Welcome to issue five!

When we chose the elements for our October issue, we anticipated some eerie, creepy, possibly terrifying pieces. And we did receive stories, poems, art, and photography with all of those characteristics, but not in the horror-like sense that we anticipated. They’re deeper, heart-wrenching, more than just a surface-level scare.

They are stories about loneliness and the end of the world, the dead bodies of a couple floating and dancing beautifully along the current through the eyes of a little boy, suicide and arson, and a little girl who finds a mysterious secret in her father’s closet.

Please see for yourself what these new, as well as veteran writers and artists created around three simple words.

Consider trying it for yourself. The next issue’s elements are: wring, respite, and smudge. We also have a poetry and fiction contest ending March 1st with well-published judges and monetary prizes! Check out more information about these opportunities on our website. Follow us on Twitter and Facebook for all the latest updates.

Sincerely,
Mikaela Shea
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Lament of a Robin

Peter Witte
When I speak, I take big breaths.
Deeply, like I want to turn my lungs inside-out.
I chew my words, savor my thoughts
(I don't like wine, but the word *obscene* gives me shivers).

The tradeoff to thoughtfulness is social obscurity, though.
People forget what they don't hear. A true wallflower, "too quiet";
they brand my dirge in the unwritten.
Bludgeoned with anecdotes about my held tongue,
I am not what you think but what is there.
I am a thousand realities that you cannot comprehend.

While I speak, I'm already thinking of the means to end this conversation,
my own anemic doppelgänger,
a saboteur at the first sign of a stutter.
My thoughts say *get out get out get out*
but I'm desperate to stay in.

Look at it this way:
there are 171,000 words in the dictionary –
but that does not include the 47,000 that fell into obscurity.
EVERYTHING that burns has its moment to shine. But maybe it’s the other way around. Still I should have told you. I could have said life was great, the future was bright, and that matters were certainly looking up. I could have told you these things, but you probably would not have been able to hear me over the gunshot. You were never one to listen to the words forced through another’s teeth.

Smoke rises, twisting and twirling through the air, dancing against the resonating sound in an exodus of ghosts. I take a deep breath, allowing it to fill my nostrils and enter my lungs. The smell is sickening. I hold the smoke in, forcing it to burn through me from the inside out; I exhale slowly. And so it is, I say. You, of course, say nothing.

I pull out a chair and take a seat across from you, unwavering in my surreal stupor. Resting on the table between where I sit and where you lie is a box of Frosted Flakes. On the side of the box, just above the nutrition panel boasting of the ten essential
vitamins and minerals that can be found within is the cardboard, recyclable promise that a bowl of this cereal in the morning ensures the start of a good day. On the back of the box is a promotional advertisement for a Tony the Tiger t-shirt reading, “Life is Grrrrreat!” How appropriate.

The muted ringing in my ears begins to subside, and I become more aware of the air around me as it starts to settle after the single, sudden explosion of the revolver. Somewhere in the distance, a dog is barking an incisive message that falls upon the deaf ears of the city. A few cars can be heard passing insouciantly on the nearby overpass still wet from the previous day’s rain on their way to some unknown destinations at this ungodly hour. One by one, headlights illuminate the front windows of the house, causing distorted strips of light to squeeze through the blinds and glide across the walls in a choreographed, balletic fashion, casting unintelligible forms and shadows around the room. The shadows linger in this somber scene, incapable of sympathy.

I take another deep breath, hoping this one will return feeling to my extremities and clarity to my mind, allowing me to move. I hold the air in my chest a moment, this time detecting a more familiar burning scent. I turn my attention to the far end of the table, where I now see your lit cigarette in the glass ashtray, still burning a glowing orange ring. Along with your last cigarette rests the makings of your usual cocktail of Prozac, Vicodin, Hydrocodon, and a half-empty bottle of bourbon weighing down the tattered, over-read note she wrote you when she left; the note, from evidence, is perhaps the most potent of all these favorite poisons with which you surrounded yourself.

I reach across the table and pick up the note so as to examine it more closely, as if I had not already seen those words a million
times in my mind, burned into my unconscious, enough to have the letter memorized from beginning to end. You had potential... it begins. And my mind travels backwards to when this whole downward spiral began to take the floor out from underneath, when the pieces started to fall.

It was the beginning of winter. Of course, there was always a coming winter in your mind, the season that grows darker, longer, and colder with each passing hour. The sky had turned that flat, despondent shade of grey which seemed to surreptitiously lower itself upon the earth with every turn of your back. You no longer cared to leave the house just as the sunlight no longer cared to enter. She, however, always seemed to have someplace better to be. Every night she would lace up those high-heeled designer boots you gave her two Christmases past, removing her ring and hiding it under her pillow, far from sight. I was never sure if she could no longer stand the sight of the ring because of what it represented or because she was no longer able to look in the eyes the person she saw in its reflection. She would lean over the sink, painting up her face and her story, and force out a smile, as if speaking it gently made it any more convincing when looking right through you. She would be going to the office, the store, a friend’s, or some other fabricated destination. It did not matter. The lipstick she wore would complement her crimson nails, telling all; the impassivity you wore would complement your denial as you learned to bite your tongue with every lie she told until the feelings of discontent were washed away by the metallic taste of apathy.

Apathy, now that is a taste you grew to know well. Perhaps that was the lingering, bitter flavor you attempted to extinguish daily with the liquid burn of your spirits. Oh, how faithfully you
would drown in spirit each night. She would leave every evening, returning later and later each time. You would ask her where she had been or what had taken so long. Eventually you just stopped asking. That way she no longer had to lie, and you no longer had to care. Then there was the night she simply did not return at all.

For days the house was empty. She had gone in the middle of the night, taking everything she deemed to be her privilege, even that god-forsaken rodent of a dog she could never remember to feed. Then you had gone, taking nothing, nor leaving any indication of where you were going or how long before you would return. That is, if you would return. Inside the house, the walls and ceilings bounced hollow echoes of sounds that were never created or perhaps only created once in a faded dream. The couches and chairs were filled with your absence, still indented in the shapes and forms of where someone used to be, longing for a more tangible weight to bear. The air seemed trapped within the rooms and soon grew dark and stale, as if losing hope of ever again escaping. Without her touch the house had become more notably bland and visually monotonous. Everything was white on white, black on grey, silence on dust. It was the kind of hue and palette combination that could wear on your dreams and make you envy the blind.

Days passed like years before I found you by the shore, sitting on the seawall, collecting your thoughts like souvenirs from ideas once visited. You were wearing your dirty black overcoat much like you wore your own skin, shifting restlessly and ill-fittingly within its tired, hardened confines. Your khaki pants were torn and rolled mid-way up your calves to reveal the filthy, frozen, and bare feet beneath, suspended lifelessly below you. There were no shoes in sight. I approached you from behind, climbing over the
wall to occupy the seat beside you without receiving so much as an acknowledgement of my presence. I followed the gaze of your deep blue-grey eyes to the young girl in the red sun hat skipping along the posts of the boardwalk with one arm extended outward, gently touching and grasping onto every one of them as she passed, and I could tell that you were thinking of all those things from your past which you had held onto.

