outbreath

short stories, photography, and poetry

fall 2008

XX
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In the four years that I have worked on *outbreath*, I am continually astonished by how much of themselves people are willing to give away in stories. It’s as if by giving pain another name we can confront our true sorrows more freely. Writing is a second chance, a way to play out an alternative scenario, a way to speculate.

There is no dividing line between fiction and reality. Reading triggers the memories of past experience. Present experience relates to scenes drawn from novels, allowing us to draw strength from the idea that we already know the conclusion. Truth swallows the details of a story and fiction restores those details to make the event sharper and more real.

You have lived pieces of these stories; you have contributed to the reasons they were written. My advice? Look for yourself on these pages. Every beginning, every sentence, every word is a collaboration. I am grateful and proud to put my name on this magazine, but each page belongs to us all.

Victoria Petrosino  
Co-Editor
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Jaani was slicing onions with quick, precise movements when Dev walked through the door. Two pots on the stove were sizzling, and the smell of cumin and coriander lingered in the hallway. Dev dropped his briefcase next to the door and walked into the kitchen, loosening his tie.

“Jaani?”

Jangi clenched her teeth and inhaled sharply as the slow clicking of his shoes neared the kitchen.

“Hmm,” she said looking at the clock on the microwave. It read 8:30. “Did you have another meeting?”

“No,” he paused, flipping through the mail. “Rob was just giving us some last minute details about the client tomorrow.” He looked up and asked, “Did you talk to Ma today?”

Jangi chopped the carrots and put them into a bowl. He first called her jaani after they had slept together for the first time. She had giggled and kissed him, delighted by this cute, familiar play on her name. The next day, Mel asked what the big deal was. Jangi explained to her that Dev was the only Indian she had ever been with. Being his jaani was why.

“So you had sex with him so he’d call you honey in Hindi?” asked Mel, “George would’ve called you jaani if you’d just told him to.”

Jangi couldn’t convey what the intimacy of that word meant to her. The connection she felt with Dev was not simply about the man, it was about her idea of what should love be. It connected the disparate spheres of her family, and the life she had created away from it. Two weeks later he proposed, and she accepted. Dev was the man she should be marrying, she thought. She wanted to be his jaani for the rest of her life.

They had an elaborate, five-day wedding at the Ritz Carlton in Central Park, complete with dholaks, shehanayis, and the entire New Delhi clan of Manhattan. She had attended countless weddings with George, where he would remark on the beauty of the ceremony and the bride’s gown. All she would notice was a long white dress and flowers. Her heart would sink at the thought of standing at the altar, trying to replicate this unfamiliar ritual with George. At the Ritz, there was chaos when Maharani Caterers brought extra meat samosas instead of vegetarian ones. Dev’s mother nearly had a heart attack when her daughter showed up wearing an old ghagra instead of the sari they had picked out together. Mel lamented over her long, black Cavalli halter gown, which paled in comparison to the sea of colorful, intricately patterned salwars, pallus, ghagras and churidar-kurtas. As she sat in front of the blazing marital pyre, Jangi listened to the priest chant incomprehensible Sanskrit phrases and the women whispering to each other about how beautiful she looked and how fortunate he was. She looked at Dev, looking as handsome in his gold embroidered sherwani as the day they met, and thought, “Perfect.” That night he whispered jaani in her ear over and over again.

“Jaani,” Dev said louder over the sound of the exhaust fan, “did you call Ma?”

“Yes. I called,” Jangi snapped. She went to the stove and swept the pile of sliced vegetables into the
large, steel pot. The oil sizzled loudly, releasing a burst of smoke.

Dev opened the cupboard and took out a bag of Cheetos. The plastic crunched as he pulled open the bag, “What did she say. Is she feeling any better?”

The previous week Janki had been bed-ridden because of the combination of Dr. Rogers’s advice for more rest, and her mother-in-law’s excessive maternal anxiety, which had become especially acute since hearing about Janki’s pregnancy. Dev had worked late four days that week, and had neglected to get any of the groceries she asked for. Now that his mother felt a slight fever coming on, Dev had been calling home every afternoon coaxing Janki to check up on her.

“She’s fine, Dev, it’s all a big fuss,” Janki stirred the pot. “As usual,” she muttered.

Before leaving that morning, Dev had told Janki that his mother was expecting a call from her around lunchtime. Janki had her monthly lunch date with Mel so Janki told her to come over instead of going out.

“What is it this time – did she snuffle and think it was pneumonia?” Mel had asked. Giddy at the thought of seeing her dear friend, Janki had set up a beautiful spread next to the tall windows in the dining room overlooking Second Avenue, so she could pretend to be part of the rest of the world for an hour.

Mel had talked about the merger that was taking place between her company and its former rival, and the stress it induced on her sex life with Jeff. She spoke about Jeff’s installation piece for Columbia University’s art gallery, and how his frustration actually made him more creative with the meals he cooked for them, so at least she ate well even if she wasn’t getting any. Janki had laughed at the appropriate times, but her heart pounded as Mel spoke. She glanced at Mel’s crisp black suit, blow-dried hair and impeccable make-up, and down at her own faded maternity pants. She fidgeted with her gold wedding bangles, which hadn’t matched any of her clothes since her wedding day, and now felt tight around her pregnant wrists. She asked Mel about their favorite bakery on 42nd Street with the crazy Italian owner who wanted to set Janki up with one of his sons. She talked about things which were important in her old life, her life before staying at home everyday, calling her parents-in-law once a week to check in, asking for the recipes of Dev’s favorite foods - before marriage, family, and pregnancies. Mel asked Janki for the hundredth time if she was happy and for the hundredth time, Janki smiled and said she had responsibilities now.

“Oh, by the way, Janki, I saw George and little Miss-Perfect-Wife yesterday,” Mel said as she was leaving. “He asked how you were doing.”

Janki, holding the door open, felt her heart thumping and said, “Oh. What did you say? How-how is he?”

“They were coming out of that little bistro you introduced him to - the seafood one on West 4th Street? She was complaining about the clams – or yams, or something. Apparently, her perfect stomach can’t handle the stuff George likes. Anyway, I told them you were pregnant and fabulous as ever!” laughed Mel.

“Fabulous as ever?” Janki raised her eyebrows. “Well,” she laughed, a little too loudly, “thank you for lying!”

They hugged as Mel said, “Honey, you’re the most fabulous woman I know.” She held Janki at arm’s length, “And I know fabulous women - look at me!” They laughed as she walked down the hallway.

Janki closed the door and ran to the bathroom to throw up the lunch she had just eaten. Then she sat on the toilet and cried, until Dev’s phone call interrupted her.
That night Dev went to bed early without eating dinner. She didn’t reply when he told her he had already eaten. She put the food in Tupperware boxes, as she had seen her mother do a countless times when she was little. One night she had asked her mother what she was thinking during this nightly ritual. Her mother replied that she was thinking of what she would cook the next day.

Janki sat on the bed and looked at Dev. When they were newlyweds, she used to stroke his hair and watch him breathe. Now the only thought she had before getting into bed was George. It was with a hollow sadness that she thought the countless times they had been too tired to make love, and instead talked into the early hours of morning. At these times, she imagined what she might tell George of her marriage now, and what she would say when he asked why she had stayed with Dev.

