

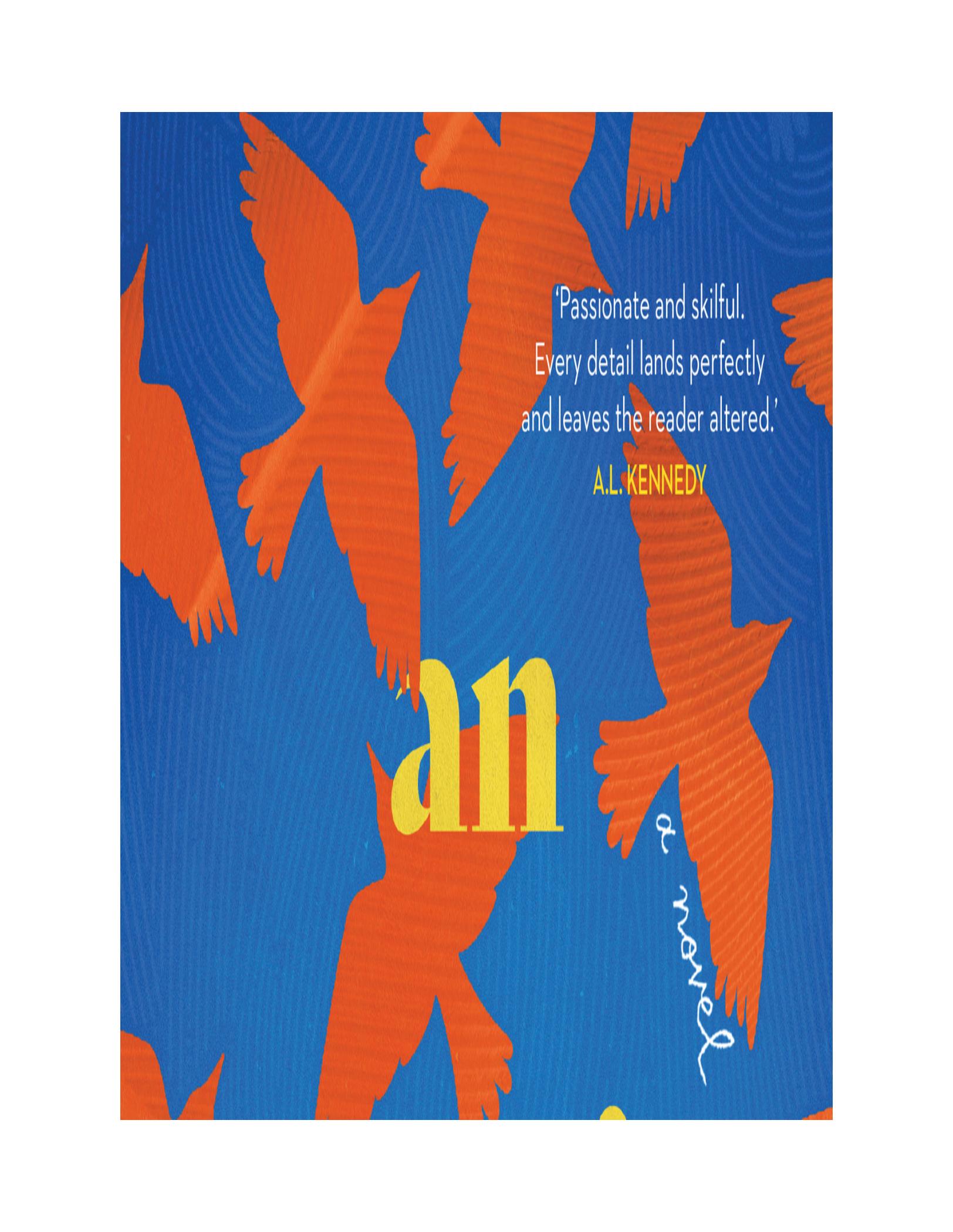
'Passionate and skilful.
Every detail lands perfectly
and leaves the reader altered.'

