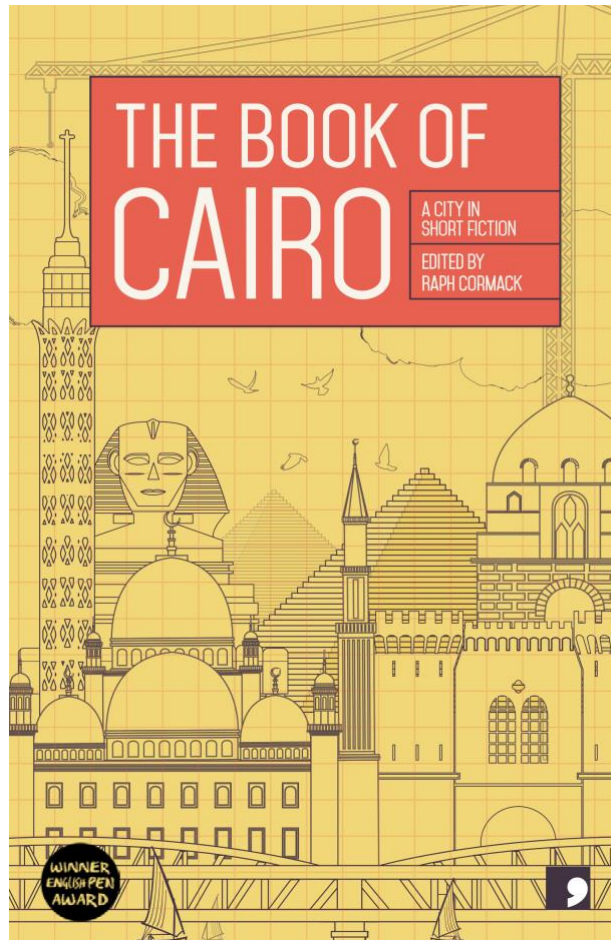


## Spotlight on Women in Arabic Literature

### *The Book of Cairo* (excerpt) *The Other Balcony* by Nahla Karam Translated by Andrew Leber



Today, we continue National Translation Month's tradition of featuring Arab women writers in translation. We're delighted to share an excerpt from the new collection of short stories [The Book of Cairo](#) edited by Raph Cormack and published by Comma Press in May 2019.

We selected *The Other Balcony* by Nahla Karam translated by the accomplished Andrew Leber, a short story that takes the reader inside two Cairene houses. Its love affair across a small alley is simultaneously a critique of the problems of gender in modern Egyptian relationships and a tale of an opportunity suddenly and inexplicably lost. We thought this story gave a good sense of life in Cairo and hope you'll like it as much as we did.

We'd love to hear from you! Let us know how you like our posts, or attend, share, and spread the word about our readings. Open your heart to new experiences and the beauty of the world, and celebrate its cultures and new voices with us, using #NTM2019. Happy National Translation Month and happy reading!

—Claudia Serea and Loren Kleinman



### [The Book of Cairo](#)

Comma Press, 2019

Founded over a thousand years ago under the sign of Mars “the victorious”, Cairo has long been a welcoming destination for explorers and tourists, drawn by traces of the ancient cities of Memphis and Heliopolis. More recently, the Egyptian capital has become a city determined to forget. Since 2013, the events of the “Arab Spring” have been gradually erased from its official history.

The present is now contested as writers are imprisoned, publishing houses raided, and independent news sites shut down. With a new Administrative Capital being built in the desert east of Cairo, the city’s future is also unclear.

Here, ten new voices offer tentative glimpses into Cairene life, at a time when writing directly about Egypt’s greatest challenges is often too dangerous. With intimate views of life, tinged with satire, surrealism, and humor, these stories guide us through the slums and suburbs, bars and backstreets of a city haunted by an unspoken past.

# The Other Balcony

Nahla Karam

Translated by Andrew Leber

AS SOON AS HE TOLD me they'd be moving into the building facing ours, I began dreaming of what it would be like to be able to see him whenever I wanted. This was after the school found out about our relationship, when they moved me from the class where we had studied together to another, all-female group. I had barely seen him since.

Now that he was our neighbour, I thought, his mother and mine would surely become friends. The more they visited each other, the easier our relationship would be – once we were old enough and he had asked for my hand in marriage, our families wouldn't need to get to know each other; we would all merge into one big clan.

On the day itself, I returned from school to find a removal van loaded with furniture in front of the building across from ours. Smiling, I ran up the steps of our house and went out onto the balcony of my room, not even pausing to change out of my school uniform. I gazed up and found him standing on a balcony that looked out on ours, smiling back at me.

He waved and said something I couldn't make out, even after he had repeated himself many times. Seeing me shake my head once again, he left for a bit, then returned with a piece of paper. He flattened out the paper on the wall behind him,

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scrawled something across it, then folded it into a clothes peg and tossed it down to me.

