New Poetry by Amalie Flynn: “Strip”

New Poem by Amalie Flynn: “Strip”

New Fiction from Hadeel Salameh: “Everything Will Be Okay”

1. Her Friend the Israeli

(Eli)

Mais got a phone call from her parents in the occupied territories of the West Bank. I don’t know what they told her yet; she’s been too shaken to tell me. All she told me is that I needed to book her a ticket to Palestine. She wants to go through Jordan, cross the border and reach Sarta that way. I tell her I’ll come with her, and that we’ll go through Ben Gurion, that it’ll be quicker. She doesn’t want to enter Israel.

She insisted she go alone, that it’s not appropriate for her to bring a friend with her. I want to think she means it’s inappropriate for her to bring her male friend to her parents’, that if her family saw us together, they’d think we’re an item, the thought of anyone thinking Mais and I could be together, that I’m not crazy to think we look good together, that it’s not only me that can see it, is hopeful. But what I know what she means is it’s not appropriate for her

to bring an *Israeli* friend with her, although she won't admit this.

But I can't let her travel alone like this, feeling so distraught, so I insist I'll join her, say that I don't need to go with her to Sarta, that I'll visit my family in Tel Aviv while she's there. I want to be near in case she needs me. She didn't argue, and now we're waiting at a bus stop in downtown D.C to go to the airport, to Jordan.

I can feel the cold outside, making its way inside my bones. It feels as though the raindrops pouring on my skin are sinking through the surface, freezing once they pass each layer of warm flesh. Just as the blood flow seems to slow down in between the narrow veins in my arms, she tells me why we're going. Her brother attempted suicide.

She starts to cry.

I never met her family, and don't know much about them, only that she hasn't seen them for years. I don't know why, if it's because of the distance, or for some other reason, but I never thought much about them. It didn't seem she did, either. But now her crying is uncontrollable. "I should have never left, Eli. I left them," she says between breaths and cries harder. I don't know what to do, or how to comfort her. I don't know the situation. I'm afraid to make things worse and people around us aren't sure if they should help me try and console her as I sit there, next to her on the bench, and listen. Others seem to decide to mind their business. They stand back and watch her cry, although some whisper. I don't know why she left, but I'm glad she did because I would have never known her if she stayed. I hate myself for this, knowing the pain she's in now for being here. I don't tell her she did the right thing by leaving, I don't know the situation and I'm afraid I'll say something to make it worse so instead, I stand by, too, and let her cry until the bus comes.

“I should have never left,” I hear her say again, rocking gently. “I should have never left.”

At the airport, Mais is calmer now, and I hold her, my Palestinian friend. I hug her tight and let her know I’m here, but she’s cold and distant. When I let go, I feel she’s glad I do. I even notice her shift in her seat a little, inching away from me. Did I do something? I think of everything that happened, if anything happened, and I can’t think of anything.

She sighs. I notice her knee is shaking and, in my head, I raise my fingertips higher and intertwine them through her charcoal hair, brush away the fallen strands from her moist lashes as she starts to cry again. But I’m not sure if she would let me. I should, at least, tell her to calm down, to take a deep breath before her crying starts to build again. None of it would do any good, anyway. Fixing Mais’s hair wouldn’t change the once milky complexion of her face from pale. It wouldn’t sooth the dark circles under her eyelids, and it wouldn’t stop the trembling of her knees. Maybe it would only push her away. The tiny voice inside my brain is screaming louder for me to do something to calm her crying. It’s growing larger and maturing more with every second we wait for the line to board, leaving us waiting on the cold, metal bench, but it’s too late, she stands up and starts to pace near the window of the terminal.

Outside the terminal window is endless pavement where the plane we will board will take off. It’s empty and around it only a plain field. It’s unlike our city, but it takes me back to a day I spent with Mais last fall, when we spent Friendsgiving together at her place, just the two of us. We feasted on the canned cranberry sauce that day because I burnt the turkey. The smoke alarm had gone off and we needed to open the window to clear the air. It was a disaster. But there was a moment, between all that smoke and the cold air coming in from outside, her laughter uncontrollable as she threw herself into my arms, “you had one job,” she said between sweet

giggles and chattered teeth. I felt the goosebumps on her arms as I held her. And I knew that with the cold she felt it, too, the warmth between us, for when the smoke cleared she stayed in my arms, looked up at me with lips slightly open, wet, and eyes locked on mine. She watched me lean in under the dull lighting. She didn't pull away until after my lips touched hers.

