outbreath

short stories, photography and poetry

spring 2007

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As an editor of *Outbreath*, I have had the opportunity to read the short stories and plays of the budding writers at Tufts. Each semester I have become increasingly impressed by the creativity and talent exhibited by my peers. I have the utmost respect for their unique styles and original visions.

It was my involvement with *Outbreath* that encouraged me to pursue my own writing. Inspired by the works of my fellow students, I enrolled in a creative writing class. I had enjoyed reading fiction and now, since taking two more writing classes, value crafting my own compositions. This magazine triggered an interest in reading and writing that I did not expect, but look forward to exploring in the future. I hope that the pieces in this issue stimulate the same excitement about fiction and literature in its readers in the same way the stories have inspired me.

I am proud to leave the magazine in the capable hands of our new editors and am delighted that they have accepted their new positions with enthusiasm and dedication. I am pleased to know that *Outbreath* will continue to develop and I hope it broadens its important presence on the Tufts campus.

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It is dark when I step out of my tent, the stars still blazing overhead and Orion low on the northern New Mexican horizon. The river is muddied and brown and rushing from the heavy rains yesterday, and I cross over the log carefully because one side is submerged, and the water is louder and more urgent than usual. The light of the kitchen is on in the main house, where the guys sleep on mats and futons in the living room, and the window casts a square of light onto the apple trees.

Out on the driveway everyone’s around the truck with their headlamps beaming bright, and I put on my thick socks and boots in the dark by the door. Tim throws me a rain jacket because we may need it up there in the mountains where the sun can change to thunderstorm so fast there’s hardly time to lace your shoes before you’ve got to sprint down like a crazy mountain goat, or so Tim says, and I believe him because he’s done this every summer since he was a boy. Cory has made us all mason jars of tea, green from the floating mint leaves and clover flowers, and I tuck one inside my down vest and hold it against my belly as I get in the back of the truck. Brett’s putting four empty duffel bags under my feet, and I see Cory’s got a loaf of rye bread and some apricot jam and even some nuts and seeds and raisins as a treat for later, though we’re hoping that we’ll be up and back before lunch.

Tim jumps in the driver’s seat and puts his tea next to him. He has on his wool hat from Tibet, the one that Cory gave him back in college a couple years back. It is the color of yaks, brown and grey and dirty, with different mountains and spiral shapes woven around it. Cory is next to him, the same long legs of his brother stretching out, his knees touching the outline of the air-bag. Brett is drinking his tea already, even though it is too hot, and I wonder out loud what time it is. No one responds, and Cory slides back his seat as Tim starts up the truck.

We drive by the fields behind the house and the sky is light now, but the sun is not yet over the mountains, so the rows of carrot tops and multicolored lettuce leaves and purple kale all look grayish blue and wet with dew. The truck rolls past the barn where some of the animals are up and strolling the fence line, and Fifi, with her warm eyes and long lashes, is gazing at us with the disinterest of a sleepy goat. The driveway is long and bumpy and we are all quiet in the car as we slide out onto the highway. And almost as soon as we’re on the highway we’re off it, down a fire service road roughly cut into the forest. Tim veers left and right at different forks in the road, but there aren’t any signs, and the forest slowly changes from birch to densely packed ponderosa pine. He’s leaning forward more in his seat as we get closer to the trailhead, and he rolls down his window.
Cory starts cutting the rye bread into thick slices, and we slather on the jam, and finally we are waking up to the smell of the rain-soaked mountains.

We pull up to the trailhead, empty save for the forest service signs warning of forest fires and camping permits; the grassy meadow sunlit and warm waiting beyond the fence. We all get out and Tim’s already relieving himself over on the other side of the road. I take a few last gulps of lukewarm tea, spitting out pieces of clover flower drained of their colors. I hide my jar under the front tire for when we get back and bend down to touch my toes and stretch, my lower back sore from the past two months of heavy summer harvest.

“Hup hup, let’s go,” Tim shouts over his shoulder, already striding down the path, empty limp duffle bag in one hand. Brett hands me my duffle for the day, blue and awkwardly long for having such small worn handles. I stretch for another moment, re-tie my shoelaces, and then jog to catch up with the boys. It seems like they are running, and unless I do too, the trees up ahead will quickly swallow them.

But soon enough we’re all at a halt because there are wild raspberries everywhere and Brett is fully submerged in a particularly abundant bush, and Cory is giving me a plump juicy one, and even Tim, who is walking backwards up the path, is eating some and grinning madly The berries are like tiny tart punches of flavor and I want to stop here and collect large handfuls that I can eat in fist-sized gulps. But Tim is down on his haunches over a solitary mushroom in a sunny spot by the path, and he is shouting us over. It is tall and has a delicate cap not yet unfolded, still draping and attached to the stem.

“That there is a Lion’s Mane,” Tim explains, sliding into his mock-professor tone. “Oh, man, that’s gonna be a beauty when it opens up in a few days. Real tasty that one too, but no sense in pickin’ it early.” He looks down at this tiny fungus in what I know is genuine awe. And as if this little mushroom has suddenly reminded him of the millions more waiting for us up in those hidden valleys and decomposing logs, he is up and bounding up the mountain path on his long legs. Brett and Cory ramble behind him, starting up boys-in-the-woods conversation, and I follow, wiping berry juice onto my pants.

I’m trying to keep up, but I also want to have the trees to myself for a moment, so I slow down just enough to be able see one of the boys when the trail twists. And I know that I will catch up inevitably when Tim decides to rest or to stop to remark upon the wildflowers, but I still feel that little bit of lost-in-the-woods panic. Not because I am, but because it feels like it could happen at any moment. Reminding me of the road we drove up, the path splits in odd places, mostly where years of storms have downed trees and intrepid hikers forged new routes around them. And when I choose the wrong one, which happens enough because I am slightly dizzy from the soggy earth smells and the river shouting loud to my right, my heart pounds hard against my chest. We are following the river up the valley, so it is almost impossible to get lost, but I still have to scramble to orient myself when I pick the wrong way, back-tracking and then running up the path to catch up to where I can hear the chatter of Brett and Cory. Then I can slow down again and pretend I hadn’t really been scared.
We climb higher and I feel good, my legs strong and my bag empty and light. We cross the river a few times over giant log bridges, and I am thinking about the icy cold lake at the top and how I’m going to dive in and then lie on a sunny boulder till I’m dry and warm again. I get into the rhythm of staring at the path passing under my feet, and when I break into a meadow and I finally look up, the sky looks like a million specks of dirt, or a million grainy stars, all moving away at the same speed I have been walking. The path gets steep; the gradual crisscrossing assent has ended abruptly and now we are climbing up and only up. The boys are still ahead and I lean into my steps now. Occasionally, in a break in the tree line when I stop and turn around, I can see the bottom of the world far below, tiny pueblos with the vein of the high road to Taos running through.

I’m not sure how long it has been when I come upon Tim waiting by the side of the trail. Brett and Cory are already on the steep slope to the left of the path, climbing up on all fours.

Tim has his knife out and a brown mushroom in his hand. “It’s a Boletus,” he explains, “Check out the bottom, see how its spongy-like, no gills? And here,” he touches his tongue lightly to the undersurface of the cap, “not bitter. You can tell right away if it’s bitter.”

He hands it to me. The cap is oily brown with hints of orange and red. He expects me to taste it, so I do, and it tastes like a moldy tree.

“Yep, not bitter.” I hand it back to him.

“Alrighty, lets shoot up this side.” He points up the opposite slope from Cory and Brett.

I slip my arms into the two handles of my duffel so I’m wearing it like a tight backpack and my hands are free to grip the mountain. I follow Tim up the slope. I’m scanning the hillside, hoping to spot anything even remotely fungal, and all I see is pine needles and earth. I traverse the steep slope slowly, squinting at the ground in front of me. There is a triumphant yelp through the trees, and Cory and Brett are shouting that they’ve found a whole bunch. I look up and Tim is out of sight, up and over the ridge at the top of the slope. I am not having any luck so I stop looking at the ground and run to catch up. When I get to the top, there is a small valley just over the ridge and Tim is already filling his bag with Boletus and Hawk’s Wing and even an orange one that looks like a tiny piece of coral.

“This is the place,” Tim says, concentrating on making his cuts high enough to leave some of the stalk, “We should just spread out around here.”

I’m nodding, and I take out my pocketknife because maybe this will make the mushrooms appear. Tim is leaping from mushroom to mushroom, and he finds a huge Hawk’s Wing, which he calls me over to see, and I have to admire its size. But all I see are trees, and I think I may be mushroom-blind. I wander around, looking behind logs, even getting down low on my stomach and looking out at the forest floor horizon. I don’t see any, I don’t even like mushrooms, and meanwhile Tim is moving up the hillside filling his bag.
Then I see it, a whole growth of Hawk’s Wings, there must be at least five of them, different sizes but all clumped together with their characteristic gray-brown scaly caps that really do look like birds’ wings. I run over and shout out to Tim, “I found some, oh man they’re HUGE,” and from up the hill he shouts back a congratulatory whoop. They’re growing sort of all together, so I carefully cut each stalk one at a time and place the caps gently in the plastic bag inside the duffel. I’m on my knees, and when I look up I see another clump of Hawk’s Wings just up the hill and run to collect those, too. I cut them carefully, and when I stand, I see that down the hill, in an indentation in the earth I couldn’t have seen before when I was below, is a Boletus with a cloudy orange-brown cap. And next to that, another is sunbathing in the splattered light filtering through a small sapling’s branches.

Suddenly I am the older sibling playing hide-and-seek and all these little mushrooms are doing such a bad job of hiding it’s laughable, and in fact I’m laughing as I am walking. They keep appearing in my path, and I rush about slicing and admiring each one. I have already filled up half a garbage bag and looking down at them heaped together like slimy pancakes I notice that some of the bigger ones are breaking, so I pull out another plastic bag. And to think that only a few hours away people are pushing their shopping carts with broken wheels, picking out tiny bags of vacuum-packed dried wild mushroom slices and blue Styrofoam boxes filled with flavorless white mushrooms, and here I am in the forest swimming in them. It’s enough to make me giddy, and even a little greedy, because my bags are getting heavy but I can’t stop pacing up and down the slope looking for more. I place one almost-full plastic bag in a small clearing where I found the first ones so that my hands are free, and so I can find my way. I work my way along the side of the slope and back again, the bag now so heavy I have to swing it over my shoulder as I walk. When I return to the first bag, I stand quietly for a moment, looking down at my piles of mushrooms. I look up the mountain towards the direction I last saw Tim but I can’t see much further than a dozen trees away.

I whistle weakly towards where he disappeared. Then I yell as loud as I can, which is strange sounding because my shouting voice doesn’t even remotely resemble my normal voice, and in fact sounds like a boy who’s been hit by a football in his stomach, so what comes out is a “Hu-ah,” instead of the “Hey” that I intended. I do this a few times, pausing for a while in between each, hoping to hear a return shout. But no one shouts back and I should have known this would happen. I pack together all the mushrooms into the duffel bag, but I can barely pick it up, so I get down on my knees and rearrange them so that the plastic bags are packed more or less evenly. I leave one plastic bag inside the duffel which I hitch onto my left shoulder, and I twist up the other to make a grip, and throw it over my right shoulder. It feels awkward, but at least the weight is relatively balanced. I work my way down the slope to the point in the trail where we had left it.

