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Writing Sample

Karim Alrawi

Excerpt from the novel *Book of Sands*.

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Karim ALRAWI
Excerpt from the novel *Book of Sands*

Chapter 1

Nada, not yet ten years old, watches flights of starlings soar over minarets and cathedral cupolas past skyscrapers, as sheer as the crystal turrets of a picture book palace. Silver flights sweep above city blocks, chase tendrils of cloud, swoop to cut through street traffic like shards of glass. Lines of cars knot then divert towards the river to spread gridlock across the city. From the subway station, pedestrians rise like a tide through steel grated stairwells, stare at chattering swarms spread across sidewalks and buildings.

The school bell sounds. Loudspeakers announce morning assembly cancelled. Nada joins children in blue overalls with satchels on their backs. They flow down corridors, rise up stairs to classroom to take their places at their desks. Teacher stands by the blackboard, twists her gold pendant about fingers. Her nails polished red. "Today, school will close at recess."

Nada leans forward, not the way she does most mornings, but to see what may happen now the yard teems with flocks that gather on boughs, and spread along walls.

Part way through class, urgent bird song calls the children to windows to watch as men in black uniforms, helmeted with visors wield long black batons, pursue feathered clouds that scatter from one place then settle and spread in another. Swirls flutter beyond the men's reach, take flight, land then disperse to gather again. On rooftops, balconies and lampposts, flocks chorus over the sound of stalled cars, draw down from the sky flights in quicksilver streams. The black uniforms blinded by the flurry, skate and slip on liquid droppings, collide and fall. Overwhelmed, bruised and concussed, they abandon the streets for their trucks, to return to barracks along the airport road.

When the recess bell sounds, Nada rises from her desk, hesitates to leave, uncertain what to do, her day unfamiliar with school ending so early. In the playground, children feed birds with crumbled cookies and flakes of bread. What if nobody shows to collect her? She considers the question-- not in an overly anxious manner, but seriously, as she would solve one of her father's puzzles. Besides, she does know the way home. She has walked it often with him. She really must not worry. Then, as though summoned by the thought, but still distant like an echo, she hears him call. He waves from across the street, weaves his way through slow moving traffic to the school gate.

"I came as soon as I could." He takes her hand.

"How did you know?"

"A birdie told me."

She grimaces. Daddies are sometimes so silly. She is sure the school must have called him, and, really, she had only asked for confirmation. They cross the street congested with cars and people. Above them the sky surges in silver waves that flash in the sun, throw forward then fall back then sweep forward again in fitful pulse.

"Has mummy had the baby?"

"No, not yet."

She feels a wave of anxiety, glances at her father. He squeezes her hand, stills the moment's turmoil.

Down several blocks, in the main city square, crowds gather from college campuses beyond the bridge of crouching lions, and from offices by the old corn exchange to watch the birds muster in unrecorded numbers, drawn as by a current, deep and powerful, to eddy in tidal pools of onlookers. They pay no heed to the chimes from parliament's clock tower or calls to prayer from mosques and the peal of church bells. They tear sheets of corrugated steel and scaffolding from nearby building sites, construct barricades. More arrive with food and bottled water, tents and blankets to hang flags from lampposts, banners from the sides of buildings that call for an end to the rule of soldiers.

With coveys of starlings sighted in more neighborhoods rousing young and old with their calls, the army, summoned to impose order, sets up checkpoints at the main junctions. Armored cars take up positions on bridges and by government buildings. On highways, in and out of the city, soldiers with razor wire and sandbags construct roadblocks.

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At the *Karagoz* puppet theatre, once a two-car garage in an alley shaded by apartment blocks, Nada leans forward, tugs at the shutters to close out the morning light from an auditorium of children on cushions and mats. At the side wall she switches off electric lights, turns on the ceiling fan that whirls currents of air to spins coils of dust. A small black dog spreads itself at the foot of the stage, pants, lays its head on its paws, its eyes heavy from the heat of the room.

Backstage, in the red light of a low wattage bulb, her father, Tarek, checks the time on his watch, speed dials his mobile phone. For the last couple of hours, every twenty minutes, he calls his wife Mona. The conversation gets briefer with each call.

"How are you?"