She closed the window shut behind her when she turned away and I stayed behind a while looking out, watched the leaves continue to fall, one after another, listened to the bitter wind scratch at the glass.

I can tell when Mais's knees start to shake as she paces. It doesn't look good; her face is turned to the window and she occasionally looks up at the ceiling, tilts her head so that the tears don't fall. It's time to board so I stand in line, signal for her to come back. When she does, her eyelids are heavy and her cheeks are wet with tears, she doesn't face me. I ask her if she's feeling better and she looks at me as though she's disgusted.

"Am I feeling better?" she mocks me. "My brother could be dead, and you think I could feel better?"

I didn't mean anything by it, and I want to explain that but she gets heated and starts to hit me.

"Of course, you'd think that—"

She raises her voice. "I'm so stupid for thinking that you'd ever understand, to let you come with me. You'll be in Tel Aviv, on the beach, when I'm going home to—" she starts to cry hard. She's overreacting, people are looking at us.

"He could be dead and it's because of you, your people burn everything to the fucking ground!" She pushes me and cries and then pushes me again and people behind us start to talk. "I know it! You Israelis ruin everything, kill everyone!" she

pushes me again and again. “You take everything from us and now he’s lost even the will to live!” Her knees buckle and she falls to ground and wails until her breath is shortened.

The people behind us see her as a petite woman who falls to her knees with a larger man standing over her and assume the worst, I know it looks bad when I feel others step in to pull me away from her. I raise my hands when the security comes, step back. I look at Mais, wait for her to say something, to tell them that it’s a misunderstanding, that I could never hurt her.

When we board the plane, I give her space and even try to exchange seats with someone across from us, but Mais tells me it’s okay, admits she overreacted.

Now that she’s calm, I’ll talk to her. “Yes, a lot,” I say. Even though that’s not what I want to say at all. I want to say, “don’t worry about it,” that everything will be okay.

Auburn green and swollen hazy eyes glance up at me apologetically and for a moment I’m looking at her through windows of despair. A bulging lump of disappointment builds in the back of my throat and I feel I need to throw up. I can’t believe she blamed me. I don’t know what happened to her brother, how could I know why he tried to kill himself? But the more I think of it I worse I feel. I know the situation, about the occupation and the *intifada*—it’s chaotic over there, has been for years and nobody’s known what to do about it—and that’s enough to understand she feels worse than I do. But I think I just need some time to collect my thoughts.

I fall asleep and wake up to find Mais reading *Everything that Rises Must Converge*. I don't like how we left things, and I understand she's worried, understand she didn't mean what she said earlier before we got on the plane, but what if, deep down, she did mean it?

I can't help but wonder if that's how she really sees me, as her friend the Israeli? I'd much rather she see me as her friend, who happens to be Israeli. I'd much rather she just let herself look at me long enough and see that I can be more than that.

I want to try again, tell her everything will be okay. But will it? She needs truth, answers and ways to get there and I know it might be true, that she won't get the answers she's looking for. All I can offer her now is my unbending stone of a shoulder to lay her head on and wish for more.

"Everything will be okay," I say a million times in my head. "When you reach, you'll see he's fine," I say. "It'll be okay," I say. But then I open my mouth to say just that and I don't say anything. The words inch out and I swallow them back.

2. Her Home the Occupied

(Mais)

Mais thinks back to a conversation she had with her mother five years ago, the summer before she left Sarta for America.

"Any ideas on what to cook tonight?" her mother had asked. Mais's uncles, aunts and cousins were coming for dinner.

"Anything works. Just try to cut down the coffee, okay? It's too much work keeping up with your caffeine." Mais laughed at how many times the visit would mean making tea and coffee.

Her mother laughed faintly, without much enthusiasm.

“As soon as our guests come, we offer them a cup of Turkish coffee as an appetizer, then there’s dinner, and another cup follows that,” Mais continued. “And then right after, I mean, before the dishes are even dried you guys are at cup two. And a few hours after that you will want another,” Mais said. “I find it difficult to sleep at night just by watching you guys take all that caffeine in.”

“We’re Arabs,” her mother said. “It’s our water.”

Mais smiled and there was quiet for a while.

“We’ll miss you here.”

“We still have all summer.”

“It’s going fast.” Her mother seemed to take a moment to collect herself, “it’s good that you’re leaving,” she said after a pause, “you’ll have a beautiful life.”

