

The perfect day. 1998

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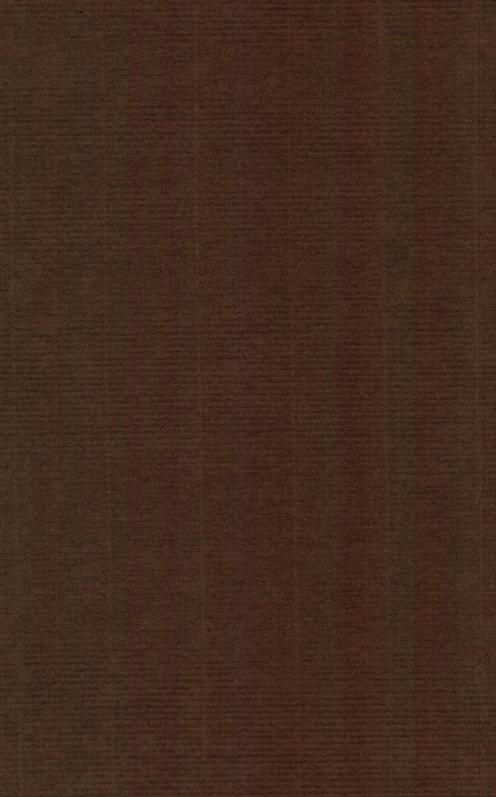
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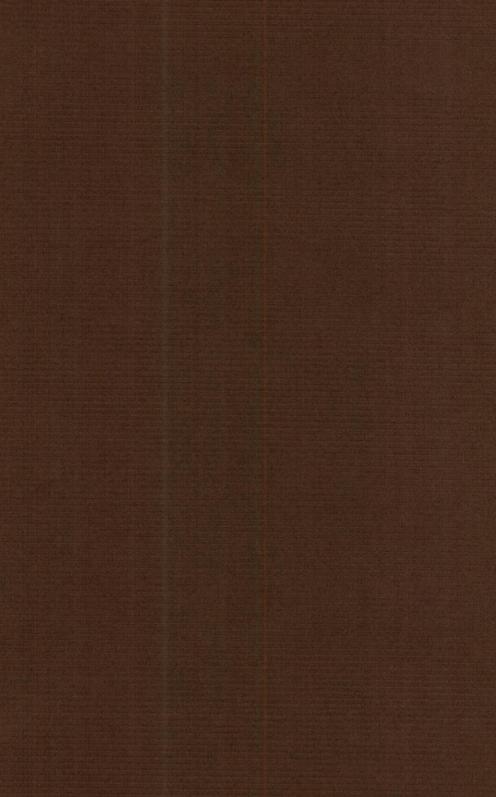
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Perfect Day





THE PERFECT DAY

The Perfect Day

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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 furled 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, furled 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.

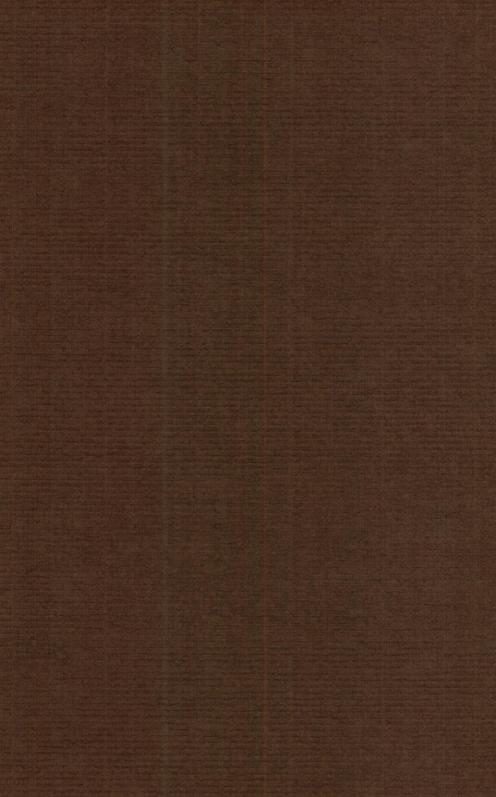
Making the Dough

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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