

Cooper Young, '20

Dear Mr. Mayers,

It's nice to meet you, and I'd love to share a bit about the work that I did at Princeton. I apologize for my delayed response—shortly after I received your email, my appendix ruptured, and I spent longer than I would have liked having surgery and recovering in the hospital.

As in the University's brief summary, my main interests are threefold: math, dance, and poetry. Math and dance have always played a large role in my life. When I entered Princeton, I knew that I wanted to pursue these disciplines. Poetry, on the other hand, came a bit later. Both my father and my brother are professional poets, but before coming to Princeton, I had never written any poetry myself. In freshman year, I was looking for a fifth class, and I figured I should take an introductory poetry course to see what my father and brother have dedicated their lives to. After one class with Professor James Richardson, I was hooked.

I was immediately drawn to the style of Japanese and Chinese poetry that I had grown up reading. Poems of this style tend to be short and coherent, and in that way, the aesthetic aligns with my interest in mathematical proofs. I believe that good poetry, like a good proof, cuts to what is essential. Nothing is there that doesn't need to be there. From my perspective, mathematics and poetry both seek to make sense of the world (be it through a framework built purely from logic, or through more rhetorical means), and part of that is conveying truth in a lucid way to the reader.

Many of my favorite writers, including Gary Snyder, Kenneth Rexroth, W. S. Merwin, and my father, have been influenced by Japanese poetry, and have spent time in Japan to seek inspiration and to write. Perhaps my favorite Japanese poet is Matsuo Bashō, who made several long journeys and kept travel diaries filled with haibun—a mix of prose and haiku. In the back of one edition of *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, I found a map of Bashō's first journey, and came up with the idea of following the same path that he took 330 years ago, and writing my own travel journal. Thanks to the generosity of the Adam family and the Lewis Center for the Arts, I was able to make that project a reality in 2018.

I spent two months traveling through Japan, tracing Bashō's path and writing poetry. At the end of my journey, I put together a chapbook, *Sacred Grounds*, out of my longer poems, which was published in May by Finishing Line Press. During my trip, I discovered an appreciation for the "Poetry of Place," where I let the environment and location kindle and direct my writing. This became the central idea that I wanted to explore with my poetry thesis.

Based on department regulations, the poetry in my creative writing thesis must all be written in my senior year, meaning that I couldn't use any work I had done in Japan. While I was on campus during my last year, I devoted most of my time to my math and dance theses. In short, my math thesis looked at certain algebraic structures which give rise to topological shapes. Passing to smaller structures yields more complicated shapes, and my thesis studied the rate of which the complexity of shapes changes. My dance thesis was a fifteen-minute piece that I choreographed, though the performance was unfortunately cancelled a week before it was supposed to happen due to COVID-19. I had written a chunk of my poetry thesis during summer, but since I also had to make time to eat and sleep, I was left with little time to work on it during the school year.

I decided to dedicate my winter break to poetry, and thanks to the Class of 1954 Senior Thesis Endowment Fund, I was able to travel to Thailand to immerse myself and focus on

writing. I wrote poems that reflected the stories I heard, food that I ate, and landscapes that I explored. I wrote a large collection of work, and was able to spend the rest of the semester workshopping what I had. By the end of the year, I had finished my poetry thesis, entitled *Here We Were Happy*.

That brings me to where I am now. My pre-COVID plan was to spend the year travelling abroad, writing poetry, and exploring work in the realm of quantitative finance or software engineering. I planned to enter graduate school in a year or two, but when coronavirus made travelling nearly impossible and jobs scarce, I decided to go straight into a graduate program. I am currently pursuing a Ph.D. in mathematics at UC Santa Barbara, and writing poetry on the side. To try out industry work, I'll be applying for positions as a summer intern in the fields I mentioned above. I've also combined my senior thesis with my chapbook from Japan and am submitting it for publication at a few presses.

Below, I've attached "Where Owls Won't Fly" and one of the poems that I wrote while in Thailand. I've also sent a copy of *Sacred Grounds* to the address provided in your email signature. I hope I've answered all of your questions, and I apologize if this is more information than you were asking for! I couldn't help but gush—it is because of the generosity of your class that I was able to make work that I'm so proud of. I hope fall is treating you well and that this crazy year ends nicely for you.

All the best,
Cooper Young

Where Owls Won't Fly

At night, grids of windows
shine from buildings
that stretch to the sky.
The streets glow
with cell phones, traffic lights,
and neon signs for drugstores
that never close. Street lamps
spill their light over the city
and brighten the pavement.
The stars are no longer visible,
and the city lights
lead nowhere.

By Cooper Young

New Year's in Chiang Mai

Two women sing karaoke
in front of their barber shop,
while a man plays an electric guitar
on a wooden stool. They invite
my brother and me to dance,
and we don't hesitate to join.
The owner opens beer bottles
with a wrench, and never lets
our glasses get empty. We haven't

even exchanged names, but we feast
on pork grilled on the sidewalk.
A Frenchman and a Japanese man join us,
and add to the choir of languages
I can't understand. It is 2020
in the Gregorian calendar, and 2563
in the Buddhist calendar. Everyone
has a reason to celebrate.
We light fireworks that explode
into blossoms of light, level with the roofs.
We've missed the countdown,
but no one minds. Lanterns
released hours ago still linger in the sky.