*I chose this room so you'd be the first thing I see every morning.*

I looked at him with a smile and he said something else I couldn't make out, so he wrote it down again and threw it over with another clothes peg.

*I need to go help the workers – see you soon.*

My smile disappeared when I heard the sound of my father and mother arguing, and my heart raced, hoping they wouldn't get any louder. The two buildings were very close together, after all. I had to go in and close the window behind me to keep the noise down a little. What if he heard the sound of their constant fighting? (I hadn't taken this into account when he told me he was going to be our neighbour.)

As soon I woke up the next morning, I jumped out of bed and headed out onto the balcony. I saw him standing there. He tapped the watch on his wrist, which I took to mean he was saying I had woken up late – and that he needed to go. Before he went, though, he made a circular motion around his face and gestured towards me, smiling.

I didn't understand what he meant, and he hadn't written anything to throw down to me. When I went into my room, however, I looked at the mirror and was shocked to see myself. *Did he mean my frizzy hair?*

When I woke up the next day, I didn't leap straight from bed to balcony, but went to the mirror and straightened my hair first. He was waiting when I finally went out, but he wasn't smiling. He gestured at me again, waved his hand as if to ask a question I didn't understand, then wrote yet another note thrown down with a clothes peg:

*How can you go out on the balcony dressed like that?*

I always wore my sleeveless pyjamas and shorts in the summer, but, at that moment I felt like I had stepped outside naked. I slowly looked up at him, not making any signs with

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my hands, then lowered my head back down towards the street. After a while, I heard another clothes peg bundle land at my feet.

*Don't get angry at me – I love you, and I don't want anybody but me to see you wearing that outfit. Wear it if you want to but just don't go out onto the balcony.*

I nodded my head in agreement, thinking maybe I should buy some new pyjamas for the next time I went on the balcony.

I didn't just change the clothes I wore; I also started to do my hair whenever I went out onto the balcony – sometimes pulled back into a bun, sometimes in rolls. I'd straighten it even if it was still wet, so Kareem wouldn't see it looking messy. Even when I wasn't feeling well – he might come out onto his balcony at any time.

I always tried to look my best in front of him, even when we spring-cleaned our apartment – the first time we had done so since he and his family moved in. My sister and I had a system, dividing up the rooms for cleaning; I would always pick my own room and the living room because they had the least furniture to clean around.

I scrubbed and dusted the entire room, but before I crossed the threshold onto the balcony I realised I was wearing a dirty dress and had a handkerchief wrapped around my head to keep the dust out. I had always gone out onto the balcony dressed like this on cleaning day, but suddenly I felt that I couldn't do it anymore, now that Kareem was above me. I went over to my sister – in the middle of cleaning the other room – and asked her to wash down the balcony after she had finished up her section, claiming that I felt too exhausted. But she refused – I had chosen the room with the balcony, so I had to clean it as well.

I went back to my room in despair, hiding behind the curtain and sneaking a look up. No Kareem. He might not be

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home at all; I hadn't seen him since the morning. So I decided to clean the balcony quickly before he came back.

When I had finished, I crouched down to sweep the dirt into the dustpan. At that moment, I heard Kareem's mother from inside their apartment. Confused, I looked up just in time to see his back as he headed inside. I dropped what I was holding and ran to the mirror, squatting down in front of it to try and imagine what I looked like from above. What had I been doing when he showed up?

After washing and straightening my hair, I stepped out onto the balcony every so often to try and erase the memories of what he'd seen before. But he didn't come out again until nightfall; he just made one gesture and didn't say anything. We normally didn't speak at night. I had been learning his sign language since he moved in, but the dark made it difficult to understand. Still, I was quite cross when he went back in as soon as he finished his cigarette – not a word or a clothes peg.

I stayed up all night wondering: had he been able to see me through the darkness in my clean clothes, with my straightened hair? Or did he think I was still dressed like I was in the morning?

From then on, I started going to the balcony in my outdoor clothes, standing outside for long periods of time so that Kareem would see me if he came out. Perhaps he would remember what our relationship had been like before he moved to the neighbourhood. But he no longer came out to the balcony quite as often as he had in those early days.

I caught sight of him by chance once, outside of the hours I was used to seeing him. I tried to make what I thought was a questioning gesture, not really expecting a response. Still, he wrote me a note:

*I don't spend much time at home these days – I go out to study with my friends because exams are coming up.*

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I nodded my head even though I wasn't convinced – I knew he was the last person to be interested in studying.

