

**One Unforgettable School Year, Four English Department Members**  
**by Angelica Duran, with Kasia Ashwill, Ike Pickett, and Katelyn Taylor**  
**Spring 2021**

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**Introduction**

At the beginning of the 2020–21 school year, I remembered having read with acuity and compassion about pandemics, called plagues and pestilences across the centuries and in the literary texts that are the bread-and-butter of my research and teaching in English, Comparative Literature, and Religious Studies. All those months ago, I recorded my synthesis of just some of those in a 5-minute video, “[One Literary Perspective on the 2020 COVID19 Pandemic](https://www.purdue.edu/innovativelearning/faculty-expert-videos/),” <<https://www.purdue.edu/innovativelearning/faculty-expert-videos/>>, for but one of the many collaborative efforts that Purdue innovated as we Boilermakers all made our way through the practical and social challenges of the COVID19 Pandemic. Even at its best, however, reading and considering experiences are no substitute for actual experience, and each experience is unique. So, when the Purdue Archives & Special Collections sent out a CFP for its “COVID Stories” in the Spring 2021 semester, my response was able to be different ... and collaborative.

I shared the CFP in my Spring 2021 course, “English 301: Ways of Reading,” the methodologies course required of English majors and minors. Further, I continued my practice of completing the assignments I assign to my students, which motivates me to continue research and publication, to persist. So, this contribution includes the works of three graduating seniors in ENGL301 and me, records in prose and verse, snapshots of how Purdue English scholars responded to the COVID19 Pandemic. The context weaves its way expressly and implicitly through each work. Each includes a digital component, since that is how we operated at least in part, and each involves a text from the Purdue Archives & Special Collections, which we were unable to visit in-person, as all the students and me have done in all my courses in the 20 years prior, but which served us because of its can-do staff and long-standing digitizing work.

### **“Letting in STEAM” by Kasia Ashwill**

The first chapter of Genesis demonstrates the power of spoken words, as “God said, Let there be light: and there was light” (Gen. 1.3). Merely by speaking the words aloud, so the story goes, God created matter such as light, water, land, and creatures. Throughout the Young Adult Fantasy Fiction *Mortal Sight* by Sandra Fernandez Rhoads, the Awakened community strengthen their individual skills, called Bents, by supporting each other’s art forms. The protagonist, Cera, is taught that “tapping into our creative self opens our Bent in ways that simply training could never do” (Rhoads 117). The spoken arts are important not just within the liberal arts community, but also in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) as well because research into world-shaping topics are only as good as the findings can be communicated.

Curating writing proficiency showcases technical skills and findings that flourish through publications, educating the public in books or articles, and being able to communicate ideas. For example, in 1666, Robert Hooke, the first curator of experiments of the Royal Society of London, published a book called *Micrographia*, which demonstrates the importance of art in science. In this beautifully-kept rare text resource, a copy of which resides in the Purdue Archives & Special Collections, there are detailed descriptions and anatomically-correct drawings of insects that have furthered the study of entomology, as the physiological descriptions of the bodies are intimately exact. Entomologists claim importance because their concentration influences other areas such as forensics, food production, and even the study of evolution to name a few. Having the capability to eloquently detail what was previously unknown can have wide impacts and importantly personal ones, too, like establishing the innocence of a falsely accused perpetrator through the use of entomology in forensics.

The U.S. literary and cultural critic Jonathan Culler emphasizes how ecocriticism, or an “earth-centred approach to literary studies,” is powerful, as it is a scientific pursuit combined with literature (Culler 127). This approach challenges how one considers the environment as well as the direct human impacts on nature that have caused havoc on the environment. Different publications, such as “Sea Trash, Dark Pools, and the Tragedy of the Commons” by the English and Women’s Studies professor Patricia Yeager, shows how in literary studies the oceans can no longer be conceived as an unlimited resource. This methodology assumes that the “wellbeing of

the full range of life forms [...] is an end to which other purposes should answer” (Culler 127).

