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The COVID Papers: Exploring the Absurdity of Pandemic Living

SIMON HEBERT
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Reviewed and approved* by the following:

Alison Jaenicke
Assistant Teaching Professor of English
Thesis Supervisor

Carla Mulford
Professor of English
Honors Adviser

* Electronic approvals are on file.

ABSTRACT

This thesis is a collection of essays that convey what it is to be a college student during the COVID-19 pandemic: politics and potted plants, spikes and sports, deaths and deadlines. It covers primarily the Fall 2021 semester, when vaccines were available but cases continued to reach new highs domestically and abroad. Each essay covers a distinct but related topic, ranging from a literary magazine release party to theories of identity. Living through the pandemic means juggling these disparate concerns daily; the world doesn't stop because one college student is stressed. *The COVID Papers* seeks to make sense of a profoundly senseless moment.

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An Absurd Project: A Reflection

There's something ridiculous about me sitting here in a campus building, fully alone and fully masked, beginning work on my thesis on September 7, 2021. The pandemic has been raging for 18 months now. I have the window open and nobody else is in the room, but university policy (and some combination of anxiety and ethics) dictate that the mask stays on most of the time anyway.

My girlfriend Kelly is currently at home a few hours away in rural Pennsylvania. She's a student at Penn State, too, and tested positive for COVID 8 days ago. Likely due to her vaccination, she only had serious symptoms for two days; of course, quarantine is still required for everyone else's sake.

After her initial shock and gloom wore off, she sent a flurry of emails to professors: I'll be out for a while; will your lectures be recorded? Should I Zoom in? How can I make up assignments? Some responded quickly. Some less so. She's in a strange limbo now where she sits on the porch with her dog Georgie, knowing she is falling behind in schoolwork but without any work to do. Originally she quarantined in her apartment, but went home to her mother and her dog and her piano so she can practice, at least a bit, for her recital (which is the day that she gets out of quarantine).

One hour ago, I received an email from one of my own professors (figure 1).

(Will I still attend class tomorrow? What choice do I have?)

  Inbox - Penn State September 7, 2021 at 6:10 PM
just sent you a messa... [Details](#)
To: Simon Hebert,
Reply-To: 

COVID exposure information

Dear class,

I have been notified by the university that a student in our class has tested positive for COVID-19. I do not have any information about seating arrangements and who might have been within six feet of the student, but since our class is 50 minutes long, some number of you would ordinarily be considered as having been in 'close contact.' I am sharing this information with you so that you can be vigilant about any possible symptoms or co-exposures. In an abundance of caution I would encourage you all to get tested, as I will, and to maintain proper public health measures to minimize your risk and exposure to infection. (That includes vaccination, masking indoors, social distancing when unmasked outdoors, etc.)

I know we are all wishing the student a speedy and full recovery.
As always, if you feel ill or find out you have had significant exposure (a COVID positive roommate or partner, for example), please do not come to class, but get tested ASAP, and take care of yourself and your community.

Figure 1. Email from professor on September 7, 2021.

As I wrote this particular paragraph, a bit later in the day, my roommate Camille walked in. I complained (and laughed, but not enough to take the sting off) that I'd left this writing for 10 P.M. the night before it was due to my advisor. Camille reciprocated by complaining that her essay for ENGL15—a freshman seminar—was also due tomorrow (and was, like mine, a blank document). When I asked why she, a junior, was in that class at all, she explained that she'd first enrolled in Spring 2020. The ides of March arrived, and her grandfather died, and ENGL15 marched on. Camille didn't finish the semester and is only now catching up on her classes from that first COVID semester.

Do I blame Kelly's professors, or my professor, or Camille's freshman professor for leaving us out to dry? Of course not—they have other students, and other worries, and their jobs very well might be on the line at this university which has been none too amicable to faculty who raised concerns about the safety of in-person instruction in our fourth pandemic semester (and which refused to mandate vaccines in fall 2021 even as other comparable universities did so). Our

personal misfortunes are not—cannot be—their primary concern, no matter how compassionate or concerned those professors are.

The irony, though, is that during a pandemic, no misfortune is ever personal. Now, misfortune metastasizes outward in a six-foot radius for two weeks (give or take, depending how the current CDC guidelines).

This is the space in which I write my thesis: an anxious, lonely place between a few absolutes and many more uncertainties. Nothing is normal, but we are somehow expected (or maybe “forced” is a bit more apt) to continue business as usual. On the day that I wrote this page, 29 Pennsylvanians died of COVID-related causes.ⁱ 1,317 Americans joined those numbers,ⁱⁱ alongside 10,467 others worldwide.ⁱⁱⁱ Statistically, then, about 2 Pennsylvanians (and 110 Americans, and 872 people worldwide) died in the two hours that I sat at this table writing about them.

I don’t mean to sound morbid or flippant in these calculations; I feel it would be more insulting not to include them, to banish these numbers (who are, of course, not numbers but people) to the silent background of this work.

And so I return to my initial assertion: this is an absurd project. I’m a generally unremarkable person writing a paper because, despite all the death and isolation and misery, I’m still a student and I need a passable thesis to graduate. Grades are still due at the end of the world. So here I sit in my mask, and I write. Documenting absurdity is only possible from within.

My primary model of a writer who articulates the indescribable is Claudia Rankine, particularly in *Just Us: An American Conversation* (published September 2020), an examination of how

racism functions in Rankine's own life (and a sequel of sorts to her most famous work, *Citizen: An American Lyric*, which was noteworthy for how closely and immediately it engaged with specific news events). Rankine splits *Just Us* laterally, with the main text on the right-hand pages and additional material on the left; this conversational format is dynamic and highly effective. She writes about a rendezvous with her white friend and the realization that "even if we arrived in the same dorm room, we don't actually wind up in the same place economically."^{iv} The fact check on the verso confirms that "According to Pew and Brandeis University's Institute on Assets and Social Policy, in 2016 the median wealth of white households was ten times the median wealth of black households."^v Other left-hand material includes stills from a CNN news report, poems from James Baldwin, and images of Nelson Mandela's itinerary. Without these additions, the writing would be skillful—beautiful, even—but hollow.

Such colossal stories as racism or COVID-19 cannot be told by one voice; they are pandemic, and inescapably public. Even Rankine, a highly decorated writer and poet, does not presume that she can tell her story without commentary, clarification, and illustration; as a slightly less decorated writer, I'm inclined to take the same approach in this project. Though I haven't adopted the split structure, I hope my footnotes and figures (though sparser than Rankine's) will achieve the same effect. The simple truth of storytelling is that *the* definitive story of anything doesn't exist, but this story is particularly treacherous. Due to the broad range of essays, the glut of misinformation, and the evocative nature of the subject matter, I feel it is appropriate and necessary to include footnotes and figures not as supplementary material (in endnotes or appendices) but as an integral part of the final product.

The American essayist Eula Biss's layered style also heavily influences my individual essays. Biss's second essay collection, *Notes from No Man's Land* (2009) is equal parts memoir,

sociological study, and historical collection. Each of her 13 essays is a comprehensive study of a particular phenomenon—telephone poles, Barbies, apologies, and so on. These unassuming (and seemingly uninteresting) starting points become the seeds of larger cultural examinations, while frequently veering back to Biss’s own anecdotes and observations. In the first essay, “Time and Distance Overcome,” the history of the telephone pole becomes a nexus of exploration for globalization, lynching, and Biss’s own family history, all in a few highly readable and thought-provoking pages.

This multi-lensed strategy grounds huge, wide topics—covering vast centuries, and endless miles, and numerous characters—in Biss’s own life, reminding the reader that racism and gendered violence and political rhetoric are not abstract, distant concepts but threatening and urgent forces. For my part, I seek not to tell the entire story of COVID but my own slightly more manageable story (after, all I can’t tell any other story with any accuracy). Even more appropriately, many of Biss’s cultural studies are centered on her experience in a small college town. Hers is the University of Iowa in Iowa City, mine is Penn State in State College—but they belong to the same athletic conference, and they’ll play each other in football a month from the day I write these words.¹ Both settings therefore share themes of rash youth, callous bureaucracy, and all the other usual characters of a large American university.

In terms of organization (and subject matter), my thesis owes a debt to Bo Burnham’s comedy special *Inside* (2021). *Inside* is Burnham’s return to the stage (significantly, though, a metaphorical stage—filmed entirely inside his room, and released directly to streaming services) after a five-year hiatus. It is an absolutely dazzling record of both Burnham’s own psyche and

¹ A note from future Simon: Iowa won, effectively ending our season.

the larger ethos of our time during COVID. In a series of 20 musical numbers, he pirouettes from a satirical ballad of Bezos to an uncomfortably honest snapshot of his mental health to a manic dissection of the internet, all without pausing for breath. While I don't aspire to quite that degree of chaos, I do feel that *Inside*'s form captured the claustrophobic, breakneck stream of time we are living in. Just as Bezos and depression and internet insanity are related in Burnham's story (if not by simple cause and effect but by broad association), avocados and football mania and feuding protestors are related in mine. The COVID era is one of chaos and fragmentation, and I hope my essays reflect that. Like *Inside*, this thesis is also arranged largely in the order that it was written; each essay is situated in the moment it was written. Therefore, I have provided dates where necessary and I've avoided retroactively editing facts (or writing conclusions with the benefit of hindsight) about COVID or my personal life to maintain a real and visible progression through the thesis. Writing a unified, neatly-wrapped essay collection would feel not only reductive but dishonest—these stories are still happening, and pretending they are complete would be inaccurate.

