LAUREN HALDEMAN POETRY READING AT THE UNIVERSITY OF LOUISVILLE, EKSTROM LIBRARY, BINGHAM POETRY ROOM, 9‑22‑16 4:00‑5:30

>>KRISTI MAXWELL: Hello and thank you for coming out to our first Axton reading of the academic year. I have some Axton fliers here, so if you need to learn more about our upcoming readings, you can grab one of these on your way out. I will put them right here for convenience sake.

I'm Kristi Maxwell, a new assistant professor here at the University of Louisville, and I'd like to welcome you to tonight's reading by Lauren Haldeman.

We owe a great thanks to Anne and Bill Axton who established and endowed our series, and to the English department for continued support of the series.

Our next Axton reader is Merritt Tierce, who will join us on October 20th and conduct a Master Class on the 21st.

You can still submit materials for that, correct? So if you're interested in being in that Master Class, submit some materials.

Lauren Haldeman received an MFA from the Iowa Writers' Workshop and is the author of the poetry collection Calenday published by Rescue Press in 2014.

She is also the creator of poetry comics and video poems. I guess we really don't have the technology in here to see those today, but I've been watching some online and they're really, really cool, so I encourage you to check them out.

She works as a web developer, web designer and editor of several websites, including the Writing University website at the University of Iowa and the Iowa Review.

The title of her first book, Calenday, itself gives us some insight into the way this poet's mind works. A Calenday, one presumes, is a year collapsed on itself. Memory is the rebel we claw our way out of and the material with which we can opt to rebuild.

I have been savoring Haldeman's dream cheese for days, a compound I first encountered in her work. Recalling Joyce's cheese, corpse of milk, Haldeman's dream cheese seems aware it is simultaneously life‑giving and bound to death, but I also read a desire for an alternative milk and, by extension, cheese that is not a byproduct of the exploited maternal body, milk that reinvents itself as of February with 30 days.

Haldeman's poems are committed to invention and understand that naming and unnaming are privileges and violence, birth and murder.

Naming is prioritized as is metaphor because here it's a way to extend the named, a means of anchoring the ephemeral through language, a means of protecting by obscuring, a way of pleading stay, the impossible request of love.

Haldeman's contents are serious, but there's also a strong strain of play and a kind of poking at the modes of familiarization upon which we rely. Think soon‑to‑be parents who imagine the growing fetus as food product, as big as a sesame seed, grapefruit, eggplant. When we map one thing onto another, there is either excess or shortfall.

Haldeman finds delight in the distortion. Some of her lines from the size. Nightmare the size of a breath mint, breath mint the size of an armchair, armchair the size of the capital, the capital the size of a pair of pants, a pair of pants the size of a torpedo, torpedo the size of a dreadlock, dreadlock the size of the Broadway musical Cats, the Broadway musical Cats the size of a newsboy, newsboy the size of another newsboy, another newsboy the size of the gravel road.

I'm excited to hear these poems tonight, and we'll all be able to purchase a copy, if you don't already own one, at the back of the room after the reading, after the Q and A.

Please join me in welcoming Lauren Haldeman.

(Applause)

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: Thank you so much. That's great. You found the hidden day in it. I'm always excited for people to find that I put February 30th in there, so ‑‑ in the book. It has multiple days at the beginning of each poem, so I wanted to hide something in there.

Thank you for having me. I've never been in Louisville before, I'm excited and just got in last night, so I want to check out the rest of the town while I'm here as well.

I wrote this book, Calenday, during the first year I had my baby. She's six now, so time keeps ticking. Got to get another book out there, Lauren.

But these were all poems that I wrote in kind of a space of panic and sleep deprivation, in a space of self‑doubt and also kind of chemically induced awe/worry.

So I wanted to read a few from this book to start out with and then a few from a manuscript that I've been working on that's a little bit more, I don't know, stark or serious, who knows.

So I'll just start off with some Calenday poems first.

This one is called Criminals.

I cried because your head came out of my body. Your whole body came out of my body and it was nuts. It was absolutely insane. Then your hands kept hitting your face. Over and over, you didn't even know what your face was, but it still kept getting hit.

Everything we did was wrong. The cat put its butt in your face. My milk got in your nose.

At night I pulled you into my armpit on the bed where we slept together, criminals.

So basically I felt like I didn't know what I was doing and ‑‑ with a little baby, and that ‑‑ and I also felt I was a bad person for not knowing what I was doing, so ‑‑

This was a poem based on a dream I had right before I went into labor. I had this dream and I went into labor about ten hours later. I can barely remember those days, but I remember this poem quite clearly. Or this dream quite clearly.

5/22.

We are in a forest, we find a deep spring, a metaphoric rock face and carved step symbols. Next to the banded‑face god a plume of feathers. An alligator looking to the sky. We hear a sound. It is the story of giving birth coming from the rock face. No, we mean actually being said out loud by the rocks, behind the hidden pool, saying to us: See those glowing dots in the small cavern like bits of prisms. They are souls, they look white, yet as they flicker, you will notice it is every color. See now one of those lights is passing into your belly. You will have to push. Somehow this is not a surprise. We look at the water out of which a face now rises: Ambient layers of rich minerals and sediment. Maybe the chest of a jaguar or a bird with a toothache. No, it is a woman, the face of a woman we know.

This is another one written during those early days.

My human, I held your head against my breastbone. I called a seagull and asked for more taffy to be flown in. I wrote the boardwalk committee and ordered up surreys, Ferris wheels, kites in the shapes of seagulls. To the mirror‑house, I said, "No."

