

ENGL 6714 – Graduate Poetry Workshop

“The creative writing department is not just a factory for producing poems...that are then published and consumed, but...a site where minds converge and think through writing about language, self, boundaries and the larger concerns of the world.” —Kristin Prevallet, “Promethean Risk: The Poet as Translator”¹

CRUCIAL INFORMATION

Professor: Erika Meitner

Email: meitner@vt.edu

Office: 410 Shanks Hall

Office Hours: 2-3 Tues. • 1-3 Thurs. • by appointment

Office Phone: 540.231.7728 (or cell, 434.825.2159, 9am – 10pm)

Class: Thurs. 6-8:50pm, Shanks 352

HOW TO REACH ME

Please feel free to come to my office hours with any questions, comments, anecdotes, or issues you might have. Aside from office hours, you can e-mail me or call me at my office, or on my cell if it's urgent (though please not past 10pm). Email is generally the most reliable way to get in touch with me to arrange an appointment.

REQUIRED TEXTS (eventually available at the VT Bookstore & on reserve at Newman)

- *The Pajamaist*, by Matthew Zapruder (Copper Canyon Press)
- *Real Sofistikashun: Essays on Poetry and Craft*, by Tony Hoagland (Graywolf Press)
- *Lizzie Borden in Love: Poems in Women's Voices*, by Julianna Baggott (Southern Illinois University Press)
- *Sad Little Breathing Machine*, by Matthea Harvey (Graywolf Press)
- *My American Kundiman* by Patrick Rosal (Persea Books)
- *Some Ether* by Nick Flynn (Graywolf Press)
- *Fire Wheel* by Sharmila Voorakkara (U of Akron Press)
- *The Hounds of No* by Lara Glenum (Action Books)
- *Wind in a Box* by Terrance Hayes (Penguin)
- *String Light* by C.D. Wright (will be available online as a pdf)
- *Chattahoochee* by Patrick Phillips (U of Arkansas Press)

RECOMMENDED TEXTS (eventually available on reserve at Newman)

- *American Linden*, by Matthew Zapruder (Tupelo Press)
- *Ghost Letters*, by Richard McCann (Alice James Books)
- *This Country of Mothers*, by Julianna Baggott (Southern Illinois University Press)
- *Lizzie Borden in Love: Poems in Women's Voices*, by Julianna Baggott (SIU Press)
- *Compulsions of Silk Worms and Bees*, by Julianna Baggott (Louisiana State University Press)

READINGS

- www.english.vt.edu/visitors
- Stephanie Strickland (hypertext, digital writing, poetry), Wed Sept. 5, 7pm
- Mark Evans Bryan (playwriting), Wed Sept. 26, 7pm
- Richard McCann (fiction & poetry), Thurs Oct. 18, 7pm
- Julianna Baggott (fiction & poetry), Wed Nov. 7, 7pm
- Matthew Zapruder (poetry), Wed Nov. 28, 7pm

¹ www.raintaxi.com/online/2003summer/prevallet.shtml

COURSE INFORMATION

Welcome to the graduate poetry workshop! This is an eclectic class, where my ultimate goal is to help you develop your poetic voices, and simultaneously push you in new directions with your work. This class is not a factory, and you are not on an assembly line: I will not be conducting this workshop expecting or believing that, robot-like, you can create a poem a week that is ready for workshop, nor that, as a group, you have identical poetic practices, interests, goals or processes. But I will be asking you to write a lot, and to consider your practices, interests, goals and processes carefully. I will be meeting one-on-one with all of you numerous times over the course of the semester, and will also be assigning everyone a mandatory individual writing assignment around the mid-semester mark.

When we meet as a group, class will include the following components:

- announcements, questions, and concerns
- discussion of any assigned texts
- workshop

Because I believe that workshop (especially at a graduate level) can become rote, we will employ a few different methods of workshop response (though each will begin with the poet reading their poem aloud to the class). Please specify at the top of each poem you hand out which method of workshop you'd like us to use:

- **GLOBAL CONTRACT RESPONSE:**
We will discuss the “contract” the poem assumes/implies between the poem and the reader, as well as the world of the poem. What seem to be the rules of the poem? What seems to be the lineage? What expectations can we rely upon? Why was the poem written? What purpose does it serve? The poet will listen and take notes during this discussion, but not participate. We will not discuss line-level edits during this workshop.
- **Q & A:**
The class will begin by asking direct questions of the poet about the poem's content, form, language, etc. Then the poet will have a chance to ask direct questions of the class.
- **SNAPSHOT RESPONSES:**
These workshops will function as a sort of speed round: each member of the class (including the poet) will be required to say something about the poem in turn. The statement can be a criticism, a compliment, a “this made me think of,” etc., but it must be a statement. Questions (by both class and poet) will be entertained at the end.
- **TRADITIONAL WORKSHOP:**
Here we will start by noting what is working in a poem and why, offer up readings/interpretations of the poem, ask questions to the workshop (and not the poet) about the poem, and offer suggestions for what might not be working in a poem (including line-level edits). We will abide by the “gag rule,” which means the poet will not be allowed to speak until the very end of our discussion, and will only be allowed to ask questions of the workshop about things they didn't address that are of concern to the poet.

For workshop, I ask that you submit a poem for which you are genuinely ready to receive feedback—not a poem you hate, or a poem you adore, or a poem you don't know anything about. You may be asked to respond to hard questions about your poem—be prepared to talk articulately about it. As workshop members, I expect you to come prepared for class, having read and commented on all the poems on the docket. If absolutely necessary, I reserve the right to collect copies of everyone's comments, or require you to post them on Blackboard (though, to date, I have never had to do this with any of my workshops).

I would like to meet with all of you in 20-30 minute **conferences** to discuss your work *at least twice* over the course of the semester (though I will happily meet with you more than twice if you would like). This is your time, so use it wisely: we can talk about the current state of your poetry, your

goals for its progress, my goals for you, assigned readings/exercises based on those goals, publishing, etc. We'll also discuss what you're reading, your critical prose, and your style, or voice—where it's come from, where it is, where it's going and how to refine and articulate it. You are expected to come to conference prepared, with copies, books, etc.—whatever we need to have our discussion—and on time. If there is something about your poems that was not addressed in workshop, or if you would like a specific kind of response/reading from me, just ask. The more you participate and guide me, the better I will be able to help. Conference times will be determined week by week.

ASSIGNMENTS & CLASS SCHEDULE

- Thurs 8/23: INTROS & VARIOUS OTHER STUFF
HW: Hoagland essay & Burt essay; **For me:** compile a selection of three good, representative poems and a short letter about your aesthetic and goals (including your poetic influences), due next class. **For the entire class:** bring in copies of one or two poems (on one page, if possible) that you feel exemplify your work to date, with copies for everyone. Be prepared to talk to the class about what you would like to produce by the semester's end. Question: are there a few 2nd or 3rd year volunteers who would like to workshop a poem next week and can get it up on Blackboard by midnight on Saturday?
- Thurs 8/30: DISCUSSION OF ESSAYS & WORKSHOP
HW: Write, comment on workshop poems, and be prepared to discuss the Strickland reading.
- Fri 9/7: **CLASS RESCHEDULED DUE TO BIG CONCERT**
Class will be at the clubhouse in the Maple Ridge development where I live, from 4:30-7:30pm. See Blackboard or your email for directions.
HW: Read *My American Kundiman* by Patrick Rosal
- Thurs 9/13: DISCUSS *MY AMERICAN KUNDIMAN* (Lauren G. & Ben present) & WORKSHOP
HW: Read *Sad Little Breathing Machine* by Matthea Harvey
- Thurs 9/20: DISCUSS *SAD LITTLE BREATHING MACHINE* (Tim & Nick present) & WORKSHOP
HW: Read *Some Ether* by Nick Flynn
- Thurs 9/27: DISCUSS *SOME ETHER* (Geri & Robert present) & WORKSHOP
HW: Read *Fire Wheel* by Sharmila Voorakkara
- Thurs 10/4: DISCUSS *FIRE WHEEL* (Brian & Ben present) & WORKSHOP
HW: Read *Wind in a Box* by Terrance Hayes
- Thurs 10/11: DISCUSS *WIND IN A BOX* (Derek & Lamar present) & WORKSHOP
HW: Read *Wind in a Box* by Terrance Hayes
- Thurs 10/18: Workshop until 6:45pm due to Richard McCann Reading at 7pm
HW: Read *String Light* by C.D. Wright
- Thurs 10/25: DISCUSS *STRING LIGHT* (Weston & Carrie present) & WORKSHOP
(ISSUE: HOME FOOTBALL GAME AT 7:30PM)
We will hold class in the Maple Ridge clubhouse again, but at our normal class time.
HW: Read *Lizzie Borden in Love* by Julianna Baggott
- Thurs 11/1: DISCUSS *LIZZIE BORDEN IN LOVE* (Lauren G. & Lauren J. present) & WORKSHOP
HW: Read *Chattahoochee* by Patrick Phillips
- Thurs 11/8: DISCUSS *CHATTAHOOCHEE* (Lamar & Betsy present) & WORKSHOP
HW: Read *The Pajamaist*, by Matthew Zapruder
- Thurs 11/15: DISCUSS *THE PAJAMAIST* (Josette & Lauren J. present) & WORKSHOP
- Thurs 11/22: THANKSGIVING (NO CLASS)
- Thurs 11/29: MATTHEW ZAPRUDER COMES TO WORKSHOP!

