CONTENTS

A Dream of Ariadne 4
Opalescent 12
About the Work: Huckleberries and High Holidays:
   Writing the Lyric Essay as an Act of Faith 21
About the Author 24
A Dream of Ariadne

What would you do inside me?
You would be utterly
lost, labyrinthine

—Nick Flynn, “Hive”

I.

I have a vivid memory so unlikely I know I’ve either dreamed it or made it up: my mother, alone, packs her three kids into the station wagon and drives us into downtown Los Angeles to see West Side Story. We’ve been listening to the soundtrack at home, on the big stereo console, my brothers and I dancing in manic jerks as we became the Sharks and the Jets. We’ve hounded my mother to take us, even though the movie won’t arrive at our suburban theaters for another month.

I don’t know why my father is absent in this scene. He always did most of the driving; my mother, a native New Yorker, had learned just a few years earlier and was a timid driver. She was terrified of sneezing on the freeway, because of the split second her eyes would be closed. Once, a man shouted out his window to my mother after she bungled a parking job in the lot at Hughes shopping center, perhaps taking up two spaces—where’d you get your license? Sears? My mother bit her lip and kept her head down as we hustled down the sidewalk to the supermarket, her hand gripping my shoulder. The shame burned on her face, across her whole body; I could feel it, palpable as fire.

And now, it’s just us here in the car—my brothers, my mother, and me—on the way home from West Side Story, and I can feel inklings of that shame emanating from the front seat for no immediately apparent reason, but I prick up my ears, stop looking out the window and stare hard at my mother’s head, which is swiveling back and forth, and I note the way her body is hunched forward over the steering wheel, and I see glimpses of a front tooth worrying the skin of her lower lip. It was daylight when we started from home, but now it’s dark, the early dark of winter, even in southern California. My mother drives slowly now, and am I really the only one to notice we’re in trouble? My little brother is asleep in the “way back” of the station wagon, my older brother chewing gum and looking out the window or playing with his baseball cards, or doing something to annoy me, spidering his fingers toward my side of the bench seat, and I note the car’s gradual deceleration, my mother now sitting up straighter to peer over the dashboard.

I straighten up too, swat away my brother’s hand and scramble up to my knees to rest my chin on the front seat, to hover right behind my mother’s taut neck. We’re stopped now, and her head looks left and then right; the streets here are different than the streets in our neighborhood, the tidy cul-de-sac where our own house sits so placidly, awaiting our return (why have we been gone so long, it must wonder, and our Great Dane, Sheba, who will be dead in a few years’ time:
she must be pacing the backyard, wondering where everyone has gone, the unnatural quiet as dusk falls; why not the smells of dinner, the thump of the basketball, the creak of the jungle gym?) The streets here are narrower, with dark houses, porches filled with tricycles and paint cans, front yards with small boats leaning into the grass; we can hear the freeway off to our left somewhere and my mother cocks her head in that direction.

Are we lost? I say, and I say it softly, trying not to sound an alarm, though distress signals begin to shoot all up and down my body, that lost feeling rising in my chest. I once got lost just a block from my house, running home from school because I was hungry and had to go to the bathroom, and suddenly I turned a corner and had no idea where I was—Mayall street suddenly unfamiliar as a foreign city, the trees transformed into lush canopies, the houses a different color, and I turned around in a circle, bewildered, and that lost feeling began to spiral up my throat until the light shifted and the street looked normal again, and I flew down it toward home.

My mother taps the long ash off her cigarette, and holds it up to her lips, just holds it there. “No,” she says finally, “We’re not lost.” The station wagon idles, then she presses the gas and turns left. “I’m just not quite sure where we are.” And then the station wagon glides (oh, I remember that glide, as if we weren’t really driving at all but on one of those clever rides at Disneyland, where around every corner something lurks to surprise and terrify you), and we turn a corner and ease right into a vast field, where steel towers rise a hundred feet into the air, a dozen of them at least, and at the top of each one two red lights blink asynchronistically, first one, then the other.

The freeway surges on the other side, cars swooshing back and forth, so sure of their direction—north, south only two distinct ways to go—and between them and us lies this field of steel towers with their blinking lights, and a barbed wire fence with cyclone netting.

My mother stops the car again, loosens her hands from the wheel. I understand now, years later, how young she must have been—with three children in the back of the car whom she had, unwittingly, drawn into a landscape so unfamiliar it could have been the moon. Home most likely felt as far away as the outermost planets, those orbs I would later fashion from Styrofoam and hang on wires to map the desolation of outer space. I had always just seen her as my mother—a fallible woman, yes, but still capable of negotiating the most treacherous places in our small world. But really she must have always been scared, unsure of herself, baffled by how she had found herself just here, just now, not only miles from our suburban neighborhood, but thousands of miles from her true home, in Brooklyn, far away from her own mother, her sister, her friends, her job as a typist at a stylish magazine in Manhattan and the nice clothes she used to wear, the high black heels and the red lipstick, the ingrained map of those subway lines etched into her brain, so she is never lost—a smiling young lady emerging fresh onto those familiar, bustling streets.

For an hour or two, in West Side Story, she remembered it all: her childhood streets, her sense of knowing who she was and where and why. But all that is now eons away. Instead she sits now in the front seat of a station wagon, her daughter breathing down her neck, her sons asleep or carefully watching. The towers blink their red eyes, back and forth, over and over, warning airplanes away from their misdirected paths, nudging them back to routes that will lead them out of danger and toward a safe arrival.
II.

Ariadne was lost the moment she laid eyes on Theseus, the warrior. She caught a glimpse of that blond head and it was all over. I want to know her more than the mythology books allow: that vague figure standing at the opening of the labyrinth, holding the end of a golden thread, watching as her beloved ventures off to slay the Minotaur who lives within those coils. Some say this thread was given to her by Daedelus, himself—the architect of the labyrinth—and that it carried within it the clue (“clew”), the key, an ingrained map to the center and back out again.

Once Theseus slays the Minotaur, he follows the thread back to Ariadne, they embrace, they kiss, they flee together on a boat for the island of Naxos. But when Ariadne awakens after her one night of love, she finds herself completely alone. Perhaps there are ships off in the distance, perhaps a wind; perhaps her neck aches from her night spent sleeping among the stones. But before she even raises her head she can tell from the quality of the air—some high keening that whistles in her ear—that she is completely alone, and lost.