Once on the trail, I drop the bags and look up to where it climbs steeply into the trees. I yell a few more times, cupping my hands around my mouth and trying to throw my voice further. Except for the rustle
of the plastic bags at my feet, and the bird twitterings, and the insect rustlings, nothing sounds back.

I stay for a while in that spot listening because I don’t want to resign to what I know is the decision I will have to make to go back down, even though they may have continued up, and may already be dipping into that ice-cold water at this very moment. Because if I do go up to that beautiful lake and no one is there, and they are already down at the truck waiting, then I will be holding them up. I can just see them sitting by the road, impatient and hungry, as I come trotting down the trail with only my one duffel of mushrooms.

But just in case they hiked up, I clear a spot on the path and arrange some white rocks into an arrow pointing down the path, with some orange coral fungus around it in a circle because I don’t think its edible anyway. It looks pretty good, and I think that they will see it, but I hope they don’t because they are already on their way down to the truck.

I hitch the two heavy bags over my shoulders and start down the trail. I am walking hunched over, and soon I have to sit down on a sunny rock to the side of the path and rub the spot where the duffel bag’s handles are digging into my shoulder. I stare down at the mushrooms, visible through the open zipper, and illuminated in a shaft of sunlight.

I pick up a large Hawk’s Wing from atop the pile. It weighs, I’m guessing, about a pound on its own. I place it in the middle of the trail. If they’re up there, they’ll know I’ve headed down the path, and maybe they’ll even pick this one up on the way. I don’t really care one way or the other. It was a little broken anyway.

I take a deep breath of dusty sunbeam air and continue down the trail, but I keep stopping and sitting and sighing and adjusting the duffel. I drop one more mushroom in the path, just in case they hadn’t seen the first one. It is a Boletus this time, but I wasn’t even that sure because the bottom wasn’t quite as spongy as some of the others. I put the straps of the duffel over my forehead just like the Panamanian women I’ve seen carrying their baskets of yucca and plantains from the jungle. It thumps against my back with each step, because the duffel is not a basket and I am not Panamanian, and I am sure that the mushrooms are breaking and squishing in there.

Hours go by, or maybe just an hour, and I’m tempted to just dump everything out here by the side of the trail, but then I’d feel useless, so instead I count my steps and give myself rests every 30 or every 20 seconds counted out fast in my head, or every time I see a nice rock to rest on, which becomes more and more frequent.

Suddenly I am recognizing the trees, and the trail is leveling off, and even that meadow looks like the one I felt like stopping at earlier, when we were hiking up. My feet are moving but I am focused on the truck, which I keep imagining is after the next grove of trees, but it never is, and now I can’t remember just how long this flat part was. But I am driven by the thought that at any moment the trailhead will come into view, and finally it does, first the berries, then the meadow, then the fence,
and then the road with the silver of the truck glinting sharply in the sun.

The truck is locked and there are no bags of mushrooms sitting around it. I heft my two bags under the shade of the back wheel and drink the last of the still-warm tea from the dusty mason jar. And now that I’m finally down, and no longer have the weight on my body, I feel just fine. I can’t remember if that hike was really all that bad, and I’m cleaning out the limp tea leaves because there are raspberries everywhere, and I want to collect a whole jarful to bring back to the farm. The boys are nowhere near, and I don’t even care because there are raspberries and even tiny wild strawberries and I just collected fifty pounds of wild mushrooms. The clouds are gathering around the top of the peak, probably right over the lake, but it doesn’t feel like rain is coming. I pick the berries, winding through secret deer trails, or maybe bear trails, between bushes, eating some and dropping some into the jar.

And when the jar is half full with tiny bleeding berries, I walk up the grassy hill in the meadow by the truck and lay down, tucking my sweatshirt under my head as a pillow. The sun is high and bright, and I throw my arm over my face as shade and chew on a piece of grass. Two flies are dancing around my head, but they seem so absorbed in each other that I leave them alone. My body feels at rest, but strong and limber from the hike and long harvests and afternoons of goat herding and bread kneading. Then the boys appear out of the woods, striding through the meadow, bags bursting full, sweaters and jackets stripped off and tied around their waists.

Cory, walking with a bit of a swagger and holding his massive duffel like a trophy, shouts out, “Hey there, little lady, did ya sneak back down here for the raspberries?”

“Yep that’s right,” I say, and I decide not to ask where the hell they disappeared to, or if they found the signs I left, and definitely not about the lake. The boys load up the back of the truck with their treasures, chattering about mushroom stew and where they’re going to set up the drying racks in the house and arguing over the idea of stringing them up instead. And while they plan for winter storage and beat their boots against the side of the truck, I hold the jar of berries up to the sunlight and look at the bright red mixture of flesh and seeds. The tart juice and grass mingle in my mouth as I walk down to the road, where the boys are waiting, and Tim has started the engine.
narnia

a photo by jinah kim
I.

There were exactly forty-seven cracks in the ceiling, not counting the four small ones running down the wall to the top of the window overlooking Esperanza Park. Henry sympathized with the peeling, waterlogged plaster. He admired its determination. Chipping its way to the floor piece by piece, day after day. Expired. Rotten. Tired. Stuck to a life long since abandoned. Or rendered useless. Henry could think of four hundred and twenty-three ways to make his exit. Unlike the plaster, he could have his way. He envisioned the fall from his seventh floor window. Careening his way onto the grey steel of the stand below where a forty-nine-year-old Puerto Rican man sold beef hot dogs wrapped in bacon. Driving his red sedan off the sun-stained 101 Freeway into the depths of the Pacific Ocean. Driving a bullet through his mop of curly brown hair and into his right temple.

From the grungy tan couch where he reclined, he had an unobstructed view of two blank white walls and a third adorned with four black and white photos. On the far right Henry and Hemingway stood arm in arm on the bow of a boat, alcohol-red faces under Cuban sun. To Hemingway’s right, a tall bookshelf stretched from the floor to the cracked ceiling. Collections of Henry Herschfeld poems and prose, including a still shrink-wrapped copy of *Hope for the Best*—his most acclaimed work—were nestled among Marx, Freud, Gertrude Stein, and the complete works of Robert Creeley. The top two shelves were lined with LPs. Mahler, Debussy, Coltrane, and *Howl* read by Alan Ginsberg. Then there was the typewriter. The decrepit beige typewriter was staring straight into Henry’s hollowed brown eyes—bulky dark bags sunk slowly into his bony, unshaven cheeks.

“Look at yourself,” taunted the beige typewriter, “Worse than the fucking plaster.” Henry shrank deeper into the massive, shapeless tan mush of a couch.

The heavy sun beat its way through the grey film crusted on the outside of the windowpane. Los Angeles sun was like diesel exhaust, or a cloud of locusts. The locusts propelled themselves into the glass. One after another, ploughing their flicker bodies into the filthy window. They filled the apartment with the sarcastic sunlight of yet another blistering afternoon heat. The sun mocked him with its myriad possibilities. Henry Herschfeld would sooner see his body warped on a pile of broken glass and bacon dogs than be subjected to yet another sunny, endlessly sunny Los Angeles afternoon.

He closed his eyes and listened. Outside on La Cienega and Vine, cars were backed up for seven blocks in any direction. Maybe Henry would take a bottle of Aspirin and a bottle of Jack.
He tried to ignore the mechanical hum of the refrigerator. And the car horns. And the locusts. And the
unruly banter of the senile typewriter. He heard the strangest of sounds. A rumble. A guttural moan
from the bowels of the building. The slow scrape of wood and plaster and filth against red oak floors.
Henry did not open his eyes. He did not need to see to feel the walls creeping their way inward.
Plaster cracked. Glass shattered. The locusts flooded through the open window. Four black and white
photos in wood frames fell to the ground. Hemingway and Herschfeld lay face down on the floor,
sunburned and incapacitated—still arm in arm.

Henry felt his middle-aged body melting into the amorphous tan mass. His muscles were useless. His
flesh was as weak as bacon frying on the steel cart. The table was bulldozed by brilliant white walls, toppling
the typewriter, six mostly empty coffee mugs, and an overcrowded souvenir ashtray from the gift shop at
Graceland. The wall behind him drove Henry’s stagnant body deeper into the tan mush and into the floor.

He crawled. Henry crawled like a wounded soldier in the thickets of Vietnam. Under the
blistering brown sun. Under flying bullets and flying locusts. Under the sound of cracking support
beams and the horns of luxury SUVs creeping angrily toward the Hollywood Hills. He snaked his
way across the trembling floorboards one fist after the other. Through enemy territory. Through mines
and marshes. Through trees and trenches and into his apartment kitchen. The refrigerator hobbled its
way off the wall and through the narrow corridor towards the grease covered range. The dishes in the
sink smashed themselves against the ceiling. The microwave liberated itself from the wall. Henry saw
it so clearly: Number one hundred and thirty two—a sharp knife from the kitchen drawer.

The night before, Cheryl had waited for Henry in her North Hollywood apartment in nothing but
black mascara and turquoise high heels (not counting the cocaine residue of a well-powdered nose).
She was twenty-four and had tits like an angel. She had three freckles on either cheek and a small
dark mole next to her right nipple. Her wiry, dirty-blonde hair fell just below her ears to the fair skin
of her neck. An art school dropout from Portland Oregon, Cheryl had made her way down the Pacific
Coast in a grey Buick La Sabre in search of warmer weather and wider cracks (in the vast sprawl
of Los Angeles, one does not slip through the cracks, they disappear down a cavernness fault line—
Cheryl was amazed to find that the traffic was still gridlocked on the tectonic plates below.)

Cheryl had waited until midnight to please herself. In the glow of the Christmas lights that
lined the perimeter of ceiling above her bed, her naked, high-heeled body had an iridescent radiance
against the black bedspread and dark red walls. She imagined a nude Sigmund Freud. She tied him up.
She paraded around his office and fed him Polish sausage. She showed him photos of his mother.
Freud watched Cheryl touch herself on his patients’ leather chaise lounge. When she was finished, she
got up and left. Leaving behind one unsatisfied, handcuffed Austrian thinker.
Roughly sixty percent of her clothes lay sprawled on the grey shag carpet of her bedroom. The remainder hung behind the closet door adorned with a five by two foot canvas splattered with oil paints and the outline of six black triangles, which Cheryl lovingly called *A Portrait of T.S. Eliot*. “It looks like a butterfly,” Henry had once told her.

*Chairman Mao on Holiday, Jesus and Mussolini at Sunday Brunch, and Reflections on Abe Lincoln* eyed each other from around the room, one hanging on each of the three remaining walls.

Cheryl walked to the closet and reached for black leggings and a violet halter-top. She tied a white lace scarf around her neck and rescued a pair of lime-green boots buried underneath a bright mountain of discarded garments. At the base of the mountain were three once black uniforms from the French restaurant in Silver Lake where Cheryl worked—the espresso and aioli stains had been a major inspiration for her splattered tribute to Jesus and Mussolini. She left a note on her front door for Henry.

