

Final exam

by [Paul Willis](#) in the [April 7, 2021](#) issue

—with a prayer from *Cymbeline*

Under an awning in a parking lot,  
I proctor an exam in time of Covid.  
It is a week till Christmas, and the sun  
beats underneath the tent from its low place  
above the islands in the gaping sea.  
Each at a desk, the students bend with masks  
and pen their thoughts on those who took their lives  
in Shakespeare's tragedies—how Romeo  
left not a drop of poison on his lips  
for Juliet to taste. How Goneril  
destroyed herself for spite. How Gloucester too  
tried leaping from the brink, so overcome  
with sorrow, and Othello with his shame.  
Even the ocean spread so bright below  
could be where Roderigo yet might choose,  
like pigs of old down cliffs of Gadara,  
to dive and drown himself incontinently.  
The students finish writing, one by one,  
and rise in quiet triumph to present  
their meditations, thanking me in turn.  
And then they take their unregarded leave.  
I'm left to pray each one might find their way  
into the darkness, through the solstice shade.  
And for myself I add this prayer as well:  
*To your protection I commend me, gods,  
From fairies and the tempters of the night.*