

# In Writing

Fall 2010 - Vol 4.2 - Grand Valley Writing Department

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## Founding: A Play of the Students, for the Students, by the Students

*Kiera Wilson*

In honor of GVSU's 50th anniversary, the Winter 2010 Advanced Playwriting class collaborated on a single script commemorating the school's history while celebrating the present. The script called *Founding* represents the research and ideas of many writers.

"*Founding* is a look at Grand Valley's past through the eyes of the present. It's about a group of students who are tasked with writing a play about Grand Valley's history, and through that experience, they learn both about the past and about themselves," said Laura Hogg, senior Creative Writing major.

The play shifts between past and present, peppered with comedy and drama. Students conducted face-to-face interviews and historical research. They also wrote transcripts from the interviews to construct the historic portion of this play. Thomas Mervenne, who recently graduated, said the class divided into teams to research specific parts of the history. "Seth DeHaan and I researched William James and Thomas Jefferson College," said Mervenne. The class assembled after the research to write the first draft of the play.

The Advanced Playwriting class wrote most of the play during the

Winter semester. To prepare the play for production, a small group of students—Chelsea Chandler, Laura Hogg, Allison Klosner, and Brian Murray—worked hard in the beginning of the Fall semester to complete the revision necessary for the script. They often gathered with the guidance of Assistant Professor Austin Bunn. In finalizing the script, the main goal was to trim the reading time to about one hour and thirty minutes. The students and Bunn sat around a table with laptops snacking on pretzels (pictured below) while they suggested ways to tighten dialogue or cut unnecessary lines. Although working with a group of writers could be slow at times, the students seemed comfortable accepting or denying suggestions during the meeting.

"It's tricky collaborating with a group of writers," Brian Murray, a senior Creative Writing major said. "Everyone has good

*See PLAY on Page 4*



# Annual Reading Invites Michigan Poets Back to Mitten State

*Dylan Dunne &  
Susie Skowronek*

“I lived in Michigan forty-three years,” read poet Bob Hicok. “I now live in Virginia, which has no backup plan but is named the same as my mother. I live in my mother again, which is creepy.”

To celebrate the 50th anniversary of GVSU, two Michigan poets read at the Fall Arts Celebration’s ninth annual Poetry Night on October 21.

The evening began at 7pm with a brief introduction from Fred Antczak, Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Science at GVSU. Poet-in-residence, Patricia

Clark, opened the reading with an introduction of the poets: Hicok and Carolyn Forché.

“Thanks to Grand Valley for turning 50 years old, for giving us an occasion for celebrating with words and poems,” Clark said.

As an acknowledgement to the prestige of GVSU’s Poetry Night, Great Britain poet laureate Carol Ann Duffy was originally slotted to read alongside Hicok. However, a last second emergency prevented Duffy from making an appearance.

Amidst the crowd of about 300 listeners, Hicok opened the reading with “My New Neighbor,” a poem from his newest collection. The poem began the evening on a humorous note, putting smiles on faces in the crowd. He read in the classic poet style, dropping the pitch of his voice in the center of each line and raising it to mark the end of the line.

Many of his poems had his listeners laughing. “A Primer,” published in 2008 by *The New Yorker* poked fun at residents of Michigan and at the state itself.

“We are a people who by February / want to kill the sky for being so gray,” Hicok read. “When a man elopes / with a

daffodil, you know where he’s from.”

Hicok read poems set both in Michigan and Virginia, and he tempered the humorous poetry with a work of a more somber tone. He shared a poem about the cremation of a dog and ended on a cheerful note with “A Picture is Worth 886 Words,” in which a man loses his

*“We are a people who by February / want to kill the sky for being so gray,” Hicok read. “When a man elopes / with a daffodil, you know where he’s from.”*

girlfriend because he hides his penis in a nude photo.

Hicok has written five books of poetry, including a National Book Critics Circle Award finalist and a 1997 American Library Association Booklist Notable Book of the Year. Hicok has received three Pushcart Prizes, a Guggenheim fellowship, and two National Endowment for the Arts fellowships. He published his most recent collection of poetry, *This Clumsy Living* (University of Pittsburgh Press) in 2007. He teaches Creative Writing as an Associate Professor of English at Virginia Tech.

Following Hicok, Forché read poems about Czechoslovakia, Ukraine, and Eastern Russia. Her poems tell stories of war victims, refugees, and exiles. Whereas Hicok made the audience laugh, Forché’s poems cast an eerie mood.

Many poems told about her dead grandmother, who the poet said often influences her writing. “She’s been dead since 1968, but she’s still over my shoulder often,” Forché said.

Her grandmother came from Czechoslovakia and wore babushkas and wire-rimmed glasses; she could not speak

English well.

At times, her poetry offers its own variety of dark humor. In “Ashes to Guazapa,” she read about a group of people, including the town mayor, who stack stones as a memorial and scatter ashes at a volcano in El Salvador.

“A cremated body normally weighs five to six pounds,” she said before the poem. Then she read, “Your cinerary box was light, but filled with you it weighed eight pounds.”

Forché read in a raspy voice, a theatrical, loud whisper. She shifted her eyes to dramatize her narrations and gestured to emphasize her story.

Forché has authored four books of poetry including her most recent work, *Blue Hour* (HarperCollins 2004). Her

writing has earned the Los Angeles Times Book Award, and she has had fellowships with the Guggenheim Foundation, the Lannan Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts. She has edited a book of poetry and translated multiple works from Slavic to English. She currently teaches in the MFA program as a Visiting Professor at Georgetown University.

Through their words and images, both poets provided many in the audience with hope on what Michigan poets can accomplish.

