

# The Paragon Journal

## A Journal of Creative Arts





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# Ode to Greta Thunberg .... Laura C. Wedorff

Greta of the golden braid thrown  
nonchalantly over one shoulder.

Greta of the serene round face,  
the small smile on meeting Jane Goodall.

Greta of the solar-powered sailing ship,  
of wind and waves, of integrity and honor.

Greta of the literal mind that will not  
comprehend climate change as metaphor.

Greta of the perseverant mind that  
won't let go of one inconvenient and terrible truth.

Greta, whose eyes sometimes slide off their subject,  
who looks head on at the facts and reveres them.

Small Greta, confronting the men in power  
with facts, tears, and a face scrunched-up

in anger and incomprehension that these  
men are not panicking, that these men will

do nothing, that these men would rather make  
money than stop the world from tumbling off the side of a cliff.

Greta Thunberg, lone climate striker,  
sitting on the ground outside her school,  
holding a homemade sign.

Greta, your power has been unleashed, and now  
you are a multitude: shaming us, goading us,  
pulling the world back from the precipice.

# Facts are Facts .... Laura C. Wedorff

Who will be left when the last bit of ice has melted,  
the oceans have risen above the coastal cities, and the  
rivers have overflowed their banks?

Who will be left after droughts claim cattle,  
corn, apples, and coffee beans?

The world is without chocolate and young children.

No tigers burn bright in distant jungles and  
no bees are told of innumerable deaths.  
The bees themselves are dead.

You were warned; you could have done more:  
voted for a different candidate,  
crossed an ocean in a solar-powered sailing ship, or  
exchanged your gas-powered leaf blower for a rake.

The permafrost thaws and unleashes its horrors:  
bodies are claimed by smallpox or anthrax;  
corpses lie in the streets.

Only cockroaches, thin rats, and  
crumbling buildings are left, and  
when the stored methane escapes  
its underground pockets,

and comingles with the atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub>,  
then cockroaches and rats will follow humans  
into oblivion.

Then Earth will become Venus.

Race doesn't matter.  
Religion doesn't matter.  
Whom you love (or don't love) doesn't matter.

What matters is that the human trajectory is toward death.

You were warned; you could have done more.  
Your inaction is beyond comprehension.

Comprehend this: two golden discs  
aboard a small probe hurtle toward the edge

of the galaxy. A message from a long-dead



president, one who ages ago installed solar panels  
on his presidential mansion, explains the past  
to the future:

*This is a present from a small, distant world,  
a token of our sounds, our science, our images,  
our music, our thoughts and our feelings.  
We are attempting to survive our time  
so we may live into yours.*

# On Turning Sixty .... Laura C. Wedorff

The poet's corpus  
is not to her liking. It is with dismay  
that she gazes into the mirror  
at sixty. At the not-so-hale  
outer shell of meaning.

Gold glitters as it  
nestles in the lobe of her ear,  
but it is a tiny, pristine egg  
in a compost heap.

The eyes—still blue.  
The nose—still straight and stalwart.

But the skin on her neck  
droops into small folds,  
like layers of sediment at the  
bottom of a pond.

She has hairs sprouting from her chin,  
like all the wicked stepmothers  
in all the grim fairy tales.

She has varicose veins, excessive weight, a  
nd no breast on her left side.

Her hair is nearly white.

One day she dresses up for work.  
Her daughter stares but does not say,  
*Why are you dressed up, Mom?*

Her daughter says,  
*You look really pretty, Mom.*

Her father, at ninety-three, used to  
read the obituaries every day.  
Her father, at ninety-three, used to say that  
having a birthday was better than the alternative.

Her father was right, of course.

As was her daughter.

# The Gospel of Kaylee ... Matthew Wallace

Lois blinked, trying to shield her eyes without touching her makeup. The overhead lights were so bright that light pushed into every corner of the soundstage, chasing away every shadow, eliminating darkness. Lois had never felt so exposed, so raw.

Lois shifted on the too-small chair and tried to stay motionless, worried that she might dislodge the microphone that had been snaked up under her dress, worrying that she would look fat on the camera, worrying that sweat would bead up and ruin the makeup they had layered on her face. But most of all, she worried that she would not tell the truth about her Kaylee and Jesus.

The famous hostess leaned in and touched Lois's dress right above the knee. Lois felt her knee trembling beneath the host's warm, coffee-colored hand. "It's okay, you won't even know the camera is there." Too soon, the hand retreated.

"I'm scared," Lois said.

The host looked away, motioning. "It'll be fine, honey."

Lois hooked on the host's Southern accent. It was the only thing familiar in this strange place. Ever since she got on the plane in Birmingham, nothing felt familiar. Lois had never seen a private jet before. And heaven knows her friends might be whispering about her putting on airs. Flying on a private jet, that would cluck a few tongues. But she was on Kaylee's mission now. And her friends could put that in their pipes and smoke it.

She pinched herself. That was not fair. Her friends—Roberta, Jane, Mary Bell, they would never say anything. No matter what they thought. After Kaylee had been killed—*murdered*, she corrected herself—they had been great. Not a day went by that one of them did not bring over a cake or a casserole or a roast. Every day. Even when Mary Bell had brought over that nasty *Southern Living* dessert made with Dr. Pepper and molasses, Lois had felt grateful. They kept her going, kept her strong. Them and the reverend.

Reverend Crain had been at her side right after the police. Torn to bits by what had happened, it was the reverend who had held her hand as God revealed His purpose. In time, Reverend Crain helped her understand what she had been called to do. This understanding, the divine purpose behind all of this pain, the mission, helped her survive the unbearable. Her brave, beautiful child, taken so young, sent on her way to a greater glory. That truth is what had brought her to this spooky city with its impossibly tall buildings.

But now she felt weak. The hot lights made her sweat. She could feel each bead of sweat coalesce, rolling down her arm, pooling around her dress shields, running down that snaky microphone wire.

The host grabbed her hand. "Lois, are you okay?" And, before she could answer, "Do you need something? Can I get you some water?"

"No, I'm fine," Lois said. In truth, she felt anything but fine. She tried to pull up the image of Kaylee and failed. Her knees trembled, and she felt her lips start to quiver. The harder she tried, the more panicked she felt. Suddenly, even her daughter's name was lost to her. Lois started to stand.

She felt her host's delicate hand on her shoulder. "Honey, sit tight, water is on its way."

"But I can't even remember her name and she will never forgive me."

The host, pleasant and round-faced, appeared in front of her. "Honey, Kaylee knows how hard you are trying. Kaylee is very, very proud of you. She is smiling, even now."

Reassured, Lois found her footing; even better, she felt inspired. She was here to do the most important thing in the world. She was here to spread the Gospel of Kaylee.

Then, as if by magic, the reverend appeared before her. "Look who I have," the host said.

Pastor Crain leaned in, his worn hand gripping her shoulder, a gesture of compassion, a gesture of control. "Lois, I have come to help. You okay?"

"Yes, Reverend, better. I just got scared, that's all."

"We all feel the Devil, child. You just need to push him out of your mind. He wants to separate you from Kaylee. He wants to hide your heart from you. He wants to take from you your purpose." The reverend spoke in a cadence that made Lois feel at home, the safe feeling that she felt when she ate her favorite food from childhood.

Crouching down, the reverend placed his hand on Lois's knee. "Lois, I'm here for you," he said.

Lois gestured at the overhead lights.