It's worth noting that Burnham and I are responding to different eras of the pandemic, if they can be demarcated at all. *Inside* was released May 30, 2021; I am writing from September to December of the same year. The second major difference is that Burnham's work was produced almost entirely as a solo project, in terms of both production and stories told. I've opted for a more open approach—while *Inside* was primarily the story of Burnham's interior state (bounded by his skull as well as the walls of his room), this thesis will be slightly more exterior (in part simply because I am writing from the vaccine phase of the pandemic, when slightly more movement is possible). In any case, the story of the pandemic, whether the international

pandemic or the American pandemic or the Pennsylvanian pandemic or my pandemic, is one with a rich cast of characters the likes of which do not appear in *Inside*.

A final source is the *Harper's Magazine* "Index" series. Each month, Harper's puts out a curated list of statistics—figures and percentages ranging from "Percentage by which a U.S. conservative is more likely to want to travel to the past than to the future" to "Minimum amount spent by U.S. businesses on corporate swag last year" (both from the September 2021 edition)—presented in one unbroken list. No commentary is provided, and no connective tissue between the statistics is given. It's up to the reader to interpret, and if they dedicate the time to do so they typically arrive at a certain story about U.S. politics or global affairs or social ailments. My version, "A Few Numbers," is slightly less holistic and a bit more scenic (or as scenic as a list of statistics and numbers can be). I also depart from the strictly objective *Harper's* formula by using complete sentences and even an adjective or two at appropriate points. Instead of a picture of a country or world at a moment in time, I'm using the statistics as a means of representing all the little preoccupations and manias which the pandemic brought into my head (in this sense, this essay is probably the closest to *Inside*).

Ultimately, my thesis is a witness to COVID on a college campus, a recollection of and reflection upon the past 18 months and counting—a period which accounts for more than half of my college career. With the help of friends, family, photographs, news articles, poetry, and more, I hope to chronicle an unquestionably historic period. Like all history, it is primarily a story of people whose individual experiences may be small but certainly are important. While this thesis isn't a journal, it will naturally focus largely on my own recollection and interpretation with other characters, events, and ideas radiating out like the spokes of a wagon wheel—a wheel which will roll along a long and rocky, but hopefully fruitful, road.

How Did We Get Here?

March 7, 2020

We picked up Simon and Nolan for spring break. We told them to pack like they wouldn't be back for awhile. We ate at Fields restaurant at golf course and drove to our house. Nolan's mom picked him up because she was in Oakland anyway.¹

Mom started journaling on an iPhone app early in the pandemic (on March 22, 2021, backdating these first few entries). When I asked her why she did so, she said, “I expected it would someday blur together and we’d want to remember some details.” I’m inclined to agree; if you asked me what I was doing any time from the mid-March 2020 to today, November 10, 2021, I couldn’t give you an answer without racking my brain (or checking my camera roll and notes app).

Writing, for mom, then, is an act of preservation and delineation—quick, efficient, and functional.

She isn’t the only person I know who journals. Kelly, my girlfriend, keeps a journal nearly opposite in style to Mom’s. (Take that, Freud.) When I asked how she’d characterize her journaling, she gave a list of adjectives. Descriptive. Personal. Cathartic. Artistic. Emotional. Effortful. Unreliable. Her journals are chaotic and appealing; pages contain her hand-written musings juxtaposed with doodles, stickers, leaves, bits of trash—the texture of the day the page was written, arranged on the pages of her little brown paper journal (figure 2). Writing for Kelly is an act of liberation, a daring outburst of effort and creativity stored mercifully and permanently outside her own head.

¹ These entries are from Mom’s journal; I haven’t copied every entry, but those that appear are unabridged.

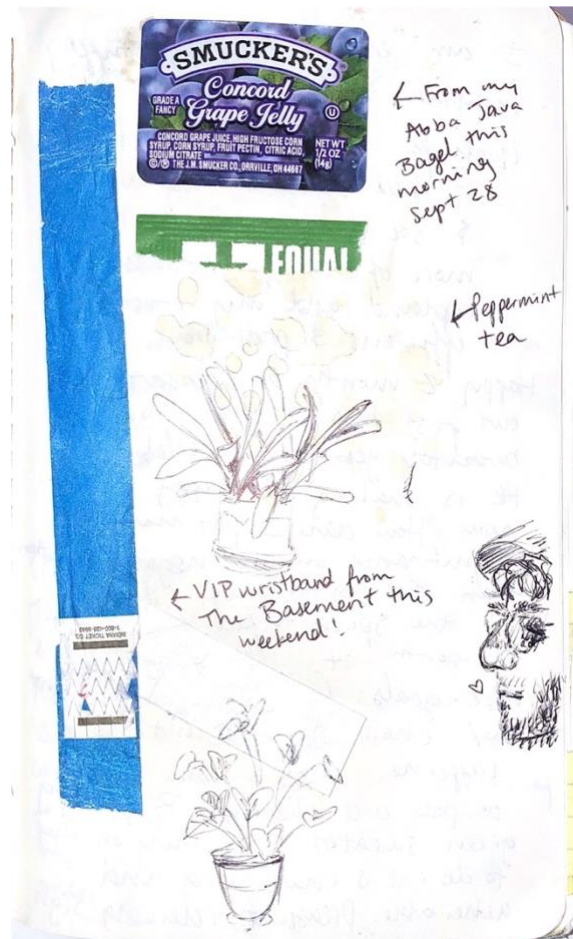


Figure 2. A page from Kelly's journal on September 28. Abba Java is the coffeeshop/food bank where we intern together. I'm on the bottom right.

Perhaps surprisingly, I don't journal. I seem like the kind of person who should journal; I'm an English major, and I intern for a coffee shop (where I frequently drink dandelion tea). I wear knitted sweaters when the air gets nippy, and tortoiseshell glasses at all times. I have a favorite pen. And yet, I don't journal.

I do, however, write essays. Though perhaps less spontaneous, I feel that my own writing serves some of the same purposes of preservation, delineation, creation, and liberation as Mom's and Kelly's. And I think that for all humans it is necessary to satisfy these functions somehow, whether by journaling or essaying or painting or conversing with friends late at night. The folds

of a brain and bounds of a skull are woefully insufficient to contain the depth and color of even the most mundane moment—and of course, this is not a mundane moment.

May you live in interesting times, as the curse goes. And may you create something beautiful and important from them.

March 8, 2020

We bought plane tickets for Claudia to visit from Thursday, March 12 to Sunday, March 15. I told her to pack like she might stay. She did not. :-)

Claudia is my sister, older than me by two years. (Henceforth she will be referred to only as Flo; Dad gave us all gibberish nicknames when we were younger—Claudia became Flo, I became Beege, and Julian became Peeve.) Her three-day trip home from Minneapolis became a three-month trip for the same reason that my extra week at home in Pittsburgh became an extra half-semester at home in Pittsburgh.

Flo isn't typically an optimist, but here I understand her failure to anticipate the scale of the pandemic. None of us understood what was coming; a virus that started in China was causing lockdowns in Italy, and we all had two weeks to flatten the curve!

I was in my second semester of college, 612 days later. I'm now in my fifth semester, and I graduate after my sixth.

March 13, 2020

*After school, Central announced they'd go online. The Benedum canceled the musical *The Band's Visit* that we had tickets for (we weren't going anyway, starting to worry about bringing germs to Randy's nursing home patients).*

Every year for Christmas Mom and Dad buy season tickets for the Benedum, the Pittsburgh theater and performance hall. Soon after Mom's concerns about Dad's patients kept the parents from attending *The Band's Visit*, the Benedum shut down entirely for the season.

At the start of the pandemic, Dad worked in palliative medicine for the Personal Care Medical Associates, a company that works in nursing homes and assisted living facilities in western Pennsylvania. He was already in the process of switching jobs in early 2020, but the pandemic hastened the move. We bought the “corona couch”—a small grey folding mattress, the least comfortable item of furniture I've ever had the displeasure of using—for Dad or anyone else that might need to quarantine at home on our third floor. On normal days, it sat bleakly in our living room.

Brighton Rehabilitation and Wellness Center, one of PCMA's facilities, ended up hosting one of the deadliest COVID outbreaks in the nation in the early months. At least 76 residents and one housekeeper died, and hydroxychloroquine was prescribed to hundreds of patients without approval. Numerous lawsuits are currently pending.ⁱ Understandably, Dad hasn't spoken much about Brighton. I haven't pressed him.

March 15, 2020

We grocery shopped at Target and Trader Joe's. Bought a lot of food! Julian had a fever and body aches, sore throat, tired.

Over the next week, most businesses moved to work from home. We ate well: beef stew by Claudia on Monday / Costco chicken, kale, and white bean soup and homemade bread / hot dogs and sausages / homemade Mac and cheese / eggs, toast, veggie sausage, potatoes, onions, peppers / Indian food takeout. Randy, Simon, and Julian tried KFC doughnut chicken sandwiches. Claudia and I sensibly declined.



*Figure 3. A picture Mom took for the Christmas card.
I'm on the left, Flo is in the middle, and Peeve is on the right.*

The COVID Golden Age: an extra week of break, a wonderful feeling of patriotic unity against an enemy which, for once, was not a person.

Flo didn't return to Minnesota on her originally scheduled flight, and Peeve (my younger brother, a freshman at Central Catholic High School at this point) worked from home since his school had gone online on the 13th (figure 3). My classes were online, too; Flo woke me up early on Monday morning to help with her slow-cooked beef stew. I attended my Psychology 100 class on Zoom as we cooked, and logged out—never to return—when my professor told us that attendance was now optional.

As pestilence spread across the world, inside our house in Pittsburgh the whole family was happily joined in an unexpected reunion. Mom was delighted to have all the kids home, and we all took turns cooking dinner—all we had was time.

