

ASHBELT

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Kaylie Yaceczko
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Amanda Piekarz
NONFICTION EDITOR

LouEllen Ashcraft
NONFICTION READER

Dylan Morris
POETRY EDITOR

Jared Charlson
FICTION EDITOR

Katelynn Broadus
FICTION READER

Dr. Jon Miller
FACULTY EDITOR

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Interior Design: Kaylie Yaceczko

Cover Art: Nadia Alnashar, Student at Myers School of Art

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Dear Reader,

Welcome to the eighth edition of the one and only *AshBelt Journal*.

The pandemic, political tensions, and natural disasters gave us one of the most stressful and heartbreaking years many of us have ever seen in our lifetime. In a time of constant uncertainty, literature and creativity give us comfort and a sense of hope. Thank you for choosing *AshBelt* to bring that to you. Within these pages you will find tales of washable hearts, the power of family, and stuck zippers.

The *AshBelt* staff would like to give a warm and infinite thank you to our faculty advisor, Dr. Jon Miller. From your endless knowledge of literary magazines and guidance every step of the way, we appreciate having you on our team, and we couldn't have done this without you. We would also like to thank Amy Freels for her constant support and assistance with the book design process. To say we would be lost without your help would be an understatement. We would also like to thank *AshBelt's* founder, Eric Wasserman, as this journal would not be possible without you. Thank you for creating an outlet for undergraduates to express their creativity, and we hope this edition is one you can be proud of.

This year's faculty interview was with the one and only Dr. Hillary Nunn. From your insights on Shakespeare to your irreplaceable work with the Literary Guild, this edition wouldn't be possible without you. Thank you for your time and willingness to share your thoughts and experiences over the course of an impressive career, and from a personal note, thank you for guiding me and countless others on our own academic journey.

Once again, we were lucky enough to have the talented Nadia Alnashar design our journal's cover, and we couldn't be happier with it. Thank you, Nadia, for not only capturing *AshBelt* but also the importance of community during these unique times. We could not have asked for better.

A journal is only as good as its staff, and I am extremely proud of mine. To my editors Amanda, Dylan, and Jared and my readers Katelynn and LouEllen, I can't begin to express how much your hard work and help to make this edition possible has meant to me. I appreciate everything you have done to make this happen, and I hope you're as proud of yourselves as I am of you.

Last but never least, to our readers, this past year has brought us all challenges, heartbreak, and loss; however, if you take anything from this year's journal, I hope it's that no matter what life throws at us, it will always get better. We are stronger together.

Without further ado, I present *AshBelt Journal*. Grab your coffee mug and fuzziest blanket because you're in for a treat.

All the love and good vibes,

Kaylie Yaceczko
Editor in Chief

A.Z. VALENTINE

The Worm's Oak

As I lapse between the realms of consciousness and unconsciousness—the latter being objectively far more merciful than the former—it is with the last of my dwindling strength that I record the events that unfolded upon this unhallowed ground. There is no being to have ever sprung from the earth more monstrous, more sanity-blasing, or more ravenous than that of the Worm's Oak. I can only hope against hope that whosoever may stumble upon this wretched dwelling will find these pages, and find it in themselves to destroy the blasphemous abnormality. Cut it down, burn it to ashes, poison its roots - it matters not how the deed is done, only that it is done swiftly. Should one hesitate for too long, or not have the constitution to carry out the act, they will become yet another victim of the Worm's Oak's insatiable hunger.

My grandfather, Alshenha, once a noble and hearty man, came to this forest in search of healing herbs which could not be found elsewhere in the country. He was a medicine-man of great renown, and was frequently visited by the rich and poor alike for his ability, his wisdom, and his kindness. I was but a small boy when he made his first journey into the forest. Upon returning to our village, he told my mother that he was going to build a hut in the forest, thus moving his practice with him. When asked—and believe me, the whole village questioned him—why he was undertaking such a drastic move, he merely smiled and said “the village needs me, but I won't be far. The forest has everything I ever could have needed for my medicines, and then some.” Satisfied, the villagers let it be, and life went on normally for a time.

The first winter after Alshenha left for the forest, he returned to trade some of the medicines he had made, and was greeted with the terrible news that my mother, his only remaining child, had contracted a lethal disease of the lungs. He thrust his medicine pouches at a shopkeeper, and left without gaining anything in return, supplies or coin. He found me at my mother's bedside as I

wiped the sweat gently from her brow, and carefully fed her a bowl of hot chicken soup. He shooed me away when she began to cough, a wretched and painful sound, and told me to return with a cup of boiled water. I gave him the water, and from his satchel he produced a slim, twisted white root. He set it in the cup and ushered me away again, saying I should not risk myself now that he was there, and that I had done a fine job in treating her. Although afraid for my mother's life, I obeyed Alshenha, and went to my room. When I awoke the next morning, my mother was cured.

It was after this terrifying experience that Alshenha asked my mother to allow me to go live with him in the forest, and learn medicine from him. After her miraculous recovery, she wholeheartedly agreed to this proposition. It took nearly a whole day to reach Alshenha's hut; it was built in a modest clearing with a tiny pond, a vegetable garden, and a small outdoor laboratory. However, these humble, familiar sights were put-off from me when I spied a certain tree, growing near the far edge of the clearing, away from Alshenha's home. It stood tall, with a gnarled trunk and bare, twisted branches. Its color was that of oily, spoiled milk. My stomach lurched as I stared at it. Alshenha must have noticed my immediate repulsion towards the tree, for he took me inside the hut, and began teaching me the health benefits of garlic, successfully diverting my attention from it for the time being.

For several years, the time I spent with Alshenha was wonderful. We made weekly trips to the village during the warmer months, and biweekly trips in the winter, so I was never away from my mother for long. I was always astonished by the way she had recovered from her illness; she was the same strong, hardworking, boisterous, and kindhearted woman I had always remembered her to be. She would never let us leave without sharing a couple pints of mead with Alshenha, and giving me a basket of her buttered rolls. All was well, and I had no reason to believe that anything could be amiss. However, every time we returned to the clearing in the forest, I could not help but stop and stare at that hateful tree for a few moments before running into the hut, like I was running away from it. I admit, I *was* running away from it. Even without logical

reason, our minds can perceive danger, and I should have heeded the warning.

It was during my sixteenth year that I developed so much disgust for the tree, I finally screwed up enough courage to confront Alshenha about it. He sighed at this in a sort of defeated manner, and asked me to accompany him at the foot of the outlandish *thing* in his domain. Together, we sat under its hideous branches, and for the first time, I was close enough to it to smell its putrescence. I was immediately overcome with nausea, and vomited. Alshenha patted my back, chuckling softly. He was so used to the smell, it did not faze him in the slightest. It was then that he told me the story of the tree.

“You see, Illio,” he began, stroking his magnificent white beard. “When I found this place, I reacted the same way. I was repulsed, but I was curious enough to snip off a tiny root that was sticking out of the ground. The tree shuddered, and I heard a voice, not from around me, but from inside my own skull. It was so powerful, my whole body vibrated! It said, ‘who dares steal my body?!’ I was petrified, Illio—a massive root had pulled itself out of the ground and snatched me, dangled me in the air! Then, the tree looked at me, actually *looked* at me, through hundreds of eyes—you see those knots on its trunk and branches, no?—and it just stared at me for a few minutes. I couldn’t move, couldn’t speak, I was so afraid. It set me down gently, and returned its root to the earth. It said, ‘you are worthy of my flesh and blood. Go forth and provide my gift of life to those in need.’ The eyes shut, and the tree went silent. I tried talking to it, asking it about itself, but it didn’t reply. So, I kept the piece of root, and went about my business, not going back to it. Then, Malshika got sick, and I happened to have the root with me, and remembered the tree’s words. This tree saved your mother, Illio.”

For a time, I was placated, even grateful to the tree. I no longer hesitated to approach it, and a few times, I thanked it for curing my mother. I admit, I was disappointed to have never gotten a reply from it, but I grew more and more accepting of its presence. Alshenha and I lived in harmony with the tree. We plucked the

weeds from its base, and removed any ivys or morning glory that wound themselves around its great trunk. We planted flowers in a semicircle around it, as Alshenha said he thought the tree might like some vibrant colors in its surroundings, and for a while, I agreed with him. Then, one warm summer morning, I stepped outside to fetch a pail of water from the pond, and when I glanced over to the tree, the flowers surrounding it had grown to be over five feet tall. They glimmered with dewdrops in the early morning light, and swayed slightly to a rhythm all their own - there was no wind that morning. I hastily filled my pail, and returned to the hut, locking the door behind me.

The flowers moving with no wind was only the first, minor sign of trouble. That afternoon, a nobleman from a country far to the East of ours fell off his horse in the clearing. Alshenha and I heard the commotion, and helped him into the hut, laying him on a spare cot. He was feverish and sweating profusely, mumbling something about coming to see a healer. When Alshenha gave the man his name, he nodded vigorously. "Yes!" He exclaimed. "Yes, you're him! Please, cure me!" After a brief examination, my grandfather determined that the man had only a few more hours of life left in him. He exited the hut, returning a couple minutes later with a freshly clipped piece of root from the tree. Like I did for my mother, I boiled a cup of water for this stranger, and gave it to Alshenha to add the root. When the brew was ready, he aided the poor man in swallowing what must have been the most bitter and repulsive drink he had ever passed between his lips.

The nobleman abruptly went to sleep after this, and a few hours later, he awoke, refreshed and reinvigorated, as though no illness had ever touched him in his entire life. The nobleman was so grateful to Alshenha, he dropped to his knees before the old man, held onto his robe and sobbed, thanking him profusely. My grandfather, humble as ever, patted the man's shoulder and sent him on his way with a few of my mother's buttered rolls, and a skin of fresh water, vehemently refusing payment for his services. Touched by Alshenha's generosity, he left us with a promise that, should we ever need anything at all, we need only to send a letter to his estate.

With that, he was gone. Truthfully, I expected never to see him again, but it would be merely a few days until his return.

It was the third night after our encounter with the nobleman, and I had found it impossible to sleep. Taking a lantern and a book, I went to sit by the pond and read until I was ready to try sleeping again. I was only there for maybe fifteen minutes before I heard a rustling in the brush beyond the tree line. Deer regularly passed through the clearing, so I was not immediately worried, but when the sound of footfalls grew closer and louder, I became perturbed. Those footsteps were not of beast, but of man. Abruptly, I turned about where I sat, coming face to face with the nobleman from a few days prior, and knew immediately that something was horribly wrong with him. He hobbled forward, as though propelled by an invisible force. His eyes were glassy and blank, and a thick, white fluid dribbled from between his parted lips. I stood and asked him what was the matter, but he gave no reply, seeming to not notice me at all. As I watched him shuffle pass, I saw that he was heading towards the tree.

I leapt into action, grabbing his arm, attempting to pull him to the hut for my grandfather's help, but he knocked me back, and continued his trek to the tree. Staying a few feet back, I followed him, eyeing the flowers carefully, watching them remain perfectly still despite the cool night breeze. I shuddered then, fearing not only for the nobleman, but for myself. Gathering my courage, I matched his stride, walking right beside him. He reached the base of the tree and lifted his arms to the sky. He threw his head back and shouted something in a language I could not recognize, and moved even closer to the tree. Suddenly, from one of the knots on the trunk, a spike emerged and shot forward, impaling the man's throat. Blood and white liquid splattered from his lips, his glassy eyes rolling back into their sockets. Two large roots lifted themselves up from the dirt and wrapped around his legs.