_The World is Round and  
You are Old.  
Hope for the Best._

Cheryl mounted her Buick and tore down Burbank Boulevard. It was nearly one a.m., but still hot and bone dry. Arriving at the Second Draft, a trendy dive in the Valley packed with aspiring actors and someday screenwriters, she fought her way across the carpeted floors to the mirrored bar and ordered a vodka tonic.

“It’s a love story really.” The man in the seat next to her was narrating to a man in an ash grey suit and orange necktie. “A psychotic struggle, but a love story nonetheless. I’m picturing Tom Hanks.” Worse than poets, she thought.

Cheryl crossed her right stretch-panted leg over the left. Her feet dangled, not quite reaching the crossbeam of the tall, cushioned bar stool. Through a row of Absolut Vodka bottles, she observed her reflection in the mirror lining the back wall of the bar. The bottles were bobbing and weaving, spinning on their shelves. The orange of Absolut Mandarin melted onto the green scotch bottles below. The dripping colors reminded Cheryl of *Swimming with Bukowski*, which hung over the futon in her living room. The chatter of the crowded barroom reminded her of Mahler. To her right, the man in the ash-grey suit floated out of his seat. His shoulders melted down into his torso. His orange tie danced in midair like a charmed cobra. Cheryl felt a hand on her shoulder.

“Hope is a tea party, but we die alone,” said the voice behind the hand. Actually when she thinks back, it was more like, “Hi, I’m Steve.” Or was it Sean? “Stella,” proclaimed Cheryl, doing a full five hundred forty degree spin in her stool to face him. “What do you do, Stella?” He looked about thirty in a crew cut and black collared shirt.
“Porn. I’m in porn.” Her blue-green eyes focused in. She watched him squirm. His head drifted up off his body like a hot air balloon. His eyes and nose split into orbit around his airborne body. His collared shirt was melting. “My parents are both pornographers and I grew up in the Valley. It’s a family tradition.”

“Oh…” His limbs drifted further apart. Tiny black triangles of Steve (Sean) drifted towards her. The crowded bar was a haze of floating colors—concentric circles and black outlined triangles. A melting mass in cleverly planned lighting and dark red carpet. It was like a Van Gogh after a bottle of absinthe. A regular Stalin and Dorothy Play Chinese Checkers.

“Umm…can I buy you a drink?” Cheryl would have five. “I write for NBC, but I’m working on a screenplay of my own.” He sipped his scotch and soda slowly. The ice floated out of the glass and did the Lombada in the smoky air. Cheryl was lost in the symphony of glasses klinking, voicing speaking, and laughter laughing. She told him of her latest film about a troupe of renegade nannies fucking their way across the country in a grey Buick.

“It’s an epic really.”

The walls were moving. He was handsome enough, though he was constantly floating apart and back together again. Cheryl wished he were older. She closed her eyes. His hair turned from brown to grey to white. His face wrinkled. The smell of the age and death and scotch reminded Cheryl of her grandfather, then of Henry Herschfeld. She vomited on her black leggings.

“Jesus Christ!” Steve (Sean) was startled but not alarmed by the vodka tonic vomit.

“How you feeling?” Steve (Sean) seemed genuinely concerned.

“A bit damp, really,” Cheryl replied, paper-toweling Absolut Mandarin from her blotched leggings. The thought of Henry and Grandpa Alan had made her two parts nauseous and three parts aroused. Grandpa had handled her in the same peculiar ways she now longed to be handled by Henry. Or perhaps Steve (Sean.) Or the ways she might taunt that deviant Freud on occasion. Cheryl had a special affinity for the smell of age—of death. The smell of Henry Herschfeld. Cheryl reveled in the decay. Breathing the death straight out of Henry’s wrinkled body, she was invincible. Immortal.

Cheryl wiped the vomit from her leggings with a wad of paper towels. In the Mahler symphony of drunken actors and melting liquor bottles, she was feeling the same mix of panic, asphyxiation, and unbridled possibilities of hope that she felt in Henry’s La Cienega apartment. She could almost smell the rotting plaster and bacon dogs. She began to hear a faint echo of gunfire in the distance. The walls were grinding in around her. Soldiers poked their heads above the marbled bar, surveying the landscape. The bar was a war zone and Henry was nowhere in sight.
“I think this might be a good time to make our getaway.” Cheryl said.
Steve (Sean) was a bit perplexed watching Cheryl lost in space as she de-vomited her black stretch pants.
“Where’s your place Stella?”
“Where’s yours? And can I borrow some pants?” His fit body was blurring in and out like the waver of hot air a mile ahead on the 101 Freeway. “I wouldn’t want to wake the other nannies anyways. They get cranky when they don’t get their beauty sleep.”

III.
Cheryl had woken up first and absconded with a pair of Steve’s (Sean’s) oversized blue-jeans. In exchange, she left him with a painting on her black stretch pants made with swirls of mustard, jelly, and ketchup from his meticulously orderly refrigerator—Tom Hanks and Gustav Mahler Make Eggs Florentine.
When Cheryl walked through Henry’s front door, he was face down on the kitchen floor. It was 8:32 a.m. and the locust sun was already rapping impatiently at the living room window. Cheryl stood over the unconscious body of Henry Herschfeld—acclaimed poet, master bohemian, and famed wash-up. The left side of his head was resting broadly on the clay pink-purple tile. A viscous trail of foamy white vomit stretched from his mouth to the small pool that was trickling down the cold tile to his chest and shoulder. A thin layer of brown dried blood was encrusted on the right side of his forehead, mashed into his curly black hair. His eyes were closed. He smelled like shit.
Henry hadn’t changed since the last she had seen him, though he had pissed his khaki pants. The gunfire and napalm was rampant around them, but Henry was still out cold. Cheryl bummed a match from a thin soldier in an olive green cap. She lit a cigarette. Dodging the enemy fire and swarms of locusts, she walked to the refrigerator and retrieved a cold can of Pabst Blue Ribbon. The refrigerator hummed its approval. She paused over Henry, one foot on either side of his rag-doll body. She walked into the living room, beer in hand, to rehang the black and white photos which lay facedown on the floor. One by one she placed the photos back on the nails that protruded from the white wall. Picasso, Freud, and Elvis. Finally, the famous shot of Henry and Hemingway. Freud must be getting hungry by now, Cheryl thought, picturing the handcuffed analyst. She picked up a typewritten poem that lay face up on the desk and retired to the couch to watch the sun climb its way over the dry brown hills. It smelled like bacon as she drank her beer.

*It is quite something*  
*To hear Mahler*  

*In the evening*  
*In a concert hall*
In a crowd of people

Men in ash-grey suits
Collared shirts
Wrapped tightly around quiet throats

White hairs
And crumpled cardboard cheeks
Above red cushioned seats

The dangling feet
Of children
Swinging above vacuumed floors

Sitting in silence

Awaiting the sound
From a dead man’s mind

Quite something
To hear an orchestra

Sixty people
Sixty stories

And hear sixty sounds

The sound of one man
A dead German man

And here we are

Not stirring
Not doing

Here with sound

From violins
From cellos
From the clearing of throats

From restless fingers

And we listen
And we leave

And we are alone

But the sound is not gone

The sound and the dead German man
Are not gone

And our thoughtless brains
Our steps on cold cement

Are not gone

Henry S. Herschfeld

V.

It was 1:47pm when Henry came-to. The sun was high above the Hollywood Hills and orange-brown light was flooding through the living room window. It shone across the entire length of the ceiling, illuminating at least thirty-two of the forty-seven cracks and shimmering off the pink toenail polish of Cheryl’s outstretched feet. Henry used two hands to push his body up off tile floor. He swung to face the sun.

Sitting cross-legged on the kitchen floor he bowed his head and rolled his neck from side to side. His body was as stiff as a steel cart.

“Shit.” Henry wiped vomit from the corner of his mouth using the shoulder of his black tee shirt. Henry pulled a pouch of Bali Shag out from his pocket and rolled a cigarette in his pissed-stained lap.

“T.S. Elliot missed you last night,” Cheryl said looking upside-down over her dirty blonde hair, head hanging over the armrest of the tan couch. “But I think Freud is a very happy man.”

Henry looked up as he licked the seam of the soon to be cigarette. He smiled. “Freud needs just needs his mother, Cheryl.” Henry replied, a bit defensively. He swatted a locust buzzing around his head and lit his smoke.
“You, Henry S. Herschfeld, need your mother,” Cheryl said gazing up at the ceiling. She was following a crack from one side to the other. It was number seventeen. “Besides, you should have seen it. I fed him Polish sausage. You’d have loved it.”

Cheryl joined Henry on the kitchen floor and rolled herself a cigarette. His jealousy was subsiding. In the locust sun, she looked as beautiful as Henry could remember. Her hair was tangle and, in a few places, standing straight up toward the ceiling. Her violet top sagged off of her right shoulder, almost revealing the mole on her breast. Her jeans looked a dozen sizes too big, but Henry bit his tongue. He was happy to see her.

They sat silently on the kitchen floor, taking each other in. Cheryl traversed his wrinkled, bony cheeks with her blue-green eyes. She could feel his breath on her neck. The faint air of age on her fair skin relaxed her muscles. She breathed out deeply and let her knotted shoulders slide. Above her head, the cigarette smoke was suspended in midair—resting surely on the afternoon sun. They were timeless, Cheryl and the milky smoke. Black triangles floated off of Henry’s black tee shirt and hovered around his head, which was gently melting towards his shoulders. The floating shapes and looming smoke made her smile. She licked her thumb and dabbed the blood from Henry’s forehead. Henry’s stiff body was creeping slowly back to life. She ran her fingers through his curled hair. Peaking through the space between her fingers, his hair was dancing on end, wavering slowly from side to side. The bright white walls were glowing in the marmalade sun. Cheryl was drifting blissfully away in the quiet stream of death that swept through the apartment—that swept through the melting poet before her. A new painting was unfolding in her mind—Herschfeld and Freud at Mother’s Day Brunch.

Henry finished his cigarette. The walls were standing still. He was relieved by the absence of the hungry locusts. He stood up slowly and walked to his cluttered desk. Elvis and Hemingway looked on as he began to compose a poem. The typewriter was silent, save for the sound of Henry’s fingers against the keys. After several pages, Henry paused to admire Cheryl sitting cross-legged on a pillow of smoke eight inches above the oak floors. He smiled and dove back into poem.

After what could have been four minutes or three hours, Henry leaned back in his chair and rolled another cigarette. Cheryl had relocated to the tan couch and already had a cigarette hanging from her lower lip.

“You should really quit,” Cheryl said through a thick cloud of smoke.
“What, writing?”
“Smoking,” she thought for moment. “Maybe writing too. It’s hard to tell which will kill you first.” Henry paused. Maybe it would be number three hundred and twenty-four—drowning himself in the pool while on the tour of Graceland. He wished Cheryl would come with him. Maybe she was right, though, at least about the poems.

Henry’s heart was beating slowly as he breathed out warm summer air and a dense stream of smoke.
The sounds of artillery had faded and he could hear Cheryl’s stomach growl—Freud was not the only hungry one.


