TO THE UNIVERSITY OF MISSISSIPPI GRADUATES, CLASS OF 2020

You were supposed to be clad in your rustling academic gown, processing into the Pavilion with all the pomp and circumstance, your trembling tassel betraying your nerves as you awaited your name, your family in the nosebleeds cautioned to “save their applause,” but disobeying, they were too proud. Maybe your grandma was brought here from her nursing home, maybe your aunt was taking a shaky video, maybe your little brother actually wore a tie, and they leaped to their feet to watch you accept your diploma, accept the handshake (remember handshakes?) and suddenly—four years (maybe five) were over in a flash of the photographer’s camera, and, despite that one dodgy semester with Chem, you’d graduated.

Afterwards, you’d imagined, you’d find your friends, and hug, marauding to the Grove, and everywhere you looked, your classmates would be laughing and taking photos, tossing their caps under the arch at the Walk of Champions, tears bright on their mothers’ faces, their fathers’ faces, and the Grove would be beautiful, tall oaks deep-pocketed with dark green shade, the day dense with emotion, the gifts, the checks, the Spanx, the songs, the beers, the byes, the vows, the tears, the late night run for chicken-on-a-stick...

Instead, you got this. You and your friends separated, sealed off behind your lap top with your flickering internet, your iPhone with its dying battery, in your lonely apartment, or in your too-crowed house with its dwindling toilet paper, in your face mask, your sweat pants, maybe your “grad pack” cap on your quarantine hair (too long, perhaps not-squeaky-clean).

You never asked for this, your unique place in history, an honor which, quite frankly, sucks, which is a word that isn’t used often in poems but seems appropriate, because you know what? This sucks. And you know what else? You triumphed anyway. Any graduation is worth celebrating, but look at what you had to do to earn that paper: your classes disrupted, your books and things and thoughts scattered, and maybe your grandma is sick, maybe your aunt is laid off, maybe your little brother can’t sleep, maybe you have never felt so scared, but you persevered. Oh, there’d better be champagne popping in the background, somewhere. Your whole lives, you will always be the Class of 2020, the class who wasn’t defeated. You have so much to be proud of, my resilient friends, you who faced the unimaginable and had the courage to imagine a world slowly healing, and you, all by yourself, walking out into it.

—BETH ANN FENNELLY, PROF. OF ENGLISH, POET LAUREATE OF MS