

Pnina Shinebourne

The life I left

The plane slides into Bahir-Dar, Lake Tana
under its belly. A rickety bus totters
across the bridge. On the roadside
women sell injera from straw baskets;
a man fanning a horse-tail swatter
shuffles past a bull and a donkey
pulling a wooden plough through mud.
We leave the bus, go down into the field.
I pick a sheaf of mashila ears fingering
the spiky ends, my eyes shut, jittery.
Shivers rise up, grab me in a spin.
I know I have been here before, know the girl
who zigzagged through mashila stalks
up to her chin, the girl who heard the hyena's
hee-hee-hee on a starless night.

I lulled
my life to fit under a new coat of splendour.
Now I struggle to unbutton my throat as I watch
women fetching water from a public tap,
a rustle of glimmers inside my head, imagine
what would have become of me had I stayed.
Sunglasses and backpack, a wide-brimmed
hat, feet in sturdy trekking shoes
on a 'roots trip' to my country of birth,
unsure of what path I'll take, ex-cursion,
in-cursion, re-cursion, or maybe
a homecoming?

A girl offering
a bunch of meskel flowers giggles
for the camera. I could have been
that girl. When I was little we chased
the ferenji through the dusty footpaths
to glimpse a faraway world all white.
Home was *here*. I touch the trees
I used to climb – a breakfast tree

[cont.]

in the yard, a memory of a slaughtered
goat hung underneath to drain,
a wild fig tree where father's forge
sparkled and hissed at night.
I search for a trace in a handful of ash,
but all I can see are a few dark stains
in the scrubby grass.

A sudden twilight
sinks into blackness. Dozy shadows
of eucalyptus trees crawl along the path.
That's how we escaped – leaving
in secret after dark.
I was six when my family started walking
down the mountains towards a land
of concrete and asphalt, a shock of grey
by day and dazzling streetlights at night.

A steep
trek covered in dense forest ascends
to the skyline. Up here I feel
at the edge of a vision, something
I didn't know I'd missed.
I wait for roots to sprout from my toes,
my fingers to turn to twigs. I listen
to the sound of footsteps that stutter,
stop, then turn around – my homeland
walking into a vanishing point.