Olivia Grantham

Pandemic Poetry: Studying Poets’ Responses to AIDS and COVID-19

My project revolved around poetry written during and about two pandemics: AIDS and COVID-19. For the first 4-5 weeks, I conducted background research on AIDS, and read collections of poetry by Mark Doty and Thom Gunn. I also read from collections that included poems from a variety of other poets. I started drafting my own poems as I became more familiar with AIDS. My advisor, Dr. Helena Mesa, sent me writing exercises to use as inspiration. Once I felt comfortable, I transitioned my research to focus on COVID poetry. I read from three different collections that included a plethora of contemporary poets and their responses to the pandemic. My goal was to analyze the potential differences in content, tone, and outlook between AIDS and COVID poetry. Another goal I had was to write my own “pandemic poems” based on my findings.

I would say that I definitely achieved the goals I set for myself. Firstly, I broadened my perspective on the current pandemic by researching AIDS. Pandemics have the ability to echo each other, and my research showed that. Second, I deepened my knowledge of poetic techniques. I recognized new ways in which grief and isolation could be expressed creatively--ways that I wasn’t previously familiar with. Lastly, I drafted more than 25 poems, some of which were sent to Helena for further revision and editing. I’m currently working on a piece that I’m really proud of, titled “My Mom Said Death Is Like A Dandelion,” that’s in its final revision process. I’ve copied a draft on the next page.

Overall, I’d say that my project allowed me to contribute to an ongoing conversation about overcoming grief within the context of a pandemic. It also gave me the space to write my own poetry and the confidence to keep improving my work. I plan to incorporate this research into my thesis, which I’ll be starting this year. In addition, I’m going to continue working on my current poems to get them to a place of potential publication. My next goal is to read my work at the Elkin Isaac Symposium, which will essentially serve as a deadline for finalizing my work.

My Mom Said Death Is Like A Dandelion

I don’t know how birds can chirp

every morning. Are they crying

for us? My mom said so. She was

always aware of the inevitable catastrophe:

death, like dandelions pulled from patches

of a blighted backyard. We have the same

conversations everyday: COVID, my grandma,

death and who’s doing it, and what time

last week they were found in the kitchen.

Alone and cold, the temperature of tile,

their bodies lifeless on the floor,

like the fly floating in my water, caught

in a whirlpool of ice chunks and lemon

seeds --*what a waste.*

Life against isolation, against itself

in isolation. The fly spins slowly

on the surface, already drowned

by the birds’ distant chirping.