Welcome to issue no. 11!

Thank you for taking the time to read our 11th issue! We sincerely believe that you are going to find some great material in this issue. This issue is packed with various writers, artists whose work we truly enjoyed!

The next issue’s elements are: Relic, Passageway, Kiss.

Follow us on Twitter and Facebook for all of the latest updates!

Sincerely,
Mikaela Shea
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They let the bridge fall
into disrepair, never set aside the tax money
required to fix it. Now I haven’t been
in years, and wonder if they bother still
to trim the boxwoods of their famous labyrinth.

Another failed Utopia
nestled between the lowland farms and river.
I can still trace the back ways on a map
and find the gravel roads that take you there.
Even when I hit Old State Road 66, I’m drawn,
a reflex that pulls me west and past my exit.
I can still hear the two quarters hit the toll basket,
or see my mother place them in the hand
of the old man interrupted at his paper.
The tollbooth will not let us cross
into Illinois again, the state that birthed
and nearly killed my mother.

Now a set of reflective signs block
the route where my mother, when much younger,
coming home with her sister from a dance,
rang her car off into floodland muck and sunk,
waited on the car roof as if it were a raft,
until the farmer saw the car lights shimmer beneath the water,
and skimmed across his ruined fields
to save her in his jon boat and ferry her to safety.

Whenever we drove past, zipped through to Carmi
and her parents, the spot was a mental marker on the trip,
the far-off Christmas star shining year round, high upon a metal silo.

Only now that I can no longer go
do the questions come like saplings
washed away by the Wabash River.
Those thousand things between there and here
that made her who she was and is, my mother a girl
I’ll never fully know, who travelled roads that disappear.
They say the millennials aren’t eating breakfast cereal. All those boxes of Cap’n Crunch, Cocoa Puffs, Mini-Wheats, just sitting there with their mascots grinning manically off into space. Cereal takes too long, you see. The Youth of America want to sleep until the very last minute, jump out of bed, pull on clothes that don’t need ironing, hop into purring hybrid cars, have Siri order $10 flat whites they can then have thrown at them through sunroofs that they reflexively catch while they silently glide into their parking spots without a moment of their precious day wasted.

I read this and laugh. We’re obsolete, I guess, those of us who eat our breakfast at a table, who wake up with a buffer of time between dreams and the day. I think of the distance between us, the twisted labyrinth of roads, and the somewhat rueful delight I felt knowing that, if nothing else, we would remain, after the dust settled, in the same time zone. Our suns the same, our moons, although the rest burns in gaudy Day-Glo.
All that is old is new again: it is the only constant, all that we can hitch our star to. The marketers fret because they do not understand these whippersnappers and the millennials just want some sleep and maybe not to pay student loans until they die, and you’re gone other than a hastily written note and a photo where the frame almost cuts you off. I wipe a trace of milk from my lip and get ready for my day. Newspapers, breakfast cereal, live theater, men who stay: everything I love has a tendency toward obsolescence.

Rural Commute
Elizabeth Morton

The pylons stand, with awkward gait; industrial totems. Beneath, we are subject to the same old blunt -traumas—throb of lawnmower, wethersheep aching with impotence in groundfog that sunrise scalds, day that hammers too early on our shoulderbones. I trace my way in zigzags, between the ankles of giants, to a bus stop where I wait for ordinary predations—guttermuck and conversation, the reflexive shaking of umbrellas. Sometimes we commuters will babble about dairy prices and cobalt, rotary systems and roundworms. Other times the cloud breaks heavily, leaving us to wince under birddrift and poplars and a labyrinth of sky.
JOEY followed Siena, and I followed Joey. The three of us had walked out of our Introductory Astronomy class at the junior college and escaped into the early spring sunshine. Joey was one of those punk-stoners who hung outside Club Zero, trying out their fake IDs and listening to bands that wanted to be The Clash or the Pistols but were a few decades too late. I was in love with him then, but his dark eyes had been following Siena all semester. Siena liked him enough, but I knew she’d lose interest. She always lost interest. The world, as Siena saw it, was full of *joey’s*.

And she was right. But I couldn’t be that confident. I wasn’t Siena.

Siena didn’t tell me to back off. She did try to remind me, as she often did, that girls without birth control were playing Russian roulette with their lives.

“Only a matter of time before you get yourself stuck. A bug pinned down in a glass box,” she said when she saw me watching Joey run his hands through his choppy black hair.
“You think that’s what I want?”
“I think you make bad choices,” she said.
“I learned it from watching you,” I said, quoting a famous “anti-drug” campaign from when we were kids.
She laughed, but then her eyes turned sullen again.
“Seriously, Deanie,” she said. She made a popping sound and a motion with her hand like she was sticking a pin through a bug on a board. “Don’t think I’ll stay around to help you raise some brat.”
“You’d never leave me, Siena,” I said, then I laughed because none of this was serious.
She got this look in her eyes that I’d noticed lately—it was a look that said she was about to take off running.
But it was almost summer, and the stifling heat was creeping in.
I loved Siena in that way you could love a best friend, sister, and bully. I’d moved in with Siena and her mom when we were both just kids. At nineteen, I’d known her longer than I’d known most people, even my own parents.
That morning she couldn’t sit still in the lecture hall, and she’d just stood up and walked out the side door without saying anything.
“Where we headed?” I asked her. I was always asking Siena, Where? just by virtue of the hierarchy in our friendship.
We stopped for gas on the highway an hour outside of Phoenix. Joey and Siena went inside to buy smokes. When they came out, his hand was on her back. I watched them, my heart filling up with its own brand of crazy schoolgirl longing. The air conditioner in the car was turned up so high, the windows were fogging over. Someone had drawn a heart in the dust on the outside of the backseat window. I traced the heart into the mist on the inside of the window, then I got out of the car and pumped the gas.
“Where are we going?” I asked her again. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath in, contemplating our next move. Joey glanced at me for a moment and I smiled. Then he watched Siena’s breasts as her chest swelled then receded. I took a step forward so that I stood next to her. I rolled my shoulders back.
“I know a place in the desert,” Joey said. Siena’s eyes opened and darted toward him, the ghost of a glare settling in her dark pupils. There’s no way he saw it, but my stomach flipped for a split second, a reflex action developed over the years of being friends with Siena. Pissing her off, when we were kids, meant weeks of silence, hissing derision on the playground and possible banishment from the group. It sounds excessive, but all dictatorships have rules.
But Joey, he didn’t know the rules. He smiled and looked from Siena to me.
“You girls have the same hair,” he said. “It’s like, exactly the same.”
“Mine’s darker,” Siena said.
“We used the same dye,” I said.
“Same exact length. Same color as far as I can tell,” he said, pointing from her head to mine. “Do you want to check out this place in the desert, Deanie?”
I glanced at Siena, but she was fingering the strands of her dark hair; the tips, like mine, bleached blonde just last week in her mother’s blue bathroom.
“Sure,” I said.
“Give me the back seat,” Siena said.
Finally, I thought.
I got in the passenger seat and goose flesh covered my arms as soon as the air conditioning met my skin.

Joey tried turning his head to talk to Siena, but after a few failed attempts he gave up.

We drove in silence, and I waited for him to turn his attention to me. The sun formed mirages of puddles in the middle of the road in front of us. I stared out the window at the passing neighborhoods and plazas. Siena pretended she was sleeping in the back seat, her head tilted toward the two-sided heart in the glass.

“So how do you girls know each other?” Joey asked me. We were somewhere near Sedona and I was shivering from the cold air. “Jesus, your teeth are chattering,” he said. “Why didn’t you say something?”

I shrugged.

Joey turned down the knob on the air-conditioner.

“All you have to do is say what you want, Deanie,” he said. “Siena’s mom raised me,” I said. But that wasn’t entirely true. Siena’s mom Elena was like a beautiful, popular girl who you wanted to possess and become at the same time. She didn’t expect much from either of her girls, as she called us, except some silence while she drank her evening beer on the back steps and a blind eye whenever she’d be gone for a day or so.