“What is potential, anyway?” you asked suddenly, more rhetorically than directed at me. This floating inquiry seemed to be the first sign that you recognized someone else had entered the vicinity of your personal space. I turned toward you, slightly startled. It was then that I noticed something in your hand, like a wrinkled handwritten note, along with a photograph. “It’s this great burden hanging above our heads, weighing down on us while begging to be reached,” you continued. “Is potential nothing more than the measure of sky above us? The higher the potential, the less....” You paused and wrinkled your face painfully—the first expression of any kind I had seen for some time as you searched for the right word to bludgeon my consciousness with your tongue. “The less obtainable it seems to become. Here we are, looking up at all this sky above our heads.” You turned your stare to the clouds forming in the atmosphere, darkening and indicating a coming storm. You breathed a few moments against the tension. “The tragedy, of course, is that we are just like everyone else; no matter the amount of potential hanging above our heads, we all walk on the same ground, the starting point of earth to which our gravity holds us.” I used to love your lectures, your way of turning every mystery of the world into a precise equation, replacing lost wonder with intricate understanding. You would say it was the only way to live, to do so with your eyes open. Until this moment,
it had been some time since I had watched you turn your sight from the shadows of denial to the open glare of the spotlight on the stage of convictions and certainty.

You clenched your jaw, finding that same conviction to speak as if it were rehearsed: “So here we are, those of us to whom the greatest amount of potential has been attributed; we walk about this same lonesome earth with all this sky above us and no wings to speak of. I cannot help but to feel we have been set up, even designed for disappointment in a world that leaves so much to hope for and so little to expect. With every ordinary breath we take, another exhaled lungful of ‘potential’ becomes toxic and wasted.” I watched your chest sink as you shifted from the boldness of declaration to the defeat of believing in it. *Who could have known that so much air could be the source of such suffocation?*

For the record, I always considered you to be brilliant, even if devastatingly so. Of course, I guess not even your brain would prove any match for the bullet that would be sent searing through it.

Your eyes began to swell with the kind of tears that are refused their gravity and just seem to gather on the surface of the corneas, glossing them over. In them I could see the reflection of clouds rolling over each other, blanketting any sign of the fire that once burned inside of you, smothering it in dark grey, like ash. The photograph fell from your hand, blew around wildly for a moment, and then stuck in the sand in front of us. It was a picture of the two of you dancing hand-in-hand, her in her pure white dress and you in your clean black suit with a lush red rose in the pocket—a doppelgänger of your former self. You were taking the lead with one foot in the future and the other right there with her, twirling
and spinning until the crowd around you became a blur of many colors, all the wild shades of infatuation and elation. You would continue this dance, with one foot in the past and the other in the grave, turning and spinning around in circles, losing control until the world around you would become a blur of all one color, the worn-out shade of disenchantment. You would throw out words and phrases, allowing them to assemble in the spaces in front of you, constructing conversation to fill the distance between your true selves. Meanwhile, neither one would but hardly acknowledge the vast, empty spaces above your heads which, despite your romantic longings to be free, both secretly hoped belonged to someone. This sort of romance would last, at least for a while. But soon the words would fall, the colors would fade, and the air would close in around you.

“Look,” I began. When burning bridges, I have learned that it is best to start at the bottom of things. By the very nature of fire, the flames will then rise, and the entire structure will thus be destroyed more completely. “Look, she doesn’t love you anymore. There is another, and she doesn’t love him even now.” I paused, waiting for this comment to ignite some sort of reaction in you. But there was none. “I mean,” I continued, desperately grasping for any words left hanging in the air that might help me know what to say. “It’s not your fault. You couldn’t have known. These things happen. The two of you met, there was some chemistry, a spark....” I hesitated. Even the largest, most raging and destructive of fires is nothing more than a sustained chemical reaction. “You fell in love.”

For a moment, neither of us moved. Then you lowered your head and straightened your arms on either side of you, as if to lift your body from its frozen position on the seawall. “I suppose
we all fall from time to time,” you said, finally looking up at me
to give a slight smile from one side of your mouth. I could not tell
if you said this to extend a more light-hearted sense of warmth
or to indicate that perhaps you were thinking about jumping. I
nervously smiled back. The wind began to pick up, and we were
reminded once again of the cold. “Come on then,” you said,
standing up, “before the storm comes.”

The very next night, I awoke to a gunshot.

Now I sit, still holding the note in both hands. You had
potential... it begins. I squeeze tightly, crumbling it beyond
legibility or comprehension. I look once more across the table.
Blood paints the wall behind you in an explosion of vibrant red,
and I cannot help but to wonder if the added color would have
done anything to lift your mood.

The clock on the wall behind me ticks unceasingly, becoming
louder in my head with each fleeting and carefully marked
second, and I find myself somewhat annoyed by its persistence.
Who would wish to be reminded so abruptly of the passing of
time, of his or her own impermanence, in a place such as this?
Suddenly, I am angry that you would wish to remind me of your
impermanence in such a tactless fashion. I stand from my chair
so as to be heard more clearly, kicking it back with my sudden,
impassioned haste. “Everything was always black or white with
you, wasn’t it? Was it impossible to get you to consider that
maybe life was just a giant shade of grey? Why did you insist on
either living in bliss or dying in misery? Why couldn’t you have
chosen to compromise and just live in misery like the rest of us?”
Again, you say nothing. I snatch the half bottle of your bourbon
and dump it out, splashing it negligently across the table, pouring
out your spirits the way someone else might pour out his soul.
“You were always a god to me. Is that what you needed to hear?” I reach once more and knock over the glass ashtray, finding satisfaction in the sound of the loud, chaotic shatter as it hits the floor. “Maybe if I had told you that... maybe if I had eaten more Frosted Flakes....” Now I am beginning to feel ridiculous. I pause to take a breath. From the corner of my eye, I see light appear. It is a flame, like an epiphany. The lit cigarette from the ashtray has fallen onto the table, causing the alcohol-soaked cardboard box to ignite in a tiny fiery divider between us. Suddenly I know what I have to do.

I take off running to the garage where I search frantically in the darkness. In the absence of light, as in the absence of hope, everything is black on black; everything looks and feels the same. The flicker of a streetlight forces its way through the small, grime-covered garage windows, briefly and dimly illuminating the floor. That is when I see it, the bright red canister of gasoline in the middle of it all. I grab the canister and run back into the house, dousing the floors, furniture, and everything in a trail of idle, fuming petroleum just waiting for its calling. Just waiting to fulfill its destructive potential. The toxic fuel soaks into everything that was our lives, slowly occupying my lungs, suffocating me as it waits for a spark, some chemistry. Finally I bend down next to you and carefully remove your matchbook from your pocket. I strike a match and hold the flame to her crumbled note; I hold it to that hand-written notice that our lives were over. Now, I drop the flaming paper onto the trail of gasoline on the floor.

Without hesitation, I turn and run from the house. The flame catches instantly, and within moments the fire is consuming the entire structure. Lying in the grass across the street, I watch as the whole house burns, the red and orange flames tearing through
the darkness of the night, pushing black smoke against the sky and the heavens, challenging the glow of the stars with its embers, and raining down ash to cover the earth in a hush of grey. I watch until every section of sickeningly outdated patterned wallpaper, every piece of furniture, every article of clothing, every appliance, book, photograph, and memory is reduced to the same particles of meaninglessness, erasing the artifacts of a life. This is my inheritance. This is where, in ashes, we bury fallen gods. This is the dirge. This sort of beautifully blazing farewell is the least I could do. After all, you were my father.
To My Last Miscarried Sibling
Johnson Cheu

Two born children, two lost ones, then you, a bludgeoned corpus of blood, cells, rejected, ejected in our parents’ bed, We don’t speak of you often; the dirge pains. Today, I treated myself to mint chocolate chip ice cream, a childhood favorite. Again, you visited, a visage waiting for big brother to treat. Your favorite, only the stars know: 
_butter brickle, strawberry, black Cherry, Neapolitan?

Yesterday, our sister, a lover of strawberry, emailed our nieces’ drawings: cups, fruit bowls, a flamingo. I wonder about your own unborn, what they might have been like, who they might have become.

To me, you always come fully formed. You, the perfect doppelgänger, conceived to ensure I’d be cared for. I, malformed, made Dad afraid, so he rejected Mom’s last-ditch pleas for you till it became too late — his one lifelong regret. I am Big Brother still, responsible for you, for not-you. Sibling rivalry
would have divided us; we would have fought. Still, I would have loved you fiercely.

