

Syllabus
ENGL 591
Techniques of Poetry
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Office Hours: T & Th: 10 – Noon & 1 – 3

PURPOSE:

We may not all remember the first poem that made us feel, in the words of Emily Dickinson, as though “the top of [our] head been taken off,” but most of us would agree that that’s how it starts. We get struck by poetic lightning. We read a poem and somehow it goes right into us, right through us—into bone or marrow or something that feels like the soul. I didn’t have much use for poetry when I was a boy, or even when I was a young man; I didn’t like it very much. And yet here I am today, more devoted to the art than ever, and I can say without the least doubt that in the beginning that devotion, that thrilling love for poetry, did not begin with books but with individual poems.

This is as it should be, no doubt. Not for no reason is there a “Favorite Poem” project, as opposed to a Favorite *Book* of Poems Project. But because I have been, over the last 30 years regularly if periodically at work on books of poems, I have become more and more interested in what goes into such a literary construction. What makes a book of poems a book? Is there a difference, beyond the merely semantic, between a book of poems and a collection of poems? How does one reconcile the linear arrangement of a book of poems with the spatial, time-stopping characteristics of the lyric poem? Does a book of poems have an arc, like the narrative arc of a novel or even of some collections of stories? Is there something in the individual poem in a book that mirrors the book’s totality? Is there something in the book’s totality that shows up in the individual poems? Is there heaven in a grain of sand? Eternity in an hour?

We will read a book per week in this class, all by living contemporary American poets. We will analyze and attempt to come to grips with 1) the poet’s voice and style—his or her individual poetic; 2) the shape of the book as a whole; 3) and, most subjectively perhaps, the quality of the book’s accomplishment. Students will do a great deal of writing in the course, often in the “style” or the borrowed voice of the poet under discussion, and sometimes in a critical way, in analytical prose. All students must submit, at the term’s end, a “project” consisting of a short, chapbook-length collection of original poems *written as part of the course’s assignments*, and accompanied by an introduction explaining the processes—the problems and challenges, the satisfactions—of its assemblage. Each student will be responsible for leading a class discussion of the week’s assigned title.

TEXTS

Addonizio, Kim, *Tell Me*, BOA Editions
Baggott, Juliana, *This Country of Mothers*, Southern Illinois UP

Campo, Rafael, *Landscape with Human Figure*, Duke UP
Dent, Troy, *HIV, Mon Amour*, Sheep Meadow
Derricotte, Toi, *Tender*, Pittsburgh
Fairchild, B.H., *The Art of the Lathe*, Alice James
Hamilton, Saskia, *As For Dream*, Graywolf
Harrison, Jeffrey, *Feeding the Fire*, Sarabande
Hoagland, Tony, *Donkey Gospel*, Graywolf
Howe, Marie, *What the Living Do*, Norton
Lee, Li-Young, *Book of My Nights*, BOA Editions
Lux, Thomas, *The Street of Clocks*, Houghton Mifflin
Millar, Joseph, *Overtime*, Eastern Washington UP
Pinsky, Robert, *An Explanation of America*, Princeton UP

REQUIREMENTS:

- a. Each student will lead one weekly presentation of one of the course's required texts. If you have a favorite (or a favorite poet) among these titles, let me know as soon as you can, and I'll try to accommodate your preferences.
- b. A weekly response to the book. This response may come in the form of a poem, or a small group of poems, "in the style of" that week's poet; or it may be a more academic/scholarly response to the text. If the latter, responses should concern themselves with a) what the student sees as the book's larger ambitions (its vision, its intents, its themes, for example), and b) the poet's formal and craft-centered approaches (style, structure, etc.)
- c. A final project: either a substantial scholarly paper on an additional title by one of the poets under consideration, or a paper on another text that might be seen as influential or *from the same or a similar tradition* as one of the poets at hand. The alternative project, from MFA students, is a brief, chapbook-length collection of original poems for which one of the collections under consideration serves as the impetus (in the style of, reflecting the approaches of, etc.).
- d. Consistent participation in class discussion, religious attendance.