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Ottinger '23 Confronts Change in Environment, Identity and Family Through Eckley Project

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BLOOMINGTON, Ill. — By carefully braiding the topics of environmentalism, queer identity and family roots into a collection of poems, Emile Ottinger '23 has completed a project as [one of six recipients of the 2022 Eckley Scholarship](#).

Ottinger, who uses they/them pronouns, is double majoring in environmental studies and English writing with a minor in philosophy. They spent the summer completing a project

originally titled “Devastation, Reconstituted: Queer Restorative Ecopoetry” — but Ottinger expects to change the title as the final work takes shape.

The project is a collection of shorter poems and a manuscript-length modern poetic sequence which were inspired by “restoration ecology (the planned renewal of degraded natural ecosystems) and queerness (as any non-normative forms of intimacy or personal self-identification),” Ottinger said.

Ottinger, who has been injecting intramuscular testosterone since January, said that the transition process “is its own form of restoration for my body.”

Ottinger alluded to complications surrounding the level of contact they have with their family. During a recent phone call, after not speaking for what Ottinger described as “the first time in a long time,” their 72-year-old father revealed he was experiencing the first signs of his anticipated neurological degeneration which runs in the family.

“He’s been forgetting things, he told me,” said Ottinger. “Less than a month later, when I was able to see him in person, he told me again, and then twice more within two days. From that point on, whether I liked it or not, the project was going to end up being about my father.”

While transitioning and embracing their queer identity, Ottinger realized “the very thing that threatened to alienate me from my father is now grounds for something we finally have in common.”

One of the temporary symptoms of injectable testosterone is brain fog.

“I’ve sat in a car with my father and we both forgot where we were headed,” they said. “We’re losing our minds in separate directions, but again, my experience will be only temporary. It’s a terrible, poetic setup. One I can only hope this project eventually delivers some sense of relief from.”

Ottinger chose to relate restoration ecology to queerness through the memories of walks taken around the Upper Lake, a restored artificial wetland near their father’s home.

The restored external environment is a backdrop for “confessing vicious, private reflections on unresolved family history and its proximity to my queerness” in the face of their father’s ongoing neurological degeneration, Ottinger said.

Michael Theune, Endowed Robert W. Harrington Professor of English, aided Ottinger with the project.

“(Theune) understands my writing processes often better than I do, and has 20-20 intuition when helping me find my next steps,” said Ottinger. “I can also always trust in his audacity — he’s the one who told me I should use this project to reflect on my father’s imminent passing, and he was right about that.”

Ottinger hopes to rename their work and possibly have it published, but primarily they see the Eckley project “as something I can hold close to my chest, and as something I may be able to let my father in on if the time is ever right.”

Ottinger encourages anyone interested in completing an Eckley Fellowship to reach out to a faculty mentor.

“Sure, it’s forcing me to prod at my own family roots with the pointy end of a trowel. But it’s been the setup for a load of experiences I never could have had otherwise,” they said.

[Established by the late IWU President Emeritus Robert Eckley and his wife Nell](#), the recognition provides a stipend of \$4,000 for each scholar to spend the summer conducting academic research or artistic activity under the mentorship of a faculty member. The program is designed to develop and deepen a student’s creative and research competencies.

Read about other 2022 Eckley Scholars:

- [Tyler Maple '22 — “The Effects of Reflexive Performance Reset on Performance of Elite High School Athletes: A Preliminary Study”](#)
- [Maria Harmon '23 — “Investigating Poetry’s ‘Well-Made’ Surprises”](#)



Emile Ottinger '23 is one of six Illinois Wesleyan University students who received a 2022 Eckley Scholarship.

By Maria Harmon '23