## Upcoming Visiting Writers

**Laura Kasischke**

Thursday, Feb. 24

**Dinty Moore**

Thursday, April 7

# Department Welcomes Laurence José

At the end of Winter 2010, the Writing Department said goodbye to retiring Professor Ron Dwelle.

He is now enjoying his time sailing on Lake Michigan full time. To fill his spot, the department welcomed a new tenure-track assistant professor—Laurence José

Teaching professional writing is “a space for me to bring theory and practice together,” says José. She’s happy to join the Writing Department’s faculty to do just that.

José moved to the United States after finishing her *Diplôme d’Études Approfondies* (or the U.S. equivalent to a Master’s Degree) in Linguistics from the *Université Marc Bloch* in Strasbourg, France. She admits that her upbringing in Alsace, a little region next to the German border, has probably played an important role in her desire to undertake studies in a field that focuses on what language is and on how people use it. Alsace is indeed a region where bilingualism is still very much alive. The aftermaths of World War I and World War II remain visible but also “audible.” José herself grew up speaking the Alsatian dialect at home and French at school. Although the Alsatian dialect is in decline today, José admits with a smile that “the people from Alsace are still often referred to as “the French with a German accent.” To José, a degree in Linguistics was almost a natural outcome of her growing up in such a cultural and linguistic borderland.

Pursuing a doctorate in the United States was yet another opportunity for José to cross cultural and linguistic borders. Her interest in combining the theory of linguistics to its practice greatly influenced her decision to enroll in the Rhetoric and Technical Communication Program at Michigan Technological University in Houghton. She completed her PhD in 2010. Her dissertation focuses on the meanings of international contexts for the disciplinary identity of professional and technical communication. “I see international contexts acting like a magnifying glass for emphasizing the contextual dimensions of professional writing,” said José.

Her dissertation stems directly from her experience teaching professional writing



in the United States. “Incorporating international and intercultural examples into the classroom is a means to encourage students to think more critically about their writing projects,” said José. For her, incorporating global contexts into the classroom is not an end in itself; it is way to emphasize the contextual dimension of our writing practices. “Writing for multicultural audiences forces you to recognize how your own belonging to a culture impacts what you say and how you say it.”

During her graduate studies at Michigan Tech., she created an assignment requiring students to create resources to facilitate the cultural transition of new international students. Inscribing professional writing in a global context gave José the opportunity to “open” the classroom and to collaborate with IGTAAP (International Graduate Teaching Assistant Assistance Program), a program at Michigan Tech. that works with international students. Many of the pamphlets the students designed in the classroom are part of the resources used by

IGTAAP.

Today, José is excited to be able to continue her work at GVSU. She said, “I would like to build connections with outside audiences and create communities of practice. I want students to use what they know and want to write about to make their profession as a writer more visible.” Thanks to Kate Stoetzner, the director of International Student & Scholar Services, she has been able to initiate a collaboration between her writing course and the international student community. This semester, her students were offered the option to publish their completed project on the Padnos International Center website.

José is a former associate editor for *Programmatic Perspectives*, the journal of the Council for Programs in Technical and Scientific Communication. She has published articles on technical communication in *The Nordic Journal of English Studies*, and is currently working on a book chapter on programmatic issues in technical communication for an edited collection.



# Review of *Founding: A Night of Firsts* to Celebrate GVSU's 50th

Kiera Wilson

The first ever student written, directed and centered play at GVSU premiered Friday, November 12, 2010 at the Louis Armstrong Theater. *Founding* is a story about process. Six students at GVSU search for purpose and a plan for their futures while trying to bring to life the university's past in their script. The play brought the audience into the world of a creative writing classroom. A small group of students in a playwriting class find themselves attempting to collaborate on a completely student produced play. *Founding* mirrored the situation the actual advanced playwriting class at GVSU faced while providing the audience with a seamless blend of the past and present.

The opening act begins in the classroom, with actor Ben Cole playing a character called Professor Hayes, who looked suspiciously like Assistant Professor Austin Bunn. Professor Hayes chided Jason, played by freshman Ross Stolzenburg, for stepping outside the "glass box." This concept is well known within creative writing classes—students who have their pieces workshopped are not allowed to comment during the process. *Founding*

reflected the amusing reality of creative writing classes at GVSU.

The play also excelled at creating flashbacks that educated the audience about the school's history. For example, the play offered scenes of Bill Seidman asking his wealthy friends for money to help start the school to Don Lubbers reflecting on financial hardships and combining of colleges.

Simplistic scene changes helped move the audience through the play. With the use of a giant screen at the top of the stage, a projector announced the location of each scene. The minimalistic use of props and background highlighted the talent of the actors and the writing. The dialogue and blocking was hilarious and engaging. Mimi and Zeke, as played by Sophie Ni and Darion Murchison, stand at the familiar Kirkhof bus stop waiting on the well-known 50 bus. Murchison embodies Zeke's gamer attitude and his awkwardness that stems from his infatuation with the theatrical Mimi, who makes reference to many musicals throughout the performance. With lights and sound effects, the stage crew helped bring this scene to life. As an audience member, I could easily envision standing at the bus stop overhearing Mimi and Zeke's conversation.

While comedy was the strength of *Founding* that kept the audience laughing, the play was not without serious moments. A subtle mantra, "Characters start in one place and end up in another," spoken by a few characters, echoed throughout the play. The students struggling to synthesize a cohesive play must find a way to collaborate and to make the performance work. With a zany director whose misguided vision warps their ideas and prima donna actors, time is quickly running out for the writers. Faith, played by Danielle Armstrong, like many students, dreads answering the question: What are you going to do after graduation? Faith can't seem to reconcile her dreams with the pressure to get a job. Joan Birch, played by Lois Owens, offered these words about this pressure on students, "You are waiting for someone to give you permission." This

line highlights the subtleties and drama of the play—all students look to others to validate their choices in life.