In old age, would we have rejected one another over some infraction, a long-ago hurt? Or bickered, bonded over checkers, gin rummy? Would the air reverberate with recrimination, remorse, or resolution?
Out of context, this doppelgänger seems oddly unable to convey the story of how he came into being: a fast foil, handsome yet hindered by hardship, an escaped prisoner wronged by society washed up on this welcoming shore.

Before he can bludgeon our hero with moral and philosophical discourse designed to explain and subject to scrutiny, there’s an aside, a footnote to readers the world over, a reminder that emotions often rule logic, hearts over heads, a simple warning not to overthink things. This rough Bildungsroman continues apace, the sun’s chariot commuting a sentence of a season or three, and meanwhile the third person becomes omniscient, narrating snippets of thoughts no one dare share.

Some children are born old from the start, aged souls eager to mince and parry in escaping the dirge the grave-digger sings
from that birth day on. We are all skulls and stone, women and men thrown by diversions into ignoring the inevitable, rolling forward like fate, unstoppable.

Those were the best of times, and we read on eagerly. Back when years were seconds, a different age in which the spiraled secrets were slowly revealed, sunlight conquered shadows, and justice was served cold and hard on a plate the color of sky.
YOU don’t normally see a suit floating in the water. You just don’t. Suits don’t go in the water. They aren’t supposed to get wet. Sometimes wet things get spilled or splashed on them, but they don’t go in swimming pools, and they don’t go in rivers or brooks or streams, and they don’t tumble, of all places, in the churning surf just off of Hatteras Island.

That’s why, when you actually do see one there, diving and rolling over and over as the ocean bludgeons the shoreline, it catches your eye. You don’t go after it, at least not right away. It’s a surprise, and you need time to make sense of how it slides over the roaring break and disappears into the mud and pebbles below. Then it gets sucked out in the rip current and starts the process all over again. And you don’t run to it because it’s a suit in the ocean, all put together in three pieces, not getting ripped apart or separated by the rushing, dumping, sucking, and re-rushing, and dumping water.

You’re a boy, maybe ten or eleven, and you’re wearing a tank
top and yellow swim trunks, the first pair you’ve ever owned without He-Man or the Thundercats printed somewhere on them. You’re a big boy, a little man. Your little sister is hard at work shoveling smooth wet sand into her little red pail, buzzing at your feet in her pink one-piece with the daisies and the matching sun bonnet, singing some song she’s just making up as she goes along. Girls are dumb.

As the sun rises over the horizon and the tide pulls away, you write your name in the sand with the point of a seashell, and the water wipes it away, over and over. That’s when you first see the suit.

You think it’s something else: a hunk of driftwood or a cluster of seaweed, maybe a piece of Highway 12 that got washed away during the last hurricane (Dad told you that happens). But then other details creep into view: a burgundy tie and a silver cufflink glinting in the same new sunlight that’s already biting at yesterday’s sunburn on your cheeks. It’s a suit. How did a suit get in there?

The riptide sucks it away again, and this time, the suit disappears for a while. You lean in, maybe take a few more steps forward toward the breakers, but your mom yells for you not to go too close to the water. She’s calling out from her perch at the top of a grassy dune where she’s stretched out on a chaise lounge reading something by Anne Rice. She warns you not to make her get up, and you know that somewhere behind the oversized sunglasses and under that oversized floppy straw sunhat, she’s making that “mom face,” the same one she makes back home when you’ve done something bad and she rattles the wooden spoon drawer just to make you run to the bathroom because it’s the only door in the house that locks. (Even though it’s been a few
years since she actually used the wooden spoon on you, it doesn’t matter. She’s used it before, and the expectation is ingrained in the soft tissue of your ass cheek like a birthmark.) That face.

You listen to your mom, and you don’t go farther out toward the crashing waves. You push your vision out to the horizon on the glimmering ribbon of white light the sun has put down for you, and the suit reemerges. It’s farther out this time, and something else has changed. When it pops out of the water, it no longer floats along like a piece of driftwood. The suit is upright, bobbing up and down like a buoy, and you notice something inside of it. Perhaps the suit wrapped itself around something on its journey, something to give it form and purpose, something to make it a suit and not just a tumbling, rolling, churning collection of wet cloth and thread. That’s ridiculous. A suit doesn’t have a conscience or a soul or any great purpose.

The left arm of the suit (and whatever the suit has wrapped itself around) is bent at the elbow, and for a second, it looks like some wayward doppelgänger of a hopeful young husband bobbing in the surf, waving to get your attention. In the glare of the sun, you think you see a hand, but maybe it’s just a branch. You think you see a head, but it might just be an illusion at the crossing of shadow and sunlight.

“Look!” you finally call to your little sister, but she doesn’t listen to you because you’re not the boss of her. “Sarah-Jean, look!” She tops off her bucket of wet sand and smooths it over with the back of her little plastic shovel and quickly patters her tiny feet back to the grassy dune.

You look out to the suit again, and you notice it has flipped over and the legs of it are sticking up and out of the water, angling just slightly to the left—its left, your right—where it’s bobbing.
up and down. The sunrise blazes off of a black leather loafer. Now it’s showing off, doing underwater handsprings like you do at the community pool back home to impress Jenny from homeroom. That’s ridiculous. Suits don’t show off. Furthermore, how does a suit wear shoes?

The angle at which the legs are sticking out of the ocean gets smaller and smaller until the legs disappear, and the top of the suit reemerges, flattening on its back on the surface of the water. Just as it is lifted once more by an infant wave, you notice something else, a white ruffle in the breaker.

You have keen eyes to see it, because the ruffle is almost the same shade of white as the breaker itself. Your mom once told you that eating carrots was good for your eyes, and now you know she wasn’t lying. You feel a bit like Superman.

The ruffle disappears and the wave crashes down. When the force of the blow to the beach recedes and retreats, you see pebbles and sand fleas and bubbles retreat with it, leaving behind a white dress.

You think you see a pale white neck and a tight bun of brown hair just as the next wave crashes down and pulls the dress away, the same wave that’s carrying the suit. Now it has them both.

You don’t normally see suits or dresses tumbling in the surf just off of Hatteras Island. It must be even rarer to see them tumbling together, rolling over one another, over and over and over in some violent dance. Each time they come together, they drift apart. Then they come together, they bump into each other and drift apart again. The suit does a handspring, and the dress lifts at the hem. They push into each other. They drift apart. They tumble over one another. They crash into shoreline. They get sucked out to sea. They come together. They drift apart.
You’re mesmerized by the dance in the sunrise when you feel a tug at the hem of your tank top.

“Momma doesn’t want you to go in,” Sarah-Jean says. She looks up at you, squinting from the glare of the sun. “She says to come back now.”

“Okay,” you tell her. “I’ll be done in a minute.”

“Momma says NOW!” she says.

“Okay, I said!” you say.

Sarah-Jean patters off again to the grassy dune, and you look out one last time beyond the crashing waves. The suit and the dress are both gone, from each other, from you.

You dig with the point of your seashell and carve your name in the dense, wet sand, as deeply as your big boy, little man muscles will push. You put the shell in your pocket and turn to leave as the next wave whispers a dirge and washes everything away.
Questions for my Doppelgänger
Megan Collins

With our face, our hands, what life have you lived?
What lines have you written? What mouths have you kissed?
And did you do it all better than I ever did?

Did you bludgeon our body so his flaws would fit,
or when he reached for the door, did you let the knob twist?
With our face, our hands, what life have you lived?

Did you gather your grief inside of our ribs?
Did you nurture it like a garden, unwrap it like a gift?
And did you do it all better than I ever did?