Bringing awareness to the negative impact that humans have on the environment has led to drastic changes, even one recently, when U.S. President Joe Biden announced a 50–52% carbon emission cut below emissions from 2005 (Sullivan, Liptak). This considerable change and other developments would not have occurred, however, if this ideology were not widespread. Without books like Yeager’s to educate the public and inform people about the effect humanity is having on the environment, the message would not be as commonly received. From this perspective, writing in itself is an act of awareness for the writers and the readers.

The use of literature and communication through writing or drawing allows scientific ideas to become well known and understood. Without the artful skill only learned in liberal arts, hypotheses could not become thesis, and thesis could not become law, so scientific progression would be stunted. Thus, writing and the arts are skills that all STEM majors should have, because without them, scientific progression is severely diminished.

Just knowing that writing skills is important is useless without being able to develop them. At Purdue, there are several courses that can be taken to develop critical thinking skills and proficient communication through technical writing skills. These classes can be found on [Purdue’s Master Class List of English courses](#), and specific courses can to take can be found on the [Academic Overview for the College of Liberal Arts](#). These Cornerstone classes will provide a good starting base for any STEM majors to cultivate communication through written arts, joined with critical thinking.

Both *Genesis* and *Mortal Sight* represent the power of spoken art, which impacts me directly since my career will center on STEM and since, with my holistic approach to my career, I plan on providing solutions to problems that are often hands-on and interactive, like developing the vaccine for COVID-19. For example, in my undergraduate research in Biological Engineering, I specifically set out to find mycobacteriophage, or viruses that infect bacterial hosts. These viruses can replace antibiotics and improve the medical field as each phage attacks a unique bacterium. Without the ability to reason and communicate, however, this important and potentially lifesaving finding would be rendered useless, because the project could lack patents or funding. Thus, continually striving to put the Arts in STEAM is essential in our ever-changing world.

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“Recovery with the Help of Maya Angelou and Others, Spring 2021” by Angelica Duran

“Into a daybreak that’s wondrously clear” –“[Still I Rise](#),” Maya Angelou<sup>1</sup>

I was almost written off  
 as I lay in bed those weeks,  
     (can weak be plural?)  
 unable to walk even with a walker  
 but somehow, I continued  
   to breathe.  
     I continue to breathe.

These weeks later, you still speak  
   quietly to me.  
 You must still speak slowly to me.  
   speak slowly  
   speak                  to me.

Julia reaches out for me, slowly, “dáme la mano.”  
 Then Nigel asks patiently of me,  
     “where do you keep the oregano?”

I am still here, still.  
   They are at last here.  
 I can breathe at last.  
 I can smell at last  
   the soft pasta to eat.

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<sup>1</sup> The Purdue Archives & Special Collections holdings include the following works by Maya Angelou: *Our Grandmothers* and *Music, Deep Rivers in My Soul*.

They would have prayed for my soul.  
 They would have.  
 They rooted me, past the pain.  
 They root me, making me dinner.  
 They rooting me, joining me for dinner.

I am often still now.  
 I still terror and fear.  
 But there stands Julia of the sparkling eyes,  
 and there sits Nigel of the British lilt.  
 So, I?

I rise.  
 I rise.  
 I rise.

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*Two American Birds by Ike Pickett*



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Ars Poetica

The COVID19 pandemic, its isolation, and the hours spent anxious at home led me to an engagement with poetry I had not yet experienced. My attention span was one of the first of my faculties to leave during the pandemic, and I could no longer get through a book. As much as I wanted to sit and read, I suddenly could not pay attention long enough to progress through a novel. Too much of my mental energy was spent concerned about infection rates, assignments I was neglecting, and friends I couldn't see. Paragraphs? Forget it. Paragraphs became these indecipherable blocks someone insisted I squeeze out meaning from. I would finish a novel and realize I had retained none of it. I could point to no major themes. I could hardly remember any of the characters I had met.

Before Covid's long haul, I had considered myself primarily a fiction writer. What was I to do if I couldn't read novels? Stop writing? I surveyed my options.

The brevity of poems provided me with a foothold. They kept my creative mind turning. I favored poems with urgency, vivid image work, and feeling. Where the real world had slowed down and dulled, poems pulled me along in their space. They showed me things. They provided a path for all my torrent emotions to flow. A two-page poem felt far more achievable than a full novel, and left me feeling engaged. I could finish a piece in one sitting and then move on to other tasks. Poems sat with me long after I finished them, poems by writers like Frank O'Hara, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Richard Siken, and Paige Lewis.

