MATA KASTRISIOU

“Milk out of Snow”

(fiction)

Translated from the Modern Greek by Jane Assimakopoulos
We live amidst still waters. Mother calls it a lake, I don’t know what to tell you. I only stare out the window and the picture is always the same. In winter when the lake freezes over, I venture out of the house and walk on the smooth surface. I take a few halting steps and then fall—clumsy person that I am—on the crystal-like surface that reflects my unfamiliar (to me) image. My life is projected through a dirty square windowpane. Mother doesn’t let me go even as far as the storeroom to find a dust-cloth to clean it. She keeps me tied in the wooden chair in front of the window so I won’t miss out, even for a moment, on the beautiful view. Why, just the other night I told her, “Mother, don’t be afraid, take your teeth out of my hand, I’m not going anywhere. Take your teeth out of me and I’ll still love you.” Then she released my hand and began furiously biting her own, while screaming to me, “Well is this what you want? Is this what you want?” And so I again reached my hand out toward her with a slow almost ritual motion and suddenly I felt my love for her growing.

I can’t remember how many times I’ve seen the lake thaw and freeze again, though I shouldn’t be so ungrateful. Mother celebrates my birthday every year by making me a large cake, most often out of moldy marmalade. It doesn’t taste all that bad, and even if it did, it would upset me terribly if I had to be separated for a few hours from Mother just so she could go into town to shop. This year I received an unexpected gift for my birthday. Before the sun had even come up she came to my bed and undid the bandages that have for years now been tightly wrapped around my chest. Then she kissed me tenderly on the forehead and went out of the room, leaving me all alone with this new feeling. Mother is affectionate toward me and I know that my whole life I owe to her. I said I don’t remember exactly how old I am, but I feel like an infant just a few months old, a baby groping with its hands, its eyes and its voracious mouth for its mother’s nipple to lull it to sleep.

The truth is that our few remaining relatives don’t understand the amount of care Mother gives me. They accuse her of keeping me shut away in here, but tell me, really, don’t they see that outside the window is an endless expanse of frozen lakes? Where could I possibly go in such bitter cold? Mother wants nothing to do with them, and I sense in them a threat, a threat that could all too easily disturb the calm and the order in our life. A few weeks ago a distant nephew of Mother’s paid us a visit, and he hadn’t even finished drinking his tea when he began spouting
theories about how wrong it was to keep me so isolated. Mother was unfazed as always, but I couldn’t take it and I lost control. I pounced on him and scratched his face with my fingernails until it bled. He rushed out the door of our house and went off howling. I watched him from the window running like a madman over the frozen lake, slipping, falling, and propping himself on his palms to get up, with his palms sticking to the ice leaving tiny specks of blood punishing the crystal surface.

As I understand it from what Mother has told me we live in a city filled with bridges. Small boats come and go on the lakes and all the legends of our people have to do with water. Mother will not tell me the name of the city, she’s afraid that one day while she’s asleep I will open the door and leave. How silly of her not to know that I would never do that because I know very well how protected I am in here. Beyond the lake lies a vast world, unfamiliar and dangerous. Here, I only hear the quiet of the snow, and of course I watch. Through the windowpane I see snowflakes falling on the sole tree that has not yet been scorched by the storm. At this time of year night never falls on the lake. Even at midnight the sky never darkens, there is just a dim light spreading out, that fleeting pale blue afternoon hue that at other times lasts just a minute, a mere minute before the sun sets. For years I have counted up these seconds before the day disappears behind the mountains, I keep them in my mind, and I imagine that those seconds are the exact time it takes for the soul to leave the body, and that they differ according to how hot or cold it is, according to the position of the moon above the earth. But now the sun is continuously at half-mast, and motionless. Pinned in place. So I could say that there are times I forget when the days or the months change, the water-color of the sky never ends, the snow merely dilutes it, fades it, and makes it less concentrated.

When I was young I too used to draw on square-shaped paper but my drawings were always so empty. The whole page white and in the middle a tree or a small killed animal. I once tried to run away, to go as far as I could from the house to see what was behind the glass pane and then to draw it on the surface of my paper, so as not to see it empty. I came back two days later. Mother was holding a large pair of scissors in her hand and her gaze was cold and she was waiting for me. She pinched my cheek so hard that tiny red stars broke out on my skin. With one swift motion she cut off my hair, she hoisted me up on the kitchen table and lifted my dress up high. She opened my legs and with a furi-
ous look in her eyes she said, “Oh no, don’t tell me . . .” and then she sat me down to eat my dinner, we had instant broth and it was the first time I didn’t like the food she had made for me. But I really loved my hair. And I wanted it long. So I mustn’t ever leave again. And I loved my mother very much. And I wanted her near me. And so I stayed.

From that moment on we have slept in the same room. Our beds side by side. I hear her snoring, coughing and choking in her sleep and I wonder how close someone must be to you to let you live amidst her sighs and her nightmares. I watch her sleep and I see her growing older in her sleep. I remain the same. Like the landscape outside our window. The seasons pass over me and leave no trace. Only the tiny broken stars grow larger with time, grow older, and my face becomes a bloodied canvas. One night I hoisted up my dress exactly the way mother had done and muttered to myself, “Oh no, don’t tell me . . .” and then I disappeared inside a pool of red water-paint in a way that might make someone say, “How silly of her . . . She was born next to a vast watery surface and look at her now, drowning in a few drops of color.” I got up from my chair and went to the kitchen. In my windowpane, there I was, a small, bloodied animal on a white sheet of paper.

I killed Mother only last night. I didn’t intend to do it. She woke up from our sleep with a start and began breathing with difficulty. “Bring some water,” she howled. “Why are you looking at me like a milkfish?” And I took the pillow from my bed and I put it over her face. Nearer to me than ever, closer to me than ever before, I felt her beneath my hands, struggling, sweating and perhaps crying. When her chest stopped heaving, I got up shaking and left the house. With the large poker we use to turn logs in the fireplace I tried for hours to break through the ice, until finally I managed it just before dawn. I was hurting and suffering from the cold but that didn’t frighten me as much as the fact that the whole time I was smashing the ice, I seemed to also be smashing the reflection of my sickly eyes on the ice. My pale, tightly drawn lips and severe cheekbones. I went back home and paced all around the house. I opened Mother’s trunk and found a diary hidden there and a large book with the legends of my country. The date showed it was Christmas Eve. Not being so good with dates, I know that this holiday, for me, is nothing but another day with dim pale blue light. I lifted my mother from the bed and took her in my arms. She was light and still warm. I went outside and began walking on the frozen marble. When I reached the hole
I knelt and looked at my mother for a moment, but I didn’t recognize her. Perhaps that was my punishment. I let her slide down into the water and watched her disappear with the white of her nightgown up over her shoulders. Oh no, don’t tell me . . .

In the center of my city today they will be celebrating Christmas. Legend has it that the eldest female child of the household, dressed in a white tunic, goes round the houses door-to-door humming an old Neapolitan tune. I don’t know where Naples is, but the photograph in the book shows beautiful girls there, with ample bust-lines and quite alluring eyes. But I don’t know if they have mothers, too. One can’t have everything. In a little while I will get up from my chair and go outside. At the spot where I made the hole, the water will have frozen over again and I won’t know where my mother is buried. She may even still be sleeping in the bed next to mine. I’m not really sure. I should have marked the spot. But how? There’s nothing but a white sheet of paper with a tree, and a killed animal in the center. I read in the book that in the depths of the lake is the city of the dead. Nonsense. If the dead live down there, who are we, living up here?