A.L. KENNEDY

a novel

an unlasting home

MAI AL-NAKIB

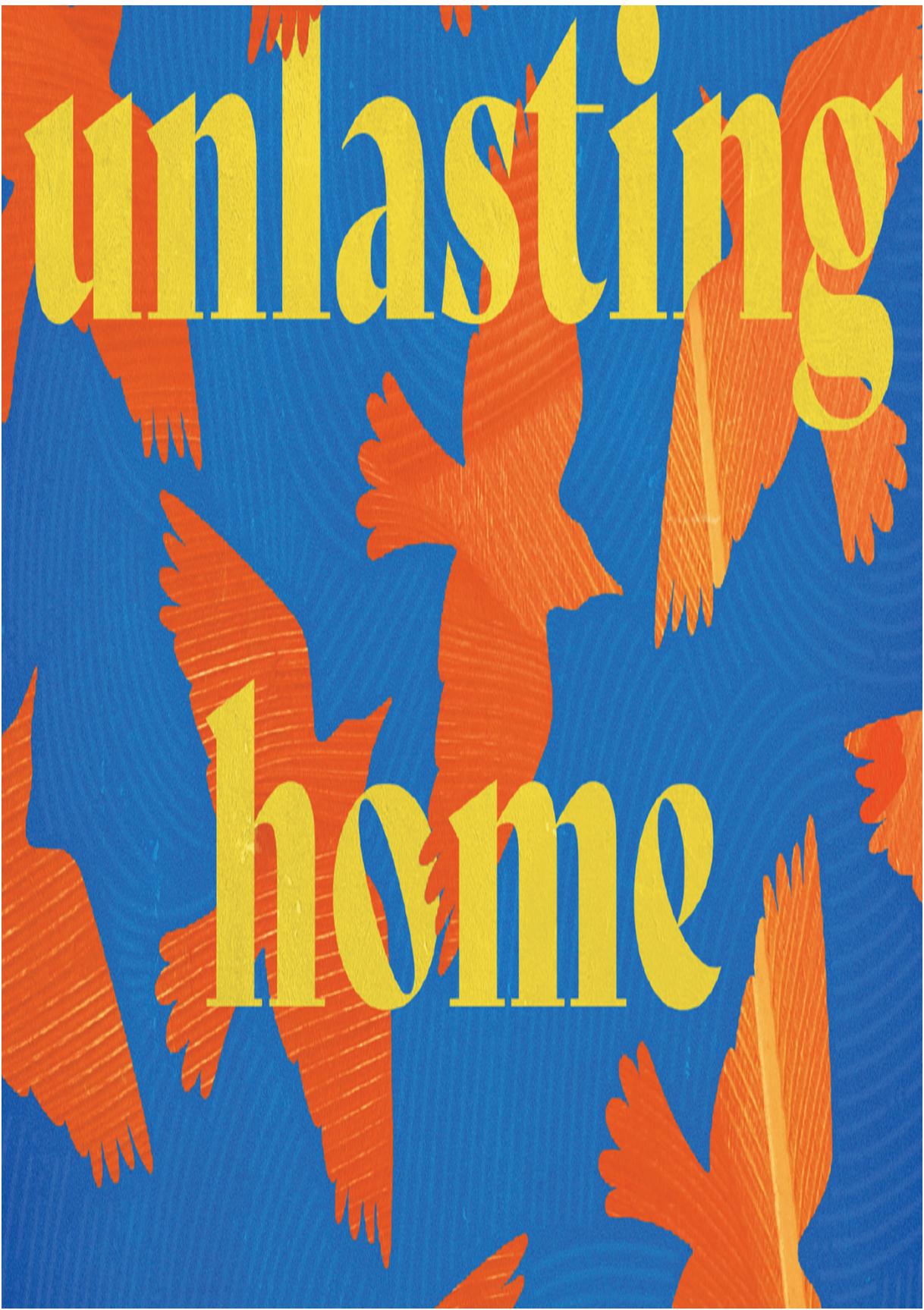


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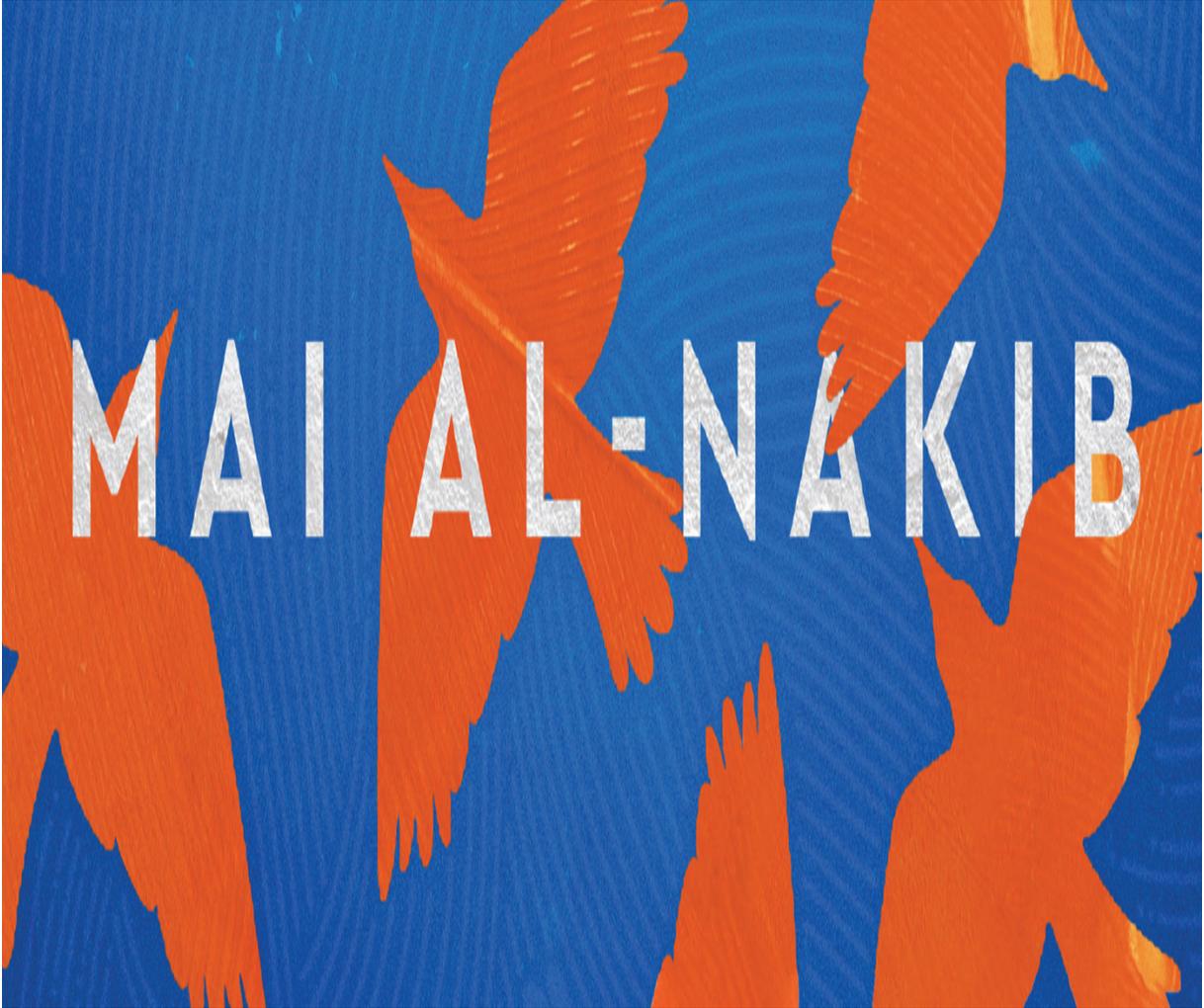
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unlasting