When he came back for blood, did your scabs go unpicked?
Were you done singing dirges? Were they stale on our lips?
With our face, our hands, what life have you lived?

Did you know that his words would furl into fists?
Did our skin stiffen to armor? Did you re-write the script?
And did you do it all better than I ever did?
Still, my double, doesn’t he pulse sometimes inside our wrist?
Aren’t there nights you’re so lonely that you scratch at the itch?
With our face, our hands, what life have you lived?
And did you do it all better than I ever did?
Grave on Skye

MT Cozzola
It must have been
my doppelgänger
they were thinking of
when the school advised me
I ought to be a funeral director.

As I saw it, I didn’t
fit the profile:
grave downcast eyes,
voice well-suited to a dirge,
all minor keys and monotone,
teeth set like headstones
in a florid face.

I couldn’t bludgeon
grieving daughters,
nervous sons
with false good nature,
sympathy-for-profit,
leading them
up and down long rows
of coffins, tricked out
to look like satin-lined convertibles,
bargain urns fashioned of
sturdy cardboard, yet capable
of sheltering those heavy
bits of gristle, bone, and ash
just long enough to bury
or scatter on the waves.

Now, although I’m glad
I didn’t go in this direction,
I know it’s certainly unfair
to judge a whole profession
by its worst.
Since death is part of life,
some people, like some animals,
must have a role
in cleaning up what’s left,
tending to ritual,
allowing the rest of us
to turn our faces
toward the light
and walk away.
AT dinner with friends about 15 years ago in a Colorado silver-mining town, a curly-haired, serious-faced young man I’d just met told a riveting story about drug abuse, gangster life, and prison years. It featured the torture he underwent during rehab when a dentist gave him a root canal with no anesthetic. He’d fallen in love with a patient at the addiction facility. He went looking for her when she was released, only to learn that she had killed herself one day earlier. He was working on a memoir: part thriller, part dirge.

“An amazing story,” my girlfriend Pam said after we dropped James at his motel. She was a writer, too, and a whitewater rafter with her own harrowing tales.

“Yes,” I said. “I just hope he doesn’t try to pass it off as true.”

I glanced in the rear-view mirror at Kim, visiting from Sacramento.
We had traded glances during James’ implausible, hour-long tale. She winked.

So much air whooshed from the car that oxygen masks might have dropped from the roof.

Pam glared. I had said the wrong thing. Again.

Soon we broke up. In the sizzling postlude of our umpteenth morning fight, I packed while she shopped in town. I left a brief note. Little needed saying, I figured. We needed not emotionally bludgeon each other more.

Wrong. Within a year, Oprah Magazine – the June 2001 issue – published her essay about how to heal after being “dumped.” The preamble used my first name. Everything had been fine, she wrote. I had simply fled, brutally and mysteriously, as wedding plans took shape.

Her recovery tip #5 about seeking help from friends made me pause. “James offered the services of his hit-men buddies, should I wake up one morning and find myself really mad.” Emails from James in Los Angeles had dwindled after the split. Sides chosen.

I was settling my late mother’s affairs in Illinois when I learned about the article from family and friends. They were amused. I was not a “nice guy,” they said, but this was over the top. Nobody is so fully villainous, no situation black and white. Forget about it, they said – not easy, since Oprah had Pam on her TV show to play up the magazine article. Silly, my friends said.
And so I forgot, until an afternoon in 2003 when I stood in a San Francisco bookstore thumbing *A Million Little Pieces*, the just-released memoir by James Frey.

There it was, his entire narrative from dinner – the tale I dismissed as made up – in hardcover as nonfiction, as actuality. I felt foolish, ashamed. Worse than regret about doubting James was the skepticism about myself. If I could not accurately judge the veracity of his story, maybe I could not see what was false in my own. Maybe my friends and family couldn’t. Maybe the *Oprah* article was correct, and I was blind to my own nature, self-justifying and randomly cruel.

You know the now-ancient Frey saga’s weird twists. After reporters in 2006 exposed the whoppers in *Pieces*, Oprah defended him. She reversed herself and went on to humiliate him for lying. James mournfully apologized to Oprah, but later reversed himself and wished he hadn’t. I picked through the scandal like a bird for seeds that might vindicate me.

At last, I gave up in confusion.

A memory: Cleaning out my mother’s Illinois house, I stopped to phone Susan, my first love. Our contact had grown sporadic at best. Married with kids, she’s a librarian in Dubuque.

“Oh, we carry the magazine,” she said. “I saw it and laughed. Let me go paragraph by paragraph and tell you which of these terrible things you’re guilty of, and which ones you’re not.” She would find, she said, the flaws in this imperfectly made doppelgänger.
Nervously, I agreed. As she spoke in a measured tone, I pictured her patient finger traveling down the page and considered how rare it is to be known by someone and at the same time loved, despite changes and from afar.

She scored 100 percent. Even what I had denied to others, she guessed correctly. “Big deal,” she said. We listened to the connection’s hiss. “Anyway, enough of this crap. How’s your mom?”

The sound of distance held for a few seconds, and I told her the news, the straight facts, and the rest tumbled out like a river – seeming weary eons of what had happened, my body thrashing in the jumbled, frothy current of it. I paddled and clawed to keep up with my own words. To say something true.
Closets
Katie Kelleher
Who is the Ghost?
Danielle Hooke-Goodbody

I am bludgeoned senseless by
the bonfire scent of my seventeenth year
sneaking through this commuter train carriage.
I am so far ahead in time. Halfway home
on the Sidcup line and there never was
an Autumn like that seventeenth Autumn

I remember you once saying *immolate*
and I slunk away to look it up, and I
haven’t ever forgotten. Christ, all
the ways I burst into flames

I’m not saying I was ever a leaf or the
branch of a tree, never anything so
brittle or dying or green. I just mean I
first saw you when I was seventeen
Everything burns. Now the dirge of a barge in a dawn fog on a doppelgänger river, just slightly bigger than the one on which I was born

So who is the ghost? The ash or the smoke, the Thames or the Fox, or all the rivers we have yet to cross
Her Doppelgänger is Herself
Gabrielle Deimeke
I found my first secret during a thunderstorm in the back of my parents’ closet, curled up between the wooden file cabinet and the wall, its blackened eyes staring up at me, unblinking. I’d often hide during storms, cowering from the thunder and lightning variety as well as from the frequent screaming and shouting parental tempests that would swell to the rafters like a flash flood. Parting Mother’s housecoats, I’d tiptoe over shoes lined as hedgerows toward Father’s side of the closet, which seemed darker and deeper and therefore, safer. With flashlight in tow I’d push past his suits, his woolen winter coat, his leather-armed high school letter jacket and wait, hunkered in a squat, until the rain stopped or the waves of anger calmed to a trickle of sporadic expletives.

While sitting out a ferocious spring storm, hugging my knees, and savoring the smell of moth balls and cedar chips, I sensed I was not alone. Perhaps I heard a shallow heartbeat, or felt a flinty gaze, or maybe I picked up a weakened signal as if it were emitting
a high-frequency pulse, drawing me close, but somehow I knew something was back there in that sliver of space behind the file cabinet, living, breathing, and waiting to be found.

With quaking arms, I aimed the dual beam of my flashlight along the baseboards illuminating a sock, a rubber band, one of father’s silken ties, a dead fly, and then, with a great flash of lightning and accompanying thunder that shook the house and rattled the windows—I saw the secret. It curled defensively in the pale yellowed light like a dog bracing itself against the cold, its eyes trained on me, those darkened pin-head eyes. How strange, I thought. How strange and yet how astonishingly beautiful. (Only twice in my life have I experienced this odd mix of attraction and repulsion: that day in the closet and on my wedding night, having set eyes for the first time on the naked male form. Thus said, attraction was the victor on both occasions.)