"Reading."

"Contractions?"

"It doesn't have to be today."

He detects a note of exasperation in her voice. Yes, he knows the obstetrician only estimated the date, but by that estimate Mona is days late. "I'll call later."

"No, please. I'll call you."

Nada strikes a match. It breaks, flares in the darkness. Her finger scrapes the striking strip on the box, burns from the friction. She sucks the grazed skin. The next match grates, flares, lights a candle stub in a pool of wax on an old metal saucer. She cups the flame with her hand, sets the candle on a shelf against the back wall. Behind a white muslin screen, the size of a single bed spread, she adjusts the rear footlights of oil lamps on a narrow table, takes the flat puppets, painted and translucent, out of a carved wooden chest, checks their wired joints to make sure that the rods are fully secured to their frames, suspends them from hooks on a stand by the back wall. She knows each puppet by name, knows their stories, talks to them. "Don't be nervous. You'll be fine. Have a great performance."

Children sit cross-legged in rows on rugs, heads rest on palms and knuckles, elbows on knees. Perspiration glistens on faces, reflects like glitter the glow of the screen on which shadows distend, contract, come into focus to take on color. Behind the cotton sheet, her father, moustache frosted by light, the mobile phone by his side set to vibrate in case of a call from Mona, speaks for each of the puppets, changes tone and inflection. He holds thin, long

rods horizontally attached to arms, legs and torsos. With a flick of the hand or a turn of a wrist, some take flight, others walk, run, ride steeds, wield scimitars.

He tells the story of three sisters:

Once there was, though maybe not, three sisters.

One morning, mother-ghoul knocks on their door, sniffs, smiles and says:

Good day, you sweet and lovely little girls,
Your skin like jasmine, your eyes like pearls,
I could gobble you all from your toes to your curls.

The sisters run and run as fast as their legs can carry them, from hearth to door to town and city. They rest here, leave from there, never more than a single night under the same roof or in the same bed. Then, one day they come to a crossroad. There a bird on a golden bough of a whispering tree says:

This way to the road of stoning
That way to the road of drowning
And this to the road of no return.

The three sisters decide that each should choose a separate path and with that choice risk the consequences, come what may and as they must, to search for the Forever Rose that blooms in the valley of the Peacock Angel.

"Before we part," says the eldest, "let's bury our pendants at the foot of the whispering tree so should one of us return she'll know who of us is lost and who has made it back."

She buries a pendant of turquoise, the middle sister a pendant of red carnelian and the youngest a pendant of golden amber. Then, with tears and hugs, the sisters part. Each sets one foot before the other down her chosen path not knowing what lay ahead.

Far into the story, Tarek recites the words of the hoopoe to the parliament of birds, tells of the Peacock Angel who lives by Mount *Qaf*, the hinge of sky and earth, where the book of all that was or ever will be is hidden.

Tarek pauses as rustles and chitter from the ceiling interrupt his storytelling. As the sounds die down, he continues with the tale of the three sisters who search for the emerald oasis in the amber desert, where rainbows bloom, and the dawn first breaks to spread across a world sustained by the song of the Peacock Angel. When the song stops the world will end.

Nada shakes a tambourine to make a sound like the rustle of leaves, slaps the taut skin with the heel of her hand to clash the cymbals on the frame like bells to signal a change from scene to scene, place and time. She adjusts rear footlights, moves one of the oil lamps away from the screen, its yellow flame shielded by a glass bulb, drapes another with a cloth, alters the quality of light to suggest a change from morning to evening, day to night, brings forward to within her father's easy reach puppets whose turn has come, and carries away puppets whose time has passed.

Bird squalls erupt from above, cause Tarek to stop, wait before he can continue.

Tasks for the moment done, Nada leans against the side wall of the dark auditorium, gazes at the screen, chews on the tip of her fingers, thinks of her mother pregnant, wonders what life will be like once baby is born-- *and what if it is twins?* And, oh, if she had two sisters, then the three of them would be deciding what to do and wondering what should be done. Who of them to take the road of drowning, and who the road of stoning, and would she take the road of no return? How she would argue all three of them should stay together and not part ways just yet. But once her two sisters set off to who knows where, alone with each their own path taken, then so must she, who has shared with them everything in this life

from when she first knew herself with a mind of her own, all will and wish, and so full of curiosity to find the Forever Rose.