home



AN UNLASTING HOME

MAI AL-NAKIB was born in Kuwait and spent the first six years of her life in London; Edinburgh; and St. Louis, Missouri. She holds a Ph.D. in English from Brown University and is an associate professor of English and comparative literature at Kuwait University. Her short-story collection, *The Hidden Light of Objects*, won the Edinburgh International Book Festival's First Book Award in 2014. Her work has appeared in various publications, including *Ninth Letter*, *The First Line*, *After the Pause*, and *World Literature Today*. She lives in Kuwait.

www.maialnakib.com

"So fresh and unsettling that it will enchant you from the first page and linger for days after reading. . . . Deftly written."

Los Angeles Review of Books

"A poignant and profound novel . . . Mai Al-Nakib writes with grace and intelligence."

Selma Dabbagh, author of *Out of It*

"Deeply enchanting, at times suspenseful, *An Unlasting Home* is filled with tales of women's lives and their intersection with the often volatile and unpredictable currents of nations, war, and political history. Mai Al-Nakib's book kept me entranced to the last page."

Diana Abu-Jaber, author of *Fencing with the King and Crescent*

"Spellbinding. *An Unlasting Home* splits open time and leaps across continents. Mai Al-Nakib creates the sort of characters we carry forward into our hearts and lives. I absolutely loved this book."

A. Manette Ansay, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Blue Water*

"Shimmering with poetic prose and as pressingly real as the white heat of August in Baghdad, this poignant debut will keep you in its thrall."

Juheha Kim, author of *Beasts of a Little Land*

"Mai Al-Nakib lyrically explores themes of homeland, tradition and agency as she relates the stories of generations of Arab women across Kuwait, the US,

Iraq, India and Lebanon.”

Ms. Magazine

“An ambitious family epic with a historical sweep, an elegy to grandmothers and mothers who were forced from their original homes by personal or political circumstances in the Middle East to build nests elsewhere.”

World Literature Today

“Stories-within-stories is a classic Middle Eastern format with roots much deeper than *The Arabian Nights*. [*An Unlasting Home*] marries these traditions and implodes them.”

Guernica

“Refreshing and eye-opening.”