In this deep exploration of poetry, I found a stronger connection with the form. On days when I felt too exhausted to analyze, poetry gave me space to focus on the more innate aspects of the art. I began to see poetry in terms of its "non-semantic features" (Culler 75), like sound and rhythm. I read them aloud. If I didn't want to bother with analysis, I could fade into what the words sounded like together and how they felt in my mouth. This, in itself, had meaning to it. As Culler says, "It is the scandal of poetry that 'contingent' features of sound and rhythm systematically infect and affect thought" (80). I began memorizing poems just to have their shapes in my head. I wanted to mimic what I loved about poetry in my own writing, so I began to write poetry more seriously. I let it infect and affect me.

As for the meaning of these poems, I can only offer them in terms of their context. They were written as a "sort of act" that I was "performing, given the situation of the moment" (67). They are not poems about the pandemic, but it is difficult to engage with them without recognizing that context. They are a reaction to many of the feelings this past year elicited.

In these poems, speakers hold funerals for birds, swat away indoor rain clouds, and search for solace in YouTube comment sections. To me, they orbit grief and isolation in ways I've come to find all too familiar during this pandemic.

The final poem, the poem from which this collection gets its title, traverses an American landscape only able to be rendered through living life during this past year.

If there is any takeaway from this collection, I hope it is that poetry is vital, not as water is vital to a fish, but as a branch is vital to a bird. I hope these poems provide somewhere to land as so many poems have done for me.

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An Invocation to The Walrus

*After a YouTube comment for John Lennon's "Nobody Loves You When You're Down and Out"*

So much is happening. YouTube commenters are  
making desperate appeals  
to John Lennon's corpse.

I'm yearning like a fish on a treadmill.  
Bodies move around every day,  
never in the same way twice.  
I want to shock like the opening scene of  
*Midnight Cowboy*.

Teenagers are making out in the bleachers.  
An attendant comes and tells them  
to please keep their masks up.  
Why, God, why?

I've never been one for ceremony,  
but I'm a sucker for good invocation.  
Please, John, we need you now.  
More than ever.

I'd stand up on my chair, but  
in my heart I know that *nobody*  
*loves you when you're down*  
*and out* like the world.

## Big World

Leah leaves the window open,  
the window lets the outside in,  
and it rains in our landlord's kitchen.  
In the sensational wet,  
we swat at clouds with pot holders.

Our security deposit  
(the flaky bastard)  
flips an unhelpful coin,  
lets the puddle pour  
from his hat,  
and leaves—  
off to rattle his chains at the windows of other tenants.

Now, I hug my friends  
even when they're not here.

Leah, on day three of an  
Appalachian Trail thru-hike, has

a crawl in their walk  
a phone call in their voice  
a guitar sculpted from their strong arms.

I, on day 900 of  
feeling like a wet towel,  
check the mail four times in the morning,  
read James Tate in the afternoon, and  
wonder about D.B. Cooper's shoe size after dusk.

Most of all I miss  
and  
get wet in the rain.

## Two American Birds

I.

Current event: Automation has taken the job of coming up with new car names. The cars are a smash hit. They drive well.

The pale skid of the Earth, *Orbitum Depressum*,  
can finally be seen from the International Space Station  
with the help of special glasses.

I can see it from my desk, too. The brown lip, the broken handle.

I can see lots of things from here. I see

poems about Sunday school kids whose idea of heaven is mustard / a look into the water where  
we couldn't see ourselves so we looked to each other / the obvious peace of goats sat in  
moonlight.

Despite my grapevine to an opposite end, I am still thinking about your poor neighbor who must  
now construct model cars and name them like fish.

The computers have improved. They run a calculation—No more birthdays. We come to Jane's  
for nothing. I drop my envelope in a gutter.

Bandit, come back to the Toyota Muscular the Honda Jawbone the Ford Sinew.

This town is not yet angry in its anger,  
not yet ready to be cracked like the bright end of a shell,  
not yet ready to reveal something that just learned of light.

