

SHAY · A PHOTO BOOK

Eyes

Thirteen photographs and where they were taken

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BEFORE YOU START

My mom has brown eyes. My dad has green ones. I got one of each, which as a kid meant a lot of people leaning in way too close to check if I was wearing contacts.

I'm not, by the way.

These are thirteen times somebody got close enough to catch them. Some of them I took myself, phone held out at arm's length. Some were friends who just said "don't move" at the right second. Each one comes with where it was and what was going on, because to me the picture's never really about the eyes. It's about the day.

Every photo in here can be downloaded full size, in 4K for your desktop and a version for your phone. The links are right under each story.

— Shay

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First Snow

Prospect Park, Brooklyn · January

It snowed overnight and nobody told me. I woke up, looked out the window and the whole street was just gone, white, quiet in that way the city never is.

I didn't even make coffee. I put on a coat, forgot a hat, and walked to the park while it was still coming down. By the Long Meadow there was nobody, just me and one guy with a very confused dog.

My friend Tess lives two blocks away so I texted her, she came out in pajama pants and boots and took this. It's freezing. My eyelashes had actual snow on them. I couldn't feel my face for an hour after, but honestly, worth it.

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Waiting Out the Rain

A diner on Manhattan Ave, Greenpoint · March

I got caught in one of those storms that comes out of nowhere. One minute it's fine, the next the sky just opens. I ducked into this little diner that's been on the corner forever, sat by the window and ordered a grilled cheese I didn't really want.

Outside it was all taillights and blurry red signs. I leaned closer to the glass to watch and saw my own face kind of floating over the street.

I propped my phone against the napkin holder and set the timer. Took maybe twenty of these. This is the only one where I'm not laughing at myself. The rain stopped about forty minutes later. I stayed another hour anyway.

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Upstate, Face Down

A field outside Hudson, New York · May

Every couple of months I need to get out of the city or I start getting weird. So I take the train up the river, no plan, just a bag and a book.

There's this field past the edge of town that nobody seems to own. In May it's all long grass and these tiny white flowers. I lay down to read and ended up just lying there, chin in the grass, listening to absolutely nothing.

My friend Danny came with that time. He got down on his stomach with the camera, said "stay exactly like that," and I tried really hard not to smile. You can see I almost made it.

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October Swim

Rockaway Beach, Queens · October

Everybody says you're crazy for swimming in October. You are, a little bit. That's the fun part.

I took the A train all the way out on a grey Sunday. The beach was empty, the lifeguard chairs were stacked up, the water was this flat silver color. I ran in before I could talk myself out of it.

It's cold in a way that makes your whole brain go quiet. When I came out I was shaking, hair dripping in my eyes, and I held the phone up just to remember what that felt like. I look kind of serious here. I promise I was just trying not to chatter my teeth.

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Under the Sycamore

Fort Greene Park, Brooklyn · July

July in the city is a lot. The sidewalks get hot enough that you can feel them through your shoes, so you start planning your whole day around shade.

There's a big old sycamore at the top of the hill in Fort Greene where I go to write. Late afternoon the light comes through the leaves in these little patches and moves around every time there's a breeze.

I was trying to finish a story and kept getting distracted by the light on my notebook. So I gave up, looked up, and took this instead. A patch of sun landed right across my eyes and stayed there for maybe ten seconds. I didn't plan that. It just happened.

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Rooftop Pool

A friend's building, Williamsburg · August

One of my friends moved into a building with a rooftop pool and we've basically all decided it's our pool now. She's very patient with us.

This was the hottest day of the summer. I got in and just stayed there, chin on the water, watching the light do those wavy lines on everything.

Someone said "look up" and I did. The water was so bright it bounced right back up into my face. I swear I don't usually look this intense. It was just really, really bright up there.

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Between Takes

Cala Deià, Mallorca · June

This was a work trip, a swimwear shoot on the coast of Mallorca. Sounds glamorous. It mostly means waking up at 4:30 for the light and standing on rocks for six hours.

But in between setups there's always this weird stretch where everyone's fixing something and you just stand there with the sea right behind you.

The photographer's assistant grabbed her own phone and said "do the sunglasses thing." I didn't know I had a sunglasses thing. Apparently I do. This ended up being everyone's favorite photo from the whole trip, and it wasn't even part of the shoot.

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Last Light

Ditch Plains, Montauk · September

Montauk after Labor Day is the best version of Montauk. The crowds go home, the town gets quiet, and the sunsets get kind of ridiculous.

I'd been in the water all afternoon. Salt on my face, sand everywhere, sand in places sand should not be. I sat down on the beach to watch the sun go and it came in so low and gold it lit up my brown eye like amber. I'd never seen it do that.

I took about thirty photos trying to catch it. This is the one. My green eye barely changed. My brown one went full honey. My mom thinks this one should be framed.

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Good Morning

My apartment, Brooklyn · April

I have these linen curtains in my bedroom that let the light in soft, kind of creamy. Mornings in there are the best part of the place.

My friend Tess, the same one from the snow day, was over early for coffee before a shoot. I was still half asleep, she was messing with her camera, and I peeked out from behind the curtain to see what the weather was doing.

She just said “oh. Don’t.” and took it. It’s probably the closest thing to what I actually look like at 8 a.m. Messy hair, not fully awake, hiding a little.

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Campfire

The Catskills, New York · November

A few of us rent a cabin in the Catskills every fall. No signal, a woodstove, and a fire pit we sit around until way too late.

This was the last night. Everyone else had gone in, it was just me and the fire and the sound of the trees. Every time a log shifted the sparks went up into the dark.

I set the phone on a stump with the timer and moved in close. The fire was doing all the work here. You can see it reflected in both eyes, tiny orange dots, which I think is my favorite thing about this one.

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Wind off the River

Brooklyn Bridge Park · December

December by the water is brutal. The wind comes straight off the East River and goes right through whatever you're wearing.

I was meeting someone for a walk and got there way too early, so I stood by the railing in my biggest sweater with the collar pulled up over my nose. Grey sky, grey water, grey sweater. Everything matched except my eyes.

I took this to send to the person I was meeting, like a "where are you, I'm freezing" text. They said it was the most dramatic "I'm cold" message they'd ever gotten. Fair.

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New Year’s

Bleecker Street, West Village · December 31

I usually avoid New Year’s Eve. Too many people, too much pressure to have the best night ever.

But this year a bunch of us just walked around the Village. There were lights strung across the streets, everyone was a little tipsy and really nice, and some stranger was handing out sparklers to anyone who walked by.

My friend held mine right up by my face so the light would hit, which, looking back, was not super safe. Somewhere around midnight I remember thinking that I didn’t want to be anywhere else. Which doesn’t happen a lot. Happy New Year, from me.

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Five More Minutes

My bed, Brooklyn · a Sunday in October

Sundays are the only day I don’t set an alarm. The sun comes in through the window around eight, hits the pillow first, then slowly climbs up until it’s right in my eyes. That’s my alarm.

Most mornings I roll over and hide from it. This one I didn’t. It was warm, the room was quiet, Moro was still asleep at the foot of the bed doing that little snore she does, and I just stayed there squinting into the light.

This is the photo I wanted to end on. It’s the one closest to how it actually feels to be around me. Not the snow or the beach or the fire. Just a Sunday, the light coming in, and me saying five more minutes, probably for the third time.

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That’s thirteen. The last one’s my favorite. There’ll be more, I’m sure. Somebody always gets close enough eventually.

Thanks for looking at these the way I do, like small pieces of a day instead of just pictures.

– Shay

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