I started watching hours of food YouTube and made wonderful chicken katsu sandwiches: chicken thigh skinned and pounded to a half inch thick, coated in seasoned flour and spicy egg wash (with 2/5 of every portion made non-spicy for Mom and Peeve) and panko breadcrumbs and pan fried. We bought little TV trays and for the first time ate together in the living room instead of at the dining room table. Dad watched from his corona couch, which he had inexplicably adopted as his preferred seating option. Most nights we'd watch *Tiger King*; Joe Exotic provided laughs and only slight horror at the various murders and losses of limbs—the fun, incredulous type of horror, not the smothering, choking type when you can't get enough air.

March 25, 2020

What is notable is the speed at which things were changing. The time from your classes might go online to that happening was a few days. The time from “pack like you might stay home” to Governor Wolf ordering Allegheny County to stay home except for emergencies, exercise, and food was 12 days. And we have been functionally already doing that for a week and a half (since March 15).

A rare reflective moment in Mom's journal (or maybe just a raw statement of fact). From March 7 to March 25, 18 days, all three siblings' schools went online, all three siblings found ourselves back in our childhood bedrooms in Pittsburgh, and the real life stopped.

Even as the world froze and locked down, my world continued moving at a nauseating, breakneck pace. Things are still changing fast, and also not at all.

Around this time I started growing potted plants.

April 10, 2020

Wednesday (4/8) was Randy's last day of work at PCMA. Simon and I went to Trader Joe's, Target, and McDonald's yesterday to grocery shop, wearing cloth masks made by Megan for the first time.

We left Randy home from grocery shopping because he is most exposed. Several of Randy's patients have tested positive, or likely. Pennwood and Southwest seem poised to get bad—Brighton (he hasn't been there in several weeks) has at least 50 positive patients, 11 deaths, at least 10 positive staffers before they stopped giving out information.

Julian has been running low fevers again.

We still haven't stopped wearing masks (and some people never started). Dad left his old job as Brighton imploded and went radio silent.

I recall commenting how lucky we were—that we had the computers and connection for virtual schooling, that we were all relatively healthy, that Dad immediately had another job lined up and we didn't have to worry about money. This was (and is) all true, but it's still hard to feel lucky during a pandemic.

Peeve didn't have COVID; in fact, miraculously, none of my immediate family has been infected. Still, at this point every symptom was cause for alarm and so the corona couch got its fair share of use.

May 25, 2020

George Floyd killed in Minneapolis.

A shocking moment. A painfully avoidable death. I still haven't watched the video; I don't have the stomach.

Was COVID not horrific enough on its own? Weren't enough people dying without Chauvin adding one more?

How much can we take all at once?

June 3, 2020

Went to George Floyd vigil, East Liberty Presbyterian Church, noon to 1, with Julian, Simon, Brendon, Patrick (Brendan's brother), Coyne, Terry (Coyne's mother).

Coyne was a friend from high school. We were never very close, but he was as friendly as anyone. When the protests began, we texted the old high school gang about attending. Everyone wore masks at all the protests (figure 4).



Figure 4. A Black Lives Matter protest in East Liberty.

I'm facing away from the camera. Coyne is in the blue mask facing right.

Coyne's father had died 3 months before on March 17. His family couldn't have a proper funeral because of COVID. I texted him a few times and he seemed okay, but you can never really tell; in any case, I couldn't muster the energy to add one more digital friendship to my already

overstretched web of connections. Zoom classes—psychology, symbolic logic, French, Shakespeare, and a few other classes that didn’t work at all virtually—had already sucked me dry.

At this point, Flo was not in Minnesota where the protests were more heated.

August 23, 2020

Took Simon back to Penn State (figure 5). Classes start August 24, about half are in person (at least partially).



Figure 5. Peeve sleeping on the car ride back to Penn State.

My potted mint, planted earlier during the pandemic, is in the foreground. It died soon after this. Later plants have proven more resilient.

Mom’s estimate was incorrect. I had only one class in person: ENGL214, Introduction to Creative Nonfiction.

The class was held with a voluntary virtual component, which many students took advantage of. While I understand their choice—whether they chose to Zoom in for health reasons or because they just preferred to stay home—it made for an impossible environment for discussion. It’s difficult to workshop Ryan’s essay when you’re at a desk talking to his huge digital face on the projector (like some modern Wizard of Oz) and he is still in bed in front of his White Claw wall.

Professor Jaenicke had to constantly readjust the lone classroom camera so it would face whichever student was speaking. Because we were seated six feet apart—extra seats cordoned off with safety tape—we spread across the entire room (well outside what the camera could capture).

Frustrating as it was, something about the class still stuck. ENGL214 was my first ever creative writing class, and here I am a few semesters later writing a creative thesis.

November 7, 2020

Today, Saturday, four days after the Nov. 3 election, Biden was declared the winner of the 2020 presidential election. The call came after Pennsylvania was projected as a Biden win, putting him over 270. Kamala Harris will be first female, first African-American, first Asian (Indian) vice president.

Also, my birthday! (Thanks for the mention, Mom.) My family joked that it was a birthday gift, finally balancing the scales from Al Gore's defeat on the day I was born in 2000.

I remember that, welcome as the announcement was for me and so many others, I didn't feel relief that things would get better. There was only a cautious hope that for the first time in months, things might not get worse. For the time being that was victory enough.

Not everyone agreed. A few days before my birthday, on the actual night of the election, I finally acted on an anxiety that had been gnawing at me for a few months. I texted my oldest friend Brian Sproule a simple question: Can I ask who you voted for? He replied that he had voted for Trump, and I, overwhelmed by stress, declined to respond to the text. Donald Trump represented everything tearing me apart since March: George Floyd, the pandemic, greed and anger and

ignorance. In one text, my best friend was subsumed by this rotten specter. After an initial outburst, we didn't talk for a few days.

I don't remember what I actually did on my birthday except that I found myself on the verge of tears that night, trying not to cry that Sproule hadn't texted me. Then he did: "Happy birthday, man." It was simple, but it was there.

January 6, 2021

Attack on capital from Trump supporters.

My family sat aghast in front of the TV all day, toggling through news channels as if any of them would tell a more hopeful story. Peeve cried.

I didn't have the stomach to discuss it with Sproule, and my own anxiety (not any of his actual actions or opinions) ate away at me. Suffice to say that January 6 did nothing to make me feel optimistic about the world in general.

What followed were the most stressful few months of my entire life. Sproule and I—inseparable from our freshman year of high school, lethal striking soccer duo, writing buddies, and always each other's closest confidants—barely talked at all (virtually or otherwise). None of my breakups came close to the magnitude of distress. After all, when I looked to the future, I couldn't see who was standing in front of me at the altar; but I was (or had been) certain that Sproule would be standing behind me.

January 15, 2021

Memere to hospital after seizure. Diagnosed as small stroke, no lingering effects.

January 25, 2021

*Pepere has heart attack while shoveling snow. Drives self to hospital. Doing well.
Lifeflighted to Bangor hospital 3.5 hours away.*

My take on the events of January, written as a prompt response April 10 for my second creative nonfiction class. Now, having visited Mémère and Pépère, it reads to me as melodramatic. In the moment, it felt perfectly appropriate:

My grandmother was walking when she had a stroke. Ten days later, my grandfather was shoveling when he had a heart attack.

Both survived, and both are doing well. Dad drove up to Maine at the news of his father's heart attack, though he couldn't actually see him because of COVID restrictions.

I wonder how that must've felt for Dad—both parents, energetic and apparently indomitable even into their late 70s, brought to their knees in the space of a week. Unable to communicate with his mother in what could've been her final hours because she was in a hospital across the Canadian border and doesn't carry a cell phone. Unable to see his father a week later because of the safety measures in place at that same hospital.

Dad's a doctor. He's no stranger to the elderly or infirm—he worked in palliative care for decades and is now a medical director of a nursing program. I doubt anything could prepare you for those calls, though, or that trip. He relayed the news to us clinically, calmly citing tests and measures that meant nothing to any of us. I assume this was a coping mechanism. I doubt he cared a mote about Mémère's new meds or Pépère's hormone levels. As I said, he's a doctor; doctors tell these stories to families instead of engaging directly with questions of life or death. I don't blame him for stepping out of the role of scared son for a moment.

We're similar in that way, I think. For my part, I waited a shamefully long time to call the grandparents—another way to step back to safety, to be a student who had no time to call instead of a boy who had never really considered that his grandparents were, in fact, mortal. I told myself that I was simply busy and deluded myself into thinking I was okay—they were okay, after all—until I mentioned it to friends on a call and noticed my leg was shaking.

Even now, I don't know when I'll be able to see them. The universe typically doesn't abide by one family's preferences. We've all done what we have to, separately: Mémère and Pèpère playing cards and going for walks (together now, never alone) in Madawaska, Dad returning to work in Pittsburgh 16 hours from his parents, me doing my best to stay afloat in school and internships and relationships in State College. Life goes on, whether we're ready or not. All we can do is live with the knowledge that eventually it won't, so that we don't realize one day that the last visit or call was truly that: the last.

February 2, 2021

Randy gets first dose Moderna vaccine!

As a doctor, Dad was designated for the 1B phase of the initial vaccine rollout. The grandparents—even Pèpère, who is deeply Republican and generally suspicious—received their first doses a few weeks before him.

Dad is a thoughtful and reserved man, and he doesn't speak or argue without due cause. In more recent months, as disturbingly high numbers of healthcare workers decline to get vaccinated, Dad has sent out multiple emails urging his staff to do so. Though the email is polite and helpful, a hint of frustration still manages to peek through in the long list of anti-vax arguments refuted with peer-reviewed studies (for example, that COVID itself is far more likely to affect fertility than the COVID vaccines).

I received mine on April 8, 2021. Also Moderna. After signing up unsuccessfully to receive surplus vaccines for weeks—even back in Pittsburgh, with desperate plans to drive home, get vaccinated, and drive back before my 9 A.M. class—a friend's professor found a tiny local drug store in Tyrone, a small town 45 minutes from State College that had an abundance of available vaccines. (This was extremely exciting at the time; now, I realize that the lack of interest in vaccination in these red counties should have been a cause for larger concern.) Nolan and I loaded into his Toyota, got the shot, and browsed the porcelain frogs and Steelers lawn

paraphernalia for 15 minutes to make sure we had no side effects. (Only a slight soreness, fortunately.)