When the VISA was approved, Mais knew she’d miss Mejd the most. She liked being his older sister; it meant being looked up to, and that helped her with her work ethic. She wanted to make him proud, thought of ways to so that he could learn from her and find ways to study himself—no matter the circumstances that stood in the way. That was back when the *intifada* started, when people were uprising against the Israeli occupation and, as a result, schools and universities were closing. If it wasn’t for the way Mejd looked up to her, Mais would have never worked so hard to get that scholarship she got so that she could leave and make something of herself abroad. She would have never made it out of there.

She knew she’d miss Mejd the most because she was hesitant to leave Palestine at all when she won the scholarship. With a ten-year gap between them, she worried for him more than most sisters worried about their brothers—she was the one that styled his hair on his first day of school, the person who helped with his homework and told him how to get other boys to

stop bullying him. She was worried that he'd need her, and she wouldn't be around. More than that, she was worried she'd need him, and that it'd show, that she'd miss him so much he would know that she wasn't as strong as she seemed, that she was only strong because he looked up to her and needed her to be.

When she first came to America, she waited for the weekends to hear Mejd's stories. He told her everything—how he and his new friend, Hadi, climbed the top of Jabal Al-Shaykh and how he was excelling in school despite the village school's closure, despite the checkpoints crossings to other schools closing constantly—how he had found ways to go to a school in Nablus with Hadi, whose father had a permit to work in Israel and so could use the Jewish-only freeways.

As the years passed, Mais became busier with college, and with the difference in time zones, her calls home minimized. Mais didn't mean for this to happen. She had meant to call more often, never meant for the phone calls to stop when they did, but it became harder to keep conversation when she did talk to her family the longer she stayed in America. Her mother told her of gossip among the village and her father only cared to know about her studies—he seemed happy as long as she was excelling, and Mejd became less eager to pick up the phone as he started his teenage years. He was growing up, she understood, didn't need her as much, and with everything going on around her, she couldn't herself keep up, balancing both grades and a social life. There wasn't much in common anymore and the phone calls naturally stopped altogether somewhere between graduation from University and the start of graduate school. She no longer knew if Mejd was still going to that school in Nablus, but she kept watching the news, knew that in Nablus things were better than in the villages around it, assumed there was no reason for things to have changed for him.

Now she thinks of home, remembers how badly things were when she left—reminds herself that it was why she had to go. She

realizes, though, that she wouldn't have had the determination to get out if her brother didn't need her to find strength to carry on and study the way he did. And things change, of course everything does with time, even people, even Mejd. She wonders now why he stopped talking to her as much, what changes happened to him while she was away. If her brother didn't need her, she thinks to herself now, it would have been okay that she wasn't there.

When Mais had picked up the phone, she couldn't make out what her mother was saying at first. It sounded like she had been crying, but Mais couldn't be sure—when she asked, her mother told her to let her finish, first. She started to talk about Mejd and Hadi, how a few months ago, they were approached by three Israeli settlers, who she said had probably come down from the settlement miles away on the hilltops. She told her how these settlers started fooling around at first, how they walked between the copse near Hadi's house, picking olives from the trees, throwing them at one another and laughing.

Mais asked her mother why she was saying all this—asked what it mattered now. Her mother sighed, told her to listen. That what she was calling to say wasn't easy, to let her say explain it to her.

She went on to tell Mais how the settlers then started to throw olives at Mejd and Hadi. The boys got scared, started to walk away, but the settlers called them cowards, told them to come back.

Mais felt her face turn hot as her mother told her this. "Please tell me nothing happened," she said.

Then there was silence.

"*Yama*?" Mais called for her mother, told her again to assure her.

"They killed Hadi, Mais," her mother said. "They took him, one

tightly held the boy in his arms as the other two threw olives at him. Then they started throwing rocks."

"Your brother was brave, tried to fight them off. Picked up rocks and threw them at the settlers that were abusing Hadi. But then they charged after him. Thank God he survived."

Mais felt as though her heart would collapse; she couldn't understand what her mother was saying—she couldn't believe anyone would harm a boy like that, only a teenager. "Tell me everything. What happened," Mais sobbed. "What did they do to Mejd?"

"They made him watch."

Mais hung up with her mother. Imagined her brother and his friend, imagined her little brother, with tears thick as oil running down his face, watching the settlers pierce sharp, heavy stones into his friend's skin, breaking bruises and burning blood with the dirt from the ground. She could not imagine what her brother must have experienced. She imagined that he and Hadi tried to be strong, that maybe his friend Hadi had tried to stay silent so the settlers wouldn't take joy in his pain.