(Has anyone ever been in a mirror‑house? They're like terrifying. I don't know why we built them. Like why do humans make something like that? There's like walls that are glass and there are walls that are mirrors, and you just run into things over and over, so ‑‑ okay. Back to the poem.)

To the seagull, I said, "seagull." On the beach we applied meat tenderizer to a person's jellyfish sting. My human, it helped. My human, there were sentences in the sky. My human, there were popcorn‑tins flying through the air. Glow necklaces. Grandmothers. Slideshows. Matterhorns. If I were told to start a collection, and it seemed wise to start a collection, and everyone else was starting a collection, I would start a collection of you.

I'm going to save these if we have time at the end and maybe move on to some new work.

Well, first so Calenday is written ‑‑ the first half of the book is basically about my daughter who was born about six years ago and the first year of raising her.

When my daughter was about two, I got a call that my brother had been killed in Denver. It was like, really, sudden; it sent me sort of into a spiral of pretty deep, deep grief. The situation was very confusing. And a lot of my friends, people who loved me, you know, during this time of grief were saying, you know, may ‑‑ you know, maybe you can use art, you can use writing to sort of move through this.

At the time ‑‑ I don't know if any of you have lost someone you love, I'm sure, but at the time when you're grieving, you're sort of like, yeah, that's not going to help, I don't think anything's going to help.

But eventually it just sort of started coming out, I was using poetry to sort of just sort through what happened, almost in a way just to tell my brain what happened to be in ‑‑ sort of synthesize a new reality with an old reality, so ‑‑ so Calenday ended up being a book about my daughter and then about my brother.

And at first I didn't think that would work, but they really ‑‑ it was a strange relationship they made together, you know, and I ‑‑ I value that relationship because they are not going to have a relationship in their bodies. He's ‑‑ you know, she's not going to know her uncle, so I think it's nice that they have a poetic relationship in the book.

So ‑‑ this one's called Demolition.

We tore the cabinets out. The sound of an animal vomiting. We pulled the faucet from the wall and suddenly I thought of your body. How a knife went in it, how a knife was yanked out. There is only one place where you could've died and we didn't know where that was until now. Next to a parking lot on a sidewalk in Denver, everyone can only die in one place and you died there.

The sound of teeth chattering. You died with your jacket on; we didn't get that jacket back. We didn't get to see where the knife cut the clothes. We swung a sledgehammer at the wall. The sound of coughing. Where your clothes were cut by the knife seems like a secret. Even the dead want their privacy, I guess. How dead you are now. How private.

This is called 11/02. He died on November 2nd, so 11/02.

Here's a drawing of a boy with a wolf head, has been stabbed. I want Number 4. I want to represent the blood with a rainbow. No. Not a representation. No. This is your brother. Your brother has been stabbed. Number 9. This drawing can Number 10. This drawing can do nothing except be a drawing of a real thing happening.

Kind of just confusion coming out, trying to write and then erase and then write again. I liked ‑‑ I wanted to keep kind of the confusion in there. So ‑‑

After that occurred, I started working ‑‑ I was sort of going through a lot of memories in my past growing up with Ryan, being a kid with Ryan.

We grew up on the Virginia side of D.C. and I was sort of trying to explore a bit of my past back there in Virginia. I played soccer, I played a lot of soccer when I was a kid, and I also experienced a lot of things called, and this might not be a word that you have, but hypnagogia. Has anyone heard of hypnagogia before? Tell me if this has happened to anyone before.

This happened to me a lot. I wake in my room at night and there's a person there and they interact with me. Sometimes they're reaching for me, sometimes they talk to me. I interact with them and then I start to blink my eyes and they disappear.

Has that happened to anyone? Dang it. There was one time I got someone, it was like, "Me too." I was like, "Oh, gosh. Thanks. Yes."

Sometimes there's spiders too, sometimes it's other signals, but in Virginia especially I woke up to ‑‑ to people and I woke up to what I thought of were people from another time.

So I started wanting to investigate this phenomenon, investigate what was happening when I was in Virginia, and I also grew up playing soccer on the ‑‑ near the battlefields, the Civil War battlefields.

So the specific battlefield called Bull Run was the battle ‑‑ the first battle of Bull Run was actually the first battle of the Civil War. It was an absolute disaster. It was a mess. Neither ‑‑ neither Army knew what they were doing, terrible things were happening, the north retreated back into D.C., thought about just giving up after that battle, and then later there was a second battle.

But I was especially intrigued by the first battle, and I started to do research on it, because I was playing on soccer fields right next to this battlefield and I always felt haunted, so I wanted to use some of the information that I was learning in the research to start writing poems about this.

I'm going to read a couple of these and just to get a sense of what is going on and tell you more about what I found when I actually went to the battlefield, so ‑‑ this one's called Team Photograph.

Team Photograph.

Today is Team Photograph. You must join Team at the brink of the field. Look. What they say goes. It is all in the way you wear your socks. And someone may come, may point you out. Here there are chirps, trees, it is cold. It is the brink of the field where trees are bruising. Episodes of trees, broken pencil, animal. I am number 4 on Team. They have asked me to kneel. They have asked me questions at the brink of the field. I knelt down, meaning to just kneel down and they all stopped. You noticed they stopped and everything occurs on the brink of the field. Counting occurs, moving slowly up. Afterwards, you felt you could hold your head and pretend it was already a skull. You felt you could hold your head instead of calling out what word a mouth makes. The photographer making the field with his shutter, lining Team up, making perfect lines. Everyone is checking their socks, you notice they stop. Holding your head, you see your socks. Counting, beginning to count, beginning to watch on the brink of the field, a sharp shadow of something moving slowly up.