*Founding* probes into the heart of student life at GVSU. The efforts of the writers, cast, crew, and all those responsible for the final production shined on opening night. *Founding* is more than just another play; it represents the spirit of collaboration in theater and core of GVSU.

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## PLAY

...continued from Page 1

ideas to incorporate. The bad ones get shut down."

Hogg commented that she wasn't sure how writing as a group would go. She said, "Having those other eyes really helps you take a look at your own writing and get a fresh perspective."

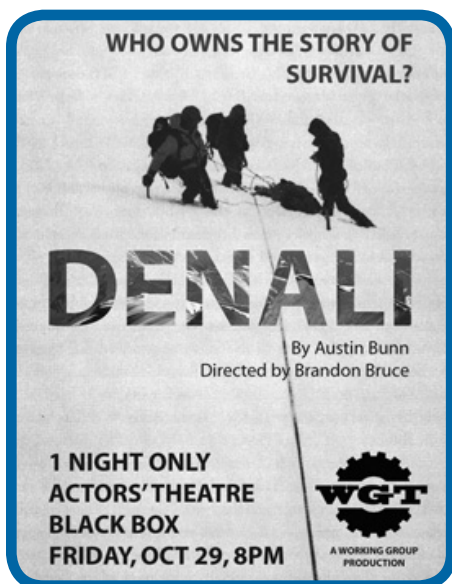
Murray said one of the worst parts of writing this play was all the confusion as the deadline approached. Because everyone had a version of the script, keeping track of all the changes proved difficult at times. In the meeting, issues like different page numbers and small details slowed the process of revision. Murray credits Bunn with keeping track of multiple versions throughout the process. "We worked very late into the night on the Tuesday [September 5th] before the deadline the next day," said Murray.

With the writing deadline completed, the playwrights handed the script to the GVSU theater department. The directors and actors were all students, making the production an undergraduate student project from start to finish. While the writers handed the play to the theatre department, many attended some of the rehearsals. "My favorite part will be seeing this play as a finished product," said Murray. *Founding* premiered November 12, 2010 at 7:30pm in the Louise Armstrong Theatre.



# Denali: A Mountain within Mountains

Jessica Levine



The wind howls—cutting straight through parka to marrow—as Finn’s brain begins to swell in the high altitude. The audience enters his dream, watches his spirit break in the Mars-like cold of Mt. McKinley’s face. This setting of fear and chill ripped through the packed GRCC Actors’ Theater on October 29, 2010. Through a series of metaphorical summit pushes, *Denali*, a one hour play written by Assistant Professor Austin Bunn, questions the intestinal fortitude and veracity of stories of survival.

Bunn, taking his interest in extreme survival narratives and reacting to the controversy surrounding James Frey’s not-so-honest memoir, *A Million Little Pieces*, focused his play on our era’s hunger for fabricated and glitzed reality.

“You start to wonder,” he said. “In extreme conditions, when people aren’t necessarily coherent, what does truth look like?”

*Denali* tells of childhood friends Finn, Doug and Josh and their climb up North America’s highest peak—only two of them survive the trip. Finn cashes in on Josh’s

death by writing a memoir à la Frey. Now a mega-rich New Yorker donning “Robin Hood” leather shoes, Finn visits Doug in their un-swank hometown of York, Pennsylvania. What unfolds thereafter, what is revealed by curtain, is the shakiness of Finn’s retelling. The ending is too suspenseful to spoil.

“What I’m most proud of with *Denali* is that not only is it researched and structured very intensely, but there’s also a very personal connection to it,” Bunn explained. “Maybe that’s the hardest thing to do, to identify ways that your research can also inform your own personal exploration.”

He began his research three years ago by listening to hours of recorded books like *Endurance* by Caroline Alexander and *Eiger Dreams* by Jon Krakauer. Fueled too by his own summits up Mt. Whitney and Mt. Washington, Bunn sought to write something raw and complicated; naturalistic and poetic.

It worked: the set (pictured below)—a table, white cloth and crumpled pages from a book—together transformed from living room to ice cave to the set of a television show. In the second act, sound effects of eardrum-piercing wind rocked

the theater. Laura Hogg, Bunn’s former drama writing student, felt truly connected to the scene he created on stage.

“Though I was completely satisfied with [*Denali*’s] ending, I wanted to be in that world for a little while longer,” she said.

That alone is a testament to Bunn’s diligence as an artist and a professor. In his classes—whether teaching drama, fiction or nonfiction—it’s all about the research, about constructing something authentic. To Bunn, the writing process is like a summit push—a grueling trek through lung-punching obstacles. Through ice. Through snow. Through the unknown, but to something great and worth all of the risk.

As the character Finn explains, “Every sentence has little peaks. And then so do paragraphs and chapters. Once you start noticing it, you can’t stop. Good writing is, like, mountains within mountains within mountains.”

*Denali* is a mountain within mountains—good writing, good research, and one heck of a play.



# Barolo on the Road

Madeleine Hart

What do you get when you combine one scruffy haired college writing professor, the experience of learning the art of food and cooking in Italy, and a recently published book? Ask Visiting Professor Matt Frank, and he will tell you that these three ingredients are sure to whip up one memorable summer tour promoting his recently published book, *Barolo*.