Cheryl’s stomach turned at the thought of greasy pork wrapped around a slab of beef. She was sharply reminded of her lingering hangover and of the bizarre events that had transpired in Steve’s orderly bedroom. His Ikea furniture and immaculate cleanliness reminded her of a hospital waiting room—it smelled like the freezer isle of the grocery store. Cheryl had done her best to desecrate the sterile placidity of her companion.

“You need to get out of the apartment.” She said convincingly, “Let’s go to Cantor’s.” She was determinedly nudging the previous night out of her brain.

**VI.**

“John, an investment banker. He pees sitting down and likes to masturbate in front of a mirror.” Henry smiled his approval as the man walked passed their table to the deli counter. The man ordered a turkey club on rye. “John hates to finish a book,” Cheryl added. “He’s terrified of death.”

Henry and Cheryl sat side by side in the brown leather booth, facing the meats and cheeses behind the glass the counter. They narrated the life-stories of the people trickling into the deli off of La Brea and Melrose in the old Jewish district. Neither of them had changed, and their knotted hairs and soiled clothes received many a disapproving stares from the characters they were inventing.

“Cindy, mother of two,” Henry had his turn. “She bikes to work and spends six of eight working hours ogling online antiques. Her husband left her for the nanny who left him for her yoga instructor. They now live in Vermont and have a dairy farm: nanny and yogi. They have thirty-six cows.” “Cindy” ordered a chicken ceasar to go and stood next to “John” who was reading the LA Times, waiting for his sandwich.

On the way out the door John shot Cheryl a disrobing glance out of the corner of his eye. His eyes tore straight through her violet halter-top. Even his turkey on rye was eye-fucking her. Cantor’s was famous for turkey on rye. Henry felt old. He felt the few rebel grey hairs in his brown curls multiply. He felt like an aged Mahler, whose life and young bride had been slipping slowly away. Cheryl smiled back at the man, or perhaps at the turkey on rye, walking out the deli door. John was taken aback when she pointed at him with the pocket mirror from her corduroy purse, but winked at Cheryl nonetheless.

Henry felt ancient. He was invisible. He could hardly breathe. The ceiling, largely crack-free, descended slowly upon him. From all sides the room began to close in around him. Behind the glass counter the pastrami sat up to life in its metal tray. Henry looked on in horror as the pastrami reached for a cleaver and carved up the famous turkey in the next tray over. The turkey put up a fight, but could do little to defend itself from inside the plastic-wrap straightjacket that imprisoned it. The tabletop was ramming Henry’s torso into the leather booth. The ground beef upper-cutted a
slab of veal, knocking it out cold. Number two-hundred sixty, Henry thought, grab John by the shoulders and dive into the speeding traffic of La Brea Avenue.

“Serge and his mail order bride,” Cheryl interrupted, putting the mirror back into her open purse. By now John was long gone. “Married four months. When she’s out shopping he wears her panties around the house.” The man (real name Mike) and his fifteen-year-old Russian Orthodox daughter, Charlotte, looked on with curiosity as they passed the couple’s booth. “When she’s not in bed with their downstairs neighbors she ties up Serge and eats schnitzel off his bare stomach.” The man and his daughter ordered bologna and a grilled cheese.

Henry turned to Cheryl and forced a smile. He was petrified to find her naked. He quickly turned his head away. Serge was looking her body up and down. The mail order bride did the same. Henry surveyed the landscape, finding all eyes on them—sagging, graying, aging poet and nude dirty-blondie. The salami had a massive hard-on. Cheryl rose from her seat and tangoed with the butcher before the crowd of onlookers. She was a nude blur under the spinning light of a disco ball. Henry was shrinking. He was smaller than a locust. His poems were nowhere in sight. He felt the same inexplicable feeling he felt laying naked next to Cheryl under his cracked ceiling. He wished she were dead. Or rather, he wished they were not living—both of them. Together.

“More coffee, sir?” The waitress held the steaming pot over the table. “Sir, more coffee?” Cheryl’s green-blue eyes were wrapped around him. Serge was gone. Henry wanted to crawl into the green-blue gaze and never return - to be where the John, and Serge, and the typewriter, and the cannibal salami could never reach him. The waitress was waiting. He held out his porcelain cup.

“Sure.”

VII.

Back in Henry’s apartment, nothing had changed. The ceiling was cracked. The locusts were rampant. Mines exploded below the trembling red oak floorboards. Hemingway was still captive on the wall of the dank apartment—Henry regretted letting his friend see him this way. The room was dark save for the faint glow of the brown sun retreating over the hills. He collapsed onto the tan couch and shut his eyes. He sank into the familiar sounds of imploding walls and machine-gun fire, bracing himself for the bulldozer walls. He heard a pop and then the faint crackle of vinyl. Slowly a cello crept to life off his dusty bookshelf— it was Mahler’s Ninth Symphony. Cheryl smiled at him from behind his desk. She was chatting with Elvis and Hemingway. It was Freud who had requested the Mahler. Cheryl began to float out of her seat. She was drifting towards him on the brassy timbre of a French horn. Hemingway disembarked his docked sailboat and boared the swirling strings on their way up to the cracked ceiling. He brought mojitos and Cuban cigars. Elvis was a real gentleman and uncuffed Freud, who was scarlet-red embarrassed and more than a little emasculated. Freud was aching to speak with Mahler again—their single and brief
encounter had only whet his appetite.

Henry was weightless. He too was rising off the tan couch, greeting the violins as they wafted through the air. The sun was rounding the tops of the dry hills, but sent a purple-orange glimmer to join the party. The basses and the timpani were roaring thunder like an aircraft overhead. The brass wailed a piercing note—an explosion. Mahler was delighted by the spectacle and peeled himself off the bookshelf. He wiped the dust from his glasses and began gliding towards Freud. He was cut-off, however, by Gertrude Stein who gave Freud a healthy slap across the face. She gave him a good talking to and drifted over to give that bastard Hemingway an earful.

Henry and Cheryl met somewhere just below crack number thirty-eight. Their limbs were drifting off of their weightless bodies. Black triangles of Henry’s tee shirt mingled with concentric circles of Cheryl’s purple halter-top. After a brief and tentative courtship, they grabbed each other and burst into a lively sarabande. The black triangles swung the circles through the air, once nearly colliding with ceiling. Mahler was confused by sarabande—this movement was a waltz—but he was too wrapped up with Freud to care.

Purple and black were melting down from the ceiling through the thick smoke of Hemingway’s cigar. Cheryl and Henry were disintegrating together in a haze of color and smoke. Brown curls and a dirty-blonde mass were converging. Melting. Drifting apart and back together again like smoke rings in purple-pink twilight. The orchestra was simmering, raging toward climax. Cellos tore furiously through the air and ripped the crumbling plaster from the white walls. The bodies and colors and sounds blurred together like Van Gogh brush strokes. The locusts were engulfed in the cloud of violins and cellos and thinkers and writers and soldiers and half-drunken mojitos. The explosions and the mechanical crackling of machine-gun fire disappeared in an orgy of trumpets and drums and strings - the sounds of wood and metal and human hands. The sounds of Mahler. The swirling mass was rising higher into the air, engulfing the ceiling, devouring all forty-two cracks. Pieces of Freud and Stein and Elvis mingled and melted into the blurred mass, rising higher and higher, through the molding brick apartment building—a deafening aurora borealis rising into the smoggy, starless Los Angeles night. Rising above the desert earth and carnivorous, cavernous fault lines of urban sprawl. Leaving behind the smell of bacon dogs and rotting plaster. And the lingering sound of Mahler.

Number four hundred and twenty four —

Disappear completely.
I love him in the morning

When the white sunlight streaks in
through the curtain-less windows
and the shy moon hides in the certain sky

When particles of dust hang motionless
and visible in the unmoving air

When silence is marred only by the
steadiness of coffee dripping into the glass pot

When mothers rest and shift their thankful eyes
from full mugs to gaze out picture windows

When children wait at bus stops
and see their futures as blank canvases

I love him when it’s easy
We leave the bed unmade
and crawl like cat thieves
over the broken glass bottles
and day old *New York Times*.

Black puddles of shadows
pool at our naked feet.
We try to ignore them
by floating on old promises,
fooling ourselves into thinking
that today will be different, but
in the dawn you’re always quiet.

When the joists creak, just below
the surface of the floorboards, angry
because they are neglected,
and you listen like you understand
something deeper than what’s present.
Like you understand the generations of
tiptoes and tears that have
worn their way into the cherry varnish.
I watch you,
angry at the trap your silence sets.

We descend the stairs together,
but not really, and walk to the table
salvaged from Germany after the war,
its scratches obscured by Lenox flatware.

We sit across from each other, reading
headlines about stalemates and soldiers
sent home with one arm, who will
continually carry the image of war.

Our wounds are not yet visible;
Our war sleeps during the day.
Winery

A photo by Julie Furbush
The four Michelin squealed in agony as their perforated treads soldered to the road, releasing heavy, bitter fumes. As the pickup truck peeled out of the diner parking lot, the once proud, heavy-duty tires were reduced to smooth rubber donuts.

*Something* had to give, reasoned Jimbo, as he steadied the wheel. At least it wasn’t the transmission. But the way I’m cooking oil, that’ll be the next to go. Blue smoke rose from the hood and licked the windshield.

Jimbo gnarled his teeth and furrowed his brow, trying to wring his mind of worry like water from a sponge. The hair on his neck stood up straight. The interstate was a straight line for a hundred miles.

The diner’s cash register had less than a hundred dollars in it. Of course, he also took some pie. It was something about those display dishes, encased in smooth, round glass, that made the pie look so appetizing. Maybe it was how they bent the light to make the key lime glaze shimmer. Maybe it was that Jimbo hadn’t eaten since he stole the truck. Maybe it was the handwritten sign, “Homemade.”

Jimbo sped up, his eyes plaintively raised to the distance above the horizon. The mountains were a portrait, aloof purple shapes that never got bigger or smaller. Jimbo winced.

The endless expanse of cattle and cacti was a tunnel, whizzing by in a wall of brown and green. Breathe, Jimbo. He checked the rearview. The woman was okay. Sweating, terrified, but still okay. He checked the front seat. The armadillo (well, the live one) basked in the desert sun that penetrated the passenger side window. This sun was different than home’s sun. It was large, orange, and low to the horizon. It baked the landscape, leaving a brittle reddish crust. Jimbo imagined a moist casserole simmering underneath.

No time for casseroles, thought Jimbo. His eyelids forced themselves together, then apart. Brown, green, blue, and orange melted together, the world swirling in colors like the big lollipops from state fairs. The hood gobbled yellow lane markers in a steady stream, like a lullaby. No time for sleep. He checked the clock and floored the gas. The vehicle paused as the engine negotiated more friction from the overworked Michelins. Jimbo was racing the clock. Rather, he was being pursued. Or was he the pursuer? Which is it, Jimbo?

The woman wasn’t helping. Tears now trickled down her cheek, mixing with sweat to form a salty film over her face that glinted in the waning light. Jimbo met her petrified gaze in the rearview mirror. Say something, Jimbo.

“Pie behind the seat,” he offered with a consoling drawl. He watched the woman’s eyes
slowly move to the back of the seat, then spastically shut, like a turtle hiding in its shell.