Reverend Crain shook his head. His white hair glinting silver in the lights. "Don't worry about those lights, you will be fine. The heat you feel is Kaylee gazing down from above."

Lois tried to breathe. In the long, dark days after the shooting, it was her reverend who had saved her. He showed her how this unbelievable lump of pain had divine purpose. The day after, with the media surrounding her house, the reverend had pushed his way through with breakfast and fresh coffee. She had opened the door for him and no one else. That afternoon, he had held her arm almost painfully, keeping her upright when she faced the flash of television cameras and the forest of microphones, holding her, guiding her.

The reverend squeezed her knee. "How's Earl?"

Lois answered, trying to explain how broken he seemed. Trying to protect him and ignore how hard it was for her to be so alone. How Earl barely spoke, a robot who went from home to work and back. He ate with mechanical motions. His eyes fixed on the before. "Oh, Reverend," was all she managed.

The reverend squeezed her knee again. "Just stay on message," he said.

"I will," she said.

"That is why you are my steel magnolia." He smiled, the bright-white teeth reflecting those hot overhead lights. "We are counting on you; Kaylee is counting on you. You are her speaker. Through you, people will learn of Kaylee and her sacrifice. They will hear of Satan's inability to sway your child away from God. How she faced Satan and did not bow, did not cower, but stood with her Lord. Can I hear an 'amen'?"

Lois managed a faint "amen," and caught the reverend's nod. "Thank you, sister," he said.

The reverend pulled his hand away. "I have to go check on things, will you be okay?"

She heard his footfalls before she managed an answer.

Lois was alone in a circle of light. Her face itched. Lois had to will her hands to be still, wanting to scratch her face where the makeup felt thick and heavy. Lois clasped her hands together, as tight as possible, squeezing until they hurt, as if the tightness of the grip would strangle the insistent desire. Just like her mom had taught her in Sunday school in Mars Hill.

Lois felt alone for a long time. Just as the fear bubbled up to burst again, she felt the friendly hand of the makeup artist.

"It is almost ready for showtime, dear," the angular, narrow face said. Lois felt herself smile.

"What a great smile," he said. Lois smiled, pleased.

Lois felt warmed by this nice man's attention. She liked him, even though she knew he was gay. All these New York gays were, how did Earl say it, "light in the loafers."

But in that moment, Lois didn't care what Earl, the reverend, or the girls would say. It was this man's kindness that had gotten her through the endless time in the makeup chair, and but for him, she would have run screaming back to the airport.

The man leaned in and touched her face with a sponge. He had the lightest touch. No man, certainly not Earl, had ever been so gentle with her.

He smiled. "Kaylee would be proud of you, darling," he said.

Lois straightened, pushing down the wrinkles in her dress. Scared or not, she had to do this for her daughter.

The famous hostess walked toward her. The makeup artist finished with a single delicate touch.

"Showtime," she said.

\* \* \*

Amanda was pretending to study her biology notes when the fire alarm went off. She looked around to gather her things. Before she could close her notebook, that prissy teaching assistant ran, screaming, into the library. "They are shooting everyone," she said.

*What?!* Amanda struggled to understand the teacher's words. The TA's white blouse had a fast-growing red flower spreading across her stomach. As if she were an actor from a bad Lifetime film, she slipped to her

knees, opening her mouth, finally pitching forward onto her face, making a wet *crunch* sound. Amanda heard a distant *pop, pop, pop* from the hallway.

“Under the desks, everyone under the desks,” someone said.

Amanda looked at Kaylee. She sat still, looking at nothing, gripping her copy of *Macbeth*. Her hands twisting the paperback into a tight white cylinder. The pen cap of a yellow highlighter rattling, forgotten on the desk.

“Kaylee,” Amanda said. “Get down.”

Amanda crouched behind the table, pulling chairs by the legs, making a child’s fort, hiding. She looked over at Kaylee, who was peeking between the chairs. “What are we hiding from?” Kaylee said.

The fire alarm stopped.

“I don’t know,” Amanda said. The teaching assistant lay facedown on the floor; the red stain on her back had a dark-black center. *Wow, a tie-dye*, Amanda thought.

The library doors smashed open, echoing in the odd silence. Then, from the hall, “Okay, who’s next?”

Amanda pushed herself down, next to Kaylee. Peeking between the chair legs, she could only see two sets of feet. A pair of perfectly polished work boots and a set of footies like a ninja costume from one of those fighting games her brother played.

A high, crackling voice spoke from outside the library. “Don’t worry. Everybody gets a turn.”

The door to the library smashed against the wall again. “Boy, I hate this fucking place,” the cracking voice said. Peeking between the chairs, Amanda saw a familiar face, confusing because he carried a sawed-off shotgun. Amanda knew him. He was Gavin Edwards. He worked at The Krystal. She recalled seeing his awkward picture on a plaque: September Employee of the Month.

Amanda watched as Gavin looked at a boy crouched underneath another table. “Don’t worry about those penalty laps,” he said, raising his shotgun. “Me and old Bessy have been cleaning the halls with your coach.”

The boy waved the shotgun around the room. Gavin spoke in a normal tone, just enough to be heard.

“Don’t worry about your gym grade, Doug. I gotcha covered.”

Amanda watched as Gavin pushed the shotgun under the edge of the table. Scared, she looked away just as Gavin pulled the trigger.

The *boom* echoed through the library, squeezing the air out of the room.

Kaylee squeezed Amanda’s hand impossibly hard. A moment later, Amanda smelled a stench like when her dog piddled. She did not need to look over to know that Kaylee had peed her pants.

Amanda focused on where the killers were. She felt incredibly alive, amped, tuned to every sound. She could see the two sets of feet, one in those stupid ninja footies, facing each other. The two kids talking in hushed tones. They laughed and walked out of the room.

The room exhaled. No one moved, peering around for the killers, but finding only each other’s scared eyes. Kaylee crying, trying to stifle the sound. Amanda caught herself staring at the growing dark puddle around the dead TA.

Amanda’s back ached, but she was frozen to her place under the table. She started when someone grabbed her leg, rearing up so hard her head knocked against the table. The dull *thump* that echoed through the library.

Her friend Dillon pushed his face in close, mouthing, *Sorry*. His face stark white, streaked with tears. His face covered with a fine spray of red dots. He stayed close, keeping his head under the table, opening his mouth as if he wanted to say something.

The swinging doors smashed open again. “We’re back, boys and girls. The Killer Gs are back.”

Amanda recognized the voice as Garrett something. In the ninth grade, she remembered flirting with him until he stumbled through a stilted movie date invite. Then she laughed. He was friends with Gavin. They were always talking about some online shooting games.

Amanda heard, or believed she heard Kaylee say, “Oh, no.”

Dillon grabbed her hand and squeezed hard. Amanda hunched down, trying to see the killers, but only saw the flash of boots and ninja shoes. The work boots thumped off and the library door crashed again.

Sharp *pops* started echoing from down the hall. Gavin spoke loudly. “Don’t worry, kids. Principals are a dime a dozen.”

Amanda jumped as a shotgun went off a few feet away.

“Wow,” said one of the killers. “That boy shit himself when I shot him, so much for the clean underwear rule.”

The two killers laughed, a laugh that sounded both forced and fake. Amanda felt frozen in place. She could feel her bones grind in her hand as Dillon squeezed and squeezed.

The boots and the ninja feet appeared right in front of the table where she and Dillon and Kaylee were hiding.