For the first time in a long while, I felt truly liberated—like the time I first drove on my own, or my first kiss, or sledding as a kid. The feeling lasted for months.

Life kept happening after the vaccine, of course, but for a bit it felt somewhat normal. Whether things were returning to true normal or just we had just adapted to the new normal, the effect was the same.

Mom's journal cuts off on in the early summer of 2021, which is about the time I started researching for this thesis.

The Disappearing Professor

My class met twice before my professor disappeared. Really, there were a few more, but I slept through one, and for another he emailed us saying he woke up feeling unwell (and any symptoms at all were cause enough to cancel class). The course was Slavery and the Literary Imagination, a class spanning from Olaudah Equiano to Assata Shakur.



Figure 6. Email from head of English Department.

The night before what would've been my third class on Wednesday, I got a frustratingly curt and ambiguous email from the head of the department (figure 5). Mom and I speculated for a bit over text, and ultimately decided on a family emergency of some type—perhaps John Marsh was simply being helpful and taking one email off Professor Oliver Baker's plate during a stressful time. This was not the case.

Class resumed on Friday after another curt and ambiguous email from Mr. Department Head¹. (I may have slept late again and missed this class, too; what did Alexander Pope say about erring?) When I returned on Monday, Mr. Department Head Marsh stood where Professor Baker once stood—taller and slightly more reserved, but just as knowledgeable. If any explanation was

¹ Actually, acting department head who was called up to manage the English department for the duration of the true head's pandemic sabbatical.

given for the swap, I had missed it on Friday. I introduced myself after class and hoped that this meant my uncharacteristically high absence count had been reset.

A few days later I received a text from my mom, who typically knows my local news better than I do (even 137 miles away). It was a link to a *Centre Daily Times* article: “A PSU professor is facing charges for allegedly assaulting a counter-protestor at Old Main.”ⁱ

The incident occurred on August 27, 2021, in the center of campus; Old Main is the historic heart of Penn State which used to contain the entirety of the university and now houses the office of the president, as well as frescoes and busts representing the school’s history. On most sunny days, the lawn is covered by students sunbathing, tossing frisbees, and playing soccer and volleyball.

The counter-protestor and the professor were both attending a faculty pro-vaccine rally (though they were, of course, lending their support to opposite sides). Penn State professors were demanding that the university do more for staff and student safety, including mandating vaccines—a step that other Big Ten schools had already taken. Video of the incident shows a few dozen protestors standing, mostly masked and distanced, on the grand patio of Old Mainⁱⁱ. Many hold cameras, and a few have signs or flags (including a Trump flag, waved proudly). A speaker announces into his mic, “This event was organized by the—”ⁱⁱⁱ before being cut off by a disturbance in the crowd.²

² The end of his sentence would’ve been the Coalition for a Just University, an organization made up primarily of Penn State faculty whose mission (from their website) is “working for greater transparency, equity, job security, and safety in the context of the pandemic, and for the meaningful involvement of faculty and other workers in decision-making processes at the university.”

The counter-protestor marches through the center of the crowd in an orange vest, sign held high (figure 7). The professor follows him and reaches for the sign, and the man lowers his shoulder and pulls back, shouting, “Hey! Hey! Hey!”

Their scuffle takes them out of camera view, and the crowd backs up. One woman walks quickly away from the men towards a sign directed towards President Eric Barron: “Eric, please protect us.” The man with the microphone, at a loss for words, simply repeats “Okay. Okay.”

From behind the throng of protestors, “Get the fuck off me! Get the fuck off me. You’re the one who fucking took my poster, bro.”



Figure 7. The counter-protestor faces off with Oliver Baker. The counter-protestor is in the neon vest. Baker is in the striped shirt. Image from Centre Daily Times.

The professor in question was, of course, mine. After the incident, each side told a different story (as they do)—peacefully exercising a first amendment right, menacing protestors with the intent

to disrupt. Whichever story holds more truth, the result was a bloody nose for the counter-protestor and a few criminal charges for my professor.³

As I was researching this story, I came across another tweet from from an account which, as it turns out, does not just support the counter-protestor—it is the counter-protestor.^{iv} I am slightly less disappointed than the “Penn State Resistance” (whose Twitter bio, presented without comment, reads, “No masks. No mandates. No authoritarianism. No tyranny. Freedom only.”) to hear that the charges against Professor Baker have been dropped as of October 8, 2021.



Figure 8. Tweet from counter-protestor.

Maybe it was the fact that he had seemed so thoughtful and excited those first two classes. Maybe it's that my sister's ex-and-now-again-current boyfriend was, as of the last time she updated us, "vaccine hesitant" (which was the cause of that first prefix, as well as a fair amount of sororal grief). Maybe it's that the counter-protestor's sign featured a memeified picture of Donald Trump with the ever-classy caption, "Shut the fuck up liberal," or that the assault in question looks more like a glorified shoving match, or that there were 37 confirmed COVID

³ Simple assault, disorderly conduct, and harassment.

cases in Centre County on the day of the incident, or that one of those cases resulted in a death 6 days later.^v

Am I biased? Absolutely. But at least I admit it, and I'm confident that science and history will validate me, and frankly I'm too tired to feign some irrational impartiality at this point.

In any case, Professor Baker hasn't returned to class.⁴

⁴ Yet. There is an open letter circulating in the English department calling for his reinstatement.

Soak It All In

Like so many other Penn State students, I had three alarms set for early in the morning of July 30th, 2021. Football season tickets were on sale for \$245, and, though at the best of times my interest in football is tepid and my feelings towards crowds even cooler, it felt a worthwhile purchase. Due to scheduling quirks and virtual schooling, I am graduating in three years instead of four. Given that the 2020 season had no fans at the games because of the pandemic (figure 9), this was my second and final shot at a fun football season (since I spent my freshman season unhappily sharing the stands with soon-to-be ex-girlfriend). The COVID numbers looked—or perhaps only felt—hopeful enough at this point.



Figure 9. Fan policies for the 2020 and 2021 football seasons.

(New COVID cases per day in Pennsylvania on October 6, 2020, when the first articleⁱ pictured was published: 1,407. New COVID cases per day on August 8, 2021, when the second articleⁱⁱ was published: 2,123.)ⁱⁱⁱ

Tickets sold out in 38 minutes, but if you weren't in the virtual queue in the first 45 seconds you had already missed your shot.^{iv} Most of my friends did not get one. I secured mine, then went back to sleep.

The first few games passed relatively predictably; shockingly, 19 months of near-isolation did not make me enjoy being jostled by a sea of people who somehow all seemed to be having more fun than me.



Figure 10. Penn State Barstool's White Out post.
Make sure to read the blue comment from a Penn State student. The “PSUFlu” is the local nickname for any unidentified illness.

The biggest game each year is the White Out (figure 10), when everyone in the crowd wears white in a blinding, deafening display of biblical proportions. It is an enormous event, physically and culturally. Beaver Stadium (named after James A. Beaver, a 19th century member of the Penn State board of trustees and 20th century governor of Pennsylvania) is a behemoth, a mecca of football that can house a mid-sized city in its endless stands—in fact, the full stadium alone is the fourth-largest “city” in Pennsylvania with a population of 106,572.^v And the football swell is not contained to the stadium. Each year, alumni flock to tiny State College and pack into hotels, friends visit and sleep on dorm floors, and people who are years out of college in one direction or

the other act and drink and party very much they are in college. Every patch of grass on campus is claimed and populated by Nittany Lions who set up pickup trucks and TVs and grills and minibars to tailgate, leaving muddy scars when they peel away for home the next day. Joining the living population are hundreds of life-sized cutouts of Joe Paterno, who, sex abuse scandal notwithstanding, remains a mythical figure in the Penn State narrative as the coach with the most wins in college football history (the man has a fellowship program, a library, and an ice cream flavor named in his honor—Peachy Paterno, which I eat with only a slight pang of guilt). On White Out days, Beaver Stadium develops its own center of gravity, pulling in fans from hundreds of miles away; in some circles, it nearly a sin to miss the game for any reason.

The 2021 White Out game was against Auburn. I had fun—I swear I did. I am not some prudish church boy or teetotalling stick in the mud. I played Stump (a thoughtful, sensible game involving alcohol and hammers that I am surprisingly proficient at) with my friends, and talked good-natured trash to whichever middle-aged men were tailgating nearby and whose sons, daughters, nieces, and nephews are my friends. There were more people than I had seen in the past year and a half combined, and the sole topic of the day—the only thing happening in the world—was Penn State football.

Then came the game. At two hours from kickoff, we entered the stadium with our digital tickets. Staff waved us through at the gate and told us we didn't need paper tickets. When we tried to enter the student section, internal staff held us back and told us we needed paper tickets. We returned to the gate and argued with four different attendants who told us they were already out; eventually we found one who somehow had a few tickets left (but not in the same section, so we had to go back to him a second time and ask to exchange them so that we could actually sit

together). We returned to the stands, pissed and sweaty with ears buzzing, still a full hour early for the game.

The student section (which, recall we had spent a few hundred dollars and a few minutes of intense ticket stress and a few hours of jostling to ensure our spot in) was full, somehow. Maybe the student section attendants, so vigilant and firm with us, let a few thousand students slip by. Maybe they oversold tickets, like the airlines who assume that a percentage of their passengers will cancel and oversell by that same percentage—but who would possibly miss the White Out?