“It was an exhausting blast,” Frank said. “[...] I figured that, after the work I put into the manuscript—researching it, writing it, rewriting it, rewriting it again, finding a publisher, rewriting it three more times—I owed it to myself...to get out there and promote the book.”

*Barolo*, Frank’s vivid memoir compendium, details his time spent in Italy, as well as the once less than amicable relationship he shared with food. A childhood full of processed TV dinners high in saturated fats left Frank wanting more from the world of food, ultimately motivating the

Italian journey.

After the release of *Barolo* last spring, Frank began his first book tour this summer across the United States. Starting locally in Michigan, Frank then visited a multitude of other states, stopping at various venues along the way for readings, signings, and talks about the restaurant industry and Italy’s food and wine scene.

“I read at bookstores, libraries, coffee shops, universities, conferences, restaurants, wine bars, and liquor stores—I mean the kind with neon Budweiser signs in the windows.”

Of all the venues he reached, Frank recalls Trattoria Lucca located in Charleston, South Carolina as being the most memorable. According to the restaurant’s website, its head chef, Ken Vedrinski, boasts Italian heritage, and, like Frank, has visited the country in search of fine olive oils and wines. Vedrinski’s acclaimed culinary skills and the restaurant’s authentic feel made it a perfect stop along Frank’s tour.

“I fell in love with Charleston and their food scene,” Frank said. In honor of *Barolo*

and Frank’s reading, the chef at the Lucca, prepared a multicourse menu specific to the cuisine found in Barolo, Italy. The ticket-only event sold out.

“After the event, my wife and I lounged at a long table with the kitchen and service staff, and the wine reps, drinking bottle after stellar bottle until the sun came up,” Frank recalled.

The tour was both exciting and educational. Frank said he learned a lot about the different nuances of regional audiences and was able to tailor his readings based on who would be receptive to what.

“The younger NYC crowd didn’t seem to have a problem with [curse words], but some members of the elderly Tennessee crowd dropped their eyes, and shook their heads...Being a presumptuous and cautious kind of guy, I no longer read that section in the American South.”

According to Frank, the crowds were diverse in both reception and size, some being over 75 people, while others sat below six. Of the tour as a whole, Frank fondly recalled that, “All events were, in hindsight, some version of a blast.”

The image shows a dark blue navigation bar with a white logo on the left consisting of vertical bars of varying heights. To the right of the logo, the word "WAKE" is written in a large, white, serif font, with the tagline "great lakes thought & culture" in a smaller, white, sans-serif font below it. At the bottom of the bar, there are five white text links: "Mission Statement", "Masthead", "The Wake Blog", "Submission Guidelines", and "Contact".

## Wake Finally Awakens

Rori Hoatlin

Formerly known as the *Grand Valley Review*, *Wake* is set to release late Fall 2010. Renamed and revamped to bring awareness to the unique area known as the Great Lakes Region, *Wake* seeks to incorporate places like Duluth, Toronto, Buffalo, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Detroit, Gary, Milwaukee, and all other places part of the Great Lakes region. One of *Wake*’s goals is to distinguish the Great Lakes region from the rest of the Midwest and bring it some recognition.

This new vision of *Wake* has been in development since 2004. “The *Grand Valley*

*Review* was mostly for faculty at GVSU,” said Editor and Associate Professor Chris Haven. The articles were specific to those faculty members. Haven and Visiting Professor and Managing Editor Amorak Huey have expanded the journal so that faculty and writers from all over the Great Lakes Region can contribute.

There have been many writers in the past that have highlighted this region such as Margaret Atwood, Tim O’Brien, Jim Harrison, Alice Monroe, and Stuart Dybek. *Wake* will continue to celebrate the region and emerging writers from this area. Haven also hopes that *Wake* will provide a place for students to learn, discover, explore, and appreciate the place

where they live.

The journal will be available in hard copy; however, one of the most exciting developments of *Wake* is its new format: digital. This shift gives the journal potential to expand the audience base. *Wake* features nonfiction, fiction, and poetry, but digital form will allow expansion into different medias including video and sound bites.

*Wake* is open to any writer who feels compelled to write about Great Lakes subjects or who has strong ties to the region.

“It is a hybrid journal—not just a literary journal, but also a cultural repository of the region,” Haven said.

For more information and specific guidelines visit [wakegreatlakes.org](http://wakegreatlakes.org).



# The AWP Conference: Perspectives from Two Students

*Rori Hoatlin &  
Meghan McAfee*

**T**he Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP) is an organization that provides resources to writing students, professors, and writing professionals of all kinds. Every year, the AWP hosts a four-day conference, where attendees have the opportunity learn from influential writers at panel discussions, listen to public readings, collect information on potential MFA programs, and discover a new city.

In April 2010, the AWP Conference was held in Denver, Colorado. We had a great time and picked up some tips that will help if you plan to attend. We hope our shared experience inspires more writing majors to attend this year's conference, which will be held in Washington D.C. on February 2-5.

## Find Funding

Grand Valley is unique in that it offers travel grants to undergraduate students attending conferences. The Office of Integrative Learning (LOH 181) has information on different grants available to students. Most likely, a student will receive the Academic and Professional Enrichment Fund, which provides students up to \$400 to travel and attend a conference with a faculty sponsor. We did not take advantage of this option last year, so don't make our mistake!

## Volunteer at the Conference

Volunteering at the conference is an opportunity only offered to students, so it's worth taking advantage of. In exchange for working a four-hour shift, students are waived the \$40 registration fee. We worked the registration table checking in conference attendees on our first day. Volunteering allowed us to meet writers from all over the country, so it was a

wonderful introduction to what the AWP Conference offers in general.

