ENGLISH 406 ST. JOHN INTERMEDIATE POETRY WRITING (POETRY & SONG) FALL 2018 THH 203 TUESDAY

TEXTS (Required)

Contemporary American Poetry, edited by Poulin and Waters
The Selected Levis (Expanded Edition), Larry Levis
The Mercy Seat, Norman Dubie
The Joan Baez Songbook

Office: THH 404/ Hours: Tuesdays 2-3:30 by appointment.

Course requirements

All of the reading & writing assignments below. Attendance: Don’t miss more than two classes or your grade will drop one level for each class missed after that. Grading: Completion of all assignments and class participation are expected of all students in order to earn an average grade. A better-than-average grade is earned with unusual effort and participation. My email: dstjohn@usc.edu

Academic Conduct

Plagiarism – presenting someone else’s ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words – is a serious academic offense with serious consequences. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism in SCampus in Part B, Section 11, “Behavior Violating University Standards” https://policy.usc.edu/student/scampus/part-b. Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in SCampus and university policies on scientific misconduct, http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct.

Discrimination, sexual assault, intimate partner violence, stalking, and harassment are prohibited by the university. You are encouraged to report all incidents to the Office of Equity and Diversity/Title IX Office http://equity.usc.edu and/or to the Department of Public Safety http://dps.usc.edu. This is important for the health and safety of the whole USC community. Faculty and
staff must report any information regarding an incident to the Title IX Coordinator who will provide outreach and information to the affected party. The sexual assault resource center webpage http://sarc.usc.edu fully describes reporting options. Relationship and Sexual Violence Services https://engemannshc.usc.edu/rsvp provides 24/7 confidential support.

**Support Systems**

A number of USC’s schools provide support for students who need help with scholarly writing. Check with your advisor or program staff to find out more. Students whose primary language is not English should check with the American Language Institute http://ali.usc.edu, which sponsors courses and workshops specifically for international graduate students. The Office of Disability Services and Programs http://dsp.usc.edu provides certification for students with disabilities and helps arrange the relevant accommodations. If an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible, USC Emergency Information http://emergency.usc.edu will provide safety and other updates, including ways in which instruction will be continued by means of Blackboard, teleconferencing, and other technology.

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August 23: Introduction to workshop procedures. Syllabi will be distributed. Your reading assignment for next class is from CAP: Li-Young Lee, The Gift and Persimmons; Gary Soto, Oranges; Hayden, Those Winter Sundays; Clifton, Moonchild; Nelson, Minor Miracle; O'Hara, The Day Lady Died. PLUS: from Dubie, The Czar’s Last Christmas Letter; from Levis, Winter Stars.

August 30: Discussion of the reading assignment and a brief discussion of poems of childhood memory; character sketch & family member poems (your first writing assignment); the elegy; the dramatic monologue. Also, time permitting, a discussion of Song, Ballad, and the tradition of music in poetry. Your assignment: Bring to class next week (20 copies of each): 1) a favorite poem by any poet of the 20th Century and/or 2) a favorite song and if you bring a song please bring a lyric sheet, and if you want to play it for us on iPod, CD etc, that’s great.
Sept 6: Discussion of your favorite poems and songs (Part I).
Assignment: Write a poem that concerns a childhood memory or one that is a character sketch poem or a poem that reveals to your reader something about a family member. REMEMBER – SHOW, DON’T TELL. DETAILS AND IMAGES!! Bring in 20 copies of your poems on September 27th.

Sept 13: Discussion of your favorite poems and songs (Part II).
Remember: bring in 20 copies of your poems (childhood memory/character sketch/family member poem) on FEBRUARY 14TH. Plus, do the reading for FEBRUARY 7TH, below.

Sept 20: Discussion of the following poems: Levis, My Story in a Late Style of Fire and The Oldest Living Thing in LA; from Dubie, A Genesis Text for Larry Levis and Politics & Art. Also, Philip Levine: Call It Music (at the end of this syllabus).

Sept 27: Discussion of your childhood memory or character sketch/ family member poems (Workshop I). Assignment: Read in The Joan Baez Songbook.

Oct 4: Discussion of your childhood memory or character sketch/ family member poems (Workshop II). Introductory discussion of ballads and blues.