We stood on the steps, unable to make it into the bleachers, as fresh throngs of white-clad students muscled past us to higher rows looking for seats (as if we had chosen the steps for fun, not last-ditch necessity). At one point, a cameraman stationed himself immediately next to us and the backs of our sweaty, deeply unhappy heads, foregrounded against a crowd of 109,958—almost none of them masked—were briefly broadcasted to college football fans nationwide on ESPN.^{vi} (I know this because my step-grandma, Leelee, was watching the game comfortably from her couch in Alabama and texted me excitedly to let me know about my moment of stardom.)

None of us made it past the first quarter; Nolan and I left 11 minutes in. We called our moms to vent on the walk home, and I skipped the next game to visit my family in Pittsburgh.

Everything I Am Stressed About at 8:54 PM on September 28th, 2021, In Rough Order of How Urgent They Are, And What I Hope To Do About Each¹

1. I forgot to bring a mask and had to go maskless through the (empty) halls of my friend's apartment building.

Solution: Nothing to be done this time.

2. I need to read chapters 1-11 and 17-24 of Martin Delany's *Blake, or Huts of America*, for class tomorrow.

Solution: I'll read it.

3. I need to read Ali Sipahi's "Deception and Violence in the Ottoman Empire" (25 pages) for class tomorrow.

Solution: I'll read it.

4. I need to read İpek K. Yosmaoğlu's "Counting Bodies, Shaping Souls" (22 pages) for class tomorrow.

Solution: I'll read it.

5. I only have 2 pages of thesis written for the week, and I committed to 3-5 weekly.

Solution: I'm writing this (and I know I have at least a page worth of stress).

6. I'm sitting with my friends Andrew and Graeme, and I feel like every time I'm sitting with my friends I'm doing homework.

Solution: Don't do my homework? Do it faster, maybe?

¹ Written in one breathless rush, with no editing.

7. I'm trying to fix my sleep schedule, and it doesn't look like it's going to happen tonight.

Solution: Tomorrow?

8. I worry I haven't been fully emotionally present for Kelly recently.

Solution: I'll give her a back rub and a check in later.

9. I haven't called my grandparents in a long time.

Solution: Call them.

10. I've done barely any research for grad school (or careers, or fellowships, or co-ops) and deadlines are in a few short months and at no point will I have more time to chip away at applications than I do now.

Solution: Meet with a career counselor this week, if I have the time.

11. I feel like I've done barely anything for Abba Java, the free student coffeehouse where I intern. It pays very well, and my boss—who is wonderful and understanding—will never mention it (because she is so wonderful and understanding).

Solution: Try to carve out some time to plan a project for this semester. Execute later, somehow.

12. I know I've done barely anything for my internship at Viral Imaginations, the Penn State-sponsored public archive of creative work from Pennsylvanians during the pandemic. It doesn't pay at all, and my boss—who is wonderful and understanding—might mention it (but she'll also send me a care package of snacks and encouraging notes).

Solution: I'll power through my weekly outreach emails on Sunday night an hour before they're due, like I always do.

13. I think I might've killed my herbs when I repotted them last night, which messes up the hopeful metaphor in the plant essay later on.

Solution: Tell no one.

14. My room is terribly messy, to the point that only the bed is really usable.

Solution: Clean it (realistically, not happening until the semester ends).

15. I haven't seen my best friend in months, and have barely called him.

Solution: Visit Columbus for the annual Penn State vs. Ohio State game. Try not to catch anything. Don't get behind on work.

16. My sister is back with her boyfriend who, at least at first, was "vaccine-hesitant."

Solution: Not sure if I can do anything here.

17. I have no idea what I want to do after school, when I graduate in eight months.

Solution: See #10, I guess.

18. Especially given that I have no idea what I want to do, I worry about the feasibility of starting a family at some point in the future.

Solution: Switch from English to engineering? Move to a country with universal health care? Become a drifter, and raise my kids as freighthoppers?

19. COVID is not particularly close to finished, and at any point we could be plunged into another full lockdown.

Solution: I'd love to have anything to write here.

Fragments of a Life

I had always assumed that the condition of living was a binary one; you are alive or you are dead, here or gone. Moreover, I thought it was independent—you live among others, yes, but not truly *with* or through them, or they you.

Ironically, the isolation of the COVID era suggests otherwise.

There's a trend on TikTok (my current social media of choice) where young people recite their quirks and peculiarities, crediting them to their friends and families and teachers and exes and randoms who they passed on the street half a decade ago, in a sort of slam-poetry meditative mosaic:

I drive with one hand on the bottom of the steering wheel (at 5 o'clock) because that's how Dad does it, and I thought it looked so effortlessly cool watching from the backseat on long road trips.

I listen to Green Day and U2 and early Eminem because that's what Mom played on the way to school every morning (she's also the reason NPR is my favorite radio station, and why I still find their pledge drives soothing).

I hang art on my walls without frames because that's how Flo did it in her apartment in Minneapolis.

I eat peanut butter toast with honey because when he was little Peeve was so picky that that's all he would eat.

I read sci-fi because it's Sproule's favorite genre, and I adore Chipotle because it's Nolan's favorite restaurant.

I put noses in my smiley faces because Kelly thinks the noseless versions look creepy.¹

I wear bandanas because David Foster Wallace did, and he was my favorite high school teacher's favorite author.

¹ :) vs. :-). Grudgingly, I came around to her point of view.

This is not an exhaustive list. I encourage you to make a list of your own—you'll see that we are, all of us, basically just a fantastically composite amalgamation of the people around us.

The idea that we are truly and wholly alive only with others—that others are as much a part of us as whatever independent self there may be—is not, of course, my own insight. It appears in theology, in art, even in everyday speech.

The central tenet of Christian theology is that of the Holy Trinity: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, three persons, one god, consubstantial, united. And since Genesis 1:27 says that we are made in God's image,² we, too, are fundamentally communal beings according to Bible. (Current contentious relationship with the Church aside, that was one of the few teachings from twelve years of Catholic school that stuck.) Biblically, at least, your "other half" is more than just an expression.

By the same token, the perennial breakup motif "I can't live without him/her," is not quite so inflated or overblown as it may seem. The spurned lover could not (and will not) exist as he or she is without their partner. Their heart will continue to beat, and their lungs will continue to fill, but they will never again be the person they once were. That person died with the relationship, when the beloved left their life and forever changed their soul.

² So God created mankind in his own image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them. (New International Version)

Eric Clapton learned that same truth at the loss of his son, and so he sang:

I must be strong
And carry on
'Cause I know, I don't belong
Here in heaven

imagining that he was in heaven with his son Conor—as if some fundamental piece of Eric also died when Conor fell from the window in 1991. Faced with incomprehensible loss, he recalls that he “went cold,” and that it felt like he had “walked into somebody else’s life.”ⁱ Those feelings—cold and numb and not-really-alive—persisted for years after the incident.^{3, ii}

More recently, neurology supports the sentiment of so many mournful lovers, artists, and theologians.

Social baseline theory is a hypothesis—supported by psychology, neuroscience, and the lived experience of every person who has ever existed—that the human brain is wired for connection.¹ The journal *Current Opinion in Psychology* posits that “the human brain assumes proximity to social resources—resources that comprise the intrinsically social environment to which it is adapted . . . the human brain *expects* access to relationships characterized by interdependence, shared goals, and joint attention.”ⁱⁱⁱ Your brains doesn’t *allow* relationships; it *requires* them. It evolved with other people, and cannot function fully without them.

The default state of the brain (and therefore the default state of the person) is with other people. Friends and family are encoded into the neurons of that brain (and that brain, of course, is you).

³ More recently, Clapton has become an icon in certain circles for his inflammatory stances on COVID, even performing anti-lockdown songs with Van Morrison. He also wrote a letter condemning vaccine “propaganda.” Still, he maintains that “I’ve been a rebel all my life, against tyranny and arrogant authority, which is what we have now . . . But I also crave fellowship, compassion and love... I believe with these things we can prevail”—just not, apparently, by getting vaccinated.

Cognitively speaking, you aren't a planet with friends and family in orbit, nearby but distinct from the main "you"; instead, you are a Jenga tower, each block one of your friends or family members or teachers or classmates or coworkers or acquaintances.

The loss of a block, then, is more than upsetting. It is damaging, catastrophic—fatal, even. You haven't lost a friend; you've lost yourself, in quite a literal sense. It isn't a bruise but an amputation.

The relevance of all of this, and the question that must urgently be answered, is as follows: what happens when you remove the presence of these others (who we know now are not so other at all) for an extended period across an entire population—across the entire globe?

On my first night of college, Andrew and Graeme (who lived down the dorm hall from me) invited me in to play Super Smash Bros. They immediately became my closest college friends. Andrew is magnetic, attracting people to him like nobody I've ever seen, and Graeme's more subdued energy harmonizes well with my own; the two of them invited me into the fold of their friends, old and new, without a second thought.

In the spring of 2020, when we were sent home, I barely talked to any of them at all. I wanted to. I really did. I just could not muster the psychic energy for a call or video chat, drained as I was from endless hours of Zoom and the unexpected return to Mom's anxious care.

We all returned to Penn State for our second year for virtual schooling, but they were a mile off campus and I was in the dorms (which didn't allow visitors). I can count on one hand the number of times we made the trek to them during those semesters. Only now, when we're all vaccinated

and all live off campus, am I able to spend real time with them (and of course, this time is shoehorned between our homework and jobs and sleep and all the other obligations). By no fault of anyone's—least of all theirs—I still feel somewhat estranged from the group, a slightly-anxious hanger-on who doesn't quite understand the dynamic. This feeling is entirely new to me who was always secure in my friendships before COVID (or more precisely, before COVID lodged miles between me and every one of my friends). Relatively speaking, though, I still consider myself one of the lucky ones.

