

For Azza, the Song of Tunisia

The poem burst from her mind like a song, like a bird full-fledged, like a small, free, perfect bird that hovered, flittered, tested its wings, threw its head back and thrilled before soaring to its freedom; soaring high over the ocean. The song took form, formed the moment, came like a gift, flowed away freely given, climbed and floated above the heads of her sisters as they walked slowly away from her on the ragged beach; as they walked ungainly, bound round with the flowing, creamy, gauzey bonds of tradition and history and timelessness. The air was still except for that one clear note; a note of freedom that floated, dipped, darted, soared above the heads of her sisters.

Could they hear it, she wondered, watching them? Could they hear it now through all those soft, thin, cottony layers of hidden meaning-layers of cloth that wrapped the past in the body of each woman to keep it safe and soft, vulnerable and pale, to hobble its strength? And if they could not hear it now, would it be lost forever over those misty, milky, mossy, watery depths, over the ocean and the high, tearing peaks beyond? Would it soar high enough, her song, to cross those mountains, that sea, and leave her forever behind, holding the perfect round globe of an orange in each hand?

The song mingled with the pulsing waves, the drifting breezes; the voice of the child, her little daughter, her hope for the future, the only song that might endure. Her daughter who asked her now for the secret juice of those glowing fruits, those solid spheres which she herself held in her own two strong hands: her hands that had held the child's father like a child himself; the hands that had cradled the head of her own dying mother, traced the lines of the sunken orbits, the feathery brows, the cavernous cheeks; the hands that had fought to protect her own body, her

own being, that had covered herself and been inadequate but all she had; the hands about to squeeze the blood red juice from the fruit, the juice to soothe her child's thirst.

«Why are you waiting?» the child asked, her round dark eyes set like rare jewels in her porcelain face. «Why are you waiting?» As she stood with an orange in each hand, watching the layers of air shift over the restless sea. «Why are you waiting?» As she listened to the echoes of the song weaving, twining, losing itself among the folds of her sisters' flowing, graceful bonds. «Why are you waiting?»

I am waiting to live in a world where I can walk outside alone; where each one I meet isn't watching every breath I draw, counting every heartbeat and judging it evil or just. Freedom: an elusive, simple thing. It is nothing: the air, the haze on the mountain, the color of the sea, it is nothing at all. From whom would I steal my freedom? There is enough for all the world; not yet enough for you or me.

«Why are you waiting?»

I wait for you, my child, to grow; for my sisters to hear; for my brothers to awaken; for the future, for the movement of the waves, the fullness of the moon, the keeping of promises, the breath that feeds the body, the breath that nourishes the soul, the breath of life. I wait for the juice of the orange to melt the bonds and to flow sweetly and fully in the veins of my daughter; for a world where even the poor have dignity and even women are alive. I wait for my sisters to hear my song, and for brothers to awaken from their long sleep.

The juice flows sticky rich and ruby red, staining my strong hands with promise. And I wait.

Ann Marie Skye