Of course at that time I did not know it was a secret; I didn’t even know they existed. I’d learned childish rhymes to help identify and steer clear of possible threats such as poison ivy—leafelets three, let it be, coral snakes—red touching yellow kills a fellow, black widow spiders—red hourglass, better run fast, all of which could cause bodily harm, yes, but no one had ever warned me about the innocuous-looking creatures lurking in the back of closets and under beds, between mattresses, beneath floorboards, and inside of toilet tanks, that can rip your world to shreds quicker than one can say London Bridge is falling down. I think of this often and with deep regret: if only I’d used my flashlight right then as a bludgeon to its ripened head; how very different my life might be.

My fear of storms having been stolidly replaced with the exhilaration of discovery, I scooped the secret into my palm where
it sat placid as a toad (and much heavier than I expected, quite like a lead paperweight). I couldn’t wait to show Mother what I’d found and as I headed down the stairs, I took them with care, one at a time, as opposed to the usual sliding on my backside, the flashlight clenched between my teeth to navigate the way. Presumably, the lightning strike had knocked out the power and even though it was only late afternoon the house was drenched in deep shadow.

I found Mother in the basement holding a candle to the fuse box. She balanced the baby on her slim hip and huffed loudly upon a cigarette which protruded from the center of her bright red mouth, her lips like a hibiscus flower, the cigarette poking through the petals as a phallic pistil. “Aren’t you the brave one?” she asked, flipping a switch. The basement lights flickered back to life and the sounds of her favorite television game show showered down from the den: the audience laughter, the ticking clock, the raucous buzzers. “I didn’t expect to see you until after the storm,” she said, with genuine surprise. She then snuffed out the candle and set it down. “Whatcha got there?”

“Something I found.”

To gain closer inspection Mother shifted the baby (also known as The Doppelgänger because she looked like a smaller, balder, version of me) and took my cupped hands into her silken palm, then drew it away quickly as if burned. And indeed she had been hurt; a pearl of blood pooled upon her fingertip. Mother’s face twisted in confusion as she sucked at the wound. “Where did you get that?” she asked.

“In the closet.” I replied.

“In your closet?”

I shook my head, bewildered.
“My closet? You found that in my closet?” she repeated, her voice rising like a thunderhead.

“Behind Father’s file cabinet.” I whispered.

She threw her cigarette onto the bare floor and stamped it with her shoe. “Take it upstairs,” she commanded. “Take it upstairs, now.”

“But, wh-what is it?” I stammered as she took me by the collar, steering me toward the stairwell. “What is it, Mother?”

I spent the rest of the afternoon sequestered in my bedroom, studying the whorls in the wood grain of my headboard in attempt to decipher a friendly shape but seeing only the distorted faces of shrieking ghosts. The thunderstorm outside had abated, but a new one, fiercer and more destructive than the first, arose when Father came home. As soon as he had set foot upon the threshold, I heard Mother’s wailing, her shrill voice whipping like wind, her words pelting down as driving rain.

She’d shown him the secret.

Boldly, I raced to the kitchen and there she stood, her arm outstretched, holding it by its bristled tail, dodging its swiping claws and gnashing teeth. How terrifying it had become in her presence, how vicious in her grip. Yet, Father, amid this raging squall, said nothing. His eyes remained level and flat. Despite the lashing, the railing, the violence, he said nothing. Nothing at all.

Mother threw the secret in the trash, and we were sent away, The Doppelgänger and I, to stay with Grandmother. Usually a pleasant adventure filled with sweet meats and storybooks, I was too distraught to enjoy either, spending the better part of two days pushing my food about my plate and sulking in her backyard, throwing rocks and kicking up clouds of dirt. Even the sound of her backyard wind chimes seemed to sing a mournful funeral dirge.
Finally, on the third day, we were allowed back home. I felt much like Jonah from one of Grandma’s stories—vomited from the fish’s belly—weak, hungry, and eager to make things right.

Mother greeted us at the door with bare lips and uncombed hair. I pushed her outstretched arms aside and ran through the house out the back door to the alley. I wanted to find the secret, to put it back where I’d found it, to undo the maelstrom it had caused. But as I kicked over the trashcan and began a desperate search amid tin cans and coffee grounds, I knew that Father was already gone, that his side of the closet was empty, swept clean. His suits, his winter coat, his letter jacket, the file cabinet—all of it—no longer there. Nothing left but a heap of wire hangers abandoned on the floor like a pile of bones picked clean.
Cure for Longing
Katherine Liu

Just think about her legs—
overgrown with hair now (probably)
because she hasn’t shaved all winter, all
winter, when snow was piling into your driveway
and you turned the keys to ignite your car
but the engine was jammed—

    think about her legs, curly,
the tough wires matted over skin
(and you wouldn’t want her now).
    Dang.

Lovesick teenage boy, nearing adulthood,
who are you to be chasing
such a mirage, doppelgänger
of baked summer heat.

(Summer which turned to fall which turned to winter which turned to
spring, but winter)—where you sat next to a mug
of coffee, stirring cream, milk, dumb milk
while thick, ugly cells sprouted from her
legs
from the rest of her too.
   (how you wanted to bludgeon biology)

What’s the song for loss, dirge, for growth,
the blastula—did you know the prefix blast means germ? Let’s misinterpret science and think pathogens.
those budding cells (chambers)
couldn’t you have loved those too ...

But look, poor boy,
this is all of life:
engines slow and weird things grow.
Brooklyn Dirge

Howard Skrill
Nothing’s more painful than a young girl’s shoebox diorama she now facetiously calls *The Morning Dirge*.

Inside, two lovers with moony, adolescent sighs & a park bench on which the hero, in lust’s first flush, inches ever nearer the heroine’s full expectant lips.

The two are a double doppelgänger of those powder-blue, ring-necked pigeons cooing for crumbs & holding their heads, imagining that they will be somehow capable of holding up this morning’s salmon-pink sunrise as well as managing to endure that evening’s bludgeoned sunset. We here are witnesses to this slipstream of cooing again & again until we’ve become exhausted with their secrets, until whatever it is that rubs off the sweetness & luster of springtime stares us full in the face, at last brazenly enamored with such a vulnerable display
of emotion-riddled flesh. Nothing’s cinematographic here

save, perhaps, several of those sorry aches & clinging hugs
that will persist well past midnight. Now’s the hour for her two

imprisoned young lovers to frantically grope for & squeeze each

other’s fingers as they recount several of those frontiers they were
compelled to cross in this foolish schoolgirl’s diorama of love.
WAITING near a rickshaw stop in Mumbai, I met an engineer who spoke an English elegant enough to embroider a perfect tapestry of the caste system and how each man had his place, each person his or her assured role. He introduced himself as Mr. Agarwal. When we shook hands, I noticed the light hue of his skin matched my Mediterranean olive.

I asked vaguely about his engineering consulting firm and turned my face eastwards, hoping for the shard of a breeze.

“I’m not an auto mechanic,” he said. His sigh was of the parlor trick type—intended to convey feelings of personal affront thick behind the plausible deniability afforded by courtesy. Running trim fingernails over the discrete golden insignia, Mr. Agarwal’s offense might pass for fine tailoring.

“I am a solidification scientist—a metallurgist. Metallurgy runs in my blood—my father and grandfather are both metallurgists. Metal is a big deal in my family.”

Oh so many bad things come to be simply because a few
rebels roused the rest against a divine system, a historic means of reckoning.

“In some ways, I am very liberal,” he assured me with a friendly wink.

But Mr. Agarwal had his limits.

“But I am conservative when it comes to my heritage and the story of my country’s past. And when it comes to the caste.”