This sister holds the ball of sorcerer's thread, that one the magic comb, and she with the mirror of wonders in which she can see her two sisters wherever they go and wishes them safe going and coming. Their choices made, the sisters depart to face whatever ordeals the world has set them. It is the mirror that saves her and helps her return with the Forever Rose to search for the pendants and finds them where the sisters had buried them. Then she must choose to set off again to find this sister on a mountain turned to stone, and that one in a dark forest by a stream made a willow that sheds tears to see her. And it is she who solves the riddles to return them sisters and splashes water from that golden lake that washes stone to life, and with the spell of the talking bird makes trees into children once again who can play together forever, like the children watching the screen in the glow of lamplight in her father's *Karagoz* theatre.

For the children, this is not like television, with interrupted reception, power failures, political speeches and grownups constantly changing channels to watch the news with its sad litany of deaths from towns they have never heard of. At home, they watch videos and DVDs, pirated and of poor quality, with pictures that fade, and sound that crackles, when it can be heard. Tarek's voice is clear and nuanced, his storytelling practiced, the puppets as vivid on the backlit screen as images on the pages of a picture book.

A rush of chitters and a chorus of chirps from the rooftop forces Tarek to wait for a lull in the sound. He strokes his moustache, checks the time on his watch, pauses for the chattering wave to pass, and the children to fall silent. The clatter and rustling gets louder, reverberates against the concrete walls of the old garage. He starts again, but can barely be heard, skips through the story to when the sisters are together back where they belong. "As happy and safe to their home they came, may you to your homes go happily the same."

At the window Nada draws back the shutters to let in the light through dusty panes. Tarek comes forward from behind the blank screen. The black dog gazes at the children from the foot of the stage, its eyes moist from the heat, its rest disturbed by the play's sudden end and the clattering sounds from above.

The children rise from the mats their minds still full of story. Once in the sunlight their languor gives way to excitement. They run, scream and stamp in pools from leaking underground pipes. The acrid water rises from a grate over a shallow gutter. Cars slow to avoid hidden potholes, send ripples to the edge of broken sidewalks.

In the alleyway, Tarek tugs at the ends of his moustache, gazes as flocks alight on the flat roof of the building, like a quilt unfurls on a bed, then peel in flights towards the sky, to return and swarm once again. The phone vibrates in his pocket.

"Who's calling?" Nada glances at her father.

He checks the small green screen, mouths to her, "uncle Omar." Above him birds squall. He speaks into the phone, "No, nothing yet," cups his ear with his hand. "I'll call when I know."

Backstage, Nada collects the puppets, places them in boxes, packs away the stage set. She clears the floor of silver candy wrappers and crinkly cellophane, confident that one day, so very soon, when she is fully ten years old, she will not just be the *sandikar*, but the *khayali* allowed to work her own puppet show. Then she will tell stories, and in her own way too. This notion infuses her labors with serious intent, fills her with a sense of pride and purpose.

Omar prays the noon prayers at the airport mosque, a carpeted room to one side of the duty free stores advertising perfume and whisky. He enters the glass doors of the arrivals hall in time to meet the client just arrived on a flight, to deliver him to his hotel downtown as instructed by the company dispatcher.

At the checkpoint at the exit to the car park, he waits at the wheel to his cab to show his driver's license to soldiers and be waved through. The sight of men in khaki uniform causes him unease. He stares at a line of armored cars. It has been a while since he has seen the army in such force on the streets-- *whatever, but how bad will this be for business?* His thoughts wave to and fro between the tasks he must do that day and the condition of his sister, Mona, pregnant and on the verge of labor-- *God willing it will be this evening and not during the day what with traffic and soldiers and having clients to ferry from place to place.* He waits for the call from Tarek that she needs to be taken to the maternity clinic.

