

A Western Suburb

Isi Unikowski

A sort of colonisation took place
here: people who spoke dialects
from the side of languages' mouths
arrived along a haft of highway
a bow sending semis dopplering southwards,
the hollow tin of their passing
a single fact queried only by the creeks
tendering tithes of sunset in their reeds
in fealty to the saltwork's desolate ziggurat,
the city's distant barcode.

They laid bricks on clay that rose and fell
as if the swamps, newly named
in still more ancient dialects
clotted again at the doors; fenced off
miniature replicas of fields back home
places for seeds that had made their own travel plans,
espaliere by lore leached by
the wrong kind of rain and the wrong
kind of heat at the wrong time of year.

They bought grapes from the back of lorries
in puddled, pitted vacant lots
where factories once stood, from men small
and dark as sultanas; sampling
the dark little clouds, pushing them askance
to the tongue's tip, to the side, splitting
and spitting the skins, nodding at those ready
for miraculous vintages where each year
is worse than the last.

Wives pined for countries that no longer existed,
drawers, like quarrels with history, never quite sorted.

Still, a consolation of sorts took place
here: the kids learned the language (but
answered in English)
handling its inflections like the apparatus of
small projects – lugs, flanges, block and tackle,
pop rivets, self-tapping screws – by which yards
and lives are changed, tinkering
in sheds beneath tinkling ironies
of hooks, years twisting
like children held up for a neighbour.

They left wives and daughters to a frugal grief,
the freight train's rhythm dissecting the long nights,
a dwindling group of friends huddled on a knoll
in that place there, that they made
that grew smaller as it grew
beside the unrelenting highway, trefoiled and plaited
like their stories of priests and documents
of children and conscripts crossing
the unfathomable fields and forests of the past,
stories that I didn't understand, who scoffed at stories
often told, who missed
the point in the telling;

the demijohns half decanted, pulleys half hoisted,
the shed door half ajar as though someone who had gone
for a spanner was about to come out; buffets and tallboys
ageing into their own honey-coloured epochs,
only a panel, here or there, split
in the uncured circumstances of a dry climate.