What of Laurie DuBois, my French teacher that first COVID semester who abruptly returned to France due to lockdowns? She continued teaching us French children's literature virtually across a 5-hour time difference. To add to the stress, she was pregnant; while the French countryside may be picturesque, it is also isolated—she did all of this with the barest support from the university, alone in the house with her mother and dog for months. In one email to us (which I am tearing up now re-reading), she wrote:

I wish I could give you all a big hug! It will be ok. You will learn and we will all be fine.

Bonne nuit et bon courage à tous,⁴

Madame Dubois.

I originally was planning to double major in French, but I lost the will after hours of stilted, impossible online classes. I give Madame DuBois all the credit in the world, but there's only so much one woman can do on Zoom. The fatigue was just too much.

Then there's Mémère and Pépère, my paternal grandparents who live on the northern border of Maine. Typically we visit every summer; we skipped the trip in 2020 because at the time it felt

⁴ “Good night and good luck to all of you” is the most accurate translation, but the literal translation may actually be more helpful in this case: “Good night and good courage to all of you.”

unwise to temporarily expose our five-person-school-and-nursing-home-going-family to two septuagenarians who we love very much. Then Mémère had a stroke and was rushed across the Canadian border (one of the rare cases where crossing was allowed) to the hospital. She told us not to worry, and that Dad didn't have to make the 16-hour drive to check on her. One week later, she called us again. Dad, answering the phone as a doctor and a son, asked if she was okay. She said yes—but Pèpère had suffered a heart attack while shoveling snow. He was rushed to the same hospital in Canada where Mémère had been sent. This time, Dad did drive up; because of restrictions on visitors, he wasn't able to actually see his father before returning home to go back to work. Both Mémère and Pèpère eventually made full recoveries (but of course we didn't know that when we got those first calls, and I was terrified at the thought that our last visit might've been *the* last visit).

Brian Sproule (known only as Sproule, since there were far too many Brians in high school when we met), who with Nolan is one of my two best friends, came precariously close to falling off my radar when we had a falling-out eight months into the pandemic: politics, pandemic fatigue, and who knows what else. He may be the person who knows me best in the world—and is certainly my oldest friend at this point of my life—and our fight left me lying awake and anxious in bed for hours every night. The thought of losing him felt like some cruel Civil War injury, lurching about without support in extreme pain. Calling felt pointless, and all the little physicalities which would've paved the way to reconciliation—passing him a slice of pizza, making eye contact and laughing at some ridiculous moment—were impossible. We were distant in every sense, and all interactions were mediated by a cold screen.

And I tell these stories from a place of privilege, as someone fortunate enough that none of my family, friends, or even acquaintances have passed away. The more solemn and final version of

my question is this: how many shards of death rippled out from the 5 million complete deaths that COVID has wrought thus far? How much has Dad been affected, as a doctor who throughout the pandemic has tended to elderly patients with a high mortality rate? I'm sure he could write an index of names of the lost, and so much death leeches from everyone nearby—no matter how strong or stoic or well-trained he is. What of my high school, one of whose star alumni—a huge, affable boy nicknamed Juice who was a junior on the track and field team when I was a freshman—passed away from COVID complications?^{iv} What of his classmates, his friends, his mother, and his father?⁵

Perhaps the death toll for COVID—as incomprehensible as the true death toll is—also includes innumerable intangible fragments of lives which were cut short.

Or perhaps not. Where there's life, there's hope; even the tiniest bit of life can sprout hope as a flower growing in a sidewalk crack.

Even as I approach the last semester of my college career, I'm struck by the realization that as truncated a time as Andrew and Graeme and Kevin and Cate and Greg and Erik and Danika and I have together, there are moments which will long endure; yelling at Andrew and Erik over *Smash* in the late hours of the night, listening to Graeme over-explain horror movies, watching Cate and Greg become a couple, tailgating with Danika and her family. I'm writing this essay next to Kevin, my most reliable study partner, and the rest are on the way. These are jewels of memory that I will hold close to my heart forever.

⁵ It occurs to me now that Juice was younger when he died than I am as I write this.

Back in March 2020, no matter how much we wanted to, we students of FR201 couldn't hug Madame DuBois from across an ocean (plus 6 feet) apart. But a few weeks ago when I was walking home, I passed a woman in a crosswalk in State College; I didn't recognize her at first because she was pushing a stroller. I ran back across the street and finally got that hug. Her daughter, Adélie, is beautiful.

We visited Mémère and Pépère in July 2021, packing into the family minivan with dad at the wheel. I made sure to visit all the Madawaska classics, from Tastee-Freez (the only ice cream shop in town, with surprisingly good pulled pork sandwiches) to Marden's (a combination furniture store/thrift shop/grocery store where everything is years out of date). Pep took us for a ride in his old GTO, and we ate Mémère's meals around the firepit out back.

As for Sproule, I've been sending him this thesis as I write it—he provides encouragement and insight every time. I'm visiting him at Ohio State in 3 days for the annual OSU/PSU beatdown. Neither one of us cares much about the game.

Growing in Glass Bottles

The spring of 2021 was the most euphoric period I can recall (in recent memory, at least—the days leading up to Christmas in my younger days may be the only rival). It was my first spring at college, since the previous year I was sent home rather abruptly (figure 11)—and at that point, guidelines on outdoor activities and masks and all other safety precautions were at their absolute murkiest so I barely left the house.

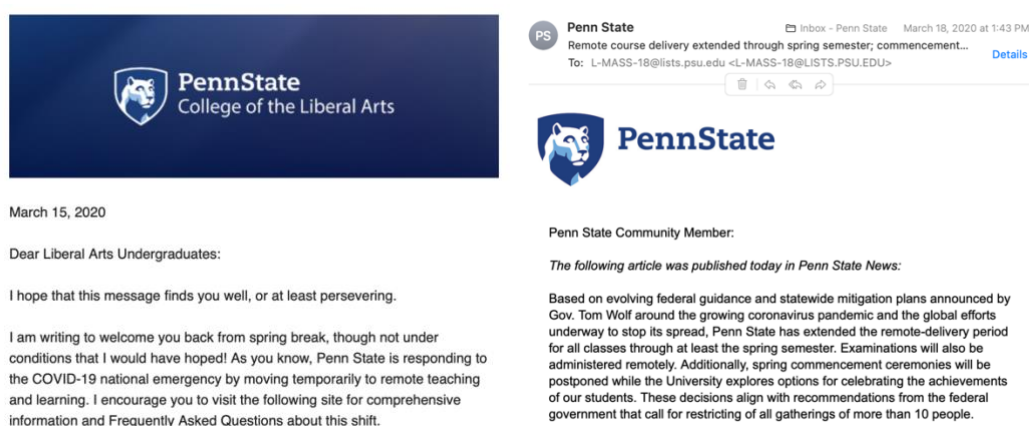


Figure 11. Emails sent from Penn State about remote instruction.

The move from temporary remote teaching to a full remote semester was three days.

After the splotchy lighting of my childhood bedroom and the smothering beigeness of my dorm and the slushy Pennsylvania winter, the spring (spent in State College, but with all virtual classes) was luminescent. I was absolutely dazzled by the clear blue sky—and when it rained, I'd splash in the puddles with my friends. I watched a family of bunnies down the street as they grew up. They'd peek out from under the hedges, staring at me until their courage failed and they hopping to safety under the green canopy. (There was often a baby the size of my fist that would sniff a bit longer before retreating—realistically, many young bunnies from different bunny generations. But I like to imagine that it was one timeless baby bunny that looked forward to my visits.) Most of all, I watched the plants.

I'm not typically given to hyperbole, but in this case it feels appropriate: the grass was a carpet of the finest yarn, soft and fragrant and comfortable. Dorothy's poppy field comes to mind. I stole a picnic blanket from Mom in Pittsburgh so that I could attend classes and read and nap outside of Old Main instead of in my dorm room; the wifi on the lawn was awful, but I was willing to abide crackly Zooms and a drained laptop battery for the sunbeams. One day, I spent so long lounging unmoving on the grass that I acquired a brilliant, toasty red sunburn on the entire right half (and only the right half) of my face and body.



Figure 12. The narcissus flowers outside my dorm.

In hindsight, rather mundane. In the moment, nearly spiritual.

There was a bed of yellow daffodils outside my dorm window so vibrant and joyful that I had no choice but to snap pictures and send them to my boss, my friends, my mom (figure 12). I watched them bud, then bloom, then somehow retain their majesty even as they faded and dried.

I was not alone in my newfound appreciation, apparently. We never cared much for the greenery before, but the windows separating us made it that much more tantalizing—distance makes the heart grow fonder, I suppose. And so the pandemic led to an era of botanical fascination the likes of which would make Wordsworth and Shelly proud. Of course, as humans and Americans, we weren't content just to look and admire—we had to acquire, and own, and bring the plants under our own control.



Figure 13. Google search trends for "gardening" and "houseplants."
Note the peaks in spring 2020.

The *Philadelphia Inquirer* reported in September 2020 that nurseries were experiencing a boom in sales.ⁱ In March 2021, *Vogue* published a piece on houseplants and self-care (and how plants are the ideal “quarantine buddies”).ⁱⁱ In June 2021, *Marketplace* asked whether all the plants people bought in lockdown were still alive.ⁱⁱⁱ (Conclusions? Usually not, but the spirit and the sales persist.)

For my part, I followed @ronfinleyhq and @houseplantclub and @blackmenwithgardens on Instagram, and eventually started my own herbs. (It went poorly—the bushy parsley from grandma wilted no matter how I watered it, and my rosemary molded a week after repotting. I have since bought new ones, which have at least survived.)

Over the summer, however, I started growing avocado plants. As it turns out, it's not all that difficult—I learned from a 45-second video.