He runs his fingers through his cropped beard, glances at himself in the rearview mirror. The beard makes him look older than his thirty-six, almost thirty-seven, years— maybe, at times, as much as ten years older. He detects grey hair in the beard. Hardly surprising from the constant worry of trying to keep away the devil-- *the malevolent whisperer, whispering envy in the breasts of men.* As his eyes drift from the mirror, he sees legions of starlings chase and spin in sheets above the city center. It brings to mind verses from scripture-- *what is the phrasing? Something, something, "birds on the wing a community like those of humans." Something about raised to the heavens by the Almighty.* But he cannot be certain of the precise wording. He kisses his finger and touches the holy book on his dashboard-- *God forgive my poor memory.*

The passenger on the backseat looks up from the papers he sorts, "Why the delay? Why all the soldiers?"

"Just a security check." To distract the client's attention and disguise his own unease, Omar nods at the swarms of birds that swirl like tufts of cumulous above them. The man, irritated, complains of being tired from the flight. Omar inches the cab forward, stops, waits his turn for the checkpoint. There are eleven cars ahead of him. He calls Tarek on his cell phone, asks after Mona, hears his niece, Nada, in the background ask, "Who's calling?"

"No, nothing yet," Tarek says.

Omar speed dials the dispatcher, says he has been delayed. "Should make it in forty-five minutes to the hotel." He turns to the passenger, "Your request was for blonds?"

"Two escorts for this evening."

The boss will not have trouble filling this order. There has been an influx of Eastern European women over the last decade or more. What does Omar care what foreigners do with each other in hotel rooms and nightclubs? Of course, as long as he and his own are left alone. Though, of course, there have been times when he has taken local women to hotels for clients. It's just a job driving women to and fro. But he does feel sullied to do so-- *just a cabbie making a living not a pimp, God forgive me if ever it seems like pimping. What choice do I have to sin or very nearly do so?* Once an engineering student, he dropped out. What was the point when so many graduates could not find employment in a stagnant economy? Why spend years in study to be what? A driver ferrying women who earn more an hour with their bodies than he does in a day. It is a living-- *Lord have mercy on me all the same. Women are awra--* the vice that blinds, the temptation of perception. The sin Eve caused Adam. He keeps his conscious clear by prayer, touches the sacred book with the tips of his fingers, calms himself as he approaches the checkpoint.

They pass with barely a nod from the officer in a red beret and wraparound sunglasses, speed along the airport road for the city center. Omar glances at the phone on

the passenger seat by him. He has willed it to ring all morning, but it remains silent. No matter, it will ring when Mona goes into labor.

Once he has dropped off the client at the hotel he collects a roadside fare, drives downtown. As if congested roads are not bad enough, traffic stalls as clouds of tear-gas climb the sides of apartment blocks, waft from sidestreets leading to the city's central square.

He drops off the passenger and decides to take an early lunch in the hope that whatever is happening settles, and the traffic returns to normal. He stops for a sandwich from a man at a street side stall, watches him whet a long thin knife by slicing it along a fluted steel rod. He gazes at the slivers of liver being chopped then cooked with onions and garlic on a hot plate over kerosene burners. It pleases him to imagine himself being so skilled with knives, wielding them so deftly. Blood drips from the edge of the hot plate, sizzles in the flames. The smell of burning blood adds to his pleasure, sharpens his appetite.

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Late afternoon, Nada stands on the side of a hill, all stone and sand, spread before her the ancient necropolis of domed mausoleums and *masjids* of the City of the Dead. Beyond it Saladin's citadel built to withstand a crusader's siege and beyond that tower blocks, spires and minarets of the city above which silver flights swing to and fro in waving pennant motion. About her a salvage yard strewn with carcasses of machines, iron entrails in heaps with skeletal frames, rusted car shells like skulls, mounds of twisted steel. It is as though a great monster flattened a mall, stomped on the stores one by one to reduce each to a pile of mangled debris. What survives in any semblance of its original form is surrounded by shattered and distorted shapes. She walks around stacks of tubes for plumbing, car exhausts, bent metal, some charred and melted. Mounds of washing machines and old television sets block her way, obscure a path pockmarked by stagnant pools of water, and oil drained and dark and foreboding. Handwritten signs point to one heap or another with some vague description. She thinks herself like a little red dot in a computer game of mazes that has to find its way to escape a gobbling Pac-man.

