Volume One: Creative Thesis

Allah on the Soles of his Feet

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Alice Melike Ülgezer

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School of Media and Communication

RMIT University

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Declaration

I certify that except where due acknowledgment has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the thesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; and, ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

Signature ________________

Alice Melike Ülgezer

Date ____________________
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Allah on the Soles of His Feet

Alice Melike Ülgezer
Empty Boots
The Pen That Lit The Fire Made The Bird Fly From The Tree
This is what I remember this is where I have been. My feet still bear the corns from the running, always the running. My eyes yet the distances. My lips are parched and my ears ring with the sound of dogs running by me in the night. Paw pads through saltbush, hot gusts of air over wet tongues. And yes, all of this, when I was merely the size of a baby bee and all this before I was spirited out like a fish into the English spring of Kingston and my umbilical cord was thrown into the Thames with the hope of it reaching the Aegean.

Having existed as an infinitesimal speck of light, laying dormant for aeons in a space where horizons don’t exist and bound tightly as a knuckle of secrets, I yearned to realise myself. My mother longed too and called me with the swing of her compass as she hungered to return like tidewater to the ocean. Drawn by her sigh in the heat haze, by her solitary sorrow, I found I couldn’t resist revealing myself even if she didn’t notice me. I couldn’t wait and I admit and most of us do. We swell and pulse out in those farthest reaches beyond breath. We come when we are called into being, when we are desired and when we desire. But I couldn’t wait. I craved to see the land where my two lovers met my self, such was their journey. I desired to know them from the beginning and refused to let the fog of amnesia descend on me. The price for my impatience was great. I had the gift of a seer. Yet bound and configured by the vagaries of form I found I could not
alter the course of events and was compelled to wander for years, lost
and alienated from where I had come, unable to return, unable to
reveal myself totally. And as I sit here oceans away and years later
writing this I realise that I have never told anybody what I am about to
tell you. Some people have heard some parts and some, others,
perpetuating a disjointed narrative that retires every so often. I have
never told anybody from the beginning; from the first word, the first
breath, from the first time I came ashore for we are all born at
adventure. I have wanted to tell before but my Friend urged me to
secrecy and keeping secrets has never been my strong point. Even
when I was a child my grandmother chided me by calling me a
chatterbox. But by then you see I had been moving for a long time.
And when there is no rest for a tired spirit I swear on the stars that
made me that it is so hard to remember how to stop. So I tell you this
sometimes running, sometimes walking, spilling secrets as I go. And
as I sit here lonely with fatigue and solitude I realise that I won't be
here long so I must begin.
Allah on the Soles of his Feet
And
Baba
Rose
As
The
Flames
Fled
The
Canopy
My father, Captain Schizophrenia, as he once penned himself on a wall, leans forward a little in his armchair.

“Alis” he says, “in de Beginning when Allah made eweryting, der were fruit trees everywhere. You can’t imagine what it was like! Oo-ooff you have to be there to taste it and then you really know, more than imagining. You could just walk around and pick fruit, so many fruit.”

The words come slowly with an unnerving calm as he imparts his knowledge with the haze of a visionary. Despite his slumped shoulders, his kohl rimmed eyes blacken over and his face grows taut in concentration. His tracksuit pants have been cut off at the knees to accommodate the stifling summer heat and his feet tap on the carpet in leather shoes a size or so too big. With one hand he picks up his prayer beads and begins to swing them around his calloused butcher's fingers as he continues, “Oo-off you can’t imagine! Life was so bootiful der! All ower de eart you could eat whatever fruit you wanted. Orange, pomegranate, pineapple, pear.”

He pauses, playing with the tip of his full grey beard with his fingertips and I notice his skin is unusually pale, floodlit under the opaque florescent. The beads thwack and thwop one last time before he lets them collapse on the coffee table between us. He trembles slightly as he takes three cigarette papers, licks the Arabic gum and sticks them together to form a little white flag on which he crumbles some sticky red dope. He sighs through a prayer, through the gap where a tooth once was and his tobacco-stained fingers tremble with the lighter as a slack wind sucks the torn curtain in and out of the window.

I can see him now, my Adam, my prophet, reaching a hand up through the rough branches of the pear tree. His toes stretch as far as they can as he leans in for the fruit. But it's the
glow of the lighter that flickers red-yellow as he tries once then twice to light his joint. Finally it catches and he inhales deeply leaning back for a moment he utters, “Aha, dat's de one Alis, dat's de one.”

He has another puff on his joint then taps it tenderly on the side of the ashtray, rolling the smouldering end this way and that, and as he lays it to rest for a moment the sharpened tail end of inked Arabic letters are revealed for a moment beneath the sleeve line of his tee shirt.

“All de animals of de world lived der,” he whispers, looking up at me. “So many. Animals who are now deat forever, de serpents you can't imagine! One look from dem and you dead!”

He straightens up abruptly and I see now how bloated his belly has become. "One look." And I am enveloped in the relief of sweet, blue-grey smoke.

"But didn’t the serpent come to wake up Eve?" I caution.

He looks at me suspiciously and ignoring my question says gravely, "Listen Alis. Allah made de earth wit eweryting we needed. Foods and water and places to live but den de peacock came; handsome and greedy. Kendidni Beyanmish," he hisses. "Proud as Lucifer.

"The peacock?"

"Ye. Allah looket to de world what he created wit his eyes, says, 'No, no my pipol will spoil it. I create the animal who will eat 100 seed a day from every fruit tree till dey die and den I'll send it to eart.' And dey were eating ewery day 100 seeds from every fruit tree. A lot of peacock and de fruit trees died. Whatever dey left over, whatever left today, dat's what we got."
"Did the peacock go with Noah in the ark?"

"Noooo it was early…. far before Noah. Miilyons of year ago. First creation of de world I'm talkin about, first days of de world …." 

"Oh."

"Ye, I tink it's six bilyon year ago, something like dat."

He muses and picks up the joint again not looking at me as he smokes and I wonder how long it takes an oyster to make a pearl.

Through the open window, the tangle of tram wires and the blue stone wall of a church throbbing in the black heat of the day. Shadows criss-cross his lined face as suddenly he breaks the silence.

“Der were so many pear trees. Hundreds. Tousands! The eart was just covered in fruit. You couldn’t beleew Alis, you couldn’t beleew, you never gone hungry der!”

Sunlight catches the corner of a coin that sits in a pile of others on the table between us and he shields his eye not waiting for a response.

"And for seven tousand years der is de peacock flirting with de moon and de sun, wandering the eart, eating hundred seed a day. Can you imagine?! Flirting wit de sun? Wit de moon?! Pa! How come?"

These words come out like fire lighters, ready to ignite. I look at him, my face written over in invisible ink. He hasn’t yet admitted that he knows how to read these hieroglyphs so he answers himself.

"I don’t know Alis. I don’t know."
And at that he breaks off into a rasping cough. Still holding the joint he doubles himself over as his eyes brim and his face reddens with every wheezing, racking splutter.

“Baba, are you okay?” I ask as I move to the edge of my seat in alarm. “Do you want me to whack your back?”

He continues to cough and then gripping the side of the armchair he leans forward a fraction and spits decisively out the window and wipes his chin with the back of his hand.

"EstaughfurAllah," he mutters into his knuckles.

"Baba?"

And he waves away my advances spluttering incredulously, "Wandering de eart and eating! De fruit it ate disappeared for ever. Gone!"

His red eyes water a little as he gives a last cough, clears his throat and takes a deep reassuring draught on the joint. Holding the smoke in his lungs for a moment a sudden light shines in his eyes as the fine grain mist of a certain familiar calm descends upon us.

Smoke plumes curl from his nostrils and then poof I am enveloped again.

“But çok şükür it didn’t eat all the fruit Alis. It left some for humans. Yeas! Pears, oranges, bananas, tobacco, coffee, marijuana, it left for humans."

He pronounces this last word with a languid mischievous smile and I glimpse for a moment vistas of the round earth scooping off in all directions, ripe and laden with sweet abundance.

"Ooof! Life was so beautiful there…. It was like de heaven….But der is no heights. Der is no mountain in heaven…all straight…"

“Flat?”
“Ye and eart is mother of pearl. Trees are growin in de pearl eart, different trees different fruit, all different, and you talk different your heart is clean. Allah goin to wash our hearts. Get rid of de worldly ss-piins, you know what I mean . . .? ”

I don’t ask how Allah will wash our hearts or how fruit would have grown from pearls as there is no apple to reach for here, no hundred seeds. Just this man I have watched for years whose belly heaves and deflates now with every laboured breath, like a ships hull rocking under the water.

“And so you see de fruit trees are created by Allah, single numbers, dats de why.”
"What do you mean, single numbers?"
"Like tree, five, elewen, nine. Not six. Hundred and sewen."
And he laughs as if at some private joke as I await the punch line.
"So I get my beauty out of dat fruit trees. Nobody tought about it. I get good sense out of dat u see? I get hundred point too. Hundred good seeds, good…ah what's 'is name . . .?"
His eyes shine smiling, then hanging his head to his lap, he coughs again, "Alhumdalillah rab alaalamiin!!"

This dank carpeted room stifles me. This summer stifles me. These stories stifle me. The walls seem to slacken and it feels as if at any moment they will cave in with one almighty collapse, at once dashing all my hopes of getting out of here alive. Here in this room in which every imaginable surface is scribbled over with Arabic; the walls, the cupboards, the windowsills, his shoes and even his socks. Here where the curtains suck sickly in and out with every feeble breath of air, here in this languid anaemic summer where he sits
smoking a sticky red resin, where I sit beside him, becoming more and more intoxicated on this exercise of re-imagining, re-writing maps of love that are essential to make an escape from these two lovers of mine. Here where I am trying to re-configure their desire, here in this story, his story, her story into which I was born, from which I am running, here in this heady smoke, in his dislocated beginnings, it is from here that I have to get out of alive.

His hallucinatory musings are suspended somewhere between us as he puffs quietly, abstractedly and I wonder when he would have penned all these images on his walls. A ducktail bobbing above a waterline its head forever submerged in the peeling grubby paint. Nearby a faceless man in a long kaftan which hangs open to reveal an erection and a faceless woman stands by him, also naked.

The cigarette box on the table between us reads:

In the name of God
The Most Merciful
The Most Compassionate

Winfield Red

On his wall above the door he has written the same. And around the profile of a busty woman leaning back on her hands he has embroidered an Arabic border of prayers.
Subuhan Allah over and over in the shape of a love heart. He notices me looking at her prayers and yawns, "La ilaha illAllah." There is no god but God.

"Oceans cannot finish it up what does dat mean," he tells me. "Even if de ocean were ink and de angels were secretaries dey couldn't finish it. It means so many ting. It means so much Alis. It can help you so much."

"I am trying to learn the Fatihah," I tell him and he recites it from beginning to end not taking his eyes from mine for even a moment.

"And the Ikhlas," I add, which he recites also. The prayer of sincerity of faith.

"Learn dem Alis. Good, learn dem," he concludes. "Save yourself," he adds under his breath and I'm not sure if it's to me he's talking.

"I will, I will." I say earnestly.

"Devil is playing games wit you," his voice comes thick and steady, "coz you're my daughter," and he pauses for a moment eyeing me circumspectly, waiting for a response but I sit innocent, reticent. The pressure of my history gathering silent speed yet my back remains straight.

"Dats de why you must learn dem," he concludes finally, unable to pin anything on me.

"Ah…"

"Ye," he says decisively, staccato.

“But I’m alright, even if he is playing with me," I caution.

His thumb rests on the top of the lighter wheel for a second as he puts the joint between his lips and at once there is fire. He takes a drag and continues.

“Anything happens in lifetime, it's from Allah. Including accidents, it's from Allah. Good deeds and bad deeds are all from Allah."
“So then what about the dev-?”

But he doesn’t let me finish and waving away my ignorance laughs quickly shaking his head, “Alis de Palis!”

I can almost surrender to the visionary tide of his musings yet these days I am no longer a child and unlike the duck I keep my head above water most of the time. I keep my head above water because there I have a better chance of understanding these legends that he tells himself.

The couch beside us sags open to reveal tattered foam cushioning, the walls have the patina of itinerants and unanswered prayers. The grubby carpet sports an urban ground cover of tobacco and dope shreds and a fire place that has been boarded up graces the wall opposite. We sit in the shifting yellow-grey afternoon light that somehow makes it through the heavy grime of the two curtained windows overlooking Sydney Road and it is home.

“Who was your Sheikh you were telling me once. Astral travelling, the one you said was astral-…?”

He turns to the window into the light and I admire the sun that has travelled so far to meet his face.

"What was his name again?"

His hands rest on the frayed edge of his pants. Grey calluses beneath his finger tips as he utters low to himself, “He trawelled…trawelled…”
His voice trails off and he doesn’t look at me. Fearing I’ve asked too much I shift about on my chair, the sound of my bangles rousing him and he re-emerges, “Ibrahim. My Sheikh's name, Ibrahim.”

"Ah, that's right…"

"He travelled de universe. Den he travelled 500 year distance of one screen. He has to pass 5 screen like dat to go to heaven."

“What’s a screen?”

But the light moves across his eyes and he doesn’t hear me.

“What do you mean by screen?” I ask again.

“Ah… sort of a curtain but you can’t...”

“Ah curtain, ok...”

“But you can’t see it. You can't pass, you hev to hev speshal allowance to pass from Allah, otherwise no one can pass. And he passed. He see...he saw eweryting, He saw de hell. He saw to heawen, and den he went to hell and he see...he seen scorpions big as a mule,” he almost whispers. His voice hoarse, frightened and he stretches up an arm the height of the beast, raising his eyebrows in earnest.

I raise my eyebrows in support and shake my head a little in disbelief wondering just what crime would warrant such a creature.

“Dat big scorpions to punish de pipol.”

"Oh," I utter in trepidation "Ye," he says. "One of der poison, of dat scorpions, if it comes on to de world, world will shrink. It's dat poisonous! Dats for de humans to be punished…”

His hand wavers imminently a metre or so above the floor as he grows quiet.
He scares himself sometimes with words like this, and others. He scares himself almost to tears. Not looking at me he says sadly, the light catching the corner of his eye, "No, I don’t wanna go to hell. No way. I don’t wanna go to hell."

I want to reach out and hold him. I did it once but he just went stiff as a board in my arms, stiff as a ship’s mast.

"Baba," I implore, "you won’t go to hell."

"No, no we won't," he answers distractedly, barely audible.

The sound of someone stirring; a teaspoon against glass and all that was still shudders in a sudden gust of wind.

He gets up abruptly from his seat and leans out the window to peer past the blue stone church at the clock-face which hangs from the town hall.

"Asalam alaykum Abi!" he calls to someone below on Sydney road as he cranes his neck through the slackening heat. And then he is quiet. With his back to me all I see is his forearm bend and his shoulders lean in as he takes a puff of his joint every now and then. I hear him breathe out and then sigh. I am used to listening. I listen to his silence when he all but evaporates and gazes like this, out into the middle distance for minutes on end, and I am listening still when he resurfaces with the sighing exhalation of La illahe illAllah, and grinds the cardboard end of the joint into the crystal ashtray. La Illahe illAllah I repeat softly to myself. Scorpions aren't hungry for my father but the doors of heaven aren't open to him either and so in this exile, cursed with this loneliness he wanders.

"It’s a nice old church, don’t you think?" I ask.

Turning to face me, he laughs abruptly as if sloughing off an old skin.
"I don’t think about it," he says disinterestedly. "It doesn't interest me. Some mosques don’t interest me. Anyway, I have to pray."

"Ah…It's just that it's made of really nice old blue stone…"

"Look," he cuts in, "some of de mosques in Istanbul, full of art nouveau! All dese tiles and dis and dat. You put dem together and dey make faces. Mohamed wanted simple mosque, simple. But now we are all praying into, de in front of de stetue and decorations like a church….."

He stands by the window outlined by the blue stone waiting for an affirmation. But it doesn’t come. Once he wrote on the walls of the town I grew up in, at the back of Turkish take-away No Tattoos in Churches, No Stetue in Churches. I recognised his aerosol hand writing and never asked him about it. I offer no reflection and he continues emphatically before sitting down again.

"Alis dey don’t wash der feet wen dey do woudou."

"Voodoo?"

"Ye woudou. Dey say in desert it was no water."

I listen simply without needing to understand and then inadvertently,

"But there was water. I saw it. And you and the magician were drink-…" and I stop myself quickly.

Baba is profoundly still.

"No no I mean…ah there is water in churches, they, ah, have water. Holy water," I add in vain obfuscation.

Some wave of tacit generosity floods gently in as I fumble and he lets it go.
Leaning forward a little so I can see the deep porousness of his skin, the oil in the creases of his nostrils, the thick white wire of his beard, he says, "You hev to say euzubillahi min ashaytan a refijim, bismillah irahman irahiim…Let the name of Allah protect me from de Shaytan and den, I wish to wash myself under de name of Allaahh. Ok?"

"Ok," I say in relief.

"And you don’t worry bout no magician sh’magician, tamam?"

"Tamam Baba."

"Okay. And den you start washing wit your fingers front."

He annunciates fingers like I would singers and lightly massages the tips of each digit on his right hand, one by one.

"And den between your fingers and your hands and while you washing dem you say la illahe illallah tree times…"

"Up to here then?" I roll up my sleeves to my elbows.

"No, no. First hands and den mouth."

He cups his hand and raises it quickly to his mouth and I can almost see water light splash.

"And den nose." He moves the heel of his cupped hand from his chin to his nose and breathes in. I remember the effervescent tickle of prayer water making my eyes water.

"And den face, and den arms, and den head, and den ears, and den your neck."

His hands move over his crown.

"And den first right foot den left foot. Wit your left hand you hev to do all dis. Don’t mix it wit right. Wit left."

He sighs and takes a deep breath and then sniffs loudly through his nose, the virtual ablutions almost completed.
"Ye," he remembers something, "And, I start to wet my head - hair from my forehead. I hold de water like dis here first and den I go ewerywhere, but first my forehead."

Leaning out the window to look at the clock face again, he says, "Alis, I hev to pray."

When he returns from the bathroom I watch him silently, not daring to move lest my bangles break the silence. He takes a green skull cap from the back of his chair and pushes it firmly down over his grey curls and then reaches for a long white scarf on the top of the wardrobe and sitting on the edge of his seat winds it carefully about his head. A green prayer rug I gave him is rolled out and he stands at the foot of it with his hands behind his ears and his heart toward Mecca moving his lips in almost inaudible prayer. People call to each other down the hallway outside his door but in this singing up he is transported and his naked suffering heart is almost too much for me to bear.

I have prayed with him before. I have mumbled along behind him swathed in a scarf stumbling across sounds and syllables always a few beats behind. My hands moving to my ears instead of my chest, my mind wandering as he held his hands the right way. I remember noticing people through the window standing outside on the evening street corner, their furtive jacketed and quizzical expressions.

I remember the evening prayer in Istanbul. A chorus of ezzans weaving though each other. Each with a different texture, tone and finish. Each voice a man calling God through the torpid heat of the evening. Red flame blossoms lay on their branches, lay still in the voices, and the utter quietude afterwards as if a spell had been cast. Even the street dogs
stood still like statues until the voices evaporated into the night. Over each shoulder he offers a final wish of peace then leans his hands heavily on his cracking knees and rises to unwind his white turban and remove his green crocheted skull-cap from beneath it. Then looking at me he says through yellow stained teeth and kohl rimmed eyes, “Insh’allah Alis, one day you will wear the full hijaab.”

I smile wanly and say nothing. After all that has passed, nights of singing for our supper together on street corners ensconced in the sweet oblivion of intoxication, the bitter husk of survival, the raw unsung veins of this history, the trajectories of petty crime. All that has passed; the trumpet he left in the middle of a football oval, turned his back on and sped away from, the Double Bass of dubious origins that we smuggled from one end of Melbourne to the other in the Morris Minor, the nights of me belly dancing on a street corner while he played the violin, or the parties of people we entertained at outdoor cafes afterwards with me on the accordion. Or the bottle of Sherry he had hidden beneath his kaftan when a photographer from *The Melbourne Times* took our photo together on Sydney Road, or the way he instructed me to speak in halting English when we began busking, telling people we had just got off the boat. Or the time we lived together in a share house, he beneath the staircase and I in the back shed, walking from one end of our city to the other, instruments under our arms, our pockets empty. After all that has passed it doesn’t come as a surprise that he should lay this wish out before me to blanket out my visual identity in one billowing swoop. Covering over the big Turkish pants I wear, the skirts, the bangles, the jewellery, all my *shingr shingrs* as he calls them and the costumes.
After all that has passed, this wish, coming as it is from a visionary bobbing about on the furthest tides of intoxication; synthetic, organic and otherwise, is never repeated and perhaps forgotten.

"So when do you see Ibrahim your Sheikh?" I ask, changing the subject. "Is he at a local mosque?"

"Haha!" He laughs at me. "He dead long time ago Alis! I dunno maybe six hundred year ago."

"Oh."

"He's coming from de Samarkand. Somewhere der and he tell me bootiful ting, different ting."

"Ye?"

"Have you heard of de triangle of La illahe illAllah?"

"No."

"La illahe illAllah start between your eyebrows. You hev to shut your eye and you looket der." He closes his eyes and with an index finger pointing to the middle of his forehead he continues.

"And den your belleh button," his finger moves down his torso. "And den your right shoulder and back to here again."

He opens his eyes and draws again with his finger.

"Sort of a triangle. Dang dang dang dang. You hev to do like dis. Look I do it now for you."
He closes his eyes again and says deep and slow showing me with his finger from the start again
"LaaaaaaaaaaailllllaaahhhehillllAllllaaahh." He makes a round of the triangle in a sonorous bass drawing out every syllable before resting on the last one for a moment.
"So my eyes looks dat way, and dat way, and dat way, and back dat way sort of a triangle."
"Right. Ye."
"So it gives you different sense. And if you do hev a deep breat." He gulps in as much as he can.
"Fill your lungs and you hev to say tweny-trree times witout your lip movemement, wit your heart and under your tongue, tweny-tree times La illahe illAllah and at de end when you say de last tweny-tird, when you giving your breat away, you say like dis, Mohamedan Rasoul Allah." There is a sensuous release in this last declaration.
"Look-look," he says excitedly. "I do it now look, look."
He expels all his breath with wide eyes before filling his lungs.

I am attentive and watch as he points to each digit with his index finger first on his right hand and then on his left. I say it over in my head along with him and try to hold my breath, but fail. He smiles at my sudden exhalation and keeps on going up to his last three digits, holding my eyes and then, "Mohammedan Rassoull Alllaaaahh."
Laughter flowers between us and I am proud of him.
Still beaming he says, "Dat's different, it's bootiful. My Ibrahim, my Sheik he says dis. I'm belong to him, so if I go dat way you come wit me dat way…Ye…"
I feel yet the last ripple of laughter when I ask, "Was your Ibrahim, your Sheikh, was he Sufi?"

"Naqshibendi. He was Naqshibendi. And my name is Ahmed Naqshibendi and ah, Naqshibendi pipol do dose tings."

"Ah. Where's the Naqshibendi people from?"

"Naqshibendi pipol is from Mohamed…Mohammed's arms and Ebaa Bekir."

"Baar Bekir?"

"Ebaaa."

"Ebaaa," I repeat wondering who he is talking about.

"Eba Bekir. Dats right his name."

"Who's that?"

"He's is de right hand of de Mohamed."

And just before I think to ask who is his left hand - "Oh!" I finally hear past his accent.

"Abu Bakir!"

"Eba Bekir," he confirms with authority. "He used to do like dat."

"Ahh! He was his uncle, right….?"

"Yes."

"Or, no…Who's his uncle? Abu Talib or Abu…?"

"Ye…. No…ah ….Abu Bakir is not his uncle but very close friend."

"Ah, right."

"Eba Bekir was milyon air. He gave all his money to poor Islam and he left ower wit noting at home at night and he had to go to Mohammed to ask some food, some tea. He has got no money after he gave everting away he is dat kind man….."
"Wow," I nod my head.

"I'm gonna hev a tea. You want one?"

"Ye, I'll have one."

He gets up and unplugs the electric kettle from its place on the floor and goes outside to what barely passes as a shared kitchen and fills it up at the sink. I hear the water running and call out through the open door,

"Baba, did Mohamed do miracles like Jesus?"

"Wait a minute!"

He turns off the tap, comes back in and shutting the door behind him plugs in the kettle. His hands still wet he wipes them on his trousers and says, "Ye he cut-ed open de moon!"

"I heard this ye! What's this story?"

"He opened it out to de two like dat, and closed again. Everybodi in de Middle East watched it. Including Jews," he adds with authority.

"Ah…I heard this story before I think. Is that in a Hadith or something?"

"Hadis ye from Hadis…"

"My God, he split the moon in half?" I say to myself.

"Ye."

"And what did the Jews say?"

"Dey said to Mohamed; 'Jesus was doing dis! Opening up de dead, ah, blind pipol's eyes, curing de leprosy.' Eyewertying dey told him. He says, 'If you are a prophet, prove us!' Something like dat, and den Mohamed said, 'Looket to de moon.' Dey all looket to de moon and he did dis."
Baba slices his hand through the full white moon suspended between us and each half falls away from its axis. The two parts hang ripe, swinging now and then on their hinges.

"Opened it up to two, cut it to two end den it came together again! Everybody saw it!"

"Hmmm……..wow….."I say quietly, looking as the two halves swing back to a whole.

"He called Sünnet what's Prophet used to do. Not dat but all de eating sleeping wawawa-wawawa."

"Ahh. Like how he lived"

"Mmm," he nods a little. "I gev up now but I used to do what exactly what Mohammed used to do. I used to do everything exactly what it was…ye."

But the moon between us has gone now.

"And den de book said, 'whose de person who lives every Sünnet and,' eh, 'he lives de Sünnets and one different.' Doing de one of dem, and de leaving de rest. I'm doin dat now."

And he sighs. The kettle, which has undoubtedly seen better days, begins to tremble a little on the carpet and he leans down to unplug it, pours the boiling water into two cloudy glasses and dangles tea bags in them.

"Wanna keep de tea bag in it?" he says.

"Evet," I practice my Turkish.

"Şeker?" He chuckles.

"Bir tane Babagym!"

He laughs now at my accent then adds, "Ye, he did de miracles," and trills the teaspoon against the glass.
"Remember once you said to me, ages ago, you said, 'Now your name is Ganeshka Naqshibendi'?"

We both laugh quickly, impulsively, deeply.

"And at the time I was like, what's that? And you wouldn't tell me. Remember?!"

He smiles sheepishly.

"And I was like what's that?!"

He laughs again.

"Am I still Ganeshka Naqshibendi?"

"No. Melike. Melike Naqshibendi. Melike is very good name Alis, very good name, verry good. I cannot explain how good dat is, how bootiful it is. I just can't explain. And its one of de Allah's names."

I have read Allah's names emblazoned down the middle of the highway from the Sinai to Cairo. Don't Forget the Remembrance of God.

"Like Hanan?"

"Ye but if you were boy I would hev to call you Abdul Melik. You hev to add Abdul. If you say Melik it's sin. You using Allah's name as a name. No it's not allowed."

"Mmmmm..." I sip my tea.

"But Abdul Melik, it's ok. Or Melike it's ok. Some...changes. For instance Aziz. Abdul Aziz, Abdul Muttalib, Abdul Taalib, Abdul Wahab, Abdul Raheem, Abdul Rahman."

"Abdul Samad."

"Abdul Samet ye. Abdul, always Abdul."
The sky out the window has bled powder blue to navy-black ink and I glimpse the first star of the evening. Nodding abstractedly I wait for him to continue and wring my hands together, interlocking my fingers into strange configurations of impatience and quiet improvised prayer. Dad sips his steaming tea and gazes out at the early evening sky past the texted Arabic on the windowsill to the traffic. In his hand he fingers the thirty-three beads of his tesbik, one by one repeated three times, the final phase of prayer. He continues the recitation of his prayers under his breath swinging the beads around his fingers and begins to tell me about the jinn.

"Jinns are…Dehwil's family."

"But aren't there good jinn?"

"Ye der are Mūslūm jinns and der are kufar jinns. Dey live under de houses and do woudou. Curses, spells."

"Mmm."

"Kufar jinns are livin on de coast lines of de world, on de beaches. But good jinnies are livin on de hills, on de mountiains. Mūslūm jinns are livin on de mountains and Mohammed did dat (allayhi salam). Mohamed was reading one day, no he was…he went to de toilet in de desert and den he didn’t come back and all his mates are start to get worried on him. 'What happened!? What happened?! Let's go and see.' Dey go and see and he was sitting der and reading de Qur'an!"

I nod with wide eyes as I should.

"Hi-his Qur'an, pocket Qur'an but dey can't see and Mohamed finished it- closed it, put it to his pocket, get up and said 'I was reading Qur'an to jinns.'"
He hangs on to this last s like a whisper-hiss and holds my gaze for a moment before continuing.

"'And I separate dem to Mūslūm jinns into hills…kufar jinns into coast, beaches.'"

"Ah."

"He separated dose days bout a thousand year ago-ye," he adds quietly as he blows on his tea.

"So jinns body, inside, if you cut open. Open it up like dat."

He slices up from his hips to his throat with the edge of one palm letting the beads dangle slackly from his fingers.

"Is a fuel. Is a flame, like velding oxy. Dat hot!" he puffs.

"Dey can only eat out of worlds, food is, manure and de bones." His eyes widen with the last growl of a word as he continues, "Beleewer jinns are eating from de Műslũm boochers and non beleewers eating from de kufar boochers…"

Have I seen these jinn, shadow flashes, spiriting over the web of tram-wires down Sydney road at the end of the day, trying to decide which butcher to eat from, one in Brunswick or one further north? And the kufar ones idling about between boxes at the back of a Delicatessen or slipping in under the doors and plastic fly curtains of a fast food joint.

"Different bones. One has got a blood de other one hasn’t got a blood tings like dat."

"Right…so does the helal bones have blood or no blood?"

"No blood…no blood at all."

"Of course, ye cos they drain it."
"Ye, dey all drained. De other meats are drained too but dey don't say *bismillahi Allahu ekber,*" and slice goes his hand with the knife across the neck.

"Ah," and I caution, my hand to my throat.

"Dey cut like dis. Lay de sheep down here or de beef, tied it up-tied it up, big knife of course, and you say *bismillahi Allahu ekber!* Boom-pa! You kill it like dat, so dat means *bismillah* I start under de name of Allah…*Allahu ekber* means *Allah* is one. And den you kill it and den you have sacrifice -helal meat."

Baba has been a butcher by trade, a graffiti conversationalist by night, a musician, a barber, a vagabond, and a nocturnal numinous nomad singing up the secrets of our streets, our spirits. I have visited him before, out the back of the Istanbul butcher on Sydney Road surrounded by carcasses hanging on hooks, up to his elbows in blood. I have stumbled across the remnants of his haphazard editorials on the walls of the town I grew up in.

He clears his throat suddenly and continues, "*Allah says; Eat it, as much as you want, but don’t spoil it, don’t spoil yourselves.*"

"Spoil, yaniy eat a lot?"

"Ye too much. I give up det too. I was eating helal meat always…*alllwaaays!* Neow I give up det too."

"I only eat helal meat."

"No I give up," he says without looking at me.

His sister blames all his troubles on the vengeance of jinn and attributes his state to a digression he apparently made against Islam.
"Look at the way he sits when he holds the tesbik," she would say. "Pa! You can't pray like that. Das ist fürbotten kizim. Harram."

“Especially in prison dese jinn will come and visit you,” he says now. “Dey sit and dey torment you Alis. Dey tell you maybe same ting ower and ower again for days and nights. So you just sitting in der and you just listening and passing the time. What else can you do?”

He looks to his tesbik as he finishes the prayer and holds them now between his thumb and index finger before flicking them over the back of his hand and then swinging them over and between each of his digits. They snake and slap their way down eventually to between his ring and little finger where they thwop back up to the thumb and index finger again. It’s like a dexterous riddle and he performs it with a swaggering look in his eyes. He says everybody in Turkey used to do it in the seventies while they walked the streets, “I don’t know why Alis.”

I want to learn how to swing the beads.

“Show me,” I say.

He leans back in the chair, utterly composed, calm and with a sly satisfied grin as he plays without looking or tangling them, with the ease of a fisherman at his net. I watch his fingers intently and he smiles and swings the tesbik back around again with a rhythm like a samba. Shluk shluka shluk…

They thwop and twirl and brap and bead around his calloused working butcher’s fingers. And at once he is an old gangster, an old Kulan Bey swinging his beads, twirling his moustache, crooning yaavvrrroum, baby, to passing girls whilst he sits playing
backgammon and smoking hash. He hands me the beads and I take them in my fingers swinging them around but we laugh as I tangle them and skip a few digits in the ladder.

I remember my Mother used to giggle like a little girl when he swung them and I remember watching him watching her. And I have a sudden urge to unthread the tesbik and rip up the floor boards and find these jinn and tear them and their mischief out. I want to rip the tongues from their ethereal little throats and cut up their spirits with a butcher’s knife.

Noticing my hackles go up suddenly he says again, "Devil is playing de games wit you Alis," he says portentously.

"Say de triangle of La illallhe illAllah ewery day."

"Alright," I murmur.

"Ewery day."

"Tamam Baba," I concede as my will begins to come undone.

"See what happens is de angel of deat comes."

Just who I want to see right now I think blackly as I reach for my now cold tea, gulping it down anyway.

"And he looks at you, what hev you done on your life. He looks at you and he can see like a teewee screen, he can see eweryting at once. And if he sees this pray I told you, different taking de life of you. Different…more gentler…more softer you'll smile when you die! You'll laugh when you die! Yes Alis! It's like tickling hahehahahaha - you dead!"

And he guffaws dying and laughing over and again.

"It's like dat! Beleewe me it's like dat!"
I guess he's trying to make me feel better. I guess it's working.

"But," he announces, the final judgement imminent any second now. "You hev to prepare yourself. Mmm…Deat can come any time."

He takes a cigarette paper from its packet and begins to roll another joint. His elbows rest on his knees as he talks into his lap concentrating.

"Ye so dats de why is better to not to talk about it wit your friends. About Allah, just don’t talk, just ignore dem. Dey don’t beleew. Dey all shirk you see."

"Whats shirk again? I’ve read that word."

"Non-beleewers…Kaafir…Kufar… Ye dey all kufar dey all kaafir," he utters with something like regret.

"What can I do? I knew it, I knew Australia was kufar. I come like dat in Avustralia, I knew de Avustralia kafir, I knew it. So all welcome to me, you know what I mean I'm ready for dem."

"But there are Muslims here."

"Ye der are some fundamentalist idyots round here. Dey expecting ordinary Avussian to pray like dem!"

He catches my eye and seeing that I am braced he laughs once reassuringly. Then opening his palms to the ceiling, and furrowing his glistening brow he looks straight at me and says, "Alis listen, I tell you from the beginning again."
Giddy from the vertigo of flight I landed in the mountains outside Kabul. From my bird’s eye view I saw the pockmarked mud flats, impressed with deep lakes in the middle. Out in the reaches the land swooned with the memory of water leaving valleys and mountains and sun baked flats. Desert frogs lived intermittently in these cracks and sometimes birds plunged at them from icy mountain hungering heights. I too swooped down, skating across the water with my toes, trailing ripples of clouded reflection, ecstatic with my birth, (of sorts). Reeling from flight I landed with a heavy thud on the rocky side of a mountain where my mother lay in the awakening winter sun. Propped on one bent arm she rolled a cigarette with pink chilled fingers. A leather bag I would come to recognise was beside her. I could see the tip of a paintbrush, the chipped curve of a saucer flaked with paint squeezed from a tube. Lighting the cigarette the storm of her pretty lips pursed to inhale. Her boots stood nearby, orphaned of feet, waiting to walk, to exhale, to reveal the winters her heart had seen, the summers her heart would see. Her boots hung suspended somewhere between the first breath of her story and the last; waiting for her wings to unfold. They waited for the time when they wouldn’t need feet for walking and she would soar above them.

