey rock.

In the nursing home – the vinyl chair,
metal-framed bed piled thick with blankets –
I go to him.
He is tapping his fingertips together –
a silent rhythm
I have watched all my life.

At 102, he says there are *so many things*
not to think about.
I imagine breadlines, his savings
lost, his son dead at three years old,
all that was never said.

I clasp his hands; they are always cool,
as if heat must rise from too
great a distance. His skin is smooth
as candlewax, thin as parchment
or the membranes of wings.
I trace their raised lacery of deep
purple lines, like the veins of an ancient country
I want to know.

Heaven

for Yaya ("grandmother" in Greek)

At 86, tears wet your eyes as you say
you *never expected to live this long*,
that your baby brother, your baby son
still wait for you there.
Then you tell me what you always
remember – a girl of seven
in Kalamata, mornings you awoke
to the sound of rinsed linen flapping on the line.
Your window opened
wide to the vast white light, air of orange
and lemon blossom, opalescence of sky
and sea, blue tourmaline water in the distance.
Fig trees circled
the whitewashed walls of your house.
I like to think of you here –
before you knew grief – the sister
who will go with her brothers to gather
mulberry leaves for the worms her mother keeps
in the pantry cupboards, so in the dark sleep
of their cocoons, they may spin
a miracle of silk.

The Well

The surface is marred
with a scatter of last autumn's
forgotten leaves,
the limp remains of insects,
their drowned iridescence.

You must bend yourself slowly
to see over the edge,
let the long rope unravel
from the tight spool of your heart.
Like seams gently torn open,
let your hands part the dark water.

Inspiration

We cannot wait for her – she flits
from stalk to stalk
and may not stop for us.

We must begin,
trudge the trail
with our bottles of cool water,
our boots with the deep tread.
We'll notice ancient
fallen logs – the mossy, fertile kingdoms
blooming beneath them,
the sprawling mushrooms,
fat red berries that call out
to be picked,
and pine needles scorched auburn
under our feet.
We'll feel the sweat form
in the hollow between our breasts,
we'll unzip our jackets
to the warming air.
It is then we'll hear
a rustling behind us
as if through mist –
like a mother or a lover who can't bear
not to be needed,
she comes.

Where Grief Thrives

Each morning a fresh ache bursts
into bud,
inside the walled garden where grief thrives.

I am searching for a way in –
through the tangle of brush that masks
the opening,
for some chink in the old brick,
or the rust-pocked key
that belonged to my grandmother.

I want to touch the bowed
blooms that must live there.
I want to cup my hands under
the fountain's water – a stream so steady
in its fall, it can carve out
a hollow in stone.

While Pregnant

As if my belly were a divining rod,
I am drawn to find water.
Water leaks up through my words.

I want to lie beside lakes,
follow rivers to their source.
I want to wait on the ocean shore
while the tide reels up to encircle me
before tracing back
to its unfathomable beginning.

I want to submerge myself in poems
and the quiet of small waves lapping.

 One week before I knew,
I dreamed a creature –
a furred form
lowering deep in silver water
like an amniotic wash.

Unborn Light

“At 24 weeks, the fetus can perceive light through the abdominal wall.”

I feel you furled there – midrealm
between air, water and light;
your eyes are swimming open now.

I stand in the bloodpale flush of dawn
and wonder what you see:
 a delicate wash of ivory,
or is it amber, like the nightlight that soothes
my niece to sleep each night – that same gold
as the deep afternoon sun of childhood,
when I stood on tiptoe in grandmother’s bedroom
to lace my finger through her shadepulls,
drawing all the blinds down
until the outside world dissolved,
and I was buoyed in the molten light
that poured through the air,
through me.

Before

Every day, in the refurbished cafe,
I am stopped by the gold-edged photo
of the city before my birth –
the now-vanished tracks
engraved deep in that ground,
elm trees lining both sides of the road,
branches like sunlit swords tipped to honor
those passing under.

The trolley will round the corner
to carry my grandmother in her brown silk
Saturday hat, netting swooped like tiny birds
across her face. She is younger than I am,
a bride from the old country,
she holds my six-year-old mother's hand.
My mother's almond eyes are sheened with delight –
more and more English rises slowly through her Greek.

