

## **My Father and the Fig Tree**

For other fruits, my father was indifferent.  
He'd point at the cherry trees and say,  
"See those? I wish they were figs."  
In the evening he sat by my beds  
weaving folktales like vivid little scarves.  
They always involved a figtree.  
Even when it didn't fit, he'd stick it in.  
Once Joha<sup>1</sup> was walking down the road  
and he saw a fig tree.  
Or, he tied his camel to a fig tree and went to sleep.  
Or, later when they caught and arrested him,  
his pockets were full of figs.

At age six I ate a dried fig and shrugged.  
"That's not what I'm talking about! he said,  
"I'm talking about a fig straight from the earth –  
gift of Allah! -- on a branch so heavy  
it touches the ground.  
I'm talking about picking the largest, fattest,  
sweetest fig  
in the world and putting it in my mouth."  
(Here he'd stop and close his eyes.)

Years passed, we lived in many houses,  
none had figtrees.  
We had lima beans, zucchini, parsley, beets.  
"Plant one!" my mother said.  
but my father never did.  
He tended garden half-heartedly, forgot to water,  
let the okra get too big.  
"What a dreamer he is. Look how many  
things he starts and doesn't finish."

The last time he moved, I got a phone call,  
My father, in Arabic, chanting a song  
I'd never heard. "What's that?"  
He took me out back to the new yard.  
There, in the middle of Dallas, Texas,  
a tree with the largest, fattest,  
sweetest fig in the world.  
"It's a figtree song!" he said,  
plucking his fruits like ripe tokens,  
emblems, assurance  
of a world that was always his own.

-Naomi Shihab Nye

<sup>1</sup> - A trickster figure in Palestinian folktales

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