



The notion of the  
Rust Belt rising again  
from the rubble of  
abandoned factories  
and buildings is one  
of the most powerful  
defining narrative  
subjects for this region  
and its literature

(See page 10)

**PLEASE HELP SUPPORT  
MICHIGAN ENGLISH**  
POSTAGE-PAID  
ENVELOPE  
INSIDE

## Dear Friends of English,

With the delights of an Ann Arbor summer drawing to a close, our Department is gearing up for a new academic year. As always, we're glad for this chance to bring you abreast of recent developments in our corner of Angell Hall.

It is with great excitement that we welcome three new Assistant Professors to our faculty this fall: Claire Vaye Watkins, Stephanie Bosch Santana, and Antoine Traisnel. Claire Vaye Watkins' essays and fiction have appeared in *The Paris Review*, *Ploughshares*, *Glimmer Train*, and the *New York Times*. Her 2012 collection of short stories, *Battleborn*, received several notable accolades, including a prestigious award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Stephanie Bosch Santana, jointly appointed between English and the Department of Afroamerican and African Studies, is a widely travelled specialist in African literature whose research focuses on popular short fictional forms that have emerged in southern African contexts since the 1950s. Considering these works from global as well as regional and post-colonial perspectives, she takes up questions of technology, urban development, and models of interconnectedness that they bring



**One of my first goals as Chair is to launch a series of conversations with faculty, staff, students, and alumni to help us identify specific challenges and objectives and to chart a propitious course for the next several years and beyond.**

to the fore. Antoine Traisnel's research and teaching interests span the fields of literature and philosophy, critical theory, and animal studies, with a special interest, in his current work, on the representation of animals and their pursuit in the 19th-century American literary imagination. He began a joint appointment with the Department of Comparative Literature in September. As the individual profiles you'll find later in these pages make clear, our new arrivals bring to the department tremendous talent, energy, and expertise, at once reinforcing existing strengths and helping us to cultivate new ones.

The past year saw the retirement of Lorna Goodison and Nicholas Delbanco, both deeply valued members of our creative writing faculty. Lorna Goodison, one of the Caribbean's most distinguished contemporary poets, retired from the department at the end of 2014. Her 12 published books of poetry, widely translated and anthologized (many in volumes featuring cover artwork of her own creation), speak to her profound and enduring commitment to the writing life. As its long-time director, Nicholas Delbanco set our once fledgling MFA program on course to becoming the nationally acclaimed Helen Zell Writers' Program. His 25 published works of fiction and non-fiction and multiple fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts provide some measure of the impact he has had on our department, the countless students he has taught, and the readers he has reached through his work. The inspiration, creative energy, and deep dedication both Nick and Lorna brought to the department as teachers and colleagues will be deeply missed.

It was with great sadness that we mourned the passing last year of two eminent colleagues and one-time department chairs. Jay Robinson, who led the department from 1974-81 and had been Professor Emeritus since 1996, passed away in October of 2014. His distinguished career included an extended directorship of the Middle English Dictionary project as well as a range of influential scholarly work in linguistics, education and literacy. In February 2015, we lost our dear friend and colleague Tobin Siebers, Professor of English and of Art and Design, chair of the English Department from 1998-99, and co-chair of the university's Initiative on Disability Studies. Tobin's ten books spanned topics ranging from religious studies to aesthetics to cold war politics, but he is best known for a pair of recent books on the cultural theory and aesthetics of disability widely credited with having helped to define disability studies, which has since become a vibrant and immensely influential field. As the powerful tribute by Terri Tinkle later in this issue makes plain, Tobin will be greatly missed by the many whose lives he touched within and beyond the University community, even as his intellectual legacy continues to flourish.

Our English faculty continue to garner acclaim and recognition at all levels, with major awards and fellowships too numerous to list here. A few, though, stand out for special mention. In January, Linda Gregerson was named a Chancellor of the American Academy of Poets, an appointment entirely befitting her prominence and achievements as a creative artist. Also this past year, Tung-Hui Hu received a National Endowment for the Arts Literature Fellowship in Creative Writing, a well-deserved recognition of his talent and future promise. And Megan Sweeney received both an Arthur F. Thurnau Professorship, in recognition of her achievements as an outstanding teacher, and a Michigan Humanities Institute Fellowship, for her exceptional contributions to interdisciplinary scholarship. Such accolades reflect well, I think, on our department's long-standing success in cultivating a teaching and research environment that enables our faculty to grow and to thrive as teachers, writers, and scholars.

At a delightful event the department convened last April to celebrate these and other faculty and staff achievements, we also recognized Mike Schoenfeldt for his five and a half years of service as Chair. The department prospered under his leadership, and we are deeply grateful for his dedication and hard work on our behalf. As I settle into my new role at the helm, I hope to be guided both by his model and the vision of committed colleagues and friends. One of my first goals as Chair is to launch a series of conversations with faculty, staff, students, and alumni to help us identify specific challenges and objectives and to chart a propitious course for the next several years and beyond. I'd welcome your input in this process, and invite you to email me directly at [dporter@umich.edu](mailto:dporter@umich.edu). I look forward to hearing from you.

Best regards

# Books

| Recent Faculty Publications |

**The U-M English  
 Alumni Newsletter**

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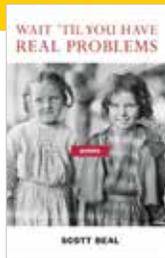


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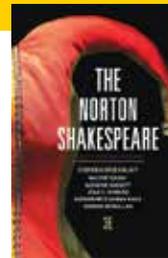
Julie Babcock  
**AUTOPLAY**



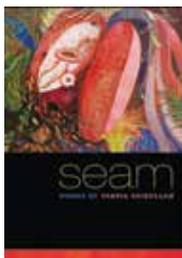
Scott Beal  
**WAIT 'TIL YOU HAVE  
 REAL PROBLEMS**



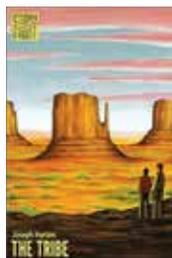
Amy Sara Carroll  
**[[ ( ) ]]**  
**THE DESERT SURVIVAL  
 SERIES/LA SERIE  
 DE SOBREVIVENCIA  
 DEL DESIERTO**



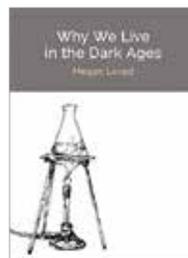
Walter Cohen  
**THE NORTON  
 SHAKESPEARE**



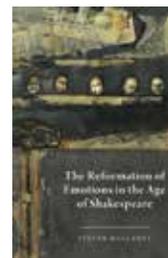
Tarfia Faizullah  
**SEAM**



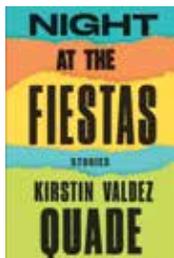
Joseph Horton  
**THE TRIBE**



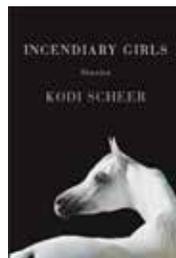
Megan Levad  
**WHY WE LIVE IN THE  
 DARK AGES**



Steven Mullaney  
**THE REFORMATION OF  
 EMOTIONS IN THE  
 AGE OF SHAKESPEARE**



Kirstin Valdez Quade  
**NIGHT AT THE FIESTAS**



Kodi Scheer  
**INCENDIARY GIRLS**



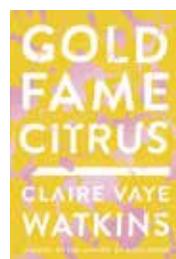
Tung-Hui Hu  
**A PREHISTORY OF  
 THE CLOUD**



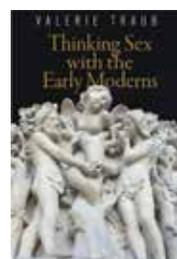
Linda Gregerson  
**PRODIGAL:  
 NEW AND SELECTED  
 POEMS, 1976-2014**