Sheer terror kept me rooted to the spot. No matter how badly I wished to run away, I could not stop myself from seeing this terrible act to its end. Slowly, the spike from the trunk retracted, and the roots that held the man's legs began dragging him down

into the earth. An awful splintering sound came from his calves, then his thighs, as his legs were broken. He never screamed, not even once. I did not scream, either, I found it impossible. As he sank into the dirt, his flesh began to melt away, first the skin, then the muscle underneath. The liquid meat and blood seeped into the earth, disappearing as the nearby roots began to glow a light red, and pulse like veins. Soon after the flesh was dissolved, the bones chipped and fell away into a fine powder, which scattered in the wind like the ashes of a spent campfire.

The tree then opened its hundreds of eyes, fixing its gaze upon me, keeping me pinned to my position before it. For the first time, it spoke to me, and I felt that rumbling, unearthly voice vibrate deep within my bones. "Fear not, Illio. I take only when I need to, and I take only those who commit great wrongs against their fellow person. You, Malshika, and Alshenha are worthy of my gift. This man, this 'noble,' was a blight to his society, a detriment to his people." It paused, and I felt something wrap around my ankle, momentarily shocking me out of my stupor. I looked down and saw that the tree was holding me there with one of its roots. It spoke again. "Do not doubt me, child, for soon, I will bestow even greater gifts upon the good people of this world. You will see." At that, it fell silent, closing its hundreds of eyes, and let go of me. I sprinted back to the hut and awoke Alshenha in a desperate panic, explaining fervently everything that had happened. To my utter horror and disbelief, the old man simply smiled, and went back to sleep.

The very next morning, chaos ensued. I watched helplessly as, over the course of the day, hundreds of people wandered into the clearing and approached the tree, meeting the same gruesome fate as the nobleman. Some were only partially destroyed, their mangled remains hanging from the tree's spikes, while others were nearly instantly devoured. The tree's roots grew larger, and further from its base. Alshenha stayed by my side, his hand placed firmly upon my shoulder. He looked to me with a withering gaze and said, "It will be my time, soon enough. One cannot take from the Worm's Oak without someday having to pay his due, and for saving my daughter's life, I will gladly give my own." Later that evening, I

watched my grandfather take on the same countenance as the other victims, and shuffle his way over to the tree to meet his end. Then, my mother wandered in, and I could take it no longer.

I quit watching the tree, and opened the books and notebooks which Alshenha had strictly forbidden me from. I had to step away from them after the first few blasphemous discoveries, but inevitably came back to study them a few hours later. These readings, which I will leave by my own written account, should be enough to convince any reader that the Worm's Oak *must* be destroyed at all costs. It devours everything it considers to be rotten or unwanted that takes the healing power from its roots, but it pays no mind to what we, *humans*, think or feel. It may come from the earth, but it is not in any way earthly or wholesome. I have every reason to believe that it has realized that human corruption spreads beyond what it initially found in noblemen, thieves and murderers. I know this because I am an illegitimate child, and it took my mother for her lack of "propriety." And now, it has sought me out, as the spawn of an unsanctioned union.

I lay here, now, in Alshenha's hut, trapped under the weight of the Worm's Oak's ever-sprawling roots. I can feel my life-force fading from me gradually—gradually, for I am not simply allowing the tree to take me and use me for its own purposes. I beg thee, dear reader, destroy this abomination, or all of Earth shall suffer. If allowed to go unhindered, the Worm's Oak will spread its roots to the farthest corners of this world, and devour everyone, for truly, corruption is present in everyone alive, in one form or another. This *thing* from within the bowels of the earth knows no difference between the common petty criminal, the psychotic murderer, those who make poor choices, or those who are born "wrong."

I am weary and tired; I know not how much longer I might have, but it is not long. The roots that have sought me out crush my body, and some have dug themselves into my torso, so as to feed on me slowly. So, dear reader, I must rest, now, and hope against hope that those who find my notes will choose to do the right thing, for all the world, and destroy the Worm's Oak.

ELSA MARIA VEIZIS

Analise and the Machine-Washable Heart

If Analise was light on her toes, Dahlia wouldn't hear a thing. It would be like she wasn't actually doing anything wrong. The business wasn't Dahlia's anyway. Ana knew that the one who had really started it was her own daddy. His picture hung on the wall beside the empty space beside the lobby desk. On white tile, he looked livid. Everything was so white and unbearable they had to be careful when they did the cleaning, or it would stain or speck and Dahlia would have her crouched over on her breaks with bleach and a toothbrush. She knew she only had to work here while she was home, but she missed it when she was gone. Hideous whiteness and all.

So she went into the backroom, where they laid out the wares and kept a light mist going for the humidity, like vegetables in the produce aisle. It blurred out all the colors and veins so that they looked like hard candy from a distance. Ana's hair went at once flat and sticky, a moment's work for the condensation. After water and detergent, the hearts went entirely white, and in previous years, sometimes the name tag washed off as well and they wouldn't know which client it belonged to. This was before Dahlia had bought strong industrial ink to write the tags on. They'd leave it in a wire basket on the front desk beside the register, a Lost and Found of sorts, and some poor fellow would be left without a heart, unless they knew theirs well enough to recognize it. And a lot of people didn't know their heart well enough. Dahlia often had to determine for them, whether a machine-wash or a dry cleaning or a simple scrubbing over the sink was necessary. She had to tell them whether they were suffering from a broken heart or if there was just some leftover dirt. She had to remind them a good heart was no replacement for a good brain. Too many objected to this.

Analise manned the counter. She scrubbed the hearts down until they went white, and sometimes they had to return their venation to their owners. We don't want your veins with your heart, she pointed out without much sympathy. It's written on the window

sign. Please read the window sign. If you want your veins cleaned, go to a surgeon. We aren't surgeons. We haven't even been to school.

Analise could drone instructions and forewarnings as thoughtlessly and as soullessly as a high school teacher. She could hold the hearts in the careful, no-fist grip Dahlia stressed in the instructions pamphlet. The one that didn't strain the ventricles or pull the aorta loose. They didn't have any remedies for a loose aorta. They stapled the name tags with a standard office stapler, to the left ventricle because it was the sturdiest. Washing the hearts ruined them a little bit, every client knew. But usually, they decided a little ruination rested higher on the scale than sickness or unwanted love. Analise never weighed the hearts but they felt a heck of a lot lighter once they've been washed.

She opened washing machine number five. Only three spare hearts fluttering around. When they hit the machine's walls, they made a funny splatty sound. Or like they were shooming down a tube. The sound of something with voluminous air pockets. But the one she was looking for wasn't here. She shut the machine. Maybe her lady was a dry-clean sort of person? She usually knew them by the way they stuck their noses in the air on the way to the counter. They were convenient customers because they'd usually read up on all the rules and tribulations. Often there was nothing behind their eyes. A lot of lawyers. Even more divorcees. She didn't know how the wash benefitted them, or changed them and she didn't think anyone she was close to had a dry-clean heart. It was hard to tell until they took them out.

The dry-clean room was smaller, because those people were rarer, and only had a few wares on its tiny table. These had more blood left in them, simply because they weren't finished yet, and the one which Ana's eyes were particularly drawn to, was half-empty or half-full of it. A real opto-pessimist. She picked it up and shook it and it bubbled. It was name-tag-less. But it wasn't the one she wanted. She set it down and fled the room, frustrated and all too ready to give up, but she thought she should at least check the sink.

Nestled in the space behind the counter, the sink was the moldiest and most unimpressive station of the three. You could really afford to be careless there, the hearts were the strongest, and

quite frankly too damaged to mess up. Rather than guarding a pristine, delicate thing, you'd save yourself a lot of time in smashing it to pieces and thus making it more useful. It wasn't doing anything for you when it was sitting being fragile, expending your time and energy. Thus were these hearts. Though, she found their owners the most tedious people. Attention-seeking and self-righteous and cowardly. Often, they expected the CardioMat™ to bend the rules and suit *them*. They kept their hearts in their sleeves, where it could lather lint and harm, so it was no wonder they were such frequent customers.

Of course the lady's would be here. Every fiber was hers was built to inconvenience Ana in every way. One side of it was warm, and the other was clammy and cool from touching the sink drain. Hard little specks of mold were plastered to it. It sat in Ana's whole-fist hand like a fetid fish. She seized the aorta, which sputtered blood like a leaky pipe and tried to rip it loose. Her rage was short-lived because her hand started to hurt. It made the skin of her fingers turn white to its pink but it wouldn't come apart. She supposed the human heart was stronger than she'd made it out to be.

No matter. She strode into the front lobby and flipped the OPEN sign CLOSED. She fetched some scissors from the wire basket of office supplies by the register. She used her stubby nails to pick out the staple herself rather than using the remover. She cut off the name-tag that said "Dahlia". She loaded the intact staple back into its namesake like a bullet. She produced another 3" X 5" college-ruled notecard. Then, she strode across the room and pulled aside daddy's portrait. The dark brown hole inside it housed his dirty and expired, but intact heart. She'd stuck it in a bag of ice, but the ice had melted and the moisture had made mold. The hole smelled awful but so did Dahlia's heart. She pulled out the heart of the first and foremost founder of the CardioMat™ and cut off all the rotting parts with craft scissors. She stapled Dahlia's name onto the thing. Dahlia didn't know her heart that well. Few people did. She deposited it at the bottom of the sink.

Then there was the matter of what to do with Dahlia's *real* heart. Analise wrapped it in kitchen paper, which made a pink

soggy mass in her arms as she stepped out of the now bloodstained counter. Dahlia wasn't smart, but she knew she couldn't risk her discovering the thing in the trash. She went out back and threw it in the trunk of her car. Then she looked down at her hands. They were peachy wet, but otherwise clean. She smoked a little bit. She took off her bloody shoes and put those in the trunk as well. She walked back in her socks.

A small man was sitting in the chair beside the window. He seemed nervous. He seemed like he had been crying. He seemed like a thousand things Analise could gleam but not trace. He held out a small, machine-washable heart. Analise guessed it would go in with the darks.

“I know you're closed,” he said pathetically. “But, help?”

Analise smiled at him.

“I know just the thing.”

LINDSAY COLLIER

I've Tried to Unpack my Trauma but the Zipper is Stuck!

And Other Facts to Tell a Therapist

Cradle the embers until they weave
their own nest of dried clovers
and blackened lungs.

Pouring rain brings an eruption
of worms from the soil, which leads
to a premature heat death
or a rubber sole. So much death
happens in our search for oxygen.

There is no perfectly empty place.
Matter is neither created nor destroyed.
We have always been somewhere.

Bees assist in pollination,
as vultures assist in carcass
recycling. Float with the amoebas.
Gather the algae out of your hair
and discard it like orange peels
and pluck the leeches off
like they're visitors wishing
you well on your journey.

I can count to ten unless I'm standing
on linoleum floors. Fluorescent
lights hurt my eyes. Scratch my cornea,
scuff my shoes.

Calendars overflowing with memories
that have infected my mind. Remembering
is a skill that cannot withstand the test of time.
Years scattered in my cranium stuck in between
the crevices and splattered on my skull.

It's not that I haven't tried to find those missing
years, they're just in a bag with a stuck zipper
that I don't want to pry open.

Just Don't Think About It

My hands feel frozen even when they're tangled
in a gentle grasp. The gravity to experience
both the frostbite in January and the tender bruising
from the Sun's kisses in July. It's too vacant
and complete to live here. Human complexity.
Where can we go?

I promise to leave a kettle to boil
and only return when it's wailing
with a blistering anger. Blue jays seldom
disappear when departing into a clear
blue sky. The magic only occurs if we ignore
them.