My mother was too intent on smoking her cigarette to notice me then. Maybe if she had things would be different now. For a moment she
blew smoky grey ribbons across the dawn and then a pair of little feet slipped surreptitiously into her big leather boots. Given that they were five sizes or so too big I am surprised I walked so far in them. She would be too. My toes, still wet from the salted lake, were pushed up against a rolled up sock stuffed in the toe of each boot still warm from her morning journey. These socks so placed by her, cushioned my young toes for the walk ahead of me, keeping at bay for a time the corns and blisters of travel. That morning when I walked off I’m not sure if she saw me. When I turned around she was looking in my direction but maybe it was the bird flying above me that she noticed. I left her lying on the hillside while her friend stood above her with a camera. I left to walk into the country that dreamed me into being. It stretched and yawned around me. A sphere netted with hemispheres, threaded with borders, written and re-written where olive greens faded to aquamarine and silverfish grey.

I walked for weeks across vast expanses of desert. Such distances weren’t easy on my tender feet but luckily I had inherited my father’s legs. Muscular and sinuous and made for walking up mountains. Years later my mother would call me her mountain goat. Did she feel me there? I still can’t work it out. But just behind her eyes, in the arch of her back and in her embrace was a pull, as the needle of her
compass swung magnetically in my direction. She must have known that I was out there somewhere walking, waiting.

The first day I made it down the mountain and into the plains. The flatness of land like a plate curved up to a sky of mirrors and the horizon bobbed with every footstep. I saw many things out there. Huge dust clouds. I would stop on the side of the road and slice my hand slowly through the air to watch as the traceries of insects altered. I saw the fury of the sands rushing into whirling, spinning storms that careered across the land and funnelled up to the heavens. I saw messenger dogs running through the wind beside me, torpedo-like with letters and tokens tied to their collars in a woman’s scarf. Ribbons of saliva trailed from their flapping pink jaws as they panted in hot wet gusts. Their shining noses caught the sparks of sun and from the corner of my eye I saw them wink at me as they pelted into the dissolving horizons.

It was the great lonely arc of the skies that caught in my breath those long days walking. The epic of my little hands traced the dust on my boots when I stopped to rest, wondering if I was mad coming before my time to see the lovers. But I had been told that there was a watcher over every soul and that the night comer is taken care of by the piercing night star.
I don’t know if my father spotted my tiny figure walking on the side of that dusty highway as he clattered past in the beaten out Mercedes truck, but I saw him. He was squatting in the back and the canvas roof was rolled up and tied with pink rope to the ribs of the truck. It rumbled and clattered along bumping over the pot-holed road. He wore a huge jaunting turban that with every bump fell at an even more rakish angle. Sitting next to him was a magician playing tricks. He smiled in mock disbelief at the magician’s cards and a string of beads that was tied above their heads swung at each temple. No sooner had I seen them than they hurtled into the horizon. I kept walking as I had distances yet to go if I was to catch the meeting.

It was so hot out there that even now I can’t believe how long I lasted. All I had to drink was a small flask of stolen well water and remember that this kind of thirst was still new to me at that time. The novelty of my tongue cleaving to the roof of my mouth and the yearning for water amidst the fire. As I walked I remembered my Friend who always persisted in telling me what grit and determination I had. Even at such a young age.

At about the same time I thought I was hallucinating from fatigue and exhaustion I saw in a distant metallic dusty shimmer that the Mercedes had pulled over to the side of the road where a luminous
blurring grove of trees seeped in and out of focus. As I got closer I realised I had come upon my first real oasis. I had heard about greens like this before but never experienced them. Intoxicated by the shimmering colour fields, I rested in the shade of the truck drinking it in. Empty of passengers a hot wind sucked in and out of the driver's cabin from where the trebles of music droned through the heat. The air seared through my nostrils singeing the hairs and the greens throbbed in and out of focus with the pulse of my singing blood.
Baba says this as if I had forgotten a musical score we learnt and he would obligingly tap it out for me one last time. Steeped in this portent he begins again and even though he never really told me a first time I don’t interrupt.

"I met Margrit in Kabul. I was playing trompet in the circus."
Once when I asked him where he met her he replied, "Pakistan…Or? No, Afghanistan I think or maybe it was Pakistan." And then, "Alis I don’t know."
But today he tells me, "I met her in Kabul."
"What would I do in Istanbul?" he asks me, not needing an answer as he continues, "I just used to play in Meyhanes every night and never saw the sun. Can you believe it? For fifteen years I never saw the sun! I just play and play all night and smoke and drink. We used to play in the old cinema too. Jang jang jang! Da! Jang jang jang! Same chords over and over all night. They loved it!" he laughs as he strums an invisible guitar in his lap.
"What, is that all you played?" I laugh as I sing back to him.
"That’s it Alis, over and over. We played on the corners too near the flat in Çapa. Busking. Ha! And when we make money we go to buy de one bottle of wine."
"How old were you when you left?" I ask and then, "How did you get there, to Kabul?"

The invisible guitar slips off his lap as he gets up once again and heads to the fridge. It doubles as a map of his makeshift world, written over like the walls. Iraq is under the handle then Filistin, and Afghanistan and all the places of the Levant which have been rearranged and their borders redrawn by this cartographer. Iraq is obscured as he opens the door and reaches a hand inside, guffawing.
"I don’t know Alis…Your age. I don’t know."

He pulls out a bottle of Raki and turning around to face me, sweeps his abracadabra arms like a bankrupt magician, which are tattooed with لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّاellite، and announces, "Aslan Süt!"

Lion’s Milk.

"Aaha!" I clap my hands together grinning and he salutes me with a smile as the fridge door wheezes shut behind him.

"Do you want me to clean some glasses?" I suggest looking around at the smudged ones but not getting up from my chair.

"No, no I do it."

And he pours some water from an old bottle into two glasses from the table, swirls them around a bit and then gets up and sloshes them out the window.

"Teki Dağıl. Best Raki," says Baba as he pours us each some, then adds a dash of water. Not too much just enough to dampen the fire on our lips.

"What shall we cheers to Baba?"

He shrugs his brow at me in a question.

"How do you say Cheers in Turkish?"

"Şerefe."

"Şerefe," I reply.

And then before I have managed to have the first sip he says quickly as if remembering just in time, "Ah-ha! If I get de jackpot, we going to de Türkai Alis!"
As I lift my glass I lower my chin and raise my eyebrows in a salute not quite able to swallow the jackpot. Infused with this milky fog, I forget for a moment about unanswered prayers and the lonely cradle full of thin blankets and misshapen stories sleeping beneath them. The shadows journey across the walls with their inscriptions as my father rolls himself another joint unaware that I can still make out his figure in the back of the truck if I try hard enough. The dust on my boots if I try hard enough.

Outside the heat from Sydney Road is lifting as the sun slips through the day. Trams hurl themselves in blue sparks down the cables and an early evening storm gathers momentum, beating the tin roofing above. A fly blows in on a gust of cool air and lands on the table between us. The aroma of coffee slowly pervades the dusk.

"Ah! Mahmud!" laughs Dad.

I look around to the door behind me. I hadn't heard anyone knock.

"No Alis. Mahmud the fly!"

I turn around and notice a fly sitting on the corner of the table, a domestic, cryptic, detail. It sits for a bit then buzzes up to the top of the Raki bottle. I can't help but think this name is slightly absurd and too big for a fly, like an oversized suit.

"He just come in here one day when I had de window open," my father explains. "He must hev been too tired, flying up and down Sydney Road, playing. So I gave him bread, water and meat from de boocher. Helal. And now he comes in here when he feels like it and sits with me. He always come back." He tells me this and the edges of his voice are frayed simultaneously with a shrill pleasure and a loneliness so vast I could never comprehend.
"Oh," I mutter. "Right…" Then with a grin I tease, "But how can you tell which one's Mahmud and which one's Abdul?"

He frowns at me for a moment without saying anything then pours some water into a little saucer and leaves it on the table for Mahmud. His olive eyes recover their smile and his head sings on his neck. And as he leans in to shoo his friend to the saucer I notice that his beard isn't perfumed today.

"I was playing the trompet at that time when I met her," he continues. "Ahk it had such a bootiful wooden suitcase you know," his voice trails as he pushes the saucer a little across the table. "Dey don’t make 'em like dat anymore you know," he laments.

I don't tell him I have held onto that suitcase, that I have stored my everything in there.

"A friend of mine in Istanbul just said one day 'Aykut why not we go to Pakistan?' So we hire a car and we go wit our instruments. We drive and drive but den de car break down! We were hardly out of Turkey! Ha! We couldn't fix it, and no moneys!"

"What did ya do?"

"Well, he left back to Istanbul and I hear of dis circus so, I go wit dem."

I sip my liquid fog and sink into the armchair.

"What would I do in Istanbul Alis?" he opens his palms again. "Drink çay with my mother?! Pa! No way! "

One afternoon, years ago in my back garden, he told me, "Alis. Your Grandmother was gypsy."

"What?" I blathered taking a step back into the bushes. "Why didn't you tell me this before?"
He just smiled, as he does, and never mentioned it again. When I asked him about it years later, he nearly spat at me and hissed, “Don’t be so stupid Alis!”

I’ve heard that she had affairs when the family lived in Germany and that she liked shingr; gold bracelets and bibelots. I still have a photo of her singing at a night club clutching a microphone in her hands, her wide face; a struggle with a love song.

As I close my eyes tight Baba sings low in Turkish to himself, if I told you, you wouldn’t be able to take it and I can just make him out starry-eyed and empty pocketed careering across the desert backblocks of Turkey, Iran and Afghanistan to the next show in Kabul.

Mahmud leaves his place from the edge of the saucer and buzzes first up above the table and then slips quietly out the open window and into the night. I tug at a knot of hair and wince as Baba points to a movie poster on the wall for Kandahar. “Alis” – he says, “I been der to Kandahar. Listen I tell you from de beginning again.”

Lowering his voice and almost whispering in husky suspense he leaves no other option but to lean my elbows on my knees and listen wide eyed.

"We were on de way to next show and too tired we stop at Kandahar. There was a tea house. I order some tea and sit down to have it. But dey smoking in there. I'm thinking just tobacco in Nargüleh but no is opyoum!" He laughs some deep alchemical secret.

"We smoke all night. Tea and opyoum all night, and I play the Saz for them. So much I can't walk."

"So much playing," I laugh.
"Of course Alis," he smiles and quickly furrows his brow. "My fingers full of callous ahk! And it's curfew there! Fucking Russians," he says with invective and has a sip of Raki. "So the owner he took me home in a horse and cart. Aa-ahk! Allah! So Fast! Birra Birra Birra!" A volley of hooves, dust and limbs.

I look at the mildewed poster, its corners tacked to roughly peeling paint. There are women in _burqas_ billowing through the desert to a wedding. One woman’s face is obscured by a drum. This faceless woman has always reminded me of the wreckage of family photos that would be left behind in his wake. Once, flicking through a photo album, I came across a picture of myself, a young woman sitting under the dappled light of my favourite childhood tree. My mother took the photo while I sat curling and uncurling my toes in their boots, my knees clutched together. I was grinning and squinting against the fists of wind, which caught needles of autumn sunlight through the pine tree. I found the photo years after it was taken. In place of my beaming face was a patch of ragged white, scratched out as if pecked by a vicious beak. Tiny balls of photography paper gathered at my neck and hair. When I first noticed the woman on the movie poster billowing through the desert I thought she too suffered the same naked anonymity as I. After I checked other film posters in the foyers of cinemas I understood that the blurry drum was only evocative of my father’s wake.
Resting my elbows on my knees I looked down at my feet. My mother’s boots were dusty and scuffed. My throat was dry and thristing like leather. From the shade I could see my father, the magician and their friends, squatted down by the water in thirst, their turbans unrolled and floating like milk skins on the water’s surface. I wish I could have warned him. From out of the trees, pop, pop, pop-three men appeared like jack-in-the-boxes and with guns slung over their shoulders they began to advance. The sun crackled relentlessly on and my father and his friends looked at one another in apprehension. The yellow eye of a bird perched high above us was still. The road ahead and behind us was still. The dust from the messenger dogs had settled and the imploring music from the truck was just audible above the cracking of knees as my father’s friends stood up. The blood in their throats was hot and their earlobes began to blush with the ferocity of the desert heat. I walked round to the passenger side of the truck to get a better view when I noticed a watermelon on the back tray striped in the most handsome of greens. The men from the bushes had begun to shout and were gesticulating and pointing at the water. I didn’t understand their language but I knew that water meant life. My father and his friends shuffled apologetically and the men with guns circled in closer. Do something, I thought, as I looked up at the bird with the yellow eye. Looking back at the watermelon I hoisted myself up onto the tray, lightly grazing my
shin as I did, and with all my strength heaved it with the heels of my hands. It took off like a rogue planet, thudded onto the ground and rolled towards the water. I almost fell head over it but landed on the dust where I watched as it broke through their circle and landed on the muddy bank of the waterhole. A crack had appeared in its side and pink glacé juice trickled into the shallows. The turbans rippled and licked at each other’s frayed edges from the encounter. The magician stood in utter bewilderment gaping at the watermelon whilst my father turned and stared at him in thrilled disbelief until they burst into hungry peels of laughter that knocked the yellow eyed bird from her perch and the guns from the men’s shoulders as they broke into wide wrinkled grins. My shoulders heaved a sigh of relief and my head pounded as I stood in the blaze of the sun and watched while they smashed open the fruit and juice dribbled down their smiling faces. As I turned on my heels towards the road I looked back once at my father, tipped my imaginary hat and winked. It was a long road ahead of me.

I don’t know if my father or his friends missed the few oranges and olives that I took that day. I’m sure they didn’t. I’m sure they were just happy to be unharmed by the bullets of those men, so happy they shared their watermelon.
Sensing my strayed thoughts he addresses me directly, "The thing is before we got to Kabul we had to cross the desert. 1500 kilometres and you wouldn’t believe how hot it was. Ahk."

I nod widening my eyes as I reach across the table for the tobacco, "Mmm?"

"The desert. What do you expect?!" His forehead wrinkles into a coarse knit of superstition and distaste as I wait for the next words and with a decisive cough as if to free this history from its tomb as well as his throat of smoke he continues.

"But before Kabul we had to pick up a lion, in Iran."

"You went to Iran to pick up a lion?" I stammer not remembering this bit.

Unmoved by my astonishment he says simply, abstractedly, "Yeah yeah…"

And after a moment pause he tears out the words, "The magician was playing tricks and telling lies all the way! I sat with him in the back of the truck. Dickhead," he snaps abrasively and swipes something away from his forehead.

He wipes his glistening temple with the back of his hand as the curtains shudder slackly but Mahmud left a few minutes ago. He reflects on this until a glint returns to his eye and I roll a cigarette in the silence. The chemistry of paper creases as I crumble, fold and roll.

“We drove a Mercedes truck through the desert to the circus," he announces as a tram bell sounds through the night. "There were messenger dogs with notes tied to their collars! Phew they flew along next to us! T-ring t-rin t-ring!" His tongue pushes up against the gap in his teeth – t-ring t-ring –t-ring, as he dances his hands first out to the left then out to the right. I remember those dogs all shadow and sinew turning up the sand like whirlies the desert all tilting rock and horizon.
“I took a turn driving the truck on and on drove and then, ahk Alis I saw trees! I thought is this a vision? Trees in the middle of the desert? Garden in de desert?”

An index finger points the question. The sky outside the window has blackened over into the blue dissolve of night and underneath the pearl crescents of his fingernails I notice there is no dirt.

“And there was green! We stop the truck. Trees, blue water, can you imagine?”

I don't tell him, yes I can. I can still feel the prickle rash of heat on my skin and see the dull shimmer of the oasis.

“We stopped the truck. No one der,” and he stretches out his arms. A vision of emptiness.

“So we go and we taking a drink from this cool water. We are tinking it's Zam Zam and we want to make wishes and ba ba ba three men appear.”

I don’t tell him I have wished on Zam Zam sips. Instead I gasp along with him and drop my jaw in mock horror.

"No!" I say, keeping myself from smiling. "In the middle of the desert! Who were they? What did they want?"

“Well," he raises his eyebrows and looking at me sidelong mimics in a burly voice,

"Brothers, what are you doing?" And they have in their hands Kalash! And we thinking La illahe ill Allah! We just taking some water!” squeaks my father. "Is so hot here brothers!” he laughs.
“We had a watermelon in the truck, and what happens is, Alis listen you wouldn't believe it! Vallahi we all were out of de truck and here comes de watermelon rolling towards us! Just like that! Ba! I don’t know how! Allah saved us that day!” And he shakes his head. "We had a knife too, so we cut it up on the bonnet and we give them each a piece! And aaaah they were so happy Alis! Watermelon in the middle of the desert! Can you imagine? They put down their guns and they eat and eat.”

"How did the waterme…?"

"Jinn Alis," he says cutting me off.

"Jinn?" I ask careful not to reveal the grin that is aching to spread out across my face.

"Yes-yes," he confirms almost scolding me, "Jinn."

How on earth did I push that thing? The sun was boring down through my skull and I think I had blisters on my heels. Given my size, I mean I wasn't what I am today, an Amazon as my Mum says.

“And then what happens is this, big dust. Huumage." I put down my half smoked cigarette and let it smoulder in the ashtray as he draws out this last word, stretches out the syllable till he's sailing and then picks up his tesbik from where he left them on the table and they thwop and curl over his knuckles once again.

“Like a whirly!” I say, remembering an old woman I passed on my journey. Most of the time she just sat outside her door and watched the land and when a whirly came past she told me that’s the spirit of so and so. She was the Wind Woman.

“Like this”, he says. He points his hand upwards and slices slowly through the air.
“It was an Afghan dog running torpedo like”.

I am for a moment blown into sand and orange spirit dogs and the thud of my boots and
blood with the voice of the old woman, my father, and the voice of a desert firedog. My
body remembers the quicksilver sting of the sand whipped up in the fury of the storm.
Afghan messenger dogs running across the big empty dinner plate of the desert with notes
tied to their collars.

“Like in Iran,” my father says, “they have messenger birds, pigeons and falcons. But so
hot summer der,” he says. “Oo-oof,” his hand moves and a small cloud of orange dust
appears before my eyes.

“Can you imagine Alis? So hot, you cannot breath like dis.” He sucks air in quickly
through his nostrils. “It will burn all de inside of your nose. You must breath slowly. Yes,
you must breath slowly, so slowly.”

He sits placid like a child and breaths through his nostrils, barely audible and so, so slow. I
remember the sweat prickle and burn my nostrils in the ironclad heat when I saw him for
the first time. His hair was full of grit, his lips cracked, the dust sticking in the creases of
his eyes. Scenting my knowledge but unable to place it he illustrates for me, long, quiet
draughts of air before clicking his tongue in a curt, moustachioed disapproval.

"So hot," he shakes his head. "So hot."

And I remember a photo I have of him whose corners have curled up with the years. He
squats in the desert his long arms resting on his knees with a big turban wound round and
round his head. I am sure he would have been smiling but there is a hole with charcoal
edges where his face once was.
"So how did you meet my mother?" I ask finally.

"Ah, I met her through a drummer in the circus."

He stops all of a sudden, then smiles quietly and pours us another drink singing low through his nose; *Fate has thrown poison into my heart. Oh if I could tell you! If I could tell you what I have suffered from the hands of this society! But I can’t your heart wouldn’t take it.*

He looks out the window and continues to hum to himself. I’ve heard this tune somewhere. There was one man playing the *Saz*, one the *Darbouka* and one singing. I remember my two lovers at some beachside restaurant at a back table falling about in a swoon. The languor of my father’s arms wrapped about my mother. Her waist length hair enfolding them as they peered out at the band and giggled.

These days his shoulders are stooped and his belly is swollen from psych pills and his hair is white. I remember when it turned white, almost overnight. I hadn’t seen him for two months or so and the next time I did, I didn’t recognise him. I remember how bizarre it was seeing this person walking towards me with his hair shorn off, jaggedly in patches. I looked at his face and an odd thought which lasted for a nanosecond said, “Is that me? I am sure I’ve seen that person before, who is it?” This confusion lasted until he got closer and greeted me, "*Selam alayküm* Alis".

Before I had time to think, I responded "*Ve alayküm selam* Baba."

“Anyway Alis,” he stops humming. "I just drank a bottle of visky…”
"Oh ye," I nearly ask.

"Yeye I was drunk and playing music, you know how it is. I was playing trompet dat time, remember?" His smiling eyes catch my reticence.

"I was very little Baba."

"I know Alis," and his eyes twinkle some undisclosed secret. "Anyway, ahh I was too tired," he sighs, “and so I lie down in de hallway to hev a sleep. Dat’s all! And den Margarit came wis a Doctor and dey woke me up and dey says, ‘This man is crazy he’s schizofrenie!’ and BOOM PAA! Dat’s it. Dey take me to Mental Hospital and dey lock me up. Ahk! Just because she has these papers from Uniwersity dey beleew her!” he jeers.

"Fucking fire hell hospitale!"
As I walked that afternoon it got cooler and I could breathe again through my mouth without it turning to cinders and setting my lungs alight. Towards dusk the Mercedes truck sped past me. The sky swung into lilacs and shimmering silverfish grey birds stretched their wings flying above me in the starry shadows.

I walked on into the evening and into the night strung with planets and wafer moons. Why wasn’t I scared of the ebony velvet blackness, of the sudden scratch of prickle bushes or the sand belly slither of nocturnal creatures? I don’t know, to tell you the truth. I probably should have been, but then again no one seemed to notice me but the birds and they knew that I was relying on their night paths as much as the soles and the road beneath my feet. As I walked I dreamt of the day when my mother would cradle me and my father would swing me around and around the birthing room dancing in circles about her. Tracing the constellations above and honouring this passage from the farthest source to the closest beginning, I moved between origins.

By the time I reached my mother again it was morning and I tell you what I nearly missed her. After walking through the desert all night, I had collapsed just before dawn at the bottom of a windswept ridge. My eyes had sealed shut with sleep and dust had crept into their corners. As I slept there, a big bird had come to roost in the nest of
my belly. It feathered me warm all morning until through my dreams came the thudding of thunder through the sand. The bird began to shift from foot to foot as the galloping grew louder and crisper through the mute earth. I stretched my arms out to support my head as the ruffled bird became all muscle and feathers in the bright morning sky. I saw as it flew off, low buildings not too far away, the colour of the land, as if they had grown out of the desert to carve a town.

No sooner had I thought this than sand flew in my face, blinding me with fine gravelly grit and the shining shanks of a fetching black horse careered passed me. On top of it rode my mother, clutching at the mane for dear life, hair coming off between her fingers. She flew up and down with the gallop of the horse and its nostrils stung and flared. I leapt up out of my slumber and grabbed at the feather weaving through the air beside me before tightening my shoe laces, rubbing my eyes and breaking into a sprint in the frisson of dust and sweat. Tearing behind her I wondered how I would ever make up the speed of this mad Afghani horse. I ran and ran and ran. The boots thudded on the rocks and sand as I leapt over bushes and past knuckled hob knobbled trees. I ran past women with children on their backs and hips. The low buildings grew larger and the sun crept through the sky. My last orange leapt up and down in my pocket, before bouncing across the ground and rolling out to the base of a tree. We ran past
the market, past the men setting up fruit stalls which I eyed hungrily, through lanes and streets nearly knocking down cyclists and old men on their early morning walking stick walks. Finally the horse slowed down to a trot and turned in to the doorway of a courtyard. Women ran from their kitchens and the adjoining lanes tearing their hair. Their faces were widowed raisin as they snatched my mother from the snorting horse and took her by the elbow to a man lying on cushions nearby in the shade. They had water beside him and a cloth to mop the rivers of blood that flowed from his body. He lay with his eyes closed, moaning slightly every now and then; the language of a whale talking in its sleep. The women looked at my mother pleadingly. Her cheeks were flushed with the thrill of the ride and in the doorways men stood half-concealed, smoking in quick deep puffs.

I remember at that time it was Ramadan and everything was out of operation and in prayer. Only the muezzins could rouse a person from their famished delirium to meet with God. How did this horse know where to go, thought my Mother silently amidst the febrile hum and chatter of a tongue she would never know. She was looking round the courtyard at the smoking men and anxious women, disarmed, waiting for an answer when a dilapidated Kombie rattled up to the gate. The man’s friends had arrived and rushed towards him. Finally I could be alone with her. The doorway of the courtyard emptied as he was
bundled into the back of the van. One of the anxious women pressed some beads into my mother’s hand, closed it to a fist and pushed her in after them. I managed to squeeze in unnoticed before the driver was behind the wheel and we sped off. Out the back window I saw the horse’s magnificent gleaming behind get smaller and smaller and wondered too just how it knew its way home.
Baba and I sit in silence for a while listening only to the sounds of life outside this room, this story. A television hums in one of the adjacent rooms, Turkish music blares down the hallway and a car takes off at the traffic lights screeching its tyres. In the next room Ali is singing along to the radio and Rasputin is clattering down the wooden staircase, down the hallway and out onto the street below, letting the door *slam* behind him. Somewhere, perhaps by the train tracks, the evening birds chat in the shrill tones of expectation. A siren sounds.

Leaning forward and bunching the tips of his fingers together in punctuation he leaves one story and begins another. At times like these I don’t say much. I just sit, a simple girl, neither agreeing nor disagreeing and reach for the *Raki* to pour another drink. I knock the saucer of water set aside for Mahmud. It spills across the table.

“Don’t worry, don’t worry,” Baba says. “Duzn metter.”

We leave our drinks untouched.

"So what heppens is Alis, I was on a ladder painting de heouse," he says after a sip.

"Ye?" I think I have heard this story maybe a hundred times, but I don’t let on.

"And you wouldn't beleewe it, I get electrocuted, by de lightning! I get hit by de lightning!"

"No?"

When was it that he was high up there on the ladder and came crashing down to earth, electrified and a new man: mad. These explanations go on in all manner of intricate and elaborate concertinaing rationalisations. One day this way and one day that.
Perhaps my sea captain whispered them wetly in his ear or perhaps he too had a similar limp. I remember his tales from when I was a child. Sometimes they veered this way and sometimes that. Whether they were about what my dog would tell Allah on Judgement Day, or how his tooth broke when he bit into Lebanese bread, he would tell these stories with the dignity of an old soothsayer or the Argus-eyed spice of a dervish. The sun would fall across his beard or stubble depending on the season, depending on his travelling.

He catches my eye, his daughter from the depths and draws in his breath suddenly to make sure I am paying painstaking attention before letting it out again like a magician -ahhhhhkk- and continues with sincerity.

"And then Alis I was dancing like this!" and he gets up and spins around and around on the spot.

He had a shop front at that time. I walked passed once as a child and there he was.

"In front of the window and people would look because I didn’t stop! Just all day I dance like this saying Allah Allah Allah…"

Round and around and around. The palm of his left hand facing down and the palm of the right hand open to receive the cosmos.

"HA!"

He falters halts and looks at me clapping out one face of a laugh. My Sufi father has spun in shop fronts. My schizophrenic Sufi father has made the perilous journey up a church steeple, risking everything with one slip, my accordion strapped to his back, in order just to play a song up there.
The wind moves and lifts the table cloth at its corner for a moment as he announces a prelude to song;

“Alis! I am Cheribashi!” Laughing, smoking, sparkling eyes.

“What does that make me?”

“Daughter of Cheribashi!”

We giggle and he beams, yellow eyes, as he sings an old Cheribashi song to me over and over until I have learnt it by heart and for a moment I find that I no longer need to know where the other half of my blood flows from, where my Father is from; Turk, Kurd, Bulgar, Gypsy, Madman, Musician, Itinerant, Butcher…Whether or not I have no blood no borders no flag no country no tongue no language, I still sing this song over and over until I am beyond all of these stories and allusions.

Just this, here he is, this man, fluid as water, mad as the still rocks at the bottom of the river, lonely as the moon looking down from the spheres or silent in the window with his elbows leaning on the sill gazing at the street below. I am content now with this jostling menagerie of stories. All, some or none of them are perfect and really none of this matters as we sit here together in the slow end of the day, the notes of the song still on my tongue. As I repeat the chorus he joins in. He sings through his nose and doesn’t look at me from where he landed eventually in this armchair after running across the world chasing love but gazes out through the window to the main street that closest resembles Istanbul and returns to his refrain. Then standing abruptly he claps his hands together.

“So what’s news den Alis?”
I continue to hum as I flip and tangle the beads.

“T’ve been writing some stories”. I say eventually staring into middle space as I concentrate on the rhythm of the beads flipping them through my fingers up and over. These stories should be something substantial that will soften the gaps and silences between us, something these beads should be able to navigate.

“Aha,” and he smiles a question.

“About here and Istanbul,” I reply as I swing.

“Bootiful,” he sighs as he sinks into his armchair again. And exhaling a smile, that could almost be confused with a laugh he says "Masha Allah" and reaches across to the table between us where he finds some papers which he hands to me.

“What’s this?” I ask, swinging with one hand, holding the papers with the other.

His eyes blacken as I notice the letter head which he points to with a nod. It’s a report from the local mental health team who ‘look after’ him. What a joke, I think as I replace the beads on the table where they slip precariously to the edge. Looking after means a ‘monthly’ injection and a signature when they can track him down. The report is a memento of his madness. Diagnosis: Residual Acute Paranoid Schizophrenia. It reads: the patient can be verbally abusive to close family members. His ex-wife is worried about how he is ‘travelling’ and confirms his disordered thoughts and bizarre delusions, one being the need for sea-horses to get pregnant so as to prevent Japan from invading Australia. I look up. He is watching me tentatively as he sips his Raki then motions for me to give it back. He has never shown me anything like this before.
“I’m reading it though,” I say as if it is something I can help decode like a horoscope, a recipe, and he lets me continue. I hold onto it as gently as I can and continue to read. Sea horses getting pregnant, I haven’t heard that one before. All it really says is the same old bullshit; *involuntary community treatment order, the patient does not believe he has any mental illness, he lacks insight, he is not a threat to anyone around him the main concern is neglect of himself.* Blah Blah Blah. *We the nurses are dedicated to educating you about your illness and helping you, Aykut Ülgezer.* And then his signature underneath for legal purposes, as if he would have listened to or understood or retained anything the nurses said! Of course my Dad didn’t read this thing, that’s why he gave it to me as if it were a bill he needed to pay but just needed to know how much.

Making sure he knows I am with him I say, “What do you think about all this?”

“Well,” he cautions, "you know der are people out der who need dis, really need dis sort of help dey try to give me. You know some people really need it and fair enough give it to them, but I don’t need it Alis. I don’t know, what can I do?”

He shrugs articulating this with such sincere lucidity that I believe him for one curious moment and find myself feeling for all those poor loons roving about in their deranged inner city circles, from pension cheque to soup kitchen, who could really use this service.

And am I telling this story so I don’t become my Father? Perhaps because I knew when I came here today how possible it was as I sat with him above his shop. I knew instantly that he was ‘unwell’, as they say. Clad in a deep maroon kaftan with a portly swollen belly and quick black eyes, I feel his hackles rise as he waits for my response. I don’t want to look him in the eye. I know he won’t believe what I say. I hand back the report and feel
him getting angry. His eyes sharpen into knife-points. I sip gingerly from the unwashed glass and appear as normal and unsuspicious as I can.

And then he announces with conviction, “I wouldn’t push someone I loved into de lion's mouth”.

I imagine my mother under the big top of a circus fused in amber light, the super woman of fortitude, leotard clad glistening with musculature, holding open the jaws of a wild lion with one arm and leg, pushing my father inside with a wily grin to the thrap and boom of the circus brass.

“That’s it Alis. All over,” he clicks his tongue and prays; *Allah hume sali Allah saidina Mohammed* as he swings the beads dexterously around his fingers. His life has become suspended like fragmented sediment in these stories, these elaborate tangential shifting fickle stories of blame and survival.

Baba points to my mother as the provenance of it all and sometimes to me too. All sorts of threats have been wielded because of it, it being his ‘madness’ and how it came about, which only landed him involuntarily in a locked ward where he ate porridge every single morning, that years later he would joke about. His fingers trip along the table past the ashtray in fumbling punctuation of a bird in the early days of take off. He laughs as his hand flies off into the shadows of the paper cut out night time room.

These are the snippets the trappings the trajectories the comings and goings and openings and closings of my Father and his roads and what I know of him and what I remember of
him in the early days. I know, that when he wasn’t on the road or off to Iraq like he once claimed in a postcard from Darwin during the Gulf War, that jinn used not just to sit but to dance a whirly gig on his shoulders and torment him with some inherited arcane melancholia that manifested itself in statues of midnight catatonia in the garden or endless incantations or graffiti in childish lettering on factory walls which read *Allah Loves Me?* These jinn they never let him be, they propelled him out into the night streets running for the Mosque, screaming for solace.

Baba clears his throat and coughs from his place opposite me in the armchair.

"Alis. When I get my jackpot, definitely we going to de Turkey. Yes!"

And we laugh together at the idea.
The Maiden of the Never-Never, in the back of a Kombi, tearing towards Kabul. A seven hour drive. I spent it watching my mother try desperately to quell the blood that trickled from the head of the wounded man. When he was dozing she would pull the beads from her pocket and swing them around fingers gazing at the landscape as it sped by. We tore through the landscape between laughter and panic and reached Kabul just in time for the dusk prayers. As we pulled into town men ambled languidly to the mosques and I noticed posters with the vulpine grin of the magician, freshly pasted to teahouse walls. My father must be here somewhere, I thought. My mother hadn't noticed me yet but why should she have? I knew. I had been told it would be impossible but even to this day that/it hasn't stopped me trying.

It was after a long day scrambling between the telephone exchange and consulate offices with closed doors trying to find the wounded man a hospital bed that I began to play tricks. I would put an extra five sugar cubes in her tea and stifle giggles as she lifted the glass to her lips and wrinkled her eye brows quizzically, calling over the poor waiter who would insist as he headed back to the kitchen that he hadn't added sugar. Once I untied the elastic on her plait when she was bent over at a market stall pretending to count the knots in a rug as she tried to bargain. She fumbled as she straightened up, after her
earnest inspection, only to find her waist length hair falling around her shoulders. Flustered she searched about for the elastic as the salesman grew increasingly distracted. Sensing this she ceased her search and let her hair cascade about her as she persisted, unflinching, with her final price. I remember the salesman was so disarmed he gave her his blessing, then simply stood gazing benignly after her retreating figure and swinging loosened mane, as she disappeared down the street with the carpet.