## Attend the Keynote Speech

The keynote speech sets the tone for the entire conference. Michael Chabon, speaker for the 2010 conference was witty, insightful, and gave the sign language translator a workout. The keynote speech also gives those in attendance a chance to feel like a cohesive group. Attending the keynote was one of the highlights of the conference, providing the opportunity to hear a wonderfully talented writer, and afterward, the chance to network. One thing that might be done before the conference is to investigate the speaker and/or read his/her work.

*Some panels will improve your writing in ways you never imagined.*

## Research

Along with the panels and readings, the AWP showcases a huge book fair. The book fair is a great place to meet publishers. If you are able to identify certain publishers that are pertinent to your own writing, you will be better for it. One way to go about this research is to look for journals or publishers that match your preferred genre. You can also look at where some of your favorite books have been published and see if that publisher will be at the conference. Prior research prompts intelligent questions such as, "I noticed that your publication seems to work mostly with poets. How did you come to that as your primary aesthetic?" Rather than, "So.... you're a publisher.... Neat."

The book fair also houses ambassadors from MFA programs. If you are interested

in pursuing an MFA degree, try to narrow your search criteria (i.e., geography, student-teacher ratio, funding). Whatever it is, understanding your own requirements before speaking to a representative makes the process less overwhelming. Don't be afraid to ask questions! Usually the ambassador is a student, so he/she will be eager to discuss the program.

## Choose Panels Wisely

Some panels will improve your writing in ways you never imagined. Other panels give the appearance of being life-changing and end up going a completely different direction (e.g., the panelists pitch your book without imparting any knowledge). So, how do you avoid the lackluster panels? When arriving at the conference, look at the panel schedule and pick a couple panels per time slot. There are generally twenty panels available for any given time slot and five time slots a day. If a panel starts to feel like a dud, don't be afraid to go to another. Also, don't feel like you have to go to a panel during every time slot. The panels typically run from 9 am to 6pm. If you need a break, take one.

## Explore the City

One of the greatest things about the AWP is the location. As previously mentioned, it's perfectly acceptable to miss a panel if your ears need a break and you want to explore the city. We ate in local restaurants, meandered around downtown, and found a really cute bookstore. We also walked—everywhere. Our hotel was about two miles away from the convention center, so the journey there and back was an adventure in itself. Joan Didion once wrote, "See enough and write it down." Discovery is as important to the writing process as discussion, so do yourself a favor and get lost!

# Freshwater: Inspiration Close to Home

**Dylan Dunne**

“Distance must smother the impact,” visiting writer Adam Schuitema reveals.

In the opening paragraph of his short story “Camouflage Fall,” Schuitema read this phrase which unintentionally illuminated a primary theme in his journey to become a distinguished writer.

His narrator’s stream-of-consciousness worked to narrate his recent success as an author. Schuitema presented as part of the GVSU Writers Series. His latest book *Freshwater Boys*, a collection of eleven short stories, was published this past April.

Schuitema spoke in the Alumni House, where he inspired a crowd full of aspiring writing students. All of the content and background of his presentation remained

grounded in Western Michigan culture. From his life story, to his formal education and his fiction, this man is an iconic figure of local celebrity.

His stories combine natural beauty, masculine struggle, and tranquil prose to provide the theme of *Freshwater Boys*. In “Camouflage Fall,” a man has his dinner interrupted to take part in a small search party for a neighbor’s son who didn’t make it home for dinner. Compulsory aloofness turns into uneasy tension as darkness sets in and there is no sign of the boy as the three men comb the backwoods. But it took both content and style to make this reading top notch.

“Glacial residue glowing under a cool glacial moon,” Schuitema writes, as his faint foreshadowing grips at the climatic tragedy. His talents were shown in the contrasting feelings of hope that existed

amidst disaster.

The question and answer section that followed his reading gave insight on Schuitema’s journey to his current success. He encouraged young writers to embrace their upbringing and make the most of it in their writing persona, rather than “rush off to New York or Boston.” As most young writers present could attest to the complacent feeling that Michigan can foster at times, this advice was potent.

Inside and outside of his writing, Schuitema instructs audiences that unnecessary distance has the potential to smother the impact of writing. By growing up in the area, receiving his MFA and PhD from Western University, Schuitema cultivated the passionate understanding of Michigan that grew into a beautiful series of stories.

# Lewis: Performance & Writing Combined

**Claire Helakoski**

“Write what you want or you’ll hate yourself,” said actor and playwright Sean Lewis, who visited campus this fall as part of the GVSU Writers Series.

Lewis is currently Artistic Director for Working Group, a theater company based in Iowa City, Iowa. A writer and director, he has penned and performed shows such as *I Will Make You Orphans* and acted in Assistant Professor Austin Bunn’s play *Denali*, which had a one-night performance in Grand Rapids this fall. On October 25, in the Performing Arts Center, Lewis offered the audience an impromptu mini-performance of *Killadelphia*, a solo play about Philadelphia that stemmed from his interviews with inmates at a prison. He was commissioned to visit and interview convicted killers by the Mural Arts Project of Philadelphia. His original intent was to write a 5-character play, but he found himself more involved in the piece than he originally planned.

When a young man was killed just a few streets from Lewis’ home, he couldn’t stop thinking about it. The piece became more than just inmates and art projects and

developed into a solo production about politics and people living in Philadelphia.

After the completion of the piece, Lewis was turned down many times before putting the piece on stage himself all over the country.