My home is mine to worry
about but if there is an inspection warn
them that when the floor-boards are ripped
up they'll hear the whisperings of words I could never say.
And if their fingers collect dust from the objects I neglected
they'll have to live through the memories I hid
away.

There are limitless ways to count to ten but I don't believe
I'll ever be able to. Dogs know how to swim when they're born.
Humans learn to crawl, then walk, then run, then swim.
I stumble and I sink. Why must it contradict
humanity if I savor the bubbling and burning
in my lungs?

Microscopic Societies

Nameless stories loom
over my body. I'm among spit-balls,
skin flakes, and pencil shavings.
We build nests from book pages and chewed
gum. The universal truth is that we rise
from incinerators to pollute
the air.

A door with a loose hinge hides
a room doused with lavender
where a pond froths with clouded
water. I dance with sharp-toothed
fairies who promise they know how to exchange
woodchips for butterfly wings,
and butterfly wings for freedom. All you need is a windshield to rest
on as you watch the shifting
world. Voyagers share their stories with insect
splatter coating their teeth.

I'll evaporate, gulp
the stratosphere until I drop
on a floating lily and lay
with the frogs. They call me
Queen of the Deep, Queen of the Breathing
Fly-Swatters. Home to the Willow blossoms
and fish bones.

Renovations

Have you tasted the rust that coats
my lips? Scrub my skull with sandpaper
and siphon the sickly-sweet bile
if you must. Promise to remind
me why it's okay to flush dead
fish like sewage, but how it's not
okay to send my grief to a landfill
so it can decompose next to shattered
toys and spoiled milk and rotten marrow.

I whisper in ancient tongues longing
to be mangled and prodded to fit
a polished mold. Everyone dissect
my body, whittle my soul and rip
out my decaying foundations. Stitch
me up and call it a divine ritual.
Will I resurrect into something worthy
of love?

Is it too predictable when I ask
if you *love* me?

What I mean is if I disappeared
tomorrow would you know where to find
me?

Could you join me?

Thanks for the Brain Ebullition and Pulverized Bones
Mount Vesuvius—

and I'm Sorry I Missed Your Funeral

One-thousand-nine-hundred-and-forty-one years ago
there was a vaporized town. A naturally occurring furnace
spewed out people's plasma, their saliva, their mucus.

Can I keep my head on straight for just a day?

Skeletons scrawled with their own hemoglobin.
A cleansing sweep of the sins, thanks
to Mr. Microspectroscopy.

I don't want them to touch my body
after I die.

One part thermal shock.
One part fulminant shock.
A case for curled toes and charred
bones. Soft tissue eaten away,
add it to the stock.

16,000 dead.

But, I knew you were dying before you did.

A brain boiling. Skull explosion.

POETRY

O, the intracranial
pressure! At least they never knew
it was coming.

I'm sorry I missed your funeral.
But, I was in a different state.

Instant rigor mortis. Six pyroclastic
surges stiffen bodies forever.
A broth made of blood, heat
up until it reaches 570 degrees.

Rip your lungs out,
fill the hospital corridors with your screams.
They'll echo in the chambers
of my mind for infinity.

For the small price of your sanity
you can step into a town where skeletons
are frozen in time.

A memory of a smile, and a beret with gray fluff sticking
out as you discovered
what it meant to be a French woman.

Now I lay them down to sleep
with a cadaveric spasm.

The invisible children
running and laughing
around your frail bones.

Murder from vaporized blood and exploding heads.
Remove the pulverized bones,
take the trauma and mask it in fiberglass.

I always thought I was one of the children.

KAYLA DEL RIO
Boy in the Photograph

To you, I am an anomaly,
a mystery, a blip in the image.
I caught you off guard,
at first, but I didn't want
to frighten you. I'm just a boy.
I want to play. I missed out
on my life.

You don't come into my room
anymore since the photo
was taken and burned. You
don't come in to say hello
to me anymore. I'm alone
in this world, no one wants
me around.

You started packing boxes now.
Are you going on holiday? Why
are you bringing pots
and pans and garlic powder
with you to a motel? I see you
took everything and put it
in your van.

You lit a candle in my room.
Are you turning off the air
while you're gone? Don't you
know that I'll be cold? There
are too many candles in here.
Be careful. The walls caught fire
Don't forget me here.

GRACE MAIER
The Savior of Worms

When it rains,
she fishes their wriggling, muddy bodies
from the pools in the sidewalk,
carrying them back to the grass.
Halting foot traffic as she performs her rescues,
She shrugs off the scorn
of the bustling crowd.

As a child, she was full of righteous anger
when the neighbor boys stomped a 5-inch earthworm into the mulch.
Tears streamed down her cheeks,
as they mangled its little pink form into a mash
like crushed cherry tomatoes.

And she bore her father's exasperation
when she refused to skewer one on a fishing hook,
"But Daddy, don't they feel pain?"

She didn't fret when watching the birds eat the worms though.
Their beaks, pecking and digging for a meal.
Birds know the value of worms.

Even now, grown as she is, her heart sinks
at the sight of heat shriveled worms on the sidewalk.
They are always fused to the edge of the pavement,
just short of their goal.
And when gazing upon their browned, crunchy bodies,
not even suitable for birds,
she hates how unfair it is.

So she saves as many as she can.
And mourns alone those she cannot.

CAROLINE LIBERATORE
A Brief History of My Deceased Grandfather,
1937–2020

Before my grandfather rose as a rookie, he grew up in the Bronx, New York. He was taken under the wings of a boxer from a young age; they were mirror images of each other, I think. This same boxer was in *On The Waterfront* with Marlon Brando, my dad told me—
after he died—the things I didn't know about him until after he died.

At only twelve years old, hungry for the freedom of thirteen, an unlucky streetcar crushed his desire. Can you imagine looking out your window to see the source of your own life crushed under hundreds of pounds of metal? They had to yank his distraught body away as he strained to save his own mother's frame. Eight, nine, ten, knockout. Cancer came out swinging for his father a year later—
he began his promising journey to the ring.

He came to Cleveland—not that he had a choice—and fought to go steady with my now widowed grandmother. She didn't like him at first—“could you imagine if he hadn't kept calling me!”—she tells me, living proof that he was persistent. She was an equally strong will, well-suited to hold accountable the fire inside him—
three more generations of Italian-Americans.

I tried to watch *The Godfather* with him once, but it was dark and dreary and long, and I had better things to do. I didn't watch it all the way through until he had been gone for two weeks; I wish it had been with him instead of in search of him. But I saw you in the godfather,

Grandfather—in your steely, bulldog exterior, trying to cover up a heart tender for your family—

everyone needs a reason to fight; Rocky had Adrian, you had us.

Rocky Graziano, Joe Frazier, Muhammed Ali—your heroes were nothing compared to you, even at eighty-three. We said goodbye so many times I lost count, only for you to get back up again to throw nine more punches—nine rounds, nine lives, you saw each of them through. You never got a belt or a parade, like Paul Newman in *Somebody Up There Likes Me*, but I think you were content to just have your family by your side until the final bell—

just to have close what had been taken from you once before.

TATIANA AVDELAS

Apartment 51

I brace myself every single time the car passes over the drainage system. The thrashing of bodies marks our arrival. Google Maps is finally silenced after one last direction, “Your destination is on the right.” A sense of relief washes over everyone in the car because we no longer have to sit in our contorted positions to accommodate the luggage. Without fail, my back aches from the 16 hour car ride. Everyone piles out of the car and lands on their feet a bit unbalanced. I stare up at the number of our condo, ‘51,’ as I stretch away the stinging pain and grunt at the overwhelming mugginess in the air. I never thought this feeling would be limited. It’s unsettling that I haven’t seen those familiar black numbers lately. While unsettling, I fear seeing those numbers will end up risking my life due to the pandemic. If I return, I’m not certain I will be able to see it again.

My grandfather bought this condo back in the early 2000’s so he could get away and relax. He was always looking for a deal, so he found this apartment on the third floor within this 55 and older community. This condominium in particular has the most creative pattern of them all; brown X’s plastered on a dirty white background which lines the separation of apartments. Oftentimes, there is bird poop lining the top of the brown that borders these X’s. I always cringe when I see a 70 some year-old gripping onto the brown ledge for dear life. Though I’m sure the worry for bird droppings isn’t as much as a problem as trying to live in a world that feels like a giant bird poop today.

Each condominium of the community has a name and a theme, so this one is called “The English Tutor,” whatever that means. My family and I always compare the other themed condominiums like we’re all suddenly interested in architecture. What mattered was we had a convenient place to stay to have a typical Florida vacation. I say it was one of my grandpa’s greatest decisions. It really is a selfish thing to say because it was meant for

him and him only. It's not very often people buy apartments to get away from their wives, yet this made the most sense to my family. My grandpa and grandma didn't exactly have the best relationship, so I can't really blame him for wanting to escape her narcissistic tendencies. And what better place to escape than sunny Clearwater, Florida? A city that we have quickly become familiar with, yet are so distant from this year. His place of sanctuary turned into everyone else's vacation spot, completely destroying its purpose. He never seemed to mind though, as he would hand over the keys with no hesitation before we decide to hit the road.

Without fail, every trip is faced with fighting, complaining, and peeing in many sketchy gas station bathrooms. Especially the bathrooms that require a key to open a room with half-lit light bulbs and a cracked toilet seat. Today, I feel even more repulsed at the thought of people even considering opening the graffiti marked stalls to spread even more germs.

At max, there's seven of us crammed in a minivan, along with our suitcases and mom's wheelchair sticking up in the back. The worst place to sit was the middle-back seat because you had no choice but to lean up against the metal footrest of her wheelchair. The chair obstructs my dad's view in the rearview mirror, but it never really bothered him. Of course he was used to this after many years of driving this route. My dad was always the one driving us when we were all younger, obviously. My mom can't drive without her hand controls due to her disability, so he was left to add hundreds of miles to the car by himself. I used to feel bad as a kid because he would drive for so long without stopping. My mom would turn up the AC at night to keep him from falling asleep on the wheel. He never wanted to stop, which is typical of my dad who is always in a rush. We would never complain though, despite our chattering teeth, we'd stare ahead wrapped in beach towels.

Seven people in a car for 10+ hours is like some sick experiment. One minute you're getting along and laughing, the next you're fighting and complaining about the music being too loud. It's always too hard to sleep when your mom blasts Greek music that features an irritating clarinet player. My mom would laugh as

we'd complain to at least change the genre of music. She'd lean back and laugh as she held her vape loosely in her hand after taking a hit. Over the years, I've learned to tune out the nasally singers and sleep with ease leaving those who can't to suffer. I like to think sleeping in the car is a great observation of character, especially in this scenario. Will I let my little brother's head fall onto my shoulder, or will I push him onto my older sister? Nevertheless, we always end up having a good time even if we drool on each other. There really is no dull moment with my four siblings. Even though today we're together, safe, at home, it doesn't compare to the giddy feeling of going mad in a stuffy car. The countless videos I have on my phone try to take me back to these moments. Even though the memories are trapped in Google photos, I feel a little closer to the atmosphere of our cramped car journey's. I even start to feel sick as the phantom smell of the car emanates from my phone screen.

As we drive along the east coast, my head usually aches as my head vibrates against the window. This pain is only present when we pass through the state of Georgia. The intruding smell of the green swamps seeps into the car, making everyone gag. Whenever my grandma joins us, she always asks in her strong Greek accent, "Who farted?" While it's the funniest thing to hear come out her mouth, the same question being asked every time we pass through gets old. Ever since my grandpa had passed, her narcissism had infiltrated and claimed the condo as her own. As she rolled down the window she displayed the control she has over us. She disregards the reactions on display to her decision and continues the journey. As annoying as this is, the smell is nostalgic even if I smell it every year. Hating Georgia is something we all love to talk about "The gas prices are too high, it smells so bad, and they drive like maniacs." I haven't even seen a gas station in the past few months, but I still wonder if Georgia's gas prices are still so unbelievably high.