Assignment: Write a narrative poem of four parts – number each part. I will tell you what I have in mind for this kind of story poem, possibilities for shifts of voice and focus. I want this poem to be two pages long. If you would like to make your poem a blues/ballad story poem, that’s great. That is, you can make it, if you wish, a typical blues or ballad narrative concerning love or the loss of love, a story poem about death and betrayal, etc. Or, if you wish, try to make the poem something a little more unconventional. Don’t try for the comic unless you’re really good at it; for the moment, I’d like you to keep things relatively serious. Again, bring in 20 copies. Due in class on October 11th.
Oct 11: Discussion of your story poems, ballads or blues (Workshop I). For the October 25th class please read: from Dubie, The Pennacesse Leper Colony for Women and A Grandfather’s Last Letter; and from Levis, For Zbigniew Herbert, Summer 1971, Los Angeles and Sensationalism.

Oct 18: No Class.

Oct 25: Discussion of your story poems (Workshop II). Writing Assignment: due on NOVEMBER 1st (20 copies): Write a poem that is either an elegy or a dramatic monologue. We will discuss this “elegy or dramatic monologue” assignment in class. Return to the Dubie book for more examples of dramatic monologues.

Nov 1: Elegies or Dramatic Monologues (20 copies) due today. Discussion of Elegy or Dramatic Monologue poems (Workshop I).

Nov 8: Discussion of Elegy / Dramatic Monologue poems (Workshop II).

Nov 15: If necessary, we will finish our discussion of Elegy and Dramatic Monologue poems. Also: a discussion about your Final Project assignment, which will be due on November 29th. Final project: a poem of 1-2 pages; then set it also as a song. If you are one of the CW poets, work with one of the singer/songwriters. You will read your poems and/or sing the song setting of the poems in our two performance classes. THIS IS A COLLABORATIVE PROJECT!

Nov 22: Thanksgiving.

Nov 29: Final Projects. We will hold our final class this week in one of the studio rooms, usually the Red Studio. Final class wrap up.

Dec 4: (Tuesday): Optional-- Final portfolios (and/or CDs) due today in my mailbox in the English Department Office, THH 404.
Call It Music by Philip Levine

Some days I catch a rhythm, almost a song in my own breath. I'm alone here in Brooklyn Heights, late morning, the sky above the St. George Hotel clear, clear for New York, that is. The radio playing "Bird Flight," Parker in his California tragic voice fifty years ago, his faltering "Lover Man" just before he crashed into chaos. I would guess that outside the recording studio in Burbank the sun was high above the jacarandas, it was late March, the worst of yesterday's rain had come and gone, the sky washed blue. Bird could have seen for miles if he'd looked, but what he saw was so foreign he clensed his eyes, shook his head, and barked like a dog--just once--and then Howard McGhee took his arm and assured him he'd be OK. I know this because Howard told me years later that he thought Bird could lie down in the hotel room they shared, sleep for an hour or more, and waken as himself. The perfect sunlight angles into my little room above Willow Street. I listen to my breath come and go and try to catch its curious taste, part milk, part iron, part blood, as it passes from me into the world. This is not me, this is automatic, this entering and exiting, my body's essential occupation without which I am a thing. The whole process has a name, a word I don't know, an elegant word not in English or Yiddish or Spanish, a word
that means nothing to me. Howard truly believed what he said that day when he steered Parker into a cab and drove the silent miles beside him while the bright world unfurled around them: filling stations, stands of fruits and vegetables, a kiosk selling trinkets from Mexico and the Philippines. It was all so actual and Western, it was a new creation coming into being, like the music of Charlie Parker someone later called "glad," though that day I would have said silent, "the silent music of Charlie Parker." Howard said nothing. He paid the driver and helped Bird up two flights to their room, got his boots off, and went out to let him sleep as the afternoon entered the history of darkness. I'm not judging Howard, he did better than I could have now or then. Then I was 19, working on the loading docks at Railway Express coming day by day into the damaged body of a man while I sang into the filthy air the Yiddish drinking songs my Zadie taught me before his breath failed. Now Howard is gone, eleven long years gone, the sweet voice silenced. "The subtle bridge between Eldridge and Navarro," they later wrote, all that rising passion a footnote to others. I remember in '85 walking the halls of Cass Tech, the high school where he taught after his performing days, when suddenly he took my left hand in his two hands to tell me it all worked out
for the best. Maybe he'd gotten religion, maybe he knew how little time was left, maybe that day he was just worn down by my questions about Parker. To him Bird was truly Charlie Parker, a man, a silent note going out forever on the breath of genius which now I hear soaring above my own breath as this bright morning fades into afternoon. Music, I'll call it music. It's what we need as the sun staggers behind the low gray clouds blowing relentlessly in from that nameless ocean, the calm and endless one I've still to cross.