POEMS
FROM THE THIRD ANNUAL
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**Broom Craft** (with lines from Aaron Beale)

“God has made of one blood all the peoples of the earth”—Berea College motto

There are a lot of ways to do what we’re trying to do badly.

Every material object has a story attached to it. We can learn about the people and cultures from which they come by studying the objects. We are charged now with making the crafts line up with the institution.
When politicians say Arts & Humanities professors don’t live in the real world, I remember

That bungalow we rented as newlyweds, teaching full time for the first time—700 sq. feet and a hot water heater that worked only occasionally. We thought the street was safe, until a neighbor slashed our screens with a knife, threatened to skin me alive.

The catalogue of jobs I worked to secure my education—spot welding on a muffler line, mowing the sweeping lawns framing fraternity houses, shaking cocktails in a bikini at a beach bar—were sometimes hard, but nothing like the hours I’ve bent over students’ manuscripts, students’ lives.

That freshman who threw up twice in the waste basket of my classroom before skulking into office hours. Did I think audience-based reasons could help convince her parents she should keep the baby?

That junior who apologized that she would be missing class for at least the next two weeks. Could I excuse the absence? --her mother had overdosed again, and she needed to return to Boyd County to take care of her thirteen-year-old sister.

Those texts from a recent grad, transitioning gender and navigating an autism diagnosis, feeling out-of-place in a Gulf Coast MFA program but knowing she should make the most of the fellowship she’d been granted.

I’m less worried about losing students to budget cuts than losing them to suicide, opioids, sexual assault, depression, food insecurity. Every day I watch them whet their words into something bright and beautiful and sharp enough to make their way.
Out of Mere Air
(for my nana, Marguerite Workman Hensley)

Turning onto Newtown Road
and threading the car like a shuttlecock
past the cemetery and tannery houses,
I realize all at once
that she is no longer in the world,
feel the void of her shape
against the darkening of early spring.

Weeks gone, and already she surprises me
in the most ordinary moments of beauty.

Pull a novel from the shelf,
and out tumbles a recipe for pork & bean bread,
clipped from Woman’s World and folded into an envelope
years ago, her script across the top—
You might want to try this one!
She has always hovered in the spoor of bread rising.

One July, she rolled raisin cookies
on oil cloth, let me cut the circles and fold them
into half-moons. Before bed, we sealed them
with a note in Papa’s metal lunch box.

I loved the story of how they met:
she was babysitting, covered in ice cream, hair frizzled
from a bad permanent. He lifted her bangs and said,
“I thought you must be pretty under there.”

Never one for pretenses, she bestowed
practical gifts, things we hadn’t thought to wish for.
My favorite: a coloring book as tall as I was at five.
I lay on my belly before the fireplace, gripping fat crayons.

Her house was a strange museum.
Curl the leaves back, and the window
wells revealed bright salamanders.
Slam the screen door, and mercurial cats scattered
quicksilver. Books, shelved and stacked and bagged—
hardback natural histories, feathery-paged
romance novels. We fought over
the elephant on the mantle, placed pennies in his trunk
and lifted his tail to feed them into the slot in his back.

Through folk art classes at the community college,
she learned the crafts forgotten somewhere
(...)

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between her mother’s early death and the Great Wars. Such alchemy in her hands back then—transmuting a wooden hoop into an egg basket or bright yarn into warm slippers (we called them Nana Boots)—her loom the vastest mystery of all, filling an entire bedroom, a frame of strings she played into tight cloth.

And so, she remains in the texture of everyday.

She drove this same road fast in a brown pinto named for a childhood pig, hollered, “Whoa, Lullabelle!” as she topped Pond Hill. In town, she knew everyone—a quick trip to Mick-or-Mack or Ben Franklin could stretch well into hours. But after loading damp sheets into the dryer at Cooke’s Laundromat, she knew to plait quiet back into the afternoon.

Seven-years-old, I stood on the sidewalk sipping an orange Slush Puppie in the heavy air. Leaning into Nana (though she was no taller than my son is now), I watched Elk Run glint and riffle through the middle of town, and it seemed the white sulphurs rising off the stream-shadows were one more thing she was weaving out of mere air.
The Gospel Truth
(Osbourne Brother’s Hometown Festival, Hyden, KY 2019)

The bus lumbers deep into mountains before belching us
dread-locked and inked, pierced
and wreathed in handmade jewelry,
clod in Chacos and Danskos and blinking
into the sun-cut, tree-scented air.

But by the time evening rises,
gathering the shadows in
from the base of the trees, we are undulating
paper fans and thrumming
behind our ribcages, recognizing
each tone of that high lonesome.
ENG 306: Introduction to Creative Writing Syllabus
(now featuring Tuesday no-contact hours dedicated to the instructor’s own writing)

I’ve always let them see
the highlighted passages
and scribbled margins
of the texts I prep
for our class discussions.

I’ve brought in the entire box
of rejections I received
the first year I submitted poems
and stories to literary journals,
let them leaf through the standard
“not what we’re looking for
at this time” letters.

I’ve shown them the before
and after versions of a story
from which I cut seven pages,
hoping they would understand
how to let go of something
hard-won for the sake of concision.
Clearly, I care--

so why not model self-care
in the critical practice
of dedicating time to art?
In a Gig Economy

We should measure our graduates’ success by whether or not they continue to live with the art. They might be working an espresso machine, designing a website for a local realtor, slicing gyros on a food truck, but if they can keep carving creative moments into their everyday—a jam session in a friend’s apartment, a few lines inscribed in a moleskin notebook, a photograph captured on a morning commute—they’re doing so much more than simply getting by.
This Is Just to Say: A Tribute from the Current Academic Climate of Kentucky

I.
We have terminated
Merit Pay
despite the
two books
you published
last year and the
community performance
your students
orchestrated in the
old theatre
so stirring
and well-attended

II.
We will still
require you
to submit
annual paper work
for Merit Pay
although
the funds
have been
permanently
reallocated
elsewhere

III.
We have halved
the MFA
budget
which brought
writers of
national promenance
to eager
students
Forgive us
a smoothie bar
was requested

(...)

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in the athletic complex

IV. We have assigned you to a committee charged with reviewing University policies.

Your writing skills will revise until rhetoric satisfies our goals.

V. We have terminated tenured faculty based on recently-revised senate-approved policies.

Absolve us Theatre is a soft program no longer viable.
Web-husk

Sometimes the university community feels less like a system of woven, invisible support, creating a flow of ideas and art and care that will nurture imagination, and more like a gossamer trap on which artists can become snagged, thinking they are sailing toward academic freedom.
Sometimes a Breath

“I’m grateful for hearing someone call me out on something and realizing someone was calling me in.” –Michelle Knapik

Sometimes a breath is all it takes to slide away from threat toward opportunity. A pause that fogs the glass for a moment then dissipates, leaving the image through the pane suddenly clear.
Daily Bread
(for Cornbread & Tortillas)

Let’s gather around this table and allow everyone to draw a chair up close. Let’s hold something warm from the skillet and remember how important it is to nurture and be nurtured.
Julie Hensley grew up in Virginia, first in the mountains of Appalachia and later in the Shenandoah Valley. She earned an MFA from Arizona State University before settling in Kentucky, where she is a core faculty member of the Bluegrass Writers Studio, the low-residency MFA program at Eastern Kentucky University. She is the author of a book of fiction, *Landfall: A Ring of Stories* (winner of the Ohio State University non/fiction prize and Everett Southwest Literature Award, finalist for the Balcones Fiction Prize), as well as two collections of poems, *The Language of Horses* and *Viable*. 