It's concerning how many times I've been through Georgia. My family and I usually endure this trip once, sometimes twice, every year. While it's tiring and frustrating, we always seem to forget the trauma once we arrive. We all say our 'hello's' to Joann on

the first floor of our condominium. She's always sitting outside on her plastic chair smoking a cigarette when we pull in. It's like she has a fifth sense and always knows what our ETA is. I never would have thought the simple wave we shared last year may have been a 'goodbye,' rather than a 'see ya later.' After the small talk with Joann, my dad pushes my mom towards the elevator while the rest of us tend to lug our suitcases up the stairs to the third floor. Normal people would take the elevator, but you never want to do that when you're staying at "The English Tutor." The elevator is as old as the people living here, as it makes unsettling noises when it moves. It's also too small and constantly filled with mosquitos, so we never really go out of our way to use it. Even though we like mimicking the sounds of the beeps, it's a pitiful display of transportation. (You'd think it would be better due to the demographic of the community.) Walking always felt better anyway after a long trip. The painfully good sting in my legs makes me sigh as I reach the staircase. The breeze gets stronger as my siblings and I climb up the staircase. The palm trees that frame the building blow so hard I always think a hurricane is on the way. The green cement floor is always littered with questionable spots and bugs. I tend to run around them making my flip flops slap on the ground as I walk to the door.

The squeaky door is opened, introducing us to the suffering temperature inside apartment 51. The white tiles sometimes have dead stink bugs on the ground because we haven't visited in so long. Even though they're dead, smashing them between my fingers with a napkin is something I never enjoy doing. The walls are covered in needlepoints of birds, and the outdated furniture still has a faint smell of insect repellent and my grandma's perfume. I have always hated the tan couch that sat in the living room. My thighs would always itch from the pilling that occurred over time. The wooden furniture strangely fits with the old-lady esque, lilac-purple walls. The chandelier in the kitchen makes me wonder if the designer was on crack while writing up these plans. The kitchen is barely ten feet wide, making the dangling crystal chandelier feel insecure. Right next to the kitchen is a room that has my

grandfather's knives on the wall. My grandmother's horrifying tapestry is hung perpendicular to the knives, as it moves from the air blowing out of a vent. This place just screams old people. Flowery bed covers, weirdly placed mirrors, and cliché seashell nightlights.

Did I mention there's only two bedrooms? My parents always get the master bedroom, so the rest of us are left to figure it out. On the occasion that all my siblings are present, this is the sleeping arrangement: My little brother gets the couch, my older brother and sister get the twin beds in the second room, and my younger sister and I get the air mattress. This air mattress in particular is very special because as it gets closer to dawn, the closer we get to the floor. Every year we think we patched up the hole, yet we continue to sink faster each year.

I always laugh thinking back to the moment my brother and dad lugged the air mattress to the community pool. There's a bike pump outside of the pool gate and they used it to pump up the mattress. While my brother held the nozzle, my dad was vigorously squeezing the flower patterned air mattress to find the hole that we can never find. My dad, being the obnoxious man he is, would yell out instructions in Greek to my brother like, "Aw man! Squeeze on the other side while I do this side." My brother was clearly frustrated from other people watching the scene unfold, so he adjusted his pants, as he usually does, and got to work.

As embarrassing as it was at the time, I miss the weird stares from the pool goers floating on colored pool noodles. I can't possibly return to a place I could put at risk. They'd float slower than normal as 80's pop would play softly in the pool area. Some looked over with their hands leaned on their hips and a slight hunch in their posture wondering what the hell was going on. My dad and brother ultimately failed the task, so they turned off the pump and dragged the deflated mattress back to the apartment. The older folk at the pool continued applying their SPF 100 like nothing happened. I imagine the pool is as full as ever today, but the chance of ruining the idyllic scene of chlorine and peace is terrifyingly high.

Heading back to the apartment from the pool is a serene walk. Whenever we do visit the pool, we leave around 3:00 pm, presumably the time everyone is napping. The dragging of our feet after a long day at the pool is the only noise that can be heard. If only tumble weeds were native to Florida because it would be the most fitting visual of this silence. With all that's happening in the world, walking to that apartment may seem to be one of the safest places. Yet, nearing the presence of flowery bed sheets doesn't seem to be the most effective when fending off a virus. Sometimes I feel like I can't even walk outside at all in fear of human interaction. Even though we always drive to get there, there is still that risk when travelling. No matter how much my family and I collectively long to return, we could never risk each other's health. The pain I'd feel from the cramped car and the uncomfortable air mattress has been deduced to memories I wish I could experience even more than usual. In the end, the pain is worth seeing Joann and the beeping elevator because the memories experienced always leave me wanting more from apartment 51. For now, I reminisce and live vicariously through the repeating memories of weirdly placed chandeliers and frames with needlepoint.

The Unwrapped Gift

The plan for next summer was in place as my siblings and I opened up our Christmas presents. Mama bought all five of us matching blue and white striped towels with our names sewed across. I rubbed my hand against the pilling on the towel, and traced my name like it was the first time I was seeing it. We all posed for a photo as Mama frantically instructed Baba to raise the camera. Baba grunted as he got on his knees pretending to be a professional photographer as he took many pictures from different angles. The eight-foot Christmas tree covered in gold ornaments created a bit of a glare in the photo. “Greece 2018” was the caption that paired with the photos on Mama’s Facebook page.

Of course, I was excited to see my family back in Thessaloniki. Yet, I was also anxious to return to a place that is unfamiliar and familiar at the same time. It wasn’t just us though. There was one last matching towel on the floor with our uncle’s name on it. This raised some complaints. Comments like “He’s gonna complain the whole time” or “He’s gonna hold us back” were tossed back and forth between the crumpled up wrapping paper on the floor. I mean this wasn’t surprising, Thieo was a very unmotivated individual who can be irritating at times.

Yet, there was so much good in him. I thought about our missed interactions that Christmas. He would typically pull me off to the side to hand over \$20 as a replacement for a Christmas gift. “Don’t say anything,” he would whisper, as he’d dramatically shove the bill into my hands. I would smile and tell him his little secret wasn’t so secret, but he would shake his head refusing to acknowledge this.

I wanted the complaining to stop because things were going so well before. The distraction of the holiday was pure bliss to my head. So, I sat back on the black leather couch stuffing pigs in a blanket in my mouth while everyone else talked about the upcoming vacation.

It wasn't for another six months, but Mama insisted on preparing ahead of time. The snow melted on as plans were made and phone calls had ended. The mosquitos I slapped off my body signified how close we were to the waves of the Aegean sea.

Well, all of us except for Thieo. He had called Mama two weeks before our flight to cancel. I remember visiting the cemetery around this time to clean up the black granite tombstone where my grandfather laid. I would always look over at the open spot next to him already engraved for the day my grandma finally passes. It felt like we only visited his grave for her sake. She had expectations. Once again, these expectations were not met, her son was causing more problems.

Mama scolded her brother over the phone for not saying anything earlier. She was so upset with him she handed over the phone for Baba to deal with. I don't know why she was angry. It's not like this was surprising. He was always running away. All I could do was shake my head as I listened to his muffled voice against Baba's ear: he was sick. The doctor said for him to take it easy because he has high blood pressure. Ironically enough, he didn't want to go on vacation.

Thankfully, the extra ticket hadn't gone to waste. It was so easily replaced. He didn't seem bothered by this, so I embraced his missed opportunity of emptiness instead. He had missed out on the dramatic hugs and kisses from family. The villages of concrete and red roofed houses on the sides of the tall, green mountains. The winding roads down these mountains sparking a sense of adventure. The trail of steam accompanied with the smell of spices, meats, and fish made its way through the cities to attract customers. Swimming in crystal clear waters with a surreal view of Mount Olympus. I dove too deep in those waters. I forgot to wish him a happy birthday. We usually call as a family, but that never happened. Not even a simple text. The wishes that come with the irreversible wind against colorful candles is something I cry over.

I never heard from him again. His Christmas presents were tossed in the closet that year. My lips would press tight whenever he didn't show up for the holidays. He would always pick at the

buffet style meals Mama would set out. The black tablecloth would be littered with crumbs. Of course, I would laugh as I scolded him, and he would respond through heavy breaths and a full mouth with “she won’t notice.” Mama always noticed, so she’d have me add more food to the empty spots as Thieo slumped on the couch with his infamous yellow button up wrinkling.

I sat slumped on my bed with a pillow propped up behind me as I scrolled on my phone. The four layers of blanket over my body helped prevent the potential case of hypothermia. It’s Valentine’s day, so there’s really nothing to do today. All I could think about those days was when I was going to be strangled once again by another panic attack. I needed more distractions like Christmas to avoid the big ball of violence in my head and the mocking words from the pills I have yet to take.

Suddenly, I heard loud footsteps barreling into my parent’s room. My bedroom door shook from the commotion in terror. My stomach dropped and I immediately rose out of bed half expecting an intruder. I stood barefoot on the gray tile listening to the panicked voices coming through the crack under my door. Once I understood it was my older sister, I rushed into the room parallel to mine. My arms were crossed trying to warm myself from the cold temperature in their room. Baba had helped Mama sit up in bed. Their hair was disheveled and the wrinkles on their faces were contorted to convey panic.

My heart started to shed tears making it hard for me to breathe. We turned into wax figures from shock then we started to melt as reality set in. Mama motioned for my sister to grab her phone off her nightstand to call Grandma. What a waste of time. She was incoherent, sobbing through her words. The wailing we heard over speakerphone was the unbearable sound of a mother losing a son. We were all too fixated on finding the body, so she had to hang up. Hospital after hospital, saying the same things over and over again, “I’m looking for a patient.” I had to walk out of the room when we found the doctor that had to shut his eyes for good. The details of his death were making me feel nauseous. The cold air in the house made it harder to stop shaking. ‘Why the fuck isn’t

the heat running?’ My older brother was the only one showing his emotions through wet cheeks and a hand over his mouth. All I could do was bite my nails and try to drain the flood in my chest. I felt like my heart was about to die the same way Thieo’s did.

“Hi, I was calling to let you know that my brother passed today.”

I heard it as many times as she said it. I can’t imagine having to explain the details of my brother’s death to a bunch of people who probably don’t even care. Yet, she felt obligated to, and I could feel the fatigue emanating from her fingers as she typed out another phone number.

“Cardiac arrest.”

Is this some kind of torture? Will this pain end?

“He had diabetes. He didn’t take care of it. He could have had his legs amputated.”

The missing food from the buffet comes to mind.

The body was being shipped over from Manhattan to Canton. If only it was Amazon Prime so we could get this over with. I couldn’t stand listening to Grandma anymore. I wanted her to go back to her stupid life in Florida. To her, it seemed like her son never died when the topic of his life insurance came up. What happened to the crying woman over the phone? She wanted it all for herself. I remember her saying she was going to wait until the end of the year to decide whether or not she’d give us money or not. My teeth clenched as I wrote out my uncle’s obituary at the kitchen table. I noticed Mama’s nails were digging into her palms while her mother spouted insensitive things. Grandma put herself on the throne while the rest of us just watched it happen. She added another jewel to her crown when the gold of a dead man came her way.