III.

In her series of prints, *Cell Study*, artist Macy Chadwick uses knotted threads in winding patterns against paper or fabric, and the threads sometimes wind their way toward a center. But in her most recent work, the threads seem to have given up on any sense of direction, and they dangle, cut, from an arched bow. Macy tells me these knotted threads are a form of language, a primitive Braille that predated the raised dots on a page. These were string alphabets for the blind: each knot or succession of knots represents a letter, and so the blind could read their way along by feeling for the texture of the knots, their distance from one another. It must have taken a long time to translate even the simplest passages to be read: imagine the skeins and skeins of knotted thread, passing through the fingers like a rosary.

In Macy’s prints, however, her knotted threads don’t necessarily find their way to meaning. They want to speak; they are, in fact, words (one is titled “My Words Hang in the Air”), but we can’t understand what they say. She spends a great deal of time knotting the threads according to the alphabetic code, and then chooses to keep the sentence indecipherable. She seems undone a bit by it all. “Just when I want to communicate quite clearly,” she says, “I find myself speaking more and more in code.” Of course, many of the words are spoken to a lost lover—a man who cannot, or will not, hear what she has to say.

Her words, her knotted words, hang in the air. In one of my favorite pieces, “Cell Study, 2003,” the knotted thread snakes its way over organza cloth, turning back on itself, a labyrinth.

IV.

My friend Bruce is studying the ancient Scriptoriums, where monks copied out scripture, a whole factory of them listening as the head monk speaks and they all copy it down as fast as they can. Of course, the work is deadly tedious, and often the monks’ minds wander to other things, coming back at key moments, so each one, though they’re making a copy, creates a different version of the text. The holy language becomes a little garbled. As Bruce says, “Sometimes they lose the thread.”
I keep coming back to that suspended moment in the myth. Not the triumphant emergence of Theseus from the maze, a little bloodied but alive; not the flight to Naxos. No, I keep wanting to approach Ariadne as she sits at the labyrinth’s entrance, holding her end of the golden thread. I want to know what Ariadne thinks at that moment, as she watches the thread unreeb, watches it go taut and then slack again. I want to come up to her, put my arms around her shoulder, say: *Ari, my dear, let it go. Put the thread down. Walk away from the thread.*

I keep coming back to that moment in the car, the blinking towers, my mother’s absolute stillness. I feel us at the moment we drop the thread, lose our way.

There’s only one way out, I would tell her. The labyrinth leads you back the way you came. It’s only an illusion that you’re lost.

V.

“One clear autumn afternoon I was sitting on a bench in the middle of the Piazza Santa Croce in Florence… I had barely recovered from a long and painful intestinal illness and was in a state of almost morbid sensitivity. The whole world around me, including the marble of the buildings and fountains, seemed to me to be convalescing.…

—Giorgio de Chirico

In most of Chirico’s “Ariadne” paintings, Ariadne is rendered as a statue recumbent on a pedestal in the middle of an empty public square. Deep shadows cross these courtyards, and in the background there may be incongruous palm trees the color of smoke, or the sharp outlines of a black train arrested in forward motion. Often a red tower holds sentinel in the composition. Mysterious figures whisper together in the background. In all of them, Ariadne lies half raised on one arm, the other flung over her head, while her massive chin tilts down toward her chest.

The paintings are titled with cryptic phrases: “The Soothsayer’s Recompense,” “Ariadne’s Afternoon,” “The Lassitude of the Infinite,” “The Joys and Enigmas of a Strange Hour,” and “Melancholy.” In all these portraits, Chirico has not made clear if Ariadne has yet wakened to the fact that Theseus has fled. He prefers to capture her in that state between knowing and unknowing, the realm of enigma. What awaits her is Melancholy, yes, but not quite yet. Everything remains paralyzed in the moment just before sorrow.

VI.

From the Nietzchien Dithyrambs of Dionysus:

*“Be sensible, Ariadne:*

*We should not first hate each other if we are to love each other.*

*I am your labyrinth.*

I forgot to mention: there are many different versions of the Ariadne myth. Not of the labyrinth and the Minotaur and the golden thread, no—*those* elements are all pretty much in good shape. What’s in dispute is what exactly happened on Naxos; *that* part of the myth seems to have
taken place off stage, hidden from the eyes of even the gods. Some versions say that Ariadne, in
defiance of direct instruction from Theseus’s crew, wandered off the ship and fell asleep on a
headland; no one knew she was missing when they set sail early the next morning. They didn’t
mean to leave her behind; they just “forgot” to check to see if she were on board. It was all her
fault. In this version, Ariadne wakes alone and throws herself off the cliff in despair. (Theseus, after
all, was quite absent-minded; he also “forgot” to change his ship’s sails from black to white, to let
his father, the King—who anxiously
awaited his return in Athens—know that he had come back
alive. When his father saw the black sails, he, too, threw himself off a cliff, and Theseus inherited
the kingdom.)

Other versions attribute more intent to Theseus; some say he had already gotten Ariadne
pregnant, and he abandoned her deliberately to avoid early fatherhood. Some say he regretted
taking her with him, now that the first flush of victory over the Minotaur had faded. In any case, he
saw her sleeping on the headland and deliberately decided not to wake her, stealing off with his
crew and those black sails in the dead of night. In this version, Ariadne wakes in despair, but the
god Dionysus—the god of wine and debauchery—waits for her. He’d been waiting for her all this
time, and he sweeps her up and makes her his wife.

In any case, before the decisive moment, Ariadne dreams. She sleeps on the beach at Naxos,
where they have landed exhausted in their flight from Crete. The waves lap the shore, as they are
known to do. The men stir and begin filling the boats, but no one looks to Ariadne, the boss’s
savior. They tiptoe around her and sail off into the north. Her dreams are of bacchanalia, her body
overtaken with both desire and repulsion. She throbs. She aches. She feels herself carried high
into
the air and then dashed on the cliffs.

It’s not long before Dionysus will sniff her out on the beach, stake a claim to her, turn her
eyes away from the cave where the Minotaur, though dead, still lurks. I am your labyrinth, he
murmurs in her ear, and she hears it: the way love twists and turns the heart inside out.

VII.