They will ride the nine miles downtown,
to the Riverside Theatre –
Katharine Hepburn in *Little Women*
on the bright marquee –
it will be my favorite story fifty or more
years from here, but for now, no one
has even dreamed of me. The picture
is that complete.

Autumn Baby Shower

Knowing the baby will come after
all the leaves have fallen – the grandmothers,
mothers, aunts and cousins gather
for cranberry punch with floating sherbet islands,
ham and eggplant pies, swirls of marshmallow
and late raspberries wrapped in fresh whipped cream.
After the coffee, the sheet cake planted with equal
roses of pink and blue,
they move to the living room for gifts, their voices
raining down as the beautiful wrappings are torn
and the contents of each box are revealed.

They are coaxing the child into the world –
soft weaves of blankets edged
with satin in every rainbow hue,
fleecy sleepers showing Pooh Bear reaching
his paws into pots brimming with amber honey,
white knit sweaters trimmed with mother-of-pearl buttons
crocheted by a grandmother's
hands – all of it, beckoning: come child,
we will clothe you, keep you,
you will never be left
naked or alone.

Child

We first spotted her
diving across the widening
pool of my belly,
a wake of soft ripples on my skin.
We first heard
the liquid rhythm of her tiny heart,
and we swooned, stumbled
from the doctor's office
awash in awe as if, after all our searching,
combing the ragged beaches of our lives,
we found the one shell,
cupped it to our ears and heard
the will of the ocean.

Grandmother, In the Dream

I enter the house of my childhood,
your old living room where now
you wait for death.
Dust motes are falling
through the lit air, the burgundy
paisleys of your carpet are swirling
like minor galaxies below us.
I watch you furling inward,
peace scrolling on your body like symbols
in an ancient text, I reach
to follow but you grow
smaller and smaller faster and faster
as if whirling back to the mouth of the womb
where I cannot possibly fit, where
I will lose you among billions of others.

My Daughter Learns That Words Have Meanings

In the beginning she was tied
to her origins, furred in
her watery home, amorphous
shapes waving past her, blur
and churn of bubbles
dissolving in their wake.
She barely glimpsed
the spill of light far above.

From the shore, I say: *water, sand,*
stone, sky,
as slowly she rises – pushing beyond
that shifting glittering crease
dividing worlds.
She hears the shouts of swimmers,
feels the bond of air on skin.
She shrieks and points to the sun's bright blade.

In the Heart

The driftless area
is where I want to reside –
land the glaciers did not
grind down, flatten
with the force of deep ice,
leaving only broken
rocks in their wake.
There is the sweeping
dance of valley and hill,
the greatest beauty where loss
has been left to the elements,
sculpting its own natural shape.

Childbirth Remembered

As if visiting the beloved dead,
I go to my journal to remember –
the waters bursting,
the earth splitting open, my breath
a hollow moan.

So many months have come since then –
rent ground has been sealed,
the wind has thrown seeds aloft.
My daughter calls *muh ma*, and roses climb
over the stone that marks my pain.

Making the Dough

In memory of Yaya

Your stainless steel bowl shines
with its emptiness.
I wear the checked pinafore apron
you passed on, trim of rick-rack,
appliques of plump apples and leaves.
I stand in my kitchen alone,
late April light reaching through the one window
as I crack the eggs, cradle each
ragged half-shell to separate
yolk from white, as you taught.
I beat in the butter, sugar,
a toss of baking powder, generous douse
of anise – I want its strong presence.
Then, cupful by heaping cupful
I add the flour. Dust flies from the bowl
like white ash or pollen.
I begin mixing, but my spatula cannot
penetrate the inner reaches of the bowl,
as it must. Then I hear you – you have finally come
to tell me forget the utensils,
use your hands; don't be timid –
plunge them in the folds,
in the core of the moist and ready dough.
Touch the shapes your life will make.

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ANDREA POTOS lives in Madison, Wisconsin with her husband and two-year-old daughter. Her poems have appeared in many journals and anthologies including: *At Our Core: Women Writing About Power* (Papier-Mache Press), *Claiming the Spirit Within* (Beacon Press), and *I Feel a Little Jumpy Around You* (Simon & Schuster). *The Perfect Day* is her first collection.

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