She hid her crown at the funeral. My family walked into the church together like one giant shadow. I was surprised the bright colors paired with spiritual beings didn’t lend me some comfort. All I wanted to do was leave. I couldn’t imagine myself facing his body. I hadn’t seen him in years and I was meant to reunite with him despite the lack of blood pumping through his body.

We all sat in the wooden pew at the front of the congregation. Grandma sat sobbing dramatically at the end of the pew with a tissue against her face surrounded by those who have fallen for her act. The colorful Byzantine icons stared at me as I walked up to kiss them. I then glanced over at the coffin as I stepped away from the icons. Thieo was surrounded by photos of the family, a Cavaliers hat, and other memorabilia. I finally forced my eyes to look the body in the face. It wasn't him. His face was swollen and his ears were sunk in his head from the complications he had. God, this is terrifying, annoying, heartbreaking. His lips matched the subtle purple patches that appeared on his face. I closed my eyes to compose myself before facing the crowd behind me. I made my way back to my seat and sat looking back at the main entrance to distract the oncoming tears.

More condolences. More kisses and hugs from people I don't even know. The layer of lipstick stacked up on my cheek as I looked over at the coffin again. No one wanted to give a eulogy. It was just another form of torture that seemed unnecessary for anyone to endure. This whole funeral process is bullshit. All of it. The flowers, the expenses, the ceremony, all a normalized form of torture. All the attention was on the body not the person he was.

My grandma thrashed her entire body on the coffin to draw the attention back to her. My whole family looked at each other, embarrassed and crying. Mama stuck out like a sore thumb in the aisle, so she made no reaction. Grandma is full of shit. Once this is all over she's just gonna head back to sunny Florida, and spend his money on the cruise she keeps talking about with her new husband. My older brother was the one to pull her away from the body. The pallbearers finally closed the coffin, mentally counted down from three and lifted the coffin while making their way down the blue carpet. I quickly followed suit with my head dipping forward. My aching head made it hard to lift my neck up, so I stared at the falling snow that melted against the cement once I made my way out of the church.

The pain didn't stop until I finally laid in bed that night. Yet why did I still feel so uneasy? The silence of the night contrasted

the screaming in my head. I thought about other people in my life dying. Dying by cancer, car accident, suicide, anything that was tragic. I rolled over on my side and squeezed my chest against my knees trying to wring out the water flooding in my heart again. It became difficult to breath as snot started building up in my nose and leaking onto my pillow.

Grandma got what she wanted, leaving us nothing. She gloated to our faces without a second thought. She bought her quaint, yellow house in a cul de sac, and is living a wonderful life with her new husband. We let her do it, and we whispered to each other about her shitty character like it was a secret. These secrets pulled us together. We had one less person whispering in our ears, making the group huddle closer. Mama finally whispered telling us we had to turn our cheeks and move on, so we followed without a word.

Time heals all wounds. It's a stupidly overused yet accurate statement. Thieo wasn't here last Christmas and he won't be here for the next one either. He'll never get his matching towel, but it will always sit on the shelf with the rest of ours. The buffet meal never needs refills anymore. Instead, he filled the empty spot next to Grandpa. I'm sure grief has overcome himself at the knowledge of where he was laid to rest. The grim reaper walks out from behind the tomb to remind me of the horrors and the inevitable concept of death. The distractions I once craved slipping away as I look into his eyes and watch him walk away.

VINNY CUCUZZA

The Places Where He Goes and I Return

A teen sits on a lone swing resting atop a hill, hanging from the corpse of a tree. The branches of the tree smack against each other. Whatever leaves remaining on the limbs fall onto the ground, floating to the soft dirt. The tree's roots snake out of the ground and back under, forming tunnels and arches of dark wood and soil. The coiled roots carve around a spot under the swing with none peeking out of the ground.

The teen sits in the swing, leaning against the rope holding the seat to the branch. His legs sway slightly, rocking the swing with the wind. A breeze pushes his hair. His eyes track the sunset, the sun barely under the horizon. Deep, rich colors float in the sky, painting it. Oranges and yellows so loud they brighten the boy's face. Red brighter and more vivid than he'd seen before creeps up under a set of grey clouds. The red feeds into pinks that clash with the blue left in the sky. The light from the spectacle reflects in the boy's eyes, keeping him entranced in the iridescent skyline.

At the far end of the table, I sit on a chair, planted on the corner. I'm rigid, ready to get up and away at the first chance. On either side of me are my sisters, both talking to each other over me. I'm quiet. One of them reaches near me and my arm pulls back from the table. Remnants of an old reflex, I tell myself. The one on the other side shifts, leaning towards my side. My arm curls back, taught, fist semi curled. She leans back, not noticing my arm.

I reach for my drink, pouring the venom down my throat to burn away the words at the back of my tongue. There aren't words left, just feelings. Feelings that fester under my skin, swarming and coercing my tongue when I open my mouth to respond to harmless questions. I take another drink, this one less like venom and more like bile that leeches the back of my mouth and fills it with sickness.

They ask me a question.

I respond, the rotten words congealing behind the lies slipping through my teeth.

The swing moves back and forth. It's sunset again. Instead of pinks and reds, the sky is painted with purples and violets. The horizon is a red bleeding into purple, slowing into blues enticingly deep. The breeze pushes through the branches cutting the sky into pieces. Each piece changes in hue. The teen gets lost inside of each shard, following the branches shearing apart the sky.

I'm a child, curled into myself in a rocker. My head under my arms, my knees to my chest. The same sisters hit me, over and over. Arms, legs, arm, arm, leg, arm, neck. I curl tighter. The wood of the rocker buries into my leg, pushing against it for a small amount of stability. The hits keep coming, two angles going nonstop. I slide down, level with the thin cushion on the seat.

I get to the ground and push out, away from the rocker. The carpet leaves burns on my knees. I rise to my pained knees, then shoot to my feet. The two stand in front of me, smiling. There isn't an issue with what just happened. I start to yell at them and they laugh. They laugh when I tell them why they hurt me and it hurts more, *why does it hurt why do they hurt me*. I go to hit them back, but our mom stops me. They hurt me and I can't hurt them back. *Why can't I hit them back .*

Why don't I get to throw a punch?

The colors from the horizon offer a refuge the teen can't describe. They pull his thoughts to now. The lights entice his eyes to the hues, the warm color reflecting back to the sky. What matters is the tree with the swing that rocks with the wind on the hill that overlooks the horizon. The winds that snake through the grass and up his legs and arms bring his attention to his skin. His thoughts don't matter anymore.

You aren't going to find someone who will deal with you, she says, after I won't let her borrow the first expensive thing I bought myself.

I don't believe her.

You won't find anyone who will love you, she spews, after I won't give her my seat because I was charging my phone.

I don't want to believe her.

Nobody will care about you if you're going to be like that, she vomits, after I tell her I won't get her the thing she's closer to.

Why do I believe her?

Branches clack together when the swing moves. The lone sturdy branch it hangs from doesn't move much, but the branches shooting off of it do. They shake and rattle, the small buds on them glowing in the sunset. Dew drips down the side, coursing down and soaking into the moss around the roots. Course bark glows in the orange light supplied from the horizon.

You really told on me? She asks after she hit me. She did my chore and told me to do hers, but I didn't want to and she didn't ask to switch. She held my shoulder tight and kept her other hand raised, clear as to what she wanted to do. I didn't move. I didn't flinch. I just waited for it. I was at fault for it. She got in trouble, and it was my fault.

That swing was old. The wood of it needed replacing years ago. The ropes were worn where they tied to the seat. He sat down anyways. The wind did its job; it rocked along with the sunset and pushed him towards the lights he couldn't tear his eyes from. His shirt reflected the colors, the wrinkles casting small shadows.

Shadows fall from the roots intertwining under the seat. The small shadows from the roots cut into the larger one cast by the trunk, disappearing. The teen sways in the swing, each movement becoming forceful, the swing goes higher.

I'm older now. I'm bigger than them. They don't treat me like they used to, but remnants are still there. They get annoyed when they reach next to me and I flinch. *It makes me feel like a bad sister* they tell me. I don't say anything. I don't talk to them often. I try to avoid it. I'm told I should forgive them; they're family. I tell them that they hurt me, and I'm okay to not forgive them.

They have kids. I'm supposed to be their uncle and pretend all is okay with their moms. Their daughters ask why I don't hug their moms. The words I want to say stop at the back of my throat. They stare at me, their bright eyes waiting for an answer I desperately wish to give. The words come. I lie through my teeth, the words I want to say congealed behind my teeth like the times before.

In my head, a mantra spins, the voice speaking it sounding more convinced with each syllable. They rotate around a wound, one that won't heal now. But it will.

I don't believe her.

I never wanted to believe her.

I wish I never did.

CAILIN M. GOODRICH

The Disbelief of Reality

I still have a hard time believing that any of this is real.

No, not because it's incredulous to think about how a million people are dead while a different group of people are having tantrums about wearing a mask at Walmart.

"Put the mask on Karen," a man stands in the Walmart "lobby" between the two sliding doors calling out, phone recording the woman who is trying to assault the employees.

"Karen is a racist hate crime against middle-aged white women," the small round woman explains, mask over her eyes in some sort of deluded protest.

"No honey, there are black Karens and brown—"

I have a hard time believing it's real because I've spent over half my life now being plagued by intermittent hallucinations. Sometimes it's like a sword hanging over my head and I'm left wondering, trying not to fixate on the frayed rope. So often my life seems like something so twisted, so ridiculous that only I could make it up.

My parents assured me I was lying. If that had *actually* happened, I would've run upstairs and told them. But I couldn't. It was like I was paused while the rest of the world kept going. *It's not real*, they would say over and over.. *It's not real*, I repeated in case it made a difference. When I found a Google Doc ominously titled "2017," I "found out" that this was most of my childhood. Most of these entries were transcripts of conversations from email or Skype chat, and others were entire verbal conversations. And that's when it really hit me: I didn't remember anything from that year.

But when school was cancelled this year, a lot of it stopped. It came almost right as I was gaining interest in actively managing my symptoms. My mind stopped buzzing and conspiring and conjuring. I didn't have any of the hallucinations I used to. I didn't have any. I couldn't sink back into wondering if the Pepto Bismol colored Anubis that used to sprint at me sideways in the front yard

was a gift or a curse. My white bedroom walls didn't recede into a checkered optical illusion. I no longer had the reassuring whispers, screeches, and shouts as ASMR to my daily life. I no longer had to struggle my way through visits to different high schools or new situations, trying to prepare for an episode. Eat right, bring water, have support, get fresh air, find an exit, find a place where the world can crash around you without you burning it down.

I had silence. And silence. More silence.

It felt a lot like *What was all of that even for?*

After years of dragging myself through life, and this is all it took?

A few mornings later, I was putting my socks away when I found an immense stack of handwritten letters from the last two or three years in the back corner of my closet. They were all written on yellow notebook paper and trifolded, all dated and timestamped. I wrapped myself in a quilt and peeled open one from the stack. It was the smallest letter, but it included a print-out of something I wrote on a Google Doc.

October 5, 2018 Navarre, OH

We lost the game by quite a bit. On nights like these, the football buses were silent with shame and exhaustion, but the Triway Marching Band didn't seem to care either way. I was on the band bus with the rest of the freshmen who were singing along with music from our childhood on a portable speaker. Since there were four buses and two chaperones, the only adult was the bus driver.

I typically sat alone on the bus. But tonight, my best friend Brian wasn't with the football team. His foot was in an air cast, but he could still march so he decided he could contribute more in his band uniform than in his helmet and pads. I begged him to sit with me because I felt uneasy, more so than usual.