The inner ear is shaped exactly like a labyrinth, the cochlea a serpentine passage through
which language arrives, all of it a garble of sound until our brains sort it out. When we are lost,
when we say in a whisper to a good friend, or to ourselves in the dark, I’m lost, we often find
language leading us back out again. We talk and we talk (well, we women do anyway) and
gradually we rise from our chairs, or our beds; we put away the telephone, or we kiss the cheek of
our friend, or give a hug that lasts a long time.

Nietzsche was obsessed with Ariadne’s ears. They were tiny, like miniscule seashells.
Perhaps he imagined her so vividly lying on that beach, her head turned to one side, as the sound of
the night waves wove in and out.

I remember my mother’s ears, small, covered with a fringe of her hair. Clip-on earrings
clamped to the lobe; I always thought that must hurt. I sat near as I could to her from my place in
the back seat of the car, breathed into her ear while she stared straight ahead. Are we lost? I
whispered. No, she said, no we’re not lost. We just don’t quite know where we are.
VIII.

Macy’s new prints have come all undone. In a few weeks in her studio, she’s gone from coded language to almost no language at all. Threads flit all over the place, wild on the page. Her latest piece is called “It all unravels.” A long coil of knotted thread zips across the page and then flares out in a spray of wild threads with no clear direction. I tell her it looks like the splayed end of a nerve, right where it might fire and spark. She says, “I needed to lose some control, not have it be so coherent.”

I had thought Macy’s prints showed me a new version of Ariadne’s thread: language as that one essential lifeline; language made tactile, leading us hand over hand out of darkness and back to one who waits patiently for us to emerge. It’s language that leads us—bloodied, tired, triumphant—out of that labyrinth we call our hearts, all those chambers and arteries twisting toward a strange and fearsome center.

But at some point, yes?, we all start babbling. We lose the thread.

IX.

I’ve walked a lot of labyrinths in my time. Labyrinths laid out on huge canvas cloths in the center of a chapel. Labyrinths laid out in stones in a clear field. Labyrinths marked out with masking tape on a ballroom floor. They were popular for a while as a form of walking meditation, or prayer, reviving an ancient practice: to get found, you must first get lost. But you’re never really lost. There’s only one path in to the center and back again.

But you feel like you’re lost. The paths keep curving close to the center and you think you’re almost there, but then you find yourself traversing the outer corners, far from the destination. You make many turns, back and forth, so it’s easy to get a little dizzy. You pass many other pilgrims along the way, all of them doing their best to look serene, hands behind their backs, their steps measured and cool. Sometimes the labyrinth keepers will give you a piece of paper with instructions on it: Breathe in with each step, breathe out with each step. Or say a little prayer: The Lord is my Shepherd I shall not want…

For you, there may be a point, about halfway through, when you start to panic. You feel it rising from your hands to your chest, and you have to keep walking through it, resist the urge to simply step over the lines and back into the world.

Once you reach the center, there may be others already arrived before you, sitting cross-legged, hands upturned on their knees, or merely standing quietly, swaying a little on their feet. It’s unclear what you’re supposed to do once you get there, and so you stand quietly, waiting for a sense of divine contentment to settle over you. In these labyrinths, the Minotaur, the monster at the center, has supposedly already been slain, but you—you find him there anyway, gazing at you with yellow eyes, drooling.

X.

And now here I am, on a pilgrimage of sorts, sitting on an islet off the main harbor of Naxos Town, in Greece. I’ve just returned from a daylong bus tour of the island, where we traveled up and down mountainous roads. I saw the abandoned kouros of Dionysus in an archaic marble quarry;
it had cracked beneath the nose and so was not suitable for transport to its designated spot; it has lain abandoned for thousands of years, since the 6th century B.C. Of course we all took our pictures standing next to the monolith, touching that ancient marble. There is white marble everywhere on this island (our guide told us there is a saying: “When God made the world, he shipped all the leftover rock to the Cyclades.”)

On our way back to Naxos Town we rode along the wild north shore of the island where there are no villages, just cliffs and the roiling sea, the occasional Venetian castle dotting the landscape. Our guide, Evie, now tells us the myth of Ariadne, and her version is the “it was all a misunderstanding” variation. “When she awoke,” Evie tells us, “Ariadne was naturally very disappointed, and she threw herself off the rocks into the sea.” These rocks, she says, are right on the verge of Naxos Town, where the gate of Apollo’s temple rises on the horizon. Evie, almost as an afterthought, goes on to tell us the happier version of the story: the God Dionysus taking Ariadne for his wife, swooping in to save her just moments before she kills herself. My guidebook tells me that even the “very air of the island is intoxicating enough to cure a broken heart.”

So when I return from the bus trip, I make my way out to the fabled islet, where many tourists now wander with their cameras to film the abandoned, unfinished temple to Apollo (many things on this island seem to remain unfinished). Those marble pillars rise into one lone portico on the headland, a gateway to nothing but the sea. I find a place on the rocks, with my back to the crowd, to sit and look out to those waves and try to imagine Ariadne lying just here, her head rising from the rocks: the epitome of loneliness, aloneness. I lower my head so that I see only the waves repeating themselves over and over.

The island of Paros is nearby; the cluster of Small Cyclades wavers off in the distance. I try to imagine the jolt of recognition, the moment an inkling expands into knowledge. And I have to admit that I think, briefly, about the men I have known in my life who have been a bit like Theseus: you help them out of a jam, you extend the golden thread of yourself to them without question, and when they’re back on their own two feet they drift away absent-mindedly with barely a “see ya” tossed behind their backs.

It’s hard to feel mythic in the midst of tourism; before long a Swedish couple asks me take their photo next to Apollo’s pillars. I turn from Ariadne’s dream and snap the photo of the happy couple embracing, the archeaic pillars framing the harbor where you can walk along the quayside and order drinks with names like “Sex on the Beach” and “Orgasm.” You can stroll along and see smooth, tanned women sunbathing topless, their arms absentmindedly stroking the backs of their new husbands and lovers who lie with their faces turned away. I have my own picture taken, a few times, with me smiling up at the unfinished gate.