I mark our ages on the inside calendar hung by a crooked nail on my ribs.  
At only 23, I feel old. Somehow that's funny.

We sit in my car. You tell me how God never learned parallel parking. I await a punchline. It doesn't come.

You tell me if your teeth fall out you will write a book of poems called *Teeth*.  
You tell me that sometimes you dream your pants are soaking wet,  
and no one will acknowledge it  
even when you make them feel.

You tell me about last summer.

Freshly graduated from college, wallowing around the broken-back  
white lawns of Connecticut, you were dating a man ("A man!" you say).

His parents were the engagement ring type, the kind to retire to a poem about America.

It was the summer you tried to imagine an endless  
turning towards God  
only for it to come back to *Wheel of Fortune*.

"It was all I could picture," you said, pushing your hair back to your hair.

The fucked up thing was how close 600 was to bankruptcy, how close comfort was to anger.

Your dog died, and you shipped the ashes to a company that would make him into a bronze  
statuette.

Your lover, after his custom snapback business failed, got into making sand mandalas from  
crushed-up anxiety meds.

By August, he was looking at you like a telephone receiver.

You'd been exclusively wearing his clothes  
to assert dominance. His, yours, yours, his.

There in the car,

I try to be more receptive than his dial tone. Truly, I do.

## II.

Near the car. Summer vacation. A pre-teen is waffling around the cat skull of seasonal autonomy.

The college-brochure trees are shading axes in what was once old growth forest and is now the suburbs.

The pre-teen, you speculate,

might even descend a family staircase wielding his grandfather's gun  
like a plank of wood, imagining life as a reanimated corpse  
who hunts, who thinks  
*I know myself, I know death.*

These drainage pipes / these cul-de-sac elaborations upon points / these dreams of quick-dry paint we could drench ourselves in should we have to become houses.

The pre-teen moves

by the car,  
his major teacher in his hand,  
a cross-legged woman  
praying for rain in Omaha  
there in his hand.

When you can't sleep, you see your neighbor watering the lawn at midnight. He's taken to naming everything, the poor guy, even things that already have names.

Eyes looking at nothing,

you say he was an artist capable of forming those ruts made by the Earth.

Now he steals broccoli from the self checkout.

The car gets hot, and we're caught in the competing songs of two American birds.

In its cubicle, the computer begins making art. It starts with a building to crush Samson.

It slowly rewrites the Bible.

The birds eventually leave  
us alone with ourselves  
and the heat we nurture.

### “A World of Books” by Katelyn Taylor

Charlotte sighed and pushed her bangs out of her eyes. She had been working for nearly seven hours now, and her lunch break seemed so far in the past that it could have been the day before. The 40% off sale was testing her patience.

It had been two months since Charlotte had started working at Barnes and Noble. She loved books and wanted to share her passion with others, so this seemed like the perfect fit for a college job. But the excitement had soon worn away. Even though her favorites were young adult books, customers were often older, finding interest in James Patterson rather than John Green.

The crowds had finally dissipated with the setting of the sun, giving Charlotte a chance to catch her breath. She noticed a woman circling customer service, eyeing Charlotte not-so-inconspicuously. She seemed to be around her early thirties, and she had shoulder length brown hair. Charlotte pretended to be busy for several moments, but finally gave up and asked the woman if she needed any help.

The woman approached her sheepishly, and said, “Good evening, I was wondering if you would have any recommendations? I wasn’t sure if you were allowed to help customers with that.”

Charlotte responded, “Yes, of course. What genres do you like?”

As the woman lifted her arms, Charlotte noticed the stack of books, which she slammed down on the counter.

“Sorry,” she blushed. “I didn’t realize how heavy it was. My arms are numb. These books were in the section I like, young adult. What do you think? I haven’t heard of them, but they seem intriguing.”

Noticing the first book in the stack, Charlotte couldn’t hide her surprise. “You haven’t heard of *Cemetery Boys*?”

The woman looked sad. “No, I haven’t had a chance to keep up with new books the past few years. My jobs have been demanding. But, well, I got laid off from one of them. I would have thought this far into the pandemic my job would be safe, but nope.”

For someone who was initially hesitant to approach her, Charlotte was surprised at how open the woman was.