She went into the spare room and sat at the oak desk in the corner, pulling out a thin stack of papers from one of the drawers. Janki wouldn’t say anything tonight. Tomorrow, she wouldn’t say anything either. She could not admit defeat when she had chosen the man, the rituals, the life. She could not bear the weight of her mistake in leaving George. She would not admit that she chose the façade of her culture over being with George. That she had chosen her image of an ideal man instead of real, flawed love. Tomorrow, they would have their short conversations where Dev absent-mindedly called her ‘jaani’ and the silences between them would stretch out even longer. Tomorrow, the gulf between them would widen, as they would struggle to find common ground, to find themselves in each other.

She looked at the stack of divorce papers, with ‘Janki Shankar’, her signature, and the year-old date on it. She touched her name before putting it back in the drawer. Before going to bed, Janki went into the hallway and sprayed it with Febreeze to get rid of the smell of her food.
The summer sun beats down upon me
darkening my skin.
revealing, as it sears my light complexion,
my mixed heritage.
stripping me from the world of whites
where I now live.

they claim, this is a modern world.
but they’re just gringos on vacation.
spending soles on cute trinkets.
sweet memories, of our rich exotic land.
Incas chewing coca in the Andes
iconic symbols woven painstakingly
into a llama wool hat.
silver crosses from regional mines.
\textit{pisco sours - papas, so many kinds of papas}
all for you,
on your ascension to Machu Pichu.
our culture has been consumed by you.
as though it were for sale.
what joy I’ve found
in lentejas y arros
the bright white rice, sheltered alongside
the aji and steaming beans.
greenish gray morsels
garnished with an egg.
a perfect meal
unaware,
that you had chicken.
without worry
of a dinner lamp snuffed out by a bang.
nor the pieces of your cousin in the mail.
a random note
a last reminder that he had lived.
the wires
the barbed fucking wires.
stretching cross the city
woven into every cement fixture.
roofs glistening at night.
the glass shards secured by concrete.
the dogs in waiting.
my family laughing.
as tio Lucho tells a joke.

but with a madre gringa
and a ticket north.
I was removed.
speaking with aid
from speech pathologists.
bending my tongue into a canoe.
renouncing erres
erre con erre caril.
turned to “the’s” and “t’s.”
 kissing close friends with hand shakes.
as winter winds blew in each year.
 white clouds enveloping my sun.
 consuming the rich dark reds that I wore,
 until left with only my mothers skin.
 white and fair,
 and despite the dark black hair
 I could walk among you,
 each step in your light
 was one further from home.
 quiero conocer más de quechua
 I prompted mi papa.
 now my father calls me mike.
 but now as the summer sun.
 calls upon my fathers hide.
 the gringo veils removed.
 like a freckle on my mother's
 irish skin.
 I shine
 a spic
beach

a photo by Ian MacLellan
Boys, ineloquent
to the marrow,
spit out the slurs
like the drunkards
soaking the populace
with their blasé, homophobic,
verbal diatribes, eager to skewer
and separate the “men” from the hens.

They say “only Faggots act like that,”
but they could never understand
we’d do anything possible
just to prevent being
classified as one
of the tribe
made of
merely
Boys.

hands clear
a photo by Anonymous
shadow benches

a photo by Sarah Korones
uncle phil's flight after death

professor rebecca kaiser gibson

If in the accompany of the two animal-faced angels,
his thin feet faced straight before, as written
by Ezekiel, his eyes flamboyant auroras,
he’d bowed always to the shekinah, downcast
in the medieval mind, where snails cure infection,
if he having spoken holy holy over the echoic decades,
 holy corridors reverberating, in the fret work
 worked metal intricacies of data,
dates and details, he’d crouched in his bow and readiness
to fly with the two, the brothers,
one on each side, winged and furred,
lifting him by his ever-bent elbows,
and light as dust to fly, his heels like a young goat’s,
hitched up, born angle of a man, he’d be
empty now. All his stories bound on spindles spun out,
a long tail over the hills and dreams.
He, unburdened, his song in the bird’s throat,
his bells in the oaken swale memorized
in the first star light, the ritual sky
that he was taught: One for the one
and hear one. The repeated
light in the old knowing.
You were upsetting the apple cart
before the horse, when Don’t, I said.
I would have been above the tree line,
glossy thick in the late autumn and the apples
sorted by mushy Macs, Macoon, Galas,
Delicious, hard as packing crates,
golden Goldens, white fleshy, then mottled.
I liked apples as much as anyone
but your dark fear propelled me. I said
Why do you barrel down the path
in a cart with no harness, breathless
past the present, into the only
one future – the one you want to avoid?
What is a prophet
who by harangue harvests evidence?

thirsty

a photo by Scott Newton
Miles pressed his nose dangerously close to the top of the toaster, lulled into an early-morning daze by the warmth of the glowing orange bars and the mysterious gentle buzzing (a noise he had long since realized didn’t comply with the standard mechanics of the appliance). It was 5:30 AM, an obscene hour to be barefoot on the kitchen tile, in a cold sweat nonetheless, clammy palms (and bitten fingernails- a habit he could never shake) fumbling with the stuck dial and eyes darting back and forth from toast to clock, toast to clock. The calendar on the wall (a fuzzy orange tabby—someone last holiday had decided to further feed his mother’s penchant for tiny, huggable house pets) marked no momentous occasion or impending event that would be likely to instill the kind of anxiety in him that was, at the moment, impossible to miss. No, the cold sweats, the apprehensive countdown of the seconds (approximately 110 until the toast popped up), was as religious a morning routine for Miles as brushing his teeth and knotting the burgundy tie that private school disciplinarians forced him to wear.

At first the toaster hadn’t been anything out of the ordinary—it worked in charming cohesion with the rest of the family of household appliances strewn around the kitchen counters. The tiny white Cuisinart had been popping out such carbohydrate flawlessness that it was hard for Miles not to notice the day when things became inconsistent. What shifting in the tides might have caused such a thing was unbeknownst to him, but the dial became stuck between 2 and 3, and the toast, taking on a mind of its own, became a sort of prophetic indication of how the day would go. It didn’t take long for him to realize that its karmic powers were not to be ignored—when 5:30 AM burnt toast popped up, Miles fell flat on his face walking to the board during Calculus that day; when 5:30 AM golden brown toast popped up, Miles found a green Ulysses S. Grant on the sidewalk. He’d been through it all—toast blackened to a crisp, warmed slices of bread that came out undeserving of the title ‘toast’, the absolute definition of perfection in toast (as if manna from heaven), and even one horribly foreshadowing morning with a small, contained toaster fire.

