

620:070:01 Beginning Poetry Writing Fall 2005

Instructor: Dr. Anne Myles
Time: MWF 12:00-12:50
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My home phone: 833-7094 (OK for weekends or emergency, before 10:30 p.m.; I'd prefer you to contact me via my office phone or e-mail otherwise)

Office hours: My regular office hours are Wednesday 9:30-10:30 and Friday 1:30-2:30 (I can stay longer if needed). If these times don't fit your schedule, please contact me and we can arrange something else. I am frequently in my office at other times besides scheduled office hours; feel free to knock anytime you see my door cracked open.

"[Poetry is] about making music of the things you love and long for, the memories that burn in your heart, and the fugitive images floating in your head, the things that you have always wanted to say, the things you thought you would never dare say, and the things within you that won't rest until they are finally given voice." --Steve Kowitz

"Sometimes writing a poem is as much about solving a problem or puzzle as it is about resolving a crisis. A poem is a collaboration with language." --David Lehman

This is a class about starting to learn to write, read, and perceive as a poet. This may be a journey you have already undertaken, or it may not; I hope and believe the class will meet you where you are in either case. The class does not presume you are, or will necessarily become, a highly gifted poet, but it will give you the resources and practices to become a better one, and more important, to explore, to push yourself, to write in ways and discover aspects of your voice that you may not have encountered before. You should expect to encounter tensions (hopefully productive ones) between opposing poles as you work within this class: first, the tension between the intense individuality and interiority of doing creative work, and the collective sharing and feedback of a workshop; second, the tension (suggested in the two quotations above) between poetry as personal expression and poetry as something approaching play, a form that can be cultivated by exercises and challenges designed to spur your creativity precisely by getting you out of your self in some sense.

On November 9, UNI is hosting a celebration in honor of the 150th anniversary of the first publication of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. Many feel that Whitman did more than any other writer to make contemporary American poetry possible. This semester's class includes a special unit devoted to exploring the power of Whitman's creativity and how he might be an inspiration for our own work.

Texts to purchase:

- Steve Kowitz, *In the Palm of Your Hand: The Poet's Portable Workshop*
- Gerald Costanzo and Jim Daniels, eds., *American Poetry: The Next Generation*

Two websites we will be using regularly, please bookmark:

- *American Life in Poetry*: A weekly poem with commentary selected by Ted Kooser, the current Poet Laureate of the U.S. (raised in Iowa, lives in Nebraska):
<http://www.americanlifeinpoetry.org/index.html>
- Walt Whitman Archive, <http://www.whitmanarchive.org/>

Required work:

1. You will submit six poems to be workshopped during the semester, plus a seventh poem in your final portfolio. Many of these poems will be based on exercises/suggestions in *In the Palm of Your Hand*, though there will always be a lot of freedom.
2. About midway through the semester you will turn in one or more additional drafts of one poem you revised substantially after getting feedback from the class and from me, along with a prose commentary (about two pages) discussing how you approached your revision process, what you learned in the course of it, what you're still struggling with on the poem, etc.
3. Finally, towards the end of the semester you will turn in an explication paper (around 3-5 pages) on any contemporary poem of your choice from the *American Poetry* anthology or elsewhere, discussing what you see the poet as trying to accomplish in it, what you notice about the techniques the poet is using, how it develops or moves, and how it all comes together as a successful poem.

Final Portfolio:

Your portfolio for the class is due at the end of the last week of regular class. It will be the main basis for your grade for the creative component of the course (50%). This should include your best version of each of your poems, plus the original version *with my comments*, and any intermediary revisions that you feel are essential for me to see. Staple or clip all versions of the same poem together, with the final revision on top. The portfolio should also include an additional seventh poem. You should number each poem according to the order it was submitted to the workshop (Poem 1, Poem 2, etc.).

Your portfolio will also include a personal essay/letter of self-reflection on your writing practices; see the page later in this syllabus for guidelines.