Her mother had told her how it wasn't until a half hour after the incident that Hadi's father came home from work and found the boys nearby, Mejd screaming at his friend to stay awake. By the time they reached the hospital, he was dead.

Mejd survived, Hadi didn't. That sense of guilt seemed to stay with him. Her mother told her how, for months after Hadi's death, Mejd stayed home from school, as Hadi's father stayed home from work. She said Mejd got angry when she told him it was time to go back. How he told her he couldn't—that he didn't want to see Hadi's empty seat in class. He didn't want to ride back in silence with Hadi's father, wondering if his father wished he had died instead for not having done anything to save his son—and most of all, he couldn't look out the car

window and see a hundred olive trees.

Mais’s mother told her she had found Mejd’s body hanging inches from his bedside, from a rope attached to the fan on his ceiling. He wasn’t conscious. Her mother needed to cut the rope quickly so she could bring him down and breath into his lungs, but nobody was home to get her a knife, so she stood on his bed and grabbed the rope, pulled so hard the entire fan fell.

3. My Friend the Palestinian

(Eli)

I first met Mais three years ago, when I overheard her voice as she talked with a table of friends. A thick accent, with a sharpness in her words, something about the light way the l rolled off her tongue, sounded Israeli. Her voice caught my attention and when I looked back from the bar, I remember feeling electrified, like when the Tel Aviv sun burns the back of my neck after a cool swim. Her dark, curly hair draped down her shoulder was alluring in a way that made me nostalgic, and I couldn’t look away. I looked at her and it felt like home.

I was foolish to approach her, too confident and sure of myself—not of myself, exactly, but of her—when she wasn’t Israeli at all. When she turned out to be the farthest from it.

“Shalom,” I said. I must have looked so foolish to her, with a smile on my face. She didn’t know my palms were sweaty, that I was hiding them behind my back and trying to wipe them off my trousers. If she knew, maybe she would have known it was an honest mistake.

But how could she have known? She heard the words and thought it was a joke, that I knew she was Palestinian and purposely wanted to insult her.

“Is this your idea of a peace talk?” she snapped at me and folded her arms.

I had no idea what she meant, what her problem was, and the allure of her made me pull a seat over and sit down. She looked at me in a disapproving way, like I was a narcissist or something. I could feel her green eyes, pierce through me. She saw me the way she thought I saw her, *other*, as the enemy.

“Can I get you a drink?” I offered, genuinely. I didn’t know she was Muslim, that she didn’t drink. I still thought she was Jewish, and by the way she dressed, I didn’t think she was religious to keep kosher.

She got up and left, without boxing her meal and forgetting her keys. Her friends all looked at me like I was an asshole and I realized my mistake when I saw the red and green cloth braided together with white and black, a small, Palestinian flag hanging from her keychain.

I still don’t know how she talked to me after that.

I took the keys and ran after her, hoping I could explain I didn’t mean to be a jackass. I found her searching in her purse outside, by the parking lot. She looked angry and frustrated, turning her purse inside out and not picking up items that fell out.

I knelt and picked up her stuff, offered her keys to her.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

She yanked her keys from my hand. Rolled her eyes.

“I didn’t know you were,” I paused. “I thought you were like me—I mean, I thought you were Isr—Jewish. I’m sorry. I didn’t know you were Palestinian.”

Her arms folded again.

“Not that it matters that you are,” I said. “I didn’t mean—I’m sorry. Really, I’m sorry.”

“No need to apologize. You’re right,” she said. “I’m not like you. I’m *nothing* like you—I would never pull a seat up to a table of people *already sitting there* and force my presence onto people who were just trying to eat their meal like they have been for the past hour.”

She was uncalled for and unapologetically intimidating, and it captivated me. I never met anyone so bold. It was the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen in a woman, and I needed to know her.

“Look. You’re right—that was *your* table, and yes, you were already sitting there. I shouldn’t have intruded. I just wanted to sit by you.” I wanted to tell her how beautiful I thought she was, how I thought she was even more beautiful after knowing she was Palestinian. But I didn’t tell her that. I knew I couldn’t. I knew then there were boundaries between us—like a wall—and that all I could hope for is a friendship, one built on trust and understanding, that our worlds are too far divided to come together. I knew then I could never let her know how I felt when she looked at me, how desperate and weak it made me feel when she talked. That she was stronger than I was, that she had a hold over me, occupying my thoughts with her dark gaze, firing shots into my chest, paining me the more I looked into her eyes, seeing how pure her distrust was in me.