“Well, we don’t need this.” Gavin yanked the chair away, flinging it behind him. Amanda felt her hand ache from Dillon’s grip, smelled the piss, and thought about her little dog, Shelby.

Then one of the boys—*killers*, she corrected herself—slapped the tabletop.

“Okay, who gets it?” Garrett said, peeking under the table. “Hey, where is the ammo bag?”

“What the fuck?” Gavin said. “I’m your lackey?”

“Go check,” Garrett said. “I got business here.” Garrett squatted on the balls of his feet.

He peeked under the table, wagging his shotgun between Amanda and Kaylee. “Wow, who pissed here?” Garrett smiled, looking at Kaylee. “Nice bracelet.” Kaylee’s hand shot out, covering her rubber WWJD bracelet, whimpering.

Kaylee crying. “I just want to go home. Can I go home?”

Garrett stared at Amanda, one hand gripping on the table above him. “I know you,” he said. “You pretended to like me in order to make fun of me.”

Amanda teared up, fighting to keep her breath even. She was going to be killed for a cruel joke she’d played in the ninth grade.

His eyes softened. “That was pretty mean, but I got over it,” he said. “You just helped prove to me that the world is full of assholes. People suck.”

Amanda felt his breath come and go in ragged, uneven gasps. She was going to die, right now.

Garrett shrugged and stood up. Amanda noticed everything: Dillon’s hard squeeze of her hand, Kaylee’s silent, mouthed prayer, the slow *click* of the library clock. She closed her eyes, trying to blink away her tears.

The next thing she knew, Amanda saw the giant, open barrels of a shotgun poke underneath the table edge.

“Peek-a-boo,” the killer said.

The barrel of the shotgun pushed under the edge of the table. Kaylee’s eyes went wide, and then her face exploded in the flash of the shotgun.

Amanda was covered with a hot mixture of blood, brains, bits of skull, and hair. Amanda vomited all over herself.

“Wow! How cool is that?” Garrett said.

The work boots thumped over. “Man, what a mess,” he said.

Amanda did not look up; she continued to wretch uncontrollably.

“Let’s go shoot at the cops,” one of the killers said.

The boys’ feet left. Amanda shook, wiping at her face, crying, trying not to vomit again.

\* \* \*

Hooters seemed like a safe refuge to Ric. The reporter had just tucked the recorder and his notes from his interview with Amanda Cummings into the messenger bag, taking care to close the flap when the kids from the “She Said Yes” rally piled in. After spending the last four hours at the rally with these folks, Ric assumed that alcohol and nearly naked women would provide insulation from the Super Christians. But no luck. He hunkered down behind his beer, willing himself invisible.

It took less than a minute for the youth pastor—something Crain—to make a beeline for Ric. The pastor dressed in a perfect white shirt, so white you needed to squint. The only break in the blinding whiteness was a

scarlet ribbon, “She Said Yes” logo emblazoned on the breast.

“Nice to see the press taking a breather,” the pastor said. “You must be tired from taking all those notes and taking all those pictures.”

Ric lifted his beer and offered a weak smile.

The pastor rested his forearms on Ric’s high-top. The reverend’s smile submerged, leaving only white teeth. He leaned in toward Ric, nudging Ric’s beer to the side, a look of disgust passing as quickly as a snowflake on a hot stove.

“You must understand,” he said. “Kaylee will take her place in the martyrs’ hall of fame.” Arms bulging against the golf shirt, eyes fixed, the pastor was so close that Ric could smell the Ivory soap. “We’re going to make sure of it.”

Knowing better, Ric still could not avoid taking the bait. “Pastor Crain, I’m sure you have heard that your published reports don’t agree with the statements taken down by the police on the scene.”

Shoving Ric’s beer farther away, the pastor traced patterns in the water trail left by the glass, composing himself. “Have you seen the statements, Mr. Cortez?”

“No, sir,” Ric said. Surprised that the pastor knew his last name.

“Well then, it is just hearsay. And we both know what that means,” the pastor said.

“Reverend, I spoke to students and parents and officers. I interviewed the first officer on the scene. He did not tell me the names of the witnesses, but he seemed pretty clear that Kaylee’s story is apocryphal.”

“Satan hides the truth. Don’t you understand that?” The pastor raised his finger before Ric could speak. “What happened to young Kaylee is nothing short of miraculous. For a young girl to face Satan and not flinch. She looked down the barrel of that shogun, and watched that Satan spawn pull the trigger. She refused to deny Christ. She is a martyr, just like John the Baptist. She looked Satan in the eyes, took on Satan, and happily joined her Lord Jesus Christ. Some interview with a patrolman will not change that.”

Looking around, Ric realized that he had become the center of a crowd. A few too many to be chance, and a few too clean-cut to be friendly.

One of the young men, his sleeve concealing the top half of an ornate cross tattoo, leaned into Ric’s space. “Pastor Crain, is this guy bothering you?”

“No, James. Thank you. We’re simply having a friendly chat about the school shooting.”

“Kaylee is my hero,” James said. The young man’s words came out an even, almost robotic tone.

“Hero?” The words and tone slipped out before Ric considered.

James punched Ric’s arm with his three middle fingers extended like a spear point. “Shouldn’t you say heroine?” James said.

“Ouch!” Ric’s hand covered his bicep.

The pastor raised a finger. “Hang on there, James. I think Ric here understands how things are.”

Rubbing his arm, Ric glared at the pastor. “I am only looking for the truth,” Ric said, forcing the words out one at a time.

The pastor smiled and spoke low, as if protecting a fresh kill from poaching hyenas. “Ric, the truth is important. I’m trying to pack as many people on the ark as possible.” He made a vague circle with his finger. “But understand this, these boys are highly agitated. My father, Reverend Crain, assured them that Kaylee will be the first sanctified Protestant martyr since the sixteenth century. I wouldn’t be one to challenge the will of God, would you?” The pastor smiled as he slapped Ric on the arm, in the exact spot where he had been poked.

Ric looked at the pastor, trying to keep his face blank. “You need to understand about Kaylee,” the pastor said. His volume elevated, speaking to a crowd. “Kaylee was a regular girl. She worked on her Bible verses, worried if she would find the right boy to take her to prom, and went to church, all of that. Then Satan took over. When Kaylee’s parents came to Reverend Crain, they thought all was lost. Kaylee, you understand, had become what they call a Goth: obsessed with vampires, drinking blood, and enjoying all the seductions of the devil. Of course, the reverend understood what needed to be done. He told Lois and Earl to remove her door, school her at home, and keep her protected from the influences of evil.

“They struggled for Kaylee’s soul; Satan on one hand, and Kaylee’s parents on the other. Kaylee fought, hurt herself, and denied God. She cut herself with razors; she locked herself in the bathroom and bashed her

against the sink until she bled. This woman was owned by Satan himself.”

Ric felt the young preacher break into a cadence and pace that he remembered from his childhood. The escalating volume and the familiar repetitions were things Ric recalled from too many days in the Chautauqua tent. Once Ric had been one of those eager youths who reacted to the meter and structure of the pastor’s speech, absorbing the emotion and the words.

Ric despised the world of the tent revival. He lost God the day he stepped on a rusty nail and his mother disdained doctors, praying the entire night to prevent lockjaw, calling on the Lord to stop disease.