The characters in *Killadelphia* are real people, inmates, politicians, and residents that Lewis interviewed. He plays all of these roles. Lewis said it isn’t difficult

*“I want [theatre] to be visceral. I want you to have an experience,” said Lewis.*

playing so many different people because he “met them personally.” He noted the physicality of someone during the interview, and the two biggest traits he takes into account are gesture and voice. “Philadelphia has its own speaking rhythm,” he said. He loves mimicry and would often surprise the inmates with his accurate repetition of their tones and pronunciation.

Though he does often work on commission, Lewis keeps writing his own

plays. His subjects tend towards social and political, and he believes in stripped down performance. He doesn’t want theatre to be artificial. “I want it to be visceral. I want you to have an experience,” said Lewis.

Rewriting his plays, he said, is easy because he has an audience. Audiences tell him what he needs to know by their reactions. He also said, “I listen to myself when I perform. I can tell if I’m not being true to character and I ask myself why.”

Lewis believes that the most important question for writers when considering their work is: “What do you want to make?” He explained that, in theatre, it is easy to be discouraged when trying to sell your own work.

“Not all artistic directors are brilliant,” which is to say that not every director can produce what you’ve created. Lewis said that it is “important not to be bitter” when others don’t share your vision.

He recommends finding a way to get your work out there. Lewis received many commissions from his “unwanted” piece because he had the perseverance and faith in his own work to get it out there. Do what you love, and find a way to let others love it, too.



# Ridl on Basketball & Poetry

*Michelle Thomas*

**H**ow many people think of basketball when they think of poetry? For attendees who left the room in Allendale after Jack Ridl's poetry reading on September 23, there was an obvious connection.

Born in Pittsburgh, Ridl is a man of basketball, from his roots to his poems. His father, Charles "Buzz" Ridl instilled a love for basketball in his son as a celebrated men's college basketball coach. As he grew up, Ridl watched his father's games from the sidelines, living the victories and suffering the losses with the team. The hardest part came from the attention young Ridl received outside of the gym on his father's wins and losses. "I wasn't cut out for that attention," said Ridl during his introduction at the reading. "You were living in a world where everyone talked about what your old man did."

This strife did not dull his passion for the game, however, as can be seen in his newest publication *Losing Season*. These

poems, among the others Ridl read from his other four collections, came to life as he delivered the readings with heart.

His life experiences are not only centered on basketball. As a youngster, Ridl spent a great deal of time at circuses. His mother's cousin owned a circus tent and hosted world famous shows from the Ringling Brothers, Barnum and Bailey, and the Great Wallendas. Ridl explored

*"Dare to be sentimental" said Ridl.*

this experience of hanging with circus performers at the age of nine in a number of poems, one of which he read for the audience about a craggy circus cook.

Ridl also discussed the importance of sentimentalism and cheesiness in life and poetry, concepts that are avoided in most modern literature. "Sentimentality is usually applied solely and soullessly to anything smacking of the gentle, the

tender, the straightforwardly affirming," said Ridl, sipping a glass of cider and cracking a wry smile. "Dare to be sentimental." While his poems are far from cheesy, they are rich and warming, allowing the reader an escape into Ridl's world.

As a retired Professor of English from Hope College in Michigan, Ridl was able to pass on his passion for writing.

More than 50 of his former students earned their MFA's and publish work nationally. During his 36 years teaching, he and his wife (a Hope College graduate) founded the school's existing Visiting Writers Series – ensuring the students are

exposed to some of the best contemporary writers. But what does Ridl do now that he is retired? "Read. Sit on my porch and enjoy a strong morning coffee," said Ridl with a chuckle. "I do a lot of workshops and readings like this one. Keeps me thinking."

*See RIDL on Page 10*

# Tocqueville Sounds the Alarm

*Dylan Dunne*

**K**haled Mattawa only needed forty minutes to leave a lasting impression on GVSU.

The Libyan born poet preformed as part of the GVSU Writers Series in September, where he transfixed a small crowd in the Kirkhof Center. Mattawa, professor of Creative Writing at the University of Michigan, traveled from Ann Arbor; his poetry resounded in the mind well after he had made in safely home across the state.

Mattawa's *Tocqueville*, recently published in April 2010, is a collection of poems and served as the focal point of the reading. He immigrated to the United States in his late teens, already privy to a childhood full of poetic inspiration that would last him a lifetime. Since then, he has published four books of poetry, including *Zodiac of Echoes*.

Along with writing, Mattawa has made a career of translating Arabic poetry into

English, and has translated seven books, making him one of the primary outlets of Arabic culture into the world of American poetry.

Mattawa read six poems, rich with dark social inequality and the obsession of feeling "concerned with being of place... constantly trying to belong." The sharp contrast between Mattawa's jovial presence and the cold, murky mood that marked his poetry seemed to mimic the irony behind the book's title—an allusion to French author Alexis de Tocqueville, known most notably for writing *Democracy in America*.

With his first poem, Mattawa posed the question, "what do we do with beauty when we are surrounded by horror or ugliness?" Mattawa was inspired about this notion after he discovered photos of Palestinian refugees; beautiful women caught in the ugliness of the world around them.

The second poem he read was entitled

"Ecclesiastes," a nod to the Hebrew bible. Wrought with troublesome social issues, this poem explored the reality of compassion in the business-oriented New World. For instance, "The rule is to assume their parents abused them. The trick is to sound like the one teacher they loved... And when they say 'anger' or 'rage' or 'love,' say 'give me an example'." As soon as the poem ended, Mattawa apologized with a chuckle for bestowing the audience with such depressing matter.