Together, Mr. Agarwal and I absorbed the gentle melody of a traditional Indian folk song wafting from a fruit stand nearby. I determined that the magic of certain words effect a process of transubstantiation between the sacred and the profane, between politics and religion.

“What do you think about the expression, ‘In the fullness of time’?” I ventured.

“It is very profound, though time is cyclical, young lady, and we are, at best, its humble servants,” he replied.

Mr. Agarwal appeared very serious. Together, we watched a blonde teenager wander around the rickshaw stop, pausing as if distracted by dust so thick one could slice it with a bludgeon. Alternately, he might have paused as if seeking a nefarious doppelgänger, or preparing to ask a question. Indisputably, however, the blonde wore a vivid orange t-shirt emblazoned in puffy black letters: “7 days without prayer makes 1 weak.”

There are so many ways to misunderstand divinity, all of them dependent on the assumption that we can unravel a mystery by applying the scientific method to deduce, for instance, that poverty is what God chose for certain people and we’d be remiss to interfere.

“Can we help you find your way?” Mr. Agarwal finally inquired of the fair-skinned blonde whose blush crept like a flag over his
“Well, I’m here with a mission team from Montana and we’re on our way to a pagan village to hand out Bibles... but, I can’t find my team members and—I know this sounds stupid—I don’t have any way to get in touch with them.”

“If you tell me the name of the village, maybe I can help you get there,” said Mr. Agarwal in what I took to be a soothing tone. “I should warn you, however, that most of the small villages around here lack toilet tissue and basic living supplies....”

Flushed, the blonde interrupted Mr. Agarwal to assure him that he knew all about the poverty and that he was prepared to see it. “My mom already explained that part to me and I promised her I wouldn’t let it upset me too much, seeing all that poverty, I mean.”

“Well,” Mr. Agarwal cleared his throat, “how do you propose to help these poor people?”

The blonde straightened his spine and announced, “By giving them the Word of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.”

Mr. Agarwal snickered. “Young man, do you know what they do with your Bibles?”

“My guidance counselor says they read the Bibles after we leave and continue their journey towards Christ...”

“When I visited my cousin in Yeeor last year...”

“What’s Yeeor?”

“It’s a pagan village, young man, and I have a cousin who lives there.” Mr. Agarwal was not accustomed to being interrupted. “When I visited my cousin in Yeeor last year, he was using pages from the Bible as toilet tissue. Sanitation is a serious problem for the residents of Yeeor.”

When the blonde’s skin shifted to a milky-white shade, as if
someone had pipetted the color from it, I wondered if he was being provocative, whether I should warn him that it doesn’t pay to mess around with a Brahmin. How, at some point in a conversation, anything you say might be mistaken for a dirge.

The blonde moved his weight from one foot to the other, juggling against stasis, turning his head in jerky motions over the crowds. I knew how it felt to find nothing familiar, how it takes so much math to declare we’ve been left out of an equation.

“So, young man, what do you and your team propose to do to assist the people of Yeeor with their sanitation problems?” asked Mr. Agarwal.

A colorful rickshaw with peony-print fabric cushions creaked to the curb. Mr. Agarwal signaled him. The driver’s sweaty skin was covered by a layer of dust, making him appear a few shades darker than his natural latte hue.

For lack of a better hand, our blonde friend had returned to his original, pinkish flush. Glaring at Mr. Agarwal while keeping his teeth gritted tight against the clouds of dust, the blonde spoke firmly, “We will *pray* for them, sir. Prayer is like a power tool.”

Mr. Agarwal laughed, lifting his pant leg as he climbed into the rickshaw, dropping a few coins into a brass bowl encircled by plastic flowers.

I gazed backwards at the blonde only once, to confirm—perhaps—the fullness of time, and how it rounds us.
Bird Tangle
Gail Goepfert
My outward appearance provides neither fair nor adequate representation of what I feel going on inside of me. I feel not a hint like those Salomes of Gustave Moreau: baroque, bejeweled, suffering from some infirmity or malady of the connective tissue tying self to other, splendidly alive amid Herod’s palace of excess.

I am a woman like the clouds of dusk, a glorious confusion of volume & emptiness.

The tradition of art would have us believe that we are represented accurately by our image, idealized though it may be in the white light from the top-right, but this is no longer the case, no longer a position which can be viably advocated. Perhaps, alas, it never was.
In any case, representation bludgeoned into oblivion is now impossible, for today, as has oft been declared, the world is all appearance & as such, the old dichotomy of image/subject no longer holds true. Perhaps the illusion was so convincingly maintained in those days of wanton hallucination through nothing more substantial than an academy-fueled profusion of emotionally-persuasive & ever-painterly virtuosity.

All sensuous entreaties aside, the painters of the West never were much in the way of skillful rhetoricians.

Outwardly, I give every indication & appearance of the slipshod existence of womanhood. This frazzled crown of lumpen locks, these Mary Magdalene cheeks which puff to blow out a candle in a warm & shadow-streaked room, these hips which embody the generative principle of our universe, these thick lips, this no one nose.

It is because of these outlandish & unfortunate physiognomic elements, or rather, the outlandish & unfortunate circumstance of finding oneself in the possession of any features whatsoever, that the inner truth remains to this day scandalously well hidden & improbably unguessed at. Indeed, it is because of the rock-solid contingency of these features that, when it comes to the truth of how I truly appear, no one knows.
I am a woman like the clouds before the rain.

To think that some in this world have found this appearing-me desirable despite having no access to the me-which-is-just-beyond-the-threshold-of-appearances. *Silly & absurd chimera chasers*! I am a woman like the clouds disguising moisture soon to be shared with the disbelieving soil.

It is for this reason that I will remain forever indebted to my double & lover, my double entendre, my doppelgänger, for her foresight & courtesy, from within this chain of blindly literal contingency, to have generated along lines only I could have imagined, to have existed preemptively to my having longed for her in the flesh after laying eyes & fingertips upon her in the mirror’s surface of the world at large.

In the same manner that Dante Gabriel Rossetti seemed to be painting the same strong-jawed woman on every canvas, I have found the sameness which smashes open-wide the false variety of the visible spectacle & supposed-spectrum!

Safely tucked away in an invisible den, with every article of her clothing I strip away, I see more of *myself*, & this alone—this cancellation of physical forms, this balancing of existence’s haphazard & awkward equations—finally allows for the
transcendence of the inner/outer divisionism I have so longed for.

Her two ruby-dotted breasts are my own, her single belly & centered neck, her no one nose; these are mine. Touching is like falling into the lake of Waterhouse’s nymphs. When we align, the alignment begins as ours; when we align, the alignment finishes as mine: a solitary dirge.

Surely there are those among you, appearing-readership to whom I appeal, who grasp at your insides as I have. Surely the double entendre has more than two meanings.

Where the matter & antimatter specks collide Is found the heartbeat of the chimera inside.
Omphalos
Hanna Washburn
its mirror image,
its date for the prom.

There’s no need to walk a mile,
no need for either to enter

the other.

There is no other.
This is the love for which the dirty foot naively longs.

Some wailing corpse
has taken my place.
Some pale child with too much eye
shadow

approves of the techno-dirges
I improvise in GarageBand.
The monster voice and key of e-minor bludgeon, the blue hippy tunes in heavy Starbucks rotation.

To even get out of bed these days, I need to imagine

myself an anthropologist from some dark dimension.

It’s my assumption, of course, that shoes rule this world and that the fleshy things surrounding them are slaves to their needs.
Bludgeon, Dirge (Bartok), Doppelgänger
Nancy Hathaway
CRAIG stared out the round window of the space shuttle at the large mass of land below as it broke slowly into chunks that drifted apart before disappearing under the rising ocean. There was a bright light followed by a cloud of explosion as an asteroid crashed somewhere in Europe.