Nada chews the end of the nail on her forefinger, follows her father as he searches. She is not sure for what exactly. He appears too intent on whatever for her to ask. In this site of carnage, she sees discarded by the side of a furnace a large metal box, brightly colored red and green, with a binocular eyepiece protruding from its front. Two men in string vests feed a machine that crushes and compacts scrap into cubes before spewing them into the smelting oven. Thick, oily smoke rises from the furnace bed. One of the men picks up the box to throw it into the crusher.

Her father calls to him.

"Just old scrap," says the man.

The outside of the box is scratched. The leather carrying straps are missing. On the side is a small brass plate etched with the words Box of Wonders. Her father asks the scrapyards workers if they have the foldaway stand that the box sits on when in use. The man frowns, shakes his heads, has no idea what he is talking about.

Tarek examines the eyepiece, a lens held in place with rubber rings, lifts the lid to look inside the box at cogs attached to a crankshaft and an axle, checks the clip-holders connected to notches on a central rod with fitments for wheels by the lens cylinder. A hand crank turns the axle that spins the wheels. The belt is missing from a drum at the end of the crankshaft. A loose cog rattles against the sides. There does not appear to be any other

damage to the mechanism. He will not know for certain until he tries to work the machine. Behind the picture wheels, the place holder for a lantern is missing. The greater part of the box is taken up by the apparatus for a music machine, a *harmonicon*, with grooved cylinders that turn and twang a set of metal pins some of which are bent, but none appear broken.

"What is it?" asks Nada.

When he was about her age, visiting the family village during the Feast of Abraham a traveling *malahi* set up in fields nearby. He went with his father who took black and white photographs with his manually adjusted Leica camera of the tubular frames hung with swings, Ferris wheels with red and green cradles shaped like bathtubs, stands of popcorn and candy floss, and juice strained from hand presses, sugarcane crushed in wringers, while fire-eaters spat flames and a strong-man in chains tore through steel sheets with bare hands, and everywhere a blaze of colored lights from cables strung from tent tops to poles. A magician conjured coins from plain air, playing cards and pigeons from a scarf. A group of *gnawa* in robes of indigo played the three-stringed *senteer* and *qaraqab* castanets, sang the stories of the ancestors.

Past the fortune-teller's stand and the palm reader's tent, a man turned a handle by the side of a painted box. A boy in peaked hat, coat and tails, danced to a tune from the box. For a coin Tarek peered into the eyepiece -- *much like this one here*-- and watched the adventures of Farfoor the Fool unfold with images that floated before him like wraiths. Then it was that his whole world turned over, and he knew that nothing would ever contain his sense of wonder.

"I'll sell it for scrap." The salvage yard manager approaches from a hut by the crushing machine, saws the last of his lunch from his face with the back of his hand, smells of raw onions.

Tarek feigns disinterest, asks if he has another box in better condition.

"What's wrong with this one?"

"It's broken."

"They don't make machines like this anymore. Cogs solid brass. There's quality for you. You'll never find another like it. Last of its kind. If you find anything like it anywhere I'll give you a full refund."

Tarek shakes his head. He does not have money to waste on useless bits of machinery.

The dealer shows him a velvet padded storage case with wheels of colored glass, another with musical cylinders. This makes a difference. Anything mechanical can be fixed, including the gears and cranks, but the picture wheels and cylinders are irreplaceable.

"They're yours if you buy the box," the scrap-dealer says. "Is that your daughter?" He grins at Nada. "God bless. Such a beautiful child."

Nada smiles, moves closer to her father. He tucks her to his side with an arm over her shoulder, like a goose wings a gosling.

Tarek tells him to put the box and cases aside, as he keeps looking. The dealer follows them past the mounds of pipes and plumbing. He smells a sale and does not want to lose the scent.

"Business has been good lately." He glances round as though not wishing to jinx his luck, tries not to appear too eager to sell. God forbid that he appears desperate.

They stop at a mound with men selecting red bricks from rubble.

"Everything has to be sorted. Full bricks and half bricks we trade to builders, the rest goes as filler for concrete." He rubs his hands, nods at Nada who thinks he looks like funny Mr. Turyaki the puppet.

By heaps of old refrigerators, machine parts and motorbikes, Tarek sees a small van parked by several old cars. "Does it work?"