I was looking outside while Brian was showing someone a song on his phone and all the people at the crosswalk turned into pointed-hooded demons. Their scrunched, gnarled green faces peered out from the bottom of the purple robes. They were gathered in a circle under a lonely street light.

I can't accurately describe them, like KKK wizards back from the dead. And I can't remember the details, but there was this polyphonic whispering filling my head like static on a tv.

I'm sure it was saying something, but it was an overlap of female voices. I remember trying to get up out of my seat and claw at the window and then my head because I didn't want to be around the KKK zombies. . . something was up with them. I was afraid they'd take me, or they'd take the bus or Brian or the next bus or anyone.

"Cailin, what's wrong?" I heard a muffled screaming underwater sound. I look up and a flash of light through his eyes tells me it's Brian. I know it's Brian. I know I can't talk, and I don't try anymore, so I turn to the window and try not to move.

"Hey," he whispers. "What is it?"

I opened my eyes. A hooded frog clung to the outside of the bus window, staring straight at me. I jolted in the seat, screaming.

We want you and we won't stop until we have you.

Oh Brian? He's just here to help.

"Cailin, you can talk to me. Tell me, I'm right here."

But I can't. I physically can't.

I hit at the window hoping that, like a mosquito, it would get scared and fly away. Its robed arm smashed the glass and grabbed my arm. My entire body seized up. I thrashed, trying to break free.

As quickly as it started, it all stopped. Silence in my mind. The creatures were gone. I looked up and saw Brian talking to someone. I buried my face back in our raincoats until we got back to the school.

October 6, 1:39PM

"Dear Brian,

"You can't stop things from happening. I learned that on the bus last night. My world can still irrationally fall down around me. It can take you with it.

"But the thing is, you keep trying. You're always there in the rubble. More often than not, I can't talk. Sometimes I can't hear.

And every passing week is getting a bit more complicated. But the thing is, it isn't my entire life. I still want to do all the things I always did. But I'm realizing I need to start doing things a bit differently."

I knew I used to be closer to Brian. We met in 2017 and so much of my time was spent wondering about him. Wondering if he saw the world like I did, or if he was just quirky. I spent most of my time begging him to be around me because I was scared to be alone, even for a moment. But I also feared that I was taking up too much of his time. That I was taking some of his stability and his innocence. And I stopped talking to him in the middle of the night, then I quit coming in early to have breakfast with him. After about six months, we stopped talking on a daily basis.

This virus and this situation had taken my normal away, but my normal wasn't family reunions or annual vacations. My normal was trying to keep up, keep quiet, stay behind, plan ahead, make up eloquent lies on the spot that seemed too specific to be fiction. And now I wasn't going to school, where I had to worry about phantom janitors in the hallway. I wasn't at Walmart where ghosts would follow me around talking in what they claimed were their own language. And I didn't have to feel guilty about stealing my friends' childhoods.

Who was I under all of that baggage? I'm still not completely sure I am someone under that. I was so young when this started. . .

So I tried my best. I tried to do new, spontaneous things to distract me. My parents thought I was out partying and taking drugs, but in reality I was walking down village streets and sitting in front of monuments, imagining what used to be. I wanted to see how long it would take for me to forget, but I always had to get back in the car and drive home.

The brown building sat empty, no cars in the parking lot and no signs of life. Yet, empty school buses sat in the back. Looking at it made me feel fuller, like some things are just empty and that's the way life is. A playful font said on the front "Creston

School 1915". I knew it wasn't used anymore, but it was one of the few old local schools that wasn't demolished. I just wanted to see it.

The neighbor's jack russell barked and pressed its claws against the gate. I shoved my hands in my warm pockets and continued down the sidewalk. My phone vibrated as the grey clouds gathered over my head. I glanced around before pulling my phone out, just to make sure nobody was around me before I became less aware.

"It's good you have something to do to clear your mind that is a really healthy thing to do and I'm proud of you. You are human and you're not blank, you have emotions and you matter, yes sometimes you feel numb and it hurts to be numb but for those moments you don't feel numb are when you will start to realize how to not feel numb."

I didn't really know how to respond except "Thanks Brian."

I paused at a pair of railroad tracks. Someone once told me that if a train is nearby, the metal part can electrocute you. I turned both ways. Nothing but a wide, curvy expanse of tracks. I still couldn't bring myself to cross.

A train whistle sounded somewhere in the distance. The tracks disappeared into the trees, so I couldn't see it. I thought it was about half a mile away. *I should be seeing it if it's that close.*

A laundromat sat on the next block. A woman stood in the window, watching me. I looked back at her, then at my shoes, then down the tracks, then behind me. When I glanced back up, her eyes were still fixed on me. I sprinted across the set of three tracks. Eternity and a half later, I turn behind me to see the divider down and the train booming mercilessly by.

I sigh.

I was told up front by my doctors, "Your hallucinations will never go away." I was just hoping they were wrong.

I went home that night more dejected than I should've been. I spent days in pajamas reading my old entries again, watching movies with ambiguous endings, and contributing nothing to my own life or anyone else's for entire weeks. Even Brian didn't understand why I was upset.

“You heard the train. Isn’t that good?”

“I mean yeah but. . . what if I didn’t?”

“Idk.”

“Me neither, that’s the problem.”

I realized I needed a change of scenery, so I begged Brian to hang out with me on a random Wednesday afternoon. I picked him up and drove past the Creston School and over the railroad tracks by the laundromat to Creston Community Park to play Guess Who and the Game of Life with the booming echo of the nearby freight trains. And he heard them too. Or at least, that’s what he said.

TYREESE WEST

As Small as the Sky

Daybreak. I roll out of bed at 6:15am every morning to witness the sunrise stretching the stillness of sleep from my body. This was a habit I formed in my sophomore year of high school in the years of discovering my identity as a person and soul searching was my favorite past time. It was the only thing in my already erratically mundane sleep schedule that I liked to do. Stepping outside on my balcony I await patiently for my morning show to begin. The sky is my favorite program to watch because it delivered a story of the day with a charm better than the morning news and half as long. It marked a promise of a new beginning. Time of day where my anticipation is at its highest. Once again, an adventure into the unknown. I always thought of it as a challenge. "If the sun can get up, then so can I." This is my motto as I watched the beams peer over the horizon until it became too bright for me to watch anymore. The skies hue of amber transitions into a brisk lemon yellow and finally to the ocean blue we all know and love. The heat of the morning warms my body as the light caresses my skin offering its warmth. Breathing life into my pores presenting me with energy for the day. Looking up, I study the vastness of the giant cotton candy maker reminding me of just how small I am. A true out of body experience of which I cherish for its tranquility. With that, I return inside to wait until the program changes.

There when I need it. There when I don't. Like a therapist that only listened to me I confided in the sky for answers, speaking my troubles, communicating my problems to it more than I would my family. Cloud watching letting my feelings go and allowing my imagination to run wild. Cumulonimbus clouds are my favorite because of how picturesque they were in their amazingly abstract form. So many shapes of fluffy white water vapor floating effortlessly carried by the wind without a care in

the world. I wished that I could be a cloud. To just fly away from it all and go wherever the wind takes me. That's what comforted me about looking at the sky. I did not fit in anywhere else in the world or at least that's what it felt like. I had little grasp of social interaction and I found solace in talking to someone or something that I knew did not have to reply, or rather could not. It was my messenger.

I believed that it was taking my words, thoughts, prayers, fears, vents, and conversations to a higher power for consolidation. It was my place to think. I found myself screaming over the balcony once at 9am on a Sunday morning before church so frustrated at life that I had vocalized my frustration into a good old 20db shouting match with myself, and consequently my neighbor. "I don't want to go!" I yelled and in the faint distance I heard a voice reply "Shut the f*ck up." it wasn't the sky replying to me. My initial thought was not me yelling but instead confusion on how someone could be that grumpy on a Sunday morning. Embarrassed and flustered I rushed back into the house before he found out where I lived and tormented me further.

Singing in the rain because the sky has many surprises.

The clouds that were once fluffy have become engorged. My Mom and I are the only ones who like the rain. The pitter patter of the water droplets hitting a window continuously is a calming sound to us. When it rains, I like to go outside and watch from my front porch and sometimes even, when I didn't hear thunder, I would take my umbrella and watch from my balcony. It's funny to see that there's no sign blocked by the clouds. The Sky is 50 Shades of grey as the rain keeps coming down harder and harder.

The tumultuous sound of thunder shakes the air around me though I am not scared. I'm fascinated by the fact that water vapor and heated air could produce the most powerful natural phenomenon. Electricity from the sky in many colors and my favorite is blue. I love watching thunderstorms as scary as they are to other people, it amazes me the level of power they have. Once again reminds me that I'm small. I am human.

The rain is misinterpreted as an omen of misfortune however that's not how I see it. I know misfortune because I have experienced it in my life, gone through many emotional struggles, and come out of them. Which is quite like a cloud filling up with water until it's ready to burst and then and let it all go. Clouds highlight the importance of letting out your emotions. To me, the rain is a symbol of rebirth. A second chance. It's the earth replenishing itself using its water. That's why we must cherish the rain because it is the water that nurtures the flowers, we find so beautiful and the creatures that inhabit them. To recover there must be a storm. Renewal, replenish, rejuvenate, and revive all possible new beauty discoverable. That's why the sky holds so much intrigue to me there is so much to be interpreted. It almost is like a person and I treat it that way.

Twilight. This is my favorite time of day. It's when the sun goes down and all the colors of the spectrum come out at once. watching the sunset is so romantic. critical interval time before complete darkness that I wish had expanded throughout the entire day. I find it so mesmerizing that I often want to memorialize it with a photo because it just never stops being beautiful to me. The clouds are stretched over the horizon adopting the colors of red, gold, and amber form shapeless but not lifeless.

The sky even seems bigger accentuating all colors even the skin on my body glows. The sun becomes a cornea to close under the eyelid. The earth will fall asleep again soon and so should I, but before I do I want to marvel again at it before it suddenly disappears. The warmth from the sun's rays is fading is fading and the energy that it gave me, is taken back until tomorrow. Even the clouds disappeared behind the sun it takes everything and returns it the next day. The stillness of dusk is sanctuary. It is the ultimate backdrop for nature's most astonishing pics.

The time spent here is no longer than an hour and within that short period of time, we exist only to experience being enveloped in it. This is the time I use to reflect on all the thoughts that I've had throughout the day and bring them all to a conclusion.

Wrapping them in a neat little bow, tying them to a balloon, and letting them go. Having that freedom, at the end of the day is freeing. To realize that what has come must go, how every second of every day that passes I will never get back and it is up to me to utilize it. The short amount of time is a microcosm for life. The cycle of life can be categorized in the cycle of a day or a cloud. We are born, we live, and eventually we end.

Under the stars. The night sky holds so many mysteries. of the unknown to the naked eye. Many things discoverable so many things that imaginable. I can only take a surface level look at the infinite cosmos. That's where my greatest grievance since I got an understanding of what stars were. I could stare at them for hours just hoping to see more.

I looked up at the stars wondering if there's something behind. a different world. a new world. What's the people would be like and what awaited us after meeting them. To understand the sky is to understand what you can see but we have dared to go beyond. I believe that everything in the universe is connected, therefore when life is over, we move on to some higher plan of existence. That might be a little religious but that is the resolve that I came to. Watching that sky makes you wonder what you are and your place in the universe. Something I'm struggling with and still struggle with today and it reminds me that everything happens for a reason. I'm comforted by the fact there are things like this in the world. I'm able to see what it has. I can ask these questions for myself I continue to gain wisdom.