“Where do you work? Or, well, where did you work?” Charlotte asked.



“I worked part-time at Walmart, and I still work part-time at PetSmart. It’s nice working there. I wanted to be a vet, and this is the next best thing since people bring their dogs in.” She explained how she kept asking for a promotion to full-time, but there wasn’t enough money. At least that’s what the supervisor said. In between job hunting to supplement the PetSmart income, she wanted something to do, so she decided to spend a bit of her stimulus check on books. “Some may say that’s ridiculous, that I should save everything, but I told myself, ‘Sabrina, you deserve something nice for yourself,’ you know?”

“I completely understand,” Charlotte responded. She realized that her snap judgment of Sabrina was extremely privileged of her.

“So anyway, I was hoping you could tell me if the books I chose are any good?”

“Yes, I can go through them with you. *Cemetery Boys* is a must. Okay, let’s see what else you’ve got... Ah nice, *On the Come Up!* Angie Thomas is an excellent writer. You definitely won’t go wrong with this one.”

Charlotte moved it aside to see the next book in the stack, discovering *Love and Gelato*.

“Ah, honestly, I read this one and it’s cute, but there are better YA options on the shelves.” The other choices didn’t impress Charlotte either.

“Sabrina, would you want to go look at the stacks again together? These aren’t bad books, but there are more exciting choices I could introduce you to.”

Sabrina was willing, so they headed toward the young adult section. As they walked, Charlotte pondered her experiences compared to Sabrina’s. This woman was struggling from the effects of the pandemic, and she worked so much that she hadn’t had time to read until she was let go. Meanwhile, Charlotte was in college and working at Barnes to make extra spending money. She felt guilty.

She thought about how Sabrina’s job didn’t allow her to pursue her passion, while Charlotte had the privilege to work in the Virginia Kelly Karnes Archives and Special Collections Research Center for a school internship. She remembered how she saw such priceless artifacts, her favorite being one she worked with the week before. It was a small scroll that accompanied a document detailing the creation of the 1935 Oxford Lectern Bible. The scroll was a humorous parody of the beginning of the Bible explaining how the designer chose the layout of the Bible (Duran). She hadn’t thought that such silly things existed in history and libraries, let alone at major universities like Purdue. It gave her a new appreciation for history

and special collections work. Her cultural capital with literature was so advanced because she had opportunities for enrichment. Sabrina didn't have that luxury.

The pair arrived at the young adult section, and Charlotte pulled some of her favorite books to show Sabrina. She explained what the plots were like, and she noticed herself discussing the ideas she learned from Jonathan Culler's *Literary Theory*, a book she read in one of her classes.

"*With the Fire on High* actually has great characterization but also has a satisfying plot. There are problems the protagonist is facing in the beginning, as a high school senior with a baby, and being torn between caring for her and realizing her dreams. The end of the story very much relates back to the beginning, and provides a satisfying conclusion for her story," Charlotte explained.

"Well, you've definitely sold me on this one! Any others with good plots?" Sabrina asked.

They collected several more books until Sabrina had five young adult titles, including *Cinderella is Dead* and *The Inheritance Games*.

Sabrina also wanted to look at the memoirs, so they meandered over. Charlotte learned that Sabrina went to school for two years to become a vet, but when her mom became ill, she took a break from college to care for her.

"Twelve years later and I'm still on that break. At least I still have my mom, though."

Charlotte was impressed by Sabrina's positive outlook. Despite all the blows she'd been dealt, she still saw the good in her circumstances.

A quick glance at the shelves had Charlotte grabbing for grey and red colored book.

"*Hollywood Park* is an amazing memoir! It's about a guy who grew up in a cult and now is in a band. Their music is really good, too," Charlotte said excitedly.

"As soon as you said the word 'cult,' I was thinking, 'I'm in!'" chuckled Sabrina as she scanned the shelves. "Oh, *Hillbilly Elegy*! I saw the movie and really enjoyed it." Sabrina picked it up and checked out the back cover.

"Oh, I am so glad you are interested in reading this one. I know it's cliché, but it's true in this case that the book is better than the movie."