"Perfect condition. Just brought it in. AK 400 2CV, 600 cc, as good as new." The scrap-dealer fetches the keys to the ignition.

Tarek asks Nada what she thinks of the van.

Red with corrugated sides. Headlights like tipped cups. Number plates above the back doors. Tail lights red. There is a little bump on one side. Poor little AK got hurt. "AK needs a good wash."

Tarek reads the mileage on the dial, kicks the tires, slides his fingers into the wheel hubs for the brake pads, opens the hood, checks the engine, measures oil on the dip-stick. The radiator is full of coolant. He looks under the van for leaks, finds none, inspects the cast iron cylinder-head for cracks or signs of a blown gasket, unscrews the spark plugs to check their condition-- the plates black with carbon. He wipes them clean with a rag, disputes with the dealer about the condition of the plugs.

Nada climbs into the back of the van, its floor grooved and uncomfortable to sit on. Through the side window she watches the two men bargain, giggles as she thinks they do look like Farfour and Mr. Turyaki. In the privacy of the van, she bites the edges of her fingers, the tips burn red, sting from spittle on raw skin.

The scrapyard dealer takes a handful of spark plugs stripped from wrecks. "How many do you want?" He drops them on the hood of the van. "That should last you a lifetime." He is eager to seal the deal, all the while insists that he really does not need to sell.

Her father sighs, shakes his head, as though he thinks it a really bad idea to buy an old van in this condition.

"Believe me, you won't find one as good as this for the price." The dealer sighs and nods, as though doing her father a great favor.

"High mileage."

"Low considering its age."

"I can't risk a breakdown half way between here and nowhere. I'll have my daughter with me." He opens the driver's door, shakes his head, as if to say, "This is all too risky." The driver's cabin is musty. A cedar tree shaped air freshener, stale with the years, dry and stiff, hangs from the rearview mirror. There are no papers in the glove compartment to confirm the age of the vehicle. Frankly, it is in as good a condition as any van Tarek can afford. He turns on the window wipers, a single wiper scrapes across the windshield. He had not expected it to work.

"You don't need to worry about the wipers. It hardly rains," says the dealer.

"When it rains I'll need it."

"You won't want to drive in the rain. The roads aren't safe."

"If the roads aren't safe I'll want to keep driving."

"Switch it off. You'll drain the battery."

"What's wrong with the battery?"

"You don't want it going flat."

The engine starts with a single turn of the key. Tarek presses his foot to the pedal. The van roars and shakes. The exhaust rattles. Nada listen to the two men as they continue to haggle over the sound of the engine like gunfire.

Tarek gets the Box of Wonders with all the wheels and cylinders thrown in to seal the deal, shake hands with the scrapyard dealer who sighs and complains that the sale has been daylight robbery, and how his loss has been their gain. Tarek counts the money out of his wallet onto the van's quaking hood.

Nada climbs from the back into the passenger seat by her father's side.

"Ready?" He adjust the rearview mirror.

"Ready." She really cannot believe they have their own van-- *And red too. How cool is that?*

It has been a while since Tarek has driven. He furrows his brow in mock concentration, scrunches up his face as though trying to seriously figure something out. Nada giggles, partly out of excitement. They drive slowly out of the yard, through the sheet-metal gates to a high perimeter wall of bricks topped by shards of broken glass set in cement. They stop at a street corner of two and three story buildings, behind them taller blocks of five and six floors in red brick. They can cut through the old cemetery to get to the main circular road, or take side streets to avoid the necropolis.

"What should we do?" He turns to her.

"Alternate universes?"

He nods, takes out a coin.

Nada calls heads for the City of the Dead.

He flips the coin slaps it on the back of his hand. And heads it is.

They drive through the streets of the dead, now a suburb in all but name with electricity and piped water. The land between walled mausoleums built up with low rise apartment blocks of brick and yellow sandstone. Stores and workshops fill the ground floors. Nada reads out the family names on charnel houses and plays what if.

"What if in an alternate universe we had gone the other way?"

"The road would be blocked by jinn and ghouls."

She thinks that silly, but who can say what could happen in an alternate universe?