I decide to go back via the Kastro, the old city; I wander behind the castle and get turned around in the narrow, whitewashed streets. I recognize that rising flutter in the chest when I know I’m lost. I think of my mother, the helplessness that came over us in the station wagon as we watched the cars roaring by on the freeway, with no clear way to get from here to there. But we must have. We must have made it home, to the happy dog and her dinner bowl, to the backyard and its friendly eucalyptus trees. Either we asked a kind stranger, or an inner compass kicked in—whatever it was, we made it out alive.
So I keep my game face on, and a sauntering gait, to fool anyone who might be watching (who would be watching?) into thinking I’m just on a touristic stroll, happy to be meandering through these claustrophobic alleyways that pass for avenues.

I keep going: I pass a Spanish restaurant, and a souvenir shop, think I’m in familiar territory, then turn a corner and the world turns sinister, with motorcycles roaring past inches from my feet and exposed wires trailing on the ground. I finally stop into a police station and ask three young officers for directions. I give them the card to my hotel, and they confer among themselves for several minutes, arguing in Greek, and I stand there with a smile fixed on my face, looking from one to the other. It must be very complicated, this business of getting me back on the right track, but finally one of them jerks his head and has me follow him outside, where he sweeps his arm and through a series of gestures to tell me it’s right down this street.

So I believe him; I walk a few feet down the narrow road, and then the world opens up again—there’s the mini-market where I bought water yesterday, there’s the Mexican restaurant, and there’s the hotel—the Hotel Poseidon, with its plaster busts of the gods, so familiar, beckoning me home.
Opalescent

I.

I’m buying stained-glass panels for the windows of my new home. They’re from a store called “Rejuvenation” in Portland, and my friend Kathleen has encouraged me to get them. She now sits in one of the lush, reupholstered chairs in the showroom, her hands clasped in her lap, her head tilted just a little to the side as she watches me, bemused at the gravity I’ve lent to this endeavor.

Rejuvenation has many, many Tiffany-inspired glass panels from which to choose: There are floor-to-ceiling windows all along the back wall—enormous paintings of climbing morning glory or gingko trees—and lamps with clusters of glass that bend into dangling wisteria or the sleek bodies of dragonflies. Now I know why Rejuvenation is Kathleen’s favorite place, and why she insisted that we come. This shop lives up to its name: the light here does rejuvenate, makes our bodies feel young in the careless way the young live, even amid all these breakable things.

I don’t live in Portland, so to make a choice now is full of risk—what if I don’t like the window once I get it home? What if it cracks on the way?—but now that the longing to buy has transmuted into the inevitable purchase, there’s no turning back. I keep returning to a triptych that hangs vertically in a side window: a white lotus flower blossoming up top, with vines that interweave and flow down three sections to reach, finally, an unopened bud. The glass winks in shades of lavender and teal. I pay the $250, and a nice salesman wraps it up securely in layers of cardboard for me take back to Bellingham.

Later, Kathleen kisses me goodbye, sorrow and joy consorting on her face to make it strangely alight. All the way home, I’m aware of the stained glass in its box beside me: a container of pent-up brilliance, already broken.

II.

Marc Chagall: For me a church window represents the transparent partition between my heart and the heart of the world.

I first saw Chagall stained glass at the Art Institute of Chicago. You see the light before you actually see the windows: a lavender glow as you come down the stairs into the foyer of the museum. I stood with my friend Kristin before American Windows, glass collages that incorporate classic Chagall motifs: figures floating midair or perched improbably in the crowns of trees; birds soaring in currents of yellow and red; objects unhinged from any force that once kept them aligned. All of it seems a frenetic act of worship, the faces drawn upward, offering candles and song in postures of supplication.

Kristin and I stood there together, transfixed in the Chagall blue. Glass, perhaps, afforded Chagall his perfect medium, though he came to it late, well past the age of 70. Chagall, whose paintings emerge from his Judaism (“were I not a Jew,” he said, “I would not have become an artist”) first assembled a stained glass mosaic for a Catholic church—the Church of Notre Dame de
Toute Grace—in France. He considered it a privilege to create windows for holy places. He took no payment for his work.

Kristin walked on, anxious, I think, to get to the O’Keefes. A doctoral student at the University of Chicago, studying comparative theologies, Kristin often called me late at night to talk of her troubles: a boyfriend whose jealousy verged on dangerous, her doubts about the myriad academic paths she has taken. Years from this moment, she will travel to southern India, squatting in huts and asking Hindu women, in her rudimentary Tamil, about their reverence for the Virgin Mary.

As far as I know, Chagall did not piece together the Virgin in cobalt blue glass, her head tilted to the side in compassion, but if he had I imagine she would look much like the primary model for his paintings, his first wife Bella: she of the long neck and dark eyes, her skin a pallor that turns incandescent under her husband’s brush. Bella’s head, in both photographs and paintings, tilts to the side the way Mary’s does, a half-smile tugging at her lips.

Bella died in 1944. She and her husband had been married almost thirty years. For nine months Chagall’s brush lay still and quiet in his studio. I wonder how the light felt to him then, if the windows clouded over and became opaque. He had not yet discovered stained glass as a vehicle, but maybe that’s what he needed then—scythes of blue, eruptions of yellow—and the deliberate, tender restoration of all that would be lost.

III.

And this, from a 19th-century edition of Harper’s: “The window, being the opening to admit light, is always the first attraction to catch the eye. The deep warmth of the ruby, the tender contentment of the sapphire, the glow and coruscation of the amethyst…may all be summoned to the satisfaction of the least cultivated eye by the infinite wealth of the glass-stainer’s art.”

And this, from stainedglass.com: “Glass is most like a supercooled liquid….sand transformed by fire. As stained glass artistry grew, the lead lines that were once accepted as a necessary and decorative element became necessary evils to be camouflaged by the design.”

IV.

Ann Gardner, an artist who lives in Bellingham, is known for mosaic sculptures that mimic waves upon waves of unsettled water. She got her start in mosaic when commissioned to create a tile wall on a stairway in Seattle. “I made all the tiles,” she said, “And I laid them all down and there just wasn’t enough energy for me. So I took a hammer and broke them all.”

V.

Down in California, my friends Rhea and Jim are building a patio. They use what they call “rip-rap”: chunks of concrete ripped out of houses undergoing restoration. They pick it up in town when they hear of it on the local radio station: people have extra rip-rap to give away, and you haul it back home yourself. They finished about half the patio when they ran out of rip-rap, and the truck used to haul it had broken down, exhausted under the weight.
What to do? After a few days of gazing with yearning at their unfinished patio, they simply decided to make their own.