At eight, Ric only had an imaginative child’s understanding of lockjaw. Even now, he recalled the terror of waiting in the dark, mother chanting, silence, waiting for his jaw to slowly tighten and then close for good, never to reopen. To die of starvation, his jaw permanently fused shut so that they would have to break a hole in his teeth with a clawhammer to feed him. That is what Ric thought about religion.

Ric’s back stiffened and he pushed himself up. He met the pastor’s gaze straight-on. “Pastor, with respect, there is simply no way that your view of what happened matches up.”

The pastor smiled his sharp, pearly white. “Ric...Ric.” His head moved slowly back and forth. “You are standing in front of a tidal wave. The ‘She Said Yes’ tour has already booked shows in all fifty states. Just last week Kaylee’s mother, Lois, was anointed by the most popular television entertainer in the world. The website the reverend built gets over a million hits a month. The truth will come out; God’s work will be done. Kaylee will ascend.”

Ric heard one of the preppy boys mutter an “amen.”

Suddenly, someone fell hard against Ric’s back. Ric heard the splash of glass on the floor and beer poured down Ric’s back, soaking him from his collar to his underwear.

“Damn,” one of the boys said. “I’m so sorry, Pastor.”

“No problem, Bart,” the pastor said.

Ric started to stand and felt strong arms push him back on his seat. “Don’t worry. We’ll take care of you. Boys, get this man a towel.”

Ric looked at the pastor, who offered a pastoral smile, devoid of warmth.

“I’m so sorry, Pastor. I went to buy our friend a beer and stumbled. It was an accident.”

Ric did not move; his eyes never left the pastor’s, even when he heard the schoolboys snicker in triplicate. Ric felt scared, more scared than he did interviewing people in Cracktown. It was time to escape the Chautauqua tent.

“Oh! Damn,” one of the young men said. Beefy arms lifted his messenger bag, its flap open, beer pouring from its seams.

“Don’t worry,” the pastor said. “We will take care of this mess.”

Someone lifted the bag, dumping its contents onto the table. A soggy mess spilled out: an iPod, a couple of flip-top notebooks (the expensive, narrow Moleskines), a collection of beer-soaked scraps of paper, and several pens. Finally, the tape recorder fell on top of this pile, beer leaking from it.

“Shit,” Ric said.

“Wow!” James or John said. “Most of the beer must have poured inside. What bad luck!”

Ric pushed away as the beer ran to the edge of the table and dripped to the ground.

“I hope your newspaper can replace those things,” the pastor said, smiling.

As if on cue, one of the bright-white shirts brought a trash can from the back, and with a single, deft motion, swept the beer-soaked contents of Ric’s bag into a trash can full of half-eaten food and broken beer bottles.

Ric’s face burned. He had backups of some of the notes, but only some. Three months’ work had been reduced to a pool of spilled beer and broken glass.

Ric grabbed the dripping bag and held it up. “I always close my bag. I never leave the flap open. Never.”

“Well, this one time, you must have. I’m sorry, Ric. I’m truly sorry. Maybe the boys can help you back to the hotel?” The pastor said. “I’m sure one of my flock can escort you.”



# The Bearded Giant .... Ryann Roberts

In the town where I grew up, there were acres and acres of vacant land. Some of the lands had been cleared, leaving wide-open expanses, providing the high schoolers with a perfect playground to drink beer and make bad decisions. Other parts were deeply forested--trees so dense you would struggle to find your way through--always eager to see the light trickling in from the edges, the first indication that you had almost completed your journey, awash with the knowledge that you were closer to the clearing and closer to the beer.

Some of the older guys, around my brothers' age, use to tell us a story about a huge sinkhole that occupied space in one of these large clearings. According to legend, no one knew exactly where it was, but everyone was certain it existed. An infinite abyss, sucking up all of the darkness, just waiting to pull you into its depths. There was no warning that you were approaching it. No wall or fences wrapped around its exterior, indicating danger. Just a giant hole in the ground, waiting to gobble up unsuspecting passersby.

On nights when the clouds were thick and moonlight elusive, the older guys would send the younger ones out to run around the clearing. I think they liked the excitement of having us run wildly, not knowing if our next step would be the last. Would this be the night that someone finally stumbled upon the sinkhole? Falling, falling, forever falling to the center of the earth.

This is how I died, or perhaps, this is how I was reborn. It's so hard to tell the difference. It wasn't the sinkhole that swallowed me up, but instead, it was an old revolver I had bought off a friend's dad. A revolver, loaded with a bullet in every other chamber--dark and light, the dense lead that could blow your brains out, or nothing at all.

The years passed, but I still tried to recreate the feeling I would have as I would blindly run through the open clearing. That almost paralyzing sense of not having control, not knowing from moment to moment whether or not I was going to continue to exist. That feeling sent a flood of adrenaline through my veins--the fear of death made me feel alive.

Many nights I would sit in the dark, spinning the chamber of the revolver. Would this be the time the chamber would stop its wild spin and land on a bullet? Was this the moment it would all be over? Would I finally be sucked into the great abyss?

By the time I was a high school senior, I had earned the nickname "Bearded Giant". I was tall and broad of shoulder, big hands, and even bigger feet. A thick reddish-blond beard covered the lower half of my face, a feature that the other baby faced seventeen-year-olds were supremely jealous of. The way I moved through my environment could only be described as "lumbering".

I lumbered my way through the school year, a notebook always stuffed into the pocket of my faded army jacket, nestled up to the pack of cigarettes that my manly beard helped me to buy, even though I was underage.

I liked to write. My mom was a writer, a military journalist. She joined the Army with the notion that she could give a voice to her brothers and sisters in arms. She eagerly accepted the responsibility of delivering difficult and often disturbing facts without losing sight of the successes. She took great pride in her job of "Keeping the troops informed, but also entertained." My writing was more creative. There was no way I was going to focus any extra energy documenting the shit things that were happening in the real world. No, a world of my creation served me better.

Sometimes, when I would let my mom read some of my work, I would watch as her eyes would fill with tears and she would quietly look up at me and say, "You're an artist, Jamie." I still don't know if her tears were those of pride or sadness. Did she have some premonition of the struggle I had ahead of me? It's so hard to tell the difference.

When I was younger, I had experienced glimpses of what an artist's path might entail. My suspicions were later proven to be correct. I discovered that an artist is lonely, an outsider in society, an outsider looking in, seeing a clearer picture of life that the nonartist is content just to live. My world was a constant movie where I observed all of the collective issues humans struggle with. This only made me retreat deeper into myself and my stories.

When it came to who my dad was, your guess is as good as mine. My mom never talked about him and I have no memories of anyone who ever acted like a father towards me. My brother didn't either, so we thought it was safe to assume he had never been around. This didn't stop us from imagining who he might be though.

When we were young we used to make up stories about who he was.

"I bet he was a pilot who flew fighter jets", my brother would excitedly say.

"Nah, I bet he was an army surgeon, reattaching arms and legs, bandaging skulls and sewing torn flesh back together again." I would counter.

"No way! An air force fighter pilot." My brother typically got the last word.

One of the favorite fantasies that we could both agree on was that he was a billionaire having made a fortune in "technology." We had no idea what we meant by technology, but it sounded fancy. One day, he would come and find us and we would all move to his huge mansion on his private island and spend our days rolling around in our new found fortune. Mom wouldn't have to hustle getting freelance gigs and our bank account or fridge would never be empty.

There is no question my brother and I have the same biological father. Our looming height, our ruddy cheeks, our reddish-blond hair. We were nearly identical, on the outside anyway. My mom was petite, with olive skin and dark hair, the complete opposite of her "rosy-cheeked boys."