I knew that no matter what, I couldn’t let her know how badly I wanted her, that what I really wanted was to tangle my fingers in her hair and pull at it, bite her lips and taste the sweet bitterness of her hate and devour her. That I wanted her like I never wanted anybody.

“We’re in America; we don’t have to talk about the Middle East,” I said. “I just want to be your friend.”

My Home the Occupied

(Mais)

Our plane from Dulles International Airport reaches Amman, Jordan, and it’s time to part ways with Eli. As we get off the plane, he insists on holding my bags and wants to come with me to the King Hussein Border. It’s nice of him to offer, I feel he’s trying to be here for me, to show me that he’s worried for me, and wants to make sure I reach safely. He cares, he’s a good friend, and when I first heard the news of Mejd and everything that had happened, I admit I needed someone to be with me. I think I still do, even now, but I don’t think it can be him, no matter how badly I want him to be the one I need. He couldn’t understand what I’m going through, maybe back when we were in D.C, between diverse crowds of ethnicity and thought, I could pretend he understood, but here, I think is where we say goodbye.

It’s late and we’re both tired. He insists I stay in Jordan until dawn, that he call me a taxi to a hotel, and, when the night is over, a taxi will be ready to take me to the border. He says that it would be safer for a woman to travel alone under the morning light, and I know he’s right, and I’m anxious to go back, too anxious to get any rest, though. So we go to a coffee shop and wait out the night there, instead.

Eli orders me an American coffee, black, no sugar or cream, without needing to ask. He’s good at things like this, pays attention to the details, knows what I like and what I need. It makes me feel like I’ve known him forever, the way he pays attention to me. When I first met him, I was so insulted at his approach. What an asshole, I thought, when he walked up to me and sat beside me and my friends. Just started talking like he owned the place. But that was before I go to know him; I soon realized he was just paying attention to the details then, too, but he had mixed up his details. In a way, it was charming—his awkwardness as he tried to explain himself, the eager way he took me out to coffee. He never once brought up Israel and Palestine, and I appreciated that. I never thought

I could become friends with an Israeli, but something about him, the spark when our eyes met briefly, followed by the quickness in which he would look away, before I could smile at all, told me he was different than most men I had met. That he would look after me the way an older brother would want another male to treat his sister, that something in his mannerisms was familiar to me, that while he came from Israel, he couldn't have been Israeli at all, couldn't look at Arab women the way the soldiers looked at me when I crossed checkpoints to go to my aunt and uncle's. As something of meat.

Maybe he was just careful, all those years, to not look at me for long so that I wouldn't mistake his glances for something of passion or intimacy. Maybe he could just never see me in that way, and avoided looking at me in any physical way at all, maybe as an Israeli he couldn't see any beauty in me because of what I am. In the back of my mind, I admit, I hoped he'd never notice the way I longed for him, the way I longed for him to look at me just a little longer and see me. The way I couldn't look at him at all, too afraid he'd see the way I want to be seen by him. Maybe that's why we've stayed friends for all this time—I wanted him to see me, and he wanted a challenge, to see me, without having to look at all.

We smoke shisha and drink coffee. I try to calm my nerves. I don't think of home, not in this moment. I think of Eli, how he'll be in the same country as me, but a different state entirely. How we'll be so close, but there will be a thick wall between us, checkpoints and security zones that stretch miles and miles between us. When he booked my ticket, he had booked two two-way tickets, assumed I would come back with him at the end of the week. He needs to come back for work, but I don't know if it'll be that easy for me. I told him I didn't know how much time I'd need, how much time Mejd would need to recover. I changed it to a one-way ticket.

He sips his coffee and asks if I'm sure I don't want him to

meet me on the other side of the border. I almost laugh at how naïve he is to think we'll reach at the same time. Doesn't he know that Israelis will go on buses far before the Palestinians board? I think he's joking, or he wants to show me he's willing to wait for hours. Either way, I tell him that this is something I need to do alone. He nods and looks away.

When we finish our coffee and dawn creeps in, he orders a cab and helps the driver put my bags in the car once it reaches. He opens the door for me and then leans in and kisses me on the forehead, tells me to let him know if I need anything, anything at all. He says he'll miss me.

"Aren't you coming in?" I say.

He doesn't answer, and I think maybe I've hurt him by saying I need to do this alone. I want to reach out and grab his arm, tell him that I didn't mean it, but instead I watch him stand by the curb and force a smile at me.