Participation:

You are required to participate conscientiously in discussions and workshops. Participation counts for 30% of your grade in the class, much more than in most non-

workshop courses. What does participation in this class mean? Besides showing up, it involves two aspects: **A)** taking an active part in the workshop discussions. The ideal would be making at least one comment in our workshop discussion of almost every poem. **B)** writing thoughtful comments on virtually all the poems in your weekly packet, and turning these in to the writers. Because I will not have the chance to see most of your comments on others' poems, near the end of the semester I will be asking each of you to rate the written feedback you received from other students in the class (how regularly they gave you comments and how thorough or helpful those comments were). These ratings from your classmates will be factored into your participation grade! So don't assume that because I don't usually see your written comments that they don't matter.

Being in a workshop is not just about furthering your own writing, but about furthering your ability to read and respond to others' writing constructively and compassionately. This is an education in being brave and kind as well as smart. For some of us, gaining the courage to voice our opinions in front of others is the challenge; for others, the challenge may be learning to be more sensitive to how our words sound to others. See the workshop guidelines below for more detail on the framework within which we will practice these virtues.

Grading:

Your final grade will be based on your poems and portfolio, 60%; on participation, 30%; on explication paper, 10%. I will be evaluating your poems and portfolio about 2/3 on the degree to which you submitted all the work as required (and on time), showed good-faith attempts to engage with the exercises or otherwise experiment with different styles and topics, and undertook revisions, and about 1/3 on the extent to which your poetry-writing shows genuine ability, promise, and/or signs of growth. Basically, then, if you try hard and participate well, you can get a good grade in the class without being a particularly gifted poet -- though naturally, that doesn't hurt. Conversely, talent alone will not guarantee you a good grade in the class if you don't take the work seriously.

Attendance and other policies:

Attendance is expected and required; I will take roll. You can, of course, write on your own, but even when your poems are not being discussed you have a responsibility to the rest of the class; similarly, those who have spent time preparing comments on your poems expect you to be there to hear them. More than three absences are likely to result in a lowering of your final grade. Legitimate reasons for missing class include your own illness; a death or medical emergency in your immediate family; your required attendance at an official University-sponsored event; or dangerous driving conditions. If one of these pertains to you, please notify me by e-mailing me or leaving a message on my office voice-mail, if possible before the class you will miss. (Weather-wise, so long as the university is open, you should assume class is being held; I will notify everyone by e-mail if there is an exception to that. Do not, however, risk your safety in snowy/icy conditions just to come to the workshop, especially if you live at a distance.)

If a situation arises that will cause you to miss a number of classes, notify me as soon as you reasonably can so that we can discuss how we will handle it. If you are going

through a personal or family crisis that wreaks havoc with your ability to participate in the class, I urge you to consider withdrawing from it. Remember that participation counts for 30% of your grade.

Re due dates: you are expected to have your poems xeroxed and ready to distribute on the dates specified. You probably won't always love what you've got on a given week, but you need to go with it. If people don't have their stuff on time it will gum up the whole works.

Workshop Guidelines (read these thoroughly before the second class!):

- 1) Bring your poem to class on the date due in multiple copies (I'll let you know how many once the enrollment stabilizes). We will assemble them into a packet, which will represent the order in which we'll discuss the poems in the succeeding workshop(s). Late poems will be added in the back of the packet. Poems must be typed in a clear, reasonable-sized font, either single- or double-spaced, on standard-sized paper, legibly photocopied.
- 2) *Before the next class meeting, read* each poem and *write* reactions, comments and suggestions for the writer on it. (It is all right to add additional comments during class discussion, but you should not be doing the initial work of reading and responding there!) These can be informal and freeform; you should end with an overall comment of at least a sentence, though. Please sign your name on your comments. Considering the following questions should help you form your response:

Questions to consider while reading others' poems:

- a. Do you like the poem? Why or why not? What is your favorite section, line, or phrase? Why?
- b. Does the poem's title help establish context or ground you as a reader in some meaningful way? Or is the title vague or obscure? If there is no title, why do you think it's untitled? Does it need a title?
- c. Who is the speaker of the poem? Do we need to know? If the poem is spoken by someone other than the poet (a dramatic monologue), is the persona identifiable? If the poem presents some identifiable scene or situation, do we get a sense of who the speaker is as a person, what her/his situation is, how s/he is feeling?
- d. Is the poem using images? Do these advance the poem's impact? Do the images feel fresh, alive?
- e. Consider the poem's language, its diction (word choice). Does that feel alive, perhaps surprising? Or is it flat or predictable or stiffly literary?
- f. Think about the poem's rhythm and movement. How are the lines broken? Do the breaks aid meaning, or create artistic tension? Does the poem move fast or slowly, smoothly or roughly, and does this feel right for its meaning? Does the poem use meter? If so, how well does it seem to be working?
- g. What about the poem's music, its use of sound? Is it using rhyme, and if so effectively? What about other kinds of internal sound effects? Do these connect to the poem's meaning or help create its effects?

- h. Does the poem seem unified? How do its parts contribute (or not) to unity? Are there parts that need further development, or anything that seems missing? Parts that might be cut?
- i. If the poem is using any traditional literary device or conventions (such as fixed forms, meters, or stanzas, literary allusions, or anything else), do you have a sense of why it is doing this? Does it help the poem achieve its effects?
- j. Is there anything that after several readings of the poem you still don't understand? Does understanding the poem seem to require familiarity with facts or areas of knowledge that you don't have?
- k. Do you have specific suggestions for the writer to resolve problems you perceive in the poem?

3) When we are workshopping your poem, you'll start us off by reading it out loud. Then you will be expected to *remain silent* throughout the discussion of it. You should listen carefully, and probably jot down notes or ideas from what you're hearing (taking notes may also help defuse the emotional tension of hearing others talk about your work).

4) Only after all discussion of your poem is done (this will probably involve silence in response to my asking "any further comments?") may you speak, *briefly* – but never to defend the poem or protest others' interpretations of it: nothing you can say will change the fact that that is how they responded to the words on the page. You might ask for comments on some aspect of the poem that didn't come up in discussion, ask for clarification of a suggestion you didn't quite understand, answer a question that came up in discussion, or simply thank people for their feedback. You will then collect the copies of your poem with the class's comments and with my comments. Make sure you save the copy with my comments, as it will need to be included in your final portfolio.

4.) We will begin our discussion of people's poems by asking "What's working in this poem?" and "What do we like?" You should find something to affirm within every poem, even if you think it's really bad. Then we will talk about where people encountered difficulties in reading or understanding the poem, or how they think it could work better, and offer suggestions. If you see a problem in someone's poem, try to think of a suggestion to offer. Overall, our goal is to be constructive in our criticism and balance negative responses with praise. Everyone feels vulnerable during this process, so restrain any impulse to be harsh, sarcastic, or dismissive of someone else's work. But equally important, if you don't have the guts to point out problem areas you're not helping anyone grow, and there's no point in having a workshop.

5.) If you are absent on a day when your poem is scheduled for discussion, your poem will move to the back of the line for discussion; if time remains within that set of poems the next day, we'll get to it, otherwise not. If there's not going to be time for your poem to be discussed I'll collect the copies of your poem with class members' comments for you. There are a couple of catch-up workshop days in the semester when it may be possible to revisit poems that got missed earlier.

Preliminary Schedule of Readings and Assignments

August

- M 22 Introduction and introductions.
- W 24 Read in Kowitz, *In the Palm of Your Hand*, chaps. 1-2; discuss workshop guidelines (pp. 4-5 in syllabus); warm-up writing exercise.
- F 26 Read in *American Poetry: The Next Generation* (hereafter *APNG*), Rick Agran, "Wearing Dad's White Shirt Backwards," 1; Carol Bernstein, "The Cup of Coffee," 48; Douglas Goetsch, "Nobody's Hell," 165; Shara McCallum, "The Perfect Heart," 261; Lee Ann Roripaugh, "Pearls," 339. Also read current poem in *American Life in Poetry* website (hereafter *ALP*), <http://www.americanlifeinpoetry.org/current.html>
- M 29 **Poem 1 due, multiple copies to distribute.** poem should be based on one of the exercises at the end of Kowitz chap. 2. Read Kowitz chaps. 3-4; in *APNG*, Craig Arnold, "Why I Skip My High School Reunions," 23; Lisa Buscani, "Miss Mary Mack," 71; David Marlatt, "The Summer of the New Well," 250; Julia Kasdorf, "What I Learned from My Mother," 212. "Practice workshop" on non-class poems, distributed last time.
- W 31 Workshop Poem 1

