

L.S. Klatt

Poet Laureate of Grand Rapids, 2014-2017

Lew Klatt grew up in Cincinnati, Ohio, but has made his home in the Eastown neighborhood since 2004. He is a Professor in the English Department at Calvin College where he teaches creative writing and American literature. He received his PhD in English from the University of Georgia, and holds advanced degrees from St. John's College and Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. For his doctorate, he studied with *New Yorker* poetry editor and National Book Award Finalist Kevin Young and the poet Brian Henry, Founder and Editor of *Verse*. While at Georgia, Klatt served the university in a variety of capacities, most notably as an assistant to the editors at *The Georgia Review*, as a Robert E. Park Fellow in American Literature, and as a writing instructor for the Lamar Dodd School of Art in Cortona, Italy.

His poems have appeared widely, including such places as *Harvard Review*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Crazyhorse*, *Poetry Daily*, *The Believer*, *Best American Poetry*, and *The Common*. His debut collection, *Interloper* (U. of Massachusetts Press, 2009), won the Juniper Prize for Poetry, and his second volume, *Cloud of Ink* (U. of Iowa Press, 2011), garnered the Iowa Poetry Prize. A third book, *Sunshine Wound* (Parlor Press, Free Verse Editions, 2015), was a finalist for The New Measures Poetry Prize. Recently, he completed a series of prose poems that take the names of American corporations as their titles. These have been collected in a new volume, called *The Wilderness After Which* (Otis Books, Seismicity Editions, 2017).

Klatt's poetry has inspired several artistic collaborations. "Andrew Wyeth, Painter, Dies At 91" was made into a 90-second animated movie by MotionPoems and the filmmaker Tom Jacobsen. Local composer David Fuentes scored for marimba several poems from *Sunshine Wound* in a piece called "Beauty Marks." "American Concrete" was solicited by the New York design magazine *Surface* for a photo essay celebrating architectural innovation in Detroit. Kalamazoo Book Arts artist Beverly Fitzpatrick recast "The Zoo of Reason" into a limited edition broadside. And, as part of a GVSU poetry project, "The Cardboard Fawn" appeared on placards designed by local artist Vinicius Lima and displayed on Rapid buses here in town.

Upon his appointment, Klatt remarked, “The great vitality of a city is its speech, and yet much of what we say to one another is reckless, superfluous, or worn out. It is the task of poetry to resuscitate the tongue. As Poet Laureate of Grand Rapids, I want to help us return again to the poems that articulate our aspirations and carry our cultural memory. In an age of competing discourses, I want to unify us once more around the possibilities and pleasures of words. This is what poetry has to offer.”

In a piece reflecting on his three years of service, Klatt said “The process of finding ways to help others appreciate what poems can do pushed me deeper into my personal affection for poetry and complicated my own understanding of it... Learning to make public the things you privately hold most dear certainly exposes you and makes you feel vulnerable. But getting in touch with those passions and learning to share them reminds you why you’re alive and what you were put on this earth to do.”
-Discovering a Deeper Passion for Poetry, Matt Kucinski, Calvin College News, April 20, 2017
(<https://calvin.edu/news/archive/discovering-a-deeper-passion-for-poetry>)

Klatt also has said that in some ways poetry is a sequestered, sanctified space because it’s not beholden to the realm of business. It’s not just utilitarian or transactional. When you treat language that way, you strangle it. We’re at a time in our culture when marketers and money-crunchers recognize the value of creativity and seek to monetize it, monopolize it. But poetry is largely disinterested in dollars and cents—that is, poets offer their words without much hope of being paid. As a result, they are free to speak candidly and imaginatively—for the pure fun of it—or for the hard truth of it. That’s what makes poetry subversive, able to poke through the sanctimony and self-deception to which all of us are prone.

Observations gathered and revised from “Slowing Down to Subvert the Status Quo with Grand Rapids Poet Laureate L. S. Klatt” by Marjorie Steele, <https://cultured.gr/slowing-down-to-subvert>

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The Poet Laureate of Grand Rapids program is based at the Grand Rapids Public Library and supported with funds from the Grand Rapids Public Libration Foundation, Dyer-Ives Foundation Poetry Fund.