So they created a mold, poured cement and aggregate into it, let it dry, then went at it with sledgehammers. They broke it into pieces—they broke it apart—merely to put it back together again with the barest of spaces between the fragments. We both laugh as Rhea tells me about this process, how silly it seems when you actually do it: to create something whole, only to destroy it, to have those pulverized pieces come together again to mimic the whole.

As we stand on the completed patio, I see they have planted small, tender starts of creeping thyme to fill in these spaces with greenery and fragrance. It’s the kind of herb that can be trampled; in fact it likes foot traffic and will thrive there, filling in the cracks the way lead does on stained glass, or mortar in mosaics. Up the hill they’ve planted a perennial garden, mulched against the summer heat by a layer of cocoa husks so that now, in the late June sun, the garden smells of chocolate, wafting across us where we stand on the broken and lovely ground.

VI.

I was a child in love with jigsaw puzzles, starting slowly with the big-eyed puppies and clowns, moving on to the 100-piece, then 500, then inevitably 1000-piece contraptions. Where did we do them? I think my father must have built us a special puzzle tray, a flat board we lifted from the kitchen table at mealtime, replaced a little later, after dessert. I can see his high cheekbones and the dimples I’ve inherited, the five o’clock shadow lining his face. Of course, like all good puzzlers, we created as much of the border as we could first, then filled the interior at a slow, methodical pace that required patience. You need to be willing to try, and fail, and try again—nudging the contours of the pieces together, sometimes roughly, sometimes softly, always the snap/sigh combination when the piece hits home.

Often we kept the television on, or the radio, and we must have been serenaded by the sound of my mother washing the dishes and scrubbing her stove. We must have looked up from our work occasionally, watched a bit of the show, said something to my mother; my brothers must have joined us now and then, never sitting but hovering, reaching out their basketball-grimed fingers to shove a piece in place. But I prefer to remember father and daughter at this shared task of assemblage alone, the only sound the muted scuff of puzzle pieces across the board, an occasional sigh, and the crisp tap when a piece settled into place.

I imagine us at this for hours, the day outside our suburban window draining away, the new landscape unfolding before us bit by bit (vistas we would never see in real life: baronial white mansions, spreading seas of lavender, wooden bridges across leaf-strewn streams). At first we used the box cover, propped up, as a guide. But after a while we glanced up at it less often, training our eyes to see by intuition, to feel our way toward the center piece by piece, color by color, through instinct alone.

Sometimes I liked the completed puzzle so much my father would spray it with a special adhesive and hang it up on my bedroom wall. I’d gaze at the picture admiringly for a few weeks or so, but after awhile the glow of accomplishment faded, and the picture turned tawdry, dull, a fake. The point was never the picture after all. What I loved (I knew even then) was the process of
rememberment. As if the picture were itself a dim memory, a collective loss, and through our grave attention we brought it to life again.

VII.

*I’ve never broken a bone in my life.* I say this sentence more often than I would think necessary, and I say it with obvious pride, as if to keep my bones intact this long is some sort of accomplishment. Not for me the heavy cast on the arm, dirtied on the playground, adorned with spirals and flowers of magic marker. But the first boy I kissed had a broken wrist, and his cast lay inert on his lap as we sought out each other’s mouths. His breath smelled of alfalfa sprouts, or maybe that was the rancid odor emanating from thick plaster and gauze. My hand, I vaguely remember, fell to rest on his cast, and I think, knowing me, that I stroked it gently, as if it really were just an extension of his knobby wrist.

Bones, after all, are used to it; even in good health, they’re always in the process of breaking. Every minute the osteoclasts gnaw away at the old collagen, and the osteoblasts muscle in to lay down fresh cells. When a bone breaks, the stem cells begin a mad dash, speeding up their rate of duplication a thousand-fold. The osteoblasts speed up too, laying down the collagen, the minerals, the calcium, until you have a whole bone, *good as new.*

Because of this cycle, any human bone is never more than 20 years old. Look at your arm, beyond the skin to divine the ulna and radius—no longer “hard as bone” but always in a state of flux, neither ruined nor repaired, but somewhere in between. Now move your gaze to the shoulder, or touch your fingers to your clavicle, that place where our skeleton becomes most distinct. Or place your chin in your hand, feel that jawbone: how solid it seems! How wholly your own bone, that’s been with you a thousand years, jawing through conversations both mundane and profound, meals that left you swooning.

But really that bone’s barely older than an adolescent, just now reaching her prime. That other bone—the one that had your first kiss, the one that felt the stroke of the first man you really loved—it’s gone, dissolved. Where does that leave us, with all these naive bones? Have they learned a thing?

Don’t grieve. Think of it as rejuvenation.

VIII.

And you see where this leads:

“The foot bone connected to the… leg bone,
   The leg bone connected to the… knee bone,
   The knee bone connected to the… thigh bone…
Oh hear the word of the Lord!”

And so on. Actually what Ezekiel said was: “and behold, there were very many in the open valley, and lo, they were very dry. And he said unto me, Son of Man, can these bones live?…and there was a noise, and behold a shaking, and the bones came together, bone to his bone ….”
IX.

...So I took a hammer and broke them all...

Sometimes the stained glass catches my eye by surprise. I forget, but not for long, that these pieces glisten in my window, submissive to whatever light happens on them.

Louis Comfort Tiffany grew famous for his memorial windows: commissions made by grieving families to remember the dead. A highly private man, yet gregarious, he threw lavish costume balls and built an entire estate, Laurelton Hall, as a testament to his art. He invented opalescent window glass, a process whereby color fuses into the glass itself, creating a rich texture impossible to obtain by mere application. He was, as some critics suggest, “intoxicated with color.”

And so when asked to create memorial windows to be set in the walls of churches, a standard practice in the late 19th century, Tiffany balked at the convention of Biblical scenes and veered instead into landscapes lush with color and light. The church frowned on this, but the families loved it: in one of his most famous memorial windows,Magnolias and Irises (ca. 1908), a field of purple iris leads the eye to a luminescent pool fed by a river snaking through the overlapping hills in the background. The water, a recurrent motif in the memorial windows, represents the River of Life, bearing departed souls from this realm to the next. Above it all, a stand of magnolia trees bursts into full bloom, echoing the golds and pinks of sunrise.