Tour

You are standing at the historic fence line, hurting so familiar as though from another life. Morning of the battle was hot and still. My brother is dead now, but once he found a thighbone or a femur at several battlefield locations, recorded messages describe the nightmare in the soldiers' own words. My father is dead now, but once my brother brought him a thighbone or a femur. About 8:45 something odd caught his eye. I was a white soccer player at Bull Run Regional Park and my brother found a thighbone or femur 200 yards to your left, I can hardly tell the story, 200 yards to your left, I will let his ghost tell the story. [Scene in the woods on] our town where the medic camp had been, Fairfax Station, Virginia, they arrived by train the injured. It is deep in the books, body parts, deep backyard. I know the folding open of trees reveals endless scenes.

This one's called An Incident, Hallucination.

This time, you are sleeping in the upstairs bedroom at the end of the hallway with the mirror and the chair and the desk (at night the woods out the window, the woods.)

You go to bed early, turning off all the lights and when you wake up, it is the middle of the night. The room is exactly as it was before, except for now there is a woman hanging from her throat in the corner of the dark room, dangling from the ceiling by a rope. She is hanging from her neck in the pitch dark corner, swinging silent in a dress. Her gown is old, her hair is, wait, you see her face. Eyes. She fades in and out. Turns the air.

Here's another one. Incident, Hallucination.

This time, next to the doorway, near the dark hallway there is when you wake up the shape of a human standing in the door or it looks like a human being standing there but no face, it has no face, just a human shape made of tiny strips of fluttering paper or it is a full body covered with burnt paper, no face. Each piece fluttering in slow motion above you in the hallway; you start saying, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," looking up from the ‑‑ yet this is when a voice comes from the human shape, a deep growl gravelly voice, a growl low hiss as though from the back of a haunted, choking animal, throat saying: We all love Lauren, we all love Lauren.

That really happened. I can't help smiling it's so messed up, that really happened. It was awful. It was awful. We all love Lauren, that's what it said. I was like what is this supposed to mean? I don't want you to love me. Go away.

You know, personally I have different theories as to what these things were. I mean, I do think there was some communication happening. I think I'm ‑‑ when I actually went to the battlefields two years ago, I opened up and felt there was communication happening, I was writing down things that weren't necessarily coming from my own brain, so I do believe that there's something happening.

I'm not going to go so far as to say these are ghosts, but the one thing that always was the case was that I – the best way to interact with them was to apologize for some reason, and maybe that's something messed up with my psyche, but apology and basically letting them be there and saying it's okay, it's okay, that helped them go away.

Do you want to hear one more hallucination or ‑‑

>> Yes.

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: Oh you do? Okay.

All right. Incident, Hallucination.

This time, a thunderstorm: The room is dark with only the hall light – (is that going to be okay? It's recording, right? That was like the thunder happening on the recording device. Okay.)

This time, the thunder ‑‑ a thunderstorm. The room is dark with only the hall light and bed and old mirror and chair, and when you wake up, next to the bed, on the floor, you see a group of men digging.

They are standing in a circle in the middle of the room shoveling through the carpet on the floor. They are digging a very deep hole. You squint at them, saying what are you doing? And one of them, an old face, turns (a dim worn face) and says, we are digging a grave.

Oh, you say. He turns back to the group, continues to shovel. It seems... okay? You squint again, now a flash of lightning and all of the electricity in the house goes out. There's no light. You think: The men are still here, they're still in the room.

Quiet for a few seconds, still, until another flash and in this instant you see you are alone, the men are gone, the floor is bare, but in the corner you glance over to the corner and there it is: The face of the dead man they were burying. The rotting, desperate mephitic face, looking right at you.

That happened when I was 12 in this house in Virginia, so. While I was doing this research, I got more and more into the research of the Civil War, and I started to realize that I couldn't write this book about the Civil War and about my experience without writing about race, and I immediately felt extremely uncomfortable and, like, I didn't want to do it.

And I was learning a lot of stuff through the Black Lives Matters movement about active listening, about white privilege, about uncomfortability, and about amplification, so when I felt this uncomfortability, I thought, there it is, there's the signal, like that's a signal that privilege is being questioned, a privilege that you have that you didn't know was being questioned, and that privilege was the privilege I had to not write about race. I could choose not to write about race.

And so I decided that I needed to go towards that feeling of being uncomfortable, which no one wants to do. We're human beings, we don't like feeling uncomfortable, but I thought, that's where the truth lies. It's not going to lie by stopping myself from exploring this.

I went to the battlefield and I found a location, it was just a concrete slab on the ground of an old house, and it was the site of the house of a free black man. He had a family there and the house was there and survived two battles.

So the first battle of Bull Run it survived and second battle of Bull Run it survived. There's a plaque there explaining this, explaining a little bit of his family, but what really, oh, upset me and surprised me was that it was so invisible, you know? It was ‑‑ it was just so invisible.

I ‑‑ as a child I'd gone to Bull Run and you learn about the Henry ‑‑ the Henry House and the Stone House, but this is an invisible house, and I thought, I mean, how like symbolic that this is actually an invisible house here in a historic site, like this is history we don't want to see.

The more I investigated the family and the history of the Robinson household, the more personal it got to me and also the more I realized I don't know how to write about this, especially as a white person. Like how do I do this? I don't think I have any right to do this, I can't incorporate it.

So I considered maybe using the idea of amplification and saying I'm not going to write my own words, but I'm going to amplify this story so that it's not lost, that at least there's a ‑‑ at least the facts ‑‑ I can be sort of a megaphone for bringing these facts up into the present, and if there's anything I can do, it's that.

