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Honors Senior Project

Britta Stifler

Grand Valley State University

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Britta Stifler

HNR 495

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What is hard about writing? What is worthwhile about writing? Why does poetry matter? What makes a poem true? How on earth do I use Adobe InDesign? These are questions I thought about in big and small ways while working on my project. I approached it with the attitude of an apprentice; very open to learn and watch, and very eager to try my own hand at the craft.

While I'm not content with every piece in my collection, I've realized that I never will be. Yet, some of them I hardly edited, and they are very successful in my eyes. While there is no perfect poem, there are poems of mine that seem to communicate exactly what I set out to say. Interestingly, it seems like these poems also resonate more with other people who have read my work. What is the special ingredient that sets apart these poems from others? I think it is emotional honesty, recorded in a moment of insight, and then worked into a form, usually simple, that highlights those key lines. Though this is far from a formula, and I would never want my writing to be formulaic, it does help me when I'm struggling to finish a poem. Instead of forcing it, I step back and identify the most salient pieces, and then let them simmer in my head until the rest comes naturally.

This hits on a tricky element of the creative process: what is the balance between inspiration and work? If there is all work but no inspiration, all I'm doing is churning out mediocre words that don't express anything deep. In contrast, only working when I feel the muse descend means that my body of work is probably lacking. I tried to find

this balance by free writing, in prose, when a poem wasn't coming easily. It at least forced me to write everyday, and to keep the influx of ideas moving. Many of these journal entries turned into poems later in the semester. I liked this idea of stepping-stones in writing, where poetry is a distillation process, starting with the bulk of prose, and then condensing it until only the bare essentials remain. Of course, not all of my poems are essential; some are pure entertainment, or exercise. In the end, I found, writing poetry is a pretty self-indulgent undertaking with a (hopefully) collectively meaningful result. When something I write touches someone, or makes them laugh or wonder, I feel like my poems transcend their selfish beginnings.

Sharing is only possible with some version of publication, and self-publishing my book was quite a journey from concept to finished project. My first idea was to incorporate photographs and artwork, but as I looked into chapbooks and read a few, I was drawn to the simple presentation and handmade appearance. However, even though I knew the basics about chapbook making from my initial reading, the practical side was surprisingly challenging. After trying a few things in Microsoft Word, I realized I needed more specialized software. Adobe InDesign was entirely foreign to me, but after watching about ten online tutorials, I started my first draft. It was followed by several more, and I finally found a template made for 5.5 x 8.5 booklets. This made my project significantly easier, because it simplified pagination and margins, but printing was still an unknown. After trying all of the Mac labs on campus, and shamefully wasting paper, I finally saved it to a PDF file and had it printed, to lovely results, at Kinko's. Folding and sewing the book was actually one of my favorite parts of the project. I work with my hands too rarely, and it was very satisfying to turn a stack of paper into a book. I am planning on making another chapbook with my friend this summer, now that I am

confident enough with InDesign. I think it will prove to be a useful skill, and despite the initial intimidation factor, I am really pleased that it's now in my repertoire.

Formatting was only one challenge, however. What was much more taxing, but exciting, was the development of writing as a discipline. I practiced a discipline not only by writing every day, but by pushing myself to see and think harder, to recognize the intricacies and detail, to see what's missing as much as what's there. Remaining engaged at this level takes spirit and guts, and periods of genuine rest and reflection. There were certainly days during this semester that I didn't notice anything interesting, or write down observations, or play with language. There were days when I felt dull to the world's brilliance, but more days wherein this practice of heightened awareness, of both my surroundings, and myself led me to notice some pretty amazing things. Some of these things were inside myself, and being honest with myself became an important side project. For my poems to translate, I had to be raw, both in the production and revision of poems.

Part of this honesty was to accept that I would probably never write anything as delightful, complex, or powerful as some of the poetry I was reading; yet that couldn't stop me from giving it my all. Some of the poets I read during this semester were Keetje Kuipers, Katie Ford, Li-Young Lee, Jennifer Sweeney, Linda Gregg, Jessica Jopp, Carolyn Forché, Jack Gilbert, and Naomi Shihab Nye. All of them taught me something about graceful expression, or clever imagery, or the holy rush of well-chosen words. Through this project, I became part of the poetic conversation that has always been happening, and will always happen, that charts the scope of human experience and tries to speak the ineffable.