As we grew older, I watched as Siena morphed into her mother, the same sad eyes, silent moods, and auburn hair. I marveled at their resemblance and I felt out of place. My eyes and hair light, the wrong color. Elena was always telling me I was like her kid—I was beautiful, as beautiful as Siena, but that isn’t what I saw in the mirror. Then sometime in high school, Siena started dying her hair, sometimes purple, sometimes green. She circled her mouth with dark lipstick and lined her eyes with a thick black pencil. Her mom started giving me all of her attention then, and for a while I did feel like I was her real kid. Then Siena encouraged me to dye my hair too, line my lips and eyes like hers, so I did. A lot of girls at school made jokes about us, but the boys liked Siena. When I felt shy around them, all I had to do was mimic Siena’s indifference or the way I’d seen Elena casually drink a beer with one hand and puff on a cigarette with the other. Pretty soon, the boys were talking to me too. Boys aren’t all that complicated.

“Where are your parents?” Joey asked me.

“Dead.”

“Jesus, sorry.”

He was quiet for a minute, then he looked at me. I shook my head. “It wasn’t an accident,” I said.

“How’d you know I was going to ask that?”

“People need to romanticize things,” I said.

“So what’s with Siena?” he whispered. Only I knew she wasn’t sleeping. “She’s cool, huh?”

I sighed. “I love Siena,” I said. He waited for me to say more. I knew enough boys to know he wanted me to say something encouraging, like how Siena thought he was cool too, or how they’d make a good couple, but I couldn’t do that.

“And you’ve known her forever,” he said. Again, he waited for more and I said nothing. I looked behind me. She had her eyes squeezed shut. She’d already moved on. Boys were so stupid.

“So, what’s with the identical hair?” he asked me. “You and Siena?”

“Siena just gets these ideas,” I said. “I don’t know, I guess I just go along.”

“That’s kind of weird,” he said. “At the beginning of the
“How’d you tell us apart?”

He smiled and glanced into the backseat. I turned and rolled my eyes at the prickly pears on the roadside.

“What’s in the desert?” I asked him.

Suddenly, we were there. We parked on the side of the road and looked down the embankment to what looked like a bunch of stones designed into a circular walking path. A lone man walked slowly along the path, and every once in a while, he’d stop and hold his face into the sun. A sign at the top of the embankment read, Harmony Labyrinth. Welcome. Siena sat up in the back seat.

“I come here whenever I can,” Joey said, “when I’m trying to figure things out.”

I looked at him and wondered if this was just a move he did to impress girls, taking them out to the desert to show them how deep he was, but his eyes studied the man following the path out of the labyrinth. He looked like this meant something to him. We got out of the car then, and Joey started toward the labyrinth. I followed him, and Siena followed me.

“So what’s supposed to happen here?” I asked.

“If you have questions, the labyrinth has answers,” he said.

Sienna rolled her eyes.

“And what does that mean?” she asked.

“It means,” he said, then he stopped and focused on me, “you figure out where you’re going. You decide who the fuck you are.”

He looked at me for a bit too long and I shrugged.

“Deanie isn’t going anywhere,” Siena said.

“Everybody’s going somewhere,” Joey said, and he smiled not at her but at me. I decided I didn’t care if she’d lost interest in him or not. I was in love.

“Not Deanie,” Siena said.

When we were fifteen, Elena took Siena and me to a tarot card reader.

“I don’t see anything in the cards for you,” she said. She placed my two crumpled up ten-dollar bills back into my hand.

“No future?” I asked. “That’s kind of scary.”

“Not like that,” she said. “More like just nothing.”

“That’s worse than no future,” I said.

“You should try again with another psychic,” she said.

Siena called me nothing for weeks after that, and I never went to another psychic.

Joey rang the large brass gong at the entrance to the footpath. The sound echoed through the canyon. He took small steps, mostly watching his feet, but sometimes looking up into the sky like the other guy had done. He made his way out, following the path, and then he stood in front of me.

“So, did you get your answers?” I asked him.

“Your turn,” he said to me.

I took a step forward.

“Your turn,” I said to Siena.

“Fuck that,” she said.

“Come on, Siena,” I said.

She made a big production of ringing the gong and taking her first step into the labyrinth. Then, she walked without fanfare to the center. To my surprise, she stopped there and stood still.

When she came out, she gave me her usual scowl, but her eyes didn’t meet mine.

“What happened?” I asked her.

“Nothing,” she said. “I’m going for a walk.”
“Where?”

She didn’t answer me, she just turned and looked in one direction, then the other, then she shrugged her shoulders and walked off. Joey stood by my side and we watched Siena walk off toward the car. She got in the back seat and sat there, sulking.

“What’s with her?” I asked.

“Probably learned something.”

“Did you learn anything?”

He crossed his arms and nodded toward the gong. I copied what Joey had done, then traced Siena’s steps, following the stones along till I reached the center. I stood perfectly still and closed my eyes. I put my face into the sun, mimicking the people who had gone before me. I waited for something. A voice, a vision, something.

Nothing.

I counted to ten in my head, waiting. Nothing.

I looked over at Joey for some kind of guidance, but his eyes were on the horizon. I squinted toward the car where Siena’s head had slipped down out of sight. I finished the journey out of the labyrinth, my pace quicker and without sentimentality.

Joey didn’t ask what I learned. His gaze had drifted toward the car.

“You want to go somewhere with me?” I asked him.

We walked through the dry field and headed behind an old empty shack. We could see the labyrinth and the car down on the road. Siena was no longer visible in the back seat.

I kissed him and he backed me up against the wall. He slid his hands up the front of my shirt, but he stopped just as the tips of his fingers brushed against my breasts. He took two steps back from me, then another.

“This is confusing,” he said.

“Siena isn’t interested,” I said.

He sighed and looked away.

“Anyway, she doesn’t get attached,” I said. “It might as well be me.”

He winced. It was a strange expression to see on a boy. Like I’d stabbed him with a sharp pin or something.

“We better go check on her,” he said.

“She’s fine,” I said. “She’s always fine.”

I followed him to the car. Siena was curled up in the back seat, her face closed and tight like she had to force sleep to come. Joey drove in silence.

“Nothing happened,” I said to Joey. “In the labyrinth. Why doesn’t anything ever happen?”

“Something always happens,” he said.

I glared at him. “Not to me.”

“How’d your folks die?” he asked.

“It wasn’t an accident,” I said.

“Why do you keep telling me what it wasn’t?”

I sighed. “He drank himself to death when I was in fourth grade. By the end of that school year, my mother moved to some town in southern California. I got a letter from my aunt Marie last summer.”

He reached out to take my hand and I let him.

“What do you want most in the world?” he asked after a few minutes. He turned his head to look at me and waited.

I told him instead about the psychic who said she saw nothing in me.

“And nothing happened to me in the labyrinth,” I said.

“Maybe you close yourself off to it,” he said.
“So it’s my fault?”
“Siena seems like she learned something,” he said. “Something got to her.”
“Every boy thinks he knows Siena,” I said.
I turned away from him and rolled down the window, the warm air stung like desert sand against my face. He took a deep breath, then another, like he was trying to decide whether or not he should say what was on his mind.
“You’re trying way too hard to be—her,” he said.
“Fuck you,” I said. I hated when guys made me feel less than Siena. I didn’t need to feel any less than Siena, any less than I already did.

We pulled into a burger place and the three of us ate in silence. Siena picked around her plate, ripped small pieces of bread from the bun then slid each French fry out of the stack and jabbed it into the ketchup. I’d been watching Siena eat for ten years; she always ate from the outside of her plate into the center. She was in a bad mood since the labyrinth.

When Joey got up to go to the bathroom I said to her, “What’s going on? Is it him?”
“No,” she said. She stabbed another fry over and over into the ketchup, then tossed it onto her plate like a bloody finger.
“I didn’t sleep with him,” I said.
She just rolled her eyes.
“He didn’t want to,” I said.
“I don’t care,” she said.
“Do you think he’ll—do you think you’ll want to with him?” She crumpled up her napkin and squeezed it in her hand.
“Jesus, do you like him or not?” I asked.
She just glared at me with those familiar dark eyes of contempt.
“Your hair looks terrible like that,” she said. She stood up and started walking away. I looked at the back of her head, her hair looked almost blue in the overhead lights. The blonde tips looked yellow.
“You told me to dye it this color. We were in the blue bathroom.”
Joey returned then. He looked at Siena standing up with her back to me, and me watching the light turn her into someone I didn’t recognize.

I got up and followed her out of the restaurant. Joey followed me, and we watched Siena get in the driver’s seat of the car. She turned the ignition and drove off, leaving us both there.
“Where’s she going?” he asked.
I grabbed his hand.
“She seems really upset,” he said.
“Every boy thinks he knows Siena,” I said.
We waited an hour for her, then the two of us rented a room at the Super 8 next door. All night long, Joey lay on his side so his back was to me. I spooned against him, my chest to his spine, even though he tightened up, even though I could tell he wanted me to back off.
“What if we’re trapped here forever,” I said as I was drifting to sleep. “What if she doesn’t come back for us?”