It's still difficult, I still ‑‑ I'm still confused as to how to do it and I'm still trying to learn and actively listen. It's all very ‑‑ it's good, it's a good journey to be on, but ‑‑ so these are all poems that ‑‑ there's a whole section in the book that are just focused on the Robinson house. Still working on it, but I wanted to share these with you all, and if you have any suggestions or ideas, I'll take them. This is all still a work in progress.

These are markers of the different areas on the battlefield that I use, so these are all from the signage.

Oh, I'm going to mention ‑‑ I'll read this.

Retreating men fled past the Robinson house (the next tour stop) where here is the home of James Robinson and his ‑‑ the Robinson house and farm are pictured in the background.

Manassas Bull Run National Battlefield Park officials are looking into whether the fire at the house, on the site of what was once a freed slave's home, might have been racially motivated.

The Washington Post, July 28th, 1993.

Triolet for the Robinson House. Is it Triolet or Triolet?

>>Triolet.

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: James Robinson had a total of six children. He was only able to buy the freedom of four. On the same field where the war began, James Robinson had a total of six children. Both sons were sold off by their owners. The fate of James, Jr. remains unknown. James Robinson had a total of six children. He was only able to buy the freedom of four.

Found Poem For the Robinson House.

The Robinson House is an invisible house. The scaffolding is see‑through, the walls a clear liquid. If you look at the floor, you can see through the floor. If you don't want to see it, you don't have to see it. Someone burnt it down just to be sure.

Here stood the home of James Robinson and his family. Born free in 1799, James is listed as mixed. Family oral history suggests James' father was possibly, don't say it. On Henry Hill, James purchased 170 acres of land. Nine family members spanning three generations resided at the house in 1860. Robinson's wife, Susan Gaskins, was a slave when their children were born, so by law their children were also slaves. James worked to purchase his children from slavery. In 1846 he purchased one of his sons. James had two other sons, Alfred and James, Jr. Both were sold by their owners to work on plantations. Alfred eventually found his way home, but the fate of James, Jr. remains unknown. The fate of James, Jr. remains unknown. Kidnapping in its legal form.

The scaffolding is see‑through, the walls a clear liquid. If you look at the floor, you can see through the floor. The Robinson House is an invisible house. If you don't want to see it, you don't have to see it. Someone burnt it down just to be sure.

During the first battle of Bull Run, George Sigel, the general, established headquarters inside the Robinson House. In 1872 Robinson submitted a claim to the government to recover some of the loss incurred during the war. He claimed that $2,608 worth of personal property was either taken or destroyed by Union soldiers, including large quantities of hay, wheat, corn, livestock, fence rails and assorted furniture. For these damages, Congress awarded Robinson $1,249 by a private act of March 3rd, 1873, less than half of what he claimed. James Robinson had a total of six children. He was only able to buy the freedom of four.

I don't like how this feels, this uncomfortable poem. Move towards it. Listen.

One more on the Robinson House.

I was trying to just take language from all of the signs there, all the literature that I was reading and just over and over bring it into forms to try to restate it but keep it powerful, and also just because of obsessively I didn't know what to do with the things that I was learning. I didn't know any of this stuff. I didn't know that if your wife was a slave, your children were born slaves. I didn't know that, but, you know, I was given the privilege not to know that, so ‑‑ and as a mom, that really hit me hard.

Villanelle for the Robinson House.

Their house survived the battle but was burnt by arsonists in 1993, and no one knows the reason why. No, we know why. James Robinson was a free man, owned the land, with his wife, Susan Gaskins, who was not free. Their house survived the battle to be burnt 130 years later on federal property. The home became a landmark hard to see, and no one knows the reason why. We know why.

The Robinsons had six children, loaned as kin: They took their mother's status as a slave. Inside the house that survived the battle to be burnt, all but two of them were freed. And here I write this little poem, having just now seen it, after the luxury of no one knows the reason why. I don't know what right I have.

How are we doing on time?

>>Good.

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: How's everyone doing on sitting there? Is everyone feeling okay? Thanks for let ‑‑ thanks for ‑‑ these are ‑‑ I haven't shared these poems before, so I really appreciate everyone being here and listening to them and just allowing me to sort of see what they're doing in real life rather than just in my head and on the page.

I also ‑‑ I ‑‑ in addition to going back and back and back to the Robinson House, I was also ‑‑ not equally, but I was also obsessed with the story of one regiment that I read about from Rhode Island, I was reading about their time in ‑‑ at the beginning of the battle in a small bit of forest where things were just kind of chaos.

In the battle, if bullets hit trees, a lot of times you weren't killed with a bullet, by the bullet, you were killed by bits of trees that would just enter into your body. The same with cannon balls. You were oftentimes just killed by nature that had just suddenly become vicious.

And I went to the site a couple times, I actually ended up going to the site, my dad was passing away from cancer and I had to go back home, and we were with him when he died, and then it was my birthday and my mom asked what I wanted to do, and I said, "I want to go to Bull Run."

It's like the dorkiest birthday gift ever, but I just wanted to get out there and walk those fields. I was so close to death already, like there was so much death in our lives, and I just wanted to be somewhere where maybe ‑‑ I don't know.

And I ended up going and sitting in the woods and just sort of communicating, oddly enough, I just started writing. I consider this research too is to go to a place and just start free writing and so ‑‑ this is a poem that came out of that.

Called Tore.