REQUIREMENTS

- 1) **Assigned Reading/Books & Presentations:** We will be reading one book a week once the semester starts up. Students will be paired up to lead discussion on an assigned text. You will talk briefly about who the poet is, their stylistic “lineage,” come prepared with discussion questions for the class about the text, pick a representative poem, and offer a well articulated and specific exercise (typed and copied) based on the selected poem. If these texts are your teachers, what have you learned? Presentations will be about 15-20 minutes each, so time yourself. Presentations will be graded for organization, clarity, pacing and edutainment value.
- 2) **Readings:** You will be *expected* to attend the readings of any visiting **poets** (unless unavoidable work, teaching or family conflicts make it impossible for you to do so). You are *encouraged*, of course, to go to all readings (fiction, play performances, etc.).
- 3) **Writing:** Since this is an MFA seminar, I will not be requiring you to write on demand, though I *recommend* that you hand in a poem each week (to me, if not to the workshop). I will always read and comment on anything you’d like me to take a look at, including revisions. Ultimately, however, it will be up to you if you’d like to hand in poems for workshop on any given week. Keep in mind that you will be working towards a 10 poem goal for the semester, and that I am only human—e.g. please don’t hand me 10 poems in the second-to-last week and expect that I’ll be able to comment on them all, or that you will be able to revise them all in a week.
- 4) **Workshop:** You are expected to bring in copies of *at least five poems* over the course of the semester for workshop, and to speak during every discussion. You will be required to read your classmates’ work before workshop, and have made written comments on it. Failure to participate in workshop will result in low grades. You are asked to be fair, serious, compassionate, open-minded, considerate, helpful and specific in your responses. Personal attacks, pettiness, disinterest and other clearly inappropriate behavior will be graded accordingly.
- 5) **Final Project:** A portfolio will be due the last day of class that includes at least 10 poems in their final form, revised, proofread, altered or otherwise “finished.” These should be poems you worked on this semester either through class or conference, and of which you are proud. They represent the best poems you are able to make right now. Submissions will be graded on evidence of careful thought and adherence to the goals you have set forth for yourself, and which I have set forth for you in class and conferences. You will need to have an introductory statement (3-4 pages) to the reader at the beginning of your portfolio that is a statement of your intent for these particular poems, and/or a manifesto of your own poetics. You will also be writing a short statement (1-2 pages) about one other workshop member’s work. (More details on the portfolio will be provided to you later in the semester).

MY HIGHLY SCIENTIFIC GRADING METHOD FOR THIS COURSE:

Book Presentation (10%)

Class Participation (30%) (Workshop, Discussion, & Conference participation)

Final submission (60%) (45% poems and revisions, 15% poetic statements)

ATTENDANCE POLICY

You will be allowed one absence during the semester before your grade begins to drop. Beyond that, each absence will drop your grade by a half-letter (e.g. an A will drop to an A-, an A- to a B+, etc.). If you have any sort of emergency (medical, family), or religious observance, that forces you to miss a class, PLEASE absolutely come see me, call me, or email me about it—I’m tough, but not inflexible.

Regarding lateness: two latenesses (of more than 15 minutes each) count as one absence.

Regarding excessive absences: THREE absences lead to automatic failure of the class.