The perfect symbiosis of boy and foreshadowing toaster lasted many magical months until, tragically, garage sale season. After an out-of-state weekend, Miles had awoken Monday in his own home to the sight of a barren, toaster-less countertop (he ate lucky charms and stayed home that day, panicked). Through a feat almost as miraculous as the ways of the toaster itself, his mother remembered to whom she had passed it off: new neighbors. Each minute, each second, was precious, and Miles, perpetually shoeless, made a beeline for the house with the moving van parked outside. For months he had been somewhat prepared for how things would turn out- always one step ahead, it seemed- but when he rang the doorbell, he was met with a wonderful unfamiliar sense of shock. A girl, as if taken right out of a carefully-painted da Vinci work, stood before him and smiled, one hand outstretched in a greeting, the other by her side, fingers wrapped around a perfect piece of golden brown toast.
battery gardens
a photo by Linda Yung
the room is full
the bookcase with what
I never read and always meant to
the shelf with the TV
brought over from the last home
the chair
    with you
    over your shoulder is a painting
my mother once bought me
it fills the wall ugly

look out the window
the moon is white
the trees are green
    your hair is purple
the ground is black
it’s 4 AM
and I’m not ready to admit
    it’s already tomorrow

on the shelf
there’s a Oaxacan figurine
from Mexico
    like your father
    you visited him and chased chickens
we don’t serve chicken in my house
we’re vegetarians
I wonder how I’ll eat
when every option is meat
    I met you just a year ago
    but I’m not ready for you to --
leaves are going to be turning colors
Boston autumn will be beautiful
    like you
like no one’s ever bothered to tell you before
it’s 4:30
we’re standing awkwardly on my stairs
you have work today
and tomorrow
and the next and
  you’re crying in my arms
  rain stealing your tears
  the water is making your hair dye drip
my shirt is purple
I don’t know if I packed enough shirts
packing life into a mini-van is not easy
some things have to be left behind
I hugged my teddy bear for a half hour
labored over every DVD
every book
every fucking pair of shoes
I planned every detail about leaving
boxed everything that would fit

it’s 5 AM

I’m on my porch
bathed in the flicker of streetlights
clicking off to dawn
and I can’t help but notice
there’s a very scared girl in my arms
she’s crying purple into my chest
I’m just crying
cow umbrella

a photo by Ian MacLellan
at your funeral

lilia carey

If they corner you in a parking lot
on a late night, a dark night,
kick dirt in your eyes,
and press your face to the pavement,
I’ll sit by the bloodstain that remains.

If a black jeep swerves, hits and runs,
and leaves you in the median, I’ll stop
roadside, place a flower and a card,
graffiti your name along the granite.

If I lose you to the turbulent sea,
you’ll see me wading in the waves, taking the dive.

If it’s your heart that fails, I’ll beat on for you.

And if sleep takes you at last, I’ll slip between
your sheets, rest my head on your pillow
and dream us both awake for another day.

At your funeral,
I won’t say much, I won’t stay long.
lincoln dawn

a photo by Ian MacLellan
On a Wednesday evening, the glorious midway point marking the demise of the first half of the week, a conservative 63-year-old named Gloria was on her way home from a pilates course when she saw, among the rows of washers and dryers in the eerily-lit laundromat, a rail-thin boy standing in his skivvies, wearing a backpack. Gloria, whose diction (especially that regarding apparel) tended to be as outdated as her penny loafers and once in-style name, stood for a moment, aghast at the sight, then quickened her pace home.

Emmanuel reached down to pull up a white tube sock that had been slipping its way down his ankle for the past five minutes. It was September; it was cold. Unwelcome air was silently sneaking its way in through the spot in the front door missing an entire panel- right underneath the “OM” in bold block lettering whose bulbs must have gone out at least a year or two ago. Fixing that, understandably, proved to be nobody’s first, or even last, priority. LAUNDRI AT proudly illuminated the street. Emmanuel leaned his bare back up against the dryer for warmth while his sole outfit tumbled around frantically inside. He had never been one with a particular penchant for keeping track of hours or minutes- the rise and fall of the sun was sufficient for him when it came to the logistics of time. So when a turn of the sidewalk had led him in front of the building, he was so drawn to the idea of warm post-dryer clothing that the fading hours of daylight and the prospect of having to stand waiting in his boxers (one of his least favorite activities) seemed insignificant.

He stood, biding time, folding, unfolding, and then folding again, the one page he had ever dared to rip from a book the day he had finished reading it at the Free Public Library. He had carefully pulled it free of the binding and ever since, it had graced the same small place in his front pocket where he could check, if ever necessary, to make sure he hadn’t lost it. He wouldn’t lose it. He turned it over and, squinting through the waning prescription in his framed glasses, read the words, almost reciting each one before his eyes rested upon the next.

“In traveling, a companion,’ as the saying goes.”
I nod. Nod, nod, nod— that’s all I seem capable of. But what should I say?
“How does that end?” she asks.
“In life, compassion,” I say.
““In traveling, a companion, in life, compassion,”’ she repeats, making sure of it. If she had paper and pencil, it wouldn’t surprise me if she wrote it down.
“I think it means,” I say, “that chance encounters are what keep us going. In simple terms.”

“Ever chance meetings’... how does the rest of that go?”
“Are the result of karma.”
“Right, right,” she says. “But what does it mean?”
“That things in life are fated by our previous lives. That even in the smallest events there’s no such thing as coincidence.”
‘Nobody seems to get it right quite like Haruki’, Emmanuel thought, as always, then letting his mind drift off to the foreign corners of Japan, a place he knew only through images and text book history— a place that he knew was worth visiting if it had birthed such a writer. ‘Someday’, he assured himself. Emmanuel was always honest with himself, because there were not many other people he needed to be honest with— but this was one instance where he needed to almost stifle his frank and unedited thoughts. Somewhere in the back of his mind Emmanuel fought with the growing reality that he would be here forever. Yet for the time being, he was the reigning champion and could always win this fight.

Enveloped in warm pants and sweater, and with no watch on his wrist to check the time (what was the need?), Emmanuel began the ten block walk, smelling of soap and the unfortunate laundromat scent that lingered on his clean clothing. Clutching the handle of his violin case close to his side, the same excitement he felt each time he was about to play the instrument began to run through his hands, from wrist to fingertip, giving him a warmth no pair of gloves could provide him. By night, Emmanuel images himself a concert violinist, though his audience is far from the wealthy suburbanites draped in pearls who shuttle themselves into the city for a night of heightened sophistication. His audience is far more diverse, his theater has far less seats, none of them red velvet. When he’s behind his precariously tilting music stand, he likes to watch his audience, trudging here and there- the occasional few running if they are late to make the scheduled train- and hope that they are listening. He hardly sees any conversations between the people, but Emmanuel likes that for brief moments, they’re all there together. They’re all in it together.

With five blocks left in his straight-line journey to the underground, the sun finally disappears and the city seems to slowly awaken. Stores flick on bright neon signs to alert passerby that yes, of course they’re still open!, while somewhere behind him there’s the sound of thick, deep-toned laughter. Violin case stuck to his hip, Emmanuel tightens the straps on his book bag, drawing it closer to his back. The only other object he has to his name, it’s full of novels and a library card tucked into the small zipped pocket- by day, Emmanuel is a book reviewer, a novelist, a connoisseur of words as he sits between the shelves of the library (where, even among so much, he still feels like a visitor). When he reaches the station, he descends the steps slowly as others hurriedly ascend, and he is briefly lost again in a sea of bodies and movement.

