

Three Poems · *Frances Jaffer*

GREAT DAY FOR THE VIRGIN

I. Patmos, Greece

Women shout on this island, they learn
to throw voices across valleys singing
Bennetto! Mothers

(Ben-net-TOH!) cook eggplant and tomato
in oil, the pouch grows
(where the babies grew)

till their backs don't look strong enough
to haul water for scrubbing bedsheets and blankets
in sheep-watering troughs under dry trees
not quite out of the blood-boiling sun.

* *

(In my dream Athena helmeted
striding fully formed from the brow
of the God. A baby rowing to shore and
the green snake swimming sweetly
beside her.

I awake hearing voices:
Smart-Ass! Why do you argue
all day! Goddess of Wisdom
and War, I follow her
to Greece.)

* *

A tourist stumbles on high heels down
the path donkeys take from the monastery
to the bay. She says Tomorrow
is Assumption Day. I ask what will go on

up there; she says The Ceremony
will be Fine, it will be a great Day
for The Virgin.

* *

In the monastery a picture-postcard
of a woman handsome severe
captioned *Virgin Almighty*
and Guiding

could such a Mary
be? I search
guidebooks, bother monks

(How would it be to take the 'Hero-Trip'
feeling entitled, models wherever I
need them:
Heinrich Schliemann searching for Troy
is Achilles Undaunted fighting for the honor
of Schliemann; Freud hunting his
prehistoric mother finds Jocasta;
all good heroes
bring their treasure home.)

I follow a little boy
who takes me to the woman who
cares for Christou Church. The Ikon
stares from the shadow at the back,

I know Her! Zeus' motherless Daughter, She
holds an angry Child.

* *

*Black Betty had a baby, Zambalam
Dam thing gon' crazy, Zambalam
Dam thing gon' blind, won't have it
None o' mine.*

Zambalam.

* *

If his sister is ugly lady don't marry
that man, genes talk,
your daughter

will be sad to be seen bucktoothed sallow
hiding behind a shield, Medusa-head
and snakes, she'd better be smart. My Aunt Ida

was 'very bright' but I watched her
selling buttons in Notions, lid drooping
over her thick blind eye. Father Zeus

tells Athena to shut up and sit down, He
has the thunderbolts. She shuts up and sits down.
Aunt Ida grew the cancer that bit her till she died.

*Sharper than a serpent's tooth
is the bite of
an ungrateful child.*

Zambalam.

* *

Tomorrow the Virgin
rises? Silly vertical axis
to hang my distemper on; poisonous
pink centipedes appear floating

on weeds in Grikou Bay, spiked
cucumbers lie under stones.

* *

Still

she is here, where

is she lovely?

When she steps from foam
no Zephyrs blow; harsh rock,
scrub brush replace an image of

Love. Then Wisdom?

and War. But the blue sky

shines and the islands

In the clear dark sea.

Athena

does what she can.

* *

Women,

Shout on this island—

EXCERPT FROM THE POEM “ANY TIME NOW”

Oh the tomb, delicate sea shell, H.D. said
the temple or the tomb, but there are
the waves holding the moon, the flicker

that holds light, the space
between columns where shape
dances, bright fog sings—

the ride undersea, the leap
spraying the world pink, the sun
swings on the sea