“What’s wrong?” No answer. She isn’t speaking to me. She could still take some pie. How couldn’t she want some pie? It was so hungry in that car. Women are complicated.

Jimbo checked the road ahead for any dangers, then quickly turned to look behind the seat. He had forgotten about the dead armadillo.

“Aw shoot,” Jimbo moaned as he resumed his watch on the road. “Sorry about the animal.”

The smell of burnt rubber and ripe roadkill were enough to make anyone lose his appetite. I guess women aren’t all that complicated after all.

“I...I didn’t kill it on purpose,” Jimbo said. “He was just moseying out on the highway. I couldn’t stop. The live one’s up here with me. Must be his kid.” Jimbo’s crew cut head pivoted downwards on his tubular neck to talk to the armadillo in the passenger seat. “His name’s Marvin. All this desert got me thinking we on Mars.” The woman stopped sobbing. What a relief. Keep talking, Jimbo.

“I didn’t want to leave him all alone in that desert,” Jimbo continued, his voice brightening. The woman began to breathe normally. It’s working. I’m on a roll. “I know what it’s like, losing your pa.” Damn, Jimbo. You took it too far.

At this, the woman sat up in her seat. She wiped her nose on her sleeve, and looked upon the human being driving the pickup.

“Where are you taking me?” Jimbo sensed the shakiness in her voice. If you shut up, Jimbo, maybe she’ll do the same.

“Where are you taking me?” The voice had no foundation, propped up on stilts. Jimbo stared straight ahead, grinding his teeth. Maybe I should turn back. His eyes again shifted to the rearview. What is “back?”

* * *

The worst part of the orphanage had been the smell. The stale, sweet cloud of must was a thick blanket that tightly wrapped around James’s fingers and the tip of his nose, the way that moisture envelops the leaves in a rainforest. Old books, old clothes, old nuns...when the sun was low and parallel to the huge reinforced windows, he could see the chaos of dust dancing in the orange rays, swirling and growing. At night, he imagined the cloud descending on all of the children confined in that building, slowly decaying them into something old and dry and wrinkly.

Then, every morning came the mops with their piercingly sour smell of alcohol. James would always wake to them cleaning the linoleum floors, their industrial soap scratching his throat and eyes. The stench was powerful, but the paradox was unbearable. All was sterile and white and clean, gloved and latexed and kempt. Life was protected, but also prevented. The outside world was foreign. This clean, musty, stifling prison was the only world James had known since he was three.

In a week, it will be over. I will be 18 and free. Somehow, these next seven days will
transform me into a real person. James sat on his bed and dreamed. Sister Carradine came into sight, her scowl scanning the room for a target. That witch can’t do anything to me. I’m out of here.

“Get up, Jimbo,” she ordered. All the boys called him Jimbo, a hick, because he was quiet and talked slowly. Sister Carradine called him Jimbo too, when she was mad.

“I ain’t getting up,” he said. “I don’t have to listen to you no more.”

She was angry. James could feel the heat from her face as she leaned over the bed. He saw her pull her ruler, dulled from abuse, from her left sleeve.

“Oh really, Jimbo? Why’s that?”

James gulped. “Because I’m not scared of you no more. I’m 18 in a week, then I can leave this place forever.”

Sister Carradine’s face cooled. Her lips cracked open to reveal her yellowed teeth, her eyes unfazed from their surly glare. I’ve never seen her smile.

“Leave? Child thinks he’s getting set to leave,” she maliciously beseeched laughter from an unseen audience. “Boy, I’ll be the judge of that. Now I want you to mop these floors. Get to it,” she commanded. She replaced her ruler and turned to walk away.

“No.” I didn’t mean to say it; it just came out.

Sister Carradine stopped in her tracks. Her face was ice again.

“What did you just say?”

James’s mouth had seceded from his brain. Panic chilled his nerves; his heart beat through his shirt. It felt amazing. “I said, ‘No, I ain’t mopping your damn floors’.”

Sister Carradine pivoted on her foot and in one smooth motion unsheathed the ruler. “I’m gonna give you three seconds to get yourself out of that bed.” Their stares met, growing more violent with each forward step she took.

“One,” she counted. James sat up in bed, but did not move further. “Two,” she counted. Sister Carradine’s arm drew back, her face bursting with anticipation, waiting for the satisfactory smack of wood on skin. “Three.” The arm moved downwards, propelled like a guillotine, aimed not for a wrist, but for the face.

Jimbo’s fist moved quickly, like lightning.

* * *

The cacti and cattle again started to whiz and blur. Jimbo tried to focus on one cow and watch it for the second it took for the pickup to pass. Its face was long and droopy, its eyes vacant. On the open range, with so much freedom, how could it be so sad? Jimbo searched for a happy cow, but they all looked the same. Bizarre. He checked the rearview. The woman had slouched down in her seat and resumed crying in a muffled whimper. Jimbo wanted her to shut up, but now he felt bad. He grimaced, but knew he had to say it.
“I didn’t mean to take you, you know,” Jimbo said, his eyes now avoiding the stare that bounced off the mirror. “You were in the parking lot. You saw what happened at the diner. You would have called the cops.”

“I wouldn’t have called the cops,” the woman shot back.

“How do I know that?”

“Who are you anyway? What are you doing?” In the mirror, Jimbo saw the woman fidgeting, still too scared to move but slowly getting her wits about her.

Just focus on the road, Jimbo. You don’t have to listen to her. The sun was setting, casting a softer glow on the desert. How can I stay awake another night?

“Why won’t you answer me? Where are you taking me?”

“Away.”

“Why? What are you doing?”

There was a pause. “I don’t know.”

Silence. The conversation was over. Peace. They rode on through the desert. The cows were gone now, replaced by large orange rocks, strong bodies with no faces. The world was amber, midway between red light and green light. Marvin curled up for a nap, wearing what Jimbo imagined was an armadillo’s smile.

The sun now stared at Jimbo from the horizon, digging under his eyelids and into his brain. The sun muddied everything. How can a man think? Everything was clear when it was dark. For a moment, then a second, then two, it was dark. Darkness was peace.

Slowly, Jimbo’s hands slid off the wheel.
take two
a photo by kristina ceruzzi
hair
a photo by elizabeth field
In my earliest memory, I am five years old and sitting Indian-style in the middle of my room, crying. I don’t claim to remember what happened exactly. I can remember the colors. The room is bare except for a circular purple rug that feels like a marshmallow beneath my knees, and a rainbow of stuffed animals surrounds me. I’m clutching a tiny gray stuffed seal to my chest, and his fur is wet and sticky with my tears. He never felt quite as soft afterwards.

My father is standing quietly in the doorway. His figure casts a dark shadow that grabs with wild fingers at the haven of my rug whenever he shifts his weight. “Hannah,” he says gently.

I’ve been told how he then attempted to coax me out of my room. He told me how my new room would be ready in just a couple of weeks, how it would be just up the hall, and how it would be bigger and prettier than my old room. I could pick all the colors, he said. There would even be room for bunk beds.

It is a story my parents love to tell over dinner, how it took me hours to stop crying, how I removed each stuffed animal with gentle care from the lone rug in my room, and how I held onto that seal as if I would never let go.

I laugh with them; I was a funny little kid, I usually say. I don’t talk about how I awoke in the night in my new top bunk for weeks afterwards, terrified I would fall over the edge. I don’t tell them that in my earliest memory I’m clinging with trembling hands to a stuffed seal because I’m certain I can’t make it alone.

* * *

The first summer I returned home from college, there was a heat wave that lasted from the middle of June through the end of July. Temperatures rose twenty degrees above average, sending most of the Northeast inside to air conditioning and cool, refrigerated drinks. Summer camps were cancelled, in-ground pools were a hot commodity, and “how are you surviving the heat?” was as acceptable as saying “hello.”

I spent my afternoons sorting through files in the basement of my dad’s office. He was making the shift to a computerized system and paid me ten dollars an hour to organize patients’ records for the new system. I completed the task by the beginning of July, and then he gave me odd jobs to keep me busy; I answered calls, I cleaned the toy-chest in the waiting room. I arrived at nine and was done by two every day.
Occasionally, I’d play the self-righteous college student and emerge from my permanent state of laziness to spew a random fact from my World Culture course about how in India it was typically 110 to 120 degrees Fahrenheit in the summer. Americans are wimps, I’d say. Sometimes, after I’d left my dad’s office, I’d even try to organize a soccer game or a trip to the beach. But I was no different from everyone else; I wilted the moment I stepped outside, like a flower left in a vase too long.

The heat wasn’t the only thing that made me weaker. My best friend, Jake, was working sixty hours a week as a lifeguard at a local pool, and as a result, I spent more time alone than I had in years. I grew up with Jake; he lived three blocks up the road and, we were two only-children who adopted each other as brother and sister. I had met him on the bus to kindergarten, him with his lunchbox full of Matchbox cars and me hiding two stuffed animals in my backpack. He taught me to play baseball and video games; I taught him to build a house out of Lincoln logs.

It was an evening near the end of June, after another hot, heavy day, that boredom finally got the best of my friends and me. Ten of us were huddled in Dan’s living room, our legs tangled on his wrap-around couch like the clothes of someone living out of his suitcase. Our eyes were aching from too much television, and the remains of a Monopoly game that had ended badly were strewn across the rug. We played a lot of Monopoly that summer; we eventually began to fight about the rules, about whether you should get the money in the middle if you landed on “Free-Parking” or twice as much if you landed directly on “Go.” We fought just to hear ourselves talk. After almost two months at home, even arguing had exhausted itself.

It was one of Jake’s evenings free. He was in better spirits than the rest of us, because he hadn’t spent as much time as we had breathing down each other’s necks. He was staring blankly out the window. Then his expression changed, lifted a little. “Let’s play dodgeball,” he said, as if it offered salvation.

In a moment, he had convinced everyone in the room. Jake had a way of speaking that made everything seem possible. We were all prepared to push off the couch and dash outside, where surely infinite numbers of dodgeball courts and balls were waiting to be used.

Someone eventually broke the spell. “Where are we going to play dodgeball at nine o’clock?”

Jake stood up without hesitating, as if the answer were obvious. “The tennis courts stay lit until eleven. And we can head back to our houses and gather up a few balls. I know I have some lying around my garage.”

We all looked uncertainly at each other. Jake was already tying his shoes and fumbling for his car keys. “You’re all a bunch of bums,” he said. “Let’s go.”

He opened the door and walked outside, and after a moment, we rose to follow him. We piled into separate cars, and I hopped in with Jake. It was always assumed that we’d drive together.

He was humming along with the radio and tapping his fingers on the wheel. It was the brightest
I’d seen him all summer. There had been something tired about him lately, though he worked hard at disguising it. I blamed it on the heat, on his job, on his lack of sleep, anything that would mean there wasn’t a new weakness in him, or worse, a weakness between us.

“Dodgeball, huh?” I said. “Where’d you think that one up?”

A small smile passed over his face. “Just wanted to try something new.”

I looked out the window, watching the neat rows of small pastel-colored houses. Each was a cookie-cutter shape of the other and usually belonged to a cookie-cutter family: a mom, a dad, a couple of kids, and the family pet. Sparky the friendly beagle sat in his usual spot in the doorway of the green house, panting excitedly, and a tabby cat named Tiger was watching the streets from the window of the blue house, his tail flicking.