That evening after she and the friends had knocked long enough with desperate knuckled fists on the hospital door an irritated nurse reluctantly opened it and peered out. They rushed in past her all elbows and protestations, ignoring her pleas and sharing the weight of the man cradled and bandaged on cushions they searched desperately for an empty bed. I entered the cool turquoise white corridor of the hospital last. After gesticulations fraught with tangled shouting a gleaming trolley appeared. It bristled with syringes, swabs and medicines. My mother’s boots squeaked on the tiled floor beneath me and I noticed on her feet a pair of new sandals and giggling softly I wondered where she thought her boots had gone.
It’s too bloody easy for me to romanticise my father who’s been offered jobs as a hit man because he’s mentally ill and according to his genius associates can ‘get away with it,’ who’s taken heroin in front of me, his daughter, with his dealer gallantly refusing to ‘swear in front of the lady.’ No, there’s no romance today as I whistle at his open window. No head pops out to greet me, no keys thrown out onto the street, just the afternoon traffic sailing by. I wait acutely, keenly, for that moment of rejection and absence. The moment that I would usually leave after trying in vain to locate him and feel like a fool for standing in the middle of the road calling and whistling. But ah! some eyes have appeared at another window of the shop top and it is his neighbour, Ali. I cross the road and wait at the door as Ali clatters down the stairs. The grubby white door swings open and Ali beams at me. “Him coming soon. He be little bit time, you come hev tea! Come, come”, he smiles. And up I go, disappearing into the big house atop the pub. Up the stairs of the old hotel to drink mint tea with Ali and he asks questions like a father might.

Looking at my top he says, ruffling his feathers in the chilly Melbourne winter, “You cold? No?”

He pauses, “Ah you want tea? So bootiful tea natural organic yea-s you wouldn’t believe too much bootiful tea!”

And he fusses around sorting magazines and tidying his bed as he switches on the electric kettle and says, “So sorry my house no clean”.

Ali’s little room jostles with peacock feathers, cheap decorations and a small television with a heavily pixilated picture. He sighs all the while and sits me in his comfortable tenth- hand armchair in front of the window so I can look and wait for my father. Every
now and then he peers out the window with his torso and says thoughtfully, “I know him coming soon here and I heven’t seen you long time . . .”

“Yeah,” I reply absentmindedly.

"You know, I hev funny story about your Baba." He smiles with his black slanted eyes.

"Mmm?"

He gets up and flits about glancing quickly out the window. As if anyone can hear from there I think.

"One night me walking down road," he says in a hushed conspiratorial whisper. "Sydney Road. And I see your Baba on de Church. Is dark and no body on de street. Nobody see but me."

"See what?" I query glancing about his jumble room.

"See de, your Baba he play piano accordion up there. Oo-ooff! So high up there! I just laugh and stand for bit and watch him. Yoohoo Aykut! N’apyorsun Lan?!" What are you doing mate?! And he waves his arms about as he tells me.

"And he smile and he keep playing!" Ali peeks out the window again and I know from his face that my father has appeared down there on the street.

"Ah, your Baba funny man! But good man. Yeas, he good man," he concludes.

And I crane my neck out the window to have a look too as he jumps up and forgetting about the tea rushes to meet my father and his companion on the staircase and tell them of my presence. But Baba and his friend walk past the open door of Ali’s room where I sit amongst the tat and feathers and don't stop to say hello. So I remain on the armchair.
Ali bustles back in tripping over a thousand apologies as he puts a tea bag in a mug and splashes scalding water over it nervously and stutters, “S-sometimes he in there his room and I kn-nocking on his door and I say Ahmet Aaahmet but he no answer”.

What a lopsided and sorry smile he smiles and with a shrug he shrugs.

“It’s alright,” I say taking the mug from his outstretched hands. ”Thanks for the tea.”

And he smiles after me through a nervous frown as I walk down the turgid hallway into Dad’s room. He doesn’t look up when I walk through the open door. He doesn’t say hello. Only, “Vee waiting for De Man”.

His companion picks up on this and is about to launch into some riveting tale but Dad catches his eye and the companion’s breath is arrested and instead he says, “So whaddya you do with yeself Alice?”

I can’t believe I am obliged to speak to this man. He probably toasted the last myopic amoeba that served the dim and somewhat obscure function of his brain the last time he stuck a needle in his arm. I am unable to hide my disdain and say through pursed lips, “I am writing a book”.

He grins.

“Yer old mans got a cupla cracker stories! Havnt ya Ayk? You should get ‘im to tell ya a few! Hey Ayk? Hey Hey!” he sniggers as he pumps his bent arm up and down his fist tucked under his armpit.

At this the point I struggle with what politque I have left and try my darndest not to pass some sarcastic comment wondering why the hell I am even giving this stupid deadshit the time of day let alone my muted Father who evidently couldn’t give a damn whether I visited or not.
“Yea’s” I reply, “I’ll ask him.”

And another silence follows as the man retreats into some deep meditative state during which he rolls cigarette after cigarette and places them neatly on the table, side by side. Dad muses like an oyster in its shell, stares blankly out from his dark sockets. No stories are offered up today. No voice to soothe. My dog who came for the ride looks up at me and thwops her tail on the carpet apologetically. Smiling nervously.

And then Kassim arrives. I take a good look at him. What a wanker, I think. I bet he has a box of tissues underneath the back window of his car that he keeps there to wipe the cum off his belly after he’s fucked some teenage girl from a club. I bet he goes home to his Mum’s to eat even though he’s forty and enjoys her mollycoddling and anxiety as he drives off with a belly of *shwarma* and *pilauv*, the fat prince of the family who comes home to eat sleep fart and settle arguments between the women. I bet he reckons he’s Mr Man with his bags of drugs driving down Sydney Road checking his reflection in the rear view mirror thinking he’s Al Pacino. What a wanker I think. Suddenly everyone is animated and resurfaces into the room from their various states. Dad’s friend cracks eager shrill jokes while Dad smiles somewhat generously and allows himself a laugh. Ali appears in the room and picks up one of the recently rolled cigarettes and proceeds to smoke it greedily. All focus on the bag that has been deposited in the centre of the table. Kassim finds himself a chair and drags it between Dad and Ali and pulls out smaller bags from his pocket to divvy up the drugs. I am indignant as this ape has not even looked in
my direction, let alone said hello. How dare you! I think, this is supposed to be my bloody visit with my Dad not some narcotic community access program.

“I’m Alice,” I snap abruptly, trying to sound important as if I am about to demand information from him. And who the hell are you young man? Does your Mother know about this? No? I didn’t think so and what would she say? Do you really think selling drugs is a good way to pay the bride price for your cousin? Hmm that’s what I’d like to know, and children if you had any. Would you tell them their tuck shop money comes from selling my father drugs? I advise you right now to fuck off out of here before I take you out myself.

“And this is my Father,” I add instead. But it’s not my place and he doesn’t even pretend to care.

“Oh Yeah,” he says without looking up. And he puts the smaller bags of drugs on the table and Dad and his companion come alive with animation as they descend on them laughing suddenly and abrasively. Kassim is important now. I bet he lives for this moment of pathetic power. Who owes who what, tick from when to when, favours to whom. He is for a moment sought after, his attention vied for. And he does live for this, his heart beats for this moment alone, what a man. They divvy up the drugs and bicker over who shouts who. Ali puts his two cents in, winking at me.

“Hadi Ahmet you were on me last week, no?”
Finally I can take no more and get up, my dog trilling behind me and pick my way through prices and weights and reaching arms and after I shut the door behind me I hear a voice say, "See you Aliis!"

“Yeah see ya”, I say as I walk away, “See ya”. And as I walk away I try to hold back tears at least until I am in a quiet back street where only the factories can hear me. Yeah all this reality hey? And what about the reality that I used to walk with him as a child from one end of Sydney Road to the other as he played at the Turkish cafes where I would fall asleep under tables while he read women’s coffee cups before it all changed, the reality that he goes every Friday to mosque to pray, the reality that once he was into spending money and that these days he pulls his own teeth out cos he can’t afford a dentist.
It must have been at least two weeks that I followed her around the hospital ward; watching as she wiped, injected, and stitched. During the nights she would sit and doze in her chair, never quite falling asleep, just in and out of dreamless silent thundering. I tried to tell her, rest, sleep I will wake you if anything happens but she couldn’t hear me. So I contented myself with rolling cigarettes for her but I am sure she was suspicious as they were so loose and amateur and, I even managed to resist adding five sugar cubes to her tea. When she wasn’t keeping a bedside vigil she walked the city. I wandered with her, just behind, at her heels and we witnessed it together for snatches of its sugar dimpled afternoons and powder blue mornings. Its inhabitants haggled, sang and sauntered while the Argus eyed mountains squatted in the sober distance.

On one of these walks we stopped at a teahouse. My mother and I sat by the front window. I sucked on a sugar cube and hummed an orphan tune to myself as she waited for the tea boy who balanced the chinking glasses on a tray in the palm of one hand. He slapped down a square of paper as a tea coaster which advertised the circus, and on top of it the tall glass steaming with liquid amber which splashed over the lip and onto the image of the magician who flashed his white teeth. My mother grinned at the soaked acrobat who appeared to swing through sweet black tea, his feet perilously close to booting my
father who was bent backwards with his trumpet pointing at the circus top, his eyes closed with the flash of the camera.

Later that afternoon we followed the directions on the square of tea stained paper to a field dotted blood red on the outskirts of Kabul. It was the last night of the circus before they were to leave for the next country. Taxis filled to their utmost capacity churned up the dust as they screeched to a halt outside the tent and families spilled out of them. Young men spruiked toffee apples and fairy floss. Children tugged at skirts for small change as they eyed others luckier than they with the sweet red gloss caught in the creases of their mouths. Smiling fathers gossiped and smoked languorously together dusting down their trousers while sons slipped off furtively behind the old Mercedes truck to do the same.

At the back of the tent I glimpsed a bear with its trainer banging a cymbal and stamping bells on his feet while the darling beast swiped flies from its eyes and hobbled about in a broken sort of dance. As the sun began its descent we found our way with other local families groping through the dark to a bench at the front row. The din of expectant children blowing on newly acquired whistles and chattering in anticipation subsided gradually as shadowy figures took their place on the stage. To my dismay my mother refused to buy sweets for the
young boys who did their last rounds between the benches as the musicians tuned up. With a drum roll the lights came on in a sudden blaze and a man strode defiantly on stage leading a somewhat reluctant and limping lion, as we all gasped and shrieked in fear and excitement. It was then that I saw my father, laughing as he lifted the trumpet to his lips giving a wink to another musician beside him and the music started up with a boom. Beside me I felt my mother almost smart with unexpected pleasure at the sight of this curly haired apparition whose eyes kissed hers.

You could say he threw her a love grenade. You could say it was love at first sight. You could say they had been waiting inside each other for years. And from where I sat I saw clear as the scuffed boots on my feet, past the acrobat and the bear and the lion, past the magician and his tricks, and even past the gleam of my father’s trumpet, I saw my very first circus unfold itself and my father and mother unfold their myth, and begin to dream me into being.
"Fundamentalists Go To Hell"
I visit Baba with a bottle of Raki and a pink carpet I found in the street. The night is warm and simple as I stand on the street whistling, waiting.

My father opens the door to the street with a flourish, baring his yellow teeth and I step into the hallway behind him, the door wheezing shut behind us.

"Hi Baba," I almost sing.

He spins around and his face is pallid in the feeble light. A dim, grubby bulb only partially illuminates his features. And I notice beads of sweat at his temples. The hallway is as deep as dark water and leads all the way to the back lane interrupted only by a staircase beneath which lives Rasputin.

"I wanted to take you out for dinner," I proffer as he gazes blankly at me through rags of twisted light. "But I don't have enough money…So ah, I bought you some Raki…and a carpet I found."

We stand like this a moment on the threshold and he begins to snigger and brandishing his arms announces, “I’m into spending moneeey Aliiisss!"

He draws out the second last word with some spiteful relish and I notice his eyelids are rimmed crimson, his pupils the concentrated black of poppy seeds. I wonder if he’s sick but no, tonight he is a high rolling fat cat, butchering for his narcotic supper at the local Turkish Meat Supply called Istanbul. Every day for just six dollars an hour his hands are immersed in halal blood yet his fridge remains ribbed, empty.
And he laughs now at his own humour as I follow him up the staircase to his night time room where he opens the window wide and flings the keys to his door out onto the street below in a moment of abandon, the smell of death in his nostrils. Turning to me he sweeps the stinking air of his room with *abracadabra* arms and widens his eyes in the fanfare laughing, "I'm into spending moneeyy!"

But it’s the hiss of an opiated snake that I hear, the ugly yellow of burnt out sickness that I smell and the prick of a blunt syringe that I feel as he struggles to find a vein.

I fold my arms with a chill and then roll the carpet out for him to see and put the *Raki* on the low table between us. The lamp is feeble against the dark night. It threatens to overcome us as we sink into the tattered armchairs and a wind plucks up outside, re-configuring the detritus of the day.

Shadows box across his face as he announces, "So what happens is Alis, Mohammed ordered us to figh---...."

But he starts to retch. “Excuse me”, he says delicately, his eyes watering and coughing he scrambles to the window bent over double.

His fingers grip the window sill and he vomits and vomits telling me after he has too much pressure on his mind so he’s sick – *whack* –

"Baba….Are you okay?"

He bares his teeth then seeing my alarm titters almost hysterically as he stands in front of the open window. I sit with my hands beneath my legs and stare at the carpet as he wheezes before sitting back down.

His eyes are red-rimmed, his pupils poppy seeds.
“Alis there’s something wrong with you”, he almost spits and wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. “You’ve lost your power”, he sneers as the wind outside wrestles with the curtain.

A ducktail bobs above a waterline, scribbled on his wall, its head submerged in the peeling grubby paint. An appointment slip stands upright on his mantelpiece, a reminder for his monthly injection.

“You’ve lost your power”, he hisses again.

I sit, immobilised, vacant. I should fight back, say something. Anything. But I remain submerged in a fever of silence and instead look around for my closest weapon. Nothing. I consider jumping out the window but imagine the pavement rushing towards me or my Dad’s fist, so I just sit there and follow the patterns of the carpet I’ve given him with my eyes. Faded baroque flourishes curve this way and that. Some candle wax spilt on a corner fossilising a small flushed rose. Footsteps pass the door outside and looking up I notice printed in texta on his door frame in neat block letters:

**ALICE**

**DIANA**

**ROMA**

A clue to my mystery blood. But Baba doesn’t wanna spill his mystery fire mongrel blood. Glowering at me, he rolls up his sleeve to just above the elbow and reveals the perfect blush of bruises the size of rooming house ping-pong balls up and down his forearm. With one hand, a pallid white fist, he grips above the elbow and lets the other
hand open and close like a sick flower as he grips his forearm tight. The pallor of his forearms bristle in Arabic blue ink under the naked bulb and he stares at me, ashen. My head rings with the jagged buzz of power currents, the voltage on high, as I remember him, electrified, writhing on a steel framed bed.

I swallow and blink as he rolls his sleeve down.

Looking at me suspiciously he spins the lid off the Raki bottle with a flourish. It clatters onto the table, a small domestic cymbal.

“Mohammed ordered us to fight!” he almost challenges me.

“Oh ye?” I gulp.

Thunder crosses his brow as he snarls, “There’s something wrong with you Alis! You’ve lost your power.”

I stifle the moan that has begun to move up my throat from my heart. The carpet has one frayed corner where the edges trail coloured threads in disparate directions all over the floor, a dissipation of pattern. The sound of liquid as he pours the Raki into two glasses one for him and one for me, with a chipped lip.

“You should just stay quiet,” he says through lips pursed so tight they’re almost white.

“But I …”

“I said Alis… just stay out of de conversation.”

And he slams his fist down on the table.

Whack.

I jump in my chair.
"Şerefe Alis!" he growls.

"Şerefe," I stammer. And tilting his head back, he takes a deep draught.

"Ah…Dat's it. Booiful."

I have a sip without taking my eyes off him and remember that once he articulated aerosol dogma on night street walls at the back of Turkish take away: Allah loves me? and No Tattoos and that an anonymous other scrawled on the opposite wall, Fundamentalists Go to Hell. And now I realise that my Captain Schizophrenia is addicted, so rich he even throws his keys out the window and craving and broken like this he wouldn’t even remember that he'd done it.

"La illahe illAllah…" he sighs and puffs on his joint.

Outside the sky window a half moon bears witness with its sometime companion star and I wonder what it would've been like to grow up with a sane father who says things like, 'What's your favourite colour?' or 'What do you want to be when you grow up?'

"Alis," he says exhaling impulsively. "I should to be telling you, I love you. You my daughter…" And as he gets up from his chair and kneels down in front of me, suddenly desperate, I can't help but flinch.

"I should be…"

His eyes begin to fill with tears as he slams his fist on the table again and the glasses jolt spilling a little over the sides.

My jaw tightens and my chest resounds with the thump. His nose is only an inch away from mine and I sit utterly still, not daring even to breath. Biting my lower lip I long to close my eyes but can't. I have never seen my father cry. His breath is hot on my face. I
can smell the rancour of bile and alcohol and see the brown stumps of his teeth. "You my
daughter Alis!" he pleads, his voice beginning to break. "You my daughter…"

The night sky outside is a nebulous tangle of black contorted grief longing to realise itself.
My ears ring with electric currents and trembling I edge closer and reach out falteringly
towards him.
"Baba…? Babagym…?"
And he looks at me his eyes blank, unrecognizing.
"Dese fuckin sorcerers! Fuckin hell fire hospitale!" he rasps, imploring.

My heart beats a steam engine as I gamble my outstretched open palms between us to pull
him in close, thanking Allah the Raki bottle is out of reach. And I find my tongue starts a
rhythm I heard somewhere.

*Tana rini rini rum*

*Tana rini rum…*

And as his head falls to my shoulder he sobs a fanatically spluttering diminuendo, "You've
lost your power! You've lost your…!" Tears slide down the crook of my neck, his arms
hang limply by his side and he lets go and falls heavily against me hanging his head
muttering through sobs. I hold him, unshackled in the shadows like this and watch, listen
as a neon sign for a nightclub outside the window flickers first on and then off.
And then I am pelting through the shadows of Sydney Road, choking on this new edition. My head bound up in a crown of electrical cords that deafens me to the sounds of the traffic as I run red, yellow and green lights that swarm and spin like drunken bees. And running like this I fall deep into the thickly painted night that quickens around me and further into the fire of solitude.

Once I dreamt of the golden flower of a trumpet with a bulb of electricity shining in its round florid throat. A man was slumped against the kitchen wall. He was naked but I couldn’t see his sex. Slumped with fatigue and a longing that had become a fecund sickness that weakened his limbs….Slumped with a head heavy with hair of black grapes his head nearly at his chest his trumpet resting on winter skin he played it, slouched like this in my kitchen, the tune of the pink panther slow and plaintively and then there is a woman sitting on the sofa nearby fully clothed and upright yet leaning toward this figure. And as I look back at the man I notice it is my father and there are clear tears rolling down his cheeks as he plays this tender tune and I look back at the woman and notice it is my mother and she too has tears rolling gently down her cheeks. I stand dreaming watching my two weeping lovers.

And I am dreaming as I walk down Sydney Road which burns like ice gunmetal grey and the bullets of my tears splash in the rain thunder puddles grinning like mirrors and the street is cut jagged into shards. I walk to my father where I see him sitting at the back of the Halal Butcher Shop. I try and reach him where he sits with friends at the back of the shop the roller door open. As I walk I look down and I see the tiny straight backs of
syringes scattered throughout the shreds of storm water. Millions of tiny metal tubes designed for veins…I can’t walk any further without them piercing the tender arch of my foot so I turn my back and I walk away. And I walk away remembering nights of dancing floors with shards of bottles cut like diamonds and my feet encrusted and bleeding. My dancer’s feet swooping with red wings across the floor.

And I am dreaming of my reflection in a mirror. I am looking at myself in the clouded unpolished glass. My head is bandaged, wrapped in yards and yards of this bone coloured swaddling. Underneath my hair has been shaved off and I am in shame. My skin is milk white my eyes cast hollow constellations. Holding my head looking at my self in this dusty glass I see my father standing behind me and he looks at me and he holds my head with tenderness and his eyes arc to mine. He is protective now of that woman who was barely a girl, still a child.

And I am dreaming I am in a lane with the cobblestones overgrown by weeds and parcels of deep dirt flanking the corrugated fencing. The moonlight is wan as she has been nailed exhausted to the sky by an angry young woman spitting curses at her mother. It is here in this lane I confront my Father, by the throat. I hold him with the pallid flower of my fist bleached white with the fury of fear I lift him till his feet are a foot above the fetid backblocks of Brunswick, his plump jugular struggling sensuously beneath my fingertips, his eyes gaze like the burnt out black of sauce pan bottoms - he doesn’t speak. I take a knife and plunge it into his chest relishing the warm hot trickle of his blood flowing definitively over my fingers and into the laneway night. I hear the thunder of horses
career through my chest and I know I have to leave this country that doesn’t sing me like home.

And I am not dreaming when I see him the next day in his eyrie shop top and I stand with my back to the wall watching him the shut the door and he approaches me saying Aliis! I have a present for you! I hope you like it! And all I can see is our madness glinting on its silver cusp as he offers me in his outstretched smiling hand this knife, this knife, this knife of ours.

And I know that I have to go home. I have to meet the people who are my family and I have to trace the genealogy of madness and desire that begat me, these stories often told in the gaps between people these legends of provenance that have been my bread. And this way of telling stories is the way I am telling his stories and the way they are moving through me still is quiet like my blood and shadows, as quiet as my voice booming out across the lonely streets of Brunswick who bloom blindly in the early morning deadly nightshade of lamplight. *La illahe ill Allah* I say as I swing this rhythm of God through me, as I trail these streets of my childhood looking for a scrap to add to the map of a man and his little family who are waiting still with their houses swept and their tea sets dusty, for peace. These sweet tragedies which I release like birds to fly home, to settle in the trees, in their anchor nests. I release these stories so I may travel on.
It was just three days before they began travelling together, first through Afghanistan then Iran and finally Turkey before they settled in London, where my mother found medical work. They lived on their toes, on the hope and promise of each sunrise they followed. It was during their early summer travels in the heat haze thrown off the mountains behind the Aegean, that my father played the *Ney* and began teaching my mother. *Elma* for apple, *üzüm* for grape and *biber* for the long thin green peppers they ate every day rolled in flat bread to ward off sickness. I always listened in on these rogue language lessons, eager to emerge a brilliant bi-lingual baby, alas to this day I am still beset by my power for reverie. I remember dad drawing little bunches of grapes and an apple in the margins of her diary as he enunciated over and over, *elma, üzüm, biberrrr*. I tried to pay attention, really I did. But I would find myself instead caught in the music of the landscape around us, or the sidelong glances of my mother’s eyes or the curling hair of my father. I was too happy watching them fall into each other to pay attention to vocabulary.

When they ambled back to their tent from a beach-side restaurant inundated with motorbikes and cats, their bellies full of food and their heads full of dreams, he would tell her stories from the *Mathnawi* and the importance of the right wood for the *Ney*. He would relay the musings of Ibn Arabi, of his astral travelling Sheikh and the secrets of
La illahe ill Allah. It was about then that üzüm, elma and biber fell apart into letters and syllables and drifted into the swell of the night tide.
The Maiden of the Never-Never
The Mother Makes A Pilgrimage To Old Trees Where She Performs The Rites Of Forest Hymns
And here is my Mother, Maggie Mac, The Wreck of the Hesperus, the weave of Summer about her brown neck, resplendent in her infamous summer whites; initially a stark crisp uniform until a splash or three of Claret augments her outfit in configurations of the conversation, some red punctuation. After all these years she still wears her dark hair in a long plait, all the way down to her hips, just as she did when I first saw her on that Afghan mountain side. Sometimes if I am lucky she will let me brush it for her, combing out the knots, all the way down her back. Her face is dotted with a triptych constellation of moles on the temple of her forehead, origin unknown. Often her sister will muse, Did they come from a Syrian Sea Captain or are they Irish? Still she listens to bird's calls, burns the rice, hoots with friends, loses her keys, glasses, cheque book or mobile phone and still she forgets that there are things which she can't forget.

Generations have imprinted themselves in gently undulating horizontals beneath the heroism of grey hairs that feather her forehead. Only the circles under her eyes are carved deeper now, and a courage of birds have left the imprint of their dancing feet about at the edges. Thick eyebrows frame her eyes; gentle or tyrannical, and her swarthy face which blushes here and there from the brilliant Australian sun. She always told me, A person's eyes Alice. A person's eyes. And Dad had said, You don't smile wit you tees but wit your eyes.

She can't abide falsity, insincerity, frozen food, microwave ovens or instant coffee. She loves to balance a map on the ridge of a steering wheel, poring over it as she drives. She likes white sheets and good wine and she can save lives, bake a mean steam pudding, intuit
a black heart and find her direction amongst the shadows of a forest but she can't sing in tune, tolerate lies, or people who don't look her in the eye. She can't pronounce focaccia, reebok, nokia, or my middle name, but she can pronounce, "Alice!....Aalice!!"

I can see an open bottle of wine on the kitchen table from the window of my little garden room where I sit typing.

"Alice! Are you there?"
She's lying on the chaise-longue by the back window, idle, waiting for a conversation, an audience, a pair of ears.
"Ye, ye I'm here," I call back.
"What's for dinner?"
I lean my elbows further across my desk and peer out the window.
"I dunno. What've we got to cook?" I shout.
She cranes her neck over her shoulder, "Oh I dunno you can work it out... can't you darling!?" she twinkles at me.
I immerse reluctantly from my tiny bungalow and its solitude and trip through the garden into the kitchen.
"How you going?" I ask as I shut the back door behind me.
She folds her face into some rattled composition of underdog exhaustion.
"I'm exhausted."
"Ah," I utter pretending not to have noticed her face.
And then she launches into her weekly Friday night tales of work as I open the fridge. "I had a Koori kid at the hospital today. Gorgeous kid. Had to refer him on to another doctor though, professor, what's his name? And Mum or Grandma had bought this kid down from Echuca or somewhere and this doctor he's an old racist, so I said to this kid, *when you go in there to see him you call him Professor okay?*

She beams with a loosely rolled filterless cigarette in her hand, threads of tobacco hanging out the end. This detail has always repulsed me as she would remove the fine brown lace from her lips every now and then between stanzas. Her glass is poised to her mouth and she is about to sip but to make sure I am paying attention, pauses deeply, then adds, "You know, get this old guy on side. He doesn't spend much time with the Koori kids, to say the least." And her eyes widen as her lips purse to inhale.

She doesn't need me to respond beyond mild interjections of exhalation in various keys so without looking up from where I slice onions at the bench, she sips her wine, from the glass of a dead beau and continues. "So I said *professor, professor*. And this kid was saying, 'pwo-fess-ar, pwo-fess-ar' all the way through the consultation," she laughs. "Gorgeous kid, but fucking complicated."

"Mmmm," I mumble opening the fridge with one hand and petting the nosey dog with another. "I earnt my keep today Alice. I earnt my keep"

"Mmm?" As if I didn't.
"Had to tell dad the kid was dying, another kid at the hospital. And there is nothing more we can do."

"Ye, that’s hard to say."

"I wasn’t hard," she retorts.

"No," I said. "It sounds hard. Your day."

"Ah." And she pauses for a moment looking at me. "Yeah, it was. Fucking I.C.U. don’t like disabled patients. Head of ethics says to me, my patients are taking his beds! Can you believe it? In I.C.U they say I always keep the patients alive – the ethics committee was set up basically because disabled kids take up so many beds. My disabled kids."

The fridge is its usual archaeological dig of a score or so of mustard and tartar sauce jars past their used by date and home made sauces with thin blue-grey blooms of mould here and there.

"There’s some mullet in there. It’s fresh," she adds brightly.

I grimace.

"Don’t give me that look it’s perfectly fine, and it’s good for you."

"I know I know," I frown as I unwrap the soggy paper package and begin to rummage around in the cupboard for the Masala to coat the taste.

"This kid has been in isolation for three months," she continues. "Jabbed with needles. It’s not gunna get better. I’m not gunna prolong its suffering. A lot of our kids die when they get to adult medicine. They don’t give a stuff about ’em there, they’re just not as important. Had a kid once with a chest infection, head of ethics tells me; he’s gunna die Margaret I said to him, I said, you’re gunna die and I’m gunna die too one day what about it?"
Our dog appears and winks at me expectantly with the box of Masala in my hand, grinning and wagging her tail.

"It's not for you!"

"What?" An interruption of bangles. A sip of wine.

"Just talking to the dog."

"Oh. Right," she almost barks. "Anyway the kid recovered from his chest infection and next one that went into adult med. He died...I.C.U. wanted to put him on a drip of morphine a quick ticket to heaven," she rumbles her cue for me.

But I don’t respond.

"Of course they're not gunna write that in the bedside notes are they?"

As she muses, the wonderfully rosy cheeked, staunchly Socialist eccentric, known by some as Aunty, sprawls on the chaise-longue, just opposite the kitchen table and I remember my first word said over and over in the deep solitude of a three year old; ho- ho hostibal....

"Anyway the professor at the Kooris, he was the same type of man who told me when I got my first job in Broken Hill, 'You won't find work in the city again you know.'"

I raise my eyebrows, "Really?"

"No-no Alice. In those days. A woman and a doctor!" She gives a swarthy hoot. "It was real patriarchy and all the rest, not like today. No one would blink an eye. Everyone's into money these days and they're all on nice tax packages thank you very much."
No-no being the equivalent of don’t you worry about that! A qualifier of sincerity, a stamp of genuine fair dinkum truth no exaggerations. With her belly rotund as a babushka and little chicken legs tittering about at the other end of the chaise-longue she rolls through the story and most of her stories at least three times to land on a finale of refrains. A quote repeated, a mimicked facial expression performed with laughs and her eyes twinkling above the pince-nez which she peered through, earlier in the day, at throats, script pads and little faces. The hose is on in the garden, perhaps it will be forgotten and left on all night. The dog has slunk off to bark at teenagers failing dismally to sneak home unnoticed and the doors both front and back swing wide open to allow for the broad summer heat to swagger down the hall like an old drinking partner.

"Were you working with kids then?" I ask, my eyes smarting with tears as I tip the chopped onions into the pan sizzling with olive oil.

"Ah, it was a bit of everything you know. Friday nights were the worst," she announces pleased for my question.

"They had these ten mile pubs out of the Hill and we would get a call that the ambulance was coming in and we’d get ready but often the sirens wouldn’t be on."

A smile looms over her pince-nez and she nods a few times to sharpen my attention.

"These kids would come in all smashed up…"

"Shit ey?"

The radio trumpets the seven o'clock news as I chop the garlic with the permanently blunt knife.
"Ye," she confirms shadows crossing her brow, "Sometimes we'd just have to certify. *Dead bodies.*"

And she looks at me gravely over her glasses making sure I have understood.

"Hmmm," I frown.

And the radio announces explosions in Istanbul…

"Can you turn that down," she entreats, flinging her hand out.

"But I'm listening to it!"

"Ah, okay but just turn it down. I'm going deaf"

"I know," I say as I swivel the dial just a fraction to make her happy and it crackles on to itself, an underscore.

*The government is still speculating as to who is responsible for these reprehensible attacks in a crowded inner city street. Fourteen dead and countless injured. With the profound economic unrest some commentators have said it could be any number of terrorist groups from a local fundamentalist cell to the Kurdish Workers Party, otherwise known as the PKK.*

Mum listens for a moment and looks sideways out the back window without moving her head, just concentrating, the lines of her face at skewed angles.

"You're father used to say the Iranians used heads as footballs," she mutters ominously.

I laugh through my words. "Mum! He would have said that because they're Shi'a. Not because they're Kurds."

"Ah *I don't know* Alice," and she looks blackly again out the back window.

"Hey," I caution. "Why don't you ever use my middle name? I mean why did you give it to me if you never use it?"
"Oh Alice. It's a name your father gave you. You're Alice to me. Alice Alice Alice," she entreats suddenly foibled. Little. And I can see her as a child walking down a dirt road in the bush, her head down, kicking a stone.

"Say it. Say my name Mum."

"Oh Alice."

"Say it," I persist.

"Alice Mellyka Oulgazaah."

I smile and shake my head a little.

"Leave me alone! You know I'm dyslexic!" she laughs.

"No you're not!" I guffaw.

“Anyway I was telling you about the Hill. There were no seat belt laws in those days Alice,” she continues over the news. “And they'd just come in every Friday night smashed up. Awful stuff,” she shakes her head unable to forget the image of headlights mowing slowly through the early mist of night.

"Mmmm-" But my mind is in Istanbul where Dad's family live, half of my family and I wonder if any of them were hurt.

"Oh and there were the circs every Saturday morning," she adds.

"The what?" I exclaim as I secret the soggy fish package back into the fridge and begin to sift through some lentils searching for stones.

"The circs!" she almost barks. "Circumcisions." and her wrists clamour with gold bangles.

"Oh," and a whiff of tumeric assaults my nostrils as I tip a spoonful into the pan, along with the sudden image of my mother wielding a pair of scissors.

"God I hope they weren't blunt."
"What?"

"The scissors."

"We didn't use scissors… and anyway, God Alice!"

"Sorry," I chortle.

"Anyway before that," she stifles a giggle, "I used to go for a glide."

"A glide?"

"Ye with a little glider you know?"

I don't really but she continues nonetheless.

"I was sharing a house at that time with a girl called Jill-"

"A woman," I say bluntly.

"Yes, yes well she was a young woman… an old girl…"

"A woman. Anyway," and she doesn't catch my smile.

"Yes, anyway and she used to go for a jump every morning with a parachute then come home and have a shot of whisky and then off to work!"


"Ye," she shines.

Smiling broadly through giggles she picks up a wet stick from her side that has been deposited by the near hysterical dog in an invitation to play.

"Mudda!" she bawls as she throws it out the window and into the pond.

"Mard-larpa!" I join in letting off some volume and stamping my feet as the dog tears through the backdoor. A fusillade of toes nails on the wooden floor.

"What's on tele then," she says flicking through a nearby newspaper. "I don’t wanna listen to this bad news. I've had enough," she waves vaguely at the radio. "Ah! Inspector Rex!"
"Mudla!" And she gets up to switch on the television.

The dog doesn’t answer.

"Mudlaaaah! Inspector Rex is on the tele!" she calls into the darkness of the garden.

Sidling sheepishly up to the back door the dog looks at me in embarrassment as if I have found out some daggy secret hobby, slinks reluctantly over to mum, blushing black fur, and glances furtively up at me.

"Mudla!" Mum giggles now enjoying herself.

Finally the dog gives in and plonks down with a sigh in front of the tele not a little humiliated as her secret past time is shown up. The show has already begun and the two of them, after all the circus of arriving, don’t seem that interested in watching it after all.

Mum interrupts, and as soon as she does Mudla leaps to her feet and shoots off down the hallway to bark at shadows on the street.

"Haw haw haw," I answer in giggles as I stir and toast the spices.

"I wanna go bush, Alice," she says after a moment, turning to me and muting the canine detective. "I need to hit the road."

When I was a kid we used to pack the little red car with a bush box (an old apple box), the swag (the sleeping bag she and dad had bought in London and the old brown rug, Yak's hair that they'd got in Afghanistan) plenty of food and a jerry of water. Even when I was six I knew the pleasure of the open road as my Mum scribbled it in charcoal in her sketchbooks carried about in that same beaten out leather handbag on a smoko stop. I remember the first time we rocked up in Copley, an old town near the foothills of the Flinders. Belbin had put Mum on to an old friend of his who he'd said would take care of us and take us bush. We'd been driving for three days across Victoria over the border at
Mildura then up through Port Augusta and Adelaide. It was the next stretch of road that gave me particular delight. In September all you can see out there stretching taut across the horizons are fields of purple, blue or red the wild flower days. I was just five or six at the time and wore a little blue cap the colour of hope. We arrived at this one horse town which you could miss if you blinked and stood at the foot of a long overgrown path my Mum holding my little hand as an Alsatian dog reared up in the dusk shadows to greet us with growls.

"Shit," thought my Mum. "What has Belbin got us into?"