Eileen Pollack  
**THE ONLY WOMAN IN  
 THE ROOM:  
 WHY SCIENCE IS STILL  
 A BOYS' CLUB**



Claire Vaye Watkins  
**GOLD FAME CITRUS**



Valerie Traub  
**THINKING SEX WITH THE  
 EARLY MODERNS**

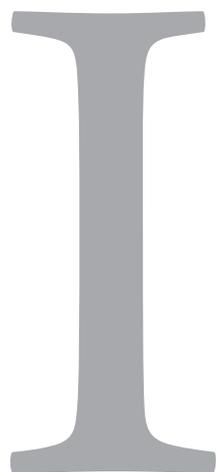


Keith Taylor  
**FIDELITIES  
 A CHRONOLOGY**



## \* DOES THIS BELONG IN AN ENGLISH DEPARTMENT?

| by Anita Norich |



I AM DELIGHTED TO SAY THAT I AM VERY RARELY ASKED THAT question these days, though there was a time in the not so distant past when I got used to staring down raised eyebrows. As I was completing my Ph.D. in English Literature at Columbia — with a focus on the history of the English novel — I “discovered” the literature written in Yiddish, my native language. I now hold a joint appointment in Michigan’s English Department and the Frankel Center for Judaic Studies and, for many years, almost all of my courses have either focused entirely on Yiddish literature or included Yiddish texts. As Michigan’s English Department has become more inclusive of works, themes, authors, and forms that were once considered non-canonical, my courses have increasingly attracted students from diverse backgrounds and ethnicities. I love that range. I think it’s important for class discussions, for the very definition of a liberal education, and for creating citizens who learn to understand others rather than seeking out versions of themselves. Years ago, I wanted to include a subtitle for my courses that would say: “not for Jews only.” I no longer need to do that.

I frequently teach a course at either the graduate or undergraduate level entitled “Literature of the Holocaust.” The syllabus includes poetry and prose originally written in English, French, Italian, Hebrew, Yiddish, German, and Polish (all in English translation). We talk about translation theory and history and form and themes and the moral, ethical, existential questions that this literature raises. These are, of course, tough questions. “How can people do such things to one another?” I’ve been asked. “Why weren’t more people saved by the nations of the world?” “How could this happen?” “Why wasn’t there more resistance?” or “How did people find the courage to fight back?” “How do people survive such horror?” “How do people write about such horrors?” (The last, most often but not only from M.F.A. students.) And more. The course doesn’t so much provide answers to these questions as compel students to consider them and to hear one another’s attempts to suggest responses. Hopefully, it teaches them not only what people are capable of doing to one another but also what it is possible to do **for** one another.

I want my courses to counter what I think of as the common view of hyphenated identities in which the hyphen that should be understood as an equal sign becomes an arrow pointing from the first (ethnic, gendered, national) term to the all-encompassing second term. Equality should not depend on similarity. Empathy for or identification with others is easier when the others are like us; it’s harder and much more important when they’re not.

Last year, I taught a new course that I hope to repeat soon: Jewish Women’s Writing in America. Cross-listed with Judaic Studies and Women’s Studies, it attracted the kind of ethnic and religious range I

had hoped for (but, alas, only three men: a topic addressed in last year’s newsletter). The course was designed to devote equal attention to each of the terms in its title: Jewish, women, writing, America. The students were some of the most engaged, articulate undergraduates I have had the pleasure of teaching. I think the balance between poetry and prose, English and Yiddish, was constructive. Students read modernist Yiddish works and understood that Yiddish was more than the jokes they may have heard or an expression of the immigrant experience. They encountered stereotypes about Jews, women, and Americans and the characters and words that refuted those stereotypes. They read works that grappled (of course) with religion, family, sex, love, friendship, work, politics.

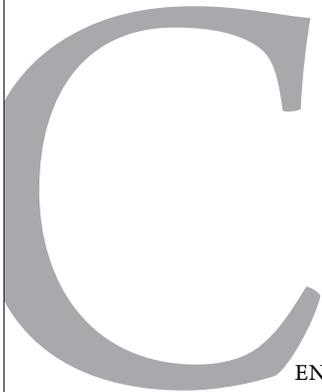
Emma Lazarus emerged as a complex poet as we read more than the lines inscribed on the Statue of Liberty. The very different political and social commitments of Emma Goldman, Mary Antin, and Anzia Yezierska led to some wonderful conversations about immigration and its discontents. Students were surprised and, I hope, pleased to read Yiddish poets who wrote erotic poetry in modernist forms. For the first time, I put a young adult book on the syllabus (Judy Blume’s *Are You There, God, It’s Me, Margaret*) that led to a discussion of how we read at different stages of our lives. But I think the writer who elicited the most fascinating discussions and papers was Grace Paley, one of the authors to whom I return again and again. Her story sequences about Faith Darwin (many saw the irony in that name!) and other women made us think about what it means to live “ordinary” lives. A line in one of her stories became something of a motto for the course: “Everyone, real or invented, deserves the open destiny of life.”

The course description began with a question meant to be at once familiar and provocative: “What do women want?” It turns out that women want pretty much the same thing that men want, that Jews want what other Americans want, that Americans and Eastern Europeans want similar things for themselves and their families, and that, for all their very real differences, English and Yiddish writers employ similar rhetorical and formal strategies in their writing. And yet there are, indeed, differences that are worth exploring. “And yet” is a refrain uttered by Leo Gursky, a character in one of the novels we read (Nicole Krauss’s *The History of Love*). Leo says “and yet” or “but” as though they were sentences containing complete thoughts. They signify open-endedness, that there is always another way of looking at something, that there is more to be said, thought, written, or read. That may be the most important thing I teach in any course. It also means that I can respond to the question of my title with an emphatic YES! ●

# MILLER AT 100

| by Enoch Brater |

(Arthur Miller, class of 1938, majored in English and was a two-time winner of the Hopwood Awards in Drama (one of the judges for his submissions was the playwright Susan Glaspell). He studied playwriting and dramatic literature in the English Department with Professor Kenneth T. Rowe, with whom he maintained a lively correspondence until his mentor's death (the letters are now part of the Special Collections of the University Library).



CENTENARIES ARE AS MUCH ABOUT THE PRESENT AND THE future as they are about the past. Arthur Miller at 100 is a case in point. His lofty status at this point in time places him securely as one of the big three in the panoply of twentieth-century American drama (Eugene O'Neill and Tennessee Williams similarly credentialed, with Edward Albee vying for the much-coveted — and much-deserved — fourth place). We know a lot about the theatrical past that enshrines Miller's name as nothing less than a national treasure. Hagiography may be beside the point, though likely inevitable in 2015. At the University of Michigan, where I have taught for more than 35 years, I often tell my students that after you write a landmark work like *Death of a Salesman* (what have you done lately?), you can just about roll over and die. Miller didn't. He continued writing for the stage over the next 50 years.

A decade after his death, Miller remains very much of the moment. After Shakespeare, he continues to be the world's most often produced playwright. This year is anything but an exception. Major new productions of *The Crucible* and *Incident at Vichy* are slated for Broadway, Miller's preferred venue, as is Ivo van Hove's brilliant rendering of *A View from the Bridge* (2014), starring a luminescent Mark Strong, who created the lead role of Eddie Carbone at the Young Vic in London. In Ann Arbor undergraduates at Miller's alma mater presented *All My Sons* to mark the centenary, which coincides with the Theatre Department's own 100<sup>th</sup> year. And there will also be a theatrical curiosity: New York will see a Yiddish-language version of *Death of a Salesman*, especially intriguing for an audience trying to trace Miller's drama to its cultural roots.

What is all the more remarkable about so much Miller activity is the ongoing dialogue a new generation of theater practitioners has with his work. His theater never stands still when actors, directors, and designers find their own way through such familiar territory. Robert Falls reimagined *Salesman* on a double-revolve stage in 1999, replacing Jo Mielziner's original multi-platform set. Simon Burney's *All My Sons* (2008) suggested naturalism rather than slavishly obeying its contours, offering the audience a new way of seeing — and experiencing — what they may have thought was a stodgy old classic, conceived and plotted through an imaginary fourth-wall. Old fashioned Ibsen? Van Hove's *A View from the Bridge* surely puts that argument to rest.

Miller's life in the theater is therefore in good hands.