In the morning, Joey was in the parking lot smoking a cigarette. I followed him outside and watched the gray drifts of smoke swirl around his head. The car was parked in a spot ten feet away.
“Siena?” I asked him.
He shook his head. “She left the keys in the ignition.”
“Are you still interested in her?” I asked.
“I don’t know,” he said. “I thought she was different.”
I laughed at him. I couldn’t help it.
“I guess I don’t really know her,” he said, then he muttered, “You don’t either.”
I pretended I didn’t hear him.
Back in the room, I kissed him again, but something felt off.
He held my hair up and away from my face and looked in my eyes before he kissed me back.
“Let’s go,” I said.
When he walked out of the room I caught a glimpse of my face in the mirror. My skin was so pale. I looked like a vampire who’d taken a wrong exit and ended up in the desert.
Outside, Joey was looking at the traffic stopped at the light near the entrance of the motel.
“I’m going to get a ride home,” he said. “I called my brother.
“You’re just going to leave me here?” he said. “I called my brother. He’s going to pick me up.”
“You’re just going to leave me here?”
“You’ve got Siena’s car,” he said.
“I don’t”—I began, but I was embarrassed to admit the truth.
“I don’t exactly know the way,” I said.
“Home is that way,” he pointed in one direction on the highway that ran above us. “The labyrinth is a few miles up the other way.”
“You’re just going to leave me here?” I was trembling even though it felt foolish to be trembling.
“You’re going to leave me here,” he said.
I hesitated next to Siena’s car, my knees shaking, and waited for him to tell me he was only kidding, that he’d drive us both home. He started walking away, up the embankment to the main road. I pressed my palm against the heart in the dust on the backseat window and smudged it away. Then I got behind the wheel. I thought about Siena and whether or not she’d be sitting on the couch when I got home, You took me seriously, you loser? And I’d laugh, because Siena was never serious.
When I reached the highway entrance, the roads diverged as Joey said; home or the other way. I wasn’t ready to go home yet, not back to her sitting there with a bag from the drug store, New hair color, Deanie! Or back to her not sitting there—vanished—and a whole chorus of what ifs in my head. I turned the wheel with shaky hands toward the other road, the one that led back to the labyrinth. I didn’t know if I’d walk that circular path again when I got there, but it didn’t seem like a big deal to go a few minutes further from home. I knew of course that there were miles of road that stretched beyond the labyrinth, but I wasn’t thinking of them yet. I inched Siena’s car forward, crept into the flow of traffic, and hit the gas.
Post Derrida, Welcome to the New World

George Moore

I’ve thought about the darkest of my dens in grad school, the place where labyrinths were born, blood traces sealed, and the suddenness of how it all would end.

Apart from a few good arguments stuffed in my locker, nothing of those years remains but paper. It was a reflex, a language thing, that ate its way through my university.

Now, only a few years out of the late moderns, I sit, retiring, to read Borges again. A moment never purely language. His place has been retrieved. Someone simply walked the labyrinth.

As for the trace, that illusive missing part to ink speech, or was it something after, some sign I could not read? It vanished on its own. A reflex, a muscle wanting something to hold.
A tiny adolescent of undeterminable gender in a woolen Minions hat says, “I lost everything, ’cause memories are tangible things.” I shuffle off in a daze to teach my senior English class, where Linda Loman says to her husband, “Life is a casting off, dear.” I try to remember that sentiment during a phone call with him, who asks me if I got caught in the rain, which he now calls “the big water in the sky.” I’m stuck between my horror at the mind’s transformation and my fascination with the rejection of language’s structures. One breezy day, he says, “Even the buildings are cold—that’s why they hold their arms up against themselves.” I’m reminded of Pozzo: lyrical, then prosaic, lyrical, then prosaic. The next breath, it’s back to the banal.

Labyrinth of micrography, words say one thing, image says another. To which do you turn to escape? I trace the picture’s windings hopefully—doesn’t it matter more than what language can no longer say, words too tiny to even register at first glance? I take out my magnifying glass to read the fine print, but place my faith in the outlining of a shadow, the revival of a long-forgotten phrase, as dead now as the reflexive power of narrative. But everything can be brought back, if not in form, then in spirit. So I revel in the beauty of the blunder, the atavistic return to an essential way of looking at the world; the man and not the story of the man—because he’s here, an unexpected turn in the hedge, and the puzzle is mine to learn, staggering towards recognition.
You should know that I’m an unapologetically obsessive reader. I bow at the altar of books every evening without fail. I’m the type of woman who attends book club in her Sunday best, clutching a sacred text in one hand and a bottle of wine in the other. I gather with others who hold the same faith. Even if we can’t remember exact titles or authors or plots or pithy pieces of advice, my book group members and I discuss our assigned readings, pointing to underlined sentences and thrilling when another reader has marked the same passage. It’s like redemption or grace or nirvana—reading is an elevation of myself out of myself in order to return to myself.

I believe.

And I come by this belief naturally. I was raised to be a reader in a house of readers with bookshelves lining even the bedroom walls. My father spent his retirement in an oversized armchair reading Calculus textbooks, legal briefs, historical biographies, and among other tomes, the complete annotated version of Ulysses.

My mother loved reading as well; she read to my brother and me every night when we were little and gave us books every Christmas. On my first wedding anniversary, the paper one, she gave my husband and me three books she thought should be in every home library: a hardcover atlas, a study Bible, and an enormous dictionary. When I got my job as a community college English professor, she said to me, “Now, you get to read books for a living.”

Like most devoted readers, I developed a theory over the years that I could solve any problem by perusing the aisles of Barnes & Noble or Powells or Vroman’s. Within these cathedrals of titles, I have found what to expect when I was expecting, how to solve my children’s sleep problems, how to listen in seven thousand ways, what great college professors do, and how to distinguish the queen bees from the wannabes. I should have had a bumper sticker that said, “No problem too big for books.” I naively believed in the truth of that imaginary bumper sticker. That is, I believed in it until the year my father died and I met my mother’s new boyfriend.

“You can call him Chuck,” my mom said, “but I call him Charles.” She took my brother and me to a restaurant to tell us, just months after our father had died, that she had a serious boyfriend. We thought she was joking. She scoffed, “You don’t think I’m pretty enough to have a boyfriend?” Already, she was changing, becoming a person who might say something like that. My brother and I exchanged glances and decided to tread lightly. Our mother was seventy-three years old with bright blue eyes and a hearty laugh, but we were ill-equipped to discuss her new relationship. “He doesn’t speak very good English,” she said. I asked if he was Mexican or European, an immigrant, and she said,
“No, he was born in New Jersey, but his grammar isn’t very good.”

Okay, this is where you can start judging me. A community college professor can’t accept her mom’s new boyfriend because he has a few pronouns out of place. That’s a plausible piece of conjecture, but it was way more complicated than grammar. The first night I met him at my mom’s house, he downed four Coors Lights over hors d’oeuvres. He didn’t talk much; he was sixty-nine years old with a full head of white hair and absolutely no conversational skills. At one point at the dinner table, Chuck said, “I once knew a man from St. Hardin.” We weren’t sure what to do with his non sequitur, but we worked with it and said something along the lines of “Really? Was this in New Jersey?” After some silence, Chuck said, “He ate everything he found in the garden.”

Now, the rhyme scheme should have clued us in, but it didn’t. We tried to make sense of his turn of conversation, seeing possibilities for a discussion of food politics or our own gardens. We tried to make it work. He let us flounder, said a few lines under his breath, and then hit us with, “He tried hard to shit but only farted.”

I can’t explain to you the level of shock that reverberated around the table. My dad read Shakespeare and talked politics, and now my mom had a boyfriend who told limericks as if they were conversation, and said “shit” and “farted” at the dinner table. I stared at my mom as if she was going to reprimand him, but she just hit him lightly on the shoulder and smiled.

This is my mom. I don’t think you understand. This is the woman who made me trace out dinner table place settings on a piece of butcher paper so I would remember where to put the salad fork. This is the lady who told me to take Latin in high school because it would increase my vocabulary and make me a better conversationalist.
I did know this, but I had a hard time accepting it. Not only did Chuck not read, but he was also closed to the possibility of reading. I had met people who didn’t read fiction or people who didn’t read history, but in my sheltered ways, I had never met a bona fide book hater. It was like trying to have a relationship with someone who hated food or water or air. And worst of all, he had such an influence on my mother that she stopped reading. All those books on her bedside table, and she didn’t read a word of them for at least a year.