Having grown up with our fair share of disenfranchised dogs we walked up the path resolutely only to be welcomed by a small band of highly intoxicated old bush-men on the veranda lounging about in a sort of laissez faire tangle with their flagons of wine strewn about and a transistor radio blaring. I remember a moment of just standing there, the Alsatian snarling and another mongrel dog who had appeared from somewhere salivating in the shadows as the conversation of these old men gradually petered out and they registered our presence.

"Ah, I'm Marg from Melbourne. My mate Belbin said we could-"

"Ah Margy ya darlin'! We've been waitin all week for ya lass! Where in god's name ave ya been love? We thought you were dead under one of those road trains!" hollered a man who came lumbering out of the overgrown darkness, scattering the dogs.
My mother was disarmed at the sight of this old man all arms and legs with a shock of white hair and an Irish accent so thick we could barely disentangle his words. "I'm Tom and I'm pleased to meet you and your little girl!"

"Alice," I chirruped.

"Aalice!" he crowed scruffling my hair. "Alice and Margy! Me two girls from the big smoke!!"

And he brimmed as he shook my mother's hand and she heaved a sigh of relief.

That night we picked our way through his junk yard, narrowly escaping impalement on the spike of a grader or some spare part and slept in an old Leigh Creek miner's cabin. We made an annual trip to old Tom's for years to come always relishing the time spent in one of his early model Land Drovers with the windscreen shot out and doors hanging precariously from their hinges that would plunge us into uncharted tracts of desert where he inevitably couldn't sleep when it came to dark because of the ghosties. I could sleep though, sweetly, deep in the arms of nostalgia with the delicious feeling that perhaps Mum had felt me out there all those years ago.

"You haven't been since I was fifteen have you?" I ask now.

"No, we went for Belbin's funeral, remember? Ten years ago. God time flies."

"Ah ye, I was finishing High School…That was black comedy wasn't it?"

"Those bloody ashes!"

And we both laugh at the memory of her and Belbin's sister mowing through the darkness of the Silverton plains in a tinny Japanese hire car after the Wake with the plastic urn that
they couldn't open in their drunken grief, even with an axe, as they wept together on a sandy crest in the midnight wind. And then hours later they had returned, their faces ashen, giggling like phantoms after hurtling through the night, the urn intact on the front seat between them. They had ploughed through a mob of Kangaroos, leaving the hire car in contorted knots of metal. The loss of a brother, the loss of a lover.

"I never got to say goodbye to him you know."

"I know, I know…He never tried to be your father. I respected that about him," she sighs.

"But I've had it with lovers. I'm just not interested anymore" she confesses from a distance.

"I don't have the time."

But her eyes are wet with sorrow.
She began to learn of his family, of Ali Riza his grandfather the sea captain and Tevfik Ülgezer his father, Raika his mother, of Yildiz his aunt who burnt down the old house on Heybeli Island and his brother Akin and sister Nurdan. The pages of her diary, which she hadn’t written in for years, became annotated with family trees and recipes, tales of rock-pools and backgammon games, of curfews and aunts in distant villages. Each day they proffered silent prayers of thanks for their meeting, one quietly creeping out of the tent at dawn to watch the sunrise, the other strolling alone for a moment on the water’s edge at evening.

Imbued with this bliss my mother was awoken one night by the first of my father’s phantom experiences. I was hoping I had been wrong, that indeed I didn’t know what would happen, that I was just a rebel spirit in a rogue orbit, but it was this thunder clap of hot house visions that he awoke from, that we all awoke to, an amulet of the future that pricked the tip of my nose and swelled into a fever of grief as I sat nearby listening. I had been tracing the dome of the sky with my index finger quelling remote feelings of homesickness when his voice tore through the anthology of stars overhead.

"Don't kill her!!" He rasped sitting bolt upright amidst a fever tangle of blankets. "Don't kill her! I didn’t tell you that!" his voice frayed, his brow glistened with jewels of perspiration.
"Aykut!?" cried my startled mother sitting up in the dark.

He stared dumbly at her, his chest heaving, his hands trembling, a polyoptic apparition. She cautioned a hand on his back, his arms taut like electric cable. The silence crackled in fanatic coruscations and outside the night was still. Only the moon slaked her furtive milky thirst, unspoken, beyond the shore.

I heard him growl and saw spittle caught in the creases of his thin bleached lips, "Dey tell me to kill you, Margrit!"

And with the barbarism of grief in his black eyes he lunged at her locking both his fists on her arms and shook and shook.

"Like dis?" he shrieked. And he looked over his shoulder through the tent flap trying wildly to penetrate the shadows. "You want me to kill her like dis?!

I watched as my mother's body was taken like this, by violent surprise, her limbs mute, barely able to respond to the eruption.

He blistered through his visions, his voice scoring her as she stifled a moan and pleaded, "Aykut! It's me, Margy. Aykut!"

His nails cut into forearms in little pink crescent moons, the colour of his inverted country love.

She tried to hold her head up but her hands quavered in her lap as he bawled in to the darkness and shook her, "Like dis?! Huh?"

And then I heard a thwop. A whimper. A low cry. I couldn't look.

Round and round I traced the sand with my finger concentrating on
the impossible task of counting the grains. And round and round I
hung the debt of my impatience about my neck like a noose and
began to hum a song I had heard my father sing once. Over and over
again;

_Tana rini rini rum_
_Tana rini rum_
_Tana rini rini rum_
_Tana rini rum_

Over and over, until it became a chant where the vowels bled into the
consonants and the consonants bled into the vowels. Until the
phonemes were stripped naked and there was no longer any
distinction between discreet words. Just primary sound on the shore.
Over and over I intoned this elemental hymn, circling my finger in the
sand trying to count. Humming. Suddenly my father loosened his grip
round her arms. His shoulders slumped and his head fell to his chest
as his hands slid down.

"I shouldn’t be to telling you d-dis," he shook his head and moaned. "I
should be telling you …" And he lifted a hand to her face where it
sang high and shrill with the crimson sting of impact.
"Sshh, sshh..." she murmured and trying to disguise a trembling hand, took a hanky from her pocket and tentatively wiped first his cheeks, then his eyes.

"Ahk, my life," he muttered into his chest and lifting his head to look at her, he saw that her eyes could brave him.

"Margrit, I would newer do dese ting dey fucking telling to me! Newer," and he hugged her suddenly, abrasively. Then beginning to tremble again he folded up like an umbrella in her arms and sobbed hot and fast like a babbling river.

"Margrit, Margrit. Dese tings dey tellin me ower and ower, "he pleaded, "ower and ower."

And as he stumble staggered through his delusions her back straightened, the fever of her shivering abated and she held him fast though the vagaries of their first night journey.

I saw my Mother's face and felt certain she'd seen mine. She stared through the tent flap and onto the shore where I sat, my toes in the water. Her face had broken and through the seams I saw her orphaned love. With her eyes staring through me and into me I leapt up. I couldn't stay and see her like that. I couldn't stay and witness her softening into the swoon of surrender realising just how far away he was as she listened to the night grow fervently silent about them. I couldn't stay watching as she tried to hold him close while he raved
disjointedly with tears in his eyes about the Russians and the satellites, the voices, the spiders, and the roses. I couldn’t stay and listen as she assured him that no one was dead or sick. I couldn’t stay. So I did what I had always known how to do, I ran. I ran and I ran and I ran until I breathed fire, until my head split open to let the salt spray of the stars in and until I could no longer hear the sobs of my father.

That was the first time I was really scared and the first time I fully realised the price of my impatience. I knew the fall of their love to come and was witnessing the beginning as I had desired. I knew it was a love of which I would’ve known only precious fragments, if I had've been patient, a love that I would never have understood had I not come before my time. But now I was here and there was no way of retreating from the fire. Utterly powerless to change anything even slightly, yet too stubborn to regret, I collapsed a few kilometres down the beach and slumped on the sand, my head in my hands, the prickly on the tip of my nose flowering into hot blooms of tears falling on the broken shells about me. I was only an impatient onlooker running as fast as I could, at once towards and away from what I most loved and most feared. There was no direction out there. Every road led to the same destination.
It was in the days of The Hill that Mum met Belbin and was known by her city friends as 
the Maiden of the Never-Never, the red dust shimmering in her long plait. She told me 
one the two of them had shared a mattress in the backyard of a friend's house next door to 
a brawling alcoholic couple called *Plugger and Tess*. They were known to hurl bottles and 
abuse at each other, an occasional stray one arcing over the fence in a renegade trajectory 
narrowly missing the sleepy lover's heads and they had a bald Galah who used to repeat all 
it heard, at the most inopportune times.

Tales immerge from those days of having to eat a Cockatoo in Port Augusta or was it a 
Galah because she was so hungry, of the goodbyes with Belbin that would last for days, of 
lingering in the back bar of a local pub singing along to the piano well after the hour when 
all the decent ladies of the town had tittered home and been consequently hushed by the 
barmaid when the local cops turned up on their rounds.

Mum sits up, "We worked like donkeys though Alice. A *sixty hour* week."
And then lowering her voice, "I still do…"

I nod not remembering the last time I did a sixty hour week, if ever.

"Ye, I wanna go bush. Become a Sadhu in a red MG…You won't see me for dust!"

I smile quietly to myself. She hasn't said this for years.

Mardlarpa wags her tail in the door way in a question, breaking my mother's musings.

"Now what's happening over there?" she asks suddenly animate, motioning to the stove 
where the onions are beginning to burn.

"It's coming, it's coming. I'm making Dahl."
"Oh," a hint of disappointment in her voice. "What about the Mullet?"

"Not in the mood. The Masala had weevils in it," I say deadpan.

"Ah c'mon Alice. Bit of extra protein won't hurt you."

"Yuk Mum! And anyway I'm on strike. Remember?"

"Ah yeas," she admits a smile. "I told the fishmonger that. Well I'm going to have some more wine. Do you want some?"

"Ah, alright," I muster sensing a long night ahead.

On these nights I am a captive audience to her stories of someone dead or gone mad, a kid off the rails, a political wrangle, or being a true socialist, the latest embittered chronicle of the demise of the public health system.

Mum gets up from the chaise-longue and pours me some wine.

"This isn't a bad bottle…*Tyrells '98,*" she says to herself as she places a glass by the stove for me.

"'98 hey?"

"You gotta drink good wine Alice."

"Mmm, if you can afford it."

"It's one left over from John's cellar"

"Oh."

When John died, her old mate and lover, the spoils of his plentiful mountain cellar were divided up amongst his nearest and dearest.

"I still miss him you know. Sometimes I think maybe I should've married him…But I just wasn't in love, you know."
"Ye."

"And he always used to say, I'll be Alice's father. And I'd say, Baleez. Baleez, she's already got a father John."

I can't respond except to stir the wooden spoon through the lentils, which I forgot to check for stones. I didn't get to say goodbye to him after his protracted illness either.

When I don't reply she limps back over to her horizontal perch.

"How's the knee?" I ask.

"Slowly, slowly. I'll be dancing again soon, don’t you worry about that! Cheers" and she raises her glass.

"Cheers Mum."

The night has blackened over outside and the two gum trees she planted twenty-seven years ago at the back of the garden when we first arrived, murmur in alabaster shadows, their limbs arching this way and that in the wind. Friday nights at our house are often like this. One of us will cook whilst the other sits and yaks about the week, trying in vain to deflect the attention of the dog from a stick or the mauled remnants of a ball. And it's funny that after all that has happened here, in her house, our house, the house just behind the racecourse of Lygon Street, that she is still here, ready to laugh and cry about it all again, telling me on our second bottle of wine that she can do tragedy. She gives a little whoop and her head nods up and down with wide eyes as she goes on to declare in reference to the half empty bottle on the table, "I like things that don't break."
And it’s funny that I keep returning after all that has happened, that Dad still lives on
Sydney Road above yet another shop top and that we all inhabit these two parallel arteries
of this city and that when I am in this city I live somewhere in between the two, keeping
fast this devotional orbit of ours. The dahl is finally ready and I spoon it into two bowls
for us with rice and yoghurt.

"Beautiful Alice!" she beams from her place at the table where she sits waiting with our
two glasses. "Beautiful!"
Her cheeks are flushed now from the wine and the hinges on the evening have loosened
like a cyclone wire gate blowing in the bush.
"You haven't even tasted it yet, Mum!"
Undeterred she chirps, "The best meals are always the simple ones aren't they? Hmm?
Hmm? The ones you make when no guests are coming over."

Our oven has been known to mysteriously turn itself off in the middle of parties despite
the roast rolled in oil and herbs waiting to cook for scores of guests who, due to or despite
the delay, become steadily more inebriated as the night rolls on until hours later someone
will discover it raw and waiting and hoist the cold tray through the melee and off to a
neighbouring oven.

"Maybe for you!" I retort playfully. "I cook well when people come over!"
"Yeah, you're like Dad," she reflects. "You'd think the kitchen was empty—the cupboards would be bare and he'd just cook with whatever there was. It was always beautiful and he never used a recipe…"

"Hmm…"

"You know," she muses, "My friends thought he was French, he was so good looking…"

Her voice trails off and I almost flinch from her reflection and thrust a bundle of cutlery on the table. The clatter cutting through her reverie all knives and forks.

"Well," she concludes not quite conceding the sleight, "it smells beautiful!"

The wood of our kitchen table is polished now. It never used to be. The cracks between the panels were a testament to years of porridge and muesli breakfasts before being whisked off to kindergarten on the back of my Mum's bicycle the two of us almost phosphorescent in bright orange and yellow under the swaying mast head of a flag. Hairclips used to disappear down these cracks as well as curls of tobacco and whole pepper grinds. Everything in this room orbits around the table. Plates have been thrown over it, people danced atop of it when Labour won the election, mobs of people have sat around it, from pass the parcel to pinot noir, and now my mother sits with a prologue of red wine in front of her and a daughter full of questions. Depending on her mood she might take me back with her to her childhood and how she had trouble with the Alphabet after p. She laughs as she tells me this and says that on her first day of school she still hadn't grown all her teeth. So it was with a lisp that she announced to her parents; *I got ten out of ten in the test and I'm going to Grade One*. The next day she came home and lisped again, *I got ten out of ten in the test and I'm going to Grade Two*. I know that my
grandmother beamed with pride for her daughter as she sewed costumes on the Singer for fancy dress parties and that my Grandfather boasted to his colleagues before coming home to build her an aviary even after she had picked all the carrots in his vegetable patch thinking she had done him a good turn and saved herself picking them every night before dinner.

"I think I was a strange child," she laughs.

And so it was that she finished her Matriculation two years early but her father being some last bastion of authority forbade her to enter University at such a young age and she was forced to do it all again. And when I asked her why she chose to study Medicine she replied with an evasive grin, "Oh I dunno. It was the longest course and I didn't want to be a Nurse!"

"Hmm…Is that all?" I manage between a mouthful of food.

"And we had the best end of year Balls!" her eyes gleam. "Richard would always come to pick me up for them with a corsage on the lapel of his suit. And it took me years of telling Mum, he's not the marrying type before she finally stopped asking why we hadn't stepped out."

We giggle across the able at one another as she continues, "And at the end of the night he would always be dancing on top of the tables stripped down to a pair of red tights."

I love this image of her left field friend in brazen red.

"And what about your other friend they wanted you to marry?"

"Haha! He came to the house once in Glen Iris and my father wouldn't let him down the drive way! He called out, You long haired lout!! And when he came to see me off at the
station when I got the job at the Hill, he was late running down the platform in knee high boots!! My father was scandalized!"

We break into laughter and Mardlarpa rushes in from the garden to see what all the commotion is about.

"So why did you leave Australia?" I ask sensing possibility.

"Well there was a group of us and we all went to India," she's reflective now and sensing this the dog plonks down at her feet smiling up at her.

"Ah."

"And, my mother said as I left, Don't bring home any stray dogs."

"Right. God…But you brought home a -."

"A Turk," she interrupts.

"A musician," I add. "It must've been a bit of a shock for Grandma, hey?"

She doesn't answer, just scrapes the last mouthful of dahl and yoghurt onto her fork.

When I was a small girl, many years after dad had moved out of the house we had all once shared together and the divorce had been finalised he visited in a billowing black kaftan, long beard and kohl rimmed eyes. I sat next to him on the wooden couch in the garden underneath one of the two climbing roses Mum had planted on either side of the lily pond. He came close to me and put his lips right beside my ear so I could feel his hot breath as he wheezed hysterically with laughter like a buckled accordion and recounted how Mozart had taken to whispering secrets in his ear. I thought only of the small bust of Mozart we had that sat on top of the piano and thought quizzically that he looked pretty quiet despite all the fuss of my father with his squeeze box voice spluttering out in dislocated giggles,
yet I listened earnestly with the simple ears of a child. And remembering my own long
nights spent trailing about at the heels of my two darlings I conceded that perhaps they
wouldn't believe me and my stories either.

The roses above the lily pond were in full bloom that day, dropping petals in the breeze as
my mother moved back and forth between the kitchen and the garden, listening with one
ear where dad and I sat, with coffee, milk and sugar. I remember noticing that they didn't
look at each other as they once had. My father's humour had weathered and my mother no
longer penned that it needed a quick mind to follow. She told me later that dad is what the
doctors would call burnt out. Just like the photo I had of him.

He had looked to her in the back doorway where she stood with a rolled cigarette and a
cup of coffee smiling, inviting. And stifling giggles, "You wouldn't beleew Margrit! Dese
tings Mozart tells to me!"

But it was to me she looked when he spoke like this and it is to fragments of things a
friend told me that I looked; Allah said through the prophet Mohammed,

*If you look for me, you'll find me.*

*If you find me, you'll fall in love with me.*

*If you fall in love with me, I'll have to kill you.*

*And if I kill you, the price I should pay is my life.*
That afternoon after Dad had disappeared around the corner of our street, back to his shop
top she is here still in the husk of the evening in this jarrah kitchen, the walls studded with
friend’s paintings and postcards, solid and patient and answering my questions about how
it all began. Having listened to his version all summer now I hunger to hear hers. It is here
in this urban tent where almost every variety of spider live behind the paintings, in corners
and plaster cracks as well as dragonflies, moths, mosquitoes, butterflies and birds, it is
here that I fling out my fisherwoman's net to hear of things that can't be undone.

Tonight as we sit across from each other drinking and eating, tonight as I press her for
stories, I see her looking on at the blood of their love that was spilt on the thirsty earth,
with a handful of salt thrown over one shoulder just in case, and a mouthful of moons.
When I press her I hear the story of a woman who ran for everything and found
everything, the story of a woman who ran for everything and lost something. And as she
sits opposite me here at our table with the lilies and the lazy orange fish out in the garden
she begins to realise that much as she has told herself, she hasn't lost everything.

"Well that was delicious Alice," and she pours another glass of wine and rolls a cigarette.
"No worries."
Something has changed now. Some blanket has descended upon us as I push a little more.
"So what did your parents say?"
She coughs lightly as if to obscure the conversation and surveys the dishes of our meal not
yet cleared away. Leaning her hands on the table as if about to rise, she says, "Oh I can't
remember Alice. I don’t know."
"A musician," I muse quietly.

She leans back in her chair, "Don’t ask me," she says as her heart dissolves into a million tiny pieces that have begun already to take flight.

"I bought your dad an orchestra," she says at last with a sigh. "I've bought him so many instruments."

The double bass of dubious origins that we had to smuggle from one end of Brunswick to the other in the Morris Minor, the trumpet that he left in the middle of a football field, turned his back upon and sped off from it in the opposite direction as if it were in hot pursuit, the saxophone, the countless guitars and violins and the silver clarinet from Istanbul- all came and all gone.

"I bought him that Saz from Istanbul, remember? And then one day it just disappeared. He never would tell me what happened to it."

"Ye I bought him a flute in Istanbul and there were curfews you know?"

"Before I was born."

"Yes, but after dark your Father and I would go out to these basement jazz clubs run by the Moroccans. Your Grandfather was worried sick. He would wait up all night until we got home, often early in the morning. You’d here about it in the morning people ending up on kebab skewers."

The streets were running with blood and bristling with martial law.

“That time was the crossover for your Aunt, from mini skirts and tight skivvies to a head scarf and loose fitting clothes,” says Mum.
She drains the wine from her glass and as I watch the shadows move across her face I remember a line from somewhere; *we are born to love those who most wound us*. 
Years later my aunt Nurdan would tell me about the risks of playing with fate like the jinn did, warning me with my father as an example. "You see how he prays with his legs like that and his arms out here lying on the couch? He invited the jinn inside him and now they won't leave." She sighed shaking her head sorrowfully. Her grey eyes rimmed with kohl and her mouth thinned with distaste. "I tell him how to pray the right way over and over but he won't listen. The jinn won't let him listen. Çok Kötü janim. Çok Kötü." Very bad my dear, very bad. But I wasn’t playing, just watching - a devoted child slipping on the hem of time.

In the aftermath of that night, the closer it got to my conception the more unable to commit pen to paper my mother became. She would absentmindedly lose her journal or pencil for days on end and look distractedly for them through her bags while my father gathered momentum as he moved further and further away and the gaps between his visions narrowed. To this day she loses things that are right in front of her and sets about searching feverishly for them. No, I wasn't playing tricks. I had enjoyed peering over her shoulder as she wrote at cafes or on the beach but this happened less as his apparitions left him miscarrying the world we knew and instead foundering in the brittle grip of paranoia. I remember a night once in a small grimy hotel toward the end of their stay in Turkey, fists banged
on the bedroom door all night and shouts bore through the tiny keyhole. My mother didn’t know then if her lack of understanding was due merely to cryptic cultural or linguistic tangles or the ignorance of old bad blood – a gambling debt perhaps? But still it kept on and she found herself torn between commitment and flight.

What could I have told her? My Friend said it would all be okay, Mum, I promise. But who would I say that was and what could I have told her when she was never going to hear me anyway? She had no idea where it would end, or if it ever would and found her buoyancy dissolving, leaving her helpless to his phantoms. But she had committed to him and had come too far to let go. The two of them became impenetrable in their devotion to each other as they rode the first waves of his madness together. At times like this I would catch her out sharpening pencils, making a mark on a page and then erasing it. I could feel her longing to be a hermit in the mountains of Afghanistan with the land scooping out about her. Her only escape from the increasing velocity of his hallucinations was the clutter of her night dreams. With each of his descents, she too traced her depths, unable to reach her previous heights.

Then she made her first mark in her journal for a long time; "I wish for a child,” she wrote, "but cant see how.” With my father skidding
further out, she knew that she would be bringing a child into the
unknown. If only I could have told her, *I promise Mum, I promise*. Held
her hand and sat with her or tried to comb the knots out of her hair.
"When we were in Istanbul together," she continues, her voice folded through with portent, "walking the streets, he used to point out the men who'd been to prison. They all had walking sticks…Their feet had been broken."

Embers burn in her eyes as she concludes, "And he told me that written above the prison doors in Turkish was, Allah is not with you here."

"Did Dad ever go to prison?" I ask softly.

"Not that I know of."

And we sit for a moment, each in her own own thoughts, privately saluting the phantom silence. Hers is a face of resilience. I have always admired it, especially in the wake of Dad’s collapse at this table so long ago. It’s the face of a survivor, a passionate map emblazoned with journeys whose arc continues across her forehead, from her nose to her mouth. A curvature of love whose silence lingers across her in shadows and branches and sometimes sparkles with salty hope as she move on yet, through to the other side of morning. Hers is a face dotted by a triptych constellation of moles, cardinal points from the chin to the crown. A face whose terrain has always conjured up the topography of the land for me as if she were not born of her mother but the Australian landscape and grew from a young willowy sapling into a River Gum leaning in gloriously choreographed gnarls and knots in a dry river bed, thirsting for water.

I yearn to feel again and stop this callousing so I don’t end up reptilian and bristling with affliction. You see I have learnt to survive these stories after years of being surrounded by the remnants of a love that was devastated by such frightening and violent madness.
Remnants like the rugs from Konya beneath our feet, the Pepper Grinders and tiles from the Grand Bazaar in Istanbul and the lonely piano that make it all so hard to forget. She tells me quietly that my father once threatened to hang her from the washing line and gut her. I heard years later from a lover who laughed without a hint of bitterness, “Do you know how many times I’ve heard that? From my own father and my friend’s dads. God it’s so fucking Turkish!”

Her fingers bear gold and ruby rings from her Grandmother and her delicate wrists tinkle with Turkish gold that will never come off.

"Tell me how you met him again."

“Your father?” she asks distractedly.

"My father."

I can’t remember how many times I have heard this story. If it is different from the last time, it doesn't matter. If it's the same as last time, this also doesn’t matter.

“I met him in Afghanistan. He was playing the trumpet in the circus.”

She speaks as if from the creased and folded foothills of a mountain range and rests her elbows on the back of the chair. Her long hands hang by her side, delicately woven with a tributary of veins. Her dark eyes become keen as she says, "Ye, he was an itinerant and I met him in the circus…There I was, a young medico in the 70’s riding a horse through the desert!”
She says this with her usual self-effacing tone and I remember her handsome heroism atop that black galloping muscle, flying up and down, clutching at the ribbons of reins, the Maiden of the Never-Never.

“It was just after dawn and a group of women from the town came tearing through the desert towards me.”

How did they communicate what they were about to tell her, I wonder. Panting, miming, flicking hair from their eyes and mouths, their children thudding after them in the rock and the sand. I remember an ankle or two was twisted that morning as they rushed to tell the lady doctor about the tourist from Germany who had fallen down a rocky mountain cliff, his head smashed in by the rocks. He had a broken leg and lay at the bottom of the mountain unconscious and bleeding. The women had found him. My mother galloped back to the town, her bare feet chaffing in the stirrups and the women straggling behind her with their red skirts and scarves flagging in the wind whilst I ran behind them and that firecracker of a horse.

"You should've seen the boots I had Alice."

"Ye?" I smile.

"I'd bought them in Paris, they were so expensive, hand-made leather. I must have lost them that morning when I was galloping back into town. I don’t know. I was so pissed off I lost them but I guess one of the locals must have found them."
I smile as she gets up and rummages through the sideboard, pulling out an old black and white photo. It is her stretched out on a hillside, leaning on one elbow her boots and bag beside her. "That was taken in Afghanistan, just before I met your father."

In the re-telling her face has lit up and on seeing her like this, piecing together her history, I see the starved mountains rearing up behind her, bleak and magnificent. The bite of early morning in her flushed cheeks. The decades have thundered past her leaving continents, stories and a child in their wake. Mum tells me she knelt by the injured man and took a pulse. The nearest hospital was in Kabul, a thousand or so kilometres away. The friends of the injured man, tourists also, were on acid and smeared about in the chilly blue morning.

She says, “They were off their faces you know those travellers. In retrospect they all would have been addicts and just there for the poppies, hash and cheap exotic acid. I felt ashamed to be associated with them, but fuck, this guy was bleeding everywhere and shitting himself. We had to get him to hospital. They had a Kombie van which they drove and someone had to look after him so I sat in the back and nursed him. And God what a journey! His friends were off the deep end, barely afloat! I am surprised we didn’t crash. The poor guy was in dire straits. I didn’t think he’d make it.”

She says this widening her eyes and taking a deep draught of wine and I find myself admiring again the creases of her mouth where the colour of muscatels has stuck.
“Dire straits Alice, like he was pretty fucking close. So I just packed up and left. When we reached Kabul I contacted the chap’s Embassy and by that time I didn’t think to return to Bamiyan.”

She pauses and looks at me but I am silently rapturous.

"It was Ramadan. Out of operation! Everything was shut! So I took the guy to a hospital, found him a bed, grabbed a nurse and got her to open up a pharmacy. He nearly died. He was pretty fucking close-"

"So how did you meet Dad?” I interject.

"Oh there was a circus in town. Some guy at the hospital took me along….Yeah,” she says quietly, “I met your father in Afghanistan… He couldn’t speak a word of English. I certainly couldn’t speak Turkish and I still don’t! You know what I’m like with languages!”

"Yep, I sure do."

“We fell in love and he ended up learning it quickly. He left the circus saying he’d had problems with the magician who had once actually performed some magic he said, but not in the circus, and we decided to travel together through Iran and Turkey to meet his family in Istanbul."

“Weren’t you apprehensive?” I quiz. “You know, just taking off with some guy you’d only known for a couple of weeks?”

“Oh it was no big deal that’s just how we travelled in those days. Not like now. I did think he was bit eccentric at the time, but I thought oh it’s just Turkish or the language barrier or being a muso, you know."

“And how long had you known each other before you got married?”
“Three months or so.”

“Three months!?” I’m gob-smacked. It seemed like an eternity.

“Yeah we were very much in love and I took the marriage vows very seriously you know. I made that commitment Alice. Marriage was for life you know? That’s that! Through thick and thin, till death do us part,” these last words come out heavy as blocks and I marvel at the memory of them so savagely in love.

“You see I think he was sick, paranoid when I met him in Afghanistan. Once when we stayed in a hotel people were banging on our door all night. Who knows what they wanted. I was scared and I had no idea what was going on. Your father had all sorts of explanations about it. They wanted our passports or money or drugs or something to do with the magician. But who knows what was really happening. It was strange business but you didn’t even try to understand the politics. The Russians came pretty soon after we left there and later as we were travelling through Iran I suppose I realised fuck this guy’s crazy. He was just so paranoid. He thought we were being followed all the time.”

His madness has become a critical point of reference for both of us, as the man we loved strayed further into hitherto un-chartered trajectories. And here together, snared by a hot Summer wind, we cling to our memories lest they fade to myth before the dawn. She blows her nose loudly on a white hanky pulled from her sleeve cuff, saying, “Your Father was a beautiful man Alice, and he loved you very much”.

Past tense and tears smart in her eyes. She relights her cigarette, takes a long deep draught and looking at me through the stillness repeats with a smile, “When I met him we couldn’t even speak the same language.”
And I find myself trying to marry these seemingly disparate two images; on the one hand my father, who gets bones from the Istanbul Butcher on Sydney Road to eat, the same ones I buy for my dog, clad sometimes in a turban and şalwar at other times in a tracksuit and leather lace up shoes, with black rimmed eyes and a slow deliberate gait he walks the length of Sydney Road swinging a plastic shopping bag, a dead weight of perspiring meat. My mother perhaps in gardening clothes, her long plait snaking down her back listening to the radio as she potters happily between the roses and the herb patch or perhaps doing her morning word puzzles over a coffee and a bowl of fruit or even dancing wildly at a party in our kitchen with my friends and I. All this helpless to the salt in the wounds of their fate. And I the mute witness, bound by the vagaries of time and a promise of secrecy withdrawing into an impenetrable solitude as she talks about the legacy of their early years. The more she talks in a low and quickening voice, the more thirsty she becomes and the more inevitable this revision becomes. Even though I must hear it, its ensuing grief makes my veins run with quicksilver. How many times have I shouldered this ache? The more she talks, the more I withdraw, the closer she verges on tears, the more stony I become and the harder it gets for her to elicit a response from me; an empathetic smile, a gesture to a woman in arms, even a sympathetic sigh but I can’t seem to muster anything, much as I want to and know I should.

My reserves are spent and instead of engaging I find myself silently conjugating Arabic verbs. He recognises, she recognises, I recognise. And with the subtraction of a consonant the verb ‘recognise’ becomes the verb ‘to know’. And that’s just it, I know this scene all too well and not the things I should know by now, like the infinitive, the origin, the root of
these words, this scene. That linguistic source of semantically intertwined concepts, encased in three root letters, three people. As I drift deeper into muddled Arabic semantics my mother stifles her tears and I reach over, hold her hands and push my chair along the floor boards to squat beside her and wrap my arms around her waist. I stay at her feet, my head resting on the edge of the table and look up at her quietly as the dog wags her tail sheepishly and thinks twice about bringing us a stick.
In the zenith of the Istanbul summer, in the house of her new family, I was committed forever, from a pencil wish to the flesh. Irreversibly I was created in the heat haze of longing, from a mustard seed of faith that he would change. The watermelon sellers on the streets below called out their prices unaware that my fate was being sealed. The minarets greeted the sunset as my grandmother Raika, who now slept on the couch, awoke momentarily from her siesta, clicked her tongue at the barely stifled moans coming from her bedroom, and reached for another baklava from the table beside her. At the coffee house opposite my grandfather rose from his stool, bid his friends farewell and moved down the street to the local mosque wondering what his wife had cooked for dinner and their daughter, my aunt, Nurdan rushed about her kitchen with one child in her belly and another on her hip swiping at her tesbik. All this while the messenger dogs continued to run in the deserts, while the man my mother had looked after sipped a coffee on his balcony somewhere on the other side of the world, while the handsome black horse with paintbrushes yearning to be free of his tail swiped flies from his hind legs in a courtyard. Yeas all of this while my father and mother swooned in each others arms in his parent's bed as the shadows of grapevines played across their bodies and children sang out to their mothers across the city.
In the months that followed I came to know intimately the unswerving and momentous pull of time as my mother waited in London until my Dad sorted out a passport. He had gone with her initially but been refused entry. So he returned to his city where he bought a new one with Istanbul as his city of birth instead of the Kurdish city of Siirt. At these times I flew between the both of them, as I was being drawn irrevocably closer; a mute cluster of cells caught between memory and desire. A mustard seed sown in the heat of faith, I began to tickle my mother’s womb with fingers and limbs aching to be released. And as I tickled, my father sat in his family apartment in Istanbul and wrote.

*Darling Margaret,*

*When I read your letter, even I see your writing I feel your talk then I am so at ease and I’m so lucky am so glad. All your words make me beam. Am believe so much to you with all my heart. After a moment my hand is in your hand my eye will be see yours eyes and my heart will be with your heart beat. Today am start to get new passport for one year. Then I want to go with Bass to Paris and from Paris to London. Yes we are in different countries but our heart is together. I know that.*

*Don’t worry Margaret after the 30 day am with you.*

*All my heart and love, Aykut*
The cracks of the kitchen table are sealed now, nothing gets lost down there. My Arabic verbs have dissolved into the dim warmth of the wine as my mother continues to tell me that I wouldn’t have recognised her if I had met her before she was with my father. We sit with the empty glasses between us, a shell used for an ashtray between us, an orphaned love that I try to resurrect between us, as she proclaims suddenly,

"I'm the real madman of this family Alice. I just keep it together better that's all."

I stare up at her, exhilarated and a little frightened.

"You wanna know why the diary you read ends? You really wanna know??"

Filled with a sudden almost intolerable dread I realise there is no point now in denying these reticent truths we so closely ignored. I maintain my focus on the table and wait not daring to look up as she cries, “He beat me.”

She breaths staccato now.

"You've told me this before,” I say blackly. "Did anything else happen?” And I stare flatly at the wood grain of the table.

"He beat me for days and days,” she says her voice breaking up like static and then after a moment, "He chased me."

I can’t bring myself to look at her and wonder where he could’ve chased her. Around his parents flat in Istanbul? And then with a shudder I remember that night on the beach when I ran…and kept on running.

"Where did he chase you?” I finally snap.

"On the beach."

We don't look at each other. I don't move.
"The beach?" I almost cower.

"Mersin, Tarsus," she says in exasperation and then knowing she's got me, "I dunno Alice its' all so far away now..."

She reaches her hand across the table to hold mine.

"What do you mean?" I ask not moving a finger.

"He beat me, for days and days," she says again as if I am slow. "I was covered in bruises." A lace of wetness has begun to embroider her words and delicate hot tears have begun to roll over the dark circles beneath her eyes. How long did I run for on that beach? How far did I run?

And if you fall in love with me, I'll have to kill you.

And if I kill you the price I should pay is my life.