1. Remove the seed from your avocado without splitting it (the seed) with your knife. Scoop it with a spoon, or just push it out of the halved avocado with your thumbs. Store bought avocados are fine—no need for anything organic or expensive.
2. Soak the seed in water overnight to soften the brown skin. Peel it in the morning.
3. Wrap the naked seed in a damp paper towel and place it in a sealed plastic container. (I used a takeout container that once held wonton soup.) Put the container on a sunny windowsill.
4. In a few weeks, a root will sprout. Remove the paper towel. Place the seed on top of a bottle filled to the brim with water, making sure the root is submerged, and place the bottle in that same sunny spot. (If you live in the basement of a student apartment, use the grow lights you stole from your brother's science project back home in Pittsburgh.)
5. Watch as your avocado plant grows. They're quite hearty.

The scientific effects of plants on well-being are well documented.

Leisure in green spaces has been shown to create feelings of relaxation, autonomy, and self-reflection, and visiting botanical gardens lowers blood pressure and heart rate.^{iv} Gardening has a myriad of benefits for various specific groups: psychiatric patients benefit from the smells, colors, and feel of the soil. Alzheimer's patients sleep better. Juvenile prisoners develop a positive self-image, and children in classrooms exhibit improved concentration.^v

We can narrow our study even further, from forests and community gardens to houseplants (or, as the academics describe it, move from landscapes to interiorscapes). Indoor plants enhance

attention, lower stress, and lead to higher job satisfaction—hence the snake plant by the water cooler phenomenon.^{vi}

And more specific still: plants at home during COVID-19 lockdowns. Three quarters of houseplant owners interviewed reported that having plants inside the home positively affected their moods, while negative feelings prevailed among those with few or no indoor plants.^{vii} Most respondents also noted that they spent more time tending their plants than they did pre-pandemic, and they also would have preferred to have more plants still.^{viii}

Some scientists are suspicious of the experiment design or the quality of the data gathered in such studies, and in any case it is virtually impossible to prove causation in studies on well-being—but if you surround yourself with enough correlation, something will eventually work, right?

After staring at this page for 15 minutes with no useful thoughts—lethargy and stress have stolen the night—I decided to repot my herbs. I’ve never done it before, but I’m assuming that they’ll be fine. After all, I survived my repottings from my dorm to my childhood home (March 2020, the onset of COVID) and back to my dorm (August 2020, fall semester) and back to my childhood home (May 2021, summer break) and finally to an off-campus apartment (June 2021).

My (extremely patient and supportive) girlfriend joined me on the porch at I brought the plants up from the grow light in my room and started finicking—teasing apart the rootbound mess that emerged from the too-small oregano pot, pruning the scraggly mint plant down to almost nothing, taking cuttings from the rosemary to propagate into new cloned plants. (Did you know that cinnamon helps cuttings root more quickly? Kelly did.)

There's dirt under my fingernails, and my hands smell earthy now as I type. Is my blood pressure lower, or my self-image improved, or am I less stressed? Unsure; but at least I got another half page out of it.

All the aforementioned studies about the link between plants and mental health—while important and correct—fail to explain what exactly makes potted plants quite so compelling. (Such are the limits of science.)

Beyond the obvious tote-bag-wearing, green-tea-drinking, subtly-better-than-you aesthetic that potted plants impart unto their owners, the potted plant has a slightly more teleological appeal. A plant is a living thing, beautiful and fragile and simple (though not undemanding).

There's also something tragic, even lonely, about the potted plant; it's been plucked from the ground in which it sprouted, isolated from the ecosystem in which it evolved, suddenly restricted to a pot or can or bottle.

Deprived of the gaeaic abundance of soil and nutrients and water, the potted plant's survival depends solely on its owner; they must feed and water it, prune the rot, check the roots, give it proper light. It's a delicate balance, but it can be done. There's an immense satisfaction in seeing a new sprout emerge, and knowing that you—you, messy, anxious, lonely, haven't-slept-in-a-week you—not only kept it alive, but helped it to thrive in its little pot.

And so, as I watched the world go by from inside my window, separated from my friends and my healthy central-Pennsylvanian soil, I started growing potted plants.

But back to my avocados in particular. Perhaps I've been too subtle—they are my pride and joy, and though I can never quite trace my way back to the source of inspiration, I'm fairly certain that in this case my need to boast came first and the metaphors followed. My avocados are housed in empty wine bottles—prettier than plastic soda bottles, and less prone to tipping (and not exactly scarce in a college town). They grow fast and strong; for a fruit that naturally grows in open fields in Mexico or California, mine are surprisingly healthy next to my desk.



Figure 14. My avocado plants at four months old.

The avocados grow in only water, no soil at all (which allows me to check the branching and splitting of the roots every morning through the thick, clear glass of the bottle). As it turns out, the large seed is itself sufficient to nourish the plant for quite some time before growth stalls and the plants eventually gangle out of existence. As it turns out, there's plenty of growth that can happen in a glass bottle; my plants have 9 and 11 leaves—not quite a California redwood, but close. The third was left in a car on a sunny day during one of my many repottings around Pennsylvania, and the leaves were baked to a crisp. I trimmed it down, and it is beginning to sprout again.

Of course, so long as they remain in the bottles they'll never bear fruit. Someday far from today, I'll transplant them into a garden or field somewhere; I feel only a slight twinge of sadness at the prospect of losing the most dependable and undemanding of my pandemic companions. I've seen the roots and tended the leaves, now, and I understand the avocados; they deserve to leave my bedroom, leaves stretching up to the sun and roots reaching ever deeper in the rich soil.

Sign of the Times

My most extensive extracurricular engagement at Penn State is as editor-in-chief of *Kalliope*, the student literary magazine (to my career counselor who asked what I planned to do with an English and history degree, I say: I will simply edit student magazines until the day I die—a realistic and highly profitable option). It's a warm little publication, and manning the helm has been one of the great joys of my college experience—not the least perk of which is the editor's office where I am currently sitting and writing, surrounded by copies of *Kalliope* past.

A few days ago, on October 10th, 2021, we hosted the release party for last year's publication: *Kalliope 2021*, celebrating 40 years in print (*Kalliope*'s first in-person event since January 2020, and the first in-person *Kalliope* release party since April 2019). *2021*'s published authors, as well as all current members, were invited to the open-mic event to share their poetry, essays, and artwork.

I hosted the release party in Abba Java, just off campus. It may be my favorite place in the world (and is certainly my favorite place in State College, and the site of my very fulfilling internship). My boss Sarah allowed us to use the main meeting room for the party instead of a dismal after-hours classroom on campus. Sarah, who shares my love of plants, has gradually added more and more herbs on the windowsills (and I'm going to gift her one of my avocado plants when I graduate).

We gathered around the tables, each of which had a QR code in the center for contact tracing (as well as an official university attendance sheet for the same purpose, required for any student meetings involving food). The crew waited patiently as I scrambled to set up the catered Jersey Mike's, then descended on the cornucopia of pre-packaged (as per university mandate) food like

a school of piranhas. Kenny, a *Kalliope* alumnus who returned for an intro speech, requested coffee. I brewed a cup and he drank it slowly, pulling his mask down for each sip.

It was a wonderful event; after a slow start (nobody wanted to be the first to share, so I read my own work to get things rolling) everyone warmed up and a steady flow of writers and poets took the stand to read. Nonfiction dominated, with poetry intermixed and a lone fiction writer braving the mic. I sat with Nathan, who read his piece on Dungeons and Dragons (a game I never wanted to play before, but now wonder why I haven't yet). I wonder if he's kept up the campaign through the pandemic, or if pandemic distance killed off the party. We cheered each successive contributor as they returned to their seats. The whole affair was invigorating—meeting in person to read from a literary magazine which had been produced wholly online was a welcome reminder that these people had bodies beyond the decapitating Zoom screen and minds beyond what they had put on the page.

Something struck me halfway through, though; our readings were overwhelmingly somber. Perhaps it was my fault since I started the night with “Still Stands the Forest Primeval,” an essay on my seemingly immortal grandfather Pèpère's obsession with his own mortality (culminating in a memory of when he took us to visit his own grave, prepaid for what he speaks of as the very near future).

Maddy followed with “Actively Dying,” about the preparations for her own grandfather's funeral and the realization that his long, cosmopolitan life was really and truly ended.

Maggie countered with a poem about *her* grandfather, who passed away when she was only two years old.¹

(“We’ve all written such cheery stories about our grandfathers!”)

Emily read a touching poem about her friend who committed suicide.

Even Isabella, the lone fiction writer who took the podium, read a story about visiting the empty candy shop of a great-uncle who passed away. I forgot it was fiction fifty words in; even in the realm of imagination, apparently, we cannot escape the death that surrounds us.

Recall that these poems and stories were written in mid to late 2020, selected by the committees in early 2021, and published in spring 2021, which means that they were produced in the heat of the pandemic, somewhere between the six-month and one-year mark. If you are like me and only started creative writing recently, then the only environment you’ve ever written in is a profoundly sick one.

At the end of each piece, we’d clap and return to our snacks—an abrupt transition from considering mortality to grazing on turkey and provolone subs.

The writing was beautiful and probably necessary, but none of it was happy.

¹ Perhaps one day I’ll grow worn and
Withered by reality and I’ll
join him in the Beyond of
slopes and snow and
Simpsons every day, perhaps then
I’ll understand why he kept
His poems to himself and
Himself frigid. (Excerpted with permission from Maggie Dickinson-Sherry’s poem, “Grandpa Up In Centennial”).

There's a great deal of debate about the (ultimately arbitrary) boundaries between generations, and what exactly defines each. According to Pew Research Center, I am part of Generation Z.¹ Each cohort has a defining moment, or moments.

The Lost Generation had World War I and the Spanish Flu.²

The Greatest Generation had World War II, and the Great Depression.

The Silent Generation had McCarthyism and the Korean War.

The Baby Boomers had the Cold War, Vietnam, and Watergate.

