

Why We Write

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Deciding to become a writer can be a difficult decision for some, especially if those surrounding them are unsure of what that means. Oftentimes, we writers find ourselves in the same conversation over and over again. Mostly, the conversations boil down to the same question: why? There are many writers and many things to write about. You can choose from a plethora of genres and create something entirely your own, whether it be fiction or fact; this is something writers understand. The rest of the population, however, doesn't try to hide their confusion when someone they know, closely or not, commits themselves to the craft of writing. Again, the writer is asked why.

Why is writing important and what is it to you? Why do you write and what do you do with it? Question after question is asked while we writers try to explain the love and care with which each word chosen. So, why do we write?

Dr. Joshua Martin is the newest faculty member in our English Department here at Tusculum, but he's much more than a professor in the writing world. He's established himself in many ways, such as winning the *Jacar Press Full-Length Book Award*, the *South Atlantic MLA Poetry Award*, and more. Tusculum's smaller campus allows professors and students to become acquainted quickly. It doesn't take long to become familiar with Josh's obsessive discussions of food, or his tellings of new experiences fatherhood brings him via his precious daughter, Sloane.

Josh's wonder-filled spoken stories are ones to be remembered, but not quite as polished as his written work. His poetry collection, *Earth of Inedible Things*, is evidence of how moving his suave sentences can be. Upon reading some of his work, you'd understand my curiosity and wonder at his skillful demonstrations of imagery and tension. His ability to craft a memorable story in such few lines leaves readers in awe. I wanted to know how he honed this skill and how he juggles all of these commitments; more importantly, I wanted to ask him *why*.



In the times I've found myself in conversation with Josh, I'm left astounded by the intricate sentences he throws out casually. "I've always loved language and the way it's used,"

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he says. Singing in the car as a child with his dad began his love for words. His love for music, specifically hip-hop, is mostly why his preferred genre is poetry.

Music is often seen as a form of poetry due to its rhythm, tone, and storytelling features. Reading lyrics also reminds us of how similar songs are to poetic forms, divided into stanzas. Music is what draws many writers to find their love for words and language, and Josh found his passion for them early. Poetry's compulsion was discovered a bit later.

Writers are often depicted as struggling artists. They're seen as lone black sheep that reject society and do whatever they want. Josh remembers a high school assignment to research a writer's life; this reading is what presented the stereotypical image to him. "They were rebellious, wore all black, smoked cigarettes," he laughed at his younger self's idea of writers. He goes on to describe the dawning of this newfound love, "To a 14-year-old kid, that was all really cool." A writer's image can have a gravitational pull, but this wasn't the *why* I was looking for.

While speaking to Josh, I can't help but notice his self-awareness, and I'm not the only one to see it. One of Josh's old friends and fellow writer, Dr. Gregory Emilio says, "Josh is true to himself and the poetry he believes in," and describes his incredible sense of rhythm and sound, with the tone from Appalachian language and heritage; all these elements are used throughout his published work make a

successful writer. "Poetry is in his bones . . . he always takes your breath away."

His understanding of rhythm and voice is evident in this excerpt from "Greetings Unanswered," published by *rattle*:

so I'd bundle his letters and forget them
in boxes like leaves hanging on
the one holly left in the meadow
I never returned to, the wind
like a blunt letter knife, powerless
to do anything but save them.

A workshop class during his junior year of college is what set Josh on the writing path. This experience gave him a real taste of what the writing world would be like and showed him how much he enjoyed the craft. After graduating, he pursued and achieved a Master's degree. Interestingly, Josh only began to consider himself a writer after his Masters program began at Clemson University. The decision to finally call yourself a writer seems so official, and it's not something with a clear definition, but Josh admits that waiting until his Masters to call himself a writer was a bit long. "Just writing is all it takes to make someone a writer, so in that sense, I guess I was always a writer," he considers before nodding. "Feeling a need to write and enjoying it is when you become one."

