POETRY IN THEORY AND PRACTICE: SYLLABUS

The Craft of Poetry, Writers in Florence, Summer 2023
30 May 2023 - 23 June 2023
Mondays and Wednesdays (3:00-5:30)
Professor: Catherine Barnett; cb56@nyu.edu
Office hours: Wednesdays 1:30-3 and by appointment

Description:
In this intensive craft class, we will focus on the theory and practice of poetry. We’ll read about the making of poems—different approaches, theories, and manifestos drawn from poets’ essays, letters, and poems—as we study exemplary models and write our own drafts.

As we read and respond to texts that discuss the art of poetry, we'll study the role improvisation, intuition, and not-knowing play in the making of poems. My hope is that through close reading and the attentive study of other disciplines and art, each of us finds approaches that support our deepest, riskiest, most meaningful work. How have poets (and other artists) weathered and transcended the hurdles?

To write and revise poems, we’ll borrow strategies from other arts/artists—from painters, photographers, musicians, magicians, architects, letter-writers, spiders, etc! We'll practice creative strategies drawn from the artist's studio and see how we can translate them into making poems full of surprise, juxtaposition, and new ways of apprehending the world as we move through it.

Throughout the four weeks, we'll examine how time and point of view function in poems; how questions can animate poems and help you discover further materials; how phatic gestures and letter-poems might extend your notion of the intimacies and distances a poem can make; how heightening the tension between chaos and order might enliven a draft; how syntax can be a light illuminating the path ahead even without knowing where your next step falls; how metaphor can transform; how form and structure serve a poem; what makes a good beginning, middle, and end. Some basic experiments in translation and ekphrasis will also engage us during our weeks together.

Perhaps it would be fair to say that this craft class is also a class in the art of attention. We will seek to make ourselves responsive to both art and life, letting close reading and other acts of attention guide us to our own poems and to deeper appreciation of others' poems. "Attention is the natural prayer of the soul," said philosopher Nicholas Malebranche in the seventeenth century. "Where your gaze falls, that's where your art is found," says contemporary poet Louise Gluck.

The class will be demanding in the ways it asks you to wake yourselves out of the habitual, to see things in fresh ways, to find ways to translate these encounters, and to improvise as artists, using whatever is at hand. We'll visit a museum, take walks, take notes, take our time as we try to experience—as readers and as makers—the lyric poem's goal of stopping time.

For each class you will be asked to hand in both a creative and an analytic response to the readings and other exercises. You will also be asked to keep a notebook (a "miscellany" or "commonplace book") where you'll gather thoughts, images, and excerpts from our summer adventures (reading, looking, wandering) as material for poem-making and for deeper response.

Please come prepared with a notebook and binder.

Grading:
50% participation and informal presentations
50% analytic and creative responses; notebook

Texts (provisional):
Books, to buy:
Ecco Anthology of International Poetry (ed. Ilya Kaminsky and Susan Harris)
In the Shape of a Human Body I Am Visiting the Earth: Poems from Far and Wide (ed. Kaminsky, Luxford, Nathan)

Essays and poems (to be provided):
Maureen McClane, "Proem in the Form of a Q&A"
Ellen Bryant Voigt, "Dialogue: Poetics"
Caroline Bergvall, "Via: 47 Variations"
Robert Frost, "The Figure a Poem Makes"
Audre Lorde, "The Uses of the Erotic"; "Poetry Is Not a Luxury"
Essays by Agnes Martin
Excerpts from Theories and Documents of Modern and Contemporary Art
Giacometti, essays on the art
John Berger, essays
Brenda Hillman, "Concerning the Meaning Molecule in Poetry"
Bhanu Kapil, "How To Write a Poem"
Jean Valentine, "The Pen"
Horace, "The Art of Poetry"
Excerpts from Diane Seuss's Still Life with Two Dead Peacocks and a Girl
Excerpts from Diane Seuss's Frank
Excerpts from Diane Seuss's forthcoming Modern Poetry
Jorie Graham, "Whereas I Had Not Yet in This Life Seen"
Jorie Graham, introduction to Best American Poetry
Forrest Hamer, "Common Betrayal" (from Rift)
A.R. Ammons, "A Poem Is a Walk"; "Poetics"
Edward Hirsch, "The Task"
Patrick Kavanaugh, from Collected Prose
Craig Teicher, excerpt from We Begin in Gladness
Louise Gluck, essays from Proofs and Theories
Excerpts from Claudia Rankine's American Women Poets in the 21st Century: Where Lyric Meets Language
Reginald Shepherd, "Why I Write"

Attendance: Because we have such a short time together, please (I implore you!) arrive promptly, complete all homework and outside reading, and turn in all assignments on time.

Class schedule (provisional)

30 May: Introductions and ideas of poetry; ideas of improvisation
1 June: Learning from artists/learning from translation
6 June: Visit to Palazzo Strozzi, writing responsively; *ekphrasis*
8 June: Poetry and walking; poetry as dreaming
13 June: Poetry and the letter; the epistolary; narrative distance and intimacies
15 June: Constraint-based writing
20 June: The art of revision; how others have done it and in-class practice
22 June: Class reading, presentations, potluck celebration