

**Amira-Géhanne KHALFALLAH**

### **Because They Don't Know the Sea**

As far back as I can remember, the most memorable discoveries have reached me by the sea.

I have always lived near the water. It is my source of inspiration. When I started writing, the sea was never far away. And then one day it became one with my work. It became its organ of life.

I like listening to the songs of sailors. They are often full of nostalgia but never complaints. The people of the sea come first to hope. They know that everything is possible. Perhaps it was this enthusiasm that drove me to them.

To write my book, *The Wrecking of the Moon*, I went to meet sea people, and then one day, they let me get on their boats. I was attentive to their gestures, I wanted to pick up on their slightest movement. I was listening to their hands, I wanted to guess the signs, imagine their untold stories.

Their bodies are subject to narrative, exposure of the essence, mechanics of memory. I was fascinated by the ancient, almost sacred aesthetic that had been passed down from their ancestors.

Over time, I learned to look at things more closely. I established a kind of body grammar where the actions and postures of sailors have been inventoried and described.

I felt, sometimes, like a choreographer, sometimes like an anthropologist trying to work on the movement. In the economy of gesture or in the display of expressions there is a multitude of meanings: links between Mediterranean, the translation of thought, the art of interpretation... I learned to understand the language of their bodies. Their way of speaking without speaking. I, a lover of words, was fascinated by sailor silence.

Still, somehow, I was hardly surprised to hear them talk.

Once on the boats, their words changed, and the transformation was not partial but complete. I do not know when, but everything rocked ...

*Voga, Sia, Mola ...* they shout.

I can still hear their voices.

Fishermen speak an ancient Mediterranean language that has survived several centuries. The language of sailors, pirates, prisoners, soldiers, renegades, slaves, left-overs ... that of the damned of the earth.

This *lingua franca*, qualified as liminal, language of transition, of those who wait in-between ... Métis language that has resisted because it has never been considered as a language in its own right. It is the

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language of all foreigners. Maybe those who are now illegally landing in Europe aboard boats of misfortune are inventing a new one. A language of sharing and waiting. A language of distance and hope ?

I recorded and transcribed the words of sailors. I listed them in a small notebook, and that is how I found the words to write my book. I finally found the words of the sea.

But to understand where I'm coming from, let's navigate back to the earth.

On land, it was decided that Arabic is the official language of the Nation, ignoring other languages, identities, minorities. All means have been put in place to serve this cause. We have worked to forget our roots, our differences.

The authorities controlled the mountains, the plains, the schools, the administrations, the billboards, the television news ... They were in the street, in our houses. They wanted to inhabit our dreams. The alienation was pushed to the point where lectures on the Amazigh language were banned sounding the knell to the first Berber spring.<sup>1</sup>

In all this madness, the sea has been preserved. Because the Mediterranean has never been regarded as a semantic area. The sea remains the last refuge of our lost languages.

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<sup>1</sup> The Berber Spring (Tafsut Imazighen) refers to all the demonstrations calling for the officialization of the Amazigh language and the recognition of the Amazigh identity and language in Algeria on April 20, 1980 in Kabylie and Algiers.

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