Mia Vance: Valedictorian, Poet Laureate 2022

- **How does it feel coming to the end of your time in the English department?**

  I’m overwhelmed on many levels! Of course, there’s a great deal of excitement to move forward into the postgraduate program of a lifetime abroad in Ireland ahead of me, and there’s still the last few assignments and exams left to clear before I finally reach the finish line. But as a nontraditional transfer student, having left my former institution with a low GPA and even lower hopes of finishing my degree, to approach that goal now as a wife, a mother, and Valedictorian—in the midst of the many challenges we’ve all faced these past two years—I feel not only deeply proud, but profoundly honored. It is the best redemption arc I could have imagined for myself as a scholar!

- **What was one of your first experiences in the English department? Any memorable moments?**

  Another aspect of my experience as a nontraditional transfer student is that my reentry into academia coincided with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. This meant that my first experiences with the UO English Department were remote, online, via Zoom. I think the very first was a meeting with my Major Advisor, Dr. Corbett Upton, who was a nontrad undergrad himself. He was eager to encourage me then and has been a constant source of empowerment, support, and positivity every step of the way. It has also been incredible to see how the students show up for each other, even from a distance. Our English Major Discord Server is an unceasing stream of cheerleading, advice, humor—and collective stress under deadlines! I have seen my fellow students rise up to help one another, comfort each other, and form fast friendships even in what feel like the darkest of times.

  Which brings me to the next question…

- **What was your process in writing this poem for commencement?**

  For this year’s commencement poem, I was inspired by the resilience of the students, staff, faculty, and community as they have faced the various challenges that have arisen in the past several years—and those that have been ongoing for much longer. I focused on the metaphorical imagery of plants that grow in the wakes of largescale forest fires and volcanic events, as I feel this paints a picture of those who are ‘rising from the ashes,’ so to speak, of the hardships we have all had to face in addition to completing our degrees. It is my hope that the imagery of pinegrass, fireweed, and morel will remind the graduates that they have accomplished greatness in the face of these obstacles, and inspire them to keep rising, keep growing, and keep reaching for the changes most needed in the world.

- **Any advice for current, continuing, or future students?**
Fellow and future students—just take one more step if you can. One more, if you can. But your needs and your values are yours for the honoring; question any system that seeks to standardize toxic work conditions. Remember you are human first and student second. And that human is enough. You are always already enough, no matter what. And your classmates are with you even in the most seemingly-isolating of times. You’re doing it right And I’m proud of you.