The Millennials had 9/11 and the Great Recession.

It's telling that we define each generation primarily by their collective trauma. The obvious question, then, is what is ours? Even in this early stage of Gen Z's maturation, generational suffering abounds in the last year alone: school shootings, police brutality, a domestic attack on the U.S. Capital, and most urgently the pandemic and all the financial, emotional, spiritual, and human cost it continues to inflict. How many once-in-a-generation disasters can we absorb before we simply crumble? Already we seem to have adopted a certain morbidity, a propensity towards the dismal and bleak.

Perhaps we should look to the last pandemic generation; in the face of the bloodiest war the world had ever seen and an illness that claimed three times as many victims as the trenches, they responded with the Roaring Twenties—flappers, jazz, the Harlem Renaissance, surrealism, art deco, Hemingway and Hurston and Fitzgerald and Hughes and Christie and so many more.

² “You are all a lost generation.” Hemingway’s epigraph to *The Sun Also Rises*, a quotation from Gertrude Stein that came to define a generation.

If we turn our eyes from war and destruction and look for creation instead, it becomes clear that the Lost Generation wasn't unique in this response. The Greatest Generation gave us comic books and Hollywood's Golden Age, the Silent Generation led the Civil Rights Movement and pioneered rock and roll, the Boomers watched Hendrix at Woodstock and wrote the books on modern feminism, and the Millennials blogged and cooked and championed such intellectual movements as Queer Theory and Critical Race Theory.

I am, frankly, rather pessimistic as to the future of the pandemic, the economy, the American republic, and the health of our very planet as they will play out over the course of the next couple months and years and generations. If *Kalliope* is any indication, however, the art at least is in good hands.

A Few Numbers

It is November 2, 2021.

It has been 665 days since the first confirmed COVID case.ⁱ

It has been 588 days since the first confirmed case at Penn State.ⁱⁱ

I have had 169 days of in-person college classes.

I have had 199 days of online college.

I have had 3 excused “wellness days” when classes were cancelled.

This is 1/2 of the days we’d have off for a normal spring break, which was replaced by the wellness days.

3/6 of my college semesters will be mostly or fully virtual.

57% of college students believe that the quality of online instruction is worse than in-person instruction.ⁱⁱⁱ

A study found that screen time over 2 hours per day and low amounts of physical activity correlate highly with anxiety, depression, psychopathological symptoms and poor sleep quality.^{iv}

This week I averaged 5 hours 39 minutes on my computer per day.

I ran 65.7 miles in September.

I ran only 32.8 miles in October.

The CDC recommends adults aged 18-60 get at least 7 hours of sleep per night.^v

I average 6 hours of sleep per night.

86% of college students report disrupted sleeping patterns due to COVID.^{vi}

71% of college students report increased stress and anxiety due to COVID.^{vii}

88.7% of Penn State students are fully vaccinated.^{viii}

This means 42,294 Penn State students are fully vaccinated.

11.3% of Penn State students are not fully vaccinated.^{ix}

This means 5,383 Penn State students are not fully vaccinated.

There are 30 people in the student lounge where I'm writing this.

3 people in this room are probably unvaccinated.

23/30 of the people in this room are not wearing masks.

I am 5 feet away from the nearest person not wearing a mask.

When humans exhale, they emit aerosol particles between 0.1 and 0.5 micrometers in diameter.^x

When humans cough or talk, they emit much larger respiratory droplets of saliva and mucus

between 5 and 500 micrometers in diameter.^{xi}

A human hair is about 70 micrometers in diameter.^{xii}

The COVID virus is about 0.1 micrometers in diameter.^{xiii}

An average human adult exhales between 12 and 20 times each minute.

My outfit is 1/6 mask.

1/8 mask, if each shoe and sock is distinct.

Mom bought me this mask in a pack of 5 for \$25 from Athleta.

Mom and Dad and Peeve are 137 miles away in Pittsburgh.

Flo is 976 miles away in Minneapolis.

A Megabus ticket from State College to Pittsburgh costs \$37.50 each way.

The Uber to get to the Megabus stop costs \$12 each way.

I visited home 2 times so far this fall semester.

I visited home 0 times my first fall semester.

Neuroscientists and productivity experts suggest that most people can only focus for 4 to 5 hours
per day.^{xiv}

I have been in class, at work, or doing homework since 9:55 A.M.

It is now 8:17 P.M.

The walk home from the student lounge to my apartment is 0.8 miles long.

It usually takes me 16 minutes.

Today it took me 17 minutes.

It was 41° Fahrenheit.

It took 45 seconds to turn around and walk back to the leaf pile I passed.

It took another 15 seconds to stomp through the crunchy leaves.

2 people saw me.

An adult human has 32 teeth.

About $\frac{1}{4}$ of them show when you smile.

What Is Notable Is the Speed at Which Things Were Changing

A phrase written by Mom on March 25, 2020—two weeks into the pandemic.

I saw a headline the other day from the Washington Post: “As Pandemic Enters Third Year, It Feels a Lot Like the First Two.”

Mentally, I still count the pandemic in months; seeing it measured in years was horrifying. But it’s true—the first confirmed COVID case was in December 2019, and I’m writing this essay in December 2021.

Everything does feel the same, in some ways. In others, not so much, not so much—and they rarely seem to be getting better. How many times have we hit a new daily high for COVID cases or deaths? How many variants will we face? We’re on the third now, Omicron. The world rushes on, accelerating ever more rapidly.

Kelly and I broke up a few weeks ago, and I haven’t had a moment to process this loss—this amputation. Oliver Baker’s charges have all officially been dropped, but the university is now moving to fire him; there are already plans to protest in his support in the spring. I skipped the rest of the football season, and most of the things I was stressed about on September 28th have quietly resolved themselves. Sproule and I have reconnected, and we visited each other multiple times this semester. My avocado plants have doubled in size, and I started four more—plus rosemary. *Kalliope* 2022 is in the works, and I am so proud of the team. The leaf piles have blown away, replaced by whorls of snow.

But at some point, I must stop writing. That's the great tragedy and the great lie of writing, I think: that the stories on the page are wrapped up neatly in words like "break up" or numbers like 5.33 million, even as the stories in the real world continue into infinity.

Where is the end? Two answers: I don't know, or just at the end of this sentence.

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Soak It In

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ACADEMIC VITAE

Simon Hebert

Education

- The Pennsylvania State University (2019 – 2022)
 - Bachelor of Arts in English
 - Bachelor of Arts in History
- Schreyer Honors Scholar (2019 – 2022)
- Pittsburgh Central Catholic High School (graduated 2019)
 - Valedictorian of 200-student class

Awards and Publications

- Marshal for History (2022)
 - Chosen on basis of academic achievement to represent Department of History at commencement.
- Philip Klass Internship Award (2022)
 - Awarded scholarship for excellence in English internships for *Kalliope*.
- Best Paper Addressing Religion (2022)
 - Awarded for “Mathematics and the Mu’tazila” by the College of the Liberal Arts.
- Published in Kalliope (2022, 2021, 2020)
 - Creative nonfiction: “Walking Home.”
 - Creative nonfiction: “Still Stands the Forest Primeval.”
 - Creative nonfiction: “Portrait of a Family at Denny’s.”
- Evan Pugh Scholar Senior Award (2021)
 - Finished in top 0.5% of class after completion of 48 credits.
- Edward Nichols Award in Creative Writing (2021)
 - Third Place Creative Nonfiction, “Still Stands the Forest Primeval.”
- Susan Hackman Scholarship in College of Liberal Arts (2020)
- The President’s Freshman Award (2020)
 - Earned a 4.0 GPA.
- Brother David S. Baginski Scholars Program (2019)
 - Best Thesis Award: “The Happiness Habit: An Introduction to the Skills and Practices Conducive to Happiness.”
- Duquesne University University Integrity of Creation Conference (2018)
 - Published in Conference Proceedings: “The Fundamental Role of Charity in a Globalized World.”

Involvement

- Kalliope Editor-in-Chief, previously Fiction Coordinator/Treasurer (2020 – 2022)
 - Managed 30-student team to publish Kalliope, the Penn State undergraduate literary magazine.
 - Arranged meetings, request and manage funding, and advertise across platforms.
 - Performed final formatting and grammatical review of Kalliope before publication.
 - Hosted and spoke at release parties.
- Viral Imaginations Outreach and Curation Intern (2021 – 2022)
 - Contacted students, summer camps, and literary magazines across Pennsylvania for creative writing and art submissions to the Viral Imaginations project.
 - Published submissions to the Viral Imaginations website using WordPress
 - Proofread and edited all submissions to the website.
- Volunteer Tutor (August 2018 – May 2019, March 2020 – December 2020)
 - Virtually tutored two elementary school students (second grade and fourth grade) during pandemic with a focus on math and social studies.

Work Experience

- Abba Java Student Engagement Intern (2020 – 2022)
 - Planned and executed a community garden outside the main coffeeshop.
 - Organized, advertised, and implemented community painting project on the walls.
 - Renovated courtyard of church-run coffee shop as a green space for students and organizations to meet.
- Liberal Arts Peer Mentor and Peer Advisor (2021 – 2022)
 - Hosted office hours for first-year liberal arts students to assist with scheduling, choosing classes, and outlining four-year plans.
 - Mentored 5 first-year students to aid with the adjustment to college, including study skills, adjusting to college life, and getting involved.
- Campus Tour Guide (May 2021 – August 2021)
 - Led groups of up to 30 prospective students and family members on 90-minute guided walking tours of campus.
- Hemingway Letters Project Intern (May 2021 – August 2021)
 - Made scans and transcriptions of letters and reference documents.
 - Edited, compiled, and accessioned documents for publication by adding scans and metadata to collaborative database.
 - Searched for letters, inscriptions, and documents from Ernest Hemingway on auction websites, museums, and private collections.