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This double issue of the *Grand Valley Review* spotlights the campus ravines as well as select papers from the The Underground Railroad in Michigan—A Decade of Discoveries Conference held at Grand Valley State University in fall 2008.

The next issue, to be published in fall 2010, will feature material celebrating the 50th anniversary of GVSU.

Thereafter, this publication will broaden its scope to the wider Great Lakes region and undergo a transformation into *Wake: Great Lakes Thought & Culture.* Please be looking for this publication in fall 2010.

Our Troubled Ravine Sanctuary

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Ravine: a word that makes an iamb, and lands the accent-mark on the second syllable, hitting that "vee." How precise are geologic terms? What is a gully, a valley, a wash, a ravine? I learn from *Home Ground: Language for an American Landscape* that there are component parts of a hillside, namely the "waxing slope," the free face or constant slope, and also "waning slope, at the foot, where fine materials collect." Behind buildings and living centers on the Grand Valley State University campus in Allendale, between buildings and the river, a ravine system. The word origin, which is apparently French, comes from violent rush. I imagine this "rush" connected and linked with the formation of the ravine. Water came over time, or maybe suddenly. There was a violent rush and soil eroded away. For me, the reference to violent rush has another meaning—the emotional rush of awe.

Suddenly the sky disappears. The air is cooler, leafier, darker. There are trees—red oak, sugar maple, red maple—surrounded by dark shadows. This is not the "cornfield" flat landscape of Allendale, Coopersville, Standale. Perhaps I have misunderstood the landscape after all. There are these gradations, variations, coolness and altitude. One crosses the Grand River, driving west up the hill to the GVSU campus. Now there is high ground, a lookout. And then the campus secret: ravines cut into the ground, traversing campus so that pedestrians need the "Little Mac" bridge between the western and eastern parts of campus, between Padnos and Henry Halls, and then the "lake" and "river" buildings: Ontario, Au Sable, Huron, Michigan, Superior. The "Little Mac" bridge is a 230 foot pedestrian bridge; at the mid-point of its span, the ravine below is seventy feet deep.

Professors in the Department of Geology at GVSU study our ravines. They encourage their students, too, to make the ravine system a lab for data collection, for experiments, for the testing of hypotheses. Sentences from an abstract: "Grand Valley State University is located on a broad north-south trending ridge of the Lake Border moraine. The ridge is buried to the west by glaciolacustrine sediments of Glacial Lake Chicago and to the east it is eroded by the Grand River and covered by alluvial sediments. Ravine exposures and bore holes show that the ridge is capped by diamicton."

No wonder it is so windy at times at GVSU—we are on a "trending ridge." The language here glitters with the edges and angles of science: "glaciolacustrine sediments,"—I love that. Lacustrine simply means "of, pertaining to, living in, or growing in lakes." Nevertheless the word, to me, has the polish of a gemstone. A glacial lake that is now strictly a geologic memory—well, a memory with some leavings. Soil, shells, minerals in the soil.

Light Takes the Trees #26 by S. Krohmer, 2006

Again, from the writings of Professor Patrick Colgan, Geology Department: "Overconsolidated matrix and striated and flat-iron shaped, polymictic clasts indicate that this is basal till, most likely correlating with the Sagatuck [sic] Till. Underlying diamicton is a coarsening upward sequence. Lamination and interbedded sand suggest that the lower part of this sequence is offshore lacustrine or distal delta sediments."

No doubt it is a poet's task simply to love the sounds of certain words: "polymictic clasts." And how sorrowful and deep the implications of "lamination and interbedded sand." I can see this place; it is our earth. It is where we walk, when we have brief times to wander, when it is leaf-fall and we step out to exclaim at the colors of change. Why does lamination have, to me, the sound of weeping, of tears? I must be connecting, in error, "lamentation" with "laminal"—"articulated with the blade of the tongue."