The earth is in a perfect spot and in between the sun inside infinite darkness of cold space. It leads me to be inquisitive about life and its meaning. To wonder what more there is out there. To be more than just an observer but a seeker of knowledge. Even in the dark vacuum of space there I light, even life however the universe is constantly expanding so everything seems too far to reach. Almost unattainable but we reach anyway. That's what human nature is. To discover meaning in the meaningless, to draw interest to the mundane, to appreciate the routine of monotony, to live. As I

NONFICTION

observed I became more and more interested. The silence of the night is tranquil. I sometimes sit in the dark because it reminds me of being outside at night and how much I enjoy it.

An Interview with Dr. Hillary Nunn

Dr. Hillary Nunn is a Professor of English and Graduate Coordinator at The University of Akron. She teaches courses in the early and mature plays of Shakespeare and early modern literature. Along with her work at the University, she has done extensive research on Renaissance literary culture and cookbooks, and she is the author of Staging Anatomies: Dissection and Tragedy in the Early Stuart Era (2005), "On Vegetating Virgins: Greensickness and the Plant Realm in Early Modern Literature" in the collection The Indistinct Human in Renaissance Literature (2012), as well as "Home Bodies: Matters of Weight in Renaissance Women's Medical Manuals" in the volume The Body in Medical Culture (2009).

AshBelt's Editor in Chief, Kaylie Yaceczko, sat down with Dr. Nunn to talk about reading Shakespeare, how to keep the love of education alive outside of the classroom, and why snails may be more useful than we may have thought.

Interview questions and responses have been edited to enhance conciseness and for economy of space.

For those who have not had you in class, would you mind describing your educational background? Bring your academic journey from undergraduate to being a professor at The University of Akron to life.

Well, I didn't expect to be an English major when I went to college. I always knew I was good at it, but I didn't really think of it as a thing you did. I thought I was going to be an International Relations major because I thought I would get to travel to exotic places and, you know, do exciting things, but I didn't realize you had to take economics to do that. (laughs) That came as a surprise. So, I started to get more involved in my English classes, and that is when I totally dove right into Renaissance literature because it was incredibly exciting. I thought of it as being a thing that would be

always important in the way that we studied English. Some places aren't necessarily thinking of it that way, but that is part of what made me decide to go with it, aside from the fact too that it seemed that everything started in the Renaissance. I know that's not one hundred percent true, but the way that we think about literature is very much influenced by that. I thought about doing more recent literature, but I realized that was full of people. I didn't necessarily want to be competing with everybody that I went to school with, so I chose something a little different. I went on to Michigan State from there where I started to find myself more and more drawn to the idea of performing and how performing was important in Shakespeare as opposed to reading, and that made a huge difference and propelled me into thinking about how people thought about bodies themselves. That's where all the medical interest came from, and that's just fun and bizarre. That's why recipes and eating and medical study became such a big part of what I do.

You teach the courses in Shakespeare's early and mature plays at the University. What drew you to study Shakespeare and then later teach it at the collegiate level?

Shakespeare's never done. Shakespeare's studied, but Shakespeare is always debated. There are no solid answers in Shakespeare, and that, I love. It makes class discussions all the more fun because it's true that everybody can have a different interpretation that holds even when it's completely contradictory to someone else's. Shakespeare is different in every performance, and wherever it is done, it has a different meaning. The possibilities are really endless, and that is what makes it exciting for me because every class is different. I have taught early plays and late plays I don't know how many times, and I never quite know where a group is going to go. Yet, there is always something new and interesting that happens in the classroom because students bring something different to the text every time.

Many people, especially college students, can have a wide variety of opinions when it comes to studying Shakespeare. What is your method in presenting Shakespeare and other classic literature in a way that reaches students who are hesitant about the subject?

Well, first of all, adaptation is always a way to do this because people have been playing with Shakespeare since Shakespeare was first written. Students never quite believe it when I say that's a mode of study in its own right. That mocking Shakespeare is studying Shakespeare, and a lot of people are actually happy to mock Shakespeare! They just don't think of that as something they can actually work with. You know, when people find out that it's okay for them to write a paper about *The Lion King*, they often change their mind about what Shakespeare can mean to them, so I try to find what it is that a given student would want to actually latch onto. I think it works really well for students to offer critique of Shakespeare as well, I mean, Shakespeare is a presence that is troubling. He perpetuates a lot of stereotypes and has been used for all kinds of nefarious ends, and seeing how that can happen is incredibly important and letting students think about that angle is just as important as it is celebrating Shakespeare.

Which play has been your favorite to teach?

Oh, that's a terrible question.

(Both laugh)

It changes all the time! I like to teach plays that students have never heard of. People think they know *Hamlet*, and people think they know *Macbeth*, but people have not typically read things like *Measure for Measure* and *All's Well that Ends Well* and plays like *Titus Andronicus* that often catch them off guard. And they can be horrified; they're often horrified by these plays, and they're not sure they're allowed to be horrified by them. Talking about that feeling

of horror and that sense of “oh, this is awful! If this happened today, we would certainly not be celebrating this!” That’s where good conversations come up. I would say that those later plays—plays like *The Winter’s Tale*—for me are so much fun because they’re bizarre, and they get students to interrogate what is it about Shakespeare that actually keeps him current. Often, it’s those bizarre things, not the fact that “*Hamlet* speaks to the ages!” It’s that we have to struggle to make *The Winter’s Tale* work for us, but that can actually be really interesting.

When you say students are often unsure if they’re allowed to feel horrified, what do you mean by that?

I think that a lot of people think they’re supposed to say that Shakespeare’s a genius. They’ve been taught that Shakespeare’s a genius, that he’s the most important writer in English, that without him we would somehow be less civilized, so when they read these plays that are about awful things—where people who do awful things get away with these awful things—they start to wonder why is this okay where women are harassed and married off and all this kind of thing. But those things are not great romances in the way that I think people come into the class sort of thinking that *Romeo and Juliet* still is. (laughs) That’s a problem. They don’t feel that they’re supposed to notice that. The students often have that idea that Shakespeare’s good for them and that they just have to deal with it, like taking vitamins. It’s a thing you have to do; you do it without questioning, or it seems that’s what a lot of them think. In my classes, we always question these things, and it’s a little liberating for them.

Which particular concept in Shakespeare do you find stirs up the most robust discussion from students?

One thing that students always notice and want to talk about are the positions of outsiders, and who they think of as being an

outsider in the plot can change from year to year. But it means they do a lot of talking about how younger people are treated by older generations and what the expectations are for them. That often leads to really interesting and hot debates about gender, and so that's something that students will often latch onto and will want to address more on. Those sorts of questions and themes are really important, and they are a way that we typically make our way into the comedies. Sometimes, students want to talk about what the larger society should look like according to the structures of plays, like what works and what doesn't. That's a thing that's been happening more and more as students are thinking more about politics in general, and one nice thing about Shakespeare is that you can have political discussions that are removed from the kinds of anger that often happen in the rest of the world but where ideas can still be tried out. That can make for some interesting discussions, too. Plus, we get time think about things like time and parents and about that question of how do you make a big decision. Those are all things that students are always happy to think about.

If a student is looking to read Shakespeare and doesn't know where to begin, where would you say would be a good place to start?

My first question would be what do you expect out of Shakespeare? Because I do think that is the thing that is important is students want to read something that is going to let them have a better conversation at a dinner party with their parents' educated friends. (laughs) That's one thing. But if they want to do it because they're looking to find out about if Shakespeare can be funny, that's a different thing. So, the first question I would ask would be why do you want to read Shakespeare, and then go from there.

It's hard to know where to start, but I think if a student says, "Well, I don't know. Aren't I supposed to?" I think I would probably not go with a comedy because the comedies are really hard to read and laugh at. When you're thinking that comedies need to be funny, Shakespeare's comedies take some getting used to, so I don't think

I would start with that if it's really their first time. I know my first was *Julius Caesar*; I would not say that because that was just way too stilted for me, even though I love it now because it's far weirder than I ever gave it credit for. I would go for a tragedy, and I might go with something unsubtle like *Titus Andronicus*. It's hard to be bored when you're reading *Titus Andronicus*.

(Both laugh) I would agree with that!

Perhaps an understatement, but still! But it does get harder and harder because things resonate in ways that students aren't necessarily prepared for, and *Titus Andronicus* is one of those things. I would ask them if they like horror movies first, and then I would say to check out *Titus Andronicus*.

You've done a great deal of research in Renaissance literary culture, specifically cookbooks and recipes. Did you have a specific moment where you realized this was something you wanted to pursue academically?

It was always creeping up on me, I'll put it that way. When I was working on ideas of medicine, the idea of what you eat determines your health was always in the background, but people never talked about how anybody decided what to eat or how to prepare things. That, along with my hope that I would be able to find more things written by women, turned me toward looking for recipes. When I read recipes, at first, I thought, "I don't know what I'm going to do with any of these!" (laughs) Because first of all, they read differently than we think recipes ought to read, and I thought, "Well, I'll just make them," and then I realized that I don't know how to cook over an open hearth. This was not a skill I had developed in life! (laughs) You have to read a lot of them first, I think, to start to notice trends and to work with them from there, but once you start, it's so hard to stop because the things that people eat and drink can be incredibly every day and sort of boring, like how to make a pancake, or they

can be just totally overwhelmingly complicated and kind of weird. Some of the things people considered to be food, we would not consider food. Then, when you look at how people made their own medicine it can get even weirder because the idea that snail water might be good for you . . . it's not a thing you would find at CVS. (laughs) But you can still buy it on Amazon, just so you know. I didn't know that until last week! Apparently, it's really good for your skin, but I don't know what it smells like to tell you truthfully.

(Both laugh) Well, that would definitely be an interesting project!

Well, and that's another thing that's been getting to me lately is that it's not pretty. It's not pretty these recipes. These things that you could use for ingredients were pretty limited, and when something bad happens to you and you really need a cure, you try what you can try.

In your Shakespeare classes, you have shown students how to transcribe Renaissance recipes through EMROC, or the Early Modern Recipe Online Collective, along with the Dromio transcription platform from the Folger Shakespeare Library. What do you hope is the biggest takeaway students get from transcribing these recipes and doing this kind of research?

First of all, that they can do it. That these are not scary things. That you can read this handwriting, and you can actually contribute to making something that's important to scholarship. That's one thing I want them to get; the other thing is that I want them to see that everyday texts have value, and recipes are everyday texts. They are written by people who don't care about spelling. They're written by people who scribble things out. They're written by people who are just trying to save paper, sometimes, so they are writing really small in margins and using ink that they made themselves and actually trying to cope with an environment that, as much as it might feel bizarre to us, isn't really all that different than we are and

our is. They recognize a disease, and they have to do something about it. Their options of what to do are different than ours, but in that sense, they're really close to us. And I think it makes that sense of connection stronger at the same time it makes the sense of difference bigger because their options are certainly not like our options. I mean, they're not calling a doctor. They can't call the nurse line or anything like that! So, they have to ask people in their neighborhoods, and though that's something we do, it is certainly not what we consider your last hope as some of these are.

The kinds of treatments may seem, well, barbaric in some respects because you would be cutting up things that you wouldn't necessarily want to think about being part of your medicine, like snails, and you're putting them on people at high temperatures sometimes. You're doing some things that don't necessarily seem like they're going to be that effective, but at the same time, it does show that there is some thinking that goes into all of this. It's not just wives' tales, as it's often assumed to be, that there's actual knowledge in the selection of different herbs that's beyond what we know.