He had always thought Earth would have a quick and abrupt end. A rogue solar flare would set the world on fire, and the planet would burn, its glowing flame seen far and wide for light years. The universe would watch in somber, heartbroken silence as Aeneas had watched Dido’s burning pyre from his ship.

Craig leaned closer to the window until his nose was pressed up against the glass. Another chunk of land broke off reluctantly then split into two as it collided with another piece floating nearby. Swirls of heavy dark clouds covered most of the planet with sporadic sparks of lightning illuminating them every few seconds.

Turning to the main console, he flipped a switch. A red light
blinking next to the switch, and his face appeared on the monitor in front of him. He noted he needed a shave before he started speaking.

“OV – 2959 Base Log, 08 April 3324, 1422 hours. This is Commander Craig T. Hadley of the space shuttle, Virgil67. As of 1100 hours, there has been zero ground to air communication from Earth, official and unofficial.”

He glanced at the communication controls before continuing. “The Virgil67 and its crew have received no communication from the other space shuttles from the Doppelgänger expedition since we all departed from Earth on 18 January, 3315. According to the last conversation with Main Base, there has been no word from the rest of the expedition after 20 December, 3316. For all we know Virgil67 is the only one to make it back ho—”

Craig stopped and stared at his face on the monitor. The Virgil67 was still orbiting Earth. It hadn’t been cleared for landing. It wasn’t safe.

*Home*, he ran the word through his head. *Home.*

He cleared his throat and resumed with his log entry. “For all we know, the Virgil67 is the only one to make it back from its expedition. We were in the middle of reporting and uplinking our findings when we lost all communications with Main Base. Efforts to reestablish contact were unsuccessful. In fact, we cannot pick up any signal from anywhere on Earth but we continue to try and reach Main Base. End of entry.”

The red light stopped blinking. Craig stood and left his private cabin to go to the flight deck. On his way out, he passed by the cabins belonging to his crewmates—empty. When he reached the stasis station at the entrance of the crew module where the flight deck was located, he noticed all of the pods were empty except
for one.

Craig walked over and saw that it was Pierce, his flight engineer. The pod was sealed, a holographic message displayed above it.

*I don’t care. Don’t wake me.*

Frowning, Craig tapped the screen on top of the pod to see the length of time Pierce had put himself in stasis for. The word *Undefined* blinked back.

“What the hell, Pierce?” Craig said. He stared at Pierce in his pod, sleeping peacefully, displaying no outward sign of the state his mind was in. As his commander, he had every authority to pull him out of stasis but he wasn’t sure if he should. Why would Pierce put himself in stasis at a time like this?

“Wasn’t he the only one of us who had family on Earth?” said a female voice behind him. He turned to see his pilot, Aradhna, standing in the doorway. “Why is he in stasis?”

Craig pointed to the message above Pierce’s pod. Squinting her eyes, Aradhna read the message. She sighed, shook her head, then turned to Craig and said, “I think you should come to the flight deck. The rest of the crew is waiting for you there.”

He followed her and as soon as he entered, gasped at the sight in front of him. The protective shields had been lowered from the windshields and the side windows, turning the front of the shuttle into a panoramic view of the Earth.

The blue and green hues of the planet were gone, leaving behind stormy grey clouds and muddy brown oceans. Every now and then, small bright explosions went off as yet another asteroid or meteor collided with Earth, and what used to be the moon now formed a ring of pulverized dust around Earth. The sun was burning brighter than it ever had, and even from this
distance, Craig saw solar flares snapping from it like whips before dissipating into sparkling embers in the surrounding black space. Mercury was gone, and Venus had been pounded to debris that still somehow continued to orbit around the sun.

In some part of his mind, Craig had always known the world was going to end and had accepted that fact when he was chosen for expedition Doppelgänger, but seeing it laid naked and bare in front of his eyes like this, the slow decay and the gradual deterioration, was a bludgeon to the head.

“Commander?” asked Aradhna. “Commander?” She shook him.

He looked at her and blinked a few times. “What?”

“We were able to pick up a signal from Earth. But...”

“But what? Are they from Main Base? Or from the others in the expedition?” Craig watched as Aradhna exchanged glances with the other crewmates and said, “You should hear for yourself, Commander.”

Aradhna tapped on the main console and set up the CAPCOM to play on the overhead speakers in the flight deck. There was the garble and squeak of static before the messages started to play.

They rolled in quickly, too quickly, tumbling over one another and bleeding into each other until Craig couldn’t tell where one message ended and another began.

“Hello? Can anyone hear us? Is there anyone else out there? We’re in Pawhuska, Oklahoma, America. The tornadoes are getting worse, we’re cut off from everyone, and no one is responding. There is no help from the city or state. Everything is in chaos. Please, if you can hear in the capital, reply to us. Please...”

“...the earthquakes just won’t stop, it’s one after the other, and there’s nothing left. Dear God, there’s nothing left! We can’t reach
anyone. We’re stranded! Is there anyone out there? Please help us!”

“Jeff, this is Mark…I don’t know if you can hear me. I said I’d contact you once I reached Florida. Jeff, it’s gone. Florida is gone, I mean, there’s nothing here. It’s just…gone. Jeff, Florida is gone…”

“And the Lord says, ‘And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and on the earth distress of nations in perplexity because of the roaring of the sea and the waves, people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world. For the powers of the heavens will be shaken.’ Rapture is at hand! Pray for your sins!”

“This is an emergency broadcast announcement for the state of New Jersey. There is an approaching thunderstorm and lightning strikes are imminent. Please stay indoors. This is an emergency broadcast announcement for the state of New Jersey…”

A shiver ran up Craig’s spine. The barrage of voices echoing off the walls and ceiling of the flight deck were a dirge against the backdrop of the fading Earth, and as much as Craig hated to think it, he couldn’t help but feel a little grateful that he was high above in space rather than down there where everything was falling apart.

“And that’s just the United States,” said Aradhna, switching off the overhead speakers. The messages continued at a lower volume. “Europe, Asia, and Africa are worse off. The meteors seem to be hitting there the most.”

“Is this live?” asked Craig.

Aradhna nodded. “They are all live transmissions. We were searching for a signal and every frequency was dead. Then we
switched to basic radio frequencies, and the messages started pouring in.”

Craig sat down in his chair. “Is this what Pierce heard before he put himself into stasis?”

“No, sir,” said Jason, the mission specialist. “There were personal emails and videos uplinked to him from the Main Base as soon as we entered Earth’s vicinity. He went to his cabin to view them privately but did not return.”

“Find the last video he watched and play it,” ordered Craig.

“But, sir, it’s against the privacy terms of agreement—”

“Play it, Jason.”

Jason quietly tapped on his console. Craig’s screen flickered as the video started playing. A woman appeared with a young boy of about thirteen sitting next to her.

“Mom, it’s recording,” said the boy. “Hey, Dad.” He gave a lopsided smile and waved at the camera. The woman followed suit.

“Hi, honey,” the woman said. “I don’t know if this will reach you in time. Actually, I have no idea if any of our videos and emails have been reaching you. Main Base says they have set them to automatically uplink if your shuttle is detected within range, but I guess you’re never close enough, otherwise I’m sure you would have replied,” she smiled sadly.

“The world is ending, Pierce, and I’m so scared. It’s not...it’s not how...I mean, I always thought it’d be like the Ice Age, you know? One big freeze and it’s over. Or maybe even like Pompeii. One second you’re living your day and then the next, time’s up.” She snapped her fingers.
Craig noticed that the boy kept glancing at something to his left while the woman talked.

The woman stared unblinkingly at the camera. “I think I’d rather have something like that. Quick and painless. But this,” she waved one of her hands above her head, “all of this, I can’t handle it, Pierce. It’s…it’s so slow and we can see every second of it. We can see the end approaching, Pierce, and it’s terrifying.

