

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.*