Tops of pines billowing through the space where the Visitor Center will be full of future but for now inside these forest hallways of trees I in the double cyan and magenta of 3‑dimensions die. A stuttering pine door, hard to remember. It was only seconds ago. Even though it was only seconds ago exploding pines like the opening of a door, the sound of a bird being born of a bird, exploding, hard to remember when I was a stuttering soldier, only seconds ago, and 3D mixed‑up magenta and cyan. Not a killing machine, a daydream merrily. I hear my mother open the door.

Let's see. I'll read a few more. I'll read ‑‑ I have one more from that book, unless ‑‑ I can find more on my phone, but I didn't print the other ones. I feel like I want to read another one of the Tour ones. Do you mind? Do you guys mind?

>>No.

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: We can all go onto our phones for like a three‑minute phone break. I'd be fine with that. I love my ‑‑ I'm addicted to my phone. Where are my ducks? Here they are. I'll read this one while I'm pulling it up.

This is another Tour one. Tour.

We went through some woods, which were full of dead bodies, and formed in line again.

As toilsome we played near Virginia's woods, my brothers disappear into that bosky thicket. We found this bone in the creek, said my brothers. Too big to be a deer bone, said my dad. This field was a scene of confusion.

What is that story now that my brother is dead? Now that my father is dead? My dead brother found a bone beside a soccer field near the battlegrounds? Dead Ryan posted over alive Ryan in the memory, dead Ryan pasted over alive Ryan in the thought.

Out of the woods behind you filed fresh reinforcements. The hallucinations begin when we move to Fairfax Station.

Find it. I think I've gone for like 40 minutes. Does anyone have any questions? Maybe we could do that. I could read a few more if I find them. Has anyone ever gone ‑‑ done ‑‑ utilized research in their writing, gone to a place and come up with a poem or a piece of fiction out of it? Yeah. Where did you go?

>>I went to an abandoned train trestle.

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: Cool. Did you find ‑‑ did you write there while there?

>>I didn't write there. It was about 11 degrees outside. I was too scared to go where it was warm of who I might run into.

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: Yeah. Exactly. Why did you go there?

>>It was an assignment, it was a school assignment, but I particularly chose that one because it had always fascinated me.

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: Yeah.

>>And then what I found when I researched, I had the original diagrams, everything else had been torn down but the base, so it was built in the '20s and there was ‑‑ there was the place where people would come and register their bags and rest rooms, but it was for white people and for black people.

So even though the main structure had been torn down, the tile for the floors were there, so I went with the diagram of, okay, I'm now standing in the colored rest room and I'm now ‑‑ and so I titled it A Place I'd Never Been Before because I had never been in a rest room like that before.

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: Uh‑huh. Did you find that learning about that and working with it like uncomfortable? Did you feel like that was ‑‑ like ‑‑ that you were learning from it?

>>Absolutely.

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: Okay. Yeah. I mean, that's ‑‑ I love ‑‑ I love this because it's subjects that I wouldn't regularly go towards. If I'm working with it as a piece of art, then I'm opening up my heart a little bit more, I'm opening up my whole vision of the world and saying, okay, let's let some of this in.

And I think that's really important, I think that that's where the truth is, is past where we feel comfortable.

And I really like research, I've been using research a lot just to get to that point.  'Cause I've written a lot of poems about myself and how the girls on my soccer team were mean to me, how I loved this boy but he didn't love me, which are fine, these are great ‑‑ go for it, but I felt like I was at the point where I was like, all right, let's get out of this ‑‑ let's get out of this comfort zone and also, you know, just thinking like it's true, I mean, I ‑‑ I don't have to think about race when I write and why is that, and I ‑‑ I probably should start thinking about it and also just realizing that, oh, that's a luxury that I have that other people don't have.

So has anyone else done research writing? Was that in Louisville?

>>Uh‑huh.

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: Okay. Yeah. Have you?

>>Yeah. I just ‑‑ I like the way that you're talking about where you're mentioning race and about how questioning if you feel qualified to talk about it, 'cause I'm tackling a project right now and I'm having difficulty going into it because it's not ‑‑ I feel like it's not my story to tell.

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: Yeah.

>>But the whole point was that I wanted to really kind of imagine that and reflect on it and get into it, but there's like this block of knowing that it's not necessarily my experience, and trying to tap into that makes me very uncomfortable and it's causing like ‑‑

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: Yeah.

>>It's ‑‑ I don't want ‑‑ it's almost like I don't want to write about it, but I know I do intellectually.

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: Yeah.

>>And then trying to open up my heart it's a really difficult place to be in, so ‑‑

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: Yeah. So you said you have primary ‑‑ you've done primary ‑‑ or secondary research?

>>I've done interviews.

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: Okay. So primary.

>>Getting their ‑‑ their experience and their input, but there's no feeling behind that, so trying to tap into the different characters of the story.

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: Uh‑huh.

>>And thinking about how they are feeling about something is not something that I've ever experienced and it's not something they are even being able to easily communicate to me.

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: Right.

>>So trying to find out I guess other sources for it or really there's ‑‑ like I said, there's this block of being reflective about it and I'm noticing it when I go back and look at ‑‑ you know, when I'm in there revising a situation that it's totally different because there's a block, there's that disconnect.

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: Yeah.

>>Feeling like I'm not qualified to even though I want to amplify it, there's a story here.

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: Yeah. There's a story and you don't ‑‑ you don't want to overtake it, you don't want to ‑‑ I'm blanking on the word. You don't want to make it your own, but you also are ‑‑ are affected by it, you know, emotionally, intellectually.

