

## 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