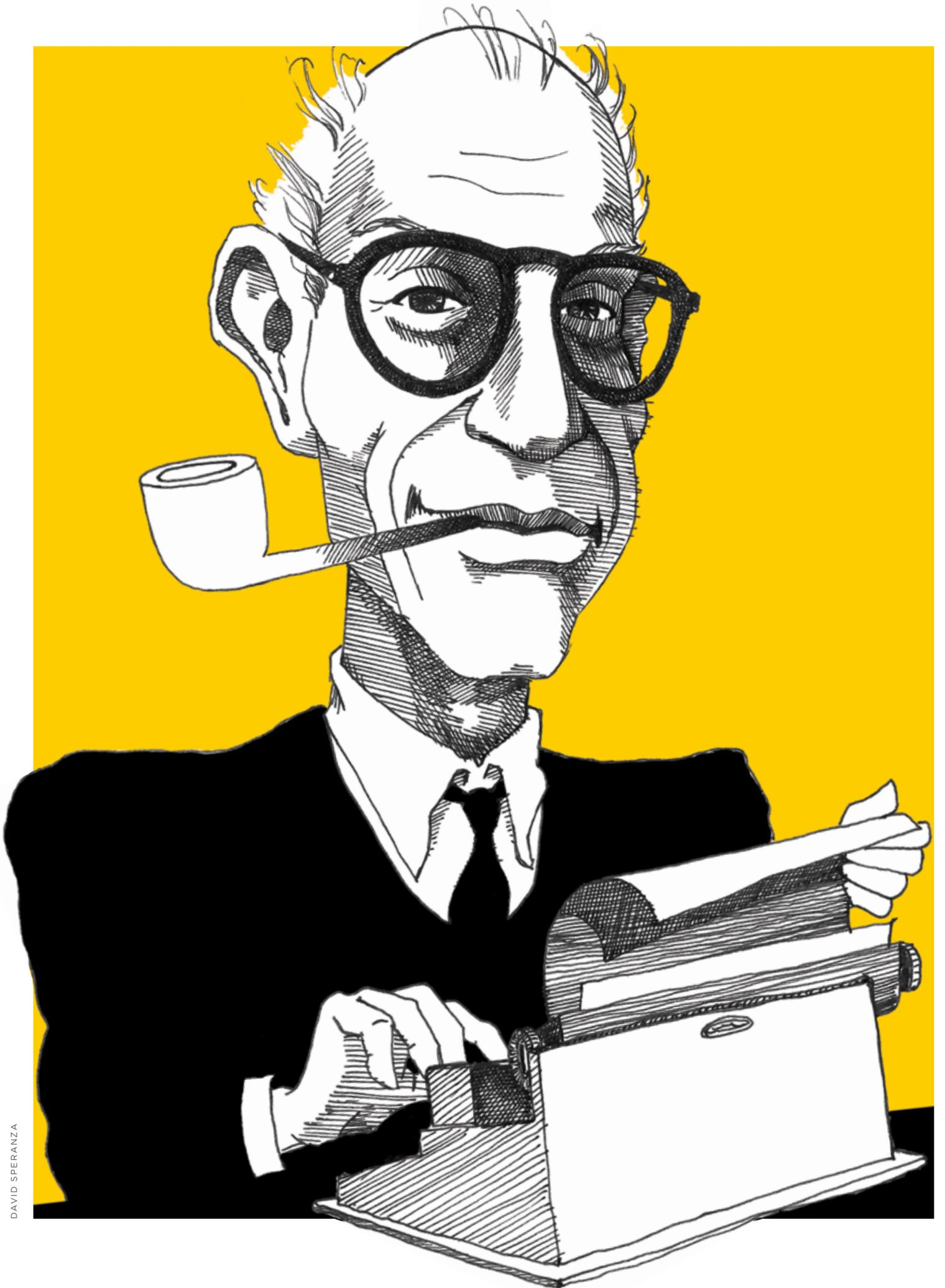
Less secure, however, is a full picture of his status, even his repu-

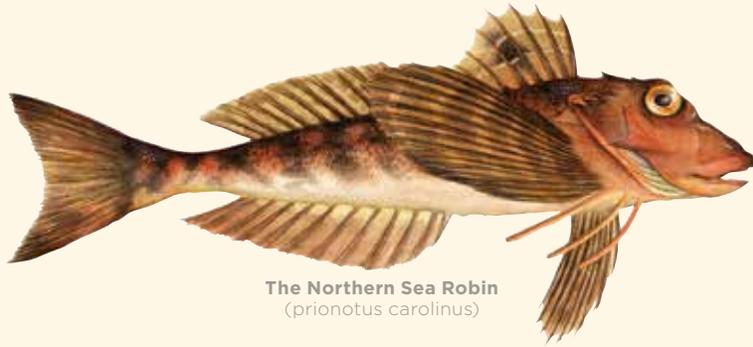
tation, as a major cultural figure of the past century. In the absence of the publication of his journals, notebooks, diaries, and letters (which, as the heartfelt introduction he wrote for the project states, he hoped to see in print — but still on hold by the Miller Estate), we know only Yeats's "smiling public man," not the far more complex human being behind a well-crafted mask. Christopher Bigsby's otherwise well-informed two-part biography (2009, 2011) was not permitted to quote at length from the cache of revelatory material the playwright kept in 49 volumes piled haphazardly under his desk in Connecticut. Miller was of course initially responsible for his own self-fashioning. His autobiography *Timebends: A Life* is nothing if not a terrific read; he published it

in his 75<sup>th</sup> year as a "Parthian shot" to discourage, even deter, future tale-tellers. They came running anyway (one of them, the journalist Martin Gottfried, was summarily dismissed with a four-letter expletive; *Vanity Fair* would be even more than usually sensational — and cruel). And yet the compelling life story Miller traces in *Timebends* is perhaps more tantalizing for what it doesn't say than for what it says. Self-editing is sometimes at full stretch; it's so well written that it's almost impossible to read between the lines. Though the playwright was probably right in cautioning us not to read his plays as "semi-autobiography," the fullness of the life that led to them is a riveting personal drama still waiting in the wings.

And so we return, again and again, to the plays, as we should. It is in this richly crafted and imagined world where, if we listen closely, we can discover the writer's true self, and our own. What did this writer want to be remembered for? "A few good parts for actors."

Thank you, Mr. Miller. 🌟





The Northern Sea Robin  
(prionotus carolinus)

## Arthur Miller As Muse

by Laurence Goldstein

Part of Arthur Miller's legacy is the inspiration he has given to poets and fiction writers, who have borrowed his plots, his themes, his landscapes, the rhythms of his dialogue. What follows is a poem of mine that pays homage to Miller by versifying the narrative line of a short story he wrote in 1960, "Please Don't Kill Anything," a recollection of an afternoon at the beach with his wife Marilyn Monroe. The story is reprinted in *Presence: The Collected Stories of Arthur Miller* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2009).

### UNTIMELINESS

AFTER ARTHUR MILLER

They sauntered at shoreline, where the breakers fell,  
pensive husband and glamorous wife.  
Today, Sartre had it right: hell  
was other people who preyed on their life.

Distant objects relieved the eye:  
four fishing boats by the peach-  
colored horizon, gulls in the sky,  
and, suddenly, trucks on the beach.

A turning winch raised a net  
bulging with fish, the sea's produce,  
and dumped for transport the ill-fated  
thrashing creatures, a silvery sluice

of never-ending energy, flowing west  
into the insatiable guts of mankind.  
"They know they're caught," she gasped, in her best  
movie voice, and he, resigned,

steered her from what was more heartless,  
the workers heaving aside inedible  
sea robins, their corpses-to-be an artless  
mosaic on the strand: waste as incredible

to tender souls as extinction of species  
or triage in the traffic and brute neglect  
of displaced persons, gypsies, refugees —  
fish out of water fishermen reject.

"Why don't you put them back?" she said.  
"Would they live again if they had water?"  
Bending her beautiful body, she laid  
fingertips on the day's slaughter —

too slippery! He intervened, a hero  
flipping junk fish to the waves,  
one by one, back to a perfect zero.  
He emptied all their sandy graves.