Predictably, my strategy for dealing with this difficult relationship was to turn to books. I read a series of self-help books that encouraged me to see my own role in the tense relationship; I journaled and collaged and found quotes that helped me realize that Chuck didn’t have to be like my dad. If he made my mother happy, then I should accept him as he was. This wasn’t my reflexive reaction to Chuck; my inner child was still crying and spitting and hollering, but through the help of my book group, I was able to create a carefully crafted response to him, one that I labored over and reminded myself of often.

For a while, this book-driven intervention seemed to work. I not only opened my home to Chuck for more dinners, but I also made sure to have vodka and Squirt on hand because that was his favorite drink. On subsequent Christmases, I gave him more appropriate presents, including a remote control airplane, which my mom said he had always wanted. I also took him on daytrips with my mom: to San Diego to learn lawn bowling, to Orange County to walk along the beach, to Pasadena to see the Rose Parade floats.

One year, I decided to take them to Rancho Mirage for the coveted tour of the Sunnylands Estate, but when I went to buy the tickets, there was only one left. I knew that this would mean two hours alone with Chuck while my mom went on the tour, but I thought it would be a good test for me and my new attitude.

When the tour started, I took a picture of my mom heading off on the 8-person golf cart and checked my watch. I smiled at Chuck, and we settled ourselves in the foyer of the Visitor’s Center on a comfortable couch next to a coffee table covered with books. I used up my top ten dialogue starters in the first half hour. I was exasperated that I couldn’t get him to talk in more than short sentences and unimpressed that he couldn’t follow up with any questions of his own. I imagined telling my book group about how difficult it had been to talk with Chuck.

As a last ditch effort, I asked him if he wanted to take a walk in the garden. He pointed to his foot and said no; he had a touch of gout, and walking was difficult. I took that as permission to take a break, and I excused myself. Outside, I followed the path around the property, slowing my steps, taking pictures, trying to fill the remaining time. At the final turn, I saw a sign and followed it to a small rock-lined labyrinth. I embarked on the circular pathway with thoughts of Chuck in the Visitor’s Center. I reminded myself to be open and extravagant; I reminded myself to be kind. I walked slowly, trying to clear my negative thoughts about him, trying to open myself to the possibilities of loving him just as he was. I didn’t want to be a snob. I didn’t want to be an elitist who could only talk to people who read books. I went back inside with this intention.

On the couch, I showed him the pictures I had taken and told him about the labyrinth. I asked if he had been “people watching.” He said, “Sort of.”

When we again ran out of things to say, I took out my book
and started to read.

Chuck said, “Why are you reading that?”

I looked at the book cover, *Hamlet*, the story of a young man too stuck in books and grief to move forward and act. “I’m teaching it next semester,” I said.

“Oh,” he said, “For work.”

I paused. I could have left it at that, but the believer believes. When given a chance to explain the center of your universe, you go for it. “Well not just for work,” I said. “I’ve read it before. I’m reading it because it’s interesting. The characters make me think.” I don’t know why I kept going. I didn’t need to argue this point with him, but I said, “Reading it makes me feel connected to the thousands of readers who have gone before me.” I smiled and added, as if it was the icing on the cake, “And, it’s a great story.”

He was silent.

I certainly didn’t need to keep going, but I couldn’t drop it. I felt like I was defending my soul against the devil. I said, “It’s the reason I read anything. It’s to travel into a world that doesn’t exist in order to cast light on the world that does exist. It’s this wonderful feeling of a parallel universe.” I knew I sounded like a crazy person. Anyone eavesdropping might have thought I was trying to sell him a book subscription and not doing a very good job. Chuck narrowed his eyes at me, as if seeing me through a new lens, and then he got up to go to the gift store.

I felt deflated, tired from my aggressive tirade, tired of the person who I was around Chuck. I didn’t know anyone else in the world to whom I had to explain the joys of reading. “All professors are assholes” really meant that all intellectuals are assholes; all conversationalists are assholes; all readers are assholes. To him, I was an asshole by the very nature of my book-loving ways. Why was my mom with a man who couldn’t understand why someone might read a book?

After that day at Sunnylands, I wasn’t as nice to Chuck as I had been before. I didn’t try as hard to pull him into conversations. I worked instead on getting my mom to start reading again and felt a stab of triumph when she did. Reading became a line in the sand: readers on one side and Chuck on the other. My mother, bless her heart, was able to cross freely from one side of the divide to the other. She was able to access a part of Chuck that was deep and emotional and kind, and then she was able to switch gears and access a part of me that loved reading because it was deep and emotional and kind. She was a masterful code switcher, and I think now that maybe she loved Chuck because he wasn’t like my dad. My mom hadn’t finished college, and my dad was an intellectual through and through; it must have been tiring for her to listen to my dad argue the finer points of legal briefs or literature while he often ignored her more emotional and practical mental landscape.

About three months later, my mom caught a virus when she and Chuck went on a cruise to Alaska; she was so sick that the captain quarantined her to her room, and she told me afterwards that she thought she was going to die. A month later, the virus hadn’t gone away, her potassium levels plummeted, and despite trips to the emergency room and desperate attempts to save her, she passed away. We were all devastated. Chuck reeled around my mother’s house, grieving and drinking and crying.

My brother and I had the horrible task of going through the papers in my mom’s office trying to find the handwritten list of ideas that she had written for her own funeral. She had showed it to me one day, and I knew it had the hymns we were supposed
to sing, the passages from the Bible we were supposed to read, the flowers we were supposed to arrange. We went through every drawer and every file. We flipped through books, thinking she might have tucked it away in a meaningful title. But we couldn’t find it. We searched for days, but the piece of paper never showed up, and we had to plan her funeral without it.

After the funeral, Chuck went into a deeper depression, and he sat watching *Gilligan’s Island* in the family room as my brother and I packed up the house. We found homes for our mother’s clothes, her kitchen items, her treadmill, her china. But we could not find a home for her books. The library wasn’t accepting them at that time. Goodwill had a strict “no book” policy, and when the Salvation Army came to pick up “everything” after our estate sale, they said they meant “everything but books.” I was flabbergasted: all these books my mom and dad had collected, all these pages of words and advice and descriptions and facts. The house was filled with at least a thousand books. We threw away some out-of-date travel guides and dusty paperbacks from the 1980s, but we couldn’t bring ourselves to throw away the stacks of hardcover art books, bestsellers, and novels.

My brother and I boxed up hundreds for ourselves, titles like *So, You Want to Write a Novel?*, *A Visitor’s Guide to Pompeii*, *1001 Books You Must Read Before You Die*. But what were we to do with the rest? I’ll never forget the image of my mom’s empty garage: everything gone including her car and gardening gear, but in the middle sat a multi-level and expansive pile of books. We ended up dropping them off at the Goodwill under cover of night, our arms tired from hauling and our heads still sure that the Goodwill would be happy to find them in the morning, despite their policy. We kept telling ourselves, “Someone will want them.”

Like with every other trauma in my life, I turned again to reading when I grieved the loss of my mom. I found comfort in Mary Oliver’s poetry and Thich Nhat Hanh’s gathas. I lost myself in Ann Patchett novels and reread my mom’s favorite book, *84 Charing Cross Road*. I taught my Shakespeare class the next semester and was transfixed by the students who were eager to read lines aloud and talk about their meaning, students who were willing to act out scenes and try on different voices. They were part of my cure. When the class was almost over, I posted on Facebook a picture of all the books we had read. “I’m going to miss this class so much,” I wrote. Chuck, who had since moved in with his son and daughter-in-law, responded, “Not as much as I miss your mother.”

I didn’t know what to say to him. Normally, when someone loses a loved one, I respond in the language of books. I send quotes, or if they ask, book recommendations. Chuck and I didn’t speak the same language. And in grief, language matters. Chuck and I spent time together after the death of my mom, but we never connected. I didn’t know how to reach the part of him my mother loved, and he didn’t know how to reach the part of me that was aching for my mother. He must have thought he needed a big word or a quotation or a line from *Hamlet*; he must have thought his words couldn’t stand up to all the reading I had done. To me, books were an opening, a pathway to human understanding and connection, but to him, books were a wall.