Electric Literature

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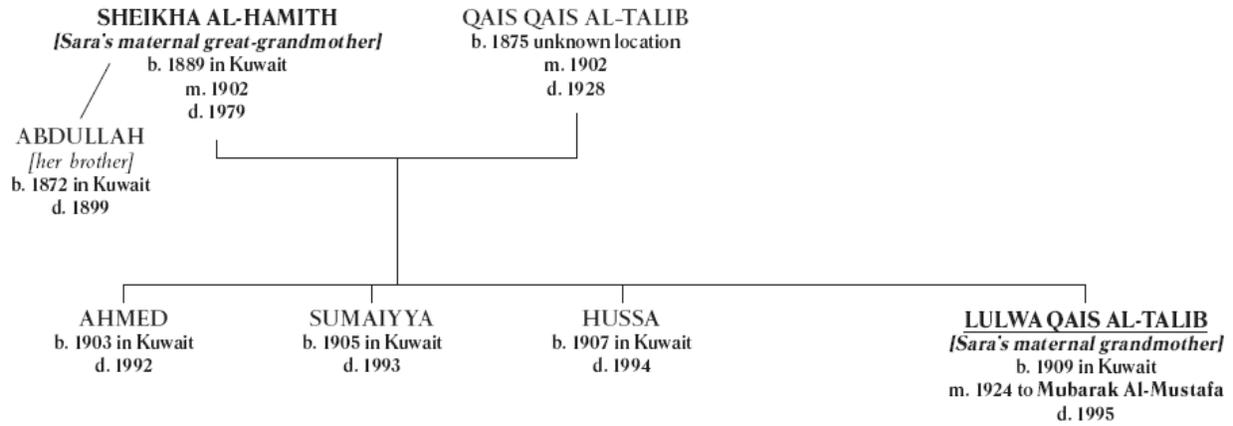
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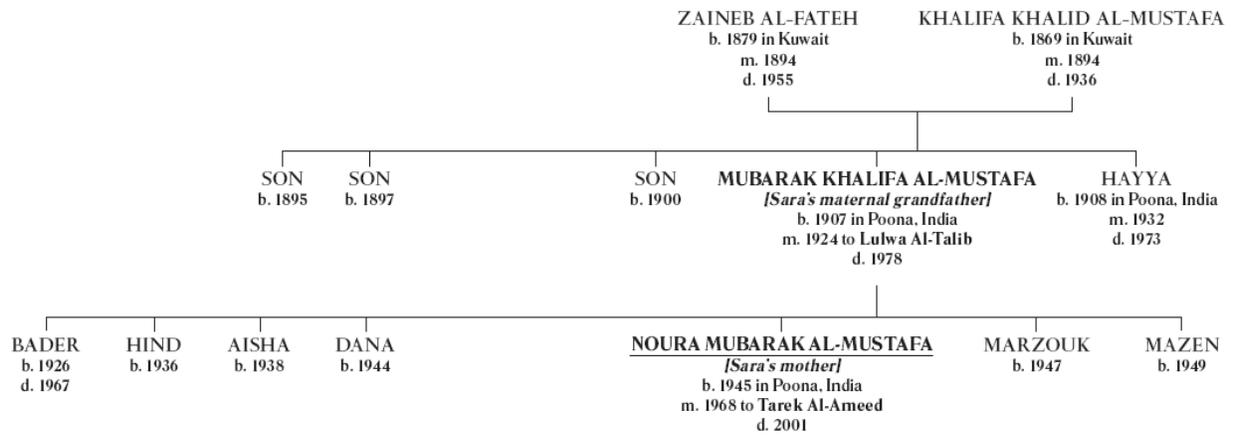
For the women who made me

M u n i r a
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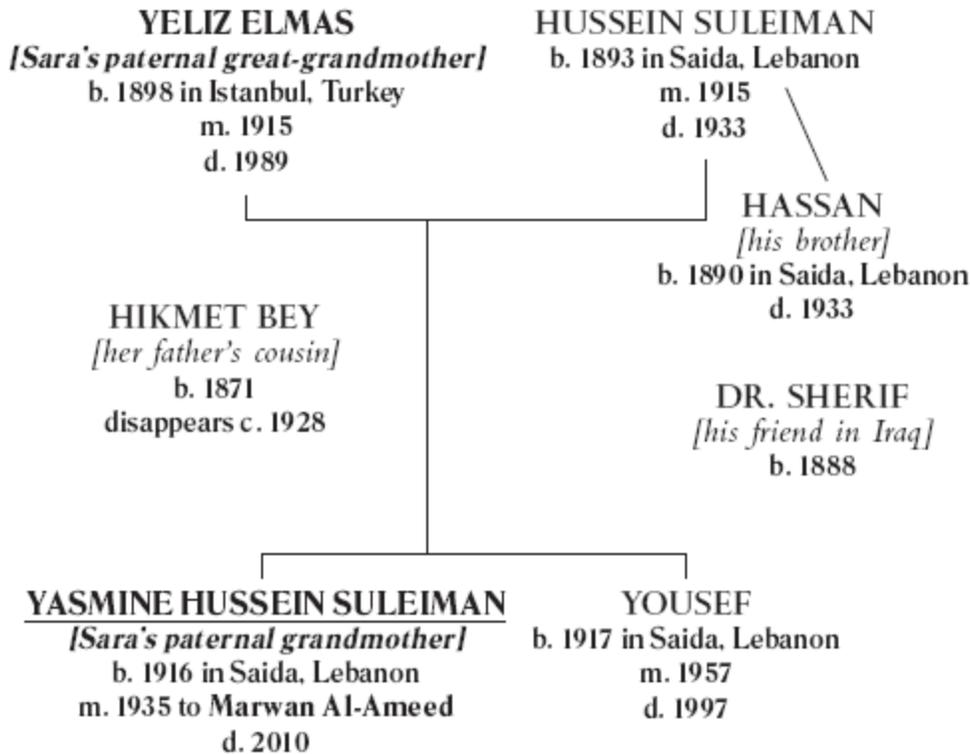
AL-TALIB FAMILY TREE