She stares at me now, almost free. "He was paranoid. I dunno what about. Some Islamic family took us in. Neys, and all that business." And the last word comes out bitter with the rind of superstition. "It was obvious the state I was in, what had happened to me." Her voice trails off. She turns her head away and shuts her eyes uttering softly, "I'm sorry you don't need to hear all this bullshit," trying too late to disengage.

"Yes I do."

I think of a line I read somewhere anyone wounded deeply in their sex... but her voice tears through, "Everyone has scars. Everyone has pain Alice!" And she stares at me at once guilty and reproachful, not sure if she has gone too far.
I think of the charity of kisses, of the Devil's jealousy of God. My friend once told me that love was based on separation. The biggest love in the world is the Devil's love for God, he said. The Devil is so jealous that he will burn forever in his own hell because he will never reach God. But love is not about reaching the lover, my friend said. If you reach the lover the love is finished. Stealing a glance at my mother's flushed face I wonder if there is any God left to invoke.

I am quiet as Mum composes herself with a hanky.

"Your father loves you very much."

I roll my eyes beneath their lids repulsed by this concession.

"Well he did. But he wasn't very interested in you. It was very hard for me. Anyway, I don't know what he does now," she adds, almost to herself.

At this, she rises from the table and with a slight limp walks out, leaving me sitting alone and still. I have never heard her talk quite like this before. Her diary is gone now. She took it one day from the kitchen and I didn't notice. I haven't seen it since. Black eyes and bruises around the time I was conceived. A swollen belly, a craving for pineapple juice and bruises.

"But what did the family say?" I ask her retreating figure

From her dark wet eyes I know that she has divined some perfect binding flaw between us, how full my head always is with my father.

"Oh Alice I'm sorry. I've had too much to drink and told you things I shouldn't have," she says gently now as she returns to her place opposite me at the table.

"It's alright. Don't worry about it... What did the family say?"
Taking a paper from its cardboard jacket she begins to roll a cigarette and says selflessly, “Oh they must have known what he was like. They couldn’t speak English, so you know they didn’t say much to me.”

“And you stayed with him after that?!” I exclaim unable to hide the inflection of derision in my astonishment.

“Well I just thought he would change, that things would get better.”

Once we all sat at the navel of the home, this old wooden table of ours to eat the food my mother had cooked. She who used to wear knee-high boots and ride me around on the back of her bicycle through the inner city streets with her plait long down her back, or we would walk down by the Merri Creek where she’d pick herbs to make Anise drops for us. My mother who smoked cigarettes from a gold packet and wore shimmering green eye shadow had cooked spaghetti bolognaise for herself, my father and I. A favourite meal of ours, I had been looking forward to it all day at Kinder. It was nearly Christmas as we sat down to our steaming bowls. Mine was a special plate decorated with Bunnikan rabbits. Before I managed to eat a morsel of that steaming pasta, my father rose from the table like a furious monolith suddenly doubling in size, turning white with the fever of lunacy. He picked up his plate and hurled it at the wall above my head screaming out poisonous ribbons as he did it, “You’re trying to fucking kill me!”

I sat trembling as he heaped abuse upon my mother and the rest of the world. Bits of hot food clung to the hair at my temples. Splatters of sauce scalded and a thread of pasta clung to my face. And unleashing a cruel domestic menagerie he leapt up like a viper spitting curses and took the wooden edge of the table and flipped the whole thing over screaming
invective as he did it. Our plates smashed on the floor and strings of pasta snaked down
the wall like limping caterpillars followed by dribbles of red sauce. I remember then in
one foul swoop he cleared the kitchen bench of the fruit bowl, jars of pencils and
paperclips, a phonebook and cooking utensils.
"I'll hang you from the washing line and gut you! Where are you going? You wanna
fuckin kill me?! You wanna kill me you sorcerer bitch!!?" he screamed and spat like a
rabid snake.

Then I raced after my mother as she ran down the hallway, her plait undone and her hair
hanging all the way to her hips, as my father tore the kitchen apart in our wake. Eventually
in a room at the front of the house, we sat with our backs against the door as she
frantically dialled numbers on the telephone ignoring my pleas as I looked at the open
window desperately and repeated over and over, “Why can’t we just jump out the window
and run?! Why can’t we just leave?!” But she didn’t answer me and the last hopes of
family hung tattered from the rafters.

"I remember lying in bed next to him in those months leading up to his committal," she
says at last. "I was too scared to breathe. And it was so fucking hard getting him to the
hospital, he was like a feral cat. Every passing tram was a Russian tank. He tried to take
the wheel so many times," her voice breaks and she wipes at her eyes with the white
handkerchief. "Your father isn't a bad man Alice."

And it is then that I realise, perhaps nothing will assuage the sorrow written on her lined
face. And perhaps she doesn't want it to.

"He's mad, but he isn't bad," she says.
"Well, what about the time the wheel of the Morris Minor came off?!" I challenge. "When he loosened it and we nearly crashed? Or the time he beat you so badly you thought you were blind and went to the eye and ear hospital to find out? What about that?" suddenly disgusted by her dogged forgiveness.

She doesn’t respond and is caught in the headlights of my callous onslaught and viciously locked in gear I can't stop.

"Or what about the time he threatened to kill me? Is that fucking bad? Or is that fucking mad? I wonder!" I scream in cheap pitiless sarcasm. "And I wonder if he wasn't so fucking mad if all those so fucking bad things would've happened to me?!"

And something breaks and I screech to a halt as suddenly as I had begun. Suddenly sentient. I have screamed myself back to feeling and am all at once agonizingly aware of her guilt and frailty and my brutality born of this repetition.

I was five years old when it first happened I guess. Could've been four though.

You see it happened when I was six too. And seven. And eight. It only stopped happening when he and his Mum moved out of the house next door. He was older than me. I thought he was a grown up but in retrospect he was just a boy. A big boy who towered over me, rode a BMX, listened to Samantha Fox, spat, swore and smoked cigarettes. Once he brought a friend over too. They told me we would play hide and seek. My neighbour took me into the big double bed that my dad had made for my mother. He pushed me under the doona to hide. I lay in the darkness barely able to breath and then the other one fell on top of me. And then the memory cuts, but most don't. Most run all the way through. I can't remember the
first blood that broke me but I have never been a virgin and it happened so much I
can’t remember when it didn’t. I don’t know where my Mum was. Probably sick
and exhausted in bed or sick and exhausted at work praying that dad wouldn’t
break his intervention order and carry out his threats. You see I was next door to be
somewhere safe, to be looked after. But that never happened.

I feel the hot prick of tears burn coals behind my eyes as I clench my teeth tight in my
closed mouth, my jaw muscles flexing back and forth. Mum sits in front of me. My heart
beats hard. I get up from my chair and bending down in front her I wrap my arms around
her and hold on tight;

"I'm so-o s-orrryy A-alice," she sobs. Her nose is streaming with clear thin snot from tears
and her chest shakes and her shoulders tremble as she says it over and over and over
again. And just standing like this, bent over, holding her, not kneeling, not upright, my
back beginning to ache - I can't let go.

"It's alright. It's okay…It's not your fault Mum," I say gently into her hair that has begun
to come loose.

She doesn't answer me. Doesn’t look up.

"It's okay Mum," I soothe again. "I'm sorry."

And she wipes her hand across her nose and looks at me through her hair and tears shying
half a limping smile.

"I'd do anything for you Alice," she implores, "Anything. Just tell me.I love you more that
anything."

"I'm sorry I'm so hard," I reply as I try to unclench my teeth.
And as we sit there our fingers remain laced and our breathing slows and we are baptized in the easing summer heat.
Eventually after a few months of official papers been sent back and forth to Ankara and London my two darlings were re-united with airmail stamps emblazoned proudly on domestic blue corners detailing their now distant correspondences. When he eventually arrived in London he wore a new suit and carried some Harrod’s shopping bags and if I remember correctly it was almost Christmas time. When Immigration asked him how long he planned to stay he smiled broadly and replied, “Ah just as long as it takes to do my Christmas shopping.”

If I could have reached, I would’ve slapped him on the back in a fit of giggles but as fate had it I leant my head on his knee and threw it back in a peel of laughter, the smooth wool mix of his brown flared pant on my cheek.

As I told you, this is what I remember and yes all of this before I spirited like a fish into the English spring of Kingston and my umbilical cord was thrown into the Thames. You see they were living in London at the time I was born. My mother worked in a local hospital and my father had a weekly market stall at Portobello Road selling leather jackets. They shared a flat and a small motorbike that broke down frequently and spent lazy days together in Richmond Park and long nights in basement bars where my father would play the flute or
trumpet. They had dinner parties with friends in the oppressive winter nights sharing cheap wine and sausage casseroles, something I didn’t understand then and still don’t now. Not many of their friends got my father’s sense of humour which I heard my mother remark needed a quick brain. The margins of the employment section of the paper would be taken up with his caricatures of bawdy cigar sucking sailors leading poodles about and his stories would be punctuated by one alter ego after the other who at times seemed to hurtle deliriously towards intersection. For a time they inhabited this makeshift domestic contentment where the only tensions were my father’s reckless driving court cases, passport anxieties, broken down motorbikes and my mothers work politics.

I admit I have a strong romantic bone and who can blame me, really? Born as I was of these two. Years later my mother would tell me with her inveterate stoic laugh that in those days she would give him some money to go and buy groceries. The day would pass and turn to night and the morning would come as it does. He would be gone for days at a time only to return with a new pair of shoes or an instrument, a bottle of whisky and a few musicians in tow. No groceries. My mother asked herself on her way to work one morning above the rumble of the motorbike, “How long can one be forever steadfast, giving away
every moment without time even to breathe?" She longed for their early days, away from London and its tyranny of clouds.

Just after my birth I remember shrieking in fright at the truth of it all thinking, I suppose, that it was just another story I had convinced myself of. The steely shock of the florescent hospital, the undeniable weight of gravity, the sudden separation and yet the keen awareness of each atom of my being still somehow a key to an inner universe. Weeping furiously at the sight of these two parents of mine and their shared fate not to mention the grim streets of London out the window, my father picked me up and danced around the room. I can still see his face, peering down at me, a grinning blur crowned by black curls that sprang up and down with each step and framed by the recurring corner of the room spinning around again and again. Where I come from, they say that the destiny of a child is written on her forehead when she's born. Was this spinning a sort of text, the music of dancing limbs a sort of writing? Or was my destiny inscribed with each galloping hoof bump of that black horse as it flew home across those plains? Destiny I have come to learn is like water, it's the currents within that move it...I am the current and the God...Whether or not my father knew all this, his dancing quietened me and I became still again with the lullaby of limbs and my impatient thirst to know the story from the beginning resurfaced.... My mother tells me that after my initial outburst I was a quiet baby. You see I was busy travelling as the
duties of a babe are fairly benign and not particularly demanding after all. Upon leaving the hospital my two lovers went and stood on a London bridge together wishing my life line to the Aegean. Their cheeks were bitten pink and they were rugged in Afghan furs as the wind nipped their ankles. My mother cradled me in spring snow white swaddling as my father held the umbilical cord and threw it as hard as he could over the bridge railing and into the water below.
She pushes her chair away from the table and goes to the bathroom to wash her face as the dog approaches me with her stick. This kitchen is all windows and wood and outside the wilderness of the night has quickened around our tangled overgrown garden. The fish sleep at the bottom of the pond and rose petals lie on its surface by the lily pads and the reflected moon in gusts of peach. When she returns I catch a slight hint of soap in the creases of her freshly scrubbed face. There is some cathartic thrill in this night as she stands before me partially revealed and partially concealed in these domestic shadows.

The coffee has boiled and she crashes about in the cupboards emerging a moment later with a plate of Turkish Delight her dark eyes smiling. We have a piece each, she the orange blossom and I the rosewater flavour and she tells me through sugared lips, “When you were born your father was so delighted, he picked you up and danced with you around and around the hospital room.”

I have always remembered this moment. The crown of his hair splashing black olive curls that looped and bounced around his face as he looked down into mine. The corner of two walls kept coming passed with a *woosh!* and then off we would swing again. Around and around came the corner, around and around.

Mum and I smile at each other.

“Do you remember when we had to tell him Babane died?” I ask stifling a giggle. She smotheres her mouth with the back of her hand, "You mustn't laugh Alice," she scolds as she shakes her head and gathers her arms about herself with a sudden chill.
"I can't help it! It was so bleak, such black comedy!" I stammer.

Lowering her voice she leans forward in her chair and says, "Remember the rose petals he left in the streets!" and she laughs desparingly as I wipe the sugar from my mouth.

When his Mother died we had to tell him. We’d only found out on arrival in the midst of a bitter white Turkish winter. She had been dead for months but no one had contacted us and my aunt had told me in German, on the way back to the flat from the airport, *Deine Grosmutter schlafen*, your Grandmother is sleeping. I am not sure why such benign words seemed so suspect. It was a cold night after all.

My grandfather wept for her everyday and told me his heart had gone with her under the earth, *unter de erder*, and he'd pointed down at his feet to the underworld. He used to disappear every afternoon for a few hours and later I learned that he was visiting her grave where he would place flowers and sing her favourite songs in his tremulous voice, his eyes watering in the wind.

When we returned to Australia we had to track down dad to tell him the news and I know I will never see such a reaction to the death of one’s mother ever again. Mum and I set out one afternoon together asking at different milk bars and Turkish cafes; “Have you seen Ahmet, Aykut?”

“He got a beard?”

“Could have…”

Whether or not he was bearded told us a lot about him; how in need of psychic sanctuary he was and how far he had plunged into his own fateful fata morgana. Sometimes he was a fallen prophet who the angels had forgotten to pray for and at others a proselytsing
visionary with a bottle of Vodka and a violin. He would become so inexorably devout with riddles of spiritual alchemy that he would instruct me to step out of the house with my right foot first, to say this prayer before I washed and that one before I ate, *Allah hume Sali Allah saidina Mohhamedin*…

“So he’s not playing music these days then?” asks my mother.

The man from the café clears his throat and spits on the concrete.

“Narr lady no instruments in Ayk’s room, just that Greyhound”.

"A greyhound!” she says under her breath. "So have you seen him then?"

"Ye he's upstairs. Second on the left." And he points disinterestedly to some grim doorway at the top of a peril of rotten stairs.

Mum and I gape at each other in a puzzle of wrinkles. Once he opened up a Nursery and he’s been a Sign Writer and a Barber and a Butcher and a Muso, but greyhounds? I imagine him on the tracks with all the betting, bookies and gambling scribbling in a stub end pencil, favours and favourites, odds and numbers.

"Right, okay. Thanks then. We'll just go up…?"

The metal gate backing onto the lane is crowded with graffiti, *Lebos Rule* has been crossed out and overlaid in texta with *Turks Rule* and in large aerosol letters on the opposite wall, *No I.D.*.

The café man cries out, "Ayk! Hey Ayk! There's a lady here to see ya!"
We stand backs against the metal gate and peer up at the back windows of the shop top until my dad’s head pops out somewhere and he clatters down the rotten steps with the greyhound at his heels who he tells us, just made a fortune at the Meadows.

"Eh eh?" He scratches its head with delight.

“Listen Margarit”, he says, “Dis money is too much better dan de music! Once, twice a week I take him down to Meadows. Boss trains her rest of week, he sleeps here and look, I don’t have to feed him too much”.

The dogs, all ribs and jaw wags its tail.

"I give upet de music, I give up," he announces as she smiles at the dog.

Mum shifts from foot to foot, “Ahh…Do you want to come over for a coffee?…We just got back from Turkey…We have presents and photographs and everyone sends their salams.”

And he claps and laughs, “Hahaha! Turkiyaaaah!” and then lowering his voice he whispers, “Yeessss! Aliis did you like Istanbul? Did you see the Sultan Ahmet Mosque, did you find out on the Naqshibandiyya?”

Later we all sat at the big wooden kitchen table perching on the edges of our seats, these two smiling at me as they couldn’t quite muster themselves to smile at each other. There was baclava, coffee, cigarettes, water, photos of Turkey and gifts. Then nervously, slowly, my mother told my father of the death.

“Aykut”, she said gently, “when we were in Turkey we found out that Babane was very sick three months ago…”
My father smiles absurdly from his place at the head of the table his eyes twinkling like the Cheshire cat as puffs on a cigarette.

“She had a heart condition that was complicated by her diabetes.”

A giggle erupts and is immediately stifled with a pallid hand across his stubble.

My mother edges forward, uneasy from his strange tittering.

“They ah, she…she wanted to be at home in the apartment, she was very sick and she wanted to, to die at home….”

She pauses waiting for a cue, anything to blanket the news. Nothing.

"Büyük Baba picked her up from the hospital and she died in Çapa three months ago. She is buried near Eyüp on that hill overlooking the Golden Horn…”

At this Baba can no longer contain himself and splutters into hysterics in no half measures. His face reddens and his capillaries strain under the comedy of it all. His eyes stream ribbons of tears as he surrenders to an onslaught of uncontrollable giggles and then begins to heap curses on her in English and Turkish. He shrieks through his own hubub at us in a piercing ragged voice, "Dat fucking bitch!"

Mum and I sit astonished by this terrible scene and stare blankly back at him. He almost chokes on his laughter and breaks into a coughing fit, his eyes brimming as he continues to spit vitriol, the hinges of his sanity loosened. His fingers tremble as he rolls another cigarette uttering through gradually ebbing laughter, "Ah well, dat's de life. Det's de deat."
And gradually he recovers himself and getting up from the table, says abruptly, "Dat's it den Margrit. I'll see you!" And he staggers out of the kitchen, down the hallway and out the house.

Where was the mother who coveted him, the sultana of her eye, who had given her blood for him, and who nearly broke her back birthing him? Was she somewhere on the frontiers of the universe listening to this? Was she reaching out from the celestial realms with a hair brush ready to whack him red raw to tears, to teach him some manners?

I met my grandmother only once. She had a broad pale face and the haughty disinterested air of a woman who had become an icon to her own small brood and had no need to ingratiate herself to a new arrival. The only time we really interacted was when she taught me how to belly dance to Chiftatelli music. We were in the apartment in the old city. All the Ülgezer family, except a couple of cousins and my father, were together. Babanne cordoned off the sitting room with the dividing glass doors behind which the men sat drinking tea and gossiping and put a cassette on the little player and as it crackled and hissed all the Ülgezer women danced in a circle together fuelled by sweet tea and peels of laughter.

Soon after we had given Baba the news about his mother’s death, rose petals began to appear outside our house, scattered on the pavement, red and pink all the way to Sydney Road. Baba shed these trails for the next couple of months. We didn’t see him again for a long time but we always knew when he’d been around. My father became a long distance
runner that day as he laughed, on and on he ran into the farthest reaches of himself, setting fire to the landscape as he ran, setting fire to our attempts to reach him with coffee, cigarettes and love.

But there’s a cough. My mum is sitting back on the chaise-longue with a near empty wine glass beside her, puffing on a cigarette and watching me.

“So how's the writing going Alice?”

-sip- “I mean what’s it about? What makes it so interesting?”

“It’s about my life mum”

"…Oh …"

And then a strange pause.

“Ahh… so is it a comedy or a tragedy?” puff “I mean, why are you writing it?”

“Because I have to Mum.”
Ah! I hear you utter. From the Thames to the Aegean, a likely story! Well just for the record it or I made it! No fish gobbled it down, nor did it get strewn on a stray propeller or immerge washed up on some foreign shore. You see after the first dance I couldn’t help myself and the irresistible urge to tumble through temporal trajectories overtook me once more. I never did feel much for London or sausage casserole. So yeas in fact I remember that it, or I, arrived safely, miraculously intact in one long slithering piece sailing into the emerald blue waters of the Aegean where with my youthful vigour bursting forth I chanced upon a man who I would come to know intimately, rather unfortunately for him.

Poor Ali Riza, the sea captain of the Dardenelles. He was even more skilled than I am when it came to ignoring the signs on the road. I knew this and his wife Emine knew this which is why after starting the day in the usual manner with two freshly boiled black coffees, between them on their little balcony over looking the Golden Horn replete with the bass of ships and the scribble of pigeons she insisted on reading his cup.

Ali scoffed lightly under his moustache as Emine said, "There is a boat."

"Of course there’s a boat my life! I am going to Galata tonight! They pass by all the time. Look I can see one there!" And he waved his hand passed the geraniums, over the balcony but then swallowed the
rest of his words as she insisted, "No Ali. A possible journey or," and she broke off looking up from the cup. "Do you expect someone? Someone from far away? A visitor?"

"Not unless the Sultan comes for tea! Or that damned Mustafa decides to show his face and pay off his shesh besh debt!"

The morning outside was blue and the leaves of the pomegranate were budding virgins in the fingers of sun. Emine gazed at him through the smoke of his morning cigarette.

"You really should eat something before you go," she soothed.

"Yok janim. Bir daha kahve?" And he slid his big leathery mitt of a hand up her thigh.

"Yok ya! It's too early!" she giggled as she got up to go and pour the last of the coffee in his cup.

"Don't forget the sugar!" he called after her.

At which point she came back and kissed him on the lips, wet and fresh.

"We're out janim."

"Aa-akh! N'apyorsun kizim, eh?"

Getting up from his stool he kissed his wife's eyes, forehead and mouth and laughed, "That's filled my belly my girl."

Emine sunk back into her chair without the coffee, gazing at him.

"Oh - and the only visitor I want to see, is you. Tonight," he purred.

"White as the moon in my arms! Balim. Gülüm."
"Ahk Ali", she smiled languorously. "Sen sen…" You, you, and she kissed his hands and watched him turn his back and set off for the day leaving her sitting on the balcony with his coffee cup in her hands and a sugar cube under her tongue. As she turned the cup about she hummed her grandmother’s favourite song and wondered whether in fact he would make it home tonight. I noticed the vein in her neck pulse voluptuously as her reverie was broken by the cry of Tevfik her new baby and she got up to quench his milky morning thirst.

I loved Emine’s cooking and it was beyond me how Ali could refuse her breakfasts but having followed him through the thickets of the city for the first time I learnt that his favourite thing apart from his wife’s kiss was tripe soup for breakfast. I nearly coughed up my ethereal insides the first time I slid in on a chair next to him at the café with the ripe broth aroma steaming into my face. The whole place seemed to sweat in a torpor of entrails. Unaware of my disgust he slurped it down through his big yellowing teeth, the broth dripping here and there on his thick gristled skin. The soup was followed by a hot glass of tea and another cigarette or two before he really started out for the day. You see he used to be a repair man wandering the labyrinthine streets of Istanbul fixing piping, electricity and delivering gas bottles. It was only when the people of the city didn’t need him that he leaned his elbows on the Galata Bridge in the early morning or the evening.
with the birds swooping in howls above him and between the minarets that he would fish along with hundreds of other coarsely knitted men. And yes from there he saw many ships and ferry boats passing. After a day's work of calling up all the lanes and streets of old Istanbul he would wander down at the burnt out end of the day to the bridge over the Bosporus already lined with fisherman. It was hard to even walk across this bridge, as it bustled from before sunrise until after sunset with these aqua fossickers wrapped thick in winter woollens and coats with dull brass buttons shoulder to shoulder as they flung out their lines to snag their supper.

And that particular evening when I first met Ali Riza, he was in no unusual manner reeling in his rod from the murky depths of the river. He and his fishing compatriots had been sharing swigs from their bottle of home made lion's milk and their breath hung like fog over the bridge. It was when his throat was warm with the fire of Raki that he felt my heavy weight pulling on his rod bending it deliciously closer to breaking point. Not sure whether it was the lion's milk tricking him he waited a few seconds. The surrounding fishermen noticing his quizzical pause, paid attention between puffs of their cigarettes and shielded their eyes with one hand from the setting sun. Knowing their suspense I tugged again teasingly and thinking he had chanced upon some mythical brilliantine supper to take home to his wife he began to
reel me in faster and faster. The other fisherman stood by in curiosity as he thought smugly of how he would boast the biggest fish from the Bosporus. The local fishmongers would hang his portrait in their shop, and the men on the bridge would recount the story for at least a year until it became a celebrated and repeated local myth. This wasn’t the usual *hamsi* these donkey drivers snagged, he thought. And so he started to pull me in; round and round went the little handle of his rod under his leather mitt hand until *slaaap*!!! Up I jumped from the turbid depths and landed on his face a long black criatura soiling his ruddy pink cheeks!

The shame of my weightless deception! Befuddled he smeared my bloody remnants all over his face and into the creases of his eyes till his eyelashes were heavy and sodden. All the fisherman around him laughed uproariously as he struggled with this oily black ribbon. Trying to smear me vainly out of history, I slipped out of his hands like a cake of soap and leaving an inky foul smelling smudge on his face, landed neatly in the fish basket, with all the firm wet fishes slithering like the thighs of village girls at a wedding. Noticing this Ali Riza comforted himself with the thought that I was merely a strange and rather grotesque piece of sea weed that had dredged the depths. If only he knew! While the others laughed at this mess he struck a match and instead focused himself on the deep blue puffs of his
cigarette trying his darndest to ignore the sniggering insults of his fisher fellows. With a net at his feet he contemplated his sea faring future and all the possibilities it held. Yet he felt privately, aside from the shrieks of his fellow fisherman, as if some sort of talisman had been flung at him (from his future or past). Some sort of reminder of something he hadn't yet learnt. The clouds fled across the sky and in the early purple evening the Meyhane's singers puckered their lips in the mirrors. A shudder passed down his spine as the ezzan began to reel in the faithful and eventually when he had stubbed out his cigarette beneath his boot on the slickened asphalt, he peered in to the basket and looking closer realised my true nature, as did the other peering men. His face turned ashen as he rushed to a nearby bucket and splashed the icy water furiously on his hands and face to rid himself of the foul smelling bloody black goob.

"What kind of infidel donkey fucker would throw this into the river under our fishing bridge?" he beseeched the crowd that had flocked around him.

Galvanised by this new instalment they gathered about in their knitted caps and gumboots asking each other the same thing.

"What kind of whoring gypsy would forsake her honour under this bridge?" asked one.

"What kind wouldn't?!" answered one and they guffawed in agreement.
Then clicking their tongues, their eyebrows grumped up their heads and anecdotes began to swell and circulate about various local vagabonds who had recently stolen a wife's purse, or a son's bicycle. Ali's brown eyes shone black as he turned his back on his fickle audience.

Tearing home with his cart of piping and his gumboots smelling of fishcakes, and the odour of something dead or just alive he muttered loud enough for innocent bystanders to hear; "Does Allah think I fuck cats in the Mosque? What is he trying to tell me? Making a fool of me! Huh? Ali you don't work hard enough. Ali your wife wants new stockings Ali your family hasn't eaten meat in three weeks and then wham bop comes this!" And he clapped the back of one hand in the palm of the other as his breath fogged about him.

"Some bloody infidel, gypsy communist gives birth under the bridge," he continued to growl under his breath, "And, out of her generosity and sense of camaraderie with all beings, what, she decides to feed the fishes my family eats for dinner the leftover entrails of her bastard birth. Baaaa! Ya Allah!" Incredulous, humiliated and furious he muttered to himself all the way home, elbowing his way through the burnt out evening traffic.

But all was not lost. Allah did love Ali very much, even when he was intoxicated with fury and shame. But really I don't know why I made
him so angry, perhaps it was my impatience…I had so much to tell him, so much to talk to him about but with his foul mood that evening, I just didn’t get a chance…And I guess it is better to leave these things to fate. Even prophets let things lie sometimes. So you see as the fortune of God and history had it, Europe was at the zenith of her madness when my sweet Ali was called by the father of the Turks to Captain a ship, the Medila, an honourable role invested with the responsibility of protecting the Dardanelles. Even though he was nearly fifty he had retained his good shape and was humbled by this divine intervention. It ensured not only a pension when he got older but gave him the chance to defend his beloved river from the thieving infidel English who were threatening not just to carve up his neighbours land but his.
Istanbul
The Daughter

Longs For

The Dot

Below The

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It was as if I had dived into oceans with the leaded anchor movement of dreams. Across the gulf of solitude, through the salty blood of my ancestors, I swam home to the dawn of my family. To the boiled milk of the coldest winter in thirty years that smudged over the Golden Horn in fishing boats and ferries. My first day here and I am bleary eyed standing on the bridge of my heart. The salt rime whip of the wind makes my eyes smart and my tongue thirst as empty fistfuls of ocean river currents bluster passed me, old spirits. My mother told me once, "Alice the world is not new! There are spirits everywhere…I just don’t let them interfere with my life." Oh I remember thinking quizzically at the time, but how?

My hands grip the railing of the Galata Bridge far away from her. My back to the Marmara and my eyes towards the Black Sea. Dangling from my hand, a rag doll I made which elicits curious or suspicious glances from the passing tides of people and the sages of fishermen bowed in devotion over their rods, waiting. Ship horns sound from the middle deep of the river as they carve sensuously through the curvature of water. Flags rip in the wind. Blood red once taut thrown as if from the hand of a reckless painter fickle above the waterscape, blood red, bone white. I try and count the minarets. I try and count the flags.

Muammer my cousin fidgets beside me spectacular in his impeccably manicured moustache and freshly pressed two piece suit, too polite to coax me from my place on the bridge yet too curious to look away. Not quite breaking my reverie he laughs like a hearty horse into the wind, at once all jaw and sinew, "İstanbul ist eine shone schtat nein? Zehr schone! Vas denkst du Melike?"
My eyes water in the smoke and bluster of charcoaled fish. My hair flicks across my face momentarily obscuring the hillsides jostling with a patchwork of apartments, the domes and the scudding clouded sky.

"Ya es ist zehr schone! Çok güzel!" I add in Turkish already tiring of my hackneyed school- girl Deutsch.

"Ah Melike du bist eine Turquishe Mechen! Wunderschone!" he exclaims into the wind and car horns clapping his hands, his wedding band flashing in the sparks of sun.

"Evet Istanbul çok güzel," Istanbul is very beautiful. And I sweep the hair from my face.

My heart beats fast and I taste that the wind is the rind of bitter lemons as it tears through the afternoon of this city in conception and climax. If I squint hard I almost see the face of my father before me. Not the bent and broken man I have come to know but a lucid and proud bell of a captain whose teeth would be strong and white and from whose hands we never knew harm. A man who strides and sings with his prayer mat under one arm and his fishing basket or clarinet under the other. I try and imagine him barrelling through these streets as a teenager. A long limbed clandestine drunk with something of a tragedy already etched in his young features, discernible perhaps in the way his neck would blush in fear or surprise or the way his hands would tremble with delight. What a place to flower, here in this city, and I turn to Muammer who is watching me curiously again. We smile at each other silent for a second as the city bobs and eddies on its hinges, the sky spinning ever so slightly above us and I grip the railing a little tighter.
"Haha!" laughs Muammer suddenly, belatedly. "Evet Istanbul çok güzel undt du bist eine Turkish metchen!" he says again, displaying an unprecedented amount of pleasure at my few Turkish words.

"Karibalik..." I add smiling and squinting at the milyon swerving taksis and veering ice skidding buses, the multitude of staring black eyes.

"Evet, evet!" he thrills. "Çok karibalik!" Yes, yes very crowded.

A boat booms like a languid patriarch as it moves under the bridge beneath us and a woman throws a fist of bread crumbs over the edge and they skitter down to the already confettied water.

"Hast du hunger?" queries my cousin, who after minutes of contending with the wind is ready to leave.

"Ya ich haber hunger," I concede even though I could stand in this cross current forever. His shoulders almost dislodge in relief as he takes my hand and spinning on his heels weaves me through the early evening of fishermen and spirits. In my other hand the rag doll dangles, absurdly perhaps, and bumps now and then against the hips of the population.

Muammer walks briskly darting through the throngs of bridge people and we dash along like two loose bullets, our axis slightly off, flying over cracks in the pavement and zigzagging between open lidded fishing baskets letting off an aroma that catches hold of my throat, all at once repulsive, yet reminiscent of some deep part of me. Hot tears prickle like spinifex behind my eyes, his hand is tight over mine and we rush on. I can't look up, so I let him lead me, suddenly overwhelmed by this city of ours. I focus instead on my feet, clad in black leather, tripping between hooks and fish tails. His hand is white and the
gold band flashes, a jewel in my eye. Someone is smoking a pipe and as the sun is setting ferociously I hear a *muezzin*. *The world isn't new Alice*, echoes my mother's voice and a sudden jerk from Muammer as he tries to yank me through the last knot of fishermen and faithful now moving to the Mosque. But the force of the current snatches my hand away from his grip and my head resounds with a thump of impact. Slam! All of a sudden all I can see is the coarse grubby grey wool weave of a suit lapel and looking up, the swarthy, thick bristled neck of an older man. Startled, the fisherman stares at me with a brow folded in surprised bushy questions. His skin is thickened mottled parchment with some sort of oceanic genesis scribbled over it in a map of lines and creases. His black eyes keen upon mine and everything else drifts languidly off into a loose focus blur; the bridge, the fishermen, the smoke, my hopes for being here. All I can see are his black eyes.

"*N'apyorsun kız? Eh? N'aber? Uh?*" What’s up girl? What happened? His two shovels of hands are on my shoulders and something of his touch makes me jump like a cat.

"*Effendum, effendum,*" I stammer in embarrassment my eyes darting off desperately to find Muammer in the crowd.

I don’t understand what the folded brow says next, but something gives way and tears begin to unfurl as I cover my face with both hands now only able to hear the sweet voice of the *Ezzan* and my own quick breaths.

"Melike! Melike!" The call of my cousin rips through like an electric cross current and after wiping my face with the back of my hands I glance once more, deep into the eyes of the old man before me and then I run towards the voice. I run and I run all the way to the
far end of the bridge, all the way to the Taksim side where Muammer is waiting for me
taut with anxiety, craning his neck and pacing three steps this way and two steps that.
"Ach Melike! Was mirt Ihnen geschach?" What happened? He calls to me even though I am close now, less than a metre.

"Ben bilmiyorum. Ich weiss nich!" I stammer catching my breath as he strides towards me beaming in relief and begins to laugh, "Elhamdulillah! Sen tamam. Elhamdulillah!"

And sighing now, I notice there is no wind on this side of the bridge. The flags droop languorously in its wake and the gulls are suspended speculatively just above the water. Everything has lost the shrill fever pitch of just a few moments ago. The taksis swerve now in a slow motion torpor, the entreaty of the Ezzan has subsided and the buses wheeze through the crowds. I notice Muammer gazing at me curiously again before he takes my hand and gently ushers me to his parked car.

"Vo ist deine Bebe?" He asks with alarm suddenly seizing my empty hands.

And I realise I lost her in that strange knot on the bridge. Muammer makes as if to return and retrace our steps but something in me stops him.


He looks at me unconvinced.

"Don’t worry about it… I came here to lose her," I almost reprimand him in English, but he continues to look at me unable to decipher my offhand curtness.

"Kafane takma," I add soothing in Turkish. Don’t put it on your head.

