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ENGL 200-01, Introduction to Poetry Writing, Spring 2013

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ENGLISH 200: INTRODUCTION TO POETRY WRITING

Spring Semester 2013

Tu/Th 9:30–10:45 PM, Buckman 330

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TEXTS

Harmon, William, ed. *The Poetry Toolkit*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012.

McClatchy, J.D., ed. *The Vintage Book of Contemporary American Poetry*. 2nd edition. New York: Vintage Books, 2003.

“As a rule, the sign that a beginner has a genuine original talent is that he is more interested in playing with words than in saying something original; his attitude is that of the old lady, quoted by E.M. Forster—‘How can I know what I think until I see what I say?’”

– W.H. Auden

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course aims to help participants broaden their understanding and appreciation of the craft of poetry. Bearing in mind that the English word poetry derives from the Greek *poēisis* (an act of “making” or “producing”), we will approach writing as a means of producing ideas rather than simply expressing feelings. Throughout the semester we will be, as Auden put it, “playing with words,” and our work will focus on elements of poetry such as diction, rhythm, imagery, and arrangement. We will read a large sampling of contemporary poetry; we will do a lot of writing, from weekly exercises to more polished poems; we will discuss this writing in workshop format and learn how to make it better.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

- Ten writing exercises
- Six poems and a final portfolio
- A poetic catalog consisting of ten reading lists
- Memorization of fourteen lines of poetry

Writing exercises. You will complete ten writing exercises, many of which begin with an activity in class. These exercises will push you to experiment with different registers and forms, and they will serve as a springboard for later poems.

Poems and final portfolio. Over the course of the semester you will craft six poems, and a good chunk of our time will be spent discussing and critiquing them in workshop. At the end of the semester you will submit a portfolio that includes these six poems in their original form (with my comments) and four substantial revisions. For each of your revisions you will include a 2-3

paragraph description of your writing process; for example, you might consider the reasons you changed the poem from its original version and the specific techniques you used, or you might describe the decisions you made about line lengths, verb tense, voice, and so forth.

Poetic catalog. Reading like a poet means paying close (microscopic!) attention to the inner workings of poems—and, more specifically, to the ways other poets use language. With this in mind, you will construct ten separate lists made up of poetic elements you find surprising or appealing in the poems you read. Detailed guidelines for these lists are provided on page 4.

Memorization. You will memorize at least fourteen lines of poetry (a short poem or a few stanzas of a longer one). Recitations are scheduled for April 25.

Workshop

I have divided the class into three groups, and we will workshop one group nearly every week. The class before your group is up for workshop, you will bring sixteen copies of your poem to distribute. Prior to workshop, members of the class will read the poems in that week's group and write a critique of each poem in the form of a letter addressed to the author. You are required to email me all of your letters, copied and pasted in the body of the email, by 8 AM on the day of workshop. Additionally, you will print out copies of these letters and distribute them to their respective authors at the end of the workshop. Each letter should be typed and roughly half of a double-spaced page in length. The focus of your critique will change depending on the week's assignment, and we will talk more about these procedures during the first weeks of the semester.

Participation

Active participation is an essential component of this course. A workshop cannot succeed unless everyone in the class attends and participates. Even if you are the quiet type, you will be expected to contribute to class discussions and to critique the work of your peers with diligence and respect. If you come to class without the required materials (poems for workshop, handouts, both books, and so forth), you will be marked as absent for the day.

Additionally, I may give quizzes. We will read a lot of poems each week, and we may not be able to discuss them all in class. Quizzes will help me keep track of your progress. These will be short (3-4 questions), and if you have done the reading you should not have trouble passing them.

Finally, you are required to attend at least one reading during the semester. I will provide more information about dates and times as it becomes available.

POLICIES

Assignments

All work must be typed, and assignments must be submitted at the beginning of class on the scheduled due date. Late work will receive a 0 unless you have made arrangements with me beforehand; the same goes for work sent through email. In the case of poems submitted for workshop, no exceptions will be made for lateness.

Attendance

You are allowed three excused absences but no unexcused absences. An absence is only excused if you have contacted me before class to explain the circumstances. For each unexcused absence, your final grade will be deducted by 1/3 of a letter grade. After three excused absences, your final grade will be deducted by 1/3 of a letter grade as well. If you miss more than six workshops, you will fail the course.

Grading

Poems and final portfolio	50%
Writing exercises	20%
Poetic catalog and memorization	15%
Participation (includes attendance, quizzes and workshop comments)	15%

When evaluating writing exercises and poems, I will ask the following questions:

- 1) Does the writing fulfill the guidelines of the assignment?
- 2) Does the writing reflect sustained effort and careful presentation?
- 3) Does the writing make use of ideas and techniques we have discussed in class?
- 4) Has the writer taken risks, investing his or her imagination and intellect?

When grading your final portfolios, I will consider all of the above as well as the quality and scope of your revisions. We will talk about specific strategies for revision in class.

I will assign midterm grades to give you a sense of where you stand, and you are always welcome—and encouraged—to discuss your progress with me.

Academic Honesty

All work in this course should be original and individual, unless I have made a group assignment. Evidence of collusion (someone helped you write the assignment), plagiarism (using someone else's published or unpublished words without acknowledgement), or multiple submissions (handing in the same work to different classes) will not be tolerated. All students are expected to honor their commitment to the Honor Code.

POETIC CATALOG

Reading like a poet means paying close (microscopic!) attention to the inner workings of poems—and, more specifically, to the ways other poets use language. With this in mind, you will construct ten separate lists made up of poetic elements you find surprising or appealing in the poems you read. Your lists should be divided into the following categories, with ten items per list:

- 1) Significant details
- 2) Concrete images
- 3) Effective line breaks
- 4) Figurative language (esp. similes and metaphors; label accordingly)
- 5) Rhetoric: plain statement, overstatement, and understatement (label accordingly)
- 6) Sound effects (esp. assonance, consonance, and alliteration; label accordingly)
- 7) Useful adjectives
- 8) Strange or startling first/last lines (label accordingly)
- 9) “Descriptive” verbs
- 10) One additional list with a heading of your choosing

Lists 1 through 4 are due on February 26. All of the lists are due on April 23.

You may reference a single poem only once in each list—and no more than twice overall. With respect to format, you do not need to explain why you chose a particular entry; instead, simply provide the line(s), the poet, and the name of the poem. An entry for a line break list should look like this:

- “For they live / only in the kingdom / of suspended wishes . . .”
Kay Ryan, “Mirage Oases”

For lists of figurative language, rhetoric, sound effects, and first/last lines, you will need to include additional information. An entry for a figurative language list should look like this:

- “my brothers huddled like stones” – simile
Yusef Komunyakaa, “April Fools’ Day”

An entry for a list of strange or startling first/last lines should look like this:

- “Wait Mister. Which was is home?” – first line
Anne Sexton, “Music Swims Back to Me”