I remembered riding my bike up these streets with Jake, the day I finally learned to ride without training wheels. My knees were still scabbed from the numerous times I’d fallen to the pavement when my parents let go of the back. They ran faithfully behind me but were always a moment too late to catch my fall. Jake had been riding a two-wheeler for months. “Just follow me,” he said.

I pedaled behind him the whole length of the block, my eyes glued to the back of his blue Power-Ranger helmet. My mom cheered and lifted me up into her arms. “You did it all by yourself!” she said, and Jake, standing quietly by, never breathed a word.

We pulled into his driveway, and he took the keys out of the ignition. He was quiet for a moment, and I saw that tiredness sneak into his face. I wanted to ask him if something was wrong, but I was too afraid to know the answer. I toyed with a loose thread on my shirt. “Do you want me to get the balls from the garage?” I asked.

“No,” he said. He seemed to right himself. “I was just trying to remember where they were.”

I followed him to the garage. “Can I go in and say hi to your mom?” I asked. “I’ve barely seen her the whole summer.”

I thought I saw him stiffen as he bent down to lift the garage door. “I think she’s sleeping,” he said. I saw a light on in the upstairs window. “And besides,” he added, “you know she’ll chew your ear off. We have to get to the tennis courts. People will be waiting.”

Jake’s mom was as feisty as a lion in a cage. Her fellow nurses had nicknamed her “Balboa” because she’d single-handedly pinned a drunken six-foot man to a hospital bed while he fought to escape the E.R. doctor’s shot of anesthesia. When I was little, I asked my mom why Jake didn’t need a father, and she told me that God had made Jake’s mom tough enough to be both a mommy and a daddy, all in one.

Jake heaved the garage door open, revealing piles of what had once been our childhood. There were crates of trading cards, board games, action figures, and even the occasional stuffed animal. I had left my mark on Jake too, after all.
He shuffled through a few of the piles and eventually emerged with three brightly colored balls. He dropped one to test its bounce. “This should do for now,” he said.

“Do you remember when we used those as cannon balls?” I asked.

He smiled. “Of course. We took them to my grandma’s house, and my mom painted our faces like pirates.” Then his smile faded a little. “That was the first weekend my dad didn’t show up for his visit.”

I felt guilty for bringing it up as I remembered why his mom has whisked us away to his grandma’s house. Jake’s mom had just issued a restraining order against his father, and it was the first Saturday that he wouldn’t be coming to visit. Jake’s mom had wanted to distract him. We sung songs for the entire hour-long car ride and spent the weekend playing games and feasting on his grandma’s cookies. It had done the trick.

I rested my hand gently on Jake’s shoulder. “We had a better time anyway,” I said quietly.

“I know,” he said. He pulled the garage door shut and managed a small smile.

As soon as we pulled out of the driveway, Jake seemed himself again. He cranked up the radio and rolled down the window to let the wind whip back his messy blond hair.

“Hannah banana,” he said, playfully, “you oughta come visit me at work sometime. I get free food from the snack bar. I could get us a couple of hotdogs and sodas and we could hang out on my lunch break.” Then he added more seriously, “I do miss seeing you, you know.”

I felt a little vulnerable, suddenly, that he was able to see right through me despite my best efforts to act like everything was okay, the way he could. I smiled and tried to laugh it off. “You won’t be too busy saving lives?” I teased him.

“No,” he said, grinning. “I’ll schedule you in right between my twelve o’ clock drowning five-year-old who forgot his swimmies and my one o’ clock adult panicking in the deep end.”

“All right,” I said. “Then maybe I’ll stop by sometime.”

We pulled up to the tennis courts, and Jake reached into the backseat and tossed one of the balls at me. “You’re out,” he said. “And also, your ship is sunk.”

He grinned and scrambled out of the car, and I hopped out the passenger side, throwing the ball back at him a little harder than I meant to. He dodged it effortlessly and pointed at me, laughing. I chased him onto the tennis courts, where everyone else was waiting.

Jake took charge as soon as he got on the court. He split us up into two teams of five and put me on the opposite team. “You’re going down,” he taunted as he walked past me to assume his position on the other side of the net.

We lined up on the back lines of the court, like Civil War armies ready to charge when given the word. None of us really knew what we were doing, and I think we all would have stood there like idiots for days, waiting for Jake’s direction.
Finally, Jake yelled “Dodgeball!” and began to walk forward. He walked untouched all the way to the net, even though three people on my team had balls they could have thrown. Jake had his eyes fixed on Dan, but threw the ball sideways at my feet. I was able to snap to and hopped over it, shocked I had beaten him. Both teams came to life at once, running forward and pelting balls at each other with all their might.

It was the first time we were all really laughing in a long time. I picked up the ball Jake had thrown at me and threw it as hard as I could at his feet, but he swooped down and caught it effortlessly.

“You’re out!” he yelled, grinning. “I thought I taught you not to throw like a girl.”

I glared at him and took my place on the sidelines, waiting for someone on my team to catch a ball so I could come back in. Balls colored red and yellow and green and blue whizzed through the air, as if they were painting the color back into our summer. The boys started inventing creative moves, some of them leaping over the tennis net when they threw or teaming up on one unsuspecting person.

Jake dodged almost every ball, jumping over it or to the side and sometimes dropping to the pavement to duck. He threw hard and accurately and was rarely off the court because no one was able to catch him out. He picked on me mercilessly, throwing a ball lightly at my back when I stooped to pick one up or pretending to aim for someone else while throwing it sidelong at me. Once, I was able to catch one he threw a little too lightly, and both teams jeered him off the court.

We figured the rules out as we went along. A wild pitch from Shawn hit Becky square in the face. After that, if you hit someone in the head, you were out. A game that ended in a four-on-one battle against Jake meant that when there was only one person left on a team, both teams had to stay inside the front box. For the most part, the rules were pretty basic; if you got hit or your ball got caught, you were out.

The evening went on like that until Ashland Park Public Safety killed the lights. The court went pitch-black without warning, and someone let out a scream when a ball that had been mid-air made contact. I couldn’t see anyone or anything until Jake started his car and the headlights illuminated the court. We were all dripping with sweat, but for once the heat didn’t seem to weigh as heavy.

We gathered up the balls from the corners of the court and piled into our cars. We headed back to Dan’s house for a late night swim in his pool and made S’mores. We forgave each other the bruises that would surely surface the following day. When Jake drove me home afterwards, he sang loudly with the windows down the whole way, as if attempting to give life even to the quiet streets.

Dodgeball swept our town with the force of a reform movement. We played a couple of nights a week, and dumb-founded tennis players on the other courts would sometimes stop their game and lace their fingers through the chain-link fence to watch. The cops from Public Safety began arriving slightly before eleven to catch our last few minutes. One night, some kids from our high school drove past the courts and stopped to join us. They told their friends, and eventually people
from different circles of our high school began showing up without warning. Some would sit around the court smoking cigarettes until it was their turn. Some brought beers in paper bags and drank on the bleachers, cheering and arguing like it was the seventh inning of a baseball game and their team was down four to three.

For all that he had created, Jake was rarely seen at the games. I’d call him and tell him to be at the tennis courts, nine o’clock sharp, but he always had an excuse. “My shift starts at six in the morning,” he’d say. “I’d love to, but I gotta get to bed early tonight.”

“Jake,” I’d tell him, “you’ll never guess who showed up at the game last night.”

“Ronald McDonald.”

“Close. Alex Klein.” Alex Klein had dropped out of school in tenth grade to go into intensive rehab for cocaine. He was a rare breed in our small town, and everyone knew about it. No one had seen him in years. “Alex Klein was there,” I said, “and he played like the best of them.”

Jake was always excited to hear the details; he let me tell him how I dodged a wild ball from Shawn, how John had thrown it a little too hard at Tim and they’d stopped talking for the night, or how Kelley DiRaimo, the girl who had tortured me through middle school, had shown up and I’d gotten her out three times.

“Jake,” I’d say, “if you’re too tired to come out, then why don’t you just come over my house? We’ll watch a movie or something. I don’t have to go to dodgeball, you know. I’m there all the time.”

“No,” he always said. “I need you to go so you can tell me about it.” There would be a heavy silence, which he’d break with something like, “After all, if you’re not there, who’s gonna be around to tell me when Ronald McDonald eventually does show up?”

I never asked if something was wrong. I swallowed the question; let it churn in my stomach like a slow and steady wheel.

It took me two weeks to visit Jake at work. I’d sit alone in the dusty basement of my dad’s office and think of the sun bearing down on him. His shoulders burned red at the start of every summer. By now, his skin had probably turned an even brown, and the dotted freckles that always emerged over his nose and cheeks had probably surfaced, quiet but expected, like flower buds in May. But still, I worried. I pictured his back raw and blistered, unable to withstand the sun. I imagined what our conversation might be like, the heavy silences, his tired eyes. I dreamed that I was the lifeguard, and he the one drowning, my frail arms too weak to lift him from the water.

The day that I finally decided to visit Jake, I was sitting Indian-style on the cold floor of the basement, surrounded by alphabetized boxes, each full with neatly arranged files. I had filed every last patient, organized their records, and thrown out papers that were no longer needed. There was nothing left to be done. I looked up the long, lonely flight of stairs, where I could hear the muffled
noises of patients shuffling through the halls, secretaries answering phones, and babies crying in
the waiting room.

I remembered when Jake and I made a night of sledding down the stairs on a spare mattress
we’d found in my basement. We were ten at the time, and Jake was sleeping over in my empty
bunk bed because his mom was having what would be her final fight with his father. They had
gotten divorced when Jake was an infant. To Jake, a father had always been a visitor, someone
to take him to the park or buy him French fries two weekends a month. It wasn’t until Jake
started spending time with my family that he discovered a father could be a man who was there
every morning to make breakfast or walk to the bus stop.

Jake’s dad had been supposed to take him skiing that weekend. It had taken a long time for
his mom to even consider the idea of a whole weekend away with a man who had been strong enough
to make her cry. But the pleading look in Jake’s eyes, his silent remorse, finally convinced her. She
made Jake’s grandparents promise to go along to supervise. She hugged Jake tighter than usual for a
week and prepared to let go.

Jake’s dad showed up two hours late to pick him up. He crashed his red station wagon into
the fire hydrant outside the house and stumbled out of the car, his breath heavy with alcohol. Jake’s
mom screamed at him on the lawn in front of all the neighbors and sent Jake to my house to be
sheltered from the fight. Jake had trudged up the block to my doorstep, dragging a suitcase packed
with brand new snow clothes he would never use and glancing over his shoulder at the father he
would never see again.

Jake and I had spent the whole day together, playing games as usual, without talking about
what happened. I heard him tell my parents that his mom said she would call when she could come
get him. I had listened to him talk about the ski trip for weeks, about the hot chocolate his dad
promised from the ski lodge, and the giant fireplace in the cabin. But when he showed up at my
doorstep without shedding a tear, I never asked more. It wasn’t until my parents told me the details
years later that I fully understood.

We had finished our dinners and were playing Shoots and Ladders when he stopped suddenly.
“I’ve never been skiing, you know,” he said, as if it was a confession.