Bishop Durande de Mende: Stained glass windows are divine writings that spread the clarity of the true sun, who is God, through the heart of the faithful, bringing them true enlightenment.

X.

Rhea has joined a quilting circle. The women sit together once a month with their squares spread out on their laps, stitching and talking through the rainy winter months. None of them really knew how to quilt at first; they learned the craft together, bit by bit, and soon the quilting became a back rhythm to their conversations, allowed their thoughts free reign.

Rhea came to visit me when I moved into my new house, before the furniture was in place, the windows still unadorned. She brought with her some squares she was piecing together from scraps of blue silk, a bit of gold. She sat on my front lawn while I tinkered with my new potted plants. Rhea made each stitch carefully, the needle appearing and disappearing among the weave of the cloth.

Two Jehovah’s Witnesses came by—in their stiff suits and sickly smiles—and asked us if we worried about where our souls would go when we die. Rhea just kept stitching her squares, and without looking up murmured that she had no worries at all. She said it with such conviction—no worries at all—the witnesses turned away without argument and headed for the next house. I heard my 90-year-old neighbor open the door, and her quavery voice as she answered them: “Well, I prefer not to think too much about it.”

When I hold Rhea’s quilt, or run my hand along its surface (this instinctive gesture when confronted with such broken and reassembled things), it’s as though I touch an essential body that lies just beneath the coverlet of skin (them bones, them bones, them Dry bones...) And I sense not only my friend’s presence in the quilt, but all the women who spoke as they sat together commiserating:
a rough man, a troublesome child, the drought, the flood—all these voices dissolved in the space between each stitch.

As Roethke put it: “May my silences become more accurate.”

XI.

Divine writings….

I’m attending the wedding of a good friend’s daughter, held in an Episcopal Church in Bellingham. I’ve driven by this church many times, but this is my first foray inside, and I’m surprised to see that we’re surrounded by panels and panels of stained glass. From the outside, these windows look dark, barely noticeable, but inside: what a grand illumination! We’re bathed in blues and yellows and reds as we watch this marriage commence.

Such belief in that room, the bride glowing with her faith, her communion. We hear psalms and prayers and blessings; the priest talks about marriage as the fusion of incomplete fragments, that the two people who kneel at the altar (so young!) could not be whole without the other. Though I—oh, modern woman that I am—squirm and balk at this particular sermon, I settle down in the light of the stained glass windows: the bride and groom, in their formal clothes, do indeed look like puzzle pieces made to be joined. So poised she is, so elegant, her arm hooked through the arm of her new husband.

When the priest follows them down the aisle, holding the gospel close to his chest, he stumbles a bit and falls against one of the pews. Later, I will hear that he is in the midst of stage-four cancer and does not have long to live. Despite this, or maybe because of it, the priest put on a good show, enthusiastically joining these young people in marriage, exhorting us to shout “We Will!” when asked if we would support this union.

I wonder now if he thought of Ezekiel and had confidence in an eventual resurrection. The bones rejoined, the sheath of the body flawless.

XII.

My friend Suzanne once broke her wrist and wore a cast for several weeks up to her elbow. The day they sawed through the plaster, the technicians split away the two sides to reveal a hand transformed: a thick mat of dark hair covered the back of her hand, like an animal’s coat, she says, laughing. I looked like a freak. She finally went back to her doctor, to see what had happened. He told her it was normal, to be expected. When a bone breaks, growth hormones flood the area, eager to repair but unable to distinguish exactly which kinds of growth to facilitate. I imagine these hormones like a mass of children let loose for recess after a long day of rain, their energy so effervescent they swarm over anything in their path. They urge everything to flourish. Grow, grow! they shout. Mend!
XIII.

….the lead lines that were once accepted as a necessary and decorative element became necessary evils to be camouflaged by the design…

When Chagall made his now famous “Jerusalem Windows,” he saw them as “jewels of translucent fire.” His windows have been described by art historians as “jewel-hard and foamy, reverberating and penetrating, radiating light from an unknown interior.” Chagall, himself, in a summation of his life’s work said: “My art is an extravagant art, a flaming vermilion, a blue soul flooding over my paintings.”

XIV.

They call it “Chartres Blue.” In the miles of stained glass that bedeck Chartres Cathedral—an hour’s train ride from Paris—a violet-blue light emanates that no one had ever really encountered before the 12th century. Can you imagine it? A pilgrim, you trudge with head down, up the hill toward the ramparts, the towers etched with hundreds of saints who wink and smile in the muted light. You enter the nave, with its cobbled labyrinth and sink to your knees, crawling toward your salvation along these winding paths. The only light in the immense dark comes from the stained glass windows, and it is enough, more than enough. Everywhere you turn there is more of it, up high and down low, the rose windows presiding over the portals. The royal blue—a color so new to your eyes that your mind ceases its babble, speechless—accumulates pane by pane, until it bathes your retinas in the glow of the saved.

Or imagine this: You are a worker, a tradesman, in the twentieth century, a time of what they call the “great” wars. You live in the village of Chartres, and everyone knows what’s coming. You climb up scaffolds and begin removing the stained glass windows, painstakingly, bit by bit, so they won’t be destroyed by errant bombs—all of Europe now quaking, and it’s up to you to save what can be saved. It doesn’t matter how much time it takes. Each piece comes away easily once you’ve loosed it from its lead casing, and you label it, put it in its proper box. A new kind of light streams into the cathedral, naked and unadorned. Who can be saved in such a glare? Once the war is over, once a peace is certain, you will climb once again and replace the windows, bit by bit. Maybe they won’t be finished before you die—such a restoration might take decades, the slow time necessary for such consecrated light to return. But you persevere, fitting each piece of stained glass into its socket, until finally the litany of saints might be whole again.

I make my own pilgrimage to see it. And even on the train, I felt a slight shift in my mood, an expansion of the self out of its narrow channel of worry and preoccupation. For days I’d been wandering Paris in earnest tourist mode, checking museums off the list, hopping on and off the Metro like an expert, pretending to have a good time. But I’ve been recovering from a broken heart, and so the City of Light has been tainted a bit, and I found myself irritably glancing at lovers along the seine, impatiently shouldering by them to get another helping of Berthillion sorbet. There’s too much light in Paris, the days reaching 90 degrees and the sun setting at 10 p.m., until sometimes I just wanted it all to go dark.