"They'll live as long as they can," she laughed.  
"That's right, they'll live to a ripe old age  
and grow prosperous," he chaffed  
her as they strutted merrily offstage,

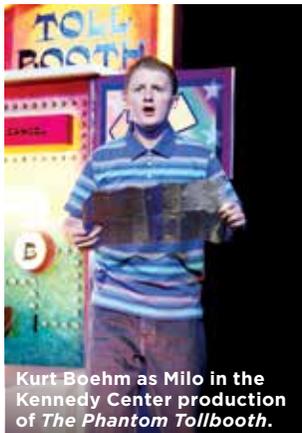
he blessing her, hope in his eyes.  
"Oh, how I love you," she said,  
thinking, For the moment nothing dies,  
Nothing on this shoal of time is dead.

.....  
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# Noteworthy

| News around the department |

## Events



Kurt Boehm as Milo in the Kennedy Center production of *The Phantom Tollbooth*.

In its 9th year, the **SARAH MARWIL LAMSTEIN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE LECTURE** featured **Norton Juster**, the author of *The Phantom Tollbooth*. Born in June of 1929 in Brooklyn, New York, Norton Juster was an architect and planner, and is professor emeritus of design at Hampshire College. In addition to *The Phantom Tollbooth*, he has also penned a number of other highly acclaimed children's books, including *The Dot and the Line*, which was made into an Academy Award-winning animated film, and the recent *The Hello, Goodbye Window*, illustrated by Chris Raschka, which was awarded a Caldecott Medal. The musical adaptation of *The Phantom Tollbooth*, which was first introduced 15 years ago, continues to be performed in schools and theaters nationwide, and was recently produced at the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC, (Left), touring the country for eight months.

Our **ZELL VISITING WRITERS SERIES** will once again bring some of the finest writers in contemporary literature, including **Cathy Park Hong**, **Sarah Shun-Lien Bynum**, **Justin Torres** and **Jamaal May**.

In addition to the readings, each semester the series also features a multi-day residency for renowned authors. This Fall the **ZELL DISTINGUISHED WRITER IN RESIDENCE** was **Louise Glück** (Below). Last winter also included **Kazuo Ishiguro** and **Martin Espada** as **DISTINGUISHED WRITERS IN RESIDENCE**.



## Awards

The 9th annual **BEN PRIZE** was awarded to (Below, left to right), **Paul Barron** and **James Pinto**. The Ben Prize was established in 2007 in honor of Laurence Kirshbaum and was made possible through the generosity of Bradley Meltzer and a group of donors to promote the teaching of good writing. The award was named after Mr. Kirshbaum's grandson. Two exceptional lecturers are chosen each year for their work with students to improve writing skills. Nominations for this award come from students.



The three recipients of this year's **DAVID AND LINDA MOSCOW PRIZE FOR EXCELLENCE IN TEACHING COMPOSITION** were (Below, left to right), **Konstantina (Dina) Karageorgos**, **Lauren Eriks**, and **Joanna Want**. The selection committee had to make difficult decisions in choosing from such an impressive pool of applicants. The committee found it inspiring and humbling to read all of the nominees' files, including the many glowing letters of support they received from their students and colleagues. The three instructors who were selected this year are remarkable for the highly effective, thoughtful, and innovative activities and assignments that they employ in their classes. David and Linda Moscow make this prize possible, and we are grateful for their ongoing generosity to the Writing Program.



ALSO AWARDED this past year was the **FEINBERG FAMILY PRIZE FOR EXCELLENCE IN FIRST-YEAR WRITING**.

Winners were **Casimir Stone** (Instructor: Scott Beal), **Minna Wybrecht** (Instructor: Ali Shapiro), **Jackie Murray** (Instructor: James Pinto). All three essays from English 125 were well-written works that demonstrated the range of genres in which our students write.

# TEACHING THE RUST BELT

| by Jeremiah Chamberlin |

“W

HAT IS THE STORY AMERICA IS TRY-  
ing to tell itself today?” This is a question Doug Stanton, author of *In Harm’s Way* and *Horse Soldiers*, poses to each of the literary guests who appear as part of the National Writers Series in Traverse City, Michigan. And it seems to me that few narratives are more relevant, or offer more significant insights about the issues Americans are wrestling with in this historical moment — the stories we’re trying to tell ourselves about who we are, who we were, and who we might become — than those emerging from the Rust Belt.

According to David Giffels in his excellent book *The Hard Way on Purpose: Essays and Dispatches from the Rust Belt*, the term “Rust Belt” entered the American lexicon the same summer that the last passenger tire was built in Akron, Ohio, formerly “the rubber capital of the world.” The term began as Rust Bowl, derived, of course, from Dust Bowl — meant to evoke loss, hardship, turmoil. However, as Giffels recounts:

“Soon it was bent into Rust Belt, and then it stuck like a barb. The first known use of the term was in a politician’s speech in 1982. Akron, because it was so closely tied to a single industry, one that was disappearing like an exhale in the quick of a Lake Erie winter, was feeling a sudden and profound loss of identity. The term Rust Belt was sucked hard into that void and there it would stay.”

Another term that emerged during this period was “postindustrial.” Those of us Gen-Xers born during the 1960s and ’70s, who came of age during the Reagan recession listening to Nine Inch Nails and Nirvana, were perhaps one of the first generations to see factories and their ubiquitous smokestacks not as symbols of progress, but of pollution; not of prosperity, but of ruin. With the dot.com boom of the 1990s that followed, and the heady economic surge that subsequently took place during this time, it was easy to forget how important manufacturing had been both to the growth of the nation and to our sense of identity as Americans. For along with Fords and Chevys, Firestone radials and Whirlpool refrigerators, the factories had been producing something perhaps even more essential to our sense of who we were throughout much of the twentieth century: the middle class.

Now, decades later, in the wake of outsourcing and automation, the financial crisis of 2008 and the burst housing bubble, the concerns of the Rust Belt seem particularly relevant once again. Especially to our students, who are naturally anxious about what their futures might hold. They’ve watched their parents get laid off, they’ve seen their neighbors lose their homes, and they’ve witnessed cities like Detroit declare bankruptcy. And few imagine that Social Security will be solvent when they reach retirement age. Most have inevitably come to see the American Dream as a myth, rather than the contract for success it had once promised to be.

In Philipp Meyer’s *American Rust*, one of the novels we study in the Literature and Culture class on Rust Belt Narratives that I began teaching three years ago, one of the characters, Lee, who has managed to escape the destitute mill town of Buell, Pennsylvania, by attending Yale and marrying well, returns home to temporarily look in on her father, a disabled steel worker injured in a factory accident. At one point, meditating on the broken social contract that the closing of the mill represents for the entire town, she thinks, “But of course that was the American Dream. You weren’t

supposed to get laid off if you were good at your job.” Then, later in the novel, musing again on the subject, she says to herself:

“There was something particularly American about it — blaming yourself for bad luck — that resistance to seeing your life as affected by social forces, a tendency to attribute larger problems to individual behavior. The ugly reverse of the American Dream. In France, she thought, they would have shut down the country. They would have stopped the mills from closing. But of course you couldn’t say that in public, especially not to her father.”

Another character in the novel, a judge, talking with the town sheriff about how things have changed in recent decades, similarly says:

“And then came the eighties, and then it wasn’t just that we lost all those jobs, it was that people didn’t have anything to be good at anymore. ... There’s only so good you can be about pushing a mop or emp-



ATOMAZUL / SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

**Detroit's Packard factory was abandoned in 1958. The buildings still stand in a decayed state of beauty.**

tying a bedpan. We're trending backwards as a nation, probably for the first time in history, and it's not the kids with the green hair and the bones through their noses. ... [The] real problem is the average citizen does not have a job he can be good at. You lose that, you lose the country."

These sentiments resonate deeply with my students today. Few subscribe to the illusions of easy and early success that so many of their older peers had a mere half dozen years ago, many of whom were convinced that they'd be the next millionaire overnight with the right app or start-up company. Not that my current students have narrowed their prospects, exactly. Rather, they understand the increasingly complicated role that fate and chance play in their lives. They have come to recognize that sheer drive alone does not guarantee success, if it ever did. That some aspects of their future are out of their hands. And that this is a dilemma facing the country as a whole as it struggles to transition from an age of manufacturing to one of information. Open office spaces are the new factory floors, cubicles the new

## Many of my students are moving to Detroit upon graduation. They believe in the city's rebirth, and want to bear witness to its new golden age.

stations on the assembly line. We even suffer repetitive stress injuries from working on our keyboards — is there any task, after all, more repetitive than e-mail? And I don't mean to glorify the factory, for it was, indeed, repetitive and onerous work. By the same token, few institutions offered a stronger foothold for immigrants to build a secure future for themselves and their families.