That's why ‑‑ yeah, I like the idea of amplification. I don't know how you'd do that with interviews, but what you just said may be your piece. I mean, your experience going towards that uncomfortability might be where to start, right? Because that is your own experience, so that way you're not taking someone else's experience and claiming it as yours.

And I think it's an important thing to hear over and over again from ‑‑ is that, you know, I was uncomfortable and I ‑‑ and I went towards it and this opened up, this treasure opened up of knowledge of being awoken to this ‑‑ to new knowledge because I went towards the uncomfortability. I mean, someone can read that and say, okay, the next time I feel uncomfortable maybe I'll stick with it instead of reacting or defending.

So also active listening, it sounds like you were doing interviews? So that active listening part too might be really ‑‑ you might want to just stick with those interviews ‑‑ I'm not sure. Anyhow, it is, I ‑‑ I definitely there with you, so ‑‑ yeah.

>>You said over and over again and returning again and again to this site, the Robinson House, right?

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: Yes.

>>I was wondering, it's just a question, very basic questions, how many poems are in the Robinson House site? Is it a site ‑‑ it seems like you're using the same language across the same poems, you keep returning and reiterating, trying out the different patterns of the same sort of information that it is itself mediated through various class and signage.

>>Right.

>>Do you see it being an infinity ‑‑ are you trying to finesse into a single poem or is it part of it about this sort of endless repetition of ‑‑

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: Yeah. That's a great question. I ‑‑ a lot of what you're seeing is me not knowing what to do with what I found and not knowing as a writer, as a white writer what to do, and so I think that these poems, they may not be done and they may need to be actual real ‑‑ I mean, I think a lot of what you're seeing on the page is me being like, oh, what do I do, churning, churning, churning, and that's what happened in my brain when I found this stuff, when I read these plaques and then I ‑‑ I looked up his history, you know, I got ‑‑ there were plaques inside the Visitor Center describing it, then I found the resources on that, then I went to those secondary resources, read more, and again, I tried to write poems where I was a lot more involved, oh, this is making me feel uncomfortable, oh, I didn't know this, oh, can you imagine, you know, your son being like basically stolen. And then I was like, why am I entering into this? Like this is getting a lot about me and this is getting a lot about like my worries, and I thought, I need to pull back and I just ‑‑ I want this information. This information was enough. I didn't need any commentary when I saw it. I show ‑‑ you know, I showed one to my mom without my commentary, and she was ‑‑ my mom's like my first reader, right? So ‑‑ she was like, I had no idea. I know, why don't we know this stuff? Like this seems like pretty important stuff to know. I mean, especially as a mother that it's just ‑‑ yeah. I think what you're seeing is that me as a writer just not knowing what to do. But being completely compelled to have to do something with the words.

And the words were ‑‑ the words ‑‑ I mean, I'm affected by words, and, you know, these two sentences could've just been the entire ‑‑ I mean, all the other details just added to the feeling that came from James Robinson had a total of six children, he was only able to buy the freedom of four. Like that was the heart for me. That ‑‑ I was in, I was like that ‑‑ what?

And so all the other details just sort of magnetized to it, and I feel ‑‑ I felt like all the other details just were basically extensions of that one detail, so ‑‑ yeah.

>>So it seems like you've talked a lot about cultivating ‑‑ or moving towards feeling uncomfortable, right? But it also seems like that for you as a poet, you are very tuned into the invisible.

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: Yeah.

>>Can you think about the two missing sons or actually having the experience of seeing a ghostly face or something or reminding everyone ‑‑ you know, you are aware of the house as an invisible house, not that it doesn't exist, it exists, but it's invisible.

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: Right. Right.

>>So what do you think the relationship is for you as a poet between actually getting ‑‑ actually being like super close to the invisible?

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: Uh‑huh.

>>You know, and then also trying to ‑‑ to understand what it is to be uncomfortable, you know?

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: Yes.

>>Yeah.

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: Like the ‑‑ that it's not necessarily the invisibles making me uncomfortable.

>>Right. Yeah.

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: It's the ‑‑ it's the seeing it.

>>Yeah. Yeah.

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: I mean, and that is a big thing. I think, why is all that stuff invisible? We don't want to see it, 'cause human beings don't like feeling uncomfortable. I mean, that house was burned down for a reason, we don't want to see it, and that's a huge part of why systems continue to take ‑‑ to keep up steam and to continue to stay in place where things aren't being solved is because we don't want to look at the stuff because of one thing.

It doesn't kill you to feel uncomfortable, you don't die from it, it just doesn't feel good, but we'll do all ‑‑ we'll do anything possible to avoid that feeling, and so maybe that was when I started realizing is you're right, there is a connection between feeling comfortable and making something invisible, right?

It's like the best way to get ‑‑ like I have this thing where I don't like ‑‑ I have a weird sensory thing where like stickers make me feel like I'm going to gag, and so any time I eat, I can't be looking at stickers. They could be like on the other side of the apple, but I have to turn the apple in order to ‑‑ and like the sticker is still there, it's still like ‑‑ and my brain knows that, but I've made it invisible so I don't any longer have my weird physical reaction.

But it's the same way with ‑‑ and I know that you've been studying down at Monticello, and they're beginning to make things visible down there, right? You were writing about that, and that's so important.

>>Yeah.

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: Like because once you get up to that first uncomfortability and you push past it, and I'm speaking as a white person here, it's a lot easier to keep going and gaining more information, it's a lot easier to listen after that first ‑‑ you break through that first wall, but a lot of people stop there and they say, no, I'm a good person and, nope, I'm ‑‑ I ‑‑ that's not me, it's not me, and it's a defense to not have to listen.