A friend once told me that if I had read about Chuck in a novel, I could have understood him. In person, however, I couldn’t read him; I couldn’t translate the skill of reading a book to the task of reading this person. And I’m still wondering, as a teacher and as a person, how to reconcile this life of overflowing bookshelves
and a seemingly innocuous love of reading with the specter of
emptiness: the empty dining room table, the empty armchair, the
empty bookshelf, the empty garage.

I can already feel myself slipping away to amazon.com, just
to look. Maybe I can find a book or a collection of essays that
addresses the conflict between the wide-open expanse of the
reading life and the walls it might create in other people’s minds.
I’ll let you know if I find it.
All children fly, or dream of flight,  
their legs grown suddenly long  
and light, stretched behind them  
like pennants, their bones hollow.  
But when they fly, they lose the knack  
of names, gain instead  
a reflex for migration, their wedge-heads  
swiveling north then south.  
The green and blue labyrinth below  
smooths to a map, a magnetic grid  
no human can perceive without  
the aid of compass or GPS.

Even on land, their names hang loose,  
ill-fitting, like shoes bought purposely large,  
to grow into. Witness that flock  
in the cold schoolyard,  
preening, splashing in puddles,  
sharing sunflower seeds,  
spitting out the shells.  
They are drawn to trees,  
looking down from makeshift nests.  
They answer to anything.

As for me, when did my name become my self?  
Alone, I dream of houses, doorways,  
passageways into the earth.  
Grounded now, I trace the arc of my flight,  
touch the spot between the shoulders  
where wings once grew.
The Plot
Gail Goepfert

By now it’s reflex
as I tuck up and smooth
the creamy duvet to hide
the bamboo sheets
rumpled each night
as I try to finagle my way
out of some stranger’s house
to arrive at an endpoint
I never seem to reach,
storm through a labyrinth
of remembered rooms,
a trace of muted color
or curtained lace,
from a string of houses,
rooms recognizable
but out of place—
a living room
with hardwood floors
and a dog-weary celery couch
on the cobalt-carpeted space,
a bedroom dipped in lemon chiffon
that belongs somewhere else,
I.

Coyote in the ante-dawn found me in a copse after the fire went black at four a.m., through a mass of exhaled breath, moving in an oak labyrinth.

II.

Dry-mouthed on the walk back dappled by sonar silence, the kind rolling indeterminate. Not a coo or brittle noise near, the terrain of the deaf mapped out, or the nightmare of history’s length traced plain.
III.

The rot of a fisher cat, mauled by God knows what, lies plucked without reflex, a fly on one of its ribs unbranched, the eyes staring up.

i.

At times, I can’t stand the bus. Normally I take it twice a day, to and from my job at the Prime Minister’s Office, but since my aunt was hospitalized, I spend almost a third of my waking hours bussing. Grit strikes the undercarriage, the frame rattles. Under grim fluorescents, plastic posters advertise STI clinics, suicide hotlines, private security jobs for ex-soldiers. But nothing quite bludgeons my mind like the people: foreign nurses sleep with arms crossed over their handbags, strung-out underaged mothers swear into cell phones, stoned teenagers grunt about killing their cousins. What is it about all of this? The feeling of toxicity, like smoke billowing from an undersea vent? Parts of myself seep out, like ashes fluttering through volcanic cracks.

Perhaps it is just this point in my life. I’m twenty-five. It’s possible I suffer from the current cultural malaise, the dread of tomorrow. I can’t help but worry if I have no future. He certainly doesn’t. And he certainly thought he did, before I arrived.
I know. It’s ridiculous. If anyone has a future, I do. It’s just the bus ride. Being a passenger.

I take solace from this mental state in scenery. The route to the hospital runs by the river. At dusk the sunset is spectacular, a vivid red that wounds the river and sets the glass towers ablaze. Today almost all the seats are taken, but I am relieved to find one seat in the middle of the bus, facing west, so I can watch.

It’s only when the bus starts moving that a man with an enormous head sits down across from me.

It’s not just the size of his head but that he moves. He shifts position constantly. He swivels his skull like an agitated animal, reading and rereading the ads, glancing at the people still doing nothing important, putting himself between my eyes and the sunset. It’s irritating beyond belief.

What happens isn’t intentional. You can’t really plan these things. They just occur. Something like a reflex.

There isn’t any visible transition.

I blink.

Where a man was, there is a pig, hovering in the aisle between the seats.

It is tangled in its clothes. Its pants drop, its jacket bunches up behind its floppy ears. Shirt buttons pop from its downy neck and go skittering.

The pig starts kicking, turning in gradual midair somersaults, tangled in the drooping tatters of its oversized human clothes. But it can’t move itself. It is confined by weightlessness as surely as a pig confined by slaughterhouse steel.

The whole bus stares except the driver, watching the road. Bags and cell phones slip to the floor as above our heads the pig floats suspended, a pasty heart in the center of the bus, its legs kicking faster and faster.

When it reaches the roof, it squeals as though pricked with a pin, and falls to the floor, dead. In seconds, it rots to bones, which then turn almost instantly to dust.

With that, final screams erupt.

Luckily I don’t have to wait more than fifteen minutes for the next bus.

I think of my aunt, glancing at the wall clock. She will understand if I am late.

ii.

The hospital is palpable tension. The usual exhausted calm of early evening is gripped by tight, agitated bustle. At the little lobby food court, people sit twitching over coffee. Their eyes dart in suspicion at every nurse and doctor going past. The woman at the information desk wrings her hands and stares at the escalator, like she won’t find sleep in the foreseeable future and hopes the looping steps will shred away her anxiety.

When I ask her what’s up, she tells me.

The doctors must be joking, though I don’t understand why they would risk their reputations over such a ridiculous prank. The receptionist assures me it’s true. I feel a compulsion to see it myself, and slip behind the scenes. I can’t help but giggle as I pass through the hospital. Arriving at the incubators, I’m laughing, like an invader who has discovered himself in accidental triumph over a city whose long-contested walls fell overnight to an earthquake.

Behind thick glass, a room of new babies wriggles in their incubators. In among them, asleep on blue sheets in an isolated tank, is the wellspring of the stress flooding the hospital: a chimaera, like a puppy roughly shaped into a child. It has a dog’s
face, velvet ears, a snout, a coat of down. It yawns, showing its tender tongue, twitches human hands and feet. I watch, thinking the PMO may need to have a stance on this if it gets out. I am so immersed in thought that I don’t notice the other man in the room until he greets me.

He is bronzed, anxious. I can picture him renting a luxury condo on his annual vacation to a hot, impoverished corner of the world. He wears a flower-smeared Hawaiian shirt that sticks to his clammy sides and his smile hovers on the cusp of melting back into the anxious blankness it wearily disguises. It’s obvious he has hovered by this window for hours while the rest of the hospital avoids it like a box of sarin gas.

“He’s mine,” he says, unprompted. “Some professors were here this morning. They wouldn’t have believed it if I didn’t tape the birth.”

He stops rubbing and turns to watch the thing in the incubator. From my angle, it looks like he is staring through his own translucent reflection in the glass.

“I was going to kill him,” he laughs in disbelief. “They padlocked the door and put a guard in front of it.” He begins to sweat like a body stuffed with coals. “A month ago my wife started having these nightmares. About a man. Her belly was a bowl of clay, and every time he passed, he reached in to pinch the baby. She said he wasn’t malevolent, or even impolite, it was just something he did. Like a car hitting bugs, she said. She couldn’t see what he was doing. I told her,” he gulps, “I told her, It’s only a bad dream.”

He buries his face in his hands, and says, “God, why did this happen to me?”

It seems like the outcast father is pressing his Creator for an answer he is fully expecting to receive.

“I doubt your wife had sex with a dog, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

He looks at me like I’ve slit a person’s throat in front of him.

His brow furrows.

My own smile has not faded. I visibly suppress a giggle.

“Is it a boy, or a girl?” I say, “Is your wife all right?”

He squints.

“Nobody’s been allowed to come or go. Who are—”

“I can walk through walls,” I say.

He gazes at me for a long time. Finds nothing.

“Excuse me,” he says, and leaves.

After I’ve had my fill, I go. The man is in the hall, puking into a waste basket. He points to me and two security men in ties become very angry. They take me aside to ask questions for fifteen minutes. I tell them I’m from the PMO and they let me go. I still have to sign an agreement indicating that I will tell nothing to the media.

I joke, “Trying to keep the end times under wraps?”

“Just read it and sign, sir.”