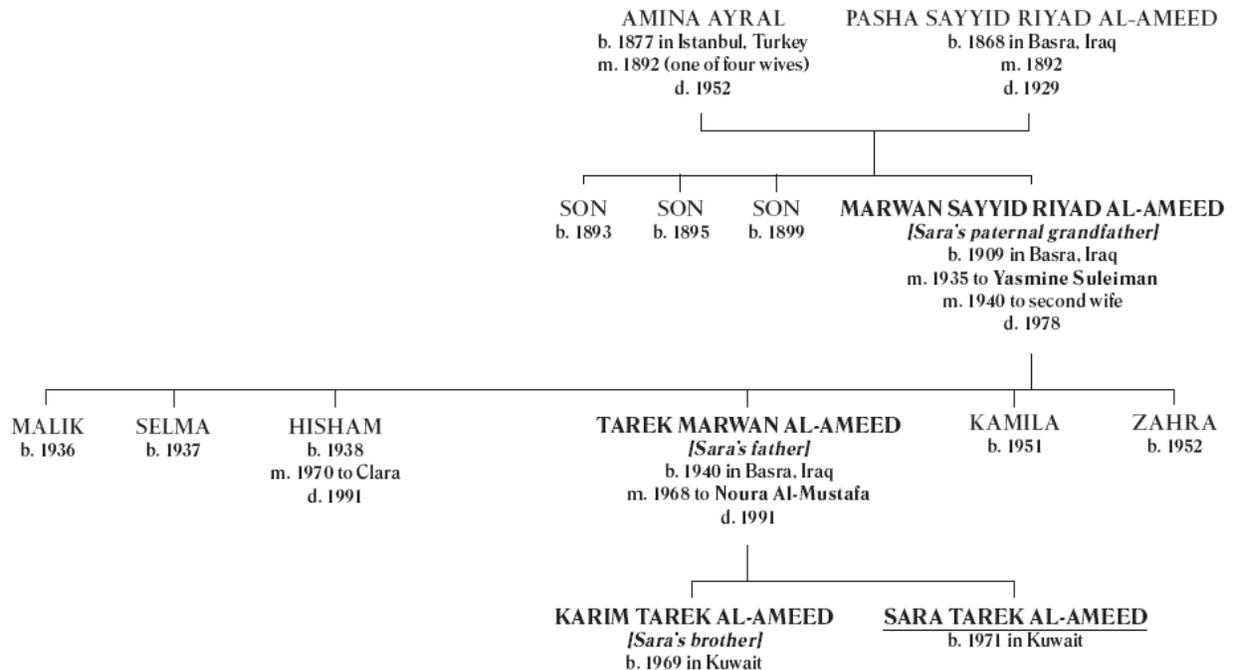
AL-MUSTAFA FAMILY TREE



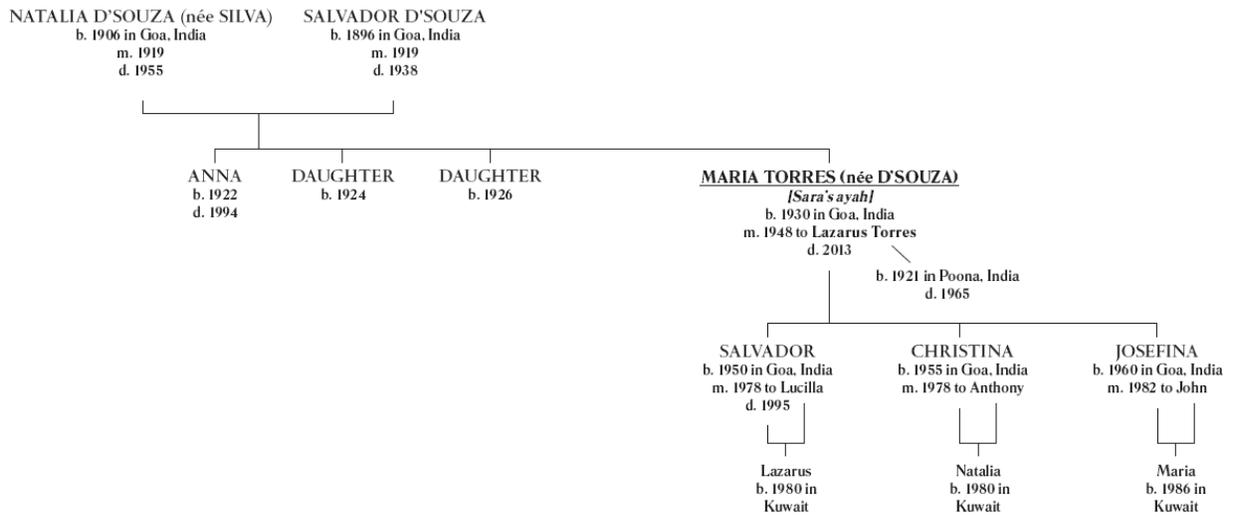
SULEIMAN FAMILY TREE



AL-AMEED FAMILY TREE



D'SOUZA-TORRES FAMILY TREE



And yet they are in us, these people
long since passed away, as a disposition,
as a load weighing on our destinies, as
a murmur in the blood and as a gesture
that rises up out of the depths of time.

RILKE

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Y a s m i n e

Sara

I open my eyes to a bloodred sky. I submitted my grades a few days ago; now I have three months to think and write. Karl comes in July. I visit Karim in August. But today, under the indifferent rust of a desert storm, it's just Maria and me.

Still in my pajamas, I skip down the stairs to the kitchen. Its walnut cabinets and Formica counters are worn, nearly thirty-six years in use, but the ochre fridge and stove gleam under Maria's care. Maria stands guard over the warming milk, daring it to froth over. She cracks three cardamom pods with her teeth, as she always does, and tosses them into the pan.