“It’s like when you’re too old and they put you in those homes and you can’t do anything for yourself anymore. You know you’re dying, you can feel yourself dying, and it’s so slow. It’s so goddamn slow and there’s nothing you can do except wait. Just sit and wait for the end because you’re too old and feeble to end things for yourself. But most of all, you’re too scared to end it yourself, so you wait.”

Craig tensed up at the woman’s last sentence. He gripped the arms of his chair, and though he knew the video was prerecorded, he found himself wishing, even praying for something else to happen. Anything but what his gut told him was next.

“I guess in a way it’s good it’s happening this way. I just…I don’t want to be scared anymore, Pierce. I don’t...” the woman’s voice trembled and she stifled a sob.

The boy put his arm around his mother and squeezed before glancing to his left again and tensing up. Something briefly lit the room, getting brighter and brighter. For a second the screen turned a brilliant hot white and Craig could hear a loud roaring
before everything dimmed back to normal. The woman buried her face in her hands and the boy whispered to her and rubbed her shoulder.

The boy spoke. “Dad, we haven’t heard from you in eight years. Neither has Main Base. They said it’s normal, that it’s routine for deep space expeditions like yours, but Dad….” The boy looked at his mom. Her shoulders shook. “Dad, we don’t know what to do. There’s nowhere to go. It’s the same everywhere.”

Both the boy and the woman jerked when a siren blared. “It’s okay,” said the boy to the woman. “I’ll go see how close it is now.”

The woman watched her son leave, then turned back to the camera. There were a few seconds of silence as she stared at nothing in particular. Craig could see the wet streaks her tears had left behind on her cheeks.

“Pierce, where are you? Are you even there anymore? Are you? Or did the cosmos swallow you up?” She blinked and took a deep breath. “They say Florida is sinking, and that in a day or two, it will all be underwater. The government has no resources to evacuate all of us. How can they evacuate an entire state?” She gave a small, derisive laugh. “So I guess we wait, Pierce. We sit and wait.”

There was a booming roar followed by another siren. This time the woman didn’t even flinch. She looked directly at the camera, her stare unwavering and stoic. “I love you, Pierce. If you see this, know that Randy and I love you very much.” Her chin trembled
and she clutched her arms, rocking side to side. Her eyes never left the camera. “We love you.”

The screen went blank.

The flight deck was silent, save for the quiet humming of the computers. There were quick sniffing sounds, and a few of the crewmembers blinked rapidly and brushed the back of their hands against their faces. No one said a word.

Craig cleared his throat. His stomach felt leaden and sticky, like it did when he’d done the flight simulations back on Main Base. He’d hated them, but at least once they were over, so was the feeling.

Looking up, he saw Earth continuing its sluggish descent. It was true—no matter the grand illusions humanity had had about Earth’s end, the reality of the matter was that the planet was dying the same way as most of its inhabitant—a lethargic crawl toward an agonizing end. Limb by limb, the people fell apart until finally their minds flickered off and their bodies shut down, leaving behind a faint outline of what once was.

The crew of the Virgil67 stayed silent, their gaze focused on their planet. What they had once called home and had tried to salvage was now a dark sphere of thundering storm clouds and sinking land mass. Soon it would be reduced to large pieces of rock hurtling through space and colliding with other planets like the very meteors crashing its surface at the moment.

As the crew watched, messages continued filtering through
the CAPCOM until they abruptly stopped and the only sounds on
the flight deck were the buzz of static and the quiet sniffing.
The Music of Ghosts
Katie Kelleher
3Elements Contributors

Glen Armstrong holds an MFA in English from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst and teaches writing at Oakland University in Rochester, Michigan. He also edits a poetry journal called Cruel Garters. His work has appeared in Poetry Northwest, Conduit, and Cloudbank.

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Audra Kerr Brown has work that has been published in Postcard Poems and Prose, Pequin, Sleet Magazine, Robot Melon, and others. She holds a BA in English and Theatre Arts from the University of Iowa and lives with her husband and daughter on a farm in the American Midwest. She can be reached at audrakerrbrown@gmail.com
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Gary Glauber is a poet, fiction writer, teacher, and music journalist. His works have received multiple Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net nominations. In 2013, he took part in *Found Poetry Review*’s Pulitzer Remix Project. He has been widely published. New work is forthcoming in *Fjords Review, Agave Magazine, Ozone Park Journal, JMWW, Stone Voices, Noctua Review, Dirty Chai, Poemeleon, Ginger Piglet, The Gambler, Thin Air Magazine,*

Gail Goepfert has poetry that has appeared in anthologies, print and online journals including Avocet, After Hours, Caesura, Florida English, Uproot Magazine, Homeopathy Today, Jet Fuel Review, Examined Life Journal, and Ardor, among others. Photographs have appeared at Olentangy Review, Blue Hour, and YourDailyPoem. Currently, she serves as associate editor for RHINO magazine out of Evanston, Illinois. She was nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 2013.

Nancy Hathaway has written over a dozen books on topics that include astronomy (The Friendly Guide to the Universe), photography (Native American Portraits), mythology, astrology, and more. Her shorter pieces have been published in periodicals that range from Alimentum and PaperTape Magazine to American Recorder and Self. She lives in New York City, where she teaches creative writing under the auspices of Trinity Church and Poets & Writers. She’s been making collages all her life.

Danielle Hooke-Goodbody is from the Chicago suburbs but has lived in the UK since 2009. She is married to a stonemason and sells tickets at a tourist attraction.

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Katherine Liu is a sophomore at Adlai E. Stevenson High School. Her main academic and extracurricular pursuits include science and creative writing.


Randy Osborne has work that has appeared in *The Lascaux Review*, *Bodega, Identity Theory, Salon, Full Grown People, Verbsap, The Rumpus*, and others. He teaches at Emory University in Atlanta, and is finishing a book of essays.

Tiara Rea works for Savings.com as a Quality Assurance Analyst but remains a poet and writer at heart. Her poetry, essays, and articles have been published in *Symposium: A Journal of Ideas, The Web Hosting Magazine*, and the inaugural issue of *3Elements Review*. She lives in Huntington Beach, CA, with her partner of 10 years and two cats, Pickle and Nagini.

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Due January 1, 2015

Submission due dates are October 31, January 31, April 30, and July 31, for issues forthcoming January 1, April 1, July 1, and October 1, respectively, unless otherwise noted on our website.

There is no minimum word count, but please keep your fiction and nonfiction submissions under 3,500 words. Poems must be under two typed pages.

It is equally important that all three elements given for the specific submission period be included within your story or poem. Artists and photographers are only required to represent one out of the three elements.

For multiple submissions, fiction is capped at no more than two stories per submission period. Poems are limited to five per submission period. In the event your material is accepted in another publication, we request that you withdraw your submission from 3Elements Review should you decide to publish your piece elsewhere.

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Staff - 3Elements Review

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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.

Carol Roh Spaulding is co–author, with Kay Fenton Smith, of Zakery’s Bridge: Children’s Journeys From Around the World to Iowa (2011). A Professor of English at Drake University, Spaulding teaches courses in writing and American literature. She is the author of several award–winning short stories, including a Pushcart Prize, best story of the year in Ploughshares, the Glimmer Train Fiction Open, and the Katherine Anne Porter Prize for Fiction. Her new novel, Helen Button, tells the story of avant–garde writer Gertrude Stein and her life in Central France during World War II. Spaulding is also director of the newly–established Drake University Community Press. The Press produces attractive full–color, illustrated editions serving a community readership while providing students with practical knowledge of book editing and production using a cross–disciplinary and collaborative focus. She lives in Des Moines, IA with her husband, Tim, and son Jonah.
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