Sabrina was relieved to hear this and was visibly proud of herself for choosing a good book. Charlotte convinced her to get one more, *Broken Horses*, that was by another musician.

Sabrina ended up with eight brand-new books.

They went back to customer service, and Charlotte rang up the books. She asked, “Which one are you gonna read first?” as she gave her the receipt.

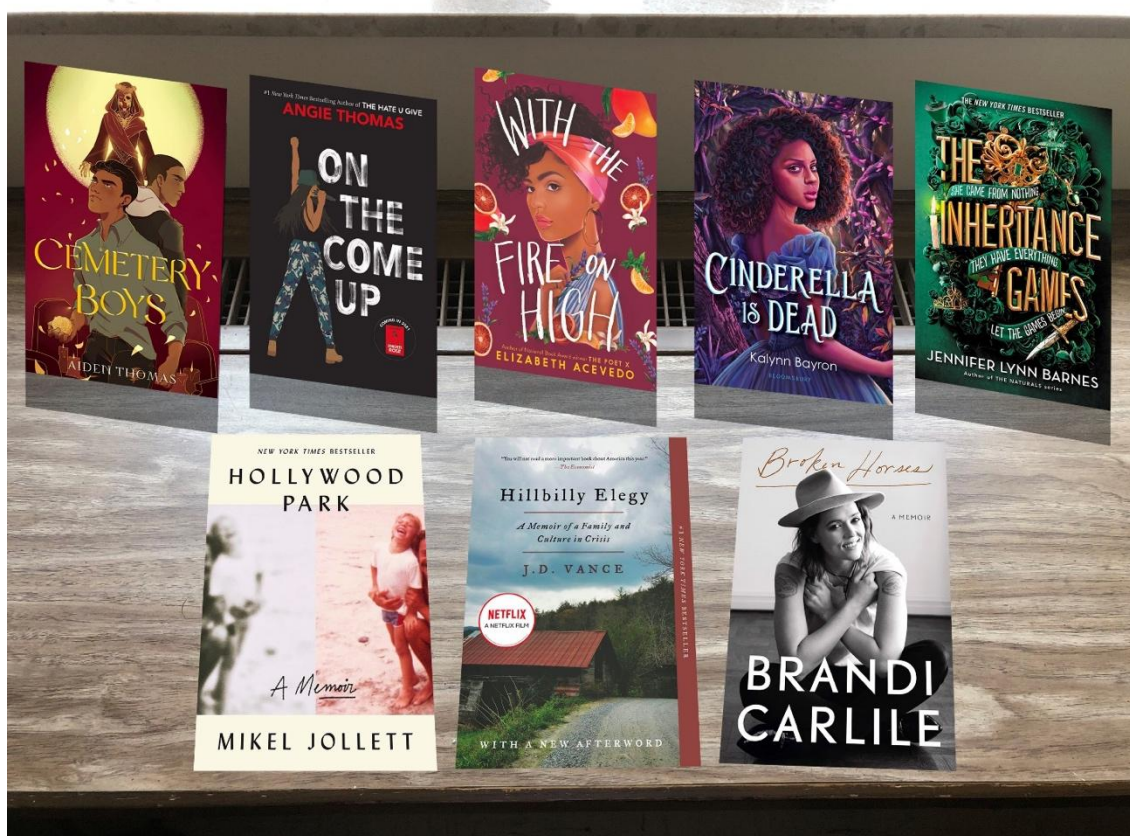
“I’m torn between *With the Fire on High* and *Hillbilly Elegy*. I want to see how it compares to the movie, but you made a convincing case for *With the Fire on High*! I might just have to flip a coin.” Sabrina smiled. “Thank you for being so kind tonight and listening to my life struggles. I wasn’t sure if anyone would be willing to help me, so I appreciate it.”

Charlotte’s heart swelled. This is what she had been hoping for: being a small guiding light on people’s reading journeys. She hadn’t anticipated learning more about herself in the process, but she wasn’t unhappy about it at all.

“Come back when you’ve finished those, and I can help you pick some more, okay?”

“I will,” she said.

“Bye, Sabrina!” Charlotte called as she walked out the door. She hoped for more customers like Sabrina in the future ... and felt more optimistic about her job.



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