Following this piece was "Tocqueville," which Mattawa read only a portion, choosing to "not ruin our night." After, Mattawa read a few shorter poems from his collection, including a love poem called "Pastoral."

With that, Khaled Mattawa finished. Seemingly as soon as he had arrived, Mattawa was gone; leaving the small audience at GVSU with a trace of tragedy, culture, and especially, poetry.

# Breadcrumbs Scabs: A Trail to Poetic Honesty

Jamie deGraaf

Lena Judith Drake was tired of pretty poems.

She'd had enough of mainstream poetry magazines full of what she felt were disingenuous words painting flattering portraits of the speaker, a setting or nature. Even the darker pieces seemed restrained and left her unsatisfied. She craved poetry that captured the dark, bizarre, unflattering gamut of real human experience. She ached for a "truly confessional" adult poetry magazine that was LGBT friendly and published a significant amount of women writers without being a "women's magazine."

In December 2008, with time over semester break and the help an online magazine database, the GVSU senior birthed *Breadcrumb Scabs: a poetry magazine*.

The magazine answers the call of open-minded adults with "liberal" attitudes who are frustrated by conventional poetry and interested in the dark side of honest human emotion. "The overall purpose of the writing," said Drake, "is to give a voice to emotions people aren't supposed to talk about, describing common or uncommon experiences in new ways."

Drake is pursuing a B.A. in Creative Writing and says she's been a writer since childhood. She is passionate about writing because of the way it allows her to think about the world and helps her appreciate overwhelming moments.

"We don't define 'poetry,'" said Drake. "We accept very non-traditional poems. You don't have to write with meter and rhyme to be a poet. In fact, does this act restrict what you really need to say? What others have never heard but need to hear? Does it sometimes encourage clichéd content?"

Although Drake was a young writer herself, the publication consists of contributors over the age of eighteen. "We have complex adult themes and have been known to publish very graphic material," she said. "You don't need explicit content

to get published, but I do think that important parts of the human experience are simply not what the mainstream would consider 'appropriate.' We like poems that break the silence on taboos—when they're honest rather than simply for shock value."

Since the first publication in 2008, Drake's staff has grown by two. "*Breadcrumb Scabs* was much more work back then," remembered Drake. She was solely in charge of sending personal letters back to every submission, designing covers, ordering and copyediting, sending out proofs, setting up the issue for the printing company, updating the website, and doing promotions. Now she has help with copyediting, website design and maintenance, and graphic design for the covers.

"Despite my extra workers," said Drake, "if you submit some poetry or art to the magazine, I will still personally take a look at every single piece and make the decision, which is my favorite part of being an editor."

Over the two years *Breadcrumb Scabs* has



been in print, submission rates have stayed essentially constant in numbers Drake said she never could have expected. "On good days, I've received submissions from maybe ten different people, 1-5 poems each. On slow days, maybe one or two people submit, but never less than that. It is astounding to me that I'm not running out of poets yet."

*Breadcrumb Scabs* is available monthly as a free download and in print (\$6) from: <http://www.breadcrumbscabs.com>.

Submissions are electronic and guidelines are available on the website. Search for *Breadcrumb Scabs* on Facebook, too.

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## RIDL

...continued from Page 9

As to his experience at GVSU, Ridl was complementary. "In all the times that I've come here, I'm always impressed with the generous reception I receive," said Ridl. "Also, the students are very sharp; I always get good discussions here."

Ridl is a poet for novice readers and

poetry buffs alike. With impeccable craft and a grounded perspective, he will continue not to tell, but to show his readers the value of living the sentimental life, of the poetry in basketball, and of the call to live passionately.

# Balancing the Blur: Truth in Writing

*Meghan McAfee*

Visiting Professors Ben Drevlow, Matt Frank, and Elena Passarello, along with Assistant Professor Sean Prentiss, attempted to untangle the issue of truth in writing during a special session at GVSU in October. The panel, “The Whole Truths, Half-Truths, and Quarter-Truths of Creative Writing,” stemmed from a conversation between colleagues. The intent was to provide a setting for students to understand what goes on during a creative writing conference sessions without actually having to leave GVSU and to provide a philosophical discussion about writing.

Panel attendees received a packet of suggested, though not required, readings. The packet included full-length examples of poetry and fiction by Norman Dubie’s *Oration: Half Moon in Vermont* and Tim O’Brien’s *How to Tell a True War Story*, respectively. Also included were excerpts from John D’Agata’s book-length essay, *About a Mountain*, and a review from the *New York Times*, written by Charles Bock. An essay titled, “Creative Nonfiction Definitions,” written by Prentiss, completed the discussion materials.

Panelists examined different facets of the overarching theme. Prentiss introduced the audience to definitions of *disclaimer* and *contract*, which emphasized how they guide a reader through a piece of writing. The disclaimer can be seen as a note to the reader; it can either confirm or deny the validity of truth. Similarly, the contract a writer makes tells the reader what to expect from the piece. He also discussed the unreliability of memory. “Memory breaks down over time,” he said. “Memories are not photographs. They’re stories that we tell in our brains, and every time we retell them, we retell in some new way.”

Using Prentiss’ definitions as a springboard, Frank segued into a comparison of Dubie’s poem and O’Brien’s work. Frank argued that Dubie and O’Brien treat the notion of disclaimer with the same

reverence, though in completely different ways. “As opposed to what O’Brien does in many of his stories, where he introduces disclaimer at the beginning, Dubie tells us at the end,” Frank said. He questioned whether Dubie’s disclaimer at the end retracts from the overall experience. Frank was unsure, but he knew that loading a piece with truth is a craft choice. “You have the choice to wedge truth up into the crevices of art, when so often the opposite is done,” said Frank.