When he approaches his usual stage, which to the untrained eye seems to be just a plot of tile like all the rest, about to undo the hinges on the violin case, Emmanuel hesitates. Upon second glance around him, nothing is out of the ordinary—there has been no tricky reversal of train platforms, the rats are still darting out of their tiny wall lairs when they think the coast is clear, and the sounds are those he’s become accustomed to in his many evenings spent here. Yet Emmanuel is suddenly overcome by a strange sense—one that is, at the same time, awakening and halting. It’s enough to make him move a little slower, assemble his music stand with just that much more caution, and take in the subtleties around him with a little more attention than usual. But when he begins his first note, his eyes following the jubilant dance of the tiny black marks up and down the five lines and translating them into tangible sound, Emmanuel becomes lost in the music- the same place he finds himself lost each night. ‘This is it,’ Emmanuel thinks to himself, as his callused fingers pluck the strings and the sound
pours through the tunneled halls. Some people toss a dollar or a few nickels into the open case, some even pause to listen for a moment or two, but most avoid his eyes completely.

On the platform that Emmanuel eventually moves his stand to, for a welcome change of scenery, a small group of people wait, undoubtedly for the 11:28 train, because not many others run at that time of night. They are gathered in silence. The whole station seems to be flooded with that same silence, and Emmanuel stands a small distance away from them—he is not a part of them, no— and plays gently, the type of music that is just fitting for late into a Wednesday evening. When the larger hand on the clock surpasses 11:28 without a train bursting into the still station, Emmanuel notices a small shift in the people. More sleeves are drawn back to reveal watches, more necks crane to see the same time displayed behind them on the wall. Emmanuel’s eyes settle on a red-headed girl, face dappled with a blanket of freckles, possibly the same age as he, although he doesn’t know his own age or birth date (but has managed to make light of it and celebrate it on a different day each year! He chooses the nicest day).

Mercy Parker settles back onto the bench tiredly, looking around her. 11:32. No train. She blows auburn fringe out of her eyes and twists a tiny silver ring around her finger. For a moment she desperately runs through excuses in her head. If the train had been on time, she would still be arriving home four hours late.

‘Volunteering ran late. They needed me to help out with something especially important. I helped an elderly lady move furniture into an apartment. I saw a stray dog that needed help. The car broke down...’ she tries out each excuse in her head, her shoulders rising and falling with a quick chuckle at the complete absurdity of the last. ‘Would they even notice?’ Mercy wonders, on second thought, trying to recall how many times in the past month her parents hadn’t even exchanged two words with her when she got home from volunteering in the city. They’d forced that on her, but now didn’t even seem to care. She liked nothing more than to be caught up in the big city excitement. In her small town she always seemed to be longing for louder, bigger, better, but out in the city, in the midst of it all, anonymity seemed to suit her. Mercy looks to the left of her at the formally-dressed business woman seated within a foot of her, though they are both silent. 11:36.

Taking out her palm pilot, Maria DePaul feels her throat closing up. She knows her throat is closing up. ‘Shit!’ she lets her mind give way to uncensored angry phrases and all she can focus on is the board meeting tomorrow morning. Six hours from now. 11:37. ‘Where is the train? Are these clocks even right?’ she shakes nervously, and taps the pen of her palm pilot on the screen in a calming, rhythmic manner. Tap. Tap. ‘And won’t that violin playing stop for two minutes!’ she fumes to herself, peering over at the lanky boy on the platform pulling the bow back and forth across the instrument. ‘What a shame when children start to travel down the wrong pathways in life. I wonder where he went wrong,’ Maria wonders, pulling her purse closer to her side as she struck by the realization that she may just be in the presence of a delinquent. Tap. Tap. Tap. She sneers when the man beside her glances down at her palm pilot.

11:44. Joseph Birch stands up, unable to appreciate the rhythmic tapping of the haughty business woman’s pen. As a music teacher, this surprises even himself, as he has managed to sit through the worst of lessons with misplaced flats and sharps, out-of-tune instruments and one young student who, even with a metronome
holding his hand the whole way, couldn’t master a simple beat. 11:46. Joseph watches the violinist, and places him around seventeen or eighteen years old. ‘My own son would be around that age now,’ he allows himself to realize. ‘Maybe younger. Then again… maybe… a bit older.’ His face contorts as he struggles with the memory. The passing of years was already taking his agile athleticism, his thick dark hair, the days when back pain was the least of his worries- ‘Please, God,’ thought Joseph, ‘at least let me hold onto my memories.’

11:48. Finally, after twenty minutes of prolonged silence, stress and worry break down the barriers between this small group of people, and they begin to ask the obvious questions, and answer among themselves the same obvious answers. Maria finally stops hiding behind the glow of the palm pilot, switching it off. Mercy and Joseph manage to pull their eyes from the violin player (they’d been staring for different reasons) and, still, no train in sight, they all find themselves face to face, for the seemingly first time. Talk of the train- lack thereof- soon fades away, and at different moments, each entertain similar versions of the same thought: Maybe trains should be delayed more often. The clock on the wall is stationary as its hands creep along, number by number, and then- “Hey,” Joseph directs towards the violinist, motioning him towards them all.

Emmanuel walks toward the group that he had been playing for all the while- none of them really noticed the gentle lull of background music until it stopped. The older gentleman reached into his briefcase- a mess of papers were housed inside, and Emmanuel caught sight of jumbled treble clefs and eighth notes and rests. The man pulls one out and hands it over to Emmanuel. “Do you take requests?” The man smiles wearily at Emmanuel. 12:31. Under his eyes are divots sunken deeply enough for someone to curl up and take a nap in. Emmanuel places the untitled sheet of music on his stand, glances it over for a moment, and slowly begins to play, measure by measure.

It is in that moment, between the fifth and sixth line, that Emmanuel begins to recognize the song, somewhere deep in the back of his mind. Its familiar rhythms, the sad gentle melody- it flows from Emmanuel’s own hands to his ears. The man, who has gone to sit back down, begins to hum along with it. A mixture of humming and a distinct warbling whistle. Emmanuel knows the song, and even more so, that whistle that accompanies it. The image of a thunderstorm graces his memory- the hottest day of July, outside fireflies were flickering in the dark of the field, Emmanuel, too young to remember more, sitting on the knee of a man- his father?- whistling along to that song. Emmanuel stops the song short, overwhelmed, and stares towards the man, whose back is now turned to him. 12:59. The pause is interrupted by the train hurling itself into the station, and the group disperses, each person into a separate train car, going separate ways, as it pulls away as quickly as it came.
do not enter
a photo by Linda Yung
her mother's rules

jesse welch

1. Your boyfriend doesn’t have to be Jewish

2. But it would be nice if he was

3. Do not be racist, sexist, homophobic, 
Elitist, exclusivist, or fascist  
God loves everyone on this Earth 
Be Godly

4. You are not a lesbian

5. Go to the Pride Parade, Immigration Marches, and 
Civil Rights Rallies, 
Honor picket lines 
Allies are important

6. Go to synagogue

7. You are not a lesbian

8. You boyfriend does not have to be Jewish

9. Keep the door closed 
When your boyfriend is over 
He probably wants some privacy

10. Use protection, 
STDs are dangerous

11. Keep the door open 
When girls are over
12. Hell, your boyfriend can be Muslim for all I care

13. That little slut cannot sleep over
   I know what you two do

14. You are not a lesbian

15. Keep the door closed
   When you leave
   I don’t want you thinking
   You can come back
hazy skyline

a photo by Kat Robinson
our buildings have roots

Our buildings have roots:
The copper and lead piping
Red with rust
And pristine powder
Blues resting on each other;
They extend:
Piping and rusting
While the asphalt skin steals the heat from the sun
Metal vessels absorbing.