I roll down the window and look hard into his eyes. The morning sun is angled right at his face, but his eyes are open wide, unsquinting as he looks directly at me. In that moment he is looking right at me, and I think he sees me. "I'll miss you, too" I say.

At the border, Jordanians and Israelis search me and look through my purse, my permit to leave and enter the West Bank is stamped, I pay, and I stand in line countless times.

On the bus, I fall asleep and wake up to go on another bus, where first I'm searched again. I sit and look out the window for hours until the bus starts to move, flies hovering around my underarms.

When I reach the Israeli soldiers search my body and look over my documents, and then I go to look for my bags. I find them and go out to find a taxi.

When the taxi drops me off in Sarta, I walk on the main road to my parent's house. My family doesn't know I'm coming, I didn't tell my mother when we talked, couldn't say anything as I listened to her blow her nose between words.

I knock on the door and when my mother opens it and sees me, she hugs me hard, cries into my hair and I feel her tears tickle down my spine. It's a cold feeling even though her tears are warm. She then wraps her arms around me, holds onto me tightly, and I know she's holding me now to make up for all the times she couldn't the past five years.

I want to stay in her arms, feel her hold me, but I pull back, unsure why. Then, I see the way she looks at me, concerned and afraid, as though she cannot believe I made it home, as though it doesn't make sense to her that I came back. She must feel like it, maybe my guilt shows though, somehow, she knows I don't feel right being back after all these years. Even she must know I should have been here all along. But I wasn't; I was in America, getting a career of my own, putting myself first at the cost of her and her husband and her son. What kind of daughter does that make me?

I don't cry, but she brings her hand to my face and wipes at the dryness around my eyes. I hate myself, I should be crying, even she knows it. I'm sad and terrified but I don't allow it to show. My heart has become hard abroad, it has coped with distance and divided me from even my own self. This I know now as I feel her warm fingers wipe away my invisible tears, perhaps trying to see some heart in me. Trying to see me as her daughter.

Yet, she is crying, sad, and looks happy at the same time. She is happy to see me, even though she probably doesn't recognize me as the daughter she remembers. I reach for her tears, wipe them from her face so she knows I'm still in there, somewhere, that I'm back, I'm home, and I'm trying.

I then kiss her cheek and tell her I need to see Mejd. She nods, takes my bags inside as I walk over to his room. Mejd is sleeping when I go inside. I sit on his bed and look at him as he sleeps, look at his round eyes, the small hairs forming on his chin and the faint bruises on his neck.

My hand jumps to his and holds it, feels it cold and alone, and as though my own coldness inside me spreads onto his skin and jolts inside him, he wakes up at my touch. I feel him tremble as he starts to cry, as if he cannot believe I came back to see him. He sits up as to hug me and my body moves in to hug him back without warning.

My mouth is moving, my words are forming, tell him to lie back down, to rest, and my hands are working, adjusting another pillow for him to lean against. I don't know how he sees me and isn't upset, after all he went through, without me, perhaps through it all thinking I had forgotten about him.

I don't know what I can say now that would change what happened to him—days and weeks and months before—when I didn't bother to call him to say anything. But then, I think back to hours before this moment, I remember when our mother called, how horrible it was to feel the fear in her voice, how desperately I wanted to say something to make her feel better, but couldn't, and so, I left her to cry on her own. And then, karma, as though God was telling me I deserved nothing more than the coldness I give, when at the terminal, hours passed sitting on the bench and waiting in line, I thought I would never make it back home. That if I did reach, it would be too late, because Mejd would have hurt himself again in the meantime. How desperately I wished someone would have told me things would be okay, even if it was a lie, how it would have felt good, at least for a moment, to hear that I wasn't feeling the pain alone—that someone else was with me, understood that the pain was too much for me to comprehend, knew that a lie might be right to take my mind off everything terrible that had happened. But nobody told me things were

going to be okay, because I didn’t deserve to hear it. I didn’t deserve that beautiful lie, I only ever gave ugly ones to the people I love, ugly lies of silence, when inside I knew they wanted more—needed more. Maybe all this time Eli really did see me for what I am.

“I know things are bad now, but someday, maybe not anytime soon, but someday,” I start to say, but stop. I can’t seem to finish what I want to say, what Mejd deserves to hear, that everything will be okay.

Instead, I say, “You’ll remember a good time you had with Hadi.” I tell him to remember that, that Hadi loved him, that we all do, and that he would want him to live.