GVSU officials have brought in stone by barge—brought from quarries on the other side of Lake Michigan to Muskegon—to stop erosion in the ravines. Stone placed by workers and dropped by helicopter. In 2002, two places on campus: 480 tons behind the Calder Art Center, 390 tons behind Cook DeWitt. In 2006, another 156 tons were placed behind Calder Art Center. These efforts have been largely unsuccessful. What will scientists in the future think of this stone, so out of place among the basal till and interbedded sand?

Paved spaces and runoff. Every year there are physical changes on the Allendale campus; construction, buildings, parking lots. From May to August, if you leave town for the summer months, you drive back onto campus, look around, and new buildings have sprung up, seemingly overnight. New buildings require parking, sidewalks, entranceways. Where water used to soak into the soft ground, through the meadows and wild grasses, now water goes racing off, not soaking in here, down and down. Water is seeking the lowest spot, and on the campus in Allendale, that low spot is near the Grand River and the pathways to it are the ravines. I meet with James Moyer, assistant vice president for Facilities Planning and an architect by training, who shows me an aerial photograph of the Allendale campus. He grows animated and excited while talking about stormwater management, and his face glows. He tells me of the efforts over several years to redirect water. Some parking lots now have portions that are permeable surfaces—near the fieldhouse, where these is also a pool for water retention, and near student housing. It remains to be seen how much these will help, and it is unclear if the surface will hold up to

Michigan winters, to snowplowing, especially. Lag time: engineers are working to increase the lag time over which water seeps away.

The darkness of one's subject—how the beauty of the place draws you in, and then causes you to care, to wonder—like the shadows around ravine-edge trees. The impact of people, growth in enrollment and buildings on the Allendale campus has not been good for the environment of the ravines. What did this place look like in 1963? It is not enough now to wander into the ravines, to look at the majesty of trees or feel the cool air, there is also responsibility. It took awhile for me to see it. The geologists' statistics tell a sobering tale: "A 189% increase of impermeable surfaces has occurred between 1973 and 2004, and an increase from virtually zero acres of impermeable surfaces in 1963 to 168 in 2004."

Icy air. How much does the temperature drop when you walk into the ravine? It seems to drop perceptibly: so what can the cells of the skin perceive? can we feel a drop of two degrees? five degrees? If one really feels it drop, suddenly, is that a ten degree drop? There are differences among shielding qualities of trees and leaves, of different types of trees. What trees grow in the GVSU ravines? Along the ravine bottoms to the river—white oak, burr oak, Kentucky coffee tree, pawpaw, redbud, green ash, black ash, and sycamore. Kentucky coffee tree is rare—its winter buds are tiny, very hard to see, and the tree is the last to leaf out in spring. The tree, in fact, looks so far gone into spring that the French in Canada "named it Chicot, the dead tree" (Wikipedia).

Behind Lake Ontario Hall and near the South Living Center, there are rain gardens and a "natural" meadow—perhaps one of the requirements of LEED buildings like Lake Ontario Hall. Has this meadow helped stabilize some of the ravine edge nearby? The trees appear to be flourishing. From my third floor office, I look out on some immense white pines. This year they bear a bumper crop of pine cones, studding the branches like chunky draped necklaces. With the construction of Lake Ontario Hall and the new Niemeyer Honors College, James Moyer says that the water runoff in that part of campus has actually been improved. Where piles of snow were simply pushed off parking lots into the ravine, the building now "protects" the ravine edge, stabilizing the trees there. The snow goes elsewhere.

Nave. One leaves the narthex at the front of a church and enters the holy place. The main body of the church, the largest longitudinal space. I think of stepping into the ravines as a holy experience—I feel a shudder or shiver along my arms, the back of my neck. English poet Philip Larkin's poem "Church Going" comes to mind. He describes the experience

of a bicyclist, a non-believer, who steps inside a church in the English countryside. He admits he does not know the right names for objects he sees in the church yet says there is a particular aura surrounding this land, these kinds of buildings.

The speaker's meditation causes him to wonder: "When churches fall completely out of use / What we shall turn them into, if we shall keep / A few cathedrals chronically on show. . . ."