September

- F 2 Workshop Poem 1. Read Kowitz 5-6.
- M 5 Labor Day – University Holiday
- W 7 Workshop Poem 1. Read Kowitz 8-9; in *APNG*, David Barber, "The Spirit Level," 25; Lisa D. Chavez, "Clean Sheets" and "The Woman Who Raised Dogs," 89; Beth Gyls, "Balloon Heart," 174; Jonathon Johnson, "Eclipse," 202, "The View Cafe," 204.
- F 9 **Poem 2 due, based on one of the exercises in Kowitz 3 or 4.**
Read Kowitz 21 (yes, that's right, I know it's out of order); in *APNG*, focus on the different handlings of line & line-breaks in these: Rick Alley, "Cleaning," 10; Alice Anderson, "Licking Wounds," 11; Sean Thomas Dougherty, "The Puerto Rican Girls of French Hill," 126; Allison Joseph, "Adolescence," 210; Ann Townsend, "First Quilt," 394, "Eighteenth-Century Medical Illustration....," 395.
- M 12 Workshop Poem 2. Continue discussion of line breaks and rhythm.
- W 14 Workshop Poem 2. Read current poem in *ALP* site.

- F 16 Workshop Poem 2. In-class writing exercises if time permits.
- M 19 Read Kowitz 10-11, in *APNG*, Denise Duhamel, “Bicentennial Barbie,” 131 and “Kinky,” 132; Sherman Alexie, “Defending Walt Whitman,” 5; Lisa Coffman, “Cheerleaders,” 99; Elizabeth Alexander, “Stravinsky in LA,” 3, “Minnesota Fats Describes His Youth,” 4; Charles Rafferty, “The Arsonist Tells the Attorney His Story,” 318.
- W 21 **Poem 3 due, based on an exercise in Kowitz 7-9.** Read Kowitz 12-15.
- F 23 Workshop Poem 3.
- M 26 Workshop Poem 3.
- W 28 Read current poem in *ALP* site. Workshop Poem 3.
- F 30 In-class writing time or exercises.

October

- M 3 **Poem 4 due: Kowitz Poem 18 (p. 92), or write a poem about any figure, real or imagined, who is not you, or a poem voiced by a dramatic speaker who is clearly not you.** Introduction to opportunities at *North American Review*.
- W 5 Workshop Poem 4.
- F 7 Workshop Poem 4
- M 10 Workshop Poem 4
- W 12 Individual conferences [scheduled individual meetings during class time; no regular class]
- F 14 Individual conferences
By 5 p.m. today, revision of one poem from 1-4 due, accompanied by a two-page commentary on your revision process (just one copy needed, to me).
- M 17 Individual conferences
- W 19 Read Kowitz 16, 17, 20. I’ll give you xeroxed poetry selections to read that relate to these chapters. In class we’ll discuss/work on getting a feeling for meter and rhyme in contemporary formal poetry.