Brass doorknobs and silver handles growing down
Wiring and fiber optics watching, rooting
Rotting ivy
Freehanded lines just fading
Cooling
But more gold stolen
From the shadows transfusing sanguine streams, some light
While the asphalt steals the heat from the sun
And the metals steal the water from the roots.

White exes mulled over sticky,
Gritty,
Chalky ground
Lead paint—
The crosswalks like
Track marks, scabbed in tar
On the street
Cracked where the roots are gasping for
Water.

Pristine powder blue
With oxygen
Not chlorine.
Even though my body needs it,
And the metals steal the water from the roots,
And the street swallows old rain—smoky,
Gaps and iron grids
Polluted slipping.

Its water they don’t want.

old city jerusalem pinhole
a photo by Ian MacLellan
la canción de mis pestañas

kat robinson

In a cumulative count,
if the judges tally the totals,
how much do we miss
when our eyes
are closed in a blink?

My bare feet humbly trace
the cracks of the stone streets,
like so many winding lines
of a Rand-McNally
leading to Texas
or the shore or a marble monument,
and everything around me

is alive.
Full of la vida,
full of life.

Underneath the awning
Señor Márquez is
deep in a love affair,
whispering mustached words
to el fondo de la botella

while the man across from him
moves a chess piece
and to no one in particular, triumphs,
“We didn’t come to the United
States. It came to us.”

I am following a stray dog
who is following warm bread smell
that’s traveling through the
open door of la panadería
from which this dynamic couple
just emerged—mother
placing gentle tickling kisses
on each of the baby’s toes.

El sacerdote rubs his crucifix
between his forefingers
and tilts his balding head
towards the graying sky,
looking for a sign from God
or a sign of rain,

and I think maybe I would sacrifice
never being able to
flutter eyelashes
at my handsome neighbor again
if it would mean
I could keep them open forever
esperanza
a photo by Sasha deBeausset
1.

I learned to dive in Maine lakes, swimming
to the spasming beat of breath-holding.
Twenty-five feet below the surface,
eels wriggled through the silty twilight.

2.

They must have come through underground
springs, strings of flooded caves. Writhing
and turning through stalactite fields,
past schools of luminescent minnows.

3.

The eels copied the sargasso,
learned to take root in rock grottoes
and sea mud. They learned to flow,
swaying with the current, mouths gaping.

4.

Eels aren’t animals at all!
They’re dredged silt and seawater,
cut and stretched out into strips.
When they die, they evaporate.

5.

Karen and I watched the moray in the corner
of the tank, predatory rhythm in the hinge
and unhinge of his jaws. Wide open.
do not worry about the
stained fairytales

ariana siegel

Today is Ahmed’s funeral and the morning has been up all night with the jitters. I can see it out my window; the day was so nervous it shoved the sun out of bed before the moon was ready to set. Now the sky is confused, all gray on one side and violet on the other.

It is still very early, but people are awake. Around here everyone is restless. The old man across the street is stooping to give a stray cat some milk, and though the cat was probably tabby colored once it is now the color of limestone dust like everything else. It will blend in with the walls, like the old Hamas campaign posters.

I like the morning because I can just sit and read my books. There are so many books in my room that they have become the walls, and when I take one out I create a hole. Some books I borrowed, some I stole, some I found on the street left for dead. Ummi says to me Mohammed, with your head always in a book, how will you see where you are going? I tell her not to worry. I am always telling her that.

The light from the window is bright enough to read by. I sit with my favorite book, trying to hear its story over my little brothers’ childish snores beside me. This one is the story of a hero.

They say Ahmed was a hero. I believe them. I bet when that dirty Israeli bastard shot him in the head I bet my brother looked him in the eyes and said I am not scared. Not with words, just with his eyes. They were always burning, and I never knew with what. Now I probably never will.

Someone is rustling in the kitchen. That sound of clarified chaos that usually means Ummi is cooking. I should help. The whole neighborhood will come today, and anyway, I am hungry.

In fact it is my three aunts in the kitchen, not Ummi. They are wearing black robes of mourning, and their headscarves droop over their foreheads and shadow their eyes. One is cracking eggs on a skillet for breakfast. One is chopping meat for the reception. One is spinning in the corner. I love to watch when she does this. She kneads the milky-white threads between her calloused fingers and they slide through the wheel as she taps her foot in constant rhythm until they disappear into the matrix of her weaving.

I should have known it would be my aunts and not Ummi in the kitchen. For three days Ummi has not left her chair. She has not eaten, slept, spoken or cried. Though time has folded her skin she is a vital woman, and normally possesses infinite energy. Now she reeks of sitting still. Her eyes trouble me; the irises misty, the eye-
lids flexed, the brows curved skyward. Five times a day she falls on her knees, buries her face in the ground and draws slow rattling breaths that she holds for a second, before releasing them in a stream of whispered praise and pleading with Allah. I always want to embrace her and tell her Get some rest, but when I approach her she just says You will make me proud Mohammed, my love, I know you will. Sometimes I am not sure that she is talking to me.

People have begun to arrive. Allah, there are so many guests. How is a person to mourn? He was my older brother after all. The only one I had. No one in this community gives young men space to feel.

The guests are telling me I look just like him. They say that we have the same eyes. They say they have high hopes for me.

The old cat-feeder approaches me and murmurs that he has something important. I follow him away from the crowd. When we get outside he stops and stares at his fist. It not what it used to be, with veins protruding through loose brown skin and gummy scars. He begins to open it finger by finger. In his palm I see some sort of scrap metal that looks like a bit of shrapnel from the kind of guns Israelis used to use. This was lodged in my leg, he says. I pulled it out and killed the sorry Jew bastard and soon those scum will be pushed into the sea, God willing. Then he looks up at me and says Now your turn, without speaking. His irises are gray edged with violet.

I do not think I mentioned how I got my favorite book. It is a picture book with a hard orange-red coffee-stained cover, and I got it from a secret hole in the wall between us and them. I had never seen the hole before, or maybe I had but I ignored it. The day that I found the book I was walking to school when I saw it squished in the hole. It looked well loved and smelled like coffee, earth, and bedtime. It was written in Hebrew and I only know a few words in Hebrew, but since I collect books I slipped it into my backpack.

That night I examined the pages by candle light. In the shadowy glow I could see it was the story of a hero. He was a young man who rode out on a horse to rescue a princess for a king. She falls in love with him but he loves adventure better than he loves her, so he rides away in search of a new quest. Sometimes I think that is the bravest thing of all, because wouldn’t the king get mad? And wouldn’t the princess feel betrayed? But I sympathize with the prince because I also love adventure.

The old man folds the shrapnel into my hand and goes back inside. I examine my strange prize in the gray light. Beneath the rust I can see flecks of blood and a few engraved Hebrew letters. I turn it over and over in my palm, searching for a sign. Nothing.

I reenter the room and stay quiet so no one notices me. People are whispering and eating and mourning and consoling and there is a heavy sense of collective emotion. Suddenly I hear four quick knocks on the door. All the heads turn to the doorway and the muted voices become silent. Our Hamas representative enters. We pay
do not worry about the stained fairy tales

him respect because he always has something important to say. Standing straight as a board, he gives a reverent nod at the crowd and then cups his hand on my shoulder. I jump a little.

