

Two Poems: “Primer in Black” and “The Smallest Man Carries the Candle”

Paula Closson Buck

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Paula Closson Buck is Professor of English at Bucknell University.

Primer in Black

With only black
I'll make you Crete—

with only the toil and sweat
of the olive. And the sea

that gleams like schist
beneath a thunderhead.

In the tall, cylindrical hat
of the priest, a blessing

will follow the goat—
the black one fate has singled out

to cross town in a pickup truck.
They'll offer you raki

and sweets, little fruits
candied and sugared.

But the indolent flies
won't let you eat,

will circle your plate—
an annoying chorus

of the perfect
failing to happen.

Let them be. It's simple
in black—this rigid alphabet

at the hands of which you only
approximate yourself.

Like my friend who returned
to a place not his home

with black shoes
when what he wanted was black

shoe polish. There's precision
in grief, but joy

is not exactly what you meant.
Like him, you'll fall asleep

with your feet in the new
strange shoes, the more comfortable pair

perfectly good
and empty beside the bed.

The Smallest Man Carries the Candle

Feast of Aghia Varvara, December 2002

The concrete skeletons of holiday houses
damage the landscape. A coal-gray sea
rolls in. The chant of the priest

snags and wavers, runs its hagiography through us
like a tape in a player whose batteries are dying.
Women cross themselves, pat their breasts.

The smallest man carries the candle.
Then it's fish and chickpeas all around,
chickpeas and cabbage and sweets.

I drink rakí, speak English into the bad ear
of the chief of police—lightly,
since my tourist visa's lapsed. Down the road

past winter-greened hillsides,
thirty Iraqi refugees saved from drowning
lean from the windows of a municipal building.

I've no more right to be here, but the chief
is a good man—a hand-shaking, well-wishing
man—so kind he makes me want to say

I'm no accomplice in their misery either.
And haven't I drunk to the beautiful martyr,
haven't I paid

for the doves to sit atop these dovecotes
bubbling and smoothing white feathers
like glossy advertisements for peace?

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