Vernal Pool by S. Krohmer, 2006

And what of nature? Dioramas at natural history museums that show redwoods, ravines, animals now extinct? "If you've seen one redwood, you've seen 'em all." Was that really a former president of the United States?

Erosion. The etiology of ravine formation starts with water, sand, clay, and erosion. Water will seek a path and its lowest point. Physical plant officials at GVSU have tried to lessen runoff, stabilize ravine edges and slopes, stop erosion. As mentioned earlier, they have airlifted by helicopter gravel in huge containers to drop near the river behind the Calder Art Center. It has not worked well. What will the campus look like in fifty years? Maybe there will be electric cars, charging stations in parking lots from M to D to plug them in—and buildings converted to solar panels for heating and cooling.

During a violent rainstorm in summer 2008 all of the monitoring equipment GVSU had placed in the ravines was ripped out by the rushing water. Devices to measure water flow, its rate and intensity, to note the shifting of earth. Moyer says the video of water tearing down into the ravine, racing itself down to the river, was frightening beyond any expectation. The stability of the ravines is important to our buildings' stability. Moyer does not offer to let me see the video.

Landscape as metaphor—beauty but not everlasting, fragile and then not, ancient; ours and yet not. We rent here, we borrow, we are not owners. How do you own a tree? On a visit to New Mexico, we sat in the shadow of the Sandia Mountains, talking of writing, of poetry, and the hummingbirds whirred past, hearts beating their 400 beats per minute. They follow migratory paths by light of the moon, the stars—a process that scientists still understand rather imperfectly, as far as I know. Are they steering by the light of the stars? By some magnetic emanation? A subject for research, for study, for seeing, for poetry, perhaps. In Allendale in fall 2008, I notice a flock of cedar waxwings by Lake Superior Hall—crested, masked, they twist and turn in the trees, eating berries. Something here on our campus still sustains them on their journey.

Moyer tells me he (we?) will succeed on campus if storm-water runoff can be diverted west—if he can stop the water rushing too fast east into the ravine system heading toward the Grand River. It carries with it a stew of debris from parking lots—salt, oil, trash, grease, sand, you name it. He aims for runoff levels no higher than 1960. "We won't make it to 1960," he says, "but it's a target to reach for."

"Dendritic drain patterns"—from another geologist at GVSU, Patricia Videtich. In response to my question of where I could go to see current ravine formation, she tells me "north, probably." But she also adds that you can see dendritic drain patterns in a pile of gravel dumped somewhere, and then it rains a few times. Pattern, order, recurrence. No wonder since the time of the Romantic poets, nature has been seen as teacher, as nurse, as muse.

If ravine comes from Old French, "rapine"—violent rush—how far from that is the sense of "ravin"?—1.a. Plunder, booty, spoils; that which is taken or seized. and b. An act of rapine or robbery; a plundering, a pillaging. What had started with Anglo-Norman and Middle French ravine "impetuosity, force, violence (12th cent. in Old French; frequently in *a ravine, par ravine)*" turned into "robbery (13th cent.; in Anglo-Norman also 'rapacity, rape, ravishment stolen property'). I am quoting from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, accessed online from the Zumberge Library. The new library (approval still needed by the Michigan State Legislature), one-quarter mile away or so, might serve as a catalyst for another attempt on the GVSU campus to make water flow the way we would like, according to Moyer. Too much water currently flows still into the ravine behind Cook DeWitt. If we can get the water to flow to the west, the ravine system may yet be preserved.

The sanctuary is another area of a church. In my Catholic upbringing I always took it to mean the innermost part of the church, near the altar, where the sacred host was kept. It was not the territory for girls—altar boys and the priests, instead, were familiar with this golden and shining part of the church. I always associated it with magical words, as in nursery tales: say the syllables in the right order, intoned in a low voice, and the secret door springs open. Sanctuary has roots in "sanctus"—Latin, of course: "secured by sanctions, inviolate, holy." For future generations of students, faculty, staff on the Grand Valley State University campus in Allendale, we can only hope so.