The representative leads me to the front of the room where Ummi is sitting in a circle of grieving. All eyes are upon us. He straightens his shoulders and says Today we mourn the loss of one of our community’s greatest heroes. It is rare to find such great heroism in such oppressive times but, Al-hamdulilah, where one sun falls another will rise. He looks down at me with eyes that are impossible to read. Today, he says, we celebrate a new hero. God willing he will carry out the mission set for him by his name sake, the great prophet Mohammed, and receive his just reward. May we all be blessed with his glory.

The crowd begins to chorus in Al-hamdulilah. I pull my eyes away from the representative and see a room full of hope. My brothers are gazing up at me, bright with awe. Ummi is sobbing into her hands. I try to lay my hand on her arm but she catches it and looks up at me with a beaming smile. She says My son. You will make me proud.

All the expectation is expanding in the air and I cannot breathe. I begin to walk without stopping. Past my mother, past the Hamas leader, past the guests and the house of the old cat-feeder. Past the playground of broken swings and the school house riddled with bullet holes and the houses of government officials with new extra-thick windows. Past all the people who do not yet know I am a hero.

I reach the wall and I can see her. Her eyes are soft brown pools of beautiful and sad and her neck is flushed. We are alone by the hole in the wall and she says Can I be your princess? And I say yes. Yes, you will be my adventure. Then we mount my horse and ride off into tomorrow’s restless morning.
photosynthesis

Engine failing, gears broken,
Crash land onto foreign ground.
Prop my head above my feet
To witness endless woodlands.
Red and brown, freckled green,
Leaves slicing past my face
And digging homes into soft soil.
My hammer toes popped their veins
As I hiked over them to find shelter.
Ducking and bucking through
Waves and walls of dry dying
Comatose vegetation twins,
I drop to the crunchy ground
While slamming shut my eyes.
Rising to the scent of virgin tears,
My nose was hooked and reeled in
To a small barren clearing that sulked
Behind the clone army oppressors.
Peeking up from under rotting leaves
Was a stalk, dark green and limp
From lack of sunlight and water.
I sniffed, no, snorted the stalk
To confirm the scent’s origin.
So light, romantic, aromatic.
But the plant itself was drooping,
Going the path of the other decay.
Having no exit back to life and
Finding this fresh rare stalk eyeing me,
I snuggled down beside to stroke it.
Far away I trekked to find a river,
Always leaving trails of twigs to
Mark the road back to the sick stalk.
Dribbling drops of water into its mouth,
It thanked me, spewing that sweet perfume.
Soon, leopard snow spotted the forest
And I cried, thinking this our final days.
My plant, now erect and thick with life,
Puffed a few spouts of scent as I chipped
Into the ice to melt blocks of frozen water.
Wearing my wool coat and sipping water
Between aromatic exhales, the plant
Survived the winter while I rubbed
My pale body to jolt my blood flow.
The vernal sun splintered through
An infant canopy above us, and,
Crafting a heavy hatchet shaft,
I went to work on the green ceiling.
Chop chop, then the sun beamed down
Like the word of God and we obeyed.
Sucking up oceans in my palms and
Stealing yellow rays from greedy clouds,
The stalk blossomed into a crimson tulip,
So full of color I thought it was blushing,
So radiant I could swear it was a ruby.
We basked in the sun together,
That day, one day, every day,
While the forest resurrected from
Inside out, birthing life that had
Migrated when I first resided here.
Summer, Earth lassoed the pudgy sun
And dragged it right above us,
Burning my skin and drying up
My precious hardy tulip.
Swimming in sweat as I waded
Over to the river, I dove in
And cracked my head on the rocks.
Stupid, frozen, and zonked, I
Drifted slowly downstream
In a hazy rosy daydream,
Lost at sea from my perfect lover.
When my marbles rolled back,
I emerged and followed
An old trail back to the clearing.
The tulip was bent, snapped actually,
Head on the ground and butt in the air,
Still connected by a sinew to the stalk.
This time, it sprayed me like a skunk,
Puking a putrid slimy paste that reeked
Of death and disappointment.
Desperation overcame my heart, so
I knelt down and rubbed it, then
I puckered up and kissed it, then
I fell asleep entwined in it, while
It sighed and puked all over me.
Weeks of being a tortured nurse
Cured the plant of rotting brown
And when the tulip bloomed again,
It was checkered with splats of
Red and yellow and white,
Love and loyalty and innocence.

crab claw nantucket

a photo by Ian MacLellan
Elijah should have been here an hour ago. Not that his promises mean that much to me. Still, it's late
autumn and the concrete bench is cold, and the sky is darkening, and a few droplets of rain have already damp-
ened the sidewalk around me. The last car has just driven away from the parking lot of the school where I teach
science to bright-eyed 12-year-olds. I think about her, the woman in the red car, a 7th grade English teacher,
arriving home, her black high heels familiar on the caramel-colored tiles and her mind already consumed with
making dinner for her family, her children greeting her at the front door with sticky hugs.

I cross my arms tightly over my chest and stare at the slim and un-touching pinstripes on my black
dress pants. I shiver in the cold and close my eyes and imagine Elijah's arms around me, my head on his
shoulder and my left hand resting on the inside of his thigh. I think about the simple warmth of his soft, brown
jacket, the way he holds it open to envelope my body on evenings such as this one. I open my eyes; my finger-
nails are turning blue in the autumn air.

When it's cold, I always think of the Sacandaga. Homemade blankets, damp with coldness, heavy over
goose-bumped skin. Windows open, to relieve the scent of moth balls, brought the relics of rain. I would sit on
the front porch, huddled over a cup of black tea, bitter with lemon, adjusting my red hands over the porcelain
mug too hot to hold. The porch faced away from the lake, but I could see the edge of the bay and would watch
the water growing dark and white-capped in the coldness. Those were the lazy days. Back when there was no
such thing as wasting time, I squandered a few minutes here and there. The year my sister and I forgot we were
friends. When black eye-liner highlighted the circles beneath her eyes and skinny jeans hugged her anorexic
curves. Her only happiness came from stolen moments, curled under a heavy blanket, asleep in the afternoon
sun. Still, even when she was asleep, her coldness poured out of her like anger. I was afraid of her then. So I
clung to the image I had of her in our childhood. Us sneaking extra cinnamon and sugar into my grandmother's
applesauce or us running down to the lake, our towels streaming like capes behind us, back when life was etern-
al sunlight. Even that's a lie. I had my fears then too.

Where is he? I wonder as I rub my hands up and down my upper arms and try to wriggle my toes from
inside my flats. The rain is beginning to darken the sidewalk, drops falling in endlessly-related splatters. I pull
off my shoes and sit crossed-legged on the bench.

Something could be wrong. An accident maybe? I think obligatorily, but I know by instinct that
nothing is wrong. I try holding my breath and counting the number of bricks around the door of the school to
take my mind off the cold. The school was built only a few years ago, but the brick already looks much older,
chalky and weather beaten. Last summer, some kids from the neighborhood high school spray-painted their
names in green on the side wall. The clean-up dulled the color, but the summer sun had already baked the
words into the brick. I can see them now, drunk and reckless, not knowing the effects of their actions. Some
things are unerasable.