Yet what I've found so inspiring as I've continued to teach this course on the Rust Belt is the way this pragmatic realism is offset with unwavering hope — both in the literatures of this region and in the lives of our students. Few things seem more quintessential to the Rust Belt than the pairing of hope and loss. As David Giffels recounts in his essay "The Chosen Ones":

"As I grew into early adulthood and observed a larger pattern of hope and loss and hope and loss and hope and loss, and concurrent resilience thereof, I came to a begrudging conclusion: neither of these things — hope



and loss — can exist without the other, and yet at every turn it is necessary to believe that at some point one will ultimately conquer. And that will be our legacy."

I find this last sentence quite moving — and emblematic of much of the literature of the Rust Belt: the notion that collective history is inseparable from individual identity. Or, rather, the former deeply shapes and informs the latter.

Perhaps this is why loyalty to a place is such an important and fraught issue in the literature from this region. On the one hand, few experiences elicit a deeper sense of pride than remaining within the community where one was raised; those who turn their back on their homes are viewed as deserters — no greater sin. On the other hand, those who have the opportunity to leave and don't take advantage of their chance to escape a depressed landscape are often similarly castigated, as if to stay in place is to accept failure. In Mark Winegardner's *Crooked River Burning*, a novel about the rise and fall of Cleveland between the 1940s (when it was the sixth largest city in the U.S. and "no one's idea of a joke") and the late 1960s (when it ranked twelfth and was jokingly referred to as "the mistake on the lake"), the narrator muses early on in the book, "The Midwest's boosterism is just a cloak for its self-loathing. A midwesterner who accomplishes much will soon feel the suspicious glare of the neighbors: If you're so good, the glare says, why are you still here?"

A similar sentiment plagues Poe, another

**A rendering of Detroit's M1 Rail. Construction is anticipated to be finished in 2016.**

character in *American Rust*. Once a renowned high school football player with a chance to leave Buell on a college football scholarship, he is constantly criticized for not having taken the opportunity to escape the poverty of the region. Trying to defend himself against accusations that he simply lacked the courage to go elsewhere, he says to the sheriff, "You ought to be able to grow up in a place and not have to get the hell out of it when you turn eighteen."

A fair comment, perhaps. Why has personal success so often come to be measured by departure? Why do we so often view those friends and family members who settle in their hometowns, or who return after college, as lacking imagination, or having a failure of ambition? To reside in the Rust Belt, these books seem to say, is to accept being doomed to failure or mediocrity. Charlotte Swenson, the protagonist of Jennifer Egan's *Look at Me*, a model who has fled her hometown of Rockford, Illinois, to pursue the "mirrored room" of celebrity and high fashion in New York City, only to be drawn back to recuperate following a car accident, says of her earliest assessment of her hometown, when she was an adolescent:

"Rockford, I now saw, was a city of losers, a place that had never come close to being famous for anything, despite the fact that again and again it had tried. A place revered among mechanics for its universal joint was not a place where I could remain. This was clear to me at age twelve: my first clear notion of myself. I was not Rockford — I was its opposite,

whatever that might be.”

Quite a number of my students feel the same way. Early in the semester, when talking about the complicated experience of how where we come from shapes us, I take a poll to see how many plan to one day settle in their hometowns. The class is usually evenly divided, which surprises both halves in the room. Those who hope to one day return to their communities find it difficult to understand why anyone wouldn't want to reconnect with their families, their neighborhoods, and their roots. Those who have no intention of returning find it almost inconceivable to imagine moving back to where they grew up — they see it as an admission of defeat, and view their peers as lacking courage and the sense of adventure. This conflict emerges not only in Egan's novel but in books like Dean Bakopoulos's *Please Don't Come Back from the Moon* and Bonnie Jo Campbell's volume of short stories, *American Salvage* — texts by Michigan authors widely read on the U-M campus for the light they shed on family disruptions.

These disagreements are important ones insofar as they illuminate one of the most

central themes of the Rust Belt: its likely or unlikely resurrection. The notion of the Rust Belt rising again from the rubble of abandoned factories and buildings is one of the most powerful defining narrative subjects for this region and its literature. Faith in the virtues and values of “our town” speaks to the very American concept of second chances. Perhaps this is why so many of my students are moving to Detroit upon graduation. They believe in the city's rebirth, and they want to bear witness to its new golden age. I'm not sure whether it's magical thinking or a belief in destiny, but many are convinced that the city is on the verge of a renaissance. And maybe it is.

But what makes this sentiment uniquely Rust Belt? Aren't these issues of loyalty, belonging, class, and identity as pressing on the coasts? Or in the south? Or in thriving metropolitan areas? Of course. Perhaps what changes the conversation slightly is the fact that the Rust Belt has been the site of sustained immigration. Whether the African American migration in the late nineteen-teens, as chronicled in William Attaway's harrowing novel *Blood on the Forge*,

which recounts the travails of three brothers as they flee the sharecropping brutality of the south for work in the steel mills in the north, or the European migrants who came to cities like Detroit in the first half of the twentieth century to work in the automobile factories, as Jeffrey Eugenides chronicles in a portion of his novel *Middlesex*, or the Eastern Europeans who fled communism in the 1980s to settle in manufacturing cities like Milwaukee, as Pauls Toutonghi recounts in his darkly comedic novel *Red Weather*, this region has traditionally held out the promise of a new life, a new beginning.

In fact, Henry Ford went so far as to literalize America's melting pot. As part of the graduation ceremony from the Ford English School, new workers enacted a symbolic metamorphosis in becoming Americans. Immigrants in their traditional dress — in view of an audience of family members and Ford executives sitting on bleachers draped with streamers and flags — would march up a wooden staircase to the lip of an enormous cauldron measuring more than a dozen feet in diameter and eight or nine feet in height. They would then descend into the inside of the cauldron, where they would strip off the clothes of their native homeland, dress in “American clothes,” and emerge out the other side bearing a miniature American flag. Transformed. At least in dress, if not in truth.

This is one more element that seems to be a preoccupation of Rust Belt literature: the distinction between the appearance and the truth of events. The narrators in many of these texts are obsessed with articulating the difference between the felt truth of dramatized experiences and the factual reality of what took place. Perhaps this ceaseless struggle with the ambiguity of everyday actions relates to the ambivalence those of us who come from the Rust Belt feel about our origins and how we imagine outsiders judge us and read our identities. After all, no one who moves to New York or Boston or Los Angeles or San Francisco is ever asked why they wanted to go there. But tell someone you're moving to Cincinnati or Cleveland or Milwaukee — let alone Detroit — and you'll likely be asked, “Why?” That is the difficult question that haunts students as they approach graduation and the fateful next decade of their lives. They are fortunate to have so many good novels, essays, and poems available to help them chart their long voyage out. ☘

## New Faculty Member

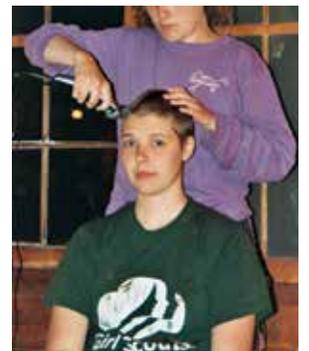
# Claire Vaye Watkins

**T**HE SELF-PORTRAIT IS A TRICKY GENRE FOR ME, WHICH IS PROBABLY WHY I've become a fiction writer rather than, say, a memoirist. Then again, origin myths are a tricky genre, too. I could as easily say I became a fiction writer because I spent the earliest years of my life living on the southern edge of Death Valley, in a town of about 100 people, a town that boasted a post office, a bar, a pair of horseshoe pits, a rock shop (my parents') and not much else. My family spent a lot of time in the car, driving to Las Vegas for groceries, school supplies, to see a movie, or to visit my grandma, a change girl at Caesar's Palace. My mom passed these drives by talking, telling my sister and me stories about the valleys and mountains we saw: how they were formed however many hundreds of thousands of years before, who lived there now and what trouble they'd gotten themselves into. She spun yarns so absorbing I consider it my professional obligation to repeat them. Perhaps predictable, then, that I arrived at the University of Nevada, Reno intending to become a geologist and came out having spent most of my credit hours on creative writing and women's studies. I did my M.F.A. at a small, little-known public university in Columbus, Ohio, where I wrote about the Nevada desert and became very fond of the Midwest. My obsession with a place and its people became my first book, *Battleborn*, a collection of short stories and also a sort of torch song for Nevada. My next book returns to the Mojave Desert, though as a futuristic imagining of the culmination of the water crisis in the Southwest. I, too, return to the desert every summer, as the co-director of the Mojave School, a free creative writing workshop in my hometown. Back in Ann Arbor, this fall I'll be leading two fiction workshops, my favorite class to teach.