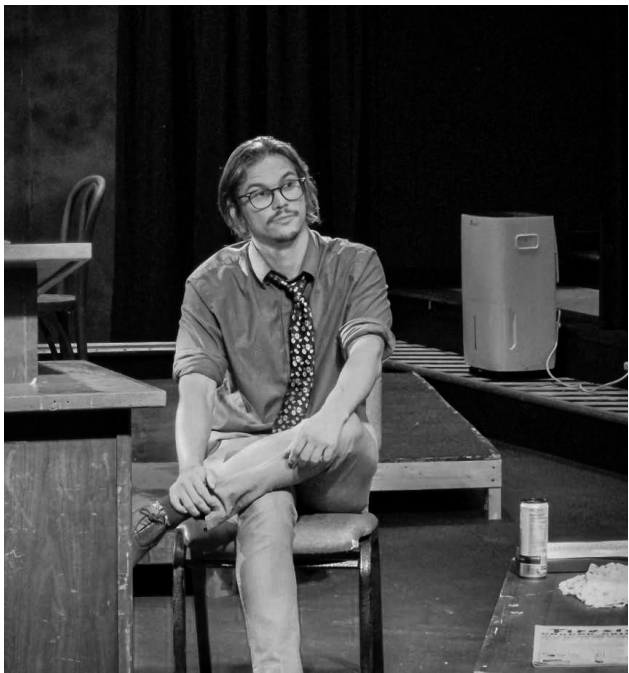
He adjusts his writing process during school semesters: his daily writing habit shifts to a weekend activity. Writing in the morning helps ensure that his thoughts are as true as they can



Lilliana Gall *Pleasant Surprise* 2024, graphite on paper

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be on the page, writing with an alertness he wouldn't have late in the evening. Of course, the writing process is never perfect, "Sometimes you just sit there and type-delete, type-delete, and that's all I do. The frustration builds and you have to walk away" Writer's block is tough, but getting away from writing seems to be Josh's way of gaining back that inspiration.



Josh Martin contemplating at the Faculty Spotlight Event

Much of Josh's inspiration comes from his family. His wife, Erica, is not only a partner but a friend. Much of his recent work revolves around their new journey in parenthood and the changes that come along with that. Sloane brings experiences of both hope and fear; Josh's words are both excited and cautious at the

unpredictability. Still, he holds an aura of ease knowing that whatever comes his way, he has the people he loves at his side.

Dr. Gary Brendle, who is a part of the financial world, has known Josh for almost a decade. He spoke mostly of Josh's kindness and candor but also had great insights into Josh's writing. "His writing is personal, vivid, complex, and thought-provoking. I appreciate that his writing is his 'self' on paper, expressive and full of meaning." But how do you do that?

This excerpt of "Foreign Language" from *Tupelo Quarterly* communicates various emotions without listing them outright. The sense of sound and touch surround the reader to make them understand the story.

we both understand. How quickly time can make any language foreign— the words for love mangled in the barbed wire of the lips, the familiar sounds dissolved at the border of a telephone— until, like the days after a symphony,

Josh is currently the Poetry Editor for *The Tusculum Review*, an exhaustive but fulfilling job. This upcoming issue is still influenced by the previous editor, Clay Matthews, but is going to have much of Josh's input as he's fully taken over submissions for poetry. So, what makes a good poem? "I look for the unification of a poem; are all the images working together to the same conclusion? What do they all say together?"

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he says. “It needs to make me feel something.”

Working in your preferred genre makes you more critical of it. However, he keeps an open mind and loves reading experimental poetry, as long as it makes him feel something. “Writing is identity,” he says; it’s extremely personal and delicate and it’s meant to invoke emotions as it’s meant to be written with emotions. Everything affects your writing because your writing is you.



Josh Martin with English students at the Southern Festival of Books

I finally ask Josh the question point-blank. What is the why for it all, why do you write? It’s possibly the vaguest question you could ask a writer, getting either a vague or very complicated response. He tells the story of losing a parent, his mother, at a young age. Death and grief are confusing experiences, even more so for a child. It comes with many questions and many we are unfit to answer. The desire to explain or understand what’s happened in our lives is

what Josh determines as his reason for writing. “I write to understand . . . I need to understand,” he hesitates before finalizing his answer, “I write because I have to.”

Kiersten Paxton ('25) is an English major from Bristol, Tennessee with a Creative Writing concentration. She is the Assistant Fiction Editor for Tusculum’s international literary journal *The Tusculum Review* and is a lead editor for Tusculum’s student-led journal, *Sit Lux*. Her work has been featured in *Sit Lux vol. 2* and the *Tennessee Voices Anthology 2022-2023*. She enjoys finding music and TV shows to overanalyze for months at a time while spending time with her cat. She hopes to publish her own books and novels after graduating from the university.