AK waits by a patch of open ground as boys play soccer with bare feet, run after a ball. Their shoes, stuffed with socks, neatly placed against the curb to avoid scuffing.

Nada watches the sky gather shadows above distant city blocks, ripple with silver swaths and effervesce like surf. "Can we go see Teta?"

"It's getting late."

She gives him a pleading look.

"But not for long. I don't want to drive in the dark."

They turn down a narrow path between rose colored stone walls, park AK by an iron gate. Tarek bangs on the gate with the flat of his hand. The sound sends sparrows fluttering from the trees around them. From the open gate, an elderly man greets Tarek, waves to Nada, removes from his belt a large ring with keys, leads them across the street to another gate in another wall. The courtyard of the domed mausoleum is full of birds sheltering in the shadows from the last of the day's sun. Inside the domed building Nada and her father stop by a trapdoor that leads down a flight of stairs to the crypt where the bones of Tarek's parents lay on stone shelves.

"Do you remember Teta?"

"Mainly from photographs grandfather took when I was a baby."

This place with its cold stone tiles makes him uncomfortable. The thought of death chills him. What might happen to Nada should he die? And to Mona, now with another child on the way?

"I have to speak to Teta." Nada glances at him as though he were intruding on a private conversation.

He nods, steps out of the mausoleum, waits in the courtyard, listens to the calls of the birds settling in the evening light, checks the time on his watch, takes out his phone to call Mona.

Once alone, Nada whispers to her grandmother that she feels ever so bad and horribly guilty. The other night in her room, she stood on tippy toes, spun round and round, pirouetted. She likes the sound of the word, pirouette. How it rolls off the tongue. She pirouetted until she was so dizzy the room spun and spun. She fell back on the bed with Teta's homemade quilt, heard the tick-tock of the living room clock and the chimes of the hour. She held her breath, closed her eyes, between strikes made her wish, an unbreakable wish, that mummy's baby did not arrive just yet-- *I don't mean never, just not yet*-- But now baby was days late and she was feeling so very sad for mummy and really wants Teta to do something to make things better and as they should be. And, yes, she very much hopes Teta is happy in Heaven.

At the crossroads out of the City of the Dead, AK stops to let pass an army patrol. Men in khaki uniforms with green flak jackets and automatic rifles across their chests sway like mules behind an armored Humvee. It trundles ahead then slows for the soldiers to catch up. An alarm goes off from a parked car as the Humvee rolls past. The siren rips through the late afternoon stillness. Nada glances at her father. His face hardens to see soldiers. He chews on his moustache. She glances through the iron grillage of a garden fence. Children sit on benches. Their hands rest on books open on their laps. With heads raised, they read with their fingers, take turns to recite out loud. The teacher claps her hands, tells them to prepare for dictation. They hold plastic stencils against sheets of paper to pierce with a stylus. Nada watches the children, imagines what it would be like to be blind, dependent on memory without perception, to never see a puppet show in all its colors, feels a terrible sadness. Once the patrol moves on, the traffic starts up again.

In the fading light, with the sky now golden, past old city ruins, AK follows the ancient aqueduct raised on high stone arches lined with chorusing flocks of birds. It is just like the movies on television of ticker-tape parades, but instead for confetti feathers. AK crosses the bridge over the river by the old cinema with painted posters for movies first screened long before Nada was born. They turn at a side street by a store selling juice and yoghurt into a narrow alley that leads to the *Karagoz* theatre. Her father drives slowly. All about them starlings and sparrows mass in flurries on the ground, scatter to make way for a hot and tired AK.

Tarek parks the van by the puppet theatre with two wheels on the sidewalk.

Nada waits in the passenger seat as her father folds back the shutters to the front of the theatre. The little black dog yaps, leaps through the rear doors to AK, climbs between the seats to lay with wagging tail, bright-eyed, on Nada's lap. She watches her father, the phone pressed to one ear, his hand on the other to muffle the bird sounds as he calls her mother. He finishes talking, slips the phone into his pocket, removes the Box of Wonders and the cases of glass wheels and musical cylinders from the back of the van. Nada strokes the dog on her lap, pats the dashboard. "This is AK." She is sure they will be the best of friends.

Starlings settle on the warm hood of the van and along its roof, cover it in more feathers.