He smiles hesitantly and I re-assure him with a tired grin before sinking into the passenger seat of the car.
Istanbul is details. Watching my cousin drive, whilst simultaneously gesticulating with both hands in German, down a dirt road in a straggling paddock, we swerve around rocks and splash through inky mud winter puddles. The road is flanked by apartment blocks and a stray-dogs home. A peeling painted sign leans on the fence of the stray dog's yard. It reads *Natural Park*. Brindle, ribbed dogs stalk up and down snatching at purple cabbage leaves in concrete runs painted aqua, yellow and pink. And a man in a black suit leans in the doorway of a dilapidated shack watching the dogs. He smokes a cigarette as we drive by on our short cut home. The longest distance travelled between two points.
It was in the lead up to his captaining that I hung about his house.
You see his wife Emine made the most delicious *sucuk* and eggs for
breakfast and I simply couldn’t help myself stealing them sometimes,
of course when no one was looking. Perhaps my grandfather Tevfik
saw me from his high chair, because occasionally he would cry out
long and shrill when Ali and his wife were otherwise engaged in
morning farewells and had left their unfinished breakfasts defenceless
on the kitchen table. At these times I would snatch up a handful of
meat and eggs with the yellows still runny and wrap them in bread.
Ali’s wife was convinced there were jinn in the house after their return
from the hallway or the bedroom and would insist on calling the local
Sheikh to cleanse the house. I was just filling my stomach as it was a
hungry business listening in on their goodbyes! After Ali had said
some prayers to sooth his wife and sat down to the rest of his tea,
which I never drank because it was simply too sweet, I would hear his
thoughts floating in mournful drifts across the half empty plates. And I
heard him still at night time as they lay together in bed, the pigeons
murmuring in their sleep outside. How long could he endure to be
away from his darling wife, he thought to himself, as he tossed and
turned beside her on the eve of his momentous position. Turning
under the crisp blue indigo sheets he drew his face close to hers and
let her breath fall his on cheek. How he would miss her *pilauv* and
sweets especially now it was the month of *Ashura* approaching.
Letting his hands trail her torso and thighs as she dreamt he thought of the seams of the new stockings he could buy her reaching from her toes all the way up her calves. And with these thoughts fraying to dreams and her soft thighs beneath his hands Ali Riza threw a handful of salt over his left shoulder and from that moment all the nights were strung with stars and all the tea glasses sugared, far too much for my taste, but he was after all a thirsty Captain. Finally asleep I would watch him fitfully suspended between the hemispheres of that last endless moment casting constellations in the reverie of his watery depths. The salted rime caught in the creases of his sober palms and he hoisted the sails, a great gull's wings in the night.

I was watching him still when the ocean was all horses and thunder defending the white brush of horizon, when the crisp snap shut of his suitcase locks and the heave of the ship as the anchor was pulled up provided the punctuation for this most important of chapters in his life. With every link of the chain he saw the movement over borders, through days and sullen nights. He looked at the fat round clock face in the ship's cabin and spooned the moon from the sky telling himself it would be for a time, a short time. By his bunk tin canisters were packed full of his wife's börek, homemade cheese, olives and cherry jam and knowing full well that he loved her food as much as I did, I managed somehow to restrain myself. He recorded the days by
tongue and tale and the stories flew about him with big white wings in the night. On parting his wife’s eyes had filled with salty tears as she held his hand she had said, “I wouldn’t push someone I loved into the lion’s mouth.” I watched him as he blew smoke from his cigarette in long sooty exhalations; the wind lashed it now east, now west. Once ships with gifts from the Kings of Venice docked here to trade in miniature mosques in mother of pearl, silk kaftans and to see the sandals of the prophet, now a metropolis strung like a web of stars across the turbid water heaving and wheezing with ferry boats and bridges and sodden bread and fish sleeping silently, secretly beneath the ship’s hull.

Ali Riza did not fight. Instead he sailed for forty two days and forty two nights on a sea which was as silent as a sheet and as stubborn as a mule. It was then and only then that he traversed his inland seas and kept direction by the tremble shudder of his compass and prayed, now west now east. And sometimes when he sat high up on the mast of his ship his beads moving through his calloused fingers with the sun boring down he remembered that eve on the bridge when everything changed in one foul swoop. While captaining the Medilla he began his rememberings of me.
Baba should be here soon. The first time in…how many years? The Istanbul Butcher on Sydney Road bought him a ticket and organised his new passport. I didn’t believe that he’d make it. Before I left Melbourne I made sure I saw him, just in case it was the last time.

We were sitting on Sydney Road at an old school coffee shop with none of the trappings or affectations of the more recent additions. I remember noticing the gap between his front teeth and thinking that they resembled the teeth of an old race horse or two rotten stumps of garlic. He can still whistle through that gap. After our coffees arrived and he’d rolled a cigarette he began to tell me about the time he visited the Wahabis, who had a centre off Sydney Road. As he spoke I was aware of a young man sitting at the café next to ours diligently chowing down a chicken parma with his ears pricked up.

Dad spoke loudly enough for anyone nearby to hear about the footage he’d seen on someone's mobile phone of the public execution of a woman in Afghanistan. His face creased in concern and disgust at the methods employed by the Taliban. I’d never heard such indignation before. Usually he had a sort of respect, a dumb admiration for the nebulous characters of the Islamic State.

But he was clearly distressed, “Allah didn’t order this sort of killing.”

I just agreed.

“So what happens is Alis, I write Almighty Allah, Allah on de soles of my feet and I go down de to de Wahabi Mosque.”

Down Sydney Road, and once at their centre by the railway line and the bike track with the factory walls brocaded in graffiti he sat in a chair at reception and took off his shoes
and socks in order to make the ablutions to pray. The young faithful shifted about also making their preparations. It was when Baba stuck his feet out in front of him ready to bathe and lifted them up so they could all see what was written there that they gasped in horror.

“Ya Allah! Abi! What have you done? Protect us oh Lord!” shrieked one young taxi driver.

"Harram Abi!" muttered another man.

And then Baba said through gritted teeth, "I told dem Alis, God is on my feet," and he swept his arm around. "In my blood," and he hissed through brown stumps.

"Over der," he gestured across the traffic to the shops, "And down der," north down Sydney Road, "And he is in Heawen. Allah created me, not you! Allah tells me what I can do! Not you! So don't tell me what direction to pray!"

I was aghast but also humbled with a newfound respect. He didn’t look at me or register my response instead he just smoked his cigarette and looked out in every direction towards Allah. And when I told him what I had met him to tell him, that I was leaving for Istanbul all he said was, "Selam alaykûm Alis. I see you der den."

Finally, my cousin and I reach the apartment of Nurdan Hala, my aunt. Hers is on the ground floor of a low rise block set back a little from a busy four lane street. She lives here with my uncle, Altan Enişte and Büyük Baba, my grandfather. The apartment block opposite, perhaps fifteen paces away, is where her daughter, my cousin Ayşegül lives. Ayşe was the name of the Prophet's wife my Aunt tells me later and the Prophet (peace and blessing be upon him) loved roses and that is why she has decorated her kitchen, the
inner sanctum, with tiles covered in the favoured pink bloom. Ayşe is sweet with porcelain skin and keen green grey eyes and lives with her husband and their two children. He is from an Arab Kurdish family down on the Syrian border. Ayşe's brother Ahmet is a perpetually laughing little man with the same green grey eyes of his sister and mother. I have met them all once before but don't really know them as family.

Muammer parks the car behind the apartment block and after heaving my backpack out of the boot and slamming the doors we lumber down a path lined with thorny rose bushes not yet in flower. Muammer insists on carrying my pack and totters about under its weight. As we walk I remember these smells. The icy pollution, the tea from kitchens, animals somewhere, the cheap charm of street side perfume. We are up high in this part of the city. If I face Eyüp Sultan, there to my left are hills upon hills in deep forested green and to my right, hillside upon hillside of the patchwork of population. Muammer puffs beside me, his face growing pink through the pepper of facial hair and the spades of his hands are rough and clean from his wife's detergents. About to knock on Nurdan Hala’s carved wooden door I notice a brass plaque, in its centre the cursive inscription of her husband's surname, and I breath the last of my freedom. Muammer heaves his shoulders in a broad grin as the door opens and Hala stands before me her kohl rimmed eyes glittering behind her cheap prescription glasses, a grandchild wrapped around her leg and kitchen hand prints wiped quickly across the apron of her bosom.

"Hoş Geldiniz!" she beams, in an excited breathy soprano, opening her arms out and giggling.
And all at once my head is resting against the knit of her sleeveless cardigan. "Kizim, kizim! MaṣaʿAllah…" She coos, and her big soft body pregnant with prayer and replete with reverence is against mine like a remedy for all my buried wounds.

She holds me at arm's length and with wet eyes laughs again before hurrying me into the flat and returning to her role as the bustling matriarch. Muammer is instructed on where to leave my belongings and I sink in to a carved wood settee and gaze at the golden embroidered Arabic calligraphy in its gilt frame and wonder what it means.

Here in this city and within the walls of this flat, I re-discover language, the elemental sound meaning that bore my first thoughts. I float across syllables, rhythms, and metres of prayer in some primary conversation with myself. I learn to pray in Turkish, Arabic and German, in gesture and in thought. I learn the language and chronology of water, the repetition of devotion, and the pleasure of the chromatics of surrender in kissing the earth. I re-discover the language of the body; scrubbed, pumiced, starved, gorged, painted, pummelled, needed and denied, shamed and celebrated. The language of blood; that slow unsung poetry that moves through our veins, like our closest companion or the killer at our backs. Sound moves through blood and blood moves through language. Language moves through me and I move through this vast theatre of symbols chanting something my father once taught me; jin jin dagada jin jin. jin jin dagada jin jin jin jin. Still now I can almost hear the deep ringing song of solitude as I did when I waited impatiently once, such a long time ago, to reach this city. Here the letters and words of blood form the mantle of stories that my Nurdan Hala embroiders me with. Sometimes gently, sometimes brusquely, she knits
me inextricably into the lore of her family until I have become blood language and the shapes of these sounds stir like cross-currents, surfacing in me from some great depth.

The flat is buzzing with activity. Hala is on the phone to Ayşe, whose children are already here, throwing last minute orders at her for the kitchen. Ayran, Sarma, Tatlılar. Muammer is playing with his cousin's children and translating their questions to me into German. But as soon as he begins formulating an answer into German and a little Turkish, the next shrill question is on their lips. Büyükbaba has just risen from sleep, bleary eyed and joking from his afternoon nap he sits at the table drumming his fingers and humming a tune. My Uncle, Altan Enişte, is restless and has one eye on the dinner table and one on his two grandchildren as they shriek and throw lego around the room. The television is prattling on in colour and the aroma of homemade börek reaches my nostrils.

"Deine Tante is eine schöne Kochin?! Nicht so?" comes Muammer's voice from beside me.
"Evet, evet," I chorus in Turkish.

And the grandchildren giggle at my accent.

"Akh, Muammer let her speak English! She is tired, no?" and Altan laughs as he says this like a horse, throwing his head back to reveal big white teeth and his feet twitching like a dancer’s in handmade leather slippers.

Muammer smiles, not understanding.

"How long did it take you to fly from de Avustraliia den Alis?" asks Altan after putting his teeth away and ignoring Muammer's incomprehension.

"Ah all together about 40 hours, kirk saat," I add for my cousin.
"Ahk zo!" sighs Muammar with wide eyes.

Büyük Baba purses his lips and points his quivering palm to the ceiling and then whistles like a plane, "Çok uzak Melike Hanim!" So far away Madame Melike!

At this mention of a plane the two grandchildren pause in their shrieking and playful melee and their eyes widen like rabbits.

"Ah! Haha! You must be tired then! O çok yorgun," chides Altan.

"Yeah I am." And then with a sudden feeling of guilt, "No, no I am fine, I mean I just need an early night. Nich müder," I say smiling too eagerly at Muammar.

And thankfully Nurdan Hala calls me to the kitchen. I understand I need to help her set the table and that this is my home and I am no longer a guest. The kitchen is a tiny rhythmic matrix of sustenance and secrets. The space between the bench and the shelving is narrow and the ceiling is low. I notice the bars on the window as she plunks a pile of rattling plates in my hands. I start walking out and she calls me back, a bundle of cutlery clatters on top of the plates. She raises her saint’s eyebrows, purses her lips and then the doorbell rings.

"Mehmet!" she shrieks smiling at me. And then something in Turkish I don’t understand.

"Answer the door, Mehmet!" orders Altan Eniste.

And Ayşe's five year old son, with his older sister Elif in tow, tears through the lounge room and passed my legs to the front door, where he can just reach the handle. The door swings wide open almost knocking the plates from my hands and Mehmet squeals like an imp at the sight of his mother, resplendent in the bright winter. She bends in the doorway and, removing her shoes beams at me with my handful of plates, "Selam alaykûm Janim!"
"Anne! Anne!" Mum! shrills Mehmet clutching at her.

Somehow we embrace despite the children wrapped around our legs and my culinary armful and I hear Hala chuckle behind me before barking, "Çabuk! Schnell, Schnell!"

And Ayşe gives me a knowing smile as she hangs her long winter coat on a brass hook.

The little table is resplendent now with piles of fresh börek and salads. There is barely enough room to fit all the seats around it but somehow we manage, all elbows and grins. I am exhausted and the more I smile, the more exhausted I become but I can't seem to pacify the musculature of my face. We all sit down at the rickety wooden table and Büyük Baba laughs as he places one hand on a corner of it and it wobbles up and down with the pressure.

"Tekkir tekkir tekkir," he giggles as Nurdan shoots him a look over her glasses and the plates tinker.

"Yar, est ist zehr alt Baba. Ich weis. Du must gelt namen und gekauf eine andrera tasche," scolds Nurdan. Yes it’s very old. I know. You must get some money and buy another one. Büyük Baba widens his twinkling eyes and gasps playfully.

"Do you know what’s mean ze tekkir tekkir Alis," asks Altan through a mouthful of börek.

"No."

"Tekkir tekkir is ze sound of ze table wit uneven legs. And our table is very old...."

"Zehr alt," chimes Nurdan.

"And so we will buy a new one," he concedes in a low voice, "Insha' Allah-"

"Tabi insha' Allah janim, tabi," repeats Nurdan almost instantly. Of course, with the will of God my life, of course.
And at that little Mehmet puts his hands on the edge of the table and breathing in quick shallow excited breaths gives a heave and shrieks, "Tekkaarrr Tekkaarrr!!"

His sister Elif giggles in forbidden delight as all the tea glasses tinker together and the food slides this way and that.

"Mehmet!!"

Ayşe's says as a glass of tea flies off the table onto the lego littered floor narrowly missing a scalding landing in Altan's lap.

Büyük Baba catches his börek in his lap shortling softly, "Ne haber lan, eh?" What happened?

"Çok kötü Olum! Cok kötü!" snaps Hala as she rises like a monolith to the kitchen. Very bad my boy, very bad.

And Altan reaches over and gives a quick curt slap to the little boy's wrist whose cheeks are inflamed with shame at the failure of his theatre and he opens up all at once into a sobbing inconsolable wail burying his head in his mother's lap.

Büyük Baba winks at me and then begins to howl and sob like a baby screaming for milk.

"Wawawawawa!"

I shake my head and grin at his peppered moustache and the crumpled indignant line of his mouth as he cries.

"See vhat you have done to Büyük Baba, Mehmet?! Hmm?" laughs Altan. "See vhat you have done?" And he pours more tea for himself, shifts officiously back in his chair and begins to chat abrasively with Muammer on the keenness of his devotional habits as Hala wipes furiously at the carpet clicking her tongue and glancing my way every now and then as she wipes her sparkling brow.

"Ich mache..." I caution in tattered German.
"Nein du must setze. Du bist hunger." I have to stay and sit and watch. But I'm not hungry and a profound weariness is threatening to overtake me.

Ayşe's rosebud of a mouth is now dashed white with exasperation as she chides her boy, "Harram olum harram."

Having tired himself of pious chitchat and the shrieking of little Mehmet now subsided Altan turns back to me, "You know just like ze gadgr gidgr is ze sound of an old car driving down ze strit."

"Gadgr Gidgr Gadgr Gidgr," tickles Ayşe and the little boy begins to laugh again.

"Ah like şingr şingr!" My dad had told me this one once.

Nurdan raises her eyebrows in mock reproach. Her work done, she regains her seat opposite me and chows down mouthfuls of pastry and tea. Ayşe laughs, battering her eyelids and moving her forearms up and down so all her wedding bracelets tinkle together above Mehmet's laughing face.

"One day you will have zis şingr şingr too," laughs Altan.


And Elif turns her face from the television and smiles at me for a moment before taking a mouthful of food and sliding off her seat to play. The late afternoon of food and selams has turned on its heel to evening. The street lights are coming on outside. Ayşe gets up preparing to leave with her children and return to her husband across the way. Muammer has driven the distance out to the furthest part of Istanbul where his wife waits with dinner, Altan is out somewhere in the city and Büyükbaba dozes in an armchair, his fingers loosely interlocked over his little stomach, a gentle snore just audible over the television.
"Deine Vater gekomt, nich var?" Hala confirms with me. Your father is coming, isn’t he?
"Ya, ich glaube. Er kommt eine woche schpater."

In one week my dad will be here. He hasn’t been here in a long time, twenty years perhaps. I follow Nurdan into the back room which I am to share with Büyükba. Two beds, a built in closet, a tall cupboard filled with starched hand embroidered linen and a sewing machine. The curtains are lace and there are bars on the windows.

We sit down together facing each other on the floor, she with her back resting on the couch that will double as my bed and me in the middle of the faded red carpet. Her legs are folded beneath her like an Ottoman cat, she rests on one hip and re-adjusting her veil smiles broadly at me and sighs, "Ahk Alis Melike! Kizim!" my girl, and as she shakes her head at our language gap and laughs quickly I remember a line I read somewhere;

There is a drop of knowledge in my soul,
Deliver it from sensuality and from the body's clay.

I have arrived unaware of the acceptable Islamic way of tying my headscarf and have instead wound it about my head as a turban. My aunt gleams from this that I must be a Hindu and playfully insists on folding the fabric about my head in the right way. I am unaware of the minutia of çay preparation, of the correct order to wash oneself before prayer, of how to make the perfect pilauv, how to sing old Turkish songs, or how to respond to greetings. All this renders me curious to my family as they waste no time in beginning their Turkish education of me. Nurdan in particular is intractable in her instruction, adamant that I become like her and her daughter. Adamant to smother the distance with likeness.
After I am veiled correctly and sitting before her, without resistance, she becomes animated once again, and fussing and tutting in German motions to my backpack. But before I can stop her, from an unzipped pocket spews forth a tide of little square foil packages. They could have been bons bons if she were a child or didn’t have her glasses on. But no, the eclectic assortment of condoms spill out onto the carpet unmistakeable in their variety; strawberry, liquorice, vanilla, ribbed. Her hand flies to her mouth and her eyes become shot with sparks of venom.

"Auzubillahi minna shaytan a rejjim...." seeking refuge in Allah from Satan, she hisses under her breath.

I hear young Mehmet clatter down the hallway giggling and at once Nurdan heaves her torso around and barks down the hallway, "Git ya Mehmet! Git!" Go away Mehmet! Brightened by his laughter I attempt to jest, "I ah, just, ah..." She just looks at me. "They're export quality!...ah.." I stumble, glad for the language barrier and scoop up as many as I can. But it takes a couple of attempts to thrust them into the depths of my backpack and when I am finished she is like a cut snake about to strike. Clearly she's scandalized yet somehow has managed to maintain a sanctimonious silence, which is only fortified by shooting me a poisonous glance through her glasses, her lips moving in some entreaty to the Almighty.

My cheeks and earlobes begin to burn as I smother my laughter. Focusing her attention on my underwear, she turns it over in her starched hands, clicks her tongue at the pile of now unfolded clothes and tells me that Allah sent me like a bird to Istanbul. She says this picking up her lilac prayer beads. She looks at me sternly and begins to intone prayers. Her face glistens white under the fluorescent lamp like a magnolia in bloom. The crystals
of her kohl-rimmed eyes spark across the gelid snow light as she mutters, *A’salamu alaykum ve rahme tu Allah*. Her hands move across her face as she thanks Allah for the snow.

"Even though you are cold the roses will have water... *Allhumdulillah."

Watching her pray after sunset, her head sinks closer and closer on the tides of sleep to the folds of her bosom in a dreamy ellipsis. The soft creamy scarf about her head reposing in sublime and subdued folds only to be woken by the man in the icy courtyard—if you could call it that, selling simit bread. I glimpse the threadbare shoulder of his coat in the yolk of lamplight outside beyond the curtains and bars. He is standing in the paved area between the apartment blocks looking up at the glowing, unresponsive windows leaning on his makeshift cart with greasy calloused hands, smoking in languorous long draughts. I watch the lump in his throat and catch one black eye illuminated for a moment by supple lamp lit fingers as he launches into his refrain “*Siiimmiiit! Siiimmiiit!*” as if he was calling for a lost child. He is still as the moon slakes her furtive milky thirst on his throat and on his knuckles. There is a hiss and my Aunt sucks in her breath quickly through the gap of her missing front tooth. Her eyes have narrowed to the concentrated black of poppy seeds and she sighs into some renewed uttering with Allah. *SubhanAllah, subhanAllah, subhanAllah* her fingers work the beads and she looks over her shoulder at the retreating figure.

She tells me Allah drops golden coins for her and that he sent me like a bird to this city, a bleary blue archipelago. Just audible her lips move in prayer. But I am not a good Turkish girl and I do not know how to pray. She tells me to ask Mevlana, “*Immer fragen, Immer fragen.*” Her skin is alabaster threaded with emerald and violet. I imagine the magenta of her blood coursing obediently though her and the colour of it on her wafer skin.
And I remember I dived into bleary blue water. A profusion of silent serenades pledged in the infinite night waters where the delirium of solitude bleeds into the skies. Bereft of language I verged and pulsed with the potential of words that abated like a fever into silences that sit just behind my eyes. Silences that brood in suspension in the swing of the compass needle on the edge of the page. Silences just before breath where blood whirls and eddies out in those remote catchments.
Everything I do in this house is in accord with the pulse of the clock. Looking up at it Hala
tells me she doesn’t hear *tick tock tick tock*. She hears *Allah Allah*. You can hear this too if
you want. She laughs now and steps smugly out of her ballooning over-skirt, her head
bobbing slightly on its bearings. And rolling up her blue mat she instructs me in German
about which biscuits to offer and which tea glasses to use. Her faculties regained we are at
once submerged again in the nightly domestic trials in minutiae; the somewhat desperate
and urgent preparation of the evening çay and biscuits for Altan Enişte and Büyük Baba.

Çay is made in the two brass teapots that I bought from the old man with the swollen
buckled knees near Suleymaniye Mosque, a great silence of domes and candles edged
with trees and tombstones, a netting of wooden winter spindles and twigs. Nurdan Hala
had requested I accompany her on a visit to the hospital. On the skidding ice bus ride she
insistently gave up her seat to an older woman with sighs and an inclining of the head to
the shoulder. The older woman tried her utmost to retain her standing place and beseeched
my Hala with warm smiles to leave her be. But Hala insisted and then swayed with pious
satisfaction in the aisle beside all the peering woollen men. Out the bus window, a young
boy with his hair shorn off to thin patches sat on a staircase. In only a jumper pulled over
his hugged knees his teeth chattered clackety-clack. I wanted to kiss his dark lips, or sit
with him or empty out the entirety of my suitcase to him.

In the waiting room I held my book open on my lap, *The History of Constantinople*.
Mainly women waited, their faces creased in tones of widowed raisin while young
daughters and granddaughters held their papery shale hands or cupped the stoop of their
backs.
Afterwards ankle deep in sooted snow, my hand snug in the greatcoat elbow of Hala she
guided me along the icy streets, skidding and skating. In an adjacent ravine of alleys and
bony cobbled streets Hala pushed me gently into a brass and copper workshop that jostled
with the dusty brass embers of teapots and cauldrons.

As if I am an investment, she beamed in Turkish, “This is my niece from Australia. My
brother’s daughter. Her mother is a doctor!” And she picked up teapots and turning them
over to peer inside their empty, self-conscious bellies while the blacksmith smiled
appropriately. On purchasing two teapot sets the blacksmith in obvious excitement relayed
stories of his daughter a doctor like my mother also overseas in America. His stories were
punctuated by the golden cymbal clangs of a copper dish to warm postponed meals, cups
engraved with mosques and flowers and ornamental tea urns. Eventually we left the shop
bundled with newspaper parcels and my Aunt’s habitual prudence momentarily abated.

Yet teapots were not enough. As we walked with giggles verging on hysterics shop
owners and craftsmen cursed their lack of timing. In the nextshop we lingered over cut tea
glasses and saucers inlaid with twenty-four carat gold and in the smug overcast silence,
heavy with biscuit crumbs and chandeliers we made off down the street equipped with all
the tea trappings of Turkey.

The bottom teapot must be half full with water, tap water is okay. Spoon five teaspoons of
special güzel çay into the top one and rinse the leaves in a little water. Burn the gas low
and when the water in the bottom pot is boiling pour a little into the top pot. Brew as
strong as you will. Don’t forget the sugar.
Then there is my cousin Ayşe rubbing lotion into her skin, precious as ivory, to take away the wrinkles. She winks at me in the mirror and applies kohl to her eyelids with one brass sweep then bats them coquettishly at me, her son Mehmet clutching at her knee. Ayşe told me her beloved biscuit recipe. Well really, it’s her mother-in-law’s recipe from Syria and it makes enough to stock two winter kitchens. Tins and cupboards yellow and full of elbowing butter biscuits. You need 1 cup of sugar, 250grams of butter, 3 egg yellows, flour, baking powder, vanilla and yoghurt. Ayşe washes her hands and mine until they are pink ices bitten by sparks of winter light and pours the white sugar into a beaming silver bowl. Next she adds the butter, which she heaves with the heels of her hands, squatting on her mother’s kitchen floor.

“Evet Mehmet!” she croons, as he leaps on her back, squealing in shrill sugary hysterics, impishly catching my eye. She rolls her eyes and her cheeks are all dimples as she kneads the mixture, her fists clenching and unclenching. Concentrating, she is swathed in plumes of feathered light and almost plunges into the sweet elastic mixture. A strand of hair roguishly escapes her scarf and tickles her cheek. She swats it away impatient immersed in her sweet work. Tiny rags of dough decorate her flushed cheeks and she slaps balls of dough from hand to hand then shapes them to little cupola peaks. Her fingers are gleaning wet with the dough. She gives herself to the mixture like a familiar song, like a moment of surrender.

The first time I went to the Hammam was with Babane. From the street it was just another grey domed shack. Inside however it was divided into three rooms; cool, medium and steaming hot. The woman who ran the place was an old friend of Babane’s. Rolling in
plump saccharin flesh, she was propelled across the bathhouse bustle as a lokum, Turkish Delight, is to the lips. She carried a tray of cool effervescent drinks in one hand and in the other a noxious blue delapitoy mixture. I undressed in a little concrete room and emerged naked except for the wooden thongs on my feet, into the cool marble room where a mother tipped water from an old marble sink over her daughter who glistened like a glacé tart.

Ayşe uses the front of her hand to adjust her loosening veil and she blows hot air upwards from her bottom lip to her face. Grinning and laughing she cracks the shell of an egg on the lip of the silver dish and then from shell to shell pours the thick syrupy whites until the yellow kernel of yolk remains solo in its shell. This plops into a hollow in the butter and sugar and gloats there silently, yellow in waiting. Then vanilla splashes jewels into the mixture and fuses in a heady amber.

The woman who ran the Hammam waddled out after me in a vapourish mist of firm wet magnitude and directed me to lay on my belly on the elevated marble slab in the middle of the room. Her tits hung to her navel and roll upon roll of substantial golden flesh nearly obscured her tiny black panties. Once on the slab she soaped me into a pearling slippery lather till I slid up and down the bench with her strong hands. I shut my eyes and giggled, oscillating between embarrassment and pleasure. Shafts of sunlight came through the trellis windows of the dome. The steam rose and motes caught the sun like handfuls of celestial sugar crystals. The mother and daughter gossiped with the woman as she worked my flesh and muscles into a languid sprawl. I was given an effervescent rose flavoured
drink to sip from a little glass bottle and left for a moment to cool in the bath-house oven where I lay naked with plasticity- my pores open and blooming.

I ask Ayşe how much baking powder to use. She looks across at me, up to her elbows in flour, the hairs on her forearm beaded with biscuit mixture. However much it needs, she says, as if I should know. Mehmet stands above us balancing the bucket of slopping fresh yoghurt. “Buçuk bardak,” she says. Half a cup. Mehmet tips from bucket to cup and from cup to bowl. Her hands slip easily over the curves and peaks of the dough. It takes time for the flour to absorb so she presses with her fingers, squeezes, rubs and moulds her creation until it is firm and busty on a massive round tray, it’s surface dotted with hollows where Mehmet has sampled the sweet mixture and left little grimy bruises from his fingers. Ayşe moves backwards and forwards, working the dough with some final alchemical kneading before slapping balls from hand to hand and shaping them to little peaks.

The woman scrubbed me with the steel wool of a loofah until my skin felt stripped from my flesh. No crevice or fold of my body escaped her. She scoured between my legs, between my fingers and toes, under my arms and my elbows. Then there was the dilapatory concoction, which in some wondrous alchemical blue removed my pubic hair, my leg hair and my underarm hair. I had to stop the woman from applying the blue mixture above my lip. The mother and daughter, the woman and Babane all clicked their tongues and exchanged glances of disapproval.
Ayşe pours steaming water from the teapots into the silver bowl and big round tray. For a moment her face softens at the edges in the fog and she says to me in Turkish, “Tamam Janim! Yeter, yeter!” Okay my life! Enough, enough! And she reaches for the little green cake of soap and foams it up in the woollen crotched cloth to scrub the pots.

Then scorching buckets of water torrented over me, one after another. My eyes were shut against the cascades and when I walked out onto the street afterwards I felt the wind hug me. My skin thirsted after the cool dry air assailed with the sweet winged scents of a metropolis of kitchens. I had never been so clean.

An embrace, korumak, that’s how big and round the pan is, gleaning yellow with butter fat. That’s how big the oven is, brooding and waiting underneath my bed. The biscuits sit obediently, ripe for the fire, in concentric circles on the flat round tin that Ayse slides onto the oven rack where the biscuits begin their journey. Her shoulders rest and she pulls the tea tin from the shelf.

Afterwards alone naked in the mirror, the windows open in indignation to the snow, searching my body for something, a mark, a blemish to recognise. I knead the flesh of my belly and breasts and listen for footsteps on the stairs. Beneath my fingers I feel my thick skin has been washed off. Most of the time here I move slowly as if under water, I curve with the current like the arch of prayer script. What is left is tactile, brittle, impressionable. Rounded, scooping, precious as ivory. I hold my breath underwater and then hear keys
rattle and come up gasping for air. Air, that swells with sweet Arabic biscuit dough. The small house staggers, it is pregnant with baking biscuits and expectant mouths.

Altan measures his steps across the lounge room back and forth as he waits for the tea and biscuits and exclaims from lips parched with frugality, “The whisker from the prophet Mohammed’s beard does not cast a shadow!”

And to my incredulous expression, “Yes Aliis. Yes, Yes!”

Wenn ich ein vöglein wär,
Und auch zwei fluglein hätt
Flög ich zu dir.

If I were a bird,
And I had two wings
I would fly to you.

Büyük Baba sings this as he cleans the breakfast tea tray and replaces the bowl of olives and cherry jam in the fridge. His braces are twisted at the back, and noticing this, Nurdan Hala will ask me to help him put them on tomorrow morning. She will smile as she watches us trying to find a song we both know. And he will wait patiently with his back turned, relishing the fuss, his dove hands gently conducting a phantom Marching Band. In the lounge room I serve tea. Altan Enişte, Büyük Baba and Hala sit engulfed by the carved dark wood furniture as I pour first the bottom teapot, then the top.
"Nich vergessen das zucker vor Büyūkbaba."

"Tabi, tabi," Of course, I say as I put in one, two then three cubes.

Büyūkbaba smiles a watery half shut smile and bobs his head. I bang my head on the lampshade and want to rip it out of the ceiling. There are bars on the windows and the snow doesn’t quite cover the thorns on the roses.

Weils aber nicht kann sein

Bleib ich allhein

But it is impossible
I have no wings,
I have to stay here.

In Istanbul, it's as if I am swimming through the salty blood of my ancestors. I hold my breath the whole time, barely able to open my eyes for the blizzards and snow. The wind here is glacial. Everyone blames Russia. Istanbul is my eyes shut and my belly full of pilauv and Hala’s chidings. It is resisting a rose stem in silver foil that chirrps ‘I love you, I love you’. It is the tannin on my teeth from too many cups of dark red tea drunk in fastidiously crocheted sitting rooms surrounded by wives and mothers who look up from their needlework and laugh at the fact that I am wearing pants. Pantalon! They giggle and put their plump hands over their mouths. When I arrived I fought the snake charm prayers
of my aunt. Her directions for how to dress, walk, talk, sit, eat, sleep, sing and dance. Then slowly I surrendered. The only other choice was to leave. I even began to like the embroidered cushion covers she gave me folded away neatly in her one bedroom cupboard. Laughing she would emerge from the cupboard with bag after bag of cushion covers, towels, embroidery and needlework. She would select a few for me then folded the others smoothing the creases out flat. She told me some people, rich people, had irons and as she didn’t she folded the trefaus for grandchildren and nieces differently each time she replaced them. Careful to ensure the old creases disappeared under the weight of the new.

My bed sits beside barred windows that I always open and Hala always shuts. Opposite is Buyukbaba’s bed. Two succinct, neat, purposeful, quiet and deliberate beds. Hala scolds me when I sit on it and directs me to the sole chair in the room. It is for sleeping in, she announces in German, as if I am a stupid child. I smile wanly, bankrupt of words as they have already begun to disassemble themselves into broken German and Turkish devoid of grammatical structure. I want to cry, or shout or just be myself. My Hala snatches a handful of my matted hair. *We don’t have hair like that in Turkey. We cut it off.* It’s as if she has already booked the appointment at the Hairdresser.

"Ich vermissten meinen freiheit," I say one day as we barrel along the street. I miss my freedom.

My aunt furrows her brow. ‘People look at me in the street when you are with me,’ she says. We are only going to the supermarket.
Once at home in the plastic toilet slippers she squats with her large blanched thighs gleaming in dimples to scrub together my underwear with ammonia and chlorine. She wont let me do it and she wont let me leave. I tell her I usually don’t wear knickers. "Ahh!" Her hand flies to her mouth and she looks at me aghast.

"Aber das ist ferbotten!"

This is forbidden, she says. I hear this a lot.

She sings old songs for me and takes me to a Sufi women’s prayer night in the old city. We crammed into a taxi with some other neighbourhood women and clattered off to the old city. We passed beneath its walls overgrown with weeds and crowned in aqueducts, down narrow lanes where a motorbike narrowly escaped riding over my toes as I pressed up against the wall, through low doorways, up stair-cases, down corridors, across courtyards which were threaded with electric cables to amplify the sound of the lead Mullah. Fat mincing cats slunk about, geraniums tussled on window sills and finally we made it into the inner sanctum of an old Hojja’s house. I could not return here by myself even if I wanted to. I was in the bosom of old Istanbul looking up into her ancient face.

My aunt and I picked our way over hundreds of women who all sat on the floor of a small white-washed room in a sea of bright white veils in which they were swaddled as if in a great gull’s wings. It took a long time to reach the place where we would finally sit for six hours or so as I had to kiss each woman’s hand and then hold it to my forehead in a sign of respect. And each woman in turn had either to kiss my Aunt’s hand or have their hand kissed by her. I can still see these hundreds of beaming wrinkled faces peering up at me.

“Peace and Blessings be upon you Auntie.”
“And to you my life.”

After we had greeted everyone and found a place to sit, the night’s incantations began. The prayers were led by an anonymous voice that crackled through a megaphone hanging precariously in a corner of the room. It was a man’s voice and he began slowly and soberly with a gently rolling rhythm. Women kept filtering into the evening for an hour or so and dutifully greeted everyone.