Brandon Mintzer '20
Alan,

I appreciate the email. Thanks to the fund I was able to visit Taipei and explore the National Palace Museum's collections in person. I ultimately wrote a 191-page thesis entitled *An Objective Identity: The Role of the National Palace Museum in the ROC and Taiwanese Narratives*. My thesis won the Bienen Prize for "most outstanding thesis from any department on an East Asian topic," a feat that wouldn't have been possible without the Class of 54's support. Here's what the feedback was:

"Mintzer's thesis investigates the aesthetic weight of museum objects and cultural memories—the displaced and constantly reimaged collection of the Taiwan Palace Museum—deployed on the highly charged political landscape. Constructing his study on the premise of theoretical understanding of space and the museum in the articulation of national imaginaries, Mintzer deftly highlights the tensions between Taiwan's attempts to nationalize the museum collection and the instability of Taiwan's own national identity. The framework for the articulation of this museum project is further extended to include the principles of "Publicization," "Localization," "Specification," "Diversification," and "Globalization." The sensitive balancing of global, local, and macrohistorical perspectives upon the museum's development, the extensive fieldwork, and the richness of detail and analysis coalesce into an illuminating new perspective upon the cultural history of this important institution."

I fully plan on continuing my study of Chinese and aspire to eventually live in China, working to foster cross-cultural dialogue. My thesis project certainly helped solidify this goal. Thank you again for the support and generosity!

Sonya Isenberg '20

Hi Alan!

Thank you for the note. I appreciate your kind words about my thesis!

I am very grateful for the award, because it gave me the ability to travel to LA and interview some very accomplished people in the film industry! For example, I had a conversation with a set designer for *Ellen* (and many other talk shows) and, although it was obliquely related to film, it helped me understand how designers conceptualize on-screen space. I was also introduced to a Princeton alum who worked as an assistant to Cathy Yan '08, the director of *Birds of Prey*. I was driven around Warner Bros and she explained how the empty lots were dressed to establish a whole new filmic world. I was even shown the detailed design / CGI mockups of different scenes throughout the film that were created before filming, which served as a guide during their production. And those were just a few of the things that I had the pleasure of learning about! I would not have been able to meet with these people without the funding that the Class of 1954 Endowment Fund provided me.

I chose to study Architecture my sophomore year, because I knew I liked designing, working with my hands, and generally creating things. My plan after graduation has always been to work in the entertainment industry in some capacity, and yes I am still moving to LA! (I haven't yet moved; I am waiting for production to reopen first.) I am not going into set design or a related architectural field... I'm actually pursuing acting and TV writing! That has been my career goal for as long as I can remember, and I'm very excited to move onto this next stage of my life. Although it's not directly tied to my thesis topic, learning about 'the haptic' and the organization of onscreen space will no doubt help me when I'm (hopefully) in front of the camera... for example, I now have a deeper understanding of angles, direction, layering, and depth, and how those elements create a dynamic, aesthetic, and alluring final product.

I hope this answers your questions - let me know if I can add anything else! Once again, I'm very grateful for the funding because it allowed me to pursue a subject I was (and am) really interested in, and it made my senior year quite enjoyable.

Best,

Sonya

Report on the Senior Thesis of James Currah '20

James Currah '20, in an exchange of letters with your scribe, has conveyed his thanks to *The Class of 1954 Senior Thesis Endowment Fund* for enabling him to explore the files on John Hersey in the archives at Yale's Beinecke Library in pursuit of his thesis on Hersey and the "New Journalism" – a movement with which Hersey is credited but from which he has dissociated himself.

His thesis on John Hersey as journalist and author asks how much of an event's impact is from the event itself, and how much is from what is written and remembered about it. The thesis considers the creation of fiction and non-fiction and history itself. What led Currah to Hersey in the first place was his Junior Paper on the public accounts about Colonel Despard, an Irishman who was hanged in 1803 for plotting to kill the King. Those accounts were a classic instance of journalists slowly embellishing a story until it becomes very hard to distinguish fact from fiction. That led Currah to the questions: What responsibility do journalists have to future historians? What responsibility do current historians have to record the present day in a way that will be helpful to future historians? He wondered "How did Hersey envisage his responsibility to future generations?"

He focused on *Hiroshima* and *The Wall* as early narrative-setting works of two atrocities, at neither of which had Hersey been present. Yet Hersey was the first, in both instances, to bring those atrocities to widespread national attention. And, of most interest, he did so with two different devices: *Hiroshima*, as non-fiction written like a fictional narrative, and *The Wall*, a work of fiction written with a device that made it seem like non-fiction. Currah was surprised to discover from the archives that many readers were confused about whether *Hiroshima* and *The Wall* were fact or fiction.

Now he has returned to the UK, living through the pandemic with his parents, working from home. While he has a challenging job writing and analyzing data at an online subscription service and marketplace, he is considering pursuing a Masters in Conservation and Land Management. Harbingers of his interest in this field were his participation in an effort at the Keller Center to develop a start-up for a waste repurposing company, a brief engagement with the Conservation Society in a coral reef documentary, his discovery of the writings of poet and naturalist Wendell Berry, and an interest in birdsong.

Asked about the connections between his choice of History as a major, the topic of his thesis, and a prospective career in conservation and land management, James Currah says “The value of a Princeton education isn't in the preparation of students for work, but in the preparation of people for life. There's no rush to find an enjoyable and sustainable profession. The journey - with its mix of good and bad experiences - is always worthwhile. Thank you, Class of 1954, for helping me on my journey.”