

Anna

from *Imagining God* by Trevor Dennis

Anna sat in the shade of the orange tree, her nephew beside her. She was all skin and bone, and the hand he held was tight with arthritis. Yet it was not her frailty he noticed, but the last energies of her spirit. When she walked she shuffled along at the pace of an exhausted snail. But her eyes still danced. That afternoon beneath the orange tree they were doing their last jig. Anna was dying.

The other side of the courtyard a small door led out into the narrow street. Soldiers passed up and down it at intervals. You could not go far in the city without finding soldiers, or without soldiers finding you.

'Did *you* sing him a song, aunt? When you saw him and took him in your arms, did you sing him a song of your own, like Simeon did?'

'Oh yes!' she cried. 'I sang him a song all right! An old song. A love song. My love song.' With that she shut her eyes, and in her quavering voice began to sing.

 'Arise, my love, my fair one,
 and come away;
 for now the winter is past,
 the rain is over and gone.
The flowers appear on the earth;
the time of singing has come,
and the voice of the turtledove
is heard in our land.
Arise, my love, my fair one,
and come away. '

Her voice faded away into the shadows, but the air still quivered with her music. At last silence came again, and she turned to her nephew and winked at him. 'It was more beautiful than Simeon's song,' she said, 'but they thought it too passionate to mention in their story. And they had to give him a bigger part to play, after all.'

`What do you mean, "after all"?'`

'After all, he was a man!'

Her nephew shifted a little. She had spent all the sixty-three years of her widowhood, sixty-four, perhaps, in the Temple precincts. In all that time she had never been allowed to go beyond the Court of the Women, never been permitted to get closer to her God than that, for fear of her pollution.

She smiled. `In the end it didn't matter,' she said. `In the end my God came to me. He came among all those people, carried in a girl's arms. People thought I was nearly blind, but I recognized him at once. I saw him, and held him in these skinny arms of mine, and stroked his cheek with this gnarled hand, and sang him my love song, softly at first, but then as loud as I could. I woke him up. I woke my God out of his dreams with a love song!'

The sound of running feet, ugly shouting and then fighting came from the street beyond the wall and fluttered the leaves of the tree above her head and troubled its shade.

`What will become of him, I wonder? What will become of him, in all this? It is not the easiest of times to come to redeem the world.' She turned again to face her nephew. `People thought I was a crazy old woman,

who had married religion when my husband died, and been stuck with it ever since. Forgetting I was a prophet, they thought I knew nothing of the world, nor any of its dark secrets. But I know the beatings in dark corners, the people taken from their houses and never seen again, the children trapped in such despair that they try to get themselves killed. If I told this tree all I have seen and smelled of this city's fear and violence, it would shrivel up and die. Oh yes, I know. Why else do you suppose I spent all those years, those days, those long nights in fasting and prayer? Why else do you think I longed with such a deep longing for my God? There is such a need of him!' She raised her head. `And now he has come!'

Beyond the wall of the courtyard two soldiers had a man by the hair and were dragging him off along the street, while others prepared the way for him with shouted abuse and sharp blows. Anna shuddered.

'Will they recognize him in all this? Anna said. 'Only Simeon and I knew him when he came to the Temple. What will become of him? I will not see him again, for I am dying beneath this tree. Will they know him?' She looked straight at her nephew. The fingers of her hand unbent and gripped his arm. 'Will they know who he is, do you think?

She closed her eyes. Her fingers relaxed, and behind her eyelids her pupils slowed their dance and stopped.

The shouting had passed further up the street and round a corner. In the uneasy quiet left behind, Anna's nephew could hear the faint sound of singing: 'Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away. Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.'

NOTE

i Song of Solomon 2.10-12,13b.