"The billionaire thing that just seems too unrealistic. I bet he was a fighter pilot after all." my brother would finally decide.

I think all of the fantasies about our father being a great hero, a fearless pilot, a soldier, glamorized the military for my brother. He saw war as a flashy game of danger, risk, a place where only the strong survive. The day he turned eighteen, he went down to the military recruitment office located in a suburban plaza between a grocery store and a pet shop. They were looking for a few good men and my brother made sure he was one of them.

At that time the U.S. was in the midst of the Iraq war. My brother joined the air force and was deployed almost immediately. Three years later he was on a fighter jet that crashed somewhere in the Syrian desert--the vast expanses of burning hot sand and heat that constantly teased; shimmering mirages that turned out to be nothing at all.

I saw later, in a report that his jet crashed with such force that they had to dig it out of the sand as they searched for any remains. They never found any. It was as if the sand sucked him up, pulled him into its hot, sandy belly until he ceased to exist. He too had fallen into the sinkhole. I just hope that in his final moments he didn't know that the barrel of his gun had landed on a bullet right before he had to pull the trigger. I read in the report, "No remains were found, however, it's safe to assume that both airmen are deceased. The absence of evidence is not evidence of absence." Think about that for a while.

My mom lost it. She blamed herself.

"Jamie", she sobbed, "I should have never joined the army. I should have never told you boys' stories. I made it sound too exciting. I should have known. Goddammit, if I had known, he would have never wanted to enlist."

I sat quietly amongst her angry, guilty sobs and wondered how often a person is confronted with the consequence of a decision made twenty-five years ago?

I retreated inward, my only solace found at the bottom of a bottle or a baggie handed off in a dark alley.

My days were spent in a haze, my nights spent on the bathroom floor, my cheek pressed against the cold

tile. The coolness of it gave me something to focus on instead of the constant barrage of threats I often found myself throwing out into the universe. I remember one night in particular, the night that a glimpse of a star through the dusty skylight inspired me to peel myself from the floor and venture outside.

I walked to a nearby park and found the closest park bench. As I sat, I could feel the coolness of the bench seeping through my jeans. The same coolness I often used as a distraction. There were clouds overhead, backlit by the universe. I watched as the clouds float by quickly, morphing into different shapes with ease, never the same for very long, always changing. I remember turning my neck, my head lolling to the side as if my body simply couldn't hold it up anymore. I saw twinkling lights slowly emerging from a dark path. "Is this it?" I thought to myself, "Angels come to help after all?" Nope. Just an old man, hunched over with a slight curve to his spine. He shuffled forward and I see that the twinkling, the heavenly beacons of light, are reflective strips sewn onto the shoulders of his oversized windbreaker. I didn't care. I'd take it. Who are we to decide what form our angels come in?

"Anything you need?" the man asks me.

Aha! Here it is, the moment I'd been waiting for, my savior had arrived. "Help me! Fix me! Save me!" these words screamed in my head yet they had no voice.

"No, I'm good." Those were the only words I gave a voice.

"Well, maybe I can just sit with you for a bit." I didn't respond as he sat down. "I've been real sick man, cancer. Thought I was going to die there for a while. I had even come to terms with it, said my goodbyes and shit. But, look here! I'm still around, heart thumping away, still living.

I still didn't respond.

"Cancer man, the best thing that happened to me. I'm no longer afraid to die. You know what I realized? Every breath, every moment is a death. It's the end of your life as who you were, the start of something new."

"Oh yeah? I muttered "Yeah man. Best advice I can give you, die a lot. Die all the time. Die with each moment. That's the whole purpose of life. You can't forget to die, man, it's how you keep living."

I woke up to birds chirping. The sun was just beginning to rise and the sky was filled with pale pink light. A new day had come. I pulled myself from my makeshift bed, feeling the imprint of the wood in my cheek, proof that I slept all night with my face pressed against the park bench. I remembered the man, remembered our conversation, but still couldn't decide if it was real or just a dream. It's so hard to tell the difference.

Shortly after that, I moved to California. How could anyone feel dark when they were constantly bombarded with sunshine? Plus, I figured that if the sunshine didn't help I could just walk straight into the ocean and never turn back.

I enrolled in a community college, it seemed like the "normal" thing to do. I took classes in creative writing. This provided me a way to spend most of my life in the world that I created as opposed to the one I was born into. I diligently went to lectures and after school poetry readings. I even read some of my work aloud to my peers in dark coffee shops that were filled with cigarette smoke. I became a known entity on campus--the tall guy, lumbering around town with a faded army jacket and an impressive beard. My pen name was "Bearded Giant."

I lived in a tiny studio apartment where the rent was cheap and the walls were thin. My neighbor and I struck up a friendship as we smoked outside on our adjoining, cramped balcony. Our apartments were such dumps, I don't know why we just didn't smoke our substances inside, in privacy. Maybe there was one tiny ember left, a little fleck of light that we were too scared to extinguish, not knowing if we would ever get it back? Maybe smoking drugs with a buddy made the whole situation seem less pathetic? At least we weren't alone.

When I would get really low, I would pull out the gun that I had bought off my friend's dad. I would load the chamber, sometimes just one bullet, sometimes one in every other chamber. I would give it a spin, hold it to my head and do nothing. The knowledge that I could pull the trigger if I wanted was enough, I didn't have to actually do it. I would toss the gun on the coffee table and fall into a peaceful, exhausted sleep.

I had seen my neighbor eyeing the gun one morning when he ran into my house to get a lighter. He never mentioned it and I never said anything. There were limits to the failings we were willing to expose.

One night, he had some friends visiting from London. I heard them all out on the balcony and my neighbor yelled, "Hey Jim! Pull that gun out, would you? The guys have never seen a real gun up close!" Already

pretty drunk, I went to the closet and pulled the revolver from its box on the top shelf. I checked the cylinder, emptied the bullets and tossed them on the coffee table.

The guys' ohhh and aww over it, nobody wanted to touch it, fearing the responsibility that comes from life and death. I tossed it over on the coffee table and joined them for a night of partying.

We came home late, or maybe it's early, it's so hard to tell the difference. Some of the guys crashed on my bed while the rest continued smoking on the balcony. I told them the story of the sinkhole, how my brother and his friends used to make us run blindly not knowing what was coming and the exhilaration I felt from it. I told them how my brother's plane crashed in Iraq and how the sands swallowed up his remains turning him to nothing.

I heard snores behind me, but I continued to sit on the corner of my bed, holding the gun, absentmindedly loading bullets in the chamber. A bullet here, nothing there, a bullet here, and on and on it went until the coffee table was clear. I thought back to the mythical sinkhole and tried to determine why it held such a perverse fascination for me. I think what intrigued me, no, what scared me the most, was the permanency of it. One minute you're here, the next you're swallowed up into the great unknown.

I thought about my losses, my failures, my uphill crawlings. Three words echoed in my head. Nothing is permanent. I cocked the revolver, put it to my head and for the first time I pulled the trigger. As the hammer hit the cylinder, I took my first breath, and with it, I saw a tiny spark of light.

# WifWolf .... James Roderick Burns

FOR NIGH-ON THIRTY years, her monthly time had coincided with the time of the moon. She noticed after she turned fourteen; by fifteen it was regular as the tides. Along came heaviness, cramps, and behold – the moon lay fat and contented in the window. It shone down equally on Agnes and her six sisters (as well as the other sheep slumbering beneath the scattered thatch of the village) but on her alone it appeared to work its curious magic. As the moon lifted between the trees she was drawn to the latch and the dark yard, where without the least pain she transformed into a sleek, relentless instrument of death.