"Gross, Maria!" I tease, as I always do.

She spins around and cackles at me, reaches out as if to pull my hair. I wrap my arms around the back of her shoulders and kiss her on the cheek. I may be forty-one, but my days in the Surra house with Maria make me feel ten.

After breakfast, Maria chats on the phone with one of her daughters, and I go up to my parents' bedroom. I sit at my father's desk, which faces the long window looking out on a garden wall pink with bougainvillea. At this desk my father wrote articles for prestigious medical journals, keeping himself current with the literature. I've changed nothing here. Not the enormous four-poster bed that never quite fit the seventies vibe of the house. Not the avocado-

green walls that remind me of hospitals. Not the shelves stuffed with decades of *The New England Journal of Medicine* and my mother's copies of Fanon and Arendt. I write at my father's desk late into evening, but I spend every night in my childhood bed.

Around noon I smell cumin and coriander. Maria is making something special. This will upset Aasif, who will ask whether his food isn't good enough that Maria must cook also? I'll reassure him, as usual: "Your food is famous all over Kuwait. One little plate of bhajia won't change that. It makes Maria feel useful. You can understand, no?" Aasif will snort, but the swollen vein on his forehead will deflate. Maria will cross her eyes at me behind his back, and calm will return to the kitchen.

I head downstairs for lunch, and Lola the cat follows. She's more Maria's than mine, but she enjoys the warmth of my lap. As soon as she sees me, Maria announces, "Josie's getting a raise!"

"At last!"

"She had to wait. Kuwaitis first."

"I know. It's not fair. I'm so happy for Josie. You're a good mother, Maria."

She smiles, but I catch the fleeting wince. I hold my breath, and it passes.

I finish off her samosas. We drink our tea with extra sugar, then Maria heads to her room to nap. I go back up to my father's desk, this time with an idea to write an essay on what teaching philosophy at the primary level in Kuwaiti public schools might achieve. In the thirteen years prior to their arrival at university, the capacity of young people to think is liquidated. They take everything literally. Supplementing the religious curriculum with an early introduction to philosophy could, I will argue, change that.

About an hour into my work, the doorbell rings. I'm surprised. We aren't used to afternoon intrusions.

Aasif, groggy from his nap, knocks on my open door a few minutes later. "Two police outside, Sara."

I slip on my flip-flops and grab a shirt to wear over my tank top. The public municipality probably needs me to move my car so that it can dig up the sidewalk for new water or sewage pipes.

Outside, the sky is still red. Two men stand a few steps below the front gate. "Duktora Sara Tarek Al-Ameed?" one of them asks.

I nod and smile reflexively. "That's me."

"You're under arrest for blasphemy. Please go inside and get what you need for a few nights in jail. We'll wait." My face must convey a total lack of comprehension because he repeats what he's said more slowly: "You are under arrest for blasphemy by order of the recent amendment to Article 111 of the Penal Code of the State of Kuwait. Please put a few things into a clear plastic bag and come with us."

I consider anyone I might know with some connection to the police, someone who would pull a stunt like this. "You must be kidding!" I say after a minute or two. "Who put you up to this?" I can think of no one.

"Duktora, this is no joke. Go inside, please, prepare your belongings, and come back out." He sounds impatient this time.

Suddenly I feel detached, floating upward. My pulse is not racing. My breathing remains steady. Aasif fidgets behind me, slamming me back to earth. "Aasif, say nothing to Maria. Tell her I had to go to Bahrain to meet someone for work, that I'll be back tomorrow or in a few days."

"I will." His eyes reflect the fear I cannot feel.

“Please make sure she eats. And change Lola’s litter? Maria can’t manage.”

He nods.

“Don’t forget Bebe Mitu.”

“I won’t. Don’t worry, Sara.”

I rush to my room, stuff a few things into a Ziploc, and call a colleague whose father is a civil rights lawyer.

“Hanan, there are two policemen outside saying I’m being arrested for blasphemy. I don’t understand what they’re talking about.”

She groans. “It’s the new law.”

“What law?” I haven’t paid attention to any laws, new or old. Unlike my mother, I’m not politically inclined. My palms start to sweat. “What do I do? Do I go with them?”

“Go with them, but don’t say anything. Take your phone with you, and text your location when you get there. If you can’t, it’s okay. We’ll find you.”

Muhannad Al-Baatin, Hanan’s father, my new lawyer, is standing in front of the building—a black-brick monstrosity in the middle of Kuwait City—when the police pull up. He is tall and wide as an elephant. Mine is not the first blasphemy case, it seems, so he knows where to find me. I’m in the habit of flipping through the daily papers, so how I missed this development, I’m not sure. But if I’m honest, I’ve kept myself removed for so long, my ignorance is no great mystery.

Mr. Al-Baatin booms instructions at me as the gray officers, diminished in the face of my lawyer’s presence, lead me up the stairs and through the glass doors. “Don’t answer any questions! A student recorded one of your lectures. A member of parliament has raised a case. Sara, pay attention to what I’m saying! Not a word, do you hear

me?" I have a hard time following any of it, but I hold on to his last words: "You'll be out tomorrow morning."