My aunt cast a glance around now and then as her lips moved in prayer and the women who had been conversing quietly became even quieter still. Gradually the chanting rose up from the group and became a swell that eddied and flowed around the tiny room. The man’s voice crackled out of the megaphone as he rode further and faster out into the ineffable company of lovers. The women picked up their pace, becoming louder and faster and I noticed my aunt was leading the way, her voice sailing above the others. The chanting swelled over the hours of the night to finally reach an ardent fever pitch sometime in the small hours of the morning. It was the mad and adoring singing of two lovers performing for each other. Circling each other, furtively at first, they moved gradually closer to the centre of the orbit. Pulled irresistibly nearer and nearer still to each other, the chanting grew into a devotional chorus of hundreds of women threading through the breath of the night imploring faster and louder to Allah until there were tears streaming down their cheeks and all their wet gleaming faces were turned toward me. I couldn’t have moved if I’d wanted to. I was to remain within this climactic incantation until the sun had nearly risen and I was delirious with fatigue.
My aunt explained in German to me, ‘I told them about your father and they are praying for you.’ Exhausted and overwhelmed by God or ideas of God I vacillated between feelings of disbelief, pride and hope. I wondered if my father thousands of kilometres away could feel their prayers? And I wondered if I could.
It was Ali Riza my roguish fisherman, my sea captain who led me over oceans and inland seas to my first breath that has caught in my sails, in my wings, in my singing water throat. It was Ali Riza who through the grace of his rememberings named me a sea traveller and imbued me with the memory of water.

All this while he sat high up on his mast perusing the Dardanelles and barking orders to the men below to settle bumps there so when the Anzacs came they found anything but a safe passage to our city. No, their ships ran aground and flailed about, eventually deciding on the bald hills and sheer cliffs of Gallipoli as the key to unlock this land.

When the war was finally over and the Sultans had fallen, Attaturk renamed Ali in the new Turkish style with a surname. Ül – being the old Ottoman word for sea and gezer being the Turkish verb for travel. So it was that my sea traveller was a coffin bearer at Attatürk's funeral procession some years later and so it is that the memory of him moves yet through my blood and shadows, emancipated, borderless, like my breath. Still his face fills me, and all I can see are his eyes. I try to forget him but he is there always. He called me home like a bird to Istanbul. "Özlemek, özlem," longing for that kernel of stillness. Forty-two days and forty-two nights under the beat of the anchor moon. The salt makes me thirst, and stiffens the clothes that I fold
each night like a great gull's wings. And now, after flying like a bird to my family I stand alone, oceans away bereft of my father's tongue telling my story.
My Hala confides in me one morning on the bus. She turns to face me straining in her great coat after a breakfast of soft, wet goats cheese, "All the thieves come from Yugoslavia."

And turns her gaze to the decrepitude of tumbled down houses with a bristling aversion. The guttering on the houses is decorated in coral pink, aqua, turquoise, lime green, blue, red and mustard and is hung with vulpine icicled fangs. Whole hillsides jostle, a cacophony of colours and perilously steep stair-cased winter ascents that land overnight. The slap up houses, gece kondu, built over night by the Yugoslavians. Yavash, Yavash, slowly slowly, people tinker their way through knitted mornings to boil the tea, catch the boat and surrender themselves to prayer. The bus rumbles across Istanbul’s midday meridian, wheezing and lurching over the seven fabled hills. We pass men speeding three or four to a motorbike, cats sleeping in the snowy angora umbra of a minaret, its crescent piercing the undefended skies, past the leaden upturned bellies of the Mosques and the steel grey of birds diving after boats and crusts of stale bread, past children in their father’s suit coats selling lighters, lockets, or flowers, leather vests, figs and slippers. And I am reeling, fluent, bleeding into this new history, and look, there’s a waxing moon snug on the horizon. My cousin Ayşe told me that if I wish on it tonight I will see my future husband in my dreams.

We are on our way to the other side of the city to see Kızkulesi, the Girl’s Tower. It’s a small tower that peers out at Istanbul from the sea. It sits back from the shore maybe a kilometre or so. No one knows who built it, or how, long ago or why, but legend has it, according to my aunt, that a girl lived there, all alone in the middle of the sea. As we
wander about it and circle up its internal staircase she tells me that the girl lived far away from the crowds and carts, lanes, markets, smoke, bells and parties. She lived far away from all of Istanbul’s breathing, dancing, eating, swooning inhabitants but achingly just within earshot.

Nurdan clicks her tongue as she labours up the last few stairs to the top of the tower. "So," she continues, huffing out the words with a victorious grin at this vista, "she could peruse the shores of this great city from a distance but never set foot there."

And why was she fated to this watery exile? Her father sent her there of course, so that she might remain a pure unblemished virgin, flowering in remote solitude.

There is a small café up here and as we plonk down, a waiter sidles over and we order two glasses of tea. I frown at the image of this poor prisoner girl but my aunt sees some romance in her solitude and carries on.

"She was not allowed any visitors. No no," and with the click of her tongue she lifts her eyebrows.

"But one day an old woman rowed her boat across from the shore and she had baskets and baskets of fresh fruit and flowers all picked fresh that morning. The Father had let her pass as she seemed kindly enough - an old villager trying to make some extra money for her family. The young girl was thrilled by her visitor and stood at the little jetty in the salty morning admiring the pomegranates, oranges, grapes, figs, roses and apples. She took her time deciding which things she would like and eventually she reached out for some ripe purple figs and at once a snakes head rose from the profusion of the basket and bit her deeply between her thumb and forefinger. The old woman helped the young girl into her
tower where she collapsed on her bed. No one realised for a long time how a snake came to bite the young woman and when they did the father was beside himself with fury that he could have let the fruit seller pass."

Back on land I sit on a bench on the little jetty waiting for my Aunt to finish her evening prayers as a boat pulls in. A young boy wishes and winches the steering wheel alone. He’s been out on the sea playing Turkish pop. His friends wear suits with short pant legs and white ankle socks. They wave and shout and cook fish on a small drum fire down the shore. His fever throat eddies in the dusk and the friend’s voices quaver over the fishing boat bobbing shallows. They jump from boat to boat to meet him in long, wobbling wooden strides. The shining leather of polished brass, street side gypsy black shoes. The red flag shudders like a sleepy lover from the breath of the small ship and its corners unfold with a rip in the blood wind.

Gözledem-looking closely; a rooster settles in the snow of a doorway. The brilliant emerald ebony of his tail feathers brush the white. Silver fish sparkle scales and glitter in the encroaching evening light like jewels. They sleep silent head to fin at a street side supper stall. Electric light globes hang from single wires on turquoise blue and pink cloth roses adorn them. A young boy leans beside a mirror on one elbow smoking cigarettes without filters and calling out the prices boasting, “Best fish this side of the Black Sea!”

The boys from the boat fry this fish and eat it off newspapers. They burn lemon rind and laugh with big teeth in the firelight. A big, round frypan with a lid. It must be big enough
to fill your belly and those of your neighbours. First oil, onion, thinly sliced potatoes, then layers of tomatoes and the small briny fish called Hamsi which are only found in the Black Sea.

"Meine geburtschtat!" said my cousin once, when his hands were coated in a film of fish scales. He was born on the Black Sea coast on a chestnut farm. He tells us every time we eat this fish. There is a photograph of him and his family that he showed me once. The women and old men sit on crates on their veranda and he lies out in the sun, grinning on a blanket of chestnuts.

My Aunt has finished her prayers and the night has quickened around us. "Hadi kizim. Hadi, hadi!" she says as if I have been holding up our return home on this chilly winter evening. "Evet Hala," I reply as I peel myself from the bench and the vision of these fisher boys in the night.

Once we are home and as I prepare to sleep, my Aunt reminds me; If you make your bed well you sleep well. And the white sheets billow up between us, sailing out on a vast starched and salty inland sea. And plumping the heavy pillows with embroidered borders by Babanne, Hala tells me the story of the daughter whose father was a rich Turk. It goes like this:

It was a night when the sky was too close for comfort. Bruised, pearly and nude it swathed the trembling inland sea like a swaddling. On one shore of this sea lived a young Turkish
girl who was enamoured with an Armenian boy who lived on the opposite side. Each night, when the weather was fine, she would creep out of her bedroom window and walk quietly through the night shadows to the shore. By her side the darkness danced from the glow of her lantern which she would hold above her head signalling her arrival to the farthest shore. This was the language of lovers; lanterns glowing in the velvet darkness followed by the slap of the water on the wooden bellied boat bobbing through the salt and turquoise blooded sea. “I’m going to row us out of here.”

The boy would propel himself in the little boat through the night to reach his adored one for just a few coveted hours. Together they did what lovers do and planned a great run away together. ‘I’m gonna row us out of here,’ he’d say. But one night her father saw her slip out of her bedroom window. Suspicious he followed her down to the shore and sniggered as he watched her swing the lantern. He stood hidden behind a cypress tree breathing with it until the couple had been enveloped in the darkness of the dunes.

Hala’s elbows lean on the plastic tablecloth by my bed and she whispers portentously in German, plaiting her fingers together as her porcelain eyes widen. Her eyebrows are agonisingly suspended as she listens to the mouth of the ocean and its undercurrent of kisses. Her whispers thread into the sea swell. And one night the weather was very bad. "Zehr sacleht," she repeats, gently inclining her head from side to side and folding her arms.

The girl decided not to visit her lover as she knew how dangerous it would be for him. There was no moonlight and the father crept out of the house like a wolf swinging his
daughter’s lantern so the trees trembled and shook with the bruised skies too close for comfort. Rain spattered in ripe drops that hung on the father’s brow. As he stood on the shore his feet sunk in the sand and froth curled at his ankles. He held up the lantern to see the boy’s boat bobbing like a toy or a cradle in the tempest as the lover struggled in devotion with the oars. Fate did not favour the boy that night, as just before he reached the shore, he ran aground on the craggy reef. The little boat was torn asunder by the ferocious rocks and his life ebbed away with the tides. The boy’s body washed up upon the shore the next morning and the sound of the waves on the rocks is his song to her, *Oh Father why did you do me this wrong! Now I’m cursed and wandering. Hungering for my love.* Gasping for air, an anchorless ship, a lover left bobbing alone in this endless ocean. Imploring. Howling. Hala shudders in the cold still room.

And as I lay tucked in beneath heavy blankets I dream of a vast and ancient inland sea. Of an old man and a young girl who are sitting on the sandy lip of this place, just on the cusp of land. And there is the memory of water, thousands of years ago now. On the old sea floor lie bleached white bones terrific in the sunlight. A thin layer of crystallised salt forms a transparent film like tracing paper and fossilised shells nestle in rocks. The light here is eerie and birds weave and tear silently across the dome skies above, all muscle and feather. The old man has a gentle singsong voice. He recounts jokes from under his clipped moustache and smiles with his watery eyes until she giggles. From her earth to his sky she moves through his stories, reeling, fluent. And I dream of them as they sit here together, just behind my eyes. They seem to be waiting for a ship to pull in across these vast salted flats traced with the hieroglyphs of ants and insect’s sex and bird’s skeletons.
"Nich Weinen", I hear him say. Don’t cry. But something needs to parch this thirsting land. Some memory resurrected of water, some salted tear for a ship to sail. In the morning I rise before anyone else and walk to the Misr Çarşı. Baba will be here soon and I need to feel this city alone. A light milky fog hovers above the city yet to awake and descend as a breath, or a shroud. Bruised violet, pearly and nude it swathes us and our shuddering inland seas like a swaddling.

Walking brusquely to keep warm, I clap my hands together every so often or put my pink fingertips just inside my mouth. As I walk down alleys and across streets dotted yellow with taxis I spot a café and wonder what my mother might be doing. What my father might be thinking. I sit beneath a blue and white striped umbrella that perches above me like an absurd jaunty racing parasol or the hat of a strumpet leaning silently, perilously suggestive. Staircases lead up and down to sooty blackened corridors and tiny stinking hallways. Men rush about with note paper, trays of tea, boot polish, cigarettes, bowls of steaming soup from doorway to street side. Bags of oranges hang from the awnings. I can buy black leather shoes from here or vacuum cleaner parts. The muezzins will be ascending the minarets. And it’s the sound of an abandoned child imploring his mother that I hear. I can come in from the water to this place and walk on the jetty to land where the grid iron fence of a cemetery, sagging, encircles tombs like broken cots and obelisque headstones like rudders steering this way and that on small fishing boats bobbing on the Golden Horn. It encircles the mother pier of the mosque and the weeds and wildflowers with melting snow and the sketch of starved naked winter trees.
The embrace is the city in the arms of the water, *korunak*. The kiss is a cat arching her back as she curls around a wooden chair leg or lies asleep in the snow here in the longhand shadows of clouds. The roofes are leaden upturned bellies, a crescent for a navel, jotted with the steely grey afterthought of pigeons diving after boats and crusts of stale bread thrown by widows with thick bunyoned fingers. As I sit alone at the café table, my notebook before me, I learn not to look at people unless I want them to love me for a night or sell me lighters, lockets, imitation flowers or leather vests, figs or slippers. Colours repeat themselves; pea green, turquoise, red, yellow, white. The detail of sesame seeds despite the vastness of this morning. A boy sells Simit bread from a glass cabinet which he peddles on small tyre wheels. He waves a rose at me complete with a silver foil stem that sings, *Seni seviyorum*, I love you. And painted on the wall opposite, in faded sea faring tones, an anchor, slaked with salt spray that is at least double my size. Istanbul is the tonality of silences within me.

Reaching a hand into my pocket, I pull out my all my coins and leaving them in a pile on the table, get up to go. It’s a long walk back to the flat and I think I can hear thunder. Looking up I trace the clouds above as they figure and re-configure in some pregnant ink-slinging conversation. Baba should have arrived by now so I rush on to meet him. And, wonder of wonders, as I bend down to re-tie my boot laces I think I can feel a blister on my foot. The first one in years.
But wait. I have slipped here, as on a fish tail, not unaided by the memories of my sea captain who just can't keep his lid on. You see if it weren't for his sitting up there on that mast one long night after he had settled the bumps with war raging around him in trenches, over which my ancestors exchanged cigarettes and Turkish delight, pondering that strange afternoon on the Bosporus I would not be here and therefore I wouldn't be able to tell you exactly what I am telling you. And yes, I think I have never told anybody. It is from my lips and those of my Father.

It's a story from the fire and a story from my Mother. And like we all are, I am merely the result of the myth my parents told each other. I cannot draw breath without this unruly band of legends straggling behind and beside me, weaving a knotted intractable lore which I encounter in the storm of a lovers throat or the crystals of their eyes. They sprawl across my mundane daily notations, my comings and goings until I am flying, fucking, swooning with them or bent over double, my strong back barely able to carry their impatient weight. Until I take this net from my throat I am captive to blood that is shaken by the bump of a desert road in the back blocks of Afghanistan, by the lyrics of a song whose meaning I grasp from translation or by the snorts of a horse a galloping home that was never mine.
“Selam alayküm Istanbul!”
My elbows rest on the windowsill, here in the old family apartment, where Büyükba’s
did, where Baba’s did and where my Mother’s have. I rest and wait. The plane must be
delayed or maybe they are stuck in a traffic jam on the way back from the airport. It’s
certainly not unlikely. There are olive oil tins cut in half on either side of me with
geraniums growing pink and red. The clamour of the street below is broken by the
piercing shrill cry of a man clanging his gas bottles and announcing their price. A white
horse with a hennaed mane and tail trots past towing a cart of oranges, cats slink through
doorways, young boys in oversized suits clap brushes tarred by shoe polish together and
the perfume of coffee and diesel pervades.

I have often found myself plunging into visionary reveries whilst leaning on this
windowsill or dad’s one overlooking Sydney Road. I can lean for minutes on end and find
myself watching as whole sentences and phrases of music arc across the sky. At first it is
that I notice a letter, a stray w, or z. These letters will fall perhaps with a feather from the
flocks of city birds that gust and swarm past. It is then that I will notice my father in tow
clutching onto a treble clef for dear life. His leather shoes still laced up, and green and
purple notes with Attaturk’s face slip from his pockets in a colourful flutter. Now you
could say these are the apparitions of a florid imagination and that perhaps I am a
daydreamer but I know what I see clear as day, real as my red blood. I know that not
everybody sees this. In fact, bar the birds and perhaps some sailors and ferry drivers out
on the Golden Horn or the mad woman who walks down Sydney Road with a bag of bread
on her head, I think only I see these sights. Fistfuls of words and letters scatter about my
father and weft their way slowly down to land or water, a half beat, two quarter beats and
the letter a dissolve on impact with the briny slap of the Bosporus. Maybe the fish pucker at these letters as they see them coming closer, through the swimming sunshine, or maybe some captain looks up from the deck smoking absentmindedly and glimpses for a moment the chimera of a man amidst the flinty sparks of the sun. Within the blinking of a captain’s eye this figure passes behind a cloud. I must admit as a child these visions frightened me. I would be lying in bed innocently enough only to be visited by the ephemeral phantom population of my storybooks. They would hover above my bed, menacingly, benignly, accompanying my nightly journey into dreams. I learned slowly to come to terms with these companions and the worlds they illuminated. And as I grew the characters of my childhood changed from witches with pitchforks to the myths of my father and his family teeming with jinns, saints, prophets, mystics, forsaken lovers and all. Once he told me about the Green Man.

"Hizir his name, Alis," he announced his eyes unusually light. "And he used to be on de world…eh…he used to come and go next to Allah and den come back de world again."

"Ah, when was he from?"

"Hiz from ewery time…He talket to de Moses to de Mohammed and ewery Friday he comes to mosque in Istanbul," and to himself with his head turned to the side he uttered, "Which mosque he comes to?...Anyway Alis he comes ewery Friday and prays and goes but no one sees him…"

"Have you ever seen him Baba?"
"Yeah," he replied eventually. "He comes to you a greedy old man or a poor man and he sez to you couple of tings you can't imagine and you say, 'Huhh?? What was dat? From a man like you?? A knowledgeable words like dat??"

"Is he good then?"

He turned to face me then, "Alis his wery good."

But it is not an apparition that I see as I adjust my elbows on the window sill and crane my neck to spy a taxi as it pulls up in the low afternoon.

"Melike! Melike!!" My cousin Ayşê is calling me and the electricity has been cut off in the flat.

"Baban burda! Gel çabuk!" she cries out again.

Nurdan races around the flat adjusting the thin white muslin about her face with the fine beaded border and pulls open the kitchen drawers searching for candles.

"Allah Allah," she shakes her head at me.

I offer her the lighter from my pocket and she shakes her head with pursed lips smelling just a hint of smoke.

"Dein vater komt. Git kiz!"

She reprimands me as she takes the lighter and begins to light some candle stubs stuck in glass saucers.

I rush outside to where the taxi has pulled up and Altan lumbers out carrying Baba's suitcase. He heaves it out of the boot and then leans in through the front passenger seat to pay the driver.

"Ve alaykûm selam," he says as he slams the door shut.
I smile as he turns around and dash to help him with the case asking, "Babam nerede?"
Where's my Dad?

And we both peer through the lengthening shadows as the taxi chugs away. Altan drops the suitcase and makes a little run out onto the road behind the taxi, but dad isn't in the backseat.

He stops and stands on the side of the road and gazes about him in a sort of wonder. He claps the back of one hand in the palm of the other and calls out, "Aykut! Nerdesin?"

I can't believe it, I muse. He hasn't even arrived and he's already gone! I go and pick up the abandoned suitcase from the street and heave it inside feeling curiously dejected as Altan idles in the street.

"Vo ist deine vater?" demands Nurdan, as I dump his case by the front door. "Ich weis nicht," I reply despondently.

"Altan Bey!" she calls as she rushes out through the door.

And it is then that I hear a commotion outside wrestling through the spindled shadows. The snow is white on the window bars as I look up and see my father outside breathing fog from his mouth and clapping his leather glove-mitted hands. He is hoisting himself up the Cypress tree limb by limb, the assiduous ascent and it sways ever so slightly with his weight and the evening breeze that has picked up.

Altan Enişte, Büyükbaba, Nurdan Hala and Ayşegül are all clamouring beneath the tree shouting and calling.

"N'apyorsun Aykut! Harram!"

"Abi gel! Gel Abi!" choruses Ayşegül. Come, come!
Altan laughs, "Aykut! Yoohoo! Come deown! Vee hev very nayce soup for you, for you dinner! Come deown!"

But from where I sit by the window with my elbows on the sill he seems quite content having found a sturdy branch to recline on with his back leaning on the trunk. I can see his lips moving as he talks to himself. And I shake my head and smile.

"Aykut janim gel burda! Gel!" Come here my life, come, calls Nurdan becoming increasingly exasperated and bitten nearly hysterical by the lashes of wind.

"Evet Ablağym! Evet!" But my father just smiles through the branches before turning his face away and resuming his conversation with the wind and snow.

Büyük Baba and Alan stamp their feet in the snow and shake their heads muttering to each other.

"Vallahi Baba," swears Altan, "O çilgin. Majnun." I swear Baba, he's eccentric, crazy.

"Tabi tabi o majnun," agrees Büyük Baba after a moment.

I can't help but smile up at him and catching his eye for a moment he winks down at me and I hear a sigh of La illahe illAllah.

Seeing the light in Baba's eyes Nurdan raps on the window, "Komme zürūch kizim! Harram! Gel kizim!"

Altan turns to face me and grins through the window, "Alis, come get your father down. He will die of cold up there."

"Tamam, tamam. Okay."

Before I go out I pour a big glass of hot tea and notice that there are no pictures in this house, only angels. Yet tonight I have the strange feeling that they are all busy elsewhere.

"Iyi, iyi. Gel şimdi kız gel!" chimes Nurdan.
The night has descended and with it the bracing cold of another snow spell about to fall. I stand beneath the tree and call up between chuckles.

"Baba! How's the view?"

"Bootiful Alis!" And he smiles broadly down at me then, "Selam alayküm Istanbul!" and he salutes the night sky like a captain at the helm.

Ayşe giggles and shakes her head, "ve alayküm selam Abi!"

"You want some tea?" I call.

And he lifts his eyebrows and clicks his tongue.

"But I poured it for you! It's hot!" I implore as the blanket night darkens around us.

Everyone's patience and sense of comedy is beginning to wane as the cold sets in.

"I'll get him down. It's alright," I assure them.

"Ah, aber es ist sehr schlecht," entreats Büyükbaş.

"Ich weis, ich weis. Kafana takma." I don't know. Don't worry about it.

"Don't worry about it?" guffaws Altan.

"I'll get him down. I will. I guarantee!"

At which point Baba begins to sing; "Satisfaction guarantee. You can't pull de plug on me! All de jungles in my cup!"

Nurdan is infuriated by this mad arborous folly and storms inside narrowly missing an intimate swipe with the rosebush.

"Allah, Allah!" I hear her mutter under her breath as she rounds the corner of the flat.

"Can you get me a blanket!" I call after her and then realise that she won't have understood.

"Baba, can you ask her to get me a blanket?" I call up the tree.
And Altan follows her inside saying, "I bring you blanket Alis. One minute."

On this one long night I sit beneath the tree wrapped in an old blanket having passed one up to Baba. I have withstood the chiding and admonishment of my Aunt who for a while insisted on peering out of the kitchen window in the flicker of candles making loud tutting noises, trying to catch my eye with her glittering green ones, pretending not to notice when I would look back at her.

I persist here in my station beneath the tree where my father like a mad wild bird pronounces his freedom.

"Alis," he calls now through the silent eiderdown of snow. "In the olden days Angels walked around with de humans, teaching dem tings….But now dey are gone so I tell you myself dis tings…"

"Okay Baba," I call up the tree trunk only able to see his feet dangling in little leather slippers.

"The universe, out there," and he waves his arm out," is quiet and peaceful place with lots of spirits. There is no direction out there. No East. No West. No qibla. All is de qibla. Yeas, der are de fire power hearts burstin and bloomin time after time…And from time to time de birth of a galaxy, a solar system…."

It is funny sitting under a cypress tree in the bitter fresh white of winter listening to the wisdom of my father as if he were a bird who had alighted on the branches of my life for a moment before flying off to the nest of a mountain. I have to ensure that the threats of my aunt to take him to hospital remain just that, threats.
"De spirits," he continues, "all de birds, all de insects, dragonflies, moths, early summer storms, de spirits that fled all the speckled blue egg shells that fell from de trees, de tyrants, de lovers, de criminals, de loners...."

As I listen to his voice trailing off and becoming smothered in the greater voice of the wind in the branches I find the words coming to me and I pick up from where he left off. I am aware of some great dissipation and a great dissolving.

"We all flicker out like fireflies at dawn and our ether scatters across the constellations of the universe's dreaming," I muse aloud.

Baba is quiet in the branches above.

"We become the formless magic of non-being, become pregnant with that which we have no words for; the primordial crown of being. We are before, beyond, above and after what we call language, what we call the word, some crude, rudimentary mimicry of the first breath."

Out of the corner of my eye I notice Nurdan in the window listening intently and Altan pacing back and forth barking into the cordless phone. And after a moment the breaking and snapping of branches as Baba begins his descent.

By the afternoon of his second day the family had all but forgotten the initial vision of my tree-born father. They no longer needed to cluster in the sitting room drinking scores of glasses of tea, eating biscuits and biting their nails in debate as to what to do. Their bird had come home.

Baba and I sit and drink our morning coffee together in the sunshine by Galata Bridge on the Golden Horn. He tells me that the ferries here are called Sea Cats.
"See dat boat der? See de anchor at de end of it and de place where its ropes rest?" and he waves his arm out toward the water.

"Well, Alis I bought a bottle of gin once," and he lowers his voice. "So cheap! Half price. Three lire fifty! De man who sold it didn’t realize. So I bought it and sat where de ropes rest and drank it with sweet lemonade and den by de time we arrived at the island my friends had to carry me off the boat!"

"How old were you?"

"Oo-of about 19."

He tells me lots of stories about fainting. Maybe these were his first episodes, his first swoons of madness and movements of unconsciousness.

"Istanbul is like a dream Alis," he says. "All dese mosques and ships and de pipol, too many pipol! Is like a dream!" he looks again over the Golden Horn at this city of dreams and hūzūn.

Is it fifteen or twenty years since he has been here? Neither of us can quite remember. But a big time. He says this. He must have left it really when he was only in his mid twenties.

"I knew a fisherman once. He used to drink his Raki with tea! Hah! Half de glass Raki, half de glass tea!" He puts his thumb to his mouth and makes like to down it.

A man in a suit squints in the morning sun with a handful of toys to sell. Another man saunters passed eyeing us with a tesbik in one hand and what's that in the other? Ships wait at dock and pigeons fly to the bird feed women at Misr Çarsi and the Yenii Camii. Ash
from a cigarette smudges to grey and a big black bird settles on the bright green of a rock that peaks above the waterline.

"It's name Kara Batak Alis. Dey fly like jets tirty centimeter above de water," says Baba following my gaze.

They are a special sea bird and only live in these waters. You can't see them in the Aegean only the Marmara. Life is about longing and bridges like the Galata where men fish all day to catch Hamsi. "Dickheads," snaps Dad as we slope back across the bridge together on our way to his old neighborhood. "Dey are so small dese Golden Horn fish. Dey should go out to Marmara or De Black Sea to fish."

Sitting in the little alley of Ocak Başı you can watch the flags that hang over the street from between the apartments and know if it's going to rain or just be cold. If the wind comes from the West and the Aegean it will rain and if it comes from the North East from Russia it will be cold. Which way do the flags blow in Çapa today, in the old city?

We sit at low stools, almost on the ground in the alley and sip black coffee.

"The pigeons here lost two eggs because their nest was falling apart," Dad's old friend tells us. "The pigeon's wife is no good," he continues, "because she is throwing everything down."

And sure enough, here come the twigs and bits of thread, sifting slowly down to the floor and all of a sudden the men who were just moments ago smoking lazily in the doorways are mobilised. I must admit, when I first saw one man put down his tea glass and take a piece of wood, I thought unkindly that he was going to shoo them away. But no, he rests it on the
edge of two steps and jumps on it a few times to break it up. Another man appears with a ladder and yet another with a bunch of bracken and twigs and dried leaves to make a nest. The man leaning on the ladder climbs up and places the bits of wood in the piping that stick out from the wall and takes some cardboard from another to secure them. Everyone is animated waiting with their tea glasses in one hand and bunches of twigs, thread or sticks in the other.

Dad’s friend who runs this place which is peopled only by regulars is called Topçu. He tells me he has great-great-great grandchildren and says if he dies they are all finished. That his wife has been sick for fifteen years and that only he looks after her. He waggles his head from side to side with his palms facing upwards and his eyes sparkling. When Baba tells him I am writing a book and that I have written 40,000 words and have 40,000 more to go he exclaims, "Yaz Abla! Yaz Yaz!" Write Big sister! Write write!

Topçu and Baba went to school together and when I asked them about it they guffaw. “What school Alis?! De teachers used to hit me like dis and dis, here and here,” he turns each cheek side to side and then Topçu joins in. "They used to grab our earlobes like this with their two fingers and squeeze and pinch us with their fingernails till we screamed.”

So when Dad was fourteen or fifteen he left school and he used to go to the movies at ten in the morning and come out at four in the afternoon and then go home again. And all the while Sadet the waiter leans in the doorway smiling at the stories in his pointy black, or or are they brown, shoes and matching jacket. Making tea, smoking talking.
A man walks in. He looks as if he has seen better days. His long hair is matted at the back and his long beard shimmers with grease. He knows my Father and he says, "Take care of your Baba, okay?"

"Ok."

And his old neighbourhood, Çapa, used to be green full of fruit trees and everyone would pick the fruit but inspectors would come to make sure no one was selling it and people would yell out to each other, *the greens are coming the greens are coming* because they wore green suits. "It didn’t used to be like this. All apartments and zazaza zeezeezee," relents Topçu. They both shake their heads now and say Istanbul is finished. "Dat’s de why Alis, I have to smoke de Turkish dope, I have to Aliis –" As if it’s a sacred national service. Topçu laughs and hands him a phone number on a scrap of paper which he punches into his mobile phone. And look! The wood pigeons have flown back to their new nest. My faith is restored. I didn’t think they would come back.

The manager of one of dad’s bands just turned up. Was it the Grasshoppers? He sits with his hand on my dad’s knee as he talks and Baba waits for his hash dealer. He asks, "Does she feel like a stranger in Istanbul? Is she a Muslim?"

To the latter, Baba responds to with, "Tabi, o müslimün tabi." Of course, she’s a Muslim of course.
And is it relief that passes over the ex-managers face? And men with glasses of tea, cigarettes, pointy shoes, flowers and nest twigs move about as they put the final finishing touches on the wood pigeons new nest.

Baba's mobile rings, it's the dealer. So we bid farewell to the pigeons and Sadet and Topçu and as we make our way through the streets he tells me about the bears that used to dance in the streets to a darbouka or kenan, violin and how he used to play in a club called Clup 69 out near the Airport and about the Tartars who used to live in this area.

"Where are they now?"

And just like that we hear a voice.

"Aaahmet!!" calls a man from a window

And it is one of his old Tartar friends smiling down from his apartment!

Baba waves and calls out that we'll be back.

And later down the road from Büyükaba’s house we sit in a sparsely furnished flat despite its plush couches, waiting for dad's friend to finish cooking and pressing the hash. I hear the dealer's son come home from school momentarily. He is a young boy and I never see his face as he leaves again soon after his arrival. The man is sallow and I sit covering my face with my shawl and try and lean my head out the window as politely as possible in order not to get stoned from the biggest joint I have seen my Baba roll.

Istanbul with Baba is one long walk that takes weeks as we trail through the streets of his early years. It's sitting by the fountain and the Mosque garden in Eyüp Sultan with the cats and the open sky while he sits opposite and sings, chat-scats La ilâhe illâllah, over and over and over again in a soft low drone. Three gypsy women pass by with their children, la
illahe illAllah, ribbons of water, la illahe illAllah, niqabed women, and where are the poets? La illahe illAllah. And he tells me that Taksim is like St. Kilda but only has one tram, as thin as a matchbox. Raki is the answer but I forgot the question announces a t-shirt from a window. All the old men sit here at Eyüp Sultan around the fountain near the Saint's Tomb. "Dey listening to the water," my father says as it splashes out of the spout and into the round pool. They sit in woollen caps and beards and the pigeons roost on the mosque roof beside the tulip garden. Or they pace slowly, deliberately, moustachioed with their hands behind their backs swinging their tesbiks. A man blows smoke from his cigarette and it lasts for a second before disappearing into the bright blue-grey air.

Istanbul with Baba is being on the search for the ultimate clarinet up the hill of Taksim, the Tünnel, which is so steep it's almost vertical. We walk slowly, cobbled, pausing for him to catch his breath and he later told his sister that I walk too fast for him. Finally, we reach the music shop, where he swaps his black clarinet for a nickel one and gives a generous hundred lira tip. It is clarion bright silver and he is beamish as he strides out of the shop with it under his arm. As we walk he tells me that I have sharps and quarter notes in my heart and I want to play them but I can't realise them on the flute. So I need a kenan violin or an Oud. A fretless string would also do the trick, although not a Saz, as it has frets that were introduced by the Chinese.

And I remember a story he told me about jamming one night with his friends in Melbourne above a shop on Sydney Road. He was playing his friend's Oud. He said it was beautiful and inlaid with mother of pearl. They were playing and smoking and drinking and he said
suddenly the Oud started laughing at him! Laughing and laughing. So he took it to the window and hurled it out onto the street below and along came a tram and CRUNCH! It was destroyed and bits of finger board, strings and mother of pearl scattered all over the street. Understandably his friend was devastated.

"What the fuck d'ya do that for, Ayk??" I can imagine him yelling breathlessly as he leaned out the window and looked in disbelief and horror at his decimated instrument.

My Dad was a little sheepish when he told me that story but then reassured me again that it was in fact laughing at him so what else was he to do?

"No you don't what dat," he says now as we walk. "But you can start de kenan anytime" he insists, full of promise.

"You practice anytime and you finish when you like. You feel it. And it's more feeling than dots on a page Alis."

And looking at a display of oranges on the street side he says, "Orange in C#!"

Istanbul with Baba is stopping at a café and coaxing him to read my cup.

"You have so much going on. Many bright paths lead to de same future."

I learn that before you read a cup you have to turn it upside down and swish it around three times then turn it again and let it settle. When you touch the upturned bottom of the cup and it's cold then you know then it's ready to read.

I follow him through the streets singing to strangers.

"Listen! Tana rini rini rum - tana rini rum. Tana rini rini rum - tana rini rum!"

I follow him lurching through a saint's graveyard. I follow simply behind as he sings and teeters about.
"Selam alayküm Istanbul! Nasilsin?" and he smiles as he looks out at the seven sloping hills jostling with satellite dishes and apartments. A woman passes by and I catch a glance for a moment of the hem of her dress beneath her chador. Her little flower speckled secret. A bus rumbles past and as it passes a group of dogs run down the street and he says, "Write down dem as well Aliís! Some of dem well fed, some of dem are starving. Some of dem have little bed in de Beyazit area and dey sleep dere in the morning sun. And I rekon during de night dey are all walking”.

The dogs of Istanbul run the streets through the traffic all grubby and golden and sleep in groups of three or four in the parks in the sun. There’s an old black dog in Taksim, red eyed, well fed and sure of his place where he sits by the little tram trolley line as he watches the world pass by. And there is a mean looking Rottweiler in a street which used to be full of nightclubs and Turkish prostitutes. It’s retired now and just sniffs around the grimy busy streets hung with washing lines and cables.