Those defenses are human too, we just don't ‑‑ we don't want to ‑‑ but I think having the courage to go past that first wall, and I ‑‑ I ‑‑ and I use poetry in writing to do that, but a lot of other people use activism to do it or just reading and listening, active listening, so ‑‑ but I think that that's ‑‑ that's the relationship is we make things invisible that don't make us feel good, so ‑‑ yeah.

>>When you were a kid, did you have like ‑‑ not to change the subject too much, but when you were a kid, did you have a hallucinations, and like if you did, what did you think that they were as a kid?

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: Yeah. I mean, they ‑‑ they all started when we moved to this house in Fairfax Station, which was situated really, really close to where Sarah Barton ‑‑ Clara Barton, sorry, started the first Red Cross.

So they brought all the soldiers there who were wounded or hurt to the same area. I didn't know that as a kid, so the first time I saw one was -- my dad ‑‑ I was in my bed and the hall light was on, and my dad walked past my room and threw in a bale of chicken wire.

I mean, we don't have chicken wire around our house. It was like ‑‑ and I was like, what? And I must've been ten, and the chicken wire started unravelling and like growing and filling the whole room, and I could see my room, I could see the bathroom, the hallway, I could see my bed, I was awake, but there was this thing that wasn't real there and I thought it was real.

And so I learned very quickly that if I blinked a lot and if I said, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," they went away. Now, I mean, I don't know if there's any psychologists in this room, but that's pretty messed up to me, but then I started seeing people.

And so I saw soldiers digging, I saw these human shapes talking to me, women coming through the windows, people standing over my bed, I'd see spiders. Here's the weird thing is that I moved to Iowa 'cause I heard about the writing program there when I was 18, and I don't get the people there. I get ‑‑ I still get spiders, I'll get sort of colors or senses that a lot of times just that the world's going to end and I need to figure out in my hallucination how to solve it.

The fact that it's still here is ‑‑ I did that. But they weren't people. And then I went back to Virginia while doing this book and that's when I saw that woman hanging from ‑‑ I was in an old house in southern Virginia, that retreat I was telling you about, and I went to sleep one night and woke up and there she was in the corner.

And I've had enough ‑‑ and she was hanging, you know, and it was ‑‑ she was in a nightgown, she was sort of like spinning, and I've had ‑‑ I've seen enough of these now that I actually sat up and went, "Oh, come on!" like to her. I was like, "Come on!" I was like, I'm already like in a weird place, like why? Like give me a break, like just give me ‑‑ you know, and I blinked and she went away, but then ‑‑ I mean, it's almost scarier when they go away because then you wake up ‑‑ when it's happening it's seems very normal, like you're a little weirded out, but you're like, "Oh, okay. Hi. Okay. So what do you need? What is it ‑‑ what's" ‑‑ but when they ‑‑ when you fully wake up, that's when the fear would start, so ‑‑ but like I said, I didn't really know what to do with all these, and I didn't want to just write a book about here are the weird things I saw, and as soon as I started trying to connect stuff together, I ‑‑ I really do think this whole project was meant to lead me to the Robinson House. And that is ‑‑ that's otherworldly to me. Yeah.

>>Given kind of that issue of visibility ‑‑ invisibility that you've been discussing in relation to that, to the Robinson House ‑‑

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: Right.

>> ‑‑ and that project, are you considering a video element this series?

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: Yeah, I mean, probably. I would ‑‑ if they would allow me to bring video equipment onto the ‑‑ I'm not sure if you're allowed to use video equipment on federal property on it. That's a national park site.

>>But in your imagination.

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: Yeah.

>>If you were going to have video.

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: I was thinking of ‑‑

>> It would be of the actual site.

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: Right.

>>Okay.

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: And I was thinking for ‑‑ I would love to do a comic book series because I see it very ‑‑ in pictures and I'd love to represent here's the house and now here it isn't.

>>Uh‑huh.

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: And I'd love to sort of draw that field and sort of bring that idea into there. But, yeah, that would be great, I think.

We'll see. That stuff takes ‑‑ takes a little long ‑‑ longer to develop, so ‑‑ but ‑‑ yeah.

>>I like the image in the comic book, we're discussing in one of my classes about the differences between looking at a phone that you have in print versus when it's in the comic book form, and we were wondering was there times where like which one comes first in your mind? Is there any time ‑‑ is it like a juxtaposition whenever you come to a creative idea?

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: Yeah.

>>Or do you think in the images first and write it out, that will ‑‑ think of it that way?

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: For me it's always language first, but my language comes from images, so ‑‑ but I don't necessarily draw the image of ‑‑ that created the poem. The poem about become a thing and then that forms the next thing, so ‑‑ but mine are mostly image first. Yeah.

>>When you're talking about language and ‑‑ I'm from the north and I had relatives who fought in both Bull Runs, and then I moved here and I learned that it wasn't Bull Run, it was Manassas.

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: Manassas. Yes.

>>So do you ever play around with that kind of language stuff that?

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: You know, it's ‑‑ that ‑‑ I need to bring some ‑‑ I mean, this book became like too big to bring some of that stuff in, but they still call it Manassas. So the south, they won a battle, they named that battlefield after the closest town. In the north they won a battle, they named the battlefield after the closest body of water.

And so the first battle was won by the south and it was called Manassas battlefield, and then the second battle was won by the north and they called it Bull Run. But in Virginia it's still called Manassas, it's called Manassas National Battlefield.

I don't know what to do with that ‑‑ that seems so messed up, right? Like shouldn't it be called Bull Run? I mean, eventually the north ‑‑

>> Right.