The small, filthy cell in the women's section of the building is beautiful in its way, covered with words in many languages. Arabic, Urdu, Tagalog, Malayalam, French, Hindi, English. The three walls, the low ceiling, the floor, even the toilet—every inch of space etched with words. Messages from one woman to another or to someone far away.

I try to recollect the faces of all the students I taught during the spring semester. Three all-girls classes, twenty students per class, sixty students total. I think of them sitting in the circle I make them arrange themselves into so that we can discuss things more equally. It doesn't quite work the way it did at Berkeley, but I persist, hoping the circle will make them brave. My accuser had to be in my eight-o'clock Intro to Phil class. A freshman offended to learn not everyone believes the same truth. I go around the circle in my mind, trying to pinpoint faces, to remember names. The girls in their hijab and niqab blend together. It's bigoted of me to think so, but they're hard to tell apart. I can't single anyone out.

I give up on my class and turn to the walls of the cell. Poems, laments, prayers to God, cries for mothers. *Please, Ma, save me.* I feel cradled by thousands of writing hands, their fear blending with mine, outsiders in a closed country. They were here before me. How many were deported home? I have nowhere to be deported to. And yet, their words of longing lull me, allowing me to drift into pockets of sleep.

Mr. Al-Baatin comes to collect me the next morning. I sign some sort of pledge and am released on my own

recognizance. He drives me home and stays for tea. The dainty love seat gives off dust the instant he sits on it; the formal sala has been neglected for months.

“A recording was made by one of your students,” Mr. Al-Baatin tells me. “On the recording you were heard stating that God is dead. The student handed the recording to the most conservative member of parliament. The Salafi MP, on behalf of the student, has lodged a complaint against you. The public prosecution has filed a case. You are being accused of blasphemy under the new law designating it a capital crime.” He pauses. “Thankfully the law has provisions. You may be allowed to retract before the trial even begins. But *if* you are found guilty—and I assure you, that would be a highly improbable outcome—execution is not guaranteed.” My blood freezes. “Even if all appeals are overturned, you should be allowed to retract your ‘blasphemous statement’ before the final judge and that could influence the punishment.” He makes little curly signs in the air with his forefingers for scare quotes. Derrida made the sign for scare quotes exactly the same way in a lecture he gave at Berkeley. Derrida and Berkeley are deserts apart from Mr. Al-Baatin and Kuwait, but unexpectedly in this gesture they aren’t.

I focus on Mr. Al-Baatin’s statements. I don’t like the sound of the words *should* and *could*.

“In that case, the sentence would likely be commuted to five years in prison and a ten-thousand-dinar fine.”

I don’t like the sound of the word *likely*.

He pauses again, an elephant with its eyes shut. “In the meantime, as the case proceeds—and these cases can go on for years—you are not permitted to leave the country. You are free to work, and you will be paid. Apart from travel, you can do whatever you please.” Mr. Al-Baatin winks at me

incongruously. I stare back in shock as he continues.
“Within the bounds of the law.”

I have been living with this accusation for seven days. A week like a lifetime.

Maria doesn't know. It'll kill her, with her heart of stents and scars. I tell Aasif and beg him not to share the news. Aasif, a man of integrity, will remain chup chaap. He closes his eyes and tilts his chin upward, hides the newspapers from Maria, my face plastered on the front pages.

Unable to sleep, I've been holding vigil with Bebe Mitu beside his cage on the landing of the stairs. Bebe Mitu—Mama Lulwa's African gray parrot—keeps a trace of my grandmother alive. She brought Bebe Mitu back from India almost sixty years ago. Mama Lulwa never wanted to return to Kuwait, but she didn't have a choice. Nobody made me come back, and now I couldn't leave if I wanted to. So here I am—unlikely caretaker of an ancient parrot, accidental collector of fading traces—stuck in place.

Lulwa

One August morning in 1924, Lulwa woke to the chirps of thirsty sparrows and warblers lined along the low parapet surrounding the sateh. Lulwa, her brother, and two sisters, like most of the townsfolk of old Kuwait, slept on the flat roof of their mudbrick home during the summer months to catch the sea breeze.

Lulwa rolled her bedding, tied it with a pink ribbon that had slipped out of the basket of a visiting seamstress. She tiptoed over her brother and sisters. The heat would wake them soon enough. She hoisted the bedroll on her hipbone and hauled it down the narrow stairs leading to the central courtyard.

Her mother, Sheikha, had completed her fajer prayers but remained seated on her threadbare mat in a corner of the liwan. She often sat this way after morning prayers, still as sea stone. Lulwa wrapped her thin arms around her mother's waist, inhaling yesterday's trace of dihin 'oud.

Sheikha stiffened. "You're too old for all this, Lulwa."

Lulwa tightened her grip. She was a few weeks into fifteen, slender but strong.

Sheikha felt like she was being punished for the news she was about to break. At thirteen, she herself had been forced to marry a twenty-seven-year-old stranger. Sheikha's father accepted the proposal because he had mistaken the

pompous, bisht-wearing Qais Qais Al-Talib for a successful merchant. The man was not known in Kuwait Town, but Sheikha's father could not afford to reject the generous dowry he offered. The amount promised to buy him and his sons out of debt. Neither Sheikha nor her father ever saw a paisa of that promised dowry.