“I know,” I said. My parents had taken me skiing for the first time the previous year.

He continued to stare at his hands, but I could see his face straining in an effort not to cry.

“I could show you,” I said softly. I opened his suitcase, took out his snow clothes, and laid
them gently beside him. “I’ll go get mine,” I said.

We both got dressed in our snow clothes and hauled the spare mattress slowly and deliberately
up the stairs. We sat cushioned at the top of the staircase, peering down at the distant bottom. “Are
you scared?” I asked him.
He reached over and took my hand. “No,” he said.

We pushed off from the top stair and went tumbling down, my one hand clutching Jake’s tightly and the other clinging to the mattress. I could tell from the wide smile on his face that he was imagining the stale basement air was cold and crisp and that the paneled walls were evergreens.

When we reached the bottom, Jake pulled off his sock and threw it at me as if it were a snowball. I threw my own pink-flowered one at his chest, and then we scrambled up the stairs and went tumbling down again and again. When we had exhausted ourselves, Jake collapsed on my basement floor, clutching his stomach from laughing so hard.

I had saved him once, I thought.

Now, I heard the stairs creak and saw my dad’s well-polished black shoes descending. He looked at the stacks of neatly arranged files and his chest swelled, the way it always did when I completed something. At my graduation, he had looked just like that sitting in the crowd. “You finished, sweetie?” he asked.

I nodded. “It’s all done.”

“Well, I’m not surprised,” he said. “You always were a fast worker.” I was still sitting at his feet, and he dropped his hand, letting it rest gently on my shoulder.

“Dad,” I said, “do you think I could take the rest of the afternoon off? I haven’t seen Jake in awhile, and I thought I might go visit him at work.”

He smiled. “Of course,” he said. “I’ll get you busy again in here tomorrow. Say hi to him for me, and tell him he needs to come over so we can talk baseball. I miss having another guy around the house.”


When I arrived at the pool, children were laughing and splashing in the shallow end, and girls were sunbathing. Mothers and grandparents sat on shaded lounge chairs, and people crowded under the awning of the snack bar, sipping Coca Colas and frozen drinks. Jake sat high in his chair, his eyes hidden by dark sunglasses, watching over everything.

I walked to his chair and tugged gently on his sandaled foot. He looked down in surprise, and his face lit up when he saw me. “Hannah!” he said. “You finally came.”

“Yeah,” I said, “I thought I’d surprise you.”

He glanced down at his watch. “My lunch break’s in ten minutes, but I can probably get someone to take over a little early. Why don’t you go over to the snack bar and get us some hot dogs? The vendor’s name is Mark. Just tell him I sent you.”

I ordered our hot dogs and got Jake’s just the way he liked it, with sauerkraut and mustard. A pretty blonde took Jake’s spot on the lifeguard chair and he came over and slung his arm around me and introduced me to Mark. “This is my sister, Hannah,” he said, nudging me gently in the ribs and grinning.
Mark raised his eyebrows. “Oh yeah? Well, that makes me a lucky guy, ‘cause that means I already have her number.”
Jake punched him lightly in the arm. “Hey, watch it,” he said, “and good luck trying to call that number.”
I blushed, and Jake led me away to a shaded table. “Mark is a good guy,” he said. “I could give him your number if you wanted me to.”
I smiled. “He’s a good friend of yours then?”
“You?” he said. “I like the people that work here.” He glanced down at his hands. “I don’t have much time to hang out with them or anything, but I like them all a lot.”
“That’s good,” I said. “I mean, that you like them.”
“Yeah.” He motioned toward the pretty blonde on the lifeguard chair. She had long, tanned legs, and bright red nail polish on her toes. “That’s Clara,” he said.
I grinned at him. “Oh?” I said. “So tell me about Clara.”
“You’d like her,” he said. “She listens to the Counting Crows, and she reads a book a week. Sometimes she comes to work early and plays with the little kids in the shallow end before she starts her shift.” He spun his straw idly in his drink. “I wanted to ask her to see a movie with me, but I’m worried I’d have to cancel, and it’d mess everything up. You know I don’t like disappointing people.”
I felt a bead of sweat drip down the back of my neck. “Jake?”
He looked me in the eye.
“Why are you so worried? I’ve seen you date a million girls before, and you’ve always been busy. You seem so worn down all the time.” I hoped he’d keep looking me in the eye so I could believe his answer, but he dropped his gaze again.
“I don’t know,” he said. “I’m just tired. I’ve been working so many shifts, I think it’s messed with my head a little, you know?”
“Can’t you work fewer hours or something? You don’t need the money that badly, your mom has always taken care of that—”
“Hannah, I can’t,” he said, his voice rising as he held up his hand to cut me off. His grip tightened on the tabletop, and his eyes looked almost menacing. “I just… can’t.” He took a deep breath and put his sunglasses back on.
We sat in silence, our hotdogs only half-finished, and my face tightened against surfacing tears. I listened to the children splashing, to the high laughter and calls of “Marco Polo.” I watched a boy’s knees wobble as he tested the weight of the diving board and landed with a flop in the water. I was startled by Jake’s touch. He placed his hand on top of mine, and I looked up but I couldn’t see his eyes through the dark shades. “Hannah, I’m sorry—” he said. “I didn’t mean to… I’m just… sorry.”
I drew my hand away and tucked it beneath my knee to stop myself from shaking. “It’s okay,” I said. I forced a smile. “Don’t worry about it. I just hope you feel better.”


I wondered if he would embrace me tightly with his strong arms the way he usually did, if I’d be able to smell the light scent of chlorine on his skin. We both rose from the table and stood straight and stiff as boards.

“I’ll see you,” he said.

I nodded and walked away, feeling light-headed. It’s the heat, I told myself, as my stomach turned at the thought of returning to my house alone. I shoved my shaking hands deep into my pockets. It’s the heat.

When we were eight, Jake and I heard a story that if you kept digging, the ground would eventually give way and you’d land safe among the clouds. I was a little skeptical; I wanted to know how you got back to earth once you made it to the sky. “If you make it that far, I think you can find a way,” Jake insisted. We took our red plastic shovels and tunneled our way into my sandbox.

About five inches deep, we struck an underground yellow jacket nest, and the bees buzzed angrily beneath us. The first bee surfaced in the sand, and a moment later, a swarm emerged, purring like an engine. I screamed, and Jake grabbed my hand and told me to run. The bees followed us across the yard, and I had almost made it to the house when I felt a sharp burning above my elbow; one relentless bee had his revenge. Jake turned up with seven stings; one just behind his ear swelled up the size of a golf ball and had to be iced the rest of the day. Somehow, I had just the one. I remember thinking, even then, that as long as I was with Jake, I was safe.

After visiting him at the pool that week, I spent my afternoons without him, much as I had done the rest of the summer. My mom asked if we were fighting, if I had gone to swim at his pool, if he’d like to come over for dinner. When I consistently supplied vague answers, she asked me to go to lunch with her, to help her in the yard, or pick up groceries, anything to keep me distracted. I accepted without protest; most of my summer consisted of busy work.

One afternoon, I was checking the expiration date on a carton of skim milk when I heard a shopping cart rattle into my own. I turned in surprise and saw Jake’s grandmother, blurring apologies and fumbling to gather the groceries she had knocked from my cart. I grabbed two oranges making a get-away down the aisle.

“It’s okay, Mrs. Bryant, don’t worry,” I said.

She finally looked up and saw me. “Oh, Hannah!” she said. I suddenly found myself
enveloped in her warm embrace, my cheek pressed against a cold stone on her long, dangly necklace. I could guess the cookies she’d been baking that day; she smelled of honey and cinnamon. She pulled away and dabbed at the corners of her eyes with her sleeve. “Oh sweetie, I’m so glad it’s you.”

Her laugh was as loud and boisterous as her size, and her tears left large splotches on my shirt when she pulled away from the warm hug. I rubbed her back in an attempt to soothe her.

“Please don’t worry, Mrs. Bryant, it’s just a couple of oranges. They’re fine, really,” I insisted.

A big, salty tear rolled down her cheek. “I’m just so clumsy these days,” she said. “I was trying to turn my cart, but I was looking at something in the fridge and crashed right into you.”

I continued to rub her shoulders until she calmed down. I knew better than to say too much. For my ninth birthday, she made me a tiny wicker chair for my princess teddy bear. She had spent weeks putting it together. The seat was lined with lace and jewels, and the base was shaped like an hourglass. One afternoon, my guinea pig escaped his cage and crawled inside, his fat bottom unable to push back the way he had come, and his black fur poking through the holes in the wicker.

I was afraid I would get in trouble and called Jake. He took a scissor and slowly cut through the wicker, as I begged him to be careful. When my parents discovered the destroyed chair, they made me promise to tell Mrs. Bryant what had happened so I wouldn’t have to lie when she asked me if I was using it. I tried to tell her about my guinea pig’s plight, about his pathetic whimpers, and how the wicker squeezed him so tight, I was sure he couldn’t breathe. She just cried and cried.

“I’m so on edge because of everything that’s happening,” she continued. Her tears had subsided to small sniffles. “It’s just so stressful.”

My hand froze on her shoulder.

“It’s gotten so bad she won’t even let anyone in the house to see her,” she said. “Her belly’s so swollen she looks pregnant, but the rest of her is so frail.” She drew in a deep, shaky breath. “I’m still a mother, no matter how old I get. And she’s still my little baby. It’s awful, to see your daughter like that. Just awful.”

She was assuming I knew what she was talking about; that I knew what illness Jake’s mother had, that I knew she was sick at all, and that I had been there for Jake through all of this.

“And on top of everything, I worry about Jake,” she said, and the tears began to well in her eyes again. “It’s so much stress on him. He wants to be with her all the time, but he has to work to help make ends meet. And it wears on him to see her like that. She was always on top of the world, and now he has to tend to her like a nurse. As if Jake hasn’t had enough to cope with already.”

My mouth was dry. I tried to imagine Jake’s mom beneath covers, her eyes shrouded by dark circles and her face pale and thin. “Is she—” I swallowed hard and leaned up against the cold refrigerator, not sure I could bear the answer. “Is she going to be okay?”

Tears spilled down Mrs. Bryant’s cheeks. I found myself breathing in that sweet scent of
honey and cinnamon as she pulled me back into her arms. “Oh, sweetie,” she said, “I guess Jake hasn’t let himself believe it yet either. Oh, sweetie, I wish she was.”

I could feel her tears tickling my neck as she buried her face under my cheek. I started to cry, too, and she wrapped her arms even tighter around my stomach. I was suffocated by her sickeningly sweet scent, but I didn’t want her to let me go. I was thinking of her house and the smell of cookies caught permanently in the pillows and blankets. I thought of Jake’s mom singing loudly with the radio on the way to his grandma’s house. I thought of long nights of board games with Jake and his mom and grandma, the loud laughter of the two women drowning out our tiny giggles. I thought of Jake’s mom. Her crooked smile and unruly curls. The stories she liked to tell again and again. The bright blue eyes she shared with Jake.

When his grandma finally let me go, I wasn’t sure my knees could support my weight. I had so many questions I was too ashamed to ask. She stroked my hair and told me Jake was lucky to have a friend like me. I wanted to ask if there was anything I could do, but I already knew the answer; there were plenty of things I could have done that I simply hadn’t.