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN:  ‑‑ finally won, and so ‑‑ and it's weird because I went there and I kept ‑‑ I was talking to the ‑‑ the park service guys, I was like, "Oh, yeah, I'm reading this book about Bull Run," and they would be like, "Manassas," and I'd be like, yeah, and I guess the ‑‑ I'm trying to find where little Rhode Island infantry came in when they first entered into the battle of Bull Run. And they’d be like Manassas. It's like they couldn't ‑‑ no, it's not. There's language there. And think about that.

>>It goes to who gets to control the narrative.

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: Right. Who gets to control the narrative, and because Virginia is still a southern state, they are controlling the narrative with the name Manassas.

>>Right.

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: I refuse to use it mostly because I think Bull Run sounds better as a poet, right? So for me it's like an artistic decision, but ‑‑ but, yeah, that was very ‑‑ a very ‑‑ and there's Manassas the town too.

>>Yeah. Well, I mean, you know, historically there's Shelby Foote, who's the great southern historian, it was always Manassas for him, and Bruce Catton, it was Bull Run.

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: Yeah. And the book I was reading, it was called Donnybrook was the first battle of Bull Run, so that was Bull Run too.

>>Must have been a northerner.

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: Right. Exactly. So ‑‑ so you're making a decision on what side you're on when you choose what to name the field, so ‑‑ and I use both, I you a ‑‑ 'cause ‑‑

>>Yeah, I heard you mention Bull Run, Manassas.

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: Yes. In the documents I'm quoting they say Manassas and I'm not going to change that. Did you have a question?

>>A remark. By doing the research that you're doing and research that I do in writing my poems ‑‑

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: Yeah.

>> ‑‑ that's a way of making the experience that's going on in the poem authentic.

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: Yeah. Yeah.

>>And you can do a whole lot if you're coming across as authentic. If you don't come across as authentic, you might as well hang it up.

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: Yeah.

>>But you've ‑‑ in listening to you and the rest of you, I feel like I've been freed up because there is a poem that I want to write that I've always backed off because I've kept thinking, something happened to me, I had not what I call a hallucination, but a vision because it happened smack dab in the middle of an Indian reservation where I was living.

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: Wow. Wow.

>>And it was very ‑‑ very much of the Ojibwe culture.

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: Yeah.

>>And so I've written other poems dealing with Native Americans and taking on the personna.

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: Right.

>>And because I've spent a lot of time and a lot of conversations and arguments and ‑‑ and so on and so on, that I can write some of my poems with considerable confidence, but I've never had the confidence to write the one dealing with the vision.

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: The vision, yeah.

>>'Cause I'm thinking ‑‑ what in the world is whitey here having a vision in the middle of an Indian reservation?

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: Yeah.

>>I don't think so, and I ‑‑ I didn't even have the courage to ‑‑ to share it with Indian friends ‑‑

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: Right.

>> ‑‑ who would've been very understanding and supportive.

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: Well, I think what you just said claiming you're saying I'm ‑‑ I'm white and I had this vision is the core ‑‑ is going to be the core of it, because that's your experience.

>>Yes.

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: And I think that that ‑‑ I mean, again, when I say that, it feels uncomfortable because we're talking about race, but that's your experience and that's how to approach it. And you can use research and everything else around there, but I would approach it from what ‑‑ what you just said of why you're not writing it.

>>That conflicted feeling.

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: Right. That's what you should write about is why you're not writing it, you know? That conflictedness.  'Cause that's ‑‑ that's the honest core of what's going on, so ‑‑ cool, I look forward to seeing that.

Are there any other questions or ‑‑ yeah.

>>I have a comment kind of ‑‑

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: Okay.

>> ‑‑ in response to what Paul was saying about control in naming. Just because we've been talking a bit about like visibility, invisibility, erasure and discomfort and I think controlling narratives is a big part of that, so ‑‑

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: Yeah.

>> ‑‑ being able to name the battle what you want to name it because of how you think things went down.

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: Yeah.

>>But I also see like control and erasure. Did you say hypnagogia?

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: Hypnagogia, yeah, is sort of the scientific ‑‑

>> Like I can control if I want to see it or blink to make it go away, and that has to do with visibility and comfort too, I think.

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: Yeah.

>>So I just wanted to comment on how I appreciated ‑‑

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: Oh cool.

>> ‑‑ the tensions and trends in the Robinson House hypnagogia, the debate about what to call a certain battle site.

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: Yeah. Thank you. I haven't actually put those two together.

Hi, Phil. Yeah, I haven't actually put those that I was blinking to get the ‑‑

>>Yeah.

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: The ‑‑ I don't even know what to call it, the hallucination away, which was my first instinct, make it ‑‑ make it go away.

>>Like turn an apple, blink your eyes, burn a house down.

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: Burn a house down. All the same move. I don't want to see it, I don't want to see it, I don't want to feel that.

>>Controlling.

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: And that's why ‑‑ I mean, there were many reasons why systems stay in place that are ‑‑ are unhelpful and destructive, but, I mean, a lot of it's a lot of looking away, just look away, look away, look away, so trying to look at things now, so ‑‑ well, thank you, guys. This is great.

(Applause)

>>KRISTI MAXWELL: That was so great. I think most of us in the room are probably going to feel compelled to join the creepy chorus of, "We all love Lauren."

>>LAUREN HALDEMAN: No. No.

>>KRISTI MAXWELL: We'll be in your hotel room in the corner tonight when things go well. Buy a book and come back to another Axton Reading. And let’s give Lauren one more hand.

(Applause)