



English

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

S C A R B O R O U G H

Commencement Address for UTSC English, Class of 2020

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Graduation is a ritual, a public celebration with a larger community of family and friends of a momentous achievement in your individual life. This should be a rite of passage as you leave behind the condition of being a student and become something else, a graduate. As you have no doubt heard from professors, a rite of passage is a liminal moment, as the initiate stands perched on a threshold, no longer what you were but not yet what you will be. And your professors no doubt promised that liminal moments are full of potential because you are between spaces and identities.

This year, however, the usual ritual has lost its ceremonial aspect: not only can we not get together to celebrate in person, but the liminal moment has engulfed the world. Nothing is what it was. It is as though, in the process of crossing the threshold, the entire order of the universe has been disturbed. As you were getting ready to leave the university, with one foot still perched on campus but your weight shifted to the raised foot preparing to land outside, the world transformed. Where should you put your feet? You need to be nimble to keep your balance. And the people who were sending you off and those on the other side reaching out to welcome you have lost their balance as well!

You cannot look back for the university you are leaving will change too. Graduates always leave behind a way of life that had been theirs, but this year the lifestyle itself has changed utterly. UTSC will continue to flourish as a place of excellence, community, and diverse perspectives, but the future remains uncertain. As a result, there is loss and grief mixed in with feelings of accomplishment and celebration, knowing that some things will never be the same. But you are Literature and Film and Creative Writing students, by definition attuned to image and narrative. You have the resources to interpret this moment, make a narrative of it, and tell it in ways both creative and critical:

Perhaps it's the Fall

From innocence to a new bitter knowledge

I hate to say it, but perhaps it's the apocalypse

The disaster made inevitable by human actions
and this is the dystopian future we will need to survive
as we lay the foundations for a new community and more
sustainable social and economic structures

Perhaps it's the climax of a bildungsroman where the protagonist finishes an apprenticeship and faces the city
the first test of the emerging hero
That establishes your identity

Perhaps it's the passage through the rabbit hole or the looking glass to what always lay beyond or behind but now will stand revealed

Interpreters need to be careful truth-tellers
Identifying the risks and dangers
Naming the problem
Imagining the world afresh
Persuading others of your narrative

But, hey, you've got this. When the old words no longer satisfy, we have fresh metaphors. When the established stories of how we got here do not explain enough, we listen for other voices. When the canonical interpretations fail us, we seek new ones. This is what we do as students of literary and visual texts and as critical and creative writers.

UTSC Department of English graduates - the class of 2020 - as you are poised on this threshold, know that you carry with you the skills and tools to help make sense of the moment in which we find ourselves and to help the world to respond in creative, resilient, and just ways. Thank you for all that you have contributed to our department and to UTSC. As faculty members, we feel incredibly fortunate to have had the opportunity to work with you both inside and outside the classroom, and to learn from you every day. Most important, congratulations. We are so proud of you and of your accomplishments, and proud too that you will be representing UTSC and the Department of English wherever your journey takes you.

