Lampblack

I sit near the back, hoping for sleep
but the night outside the bus is so dark
it keeps me wide-eyed, hungry for light.
We’re still close enough to the city
to see commercial greenhouses—
bricks of a distant radiance
or soft pats of butter melting
into the black bread of the landscape.

The night completes its blackening chores
leaving only an occasional gleam
of anonymous yellow eyes.

My mother’s game comes back to me now—
after we’d polished the thin glass chimneys
of the squat coal oil lamps
it was my job to shake the rags outdoors.
“Shake hard,” she’d say, “so the wind can carry
the black to where night is needed.
Corn grows in the night.”

I shook with such conviction
as would rid the world of night,
send the blacking packing
to someplace behind the stars.
Nothing so benign, so golden
as corn grew in my nights.
My prayers were for lamps
with endless wicks,
unbreakable mantles
and inexhaustible oil.

OLGA COSTOPOULOS