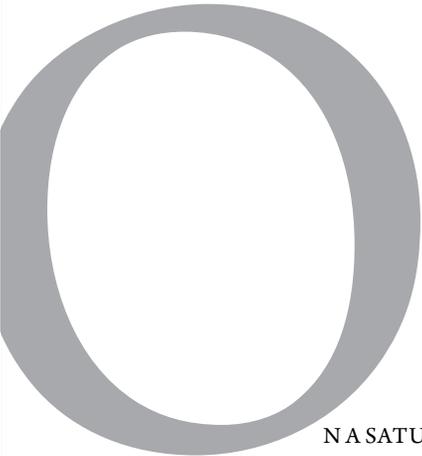
**NELP, one of the English Department's experiential living-learning programs, was founded in 1975 by U-M professors Alan Howes (above right, in yellow shirt), and Walter Clark (lower right, pointing).**



EMILY HILLIARD (TOP LEFT AND TOP RIGHT). ALL OTHERS COURTESY OF NELP

# NELP, FORTY YEARS ON

| by Aric Knuth |



wasn't just the thought of fighting the government, but it was also fighting a lot of pro-LGBT organizations who said, 'It's not the time, you should wait, let's let things happen in Circuits that are more progressive than the 6th Circuit. Drawing on some of the lessons I learned from NELP — I was like, 'What's the point? Why did I go to law school? Did I get this great education to just sit around and watch people suffer great indignities and do absolutely nothing?' So eventually I told the organizations, basically, 'Screw it! I'm going to do it anyway. And if I lose, I lose.' But you can't win a case you never file."

Dana told the crowd that she can describe her biggest takeaway from NELP in two words: "Question authority." She went on: "That was something we did. We sat around not just talking about literature, but we talked about it at a broader level. We talked about politics and

sociology and our place in the world. Where did we fit in? What were the goals that we hoped to achieve in our lifetimes?"

It came as a bit of a surprise when, toward the end of her talk on the panel, Dana changed the subject to one thing in particular she did at NELP — something that just about everyone else in the amphitheatre that morning had experienced themselves when they were students in the program — on a day called Get Lost Day.

"I was thinking about when they drop you off in the middle of nowhere and say find your way back to camp, and to me the marriage equality case was like being dropped in the middle of the wilderness, we had no idea what we were doing, we had no organizational backing, we had no money — and we fought our way to the Supreme Court, and it was kind of no different than finding our way back to camp, and finding our way back to who we fundamentally were." Dana was explaining something here that many, many students have worked to articulate after the program, and it comes from the principle at

ON A SATURDAY MORNING THIS PAST APRIL, RACKHAM Amphitheatre was filled with representatives from forty cohorts of the New England Literature Program, the English Department's experiential living-learning semester, founded in 1975 by U-M professors Walter Clark and Alan Howes on Lake Winnepesaukee in New Hampshire. The 150 NELP alumni who'd come to Ann Arbor for the weekend gathered to hear eight panelists who participated in the program themselves at various points in the past forty years. On the table for the panelists, a handful of questions: What are you doing — right now, in your life? And in what ways, big or small, has your experience in the academic community of NELP — studying New England literature and climbing mountains — been a part of what you do? How has NELP influenced how you think or live today, and what has your experience in the program done to help get you where you are now?

One of the panelists, Dana Nessel — an attorney in the Metro Detroit area and a NELP student in 1989 — talked to the audience about a case she was working on, *DeBoer v. Snyder*. The case has since become famous as part of a group of cases heard by the U.S. Supreme Court in April, resulting in the landmark *Obergefell* decision that legalized gay marriage in June. Dana was representing Jane Rowse and April DeBoer, two women who sued the state of Michigan first to challenge Michigan's ban on adoption by same-sex couples, and then to challenge Michigan's constitutional amendment banning gay marriage. Just days after the April panel in Rackham, Dana was to travel to Washington, D.C., with Rowse and DeBoer for the hearing before the Supreme Court. Of course, no one knew then how that case would turn out, but Dana was optimistic, though she described the uphill battle she fought to bring the case into the national spotlight.

"I had lots of people telling me that now wasn't the time to move forward on these cases that would challenge laws that discriminated against gays and lesbians," Dana explained. "And it

NELP that it's important for students to be able to develop a strong sense of self, to build their own, original path to the future rather than simply accepting the ideas of others as their own. How can you know what you think if you're not simultaneously engaged in a deep, rigorous reflection of what your values are? NELP is built on the idea that academic and intellectual reflection must have an intimate relationship with equally rigorous personal reflections.

"Had I listened to the powers that be," Dana said, "had we listened to the major organizations, had we listened to the people who said it's better to wait — then this case never would've happened."

Perhaps this is the best place to start explaining why NELP has been and continues to be such a rich educational experience — and why so many graduates came together in April to celebrate the program's 40th year: NELP is designed to help students think independently in a way that can persist well beyond NELP and well beyond the study of literature. Learning happens best and has the most lasting impact when ideas are exemplified, when they're felt — sometimes dramatically, which can make those ideas not only more vivid but also more practical, more applicable to daily life and not just an abstract philosophy or discourse on the page.

### New Faculty Member

## Stephanie Bosch Santana

IT'S A GREAT PLEASURE TO BE JOINING THE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT AT THE University of Michigan this fall. I come to Ann Arbor via Los Angeles, Berkeley, Paris, Johannesburg, and most recently Cambridge, Massachusetts, where I've just finished my Ph.D. in African literature at Harvard.

My research seeks to map new geographies for the study of African literature that can cut across national, postcolonial, and global frameworks. Focusing on South African, Malawian, Zimbabwean, and Zambian fiction from the 1950s to the present-day, I show how writers from these nations have developed new genres of fiction in popular media to imagine changing modes of interconnection across space. In southern Africa, popular media such as newspapers and magazines are published more frequently than forms like the novel and often travel faster and further from their points of origin. Working with texts in English, Chichewa/Cinyanja, and some Zulu, my current project identifies four generic categories of southern African fiction — "migrant forms," "township tales," "newspaper short stories," and "literary time-machines" — each of which makes visible alternative relationships between narrative, spatial affiliations, and modes of being.

My interest in these popular literary forms grew out of the period I spent living in southern Africa from 2005 to 2008. After graduating from U.C. Berkeley with a B.A. in English, I moved to South Africa where I helped to run a national short story competition and assistant edited a book titled *The Face of the Spirit: Illuminating a Century of Essays by South African Women*. I also took Zulu classes in the evening and began learning Chichewa from the Malawian cooks at the pizza restaurant where I waitressed. Over the next several years, I co-founded the Malawian Girls Short Story Competition with the Malawi Writers Union and published a book of the competition's winning stories in English and Chichewa.



At the University of Michigan I'm excited to be teaching courses on African literature that will explore how genres develop and change; migration to, from, and

within the African continent; new ways of imagining Africa's future cities; as well as the relationship between reading, writing, and technology. I'm particularly looking forward to investigating the many new digital literary forms that are emerging from the African continent with undergraduates, who as "digital natives" have unique insights into the workings of the virtual world. Overall, I'm very happy to be making a new home in Ann Arbor, which I hope to enjoy for many years to come.