But on the train to Chartres, and in the cathedral itself, I get it: the divine balance of light and dark, the heat tempered by the centuries’ old stone. There’s a noonday mass going on in the
central sanctum, the priest’s slow voice amplified so that it seems to start nowhere, to emerge from the air itself. There are only a few people actually participating in the mass, the rest of us circling around them as we keep our heads tilted toward the massive windows that loom at every turn.

I light a votive candle in front of a Mary carved from pear wood; she’s holding high the infant Jesus in her arms. It’s said that children came here during “troubled times” and prayed to Mary for her comfort and guidance. I stand there in front of my sputtering candle, my hands held like a lotus against my chest, and whisper the only prayer I really know these days: the metta prayer of Buddhism, wishing for all beings to be free from fear. Because right at this moment—in a place that has weathered so much history, and that has absorbed so many supplications—I’m thinking fear must be the root of all of it, all our suffering. And all our prayers merely aimed at a dissolution of that fear into something akin to a mother’s hush. Afterward I walk down the center aisle, and though most of the ancient labyrinth is cluttered with chairs, I place my feet carefully on the smooth cobbles of the exposed bits of the path, weaving my way in an odd, sideways little dance toward home.

XV.

My friend Kristin has returned from India. When she answers the phone, we coo to each other a few moments of our pleasure—her voice finally in my ear after so many long months, my voice in hers. I’m slouched on my sofa looking at, but not really seeing, my new stained glass windows from Rejuvenation; she’s in her new apartment in Chicago, two roommates hovering somewhere out of sight.

She tells me about a temple in India with its 22 sacred wells. She tells me about walking through this temple and undergoing a strange baptism: at each well the guide poured buckets of water over their heads, three times each—so, 66 dunkings in the course of an hour. “It was bizarre,” she says, “but also…” We pause for a moment, the line that connects us suspended. “Afterward I had to lie outside in the garden, I was so tired. I fell asleep, all these people around me and I’m sleeping like a baby.”

And while she talks I imagine the Chagall blue, the Chartres blue: Kristin with her blue eyes, in her blue sari, her leather sandals, the whisper of her footsteps in the halls, the splash of water over her head. She tells me about the worn stone floors, the puddled water from the pilgrims that came before, light flickering along the dim temple walls. Though the rest of India glares on the plain, inside this temple my friend is baptized again and again, drenched in holy water, calm and cool, wholly herself.

XVI.

From photographer André Kertész: We can never know how beautiful nature is. We can only guess.

And perhaps that’s what Tiffany was up to, with his stained glass: taking wild stabs at it. I imagine him walking the grounds of Laurelton Hall, pausing in the courtyard to admire his fountain: an octagonal pool trimmed with iridescent glass, an elegant, favrile vase rising from the center. ...and as the light fell on it the colors glimmered like mother-of-pearl... I imagine him passing his
fountain and stopping for a moment under the magnolia tree, the heavy wisteria. *We can never know how beautiful nature is. We can only guess.*

These days, when I walk to work, I’m often confronted by the locust trees in front of Old Main, just now coming into their yellow fever. It’s all uphill, this walk, and so each tree comes into view incrementally: I see the crown, then the low branches, then the weathered trunk. And my eyes perceive the broken pieces rather than the whole: I see each leaf as the individual fragment of the tree itself. And at the same time, no leaf exists in isolation: the single leaf would not carry the aspect of the season as much as this multiplicity of leaves, all of them conjoining in this singular pattern we think of as *autumn* or *locust* or *tree*.

The trees are losing their leaves, of course they are. It is not unexpected; we saw it coming all along. The leaves fall along the brick pathways, obscuring the proper way. Some of the people I pass notice this disassembling, but most do not. Some of the leaves fly up and whirl out of our way. Some of them, but not all, disintegrate under our feet.

...a transparent partition, between my heart and the heart of the world...

In any case, we walk easily, without fear, each of us held together by camouflaged ribbons of bone.
About the Work

Huckleberries and High Holidays:
Writing the Lyric Essay as an Act of Faith

The other day I went huckleberry picking on the flanks of Mt. Baker, an hour or so from my house in Bellingham. Schreiber’s Meadow, on the south side, is my favorite patch: the bushes spread out for a long way along the trail, the ripe berries dangling from the underside of the copperish leaves. You have to restrain yourself from simply hunkering down and picking at the first opportunity (which presents itself just two minutes from the car), because you know that at each bend in the trail a more ample vista will greet you. From the rickety boardwalk, you’ll see green wetlands that need only a Moose high-stepping into the field to complete the picture. You’ll see the glaciers of Mt. Baker through the trees, and you’ll cross the rubble from an avalanche slide that roared through years ago, picking your way across displaced boulders and the remnants of a hopeful little bridge. You know black bears are out there, rolling on their backs in the berry bushes, gorging themselves on fruit to sustain them in the lean months to come.

Huckleberry season is my favorite time of year; not only does it usually arrive at the beginning of the high holidays—the Jewish New Year—it seems to herald both the end of something glorious (summer in the high country) and the beginning of something new and unknown (fall, school year, etc.), all with a few weeks of jeweled treats to be gobbled in many incarnations—huckleberry French Toast, say, or salmon roasted with mustard and huckleberries, or perhaps a little palate cleanser of huckleberry lemon tarts. Sometimes I don’t really know how it will all turn out, but I keep doing it anyway, putting together in my mind vague memories of the various flavors. The huckleberries—precious in their smallness, in their rarity, in the effort it takes to acquire them—demand attention, demand to be used now; they want to be both squandered and preserved (personally, I never have the patience or foresight for huckleberry jam; I leave that to my friend Suzanne, who will give me a tiny jar if I prove myself “jam-worthy.”) I’m driven mad by the memory of huckleberry on my tongue, my desire for meals redolent of the meadows in which the berries ripen.

