

Yet, she'll speak

How do we confront what threatens us, as a society and as human bodies?

Emilia Phillips doesn't claim to have the answer, but her poems in "Empty Clip," published by University of Akron Press, wrestle with the question.

In her third full-length book, the assistant professor of creative writing turns a high-powered lens on both external and internal dangers, and how we survive them. The poems reckon with physical and emotional intimidation and abuse, with sexual violence, and with gun violence.

"All of the above," she says.

The book's epigraph comes from "Othello" – the words of Phillips' namesake, Emilia. "Let heaven and men and devils, let them all/ All, all, cry shame against me, yet I'll speak."

That was no casual decision for the prolific writer, who is currently at work on a book of essays, including one focused on Shakespeare's Emilia.

"My experience in the world is that it's shameful for women to talk about violence that's been committed against them," she says. "That quote of Emilia's says 'I'm going to say what you did. I'm going to speak. I'm going to call out these behaviors.' I wanted to embody that heroism."

The book's cover depicts a man and a woman almost dancing but actually colliding, at cross-purposes under a red target.

"I chose the image because a lot of the book deals with men and women and particularly toxic masculinity and violence," says Phillips.

Social pressures of womanhood are also central, with the poem "Pica of unsaid things" preceding "Barista," in which a young woman receives the unwanted gift of a customer's kidney stones.

"It's about being uncomfortable and thinking it's normal," Phillips says.

While some of Phillips' work may draw from personal experience, she never fully re-inhabits traumatic material. She writes as a witness, so poems can thrive as poems.

"I'm not pledging allegiance to autobiography," she says. "'Autobiographical' poems can have so many lies in them. They can be rewritten memories, which is kind of wonderful – to write a traumatic memory on your own terms is empowering."

In "Empty Clip," "The truth is / a broken bone that can't be / set."

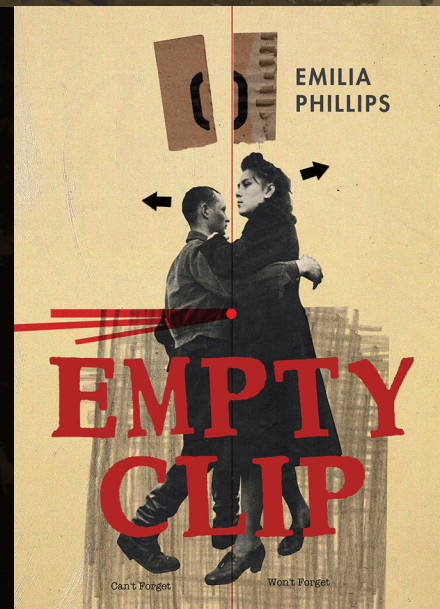
Phillips' literary scope is wide – influences include Polish Nobel Prize-winner Wislawa Szymborska and Hungarian Miklós Radnóti, whose final poems were found in his pocket after he died in a concentration camp. But as a Tennessee native, she counts Southern literature as one of her biggest interests. She's particularly invested in broadening ideas of who is authorized to write it.

"Southern literature comes across as a monolithic and static category. I want to help change those expectations. I want to see more writers of color and LGBTQIA+ writers included in our conversations."

Phillips, whose poetry and essays have appeared in Ploughshares, Poetry Magazine, and more, also appreciates UNCG's history of literary citizenship, going back to the work of Poet Laureate Randall Jarrell.

"It was important to me to teach in a program that values engagement among a wider audience. I see that in this program's history – reaching outward."

By Susan Kirby-Smith • Learn more at emiliaphillips.com



Phillips' poems such as "Campus Shooter and PowerPoint Information Session" reflect dystopic realities of everyday life. In "The Uncanny Valley," the speaker is a "blue dot nosed by an arrow," seen on a map via drone or thermal sensor. Things that can't, she explains, "tell the difference between someone intending to do harm and someone who needs help."