The other guard mutters something about giving someone hell.

The document has been drafted quickly: three times the word “media” has been spelled “medea.”

I don’t point out the mistake.
iii.

My aunt is seeing the doctor and won’t be ready to visit for a half hour. The nurse suggests I go for a walk in the hospital garden, which has just reopened after the winter. Heading out, I wonder how people work at hospitals, under white lights, near swathes of bedding, amid the smell of needles, feces, and mortality. Hospitals are like buses, vehicles packed with people waiting for stops with varying degrees of finality.

I am relieved to find the garden is lush, permeated by the scent of fresh-thawed soil. A deserted labyrinth of towering hedges rises from the lawn, and after a few bends, the only trace of hospital in the atmosphere is a rattling vent and a car starting in the parking lot. It is a place meant for being alone. In silence like that, I can almost conjure that silent world of my dreams, unpierced by the lamplight of city towers, a world that is nothing but a thin, soot-colored film hissing on the wind. It is such a soothing, pure image. I hold myself and shiver, at peace. The feeling stops when I smell cooking meat.

With that smell comes the recollection of my long-dead uncle’s Saturday barbecues. He spoke to his beef. “Good cow,” he’d say, “Good beast,” as it sizzled on the grill. He made sure that we took a moment to thank the cow when we said grace. He even used the bones to make broth. A cup of chocolate milk for me, rum and Cokes for my aunt and uncle. Fear, even then, sensing, no, knowing what was coming, feeling what was inside, him, he was, coming, I didn’t know, if it was me he was coming for, or even if I had any way to say it was him or me, how can you say it, how can you say anything like this, please, please, if I had a way to say I would have said, if I would have—

Sorry. Traces of the past. Happens sometimes.

Anyway, I can’t help but think about how lucky my aunt is. Soon she’ll see my uncle again.

I am snapped from reverie when a burning person grabs my ankle.

She is crumpled on the ground in flames, clutching my ankle with sizzling remnants of fingers burnt to the bone, gazing out of smoldering sockets whose jellies have evaporated, wailing out of a charred void that spits cinders as she writhes and stinks of burning meat. Another burning person, a man, lurches into a bush nearby, his head so mauled by fires that he is incapable of basic navigation.

The one at my feet croaks like an orphanage of screaming toddlers, “LEAVE HIM. TAKE ME. TAKE ME.”

Something flutters in the back of my mind. “Oh yes. The night of the fire. Who let you out?”

“TAKE ME. NOT HIM.”

I jerk my leg from her grip and brush the ash from my pantlegs.

“He isn’t here anymore,” I say, “You can go back now.”

“TAKE ME. NOT MY SON.”

I sigh. Feign tears. Bring my face close to hers as though he’s surfaced and wants to speak to her. She falls silent save for the hissing fats escaping from her skin.

“Die,” I whisper.

She does as instructed. The same for the father, and then I watch the fat-fed fire finish its work, at least for the time being. They’ll be back.

You know how these things are. Escaped spirits driven insane with love.

I have some trouble finding my way out of the maze.
My aunt only has energy for a short visit.
“Thanks for the tea,” she says. Her voice winds slowly from her throat. She clutches her hot paper cup in one soft bony hand, while I hold the other. It’s cold. Tendons and knuckles seem as though they might tear her over-sanitized skin. Her nails, painted with flaking pink polish, dig into my palm.
“How was work?”
“Good,” I say, “The minister of finance keeps telling me I’m destined for big things.”
“How is it?”
“Yes. And you talked.”
“What did I say?”
“He’s coming.”
“Huh.”
“Me and Garth asked you who he was but you wouldn’t say. You pretended that you didn’t remember, but there was one time, the year we went to Sandbanks... you were watching the sunset. You started crying, wailing, slapping the sand, and then stopped very suddenly as though nothing had happened. I thought that you were just having flashbacks to the fire, but Garth worried somebody had done something to you. We were never sure.”
She sets her tea on the bedside table on a copy of Reader’s Digest. Exerting herself to rise inches off the bed, she wraps both hands tightly around mine.
“What was it? What were your nightmares about?”
I free my hand to relocate her cup, so it doesn’t stain the magazine.
“I’m sorry,” I say, “But I honestly don’t remember.”
This is true, though I know he dreamt of fires shaped like giants, that strode and clapped and squatted in the sprawling ruins of scorched metropoli. He wrote the details in his diary, a desperate and embarrassing attempt of his to escape his changes.
Sadly, the document was a bit incriminating. I couldn’t allow it to exist.

“I think that little boy was just afraid of growing up,” I say. She smiles.

“The nurses say you’re so polite. I’m proud that you grew into such a fine young man. Me and Garth were always afraid that we didn’t do enough.”

“You did enough.”

There is a pause, then a whisper, “I’ll be seeing your uncle soon.”

“I was thinking the same thing earlier.”

“It’ll be good to see him again.”

“Yes,” I say, “It will.”

“You should get going. It’s past my bedtime.”

v.

At the bus stop, I watch the last stripe of day fall to the settling dark. The street lamps by the transitway resemble campfires on a lunar plane. Fatigue and elation run through me like a chill river under the ice in spring. As soon as I’m on the bus, I relax. It’s empty. Completely empty. Nobody but the driver and myself.

With the complete arrival of the night, the windows become dim mirrors of the bus interior. I am released from all focus. The noise of the bus is a welcome haze in which thoughts could quietly sprout, sputter, and die unnoticed. I start thinking that humans are like ideas in a fog, coming and going without being seen or held, thrown up in haze, incomplete until the day their allotted stretch of half-being ends and they journey again into nothingness.

However much I like these thoughts, it is pleasant to finally say good night and thank you to the bus driver, and to walk the remaining blocks between myself and my apartment.

From the street it seems my lights are on. I usually keep them off to save power, but beaming gently through the drawn living room curtains is a yellow glow, like a dwarf star blazing inside. Perhaps I left them on.

I drop my wallet and keys by the change bowl on the front hall table, lock the door, and go straight to the living room to find the source of the light.

It is, as it turns out, a creature sent to assassinate me.

She is perched on the television. Dozens of wings and eyes attest to her rank and origin in the highest celestial choirs, and she watches me from eyes at the heart of a flurry of wings, which shake and flutter with the noise of a forest, whose every perfect feather shines like a bursting firework. My living room is small, with only enough space to accommodate a love seat, a low table, and the television. She occupies almost half the room with her arms and feathers.

I go to the kitchenette.

“Can I offer you tea or coffee?” I pour myself a glass of water. She is quiet.

“I realize it’s late,” I say, “But I skipped dinner, so I was going to heat up some spaghetti bolognese if you’d like some. I haven’t quite perfected the recipe, but it’s getting there. You must be famished after traveling all this way.”

I stand with the Tupperware and the fridge door open.

Then, at the creature’s silence, not wanting to be rude, put the Tupperware back in the fridge. I return to the living room with a kitchen chair, and sit down with my glass of water across from her.

She possesses an ineluctable air of warmth, joy, and comfort. I think of childhood Christmases. I gesture to the couch.
“Please, have a seat.”
“You aren’t supposed to be here,” she says, in a voice of eagles and lions and wolves, somehow rising no louder than a gust of wind.
“Are you sure you don’t at least want a glass of water?”
“His place is not yours.”
“If you don’t like the tap water, I keep bottled water in the fridge. You’re welcome to it.”

Forgive us,” she says, not to me but to him, which is infuriating. He’s struggled to the surface while I worried about hosting, “But he has to die.”
“I forgive you,” says a voice, his voice.
I assume control again.
Now he’s done it. That scrap of astral flotsam is getting bottled water, regardless of what she wants. I rise just as she vomits a fiery, whirling, many-pointed sword from her radiant mouth, and advances towards me.

As the sword swings down to bisect my body I grab it with my hands. At my touch the blade evaporates. Before she has time to register what is happening, I reach into the center of the creature and pull out her primary heart, a nuclear fist leaking hot, transparent blood all over the carpet. Thus incapacitated, her body collapses to the floor, twitching like an escaped budgie whose chest burst from a heart attack. I set the heart on the table and swallow the creature’s still-glowing corpse.

Her body was the only source of light in the room. I switch on a lamp, lick my fingers, pat my stomach.

“Don’t do that,” I say firmly, “It’s bad. At this point it’s been my life for longer than it ever was yours. Okay?”
I don’t hear a sound, not even a stirring. An unplaceable sadness emanates from somewhere in my gut, on the borderland of myself, where traces of him still persist.

