ENGLISH 218: CREATIVE WRITING – POETRY

Goals:

This course will focus on the writing of poems, from raw beginnings to the painstaking work of revision. Students will be encouraged to write freely and wildly in early drafts, then to hone this material into finished work. While discussing each other’s poems, students will learn the basic technical aspects of poetry writing: listening to hear rhythms and rhymes, making sensible line and stanza breaks, and establishing a voice. Students will read contemporary poetry and talk about established poets’ use of voice, form, and syntax.

Required texts:

J. D. McClatchy, ed. *The Vintage Book of Contemporary American Poetry*
Ron Padgett, ed. *The Teachers & Writers Handbook of Poetic Forms*
Poems written in the workshop: Please budget for the photocopying of your poems.

Requirements and Grading:

Since this is a workshop, it is essential that everyone contribute regularly to the discussion of everyone else’s work. As a result, most of your grade will be divided equally between participation (40%), which includes attendance and spoken and written commentary on others’ poems, and timely completion of assignments (40%), which includes poems, revisions, and attendance at poetry readings (information on readings to come). The remaining 20% of your grade is determined by your final portfolio, which will include four poems in both early and revised forms, plus a one-page discussion of how you came to these revisions (one page is sufficient for the entire portfolio). In evaluating your portfolio, I will look for tangible differences between drafts and revisions – differences reflecting careful thought and considered responses to others’ comments.

Schedule:

Writing assignments are described in the syllabus. Poems are due at the beginning of class on Thursdays and will be discussed the following Thursday (or later). Always bring enough copies for everyone in the class and for me. This deadline is strict. Poems handed in late may lose their place in line to be workshopped. (If you miss a class, you are
responsible for obtaining the poems; how you get them is up to you, whether by e-mail or by asking someone to collect copies for you.) Before the next class meeting, read your classmates’ poems and write comments directly on them for workshop. Please give each other plenty of written notes, since discussion time will be limited for each poem. I will check for these notes.

You should be revising poems steadily throughout the semester, so that putting together your final portfolio will be a simple matter of assembling (clearly labeled) your originals and revisions.

Assignments may change slightly as your work evolves, but here is an approximate schedule. Every week, we’ll workshop the poems you have handed in. In addition:

1/25: Read and discuss poems about places:
   “Filling Station” by Elizabeth Bishop (CAP 34)
   “Third Avenue in Sunlight” by Anthony Hecht (CAP 172)
   “Degrees of Gray in Philipsburg” by Richard Hugo (CAP 197)
   “Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy’s Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota” by James Wright (CAP 302).
   Assignment due 2/1: Write a poem based on a place.

2/1: Discuss rhyme in:
   “The Armadillo” by Elizabeth Bishop (CAP 33)
   “The Truth the Dead Know” by Anne Sexton (CAP 319)
   “For My Contemporaries” by J. V. Cunningham (CAP 86)
   Look back at Hecht poem; listen to poems on tape.
   Assignment due 2/8: Go over “Rhyme,” “Quatrain,” “Couplet,” and “Tercet” in HPF, and write a poem using rhyme, in any format.

2/8: Begin to workshop your rhymed poems. No assignment this week.

2/15: Workshop. Discuss:
   “One Art” by Elizabeth Bishop (CAP 39)
   “Having a Coke with You” by Frank O’Hara (CAP 222)
   “Daddy” by Sylvia Plath (CAP 383)
   Assignment due 2/22: Write a poem addressed to someone.

2/22: Workshop. Discuss:
   “The Horse” by Philip Levine (CAP 324)
   “Stone Canyon Nocturne,” “Spider Crystal Ascension,” and “Clear Night” by Charles Wright (CAP 403-5).
   No assignment this week.

3/1: Discuss persona poems:
   “The Dream Songs” excerpts by John Berryman (CAP 52)
   “Next Day” by Randall Jarrell (CAP 64)
“The Tourist from Syracuse” by Donald Justice (CAP 212)
“The Hanging Man” by Sylvia Plath (CAP 382)

Assignment due 3/8: Write a poem in the voice of someone else.

3/8: Workshop.

Assignment due 3/15: Choose a poet from the anthology, and write a poem overtly influenced by that poet’s voice and techniques.


3/29: Workshop. Your attendance is required at the evening’s poetry reading (8 p.m., Memorial Hall), by poet Sidney Burris.

Assignment due 4/5: Read “Free Verse” in HPF, write a poem in free verse, and think about how you would defend your formal choices. Also, write a one-page response to Burris reading.

4/5: Workshop. Discuss:

“The Waking” by Theodore Roethke (CAP 47)
“Parsley” by Rita Dove (CAP 531)

Look back at “One Art” by Elizabeth Bishop (CAP 39).

Assignment due 4/12: Using “Villanelle” in HPF as a guide, write a villanelle.

4/12: Workshop.

Assignment due 4/19: Look through literary journals, literary web sites, and/or published books for a poem that you particularly like, and bring the poem to class.

4/19: Read the poem you chose to the class and discuss your reasons for choosing it.

Remaining class time will be used for workshop.

4/26: Workshop.

5/3: Wrap-up.

5/15: Final portfolios due by 2:00 p.m. in my mailbox (or office) in the English Department.

If you’re not already familiar with Dickinson’s Belles Lettres society and would like to pursue your literary interests beyond this class, you may want to investigate it. The Belles Lettres society publishes The Dickinson Review, a national literary magazine, and The Bonfire, a student literary magazines. It also offers the opportunity to read in student poetry readings and on the radio. Visit it online by going to the English Department site and clicking on the link to “Belles Lettres Society.”