"I used to drink wine and play guitar on that corner over der," he points. "And that Kūaför used to be a club where I would play all night. For twenty years or so, Alis, I didn’t see the sun. I lived like dat. I would sleep all day and play gigs all night. Drinking and smoking and playing."

I remember a music poster Büyükkbaba showed me in his flat in Çapa. It had a white background and perhaps twelve band members, some kneeling, some standing, all in white suits holding their instruments or a cigarette or a hat. And there was Dad in white bell bottoms with big lapels on his suit jacket, curly black hair, a long moustache, a white hat
and a trumpet circa 1970. He played with a band at the local movie theatre with a massive stage.

"All night, one chord," he laughed. "They loved it! *Jang Jang Ja Ja Jang Jang Ja!*"

And he strums the invisible guitar hanging around his torso.

"We used to play in de clubs and the police *zabita* would come. And we all had to be quiet even de owner. And one time dey came and de drummer dropped his sticks in de snare drum! Boom! And de police came and shouted, *Don’t you know who we are?! Where’s your respect?!* And dey beat him up really badly. Afterwards he was black eyes and bruises and dey stuck his head in the drum. When dey left he was unconscious and we had to give him joints and alcohol to wake him up! Poor ting he still had to play with two black eyes!"

Once the same drummer told him when you freak out you have to remember this beat *Ayk, Jin jin dagada jin jin. Jin jin dagada jin jin jin.*** I remember hearing this as a child when he used to teach me Darbouka or Tabla. And as we walk past the restaurants in *Sultan Ahmet* baba sings this to the spruiking waiters.

We come across an Afghan selling perfume on the street with a little card table in front of him. And I tell him in broken Turkish that my dad used to play music in a circus in Kabul. “That’s where he met my Mum.”

"Ah!" He breaks into green smiles!

And Baba sings his song; *tana rini rini rum tana rini rum.*

And the perfume seller nods and smiles as Baba sings and sings. Then off we leap again, back into the streets after he has bought the most expensive perfume he has ever heard of on any street in Istanbul. There is a suburb called *Zeytin Burnu*, Olive Nose, a street
named after an apple that was almost but not quite red. I love these names and these streets and the way men take such care to build a bird’s nest in the morning, the way Sadet taps his pointy shoes at the regular's café, the way the sky is blue in the morning and the evening, the way I fall asleep to Baba's prayers, the way a cigarette smokes itself out in the ashtray, the way the pigeons gather, the way a woman in the street spat three times as she told me I was beautiful then said with laughter Mash Allah, the way my dreams tell the truth, the way my dad teaches music beating out the notes from the arm chair or singing at random times and places, the way he mutters over his shoulders to I don’t know who in between puffs of a cigarettes or sips of coffee, the way we walk these streets of his Istanbul Music Era, as he calls it, the way he pays for everything as I always imagined a dad would, the way there is always a bird in the sky when I look up, the way I love this hopeless absent impossible love in this city after twenty years. I love these ways.

All week I spend with him he points out his name. On a sticker for Aykut Petrol or Aykut Küaför or Kebabs or painted on the side of a ship or the awning of a shop. He smiles sheepishly but proudly and says, "Dat's my name!"

"What would you call me if I was a boy Baba?"


And I try and count the minarets, try and count the flags.

My father and I are sitting at a bar on Galata Bridge looking out over the Golden Horn and after a sip of Rakı he recites a prayer. I think it starts with one of the ninety nine names of Allah. I have tried to learn it before but can't remember it.
"It starts with your name, Melike."

It goes *melik youm ad-din* or something like that.

"So you see," he continues "you are at the top of my list, at the top my prayers."

And he reminds me, "Remember when we lived in that house in Fitzroy when we first got to Australia and I was helping you learn to walk on that straw matting?"

"No, I don’t remember Dad."

"It was so hard on your feet! Oo-off! For you I mean. It wasn't hard for me," he laughs.

And I nearly hesitate but something stops me, maybe it’s the minarets or the flags or the pigeons or the *Raki* we are drinking, but I ask him almost involuntarily anyway.

"Dad did you love me when I was a baby?" and I expect the worst response but am overtaken by some rare courage and am surprised when he says,

"I always love you, Alis. You my daughter."

I ask him what his name means. I know *Ay* is moon and he completes it, *kut* means son.

And here I am the daughter of the moon over Istanbul, loved. And I feel like a kid again having trailed after my Dad all day as he charmed people and ranted and drank and told stories and made friends with strangers.

Here under this bridge of my heart a boat sails past and distracts me for a moment from the waiter with whom I am flirting, sharing mutual lurid fantasies and at the helm is a woman playing the accordion. I try and count the minarets. I try and count the flags. The tragedy of Istanbul is that the flags ripple like blood on the streets, that Lion's Milk fogs up my head beautifully, that Baba keeps raving on to these two men and that we are both leaving too soon and we could’ve sailed on their boat out to the Bosporus. And past the window there walks the girl with the accordion!
Dad leaps up and lurches through the doorway of the bar. "Come, play us a song! Come! Come!" he coaxes.

So in walks a Romanian gypsy with HALF an accordion stuck together with sticky tape and she explains as she plays the lonely notes on the keyboard that the Zabita, the police kicked out the buttons.

"Zabita, Zabita," she mutters.

"Ahh," I nod.

She bought it in Bulgaristan and her brother is in Moscow and her Dad somewhere here.

We talk about Franco. Dad and the two men in Turkish, her in Italian and me in Arabic with a smattering of Turkish and English. She keeps flashing her passport around and looking at my bracelets which I insist are not gold. I tell her again but I don’t think she believes me.

"Yaniy-" she says as she shows these men her passport a second time.

Dad is excited when she says she is Çingene, gypsy.

"Dese are our people Aliis! Dis is our nation!" he exclaims, filling our glasses with Raki.

The bar has become crowded with men swathed in scarfs, their knuckled sallow fingers folded about glasses of milky fog.

"Dese are our people!"

We leave the bridge bar after Baba has captivated the place with some story of I don’t know what and barrel through the streets drunkenly with the two men in tow. Dad sings and calls out to the pavement sellers, "Shout louder! I can’t hear you! How much did you say?! Why aren’t you shouting like your neighbour is? Hadi lan!" We weave and wander the streets by the Golden Horn arm in arm, laughing, and tumble into the car of the two
men. They drive us to Taksim where we get out and follow them up streets, down little arcades, upstairs and down a corridor into an old Meyhane where a gypsy band plays and a leathery old transvestite cabaret singer croons, *I gave my wife a sucuk and she gave me four kids!* Baba and the two men hoot with laughter and bang their fists on the table making the glasses jump and the singer swaggers over and seizes Baba's cheeks, stroking his beard lovingly, causing him to blush and look over at me shyly.

The singer takes Baba's hand and pulls him onto the dance floor and he doesn't resist but instead whoops for joy. It is the second time I have ever seen him dance. He hoots and laughs and throws his arms in the air. People fall in love with him all the time here. The singer keeps crooning to him and the two guys keep asking, *Is the food alright Abi? Do you like it here? Is the music ok?* It's as if he's collected two sons. At the end of the night the two men drive us home at break neck speed and out the window I see a city cut to streamers as the tulips smear passed. When they opened the car door one of them tumbled out and fell on to the pavement and baba and I tiptoed into hala's little house like outlaws reeking of Raki. He collapses on his bed fully clothed with his new clarinet beside him and I lay my head down to sleep in a haze of inebriated exhaustion. There is a red carnation from the Meyhane on the pillow beside my face and the sound of him praying in his sleep in C minor. And behind my eyes I see a white figure spinning in front of the Kaa'ba. Just one figure in a billowing white skirt, spinning around and around. *Ishte.* Just like that. I am sure it's not the Prophet Mohammed but maybe the person who asked me once in a dream if I had read the Mathnawi.
And I awake to the sound of the Ezzan, a sharp breeze and a shifting weight on the end of my bed. The sweet aroma of hash pervades the dawn as my Baba puffs his morning joint out the window scatting along with the muezzin in something like a twelve bar blues.

The next morning in the flat, we three magicians face Mecca and down water from the well of Zam Zam making wishes as we do so. Baba turns to me and laughs as he says, "I hope I win de Jackpot so den I can buy a house here!" Nurdan Hala, Baba and I. I don’t know what she wishes for but I wish for peace and for Baba's and her wish to come true. And my own. Nurdan tells me that there are angels in this room, im diesen zimmer, zu fiel zu fiel, so many. And that we live with spirits spirits who we can’t see but who lie underneath the earth in their tombs.

"Allah var?" she asks rhetorically, glad for my now undivided attention.

"Var, tabi canim." Of course, Allah is here my life, she answers.

"Isa var?" Is Jesus here she asks."Tabi Isa var!" Of course, Jesus is here my life, she answers herself again.

"Aber deine vater hatt jinn and she rubs her belly."Jinn bleib im deine vater."

Jinn live in your father, in his belly and they punch this way and that. And in his head, all because he doesn’t do salat properly.

But baba says to me one day after the breakfast things have been cleared away, "Do you know the triangle of La Illahe IllAllah?"

"No," I fib.

"It's from between your eyes here," and he puts his index finger at the point between his eyebrows. "To your right shoulder and then to the centre of your stomach, then back to the first point and back again to your heart."
"Ah," I nod.

He called her a magician once but she says he prays the wrong way lying on the couch with his legs open and that is why when she starts talking about religion at the table he gets up and leaves because the jiin can't bear to hear it.

But he says it's because she is a fundamentalist maniac and pushes and pushes and tries to sting. He says sometimes he wants to tell her siktir lan! Get fucked mate! He refers to her as a fundamentalist maniac who needs a good belting. I look aghast and he insists, "Yep each side. That'll sort her out." I have never heard him speak like this. At first it was funny but when he said that I thought of my Mum saying, "yeah, around about the time you were conceived he beat me up pretty badly."

I can hear the voice of my Aunt, "Auzu billahi min a shaytan arejiim," Oh Lord protect me from Saytan. And she continues that the angels wear green cloaks and big green turbans here and that the Greeks said they weren’t scared of the Turks but of the angels that would appear behind them. I imagine on the battle fields, looming above the Turks, green and luminous. Nurdan turns the radio on and we sit and listen to it at the plastic covered rickety table that is liable at any moment to break and if it does she says I must buy her a new one.

So I lean my elbows precariously on its surface and peer at the Turkish magazine Büyükbaba bought me while she does her crossword, one assiduous word after the next and notice her nodding and agreeing with the radio until she asks me, "Have you read Leyla and Majnoun? Have you read Rumi’s Mathnawi?"

I reply that I have read the former and only bits and pieces of the latter and at this she says, "Tell me, what was The Mathnawi about?"
I fumble about in shredded German, Turkish and Arabic and eventually resort to frustrated English remembering how once not long ago I wanted to rip out these low hanging light fixtures which I always bump my head on.

"No, No," she retorts. "That’s not it! That’s not it at all."

Baba said once that she wanted to sting me and when he would notice this he would stick around and listen to her silently.

"That’s not it at all," she says. And she smiles her smug woolly smile as she launches into her explanation.

"You ask me, how honey tastes and I can say, it sweet like sugar and delicious like such and such and beautiful like such and such and you will nod your head and say ahk ahk but do you know the taste of honey? No. Not until you have tried it for yourself and only then will you know the taste. Only until you experienced Allah through prayer yourself can you understand and know him. But these things are deep secrets and I cannot communicate this experience anyway."

"Ah!" Checkmate. I, the diligent niece nod in affirmation indulging her secrets, all in the name of what?

So she tells me the story of Leyla and Majnoun annotated on the margins of her newspaper crossword with a sort of love time line charting Majnour's ashk, longing, desire, hūzūn drawn in biro starting with Leyla at the bottom and climbing up past the squares to love of Allah at the pinnacle.

She starts, "for example you want to cook beans. First, you have to soak them overnight. Yawaş, yawaş. Then, you have to boil them slowly on a low heat all day. Slowly, slowly. Or, imagine you love a man but he is married and it is possible you can't be together. But
does the Love leave you? No, of course not. It stays in your chest and burns and grows. Or perhaps you love a man but he goes. Still the love grows and grows. Love is one path to Allah. Love is a path from the eyes to the heart. The love Majnoun had for Leyla was an impossible love. She was from a rich family he was from poor one. But his burning and longing led him to a greater love. And when a Sultan befriended him and tried to help him solve the riddle of his heart by finding Leyla for him, Majnoun looked at her and said, "But you are not my Leyla."

What is Leyla but a name on the tongue? His heart found her. She was a bridge to Allah and he found Allah quickly. This is one path to Medina. First we love Form and then we love God."

Hala says that Leyla was Majnoun's periscope to God and that then she was finished, nothing. Love beyond Form.

"There is no such thing as coincidence," she smiles, "ever."

Islam, Hojjas, Medina, Mohammed.

"He will come to you in your dreams and give you a key to a message you will find in a Sure. But we can't understand all of this here. Yet we will we will in Jennet." Paradise.

And here I am burning with latent longing and my Hala cuts through my musings advising me “Imagine you are at Mecca at the Kaa'ba. Put your tongue on the roof of your mouth and say silently Allah Allah Allah”.

She holds out a piece of the cloth which she has cut clandestine from the Kaa'ba and gives it to me to kiss then presses it to the centre of my forehead. Part of the triangle of La illahe illAllah that Baba mentioned?
She gives me prayers to say each morning and tells me Allah called me to Istanbul. That it is hard to come. It costs a lot and Australia is very far away but just like Rumi calls all people to come to him so does Allah. And I am listening to her because I am hungry for a Hojja and I want to believe her. But I can't help doubting. Would Mohammed really visit me in my dreams? Me? And then I find myself pondering, am I Leyla or Majnoun? She tells me she has been reading the Mathnawi since she was thirty years old.

"Read it," she advises over her glasses. "Read it because you have ḥūzūn in your heart and it's from your Baba. Your mum never married again, ah well, she is a good woman. You are always laughing and smiling but in your heart is this ḥūzūn and it is a gift from Allah because he loves you and it draws you to him with longing and yearning. Cry out with your ḥūzūn to Allah and the door will open."

And one night when I refused to wipe my dinner plate clean she said as if it would convince me, "but the Prophet (alayhi salam) used to wipe his bowl clean with bread or his fingers."

It didn’t convince me of anything but I made like the prophet.

And she tells me now that she chose her kitchen tiles which are decorated with roses because the Prophet loved them. When I make a feeble excuse of extrication from her monologue, something about going for a walk to email Australia she flatly refuses.

"Yok ya kizim! PKK var," she says horrified. It's unthinkable that I should go alone, the PKK are there.

Baba pokes his head around the doorway and chimes in, "Der are anarchists everywhere here, Alis." Anarchist pronounced with a ch for cherry. So poor Baba who is exhausted at
the end of the day from walking these streets has to sit beside me and wait while I type away.
The Last River
Büyük Baba was born in Beşiktaş, Istanbul, eighty-five years ago. Babane, his wife, ran from Razgrad, Bulgaria to Edremit, Turkey. My Aunt tells me they ran from Communism. She tells me this and her veins pulse with venom as this last word comes out ragged with vitriol. She suspects me of Communist sympathies. I laugh at such an absurd accusation. I never even joined the Socialist students at University let alone bothered to read a Manifesto. She's packing börek for Büyük Baba, Baba and I. It's our last day here together. I can't bear to think of leaving so we are making a journey to Das Schwarzes Meer, The Black Sea. We all insist that we don't need any food that in fact we are going there for the food but she won't hear of it and busies herself around the kitchen making an early morning domestic din, gathering apricots, halva and fruit.

Nurdan tells me Büyük Baba met his wife when she was fourteen and he was a Lieutenant who played the accordion. His old eyes twinkle with the chandeliers tears as Altan rumours behind his white knuckles, "She was attracted to the piano accordion, Alis!" They were married during the War and moved from village to village across Kurdish Turkey. When she died Büyük Baba would sit by the window of the apartment they had shared for thirty years in old Istanbul and weep, "Meine frau ist gestorben," and he would point one finger down towards the carpet. "Unter de erder." My wife is dead, under the earth."

Finally after Hala has rushed off to Zikr, Baba sinks into the armchair, his eyes half open, half closed and tells me, "Aliis I feel so bootiful. You wouldn’t beleew how beautiful I am
right now. I am so sweet I can't even open my eyes!" and he laughs and peaks out through half slits.

"C'mon Baba weren't you going to take me and Büyükbaba somewhere this morning?" I ask.

"Ok. Ok. Hadi, let's go," and he leaps up from the armchair.

As we three traverse the city loaded up with half of Hala's kitchen, weaving our way on and off buses and ferries on our way to The Black Sea, Büyükbaba tells me, "Ich wusche immer diesen schonen tag bringen." I wish that you always have beautiful days.

Once there we find an outdoor restaurant where we can look out across the vast water. Baba smiles and throws the crusts of bread we have saved in plastic bags out to the gulls who fly in swarms like ripe rain clouds. The waiters notice with distaste and eventually remove our plates and bread.

"Bir bira Melike Hanim?" asks Büyükbaba.

And Baba guffaws lightly beneath his hand.

"Hayir," no thanks I say. We haven't even had breakfast.

With a wry smile he waves to the waiter. "Bir bira istiyor!"

At this Baba pipes up, "Bende bir bira istiyorum lan!" I want a beer too mate!

Two Belgian beers arrive with tall glasses. I drink mine slowly as Büyükbaba whispers, "Nicht erzahlen meine tochter!" Don't tell my daughter!

And we all chuckle at the thought.

Büyükbaba orders a coffee and reads it before he drinks it. He thinks he'll find gelt. His black felt cap sits slightly to the left and he wears a brown woollen coat. Boats are docked nearby and the wishbones of the winter sun spark on the briny, slapping water. Hills scant
with trees rise up behind him in circumspect fingers and Baba and I wonder aloud at his clairvoyance as we always read our cups afterwards.

After lunch Baba and I walk to the top of the mountain through a quietude of Byzantine stone. It's only fifty kilometres to Bulgaria and just across the border to Russia. Before we left this morning Altan clapped his hands together laughing, "Alis, the sea is as silent as a sheet and as stubborn as a mule! Yes! Vallahi!"

The muezzins fold over the water and naked arthritic trees sprawl lasciviously up knotted hill paths. Men with machine guns and handsome crisp uniforms creep along beside us in the trees and I feel Baba bristle.

*Ich habe das Schwarz's Merr gesen*! I have seen The Black Sea!

On the boat ride home down the Bosporus Büyük Baba tells me I can rest my head on his lap when I get sleepy. We sit out on the deck, buffeted by salt sea breath. He buys us all a glass of tea from a lisping sallow waiter who relates convoluted stories with relentlessly grandiose gesticulations within an inch of Baba's nose until finally he cuts him and says, "Evet. Evet lan. Bak Sana, cigarette varmi?" Yes, yes. Now look here do you have a cigarette for me?

A man sits on the opposite bench stroking the woman's head that rests in his lap.

*Manchmal*, sometimes as his hand moves to her temple he looks in my direction. I prefer his clandestine reflection in the pane of glass beside me where the waves swell about his hands and bowed head. I stroke my own head and listen to Büyük Baba's stories of women with babes in their arms. No eyes visible, just an outstretched hand, leathery and wrinkled.

The men who sleep on the street in the snow.
"No wife, no children, no brother nor sister. No money nor bread. They have only Allah," he says sadly pointing his index finger to the sky.

My grandfather tilts his head back slightly in a no, _yok_. His eyes are black, his face peppered with clipped whiskers and a perfect triangular moustache. His hands fold over his _kleine baume_, his small stomach.

"Şükür," Baba utters quietly. "Şükür."

The water is oil and silk and he tells me the best oranges are from Iran.

We are nearly back to port. The moon is a shy waxing crescent, low on the horizon as Büyük Baba tells me about his father. I let my head rest on his arm as he kisses my eyes and says, "Nich weinen." Don't cry.

And as we all stare out at the water, hot tears begin to fall down my cheeks and I wipe them away as soon as they come.

"Çok gezer. Çok bilier. Lots of travelling. Lots of learning, Alis," says my dad.

But the eyes of a stranger stay in my heart.

"Hadi kız come and stand here," he motions from his place at the hand rail. "No more wawawa."

I join Baba by the boat rail and watch as birds flush across the sky and dive lazily at the water. Büyük Baba comes and stands by me on the one side and Baba on the other.

The wind is bitter bright in our faces and a glint of sun catches the corner of my eye as I turn my face towards the shore. Scores of minarets seem for a moment as if they are leaning in towards me; an ensemble of spines arching in longing but perhaps it is me that is leaning. Büyük Baba flicks his amber _tesbik_ languidly up and around his hand as his lips move beneath his moustache in invocation, his hair a thinning swathe of white and Baba
squints out into the distance humming to himself scat blues prayer. I lean on the rails and take my notebook from my pocket and begin to write as fast as I can to beat the wind which keeps ripping at the pages even though I haven't finished the one I am on, desperate to conclude this story that has been on slow heat for years now, like my aunt's chickpeas or a spoon of honey placed before me that I've never been allowed to taste. The nib tears the salted spray page and the ink letters bleed rogue aquatic anarchy as even I fail to recognise the meaning as both page and skin are stained. Something beats a rhythm on the ship's hull and Baba's thumbs play with the loops of wind. Here between these two I can hear my blood begin to sing in my veins, my tongue becoming keen with desire.

A languid squinting waiter balances an aluminium tray on the outstretched web of one hand and swipes away salt spray, insects and fly away hair with the other. Scores of tea glasses sit snug in red and white striped saucers with three cubes of sugar at the ready. "Çay var! Çay!" he drawls, all long limbs and scuffed black dress shoes in slick deck puddles. He pauses a moment in front of us, winks and accepts a cigarette from Baba. "Çay ister sen Abi?"

"Kahve var mí?" asks Dad as he lights the boy's cigarette, *iki bin bir, 2001*, the Turkish cigarette of the millennia.

"Var, var…"

Büyük Baba turns his back to the sea and leaning against the rail reaches out to take the glass of tea on offer. "Teşekkür."
The waiter glances at me. I decline with a lift of my eyebrows as Büyükbaba has taught me. He begins to open into a flirtatious laugh but then stops himself and says, "Ne kiz?" What girl?

So I do it again this time clicking my tongue as my eyebrows reach their peak. The waiter and Baba smile through their smoke and Büyükbaba laughs, stirring the three sugar cubes at the bottom of his glass as yet undissolved. The half size teaspoon tinkles against the painted tea glass and the crystals spin around like schools of fish, silver in the sunlight. And as he stirs he begins to sing and smile out to the waves of the endless sky.

Wan ich ein voglein var

Unt auch zwei flogel hatt

Flog ich zu dir

The waiter saunters off to make coffee leaving a trail of smoke to be dispersed by the winged eddies of the wind. I turn smiling to Baba but he doesn’t see me. Immersed in some atavistic rhythm that he drums on the boat rail with bunched fingertips I hear him chant above the wind, "jiin jiin dagada jiin jiin…." The land mass of our flesh and foremothers juts out in protruding chins here and there pockmarked with scrubby grass and the upended trappings of a sea farers past; wharves, jetties, rusted posts rising like monoliths out of the sand aching for the loop of rope to remind them of the depths, the memory of fish, the memory of light. Baba drums his fingers yet on the rail and Büyübaba stirs his sugar until it has totally dissolved and continues to sing in German to
himself his eyes watering and I find myself saying absurdly in English and to no one in particular, "but birds don’t swim."

Büyükbağa turns to me, "Ich nich fercshtein meine tochter." I don’t understand.

Waves crash up against the side of the ferry and Baba laughs a throaty troubadour's laugh all of a sudden riddling with the sea before announcing, "Hahaha! Once upon a time mein Vater..." and he sweeps his arms out toward Büyukbağa.

"Meine tochter," and he dips his head and opens his arms wide to me also before continuing.

"Once upon a time in de olden days, angels walked wit de humans and de whole eart was of one language, of one speech...Ferschteits du?" Having turned to face us he no longer surveys the land out there but studies us, here before him, amused yet desperate, he, open yet ready to ridicule our ignorance. Büyükbağa and I remain silent; vulnerable as flowers or children. My pen is poised above the page and he with the teaspoon still as Baba raps out his rhythm and barks through the wind in some dialectic of parables winking at us, "Jin jin da gada jin jin. Jin jin da gada jin jin jin..."

We all rock with the ferry, heave sensually with the waves, and I wonder where that waiter is with the coffee. Büyükbağa sips the last of his tea gingerly and swirling the leaves in the bottom of the glass around a few times sloshes them delicately onto the water before placing the glass on a nearby bench.

Baba's jaw moves back and forth and he sucks at his cigarette, his cheeks sinking, "But den Alis, de Babylon happened...Yar meine vater es ist zo," he shakes his head. "De Babylon," and he heaves a shoulder sigh of regret looking at us both as if across some vast
distance, as if he were nine hundred years old and had drunk of every colour and called
out the name of God in every language that hadn't yet been washed away in a deluge.

A calm folds across his face like a sail and the waiter sits on a bench near by with Dad's
coffee. Somewhere at the other end of the deck an old man in a woollen beanie has begun
to play a Saz. Büyük Baba used to play, so did Baba. I never really tried. Some of the notes
make it down the deck to us but not all of them.

With a face half turned as always to the music Dad continues quietly, "And dats when de
snake fighting magic began and de vimin were singing across de mountains…"

The waiter hasn’t moved from his place on the bench. The coffee is probably getting cold.
Craning my head I catch a glimpse of the old man playing the Saz, the parched leather of
his face and his anchor hands untying knots of love on those strings. Looking down at my
hands I wonder if I can see how many knots they have tied, how many strings they have
inspired to music or how many godless indifferent blows they have been dealt or
delivered. The page underneath my fingers has become encrusted with a thin film of salt,
underneath my pen the callous on my finger.

Baba's black eyes sparkle with some primordial melancholia, some liminal semiotic and
he laughs in the face of our silence and in the heart of his own possible defeat. Büyük Baba
waggles his head gently from side to side and swings his tesbik again.

"Olum, olum."
The waiter squints suspiciously from his place on the bench as Dad becomes more florid by the moment.

"And den Babylon! Baba! And den de Babylon" he almost shrieks. "Ha ! What about de Babylon?!"

Büyük Baba doesn’t look away and the old man continues to play his Saz down the deck. And seeing him like this now, here in the winds, I realise I have heard him since I can remember, calling out to God from every city he ever visited, throwing roses at maps despite those perfect drops of blood, in red the vicissitudes of an accidental autobiography; experiment and fantasy, written on a thorn. I shield my eyes against the black horse of the sun who is getting ready to begin the great journey, just as it does every night and Baba continues to tap out his rhythm on the hand rail and chant, *jin jiin dagada jiin jiin* and I hear a teaspoon flirt with a glass. Büyük Baba with his neatly knotted scarf tied smartly about his wrinkled neck is the forgiveness of sepia as it becomes bereft of black, bereft of white.

"Hadi olum," he tuts at Baba.

"Babylon Baba! Baabylon!" laughs Baba again, almost as a challenge and Büyük Baba waggles his head back and forth, purses his lips and widens his eyes before turning and continuing his song to me.

*Weils aber nicht kann sein*

*Weils aber nicht kann sein*

*Bleib ich allein*
Baba laughs like a venomous boy, through the rotted teeth of a racehorse until finally Büyükbaba turns to him. "Aykut olum. N' haber? Eh lan?" Aykut my boy. What happened? The waves slap on the side of our ship as she ploughs slowly across the depths and I wonder where he is, this father of mine. "Yeas dat's me Baba!" he cries, "I am de son of de moon! Evet -ya! You knew dat or no?"

In the creases around Büyübaba’s eyes there is the sweet submission of a mountain or the neck of an animal under the prayer knife, knowing truly that it is not the end. "Sen Ay-kut, evet olum evet," he cooes as his son the moon intones hymns of madness in his outlaw orbit.

But Baba continues, "Remember what Topçu told you Alis?"

"Ah." I stumble.

"Yaz Abla. Yaz. Yaz! Remember?"

"Yeas, I remember now."

Büyükbaba places his hand on my shoulder and repeats gently, "Yaz Ablağym! Yaz! Yaz!"

The winds rips hair across my face and on lifting my hand to clear my eyes I forget for a moment the pages beneath my fingers and they fly open like a furious concertina before tearing out across the water for a metre or so only to settle on its surface.

Shocked into silence we all look at one another for a moment before Baba opens his hands out before him and smiles, "Yabadabadoo Alis! Dat's de Life!"

Is it? I wonder almost aloud.

And Büyükbaba clicks his tongue as the pages of my notebook begin to merge with the waves,

"Ahk Kizim," he shakes his head.
"Dats de life," says Baba again. "Allah gives it and Allah takes it away. Everything dat heppens is come from Him. Got zei dank."

And as I look at him through squinted eyes and the stinging threads of my wild hair it is then that I hear that song, that voice from the river, jin jin…

A couple of pages remain glued to the spine in the last sparks of fire from the sun but I can see the letters that I took such time to write in these last days bleeding out one by one, whole phrases being loosed of their papery ink confines and slipping like a blue black cloud of octopus ink into the water.
And so it was that somewhere far away from Istanbul I happened to have the good fortune to grow from that smelly clot covered screaming baby with fishy oceanic ideations and considerable impatience into a young woman. A young woman yet caught in rememberings, I wouldn’t say cursed with them, as I told you before it was through these that I was named and my fate was sealed - or so I believed. So I was not cursed, but let’s just say I limped ever so slightly with these tales that knotted about my ankles like the strayed threads of a sail or net. And so it was that I came to be imbued with these memories of the inaugural meeting of my two lovers, even though they spin a little on the axis of each teller. You see, years later, they felt the need in their absence of each other, to instil me with their memories. It took many years and many maps and as I cast my net out I pray, that Insha Allah, I will catch something.
The last dry page curves in the wind, the back bend of a dancer, the shoulder of a lover, the white length of a back in the night, before surrendering to the tide of wetness. As I watch the letters dissolve into the blue I hoist myself up onto the rails of the boat, to the alarm of my grandfather and the bemusement of my father. I give a little heave, swinging first one hip up and then the other and follow with my legs until they dangle on the water side of the ferry. And before the man down the deck can put down his Saz or the waiter can leave the coffee and skid over in his scuffed black dress shoes I give one last push of my hands and the soles of my feet against the side of the ferry and let go of the railing beneath me.

It is then that I hear my father's bewildered voice call after me, "Alis?!

And the voice of my Grandfather entreating with tears, "Don’t go. Don’t go now."

"Nich Weinen Janim," I say under my breath as I leap into the water.

And finally the ecstasy of my lover, the water, rushing to meet me. I plunge down in bloom through the chromatics of solitude and am submerged in the icy fever heat, the laced splash of a bridal trance. Through the flood I hear the commotion from the ferry; my grandfather's voice calling my name, people knotted up, shouting and shrieking and then my father's voice cuts absurdly through the clamour, Yabadabadooooo!

The din and voices of the city above flatten out into a sheer matte opacity and I understand that the first utterance was as big as a mustard seed. My ears fill with this opening and breath becomes obsolete. I plunge down further into the watery shadows. My lungs fill with light water. My chest expands as the water of home opens into it. My eyes burn with salty vision and I begin to turn. As I spin I can just make out through the ripples above me, the bone of a minaret, the eye of a crescent dissolving into the eddies of water, the
face of my father peering over the boat and that of Büyükbaş, smiling and waving and then in front of me Ali Riza smoking his pipe by the ship's hull. He winks at me, a rogue captain, puckering his lips once, twice and thrice. I marvel as he blows smoke rings and schools of silver fish swim through them in ribbons of light, their lips puckering too as they intone some familiar rhythm, *jin jin dagada*..

Ali notices my incredulous expression and smiles, *I named you a sea traveller didn't I?* And he reaches down and picks up a stick at his feet which he throws through the water then blows another a smoke ring after it. And there is my black dog rushing after it, pumping her legs furiously, her eyes almost popping out of her head in excitement as she propels herself after the catch leaping through the dissolving ring.

I am astonished but Ali just laughs as does the Magician who stands next to him, a rascal glint in his eye and his turban at a rakish angle, like some strapping spirit outlaw.

A fish swims after my dog, making it through the remaining whisps of the ring and it is then that I notice my Mother nearby kicking her feet out in front of her, in her old leather boots, grinning at me saying, *Balleez! Baleez!*

And she waves as she leaps up onto the most debonair handsome black horse this side of Saturn and calls out as it begins to gallop swimmingly away, *I'm going bush Alice! You won't see me for dust!*

Ali's face brightens as Emine calls out for his morning coffee and as he begins to dissolve into the shadows of the ferry’s hull, he tips his cap and whispers with a grin, *Don't forget the sugar!*

I move my legs beneath me in some mystified last attempt at intercepting my own fate, or of making a difference but there is no direction here. All is rhythm and light. Through the
watery mote light rogue pages flutter drunkenly down into the deep followed by my notebook. And then all at once a violent crash disturbs my reveries as Babas leaps in and I witness him before me beginning to dissolve like an alphabet or the words of my book. The light comes flooding through and I can just hear old women sing stories of fire across the seven hills of Istanbul. The letters fall about, the romance of their black ink returning to the ocean, staining my lips and neck, my hands feet and tongue.

Baba laughs now as he calls through the blue, Alis! I've found it I've finally found it! And as he continues to dissolve like sugar into the watery light he laughs at the schools of fish swarming about his vanishing face, smiling the silver smiles of ninety nine brides burning in the pure selflessness of surrender. And the letters come drifting yet slowly through the deep blue light dark. A lemon quarter passes by me and a parsley sprig, the ships hull, the darkness of a dream shadow memory passes over me…..I wish that I could remember what Noah told his son about how to survive the flood…but all I hear is the deep sonar of the ocean and the distant trebles of light….. A page loved over with letters passes, then the music notes I wrote that afternoon in Istanbul with Baba in the silver clarinet café, the treble clef and the tram tickets I pressed in its pages, the photos and the one circle of embroidery I had started with Nurdan Hala and left unfinished. All this passes by and then the disbanded letters of my notebook, the alphabet of my father's face, the alphabet of my heart.

My clothes balloon about me like a parachute yet I am not falling anymore. I work my tongue to this rhythm of ship building and call out before he dissolves completely into sweetness,

What have you found Baba?
The fire! I've found the fire!

And he picks up the fire and throws it to me through this river of ourselves - the river of secrets, the flood of our friendship. And here comes the ٌّٓ ba stretching out with the languid suppleness of a dancer flowering out into the ی ah of ٌَّّٓا Baba of Babylon of Ba and back into the bindu of fire rushing towards me, nearing the end of its journey. I can still hear him laughing as I float amongst the fish and light with the pen in my hand, even now as my lungs are filling with water, my ears ringing with the sonar deep, my breath becoming the river.

As I the light bleeds out I realise there is no direction here. No north. No south. I try to count my breaths. I try to count the fish. Ar- rahman, ar-rahim, the most gracious, the most merciful.

A lethargy overtakes my limbs as my breath becomes the river. My legs work slower through the water and my breast rises and falls with the fading languid drum of my heart. And all at once as the dot reaches the bone white of my hands I begin to dissolve with it. All is rhythm and light. I am born with the ink and fire of my notebook and in a sudden upward rush my ears become pure sound and I am soaring through the percussion splash of the tide, through the water and bright air, past the figures rushing about on the deck, and over the roofes of the city, up and up until I can slake my thirst on the trebles of light, the weaving verse of the air. A canto of silver gulls scud about on spirit wings and I begin to laugh because out here where there is no direction, no east and no west, from somewhere I hear a voice, Selam Alaykum Alis! I'll see you der den!