One of the things I love is students will be looking at plants, and I'm surprised. I learn that a lot of my students can't cook anything, so it can surprise me that a certain idea of what boiling does is something that they've never thought about before and that's step one in cooking. They learn some of these things that are actually practical in their world, too. Those are all things that I love about it because it both makes people feel like they understand everyday people a little bit more, but also, they understand how different the world is. One of the things that students always say to me when they do the medical recipes is, "How do they know when a person had cancer? They had cancer then?" They're impressed, in a way, that people had these concepts and know it when they see it, and we rely on doctors to tell us these things.

Have you ever tried to recreate one of these recipes? Was it what you expected?

I have never tried one of the medical recipes because that just seems a little . . . much. (laughs) I've made lemon puddings. I have made tarts. I made a cheesecake once that was really very good! Desserts are always the ones that I want to make. The ones that involve unusual cuts of meat, not so much. The cheesecake was surprisingly flavorful. I kind of expected it to be a little on the bland side because it was plain cheesecake and didn't have vanilla in it because people didn't always have vanilla, but it had elderberries. That was good, even though I had to use elderberry tea, but it still worked. I would encourage you to try it!

You do a great deal of work with the Literary Guild at the University, especially with the Upstart Crows and SAGES (Society of Akron Graduate English Scholars), which are the writing organizations on campus for undergraduate and graduate students. What would you say is the biggest benefit for students in having organizations like this available to them?

Well, I think there are a lot of things that are good about both these organizations. One is that for creative writing groups outside of class, you get to compare notes in a way that is a little different than in class. There's not the expectation that you will have to quickly go back to something and make it better and turn it in by a deadline, so you can absorb the things that people are saying to you in a different way. And it's the friendliness, really. It's the idea that you're getting together with other people from beyond class. Most people tend to be English majors or minors, but there are sometimes people involved who you wouldn't expect to meet in these groups, and that's really what's great. Especially during a pandemic, there's not enough time to actually get to know people in your classes and having organizations like this change that dynamic.

SAGES is actually really helpful for other reasons too, in that, students in grad programs often are not sure of how to translate what they do into other settings, whether it means they're wanting to go on for a PhD or whether they want to try to join a certain sort of professional organization. We talk about those things and work on taking the kinds of projects that people have in their classrooms and using them in other contexts so that they get a sense of what a career would be like and that's useful professionalization, plus it's fun. I love working with student groups, especially when they have wonderful officers.

What advice would you give students who are looking to further their education after they graduate from the University?

There are all kinds of ways to do that! I have to say that, well, the pandemic is a huge pain to put it mildly, but one thing that it's shown is that there are a lot of people who want to further their education outside of the classroom. I hope that is one thing that sticks. Just today, I have a Zoom meeting about early modern herbals that I can attend that is being hosted in Massachusetts, and I can go! Keeping an eye out for those kinds of local groups, I think is a huge, huge help, or not even just local groups but there are local groups, too. There are so many reading groups in the Akron area. Bookstores post them all the time and going to a bookstore is a great thing that I hope to get to do again someday! There are like-minded people out there, and if you are a writer, just keep writing. No one knows who you are when you submit something, so why not? Even if you don't submit, you're doing it for yourself, so keep doing it! That's the main thing that I have to say.

When you graduate, it's not the end. You're taking your skills and loves into a wider world, and there are always people out there who will be willing to engage with you on those things. That's what I would advise. Then, there's always grad school. It is kind of amazing to me that people will find these strange outlets in their workplaces

for these kinds of things. I mean, if you love to write, and you don't care what you're writing, there will be all kinds of opportunities for you.

Tatiana Avdelas is a junior at The University of Akron, and she is majoring in English with a minor in Creative Writing. Though she has been writing for many years, this is the first time her work is being acknowledged in a form of publication. She's an avid reader of many genres and enjoys writing fiction and nonfiction pieces. Her love for storytelling comes from her own drive to preserve her family's history. Currently, she is working towards the publication of her great-grandfather's memoir during the Pontic Genocide to not only fulfill his wishes but bring light to the tragedy itself. She hopes to one day inspire, educate, and entertain readers through her writing.

Lindsay Collier was born and raised in Green, a suburb less than twenty minutes away from the University. She is a junior pursuing a dual major in AYA English Education and English studies, as well as a minor in Creative Writing. She hopes to be able to pursue a career in poetry and fiction writing in the upcoming years while working as a high school language arts teacher.

Vinny Cucuzza is an undergrad student at The University of Akron, majoring in English with vague notions of what he wants to do in life. He spends just as much time behind a camera as he does typing on a computer, and even more time delving into the wiki pages of fictional characters (Looking at you, Darth Vader). He enjoys writing, reading, photography, and all the things he's allergic to.

Kayla Del Rio is a poet who writes an awful lot of poetry, but also creative nonfiction and personal essays. She is an English major at The University of Akron with a minor in Creative Writing. Del Rio writes a lot of poetry about her life, mental illness, and her relationships, but she also writes a lot of personal essays and is currently working on a writing project that details the camp she's been attending and/or working at

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for nearly twelve years now and how the camp has impacted her life as well as the lives of others. Del Rio is also a blogger, who writes blog posts about organization and sustainability, which are two of her passions.

Cailin M Goodrich has sophomore standing at The University of Akron and lives in Wayne County, OH. With a passion for research and education, they have dedicated years to research projects in subjects such as color favoritism and local history. They also grew up with symptoms of untreated mental illness, something that writing helps them process. They also studied several languages in elementary and middle school, writing a manuscript along the way. They hope to pursue a degree program and career centered around adolescent Spanish education and to continue to uncover the local tidbits of how Wayne County came to be.

Caroline Liberatore is a senior at The University of Akron, majoring in English. She currently works in a public library and plans to further a career in library sciences once she graduates. Although she has mainly focused on studying literature in her degree, she has been able to pursue creative writing more intentionally during her final year at UA. As a writer and thinker, she is inspired by the intersection of ordinary beauty and eternal truths. She enjoys studying the Bible, any music with a good groove, days spent at Lake Erie, and breakfast food.

Grace Maier is a senior majoring in English and minoring in Creative Writing. With a childhood love of the written word that has been re-invigorated in college she now hopes to pursue a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing after completing her bachelor's degree. Grace's work encompasses many themes but often highlights introspection, mental health, empathy, nature, and social dynamics. Some of her favorite authors include George Orwell, Jane Austen, and

Edgar Allan Poe. It is her belief that the written word is a powerful tool which shapes history for better or worse and the impact of all forms of literature, past and present, on our world is an absolutely necessary study. She hopes to continue dedicating her education to the cultivation of creative literature and understanding how the art form acts as a social mirror.

A.Z. Valentine is an undergraduate English major, who discovered their passion for writing as a child. They have a love for horror, weird fiction, and the American Gothic. Drawing inspiration from the old masters (Poe, Lovecraft, Blackwood etc.), they hope to reintroduce their favorite genres, and add their own unique flavors to the pot. Valentine enjoys long hikes on hot days, cooking, and drawing for their various literary projects in their spare time. They are currently developing a plot for a series of novels surrounding a NYC detective and his headlong dive into the weird and terrifying. They hope to have the first book of the series finished and ready for review by the end of 2022.

Elsa Maria Veizis is a freshman at The University of Akron, majoring in Biomedical Sciences. She is virtually involved in BAHA, OCF, and the Upstart Crows. Her favorite authors are Gregory Maguire and John Irving. She's been writing since she was little and hopes to get a novel published someday. After graduating she wants to attend medical school to become a psychiatrist.

Tyreese West is a Communication major with a Creative Writing minor and a passion for media production and broadcast journalism. His plan is to graduate in the spring of 2021. He is a producer for the University's broadcast station. Tyreese has experience using Affinity Designer, Photo, publisher, and DaVinci Resolve 16 of which he uses to bring his many visions to life. Tyreese also has a Social Media Management

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certificate from Hootsuite. Raised in Canton, Ohio, Tyreese developed his love of the camera when his mom bought him his first camcorder in 2008, that he still has to this day! Ever since, he fell in love with the art of storytelling through narrative. In his spare time, Tyreese enjoys writing, watching short films, and playing video games.

Katelynn Broadus is joining the AshBelt crew for the first time in her college career. An English major with minors in Creative Writing and Theatre, she has been balancing her semesters between school, working for The University of Akron Press, and working in a comic book shop. She appreciates the opportunity to assist the AshBelt committee before she graduates this May.

Jared Charlson is an undergraduate student at The University of Akron who is double majoring in AYA Integrated Language Arts and English. He enjoys reading, writing, board games, martial arts, and puns. His favorite book series is *The Wheel of Time*. He has a passion for teaching and for helping others enjoy literature. He hopes to become a published author one day and is currently working on a novel and a screenplay.

Dylan Morris is a super senior studying Philosophy with minors in English, Classics, and Creative Writing. They are also working towards a certificate in Linguistic Studies. They are Vice President of the University of Akron's creative writing organization, the Upstart Crows. They like to spend their time reading and writing poetry, borrowing too many art and exploitation films from the library, and searching for their next meal from a fast-food joint. They hope to be in an MFA program for poetry writing after they graduate.

Amanda Piekarz is a young writer who is currently a senior at The University of Akron, located in Akron, Ohio. Amanda has worked as the Fiction and now Nonfiction Editor for the AshBelt Undergraduate Literary Journal and as the Arts and Entertainment Editor for *The Buchtelite* at The University of Akron. She will be graduating with an English major and a double minor in Psychology and Creative Writing. In her spare time, Amanda loves kicking back with a good Stephen King novel, but her all-time favorite author will always be JK Rowling because Rowling inspired her love of reading as a

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child. Lastly, Amanda loves Ohio dearly but hopes to one day return to the East Coast to complete her graduate studies.

Kaylie Yaceczko is a graduating senior, majoring in English with minors in Creative Writing and Human Resources Management. Along with being Editor in Chief of *AshBelt*, she has been the president of the University's undergraduate writing organization, the *Upstart Crows*, and both of these organizations have been the most fun and fulfilling parts of her time in college. She has also fallen in love with the world of publishing from her time working at The University of Akron Press. After graduation, she plans to pursue her MFA in fiction writing, and until then, she can be found reading Shakespeare and drinking more coffee than any person should.

LouEllen Yon is a senior at the University, majoring in English. She is a student ambassador for the Buchtel College of Arts and Sciences and a member of both the Golden Key International Honour Society and the National Honors Society of Collegiate Scholars. She plans to pursue a PhD in Russian Language and Literature to become a professor of Russian Lit and work on Russian to English translations. In her free time, she enjoys reading and writing fairy-tale retellings, cuddling her cat, reorganizing her bookshelves, watching *Criminal Minds*, and making long to-do lists.

Along with the English major, The University of Akron Department of English offers five minors—one general minor in English, a minor in Popular Literature and Film, a minor in African American Literature, a minor in Professional Writing, and a minor in Creative Writing!

These minors complement all majors, and the critical reading and writing skills acquired through these minors will enhance any future vocation. Students must achieve an overall GPA of at least 2.0 to earn the minor. These courses do not have to be taken in sequence.

Requirements for Creative Writing Minor:

3300:457 Writers on Writing

**Two introductory creative writing courses (Min. Credits: 6.0)
from:**

**3300:276 Introduction to Creative Nonfiction Writing
3300:277 Introduction to Poetry Writing
3300:278 Introduction to Fiction Writing
3300:279 Introduction to Script Writing**

**At least one advanced creative writing course (Min. Credits: 3.0)
from:**

**3300:376 Advanced Creative Nonfiction Writing
3300:377 Advanced Poetry Writing
3300:378 Advanced Fiction Writing
3300:379 Advanced Script Writing**

Two additional courses in any form of creative writing or literature from Department offerings, 300 or 400 level.

Visit the Department of English at www.uakron.edu/english/ for more information.