It’s fall now. Vibrant gold and auburn leaves sparsely cover the sidewalk and grass, which is starting to yellow at the roots. Some of the leaves have dried and lay broken and crumbled in the corners of doorways. Sometimes, my students bring me the whole ones, and I admire the way the thick stem branches out into thin veins, the way strength splits off into fragility. The rain has begun to fall harder now, so the leaves lay soggy and trapped, stubbornly resisting the wind.

I like to remember the summers. When the days stretched out in infinite fields, flattened and beaten by sunlight. I woke when the first rays stole in through the gaps between the window and shade. The lake was always calm in the morning, and the grass still wet with the dew. My sister and I skipped down to the sand, our legs and arms bare and goose-bumped. We were quiet then, as we slipped beneath the mirror of the water, conscious of the ripples we left behind. Slowly, the fishermen rowed their boats out to the lake’s center, their oars dipping into the water and gently coaxing droplets up into the frigid morning air. On those mornings, the cold was a beginning and not an end. The sun warmed the lake’s surface and the sand and woke the crows from their fitful slumber. Their pleading caws brought life into the day.

The rain is beginning to hit the sidewalk more steadily and despite the trees that separate the school from the main street, I can hear the sounds of cars driving by, their occupants anxious to start the weekend. It’s getting dark now and I am worried and a few tears fall from my eyes, but my cheeks are too cold to feel them. I bite down on the edge of my palm; if anything, the cold makes that hurt more. Elijah says I need to be stronger. He says that strength doesn’t come from holding back your feelings. He wants to see me angry, that’s why he left me here. He wants to see if I am strong enough to refuse to get into his car, to find another way home.

I could just start walking, I think and half-stand up, before I picture Elijah’s car pulling into the empty parking lot and his eyes squinting to see into the entrance ways of the school building, looking for me with radio on and the heat turned up. It will hurt me more, to leave now and walk away.

On Fridays, my sister and I rushed through dinner and spent the late-afternoon in the front yard, half-heartedly playing on the swing-set as we waited to hear the sound of tires crunching over the gravel road that lead to my grandmother’s house. It was a game then, guessing whether the car would turn off the gravel path and into another driveway, or whether we would see the car slowly descend over the hill. Sometimes, we heard the phone ring first. We knew that shortly my grandmother would come outside and ask us to pick up the apples that had fallen from the tree in the back-yard or sweep the leaves from the long path that stretched from the garage to the house. We knew then to stop listening for the approach of tires.

So even in utopia there was a fracture. A fault line that brought tears. My grandmother anticipated my parents’ hurried departures and late arrivals. She told us to pick up sticks in the yard or pulled an aging board game from the top shelf of her closet. Her distractions alleviated the most direct pain, the pain of watching someone leave you, but could never alleviate the shock of sudden realization that I had never noticed they had left. Nothing prevents the pain of realizing that no one is coming.
This is a story Elijah will never hear, I think to myself, shaking my head solemnly in the empty parking lot as my teeth chatter and my body shakes. The one that costs too much to tell, and the one I have no experience in telling.

For my twelfth birthday, my sister and my cousins tried to throw me a surprise party. All day they made decorations and baked cupcakes and laughed and told me I had to stay in my room. They didn’t want to ruin the surprise. I still hate the sound of laughter when I’m alone.

Elijah threw me a surprise birthday party last summer. He came out of the front door of his house, carrying a cake covered with 28 candles and thick pink frosting, his face illuminated by the flames. He set the cake down on the plastic picnic table on his front porch. Everyone was singing and smiling and happy. I blew out the candles, holding my hair back from my face, my features aglow from the sunlight and the flush of surprise.

“Happy Birthday, baby,” Elijah whispered, kissing my cheek and wrapping his tan arms around me, his cold crystal blue eyes clear in the sunlight. I loved him then. Simply and unconditionally, surrounded by my friends in the golden after-noon sun, I loved him.

My grandmother used to collect butterflies. I saw her do it once. Her age-bent fingers grasping the fragile gossamer of the orange and yellow wings, life enshrined in clasped hands. She took the butterfly inside and slowly transferred long white pins from her pin cushion to the butterfly’s body. She was careful to avoid the wings, afraid to fracture the delicate veins. Before that moment, I didn’t understand a person’s real capacity to cause pain.

Maybe I deserve this. Maybe Elijah is right, maybe I do need to be stronger, I think as I pull my rain-dampened hair back from my face. After all, I am not innocent. I have hurt people too. Even when it really mattered. Like Simon, who begged me to stay as he smiled and kissed me and told me I was beautiful. I ran my icy hands through his velvet, black hair, and I left him, hands in his pockets, staring at the closing door of the subway car. It would seem, then, that leaving is inevitable, but that isn’t the story I want to tell.

When I was twelve, I had a dream that my sister had died. We were fighting then. I think my diary was placed at a slightly different angle under my mattress than how I left it or we had inadvertently bought matching Old Navy shirts or I had talked to her friend in the hallway between classes. Either way it was the end of the world. In the dream, we spent the day at an amusement park. The day passed too quickly, and soon we were standing in a huge parking lot, covered by a crystal blue sky and immense, quiet, white clouds. Suddenly, I knew it was our last moment together and desperately tried to grab her hand. I woke up sobbing.

The reality of her death was harder. Everyday for weeks I woke up remembering. But that was a long time ago.

I met Elijah two years ago. It was mid-June, when the sunshine was still pale and shy and peaked gen-
tly out from behind clouds. It was parents’ day at school, and David, my student and Elijah’s nephew, had been moping all day, upset his parents had to work. When Elijah came in, unannounced and unexpected, David’s smile was dynamic, plastered to his face like a perpetual joke. The first months Elijah and I were dating, he never let go of my hand. I felt close to him then. We used to take walks on summer nights, our fingers intertwined and our pauses natural.

“What’s your earliest memory?” He asked me on one of those nights, after we passed a young boy on a red bicycle, his sneakers flashing neon lights as he pressed down on each petal.

I was quiet for a long time before I stopped walking and turned to him. “I was four, maybe, and I was at daycare. I was the last person there, my father was late, and I was sitting with the teacher, crying a little. She let me hold the classroom bunny, and I can still remember the feeling of his velvety fur underneath my fingers.”

Elijah smiled and looked thoughtful, and again we returned to the familiar silence.

Now, he knows what I look like with my eyes closed. And that scares me a little, I think, for him to know something about me that I can’t know about myself, for him to steal that piece of me. I don’t trust him not to judge my vulnerability. So, when we lie in bed, I keep my head against his chest as he runs his thumb along my shoulder blade.

“Tell me a story,” he always asks, as though physical proximity is not enough for him.

I freeze with his insistence. Without context I never know the right response. And I know that after a few sentences he will jump in with his own story and use my grief as an opportunity to beg sympathy for his own. When I met Elijah, he constantly asked me to tell him about myself. I waited weeks before I told him that I don’t believe in god anymore. He never asked what had happened or how I could still wear a thin gold cross around my neck. I was careful after that, not to give myself away so freely. So, I will tell him something neutral, like about how I felt when I met him. Back when the accidental brush of his fingers against my arm still elicited a smile.