- F 21 Read Kowitz 18-19; also read about forms on Dr. Vince Gotera's site: <http://www.uni.edu/~gotera/CraftOfPoetry/>; continue working with xeroxed poems; also read in *APNG*, Joe Bolton, "In Memory of the Boys of Dexter, KY" (sonnet), 60; Beth Gylys, "Family Reunion" (sestina), 175; Ger Killeen, "Tristia" (villanelle), 219; Beth Lisick, "Pantoumstone for a Dying Breed" (pantoum), 241; Elizabeth Bishop, "One Art" (villanelle) and "Sestina," print out from <http://plagiarist.com/poetry/poets/8/2/>. Good instructions on pantoums here, with an example: <http://sfpoetry.org/sagan/pantoum.html>; look up "pantoums" online for other examples, though most do not seem to be by recognized poets.
- M 24 Continue discussion of form in poetry. (Note: these discussions of rhyme, form, etc. will prepare you for Poem 6 – and are a preview of aspects of 620:108, The Craft of Poetry.)
- W 26 Discussion of Whitman celebration and our project in conjunction with it.
- F 28 Whitman readings to be assigned; possibly watch film in class. Explore Walt Whitman Archive website (<http://www.whitmanarchive.org>). Please re-read Kowitz 7 on Whitman and anaphora.
Last day to drop course without an "F"
- M 31 Discussion of Whitman readings, to be assigned

November

- W 2 Whitman discussion or in-class work time.
- F 4 **Poem 5 due: Inspired by Whitman in form, content, or theme.** Reading aloud, preliminary workshopping.
- M 7 Workshop poem 5.
- W 9 Walt Whitman Celebration. Attend (and participate in?) Open Mic session of Whitman-inspired work, 12:00-1:00 in Maucker Union. Attendance at one or more other events strongly encouraged, will provide extra credit.
- F 11 Discussion of Whitman experiences; discussion of explication paper, due 11/21 or sooner, continued workshopping.
- M 14 **Poem 6 due: a poem in one of the fixed forms we looked at (sonnet, villanelle, sestina, or pantoum), or a poem that uses rhyme and/or meter.** Read Kowitz 22; in *APNG*, Daniel Anderson, "The Nightly News," 16; Hayan Charara, "Thinking American," 85, "Holy Water," 88. You are also encouraged to explore poems in *Poets against War* site (<http://www.poetsagainstthewar.org>) – if you find one you like, bring it in to share.

- W 16 Workshop Poem 6
- F 18 Workshop Poem 6. Read current poem at *ALP* site.
- M 21 Workshop Poem 6. **Explication Paper due.**
- W 23 Thanksgiving Holiday
- F 25 Thanksgiving Holiday
- M 28 Read Kowitz 23-24. In *APNG*, Tom Devaney, "Sonnet," 122; David Marlatt, "Working Girl," 252; Rose Solari, "Truro," 374; Rick Agran, "Doors Thrown Open to Daisies," 3; Jacqueline Berger, "Getting to Know Her," 45; Nick Flynn, "God Forgotten," 145; Paula McLain, "Willing," 272; Mary Ann Samyn, "The Art of Kissing," 352. **You should be working on revising your poems for the portfolio, especially if you haven't been doing so already; don't leave this for the last week of class!**
- W 30 Read Kowitz 25; in *APNG*, Joshua Beckman, "Lament for the Death of a Bullfighter," 32; Kenny Fries, from *The Healing Notebooks*, 148; Steve Gehrke, "Walking Fields at Night South of Hampton, Iowa," 156; Lisa Glatt, "What We Did after my Mother's Mastectomy," 162.

December

- F 2 Class evaluation. Read Kowitz 26-27; in *APNG*, David Barber, "Little Overture," 27; Elizabeth Dodd, "Lyric," 123; Dina Ben-Lev, "A Sensualist Speaks on Faith," 44; Rick Mulkey, "Why I Believe in Angels," 284; have a look at some nature poems by Mary Oliver, at http://www.poetryconnection.net/poets/Mary_Oliver. **You are encouraged to—but do not have to—turn in any revised, new, or missed-earlier poem you want workshopped next week. (Remember that a seventh poem, any topic/form/approach, is due with your portfolio.)**
- M 5 Workshop final poems.
- W 7 Workshop final poems, if needed; otherwise, free time to work on your portfolio.
- F 9 No class; I will be available in my office during class time. **Final Portfolio due by 5 p.m.**

Exam Week

- M 12 1:00-2:50 p.m. scheduled exam time – no exam or required attendance. I will be in my office to chat if you wish. I will have your portfolios to hand back this week, but doubt I'll have all of them done by this time (I'll send an e-mail when they're ready to be picked up).