

# Basil Payne's Award-Winning Poetry Collection

10/10/2025



This summer, English Department graduate student Basil Payne earned an honorable mention in the Graduate Student Paper Award category at the Study of Literature and Environment conference held on the University of Maryland campus from July 8-11, 2025. Only three students were given awards, with a first-place recipient and another honorable mention, and Basil was the only master's student to receive this recognition.

English Department Associate Professor Michaelann Nelson and graduate student Dax Grove also attended the conference. Michaelann presented her essay "When You 'Stand for Your Land', What Are You Standing For?" based on Bears Ears and public lands research as part of the Utah People and Environment Poll through the Community and Natural Resources Institute in the College of Arts and Sciences. Dax and Basil presented their poetry collections, *Queering Natural Cycles: Humanity, Humus*, and *the Morbid Poetry of Decomposition and Specimen*, respectively.

*Specimen*, which won the award, is part of the work Basil has been doing for their thesis. "My poetry is about humanizing nature and showing that humans are a part

of nature, too; we all belong here in our differences and oddities," they say.

For Basil, nature has been a safe part of their life: "I don't feel 'right' a lot of the time because of my intersecting identities, but spending time with trees, studying insects, noticing the smaller details of the world around me has helped me realize that there's nothing wrong with me. We're all just different pieces of life on earth together, and we need that difference to thrive. I've been able to understand myself and my hurts through writing with the world around me, and I want to help other people feel that same level of 'right,' too."

On Basil's work, Michaelann comments, "Basil's work spoke to the sense of belonging that we all desire to find somewhere. Their poems named specific native tree species, recognizing them as individuals, and in recognizing the trees, they recognized themselves to find belonging. They were well crafted and full of emotion and vivid imagery."

When Basil's award was announced, the speaker read a piece of their work out loud, saying he cried while reading the poem because he felt understood. "To me, I finally felt like my writing was good enough to impact people. In that moment, I felt seen," Basil shares. "It was like a positive feedback loop of seeing and understanding each other. My goal as a writer is to help people feel seen and whole, and in that moment, I realized that not only is my goal achievable, but that I'm in the beginning stages of reaching it."