I want to tell him the story of my childhood. Of the Sacandaga. I want to share the story of shameless sunlight in the mornings and the dead heat of afternoon days and the all-consuming darkness of nightfall. I want to tell him about the baby goats at Springer’s Farm, naming them and fitting my thin fingers in between wire fences to pet their coarse fur. And Pine Tree Grocery, and waiting in line to get fresh donuts on Sunday morning and hour walks on weekdays with my sister to get a bottle of lemonade, which we paid for in nickels and dimes. I want to tell him about my childhood, because it doesn’t exist anymore.

Elijah took me to dinner last week. We ate hamburgers and talked about work and feigned interest in the civil rights abuses in Beijing. The table next to us acquiesced to silence, but the words passed between us safely, like aspirin to alleviate our pain until we spoke too much and hit upon the truth. Like digging a hole on the beach, inevitably you hit water. I wanted to talk about my sister, because I wished she was here instead. He wanted to talk about himself, lying about his modesty, pretending his words are sincere. Suddenly, the pauses are no longer safe and comfortable. I didn’t mean to come this far, but I don’t want to return with nothing.
I remember the days when my house was never empty; it was always filled with the anticipation of his arrival, of a phone ringing or the buzz of the doorbell. Or maybe I have it wrong. Maybe it was emptier then; the anxiety of waiting eating at the oxygen around me, leaving me lonelier than I was alone.

And so suddenly I’m sitting in the rain again. Feeling like I am twelve and wishing someone would see me and think I was tragic and save me, but really praying that I could just keep waiting. All that time I spent waiting. For the summer. For the violent, sunlit mornings. For my parents to pull their car up to my grandmother’s front door in the winter, where they wouldn’t notice my blue and shaking fingers peering out from the mail slot. And then I would hug them and press my nose against the damp smell of their wool coats, and forgive them.

Maybe that’s why I forgave Elijah. Though he was hours late and unapologetic, I sat in his car and hugged my arms to my body and ran my hands along my sopping skin.

“Let me take you home,” he said.

I only nodded.
It started with music.
Those distorted, screeching rhythms pummeled one another
and boiled the nature of sound.
We both rejected the harmony,
and fell into a monstrous, noisy love.
You were upfront– said you wanted most to be conceited and cruel.
I couldn’t help but be disgustedly honest and shatter your dreams.
It was meant to last.
We tried the cordial approach,
but that was short lived, like a scab we couldn’t help but pick.
Everything came forth, frothing and foaming from our disposal minds,
trash receptacles compressing and churning,
the aromatic garbage of our brains spilling out onto the floor.
Neither of us could resist a taste of that
thrilling insanity, crude and embracing.
Wrapping ourselves in its hot arms, we took on the world.
We were no ordinary animals.
We loved our freckles and our real names,
dressed disproportionate bodies in warm colors,
and pondered the one constant for us both: food.
We were mutts, stuffing our faces with
blue raspberry, steak and potatoes, and red velvet cupcakes.
With crumbs on our lips, we discussed Andy Warhol
and how he killed our fathers,
the techniques for catching crabs, and the
brain pollution of rotting, granulized media.
We were intellectuals, wannabe savants, collective freaks, and crap sarcestics.
Our catastrophe was always consumed
by glorious, stinking music.
Parasites of songs dug deep under our skin.
We were crawling, yes,
infested with blaring, thunderous sounds.
And with no cure to be found,
we lived together,
insane.
damascus gate

a photo by Ian MacLellan
the goods

Ma always said I was one of those girls, one of the ones who couldn’t say no. I was cursed before I could help it. “You’re a strutting, slutting cliché,” ma said, sucking in cigs and spitting out verbs. She was watching TV on the paisley couch which spewed thread, flipping between Jerry Springer and Jerry Falwell. She somehow missed the episode when I did it behind the Acme with the wire-bodied grocer from the express lane. When she found out, she shrugged and said it was only a matter of time.

I rubbed my Buddha belly body nine months and one bump later, chewing my bubble gum cud and secretly hoping for a girl so that I could braid, dress her.

Years later, my girl and I sat on the same paisley couch, that Newport smell still lingering, laced between the curtains. We painted our toenails and ate candy dots off the paper, picking scraps from our teeth and braiding each other’s hair. And somewhere there was another wire-bodied grocer waiting behind the Acme to check-out, to scan, bag and return, but this time the goods wouldn’t show.
about the authors

lilia carey is a freshman most likely majoring in Russian Studies. She is left-handed and dependent on live music. Rowing means she sees the sunrise on most days. She can't whistle, but she hums pretty well. Breakfast is her favorite meal. There's no place she'd rather be in late summer than northern Vermont.

rebecca kaiser gibson teaches poetry and writing at Tufts University. She is a recipient of a 2008 Fellowship in Poetry from the Massachusetts Cultural Council and has been awarded writing residencies at The Heinrich Boll Cottage and the MacDowell Colony. Her poems have been published in numerous magazines, including Agni, Field, The Harvard Review, The Boston Phoenix, The Antigonish Review, The Greensboro Review, and Slate.

shreya maitra is a junior majoring in History and double-minoring (yes, even though it isn't allowed) in English and Studio Art. Her life goal is to be a world-famous academic. The reality will probably be incurring huge debts from graduate school and living on the street, trying to sell a painting (with a short story thrown in).

miguel miro-quesada is a senior majoring in English.

krista morris is a sophomore majoring in International Relations. She loves walking (fast), sushi, company, talking. She believes that the universe has a great sense of humor; most of her writing is capturing these jokes. She laughs often and rather loudly and loves reading the news on the BBC.

scott newton is a sophomore majoring in Political Science. He is an overzealous romantic who is finally getting used to people calling him weird. During the day, he is often seen laughing at his own vivid imagination while others look on in confusion or jealousy. At night, he loves to drool on his pillow while dreaming beautiful impossibilities that he never remembers upon waking.
victoria petrosino is a senior majoring in Economics and Community Health. She likes reading Italo Calvino stories, baking cupcakes, and showing people the fort she built in her living room.

kat robinson is a first-year student at Tufts with way too many choices for possible majors. She’s completely psyched that Outbreath took a chance on a lowly freshman! Aside from scribbling words, she enjoys sorting through Mentos to find the pink ones, basking in the musical stylings of Wilco, people-watching in airports, and trips to Au Bon Pain for their new harvest pumpkin soup.

adam roy is a sophomore majoring in Latin American Studies. When he’s not diving, he enjoys travel writing, dancing salsa, and hanging out with Muffy La Mofeta, the skunk that lives under his porch.

emmas shakarshy is a freshman who loves John Hughes movies, puns, and a good merlot. Besides writing poetry, Emma spends her time perfecting her impression of Bette Midler and finding something she likes better than writing poetry to appease her worried parents. So far, she has yielded no results.

ariana siegel is a member of the third class ever not to have a double 0 in it, namely the class of 2012. Though she is yet a fledgling freshman, she hopes to study Love, Coexistence, and Linguistic Beauty, otherwise known as Peace and Justice Studies and English. What Ariana loves most in this world is stories; she likes to listen to them, tell them, read them, write them, dream them, eat them, breathe them, etc. She admires beautiful words and syntax and often has a running inner monologue describing her surroundings in story form.

elisha sum is a sophomore who is currently undecided.

jesse welch is a freshman who is currently undecided.