

Emily Lyon

Nahariya

Collins Literary Prize for Prose

She asked him these same questions over and over: “What did you do when you went in the shelter?” “Did you feel scared in there?” “What did you think was gonna happen when you went back outside?”

She had her own mental image of how these situations probably were. Children were crying; there were always lots of children, and parents. People sat down and squatted and their faces were covered with their hands and they talked into their palms as if they were God’s ears, and kissed them as if they were God’s feet.

She varied the questions a little bit, but they were always, really, about how he felt. If he would answer the one about what he did, she would guess from that what he had thought, what his heart had thought.

He never answered them. He would speak, of course, to let her know that he was listening, but he would say something like “Why do you ask me these things? It is not interesting at all.”

If she protested, which maybe happened fifty percent of the time, she would say “It is interesting, I am interested.”

Then he would say something like “It is only interesting to you because you imagine something different from how it was. It was not interesting.”

Early in their relationship, he had given her a photo of him in kindergarten. His mouth was open and she could see both rows of teeth, but the opening was just a straight line. It did not curl up at the corners. He had a shirt with cowboys printed all over it, and a crown of white daisies around his head. His eyes were the same when he was five as they were now: dark brown, so close to black, and his irises towards the top lids, and a sliver of white at the bottom lid, like pleading. When he was five, she was just being born in Washington, DC. He was being a little boy in Nahariya.

The first time they went back to his hometown, it seemed to take forever. They drove up the Ayalon Freeway. She saw waves and coastline out his window as he drove. The building he finally parked the Citroen in front of was covered in a conglomerate of tiny

pebbles stuck into a brown concrete stucco. He got out of the car, and she got out too. He walked across the street, there were no other cars driving on it. She ran after him, and they went into the door at the bottom level and up three flights of cement stairs and then at this third landing were two doors, one with his last name. She recognized it despite her slow reading speed. He knocked on it. A man in a tight white undershirt with a gold chain nestled in the hair at the top of the shirt opened the door without even looking to see who it was. He was loud and boisterous, and he had the same small teeth as the boy in the photo but with a wide smile and immediate laugh.

After a few minutes of sitting at a kitchen table and listening to a conversation she could not follow, his dad lifted a smallish watermelon up, looked straight into her eyes, tilted his head and said "Eh? You want some?"

"Please," she answered, "just a little," pinching the air with her thumb and forefinger to show something very small.

His dad took a huge knife off a magnet on the wall, held the watermelon on the countertop, and with one smooth thwack, split the melon in two. Its pink juice dripped into the sink, and he wiped it with a towel that was threaded through a drawer handle. He put a half in front of each of them: his son, his son's silent friend.

"This is not a little," she said to the boy, "I don't think I can eat all this."

His dad was washing the knife in the sink. His round shoulders were hunched forward and the left one moved up and down, with the dishrag in his hand.

"Don't say that to him," he said, "you'll hurt his feelings."

She did not think he seemed like a person whose feelings were hurt easily, but she had only known him for seventeen, maybe eighteen minutes, so she ate the melon.

Later, they walked down to the beach, across another road behind the building. A man in waders was casting his line into the surf, and he had some fish in a mesh bag that dangled at his waist. There were Humvees and some smaller white cars with large UN letters painted in black on all their sides, parked in a lot up the beach a short way. "Did you ever go there when you were little," she asked him, and pointed up to the lot. She thought that this was the kind of thing that was probably simultaneously scary and exciting. She thought that if she had lived there, she would have wrapped her fingers through the wire fence and looked at the vehicles, maybe counted them.

"Of course not," he said, not letting any space pass between her final word and his answer.