“If you ever need help with anything, you can always call me,” I said instead, my voice quivering. She reached out and touched my cheek fondly. “Of course I know that,” she said. “Me and Jake both.”

When I arrived home, I began to unpack the groceries. I removed the milk from the shopping bag, and as I reached for the refrigerator, it slipped from my shaking fingers and splattered on the floor. I started to cry, and my mom came running and held me and rocked me back and forth as if I was a child. She asked me what was wrong. Had I been younger, I would have asked her how there could be something so terrible it could defeat a woman who was strong enough to be a mommy and a daddy, all in one. I knew I was too old to ask, but I wondered anyway.

My parents insisted that I go out of the house that night to take my mind off things. They didn’t know why I was upset. I had been too ashamed to tell them what I found out; surely, they would wonder what kind of friend I was if Jake hadn’t even wanted to come to me in his weakest moment, when he needed someone most.

I accepted their advice with reluctance and drove myself to the dodgeball courts at nine. I was the first one out every game. I was distracted by the bright red ball, remembering Jake using it as a cannon ball when his mom painted our faces like pirates. I wondered what he was doing at home, if I should call him about the secret he hadn’t wanted me to know. I wanted to take him skiing down my stairs again, to tell him everything would be okay, and for him to believe me.

Then I saw his red car roll up to the courts, its headlights flooding the pavement. Everyone stopped the game and ran excitedly to clap him on the shoulders; he hadn’t been at a game in weeks. I
hung back uncertainly with friends on the opposite team, hoping no one noticed a difference.

Suddenly, I couldn’t bear it any longer. I wanted to throw my arms around him, so he could know I hadn’t given up. I walked over but before I reached the net, he looked up, and our eyes locked. He didn’t smile or approach me. He just held me with his gaze. I knew then that his grandmother had told him she saw me. He was revealed. We stared at each other for a moment longer, his eyes as blank and unreadable as when he hid them behind sunglasses. Then he turned his back to me and stooped to pick up a ball.

“Let’s get the game started,” he said, and the teams assembled on the back lines until he gave the word.

I watched Jake come to life. He seemed to be even more into the game than usual, but there was something too serious about him. He threw the ball with a little too much force and a little too often, and he fought too desperately to stay in. He dived over one wild throw and landed hard on the pavement, skinning his knee. When Dan eventually clipped his shoulder with the tiny yellow ball, Jake barely smiled and walked off the court.

He didn’t aim for me once the whole game. In fact, he avoided looking at me altogether. When we were both on the sidelines, I stood next to him, lacing my fingers through the chain-link fence. He turned toward me and just stared with that same grave expression. I opened my mouth to speak, but the game ended, and everyone pushed off the fence excitedly to line up for the next one. Before I could utter a word, Jake turned away from me and followed the others.

I resumed my position on the back lines. I shoved my hands into my pockets and stared at my feet, an easy prey to even the weakest player. Then suddenly I felt and heard the sharp crack of a ball’s hollow stomach colliding with my nose, and my mouth and cheek burned, and the world tipped and went slightly dark as I stumbled back a step to regain my balance. The noise and commotion slowly stilled, the same way the world did as it spun to a stop. My jaw ached as I attempted to move it, and the skin on my face burned and burned. I steadied myself and looked up to see Jake standing at the net, his hand frozen where it had let the ball go.

I felt an unspeakable rage churn at the back of my throat, as hot and red as the blood dripping from the corner of my mouth. I reached for the ball that was rolling around at my feet and wanted to hurl it with all my might right back at him. I rose and brought my arm back but stopped suddenly. Jake’s arms now hung limp at his sides, and he stood rooted to the pavement, his eyes heavy with grief. I understood—in that moment, I wasn’t a person to him; I was his father’s alcoholism, his empty log cabin, his overtime hours, his mom’s illness—and I embodied it all because I was the only one who knew.

My arm relaxed, and I walked up to the net, so we were standing only a few feet apart. I tossed the ball lightly at his feet. “Hit me again,” I whispered. I was aware of everyone’s eyes on us.
The ball rolled across the pavement and bumped gently against his shoe. Jake looked down, and his shoulders slumped.

“Hit me again,” I said.

His whole body seemed to bow as if under a weight. He looked up, his expression tired and defeated. He shook his head. “I’m out,” he said and walked off the court.

Jake’s mom used to say that if she could snatch moments out of photographs, she would string them around her neck and wear them like a necklace. I sat on the floor of my room, pictures spread out around me like an exploded timeline of my life. There was Jake and I at our eighth grade dance, the first time I ever wore make-up. There was Jake and I in my dad’s arms at a pee-wee baseball game, the first time we ever won. There was Jake’s mom with sugary icing in her hair, teaching us to build a gingerbread house. I let the images blur and wondered which moments Jake’s mom would be taking with her.

The house phone rang, jolting my nerves like the sound of sirens. I scrambled to answer it before my parents woke up, knowing that Jake was only one person who would call my house at 2:00 a.m. “Hi,” I said, quietly.

“I’m outside,” he said.

“You can let yourself in. I’m in my room.”

I had left the court shortly after Jake that night. Our friends were worried; no one had dared to approach Jake after he walked off the court, and I was left to answer the questions. I hadn’t let on about anything; we’d had an argument, I said. Some of them were shocked and angry that he hit me as hard as he did, and they wanted to stay with me to help ice my swollen lip. I just wanted to be alone, I told them, and for once, I had almost meant it.

Jake appeared in my doorway. He was wearing the green plaid pajama pants he’d bought at a thrift store in ninth grade. I must have looked pitiful, sitting in the middle of a pile of old photographs with a swollen lip and a bruised left eye. He looked shocked when he saw the damage he had done to my face and dropped down beside me, wrapping his arms tightly around my frail frame.

“Oh god, Hannah, I’m so sorry,” he whispered.

“It’s okay,” I said, my voice choked. I relaxed in his arms, relieved to have him hug me again like he meant it. “Jake, if I had known—”

He pulled back and shook his head. “I didn’t want you to know. Don’t blame yourself.”

“But I could have asked you,” I said. “I knew something was wrong, and I didn’t even do anything about it. You’ve needed me, and I haven’t been here.”

“You did ask me,” he said. “That day, at the pool. And you’ve been trying to see me. This was my choice.”
He looked down at his hands and then to the pictures surrounding us. He reached out and laid his hand gently on a few as his eyes passed over them. Then his fingers stopped on one and he picked it up and brought it close to his face. It was from second grade Halloween; Jake had dressed up as Batman, and I as Catwoman. His mom had made our costumes by hand, along with a Wonder Woman costume for herself. In the picture, she was holding Jake and I in either arm, our feet dangling above the ground as if we were floating.

Jake put the photograph down and covered his face with his hands. I rested my fingers gently on his shoulder.

“I guess I haven’t really let myself believe it,” he said. “I know what the doctors say. But there’s this part of me that believes she’ll fight back. She always fights back. She’s stronger than this.”

“What is she sick with?” I asked hesitantly.

It took him a moment to answer, as if he was struggling to form the words. “Ovarian cancer,” he said, rubbing his forehead and closing his eyes. “That’s the first time I’ve said it out loud. I guess I thought if I didn’t talk about it, it wouldn’t be real. That I’d wake up one morning, and she’d be getting ready for work, and I’d tease her about whatever crazy pattern her nurse scrubs were that day. That everything would go back to normal.”

I rubbed his shoulders as he spoke. He was quiet for a long time, and his body shuddered as if struggling to cope. I reached out and picked up the picture again, studying our beaming faces.

“Do you remember that Halloween?” I asked him.

Jake’s eyes returned to the photograph. “Of course. I jumped off the roof and broke my leg,” he said. He shook his head regretfully. “I thought I could fly because my mom made me a cape.”

“I did too,” I said, remembering my own surprise, one story up, my fingers trembling against the weathervane as Jake plummeted to the earth and landed with a sickening crack. For one beautiful moment, he had really looked like he was flying. His cape caught in the breeze, and it danced around him, and his arms spread out like wings. He looked like he could be carried away on the wind. “I still do,” I confessed. “Even without her.”

He looked up at me, and his blue eyes brimmed with tears. It was the first time I’d seen him cry since the day we went skiing in my basement. He folded into my arms as if he fit, and his tears dripped down my neck, leaving dark splotches on the collar of my t-shirt. I had been supposed to jump off the roof with him that day, but I was too scared. He promised me it would be okay, and he went first. When his body snapped against the ground, I thought it must be a tree branch; I didn’t think Jake could break that way. Jake’s mom said that I cried more than he did.

“Jake’s not invincible, Hannah; he’s just a boy,” my mom told me.

After that, my parents got rid of my bunk beds; I became too afraid of heights to even try to sleep on the top.
jenna nissan

Jake dragged the back of his hand across his eyes. “I never understood how you felt that day until I saw her under the covers,” he said. “It felt like getting the wind knocked out of me, to see her defeated. I didn’t want you to feel that again. I thought I could protect you. I thought I could at least control that, but I couldn’t.”

I looked down at the photograph again. Jake’s mom’s hair surrounded her like a mane, a mess of wild brown curls, and she held the two of us in her arms with an effortless strength. Jake and I were grinning big smiles, the kind that said we didn’t yet know anything of broken promises, or broken hearts, or broken dreams. We were as brave as we would ever be. In masks and sequined disguises, we might have passed as superheroes.

I pulled back from Jake and looked at his face. His eyes were rimmed with red, and his cheeks were hot and sticky with his tears. He had a small scar under the brim of his nose. I knew my own eye was bruised a dark purple, and my lip was swollen and scabbled. We were fallible. I took his hands into my own and held them tight.
over there

robert kim
bird's egg

a photo by julie furbush
about the authors

maisie ganz is a senior majoring in Environmental Studies and Child Development. She comes from the Redwood forests of Northern California where she was raised on a monkey farm and only fed beets and garlic. Temporarily residing in Somerville, she has taken to tapping maple trees, baking bread, and tending to the herd of goats in her backyard. She plans to one day cook the world’s largest pancake.

sean hutchinson (class of 2007 Music major) was born and raised in Seattle, WA and has been a professional jazz drummer since his teenage years. He recently discovered a curiosity for writing through the poetry of Robert Creeley and Charles Bukowski, as well as the short stories of Hemingway. Writing is a new and challenging creative outlet and a welcome complement to a life of music.

victoria petrosino is a sophomore majoring in economics and community health. Besides writing poems, she enjoys watching Seinfeld, reading Graham Greene novels, waiting for people to wander into Oxfam Cafe, and being indecisive.

alexander kahn is a freshman who may major in International Relations with a concentration in International Finance. His favorite authors are John Steinbeck and Ernest Hemingway, but he’s not as serious as this all makes him sound.

jenna nissan is a sophomore majoring in English. She sleeps through the end of good movies, plays the guitar, and misses nineties Nickelodeon. She believes in stars. Her favorite baseball player is Paul O’Neill, and she named her first fish Rumpleshiltskin. She wrote her first poem about a horse in second grade, and has wanted to be a writer ever since.
cityview
a photo by rachel kim