The first times were not planned. She sprang onto all fours and nosed round the yard, plunging her snout into its criss-crossing scents, locating the trail of a stoat and following it down the hillside. Without thinking she tore it open like a miller gutting a sack of grain. The following night she halved a cow in a single, graceful swipe.

Increasingly, she found her own senses mingling headily with those of the animal. She roamed to the crossroads, saw the man before she smelled him: a twitchy, reeking weasel – the wise man of these parts, she thought – hunched beneath the hand of the gibbet-corpse. He carried a knife, a bag of such interest he failed to hear her paws hurtling across soil. He hadn't time to scream before she splintered his skull with the flashing needles of her teeth.

Waking, she felt the crude hum of lust. She pulled the nearest boy out of the harvest and threw him behind a dry-stone wall, popping his breeches and swallowing him whole.

'Agnes!' he cried out.

'Quiet!'

She shoved his hands inside her blouse and it was good, so good.

Now she awaited the moon as she had for decades. Her useless husband – the third, both his predecessors sunk deep in the farthest reaches of the churchyard – lay snoring away. The children were asleep. Even in her boldest moon-days their smell, much like the gibbet's blowsy stench, did not appeal; she passed them by.

Her limbs felt thick, sweating by the fire and goose-fleshed by the window. Outside all was dark. A cow made its noises; the wind rattled the casement. Only in the topmost fingers of the trees was milky light gathering.

Unable to wait, she stripped away all but her bodice, lifted the sneck. The air was cold and sharp, and her eyes soon grew accustomed: here were the ruts of the yard, the barn and her usual run of fields stretching into the dale. She turned to the moon, raising both hands. Liberating fire raced down her left arm; it exploded into hair and tendons. Her hip cracked, ribs popping like a madman hammering the keyboard. Her leg bulged out with the speed of a waterwheel in flood-waters. She felt claws gripping the earth. But what of the rest? Her right side – her thinking side – remained pale, untransformed. With half a howl she scabbled around, besought the moon with her remaining arm, but the fire it seemed had deserted her. Agnes hobbled to the trough.

A sleek brown crackle of fur encased her from breast to crown, but on the near side one lone blue eye peeped out mournfully, a naked collarbone flowed. She howled, but all that emerged was a rough coughing bark to shame the mangiest village cur. Appalled, she lolloped into the barn and buried herself in a mound of straw.

So much for September. In October things were much the same, though now the fire burned along her right side, failed to touch her feet; like some gammy mutt she limped on one huge limb, whose painted nails barely scratched the earth. The pain and heaviness seemed less, it was true, and treading the very rim of Hell her husband and children smiled a little more than usual. But November brought no change, December a brief lurch towards normal: the flame that altered but did not consume spread like wildfire through her upper limbs, casting aside breasts and belly for a ribcage of dripping iron, but stopped at the shreds of bodice on her waist. For a moment she waited, sure the beast would burst through, but when it did not she stumped away, passed out in a snowpile.

Things went on in fits and starts until the leaves began to drop. The moon rose, and finally it happened: not a twitch, nor the smallest spark in her limbs. She raised her arms - nothing. Turned full-face to the moon, imploring - nothing more. In her heart and the lengths of her thighs she felt the dread weakness of the ordinary.

Agnes crashed into the kitchen.

‘Caleb!’

It took a few moments, but at last his tousled head (and two small visages) appeared at the platform’s edge.

‘Uh – yes, wife?’

‘Get down ’ere!’

The faces disappeared and he came down the ladder, nightgown flapping round his pimpled backside. She ripped it open, threw him naked before the fire, but it was no good – there was more life in the bunch of limp parsnips she’d set aside for the pigs.

‘Get away!’

In the yard it was quiet. The moon’s pitiless clarity picked out trough and barn, log-pile and gleaming axe. For a moment she looked at it, and the house, then collapsed on the low stone bench. For a while she sat. Now and again she flexed her fingers. It came to her with a hitch that perhaps her run was over – no more bounding wild and unfettered over the moor; no more raw triumph as she tore out a throat, forced her snout into a steaming ribcage; no more hot, joyous rain pattering on the ferns.

With an intake of breath it came, too, that there might be some reason for the glorious moon withholding its favours; something near-to-hand, rabbit’s tail nimble but obscure, almost unknowable.

Her eyes widened. Perhaps eating people was *wrong*.

# Morse .... Sarah Todd

The way people look says a lot about them.

You know, the way they wear their Doc Martens or knock back their espresso or fold their arms over their chest as overtly self-righteous bullshit escapes their trembling upper lip.

This is a fact.

Not the beginning.

I'll begin by saying that I always took the 436 to Jones Street.

On the night it was 6:00pm and there was a traffic jam, head lights transforming the bus into an incandescent red void. I had spent that day in the city, preparing for the plan.

There was a hippie wearing a bohemian style dress.

An elder sitting at the front, gripping the pole in front of him.

A punk at the back who reeked of weed. T

hree people on the bus, but it was empty.

For in that very moment there was only one person there as far as I was concerned.

Her.

She got on at Richard Street and sat in the middle of the bus, approximately six seats away from the back.

She had artificial white hair.

Black lipstick.

A pink laced jumper.

Army pants.

Chipped, dark purple nail polish staining her nails.

And the delicate pieces of art on which they sat drummed a rhythm against the bus window. A certain rhythm. It specifically went: di dum dum, dum, dum di, di, dum dum dum dum. She was probably a punk. Or probably one of those hipster girls who maul their bangs in half with the kitchen scissors to make some sort of political statement.

Or probably not.

I could hear the steady beat of the music she was listening to; it was a soft cadence dancing in the frigid night air. And there was something enticing about her collar bone. That gentle curve beneath her pale skin, that framed her slightly tilted neck and disappeared beneath her jumper as her hand shifted on the window frame to drum that same rhythm over and over again.

Di dum dum, dum, dum di, di, dum dum dum dum.

And she was staring at me from the reflection on the window.

Always staring.

Every atom, every lapse of a millisecond, and every lick of cool air brushing through the rusted vents had a way of just standing still. Halting. Ceasing to continue whatever infinitesimal role they were playing in an even more infinitesimal but bigger picture as if to say: "What are you?"

Don't worry.

I swear I was in control.

The hippie got off at Charlotte street.

The elder at Smith.

The punk at Gregorson.

We were alone.

I was shifting in my seat. Drumming my fingers on the pole beside me. Trying to mimic that same rhythm. Di dum dum, dum, dum di, di, dum dum dum dum. And the street lights flashed dimly ahead; sliced through the luminescent red galaxy around me. Around us.

I was in control.

Barely felt it as the bus pulled over to pick up an either drunk or naturally ostentatious kid waiting at

Treon. Barely felt it as she slung her backpack over her shoulder. Rose from her seat. Glided behind the kid. Watched me with big grey eyes, before stepping off the threshold of the bus.

And she was smirking.

At me I think.

That gleaming shadow of the holy dove buried itself in the back of my mind as she walked into that one bar near Treon with the tinted windows, that made people cross to the other footpath when they walked past.

I always thought it was abandoned because the windows were tinted.

But I was still in control.

I

sweat

it.