Growing up, Sheikha rarely saw her father and brothers. Nine months of the year, they were out at sea, on the boms and baghlas of wealthy merchants, trading along the eastern coast of Africa or the western coast of India. Even during the three months of monsoon, when Sheikha's father and brothers were back in Kuwait, they were out pearling. At the end of a summer combing oyster beds, the divers would return to shore, legs scored with cuts, ribs visible for wives and children to count. Like most of the divers and sailors of Kuwait, Sheikha's father was poor, in debt all his life, relying on advances from his nokhada to sustain his family.

Sheikha was the youngest of four. Her eldest brother, Abdullah, was her favorite. In the few days he was back from sea, he whittled small dhows out of wood for his little sister to play with. He carved intricate figures of boys and girls, Salukis and hamour. She watched his fingers as he worked, captivated by his descriptions of the leopards of Zanzibar, the monkeys of India, and how the color of the sea could switch from the palest streak of blue to swathes of black in an instant. He described the great bellied sail, a swan swooping through silvered water. Sheikha would close her eyes and imagine the fantastical colors and animals her brother described, the sounds of chattering monkeys and whittling wood one and the same.

Abdullah's body looked like the teakwood of the ships he sailed from the bustling port of Kuwait Town, prized timber

Author's Note

In 2013, the National Assembly of Kuwait, the elected parliament, passed an amendment to Article 111 of the country's Penal Code by a wide majority, making blasphemy a capital crime. The amir of Kuwait, who holds ultimate authority over the amendment of laws, rejected the National Assembly's decision. This work of fiction imagines otherwise.

The title of this book is taken from the following sentence in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*:

Then he was to go away for they were birds ever going and coming, building ever an unlasting home under the eaves of men's houses and ever leaving the homes they had built to wander.

Nietzsche's quotations are from Francis Golffing's translation of *The Genealogy of Morals*, published by Anchor Books in 1956. The Rilke epigraph is from *Letters to a Young Poet*, translated by Charlie Louth and published by Penguin Books in 2011.

My depiction of seafaring life in old Kuwait is indebted to Alan Villiers's *Sons of Sinbad*; the carved bird wind vane with the feathered tail comes from his book. The following were also consulted: Mary Bruins Allison's *Doctor Mary in Arabia*; Farah Al-Nakib's *Kuwait Transformed: A History of Oil and Urban Life*; Fahad Ahmad Bishara's *A Sea of Debt*:

Law and Economic Life in the Western Indian Ocean, 1780-1950; Abdul Sheriff's *Dhow Cultures of the Indian Ocean: Cosmopolitanism, Commerce and Islam*; Peter Sluglett's *Britain in Iraq: Contriving King and Country*; and Mike Pope and Stamatis Zogaris's edited volume, *Birds of Kuwait: A Comprehensive Visual Guide*. Any errors or inventions are my own.

Finally, a degree of creative license has been taken in the portrayal of some legal specifics.

Reading Group Guide

1. Why do you think the author chose *An Unlasting Home* as the title? In what ways are the homes of the five main characters unlasting? (See the James Joyce quotation in the Author's Note.)
2. Why does Sheikha have such aggressive feelings toward her daughter Lulwa? And why does Lulwa, unlike her siblings, put up with it?
3. Neither Sheikha nor Yeliz have much say in the trajectory of their lives. Compare and contrast how the choices others make for them affect their responses.
4. Why does Yasmine decide to marry Marwan instead of Majid? How much of this decision is her own and how much is structured by circumstance?
5. The trope of migratory birds runs through *An Unlasting Home*. Locate some of the references made to birds and discuss their implications in context and in relation to the overall structure of the novel.
6. While Maria is not related to Sara, her story is presented in the same way as the women who are. What does this suggest about Maria's importance to the story and its reframing of the underrepresented role of caregivers in fiction?

7. Mothers don't always share their secrets with their daughters, and this withholding can have unintended consequences. Discuss this with reference to mother-daughter relationships in the novel.

8. "But she had learned from her mother that some things—the hard, real things—should remain locked in a heavy box hidden inside a mud hole." Why can't Noura acknowledge Karim's homosexuality, and how does her lack of response compound Karim's sense of alienation from Kuwait and from his own family?

9. Whether consciously or not, Sheikha, Yeliz, Lulwa, Yasmine, Noura, and Maria all make sacrifices so that Sara doesn't have to; and yet it takes Sara more than a decade to come to this realization. Why does it take Sara so long to recognize her capacity to make different choices than those who came before her?

10. "Ethics requires thought, assessment, joy. Morality demands obedience. It's sad and depleting." In her Intro to Phil class, Sara explains this distinction Spinoza makes between ethics and morality. How does it apply to the events that unfold for Sara as a result of the new blasphemy law in Kuwait? How might this distinction apply to other issues dominating the headlines today?

11. A wide range of circumstances inform people's decisions to leave home—war, famine, persecution, poverty, a desire for a better life, to name a few. By the end, Sara has made her peace with letting Kuwait go, understanding through the experience of the accusation against her that it cannot be (if it ever was) a place where she belongs.