“Oh my God, stop. You’ve had years to get used to this.”
The feeling shrivels.
“That’s better.”

In the fray, my glass has shattered. I pick up the pieces, then fetch the vacuum from the closet. I’m tired. I have a long day of meetings at the PMO tomorrow. But in spite of my fatigue I find satisfaction in gathering those pieces, placing them in a disposable container with the creature’s inedible heart, and dropping it in the garbage with the meat trays and banana peels. They will disappear in a landfill tomorrow.

As I daub up ichor with paper towels, a stray shard of glass burrows into my foot. It takes ten minutes with the tweezers to work it out.

“Damn it all,” I mutter.
I’m pretending, though. Pretending for myself. I don’t really mind. I’m mostly happy I could save the rest of my spaghetti for tomorrow.
Go out into the garden. 
Anemones clump like isinglass 
along the mortar, and the subtle ivy suckers 
are poised to bring the house down. 
The snuffling skunk returns to trace 
a feast of bat and midge, 
its odor sharp as fear; 
and within lies that lesser catastrophe, 
our wayward dog is coaxed to the car 
since he’s going, they say, 
to live in a barn.

I’ve seen this barn. 
A goat with yellow eyes and a Fu Manchu 
that kicks by reflex at whatever it sees, 
half-a-dozen scrounging strays. 
In the garden, muffled hounds' cries 
and gray spores of rebuke 
that might be ordinary household dust— 
some things, it seems, are fragmentary, 
the thread I’ve left in the labyrinth 
gone before it can prove the way.
Downstairs all the rugs are stained,
the ceiling fans spin like weathervanes,
floorboards push up, cracked, uneasy staves.
Where in the heart’s raw lexicon
is the word for this type of disrepair,
slippage of our sun, our moon?

In tornado season, the next-door roof
was lofted high, a blackened sail.
It slowly regains its proper shape in waves
of fierce hammer blows along the sloping pitch.
Sometimes a shingle flaps like a bird
and lands on the grass, devil may care.
What else?

The spy is making his cuneiform notes,
how the terrible American boys trample iris beds
and the sly pubescent girls break twigs for sap cocktails.
He is a boarder, studying mid-western sheep and cows,
come across the sea to the aggie university.
What has he done, to take some part
in the general devastation of our house?
He says that where he’s from,
whole villages collapse and float away.
Bow to him, this connoisseur of loss.

And children alive those days under the sky
nurse mixed feelings toward the rising roof.
Nights they’ve voyaged to the stars,
summer, its kith and kin,
soft as wings of the Luna moth.

Maybe it’s time for divestiture—
of the old irascible dog, the first female blood,
which calls to me from its dark wellspring.
I’ve now to do with the speckled eggs
and gravid mammals whose tiny cries
I have begun to intuit or assume in my sleep,
just as the wind can strip deafness away.

Out in the garden, no reason to take sides.
Nearly audible sparks of white stars electrify,
mirror the mating fireflies;
if there is some illumination beyond all this
or annealed desire inside the child,
it must first grow hard, and cold.
 weren’t poor growing up. I remember being pretty comfortable. But it was unusual to see my father come home early from work one day with a large unmarked box in his arms. He placed it gently on the living room rug and instructed my brother and me to gather around him. Using his car key, he cut open the box and pulled out pieces of Styrofoam. We watched him pull out one giant speaker followed by another. Wires trailed behind them like tiny entrails. He pulled out a large console that he declared a record player. We stared at him, unsure of what we were supposed to say about this. In our family, large items like this only came around at Christmas time. We didn’t know what inspired this indulgence. If Mom had been there, she would have been angry.

He set up the record player and the speakers, arranging them on a side table. He flicked open the cassette doors, marveling at the dual tape decks. “You can record anything,” he said, pointing at me with a dopey grin on his face. My father never drank, but in this moment, he looked drunk.

After he set up the console, he hurried upstairs and pulled the ladder down from the ceiling. “Get your brother,” he ordered, and so I dragged Sean away from the TV and upstairs with me. We stood under the ceiling portal and strained to see him. His voice, loud and deep, bellowed from the rafters. I imagined this was what God might look like: an eager father rummaging around a messy attic, hollering jokes and platitudes from above.

My father’s dusty head appeared, and he called to us to collect the boxes he had gathered. One by one, my brother and I carried the large milk crates down to the living room. Dad walked in carrying another huge crate bursting with records. “This is the good stuff,” he said.

He pulled out a record and wiped the fiberglass dusting off of the sleeve. “Woodstock,” he said, thrusting it at me. “Hendrix. National anthem. Classic.” He dropped record after record in my lap, calling out names and dates to me.

Sean, finally bored by the excavation, had vanished from the room. It was just my dad and me and all those records. Dad dug through his crate, and I began to pick through the box I had carried down. I flicked through faded, crinkled album sleeves with names like Chicago, America, and Boston on the front—the same long-haired, bearded white men staring back at me.

I stopped when I reached a thick folded album sleeve. I pulled it out, startled to see bright, fiery eyes on a strange, ghoulish face. “Oh yeah,” Dad said, scooting closer to me. “That’s that fellah from that Labyrinth movie you guys are always watching. You know, that long haired guy? That’s David Bowie.”

“That’s him?” I felt like I was looking at a stranger now. The man I knew from Labyrinth—Jareth, the Goblin King—was like a
friend to me. Creepy, misunderstood, longing for more—when I watched him, I felt okay with being a weird, motherless kid who wanted a new life.

“This one is great,” Dad said, pulling the record out of my hands. He traced the yellow Bowie emblem on the corner of the sleeve, as if he were trying to uncover some secret message. “Let me show you how to use the record player. Come here.” He stood and walked over to the record player. He slid the record out of the sleeve delicately, balancing the large vinyl disc on his fingertips. Gripping the edges of the record, he placed it onto the turntable.

I stood next to him, nearly holding my breath. He took my hand and moved it over to the needle. “Now, you put the needle down into the groove, like this.” He pushed my hand gently, and the needle landed onto the disc. It was the first time my father had been this close to me since the funeral. He had grabbed my hand for a moment as the casket was lowered, but he quickly let go, as if ashamed to be clutching onto his son’s hand.

He pulled his hand away and turned the volume dial on the console. “Now, listen.”

The record sizzled and popped, a slow crackling sound filling the room. The silence erupted with howls and an eerie voice exclaiming, “And in the death... As the last few corpses lay rotting on the slimy thoroughfare...”

My father stood there with his eyes closed, the terrifying words washing over him. I wondered if this felt like comfort or a punishment, hearing these damning words rise from the turntable.

When I felt scared of the horizonless future or alone in grief, I watched movies with Sean in our basement. Where did Dad go when he felt like that? I never asked him. I had always imagined him in the garage, tinkering with some project or planning his next household project. As I watched him then, I thought, no, that can’t be right.

Maybe he sat in his bedroom fighting the reflex to cry each time he saw the rumpled sheets on Mom’s side of the bed; maybe he had been in bed each night dreaming of the turntable, dreaming of the old records he would bring downstairs. Eyes fixed on the ceiling fan above, around and around, maybe he dreamed of needles and the grooves they fit into—that slow crackling fire waiting to take hold of what was left of him.
I.

A muscled arm beckons me, flips the armrest down.

I sit rigid, tug up my sweater, expose a network of blue

that free-falls into a palm too criss-crossed to read.

My eyes hopscotch to his short, black curls;

his fingers dance my veins, trace a maze. He senses

the right spot, tender as I’ve ever dreamed of

in a night-time lover or wished for from my mother.
II.

I’ve crossed the threshold into the labyrinth of cancer;

my own cells feed on me, this large man now beside me,

black eyes piercing.
The needle punctures, a wince,

my excessive reflex, as he is skilled and kind.

There’s no blood as the spike slides out, but his hand rests

on a cloud of cotton, fingers a sparrow’s weight. He never

seems to look at me whether or not I look at him. It lasts

a long time, this not looking, this not moving, his lack of pressure.

III.

A softly placed band-aid. We’re finished. His eyes signal it’s best I don’t speak of this or he’d have to say out loud he’s petitioned his gods for my healing.