Barely felt it as we reached the street lights and the street lights flashed green. And the empty highway drained the galaxy of incandescent red lights because the traffic was fleeting ahead, away from the city.

I arrived home at 6:30pm.

Callie had come to pick up her things at 6:10pm. Her Honda Civic was parked on the crumbling visitor lot, right beside the one designated for my flat.

Boxes of clothes stacked beside hangars of fancier clothes stacked beside little dollar store figurines filled the back seat of the beaten down vehicle.

My flat would have been empty were it not for my second-hand couch,

my splintering wooden table,

and my flat-screen television laying solemnly before the peeling cream coloured walls. The first thing I did was grab a beer from the fridge.

The second thing I did was sit on the couch.

The third thing I did was turn on the television.

A musky scent hung in the air; the kind of musky scent that filled a room when the windows were never opened and the curtains were never drawn back.

Callie walked from the bedroom to the living room with a box of photo albums in her hands.

“Ah. Drinking beer and watching television. Nothing’s changed.” She said.

“Can say the same for you.” I said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“The pixie cut and the side fringe will never look good, Cal.”

“Excuse me?”

“Especially with spaghetti straps. And back fat.”

“You’re never going to change.”

“Probably not.”

“This is all your fault.”

“Probably.”

“You’re a goddamn loser. You know that?”

“Kind of.”

“And I bet you’ll be kicked out in the next week without having me here to pay all the bills.”

“I’ll have your gold medal ready by Thursday.”

“You know what? Screw you. I’m coming back to pick up the rest of my things when you’re gone.”

“What? So you can still use your old key but not park in the apartment lot?”

“Leave me alone.”

“Why don’t you get Steven to pick everything else up? Maybe he’ll park in the apartment lot. You know. Just like he parked his big fat—”

She threw down the box.

Albums and albums worth of old family photos spilled onto the unvacuumed floor. On the top there was a photo of me and Callie and her brother’s friend on that one cruise to Fuji.

I was wearing my new polo shirt.



Callie still had a nose ring.

“Keep all this shit. Keep my goddamn towels. I’m done.” Was what she said.

Then she turned away and stormed out of the apartment lot, slamming the front door behind her. I knocked back the rest of my Corona.

I wasn’t upset.

In fact, I was excited because that night was the night of the plan.

So got another Corona and another Corona and I kept watching television until it was 8:30pm and mum called again. Literally for the billionth time since Callie mailed me the papers.

“Hi Tim! How are you, sweetie?”

“Fine.”

“Sorry dear?”

“Dunno.”

“Are you-? Oh no.”

She was quiet for a long time.

“You promised me you would stop.”

“No. I’m just, like, tired and stuff.”

“Um.... alright. Understandable I guess. So, what did you do today?”

“Nothing.”

“Did you at least take your medication?”

“No.”

“Tim. You know what Doctor Chen said.”

So I took my medication. And I took it. And I took it. And I took it. And the dilapidated room around me was spinning by the time I had finished taking it. And my consciousness dissipated into one giant blob. Suddenly I didn’t have to think about mum or the doctor or Callie or the lump sleeping beside her that wasn’t me.

Not that I was in the first place.

I swear I was in control.

Control was part of the plan.

And this was the night of the plan.

I left my backpack at home, by the way.

All I needed was five dollars for the bus ticket.

This 436 was different because below the bright green ‘436’ it said ‘Via. City’ instead of ‘Via. West Cape.’ Other than that, it went on the same highway in the same city with the same miserable bastard behind the wheel. It could have been either 11:00pm or 12:30am, but I wasn’t sure because I couldn’t see properly.

That was okay.

I didn’t need to know the time to complete the plan. On that bus there was an emo couple sitting at the front and an alcoholic passed out on the handicapped seats. Everything was going swimmingly.

Until it wasn’t.

And she was waiting at Treon, outside the bar with the tinted windows. Her white hair was illuminated by the street light. The weird guy standing next to her got on first.

She got on after.

She smelt like cigarettes and whiskey.

“Aren’t you scared?” She said.

“Terrified.” I said.

“The city is crawling with officers on a Friday night. That’s what I meant.”

“But I’m innocent.”

“You’re wasted.”

“I had a few drinks.” She didn’t turn towards me.

“I’m a bartender, dude. I know wasted when I see it.” She said.

“So what are you anyway?” I said.

“Elaborate.”

“Punk? Goth? Millennial Hipster?”

“I’m Jessica. What are you?”

Suddenly, she glanced at me and smiled. I began to tremble. I could feel the sway of the bus beneath my feet as it swerved around a different corner.

“I don’t understand you.” I said.

Her hand shifted to the pole beside her. Drummed a soft rhythm into the night.

Di dum dum, dum, dum di, di, dum dum dum dum.

“I understand you. You’re a man on a mission.” She said.

“I’m going to the bridge.” I said.

“The bridge. Interesting.”

“What’s it to you?”

“I’ve been watching you.”

“I know.”

“What are you gonna do on the bridge?”

“The plan. It’s the plan. I’m in control.”

“Do you like milkshakes?”

I’ve said it before but I will repeat in case you forgot: The way people look says a lot about them. The way they copy an unflattering style from Vouge or smoke Marlboros with their plastic chokers on or bring their designer wallets to the welfare centre.

This is no longer a fact.

I learned this when I took the 436 to the city.

When the couple with the tattoos and piercings got off at Church Street, and the man with the bottle of whiskey got off at William.

We got off at Kings.

Then we got milkshakes, I chocolate and her strawberry. I sipping candidly from the striped straw and her licking foam off the end.

And we drank them beneath the bridge.

And she held me upright the entire time.

And I could feel the world around me moving.

Could feel the city and the wind and every other motion fleeting around me like insects on the skin.

I cried a lot.

But I was okay.

I was okay because she looked at me and she said,

“I know, I know. Trust me.”

# Pretty/Ugly .... Travis Madden

Heather, who hears my call, is not obese by any means. She is not unhealthy. But even so, she never believed herself to be the type who could turn heads like some of her girlfriends. Not like the women in the paintings she sees as she strolls through the museum. When she thinks of me, of the Venus, she thinks of beauty. And when she thinks of beauty, she does not think about having to buy her clothes in places that have words like barn or warehouse in their titles if she wants to feel comfortable in them.

*Comfortable.* Now that's a funny word, she thinks. Not funny like ha-ha priest and a rabbi funny. More like your ex boyfriend being hit by a car funny. The kind of funny you really shouldn't be laughing at, but just can't help. Heather thinks that she could maybe be the chubby best friend of the manic pixie dream girl, if she was funnier.

She wishes she didn't feel this way, wishes she didn't think the bad things she thought about herself. But it was becoming increasingly difficult to believe that her weight was not a direct correlation with her worth when the world told her as much every single day. It came in from every single direction; from movies and music, from television shows and the ads that aired between them, and I know if I reach only one person today, it must be Heather. I concentrate and try to pull her towards me, send out a lure, a song, and Heather moves throughout the museum, on a long and winding road, with me its inevitable end.

On her way, Heather finds a bit of solace in the paintings of Rubenesque women throughout the museum. She walks past Bouguereau's *Nymphs and Satyr*, looks at the wide hips near the center of the painting, and thinks that maybe she would be more attractive if she were born in a different time period, or in a different place, and she feels cheated. She heard somewhere that women who were closer to her size were considered more attractive in African countries, because on the whole they didn't have as much to eat. Being larger was a cultural sign of wealth, that you had enough money, and therefore, enough food, and all that made you more attractive.

