

## The Sun Tattoo

And He looked upon the moon and perceived numerous mansions. One mansion overlooks both a sea and an ocean whose shores sustain fertile and arid lands, guiding those who stay and those who travel. The Mounts of Atlas watch over quarters of the city's interlinking alleyways. Sudden open spaces surround you with fragrances – spices, green tea, mynith leaves, couscous saturated sweet, aromatic plants, and the sea's salt breeze.

In the courtyard of al Fana mosque, a woman is wrapped in her costume of white robes, veiled to the mouth. Her eyes are painted with the kohl of ancient lust and her hands shuffle cards: "Come, ladies, come see your future."

Girls in azure dresses dance before an audience. Their hair, gathered in thin braids around glimmering foreheads, falls down the sides of their faces. Beads twinkle in the darkness of their braids – virgin stars, granules, and round silver pendants whose faded rust encircles their luminous faces.

The drums of North Africa beat; the strings of Barbary vibrate. If the questioner, with his question, knocks on the lids of locked chests they'll spring open and the voices of boys, beating drums, call out and are answered by Bedouin Berber girls.

"Drum the most hidden secret's secret, the mind's lock."

Amorous and coy, the young breasts shake. Amber necklaces quiver, with saffron melted into silver and enameled the colors of the sea, the fields, and the sand. Intricate chains are the links of history, enclosing secrets that score time and the body; a tight collar around the neck, a friction whose links sound in moans. The girls' bracelets tingle; their bodies shudder, advance and retreat, craving release from the check of the ornamental fetter. The Berber morning star glows, a bloodstone gem swaying on erect breasts. Countless crescents mark body and soul and vanish in time.

A tall boy advances, hands clasping a dagger hidden in the wide folds of his robe and heart. The drums beat louder.

"Drum the secret..."

The girl steps forward proudly. Silently she unveils and veils the crescent tattoos. All speech is a veil except love's ecstasy. She glances at him and looks away, her quivering tattoo says: touch me. The boy shudders.

"Stranger to our secrets, probe with your eyes."

The veiled unveiled tattoo sweats at the summons. We called you; you've seen and examined the secret and now it's sealed in your chest as your heart's witness. The lid will not open nor the secret be known. No one will hear the hidden knowledge, visible and not visible, but our heirs and lords.

The boy stretches out his arms, in his right hand, the dagger. Across his arms and nape slides a rope. He grips the rope's tail in his left hand, its head twists into a knot on the dagger's handle. He points the blade at the lock tattoo, drawing the rope back and forth across his neck.

The boy pulls the tail of the rope, drawing with it the dagger's knot, delaying the union of love. The girl trembles.

"No escape... it must be ... nothing can be denied." The boy pulls the dagger. The rope tenses. The girl almost steps back. "No, by the heavens above, you have revealed yourself."

The blade dances, back and forth, up and down. The drum beats louder.

"Drum the most hidden secret's secret..."

Sharp and shining, the tip of the blade touches the neck. The string of beads joins together before collapsing with a sigh. The sharp point descends to the breast, slicing the azure dress, pricking the copper skin tattoo. The morning star glows with the arrows of the red sun of Marrakech.

The audience becomes a taut string and the dance, a bow. The speech of the dancers flows into the string.

In the al-Fana courtyard the cards are shuffled. "Come see your future." Naming kings and queens, jacks and aces, jokers and number cards, she reveals and collects them. Her eyes on me, she speaks in riddles and suggestions. Through the veil I discern her golden teeth, glittering with the red sun of Marrakech. She murmurs many words I don't know. The jack is in her hand. He strikes the flint of luck in love. The king, in her other hand, waits mischievously.

Quickly, she shuffles the cards, spreading them like a fan, their faces downward, hidden. She touches my hand; asks me to choose. Her hand is adorned with tattooed patterns of henna, yellowish dark red. "El henna, El henna, O Quatr El Nada."

As we touched we exchanged the tattoo and the secret's secret. My heart became serene and still.

I say: Ignorance is bewildering, knowledge is bewildering. Close by the snake charmer plays his flute. An adder's head ascends from his bag. The water carrier walks by rattling. The adder's head, the henna's glow, the woman's eye, the eye of the red sun of Marrakech – I see them all. Silence is shattered, time pours down, mosaic verses stream together. And I see Ra'Atum, the snake on either side of the revered solar disk on the King's crown.

The water carrier rattles, satiating the thirsty as if with the waters of Zamzam. The boy whirls round at the center, a Nubian, a Mulawi with no beard yet, his thin waist girdled with the skirts of the seven heavens. He whirls and whirls round to tambourine beats.

He skips over the unsaid, shaking, stunned and pale. His dark, clear complexion mirrors his successive mutations, awake and drunk, alert and entranced, enraptured, effaced. Blind to the world, he sees through the senses. A skirt spins around his head and the others spin around his waist. Two rings orbiting the colors of the rainbow, white on white, and between – a dark planet luminous with ecstasy, as if he were a poem escaping from a poet's hands, a dancing, rhythmic being... Drum the secret.

In a Ghoury courtyard we are possessed, as if birds were hovering above our heads. The body, becoming the soul's tattoo, joins the two rings of heaven and earth. The bird swoops down upon the tattoo.

There was a full moon on the night when his guardian Sheik Abul Hassan El Gareh invited him to the public bath. He was eager to go. The Sheik placed white sheets beside him and called his followers.

He helped them remove their clothes, one by one, giving each a fringed towel, then another. He helped the boy, then himself. It was a generous offering.

The boy spent the night elated as if he were lounging in a paradise of low-hanging fruit.

"No knowledge, no eye, no sense can reach us."

The following morning the Sheik was found murdered in the bath. They said he drowned in the water of passion.

The drums beat their climax. The dagger touched the naked tattooed breast.

"No mind, no audience, noseparation, nothing."

The blood flower bursts.

I hear a voice from the far shores of the soul:

*When the light of the enlightened shines*

*My soul will accompany Osiris*

*I will return as a winged hawk*

*And go out upon the earth,*

*open up hell's gate*

*To see the rebirth of the sun.*

I stood in the courtyard of the al Fana mosque gazing at al Ghoury next to Kutobiya, the old bookstore, the minaret of al Hussein mosque, and the dome of al Azhar. The sound's echo rang in my ears. It still fills them.

"Drum the most hidden secret's secret..."

"... it's open."

The blood flower bursts, between the two houses, two breasts, in heaven's dome and the sun's eye.

**Author's note:** The text is a display of visual and other sunsuuous imageries. It is also a collage of different historical periods and places: Mounts of Atlas, al-Fana Mosque, and al-Kutbiya are in Morocco, Al-Ghoury, al-Hussien mosque and al Azhar are in Egypt.

Translated by Elena Reeves

**Etidal M. Osman** (Egypt): Writer and critic. Published books: *Jonah of The Sea* (A collection of short stories, 1987), *Illuminating The Text* (Readings in Modern Arabic Poetry, 1988), *Yussef Idris* (1991), *The Sun Tattoo* (A collection of short stories, 1992).