**What emerged during the 40th Celebration Weekend is that the program reveals how the study of literature is necessarily connected to a study of the world we live in, from law to science.**

So students like Dana experience the feeling of being lost on Get Lost Day, and they bring that experience to an Emily Dickinson poem they read at NELP where the speaker articulates her own experience of disorientation. Later, that feeling of being lost — and ways you might react in response to that feeling — can come to have meaning and be used in very different contexts. Dana's story that Saturday morning was a dramatic example of how the work that can happen in a college-level English class is important — especially when that work is assumed to be part of a network of ethics and skills that students use for the rest of their lives.

Dr. Sanjay Mohanty, another panelist and NELP alumnus from 2006, had a similar message. "There's a question I was asked in a class on *The Beans of Egypt, Maine* — that I've always thought about," Sanjay told the audience. "And it informs my work, every day. Basically the question was — what my relationship is to a system or a society that allows inequality to exist. In my job — I work at a hospital in Detroit — I force myself to think about that question every day. I don't know what the answer is. But I think that asking that question is a really important part of becoming a better doctor."

Carolyn Chute's novel *The Beans of Egypt, Maine* presents students at NELP with a picture of New England they don't often see — the world of the rural poor. And Carolyn Chute herself visits the program each spring to talk about her work, her life, writing and poverty and politics. Sanjay is one of many students at NELP who had a profound experience reading Chute's work and meeting her in person, leading to literary study that resulted in vital revelations about the world.

This kind of broad application and rigorous exploration of literature happens all the time at NELP, in many different ways. Thoreau's chapter "Solitude" in *Walden* gets a new reading from a student who takes a "solo" — twen-

ty-four hours alone in the woods — and then returns to the community of fifty-three students and instructors with a fresh perspective. Emerson's essay "Self-Reliance" asks what it means to act out of your own intuition and instincts rather than out of mere consistency, conformity, or self-interest — and as students think about this question, they're also negotiating the challenges of building a small, tight-knit community with their peers, where their own decision-making about anything from how to resolve a conflict with their work group or what's fair and safe when setting up rules for canoeing can bring them into contact with Emerson's ideas about the importance of understanding what deep forces motivate your behavior and decisions.

Or lines like these — "Human beings must be / taught to love / silence and darkness" — from Louise Glück's *The Wild Iris* mean something a little different to a student after, late in the program, we experiment with a silent dinner, and the normally lively dining hall buzzing with conversation is quiet while people eat without talking and feel what silence feels like — and what it feels like to share that silence with a group. How often do students today get to experience real silence like this? When are they asked to think about how a silence like that might work, how it might be important? When and how too much noise, too much distraction, can become a problem?

NELP is first and foremost an academic program centered on the work of reading literature and writing — both analytical writing and creative writing. What emerged most clearly from the discussions we had during the 40th Celebration Weekend is that in addition to this central work, the program encourages an interdisciplinarity that requires deep reflection and commitment outside of the literary realm, revealing how the study of literature is necessarily connected to a study of the world we live in, from law to science and medicine, from public policy and the environment to religion. Rabbi Sarah Tasman, another panelist and NELP alumna from 2002, showed this vividly when she used her time on the panel to walk the audience through a guided meditation, concluding with a line of poetry: "My hope, my prayer," she said, "is that all of us, in the words of Mary Oliver, can see ourselves in the family of things." Sarah acknowledged that the plan she brought to the panel didn't quite follow the guidelines she'd been given for preparing her contribution. Though she

## New Faculty Member

# Antoine Traisnel

IT IS A GREAT PLEASURE TO BE JOINING THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH THIS fall. Prior to coming to Michigan, I was an Assistant Professor of literary and cultural theory in the Department of Comparative Literature at Cornell University.

I grew up in a small village just outside of Lille, France, and received my Ph.D. in American literature from Université Lille 3. A year spent doing doctoral research at Brown University as a Fulbright scholar prompted me to realize that I wanted to pursue a lifelong career in the United States within a system that would allow me room for openly theoretical and experimental lines of questioning. This recognition, perhaps masochistic, led to my undertaking a second Ph.D. in Comparative Literature at Brown.

In recent years I have been interested in issues of the materiality of language, theories of animality and the posthuman, and, generally, the way in which philosophical and literary discourses inform and redefine each other. I have published essays on writers including Margaret Fuller, Vladimir Nabokov, Francis Ponge, Gilles Deleuze, Walter Benjamin, and Friedrich Nietzsche, and taught classes on the subjects of biopolitics, literal meaning, posthumanism, science and literature, and critical theory.



My first monograph, *Hawthorne: Blasted Allegories*, has just been published in France. The book asks why Nathaniel Hawthorne risked marginalization to embrace allegory at a time when Romanticism had declared this figure of speech obsolete. I argue that allegory is not a failed symbol but a critical regime of figuration on which Hawthorne draws to expose the unexpected affinities and internal ironies at work in the way the young American nation shaped its own identity.

My current book project, provisionally titled *The Rule of Capture: The Technologization of Animals in Early America*, finds my interest in figuration turning toward the question of the animal. I explore not merely how animals were represented in 19th-century American literature, or what violence was done to them as the land was colonized and domesticated, but also how their pursuit in economic, scientific, and aesthetic practices — from Audubon to Melville, Cooper to Muybridge — registers a profound transformation in our conception of the work of representation.

I am eager to get to know my fellow colleagues and students and look forward to teaching Introduction to Literary Studies in the fall. I am anxious to take advantage of all that U-M and Ann Arbor have to offer and to discover the pleasures of the Midwest!

also hoped that this minor act of noncompliance was itself in the spirit of the program, which it surely was.

Writing in a scholarly article of 1985 about NELP, the program's co-founder Walter Clark articulates part of his original pedagogical project: "Our approach to knowledge is active," Walter wrote on the occasion of NELP's tenth anniversary, "placing greater emphasis on knowing how than knowing that. A rich, even extravagant educational context allows for mental flights and returns that a more economic curriculum cannot." This active, even extravagant

approach to meaningful, educative experience is as much a part of NELP in 2015 as it was in 1985. This spring, for example, a group of NELP students studied the work of the distinguished poet Ruth Stone while meeting with her granddaughter in Goshen, Vermont, for a service-learning trip. They worked on cleaning up the house in Goshen where Stone had lived, which her granddaughter is turning into an artist's and writer's retreat with the Ruth Stone Foundation.

And this tendency toward the rich and extravagant as a means of provoking meaningful, engaged reflection was surely a part of our planning for the NELP 40th. In addition to the panel, we had a post-panel talkback,

where all 150 attendees were invited to respond, ask questions, and tell their own stories about NELP—a kind of wild master-class with 150+ students. The talkback was followed by an afternoon of readings by NELP alumni Diane Cook (*Man v. Nature*, stories), Sara Michas-Martin (*Gray Matter*, poems), and Bruce Weber (*Life is a Wheel: Memoirs of a Bike-Riding Obituarist*, nonfiction), and after dinner we were treated to a screening of original documentaries made by NELP alumni who have gone on to become filmmakers.

This long day of events and activities was bookended on Friday night by a New England style contradance in Ann Arbor's Cobblestone Farms Barn as well as, on Sunday, a brunch followed by what we call Common Writing, a time when everyone comes together to write in response to a single question or prompt before sharing that writing in small groups. At the dance on Friday, we were welcomed by former NELP teacher Francelia Clark, who was married to Walter Clark and who read to us from his posthumously published book, *Like a Bird Flying Home: Poetry and Letters to His Daughter from New Hampshire*. Sunday morning, Francelia was present as the group of NELP alumni was asked a question that Walter and co-founder Alan Howes had asked students at NELP for years and years: Who are you here? It's a question that we still ask students to write on today, in the first week of the program when they get to the top of Mt. Major, the first mountain we climb together each spring.