Projects

Read Poetry Grand Rapids (2014-2015)

This project was born out of an observation that book clubs are thriving in Grand Rapids, but very few of them are reading poetry—primarily because they are intimidated by the genre. With help from a team of poetry aficionados, Klatt created discussion guides for book clubs and “Rules of Thumb for Reading Poetry.” As Poet Laureate, he recommended collections from Maurice Manning, Kevin Young, Patricia Clark and John Rybicki, all of which were offered in the Grand Rapids Public Library’s Books by the Stacks book club program. Patricia Clark’s book was also used for discussion at the Kent District Library.

Grand Poems in Rapid Transit (2015-2016)

For the Grand Poems in Rapid Transit project, students from five after school programs wrote haikus based on the history of transportation in Grand Rapids. The idea was to help kids get in touch with the roots—and routes—of their city by introducing them to the ways Grand Rapidians in the past moved themselves around. This seemed especially important for our young people because of our economic ties to lakes, rivers, and the auto industry. Student poems were inspired by archival photos provided by the Grand Rapids Public Library.

Klatt conducted haiku workshops with students at the Creative Youth Center, the Grandville Avenue Arts & Humanities Cook Center, Living Stones Academy, the Potter’s House and Camp Blodgett Club at Alpine Elementary. Haiku from six students were chosen to represent the project, then paired with the historic photos and displayed on the inside of 150 Rapid buses. The project culminated in a downtown poster session at the Rapid Central Station featuring many more of the poems.

MOTIONPOEMS Film Festival (2016-2017)

Klatt invited the Minneapolis-St. Paul arts organization MOTIONPOEMS and its Executive Director Todd Boss to present their films at the Wealthy Theatre. MOTIONPOEMS takes contemporary poems and renders them into cinematic shorts. MOTIONPOEMS not only encourages collaboration between poets and filmmakers, it also seeks to introduce poetry to a wider audience.

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Following the screening, Klatt moderated a panel discussion, which included poets, filmmakers, and film scholars from local colleges who talked about the artistic choices of both the poets and the filmmakers, the synergies sparked between word and image, and the challenges involved in creative partnerships across the arts.

Links to articles and media:

- Local wordsmiths produce a preponderance of poetry, Audria Larsen, Rapid Growth, January 22, 2015 - <http://www.rapidgrowthmedia.com/features/012215grandrapidspoetry.aspx>
- Why some people dislike poetry, Michigan Radio, April 28, 2015 - <http://michiganradio.org/post/why-some-people-dislike-poetry>
- WYCE Electric Poetry interview, April 5, 2016 - <https://grcmc.org/theatre/node/10580/electric-poetry-l-s-klatt>
- Calvin professor helps put students' poetry in motion, by Matt Kucinski, Calvin College News, April 7, 2016 - <https://calvin.edu/news/archive/calvin-professor-helps-put-students-poetry-in-motion>
- Children's poetry travels local bus system, by Elizabeth Rogers Drouillard, the rapidian, April 12, 2016 - <http://www.therapidian.org/placematters-childrens-poetry-travels-local-bus-system>
- Students' poetry takes a ride on the rapid, The Rapid blog, April 16, 2016 - <http://blog.ridetherapid.org/students-poetry-takes-ride-rapid/>
- Poetry comes to life at Motionpoems film festival, by Daniel Hickey, Chimes, October 22, 2016 - <https://calvinchimes.org/2016/10/22/poetry-comes-to-life-at-motionpoems-film-festival/>
- Slowing Down to Subvert the Status Quo with Grand Rapids Poet Laureate L. S. Klatt by Marjorie Steele, culturedGR, November 10, 2016 - <https://cultured.gr/slowing-down-to-subvert-the-status-quo-with-grand-rapids-poet-laureate-lew-klatt-78ae5872e188>
- Discovering a Deeper Passion for Poetry, Matt Kucinski, Calvin College News, April 20, 2017 - <https://calvin.edu/news/archive/discovering-a-deeper-passion-for-poetry>

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