

VOLUME 2/3

POEMS
FROM THE THIRD ANNUAL
ARTISTS THRIVE SUMMIT

JULY 30-AUGUST 2, 2019
BEREA, KENTUCKY

JULIE
HENSLEY

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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

(...)

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 prominence
to eager
students

Forgive us
a smoothie bar
was requested

(...)

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.

BIOGRAPHY

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*.

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