But even before that orgy of delight: the huckleberry picking, itself, makes you assume a posture of worship, and like all good rituals, it leads you into a trance far removed from your workaday world. After walking at a stroll through the meadow, you finally find the spot that can’t be resisted, each bush loaded with plump berries. And you begin: at first bowing down from above, then squatting, then sitting in the heather, your hands working with ever greater efficiency as you see how to grab two berries at once, then three, then four. Each bush leads to the next and the next, until you look up—dazed and stained—to find yourself far from the trail that led you here in the first place.

And let’s not forget: this all happens at the time of what, for me, is the “real” new year. The high holidays, in the Jewish tradition, invite reflection on the year past and a setting of good intention for the year ahead. You both let go, and look forward, blessed for a few moments to be
somewhere in between. Never a people to rush things, we take ten days for this endeavor, during which time we visit a body of running water and toss in bread crumbs as a way of both acknowledging and letting go of our past transgressions. We do this near water, because the fish—who never close their eyes—bear witness for us. We always need a witness. We don’t know what the new year will bring, but we pray for it anyway. We become contrite, in a state of surrender to our lives exactly as they are—right here, right now, teetering between past and future, completely absolved.

So why do I spend my time (and yours) talking of huckleberries and high holidays? What do these delicious and holy things have to do with the hard work of simply getting words on paper and shaping them into sense? Because, dear Reader, here we are, together, in a magazine called Segue, whose mission articulates the full meaning of that wonderful word: “Movement and the shape of movement: As verb, "segue" describes the transition from one thing to another—from here to there, innocence to wisdom, familiarity to strangeness.” And that is where we are—when we’re huckleberry picking, or when we’re doing mad kitchen improvisations with huckleberries, or when we’re enacting the rituals of the Jewish New Year, or when we’re writing a lyric essay: we’re in that transition from one thing to another, and we happily embrace the movement of transition; sometimes we actually prefer the movement to the destination itself (even when that destination leads to Huckleberry French Toast on the tongue…).

I’m happiest in writing when I really have no idea where I am, when I’m feeling my way along, when I’m in that holy state of segue. The essays I’ve offered you here—“Opalescent” and “A Dream of Ariadne”—both started with nothing but a glimpse, an image that lingered in my mind, and I felt compelled to follow that glimpse wherever it would lead. I had nothing to go on but faith and desire. I found myself in thickets surrounded by sweet things, picking them as fast as I could, knowing eventually I would need to fashion them into something beyond themselves, something that takes care and devotion and faith.

I often begin with what is right in front of me, and then I allow that concrete detail or image to give rise to a deeper question, one that usually begins with the simple but potent word, “Why?” That why becomes the trail we (reader and writer) follow through the underbrush. The essay “Opalescent” started with, naturally, the stained glass windows. I was so inordinately pleased with them, I sat for a long time just watching their light shift and change the atmosphere in my living room. As I set pen to paper to describe them—and as I uttered the magic word “why”—I learned that it was not really the quality of light I felt drawn to, but the brokenness of that light, the way this kind of sacred beauty could emerge from that which is fractured. Going deeper, I understood that this essential quality of “brokenness” had resonance in my life far beyond these stained glass windows. My task, then, was to follow that rather abstract theme, or idea, and excavate how it had manifested—and continues to manifest—in concrete scenes and images.

Once these pieces were assembled, I needed to fashion them together; I needed to work as a stained-glass artist myself and find the right mortar to hold them together. I had to let go of the
pieces that dulled the image, and I needed to polish those that would brighten it. I needed to find the essential repetitions across space and time that cemented these pieces together in a way that felt inevitable. As time passed, new images would enter the scene, and I’d clear a space for them (my friend Suzanne telling me about her broken wrist; or traveling to Chartres cathedral long after I thought the essay was “finished”). The essay was always in flux, until it wasn’t anymore—until I had found the order and language that seemed to fix it into place.

And yet, I hope that sense of flux remains, infusing the essay with a fluidity that enables the reader to feel as though she is putting it together herself, that she enacts the kind of faith the composition itself required. In the end, the essay moves from a simple description of stained glass windows, to a meditation on mortality—to the realization that we’re all shattered to the core, and it is exactly this brokenness that makes our lives beautiful.

“A Dream of Ariadne” began with a memory that surfaced during meditation in the chapel at the Vermont Studio Center. There, all by myself in front of the altar, I “remembered” vividly that moment of being lost with my mother. Having nothing else on the writing docket for the day, I wrote out the scene, allowing the details to evolve even if I didn’t know they were “true.” That scene sat all by itself for a while in my notebook, until I came back to it with that essential question—Why? Why did I remember this scene? And why those particular details? Why should it stick in my memory all these years later?

That “why” led me to the essential theme of “lost-ness,” and how that quality, too, had penetrated my life and my sense of myself. Being lost somehow led me to Ariadne, a mythic figure I’d always loved but never really known. Her story led me to the paintings of de Chirico, and on and on—each image, each new bit of research, opening up new pathways into this lush thicket. When one is writing like this, so much of the world offers itself as a gift to be plucked: a painter using thread as a way to communicate; a trip to Greece that leads you to the exact place of Ariadne’s downfall. Your job as a writer is to continually sift through these images and rinse off the dust, arrange them in a form that makes some kind of intuitive and delicious sense.

Huckleberries and High Holidays. The earthly and the sublime existing side by side, past and future stretching out for miles on either side of the trail. And you, in the middle of it all, segueing from one to the other with only the tools you have readily at hand: a container to hold it all, a raincoat to keep you dry, a pocketful of bread crumbs to scatter on the water and see where they’ll land. You need a witness (the dear reader), and you need your faith, simple and steady, to see you out and back again.
About the Author

Brenda Miller, an associate professor at Western Washington University and Editor-in-Chief of the Bellingham Review, received four Pushcart Prizes for her work in creative nonfiction, and her essays have appeared in such periodicals as The Georgia Review, Prairie Schooner, The Sun, Northern Lights, and Fourth Genre. Her essays have twice been selected as Notable Essays of the year by Robert Atwan, editor of The Best American Essays series. She has held creative writing fellowships from the Abraham Woursell Foundation, the Ludwig Vogelstein Foundation, and the Steffensen-Cannon Foundation. Her book of essays, Season of the Body, was published in 2002 by Sarabande Books and she co-authored Tell it Slant: Writing and Shaping Creative Nonfiction, with her colleague Suzanne Paola.

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