He motions the way to the street.
Stepping out the door, silence of fresh snow jolts my reflexes like a windowpane shattering without sound. I set out on my run—the *swish-swish* of my stride tracing fresh footprints on the whitened streets. The world is shuttered and asleep. Curved streetlights feathered with snow bow like mute swans clenching shiny pearls in their bills. Stillness and the meditative *swish-swish* free my spirit. For a few moments, I float above the frosted trees and look down at my clay body loping across the white labyrinth.
Contributors

Sean Akerman grew up in rural Maine and moved to New York City in 2006, where he earned a PhD in social and personality psychology. He has taught at Hunter College, Sarah Lawrence College, and Bennington College. In 2015, he moved to the North Woods, where he writes and edits full time. His poetry and prose have appeared in Main Street Rag, Radius, and artist catalogues, among other locations.

Carol Alexander has poems published in several dozen literary journals and a variety of anthologies. Her chapbook, Bridal Veil Falls, is published by Flutter Press. Recent work appears in Big River Poetry Review, Clementine, The New Verse News, Split Rock Review, and Poetry Quarterly.

Mikki Aronoff has poems that can be found in House of Cards: Ekphrastic Poetry, Rolling Sixes Sestinas: an Anthology of Albuquerque Poets, and shortly in Bearing the Mask: Southwestern Persona Poems (Dos Gatos Press). Now retired, she makes her home in Albuquerque, where she continues to string words and scribble pictures and smooch on her pooches as often as she can.

Martin Berlove is an aspiring artist, writer, and renaissance man. His work is a continual attempt to find a nexus between the technical and the creative.

Thatcher Carter is a community college professor at Riverside City College in California. She teaches English composition, Shakespeare, and Women’s Literature. She has always been a reader but never seriously a writer until now. Her publications are only academic essays and her dissertation that her university put in their library, never to be read again! This essay is tangentially related to the themes in her novel, When the Past is Prologue, but it’s mostly a fun side project.

Amy Durant lives in upstate New York and works as the Digital Editor for an award-winning daily newspaper. She has a Bachelor’s Degree in Creative Writing from Binghamton University and has been previously published in places such as 3Elements Review, Rose Red Review, 200 Proof Magazine, Ascent Aspirations, and jmww magazine. Her book Out of True was published in 2012 and she recently won first place for her poem “Sagamore” in the 2015 North Country Writers Contest.

Kristen Falso-Capaldi’s story, “I Can’t Hear You,” was selected as a top-25 finalist for the 2015 Glimmer Train Very Short Fiction Award. She is the 2015 winner of the Victoria Hudson Emerging Writer Prize, the 2015 winner of the Metaphysical Press New Voices Contest, and one of her stories was selected for the Editors’ Pick Award in the Fabula Press Aestas 2015 Short Story Contest. Her fiction has also appeared in FlashDogs: An Anthology, Underground Voices, and on The Other Stories Podcast. She co-wrote a screenplay, Teachers: The Movie, which was an official selection for the 2014 Houston Comedy Film Festival. She lives in Rhode Island, USA.
Brent Fisk has work which has appeared in Southeast Review, Prairie Schooner, Rattle, and Folio among other places. He will begin work on his MFA later this fall as soon as he figures out where the hell he’s going.


Lisa Hochstein received her BFA from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Later, she spent several years in Barcelona, Spain, painting and teaching English. She returned to the U.S. in 1991 and lived mostly in the Boston area before moving to Santa Cruz in 2002. Her work has been exhibited in numerous local and national invitational and juried shows. In recent years she has had the privilege of completing residences at Brush Creek Foundation for the Arts (2013, 2015), the Ragdale Foundation (2014), and the Hambidge Center (2015).

S. A. Leavesley is a journalist, writer, and photographer, who occasionally exhibits and provides cover designs. Her successes include winner of the Droitwich Specsavers Opticians’ Life through a Lens photography contest in 2008.

Sean McDonell has work in Zettel, 7Mondays, Joypuke, and in the anthology The Pleasure, The Pain, and the Profit: Young Writers on Writing. He is currently between jobs and places.

George Moore has published poems in The Atlantic, Poetry, Colorado Review, North American Review, and elsewhere. His sixth collection, Saint Agnes Outside the Walls, will be released with FutureCycle Press in June, and his most recent, Children’s Drawings of the Universe (Salmon Poetry) was published in 2015.

Elizabeth Morton is a New Zealand writer. She has been published in Poetry NZ, PRISM international, Cordite, JAAM, Shot Glass Journal, Takahe Magazine, Blackmail Press, Meniscus, Flash Frontier, SmokeLong Quarterly, the Sunday Star Times, and in the upcoming Island Magazine, Literary Orphans, and Paper Darts.

Robbi Nester is not writing 30 poems in 30 days, but is always thinking about writing, revising, submitting poems, manuscripts and other writing projects. The author of Balance (White Violet, 2012), A Likely Story (Moon Tide, 2014), and editor of The Liberal Media Made Me Do It! (Nine Toes, 2014), Robbi also has two completed manuscripts seeking a publisher and two in the works.

Isabella Ronchetti is an artist and writer who finds inspiration in dreams, stories, shapes in the cumuli, and peculiar happenings from everyday life. Her work has won awards and has appeared in numerous publications such as Diverse Voices Quarterly, Canvas Literary Journal, Foliate Oak Literary Journal, GREYstone, Glass Kite Anthology, Bluefire Journal, The Claremont Review, Celebrating Art, and The Sigh Press.
Whitney G. Schultz completed her M.F.A. in poetry at UNC-Greensboro. She currently lives outside of Baltimore, where she teaches creative writing and literature. Her poetry and flash fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in SmokeLong Quarterly, One for One Thousand, The Light Ekphrastic, and Blinders Journal among others.

Dennis Trujillo from Pueblo, Colorado, is a former soldier and middle/high school math teacher who happens to love poetry. He began writing poetry one day in the winter of 2010 when his school staff forgot to notify him that it was a snow day. In the vacant classroom he was overwhelmed with an impulse to write a poem titled “Snow Day”. The creative spigot is stuck “On”, and he has been writing and publishing poems ever since.

Rachel Voss is a high school English teacher living in Queens, NY. She graduated with a degree in creative writing and literature from SUNY Purchase College. Her work has previously appeared in The Ghazal Page, Hanging Loose Magazine, Blast Furnace, The New Verse News, Unsplendid, Newtown Literary, and Silver Birch Press, among others.
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Marlon Fowler is a Des Moines–based designer and web developer for 3Elements Review. He received his bachelor’s degree in Journalism with a major in Advertising from Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa. Marlon enjoys all things technology, making websites “do things,” running, reading nonfiction, sports, movies, video games, and Chicago food. He would really like to learn PHP and get back to Paris. You can check out Marlon’s portfolio at www.marlonfowler.com.

Kelly Roberts received a BA in English from the University of Iowa. After years of writing creative nonfiction, she decided to give fiction a go. Kelly lives in Iowa with her adoring husband, clever daughter and rescued wire fox terrier. By day she works in Human Resources, which provides her with more writing material than she could ever hope for. Cooking, reading and popping bubble wrap—one bubble, one row at a time—are her passions. Her work has appeared in Lunch Ticket.

Megan Collins received an MFA in Creative Writing from Boston University. She teaches creative writing at the Greater Hartford Academy of the Arts, as well as literature at Central Connecticut State University. Her work has appeared in many literary journals, including Compose, Linebreak, Off the Coast, and Rattle. When not writing or teaching, Megan enjoys reading, watching The Ellen DeGeneres Show, collecting miniature items, eating cupcakes, going on Netflix binges, and spending time with her husband, Marc, and her golden retriever, Maisy. Check out Megan’s work on her website, megan-collins.com.

James A. H. White holds an MFA in Creative Writing with a concentration in Poetry from Florida Atlantic University, where he was the Lawrence A. Sanders fellow. A winner of the 2014 AWP Intro Journals Project award in Poetry and a three-time Pushcart Prize nominee, his work has appeared or is forthcoming in Colorado Review, Gertrude, Hermeneutic Chaos, Tahoma Literary Review, Cha, and DIAGRAM, among others. He is the author of hiku [pull], a chapbook [Porkbelly Press, 2016]. James currently resides in South Florida with his partner and two dogs--Jack, a greyhound/giant mosquito; and Izzy, a black lab mix/micro rhinoceros.

Katherine Davis earned an MFA in fiction from the University of Maryland and a PhD from the University of Tennessee. Her most recent work appears in Gravel and in Broad River Review, and she won Gigantic Sequins’ 2014 Flash Fiction Contest. Currently, she is living in Wisconsin with a small flock of cockatiels and is completing her first novel.