A simple question in some ways, to be sure. But we've been asking it at NELP for so long because it's a question we believe in, and with any luck, we'll be able to ask students Walter and Alan's question for forty more years. Who are you here? It's a tantalizing question that, if taken seriously, and if asked at the right time and place, can provide an excellent basis for the important, meaningful intellectual work that will follow it. That Sunday morning in April, the last day of our weekend-long celebration of NELP, of education, of the meaning and value of academic community—people were eager to take on that question once again. And the room was quiet for a long time as everyone pondered and wrote. All you could hear was the scratching of pens on paper, the flutter of pages turning, a deep breath now and then, as fresh ideas presented themselves, sometimes with surprise, probably, to the room of people who were looking for them. ●

# Remembering

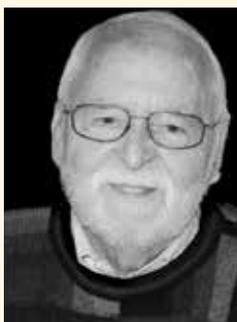
| Faculty we lost this year |

## JAY ROBINSON

BY ANNE RUGGLES GERE

A MEDIEVALIST WHO JOINED THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH IN 1965, JAY ROBINSON moved into linguistics, then into sociolinguistics, and by the time he retired in 1996, had become a scholar of literacy who traversed the spaces between the University and K-12 schools. I was privileged to work with Jay across two stretches of his career.

When I was a graduate student, Jay was a member of my dissertation committee. I never took a class with him because he was still teaching courses for medievalists then, but I got to know him through reading *Varieties of Present-Day English* (1973), which he co-authored with Richard W. Bailey, and from discussions about new directions for the English Department. From the book I learned that Jay was someone who argued against equating literacy with the use of standard English. From departmental discussions I learned that Jay embraced innovations like rethinking writing instruction on campus and creating linkages between the university and the wider community. I wanted to write a dissertation that focused on literacy. Reading and listening to Jay made me think he could help my project, and he graciously agreed. I can still visualize his neat handwritten questions in the margins of my



## TOBIN SIEBERS

BY THERESA TINKLE

*Tobin Anthony Siebers, Vernon L. Parrington Collegiate Professor at the University of Michigan, died on January 29, 2015 after a long illness.*

*He joined the Department of English in 1983 and retained an appointment as well in the Department of Comparative Literature.*

*What follows is an excerpt from a tribute by Theresa Tinkle at a memorial service on February 6.*

I WANT TO USE THIS OPPORTUNITY TO HONOR TOBY'S SCHOLARSHIP, PARTLY because it touches me deeply and partly because he was profoundly committed to being a scholar. No matter how ill he was, he wanted to be intellectually active and alive. He



was diagnosed with cancer in 2008, the same year his book *Disability Theory* came out. *Disability Aesthetics* followed soon afterwards. These are very substantial and original scholarly books. Toby renders sophisticated theory accessible through a prose style that is at once lucid, down-to-earth, and lyrical. His writing seems effortless—he created that illusion by crafting each sentence so that it captured his precise meaning. He meant to be understood and to speak to the widest possible audience. Toby doesn't just contribute to disability studies in these books; he reconfigures the field, giving it a much-needed theoretical foundation. Both books develop compelling

dissertation, questions that pushed me to think harder about the nature of literacy.

The effects of Jay's influence were visible in many places when he recruited me from the University of Washington in 1987. He had chaired the Department of English from 1974 to 1981 and led initiatives, including the founding of the English Composition Board, while simultaneously serving as executive director of the Middle English Dictionary. Graduate students could now take courses that prepared them to become specialists in rhetoric and composition; the English Composition Board (now the Sweetland Center for Writing), which Jay directed in the mid-1980s, was a well-established part of campus life, and there were numerous literacy-focused outreach programs within and beyond the Department. One of the most impressive of these was the project Jay led in the Saginaw Public Schools, working with high school teachers to develop ways of involving students in literacy learning, a space where he regularly engaged the complex issues of race and class. Jay invited me to join him as co-chair of the Joint Ph.D. Program in English and Education, and as a graduate of that program I could see that Jay had re-shaped it to prepare students for the challenges of negotiating multiple forms of difference.

During the years Jay and I worked together, I had regular opportunities to witness his graciousness, his commitments to social justice, and his passion for learning. As a colleague he gave me space to grow and at the same time offered memorable lessons in courage and humility. He didn't just talk about the need to "create and then nourish the development and maintenance of a just and democratic society," as he argued in *Conversations on the Written Word: Essays on Language and Literacy*. Jay got into his

formed ideas. He could regale students with stories about his experiences in the Marines and inspire them with quiet understated gestures; he believed in the essential goodness of all people but he held everyone to a high standard; he was committed to collaboration and the unleashing of potential, but he had a clear and guiding vision of democratic education. His classrooms were the sites of grand conversations built on his deep listening, and his sincere belief in the goodwill of others.

## I can still visualize his neat handwritten questions in the margins of my dissertation, questions that pushed me to think harder about the nature of literacy.

car and drove to Saginaw, to Detroit, and to Battle Creek to act on his principles. Jay was a prodigious reader. Often when I mentioned a book that I'd thought would be important to read, he would say that he had already read it and then give me a quick summary of why it did (or didn't) matter.

Above all else, Jay was a teacher. Students described him as always challenging but never antagonistic, as soft-spoken but fierce, as a great listener but a relentless critic of ill-

As Sarah Robbins, one of Jay's Ph.D. students put it at his death, October 5, 2014, "Jay mentored many. He leaves a powerful legacy in his former students, so many of whom have gone on to try to emulate his vision and his generative pedagogical strategies. When I read their writing now, or listen to their presentations at a conference, or reconnect in informal conversations of our own in spaces like the National Council of Teachers of English, I hear Jay's voice anew."

arguments about how our built and social environments construct disabilities, marking some traits as inferior. He counters the cultural logic that disqualifies the disabled, for he sees in everyone the inherent value of our shared humanity. He not only rejects the notion that the disabled are inferior, he recognizes that abilities are temporary possessions. We will all be disabled at some point in our lives. He teaches us to realize that "physical and mental difference" has "significant value in itself."

Toby was always growing intellectually. In the last few years he started work on a new book, entitled *Disability and Photography*. As he conceptualized it, this book would analyze how one photographer in particular, Cindy Sherman, exhibits women's mental disabilities through negative physical characteristics. Mental disabilities become visible, embodied in ways that disqualify the mad women and exclude them from society. Then his argument takes a turn in order to delve into photographs that can reverse this logic, by disqualifying not the

women but the society that stigmatizes them. This project remains unfinished, but it testifies to the humane compassion and insight Toby brought to his study of the cultural forces that construct differences as negative or inferior; I value his ability to create counter-arguments that affirm our inherent dignity and worth.

I'm grateful for the scholarly books that capture his voice and his vision of what the humanities can accomplish in the world. I appreciate too the creative originality of an autobiographical book like *Among Men*, in which his comic imagination is given free rein.

After being diagnosed with cancer, he made conscious choices to be fully present and engaged in life. He was in terrible pain for years, and he bore it with grace, patience, and astonishing fortitude. More pain relief was available to him, but he passionately wanted to be lucid, to do his work and be with his family and friends and colleagues and students for as long as he could.

My husband and I met with Toby and Jill almost every Saturday morning in recent

years. We would spend a few hours talking about our work and everything else we could think of, from current events to sex to Francis Bacon's art. We identified the most perfect dessert in all the world (Toby was decisive on this point: it's Jill's lemon tart). We got detailed reviews of Claire's performances in the theater. We listened to Pierce's new musical compositions. We celebrated Claire's and Jill's publications (this is the most creative family I've ever known). Every day Toby gave us the great gift of his love, his sharp mind and ready wit, and his commitment to living. He showed us that it's possible to endure the unendurable, that it's possible even in a devastating illness to be joyful and productive. He lived far beyond his doctor's expectations. I believe it was his strong will that kept him alive—supported every hour by Jill's loving care. If will power alone were enough, Toby would be with us still. He *is* with us still, in his brilliant, influential writings, and in the memories of his former students, who have also carried his ideas into the world.

## Thank You!

Once again, you, our alumni and friends, have been incredibly generous this year.

**You** gave over \$38,000 to our Strategic and Gift Funds. We use these gifts to enhance the classroom experience for our undergraduates, to support our graduate students, and to recruit and retain the exceptional faculty that make us one of the top English programs in the country.

**You** donated \$5,800 to the New England Literature Program (NELP) to provide scholarships for students.

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No gift to the Department is too small, and we value and appreciate each one.

## Thank you for being Victors for Michigan!

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