I decided then to focus on my own studies and stopped going out onto the balcony much. I pulled the curtain back far enough that I could still see him if he came out, but so that he couldn't see me. Still, he didn't appear all that often, and when he did would head back in as soon as he had finished his cigarette without so much as a glance in my direction. I knew that something had changed but convinced myself that it was because he was focusing on the exams. I figured I would wait to speak to him when they were finished.

The day after exams, my mother decided that we were going to clean the apartment from top to bottom – during our exams my sister and I hadn't been doing much cleaning. This time, I chose another room that wasn't mine, but came running back in when I heard my mother shouting.

I was surprised to find her arguing with Kareem's mother when I came in. My mother had started to beat out the carpets on the balcony and Kareem's mother had come out to complain about the dust rising up towards her laundry; the two buildings were very close together. My mother then took this opportunity to remind Kareem's mother that she, too, cleaned her balcony without letting us know – not giving my mother any time to keep the dirt off her washing, even though this was the first time she had complained about it.

The argument grew louder as they continued trading accusations. Before that point I had assumed they didn't know each other – I had longed to see the moment when they met and became friends. Unfortunately, I learned that they had come to know each other in a totally different way. Each had been nursing an anger and resentment towards the other.

Eventually, our neighbours were able to calm them down, and the whole affair ended without Kareem appearing on the balcony. I had hoped he was out at the time, and hadn't heard

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any of their argument, but when she went back inside, his mother angrily called for him. He must have heard.

The next day, I went onto the balcony as soon as I saw Kareem from behind the curtain. I waved, and he returned the greeting without a smile. I brought out a book and pointed to it as if to ask how the exams had gone. He nodded his head, which I took to mean he had done well, and I waited for our conversation to start. But he didn't throw a clothes peg down – only gestured that he was going to head back in. I stopped him with a wave of my hand and wrote something out in large letters, certain he hadn't understood the question:

*What's with you?*

He shook his head as if to say it was nothing, so I wrote out again:

*Write to me*

And so he threw me a clothes peg:

*I'm telling you... there's nothing with me*

I held up the *What's with you?* sign again, and kept holding it up as I waited for some other answer. He threw down another piece of paper:

*You've changed a lot... I don't know how to explain it, but that's how I feel.*

I grew annoyed, wrote to him – *How?* – and waited for a reply. Yet he threw down one last clothes peg that said:

*I can't write after today because my mother is getting suspicious – she has noticed that her clothes pegs are disappearing. I'm going in now – we can speak when we meet.*

After he left, I became even more annoyed, and wanted to write him a sign that said *he* was the one who had really changed – and didn't love me anymore. We didn't need to let the arguments between our mothers affect our relationship! I hadn't changed at all, and still loved him as much as the first time we got to know each other! But I couldn't say anything. It would have been easy for him to toss down a page



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containing all those words from up there, but difficult from where I was.

Afterwards, we didn't agree on a time to meet like he'd said we would, and I no longer saw him on that balcony. Instead, I'd see his father stroll out for a smoke every evening – clearly they had changed rooms, and the room facing me now belonged to his parents.

Some time later we met by chance at a cleaning supply store. He said hello and told the cashier to take my order first, even though he had arrived at the till before me. I insisted they take care of Kareem first, but the cashier went off to do something, leaving us alone. We said nothing to each other in those few awkward minutes.

Kareem paid for his things. When he took the change, he pulled out a loose banknote from his pocket and asked for some clothes pegs. He grabbed them with his free hand and said goodbye. For some time after he left, I wondered why he needed the clothes pegs if he'd stopped throwing messages down to me – and started to wonder what the other balcony in his apartment might look down on.

## About the author

**Nahla Karam**'s (b. 1989) first story collection, *To Hang in the Air*, was published in 2013. Her story, *Tale from the Back Lines* was one of the winning stories in a Goethe Centre workshop, and she won a trip to the Frankfurt Book Fair. Her novel, *On Freud's Couch* was shortlisted for the Sawiris Prize in 2015. The story featured here comes from her latest collection published in 2017.

## About the translator and editor

**Andrew Leber** is a translator and researcher based in Doha. He graduated from Brown University and was a Fellow of the Center for Arabic Study Abroad in Cairo from 2012 to 2013. He has previously translated short excerpts of Syrian and Palestinian literature, including a selection of Hani al-Rahib's *The Epidemic* (1981), Saadallah Wanous' play *The Elephant, Your Majesty* (1969), along with an assortment of writings by Gazan authors Najlaa Ataallah and Atef Abu Saif, and Iraqi author Diaa Jubaili (including 'The Worker' in *Iraq + 100*).



**Raph Cormack** is a translator, editor, and author with a PhD in modern Arabic literature. He has worked as a translator for Egyptian playwright Ali Salem, as well as running his own Arabic translation blog which has featured work by Mohammed Taymur, Ahmed al-Kashif, and Mohammed Ahmed Mahjoub, among others.