

Two Poems by Seble Dawit

The Falasha*

the answer to prayers
a millennia in the making
is a curious surgery

quietly

replacing a howling wound
out of one barrenness
into a holier desert
again, still
a long-staying temporary guest

and the sweet homeland,
my people?
is exodus as bitter
as Jerusalem seemed far?

The Guest in Gondar

down the narrow side-step stair
into the empress' room
moist for centuries and windowless stone
the queen guests in the dungeon
of the Holy Virgin's house
overseen by a chatty monk
his whole life pleading
with one woman
ranting about another
locking her up every night.

* * *

outside the church

*While the poet is fully aware that the term "Falasha" has acquired a derogatory connotation over the years, the use of the term here is an active and conscious refusal to engage in such derogation and an attempt to reclaim the strength of the word. Ethiopian Jews call themselves Byete Isra'el. [the author.]

just beyond the lanky eucalyptus
scattered useless furniture
in a hall way between two rooms
a rock sealed archway refuses entry
into a courtyard of brightness and stone
a queen's home in vibrant disarray
immobility
surrounded by a wall
meekly interrupted by a door
a culprit wooden door
secured by a lock
guarded by another monk
speechless for 40 years.

* * *

inside the church dungeon - side stepping -
the litanous monk extols
the boundless virtues of a radiant queen
(whose eyes have never seen him)
locked below the ground of someone else's home
receiving guests she would not have endured
at another time for many reasons

at arrival the monk quiets in deference

the queen lays quite still
grave in her fleshless smiling
her son on her right his son on her left
impossibly arranged like a perfect box of chocolates
smiling blankly
accepting homage patiently
awaiting - from a comfortable crypt -
bright fettered ruins to rise