But not in this strange land Heather and I find ourselves in.

Heather knows there are some men, of course, who long for women who are built the way she is, who would appreciate those nymphs. She remembers Jason, her last boyfriend, putting his hands on her stomach, feeling the squish of her skin. She had been with enough men to know the difference between hands that felt out of sheer desperation and hands that felt for pleasure; the former, ever-present, the latter, rare. Sometimes, Jason would kiss her upper arms or her thighs. When they made love, he held onto her hips, and even though she knew he meant nothing by it, Heather would always try not to think of the term love handles. Objects have handles. Not people.

Once, in her own house, she asked Jason if he minded if she ate a snack, and she still thinks about how she hates that she asked permission for such a thing. Was there a word to describe the particular feeling of self-loathing she felt then, or how she still feels a smoldering version of it now?

Heather sees her body as a thing that occasionally separates from herself. As something to change, improve, due to what she believes is an obvious imperfection. She hates that when she sits down--or bends over or really did anything except actively suck her belly in--it pours over her crotch. She sees nothing but pale skin. Belly and thighs. She does not see any women in the museum who are painted or sculpted in such a way.

Until she makes it to me. Venus.

I crouch in the center of the room, not dwarfing the rest of the art, and yet I know I am the only thing Heather sees. The figure of beauty in one of the most revered cultures in the world, and she sees that our stomachs are so very similar, both rolling as we crouch. She sees that our hips are quite alike, wide and spacious. And something comes over her, a vulnerable feeling she is not quite sure she is okay with. I am the one standing naked in the middle of the room, but Heather suddenly believes it to be her, and drapes her arms down across her front, stands there awkwardly, like she used to in the girl's locker room.

But she is not alone. Someone else has come to look upon me, answered the call I put forth, and sits next to Heather. He'd stand if he could, but his legs don't hold him up anymore. They haven't for a long time, not since the car accident, and he wheels himself throughout the museum. He'd found pieces that interest him, but, like Heather, nothing that truly speaks to him, nothing that makes him feel seen. There is nothing that draws him in

as I do, as I've drawn in her. There is something about me, some sensation the man in the wheelchair cannot explain, a sense of unity that makes him uncomfortable, yet that he nevertheless needs to engage with.

He rolls up next to Heather and they glance at one another, connected by a strange and unexpected feeling of kinship. They can see it in each others' eyes, that they both feel the same thing about me, about each other, and about themselves. But they do not know exactly what that feeling is yet. They take solace, at least, in one another's confusion, in their unknowing.

They are joined in their gazing by more patrons. A young man who keeps his head constantly hung low, embarrassed at the acne pockmarks on his face. A woman who feels as if she cannot appreciate the art the way it's meant to, partially color-blind as she is. A thin college student who came alone, because none of his lacrosse-player teammates wanted to join him on what they thought of as a waste of a day. Quickly, their numbers total a dozen. Heather gazes at the rest of the onlookers and she knows that these people are experiencing something akin to what is going through her own mind right now.

All the art in the rest of the room is abandoned.

I'm sorry, my friends, but they'll come back to you in a moment. For now, I need them. Or, rather, they need me. I reach out to them, but not physically. I do not move, at least not in any way they can see, but I know they can all feel my presence. Heather--the foremost, the group's sudden and unspoken leader, since she came to me first--wants to take a step back. She is filled with a feeling of fear and anticipation she, again, cannot find a word for, but she does not retreat. I touch her ever so slightly, grazing my fingers against her cheek, my thumb across her lips. My touch is like a light breeze, like something Heather would have hardly noticed had she not been paying attention. But in that touch, I let her know everything she needs to know. Or at least I try. I reach out, and I hope she hears me.

And when I touch her, I touch all of the onlookers, and the unidentifiable feeling in Heather spreads outward, like a campfire's warmth, and the strangers come closer together. Not physically, but they feel a sudden kinship, all drawn here together, all experiencing the same strange thing that, I hope, they will take beyond here, beyond this building, and out into the world.

# Water Everywhere .... Jim Kraus

Mud and a leaking pipe  
under the house...  
From dark to dark,  
water drips, keeping time.

Now, I am in a cave, listening.  
Water again, slowly, then slower,  
then I fall asleep.

When I awake,  
Waves approach.  
Now blue, now white.

Underwater,  
time holds its breath.  
Now I am an eel,  
electric.

# Some Weather .... Jim Kraus

The dancing fetch and fold  
of wind over water, an origin story  
energy from sun and gravity.

Turning 24,000 miles per day,  
each mile a metaphor  
of Earth's spinning self.

Add to this  
the speed of Earth's turning  
orbit around the sun.

And further add  
the seasonal tilt:  
eddies form, then storms.

People notice, draw maps,  
make predictions  
about where the energy might go.

Winds are the messengers of the gods.  
Over time and distance,  
their messages take form.

# About the Artists

Laura C. Wendorff is professor of English, Ethnic Studies, and Women's and Gender Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville. She has been published in several journals, including *After the Pause*, *Bluestem*, *Door Is A Jar*, *Foliage Oak Literary Magazine*, *Ghost City Review*, *Hektoen International*, *Minetta Review*, *The Opiate*, *Poydras Review*, *Sanskrit Literary-Arts Magazine*, *Schuylkill Valley Journal*, *Spillway*, *Temenos*, *THAT Literary Review*, *Two Cities Review*, *Voices de la Luna*, and *Wisconsin Poets Calendar*. Wendorff's essay "Worth The Risk: Writing Poetry About Children With Special Needs" was nominated for a Best of the Net Award and the Pushcart Prize. Laura also enjoys growing flowers, playing the piano, and has been a member of the same book club for over a decade.

Matthew Wallace has attended the Writer's Digest Conference and participated in several writing workshops, including McKee Story, Truby's Writers Studio, and Story Genius. He is the CEO of a small technology company that developed virtual reality training technology. He does a lot of public speaking and is very active in dog rescue. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Forge Journal* and *Menda City Review*.

Ryann Roberts is an emerging writer with only a small scattering of published pieces. You can learn more about them at [ryannroberts.com](http://ryannroberts.com).

James Roderick Burns is the author of three short-form collections, most recently *The Worksongs of the Worms* (2018). His work has appeared in *The Guardian*, *The North*, *The Scotsman* and a range of other publications. He lives in Edinburgh and serves as Deputy Registrar General for Scotland.

Sarah Todd is an English Major from La Trobe University in Melbourne, Australia. She is a striving novelist with dreams of opening her own small bookstore.

Travis Madden is a graduate of Towson University's Professional Writing graduate program. He has been published by *Writer's Digest* as the Grand Prize Winner of their 12th Annual Popular Fiction Awards, as well the Baltimore County Public Library for winning their 2016 Toast Among Ghosts Story Contest. In 2018 he was asked to read his work at the Baltimore Book Festival, was the recipient of the Annual Good Contrivance Fellowship, and received a Silver Honorable Mention from *Galaxy Press* magazine. He currently works as a full-time writer for the mystery-box company *Hunt A Killer*.

Jim Kraus edits *Chaminade Literary Review* and is Professor of English at Chaminade University of Honolulu. His poetry has appeared in *Bamboo Ridge: Journal of Hawai'i Literature and the Arts*, *Kentucky Poetry Review*, *Virginia Quarterly Review* and elsewhere. He enjoys swimming and surfing.