Concluding the discussion, Passarello expanded on Frank’s mention of craft choices in her conversation about D’Agata’s book and Bock’s review. D’Agata allowed himself to play with time in *About a Mountain*, condensing the book’s crucial event into one day versus three. Bock condemned D’Agata for his choice in the review, but Passarello defended it. “If we look at *About a Mountain* as a piece of artistic rhetoric, a book-length work trying to tell us something specific, nothing is made up.” In Passarello’s view, nonfiction should be inspired by fact, not shackled to it. “Nonfiction is a genre that views facts as tools for art, and as contracts and concepts that are written only in the act of trying.”

Impossible to debunk in a single evening, truth in writing remains elusive. According to Drevlow, who orchestrated the event and served as moderator of the panel, it’s how you balance the blur, the space between the story-truth and the truth-truth, that counts. “Balancing your perspective is how you’ll get closer to figuring it out,” he said. The only way to get closer to the truth about truth is to just keep writing.

# Writing Department Awards

In April 2010, the Writing Department honored the following students for their outstanding work and contributions at the annual award ceremony. Congratulations!

**Carrie Smith**

**Department of Writing  
Outstanding Student**

**Laura Hogg**

**Faculty & Staff  
Scholarship Award**

**Susan Creager**

**Glenn A. Niemeyer  
Award Nominee**

**Janelle Wing**

**VenderBush Leadership  
Award Nominee**

**Elizabeth Uhl**

**Internship Award**

**Jessica DeWent**

**Christina Bell**

**1st Annual Poetry Prize**

## *InWriting*

Faculty Advisor:

Christopher Toth

Copy Editors:

Meghan McAfee; Jessica Levine

Photo Contributions:

Kiera Wilson (1, 12); Chelsea Chandler (4);  
Jessica Levine (5); Jamie deGraaf (10)

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# Flaneur: A Writer's Art of Wandering

Kiera Wilson

London is a literary Mecca, a metropolis that inspired countless writers and provides a near endless supply of local pubs and sidewalk cafes with cozy writing spots. This summer, I lived in London and took a travel writing course through Richmond, The American International University. The university offers study abroad programs in conjunction with the American Institute for Foreign Study, who arranged my housing, some meals, and airport pick up from a sketchy Spaniard with questionable driving skills who never put down his cell phone while navigating London's narrow streets. Learning to love walking and public transportation was a work in progress for a diehard Motor City resident such as myself. London thrives on public transportation and like it or not, I had to learn to love the Tube (London's underground subway system). Quickly, I realized that London is a city best explored on foot.

Richmond's satellite campus in Kensington hosted the American students. Initially, I was disappointed to learn their Kensington campus was a loose collection of buildings in the middle of one of London's richest neighborhoods. I expected a traditional campus like GVSU, but I reminded myself the point of this experience was to leave my comfort zone. The Royal Borough of Kensington is centrally located in London, a perfect location for learning the layout of the city. Kensington Gardens and Hyde Park was a twenty minute walk from my flat. The entrance to Kensington Palace and Gardens is just off Kensington Highstreet, which has an abundance of clothing shops, restaurants, electronic stores, cafés, and book stores.

In my travel writing course, I learned

the art of wandering the city. There were no pretty articles about the usual tourist places in London. Instead, my professor challenged us to explore the lesser known parts of the city. Often we met outside of the classroom: The British Library, Liverpool Street Station, Bangla-town, Brick Lane, and even pubs. I had the fortune of being in London during the World Cup Series; my professor shamelessly had us meet at a pub to watch the matches and drink beer. However, there was a balance of work and play. The course was reading intensive and our professor mixed classics such as *Robinson Crusoe*, nonfiction pieces such as *Palestinian Walks* by Raja Shahadah, and post-modern travel based fiction *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* by Italo Calvino. He challenged us to expand our ideas of traditional travel writing and produce pieces based on or inspired by our exploration of the city. I produced several creative nonfiction pieces in the class based on my experiences wandering a large city alone. The professor required us to write an academic essay based on literary theory and let us explore fiction pieces as a final project. This class blended genres and provided me with a new perspective on traveling writing.

London is filled with hidden gems that might spark a writer's imagination. As a lover of history, I was excited to stumble upon buildings that still held burn scars from World War II bombings. I encourage travel writers to sit at a busy tube station and people watch for an hour; the exercise will yield any number of interesting characters for many types of writing. Discover a Mosque that used to be a Synagogue that used to be a Christian Church and yet



remains standing over many centuries with the haunting Latin inscription, *Umbra Sumas*: We are shadows. While London was my destination of choice, a variety of locations exist to spark imagination and create a wonderful study abroad experience for students in the Writing Department.

At first, I despaired of finding a study abroad program to suit my needs as a Professional Writing major. I would recommend that you begin your search early. Padnos International Center recommends looking as much as a year in advance. If possible, try incorporating theme or general education classes. Don't finish them all at GVSU; it becomes more difficult to take compatible courses abroad. Once you declare a major, finding specific courses that match GVSU's descriptions narrows your choices significantly. Like the hidden places I discovered during my time in London, writing courses abroad exist; they're just not always easy to find. The box to the left lists third party writing-based programs abroad to help students begin their search for finding a compatible program.

## Programs with Writing Classes

AIFS: American Institute for Foreign Study  
 American InterContinental University  
 Lorenzo de' Medici School  
 SAI Programs (Florence, Italy)

[www.aifsabroad.com](http://www.aifsabroad.com)  
[www.aiuniv.edu](http://www.aiuniv.edu)  
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