HU 4110: Advanced Creative Writing (Poetry)
Spring Semester 2004
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TEXTS:
3. A book of poems by a major contemporary American poet to be decided later in the term

COURSE LEARNING OBJECTIVES: My objectives for this class are 1) to help you write the best poems you are capable of writing, given the proper environment and support; 2) to help you learn or re-learn fundamental principles, concepts, theories, etc. about the writing of poetry; 3) to develop your creative capacities, even if the poetic products themselves by term’s end still have not quite “arrived”; and 4) to help you experience the powerful ways in which writing and thinking about poems can lead you to a greater understanding of your talents, interests, values, and life experiences.

APPROACH: A combination of discussion, some informal lecture/illustration, group work, individual conferences, and workshop.

MAJOR ASSIGNMENTS: Regarding the apprenticeship that most young writers go through, American poet Mary Oliver has observed: “[O]ne learns by thinking about writing, and by talking about writing—but primarily through writing.” In keeping with that conviction, I have focused the class on writing poems as well as thinking, reading, writing, and talking about this complex activity. I am requiring a minimum of 6 “finished” poems for your portfolio. NOTE: you will be required to turn in relatively “finished” typed drafts of poems at the end of weeks 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, & 12.** a writer’s journal (more below), and a brief critical review of a book of poems by a major contemporary American poet. I will also assign a variety of “finger exercises” regularly throughout the term; these FE may or may not lead to one or more of the “finished” poems mentioned above. Whether they do or do not, you should plan on submitting all of these when I assign them. I will look them over quickly and return them to you. You should include all of them in your portfolio at the end of the term.

**I will expect you to keep track of these established deadlines and submit work without my having to remind you.

WRITING/READING: Ideally, a writer (which I will consider you to be this term and which you need to think of yourself as) must write daily. Furthermore, he/she needs to be a hungry reader. You should plan on writing (on average) one hour each day, and reading (in SUP and elsewhere) from 1/2 to 1 hour most days. You can teach yourself a great deal about how to write a poem from this kind of focused reading, that is, reading in order to learn about the style/voice of various poets and the architecture of their poems. Although I will assign some specific poems in SUP for discussion in class, you are responsible for reading the rest of the book during the term, and the more you can read early on, the better. I will make regular assignments from The Poet’s Companion, and it is essential that you read these assignments carefully and come to class ready to discuss the reading. I will also give you
photocopies of essays focusing on various craft issues I want you to think about and discuss and respond to in your journals.

CONFERENCES: Once we are under way, I will set up some options for one-on-one conferences of at least 30 minutes per visit. We may use class time to conduct some of these conferences. They are extremely important; I will expect you to participate whenever they are scheduled. I am always willing to look at work in progress at other times throughout the term, so please take advantage of my office hours or make other arrangements with me if you are not able to attend office hours.

WORKSHOP: From time to time throughout the term we will go into a workshop mode to give you feedback on your poems. I will schedule these workshop sessions whenever I feel you are or should be ready. These sessions are extremely important. I will regard absences during these sessions as a failure on your part to commit to the learning community we are trying to create, and such misses will have a very serious effect on your final grade.

ATTENDANCE: Because this is an advanced class and because a sense of community is important, I will expect you to be in class almost all of the time. One or two unexcused misses for good reasons may be acceptable (you should inform me in advance if at all possible), but anything beyond that number is not, and will have a major effect on your course grade. If you don’t feel you can meet this expectation, you should not continue in the class.

DIALOGUE: In addition to the talk about your work in the workshop itself, I want to encourage other forms of dialogue. One opportunity will be in the almost daily class sessions. I may also break you into pairs or threesomes from time to time. Each of you should plan on being active in the various opportunities to take part in this “conversation.” I know that each of you has a voice. Plan on using it. To further facilitate this ongoing dialogue, I am planning to set up a class list, an electronic space for all of you regularly to exchange problems, continue dialogue about class poems, respond to or question assigned reading material, etc. I will participate in this dialogue occasionally, but it will be up to all of you to keep this site active and useful. I will make note of all exchanges in order to accumulate an ongoing record of your individual contributions to the conversation for evaluation purposes at term’s end.

FEEDBACK & REVISION: You should receive feedback on your work in a variety of ways—group work, e-mail, workshops, and conferences. Most of my feedback will be oral, in class or in conference. Your job is to listen to these various kinds of feedback, stay open, and be willing to explore alternative ways of handling your poem’s subject matter and approach. Revision is the result of feedback (sometimes purely internal but more often external), and you need to push your work through various drafts (these drafts are called worksheets) and give the full process of composing a chance. Save your worksheets and include them in your notebooks. I realize you will revise frequently on your computer, but you must print drafts regularly and provide a thorough record of your revision process at the end of the semester. NB: At term’s end no one should offer as an excuse for thin revision, the argument that he/she has been revising on the computer but deleting all versions but the final one.

JOURNAL: You are to write more or less daily in this journal, certainly 4-5 times per week. Some entries may be brief, others extensive. But your goal in keeping this journal is force yourself to think like a serious writer for the next 15 weeks. Get in the habit early of making entries, and make a regular space in your day to spend time there. Date each entry. Most writers keep journals, some sporadically, some slavishly. This journal is a place for you to talk to yourself about your own writing—how it is going (or not going), how/why it is frustrating, etc. It’s also a place to record ideas for poems, to tape
clipped articles from magazines or newspapers that seem to have potential as raw material for poems. Other uses include your own concrete observations—about people, about nature, about places, flora, fauna, ice patterns, sounds, smells: IMAGES, in other words, that may find their way into a poem. You can also respond to questions/problems you find in the course reading material, including the craft essays I’ll make available from time to time, and you should also write about poems in the anthology that move you, puzzle you, challenge you, trouble you, etc. In writing about the poems in SUP, write from the point of view of a writer, examining the subject matter and method of treating it, ways the poems are made, how they move, how they employ line breaks, image, metaphor, how they are paced, how they create tone, etc. I would expect you to do one of these “writerly eye” journal entries at least once per week. Over time, this journal should become a comprehensive record of your intellectual and emotional and aesthetic experience during the next fifteen weeks. Take it seriously. Try to grow comfortable with it. Plan on keeping it for future work. You cannot do well in the class unless your journal is seriously undertaken and complete.

NOTEBOOK: Your notebook will consist of a complete collection of all your written work this term. It is the primary document upon which I will base your grade. In it you should file the following: your writer’s journal, all finger exercises, all draft work, any other assignments, and the final, carefully proofed portfolio of your five poems.

GRADE: I will not grade poems. It’s not that I couldn’t; I simply will not. I don’t think a letter grade is an appropriate response to creative work. I can and will, however, grade your overall response to the expectations I have outlined in this syllabus. If you meet all of these expectations and if your poems show good faith effort and engagement, you will receive an A. Anything less than an A will be based on one or more failed or compromised expectations.

FINAL NOTE: I will regard this syllabus as a contract between you and me. If you decide to stay in this class, you should too. Put it in your notebook and refer to it regularly. If you have any questions about it, let me know ASAP.

REMINDER: MTU’s Affirmative Action Officer has asked that all faculty include the following statement on each course syllabus:

MTU complies with all federal and state laws and regulations regarding discrimination, including the Americans with Disability Act of 1990 (ADA). If you have a disability and need a reasonable accommodation for equal access to education or services at MTU, please call Dr. Gloria Melton, Associate Dean of Students, (2212). For other concerns about discrimination, you may contact your advisor, department head, or the Affirmative Action Office (3310).